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PEASANTS AND REVOLUTION IN ETHIOPIA: TIGRAY 1975 - 1989

by

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THESIS SUBMITTED IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF

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of

POLITICAL SCIENCE

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ABSTRACT

The most influential theoretical explanation of revolutions in the past two decades has been provided by the school of moral economy. Critical to this theory are the assumptions that peasants play a key role in revolutions in the modern era and that they are moved to revolt because of unsettling changes in their economy and disruption to their relationships with one another and to their patrons caused by agricultural commercialization. Although recognizing that middle class intellectuals usually lead these revolutions and that the revolutions do not necessarily produce conditions favourable to the peasants, moral economists nonetheless largely confine their research to the peasant economy and in their explanations discount the part played by conditions in the towns or wider political factors .

This case study of revolution in the Ethiopian province of Tigray between 1975 and 1989 provides a basis to re-evaluate moral economy theory. The revolution examined here began when a small band of intellectuals who called themselves the Tigrayan Peoples Liberation Front (TPLF) launched a rural insurrection for Tigrayan national self-determination in 1975 from their poor and underdeveloped province against the military regime that had assumed power after the overthrow of Emperor Haile-Selassie the year before. In 1989 the rebels swept government forces from the province and two years later they formed the national government in Addis Ababa.

Because of the almost complete absence of secondary sources, the research pursuant to this dissertation has been largely based on material collected and generated by the author in Ethiopia between October 1992 and July 1993. Although primary written materials, drawn mostly from press reports and political party journals, have been utilized, the research has relied on some two hundred interviews, mostly of peasants and party activists of the TPLF.

In contrast to the conclusions of moral economy theory, this study will demonstrate that although a collapsing rural economy was an important underlying factor in the Tigrayan revolution, the peasants did not oppose markets and commercial agriculture; nor did they object to the break up of the feudal economy and the destruction of patron-client relationships. In spite of their destitution, most peasants did not initially join the struggle of the intellectuals who instead had to depend on support from people in the towns. Moreover, contrary to the emphasis placed by moral economists on economic factors in explaining revolution, this study found that peasant commitment to armed struggle was also stimulated by a number of political factors, including the policies of the military government, the peasants' Tigrayan nationalism, and the political leadership of the TPLF.

DEDICATION

To the peasants of Tigray in the hope that their future will be better.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Invariably in a research project of this nature there are many people to thank, and organizations to acknowledge, and only a few can be mentioned here. I am particularly appreciative of the efforts of my wife, Dorothea, who accompanied me to Ethiopia, assisted in the peasant interviews, proof read various drafts of the thesis and translated parts of a German book used in the study. My dissertation committee, led by my senior supervisor, Dr. Maureen Covell, and including Professors Michael Howard, Roy Pateman, A.H. Somjee and Philip Stigger have availed me of their time, guidance and perspectives. For this I am most grateful.

There are far too many Ethiopians that have been of enormous help to thank even a fraction of them. Nonetheless, note must be made of the ever obliging faculty of the College of Social Sciences at Addis Ababa University, and particularly to the Political Science and International Relations Department to which I was assigned to carry out my research. Gebru Asrat and Haile Kiros, both of the TPLF, must be singled out for their assistance.

Lastly, this research would not have been possible but for funding from the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada for the two year period 1992 - 1994.

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ABBREVIATIONS

AAU: Addis Ababa University
ALF: Afar Liberation Front
APDO: Afar Peoples Democratic Organization
COPWE: Committee to establish the Workers Party of Ethiopia
DATW: Democratic Association of Tigrayan Women
ECA: Economic Commission of Africa
EDU: Ethiopian Democratic Union
ELF: Eritrean Liberation Front
EPDM: Ethiopian People's Democratic Movement
EPLF: Eritrean People's Liberation Front
EPRDF: Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Democratic Front
EPRP: Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Party
ESUNA: Ethiopian Student Union of North America
ETA: Ethiopian Teachers Association
HSIU: Haile Selassie I University
MLLT: Marxist-Leninist League of Tigray; also called Malalit
MOA: Ministry of Agriculture
NGO: Non-governmental Organization
OAU: Organization of African Unity
OLF: Oromo Liberation Front
PSIR: Political Science and International Relations (Department of AAU)
REST: Relief Society of Tigray
RRC: Relief and Rehabilitation Commission
SPLA: Sudan People's Liberation Front
TAIDL: Tigray Agricultural and Industrial Limited.
TGE: Transitional Government of Ethiopia
TLF: Tigray Liberation Front
TPLF: Tigrayan People's Liberation Front
WPE: Workers Party of Ethiopia

PREFACE

It is sometimes difficult to say precisely how and when research on a particular topic begins, and so it was with this project. It is clear, however, that my interest in the Tigrayan revolt developed as a result of my work as a journalist for *The Sudan Times* in Khartoum between 1986 and 1989. Although initially too preoccupied with Sudanese politics to take more than a passing interest in the affairs of the many thousands of Eritrean and Ethiopian refugees who resided in Khartoum or their political organizations that operated out of the city, in time I became increasingly attracted to these people and their political movements. Unlike an earlier generation of Western scholars who were drawn to Ethiopian studies because of the country's ancient history, unique cultures, absence of a colonial tradition or the person of Emperor Haile-Selassie, I was attracted by the epochal scope of the struggles the Ethiopians and Eritreans were engaged in and the dedication and sophistication which they brought to them.

If this seems a curious fascination it should be noted that as a journalist for a newspaper with strong sympathies for the plight of the peoples of southern Sudan, I closely followed the revolt of the Sudan People's Liberation Front (SPLA) which, like the revolts of the Eritrean People's Liberation Front (EPLF) and the Tigrayan People's Liberation Front (TPLF), was for national self-determination and opposed by a hegemonic central state. However, while these movements shared conditions of national oppression and resistance, they were in many ways very different. The fact that the SPLA was a beneficiary of the state that the EPLF and TPLF were dedicated to overthrowing, while the latter organizations received the tacit support of the Sudanese government, was one such difference, but it was not critical. Far more significant was the contrast between the political, administrative, and military skills and the commitment of the EPLF and TPLF, and the confusion and division that reigned in the SPLA.

My first introduction to Tigray in 1988 provided ample evidence of these skills. The journey from the sweltering plains of Sudan to the cool highlands of Ethiopia was over a road that had been built at the height of the 1984 - 1985 famine through the mobilization of some one hundred thousand Tigrayan peasants and TPLF fighters. Organization and dedication to the revolution was evident everywhere I was to go during my two week stay in Tigray - in the relief distributions, in the formation of local administrations of towns captured only a month earlier from the government army, in the 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 government soldiers.

But if this all too brief visit served to confirm TPLF claims as to the extent of their liberated territories, capacity to wage war against the Ethiopian government, and was at least suggestive of the Front's support among the peasants of Tigray, it nonetheless raised more questions than it answered. What conditions produced this revolutionary upheaval? How was the TPLF able to acquire such peasant support? What was the basis of the Tigrayan demand for national self-determination? And crucially, how were the largely

teenage peasant 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?

These were questions I would take back to Canada with me and serve as a starting point for this research. But I would also take back to Canada the conviction that the TPLF and its recently established Ethiopian Peoples Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF) would, as its adherents claimed, soon capture power in Addis Ababa.

NOTES

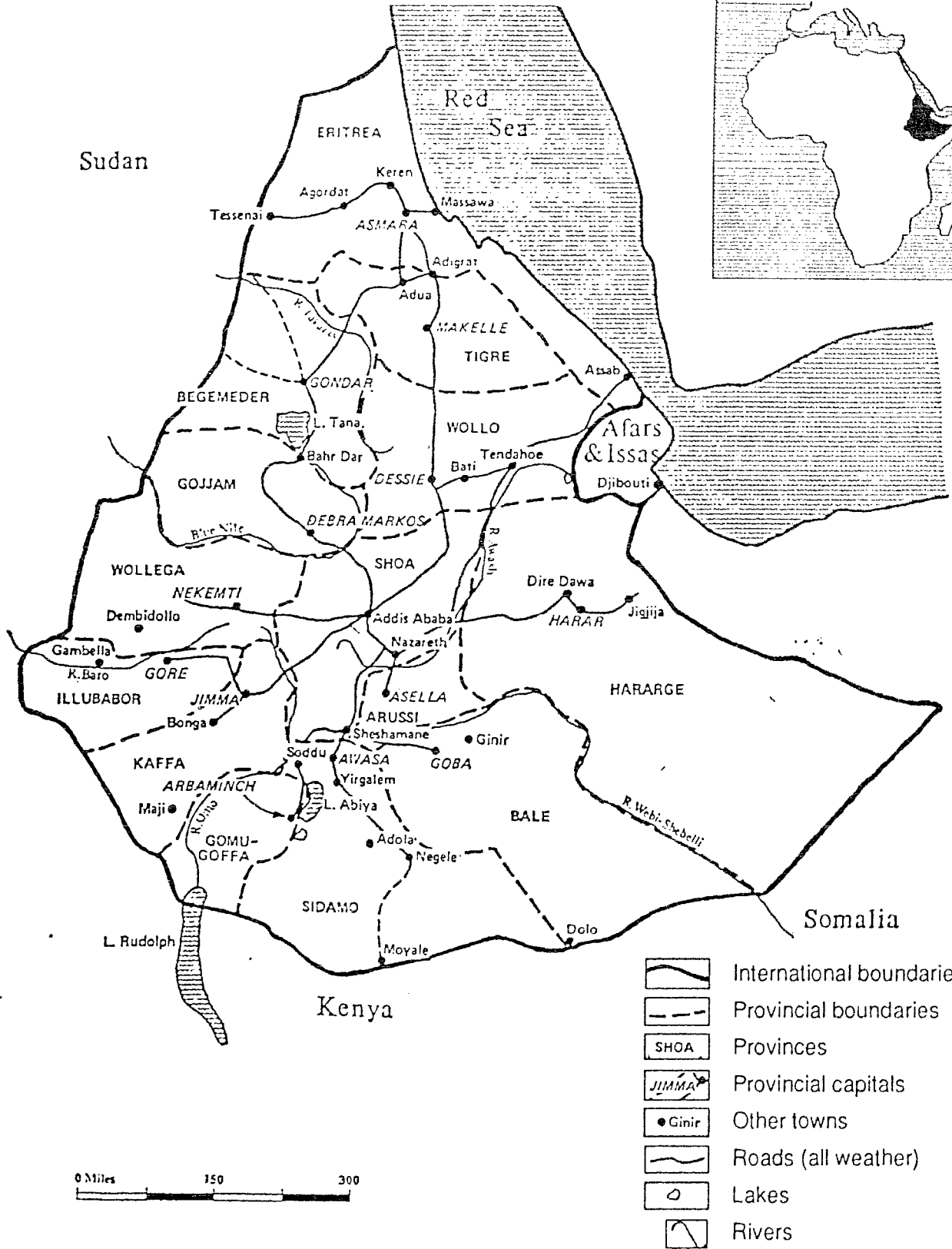
Names: Ethiopians, whether Christian or Moslem, do not have family surnames and as a result the common practice, which is followed here, is to either write their names in full (that is the individual's name followed by his or her father's first name) or to use only their first names.

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 September 11, the beginning of the Ethiopian new year, to December 31, the Ethiopian year runs seven years behind the Gregorian year; thereafter the difference is eight years. In this dissertation Ethiopian dates and years have as closely as possible been translated into the Gregorian calendar.

ETHIOPIA

Ethiopia in the African Continent



Adapted from: Gilkes, P. Feudalism and Modernization in Ethiopia. (London: Julian Friedmann, 1975).

CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

Scope and Purpose

In 1974 a popular movement led by university students in Addis Ababa brought down the faltering old regime of Emperor Haile-Selassie, but it was a military cabal, the *Derg*¹, which shortly thereafter assumed state power. Although confronted with a number of largely ethnic based insurrections, the Derg was able with the military support of the Soviet Bloc to fend off its challengers and retain power until 1991. In spite of its brutality and contempt for human rights, the military regime nonetheless managed to acquire the support, or at least acquiescence, of members of the academic community. A minority of these scholars saw the Derg as nation builders in the tradition of Menelik and Haile-Selassie; many more held the regime to be the last line of defense against the ethnonationalist movements which threatened to dismember the country. Still others saw the Derg's displacement of the feudal regime and enactment of land reform as evidence of its progressive character and looked disapprovingly at the opposition movements struggling to bring about the government's collapse.

In truth the Derg never lived up to any of those images. Far from defending Ethiopia's territorial integrity, the Derg's defense of the hegemonic position of one ethnic community, the minority Amhara,² in the state fueled the national liberation movements and precluded

¹Derg is an Amharigna term which literally means "committee" and refers to the military group which took power after the collapse of the imperial regime.

²Although statistics on the proportional make-up of Ethiopia's ethnic communities are a matter of some contention, it is generally accepted that the Oromo constitute the largest ethnic group in Ethiopia, followed by the Amhara and then the Tigrayans. According to a recent study the Oromos make up about 40% of the population; 30% of the total population is Amhara and a further 20% speak Amhargna as a second language, and 12 - 15% of the population is Tigrigna-speaking. See T. Ofcansky and L. Berry, eds., *Ethiopia: A Country Study*, (Lanham, Maryland: Bernan Press, 1993), p. xvi. It should be noted,

the kind of structural re-ordering which might have allowed Eritrea to remain a constituent unit within an Ethiopian federation. There was also little that was genuinely progressive about the regime's policies. Its land redistribution and other reforms were popularized by the Ethiopian student movement and were not enacted out of conviction, but as a means to gain domestic credibility and foreign support. Although the redistribution of land was largely equitable, it did not result in peasants gaining control over their surplus agricultural production any more than the previous system had allowed.³ Moreover, the few benefits these reforms provided for Ethiopia's destitute peasants were more than offset by the ever increasing demands which the state placed upon them to support its growing bureaucracy and army.

The task here is less one of historical revisionism, however much that is needed, than of examining the political mobilization of the peasantry in Ethiopia's northern most province of Tigray by the Tigrayan People's Liberation Front (TPLF). Living in the shadow of the more closely watched nationalist struggles in Eritrea, and largely discounted by the Ethiopian elite who considered Tigray too poor to sustain a rebellion against the state, the Tigrayan revolution was largely ignored by both journalists and scholars. However, with the TPLF dominating the Transitional Government of Ethiopia (TGE) that assumed power in 1991 it has become ever more pressing to develop an understanding of how, and on what basis, the Front gained power in Tigray. It is my hope that this study of the Tigrayan revolution between its inception in 1975 and its displacement of the Derg from the province in 1989, will make a small contribution towards that objective.

however, that these statistics were derived before Eritrea's independence which removed a substantial proportion of Ethiopia's Tigrigna-speakers.

³Andargachew Tiruneh, *The Ethiopian Revolution 1974-1987: A transformation from an aristocratic to a totalitarian autocracy*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), p. 321.

It is also hoped that the analysis of the Tigrayan revolution will provide a useful basis from which to critically examine theories of revolution and specifically the moral economy school which currently is the most influential. The findings of this study will be employed to question moral economy's peasant focus and challenge its key conclusion that revolution in the modern world can be explained as a product of agricultural commercialization. These theorists contend that capitalization of land and the growth of markets undermined the peasants' traditional economic institutions and relationships and which ensured subsistence and moral outcomes, and brought in their wake inequality and the dissolution of the village which has served as a stimulus for revolt.

In contrast this case study of Tigray provides evidence that Tigrayan peasants did not resist the break-up the traditional economy, or oppose the growth of commercial agriculture and argues the importance of examining the role of the urban strata in revolution. An explanation of the revolution can thus not be reduced to a consideration of economic variables, but must recognize the importance of political and social factors, notably the stimulus provided by the regime's policies, Tigrayan nationalism, and the role of the political party in mobilizing and directing the revolution.

In this chapter the research environment in Ethiopia will be examined, consideration will be given various methodological approaches to the study and an argument will be made in support of those utilized. A brief bibliographic review of existing studies and documentation, including newspapers, will be carried out that will demonstrate their limitations and the need to go further afield to gather data for the study. This data had to be produced by interviews, but the decision to use intensive interviews of peasants and nonpeasants rather than to rely on survey research and the use of questionnaires will be considered and defended. To provide a perspective on both the research environment in Ethiopia and insight into the changing political and social climate in the country (or at least

in Tigray), the field experience of the author will be contrasted with that of Siegfried Pausewang who carried out an extensive study of the use of surveys in Ethiopian social research some twenty years earlier.⁴ The chapter will end with an outline of the various topics to be taken up in the subsequent chapters.

Research Environment

Previous experience in Africa had convinced me that conditions and circumstances which could not be anticipated prior to my stay in Ethiopia would strongly influence the course and outcome of this study and therefore I was prepared to be flexible. Although hopeful that my earlier acquaintance with TPLF officials made while working as a journalist in the Sudan would prove useful, I had not been able to maintain such contacts and did not know anyone in Ethiopia at the time of my departure from Canada. I was aware also that my research could be considered controversial. Indeed, since Ethiopia had only recently emerged from a long and bitter war and had a new government whose legitimacy was being widely questioned outside Tigray, security concerns might well interfere with my study or even lead it to being aborted entirely.

Although I did not arrive in Ethiopia with a detailed methodology for the conduct of my research, I did have clear conception of what I would like to do, a plan and a roughly formulated time-table. My arrival in Ethiopia at the beginning of October was meant to correspond with the end of the main season of rains. The following three months would be spent carrying out library research, interviewing Ethiopian academics, government officials and others, and making arrangements to visit Tigray at the end of December when the harvest would be completed and peasants could be interviewed. These studies in

⁴S. Pausewang, *Methods and Concepts of Social Research in a Rural Developing Society: A critical appraisal based on experience in Ethiopia*, (Munchen: Weltforum Verlag, 1973).

Tigray, I hoped, could be carried out over a three and one-half month period until mid-April, at which point I would proceed to neighbouring Eritrea where I wanted to study EPLF-TPLF relations during the struggle as I felt, for reasons that will become clear, that these relations were critical to the outcome of the plans and efforts of both liberation movements.

The timing of my visit to Eritrea was designed to correspond with the United Nations supervised independence referendum which was held April 23 - 25, 1993, an occasion I anticipated would allow me to meet with some of the many academics, journalists and NGO officials who would be coming to witness or participate in the referendum as official observers. By June rains in the north would seriously impede the conduct of research in the rural areas and this would necessitate my return to Addis Ababa and more interviews for an indeterminate period. Rather to my surprise, this time-table was fairly closely followed, although not always under conditions that could have been anticipated.

While my university hosts at the *Siddist Kilo* social sciences campus of Addis Ababa University (AAU) and the faculty of the Political Science and International Relations Department (PSIR) to which I was assigned received me warmly and were at all times cooperative, they were generally not well informed as to the causes and course of the Tigrayan revolution my primary interest. Most of them had either lived in Addis Ababa or abroad during the years of Derg rule and neither location facilitated the acquisition of the kind of information that was needed for this study. Many of them, however, had been active in the Ethiopian university student movement during the 1960s and 1970s and were able to help me understand the issues and the prominent personalities of that period. Because the war kept many Tigrayan and Eritrean youth out of the university these groups are poorly represented in the university today. Those who presently hold positions at the university were both helpful and supportive of my research, but again in most cases they

were outside of Tigray during the years of war and this was a major drawback to the understanding they could bring to the course and conduct of the war.

While it is beyond the scope of this thesis to consider the complex politics of AAU during my association with the institution, it should be noted that the prevailing view of faculty and students was one of distrust of the EPRDF government whose policies it was widely held would lead to the dismemberment of the country. Indeed, on my first day at the campus I was pointedly informed by a senior professor that the "university and the government are enemies". During my nine months stay in Ethiopia this antagonism was expressed in a violent student demonstration in opposition to the planned United Nations referendum in Eritrea. As a result of that demonstration the government closed the university for three months and then dismissed forty-two professors, including three from the PSIR Department. These events did not effect my ability to work on the campus or my relations with the invariably hospitable faculty, but it did intensify the tension between the university community and the EPRDF government and that probably did impact negatively on my ability, at least in Addis Ababa, to conduct off campus research..

There were no restrictions on foreigners traveling within Ethiopia while I was in the country. However, it seemed appropriate to make officials of the EPRDF government both aware of my investigations and of my intention to do field research in Tigray. These officials in turn informed the Tigray administration of my plans, and with the latter's approval I arrived in the provincial capital of Mekelle in late December 1992. In Mekelle there was some questioning of my motives in carrying out the research, but with the consistent support of the Tigray Regional Chairman, Gebru Asrat, there were few obstacles of a political nature to the pursuit of my research in the province. The biggest obstacles were to be those posed by the province's severely underdeveloped and war damaged infrastructure.

Written Materials

Ethiopia has a long history of literacy which has produced, at least in comparison to other areas, a wealth of historical documents, but these materials suffer from a number of difficulties. First, the recorders of the history until this century were almost exclusively officials of the 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 and are of interest to this study barely figure in such records.

The second major problem with historical writing on Ethiopia has been their centrist focus on the Amhara who, with the exception of the reign of the Tigrayan Emperor Yohannis IV, have been the dominant power in the northern highlands from the decline of the Zagwe dynasty in the thirteenth century to the overthrow of the Mengistu regime in 1991. According to Triulzi, "Most 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."⁵ As a result research that focuses on the periphery and on the non-Amhara peoples which make up three-quarters of the population of the modern state of Ethiopia has been seriously under-represented in historical studies.

Neglect of the study of non-Amhara peoples 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 Axum almost 3,000 years ago; secondly, that the vast expansion of the country in the final years of the nineteenth century under Menelik did not so much

⁵A. 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.

represent imperial aggrandizement but a return to historical boundaries of the past, and lastly, that although many nations and nationalities existed 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 are part of the prevailing and dominant ideology in the country, but they have been given their most sophisticated and influential expression in the academic studies of the sociologist Donald Levine, and notably in his book, *Greater Ethiopia: The Evolution of a Multiethnic Society*.⁶ Levine holds that as a result of generations of war, conquest, trade and religious proselytization, the various peoples of Ethiopia have evolved into a single societal system. His thesis not only provided a reasoned counterpart to the powerful Solomonic myth which attempted to establish the ancient historical continuity of Ethiopia by claiming its leaders' descent from the union of King Solomon and to Queen of Sheba, but it also indirectly provided ideological legitimation for the dominance of the Amhara within the Ethiopian nexus.

Although widely accepted, Levine's thesis has not been immune to criticism. Many 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, and which generally shared a commonality of political polity, social structure, land tenure, culture and religion,⁷ 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 lowland peoples. The historian Gebru Tareke has argued that Levine's

⁶D. Levine, *Greater Ethiopia: The Evolution of a Multiethnic Society*, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1974).

⁷Gebru Tareke, "Rural Protest in Ethiopia, 1941 - 1970: A Study of Three Rebellions," (Ph.D. dissertation, Syracuse University, 1977), p. 7.

desire to assert an Ethiopian nationhood within a unitary culture has only been accomplished by de-emphasizing the ethnic, linguistic and religious plurality of the society.⁸

Markakis also challenged Levine's thesis, and his studies breathed life into an Ethiopian historiography that in the hands of both Ethiopian and foreigner scholars was largely devoid of critical content and sycophantic in its approach to the regime of the late Emperor Haile-Selassie.⁹ Markakis put class and national conflict at the centre of his historical and contemporary studies and demonstrated that Ethiopian nation-building did not end with the hegemony achieved by the Amharas from Shoa at the end of the last century, which has been the common conviction of most historians; rather this development merely set the stage for the nationalist and anti-feudal struggles that have characterized this century.

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 in the wake of the 1991 overthrow of the Amhara dominated central state. Ethiopia has a long history of regional based revolts led by nobles from the periphery, and these revolts were either overcome by the centre or led to the establishment of new regimes which maintained the old state. But the assumption to power of the EPLF in Asmara and the TPLF led EPRDF in Addis Ababa with its commitment to end Shoan Amhara domination of the state and to grant the country's ethnic communities the right to self-determination has, in my view, irrevocably undermined Levine's thesis. It has also opened the door to a better understanding of the

⁸Ibid., p. 7.

⁹See 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).

central state and its relations with the non-Amhara nations and nationalities of the periphery.

As a result then of this centrist and nobility focused history there is no comprehensive historical study of Tigray. However, prior to the twentieth century European explorers, merchants, missionaries, adventurers and diplomats usually made their way to highland Ethiopia through the Red Sea port of Massawa and hence it was the Tigrigna speaking people of the northern highlands that they first confronted and, at least in comparison to other regions of the country, most fully described. Visitors such as James Bruce, Mansfield Parkyns, Walter Plowden, Nathaniel Pearce and A.B. Wylde have all left behind valuable descriptions of political, environmental and economic conditions in Tigray.¹⁰

In the modern era only three historians stand out for their contributions to the study of Tigrayan history. They are Zewde Gabre-Sellassie for his study of the Tigrayan king and Ethiopian Emperor, Yohannis IV;¹¹ Gebru Tareke for his study of Ethiopian peasant revolts, including that in Tigray in 1943¹² and the Israeli, Haggai Erlich, for his history of the Tigrayan general, Alula and for his research on political conditions in Tigray in the run up to the Italian invasion of 1935.¹³

¹⁰James Bruce, *Travels to Discover the Source of the Nile*, (Edinburgh: 1790); Mansfield Parkyns, *Life in Abyssinia*, (London: 1853); Walter Plowden, *Travels in Abyssinia and the Galla 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); Augustus Wylde, *Modern Ethiopia*, (London: Methuen, 1901).

¹¹Zewde Gabre-Sellassie, *Yohannes IV of Ethiopia: A Political Biography*, (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1973).

¹²Gebru Tareke, "Rural Protest in Ethiopia."

¹³H. Erlich, "Ras Alula, Ras Seyum, Tigre and Ethiopia's Integrity," *Proceedings of the International Conference on Ethiopian Studies*, Vol. 1, Addis Ababa, [1984]:361-365; H. Erlich, "Tigrean Nationalism, British involvement and Haile Selassie's emerging absolutism," *Asian and African Studies*, 15(2), [1982]:191-227; H. Erlich, "Tigrean politics 1930 - 1935 and the approaching Italo-Ethiopian war," *Proceedings of the International Conference on Ethiopian Studies*, Tel Aviv, [1980]:101-131.

The anthropological literature on Tigray is also limited, but particular reference must be made to Dan Bauer's study of Tigrayan household social organization,¹⁴ John Bruce's study of a system of Tigrayan land tenure¹⁵ and Charles Rosen's examination of a land dispute in the Tigrayan town of Adwa¹⁶. These works are important in their own right, but are of particular interest for this study because they were carried out on the eve of the 1974 overthrow of the imperial regime and hence provide a last picture of an imperial Tigray before the curtain was effectively brought down on the conduct of academic research in the province until very recently.

Politically and economically marginalized regions of Ethiopia such as Tigray were not often the focus of studies by the imperial government in the twentieth century. Two exceptions which are important to this thesis are surveys of land tenure patterns carried out by the Central Statistical Office¹⁷ and the Ministry of Land Reform:¹⁸ again, they are of particular interest because of the picture of Tigray they provide on the eve of the 1974 revolution. By the late 1970s the government's loss of control over most of the rural areas of the province would largely preclude any further studies.

The overthrow of the imperial government of Haile-Selassie and its replacement by a military government apparently committed to a socialist transformation attracted considerable scholarly interest.¹⁹ However, apart from Markakis, all of the works of

¹⁴D. Bauer, *Household and Society in Ethiopia: An Economic and Social Analysis of Tigray Social Principles and Household Organization*, (East Lansing: Michigan State University, 1977).

¹⁵John 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).

¹⁶C. Rosen, "Warring with Words: Patterns of Political Activity in a Northern Ethiopian Town," (Ph.D. dissertation, University of Illinois, 1976).

¹⁷Central Statistical Office, *Report on a Survey of Tigre Province*, Addis Ababa, [1966].

¹⁸Ministry of Land Reform and Administration, *Report on Land Tenure Survey of Tigre Province*, Addis Ababa, [1969].

¹⁹See for example F. Halliday and M. Molineux, *The Ethiopian Revolution*, (London: Verso, 1981); P. Gilkes, *The Dying Lion: Feudalism and Modernization in Ethiopia*, (London, Julian Friedman, 1975); R. Vivo, *Ethiopia: the Unknown Revolution*, (Habana: Social Sciences Publishers, 1977); R. Lefort,

these authors have concentrated on the central state and have, with the possible exception of Eritrea, paid insufficient attention to national movements of opposition to the state. The centrist focus of Ethiopian studies, as has been noted, is of long standing and in the present circumstances has been due in part to the difficulty of acquiring data from which to evaluate developments in the country's rebelling peripheries. However, as a result most recent studies suffer from a lack of balance and a failure to fully appreciate the most politically dynamic forces in Ethiopian society. The TPLF was such a politically dynamic force and it was largely ignored in the studies of the Ethiopian revolution.

Among the few analysts who have written about the TPLF and its struggle are Firebrace and Smith,²⁰ Perberdy,²¹ and the former chairman of the Relief Society of Tigray (REST) and historian Solomon Inquai,²² who have all produced valuable studies of conditions inside Tigray during the early part of the war. The German journalist, Dieter Beisel, has described conditions in Tigray in a small book based on his two month stay in Tigray in late 1986 and early 1987.²³ Unfortunately his book is available only in German. Gebru Tareke has written a valuable article that attempted to link and contrast the peasant rebellion of 1943 with that of the TPLF led insurrection of 1975.²⁴ But most useful for

Ethiopia: An Heretical Revolution? (London: Zed Press, 1983), J. Harbeson, *The Ethiopian Transformation*, (Boulder: Westview Press, 1988); E. Keller, *Revolutionary Ethiopia: From Empire to People's Republic*, (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1988); Mulatu Wubneh and Yohannis Abate, *Ethiopia: Transition and Development in the Horn of Africa*, (Boulder, Col.: Westview Press, 1988); M. and D. Ottaway, *Ethiopia: Empire in Revolution*, (New York: Africa Publishing, 1978); C. Clapham, *Transformation and Continuity in Revolutionary Ethiopia*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988); Andargachew Tiruneh.

²⁰J. Firebrace and G. Smith, *The Hidden Revolution: an analysis of Social Change in Tigray, Northern Ethiopia*, (London: War on Want, 1983).

²¹M. Peberdy, *Ethiopia's Untold Story*, (London: REST, UK Support Committee, 1985).

²²Solomon Inquai, "The Hidden Revolution in Tigray", *Horn of Africa*, Vol. 4, No. 3, 1981.

²³D. Beisel, *Reise ins Land der Rebellen: Tigray - eine afrikanische Zukunft*, (Reinbek bei Hamburg: Rowohlt Taschenbuch Verlag, 1989).

²⁴Gebru Tareke, "Resistance in Tigray: From Weyane to TPLF," *Quo Vadis Ethiopia Conference Proceedings*, (Washington: Howard University, 1983).

this study has been an *Africa Watch* publication prepared by Alex de Waal.²⁵ De Waal's interest is in human rights in Ethiopia from 1961 to 1991, but he has accumulated an enormous amount of information on political and military conditions in the country, particularly in Eritrea and Tigray. On the polemical side, former TPLF Chairman, Aregowie Berhe, has written an unpublished polemic article in Amharigna (which has been translated)²⁶ in opposition to the leadership of the Front after his defection in 1987, and another former senior TPLF cadre, Kahsay Berhe, has produced two useful tracts.²⁷

Apart from these works there are a handful of reports on conditions in Tigray during the war written by officials of NGOs that will be referred to in the course of this study. Limited as this resource base is, it is still greater than that publicly available on the Derg's conduct of the war.²⁸ As a result of sixteen years of Derg rule and its attempt to suppress information the otherwise valuable collection of materials of the Institute of Ethiopian Studies at AAU contained almost no TPLF or related documents during the course of my stay in the country between 1992 and 1993. Moreover, to date the TPLF has not released party and related documents for scholarly study. TPLF officials either say that such materials have not been collected or, more commonly, that they have not been organized and thus are not available for examination.

The best source for TPLF documents was the EPLF established Research and Documentation Centre in Asmara. These archives are heavily weighted in favour of

²⁵A. de Waal, *Evil Days: Thirty Years of War and Famine in Ethiopia*, (New York: Human Rights Watch, 1991).

²⁶Aregowie Berhe, "The MLLT Jump: Our Struggle that was Impaired by Narrow Nationalism," (June 1987).

²⁷Kahsay Berhe, "TPLF: Where, How?" (March 1989); Kahsay Berhe, "The National Movement in Tigray: Myths and Realities," (February 1991).

²⁸In 1993 the Ethiopian Ministry of Defense was evaluating a proposed scholarly study of Derg high command communications to their field officers, a development which would further the understanding of the war. Interview with Yemane Kidane of EPRDF Defense Forces, Addis Ababa, December 15, 1992.

documents relating to the Eritrean revolution, but the Centre does have a good, if by no means complete, selection of various Ethiopian political party publications, including those of the TPLF. A further useful source for the limited number of academic articles that take up problems of interest to this study, and more importantly, for its collection of newspaper articles on the Eritrean and Ethiopian war, is the Research Centre of Asmara University. Material can also be collected from a wide variety of sources (scholars, former and present members of the various liberation movements, and others) who have accumulated party publications and the like over the years. A considerable proportion of the material that was examined in the pursuit of this research, much of it party publications, was written in English, but other materials written in Tigrigna or Amharigna were sometimes translated.

Party publications are by nature sectarian, usually verbose, always highly partisan, and must be read very critically. They are most useful when laying out the political and ideological problems that confronted the various movements at particular points in time, as source material from which to raise questions in interviews, at directing attention to articles of interest from foreign and domestic publications that are frequently published in party journals, at summarizing recent military developments, and of laying out the arguments of debate that the party was carrying on with other organizations, whose own publications in turn can be examined to follow the course of the debate in question.

In this study regular reference is made to the TPLF's various English language publications including *Woyeen* (which means revolt), *Tigray*, a publication of the Union of Tigrayans of North America and *People's Voice*, which was published by the Foreign Relations Bureau of the Front. As well the TPLF produced a large number of articles and pamphlets that went under different names. Publications of other movements referred to include the EPLF publication *Adulis*, the EPRP's *Abyot* and the ELF's *Eritrean Review*.

Weakness of existing statistical data is a common problem in the conduct of research in the developing world and a survey of social research studies carried out in imperial Ethiopia demonstrates that it was no exception.²⁹ This, however, is not necessarily the case in rural Tigray today where the experience of TPLF mobilization during the course of a long war has resulted in highly organized local administrations, some of which have collected detailed statistical indices that have been referred to in this study. However, it is not clear that there is a consistency in the data acquired and the methods used in the collection across *woredas* or districts. Data has also been compiled which has not been released. A critical example of this is the number of fighters from each *woreda* who died in the war, a figure of some interest to this study. It is not because of security concerns that this information is withheld, but apparently because of the belief that the hurt of family members is easier to bear if they slowly come to the realization of the death of their loved ones rather than being bluntly notified. There is also a practical concern on the part of the Tigray administration over the cost of commemorations of the deaths and the disruption to rural life that would ensue with the formal announcement of the deaths of thousands of fighters.

Media and the War

When available, newspaper articles have been examined closely. It must be noted, however, that in spite of the length and severity of the wars in Ethiopia and the global attention that the country's various famines attracted, the quality of journalism was remarkably poor. As de Waal has pointed out,³⁰ the vast majority of correspondents reporting on Ethiopia during this period were centred in Addis Ababa. With its pleasant climate, good facilities, and the opportunity to fly out to a site of interest and return the

²⁹Pausewang, *Methods and Concepts*.

³⁰de Waal, p. ii.

same day, write a story, and have it sent out that day, this was the location of choice for journalists. 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 fronts' lines was largely neglected.

However, the Eritrean war was much more widely reported than its counterpart in Tigray, in part because of the proximity of the combat zones and the ELF and EPLF's greater skills in encouraging and moving foreign correspondents to these areas. Few even of the TPLF's top leadership had lived or studied abroad and as a result, for an otherwise politically sophisticated organization, the TPLF was very inward looking. Its international public relations were poorly developed and, until the final years of the war, the Front's leadership tended to be wary of allowing foreigners to visit territories under their control. 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 remained a pre-eminently guerrilla movement that emphasized mobility until the final stages of the war. Those correspondents, aid officials and other foreigners who visited Tigray before 1988 when it captured and briefly held the towns, were forced to travel under very difficult circumstances and were almost completely restricted to rural areas.

The difficulties involved in getting to Tigray as I can confirm from my own visit to the province in April 1988 were additional to these problems. First, approval had to be acquired through TPLF or REST offices in Europe or North America, after which visas had to be obtained from Sudan, a not always 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 obstacles 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 mountains and on to the western Tigray TPLF base of Dejene. It was only then, only during the night, and only when vehicles were available, that visitors could be taken to various locations around Tigray. In these circumstances it was difficult for journalists to get in and out of Tigray in much less than ten days, and as a result few journalists, particularly those from large newspapers and magazines, reported from the Tigrayan side of the combat zones. The Eritrean struggle was frequently called the "unknown war", but there was much more reporting on it than the war in Tigray.

When journalists did visit the war fronts in the north they "were usually accompanied by armed guards, primarily to protect them from government saboteurs, but which also identified them with the relevant Front. The information obtained is therefore less than ideally independent."³¹ A further difficulty in the reports on Tigray, and particularly in the pre-1988 period before larger numbers of journalists started reporting on the war, is that many of them were written by people closely associated with REST, the TPLF, or aid officials involved in the REST sponsored, Sudan cross border relief efforts, and were thus open to charges of bias. Nonetheless, as de Waal has pointed out, 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 those to be interviewed.³²

³¹Ibid., p. ii.

³²Ibid., p. ii.

The media, no less than government officials, were subject to political biases and influenced by opportunist considerations in their coverage of events and conditions in Ethiopia. The journalist, Dieter Beisel, has written of the difficulty of getting articles that presented the TPLF's administration in a favourable light published in the mainstream German press when key "Africanist" reporters and editors were opposed to the Front, even when they had never visited Tigray.³³ Beisel also notes that journalists and editors were hesitant about publishing articles about the TPLF and Tigray that might antagonize the Addis Ababa government and thus make future visits to the country difficult or impossible.³⁴ I also experienced such problems with my newspaper in the Sudan. This kind of self-censorship, however, was not unique to 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. Nor is such self-censorship unique to Ethiopia. It is routinely practiced almost everywhere when conflicting interests are at stake, and must be one of the most significant obstacles to the conduct of research.

The biggest problems with media reporting on Tigray, however, were their limited interest in the province and a focus that was almost exclusively devoted to the problem of famine and the role of western governments and NGOs in helping famine victims. This one dimensional and ethnocentric focus meant that there was virtually no analysis of the Ethiopian politics which fueled the violent conflict and caused or exacerbated the famines that engulfed the region during the 1970s and 1980s.

Interview Based Research

³³Beisel, pp. 124-5.

³⁴Ibid.

The paucity of historical studies and documents and the limited use to which media reports can be put pointed to the necessity of relying on interviews as the prime data generating technique for this study. Moreover, as Kriger has pointed out in her study of the Zimbabwean revolution, the failure of most studies of revolution to consult peasants about their mobilization "creates the potential to misread evidence and to neglect or omit issues that are important to peasants. Peasant voices can produce new insights."³⁵ Survey research and the use of questionnaires, however, were not found to be the best approach for giving expression to peasant and other voices and, instead, I have relied on the more flexible form of intensive interviews of individuals or a group of subjects. This needs some explanation.

The techniques and concepts of survey research have been developed in advanced industrial societies to meet indigenous needs and their application in developing societies by social scientists such as myself with a limited understanding of the culture and values of the society under study is necessarily problematic. Second, because of the limited amount of historical data on the subject of this thesis it quickly became apparent that much of the research had to be devoted to collecting oral history, and questionnaire based surveys are not very useful in this respect. Third, surveys assume more than a basic knowledge of the subject (in this case the TPLF led war) and I did not have such knowledge and could only acquire it through in-depth field interviews. Fourth, surveys do not allow for the intensive questioning that was necessary to address the issues of interest to this study. Fifth, when interviewing peasants the in-depth questioning preceded from a general format with all the peasant groups, but it also developed particular foci (with respect to priests, militia, women and others.) and breaking down survey questions to account for the multitude of categories would add needlessly to the complexity of the study. Sixth, questionnaire

³⁵N. Kriger, *Zimbabwe's Guerrilla War: Peasant Voices*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1982), p. 9.

surveys allow little opportunity to open new avenues of questioning when the respondent, as was not infrequently the case, provided wholly unanticipated, but valuable, information. Again it must be stressed that the formulation of questionnaires assumes the significance of the questions and, for classification purposes, the kind of answers that may be given, and in the circumstances this was not the case. Lastly, survey research is premised by the need for sufficient time and the Tigray component of the study had to be carried out between the end of the harvest season in late December and the beginning of the plowing and planting season and the onset of rains in June. Survey research is also expensive to carry out, the more so when the focus of my interest in Tigray (as will be explained shortly) was in some of the most inaccessible areas of the province.

The use of formalized questionnaires was thus rejected in favour of theme directed intensive interviews. These interviews were carried out with a wide variety of people, but two major categories can be identified, nonpeasants (largely but not exclusively TPLF officials) and peasants, and each posed unique problems. Many TPLF officials, at least initially, were suspicious of the research, the more so when the investigator was unknown to them and came from Addis Ababa University, a centre of opposition to the government. All officials were extremely busy in the transitional government in Addis Ababa, confronting the myriad tasks of rehabilitation and development in Tigray, or participating in community meetings that are a big part of the political culture of Tigray. Facilitating the political research of an unknown foreigner on a politically sensitive subject was never a priority. When interviews were agreed to they were often scheduled in the late evenings, early mornings, and on holidays. In the circumstances it was highly unlikely that leading TPLF officials would consent to answer survey questionnaires either verbally or in writing. Again, in-depth interviews of officials was the course of least resistance chosen, and given time and persistence many leading TPLF/EPRDF officials agreed to be interviewed. After their initial reticence most of them spoke very frankly.

The format for interviews of TPLF officials was unlike those of peasants, which will be discussed shortly. Interviews of TPLF officials were almost always one on one affairs conducted in English. With few exceptions it was not possible to tape, record fully all the officials' answers at the time in writing or, in some cases because of their requests, even attribute information directly to them. Although, as will be seen, questions directed at peasants were to some extent guided by a consideration of their social roles, there were nonetheless core questions to all the interviews and all the questions and answers were written down as they were given by my spouse Dorothea. Unlike the peasants, the questions directed at TPLF officials ranged widely depending on their particular areas of experience and expertise and their answers could only be written up later from memory.

In spite of the problems in tracking down TPLF leaders, getting their agreement to be interviewed, and their reticence to answer questions in particular areas, it is difficult to imagine this research proceeding without their cooperation. Peasants and local government officials were invariably available and cooperative and provided valuable information on the local economy and society and the nature and extent of contacts with the TPLF, as well as the general form and course of the struggle at the local level. However, they were usually ill-equipped to comment on broader questions of military and political objectives, strategies, and tactics; nor were they party to the ideological issues that pre-occupied the TPLF leadership. Moreover, where it was possible to pose broadly similar questions to peasants and local government officials and to TPLF leaders, this provided a critical check on the accuracy of their answers, and a stimulus for further questions.

There were also a number of subjects that TPLF officials at all levels of the administration were generally reticent to consider. 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. Information on all of 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 interested 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 former representatives of REST, a host of former and present members of friendly and opposition movements, non-TPLF members of the 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 clearly heavy reliance on 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 my stay that they had little hesitation about speaking openly with me. Unfortunately only a few of them were able to critically and knowledgeably comment on the nature and course of the struggle in Tigray.

It was not possible to carry out many interviews of EPLF officials in Eritrea because of their involvement in the independence referendum that was being conducted while I was in the country, but it was feasible to meet with visiting academics, aid officials and UN observers, some of them leading authorities on the Eritrean war, and this did provide me with an opportunity to develop comparisons with the Tigrayan experience.

Interviews in 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 are seventy-eight) and then further into *tabias*, the lowest level of government. *Zobas*, *woredas* and *tabias*, together with the with the regional government with its capital in Mekelle, each have their own system of administration and elected assemblies at all levels called *baito*. Based on my experience (and it must be emphasized that as yet there has been very little academic research carried out in post-war Tigray so procedures may not necessarily be formalized) permission to carry out field research begins with a letter of authority signed by the Chairman of Tigray Region or his representative and addressed to the various chairmen of the *zobas* that the researcher wishes to visit. A letter to the particular *zoba* chairman or his representative provides permission to carry out research at that level of the administration. Upon request the *zoba* administration provides further letters of introduction and requests for cooperation from those *woredas* within the *zoba* that the researcher wishes to visit. This presented no problems. Should I have wished to carry out interviews within *tabias* the *woreda* administration would doubtlessly have provided the relevant letters of authorization for the officials concerned.

Although the present system of gaining approval may seem unduly bureaucratic, in fact it worked very smoothly and it never ceased to amaze me that when I arrived at a *woreda* headquarters in the company of my spouse and translator, upon presentation of my authorization letter I would invariably be warmly welcomed and it was usually only a matter of hours before the first interviews I requested were arranged.³⁶ It was found best

³⁶A major problem faced by Pausewang and his team of interviewers was acquiring the necessary approvals to carry out their research. In the early 1970s this involved getting a letter of approval from the Ministry of the Interior, a copy of which was presented to the provincial governor who then had to send

to try and arrive in a woreda administration centre on a market day as this facilitated both interviews with local government officials and with visiting peasants. In rural woredas where there were rarely hotels local officials would routinely offer up their own beds and make arrangements for our food and drink. Our practice was to carry a tent and basic foodstuffs so as to be good guests and at least try and avoid undue dependence on village hospitality. Apart from the relative ease in acquiring permission to carry out research, the fact that permission is now decided upon entirely at the local level points to the strengthening of local administrations, at least in Tigray, over the bureaucratic centralism that existed during the time of Haile-Selassie.

Before conducting interviews in the rural areas a translator had to be hired, and apart from questions of linguistic skills, compatibility and commitment, a major concern given the nature of my research was in not employing someone who would politically colour the answers to my questions. Given the extent of nationalist and pro-TPLF sentiments among Tigrayans I anticipated that this would be a problem. In the event it was not, and the person who was to serve me during my entire stay in Tigray was not at all politically oriented and, to my considerable surprise, 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 war. 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 administration.

The terrain of Tigray is very rugged with almost no paved roads and few all-weather roads. More than ninety percent of the population live in rural woredas and many of them

out an assistant days in advance to alert the local governor to inform the police and elders of the arrival of the interviewer. Even with these precautions sometimes interviewers were arrested. See Pausewang, p. 58.

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 the woredas. In the event interviews were carried out in about twenty woredas. With no vehicle at our disposal, transport ranged from bus, the back of trucks, on a couple of occasions rides in Ministry of Agriculture vehicles, and on other occasions day long treks, sometimes in the company of a guide.

In the first instance woredas were selected to carry out interviews that contained major towns because they were accessible along the main highway. As will be seen the townspeople were an early stimulus for the revolution and because Tigrayan towns are principally administrative and marketing centres, they were good locations from which to carry out interviews of religious leaders, merchants and visiting peasants and local officials who lived and worked in the adjacent rural areas. Older and long term resident teachers were also interviewed in the towns as a means of gaining an understanding the impact of the *Red Terror*, a state directed program of terrorism carried out by the Derg against its urban opponents during the late 1970s, since teachers and students in the towns were the main victims, and they were among the earliest and strongest supporters of the TPLF.

The majority of peasant interviews, however, were carried out in a small number of woredas specifically identified by TPLF officials as being areas liberated early in the struggle. A common characteristic of these areas was their isolation which meant that they were invariably difficult to reach, and sometimes even to find. 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 principle objective was not to achieve representation. In the first instance 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. The second objective was 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"³⁷ that the TPLF developed its political and military skills, carried out its first land reforms and established its first 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 the understanding of 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, and in particular how to approach peasants in terms of social differentiation. The 1974 upheaval led to the political and economic emasculatation of the traditional dominant classes and a redistribution of land that produced largely egalitarian land-holdings among peasants resident in the same tabia. Since there were some differences between tabias within woredas and considerable differences between woredas and across regions, one of the impacts of the land reforms has been to solidify regional economic differences. However, and significantly, capital goods such as buildings, cattle, and plowing tools were not distributed by either the Derg or the TPLF. Hence there is some economic differentiation proceeding that may well foster class divisions, but at present that is not the case.

Ascertaining these capital differences, however, would have been an extremely difficult exercise and of questionable value. With few investment opportunities and a dearth of consumer goods there is usually little to distinguish in terms of culture, much less politics, wealthier from poorer peasants. The difficult task of economically differentiating peasants was thus passed over. But differentiating peasants in terms of gender, religion, occupation or position, and social responsibilities were considered an important means by

³⁷For reasons that will be made clear later in the dissertation the term "liberated territories" is not entirely appropriate.

which to gather and evaluate community experience and opinion and measure the impact of change on different sections of the community.

In most cases efforts were made to seek out and interview 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. Since the political transformation that Tigray has undergone has to some extent led to the elevation of younger people to positions of power at the expense of the elders, the latter might be anticipated to be more critical of the changes and the new regime, but that was not apparent in the interviews.

A recurring theme in Pausewang's review of the methods and concepts of social research (which is based on both his own experience and an appraisal of other investigators) was the difficulty of conducting rural studies in Ethiopia given the suspicion peasants had of outside investigators. Writing more than two decades ago, Pausewang reported that it was common for peasants to refuse to be interviewed or to deliberately falsify information, and on many occasions interviewees showed open hostility to the interviewer. He attributed this to the peasants' fear of the government and apprehension of new taxes being imposed or loss of their land through land reform. But under the present regime in Tigray there can be little secrecy over an individual's land holdings since it was acquired through public meetings and all peasants in a *tabia* are expected to have land of approximately the same value.

While peasant suspicion was by no means absent in my study, it was never a serious problem; there was no hostility, and on no occasion did any of those questioned terminate the interview before its completion. This was in spite of the fact that on numerous occasions deliberately provocative questions were asked to ascertain peasant views of the

TPLF and its present regime. It is noteworthy that in Eritrea an anthropologist conducting research in the rural areas at the same time as my research reported that peasants got very agitated and some refused to complete interviews when controversial questions were asked, which he attributed to their fear of retribution by the EPLF government. There was little indication that Tigrayan peasants feared their government and they often complained about the lack of resources in the woreda and their desire that the government provide them with food for their participation in conservation projects.

As with Pausewang's experience, peasants sometimes saw me as an intermediary with the government and requested that the government 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 a TPLF official. And in one instance at the completion of a two and a half hour interview the peasants interviewed said that contrary to my stated objectives they thought the real goal of my study was to find gold that was reputedly located in the woreda.

In most cases, after an initial period of scepticism as to my motives, people in the rural areas warmed to the questions and seemed pleased that an outsider was taking an interest in their years of struggle, and this on occasion led to the problem of them presenting political conditions 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 maximizing 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.³⁸ Small groups were commonly utilized in this study and while the problems Pausewang referred to were by no means absent, 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 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 who now dominate all aspects of local administration. It was apparent in some interviews, however, that peasants would defer 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 a society 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 historically based, is a fascinating question which unfortunately cannot be taken up here.

The picture is very mixed, but it is significant that while in the Amhara areas of Ethiopia that I visited 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. (This may in fact be a reflection of the old Ethiopian practice

³⁸Ibid., p. 47.

expressed in the proverb "bowing at the front and farting at the rear".) In Tigray, however, where the TPLF leadership are viewed as their "sons", the term Ato is never heard in reference to them; nor is it heard among Front cadres. The TPLF has never attempted to establish a personality cult and it is probably significant that in Adwa, the home town of Ethiopian President Meles Zenawi, peasants answering a question on who they thought were the most important leaders of the revolution listed Meles ninth in 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.

One problem referred to by Pausewang has continued, and that is the lack of privacy for the conduct of interviews. As Pausewang has explained, insisting on privacy and the exclusion of others would be considered extremely impolite in Ethiopia and as a result the lack of seclusion for interviews must be tolerated. The common pattern for my rural interviews was to carry out the interviews in a woreda office (which sometimes doubled as an official's bedroom) and not surprisingly woreda 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. Such interruptions could work both ways, however, and in a few instances I ran into people on the street or in tea shops who had earlier been interviewed and was able to engage them in discussion or clarify some points in a more relaxed setting.

Contrary to the advice of some authorities, and the experience of Pausewang, all of whom held that questions addressed to peasants must be clearly restricted to those of a practical

or objective 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 the 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 sometimes at considerable length. Moreover, it is clear that this type of questioning was better facilitated by in-depth interviewing (usually between two and half and three and a half hours), than surveys that tend to avoid or trivialize the answers to abstract questions.

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 typically the women would defer to the men. Moreover, both men and women 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 see the condition and gauge the attitudes of the peasant women. As this problem became more apparent I specifically requested that woreda officials include women among peasants to be interviewed, but this proved to be rather late in the day. While I met with a number of female woreda executive members, and representatives from the Democratic Association of Tigrayan Women (DATW) were interviewed in virtually every woreda visited and at the regional level in Mekelle, probably no more than ten percent of non-office holding peasants interviewed were women.

Tigray is largely ethnically homogeneous, so with the exception of the Afar in southeastern Tigray who played a significant role in the outcome of the revolution in that area, there was no pressing need to go out of the way to interview representatives of ethnic minorities. Nonetheless, approximately ten Afar were interviewed, as were two Agwe merchants and a member of the Saho people who was the chairman of the Adigrat baito. Islamic sources estimate that one-quarter of Tigray's population is Moslem³⁹ and interviewing representative numbers of them and their leaders presented no particular problems.

Chapter Outline

Chapter 2 briefly outlines the various theoretical approaches to the study of revolution and then turns to a critical examination of one of these approaches, the moral economy school. Not only has moral economy been very influential in the study of revolutions since it took form in the 1970s, its approach is comparative and encompasses the experience of many revolutions. At the same time it is primarily concerned with revolutions in the twentieth century, and it gives prominence to the role of peasants in these revolutions, a critical consideration when approaching the Tigrayan revolution. In spite of its insights perhaps I have found the theory to be unduly focused on the crisis in the peasant economy and remiss in its appreciation of the importance of ethnonationalism and other largely political factors in explaining the cause and course of revolutions.

Chapter 3 has the objective of examining the historical and social context in which the Tigrayan revolution took place. It has three critical elements. First, an overview of

³⁹Interview: Sheik Kadir, Mekelle, January 5, 1993. This figure may well be too high and perhaps includes the Afar who are almost all Moslem, but have been granted their own autonomous area and now no longer reside in Tigray. The bishop of Tigray estimates the Orthodox Christian population to be 3.5 million and all others (Moslems, Protestants and Catholics) to be 1.0 million. See Interview: Meritta Christos, Mekelle, January 4, 1993.

Tigray's history so as to situate the province within the context of twentieth century Ethiopia. This involves explaining the forces that gave rise to the dominance of the Shoan Amhara feudal class over Ethiopia and which at the same time led to the political and economic marginalization of Tigray. Second, it seeks to provide a picture of Tigray on the eve of the revolution so as to appreciate the character of the society and to demonstrate that the moral economists' contention that agricultural commercialization serves as the stimulus for peasant revolt is not confirmed by the Tigrayan experience. And lastly, it aims at establishing the framework in which the 1974 revolution took place and an outline of the course of the political and military developments undertaken by the Derg so as to create a context in which to examine the Tigrayan revolution.

Chapter 4 has two principle objectives. The first is to identify the origins of the TPLF in the Ethiopian student movement of the 1960s and 1970s and to follow the group through its formative period in Addis Ababa and the towns of Tigray until the government's Red Terror of the 1970s forced it to operate almost entirely in the rural areas. In spite of this rural focus the TPLF leaders of the revolution came from the national university and in the early years most of the Front's membership came from the towns and only a small minority of the early militants were peasants. The second objective of this chapter will be to stress the part played by the ethnonationalism of the Tigrayan middle stratum in stimulating revolution. While theorists of moral economy have paid little attention to developments in the urban areas, it is important to make the critical link between the TPLF's ideological and social origins in an urban environment⁴⁰ and its successful leadership of a peasant based revolutionary movement.

⁴⁰For the purposes of this dissertation urban areas and towns (used synonymously) are distinguished from villages by the presence of high schools which as intellectual centres became breeding grounds for opposition to the regime. It must be acknowledged, however, that apart from the town's larger number of inhabitants, there was little that distinguished them from villages. Both served as marketing and administrative centres and even non-agricultural groups such as weavers could be found in both the towns and villages.

Chapter 5 and 6 will examine the military and the ideological struggles of the TPLF and will highlight the importance of political leadership to revolutions, a theme largely ignored by moral economists. Chapter 5 will review the various stages of the revolutionary war, beginning with the initial period from 1975 to 1978, through to its consolidation between 1978 and 1984, and lastly to the period from 1984 to 1989 when the strategic initiative passed to the TPLF and its major ally, the EPLF. This chapter will also examine the role played by the military regime in stimulating Tigrayans to revolt, the influence of the famine of 1984 - 1985 on the conduct of the war, and it will end by demonstrating the critical relationship between the TPLF's reforms and its capacity to wage war.

Chapter 6 will more specifically continue the theme of political leadership in its examination of the TPLF's ideological conflicts, both within the organization and in its relations with other opposition movements. A number of ideological concerns will be studied, although the most divisive issue, and the main focus of the chapter, will be on the right of nations to self-determination. The interest here is not only in understanding the ideological issues that motivated the TPLF, but also in understanding how, just as with armed struggle, the Front survived and endured potentially divisive ideological struggles when such conflicts led to the dismemberment of other revolutionary parties.

In the following three chapters, seven through nine, the task will be to examine the evolution of the TPLF led revolution within the context of Tigray's peasant society; to develop an understanding of the political interaction of revolutionaries and peasants that led to the peasants supporting the TPLF initiated struggle; and to critically appraise the moral economists' almost exclusive concern with the role of peasants in revolution. In spite of the crisis in the rural economy and the political dislocation brought about by the overthrow of the old regime the Tigrayan revolution did not develop spontaneously within

the peasant society as argued by some moral economists. Instead these chapters will demonstrate the critical role which the TPLF played in mobilizing and directing the struggle.

These three chapters examine TPLF-peasant relations at the woreda level, peasant relations with other political parties competing for their allegiance, political and military struggle in the woredas, institution building and their relevance to the struggle. It will also endeavour to develop an understanding of the process of the revolution through the experience of the peasants, something which is frequently ignored in studies of revolution. The chapters are divided geographically so as to correspond with the TPLF's operational division of the province during the course of the revolution. Thus Chapter 7 corresponds with the TPLF's Region I and embraces western Tigray; Chapter 8 corresponds with Region II and embraces central Tigray, and chapter nine corresponds with Region III and embraces eastern Tigray. Tigray is largely a homogeneous society, but this regional division speaks to broad geographical, economic, and hence political differences within the society, and thus better captures these differences and facilitates discussion of issues and problems that arise as a result of them.

Each regionally focused chapter also speaks to one or two major themes. In the west, the primary interest is with the emergence of the TPLF and its struggle with the old regime dissidents who formed *Teranafit*⁴¹ and later the Ethiopian Democratic Union (EDU), two groups that mounted armed insurrections against the Derg in the 1970s. The central region was the heartland of the old regime and of the Ethiopian Orthodox Church in Tigray, but it also became the nucleus of the TPLF led rebellion and this juxtaposition will be examined. In the east, the focus is on the TPLF's contest with the left-wing and student

⁴¹A Tigrigna word meaning committee.

led Ethiopian Peoples Revolutionary Party (EPRP), the carrying out of the Front's first land reform and the challenge of mobilizing in an ethnically pluralist environment in the southern portion of the province. The regional studies focus largely on the period beginning in 1975 and ending in approximately 1982 by which time the mass of the peasantry had gone over to the TPLF.

The concluding Chapter 10 attempts to bring together some of the political analyses developed in the course of the thesis and at the same time returns to the theoretical concerns raised in Chapter 2. A critique of moral economy theory will be made based on the study of the Tigrayan revolution and it will focus around the theoretical literature's answers or approaches to three specific questions: peasant class relations and proclivity to revolt, the linkage made between agricultural commercialization and revolution, and the significance attached to forces outside the peasantry in explaining peasant revolution. An argument will be made that the moral economists' focus on peasants in carrying out revolutions in the modern era needs revision; further that the theory's proponents have not fully understood the importance of the relationship between the existing regime, ethnonationalism and the political leadership provided by the party in the course of this revolution, and the implications for other insurrections.

CHAPTER 2: THE THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Introduction

This chapter is concerned with developing a theoretical framework with which to approach the problem of revolution in Tigray. It will begin with a brief overview of the major types of theories applied to the study of revolution in general. The moral economy school has probably become the most influential body of theory used in the analysis of revolutions in the developing world since its inception in the 1970s and therefore it is critically studied here. However much moral economy has proved to be a major advance over existing theoretical explanations of revolution, this study will expose some of its major limitations. As a result, in the last section of this chapter an argument will be made for the need to bring elements not considered by those committed to moral economy into the analysis of the Tigrayan revolution.

The study of revolution began in classical times, but the approach has changed from an interest in the normative aspects of revolution, or the "ethics of revolution", to the conspiratorial approach popularized by Machiavelli in the middle ages, to the contemporary concern with understanding the causes of revolutions.⁴² In the contemporary era approaches to revolution can largely be broken down into structuralist and non-structuralist approaches. Structuralist approaches to the study of revolution usually assume a conflictual model of society and social change. They are concerned with explaining revolution by reference to fundamental alterations in the relations of class in society, and this has led to the generation of theories that focus on such things as the struggle of classes at the level of production, changes in the international state system, and changes in the mode of production. Nonstructuralist approaches do not view civil

⁴²S. Taylor, *Social Science and Revolution*, (London: Macmillan Press, 1984), p. 114.

societies as beset by endemic conflict, but essentially as consensual by nature, and they hold that revolution does not necessarily involve class alterations. These approaches have developed theories of revolution grounded in the study of natural history, psychology and politics.

Natural history theories follow the course or stages of revolution and then develop standardized patterns that can be applied to other revolutions.⁴³ The single pivotal event in the course of a revolution from this perspective is held to be the end of support of the old regime by intellectuals which sets in motion a crisis of legitimacy. Misplaced and ultimately unsuccessful attempts are made to reform the old regime, followed by dissolution of the opposition and mobilization of the urban popular classes and peasantry, which in turn leads to coercion and finally the consolidation of a new regime.

Apart from its theoretical rigidity, there is the problem of the application of a theory based on French revolutionary experience to the national liberation struggles that make up most recent revolutionary experience. Moreover, the natural history explanation of revolution has been criticized for making the outcome of revolution part of the definition of revolution and for grossly simplifying the historical record.⁴⁴

In contrast to theories which attempt to explain individual behavior by reference to larger historical and cultural factors, psychologically based theories of revolution have focused on the individual attributes of revolutionary leaders,⁴⁵ on the relationship between leaders

⁴³C. Brinton, *The Anatomy of Revolution*, (New York: Harper and Row, 1965); L. Edwards, *The Natural History of Revolution*, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1972).

⁴⁴M. Kimmel, *Revolution: A Sociological Interpretation*, (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1990).

⁴⁵C. Leiden and K. Schmidt, *The Politics of Violence: Revolution in the Modern World*, (Englewood Cliffs: Prentice Hall, 1968).

and followers⁴⁶ and on the tensions resulting from frustrated desires. The latter concerns were taken up by Davies who held in his theory of the "J-curve" that the gap between expectations and performance generates frustration and aggressive behavior manifesting itself in revolt.⁴⁷ Gurr took a similar approach and concluded that relative deprivation is the basic condition for civil strife of any kind.⁴⁸

What is common about these psychological approaches is their concern with individual perceptions of the social milieu as explanatory variables in understanding participation in revolution. Institutional factors are cast as mediations and individual psychological states alone are held to be causal of revolutionary events. Critics of these approaches find their presumption that the behavior of revolutionary participants can be attributed to the irrational actions of disordered personalities to be based on a misplaced assumption of the legitimacy of the existing polity, an often inadequate appreciation of the historical context, and a perspective that is of limited value in explaining mass participation in revolution.⁴⁹

Functionalist political theories of revolution have attempted to shift the locus of causation to the political sphere. They assume a consensually based political system made up of functional parts, and define revolution in terms of system collapse, consensual breakdown and political disorder. Johnson⁵⁰ and Huntington⁵¹ are among the best known practitioners of this approach and both stress cultural values and consensus at the expense

⁴⁶E. Wolfenstein, *The Revolutionary Personality: Lenin, Trotsky, Gandhi*, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1971).

⁴⁷J. Davies, "The J-curve," H. Graham and T. Gurr (eds.), *Violence and America*, (New York: Signet Books, 1969).

⁴⁸T. Gurr, *Why Men Rebel*, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1971).

⁴⁹Theda Skocpol, *States and Social Revolutions: A Comparative Analysis of France, Russia, and China*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1979); A. Cohan, *Theories of Revolution: An Introduction*, (London: Thomas Nelson, 1975); Kimmel.

⁵⁰C. Johnson, *Revolutionary Change*, (Boston: Little and Brown, 1966).

⁵¹S. Huntington, *Political Order in Changing Societies*, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1968).

of other factors. As a result they ignore any examination of the character of state leadership and do not acknowledge the role that coercion plays in regime maintenance.

Huntington's version of structural functionalism focuses on the capacity of political institutions to respond to the demands by groups mobilized during the course of modernization and revolution is defined negatively as the failure of these institutions to absorb potential challengers. This approach has led to a preoccupation with the quest for system stability and an unquestioning acceptance of existing relations of authority. Kimmel has concluded that the "overvaluation of cultural values at the expense of structural analysis leads system theorists to identify legitimacy with political power, no matter how it is constituted and exercised".⁵²

In response to the influence of the nonstructuralist approaches to the study of revolution outlined above, a group of theorists whose work came to be known as moral economy took form in the 1970s. Moral economy theory has largely been championed by American scholars and was clearly influenced by, and a response to, the trauma of the Vietnam war. Common to followers of this school is first, a structural approach which assumes a conflictual model of society; second, an emphasis on the devastating impact of the incorporation of agrarian societies into the world economy; and third, the view that twentieth century revolutions have not been dominated as Marx expected, by urban working classes, but rather by national peasantries.

Moral economy had a number of advantages over existing theories. It was free of the inflexibility of natural history and it did not proceed from assumptions of state legitimacy and value consensus which clearly did not exist in Ethiopia during the period under

⁵²Kimmel, p. 62.

investigation. Instead, moral economists recognized the conflictual nature of developing societies undergoing rapid change and they pointed to the particular stresses experienced by the peasantry and identified them, and not the proletariat, as the class with the potential to carry out revolutions. Moral economists also recognize that successful revolutions are not led by peasants, nor do peasants necessarily leave a strong imprint on the character of regimes that comes to power through their struggles.

A more detailed examination of the moral economy school will be pursued by analyzing the answers of four theorists most commonly associated with the school of moral economy, Eric Wolf, Jeffery Paige, James Scott and Joel Migdal, to three specific questions of interest to this study.⁵³ First, what if any relation do the authors draw between peasant class relations and revolution? Second, what linkage do they make between agricultural commercialization and revolution? And thirdly, what significance does the respective analyst attach to factors or forces outside the peasantry in explaining peasant revolution? The objective here is to both distinguish the thinking of the various theorists, and also to gain an appreciation of the core theoretical premises of this school. The subsequent analysis of the Tigrayan revolution will provide a basis from which to critically examine the validity of the moral economy school and the work of its individual members on these specific questions.⁵⁴

⁵³This approach to understanding moral economy is suggestive in the work of Theda Skocpol. See T. Skocpol, "What Makes Peasants Revolutionary?" *Comparative Politics*, No. 2, (1982).

⁵⁴The moral economists whose work has been examined here do not provide any clear definitions of revolution. However, it can be assumed that given their structural approach that revolution involved fundamental changes in class and state relations. The question of ascertaining what constitutes fundamental social change will always be problematic. Moreover, in the case at hand it is also sometimes difficult to distinguish the changes carried out by the Derg from those of the TPLF. However, at least two fundamental changes from the perspective of moral economy can be identified. First, the nationalization of all rural lands and the destruction of the ruling nobility drastically altered social relations. Second, the re-structuring of state relations ended Amhara domination of the Ethiopian state and realized the TPLF objective of Tigrayan self-determination. It must also be appreciated that not every revolt, insurrection or uprising can be considered a revolution. Deciding whether the changes resulting from any given action constitutes a fundamental re-ordering of class and state relations can only be judged from the perspective of history. Definitions of revolution are thus inherently difficult.

Moral economy theory implicitly acknowledges the dilemma given expression by Barrington Moore who defined "bourgeois democratic" revolutions in terms of their legal and political consequences, but could only define "peasant" revolutions in terms of their social base.⁵⁵ Moore's difficulty in categorizing peasant revolutions by reference to their institutional results arose from the fact that "those who provide the mass support for a revolution, those who lead it, and those who ultimately profit from it are very different sets of people".⁵⁶ Indeed, apart from the influence of Marx, the school of moral economy has also been markedly influenced by the work of Barrington Moore.⁵⁷

Peasant Classes and Revolution

The theorists of moral economy 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 ultimately concluding that attempts to link class to proclivity to revolution only produce ambiguous conclusions. Even where, in the case of Wolf and Paige, class is identified as an important variable, the theorists differ categorically on which peasant class is the driving force behind revolutions. These differences of opinion thus do not provide direction for analyzing peasant classes in the Tigrayan context, but they do provide a point of reference from which to evaluate the importance of rural Tigrayan social structure to revolution.

⁵⁵E. Hermassi, *The Third World Reassessed*, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1980), p. 48.

⁵⁶B. Moore, *Social Origins of Dictatorship and Democracy: Lord and Peasant in the Making of the Modern World*, (Boston: Beacon Press, 1966), p. 427.

⁵⁷In his classic work *Social Origins* Moore set himself the task of developing a theory which would explain the "transformation from agrarian societies ... to modern industrial ones (Ibid., p. xi), but it was his subsidiary interest in discovering what kinds of social structures and historical situations produce peasant revolutions and which ones inhibit or prevent them (Ibid., p. 453) which has most influenced the course of the moral economy school.

Wolf's analysis of the social composition of the peasantry leads him to conclude that neither poor peasants and landless labourers, nor rich peasants are likely to pursue the course of rebellion. Instead it is the middle peasantry, or peasantries on the periphery, who constitute the major force behind rebellions.⁵⁸ Wolf defines the middle peasant as one who owns and cultivates his land with family labour. As such he is the bearer of peasant tradition and at the same time the most vulnerable to agricultural commercialization.

While the poor peasant or landless labourer who goes to the city usually breaks his tie to the land, the middle peasant stays on the land, but typically sends his children to the town to find work or go to school. In the process he is the "most exposed to influences from the developing proletariat"⁵⁹ and becomes a transmitter of urban unrest and political ideas to his fellow villagers. However, at the same time Wolf contends that it is precisely because the urban working class in newly industrializing societies is itself still closely tied to the village, from where the impetus to revolt arises, that it is receptive to revolutionary action.

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 relative freedom from the constraints of either the landlord, the market, or the state. This is because revolutionary potential arises from situations where the peasantry have a measure of control over their lives through organization 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.⁶⁰

⁵⁸E. Wolf, *Peasant Wars in the Twentieth Century*, (New York: Harper and Row, 1968), pp. 290-4.

⁵⁹*Ibid.*, p. 292.

⁶⁰One critic has argued that Wolf's own studies of Algeria and Russia contradict this exclusive dependence on the middle peasantry as the bearers of the revolution, see J. Walton, *Reluctant Rebels*:

Migdal does not focus on the class structure of the peasantry, because in his view peasant differentiation was always in a state of flux. Instead he is largely concerned with the peasantry's relationship under conditions of imperialism to other classes, the state, and society at large. In addition Migdal focuses on peasant-landlord ties and relationships, but he does not link the particular form the relationship takes to revolutionary potential. Moreover, unlike Wolf, he does not find a specific class or stratum of the peasantry likely to lead the revolution.

Migdal makes a distinction between communities where lords have governed the activities of peasants, usually classed as 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.⁶¹ In both cases Migdal's concern is with the inward orientation of peasants which he attributes to their lack of power. In the first instance the lord restricted peasant orientation outwards because it posed a threat to his monopoly of power. In the second instance powerful classes in control of the state led peasants to develop a whole series of institutions and prohibitions to minimize 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".⁶² This finding is similar to that of Wolf's

Comparative Studies of Revolution and Underdevelopment, (New York: Columbia University, 1984), p. 18.

⁶¹J. Migdal, *Peasants, Politics, and Revolution: Pressures towards Political and Social Change in the Third World*, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1974), pp. 33-46.

⁶²*Ibid.*, p. 155.

focus on the tactically mobile peasantry, and Migdal's later hypothesis that revolutionary situations are more likely to emerge in areas of poor administration, communication, and transportation, is comparable to Wolf's view that peasants in the periphery have more freedom to engage in political struggles.

Unlike Migdal, Paige bases his analysis of peasant revolution on class and like Moore, he holds that revolutions are shaped by the relationship between upper and lower classes in rural areas undergoing agricultural commercialization. Within this context he systematically addresses the relationship between peasant class and revolution for, as he puts it,

"To understand the consequences of rural property relations for agrarian revolution requires a theory linking income sources, economic behavior, and political behavior for both cultivators and non-cultivators and a set of hypotheses expressing the effect of any combination of cultivator and non-cultivator behaviors on the social movements of the cultivators themselves."⁶³

From this perspective he proposes a series of hypotheses predictive of rural class conflict.

Paige's hypotheses can be summarized as follows. First, a combination of both non-cultivators and cultivators dependent upon land as their principal sources of income, as might typify a commercial hacienda, 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, as might typify small landholding systems, 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

⁶³J. Paige, *Agrarian Revolution: Social Movements and Export Agriculture in the Underdeveloped World*, (London: The Free Press, 1975), p. 12.

wages, such as under a plantation system, 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, such as sharecropping and migratory labour systems, leads to revolution. The ideology under such systems is likely to be Communist and the demand will be for the redistribution of landed property through the seizure of the state.

For Paige then the situations offering the least revolutionary potential are those where landlords draw their income from the market and labourers draw their income from land. In this case commercially oriented landlords have "greater flexibility, wealth, and negotiating ability"⁶⁴ while small land holding peasants are tradition bound and conservative. Conversely, revolutionary potential arises when upper-class non-cultivators derive their income from land and peasants derive their income from wages. This class conflict is so structured as to preclude a negotiated or reformist solution: landlords are tied to traditional methods of labour exploitation, and the labouring peasants are victims to this relationship, as well as to a market over which they exert virtually no influence.

Landlords in this situation cannot afford a free market in labour and land and therefore must rely on repression and personal ties rather than economic forces to maintain their positions. Facing them are wage dependent peasants with little or no access to land and only their class solidarity to rely on. Economic struggles under these conditions become highly politicized because landlords cannot give up more of the agricultural product without reducing their own share of the surplus.⁶⁵

⁶⁴Ibid., p. 48.

⁶⁵A. Disch, "Peasants and Revolts," *Theory and Society*, 7, (1979), pp. 243-52.

The contrast between Paige's analysis and that of Wolf's 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 maintained, was largely a defensive response to the impact of commercialization and they were able to revolt because of their tactical mobility. Peasants thus become revolutionary to prevent proletarianization.

Paige, on the other hand, locates the core of the Vietnamese revolution among the export oriented Mekong delta rice sharecroppers who, unlike the more common traditional small holder peasants, had little prospect of social mobility, were not motivated by individualism, and hence were more receptive to radical political and social doctrines.⁶⁶ Wolf's revolutionary land-owning middle peasantry are for Paige traditional, conservative, and non-revolutionary. Peasants in Paige's schemata become revolutionary because of proletarianization.

One of the unique aspects of Paige's analysis is his conclusion that it is the very poorest and most exploited class of the peasantry, the sharecroppers, who are driven to revolution. As Kimmel points out, Paige has taken Marx's premise that immiseration provided the stimulus for working class revolution and applied it to the agricultural worker.⁶⁷

When pressed Scott points to the subsistence-oriented peasants as being more likely to be revolutionary because their subsistence ethic is the most vulnerable to the landlord. However, he finds that the answer to the problem of relating revolution to peasant social

⁶⁶Paige, pp. 311-16.

⁶⁷Kimmel, p. 139.

structure to be "ambiguous and allows no easy generalizations".⁶⁸ This is 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 reasonably be drawn. In the first instance, a case can be made that the communal structures are more explosive. 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.

This latter reasoning is similar to that of 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 those with traditions of strong solidarity, or "radical solidarity", favoured rebellion or revolution.⁶⁹ It is also consistent with Wolf's analysis of the revolutionary potential of self-administering communes which are also characterized by strong group solidarity.

The problem according to Scott is 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 would facilitate collective action, at the same time they are better arranged to "redistribute pain" and thus avoid or postpone subsistence crises.

⁶⁸J. Scott, *The Moral Economy of the Peasant: Rebellion and Subsistence in Southeast Asia*, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1976), p. 201.

⁶⁹Moore, pp. 475-6.

The moral economists are not in agreement on the part, if any, played by peasant class in stimulating revolution. However, their work, with the exception of Paige, does move beyond that of Marx who could only entertain the notion of a revolutionary peasantry after capitalism had carried out a complete rural transformation which produced a landless peasant class that replicated the proletariat of the urban areas. The fundamental difficulty of their model of peasant classes is that it is largely inapplicable to the agrarian social structure in Tigray.

The conventional approach to peasant economic differentiation, and that followed by moral economists, is dividing them into categories of rich, middle and poor.⁷⁰ Rich peasants are either landlords who have their land cultivated by landless peasants who are mostly sharecroppers and are considered poor peasants, or they are capitalist farmers who have their own land and derive their wealth from the exploitation of wage labourers. Middle peasants in turn cultivate their own land and do not exploit the labour of others, while poor peasants cannot support themselves on their own land.

However, there was very little genuine capitalist farming in highland Tigray at the time of the overthrow of the old regime, and those who assumed the role of landlords were typically poor peasants who did not have the necessary oxen to do their plowing and therefore rented their land to rich peasants who had oxen. Wealth was thus normally defined in terms of possession of capital, largely in the form of oxen and not land. Landlordism of the type considered by the moral economists was largely absent in Tigray and therefore 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 breaking

⁷⁰See H. Alavi, "Peasants and Revolution", R. Miliband and J. Saville, *Socialist Register*, (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1965), p. 244.

this pattern down, the traditional system of tenure made the alienation of land and its accumulation by landlords and capitalists extremely difficult.

Of relevance to this study, 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 centralization by successive Amhara elites from the province of Shoa in the century before the 1974 collapse of the old regime, Tigray as a whole had become a peripheralized underdeveloped region only weakly linked to the centre. And within Tigray, the lowlands of the west, and to a lesser extent those of Tembien in the south-central part of the province, were areas where the state's authority was particularly weak and it was these same areas that became centres for the TPLF led revolution.

However, Wolf is mistaken in finding the role of the middle or peripheral peasantries in revolution to be critical because of their tactical mobility. No evidence can be drawn from Tigray that supports the view that middle peasants or peasants on the periphery played a dominant role in the revolution. The significance of the peripheries lies in the fact that they allowed the revolutionary party greater tactical mobility. Moreover, while Migdal is correct in emphasizing the particular structural context in which rebellions against the state begin, he makes a mistake common to moral economists. By stressing structure, he does not appreciate the critical role to be attached to the process of revolution which brings the role of the revolutionary party to the fore, something which this study attempts to do.

Agricultural Commercialization

The destructive impact of capitalism on the traditional economy of the peasantry is held by the moral economists to be the critical stimulus for revolution by peasants who seek to reinstate the traditional institutions and procedures menaced by capitalism.⁷¹ As Wolf graphically put it, the capitalist market "cut through the integument of customs" and forced peasants to make defenses against it.⁷² But the moral economists' conception of the precapitalist peasant economy is highly idealized and assumes villages that are economically self-sufficient and possess a strong communal character, as well as mutual and valued obligations between patron and peasant. As will be demonstrated this conception does not adequately capture Tigrayan realities and Popkin is undoubtedly correct to conclude that, "Moral economists take too benign a view of the village and patron-client ties and too harsh a view of market potential".⁷³

Wolf holds that peasant rebellion takes place in the context of a large-scale cultural encounter between capitalist and pre-capitalist societies which resulted in the break down of custom, the ending of social obligations between rulers and ruled, and the creation of wage labour and a market in land. This "Great Transformation" liberated man as an economic agent, but the human suffering it entailed provided the ground on which anti-capitalism developed.

Like Wolf, Migdal also favours an anthropological approach when considering the impact of imperialist penetration of traditional economies, but unlike Wolf, he is more precise about the forms it takes. Imperialism enabled the centres of capital to achieve new levels of efficiency in the transfer of wealth from the peripheries, and together with the vast increase in state power, served to unleash a whole series of forces such as population

⁷¹S. Popkin, *The Rational Peasant: The Political Economy of Rural Society in Vietnam*, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1979), p. 245.

⁷²Wolf, p. 272.

⁷³Popkin, p. 29.

growth, patron withdrawal, new and increased taxes and loss of craft income, which irrevocably broke down the inward orientation of the peasantry and re-focused their material existence.⁷⁴ Thus Migdal writes that under the impact of nineteenth century imperialism, "The centre of peasant life has shifted from the village square to the national capital."⁷⁵

The decline of the village as the centre of peasant life, according to Migdal, both weakened the power of the lord and undermined the entire institutional apparatus designed to restrict peasants from developing relations outside the village. Those most affected by the weakened village organization suffered the most while the minority with resources, outside reference groups, and best positioned to gain from others' desperate need for cash, benefited from the crisis. He argues that aspirations and resources for increased outward orientations may have long existed, but restrictions from within the peasant community thwarted potential innovators and fostered technological conservatism.

Paige does not study in detail the impact of imperialism on pre-capitalist societies, but his studies take place in the context of the commercialization of agriculture, and he is strongest when analyzing the social formations and class conflicts that commercialization gives rise to. All of his studies are of export agriculture, identified as a function of the global character of modern imperialism. But within each state that Paige examines there are several export enclaves, each with its own social system and unique class struggle. In his study of Peru, Paige finds that with both *hacendados* and labourers deriving their income from land the result was agrarian revolt. In Angola, Paige considers landlords who derive their income from land while the peasantry is tied to a system of migratory labour; the outcome was a peasant based nationalist revolt. Only in Vietnam, he argues,

⁷⁴Migdal, pp. 91-3.

⁷⁵Ibid., p. 129.

did the particular structure of the class conflict among the Mekong delta sharecroppers favour a revolutionary socialist outcome.

Scott's approach to the commercialization of agrarian relations begins like Migdal's from a close analysis of the impact of imperialism on precapitalist peasant societies. Scott emphasizes the failure of institutions designed to protect the peasant economy in the face of agricultural commercialization. The transformation of land and labour into commodities leads to income differentiation, destruction of subsidiary occupations, demands for more rent by landowners and more taxes by the state, and the erosion of risk-sharing values of villages and kin-groups.⁷⁶ This process also promotes tensions to a point "where peasants had hardly any other alternative but resistance."⁷⁷ Like Wolf and Migdal, and unlike Paige, Scott's revolutionary peasantry are not destitute or landless, but are responding to the threat posed by commercialization of agriculture to their traditional way of life.

The breakdown of the old order and the stimulus for peasant revolt, according to Scott, also arises from the increasing ability of the state to interfere with and direct the activities of the peasantry. Scott concludes that the outcome of peasant revolutions is the creation of a "more dominant state apparatus that is capable of battering itself on its peasant subjects",⁷⁸ a conclusion similar to that of Skocpol in her studies of the revolutions in Russia, France and China.⁷⁹

⁷⁶Scott, p. 57.

⁷⁷Ibid., p. 41.

⁷⁸J. Scott, *Weapons of the Weak: Everyday Forms of Peasant Resistance*, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1985), p. xvi.

⁷⁹See Skocpol.

Scott describes his analysis as "essentially phenomenological",⁸⁰ by which he means that it is concerned with the subjective values of the peasants. As such he stresses the importance of peasants' conceptions of social justice, rights and obligations, and of reciprocity. This sets him apart from the other analysts considered here and provides the central focus of his work. Scott argues that peasant life is guided by two fundamental principles, the norm of reciprocity and the right to subsistence, and agricultural commercialization challenges both of them.⁸¹

Following the conclusions of Chayanov's Russian studies,⁸² Scott notes the peasants' willingness to practice "self-exploitation" to preserve their relative autonomy. They accepted the landlord as long as he fulfilled his responsibilities as a patron. They also accepted the state as long as the taxes that it levied were adjusted to the ability to pay them. But imperialism undermined, if not eliminated, the lord as a patron, and the colonial state imposed fixed taxes and was rigorous in its collection of them. These developments challenged the peasants' "moral economy", or "view of which claims on their product were tolerable and which intolerable."⁸³

According to Scott, two themes of peasant protest can be identified: first, claims on the products or service of the peasants are never deemed legitimate when they infringe on a minimal culturally defined subsistence level; and second, the product of land should be distributed in such a way that all are guaranteed a subsistence existence.⁸⁴ The peasants' moral economy is the instrument by which these properties are measured. According to Scott, the "crucial question in rural class relations is whether the relationship of

⁸⁰Scott, *Moral Economy*, p. 4.

⁸¹*Ibid.*, p. 167.

⁸²A.V. Chayanov, *The Theory of Peasant Economy*, edited by D. Thomas, B. Kerblay and R. Smith, (Homewood, Ill.: R.D. Irwin, 1966).

⁸³*Ibid.*, p. 4.

⁸⁴*Ibid.* p. 10.

dependence is seen by clients (i.e. the peasantry) as primarily collaborative and legitimate or as primarily exploitive."⁸⁵

Scott's concept of moral economy allows him to avoid the pitfall of denying the existence of exploitation simply because it cannot be functionally defined without, however, embracing the objective definition favoured by Marxists whereby exploitation is the surplus value of the peasantry extracted by the capitalist. Interesting as Scott's notion of moral economy is, it is questionable how much it goes beyond Moore. The latter's response to the same problem was to give an objective basis to exploitation by considering the mediating factor of "folk conceptions of those who fight, rule, and pray must be obvious to the peasant, and the peasants' return payments must not be grossly out of proportion to the services received."⁸⁶

Although approached in differing ways, concern with the impact of agricultural commercialization on precapitalist societies and the stimulus commercialization provides for peasant revolt is a common theme in the work of the theorists examined here. However, as used by the moral economists, the term agricultural commercialization is meant alternatively to refer 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,⁸⁷ but in the small landholder dominated economy of Tigray, there was little investment of a commercial nature.

⁸⁵Ibid., p. 170.

⁸⁶Moore, p. 473.

⁸⁷K. Griffin, *The Economy of Ethiopia*, (New York: St. Martin, 1992), pp. 289-290.

While peasants were increasingly taking up seasonal wage labour on farms, few of them were landless and thus they could not be considered a rural proletariat. Moreover, the traditional system of land tenure in practice in highland Tigray posed serious obstacles to land alienation, which was largely restricted to the sparsely populated lowlands. Significantly, commercial agricultural enterprises were not being developed by a class of capitalist farmers as anticipated by the moral economists, but by members of the old nobility who mixed their roles of commercial farmer and feudal lord. Moreover, the moral economists are mistaken in assuming that state centralization is only a product of capitalist and imperialist forms of political development. In Ethiopia state centralization has been a centuries-old objective of successive feudal regimes and it was pursued with even greater vigour by the post 1974 state socialist regime.

Agricultural commercialization is indeed a process which produces instability, but as confirmed by interviews of peasants in Tigray there is no indication that it served as a stimulus for revolution. Although Tigrayan villages did assume some form of collective responsibility for the payment of taxes and there were restrictions on land ownership, two of the moral economists' criteria for defining the corporate character of villages, they were not self-sufficient and the growth in markets, both in commodities and in labour, were generally welcomed by peasants whose survival in the face of a declining agricultural economy increasingly depended on them. As a result, the attempt by the Derg to end private agricultural commercialization did not resolve the rural crisis in Tigray or win it support, but led to a ground swell of opposition that benefited the opposition to the regime.

Factors Outside the Peasantry

Moral economists posit peasant revolution as arising from a crisis in the rural economy in modernizing societies, but they fail to recognize that the crisis is systemic and not restricted to the agricultural sector. In addition moral economists generally endorse the view that for rebellious peasants to seriously challenge the state they need outside leadership which is urban, educated and from the middle classes. But with the exception of Wolf, they are strangely reticent about analyzing the conditions and motivations of the leaders of peasant revolution. And they are even less prepared to examine the place and function of political leadership in the revolution. Indeed, it is only by not examining the systemic character of the transitional crisis in developing societies and the critical role of the middle strata in the revolution that moral economists are able to preserve their almost exclusive focus on the peasantry in their theory.

For Wolf the breakdown of the peasant economy produces a crisis of power. Traditional power holders have either had their power curtailed or have entered the exchange economy, while the new power holders' focus on economic transformation leaves little scope for concerns of social order. Economic relations, once an integral part of a network of social linkages and responsibilities, he argues, become bureaucratic and impersonal, removing themselves from their consequences. 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. As functionaries of the new order they are caught up in the contradiction between the demands placed upon them and the bureaucratic and structural constraints to meeting those demands. As Wolf put it, "they are limited to coping with symptoms, but do not have a handle on the conditions which produces these symptoms."⁸⁸ This stratum of "marginal men" or intellectuals suffer directly from the

⁸⁸Wolf, p. 288.

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 Wolfe 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 their own. The intelligentsia are not, however, mere "outside agitators" and it cannot be said that without them the peasants would be at rest. The revolutionary potential of the peasants is genuine, but it is constrained by their vision which is "self-limiting ... anachronistic and ... apocalyptic", an anti-state, anti-capitalist projection incapable of being realized.⁸⁹ Wolf does not analyze the process by which directionless peasant rebellions are organized by the revolutionary intelligentsia, other than to note that where the intelligentsia does not assume this role, such as was the case during the Mexican revolution where the peasantry provided its own leadership, the rebellion will not move beyond the countryside and engage the centres of power in the city.

Migdal's analysis is broadly in line with that of Wolfe's. Peasant participation in institutionalized revolutionary movements, he contends, 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.⁹⁰ The probability of such peasant participation, according to Migdal, is dependent upon increased market involvement stemming from economic crisis, including

⁸⁹Ibid., p. 290.

⁹⁰Migdal, p. 229.

the unprofitability of market activity because of corruption, monopoly and structural incompleteness.

Thus Migdal, like Wolf, points to the necessity of an outside revolutionary organization of students, intellectuals and disaffected members of the middle class to structure the peasants' revolt. However, while the revolutionary movements must demonstrate that they can meet the villagers' particular needs as their community moves from an inward to an outward orientation, the primary objective of the movement is not ameliorating local conditions but replacing the existing system of administration with autonomous structures.⁹¹ To understand the peasant-revolutionary relationship Migdal draws on organization theory and the notion of "social exchange" which stresses the discharging of obligations in return for the furnishing of benefits.

Migdal's focus on the institution building activities of revolutionaries casts light on both the revolutionary process and in particular the peasant-revolutionary relationship. Based on his study of the Vietnamese and Chinese revolutions Migdal holds that, "Revolutionaries create power through a painstaking, step-by-step process of social exchange, a process which routinizes behavior, rather than trying to forment unpredictable and uninstitutional action."⁹² It is not cataclysmic uprisings that are being organized, but instead institutions that are more powerful than those of their opponents.

Unlike Migdal who largely ignores the problem of peasant class, Paige's analysis is built on a class conflict model within export enclaves, and he stresses the impact of imperialism and the strains it causes within peasant society, but he devotes almost no attention to ideology, revolutionary struggle, the peasant-revolutionary party relationship, or indeed

⁹¹Ibid., pp. 231-3.

⁹²Ibid., pp. 263.

any intervening variables. While the schematic approach of Paige's theoretical model appeals to some,⁹³ it can be accused of being mechanistic and looking to immiserization alone to foster revolutionary consciousness.⁹⁴

Paige holds that revolutionary socialist movements are most likely to emerge in decentralized share-cropping systems. But he further claims that in these systems the Communist Party is organized from within the worker community,⁹⁵ an extreme view and one that puts him at odds with the other analysts considered here. Positing the emergence of the revolutionary party from within the class it is dedicated to emancipate of course eliminates any need for analysis of peasant-party relations, but in fact Paige provides no evidence to substantiate this assertion.⁹⁶ Only in exceptional cases does Paige acknowledge that cultural constraints operating within traditional society may necessitate "political organization from outside the workers' community."⁹⁷

While Migdal emphasizes the role that institutions independent of the state created by the party play in the revolutionary process, Scott's approach is to stress the limited extent to which the institutions of the ruling elites penetrate the rural sector. Furthermore, he argues that it is the limited involvement of peasants in organized political activity that best explains why the peasantry, and not the proletariat has constituted the decisive social base of most successful twentieth century revolutions. Scott thus puts Marx on his head and argues that,

⁹³B. Cumings, "Interest and Ideology in the Study of Agrarian Politics," *Politics and Society*, 10. No. 4, (1981), pp. 467-95.

⁹⁴T. Skocpol, "What Makes Peasants Revolutionary?" *Comparative Politics*, (1982), pp. 351-76.

⁹⁵Paige, p. 70.

⁹⁶There is little place for politics and political parties in an analysis which defines a revolutionary situation solely by the capacity of the working class for organization and the ability or willingness of the upper class to make concessions, see Kimmel, p. 138.

⁹⁷Paige, p. 68.

"The relative isolation of the peasantry from the cultural and institutional life of the state and its ruling elites has meant that, as a class, it has been more immune than has the proletariat to the social and moral hegemony (in the sense in which Gramsci used that word) of the dominant classes."⁹⁸

State hegemony for Scott is dependent upon the courts and civil bureaucracy, schools, the media, and the church and these institutions are less pervasive among the peasantry than among the proletariat. Moreover, as a precapitalist 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.⁹⁹ 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 is equally unconventional in his rejection of the "prevailing myth" which holds that it is the task of the political party to break the hold of a hegemonic value system and organize 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 organizing the peasantry, is based upon the view that the peasantry is made up of nearly autonomous communities with few, if any integrating bonds. Scott rejects this conception and holds that instead peasant economic life is not bound by the village, but by the marketing area, and further, that social interaction also takes place through religious linkages and kinship ties.

⁹⁸J. Scott, "Protest and Profanation: Agrarian Revolt and the Little Tradition," *Theory and Society*, 4, (1977), p. 270.

⁹⁹*Ibid.*, pp. 279-80.

Moreover, while Scott acknowledges the peasants' need for coordination and the tactical vision that must come from outside the peasantry, he equates the outside organization of the peasantry with Lenin's critique of trade unionism, which holds that unions become tied to a highly institutionalized struggle over the divisions of the surplus and as a consequence abandon the struggle for socialism.¹⁰⁰ Organizations of peasants are also likely to be predisposed to conduct an orderly, nonviolent contest for power within existing structures. Scott thus concludes that it is the relative absence of peasant organization, together with the peasantry's precapitalist moral economy and religious traditions, that gives it a critical revolutionary advantage.

The moral economists identified the impact of capitalism on precapitalist peasant economies as the stimulus for revolution, and in evidence they have pointed to both the successful revolutions since the advent of capitalism and the fact that peasants have been the critical social formation in virtually all of them. The failure in the moral economists' vision has been in not fully recognizing that the impact of the forces unleashed during this transitional period may serve as the revolutionary stimulus for non-peasant social classes. This has been noted by Walton who has argued that an exclusive focus on the peasantry in crisis implicitly denies the significance of the corollary crisis in the urban areas, and equally importantly, their common origin and interdependence. He writes that,

"fundamental theoretical difficulties arise when the very real rural effects of incorporation are considered in isolation from equally obvious urban and 'systemic' effects and when only the former are traced in their revolutionary implications."¹⁰¹

¹⁰⁰Ibid., pp. 294-5.

¹⁰¹Walton, p. 17.

Fanon also recognized that peasants play a decisive role in revolution, but that the initiative and leadership passes to forces from the urban centres.¹⁰²

The analysts whose work has been examined here have not always recognized that for peasant rebellion to assume a national character the peasantry's insular perspective must be overcome and that can only come about by linking, through political organization and action, their grievances to those of other classes, notably the urban working class and the intelligentsia, who have been both created and suffered dislocation because of development and the forms that it has taken in modernizing societies. Without this linkage the peasant rebellion will not rise above local concerns and will be defeated. Where the linkage is made then societal-wide restructuring is on the agenda, but the leadership and direction of the rebellion passes to nonpeasant groups. In bringing a necessary revision to a Marxism which could only see revolutionary potential arising in the rural areas after capitalism had led to the creation of a rural class of landless agriculturist workers, moral economists went too far in their emphasis and came close to positing revolution as being solely dependent upon the peasantry.

Amilcar Cabral, leader of the anti-colonial Guinean revolution, drew a distinction between the immense "physical force" of the Guinean peasantry which constituted the bulk of the country's population and produced most of its wealth, and its "revolutionary force", which varied among different peoples in different parts of the country, but was never strong. He concluded that "... it is easier to convince the workers and people employed in the towns

¹⁰²F. Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth*. (New York: Grove Press, 1963), p. 126. See also P. Koehn who argues in reference to Ethiopia that, "The nature of urban economic conditions and the values, actions, and interactions of political actors in the nation's capital - particularly the military, students and workers - proved to be far more salient in shaping prospects for radical political change than rural land ownership patterns, incipient peasant class formation, and customary patterns of acquiring and distributing rural land use rights." P. Koehn, "Forecast for Political Changes in Ethiopia: An Urban Perspective," J. Scarrit (ed.), *Analyzing Political Change in Africa: Applications of a New Multidimensional Framework*, (Boulder: Westview Press, 1980), pp. 75-6.

that they are subject to massive exploitation because they can see it."¹⁰³ Directly challenging the views of the moral economists, Cabral's experience was that the "peasantry is not a revolutionary force."¹⁰⁴

Indeed, as will be shown in this dissertation, for the first years of the Tigrayan revolution, urban elements not only dominated the leadership of the TPLF, but also constituted the majority of its members. It is thus equally important to understand the experience of urban Tigrayans during a period of rapid social change. Critical in this respect was the formation in post World War II Ethiopia of a petty-bourgeoisie to meet the growing professional and technical needs of the imperial state. In Tigray the most politically dynamic elements of this petty-bourgeoisie were found among university and high school students, teachers and government employees. And if, as Moore contends, the peasantry was the dynamite that brought the old building down, then it was the Tigrayan petty-bourgeoisie who set the fuse for the dynamite. The political evolution of this class in formation deserves far closer examination than is suggested by the moral economists.

The major deficiencies of moral economy theory that emerge and will be addressed in this study lie in three areas. First, the practitioners of the theory do not pay sufficient attention to the part played by the regime in bringing about the revolt and influencing the form it takes. Second, in giving prominence to the economy of the peasants the moral economists do not acknowledge the part played by non-economic factors, notably nationalism, in motivating peasants as well as intellectuals to revolt. Third, the emphasis on the agrarian crisis led moral economists to neglect a study of the urban petty-bourgeoisie and the importance of the leadership they provided in the revolution. This study will make clear the need for a revised approach and will develop an explanation of the Tigrayan revolution

¹⁰³A. Cabral, *Revolution in Guinea*, (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1969), p. 54.

¹⁰⁴*Ibid.*, p. 61.

in terms of the regime parameters to revolution, the role of nationalism, and the part played by the political leadership of the revolutionary party.

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, and that was certainly the case in Ethiopia.¹⁰⁵ Under the old regime political dissent was restricted, but the feudal state did not have the capacity to eliminate it entirely and as a result opposition to the regime took shape in the towns. The Derg's prohibition against dissent and the capacity of the state to enforce 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, to swell the ranks of the opposition and define the political and military context of the rebellion.

Until the 1960 attempted coup against Haile-Selassie struggles for power at the centre have 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 petty-bourgeoisie. While the nobility pursued their goals through conspiracies, intrigue and armies held together by patron-client relations, the revolutionary petty-bourgeoisie concentrated on mass political mobilization. Lastly, while the nobility did not challenge the existence of the state, the petty-bourgeoisie aspired to overthrow it.

¹⁰⁵Moore, p. 457.

The young military officers who formed the government after the collapse of the old regime in 1974 used political mobilization, 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 the students to leave the towns and launch a series of rural insurrections, one of which was led by the TPLF.

Like the urban petty-bourgeoisie, the peasants' opposition to the new regime also developed in response to that regime's policies. The Derg's dismissal of the provincial administration of the Tigrayan leader, Ras Mengesha, not only offended the peasants' national sensitivities but also eliminated a crucial element in the patron-client relations which both linked and protected the peasant from the central state.¹⁰⁶ As Clapham has noted, weakening the autonomy of local nobles served to undermine the connection between the central government and the political authority in the countryside.¹⁰⁷

By the early 1980s the Derg's policies and its authoritarian approach to government, together with its insensitivity to Tigrayan national sentiments, had alienated the large majority of peasants. The TPLF was able to capitalize on this disenchantment by raising the banner of nationalism and putting before the peasants a viable program of social reform.

Nationalist Basis of Revolution

¹⁰⁶Koehn and Cohen have noted that, "in a deconcentrated and atomized system such as Ethiopia's, powerful and centrally-located patrons can protect local officials from national government regulation..." See P. Koehn and J. Cohen, "Local Government in Ethiopia: Independence and Variability in a Deconcentrated System," *Journal of Administration*, Vol. 9, No. 4, (1975), p. 385.

¹⁰⁷Clapham, p. 3.

A theory of nationalism cannot be formulated in these pages, but a framework can be outlined in which to approach Tigrayan nationalism and comprehend the context in which it emerged and the form it took. However nationalism, or ethnonationalism, since the Tigrayan rebellion was for ethnic autonomy within a unitary Ethiopian state, figured prominently in the mobilization of both the petty-bourgeoisie and the peasants. Indeed, the first name of the TPLF, *Tehahit Tegardelo Harnet Hisbi Tigray* (Struggle for the Liberation of the Tigrayan People) and its subsequent names were specifically designed to appeal to Tigrayans' nationalist sentiments.¹⁰⁸ Ethnonationalism not only played an important role in the TPLF's mobilization of Tigrayans, but it was also became a source of controversy within the movement and frequently a cause of tension in relations between the TPLF and other liberation movements.

Moral economists hold that peasants revolt when major changes in the economy undermine their way of life; they thus recognize peasants to be economic beings, but not apparently, political beings capable of giving nationalist interpretations to changes in their economy and way of life. Generally, however, social scientists have recognized the importance of nationalist sentiments in Third World revolutions,¹⁰⁹ but they have been reticent about concluding that peasants can have nationalist aspirations or ideals that were not introduced from outside, notably by the middle classes in the towns.¹¹⁰

It will be shown in the following chapter which examines the historical development of Tigray that prior to the modern era both the nobility and the peasants regularly voiced

¹⁰⁸ Interview: Negussie Lilly, Endaselasie, February 6, 1993.

¹⁰⁹ See for example, E. Hermassi, *The Third World Reassessed*, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1980).

¹¹⁰ One of the early and formative statements made on this subject was by Thomas Hodgkin who wrote that, "it is above all in these new urban societies that the characteristic institutions and ideas of African nationalism are born and grow to maturity; and from these centres that they spread to, and influence, 'the bush'." T. Hodgkin, *Nationalism in Colonial Africa*, (New York: New York University Press, 1957), p. 18.

national grievances. Until the advent of the TPLF-led revolution these protests took place within the context, and as a result of, the struggle for state power between the nobilities of Tigray and the Amhara dominated provinces. The Amhara nobility, and particularly those from the province of Shoa, proved victorious in this contest and they used state power to centralize administration, undermine local bases of authority and concentrate development in their home areas. Efforts were begun in the middle ages and continued through Haile-Selassie and the Derg to centralize state powers by weakening political and cultural influences in the peripheries such as Tigray. And they were bitterly resented. It speaks to the continuing existence of Tigrayan nationalism, however, that in spite of the increasing marginalization of the province in a Shoan Amhara dominated empire that Tigray, alone among the core Abyssinian provinces, was able to maintain a measure of political autonomy from Shoa and was ruled by members of the local nobility until the revolution of 1974.¹¹¹

However, as a movement nationalism was not able to acquire a mass basis of support until recently because, as Connor explains with respect to Thailand and Ethiopia,

"diverse ethnic elements were able to coexist for a lengthy period within each of these states because the states were poorly integrated and the ethnic minorities therefore had little contact, with either the (mostly theoretic) state governments or with each other."¹¹²

In the absence of the state, or the inability of the premodern state to fully incorporate the ethnic minorities, there was no basis for a nationalism that had a broad support to develop in Tigray.

¹¹¹H. 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.

¹¹²W. Connor, *Ethnonationalism: The Quest for Understanding*, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1994), p. 36.

A further factor inhibiting the development of nationalism as a popular movement in Tigray was that as a territorial unit the province was constantly changing as various empires and the powers of different states waxed and waned. In the past century alone this has involved the loss of the predominantly Tigrigna-speaking highlands of Eritrea as a result of Italian conquest, as well as changes to the provincial boundaries made by the government of Haile-Selassie, and more recently by the EPRDF. Indeed, under Amhara regimes Tigrayan boundaries were drawn to include large numbers of Moslem Afars and to remove Tigrigna-speakers in the southeast and the west of the province, with the objective of diluting Tigrayan national consciousness and weakening the power of the provincial nobility.

Nationalism is thus a phenomenon identified with modernization: it begins with advances in communication, transportation and the media which progressively curtail cultural isolation and break down former identities. An unintegrated state, Connor argues, is not a threat to the existence of ethnic communities, but improvements to communications and transportation increase cultural awareness of minorities between themselves and others, particularly of the dominant ethnic group in the state.¹¹³ In Tigray these processes can largely be dated from the brief period of Italian colonialism begun in 1935.

Ethnonationalism thus can only take form after primordial identities have been overcome. According to Brass,

"ethnic identity and modern nationalism arise out of specific types of interactions between the leaderships of centralizing states and elites from non-dominant ethnic groups, especially but not exclusively on the peripheries of those states. The occurrence of ethnic mobilization and nationality-formation in centralizing multiethnic states and the particular forms they take when they do occur depend

¹¹³Ibid., p. 37.

upon the kinds of alliances made between centralizing and regional or other non-dominant elites."¹¹⁴

Following this reasoning the Tigrayan revolt of 1941 (to be examined in the next chapter) which was dominated by peripheral peasantries opposed to state incorporation cannot be considered a nationalist revolt.

Language is a crucial element in this competition because the choice of the official language and the medium of instruction largely determine which groups have favoured access to the best jobs. The preference for Amharigna in the work place, its dominance in government and administration and the required proficiency in the language for university admittance caused enormous resentment among both Tigrayan and Tigrigna speaking Eritrean members of the petty-bourgeoisie.

As a group the Tigrayan petty-bourgeoisie shared with other ethnic and regional petty-bourgeoisies in Ethiopia an opposition to the feudal regime. But as members of an 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 the contemporary interest in the acquisition and articulation of various rights for their community. This is consistent with Brass who holds that ethnic nationalism emerges in multiethnic societies in the context of state centralization and elite competition for jobs in the urban and largely public sector.¹¹⁵

Unlike the petty-bourgeoisie, Tigrayan peasants did not interact on a regular basis with other ethnic communities in the past, and this did not dramatically change even under the impact of modernization and state centralization. However, these processes did serve to

¹¹⁴P. Brass, *Ethnicity and Nationalism: Theory and Comparison*, (N.D.: Sage Publications, 1991), pp. 8-9.

¹¹⁵*Ibid.* p. 43.

both widen peasant experience beyond the village and vastly increase the intrusive role of the state in their lives. And crucially, this state which became the object of the peasants' hatred was seen as an Amhara state. This in itself was unlikely to stimulate nationalist sentiments, but it took place among a people who had a deep pride in their heritage and who had long been ruled by people from their own ethnic community.

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 seriously rising to challenge the state. In contrast to theories which attempt to explain the development of ethnic nationalism in terms of inequality¹¹⁶ this thesis reinforces the conclusions of Moore¹¹⁷ and Brass,¹¹⁸ who have both argued that the mere existence of inequality is not sufficient to produce nationalist movements and such movements may even arise among dominant groups.

Demands for independence have figured prominently in post World War II revolutionary struggles, but Tigrayans, and particularly the peasants, have not been prepared to relinquish their links to Ethiopian civilization and the state that their ancestors created. In the event and after some controversy the TPLF developed a position favouring national self-determination within a unitary Ethiopian state. As Brass has pointed out, the process of nation formation as an expression of nationalism can be fulfilled without the creation of an independent state,¹¹⁹ although in Africa the experience has most commonly been that

¹¹⁶The belief that nationalism is a result of exploitation of one ethnic group by another is also 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. 372-74.

¹¹⁷Moore, p. 454.

¹¹⁸Brass, pp. 41-2.

¹¹⁹*Ibid.*, pp. 21, 37.

the goal of self-determination is independence.¹²⁰ The TPLF, however, never refuted its original contention that Tigrayan national self-determination included the right to independence.

However, the TPLF struggled for national self-determination, mobilization of the peasants could not be reduced to this demand. As one TPLF leader put it,

"In Tigray all the people were nationalists, but the success of the TPLF lay in uniting national struggle with democratic struggle. Narrow nationalists cannot confront the problem of land, while democrats cannot confront the problem of Amhara domination. A non-narrow nationalism must at some point take up the social question as the demands of the peasants were for social reform."¹²¹

Thus as important as nationalism was to the success of the TPLF's project, it was equally significant to address the social concerns and needs of the peasants and this brought to the fore the movement's skills in political leadership.

Political Leadership

Moral economists and all those of structuralist persuasions¹²² have consistently failed to appreciate the role of political leadership in the course and outcome of revolutions. This failure flows from their inability to distinguish between the structurally necessary conditions for revolutions to occur, and the process whereby they are actually carried out. Hence the structuralists' concentration on the context of revolution has meant largely

¹²⁰B. Neuberger, *National Self-Determination in Postcolonial Africa*, (Boulder, Col: Synne Rienner Publishers, 1986), p. 117.

¹²¹Interview: Gebru Asrat, Mekelle, January 25, 1993.

¹²²See Moore; Skocpol, *States and Social Revolutions*.

ignoring the equally critical process pursued by revolutionaries to replace the existing order and state with their alternative. Chabal writes that,

"There is no simple causal link between the context and the process of a revolution. The study of revolutionary leadership (and of the revolutionary party) is as essential to the understanding of the process of a revolution as the sociology of revolution is to the understanding of its context."¹²³

The moral economists' error results in one-sided mechanical explanations that attempt to explain revolutions solely by the existence of particular structural conditions. 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.¹²⁴ He argued that the political, economic and social context in which these wars broke out was in no sense "revolutionary"; the colonial state was not crumbling; colonial rule had not led to massive economic exploitation and widespread social disruption, and there was no collapse of the agricultural system. Instead, Chabal attributed the subsequent form and outcome of the struggle to the interplay between structure and revolutionary leadership.

Contrary to the assumed collective ethos and voluntarism of peasants as portrayed by most moral economists, the revolutionary context is best informed by Migdal's notion of the need for a "social exchange" between peasants and revolutionaries¹²⁵ or by Popkin's conception of the "rational peasant". Such a peasant, Popkin found in his study of the

¹²³P. Chabal, *Amilcar Cabral: Revolutionary Leadership and People's War*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983), p. 12.

¹²⁴*Ibid.*, p. 218.

¹²⁵Migdal, p. 263.

Vietnamese revolution, is only prepared to make the commitment to join the revolution after a careful consideration of its prospects for victory and of the benefits that would be gained by joining the revolution versus what would be lost by not joining.¹²⁶ In such a relationship the revolutionary assumes the role of a "political entrepreneur"¹²⁷ whose appeal to revolution is evaluated by the assessment peasants make of the revolutionary's personal credibility and capability. In this process the revolutionaries must demonstrate that they are less interested in self-aggrandizement than other groups appealing for peasant support and at the same time be able to translate their visions of the future they are fighting for into terms consistent with peasant values and beliefs, and lastly, be able to relate these visions to their actions.¹²⁸

This is indeed consistent with the pattern that can be drawn from this study of the TPLF during the course of the Tigrayan revolution. Peasant support for the TPLF only began to develop when the cadres demonstrated their commitment to the peasantry's welfare by living with them and sharing their deprivations. Also serving to build confidence was the cadres' exemplary behavior, particularly when compared to that of members of other revolutionary parties. No doubt these high standards of personal behavior and commitment of the TPLF leadership also reinforced the loyalty of the largely youthful membership of the movement. Such an approach confirms Cabral's conclusion that the petty-bourgeois revolutionaries must "commit suicide as a class" if they are to successfully carry out the goals of the revolution.¹²⁹ Cabral did not consider revolution to be structurally inevitable and he argued that only a conscious decision by the petty-

¹²⁶Popkin, p. 26.

¹²⁷ 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, p. 259.

¹²⁸Ibid., p. 261.

¹²⁹Cabral, p. 89.

bourgeoisie to commit class suicide and identify with "the deepest aspirations of the people" could contain "its natural tendencies to become more bourgeois."¹³⁰

According to Popkin, "A leader must, first of all, be able to use terms and symbols his targets understand"¹³¹ if he is to successfully link the revolution's goals to the lives of the peasants. The TPLF did this by using traditional 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 ascribe, 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 program to transform agrarian society. Although there can be no doubt as to the significance of the TPLF's restructuring of rural Tigrayan society, it is also true that in areas such as religious beliefs and institutions, gender relations, and economic institutions, an accord of sorts was struck that balanced the peasants more conservative values against the TPLF's program of social transformation.

The moral economists whose work has been examined here are writing against a scholarly background which has emphasized individual motivations while under-valuing social structural preconditions of revolutions. They are also responding to approaches which stressed value consensus in a stable social system while denying the critical causal role of classes, the world market and the state. The structuralists' response has significantly advanced theorization on revolution, but in the process they have not recognized, as Dunn has pointed out, that revolutions are the "product of, and constituted by, human action",¹³² and as such the part played by leadership cannot be ignored.

¹³⁰Ibid., p. 89.

¹³¹Popkin, p. 260.

¹³²J. Dunn, *Modern Revolutions: An Introduction to the Analysis of a Political Phenomenon*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), p. 231.

As well as suffering from a preoccupation with structure, the fact that the moral economists' explanation of revolution is drawn almost exclusively from the crisis in the peasant economy has led them to ignore the important function of political factors. 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.¹³³ It is the crucial function of revolutionary leaders to understand the constraints and realize the possibilities of the circumstances in which they are operating. Nor can it be forgotten that while skillful 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. As will be demonstrated the success of the TPLF when seen against the failure of a host of revolutionary groups, including those operating in Tigray, provides ample evidence of the importance of political leadership.

Conclusion

The approach of the moral economists represented a significant advance over earlier explanations of revolution, but this study of the Tigrayan revolution will bring to light a number of its failings, as well as emphasizing the need to expand the causal framework. Critically, the central premise of moral economy that peasant revolt in the modern era is a response to the disruptive impact of agricultural commercialization is not supported by the evidence that will be reviewed here. In turning to peasant class, Paige's contention that sharecroppers play a leading role in revolution has no basis, while Wolf's efforts to assign this task to the middle peasantry is at best doubtful. Of more value, although in need of

¹³³Kimmel, p. 185.

revision, is Wolf's emphasis on the tactical mobility of the peasants, and Migdal's insight that peasant revolt takes place in peripheral locations.

The theorists whose work has been examined here have largely restricted their analysis to the peasant economy and as such they have not fully recognized the importance of a range of political considerations to the course and outcome of revolutions. Moreover, in focusing on peasant demands, moral economists have not appreciated that these demands change over time in response to changing conditions and the influence of political actors. While not ignoring the impact of economic change as a stimulus of revolution, this thesis will argue that the Tigrayan revolution can only be fully grasped by also considering key political factors, notably the role of the existing regime in creating discontent, the importance of Tigrayan nationalism, and the role of the political leadership of the TPLF.

CHAPTER 3: THE HISTORICAL AND SOCIAL BACKGROUND TO REVOLUTION

Introduction

In this chapter the primary objective is to examine the historical and social background to the Tigrayan revolution and the Ethiopia wide environment in which it took place. In pursuit of this objective the first step will be to analyze Tigray's political and economic decline from a position of dominance in Abyssinian society before the tenth century to one of marginalization in the twentieth century. The second step will be to provide a socio-economic profile of Tigray on the eve of the collapse of the old regime in 1974.⁹ Of particular interest following the approach of the moral economists, will be to evaluate to what extent the conditions of the peasants alone can be held to account for the revolution that engulfed the province.

Since the TPLF emerged from the Ethiopian student movement which was a critical force in preparing the ground for the overthrow of the old regime and provided much of the early direction of the new regime, the last section of the chapter will be devoted to two ends. First, presenting a brief overview of the student movement, and then an even more condensed summation of the course of the post-imperial government's war against its opponents. With this background the political and military context in which the Tigrayan revolution took place can be better appreciated.

Tigray: Emergence and Decline

The known history of Tigrayan society 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 and conquered the lesser developed civilization and settled at Yeha, fifty kilometres east of present day Axum; later they moved to Haweti Melazo, some twelve kilometres southeast of Axum. One group of Semites, the Sabeans, intermarried with the Hamites, and their offspring conquered their neighbours and established the Axumite Kingdom.

By the third century AD the Axumites armies are known to have reached Nubia, in what is now northern Sudan, and also to south Arabia where they remained, although not without interruptions, until the sixth century. According to Greenfield and most historians of Ethiopia, the Axumites spread south from their core in present day Tigray and crossed the Tekezze river to the Amhara lands and went to Lake Tana, Gojjam, and across the Abbai (Nile River) Gorge and into Shoa.¹³⁴ However, revisionist interpretations, such as that of Okbazghi, hold that there is no evidence that the Amhara were part of the Axumite empire.¹³⁵ His controversial finding is that the history of Axum is the history of southern Eritrea and northern Tigray. The Tigrayan historian and nationalist Solomon Inquai also supports this view and has concluded that there is no basis for referring to Axum as part of "Ethiopian" history.¹³⁶ Nonetheless, as the Axumites moved southwards they occupied the land and later their descendants were to claim usufructuray rights to it.¹³⁷

¹³⁴R. Greenfield, *Ethiopia: A Political History*, (New York: Praeger, 1965), p. 23.

¹³⁵Okbazghi Yohannes, *Eritrea: A Pawn in World Politics*, (Gainesville: University Presses of Florida, 1991), p. 27.

¹³⁶Solomon Inquai, "Revolution in Tigray," *Horn of Africa*, (1983-84), p. 7).

¹³⁷G. Huntingford, *The Land Charters of Northern Ethiopia*, (Addis Ababa: 1965), p. 111.

Through the Red Sea port of Adulis the Axumites exported incense, ivory, and animal skins to the Greco-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 the Hellenic world. The Greek language was widely used and Christianity became the official religion of the empire in 330 AD., after which the Coptic Church of Egypt began appointing Axum's bishops or *abunas*. *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 contemporary languages *Tigrigna* and *Amharigna*. Greenfield holds that it was the Christian Church and its doctrine and institutional apparatus that was the connecting link between ancient Axum and modern Ethiopia and not the imperial throne.¹³⁸

The fourth to fifth centuries probably saw the height of the Axumite civilization 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 was to continue until the end of the nineteenth century.¹³⁹ And with the move south decline eventually ensued at the core, beginning with the rebellion of tribute-paying conquered peoples and symbolized by the pillaging of Axum by Queen Gudit from the south, an event still referred to by Tigrayan peasants. The decline encouraged a segment of the Axumites to move south to Manz in northern Shoa and this led to the formation of the Amhara peoples. Axum's empire officially collapsed in the first

¹³⁸Greenfield, p. 24.

¹³⁹Robert Hess, *Ethiopia: The Modernization of Autocracy*, (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1970), p. 32.

half of the tenth century with the rise of the Zagwe dynasty of the Agaw people from Lasta in present day Wollo.¹⁴⁰

The Zagwe dynasty lasted until 1270 when Amharas and Tigrayans joined together to overthrow the non-Semites, after which power passed to a succession of Amhara kings who declared in the fourteenth century class, the *Kebre Negest*, that the rulers of the former dynasty were usurpers and created the Solomonic fiction of an uninterrupted line of kings descending from Menelik I, heir to King Solomon and Queen of Sheba. Ullendorff has called this myth one of the most influential sagas anywhere in the world,¹⁴¹ while Markakis claimed that the myth was not only used to sanctify the ruling dynasties, but also to deify the Ethiopian peoples.¹⁴² It also served to legitimize the monarchical descent claims of Amhara nobles and marked the beginning of a competition for dominance between Amhara and Tigrayan leaders that continued until the present day. Indeed, Article Two of the 1955 Constitution of Ethiopia recognized a direct line of descent from Solomon and Sheba to Haile-Selassie, while the Emperor's divinity was proclaimed in Article Four.¹⁴³

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 briefly in the southeast to the port of Zeila on the northern Somali coast, according to Perham.¹⁴⁴ It was these conquered territories and those ascribed to have been held much earlier by the Axumites

¹⁴⁰Bahru Zewde, *A History of Modern Ethiopia*, (London: James Currey, 1991), p. 8.

¹⁴¹E. Ullendorff, *The Ethiopians*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1960), p. 64.

¹⁴²Markakis, *Anatomy*, pp. 29-32.

¹⁴³J. Sorenson, *Imagining Ethiopia: Struggles for History and Identity in the Horn of Africa*, (New Jersey: Rutgers University Press, 1993), p. 23.

¹⁴⁴M. Perham, *The Government of Ethiopia*, (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1969), p. 37.

that constituted the basis of the empire that Menelik II was to "reclaim" in the final days of the nineteenth century. Abyssinian culture, and particularly Christianity, did leave their imprint among the disparate peoples of these territories, but to claim as many contemporary Ethiopian nationalists and some scholars do,¹⁴⁵ that all these lands were part of a greater Ethiopia is very much open to dispute.¹⁴⁶ Unlike Abyssinia, in the south traditional beliefs and Islam were the most common faiths; pastoralism and communal farming the principle 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 "a military genius", Ahmad the Gragn, (literally the left-handed) organized and led a Moslem army from the southeast, and with firearms acquired through access to ports on the Red Sea and co-religionists in Arabia and Turkey, quickly spread north overcoming the more poorly armed soldiers of Abyssinia, destroying churches, and causing massive dislocation.¹⁴⁷ Although Ahmad was eventually disposed of 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. They settled as far north as southern Tigray and make up the present Raya and Azebo peoples. Shoa in particular was subject to Oromo influence and as a result of these developments the political centre of the very loosely held empire for a period shifted to Gondar where, for the first time since Axum, Abyssinia possessed a

¹⁴⁵See Levine, *Greater Ethiopia*.

¹⁴⁶See Sorenson; B. Holcomb and Sisai Ibssa, *The Invention of Ethiopia*, (Trenton, NJ: Red Sea Press, 1990.)

¹⁴⁷Bahru, p. 9.

settled capital. However, the power of the monarchy continued to decline in the face of a series of challenges by regional warring blocs.

Around 1700 a powerful war-lord, Nagassi, expanded from his base in Manz by conquering Oromo territories to the south and founded a dynasty that was to last for eight generations.¹⁴⁸ While Shoa rulers until the crowning of Menelik as emperor in 1889 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, while at the same time retaining the 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. Intra-feudal violence and *shifita*, or bandit, activity in the north were also encouraged in the first half of the nineteenth century by the wide availability of weapons, which meant that "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."¹⁴⁹ Zewde 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.¹⁵⁰ The positive effects of Shoa's isolation were acknowledged in various reports by eighteenth and nineteenth century travelers who contrasted the poverty and lawlessness of the war ravaged north with the order and prosperity of Shoa.¹⁵¹

In the regional competition for power the Tigrayan rulers' greater possession of modern weaponry derived from their better access to, and sometimes control over, the port of Massawa. Explaining the power of Tigray's eighteenth century ruler, Ras Michael Sehul, the Scottish explorer, James Bruce, wrote "Fire-arms ... which for many years have

¹⁴⁸Levine, *Greater Ethiopia*, pp. 31-3.

¹⁴⁹Zwede Gabre-Sellassie, p. 18.

¹⁵⁰*Ibid.*, p. 19.

¹⁵¹M. Abir, *Ethiopia: The Era of the Princes*, (New York: Praeger, 1968), p. 160.

decided who is the most powerful in Abyssinia, all ... come from Arabia, and not one can be purchased without his knowing to whom it goes, and after having had the first refusal of it."¹⁵² Ras Michael was lord of Tigray from 1769 to 1809 and also ruler over parts of Eritrea and Gondar. With such rulers dominating the highlands the period from the mid-eighteenth to mid-nineteenth centuries is known as the "Era of Princes", a period which in the view of Hess, "Ethiopia had become a mere geographical expression."¹⁵³ The decline of the central monarchy led Tigray to become "virtually independent", its rulers "wield(ing) power comparable to that exercised by emperors of former times,"¹⁵⁴ although none of them, unlike the Shoan Amharas, were to found a dynasty.

The early Shoan emphasis on expansion, however, must not obscure the fact that by the beginning of the nineteenth century Shoa, with its largely heterogeneous peoples, was far from united and still paid nominal allegiance to emperors of an even more disunited empire.¹⁵⁵ The centralizing policies of Emperor Tewodros were to collapse even before his self-inflicted death in 1868 and Abyssinia was again to fragment into a number of regional blocs, the most significant of which were Tigray (which included parts of highland Eritrea), Begemdir (Gondar), Lasta, Wag, Gojjam, and Shoa. These territories can be said to have shared a loose polity, social structure, system of land tenure, culture and religion.¹⁵⁶ However, only when viewed against the periphery of the Nilotic peoples (who were commonly referred to by the pejorative term *Shankella* or slaves), and Moslem Afar, did an Abyssinian identity predominate over regional identities at this time.¹⁵⁷

¹⁵²J. Bruce, *Travels to Discover the Source of the Nile*, (Edinburgh: 1790), pp. 251-2, quoted in 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.

¹⁵³R. Hess, *Ethiopia: The Modernization of Autocracy*, (Ithaca: Cornell University Press), p. 88.

¹⁵⁴Pankhurst, p. 88.

¹⁵⁵*Ibid.*, p. 151.

¹⁵⁶Gebre Tareke, "Rural Protest in Ethiopia," p. 5.

¹⁵⁷G. Sanderson, "The Nile Basin and the Eastern Horn, 1870 - 1908," R. Oliver and G. Sanderson (eds.), *The Cambridge History of Africa* Vol. VI, (1985), p. 650.

Moreover, while cultural influences were doubtlessly felt further afield, until 1880 Shoaan expansion, as measured by occupation, had probably not reached more than one hundred miles south of what was to be Menelik's capital of Addis Ababa.¹⁵⁸

Emergence of Modern Ethiopia

Three emperors, Tewodros, Yohannis, and Menelik, laid the foundation for the modern state of Ethiopia. Kassa, an Amhara shifita leader was crowned Emperor Tewodros in 1855 and brought the Era of Princes to an end by bringing one rule to the divided territories of the north.¹⁵⁹ 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 he failed in all his objectives. His final destruction at the hands of the British army of Lord Napier created a struggle for power that was won by Dejazmach Kahailew from Tigray who took the name Emperor Yohannis IV. Kahailew's victory was largely due to his decision to aid Napier's army which traversed his territory, and thus to be rewarded with its cast off but relatively modern weaponry when the expedition left the country.¹⁶⁰

Yohannis pursued the goal of unity initiated by Tewodros, but his means, and those of the emperors who followed him, 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 regional centres of power or "controlled regionalism".¹⁶¹ The regional rivalry between Tigray and Shoa was contained by Menelik's public renunciation of any claims to be emperor and Yohannis's

¹⁵⁸Perham, p. 253.

¹⁵⁹Greenfield, p. 76.

¹⁶⁰Hess, p. 53.

¹⁶¹Bahru Zewde, p. 44.

corresponding recognition of his rival as King of Shoa. Yohannis's ascent, however, did not end the cultural dominance of the Amhara. Amharigna remained the language of the court, and Plowden, writing at this time, 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."¹⁶² Such cultural dominance was not to be seriously challenged by the reign of one Tigrayan ruler.

While Yohannis fought invading Egyptians, Italians and Madhists 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 there was a "direct connection between the influx of firearms into Shoa and the pace of the conquest."¹⁶³ Armaments could also be acquired from Europeans. In 1887 shortly after the defeat of Italian forces 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, as well as recognize him as a sovereign power, in return for Menelik's promise to assist Italy's colonial expansion.¹⁶⁴

Yohannis's defeat of the Egyptians in a series of battles during the mid 1870s led to their evacuation along the entire Red Sea coast, but the ultimate beneficiary of this development was his competitor Menelik who was able to occupy the crucial regional trading centre of Harar in 1886. An increase in Shoan trade based on the export of the South's luxury

¹⁶²Plowden, p. 128, quoted in John Bruce, p. 459.

¹⁶³R. Darkwah, *Shewa, Menelik and the Ethiopian Empire, 1813 - 1889*, (London: Heinemann, 1975), p. 96.

¹⁶⁴H. Marcus, "Imperialism and expansion in Ethiopia from 1865 to 1900," L. Gann and P. Duegan (eds.), *The History and Politics of Colonialism 1870 - 1914* Vol. I, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1969), p. 424.

goods and the import of firearms rapidly followed this change in the balance of power in the region. According to one Italian estimate, a total of 189,000 weapons were imported into Shoa from Italian Red Sea ports alone between 1885 and 1895.¹⁶⁵

In the event there was no ultimate battle between Menelik and Yohannis as the latter 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 May 2, 1889, two months after Yohannis's death. Having furthered Italian colonial interests, Menelik then attempted to contain their advance south and in 1896 his armies defeated the Italians 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 so¹⁶⁶), Menelik provided a future generation of Eritrean nationalists with evidence of Ethiopia's rejection of claims to the territory.

A small majority of Eritreans live as settled farmers in the highlands and are Tigrigna speaking peoples of the same ethnic origins and sharing similar cultural traditions, including adherence to the Ethiopian Orthodox Church, as the people of Tigray to the south.¹⁶⁷ Almost as many Eritreans live in the lowlands, adhere to Islam, practice nomadic pastoralism and come from a multitude of other ethnic communities. Evidence of the historical ties between Eritrea and Abyssinia, however, is a matter of considerable controversy. While Ethiopian nationalists emphasize the continuity of historical linkages, Eritrean nationalists argue that although part of the ancient Axumite empire, Eritrea has

¹⁶⁵S. Rubenson, "Aspects of the Survival of Ethiopian Independence," P. McEwan, *Nineteenth Century Africa*, (London: Oxford University Press, 1968). p. 360.

¹⁶⁶Wubneh, p. 15.

¹⁶⁷Clapham, p. 152.

not been part of the Ethiopian state since that time.¹⁶⁸ What is clear is that Eritreans lived on the periphery of an empire that was always in flux. The extent of the empire at any given time must be understood in terms of its power to compel tribute, and not on the later linear boundaries which were a product of European expansion.¹⁶⁹ What can be concluded is that parts of Eritrea had long ties with the province of Tigray, while other parts and peoples of the territory were never reduced to the status of vassals.

In Tigray the 1896 war against the Italians led to enormous destruction and loss of life among civilians. Kaplan has written that, "Tigray ... bore the brunt of the war with the Italians. Menelik's army fed itself from local food supplies, leaving grain and seed stocks empty, and slaughtering the oxen used for ploughing. Seven years of famine followed in Tigray."¹⁷⁰ The loss of Eritrea with its Tigrigna speaking population was also the cause of bitter resentment. Many Tigrayans even 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

¹⁶⁸Keller, p. 79.

¹⁶⁹Greenfield, p. 20.

¹⁷⁰R. Kaplan, *Surrender or Starve: The Wars behind the Famine*, (Boulder: Westview Press, 1988), p. 95.

imperial powers, however, Menelik and his successors have always attempted to legitimize this expansion by reference to Ethiopia's supposed historic borders.

The brief assumption of power by Menelik's grandson, Lij Yasu, followed by a council of the nobility who overthrew Yasu, through to Haile-Selassie, did not change the basis of Shoan Amhara domination.¹⁷¹ Nor did it effect the peripheral status of Tigray within the empire. Tigray's small-holding subsistence based agricultural economy had few attractions when measured against the opportunities available to Abyssinians in the captured lands to the south. There the lands were fertile, suitable for valuable export crops like coffee, and their holders, the Oromo nomads and peasants, could be readily dispossessed and their lands given to court and Church favourites for services rendered and to settlers from the north who were encouraged to migrate to the region. But Shoa's rise to political dominance and Tigray's decline in the empire cannot be attributed solely to narrow economic factors.

The Amhara and Tigrayans are closely related peoples ethnically, linguistically and culturally. Geographically the Tekezze River has divided the Tigrigna speakers to the north from the Amharigna speakers to the south and therein lies an important clue as to why the Amhara, and particularly the Shoan Amhara, became predominant in Abyssinia and later in the modern state of Ethiopia while Tigray stagnated. According to Markakis, Tigray alone represented purity and continuity in Ethiopian culture¹⁷² and this purity was in part a function of Tigray's isolation or 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

¹⁷¹Like his predecessors, Haile-Selassie concentrated on the centralization of the empire and this allowed little scope for any policy of integration of the captured nations and nationalities beyond the selective incorporation of ethnic elites through Amharization, a policy that predated Menelik.

¹⁷²Markakis, *Anatomy*, p. 48.

lowlands or members of the majority Amhara people. Conversely, the Shoans shared the high central plateau with stateless Oromos whom they found easier to either assimilate or dominate.

Assimilation was also 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. Amharization 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 over time many commoners became assimilated Amharas. The result is that today there are few Amharas, and particularly those from Shoa who lived on the border lands of the Oromos, who do not have some Oromo blood in them, a process which has not occurred among the Tigrayans. Without embracing Levine's thesis of a "greater Ethiopia", since ultimately this process involved, as Keller has argued, the subject peoples committing "cultural suicide",¹⁷³ it does help to understand the demographic and cultural dynamism of the Amhara, and particularly the Shoans, who were in the forefront of this process.

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

¹⁷³Keller, p. 160. Although not as politically significant as Tigrayan nationalism, the rise of Oromo nationalism must also raise serious questions as to the extent of Amhara assimilation of neighbouring Oromos. See P. Baxter, "The Problem of the Oromos or the Problem for the Oromos?" I. Lewis, ed., *Self-Determination in the Horn of Africa*, (London: Ethical Press, 1983).

from 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 1935.¹⁷⁴ The armies that fought these invaders were primarily made up of Tigrayan peasants and the same peasants were forced to feed the armies and suffered the depredations of the wars the armies 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 armies to feed themselves. Indeed, pillaging from the peasants and collecting war booty were the soldiers' incentive for joining the army.¹⁷⁵

In Shoan dominated Abyssinia all regions opposed state centralization, but it is significant that by the time of the reign of Haile-Selassie only in Tigray did hereditary leaders still rule.¹⁷⁶ The Shoan emperors reduced the territory to a semi-autonomous buffer region, but they were never able to fully control it or deprive the leading Tigrayan families of their centuries-old dominance.¹⁷⁷ Although the Tigrayan nobility could unite to defend the province against the Shoans, they were typically divided among themselves. The historian Gebru Tareke has speculated that the regional nobilities of Shoa or Gojjam were not as disunited as those of Tigray because there were not as many segments and because with their shorter political history they were not as strongly established as the Tigrayans.¹⁷⁸

¹⁷⁴Erlich, "Tigrean Nationalism," p. 195.

¹⁷⁵The 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. Caulk, "Armies as Predators: Soldiers and Peasants in Ethiopia c. 1852 - 1935," *International Journal of African Historical Studies*. Vol. II, 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.

¹⁷⁶Erlich, "Tigrean politics 1930 - 1935," p. 105.

¹⁷⁷Ibid, p. 102.

¹⁷⁸Gebru Tareke, "Rural Protest in Ethiopia," p. 132.

The Tigrayan nobles' internal divisions were also encouraged by the Shoans so that they could achieve an internal balance and prevent any of Yohannis's descendants from becoming the *negus*, or king of Tigray.¹⁷⁹ In this century Emperor Haile-Selassie sought to undermine Tigrayan autonomy by dividing authority in Tigray 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 Italians who had harboured designs on Ethiopia since their defeat at Adwa, and with the rise of Mussolini pursued a more aggressive Ethiopian policy. In a series of meetings Italian officials in Eritrea gained the support of Haile-Selassie Gugsa by promising to appoint him sole leader of Tigray after their takeover of the province in exchange for ensuring an unopposed route for their invading army through his territory. The dejazmach's treachery helped convince the Italians to invade Ethiopia while the broader and historical pattern of core-region power struggles convinced British policy-makers that Ethiopia's disintegration was inevitable, that an Italian protectorate over Tigray was in accord with British regional interests, and that it would be mistaken to allow unnecessary conflict with Mussolini over Ethiopia's integrity.¹⁸⁰ The seeds for the Italian invasion of 1935 were thus planted.

The extent to which the regional elites in Tigray and Shoa pursued their political rivalry led many foreign observers to believe that it would bring about Ethiopia's dismemberment. The evidence seemed clear: Yohannis assisted the British invaders; Menelik made deals with the Italians and the Egyptians, and the Tigrayan hero, Ras Alula, who had "gained a nearly legendary name as a champion of Ethiopia's integrity", nonetheless undermined

¹⁷⁹Ibid., p. 132.

¹⁸⁰Erlich, "Tigrean politics 1930 - 1935," p. 117.

Ethiopia's sovereignty by cooperating with Italian colonial officials in Asmara.¹⁸¹ In spite of these examples, Erlich has concluded that "in the most crucial junctions of history the theory of disintegration was proved erroneous."¹⁸² Moreover, he rejected the view that the Ethiopians were lacking in national patriotism and argued that, "in a paradoxical way the notion of Ethiopia's external existence was so deeply entrenched that it was simply taken for granted by many of the participants in the politics of traditional Ethiopia."¹⁸³ In light of events over the past decade, Erlich's assessment seems increasingly open to challenge.

Environment Under Siege

As the political fortunes of the Tigrayan nobility declined with the rise of the Shoan Amhara nobility, the condition of the province and its peoples also deteriorated as a result of environmental stress, famine and the inability of traditional institutions to cope with the problems. It had not always been this way. Northern Ethiopia was once rich in agricultural resources and provided a well-balanced diet for its inhabitants.¹⁸⁴ James Bruce, the Scottish explorer, who visited the country in the late years of the eighteenth century wrote that peasants in the region of the Tigrayan town of Adwa were growing three crops a year, without the benefit of manure, and that they "presented a rich appearance to the visitor".¹⁸⁵

However, less than one hundred years later Bruce's "rich lands" were perceived very differently by another group of foreign visitors. Members of the Napier Expedition found that, "They tell us this is a table land. If it is, they have turned upside down and we are

¹⁸¹Erlich, "Ras Alula," p. 362.

¹⁸²Ibid., p. 361.

¹⁸³Ibid., p. 364.

¹⁸⁴Girma Kebede, *The State and Development in Ethiopia*, (N.J.: Humanities Press, 1992), p. 55.

¹⁸⁵James Bruce, p. 124.

scrambling up and down the legs."¹⁸⁶ According to Bahru Zewde, the Ethiopian peasant has historically endured the largest number of recorded famines in Africa and that there were few recorded famines which did not include Tigray.¹⁸⁷ Without doubt the most destructive famine to afflict Ethiopia in recorded history was that of 1888 - 1892 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. However, its impact was more severe in the north and of longer duration there as evidenced by Catholic missionaries who described continuing near famine conditions in Tigray as late as 1905.¹⁸⁸ In the period between the death of Yohannis in 1889 and the present day an estimated sixteen famines have struck Tigray, the biggest being in 1958-59, 1965-66, 1972-74, and in 1983-84.

In spite of the impact of the famine of 1888, there appeared to be a steady increase in population in northern Ethiopia since 1892 and this served to intensify land use in older settled areas, encourage settlement in lower altitude zones which has sometimes led to conflict with the peoples inhabiting those areas and also resulted in the elimination some of the most accessible pasturage and destruction of forest.¹⁸⁹ Although there is no disagreement that deforestation and environmental degradation are major problems in Ethiopia, and particularly in the northern highlands, there is disagreement on when these problems arose.

Environmentalists and foresters typically point to massive destruction arising in the last century, and there is evidence of this. Nathaniel Pearce, a visitor in the 1820s reported

¹⁸⁶quoted in Greenfield, p. 124.

¹⁸⁷Behru Zewde (1976), pp. 52-3, Abdul Mejid (ed.), 1976.

¹⁸⁸R. Pankhurst, "The Great Ethiopian Famine of 1888 - 1892: A New Assessment," *Journal of the History of Medicine*, (1966), p. 289.

¹⁸⁹J. McCann, *From Poverty to Famine in Ethiopia: 1958 - 1977*, (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1987), pp. 32-4.

seeing "a great many elephants in the depth of the forest" near Adwa.¹⁹⁰ Less than four decades later, during the construction of a telegraph line for the invading 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 that peasants were selling the British timbers from their own houses.¹⁹¹ (It is significant that Napier's army paid for the poles and other supplies, something no other army had done before or would do again for the next eighty years.) On the other hand 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 grass lands.¹⁹²

Environmental stress, internecine warfare and lack of development on the northern plateau all point to the crisis being systemic. It was probably Bruce who first noted the intimate connection between government and famine. Although he acknowledged the impact of various vermin in precipitating famine, he nonetheless 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."¹⁹³ Being himself a feudal lord, Bruce may have been reticent to hold what he considered Ethiopia's feudal system with its unproductive but consuming classes of monarchy, nobility and clergy, responsible for the problem.

Although the peasants of Abyssinia usually saw famine as a manifestation of divine retribution, and this was certainly emphasized in the teachings of the Church, in Tigray there was a national dimension to their suffering since the rulers were from another nation.

¹⁹⁰Pearce, p. 251.

¹⁹¹Pankhurst, *A Social History of Ethiopia*, p. 276.

¹⁹²*Ibid.*, pp. 275-6.

¹⁹³James Bruce, p. 196.

There is reason to believe that the elevation of a Tigrayan leader Yohannis to the position of emperor and the subsequent loss of power by his descendants to the Amhara nobility served to heighten the Tigrayans' sense of national grievance. Certainly it is true in this century that Tigrayans generally linked "the misfortune of their homeland to its political emasculation, and to blame Amhara domination for their misery."¹⁹⁴

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 modernization. Connor has aptly described this process as "that amalgam of sub-processes including industrialization, urbanization, increasing literacy, intensified communication and transportation networks, and the like."¹⁹⁵ Modernization also left in its wake economic dislocation, new patterns and ways of life, the questioning of old identities as new ones took form, and increasing challenges to old and new political institutions.

The Italians, who had long entertained the idea of colonizing Ethiopia, manipulated the divisions between Tigray's nobles and benefited from the destabilizing effect of the banditry that plagued the province and the resentment of peripheral groups in Tigrayan society, such as the Raya, to advance their own imperial interests. As a result of the unstable conditions Tigray was ill-prepared for the Italian invasion when it came in 1935. Evidence of the weak government and social dislocation aggravated by the availability of weapons is provided by the prevalence of shifta bands throughout northern Ethiopia in the

¹⁹⁴Markakis, *National and Class Conflict*, p. 251.

¹⁹⁵Connor, p. 167.

nineteenth and the first half of the twentieth centuries.¹⁹⁶ It is noteworthy that in Tigray Fernyhough identified the Wolkait region on the border of Sudan (which was to become the first base of operations of the TPLF) as a centre for shifta bands, while Gebru has identified eastern Tigray as another centre¹⁹⁷ and this area was to be the location of the *Woyene*, as the Tigrayan peasant revolt of 1943, has come to be known. Although not a force for change themselves, the shifta did create insecurity, particularly in the peripheral borderlands, and this served to destabilize governments.

Ethiopia was made a direct colony of Italy and 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, or inability, to eliminate slavery. The Italians did eliminate slavery, the privileged status of the *neftegnas*, 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.

The Italians' administrative restructuring served to undermine, if not do away with, the role of many 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.¹⁹⁸ Such reforms were generally welcomed by Ethiopia's heavily taxed peasants. One Tigrayan elder described the Italian occupation as

¹⁹⁶A. Fennybough, "Social mobility and dissident elites in northern Ethiopia: the role of bandits, 1900 - 1969," D. Crummey (ed.), *Banditry, Rebellion and Protest in Africa*, (London: James Currey, 1986).

¹⁹⁷Gebru Tareke, "Preliminary History of Resistance in Tigray, Ethiopia," *Africa*, 34(2), (1984), p. 43.

¹⁹⁸Rosen, "Warring with Words," p. 86.

a period when the people were "getting rest, peace and freedom from the (imperial) government."¹⁹⁹

Italian modernization included the spread of wage labour as Italian settlers started up commercial concerns. The establishment of 1,436 commercial companies, 1,225 industrial firms and forty agricultural enterprises served to lay the basis of a modern economic infrastructure.²⁰⁰ During their brief rule the Italians built 4,000 miles of road and left behind machinery, lorries, factories and public buildings and many settlers. Adwa in particular benefited from Italian rule as the town was made an administrative capital and townspeople reported that "they were busy night and day making and providing things to sell to the Italians."²⁰¹ But modernization of the economy also meant the end of the centuries old mule caravan trade and, with the defeat of the Italians, Adwa declined because a new provincial administration was established in Mekelle.

The Italian defeat in 1941 and the return of Haile-Selassie from exile in the company of British imperial troops served as the stimulus for a major revolt in Tigray. Tigrayan loyalties had been tested by the war when a number of local nobles actively supported the Italians and the occupiers won further support among some sections of the population by reducing the number of taxes and their amount, and by building badly needed schools, hospitals and roads. Moreover, Haile-Selassie's defensive strategy, which had largely involved abandoning the province to the invaders, caused lasting hostility to the imperial regime and facilitated the acceptance by Tigrayans of the Italians.

¹⁹⁹Interview: Abraham Aley, Abey Gobast, Kashi Bercher Kasa and Grazmach Berhe Dumzu, all veterans of the Woyene, Mahoni, March 31, 1993.

²⁰⁰Asafa Jalata, *Oromia and Ethiopia: State Formation and Ethnonational Conflict, 1868 - 1992*, (Boulder: Lynne Rienne Publishers, 1993), p. 84.

²⁰¹Rosen, "Warring with Words," p. 87.

Haile-Selassie was anxious to reassert control, but his officials in Tigray were challenged when they attempted tax collection. Although the emperor abolished most of the traditional taxes and services, the peasants complained that the taxes were still far higher than those that existed under the Italian administration.²⁰² What particularly angered the peasants, however, was that in contrast to earlier practice the tax had to be paid in cash and not in kind, a severe imposition given the subsistence character of most Tigrayan agriculture. Moreover, Haile-Selassie's tax collecting involved the imposition of assessors steeped in corruption and accompanied by irregular troops known as Territorials who became notorious for robbery and violence.²⁰³

Tigrayan nobles, who were threatened and angered by Haile-Selassie's new administration which included the intrusion of Amhara officials, 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 and discontent. The position was aggravated, however, because Haile-Selassie had to contend also with the British occupying army in Eritrea after 1941 which wanted to hive off Tigray and Eritrea from the emperor's control. To facilitate this they endeavoured to build up the authority of Tigrayan hereditary leaders and supported a decentralized northern Ethiopia.²⁰⁴ Their efforts were facilitated by the Italian occupation of Ethiopia when Tigray was annexed to Eritrea and "self-awareness of Tigrinya speakers and Tigrean sectarianism were encouraged."²⁰⁵ As a means to stimulate Tigrayan nationalism and establish order in near anarchic conditions the British wanted Ras Seyoum Mengesha appointed governor of Tigray.

²⁰²Gebru Tareke, "Rural Protest in Ethiopia," p. 141.

²⁰³Ibid., p. 141.

²⁰⁴Erlich, "Tigrean Nationalism," p. 216.

²⁰⁵Erlich, *The Struggle Over Eritrea*, p. 3.

Although Haile-Selassie agreed to the appointment, he kept Seyoum under observation in Addis Ababa until 1947. Nor would the emperor allow any role in the Tigray administration for Haile-Selassie Gugsu because of his alliance with the Italians. The emperor faced a dilemma: the appointment of Tigrayan nobles to positions of leadership might well have encouraged 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 took advantage of the state's weakness in this transitional period to attempt to escape state encroachment. Foremost were the Raya and Azebo people who were originally Oromo and had at least since the time of Yohannis fiercely resisted Abyssinian incorporation and retained much of their semi-nomadic clan based egalitarian culture. Moreover, they constituted a Moslem minority community in the heartland of Ethiopian Orthodox Christianity.²⁰⁶ On the eve of the 1935 invasion the Italians provided the Raya and Azebo with several thousand rifles which, according to Italian military sources, they used very effectively against Haile-Selassie's army.²⁰⁷ Haile-Selassie considered their actions traitorous, and the stage was set for postwar conflict.

A neighbouring people, the Wejerat, also had a long history of militantly opposing successive state efforts to impose local administrators and the dominant Ethiopian system of land tenure. The Wejerat were mostly Christian peasant farmers, spoke a Tigrigna dialect, and practiced a system of tenure in which land belonged to the entire community and land rights flowed from permanent residence, unlike the lineage based system practiced by most Tigrayans. To ensure equality land was equally divided every four years

²⁰⁶J. Trimingham, *Islam in Ethiopia*, (New York: Barnes and Noble, 1952), p. 192.

²⁰⁷Gebru Tareke, "Rural Protest in Ethiopia," pp. 152-3.

by elders and elected leaders. Feudal incorporation for the Wejerat threatened the imposition of outside authority in local affairs and the destruction of their land tenure system and decentralized forms of government. In 1942 the state did impose a *chika shum*, or local administrator, over them and the foremost historian of the Woyene, Gebru Tareke, has concluded that this served as one of the precipitating causes for their conflict with the central government.²⁰⁸

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 another group of shifta were peasants deeply angered at their conditions and the unjust rule they faced and "their discontent was in essence the peasants' discontent."²⁰⁹ Most of the latter group joined the rebellion and one of them, the aggrieved local official turned shifta, Blatta Haile Mariam Redda, became the principle leader of the Woyene. Public disobedience, whether of a criminal or political nature, was expedited by the Italian distribution of rifles to Gugs'a's followers and to the Raya and Azebo immediately before and during the war. There was also a wide availability of weaponry in a region that had only recently witnessed clan based and anti-government skirmishes and had been the site of battles with khedival Egypt, Mahdist Sudan and imperialist Italy over the previous sixty-five years.

After a series of battles that left the Woyene participants in control of the provincial capital Mekelle and most of eastern Tigray, the rebels 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

²⁰⁸Ibid., p. 156.

²⁰⁹Ibid., p. 167.

victorious in October 1943. 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 lands taken away and were made tenants with the opportunity to buy back their own land. Tigray's boundaries were redrawn and the districts of Wolkait and Tselemti in the west were given to Gondar.

But Haile-Selassie also began back-tracking on the more overt aspects of his policy of having Amhara officialdom administer Tigray. Although the Amhara Ras Abebe Aregai was temporarily retained as governor (Ras Seyoum took over in 1947), the occupying troops were withdrawn, and woreda administrators thereafter were Tigrayan and, after Seyoum's return, were appointed by him. However, Seyoum's deputy, Fitawarari Yemane Hassen, a Shoan Amhara, and his successors became the real powers in the territory.²¹⁰ The land tax which had caused so much resentment was eliminated and in its place a tribute system introduced in which the Tigrayans themselves decided who paid and how much they paid. A measure of provincial autonomy was thus retained, but the trend toward state centralization continued and took other forms, such as the increasing use and status of Amharigna in a province where few could understand the language.

Although acknowledging that the Woyene attracted only minor support from regions outside eastern Tigray, the TPLF²¹¹ and some academics, such as Solomon Inquai,²¹² contend that the revolt was stimulated by nationalism and represented the response of an oppressed nation to Shoan Amhara oppression. The TPLF pointedly claims that the Woyene was a "struggle for self-determination when the oppressed people of Tigray took

²¹⁰Ibid., p. 222.

²¹¹*Woyeen*, August, 1978.

²¹²Interview: Solomon Inquai, Mekelle, January 7, 1993.

arms demanding an end to national oppression and exploitation by the Amhara ruling clique."²¹³ Ethiopian historian and former REST Chairman, Solomon Inquai, holds that the British Foreign Office records for the period conclusively demonstrate that the rebellion was based on peasant nationalism, and this in turn points to the continuity of sentiments among the peasantry to the *Second Woyene*, as the TPLF led revolution is frequently referred to.²¹⁴ This, however, begs the question of how much the British really understood of Tigray's complex politics and whether their own strategic goals for the Horn of Africa might not have clouded their judgment.

Moreover, both the principle 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 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" and points out that the Raya and Azebo repeatedly rose up against the state regardless of whether it was the Tigrayan Emperor Yohannis or the Shoan Amhara Emperors Menelik and Haile-Selassie who controlled the apparatus.²¹⁵ Both Gilkes²¹⁶ and Erlich²¹⁷ acknowledge the importance of Tigrayanism as a rallying cry, but the latter argued that ultimately it was a slogan rather than a program to fulfill, and that Tigrayan self-awareness was inseparable from Ethiopianism.

This problem cannot be satisfactorily resolved here and field interviews of Raya and Azebo Woyene veterans (referred to elsewhere) are too few in number to use as a basis

²¹³*People's Voice*, 5th Anniversary Issue, 1980, p. 1.

²¹⁴Interview: Solomon Inquai, Mekelle, January 7, 1993.

²¹⁵Gebru Tareke, "Rural Protest in Ethiopia," p. 215.

²¹⁶See Gilkes, pp. 186-7.

²¹⁷Erlich, 1981, pp.197-8.

for convincing generalizations. These interviews, however, would not support the contention that the peasant participants in the revolt were solely or 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 TPLF's interpretation of the Woyene, the use to which they put this inheritance of anti-state struggle, and the tactical lessons they drew from it, are however of importance in their own right. It is thus noteworthy that one of the early names that the TPLF was to take was *Hisbaswi Woyene Harnet Tigray* (People's Revolution for the Liberation of Tigray), which was designed to link the movement's struggle with that of 1943.²¹⁸

Paul Brass's work is useful here in that it recognizes that national identity is malleable over time and has a class dimension. The Tigrayan peasants' sense of national identity and anti-Amhara sentiments have been noted by eighteenth century foreign visitors,²¹⁹ and in this century Rosen has concluded that, "no matter how the political fortunes of the province have oscillated, there has always remained the sense of the cultural supremacy of the entire region and people."²²⁰ However, until the TPLF led insurrection the peasants' devotion to maintaining their autonomy in the face of state attempts at incorporation and demands on their product have figured more prominently than any desire to fight for nationalist goals.

And this appears to be the case in the most celebrated pre-1975 peasant revolt, the Woyene of 1943. In this revolt peasant demands were of a local character; few peasants

²¹⁸Interview: Negussie Lilly, Endaselasie, February 6, 1993.

²¹⁹See Parkyns; Plowden.

²²⁰Rosen, "Warring with Words," p. 66.

outside of eastern Tigray participated in the struggle, and the calculated involvement of a small minority of Tigrayan nobles suggest that they were more concerned with individualist, rather than national, interests. According to both Brass and Connor, ethnonationalism is a product of modernization which breaks down primordial loyalties and links otherwise geographically isolated peoples. This process had been set in motion by the Italian occupation, but was only weakly felt at the time of the Woyene.

While the pre-1975 Tigrayan elites were not able to effectively mobilize the population using nationalism, the peasants nonetheless did have a sense of national identity and the deterioration of conditions in the province in the twentieth century could and were increasingly laid at the door of the Amhara elite who controlled the state. A Tigrayan nationalist revolt against Amhara hegemony, however, was not possible in the period reviewed here because of the power of the Ethiopian state (aided by the British) and the diffuse national sentiments. Moreover, on the one hand conditions had not so deteriorated as to eliminate other options, and on the other the weakened and divided Tigrayan nobility did not have the ability or the incentive to lead a revolt which might ultimately undermine their own fading powers.

Rural Tigray on the Eve of the 1974 Revolution

In this section the objectives include outlining the system of land tenure practiced in Tigray and to construct a socio-economic profile of the province and, then identify the key stresses and strains the rural community was experiencing on the eve of the 1974 revolution. On the basis of this examination it will be possible to make some preliminary comments about the usefulness of the moral economy literature as a tool in understanding the causes of peasant based revolts. This examination will also provide a point of reference from which to judge the impact of both the Derg and its policies, and of the

TPLF and its program, in rural Tigray. But before examining the changes rural Tigray was undergoing in the contemporary era it is necessary to briefly outline the political and administrative context in which they took place.

The defeat of the Italians and the victory over the Tigrayan rebels, both with the crucial assistance of the British, left the latter in a commanding position in the Horn of Africa. But post-war Britain was increasingly stretched financially and militarily and hence unable to take on the role of colonial master for the region. The United States also favoured Ethiopian independence, although at the core of its foreign policy was containment of Soviet influence in the region as indicated by its establishment of an important communications base at Kagnew outside of Asmara. The eventual U.N. decision to link Eritrea to Ethiopia through a federation was thus strongly supported by the United States and served to bring together U.S. and Ethiopian interests.²²¹

The defeat of the Italians gave Haile-Selassie back his country, while the interest of the United States in Ethiopia through its base in Eritrea and its commitment to modernize his armed forces helped to ease the British out of the country. The United States became Haile-Selassie's new patron, and one far less demanding than the British. These international developments, together with the crushing of the Tigrayan challengers to his power, served to create a favourable environment for Haile-Selassie to pursue his life time goals of modernization and the consolidation of state power. For the next thirty years Haile-Selassie worked to reduce or eliminate regional bases of power by taking greater control over appointments, establishing a fiscal system with tax payments going to the Ministry of Finance instead of to the nobility, monetizing the collection of taxes and tithes,

²²¹In spite of this support for a federal arrangement, the US 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, was to testify before Congress that the dissolution had been illegal and that Eritreans had a right to self-determination

creating and maintaining a central armed force and police, and developing a system of state supported education.²²² In fostering the growth of a middle class and a professional standing army, Haile-Selassie's policies were not, however, without their dangers. In 1960 his palace guard launched a coup which demonstrated the vulnerability of the regime.

In Tigray the emperor's administrative centralization led to a decline in the authority of the local nobility, but it also involved the ancient practice of creating a network of political loyalties by dynastic marriages between Haile-Selassie's family and the leading families of Tigray, and notably the descendants of Yohannis.²²³ 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. John Bruce has found that since early times commentators have emphasized that in Tigray, to a greater extent than elsewhere in Ethiopia, local governments were administered by particular families. Tigray did not significantly benefit from the post-war expansion in education facilities and little state money was put into other infrastructural developments, which were largely concentrated in central and southern Ethiopia and Asmara, areas which offered greater commercial prospects, thus furthering and reinforcing trends towards uneven economic development. State centralization may have brought a greater degree of security to the lives of Tigrayan peasants, but it could only come about through increased extractions of surplus from the agrarian sector.

Tigray's post-war decline was evidenced by changes in the province's social stratification and social status. Rosen's study, based on four years residence in Adwa immediately prior to the 1974 revolution, shows that the town's traditional elite, made up of descendants of past leaders and generals and prominent traders, were relegated to a category known as

²²²Asafa, p. 86.

²²³John Bruce, p. 33.

jachawa lig, or children of the well born.²²⁴ According to Rosen the former elite retained a sense of honour but,

"since they were generally either retired personages or paid employees of the central government, they could no longer maintain huge entourages, nor could they keep any significant number of men under arms, even though they might have kept hold of their gult lands, they could no longer be sure that the people would pay them much of their former rent. This also applied to the effective powers of the heads of the major monasteries and churches, for these clerical leaders no longer were able to exert absolute control over the farmers working on the gult lands of the church. The people in the town at least were reluctant to be impressed with the efforts of new men to claim to be worthy of the kind of honor which had been prevalent in the past."²²⁵

An elite which had dominated Tigray for centuries was being displaced from the centre of Adwa life and in the late 1960s and early 1970s Rosen was still hearing the townspeople's lament. The new elite by contrast were rich merchants without pedigrees who used their money to enhance their economic positions. They were resented for not using their wealth to provide feasts as was the custom in the past. Instead they accumulated land and provided gifts and services to government officials to bolster their newly acquired positions of prominence in the towns.²²⁶

Given what was to follow it is even more interesting to note that the people of Adwa held the Amhara ruling elite responsible for these unwelcome changes. In a fascinating, but all too brief related study, Rosen found that the inhabitants' perception of themselves was typified in the notion of *hobbo*, which refers to Tigrayans' determination, integrity and

²²⁴Rosen, "Warring with Words," p. 90.

²²⁵Ibid., p. 92.

²²⁶Ibid. p. 92.

desire for revenge in the face of injustice.²²⁷ Moreover, according to the Tigrayans, it was a characteristic the Amharas did not possess. Indeed, Tigrayans' desire for revenge was directed against the Amhara for having sought to dominate and oppress the people of the province.²²⁸ Specifically the Amhara rulers were held responsible for the deaths of at least six members of the royal house of Tigray who died in Shoa and for the economic neglect of the province. For Tigrayans, the term Woyene was "a reminder of the constant desire for some form of protest and possible future rebellion."²²⁹ It is noteworthy that Kalechristos, governor of Tigray from 1976 to 1978 singled out the people of Adwa as being particularly resistant to unjust authority and obstinate in their struggles for justice.²³⁰ Nonetheless, writing on the eve of the TPLF led revolution, Rosen 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.

The rural economy and way of life was also undergoing related far-reaching changes in this period as a result of similar forces of modernization and state centralization. But to appreciate their significance some perspective is needed. From the seventh century until the introduction of the Derg's "Proclamation to Provide for the Public Ownership of Rural Lands" in March 1975 the vast majority of the peasantry held land under the *risti* tenure system which ensured that every Tigrayan of the requisite social standing was entitled to claim land through descent from an *Akni Abat*, or founding father, who was once believed to have owned the land.²³¹ Tigray recognized three respectable statuses: farmer/soldier, cleric, and governor/warlord.²³² Other groups, such as slaves, Moslems,²³³ tradespeople

²²⁷C. Rosen, "Tigrean political identity," R. Hess (ed.), *Proceedings of the 5th International Conference on Ethiopian Studies*, University of Illinois, (1975), p. 261.

²²⁸*Ibid.*, p. 261.

²²⁹*Ibid.*, p. 263.

²³⁰Interview: Colonel Kalechristos Abbay, Addis Ababa, June 4, 1993.

²³¹Ministry of Land Reform and Administration, *Report on Land Tenure Survey of Tigre Province*, Addis Ababa, 1969.

²³²John Bruce, p. 467.

and ethnic and religious minorities, were not socially respectable and were generally denied access to productive land. 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. 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.

Risti holders had considerable rights over land. Although the holder could not vary inheritance patterns he or she 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, the holder could bar access to any of his or her children, or favour one child over another.²³⁴ According to Bruce, the risti holder's "mental set is that of an owner rather than a 'mere usufructuary'. Risti is the maximal estate in land, the most comprehensive bundle of rights over land, recognized by customary law. As such it is valued intensely."²³⁵

Although there were regional exceptions, in most areas the risti land of both parents was divided among sons and daughters, but the division was rarely equal, and Bruce has found that these disparities were generalizable:

"eldest sons will generally receive somewhat larger amounts of the parental risti land than other sons; sons will generally receive larger amounts than daughters; children who are

²³³While probably the majority of Moslems in Tigray were denied access to land, there was a large degree of regional variation as will be noted in this dissertation. Many Moslems were also involved in trading and weaving, occupations generally looked down upon in Tigray.

²³⁴*Ibid.*, pp. 52-53.

²³⁵*Ibid.*, p. 53.

patrilocally or matriclocally resident will usually receive more than those who are not; and usually a son will receive some share, no matter how small, while it is quite common for a daughter to receive none at all."²³⁶

In spite of these inequities and the upset these land divisions frequently caused, they rarely became open conflicts or went to litigation because such action was considered shameful.²³⁷

On top of this land holding system rested the state with its two arms, the Church and the secular nobility, for whom land and peasants to work the land were necessary for their survival. Churches or monasteries were granted one of two types of land: either *gulti* land which enabled the holder to levy taxes on the peasants of the area, or *rim* land which was directly acquired from the area peasantry and could either be farmed by the clergy themselves or by tenant peasants. Gulti rights were also given by the monarch to members of the nobility, generals, or other favoured individuals, who could retain part of the variable amount of taxes collected and pass the balance to the monarch. Gulti rights in theory reverted to the crown with the death of the holder, but this was not usually the case with rights held by the Church. According to tradition the Church should hold one-third of all land, but in practice in Tigray Bruce found that it held less than a tenth of the land in most parishes.²³⁸ Where the Church held no land its clergy had to be paid in cash or kind by the peasants of the parish.

The state extracted surpluses through *asrat*, a tithe on land, that varied between one-fifth and one-third of production and taxes on livestock and trade. Cultivators were also required to provide compulsory military service, billets and provisions for soldiers, unpaid labour for work on the nobles' lands, and gifts to the nobility on special occasions. In spite

²³⁶Ibid., p. 47.

²³⁷Ibid., p. 49.

²³⁸Ibid., p. 53.

of these features which suggest similarities with European feudalism, and the fact that most early European visitors described the system as "feudal", there were significant differences. Of particular significance is the fact that Tigrayan (and Amhara) peasants drew their rights to the land from a lineage system; they had a high degree of control over their land, and the nobility lacked direct access to land, enjoying only rights of income from resident producers.²³⁹ Bruce concluded that land in Tigray was "an intensely private property and the State's mechanisms for drawing off the farm surplus to support itself and its cadres are those consistent with a private property system - those of taxation."²⁴⁰

Although land as the principle means of production was inequitably divided in Abyssinia and this pointed to the solidification of classes, social relations were largely structured along patron-client lines.²⁴¹ Abyssinian society has been noted for its hierarchy and rituals of deference which sharply demarcated its members. However, there were always strong bonds between superior and inferior, ties of blood, and what Hobben has called a "relatively low degree of differentiation in life-style - i.e. forms of social organization, ideas and ideals."²⁴² 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. Crummy has written that there were classes in themselves, but not classes for themselves.²⁴³

²³⁹See McCann, p. 41; Asafa Jalata, p. 38.

²⁴⁰John Bruce, p. 55.

²⁴¹Gebru Tareke, "Rural Protest in Ethiopia," p. 17.

²⁴²A. Hobben, "Social Stratification in Traditional Amhara Society," A. Tuden and L. Plotnicov (eds.), *Social Stratification in Africa*, (New York: The Free Press, 1970), p. 192.

²⁴³D. Crummy, "Abyssinian Feudalism," *Past and Present*, (1979), p. 23, quoted in Gebru Tareke, "Rural Protest in Ethiopia," p. 17.

In Tigray class structure became particularly fluid in this century for a number of reasons. First, although ruling families, such as that of Emperor Yohannis, did become a feature of the society, titles and gulti rights were not inheritable and therefore class consolidation through inheritance was discouraged. Secondly, risti held land was not 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 many plots of land changing hands. Thirdly, closely defining peasant class in the Tigrayan context is made difficult by the need to account for considerable regional differences in wealth and in 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 also caused by the dislocation of Tigrayans have experienced in the past one hundred years as a result of war, drought, environmental decline and pestilence.

In spite of the lack of statistical or other analyses of Tigray, two imperial government studies, one carried out by the short-lived and largely ineffectual Ministry of Land Reform, and another by the Central Statistical Office (CSO), can be used in outlining a socioeconomic profile of the province on the eve of the 1974 revolution. There are major problems with the analyses of these studies, but the lack of other available empirical data, nonetheless, makes them useful. 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 under-estimated Tigray's population in the past.²⁴⁴ Moreover, these figures do not include the populations of Wolkait and Tselemti which were removed from Tigray in the aftermath of the Woyene, and parts of south-eastern Tigray which were attached to Wollo in 1957. In addition, the

²⁴⁴For a discussion of this see D. Hicks, "Tigray and North Wollo Situation Report April-May 1992," UN Emergency Prevention and Preparedness Group, June 1992, Addis Ababa.

1966 study acknowledged that no attempt was made to estimate the province's nomadic population.²⁴⁵ The CSO Tigray population estimates for 1989 - 1990, again not including Wolkait and Tselemti and parts of south-eastern Tigray, were 2.7 million, while TPLF/REST estimates for the same year, but including these areas, was 4.8 million.²⁴⁶

Although Tigray's literacy rates, according to Solomon Inquai, were the highest in Ethiopia,²⁴⁷ both his study and that of the CSO record that only 6.4 percent of the population were literate and this broke down to 12.1 percent of males and five percent of females.²⁴⁸ Within Tigray the figures ranged from a high of 12.1 percent literacy in Adwa to less than two percent in the awardja of Tembien. The average Tigrayan household was made up of 4.53 individuals and the average age for marriage was fifteen, with ninety percent of Tigrayans marrying between the ages of ten and nineteen.²⁴⁹ 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 same exclusion of the western and south-eastern districts gave Tigray an area of 65,920 square kilometres, approximately 1/17 of the total area of Ethiopia.²⁵⁰ Ninety-three percent of the population lived in the rural areas and 91 percent of the economically active population were engaged in agriculture. More than three-quarters of the land holdings in Tigray were privately "owned" (although given an earlier description of the rist system the term privately held would probably be more apt; the studies simply

²⁴⁵CSO, p. 1.

²⁴⁶Hicks, Appendix 1.

²⁴⁷Solomon Inquai, article in *Journal of Ethiopian Studies*, Vol. 11, No. 1, January 1969, p. 58.

²⁴⁸CSO, p. 10.

²⁴⁹*Ibid.*, p. 18.

²⁵⁰Ministry of Land Reform, p. 3. Boundary changes after liberation increased Tigray's area to just over 100,000 square kilometres.

distinguish "owned", "rented" and "partly owned and rented"), a figure considerably higher than anywhere else in Ethiopia.²⁵¹ Within Tigray the awardja with the highest percentage of owned land was Agame with 94 percent.²⁵²

Less than twenty percent of land in Tigray was partly owned and partly rented and only seven percent rented. The two woredas of Raya and Azebo had the highest figures for rented land at almost one-third, and the statistical profile notes that this was the only area in Tigray where land holdings were commonly measured and registered in the names of individual owners.²⁵³ The study omitted to note in explanation that the peoples in this area had their communal land system destroyed and their lands confiscated by Haile-Selassie in the wake of the Woyene and the original owners were only given the option of buying back or renting their former lands.

The average cultivated area of land per household in Tigray was 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.²⁵⁴ The average size of household land holdings was highest in Shire while Agame had the smallest average cultivated areas with a figure of 1,800 square metres per household.²⁵⁵ The awardja's extreme land shortages would be a major reason why the TPLF chose this area to carry out its first land reform, the process of which will be described in chapter eight.

²⁵¹Ibid., p. 54.

²⁵²CSO, p. 27.

²⁵³Ministry of Land Reform, p. 16.

²⁵⁴CSO, p. 26.

²⁵⁵Ibid., p. 27.

The risti system of allocating land where claims could go back twenty generations and be made on both the male and female sides encouraged land subdivisions and fragmentation of land parcels. On average a household held 3.5 parcels of land, but three-quarters of the peasants surveyed were opposed to land consolidation for four reasons. First, they had a sentimental attachment to land inherited from their forefathers. Second, separate plots provided protection against crop failure and uncertain weather. Third, separate plots had different soils which favoured production of different crops were preferred as they spread risk. Lastly, consolidation was not deemed consistent with the risti system of land holding.²⁵⁶ Further evidence of the individualism of Tigrayan peasants that anthropologists have also noted 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 and few would agree to resettlement, even within Tigray.²⁵⁷

Because of land claims which could be activated at any time and because most woredas allotted land shares in old holdings for new residents, land insecurity was a feature of the system and this served to discourage capital formation and conservation of the soil, trees and water. As population grew and land shortages developed in the post World War II 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 sixty percent of civil cases and eighteen percent of criminal cases in Tigray were recorded as being related to land.²⁵⁸ Although the risti system of land tenure strongly discouraged the privatization 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

²⁵⁶Ministry of Land Reform, p. 42.

²⁵⁷Bauer, *Household and Society in Ethiopia*, p. 42.

²⁵⁸Ministry of Land Reform, pp.37-41.

concluded, provided evidence of the process of "individualization of the land tenure system in Tigre."²⁵⁹

Only in the Axum area, where the Orthodox Church had large land holdings, were landlord-tenant relations singled out by the Ministry of Land Reform 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 thirteen percent of tenants were reported to have made improvements to their land.²⁶⁰ A mere five percent of rental payments were in cash which gives some indication of the low level of agricultural commercialization in Tigray at the time, a figure incidentally, that was the lowest in Ethiopia.

There is reason to believe, however, that landlord-tenant relations were far more fraught with problems 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.²⁶¹ 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 percent of the tenants actually paid the land tax for their landlords, and there is no reason to think that this was a unique example.²⁶²

²⁵⁹Ibid., p. 59.

²⁶⁰Ibid., p. 36.

²⁶¹Gilkes, p. 116.

²⁶²Ibid., p. 117.

Unlike elsewhere in Ethiopia, a land tax was applied to Tigray as a whole and then 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 vary year by year, but individual rates varied because they were dependent upon the number of persons holding land in the goth. The Orthodox Church collected 28 percent of the taxes and one-third of its taxes were spent on the schools which it operated.²⁶³

The researchers had little to propose except to reiterate government policy which favoured increasing agricultural productivity through "individualization of communal tenure", a policy that would be carried out by eliminating "systems of holdings which are incompatible with economic and social development."²⁶⁴ In spite of this policy, and the evidence examined above which the researchers concluded indicated a move toward individualization of the land tenure system, the study nonetheless categorically rejected the introduction of freehold land tenure. Instead, the study's authors called for permanent and inheritable leaseholds with restrictions on the transfer of land outside the community.²⁶⁵ Since nowhere in the study do the authors consider the attitudes of Tigrayan peasants, this rejection of freehold tenure needs some explanation which the study did not, or could not, provide. This analyst was to discover what the earlier researchers almost certainly knew but perhaps for political reasons could not state, namely: that Tigrayan peasants abhorred any suggestion of the imposition of freehold land tenure.

Compared to the Addis Ababa government which spent little on infrastructure in the province, and did even less to encourage economic diversification, the Mekelle-based government was, if nothing else, energetic. With few possibilities for agricultural

²⁶³Ministry of Land Reform, p. 19.

²⁶⁴*Ibid.*, p. 60.

²⁶⁵*Ibid.*, p. 60.

commercialization (outside of pockets of land in the west and southeast which had earlier been removed from Tigray) Ras Mengesha Seyoum, who became governor-general of Tigray upon the death of his father in 1961, attempted to establish an industrial base in the province. With less than one-third of one percent of Ethiopia's industrial employment against 87 percent for Shoa and Eritrea in 1970, Mengesha's plans for a regional industrial core in Tigray were at odds with 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.

A regional government development corporation, Tigray Agricultural and Industrial Development Ltd. (TAIDL), was established through public subscription which led to the revitalization of the incense industry. Some other infrastructural projects were pursued as well. However, at the end of the day, and in spite of Ras Mengesha's undoubted personal commitment to the projects, there was only a marginal increase in industrial employment. Bad management and a lack of access to capital and skilled labour clearly figured in these failures, but until the TPLF can prove otherwise there must be some doubt whether Tigray's peripheral and largely subsistence economy could sustain an industrial base. Moreover, the few jobs created as a result of these projects were paid for by Mengesha's taxation of peasants living very close to the margins, something that older peasants were noting with anger even in 1993. This must have had some bearing on their unwillingness to support him when he went to the countryside in November 1974 to launch his anti-Derg rebellion.

The picture that emerges of Tigray on the eve of the revolution is one of a rural economy facing a crisis that Mengesha's tinkering could do little to overcome. 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.²⁶⁶ 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: first, the Afar pastoral nomads who were being displaced from their historical grazing lands by commercial cotton plantations, and second, the Raya and Azebo tenants still suffering from the effects of the loss of their land in the wake of the Woyane.²⁶⁷ For most of this century Tigrayan peasants had trekked north to Eritrea when in need of supplementary income but by 1973 factory employment for the displaced Tigrayans had become scarce as the growing Eritrean insurrection was reducing the supply of raw materials and factories were operating at reduced production levels.²⁶⁸

A lack of rain precipitated the drought in 1972 but the cause of the famine that ensued lay in a bankrupt social system. The evidence is overwhelming that that the Haile-Selassie regime worked to thwart changes that might improve the living conditions of poor peasant families or make them less vulnerable to natural disaster.²⁶⁹ As Girma has noted:

"Drought does not take people by surprise: its causes build over time, and ample, detectable warnings are visible well before drought incurs damages. If famine occurs, it is not caused by the lack of precipitation that triggers it, but by the lack of political commitment to develop adequate food distribution systems."²⁷⁰

²⁶⁶Mesfin Wolde Mariam, *Rural Vulnerability to Famine in Ethiopia 1958 - 1977*, (Addis Ababa: Addis Ababa University), p. 106.

²⁶⁷A. Sen, *Poverty and Famines: An Essay on Entitlement and Deprivation*, (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1981), pp. 86-112.

²⁶⁸"Forced Labour but no Relief," *Horn of Africa*, Vol. 4, No. 1, 1981, p. 29.

²⁶⁹P. Koehn, "Ethiopia: Famine, Food Production, and Changes in the Legal Order," *African Studies Review*, Vol. XXII, No. 1, (1979), p. 36.

²⁷⁰Girma Kebede, p. 75.

Indeed, the northern centred famine occurred at a time when the country had sufficient food supplies that remained undistributed, causing people to starve to death in the midst of plenty.²⁷¹

However, 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 the urban poor, and gave rise to comparisons with the French Revolution which had also been preceded by famine.²⁷² Moreover, British television's Jonathan Dimbleby's exposure of a famine that the government was assiduously denying did much to undermine the international legitimacy of Haile-Selassie's regime and at the same time provided further and graphic evidence that radical elements in the towns used to assail the regime.

The defeat of the Woyene rebels and the changing international configuration in the post-war period facilitated rapid moves toward state centralization and modernization. To the extent that state centralization measures were effective they reformed the administrative links between centre and periphery and increased the power of the emperor, but they also served to emphasize the Shoan character of the Ethiopian state. In Tigray weakening the local administration further undermined the peasants' bond with their traditional rulers and this served to lessen the peasants' identification with the state. The only significant Tigrayan leaders who retained power after the reforms were enacted were those like Ras Mengesha who had familial links to Haile-Selassie and this was clearly a mixed blessing. But, in spite of the declining legitimacy that traditional leaders had in the eyes of the peasants, there were no signs prior to 1974 that they were prepared to oppose the

²⁷¹Ibid., p. 76.

²⁷²Lefort, p. 49.

increasing demands of the state on their meagre product, much less challenge their rulers' monopoly of state power.²⁷³

Economic modernization produced little genuine development in Tigray. In the early years the state had been maintained by the surplus extracted from ox-plough agriculture as well as by 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 small-holding subsistence, backward and difficult to commercialize 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 processes that were only in their infancy 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 and this was certain to be resisted by the risti holding highland peasants.²⁷⁴

²⁷³See J. Markakis, *Ethiopia: Anatomy of a Traditional Polity*, pp. 88-89, who argues that in northern Ethiopia the absence of commercial agriculture, the strength of patron-client relations and the risti landholding system, inhibited the growth of peasant class consciousness.

²⁷⁴J. Markakis and Nega Ayele, *Class and Revolution in Ethiopia*, (Nottingham: Spokesman, 1978), p.59.

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 with government support. But with few exceptions these farms were outside Tigray or in pockets of the province's inhospitable lowlands. In the majority of cases peasants were not drawn to wage labour by market created needs of an expanding commercial economy, but for their very survival in the face of declining living standards. However, there was no indication that Tigrayan peasants were averse to participating in markets; indeed, all indications were that even when operating at the margin peasants were sending small amounts of their produce, principally grains, to local markets.

These conditions and circumstances do not at all conform to those sketched by moral economists who put agricultural commercialization at the forefront in undermining peasant forms of production, producing a class of landless labourers, dividing peasants by their involvement in the market economy and fostering rebellion. The growing crisis afflicting rural Tigray derived in part from an insolveable dilemma: on the one hand commercial agriculture could not advance in highland Tigray because it would necessarily 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 political economy could not support the population as their poverty and the cycle of famines made clear. But even if the rural crisis had its roots in production and not in commercial agriculture per se this alone can not explain peasant revolt in Tigray when peasants in neighbouring Wollo, who suffered from a similar crisis, did not respond by revolting.

This points to the need for a much wider causal framework than that proposed by the moral economists. What is required is a framework that embraces the impact of the

political and economic changes that took place in Tigray during the forty years between the Italian invasion and the TPLF led insurrection. This was a period that can be characterized as one of modernization with virtually no development and one of economic change that produced declining standards of living for most Tigrayan peasants. The forces at work were not limited to agricultural commercialization, but crucially involved the breakdown of primordial loyalties and village isolation, a weakening of patron-client relations before the demands of state centralization, a far more intrusive role for the central state in the lives of the peasants and, crucially, the growth of a privileged but increasingly discontented strata without a strong allegiance to the old regime: the petty-bourgeoisie.

The Student Movement and Revolution

The 1972 - 1974 famine in northern Ethiopia was not an underlying cause of the overthrow of Haile-Selassie, but it 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. The task here, however, is not to examine in detail the reasons behind the collapse of the old regime, or to follow the course of the military regime that took form in its wake. What is required is an adequate background to approaching the subsequent Tigrayan struggle against the Derg which is the subject of the chapters that follow. Therefore, this section is necessarily brief and makes no claims to originality. It opens with a discussion of the student movement which Markakis has described as "the imperial regime's political nemesis".²⁷⁵ Although the critical role that students played in bringing about the collapse of the Haile-Selassie regime is not shared by all analysts of the period,²⁷⁶ there can be no doubt that it was out of the

²⁷⁵Markakis, *National and Class Conflict*, p. 100.

²⁷⁶See P. Gilkes, p. 248, and D. and M. Ottaway (1978), pp. 38, 66, 100, quoted in P. Koehn, "The Ethiopian Revolution: Events, Interpretations and Implications," *Africa Today*, Vol. 27, No. 1, (1980),

student movement that the TPLF derived its core membership and ideological and empirical origins, themes that will be taken up in the next chapter.

The University College of Addis Ababa was founded in 1950 by French-Canadian Jesuits and was later re-named Haile-Selassie I University (HSIU) and, after 1974 Addis Ababa University (AAU). The institution experienced its first political stirrings during the 1960 coup attempt of Haile-Selassie's palace guard. Following a personal appeal for support by the coup leader General Mengistu Neway, virtually all the students at the university marched through the capital.²⁷⁷ Although the coup began the process of undermining the imperial mystique, its defeat 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.²⁷⁸ By this time most university students rejected royal blood and religious sanctions as legitimate sources of political authority, and they viewed the regime as being corrupt and held that a highly inequitable proportion of the nation's resources was going to landed interests.²⁷⁹

In the absence of political parties or forms of education different from those in other developing countries, Koehn and Hayes attributed early radicalism at the university to the presence of politically conscious foreign students in the country, together with declining

pp. 34, 38. Koehn, who like Markakis had close contacts with student activists at AAU during the early 1970s, argues that urban forces and particularly students, were critical actors in the decline and ultimate downfall of the old regime.

²⁷⁷P. Koehn and L. Hayes, "Student Politics in Traditional Monarchies: A Comparative Analysis of Ethiopia and Nepal," *Asian and African Studies* XIII, Vol. 1, No. 2, (1978), p. 39.

²⁷⁸A comparative study carried out at the end of the 1960s found a larger proportion of Ethiopian university students opposed to traditional authority in governmental structures than in the five other African nations studied. See O. Klineberg and M. Zavaloni, *Nationalism and Tribalism Among African Students: A Study of Social Identity*, (The Hague: Mouton, 1969) p. 222, cited in Koehn and Hayes.

²⁷⁹Koehn and Hayes, pp. 35-6.

employment prospects for the educated minority.²⁸⁰ In the first instance Ethiopian students, who frequently perceived themselves and their country as superior to the visiting scholarship students from "black" colonized Africa, were shocked to find that these students typically came from countries with higher standards of living, development and political organization 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 Organization of African Unity (OAU) and for the U.N. Economic Commission for Africa (ECA).

Secondly, declining employment opportunities for the educated minority meant that there was less scope for the government to co-opt disaffected intellectuals into the bureaucracy. It has been argued that with most students coming from non-aristocratic backgrounds they recognized that they faced a future of landlessness under a regime where the aristocracy was monopolizing investment in commercial land enterprises.²⁸¹ The same author holds that the predominately Amhara and Tigrigna speaking students at HSIU raised the "land to the tiller" slogan as a means by which to draw the southern peasantry into a political coalition against the landlords.²⁸²

While these sociological and political factors must figure in any explanation of the strength of 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 conversely in the state bureaucracy where it occupied a well-paid but subordinate position. As Kiflu has noted, "[T]he only escape

²⁸⁰Ibid., pp. 36-7.

²⁸¹Michael Chege, "The Revolution Betrayed: Ethiopia, 1974-79," *Journal of Modern African Studies*, Vol. 17, No. 3 (1979), p. 365.

²⁸²Ibid., p. 366.

from this petty bourgeois destiny lay through the exercise of political power, a fact that eventually turned the intelligentsia into a dissident group."²⁸³

However, it would be a mistake to deny the importance of youthful idealism and the influence of revolutionary experiences of the past (notably China and Cuba) and of the contemporary period (particularly Vietnam) in inspiring the students. The willingness of large number of students to give up their lives during the course of the Red Terror and through their participation in the various liberation fronts and parties cannot be reduced to simple careerism or political opportunism. It is probably not coincidental that students' demands for land reform came to the fore one year after the initiation of a government program to send university students to the countryside. This brought the students into direct contact with the people whose lives they wanted to change at a time when conditions generally for the country's peasantries, and particularly for those in the north, were deteriorating.²⁸⁴

In a country where literacy rates in the 1960s were below ten percent the small number of students who gained entry into Ethiopia's only university were a privileged minority. Markakis has estimated that no more than 8,000 Ethiopians held higher degrees including university graduates in 1970²⁸⁵ and Ottaway reckoned that Ethiopia had one of the smallest educated classes as a percentage of its population of any country in Africa.²⁸⁶ 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 pursued their studies in North America and Europe.

²⁸³Kiflu Tadesse, *The Generation: The History of the Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Party*, (Trenton: Red Sea Press, 1993), p. 19.

²⁸⁴Bahru Zewde, p. 222.

²⁸⁵Markakis, *Anatomy*, p. 182.

²⁸⁶Ottaway, *Ethiopia*, p. 23.

Indeed, by the late 1960s there were almost 2,000 students abroad, one-third of them in the United States.²⁸⁷ 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 petty-bourgeoisie."²⁸⁸ This must be qualified with respect to Tigray. Most of the students at HSIU came from Shoa and Eritrea, the most economically developed provinces of the country with the largest petty-bourgeoisies. However, with the exception of poor scholarship students, in far lesser developed Tigray students were more likely to also come from backgrounds in the rich peasantry and lower nobility.

Oromos, who constituted the largest ethnic community in Ethiopia comprised less than ten percent of the university student population at the end of the 1960s.²⁸⁹ Although Moslem numbers probably equalled those of Christians in Ethiopia, because of the discrimination they experienced and their own 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.²⁹⁰ Females were also a negligible force at the university, amounting to only nine percent of the student body.²⁹¹

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

²⁸⁷Kiflu Tadesse, p. 18.

²⁸⁸M. Ottaway, "Social Classes and Corporate Interests in the Ethiopian Revolution," *Journal of Modern African Studies*, Vol. 14. No. 3. (1976), p. 475.

²⁸⁹HSIU, 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, p. 17.

²⁹⁰J. Trimingham, *Islam in Ethiopia*, (New York: Barnes and Noble, 1952), p. 15.

²⁹¹Legesse Lemma, *Political Economy of Ethiopia 1875-1974*, (1979), p. 303, quoted in Kiflu Tadesse, p. 17.

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, as Koehn points out, it was the students alone among the organized collectivities in Addis Ababa who consistently engaged in overt antisystem acts.²⁹² 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 noncommissioned officers, enlisted soldiers and radical junior officers with ties to the intelligentsia²⁹³ 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 and 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 program 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 the suspension of all civil rights. These events caused ideological confusion and organizational 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 Peoples Revolutionary

²⁹²P. Koehn, "Forecast for Political Change in Ethiopia: An Urban Perspective," p. 82.

²⁹³Ibid., p. 84.

Party (EPRP), which demanded a quick end to military rule and the formation of a "people's government". At the other extreme, the smaller All-Ethiopia Socialist Movement (MEISON), which also saw itself as Marxist-Leninist, attempted to work with the Derg to gain the support of progressive elements among the urban population. A myriad of other groupings from the student movement took varying positions in this debate and others left Addis Ababa and the towns and went to the rural areas where in due course they launched the insurrections of the Oromo Liberation Front (OLF) and the TPLF.

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 turning its back on the past the military had to acquire a new basis of legitimacy as well as institutional structures through which it could govern. In the absence of any philosophy of its own the Derg increasingly absorbed that of the Marxist-Leninist inspired students. Socialism was to provide the ideological underpinnings of the state and this was most forcefully expressed through the Land Proclamation of 1975 which nationalized 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.²⁹⁴

To carry out its program in the countryside, as well as rid itself of student critics in the towns, the Derg organized the Zemacha, or campaign, that sent some 30-50,000 university and secondary school students to the rural areas to take the revolution to the peasants. To build a popular basis for its rule as well as to decentralize authority the Derg created Peasant Associations in the rural areas and *kebelles*, or urban associations, in the

²⁹⁴Harbeson, p. 86.

towns. However, by 1977 the role of the PAs and kebelles had largely been reduced to that of mobilizing support for the Derg. Under Soviet and Eastern European influence the Derg established the Commission to Organize 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 organizations.²⁹⁵

The tensions between the government and its radical urban critics became increasingly violent as the EPRP started a White Terror campaign in 1976 against the military government which in turn responded with its far more lethal Red Terror campaign. Initiated in Addis Ababa, largely through the kebelles, the government orchestrated urban terror spread throughout the country and after the EPRP was largely exterminated in the towns and only survived in a few rural outposts, the Derg then turned on its ally, MEISON, which it eliminated by the end of 1977.²⁹⁶ Other victims of the military included remnants of the old regime and merchants, particularly grain traders, who were blamed for their role in the 1972 - 1974 famine. 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 Ogaden region and this set the stage for the Soviets and the Cubans to end their alliance with Somalia and come to the defense of Ethiopia. This leftward tilt also led to the United States breaking with its long-term regional ally. Disarray within the Ethiopian state served

²⁹⁵Girma Kebede, p. 4.

²⁹⁶de Waal, p. 104.

to embolden the Eritrean liberation Fronts, which by 1977, were in control of most of the province and appeared close to over-running Asmara and Ethiopia's main port of Massawa. However, the defeat of the Somalis 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 Front, the EPLF, back to its base area at Nakfa in the isolated Sahel region of northern Eritrea.

At the time many sympathetic observers of Ethiopia predicted the eminent demise of the Eritrean insurgents and saw the Derg and its leader Mengistu as continuing the efforts of Twedros, Yohannis, Menelik and Haile-Selassie to unify the country. But the large numbers of highland Christian youth that joined the EPLF in the late 1970s testified to the failure of the Derg's attempt to win the support of Eritreans. And almost unnoticed by both the Derg and foreign observers during these tumultuous times, a small band of revolutionary students went to the lowlands of western Tigray and founded the TPLF in 1975.

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 and 120,000 of them were used to attack EPLF positions in the Sahel in the largest series of battles to date in the war, the Red Star Campaign.²⁹⁷ This campaign and those that followed it produced enormous destruction, loss of life and the creation of a large refugee population in neighbouring Sudan, but it did not defeat the EPLF. Instead, faced with a spreading insurgency, notably in Tigray, the Derg

²⁹⁷Ibid., pp. 117-8.

encouraged famine conditions in the north and began resettling northern peasants to the south, as a means to undermine the growing appeal of the liberation fronts.

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,²⁹⁸ responded quickly and over-ran most of the Derg'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 wake of these military developments, and the evidence they provided of both the Derg's weakness and the opposition's strength, there were rapid changes on the political front. Notable was the TPLF's establishment of the Ethiopian Peoples Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF) which brought Oromo and Derg POWs, together with the largely Amhara Ethiopian Peoples Democratic Movement (EPDM) into a grand coalition. With the support of the EPLF, and to a lesser extent the OLF, this new TPLF-dominated front was to bring down the Derg and force 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 then, after the UN supervised independence referendum of April 1993, as the Government of Eritrea.

²⁹⁸The TPLF has never given figures for 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 emphasize the success of its political mobilization, suggest that this contention is 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.

It is beyond the scope of this study to provide an explanation for the ultimate overthrow of the Derg beyond considering the role of the TPLF in bringing about its collapse, but some brief comments based on the above analysis may contribute to an understanding of what follows in the dissertation. The students' efforts did much to undermine the legitimacy of the old regime, but they did not have the power to overthrow it, a task that fell to the military. The Derg appropriated the students' Marxism-Leninism as a legitimizing device and as a means to maintain and advance their authoritarian control. 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 land proclamation. In consequence, the multinational character of the movement to overthrow the old regime largely withered as the Derg's rule increasingly took on an Amhara cast. Much of the disposition, if not the form and method of rule, of the old regime thus 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 new regional and ethnic elites.

Nationalism aroused in the course of the Somali war was used by the Derg to strengthen its grip on the state, but the regime's repeated failures 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 mobilize an army of over half a million, devote fifty percent of the government's budget to defense 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 was almost anti-climatic.

Conclusion

As part of the Abyssinian core and descendants of the Axumites, Tigrayans have historically held a privileged position in society in relation to those in the peripheral areas. However, in the period from the decline of the Zagwe empire in the thirteenth century power in the northern and central highlands has irrevocably shifted to the more numerous Amhara peoples, and in the hundred years since the death of Yohannis, state power has been firmly held by Amharas from Shoa. Moreover, the social status of Tigrayans has declined as the locus of power moved south, and as both they and other Ethiopians have become increasingly aware of their poverty. Across the Tigrayan community pride and national sentiments fused with resentment which was directed at the Amhara elite who were held responsible for conditions in the province.

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 hand. The central state's efforts to replace personal means of control with bureaucratic institutions spurred dissension because it gave the petty-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.

Similar processes 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 their power and return to Europe.

Rather, it was held by an indigenous nobility whose survival as a class depended on their retention of state power. Moreover, the inability of the Haile-Selassie regime to respond to the key demands for land reform and an end to Amhara hegemony left it with a dwindling base of support in the 1960s and 1970s. Indeed, the overthrow of the old regime in 1974 was accomplished with very little bloodshed but, like Russia in 1917, it opened the doors to revolts in the peripheries that were to consume the country for the next seventeen years.

The focus of these revolts was national self-determination and the dominant movement in Ethiopia was to be the TPLF. It is the objective of the next chapter to locate the roots of this Front in the Ethiopian student movement and the towns of Tigray.

CHAPTER 4: THE URBAN ORIGINS OF REVOLUTION IN TIGRAY

Introduction

Moral economists generally hold that left to their own inclinations peasants are only capable of initiating local or spontaneous revolts of a largely reformist nature. That is, their demands are an expression of local grievances and not those of the peasantry as a whole and they rarely challenge the legitimacy of government, only the means by which government is pursued. Both the demand for revolution, and the leadership that gives expression to this demand, comes from an urban based intelligentsia. It is a case of mutual dependence with the peasantry unable to realize through their demands for change without linking their struggle with that of a section of the petty-bourgeoisie who in turn are too small and weak on their own to fundamentally alter social relations in society.

Although most moral economists recognize the critical links that must be forged between the intelligentsia in the towns and the peasants in the countryside to make a revolution, they have not generally recognized the importance of urban inhabitants to peasant-based revolutions. Like the peasants, the Tigrayan townspeople also experienced the convulsions of rapid social change and the dislocation of the economy. They also became increasingly bitter at Tigray's growing marginalization under the Shoa-centred regime. Significantly residents of towns, particularly those towns with high schools where political radicalism was the most developed, provided much of the leadership and rank and file of the early TPLF. For the most part peasants took much longer to be drawn into the revolutionary struggle and their participation was far less influenced by ideological considerations than was the case of the petty-bourgeois students from the towns. Thus the almost complete exclusion by the moral economists of any serious analysis of the urban based population and their problems appears entirely misplaced.

The objective of this chapter is to bring into focus the importance of the towns as the setting in which Tigrayan nationalism developed and in which the revolution was conceived, achieved prominence and then faded in the face of repression and was forced to focus on the countryside. The main concern of the first part of the chapter will be to consider the roots of Tigrayan nationalism among the petty-bourgeoisie in the towns of the province, and secondly, to examine the critical role of teachers in giving a political expression to cultural nationalism. The last part of the chapter will take further the examination of the Addis Ababa centred student movement begun in chapter three. Here the concern will be with the emergence of ethnonationalism in the student movement and specifically the organizational evolution of Tigrayan nationalism which led directly to the establishment of the TPLF.

Nationalism in the Towns

Until very recently Tigray possessed no industry and, with the notable exception of the Humera area (only placed within Tigrayan boundaries after the liberation), virtually no commercial farms. There was no mining except that carried out on a seasonal basis by a handful of workers. Until the 1992 establishment of the Teachers Training Institute in Adwa, there were no post-secondary educational institutions in Tigray. And trade was, and remains, 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 no more than 80,000 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 involved in commerce (invariably very small traders and merchants) heavily dependent upon 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, pillaged them, and forcefully 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 peasants 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 nonetheless held in high esteem by Tigrayan peasants.

Haile-Selassie's post-war program of modernization and state centralization involved a major expansion of the role of the Ethiopian state, particularly in the final years leading up to the collapse of his regime, but it did not alter the inequitable urban-rural relationship. Indeed, his program served to increase the part played by towns in the lives of the people and produced an urban based petty-bourgeois class. As this loosely linked class developed, a section of it began actively opposing the old regime which was held responsible for the slow pace of modernization, corruption and for the constraints to its own participation in government. The Tigrayan petty-bourgeoisie shared these sentiments, but it was also motivated by its opposition to Amharization. This class held its tenuous status because it succeeded in spite of its ethnicity in acquiring the necessary language and cultural attributes of the dominant Amhara. However, until assimilation was completed, and the collapse of the old regime was to bring a dramatic end to the

process, the Tigrayan petty-bourgeoisie were to use their critical position in society to attack Amhara domination and espouse Tigrayan nationalism.

Much of the bitterness of the Tigrayan petty-bourgeoisie revolved around what for them was the denial of educational opportunities.²⁹⁹ They recalled that prior to the Italian occupation there were almost no schools in Tigray. During the Italian occupation of 1935 - 1941 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 had been built in the towns largely with grants from abroad, often from Sweden, but these only served eight percent of the school age population.³⁰⁰ These conditions led Tigrayan parents who had the means to send their children outside Tigray to board with relatives and attend school.

The Tigrayan petty-bourgeoisie further 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 schools Tigrayans again saw that they were discriminated against (at least in comparison to the Amhara) in the employment market. Tigrayans had few opportunities to rise in the public service to top positions, which under Haile-Selassie were largely reserved for Shoan Amharas. The military was another field where Tigrayans did not

²⁹⁹Interview: Solomon Inquai, Mekelle, January 7 and January 8, 1993.

³⁰⁰Statistics from Huntings, Consultants to the Ethiopian Government, "Tigray, a Rural Development Study," Main Report, (London: 1977), quoted in J. Firebrace and G. Smith, p. 54.

share equal opportunities with the Amhara. These obstacles led many educated Tigrayans to become teachers. However, even in teaching the national government often chose to place 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.³⁰¹

Much as these concerns with education and employment equity embittered the Tigrayan nationalist petty-bourgeoisie, it was issues of cultural symbolism that proved the most effective in mobilizing petty-bourgeois ethnonationalism. When the Amhara manufacturers of Pepsi-Cola publicly announced in the mid 1960s their 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.³⁰² A further focus of national resentment was caused when the authorities ruled that placards with "Tigray" carried by Tigrayan athletes during a sports competition at the Addis Ababa Stadium in 1972 be changed to read "Tigre", a term considered derogatory by Tigrayans.³⁰³ The Tigrayans refused and boycotted the affair. And positively, this heightened interest in Tigrayan culture 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 Amharaization was most advanced in the towns of Tigray because Amharigna was the language of government, the courts, church officialdom and, crucially, of the schools, institutions which were predominantly located in the towns. Significantly

³⁰¹Interview: Gebregiorgis Gegziabher, Mekelle, January 5, 1993.

³⁰²Interview: Solomon Inquai, Mekelle, January 7, 1993.

³⁰³*People's Voice*, September/December 1989, p. 22.

for upwardly mobile Tigrayans, proficiency in Amharigna was a requirement for admittance into HSIU, the only university in the country. 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 and factory workers and as traders. As a result, the public language spoken by many non-farm bound Tigrayans, and virtually all educated Tigrayans, was Amharigna. And 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.³⁰⁴

In the countryside the situation was different. 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 more clearly seen as the language of outsiders, of people from the towns, and of 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 Tigrayan governor, Ras Mengesha, and it was the language of their town-dwelling intelligentsia. Moreover, while there were a handful of ethnic Amharas in Tigrayan towns employed as administrators, church officials, and teachers, there were virtually none in the rural areas with the exception of the mixed ethnic groups that inhabited the borderlands of the southeast.

Although for the most part illiterate, rural Tigrayans were deeply attached to their language and retained a vibrant oral tradition where poems were prepared and recited on

³⁰⁴Indicative of this is that to this day most Tigrayan professors at AAU are more conversant in Amharigna than in their native tongue.

special occasions. While concern about the threat to Tigrigna did not have the same resonance in rural areas as it did among the intelligentsia in the towns, the TPLF was to put to good use the peasants' oral tradition as a means of introducing their political appeals to the village.

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.

Although Church schools rarely went beyond the elementary level, they were little different than state schools in their attachment to Amharigna and hence the minority who graduated from Church schools and went on to become priests were well acquainted with the language. Years spent ministering to parish constituents, few of whom understood Amharigna, doubtlessly weakened the impact of the language, but Tigrayans who held higher positions in the Orthodox Church did, and still do, function linguistically in an almost wholly Amharigna environment.³⁰⁵

Teachers and Nationalism

Long economically and politically marginalized in an Amhara dominated empire-state, it was the Tigrayan petty-bourgeoisie, and principally the teachers, who first began raising the nationalist issue in its modern, post-Woyene, form in the 1960s. Cultural oppression

³⁰⁵Even in the present and very different circumstances, the native Tigrayan who was serving as the Orthodox Church's bishop for the province during my visit was heard to preach in Amhargna in his home village; witnessed in Colliquot, January 22, 1993.

prompted the concern of teachers who focused on the decline of the national language, Tigrigna, and of Tigrayan culture in the face of a bureaucratic state devoted to centralization and homogenization 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 in the national state that the state proved to be most vulnerable. And its opposition was articulated and led by the modern state produced nationalist petty-bourgeoisie.

The sub-stratum of teachers, as a component of the Tigrayan petty-bourgeoisie, has a number of characteristics that help explain their concern with cultural oppression. First, since teachers' education consisted of only one year of post-high school education, and these studies took place at provincial teachers' training institutes, teachers were not exposed to the cosmopolitan environment of Addis Ababa and the wide variety of leftist ideologies that were increasingly being entertained in the period after the 1960 coup attempt. Second, formal education, at least beyond the elementary level, was largely the prerogative of an urban minority, and this minority was the primary focus of state efforts at breaking down regional and ethnic loyalties and identities and forming a national Amhara overlaid culture. The teachers were thus critical to the implementation of this objective. More than any other group in society they were made 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. Third, unlike other provincial professionals such as those who were employed in local administration, teachers had few loyalties to their department, they were locally focused, and they were not hierarchically organized and therefore had fewer structural divisions to achieving unity of purpose.

Tigrayan teachers were organized 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 organizations, 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. In a school system that completely omitted the study of Tigrigna and emphasized Amharigna, teachers could and did arrange cultural events that stressed the value of the Tigrigna language and Tigrayan songs, music, art and dance. Mocking 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 they inculcated their critique to the generation of Tigrayan students who would join the TPLF and launch an armed struggle.

But that was not all. Teachers, together with university and high school students, would form the backbone of the early TPLF. The most notable figure in this light 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 in to the field in 1975 it was quickly joined by many teachers and students and this movement intensified with the Derg's imposition of the Red Terror in which these groups were the principle victims.

Leaders of the present Tigrayan Teachers Association estimate that more than one-half of the Tigrayan teachers left their employment and went to the countryside in the period

between 1975 and the height of the Red Terror in 1978,³⁰⁶ and sources within the TPLF confirm the accuracy of this estimate. An official of the Tigrayan Teachers Association claimed that because of the large number of urban recruits it was not until 1982 that the peasantry formed the majority of the TPLF,³⁰⁷ while a former TPLF cadre reckoned that urban elements, largely teachers, dominated the Front for its first two years in the field. Whatever the case, and numbers alone do not reflect political dominance, the social base of the TPLF in the early years clearly lay with the urban petty-bourgeoisie, and the largest component of it was the teachers.

Student Movement and Tigrayan Nationalism

Parallel to the growth of nationalism among the petty-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 interest in 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. In spite of national movements in Eritrea and elsewhere most student activists rejected references to national divisions in Ethiopia as designed to promote tribalism and as such broadly matched the regime's policy of avoiding references to ethnicity in any context.³⁰⁸ Instead students extolled Ethiopian nationalism which was perceived to transcend all other identities and loyalties.

³⁰⁶Gebrekidan Abay, President ETA, Tigray branch and Gebregiorgis Gegziabher, Secretary ETA, Mekelle, January 1, 1993.

³⁰⁷Interview: Gebrekidan Abay and Gebregiorgis Gegziabher, Mekelle, January 1, 1993.

³⁰⁸Kiflu Tadesse, p. 51.

However, in what was to prove a ground breaking article published in the student newspaper *Struggle* in November 1969, Walleligne 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.³⁰⁹ He thus implicitly supported the secession of Ethiopia's various nations at a time when the government was engaged in a war with Eritrean "secessionists". This challenged government policy which espoused "Ethiopianism" and denied the multinational character of the country, policies with which the students were largely in sympathy.

As well as leading to the closure of the student newspaper, Walleligne'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 recognizing the right of all Ethiopia's peoples, including the 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 to secede. At a practical level the difficulty was also a function of their experience in an Ethiopia where, as Walleligne put it paraphrasing Fanon, "to be an Ethiopian you will have to wear an Amhara mask."³¹⁰ 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 organized compatriots abroad.³¹¹

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

³⁰⁹R. Balsvik, *Haile-Selassie's Students: the Intellectuals and Social Background to a Revolution 1952 - 1977*, (East Lansing: Michigan State University, 1985), pp. 277-8.

³¹⁰Walleligne Makonnen, *Struggle*, November 1969, quoted in Balsvik, p. 277.

³¹¹Balsvik, p. 285.

Ethiopia, the authors found Ethiopians to be less likely than other students to mention tribal and regional affiliation as identity attributes,³¹² and also less likely to express concern for inter-tribal tensions.³¹³ In general the authors of the study concluded that, "Ethiopian students are highly conscious of their student status, emphasize 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."³¹⁴ 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 idealized, 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 Addis Ababa University were Amhara and, as befitted the dominant ethnic community, they typically looked upon themselves primarily as "Ethiopians", rather than as Amharas. A further twenty to twenty-five percent 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.

While it may not have initially been apparent, most non-Amhara students resented the cultural and employment advantages of the Amhara students and they were angry at 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

³¹²Klineberg and Zavalloni, p. 76.

³¹³Ibid., p. 127.

³¹⁴Ibid., p. 233.

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 in the university coming 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.³¹⁵ 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.³¹⁶

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 president 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 it was Tigrayan soldiers and civilians who paid the highest cost in lives for Menelik's victory.³¹⁷ In another incident a leading Tigrayan student activist, Tilahun Gizaw, claimed that 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 Tigray students association at the university was united in

³¹⁵Balsvik, p. 280.

³¹⁶Balsvik, p. 281.

³¹⁷Interview: Eschetu Chole, Faculty of Business and Economics, AAU, Addis Ababa, December 23, 1992.

the conviction that their province was condemned to stagnation because of its exclusion from power in an Amhara-dominated state bureaucracy.³¹⁸

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 the Oromo.³¹⁹ In turn hostility to Tigrayans was based on the perception of Tigrayans' "feelings of superiority" and "ethnocentrism and tribalism".³²⁰ 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.³²¹ The study found distrust between the Tigrayans and Amhara was more strongly felt than between the other Ethiopian communities. Balsvik held that this antagonism was "rooted in the fact that the Amharas had won the historical struggle for political supremacy",³²² and while there is some truth to this view, it is largely meaningless without placing it in a suitable historical and social context which she does not do.

It would also be a mistake to over-emphasize ethnic antagonism at the university. The Tigrayan student Tilahun 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

³¹⁸Kiflu Tadesse, p. 52.

³¹⁹Klineberg and Zavalloni, p. 128.

³²⁰Ibid., p. 143.

³²¹Ibid., p. 93.

³²²Balsvik, p. 281.

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.

Generally the 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 transitional demand or tactical concession, and that 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.³²³ Indeed, many of the student Marxists held that the narrow chauvinist policies of the Shoan Amhara old regime were stimulating dissident nationalism in the periphery and that by overthrowing the regime and carrying out a social revolution that they were ensuring the unity of Ethiopia. Like the later Lenin and Stalin, most students on the one hand granted the theoretical right of Ethiopia's nations to secede but on the other posed a number of obstacles that ensured that they would not be able to realize this right.

As the perspective of the student movement deepened and broadened during the 1970s, various study, recreational, and self-help groups started forming among non-Amhara students. Such groups also formed among the Tigrayan students, but when some activists attempted to politicize their association by denouncing the governor of Tigray, Ras Mengesha Seyoum, they were roundly criticized by other Tigrayans.³²⁴ Nonetheless, according to Markakis's informants, these same militants used the occasion of the closure of the university and the secondary schools following student demonstrations in 1972 to return to Tigray and to visit Asmara in an effort to gain further recruits.

³²³R. Pateman, *Eritrea: Even the Stones are Burning*, (Trenton, NJ: Red Sea Press, 1990), p. 13.

³²⁴Markakis, *National and Class Conflict*, p. 252.

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. For most non-Eritreans, national self-determination did not assume engaging in struggles for independence and class emancipation remained the objective. The view Tigrigna speaking students increasingly embraced was that in a situation where a Shoan Amhara feudal class dominated Ethiopia, the best approach would be to engage in a national liberation struggle. 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 Tigrai People",³²⁵ perhaps the first real indicator of the political direction they would take.

The outcome of these debates was the establishment of the Tigray National Organization (TNO), the organization that was to serve as a link between the militants in the university and their supporters in the towns until the TPLF took form. Markakis has the TNO being formed after the Derg's seizure of power and this is consistent with the position of some TPLF officials who hold that the TNO was only in existence for six months to prepare the ground for launching the armed struggle, but other sources claim a much longer existence for it. According to one TPLF publication, the TNO was formed in the early 1970s as an underground urban organization of progressive intellectuals and patriotic nationals who "carried out considerable work of agitating the masses during the 1974 uprising by writing and distributing pamphlets."³²⁶ This is also supported by the Eritrean scholar, Bereket Habte Selassie who wrote,

"During the Ethiopian revolution, the TNO played an important role in publishing and distributing agitational material and in guiding popular demonstrations. It

³²⁵Ibid., p. 252.

³²⁶*Woyeen*, February 21, 1979.

intensified its organization of underground cells, in view of the usurpation of the fruits of the revolution by the military in September 1974, and, after having analyzed the situation in Ethiopia and in Tigray, it began to prepare for armed struggle in the countryside."³²⁷

While Tigrayan students were among the most active in the uprising some of them now claim not to have known of the TNO's pre-1974 existence. It must be stressed that the TNO almost certainly did not command the support of the majority of Tigrayan students before 1975. Marxism and nationalism were the dominant ideologies among students, but their form and interrelationship had not solidified by the time the TPLF launched its insurrection as was to be evidenced by the ideological disputes that would afflict the movement in its first years. Probably most Tigrayan activists at the time the TPLF went to the countryside were members or supporters of the Marxist EPRP, the largest revolutionary organization in the country, and it had a decidedly centrist perspective, emphasized the primacy of the class struggle, and had little sympathy for national or peasant based movements of liberation.

In their ideological struggle with the EPRP the TPLF followed the Maoist line of "protracted struggles that march from rural to urban areas."³²⁸ 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 strong hold towns. Thus the rural population is the backbone of a revolution in the Third World."³²⁹ The EPRP cadres had more prestige and a better knowledge of

³²⁷Bereket Habte Selassie, *Conflict and Intervention in the Horn of Africa*, (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1980), p. 89.

³²⁸Woyeen, August 1978, p. 25.

³²⁹Ibid., p. 25.

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 program proved to be a fatal mistake.

While the TPLF may have over-emphasized the role of the TNO in the 1974 revolution, there is little doubt as to its importance in organizing the Tigrayan militants and preparing for the organization's move to the countryside, although only the barest of outlines of these events is known. A key figure in the TNO, and a person whose house was frequently used for meetings prior to the move to the TPLF's first base was Ayele Gesese, a former *shifta*, a dissident member of the lower nobility, onetime mayor of the Tigrayan town of Endaselasie, former senator under the Haile-Selassie regime and, because of his popular following in Tigray, a person whom the Derg had been anxious to co-opt into their administration by appointing him to a newly established council of regions. This was a calculated act on the part of the Derg to draw on the popularity and prestige of individuals like Ayele to increase the legitimacy of the new government. But Ayele (whose history will be taken up at greater length in chapter seven) was also a Tigrayan nationalist of long standing and he viewed the Derg as the inheritor of Amhara hegemony and not a government committed to its banishment. In the end he gave up his position in the fledgling council and joined the TPLF in the countryside.

Although not enough data has been collected to speak conclusively, it nonetheless 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, but there is room for confusion here since members of these classes commonly did not have the resources to live a style of life that set them apart from that of lower classes with who they were more likely to be aligned, than with the ruling families of Tigray. Thus apart from Ayele, a member of the lower nobility, 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 directly to the traditional basis of status in Tigrayan society, a hierarchy developed based on academic standing at AAU. 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.³³⁰

Not unlike an earlier generation of Tigrayan dissidents, the student militants looked north to the Eritrean Liberation Fronts 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 and gain the support of the Eritrean Fronts. 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 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

³³⁰Interview: Tecklehaimanot Gebre Selesie, Department of History, AAU, November 2, 1992.

was not going to be loosened, nor Amhara power significantly curtailed."³³¹

While Ayele investigated the best location from which the Tigrayan insurrection might be launched, other elements within the TNO set about organizing support cells in the towns of Tigray. Since most of the members of these cells were later to be captured and killed after their identities were made known by another dissident Tigrayan group, the Tigray Liberation Front (TLF), the nature of their activities is not completely clear. However, it is known that most cell members were teachers and former university students and it was their task to carry the party banner in the towns, to identify supporters who would be sent to the countryside for training at a later date, and to serve as intelligence gathering units. Thus the TNO made arrangements to send a squad of men to the TPLF's first base of operations at Dedebeit, 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, establish cells in the towns of Tigray and in Addis Ababa, and establish links to supporters (frequently teachers) stationed in other parts of the country.

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 to the thinking of the TNO 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, whose targets were primarily in the towns. Nonetheless, some of my informants explain the departure from the towns, and notably Addis Ababa, as a response to the deteriorating political conditions and point to the Derg's execution of the Tigrayan student

³³¹Markakis, *National and Class Conflict*, p. 252.

leader Meles Teckle in late 1974 to argue that state repression had begun before the Red Terror officially started.

Given Meles Teckle's high status at the university, and the fact that the current president of Ethiopia took Meles's name for his "field name", it is noteworthy that the original Meles was not a member of TNO nor, according to his many friends and colleagues, a known Tigrayan nationalist. Nonetheless, 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.³³²

It was not Tigrayan nationalism, but Meles's influence and appeal to students not to participate in the government's zemecha campaign, which involved sending the students to the countryside, that led the Derg to falsely accuse and then execute him for the bombing of the Addis Ababa Municipal Buildings and the Washebelle Hotel. According to Markakis the ELF has since admitted responsibility for the bombings.³³³ In spite of Meles's death many other students, some known as *crocodiles* because of their powerful but underground involvement in the student movement, were able to continue their activities throughout this period simply because the Derg was too involved with its own 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 field at this time.

³³²Interview: Merara Guidina, PSIR Department, AAU, December 24, 1992.

³³³Interview: John Markakis, Addis Ababa, June 10, 1993.

It is probable that the timing of the TNO's decision to begin their armed struggle was also influenced by fear that other would-be revolutionary organizations would pre-empt them. Writing sometime after the decision, a TPLF publication explained that, "unless galvanized 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."³³⁴ Ras Mengesha, doubtlessly the "ex-feudal lord" in question, did attempt to raise a nationalist and reactionary Tigrayan rebellion, which will be examined in chapter seven. 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 Tigrayan militants of the TNO argued that to ensure that the Tigrayan insurrection was not dominated by feudal elements they had to lead their own national liberation struggle. It is also entirely plausible that the TPLF's decision to launch the armed struggle when it did was also over 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 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 Somalian government which invaded the Ogaden during this period, by the rapid military successes of the Eritrean Fronts and by the OLF and the EPRP, which also started rural insurrections at this time.

³³⁴*Woyeen*, February 21, 1979, p. 3.

The TPLF was officially established on February 18, 1975 at Dedebit, an isolated lowland and shifta infested near the western town of Sheraro. 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 formalizing the Front's political program.

Meanwhile, another contingent of about seventeen, including Ethiopia's current defense minister, Seye Abraha, went to Eritrea for military training with the EPLF. Nineteen fighters returned to Tigray three months later, including two EPLF veteran fighters, the Eritrean Mussie who was to become the TPLF's first military commander, and Jamaica, of mixed Eritrean and Tigrayan parentage, but raised in Eritrea. The expertise of these fighters (curiously the EPLF did not arm the returning Tigrayans) was crucial to the TPLF's evolving military capacity. A further small group, which included Meles Zenawi and the present Chairman of Tigray, Gebru Asrat, were sent to the towns of Tigray. The armed struggle commenced.

Conclusion

What needs to be explained is why most of the Tigrayan petty-bourgeoisie chose to link its political fate with that of 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 organizations in opposition to the Derg. The Derg's monopolization of political power in the state, and the vast, almost totalitarian, expansion of the state into

traditionally civil spheres of society meant that a politically sophisticated, aroused, and ambitious stratum which held itself responsible for the collapse of the imperial regime was being ignominiously shut off from the levers of power. Moreover, it was refused a share in power by another section of the petty-bourgeoisie, the military, that the teachers and students, in particular 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 petty-bourgeoisie were to 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 deep-seated resentment at Tigray's position and destitution within an Ethiopia dominated by Shoan Amharas. Haile-Selassie's regime was not able to overcome this ethnonationalism and neither the Derg, nor the EPRP, who both shared a class focused, statist anti-national perspective, fully recognized the need to confront Tigrayan nationalism positively. Tigray's structural marginalization within a Shoa dominated Ethiopia fostered nationalism within the petty-bourgeoisie and the nationalist banner was there to be raised by any group in opposition to the state.

The moral economists have been correct to emphasize that in underdeveloped societies dominated by feudal or colonial bureaucracies the petty-bourgeoisie's limited numbers and intermediary position (along with a big bourgeoisie and a working class) means that any marked political frustrations can only be overcome by aligning with the peasantry. In the case of Tigray, the Woyane rebellion of 1943 failed for many reasons, but of critical significance was the weakness of a class alliance between an exploited, but still largely

geographically and culturally divided Tigrayan peasantry, and a provincial nobility eager to protect their threatened regional powers, but hesitant about openly challenging the imperial government on which their own legitimacy ultimately depended. Divided on an inter and intra class basis, the peasant revolt, like others before it, was destined to fail. State centralization and modernization over the following twenty years, however, reduced the powers of the regional nobility, broke down some of the divisions between the peasantry and, crucially, gave birth to a petty-bourgeoisie made up largely of state functionaries.

Having recognized the role of the intelligentsia in peasant based revolutions, the moral economists have, however, conceived this role as one limited to organizing 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. Moral economy's link between rural economic crisis and peasant revolution is thus altogether too mechanical. Moreover, moral economy largely ignores the importance of the urban-based petty-bourgeoisie, particularly when it is infused by a deep sense of national grievance.

Nationalist sentiments were thus a critical stimulus of the Tigrayan revolution, but within the TPLF and in the Front's relations with other opposition movements it was the focus of considerable controversy. Conflict over the form national struggles should take, and between national and multinational struggles, and even between competing nationalisms, have been enduring themes in the political life of Ethiopia and Eritrea for more than thirty years now and they figured prominently in the TPLF, the concern of chapter six. But before that issue is examined in the context of the armed struggle it is necessary to put the TPLF revolution into its military context, the major objective of chapter five.

CHAPTER 5: THE ARMED STRUGGLE IN TIGRAY

Introduction

By emphasizing the structural context in which revolutions occur, moral economists have largely ignored the process of revolutionary wars and the part played by the political party and the leadership it provides to the outcome of such wars. In this chapter political leadership will be highlighted through an examination of the TPLF's armed struggle. The TPLF's successful pursuit of war was crucial in gaining the support of initially sceptical peasants. But it also figured significantly in the TPLF's reform program: reforms were instrumental in the mobilization of peasants for carrying on the war and at the same time they were both shaped and constrained by the needs of the war.

This chapter will be framed by the stages of the war. Thus after beginning with an overview of the part played by the Derg in stimulating the revolution in Tigray, the chapter will consider the first stage of the revolutionary war which began in 1975 when the TPLF launched its insurrection, and ended in 1978 with the Front's victory over its major competitors for leadership of the anti-Derg opposition in Tigray. The second stage covers the period 1978 to 1984 and stands out for the mass mobilization of the peasants and the defeat of the Derg's efforts to overwhelm the EPLF during the Red Star campaign. However, before the strategic initiative could pass to the opposition Fronts, northern Ethiopia and Eritrea were struck by the famine of 1984 - 1985. The famine itself will not be examined, but it did have a major impact on the conduct of the war and that is of interest to this study. The third stage of the armed struggle began in 1984 and ended in 1989 with the TPLF's capture of the entire province of Tigray. The chapter ends with a selective examination of the TPLF's reforms and the role they played, and means by which they were constrained, by the Front's war objectives.

Regime Provocation

This section takes its direction from Moore who argued that it was the actions of the upper classes that both provoked rebellions and defined their outcome. Such a conception must be considered both historically,³³⁵ and in terms of the immediate impact of the actions of those dominating the state, the task here. The objective is to examine the policies and administrative approach of the Derg in Tigray and demonstrate the role they played in stimulating the revolution, first of the urban based students and teachers, and then of the peasants.

From the Derg's state coup in 1975 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. However, a Derg victorious in the Ogaden and richly supplied with armaments by the Soviet Bloc was anxious to overcome its domestic opposition. According to Colonel Asaminew Bedane, a former Derg officer and presently with the EPRDF, the government's priority was to crush the Eritrean Fronts militarily which it was convinced would bring an end to insurrections in Tigray and other parts of the country.³³⁶ The widely held view among the Derg leadership, if not necessarily by officers in the field, was that given the poverty and backwardness of Tigray, the province could not support a full-scale guerrilla war against the government. Indeed, if the Derg could have achieved a complete military victory over the Eritrean Fronts or drawn up a program of political reforms that alienated them from the Eritrean people, it is unlikely that the still minuscule TPLF could have survived the full thrust of a concerted Derg attack.

³³⁵This was achieved in chapter three.

³³⁶Interview: Colonel Asaminew, Addis Ababa, June 13, 1993.

The Derg also used a military approach to confront its civilian opposition. Initially the Derg's Red Terror proved effective at both eliminating its opposition in the towns and in consolidating Mengistu's dominance within the Derg. By the late 1970s the Red Terror served to expose and destroy most of the TPLF's underground cells. However, ultimately the Red Terror proved to be one of the Derg's most serious mistakes because the regime could not eliminate an opposition that expanded as a direct result of its policy of terror. In Tigray the urban terror led to large numbers of teachers and students, the major victims of the terror, fleeing the towns and joining the TPLF. Indeed, a pattern began to develop that was to continue for some years, of the Derg and the TPLF growing almost symmetrically in their capacity to inflict violence on one another.

While the Red Terror was primarily an urban phenomenon, peasants who visited the towns for purposes of marketing, dealings with officialdom or to visit their children attending high schools which were exclusively located in the towns, could not escape the impact of the terror, which was widely interpreted as an attack on the entire Tigrayan community. Closer to their homes, the Derg attempted to organize rural administrations, but its methods were harsh, allowed little room for democratic participation and, in particular, involved direct and indirect attacks on Christianity which alienated the deeply religious Tigrayans. Moreover, by 1978 traffic on all main roads and most secondary roads was tightly controlled by the military and this seriously interfered with both the movement of agricultural goods to the towns for marketing, and the movement of consumer goods to the rural areas. In the late 1970s government officials in the towns started restricting the sale of goods, particularly agricultural implements, to peasants in an effort to cut food production and thus undermine TPLF support, but by mid 1982 grain surpluses were regularly being taken to the towns and the army was so desperate for food that it was

forced to ignore the illicit trade of the town merchants.³³⁷ In the TPLF held areas observers reported that the shelves in the public shops were well stocked with goods brought from the towns.

Furthermore, after the initial euphoria brought about by the collapse of the old regime, many of the reforms were either being rolled back or were being seriously questioned. New state taxes were being imposed by a government that 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.³³⁸ Peasants were unhappy at the Derg's closure of most rural schools on the pretext that the teachers were TPLF sympathizers.³³⁹ They were angered at being forced to provide quotas of produce at fixed minimal prices for the state run Agricultural Marketing Board. Nor were peasants happy 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.

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. A critical element of the Derg's land reform was the prohibition on hiring of labour, a provision that made sense in southern Ethiopia, but which was bitterly resented in Tigray. Meles Zenawi said, "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

³³⁷Firebrace and Smith, p. 38.

³³⁸Woyeen, August 1978, p. 12.

³³⁹J. Hammond, (ed.), *Sweeter than Honey: Testimonies of Tigrean Women*, (Oxford: Third World First, 1989), p. 80.

from the very beginning."³⁴⁰ Peasant Associations which had started out as bodies representative of local opinion were reduced to the status of organs responsible to the Derg.³⁴¹ According to peasants across Tigray Derg appointed PA officials were invariably friends or cohorts who, together with their families and friends, became the prime beneficiaries of land distributions.

The TPLF claimed that the Derg issued secret circulars instructing PA officials to give land to those who had the means to plow it, which would have the effect of ensuring that the benefits would have gone to higher income peasants who dominated the associations.³⁴² 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 reforms which were held to be fair, based on serious land and census studies, and involved the community in the process. By the late 1970s there were enough examples of TPLF initiated land reforms in the province that the peasants could make comparisons.

These and other Derg policies undermined peasant support for the regime throughout Ethiopia. Noteworthy was the villagization program which was pursued between 1985 and 1989 and had the goal of forcibly relocating thirty-three million people into nucleated villages so they could be brought under closer government control, and as a means of encouraging a collective mode of life.³⁴³ The primary victims of this policy, however,

³⁴⁰Paul Henze interview with Meles Zenawi, Washington, February 1991.

³⁴¹P. Koehn, "Agricultural Policy and Environmental Destruction in Ethiopia and Nigeria," *Rural Africana*, 25-26, (1986), p. 30. Koehn identifies this change in the function of the Peasant Associations as taking place throughout Ethiopia in 1977 and attributes it to the rise in power of Mengistu Haile Mariam and the need to maintain law and order and raise funds for the military to confront rebellions in Eritrea, Tigray and the Ogaden.

³⁴²J. Bennett, "Socialism and the Nationalities Question in the Horn of Africa - the case of Tigray," unpublished paper, May 1982, quoted in Firebrace and Smith.

³⁴³Girma Kebede, p. 22.

were the Oromos in the south and southeast of the country, and by the time the Derg attempted to introduce it into Tigray, the regime had little control in the province.

Unlike the Derg's efforts at villagization, its resettlement program did have a major impact on Tigrayan peasants. Because of the extent of environmental degradation and peasant poverty in the northern provinces, proposals had frequently been made by a variety of sources advocating the relocation of northern peasants to the richer and less populated lands to the south. Indeed, between 1950 and 1974 an estimated one million peasants had left the northern highlands on their own and moved to the south and west of the country.³⁴⁴ In 1984 the Derg launched a resettlement program with the aim of moving 1,500,000 peasants, and by the end of 1986 half a million had been moved, most forcibly.³⁴⁵

The TPLF has long contended that the program was designed to undermine their support base. While the rationale for such a program predated the Derg, the former head of the government's Relief and Rehabilitation Commission (RRC) has acknowledged that this was a factor as part of the reasoning behind the program was to reduce the population in rebel areas so as to deprive the guerrillas of access to their peasant supporters.³⁴⁶

Realizing the danger posed by the program, the TPLF did its utmost to disrupt it. In one of many similar examples, the TPLF hijacked a government convoy of trucks and a bus carrying civilians from the town of Korem (then in Wollo, now in Tigray) to Welego for resettlement, as a means of disrupting the program.³⁴⁷ However, until the TPLF

³⁴⁴de Waal, p. 121.

³⁴⁵Girma Kebede, p. 81.

³⁴⁶Dawit Wolde Giorgis, *Red Tears: War, Famine and Revolution in Ethiopia*, (Trenton, NJ: The Red Sea Press, 1989), p. 277.

³⁴⁷International Herald Tribune, November 21, 1984.

controlled all of Tigray it could not stop the Derg capturing and removing peasants from the province. A complete review of the Derg's resettlement program cannot be made here, but the evidence that has emerged makes clear that it involved massive human rights violations, was environmentally disastrous and ended in complete failure. Its political impact in Tigray was probably less in alienating peasants from the Derg, since this had largely already occurred by the time the program was enacted, but rather in convincing peasants that their only hope for the future was to join the TPLF or leave the province. However, the fact that only fifteen percent of the total number of peasants removed from the northern region by the government were from Tigray had less to do with the TPLF's efforts at disrupting the campaign than with the large number of Tigrayans who fled to the Sudan.³⁴⁸

The Derg's weak presence in Tigray in the first years after the overthrow of the old regime allowed the TPLF and other revolutionary bands the opportunity to establish themselves and encourage distrust of the new regime. However, it was the Derg's own policies and heavy handed administration, as exemplified by the Red Terror, that first drove the educated urban youth out of the towns into the arms of the TPLF, and then increasingly alienated the peasants. Derg policies and practices which encouraged revulsion for the regime were in turn reinforced by TPLF efforts in both the military and political spheres to transform disaffection into support for armed struggle.

The Insurrection Launched: 1975 - 1978

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

³⁴⁸Girma Kebede, p. 81.

about the peasants' lives that the TPLF was committed to transforming. Another leader 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". The early TPLF was such a negligible force that it devoted much of its energies to simply traveling extensively across Tigray so that the Derg, and even the peasants, would be deluded into thinking the organization was far bigger than it actually was.

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 the peasants and "showing their power".³⁴⁹ Many of its early weaponless members carried sticks covered in plastic sheeting to create the impression that they were armed.³⁵⁰ With the exception of Yemane Kidane (code name "Jamaica") and Mahari Haile (code name "Mussie") who were originally from the EPLF, a former corporal in Haile-Selassie's army, and a couple of peasants who had experience in the imperial army, the intellectuals who made up the membership of the early TPLF knew nothing about fighting. Even TPLF publications of this period implicitly acknowledge their weakness.³⁵¹

³⁴⁹Interview: Yemane Kidane, Addis Ababa. December 1, 1992.

³⁵⁰*Woyeen*, February 21, 1979.

³⁵¹The 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 Nchase 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 mean time 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 *Woyeen*. See Markakis, *National and Class Conflict*, p. 253.

In the early years the TPLF gained something of 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 later released, and John Swain of the *Sunday Times* was briefly held captive before being freed.³⁵² In July 1980 a TPLF raid on Axum led to the capture of two Russian doctors working in Tigray.³⁵³ And in 1984 the TPLF briefly held ten foreigners after their capture of the tourist centre of Lalibela in Wollo province.³⁵⁴ Selected assassinations of Derg officials were also carried out by "Fedayean/Suicide squads", such as that on February 4, 1978 against Lieutenant Tefera, chief of the Red Terror campaign in Tigray.³⁵⁵ The TPLF was very much a product of its times and worked at linking its struggle with various popular struggles of the era.³⁵⁶

The TPLF held its first "Fighters Congress" on the first anniversary of its establishment, February 18, 1976, at Agame and it was attended by its entire membership of about 170 people.³⁵⁷ Aregowie Berhe was elected the first chairman of the organization and the first Central Committee consisted of seven members: apart from Aregowie there was Sebhat Nega, Abaye Tsehaye (from Axum and in charge of organization), Seyoum Mesfin (from Agame and responsible for Foreign Affairs and presently holds that portfolio in the government), Gidey Zeratsion, Mussie and Suhul.³⁵⁸ Suhul was the overall military commander and Mussie the first chief of operations.

³⁵²Woyeen, August 1978.

³⁵³D. Connell, "A Lesson of Hope from Eritrea," *New Statesman*, November 7, 1980, p. 20.

³⁵⁴*10 Held by Rebels in Ethiopia*, Associated Press, Addis Ababa, November 21, 1984.

³⁵⁵Woyeen, August 1978, p. 38.

³⁵⁶A sense of the political character of the TPLF in the early period can be garnered by its appeals for support issued to, "all revolutionary, Democratic and peace loving Forces of the World to extend their helping hand to the Tigray people in their just struggle against Imperialism, Zionism, Feudalism, national oppression and Fascism." sic. *Woyeen*, August 1978. It says much about the political times that the EPLF, EPRP, or the Derg could each have issued the same appeal.

³⁵⁷Markakis, *National and Class Conflict*, p. 253.

³⁵⁸Theodros Dagne, "EPRDF's Rise to Political Dominance," *Ethiopian Review*, December 1992, p. 17.

In the early years the fledgling TPLF was willing to engage in relations based on "tactical" considerations with virtually any non-feudal organization openly challenging the Derg's political and military hegemony. Thus, in spite of the initial support of the EPLF, the TPLF soon developed closer relations with the ELF. It is not entirely clear why this was the case, but the ELF had gained considerable status, both domestically and internationally, from operating as a guerrilla movement in opposition to the Haile-Selassie regime since 1961. Moreover, in 1975 it was still not clear that the ELF would soon lose out both politically and militarily to the EPLF.

Certainly one of the reasons why relations of a military nature developed more rapidly with the ELF than with the EPLF was because of the ELF's greater proclivity to conduct cross-border attacks on Derg positions in Tigray, thus providing the TPLF with the opportunity of joining them and gaining valuable combat experience. These joint military attacks were primarily against Derg positions at Zalambessa (a Tigrayan town on the Eritrean border), Mulgetta (an important Derg communications centre outside Adigrat linking Addis Ababa to Asmara), and the Agame capital of Adigrat.³⁵⁹ In the 1970s the ELF also conducted operations in the Rama area, immediately south of the Mareb River, and in the Badima area of northwest Tigray.³⁶⁰

Although the EPLF did not as often attack targets in Tigray as did the ELF, the TPLF house organ *Revolt* reported in mid 1976 a series of joint TPLF-EPLF attacks stretching from Zalambasa to Enticho were carried out simultaneously.³⁶¹ In the following year the EPLF joined the TPLF in attacks against Derg forces at Nebe Ibal and on a convoy at

³⁵⁹*Revolt*, No. 7, First Year, p. 29; *Revolt*, No. 8, First Year, p. 26.

³⁶⁰Girma, Karen Eritrea, April 27, 1993.

³⁶¹*Revolt*, No. 3, Yekat, 1968 EC, p. 12.

Bizet.³⁶² Moreover, the Derg's "Raza Project" of 1976, in which it attempted to crush the Eritrean insurrection by organizing an invading peasant army, brought both Eritrean Fronts into Tigray and into military alliance with the TPLF. 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.³⁶³ 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 them inhabiting the Tigrayan border area of Agame and related to the neighbouring Eritreans.³⁶⁴ The Derg's plan was to use the military campaign as a means 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.³⁶⁵ In line with ancient Abyssinian practices the "patriotic" army was promised free rein to plunder and 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.

³⁶²TPLF Foreign Bureau, "A Short History of the Tigray People and the Activities of the TPLF," December 1977, p. 6.

³⁶³EPLF, *Adulis*, July 1990, p. 7.

³⁶⁴Interview: Colonel Asaminew Bedane, Addis Ababa, June 13, 1993.

³⁶⁵Erlich, *The Struggle over Eritrea*, (Stanford: Hoover International Press, 1983), p. 76.

Most of the TPLF's military ventures were not so successful in the early years and its naiveté and inexperience frequently led to death or disillusionment, and 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, reported that the number of TPLF fighters fell from 1,200 to 450 in that period.³⁶⁶ TPLF sources maintain that the number of Front fighters was much lower than Kalechristos's 1976 estimate, but were prepared to accept that in the following two years there was a significant loss of membership. Both sources agreed that the decline was due to the high number of fatalities in the fight against the EDU forces of Ras Mengesha for dominance of the Tigrayan opposition and as a result of defections.

In spite of acknowledging a loss of membership through defections, TPLF sources deny that their members left for political reasons, but argue that they left because of the arduous living conditions and the high number of battle fatalities. The leadership does, however, admit that when confronted by some 10,000 troops of the EDU in the Shire-Adiabo district of western Tigray in March 1977, they were forced to retreat and some cadres abandoned the organization.³⁶⁷ Although the Front leadership accused the defectors of being opportunists and of failing to understand the nature of a protracted people's war, they nonetheless maintain that the defectors helped to convince the Derg that the Front was close to collapse and thus deluded it as to their real strength.

The picture that emerges from examining the context of these struggles, however, is not so clear. Kalechristos was appointed governor of Tigray, not only 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

³⁶⁶Interview: Colonel Kalechristos Abbay, Addis Ababa, June 4, 1993.

³⁶⁷Bereket Habte Selassie, p. 91.

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 the new governor could only rely on a single artillery battalion and a police force in the province so the rebel groups had to be primarily confronted 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, his EDU was not considered a significant political threat, while 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 and 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.³⁶⁸

In spite of the Derg's weak military position, the effect of promises of genuine development and good government in the province and the appeal of elders who did not want to see their sons die fighting the government, set against the difficult living conditions, led to hundreds of fighters 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 marginalized.

³⁶⁸Paul Henze reached a similar conclusion. He wrote, "It seems unlikely that its Marxism is the prime reason for the TPLF's relative success in gaining the support of a sizable 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.

In the event the Derg's response to popular disaffection in Tigray was neither effective politically nor militarily. It did not fulfill promises of reform, and it thought so little of the military threat posed by the TPLF that it was slow to build up its forces in the province. The regime facilitated the spread of the revolution, but the TPLF was also working to their own agenda and, by 1978, the Front was able to operate in most of Tigray and had defeated its chief competitors to lead the anti-regime opposition in the province.³⁶⁹ A strengthened and emboldened TPLF could now devote its energies to confronting the Derg.

War Against the Derg: 1978 - 1984

The period 1978 - 1984 began with the TPLF confident as a result of its victories over the other opposition forces in Tigray, but with a much depleted fighting force and still only limited committed support among the peasantry. The Derg's victory over the Somalis in 1978 freed up troops which were sent to the north and by this time the regime was also receiving large amounts of military equipment from the socialist bloc. Connell quotes the TPLF's Seyoum Mesfin as saying that there were 30,000 Derg troops in Tigray by the end of May 1978, three times the number of two months previously.³⁷⁰

However, as a result of its military successes within the province, the failure of the Derg's campaign to wipe out the EPLF, and the TPLF's positive response to peasant demands for village level reforms, the period ended with the TPLF considerably enlarged and with virtually the entire Tigrayan peasantry committed to the armed struggle. The TPLF's growing ability to meet the social welfare needs of the peasants is indicated by the Front

³⁶⁹Analyses of which are made in chapters seven and eight.

³⁷⁰D. Connell, *Against All Odds: A Chronicle of the Eritrean Revolution*, (Trenton, NJ: Red Sea Press, 1993), p. 157.

established Relief Society of Tigray (REST) in 1978 to administer relief and development. Although structurally independent, REST remained largely politically dependent on the TPLF. As befitted the changing circumstances resulting from the TPLF's victory over the EDU and the EPRP, the Front began this period with a review of its leadership.

At the Front's First Organizational Congress in 1979, held in Shire three years after its first Fighters Congress, eighteen more members were added to the seven person Central Committee. Sebhat Nega was elected Chairman of the TPLF and the former chairman, Aregowie Berhe, became head of the powerful Military Committee.³⁷¹ The first Politburo came into existence and its membership included the original five Central Committee members as well as Meles Zenawi, Seye Abraha, Tewelde Wolde Mariam, Gebru Asrat, Awalew Woldu and Aregash Adane, the only woman member.³⁷² Apart from the elections, the major item on the agenda was drafting and passing the program of the National Democratic Revolution, which as one not unfriendly observer has noted was virtually the same as that of nearly all the contending groups in Ethiopia, the Derg included.³⁷³

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 Amhara lands to the south with the besieged territory of Eritrea to the north. Writing in mid 1980 from field observations, Rebecca Moore concluded that the most important factor in reducing Derg morale was the growth of the TPLF and its effectiveness in harassing Derg overland supply routes. "It [the TPLF] effectively blocks the two main roads into Eritrea [the main Addis - Mekelle - Asmara road and the secondary Addis Ababa - Gondar - Endaselasie -

³⁷¹Theodros Dagne, p. 18.

³⁷²Ibid., p. 18.

³⁷³Markakis, *National and Class Conflict*, p. 257.

Asmara road]. 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."³⁷⁴

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

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 from the Derg.³⁷⁵ In addition, as late as 1981 when the TPLF was unable to cope with the large numbers of recruits it was attracting, it turned to the EPLF to provide military training for its fighters in Eritrea.³⁷⁶ The EPLF was to request the use of these fighters in its desperate defense of its Sahel base during the Derg's 1982

³⁷⁴R. Moore, "Ethiopia's Widening Cracks," *The Middle East*, September 1980, p. 32.

³⁷⁵D. Connell, "A Lesson of Hope from Eritrea," *New Statesman*, November 7, 1980.

³⁷⁶*Ibid.*

Red Star Campaign.³⁷⁷ It has been estimated that TPLF technical dependency on the EPLF continued until about 1983. By the early 1980s the TPLF and EPLF leadership were reportedly in daily radio contact to coordinate their military and political activities.³⁷⁸

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 could hold clandestine meetings and distribute pamphlets in the towns. But the urban terror brought this period to an end, after which security concerns meant that inter-movement communications and the dissemination of propaganda were tightly controlled by the leadership. 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.³⁷⁹ Indeed, numbers and codes were widely used in the TPLF to identify everything from geographical locations to prison camps.

Fear that their political message could be distorted by enemies of the movement meant that communications had to be tightly controlled and disseminated from the centre. For many years Dejena in Wolkait 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 same relatively secure area 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. Given the poverty of rural

³⁷⁷Interview: Aregowie Berhe, The Hague, Netherlands, June 22, 1993.

³⁷⁸Ibid.

³⁷⁹It is worth noting that in spite of these efforts that the governor of Tigray (1976-78), 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, June 4, 1993.

Tigray, however, few peasants possessed radios and radio-transmission was probably more effective at linking TPLF fighters, audiences in the town, refugee camps in the Sudan and (to a limited extent) the international community.

Until about 1980 the majority of TPLF fighters were from the towns, mostly teachers and students, but in the period 1980 - 1982 recruitment increased by a (TPLF) estimated factor of four or five, with most new recruits coming from the peasantry. 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. Their defeat of the EDU and EPRP, and survival in the face of superior Derg forces began that process. Secondly, with growing numbers of competent cadres the TPLF could advance 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 reported that by 1980 peasant heads of families who had earlier 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.³⁸⁰ So massive was recruitment in the period 1980 - 1982 that the Front was unable to absorb them all and had to send some to the EPLF for training.

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. Popular local

³⁸⁰Daughters were more likely to join the TPLF without parental permission.

support meant a rapid buildup in militias which, according to a former Derg officer, had little functional difference from fighters when engaged in combat.³⁸¹ 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. The same source concluded that by 1982 Derg control did not reach beyond five to ten kilometres from the main roads.³⁸²

While the struggle was rapidly escalating in Tigray, the Derg's Red Star campaign of 1982 against EPLF positions was to have a marked impact on the insurrections in both Eritrea and Tigray. The Derg's objective was no less than the complete destruction of the EPLF, and the planning for this campaign and the human and material resources deployed were on a scale never before witnessed anywhere in Africa since World War II. 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, the EPLF. Part of the EPLF's defense involved the request to the TPLF, and the latter's consent to its 3,000 recruits sent to Eritrea for training being utilized. As with the case of the Raza Project, the ability of the TPLF to continue its insurrection was held to be dependent on the survival and viability of the EPLF.

These TPLF fighters spent nine months in the hot lowlands of 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 defense held for the TPLF leadership.³⁸³ Indeed, a senior TPLF military leader acknowledged

³⁸¹Colonel Asaminew, Addis Ababa, June 13, 1993.

³⁸²Ibid.

³⁸³One journal gives the figure of 4,000 TPLF fighters being sent to the EPLF (*New Statesman*, May 28, 1982, p. 15), but my informants hold this figure to be too high.

that the "success of the EPLF in defending its positions was critical to the survival of both organizations." The course of the Red Star campaign need not be taken up here except to say that, although the EPLF was pushed into the far north of the Sahel and lost an enormous number of fighters, the failure of the Derg to dislodge the Eritreans from their Nakfa headquarters in this and subsequent phases of the campaign, irrevocably shifted the strategic initiative away from the regime, both in Eritrea and in Tigray, in the view of many leaders of the EPLF and TPLF, as well as of Derg officers who were in Eritrea at the time.

This key campaign also helped to define the emerging military differences between the TPLF and the EPLF. Doubtlessly because of its significant involvement in the defense of the Sahel the TPLF felt that it had a right to question EPLF military strategies that were extremely costly even where they were successful. While the TPLF recognized the need to advance from guerrilla to conventional warfare if the Derg was to be defeated, it was convinced that the EPLF had opted for conventional warfare too early and at too great a cost.

Contrary to the EPLF, the TPLF remained committed to a guerrilla style of warfare until the expulsion of the Derg from Tigray in 1989 where it had no choice but to operate as a conventional force militarily. A TPLF cadre pointed out that the Front's base area, if it could be called that, was generally in the Sheraro area of western Tigray, but this area was evacuated on three or four occasions when it was attacked by superior forces.³⁸⁴ Even after the TPLF's 1988 capture of all the Tigrayan towns north of Mekelle, it evacuated them and reverted to guerrilla struggle a few months later when the Derg mounted its offensive. In neither case was the TPLF prepared to accept the loss of large numbers of

³⁸⁴Interview: Tsegaye Berhe, Mekelle, April 11, 1993.

fighters and civilians to defend areas that it was confident it could at a time of its own choosing retake without loss of life on such a scale.

Although TPLF leaders today are reluctant to publicly criticize the EPLF's 1982 - 1983 defense of its liberated territories, the journalist Dieter Beisel was told by a group of TPLF fighters at their base near Dedebit 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 they had been pushed back to the Sahel and had little support in other areas of Eritrea.³⁸⁵ 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."³⁸⁶

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 was forced to conduct non-conventional warfare, by 1980 its military leaders had largely built and directed an army that increasingly fought a conventional war from liberated territory against the Derg for the duration of the conflict. For the EPLF this demonstrated their military superiority over the TPLF which was committed to guerrilla struggle. The TPLF in turn saw the EPLF's devotion to conventional warfare as indicative of the

³⁸⁵Beisel, p. 59.

³⁸⁶Ibid., p. 59.

ascendancy of a professional military establishment within the EPLF, a development which threatened to weaken the democratic character of the war.

Indeed, from the early 1960s ELF guerrilla leaders trained primarily in Syria at the military academy; training was also provided in China, and by Cubans in South Yemen.³⁸⁷ 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 and two results followed. First, there was increasingly a formal division of authority between the military and political leadership of the Front.³⁸⁸ Secondly, this professional military leadership emphasized technique and relied on technology. This approach was 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 Tigriña-speaking highlands in the late 1970s, giving it a relatively skilled force capable of being quickly trained in the use of more advanced weaponry and military techniques. But the greater skilled base the EPLF could draw upon is only part of the explanation of its emphasis on military professionalism and conventional war.

Of the top three surviving TPLF military leaders, Siye, Samora, and Hayloum, the first two were university educated, but none of them went abroad for military training. Military strategy and techniques were acquired by the Front leadership through personal study and practical experience in the countryside.³⁸⁹ Their training methods may have been primitive, but they were consistent with the TPLF's emphasis on self-sufficiency.

³⁸⁷P. Andreas, "Politics and Liberation: The Eritrean Struggle 1961 - 86," Ph.D. dissertation, University of Aarhus, Denmark, 1987, p. 67.

³⁸⁸Interview: David Pool, Asmara, April 20, 1993.

³⁸⁹Interview: Yemane Kidane, Addis Ababa, December 1, 1992.

While those with military skills assumed leading positions in the army, there was never the marked division between the military and the political leadership in the TPLF that was evident in the EPLF.

Another related and significant contrast between the Fronts is that unlike the TPLF which had a substantial and well organized force of local militias that were an integral part of its army, the EPLF did not place the same emphasis on developing its militias. Thus while TPLF fighters moved widely and frequently throughout Tigray and beyond to link up with local militias (and at times bringing militia members with them into battle) and then attack Derg positions, the EPLF depended largely on more carefully planned "push" movements of its conventional forces. With usually large numbers the EPLF army would move from fixed defended positions to attack the Derg, and then withdraw to their bases.

A former Derg officer with extensive experience fighting both Fronts found the EPLF's strategy and tactics to be superior to those of the TPLF, but the latter more terrifying in combat because of their skill in launching surprise attacks and their fighters' courage.³⁹⁰ The same officer holds that these differences in tactics can be explained by the closer relations the TPLF had with Tigrayan peasant supporters than the EPLF had with Eritrean peasants.³⁹¹ 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.

The rapid mobilization and commitment of the Tigrayan peasantry to the struggle in the period 1980 - 1982 gave the Front an increasing capacity to attack much larger Derg

³⁹⁰Interview: Colonel Asaminew Bedane, POW Camp Tigray, May 5, 1988.

³⁹¹Ibid.

forces. The Derg was astounded when the TPLF wiped out an entire brigade in northern Wollo in 1983, something which the much larger EPLF had thus far been unable to accomplish.³⁹² By this time the TPLF was claiming to have "wrestled" control from the Derg of eighty percent of Tigray where ninety percent of the people lived.³⁹³ If it is accepted that the Derg's loss of control was not synonymous with the ability of the TPLF to always defend these areas, then the claim was probably true. TPLF leaders hold that by 1984 the movement had advanced from a strictly guerrilla stage of combat to a transitional stage that anticipated conventional warfare. Although the leadership in Addis Ababa may have deluded themselves into thinking otherwise, by the mid 1980s Derg operational officers in the field had concluded that neither the war in Eritrea, nor that in Tigray, was winnable militarily and that efforts had to be made to resolve the disputes through political means.³⁹⁴ With the TPLF and the EPLF poised to take the military initiative, northern Ethiopia and Eritrea were struck by famine which threatened to undo their achievements.

Politics of Refugees and Famine

Although the TPLF took an active interest in Tigrayan expatriates internationally³⁹⁵ the primary focus of their energies was on the large number of refugees who resided in the Sudan. Tigrayan refugees in Sudan were to be a source of funding for the TPLF, and equally as important, as a source of fighters. The TPLF did not operate armed camps in

³⁹²Interview: Colonel Asaminew Bedane, Addis Ababa, June 13, 1993.

³⁹³Tekeste Agazi, *Agrarian Reform in Tigray: A Case of the Land Reform in the District of Abi-Nebried*, (London: Published by the Friends of Tigray in the UK, 1983), p. 3.

³⁹⁴Interview: Colonel Asaminew Bedane, Addis Ababa, June 13, 1993.

³⁹⁵Early on the TPLF recognized the importance of gaining the support of Tigrayans living abroad. TPLF efforts to organize expatriate Tigrayans went on among those employed in the Gulf states and among 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 TPLF, and lastly, as a base from which to recruit fighters. By the mid 1980s the Tigrayan community abroad was as politically conscious, organized, and supportive of the revolution as the Palestinians were of their struggle, with which the international community is much more familiar.

Sudan and as yet there is no evidence that the Sudanese regimes of Nimeiri or Sadiq el Mahdi supplied the Front with weapons or let them carry weapons in the country, but both governments did allow the various Ethiopian and Eritrean rebel organizations to operate in the country. As a result TPLF cadres moved freely across the Ethiopian - Sudanese border, had virtual embassies in Khartoum, and carried on a multitude of political and service activities among the largely refugee population who lived in Sudan during the period of the conflict. The politics of refugees and the war-induced famines they were fleeing thus played an important role in the course and outcome of the struggle to liberate Tigray.

In the late 1970s some 30,000 Tigrayans left Ethiopia and settled as refugees in two communities outside Gederef in eastern Sudan as a result of fighting between the Derg, EDU and TPLF.³⁹⁶ Tens of thousands more Tigrayans crossed the border to Sudan in the coming years, and all were the object of efforts by dissident Ethiopian groups to organize them and gain their support. These early refugee settlements were initially centres of EDU loyalism, and attempts by the TPLF to organize in them frequently led to violence and injury to the Front's cadres. It was only after many years of community development combined with the same type of political propaganda used in Tigray that the large majority of the refugees were won over to the TPLF.

Over the years the TPLF developed an impressive number of garages, workshops, a wide variety of refugee organizations and the means to care for seriously injured fighters who were evacuated to Sudan. Like the EPLF,³⁹⁷ the TPLF was generally able to maintain amicable relations with successive Sudanese governments for a number of reasons. First, the TPLF kept no armed soldiers in the country. Second, the Sudanese feared that a break

³⁹⁶Interview: Ahmed Kadawi, Mekelle, January 7, 1993.

³⁹⁷Pateman, p. 109.

in relations could lead to the country being overwhelmed by refugees.³⁹⁸ Third, the tacit support given to the Ethiopian and Eritrean fronts was a response to the much more substantive support the Derg gave to the SPLA in southern Sudan. And lastly, the Sudanese government did not have the capacity to close its borders to the rebels.

The failure of the Derg's Red Star campaign provided both the TPLF and EPLF with a major opportunity to go on to the offensive, but before that was possible Tigray³⁹⁹ was beset in the last months of 1984 and the first half of 1985 with famine. As a result, much of the resources of the TPLF and its relief agency, the Relief Society of Tigray were devoted to ameliorating starvation and moving large numbers of refugees to UNHCR relief camps in the Sudan. Some 200,000 Tigrayan refugees went to the Sudan and many more internal refugees went to western Tigray in search of employment that could save them from starvation.

De Waal is critical of those who suggest that the large scale movement of refugees to Sudan under TPLF auspices may not have always been voluntary, but the picture is more complex than his analysis would suggest. When famine conditions began to emerge in Tigray, Abadi Zumi 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 stabilize conditions in the highlands, and stated that if the regime failed to do this a flood of refugees would be unleashed on the Sudan, a threat that the Sudanese Commissioner of Refugees at the time, Ahmed Kadawi, has called "political brinkmanship".⁴⁰⁰ When refugees did start arriving in large numbers,

³⁹⁸More on this possibility shortly.

³⁹⁹And other areas of northern Ethiopia and Eritrea.

⁴⁰⁰Interview: Ahmed Kadawi, Addis Ababa, May 28, 1993.

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.

The TPLF did not get international relief aid to the extent it wanted or expected, but in part through the efforts of a group of young supporters from the West operating out of Sudan, the relief efforts of REST and the struggle of the TPLF for the first time gained international attention. The Front also convinced a number of small western NGOs of the value of stopping the flow of refugees by stabilizing conditions in the highlands since the TPLF had begun to appreciate that it needed a settled population if it was to successfully pursue the war: "No peasants meant no support for fighters" is how one REST official put it.⁴⁰¹ The same official noted that, "support for the villages meant the preservation of the military instruments of the villages, the militias."⁴⁰² It was a case of re-learning 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.⁴⁰³ Moreover, the TPLF had long recognized the vulnerability of the peasantry and, unlike the experience of revolutionaries elsewhere, knew that in poverty stricken Tigray it could not expect to survive exclusively on the peasants' produce. For this reason the TPLF had established its own farms in western Tigray.

De Waal has argued convincingly that although there was a major crop failure in 1984, the "primary reason for the severity of the famine was the government's counter-insurgency strategy,"⁴⁰⁴ and it is true that the Derg carried out a major military campaign in Tigray from February to May 1985. The principle objective of the Derg's military strategy was made clear by the focus of its attacks in two zones: in Tembien in central Tigray where

⁴⁰¹Interview: Chekol Kidane, Mekelle, January 4, 1993.

⁴⁰²Ibid.

⁴⁰³Firebrace and Smith, p. 70.

⁴⁰⁴de Waal, p. 195.

the famine was most felt, and in western Tigray, both areas which usually produced harvest surpluses, with the west being a major destination for destitute peasants in search of employment. 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 its survival.

While the Derg was creating famine conditions, it was at the same time interfering with international relief efforts by first, not allowing food aid to be transported across military lines, and second, blackmailing aid agencies with the threat of being evicted from Ethiopia 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 attempt to meet the needs of the majority of famine victims in Tigray and Eritrea. Western governments, which should have known, and probably did, that the vast majority of famine victims were behind rebel lines, chose instead to direct most of their foodstuffs through the Derg's RRC. And 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. Because of the ignorance and even negligence of the United Nations, western countries and some NGOs, Tigray with one-third of the famine stricken population received only about one-twentieth of the food relief made available.⁴⁰⁵

But the Derg's military objectives and the international community's negligent response to the famine were not the only problems faced by the TPLF. At the height of the famine in

⁴⁰⁵Ibid., pp. 196-202.

1985 the EPLF broke relations with the TPLF as a result of a long simmering dispute⁴⁰⁶ and they were not resumed until 1988. Although the causes of the rupture were sometimes lost in the subsequent war of words, the impact of the breakdown in relations between the former allies was clear enough and immediate. Military collaboration ended, political contacts were terminated, and the TPLF's radio station in Eritrea was closed down. Demonstrating just how serious the EPLF considered this dispute to be, it went on to refuse 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 mobilized in consequence to attend the urgent task of constructing a direct road link from western Tigray to Gederef in Sudan. Following a road line previously surveyed and planned as a means to reduce dependency on the EPLF, the TPLF and its army of peasants with virtually no heavy equipment or outside support were able to construct a rough track that was functional for emergency truck traffic in less than a week, but upgrading went on for another two years.⁴⁰⁷ As a result, aid convoys were quickly able to resume the transport of grain to famine-struck Tigray and refugees as well had 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 TPLF's approach to the famine resulted in a serious re-thinking of strategy. Some cadres left the TPLF over what they considered manipulation of the peasants. In addition, these events also provoked an extensive internal debate between the proponents of

⁴⁰⁶This dispute will be considered in the following chapter.

⁴⁰⁷Interview: Haile Kiros, Addis Ababa, May 24, 1993.

"pragmatism" and those of textbook Leninism, who held that the TPLF should rely principally on mobilizing the local population. According to de Waal, as a result of the famine and the way the Derg was able to orchestrate relief efforts to its advantage, the Ethiopian army's offensive gave it a greater degree of control in Tigray than at any time since 1977.⁴⁰⁸ While TPLF's military prospects were indeed set back as a result of the famine and break in relations with the EPLF, in view of the events that followed de Waal's pessimistic conclusion is almost certainly an exaggeration.

The Initiative Passes to the TPLF: 1984 - 1989

The reason one might question de Waal's judgment on the extent of the Derg's victory is the speed with which the TPLF was able to turn the tables on the regime. In spite of the military setbacks the vast majority of the peasantry were irrevocably alienated from the Derg and wedded to the TPLF by the time of the famine. With the stabilization 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 and attacks on Derg convoys and positions. 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.⁴⁰⁹ In the event the Front not only ended the stalemate but irrevocably turned the course of the war in their favour.

⁴⁰⁸de Waal, p. 203.

⁴⁰⁹The 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, May 5, 1988.

While the TPLF was able to mobilize 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 nonetheless singularly unsuccessful in inculcating a faith in the regime, or a willingness on the part of its soldiers to fight. Interviews carried out by the author and others of Derg POWs held in Tigray exposed forced conscription on a massive scale, ineffectual training, and little understanding among the soldiers of why they were fighting. Many soldiers had been denied contact with their families for years and others received only rations in lieu of pay. Indicative of the declining conditions in Tigray, the Commander in Chief of the First Division, Colonel Hailu GhebreYohannis said that he was forced to raid the food stocks of the NGO World Vision in Maichew to feed his hungry troops.⁴¹⁰

Colonel Asaminew Bedane, Deputy Commander of the 17th Division, said that at the urging of senior officers he began meeting with local Tigrayan leaders to learn of the situation and gain their confidence with the idea of going over to the enemy.⁴¹¹ 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. Colonel Asaminew said that with the exception of a few of his fellow officers, most talked openly of their forces' weakness and the inevitability of defeat.

Although the bulk of the Derg's troops remained in Eritrea, in 1987 there were unconfirmed reports of a meeting between divisional commanders and Mengistu where the latter was reported as saying that the TPLF had replaced the EPLF as the main enemy of the regime. Whatever the truth of these reports, growing TPLF inroads into the provinces

⁴¹⁰*People's Voice*, September/December, 1989, p. 20.

⁴¹¹Interview: Colonel Asaminew Bedane, Addis Ababa, June 13, 1993.

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.⁴¹² The Derg's counter-attack failed badly and the stage was set for the TPLF's biggest military triumph to that point in the war, the 1988 capture of the towns.

If troop morale was not already a serious problem for the Derg, between March 17th and 18th, 1988, it certainly was after its forces suffered their biggest defeat of the war at Afabet in the southern Sahel at the hands of the EPLF. Basil Davidson who witnessed the battle called it Ethiopia's "Dien bien Phu". Some 15,000 government soldiers were put out of action, three senior Soviet officers were captured, and the Derg's Eritrean army fell back in disarray to strategically significant defensive positions at the town of Keren, north of Asmara. An enormous amount of military hardware and tanks were destroyed and still litter the road between the towns of Keren and Afabet and Nakfa. Within days of their defeat at Afabet, Derg forces were being attacked in Tigray. The close timing of the EPLF and TPLF attacks suggests coordination, although at the time the two Fronts were divided over ideological questions and claimed they had no relations.⁴¹³

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 have seemed. Foremost among the political considerations was a desire to re-establish working relations with the EPLF which had been broken off in 1985. The TPLF view was that the EPLF wanted to dominate their movement, that it was arrogant, and that it under-rated the TPLF's military

⁴¹²Colonel Asaminew as reported in *People's Voice*, September/December, 1989, p. 20.

⁴¹³The apparent coincidence of the timing of their attacks may be due to the preference of both Fronts to launch such attacks in the dry season so that the agricultural cycle on which the peasants depended would not be disrupted.

capacity. Capture of major Tigrayan towns, it was hoped, would convince the EPLF that victory against the Derg was not possible without unity with the TPLF and that unity must be achieved between equal partners. Further to that end, but also to bring the struggle of the TPLF to the attention of a much broader international audience, the TPLF for the first time began encouraging journalists to visit their liberated territories and meet their leaders.

Another TPLF 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. 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 the urban and rural Tigrayan population, 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 the TPLF was prepared to expend so many human lives in capturing towns when it did not have the resources to administer or defend them.

For the Derg the western Tigrayan town of Endaselasie was "a centre of gravity in its military strategy" and its defensive core was Hill 2005, which dominated the town and served as the army's headquarters.⁴¹⁴ With some 35,000 soldiers in and around Endaselasie, 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

⁴¹⁴Interview: Negusie Lilly, Endaselasie, February 8, 1993.

Tigray, and beyond its defensive perimeters were areas of TPLF control: south to the lowlands of the Tekezze River, west across the plains to the Sudanese border, and north to Eritrea. For months before the battle for Endaselasie the TPLF sent out squads to ambush Derg positions on the hills surrounding the town and 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 corner of the province 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 instead retreating 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 moving on to the Derg command post which served as the final defense of the town. The TPLF had no tanks and only light artillery. It relied on 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 a squadron of MiGs for support.

The fighting, which was the heaviest of the Tigrayan war, went on for two days before the Derg's positions were over-run in late March, with surprisingly little damage done to the town. But before Endaselasie fell Derg troops went on a rampage and soldiers who had been imprisoned were taken to nearby Dagabuna, sprayed with fuel and burned to death.⁴¹⁵ The fall of Endaselasie caused terror among Derg forces throughout Tigray,

⁴¹⁵Interview: Mohammed Esumane, Nurehsyne and Melite Beyene, Endaselasie, February 6, 1993.

and in the following days Derg garrisons were evacuated from Adigrat in the northeast 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.

Everywhere there was evidence of the army's panic: Derg vehicles and equipment lined up and torched, tanks, trucks and armoured vehicles destroyed or abandoned along the road. But as I witnessed one month later, the army nonetheless found time to destroy civilian electrical generators, pumping stations and clinics in the towns before they withdrew. In their terror Derg forces in Axum did not have time to remove an Ethiopian Airways DC3 and it was not until May 2nd after two earlier attempts that two MiG 23s were able to destroy the undefended and sole plane on the runway.⁴¹⁶ The TPLF claimed that more than ten brigades were destroyed and over 7,000 troops captured in the rout of the Derg's forces.⁴¹⁷

Having captured the towns, the TPLF had the onerous task of informing the towns' inhabitants that if the Derg launched a serious counter-attack, which was anticipated, the towns would not be defended. The TPLF's willingness to revert back to guerrilla warfare was based on a number of considerations. First was the acceptance of the basic guerrilla principle of not defending positions where the attacker could bring superior numbers to bear. Second, 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 to the EPLF. Thirdly, the TPLF did not want to expose the towns to Derg attacks which could lead to their destruction.

⁴¹⁶Attack witnessed by the author

⁴¹⁷*People's Voice*, May 1988, p. 7.

Another reason why the TPLF was not prepared to hold the towns at this time was that it did not have the resources and skilled administrative personnel to run them. Government employees and teachers who could not be paid from the Front's meagre resources were encouraged to move to Derg-held towns. The capture of the towns, however, 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. Indeed, the TPLF responded by quickly establishing schools of public administration in the liberated territories of Tembien which, unlike the past, were far more practically than politically oriented.

Although it is clear that both the townspeople and the fighters were upset at the impending turnover of the towns to the Derg, the TPLF was able to carry out its political work, to establish underground cells, and to prepare for the next stage of the war. As the author can confirm, 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 to do so, and those who stayed behind were advised to "greet the Derg, to dance and demonstrate in the street as a tactic to protect ourselves."⁴¹⁸

In the wake of the losses in Tigray and the major defeat at Afabet, the Derg faced its biggest crisis of the war. The regime quickly reached an agreement with Somalia which ended their state of belligerence that was in existence since the Ogaden War, and this made available troops and materials which could be transferred to the war zones of Eritrea and Tigray. Another mobilization campaign was started, and the Derg ordered the expulsion of all foreign aid workers from Tigray and Eritrea on April 6, 1988, for "security reasons", a move interpreted as ensuring that foreign observers would not be able to

⁴¹⁸Interview: Mohammed Esumane, Nurehysne and Melite Beyene, Endaselasie, February 6, 1993.

witness the events that followed. RRC Commissioner Berhane Jembere was quoted as saying, "the relief activities will be carried out only after the bandits are militarily crushed."⁴¹⁹ On May 14th, the Derg announced a state of emergency in Eritrea and Tigray,⁴²⁰ but the effect of the proclamation in Tigray was not clear since with the exception of the southeast portion of the province, the Derg no longer had a presence in Tigray.

Three months after its expulsion from the towns the Derg fielded an army of over 150,000 in Tigray, the largest army ever assembled in the province, according to TPLF sources,⁴²¹ Elements of these forces began moving north from Mekelle along the province's main highway to take over the towns. Confronted with massive Derg reinforcements TPLF forces often moved no more than five kilometres outside the towns and resumed their earlier tactics of sniping and ambushing Derg lines of communication, thus reinstating the earlier sieges on the towns. And as the army re-established its garrisons along the highway it became progressively smaller and weaker, although with the re-capture of Endaselasie its total strength in the province was considerably greater than before the loss of that and other towns. The TPLF's view, however, was that although numerically much larger, the Derg was in reality a weakened force since its troops, having already been defeated, were demoralized 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. A joint operation involving helicopter gun ships and MiGs' attacked the market of the northeastern town of Hausien on June 22, 1988, producing 1,800 civilian deaths, the

⁴¹⁹*Adulis*, May 1988, p. 4.

⁴²⁰*African Defense*, July 1988, p. 1.

⁴²¹*People's Voice*, August 1989, p. 4.

worst single atrocity of the entire war going back to the start of the ELF insurrection in 1961.⁴²² De Waal writes,

"The motive for bombing Hausien can only have been terrorism against the people of Tigray, in part revenge for the military successes of the TPLF over the previous months, and in part 'softening them up' for the government offensive. Hausien was probably selected as a target because, not being in a rebel-controlled area, the market still met during day-light, and there were no TPLF fighters with anti-aircraft artillery to make an attack dangerous. It had no military significance."⁴²³

However, as de Waal explains elsewhere, there was a motive to the succession of Derg atrocities, particularly its attacks on markets, and this lay in the regime's desire to reduce the population to a state of famine as a means of weakening the TPLF.

Unlike earlier efforts, 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 weakened. Derg terrorism, however horrific, was but the final actions in a drama which was rapidly reaching its conclusion. 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 as a prelude to a joint military campaign. After years of bickering, the announcement was made in Khartoum that after only four days of meetings from the 20th - 24th of April, the TPLF and EPLF had reached an agreement to coordinate their struggles.⁴²⁴

In the event, the Derg's collapse in Tigray came more quickly than the TPLF had anticipated. Once again the struggle focused around Endaselasie where the 603rd, 604th

⁴²²de Waal, p. 258.

⁴²³Ibid., p. 263.

⁴²⁴*People's Voice*, May 1988, p. 8.

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 before and the army found itself under siege in the towns 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 Selekhekha, forty kilometres east of Endaselasie, was taken over by the TPLF.⁴²⁵

The end was now only a matter of time, and on February 19, 1989 the area in and around Endaselasie was captured and 12-13,000 Derg soldiers killed or taken prisoner by a joint operation involving a contingent of TPLF forces and backed by an EPLF armoured brigade. With the army's morale in almost total collapse, the TPLF could probably have routed the Derg in western Tigray on its own, but the presence of the EPLF brigade represented both the results in tangible form of the recent unity agreement, and, as TPLF military leaders have acknowledged, the Front's continuing weakness in the sphere of heavy artillery, associated with conventional and not guerrilla forces. 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 shock wave through the Derg's remaining forces in Tigray and within two weeks all the garrisoned towns north of the Wollo border, including Humera, had been 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. As had been the case in 1988, the retreating Derg forces still found time to remove the cash from the banks and sabotage public facilities, such as

⁴²⁵Ibid., May/August 1989, pp. 4-5.

electrical generators and water stations. 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 used the opportunity to go on a rampage which included the pillaging of schools until parents of the students attending those schools could organize their defense.

The last major battle that ensured Tigray's security was fought at Kobo on the border of northern Wollo, where retreating Derg forces regrouped for a final engagement. The fighting was surprisingly severe as the Derg brought everything it could to bear in the two-day battle, including the dropping of paratroopers, while the TPLF had to utilize even medical personnel. The Derg's defeat at Kobo, however, did not end the war, as many Tigrayans had somewhat naively hoped. Aerial bombing and ambushes were to continue until virtually the final days of the regime. For example, in April 1991 with the EPRDF on the outskirts of Addis Ababa, some ninety-eight people in Sheraro were killed or wounded as a result of an aerial bombardment.⁴²⁶ But the victory at Kobo did largely take the ground war beyond the province and irrevocably passed the strategic momentum to the TPLF.

With the Derg's demise widely anticipated, the concern of the TPLF and the other anti-Derg movements turned to alliance building and planning for the post-Derg administration of the country. But this alone does not explain the two years that transpired from the capture of Tigray to the final defeat of the Derg. Two other factors were critical. First, the scale of the TPLF's military victories meant that on the one hand it could no longer be ignored by the international community, and on the other that anticipation of power in Addis Ababa encouraged the Front to end its long years of international isolation. In 1989

⁴²⁶Mohammed Esumane, Nurehsyne and Milite Beyene, Endaselasie, February 6, 1993.

James Cheek, US Ambassador to the Sudan, met with Meles Zenawi in Khartoum and in the same year Meles visited the UK.⁴²⁷ Meles' expression of admiration for Albania during that visit, however, led him to be harshly criticized in the British press, but in a visit to Washington in March 1990 he was reported to have renounced Marxism-Leninism.⁴²⁸ Mengistu also dissasociated himself with communism at this time, but unlike the TPLF he did not win US favour, perhaps because he was not believed, or more likely because the Americans recognized that his days were numbered.

These developments in the diplomatic sphere ended the TPLF's international isolation, and together with the rapid retreat of the Derg's forces in early 1991, set the stage for the US brokered London conference of May 1991. At that meeting Herman Cohen, Assistant Secretary of State for African Affairs, proposed that the EPRDF, whose troops were at that time on the outskirts of Addis Ababa, enter the city and assume the government of Ethiopia. This decision caused great anger among the TPLF's opponents who considered it an act of US betrayal. However, it was almost certainly not the result of any US-TPLF collusion, but simply based on the recognition that 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 witnessed in Monrovia and Mogadishu when the Dole and Barre regimes disintegrated.

A second reason for the delay was that after the 1989 TPLF capture of the entire province of Tigray, the movement's own fighters, and Tigrayans generally, began to question the need to carry the war south into Oromo and the Amhara populated lands. As a result a province-wide debate was organized by the new TPLF administration and until it was completed, there could be little progress in the war. The outcome of the debates was that

⁴²⁷Andargachew Tiruneh, p. 362.

⁴²⁸Ibid., p. 362.

Tigrayans were convinced that their peace and security could be assured only with the Derg's elimination.

The resolution of this dispute led to rapid developments on the war front. On February 23, 1991, the TPLF led coalition, the EPRDF, announced that "Operation Twedros" had been launched with the assistance of the EPLF and in less than a month Derg forces had been removed from Gondar and Gojjam. The strength of the EPRDF, the declining morale of the Derg's forces and the lack of support they had even in Amhara areas, were all evidenced in these final days of the regime. In mid-May of the same year the EPRDF launched "Operation Walleigne"⁴²⁹ in Wollo and by the 28th of the month EPRDF forces began the final assault on Addis Ababa which, as a result of the diplomatic efforts outlined above, was soon in their hands, together with the rest of the country.

War and the Pursuit of Reforms

The desire to transform Tigray and its relationship with the central state were the fundamental reasons why the TPLF launched its revolution, but the realization of these ambitions could only come about through successfully waging war against the Derg. What this meant in practice was that no matter how worthy these transformative projects were, they could not be considered independently from the impact they had on the war effort. In this section the objective is to examine a few selected TPLF reforms to demonstrate how they were formulated to meet the needs of the war, or were constrained by the pursuit of the war.

⁴²⁹Named after the well-known university activist from Wollo who had charged that Ethiopia was ruled by an Amhara clique - see chapter three.

Much of the TPLF nationalist appeal made the point that the peasants' poverty and the lack of infrastructure in their villages was a result of the state being dominated by an Amhara elite which wanted to keep Tigray in subjugation. It was thus to be expected that the peasants would respond by asking the TPLF as representatives of the Tigrayan people to supply their communities with the facilities they needed, and high on their wish list was schools. Although the TPLF had limited access to material and financial resources, after 1978 they had a growing supply of skilled personnel who were fleeing the Derg's terror in the towns and could be employed at mobilizing local resources for such projects.

After preparing a curriculum in 1980 the TPLF asked the *baitos* to send them some of their most proficient members for training as teachers. Materials were supplied locally and "green" or camouflaged schools were built in the absence of existing schools or to replace old schools that the Derg targeted for destruction. Schools were particularly attractive for the TPLF because they not only advanced 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 utilized in the struggle.

The employment of Tigrigna as the language of instruction in the schools demonstrated both the TPLF's nationalist credentials and symbolized the Front'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 mobilize and politicize the peasantry. These activities underpinned and fostered Tigrayan nationalism."⁴³⁰

Although the villagers were involved in all aspects of the educational reforms, the primacy of TPLF priorities is indicated by the switch from an initial emphasis on schooling for children aged six to twelve, to youths aged twelve to eighteen. When it was found that there were insufficient resources to meet all the demands for schooling, the TPLF preference was on educating those who could soon be utilized as fighters and administrators in the mass organizations. Gebru acknowledged, "This was not readily agreed to by peasants who may have seen their younger children denied education because of lack of resources, but they were eventually won over."⁴³¹

Apart from formal education, the TPLF throughout the revolution placed great emphasis on developing established forms of Tigrayan culture and using them in the mobilization of the peasants. In particular the TPLF peasants' oral tradition was put to considerable use and the Front also introduced drama, which although new to the peasants, proved highly effective. According to one observer,

"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 the 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."⁴³²

⁴³⁰Interview: Gebru Desta, Mekelle, January 1, 1993.

⁴³¹Ibid.

⁴³²K. Wright, "Tigray: A Political Report," September 1979, p. 9.

It speaks to the importance with which the TPLF held culture that in the division in the Central Committee into two sub-committees, Political Affairs, and Social and Economic Affairs, culture was handled by the former. The TPLF also published a cultural magazine from the early days of the struggle.⁴³³

While the TPLF's organization of schools and clinics in the rural areas gained the movement popularity, its Marxist-Leninist sympathies risked running afoul of the powerful Ethiopian Orthodox Church and the strong religious sentiments of the Tigrayan peasants. In the event that did not prove to be the case. The issue has been posed by Henze, who has raised the important 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?"⁴³⁴ The answer to it is that the TPLF did not attack the local church or challenge the religious sensitivities of the peasants. The Front's skillful and balanced approach did not alienate the peasants, but it necessarily restricted the scope of the reforms that could be carried out, and it has left the Church a still powerful and sometimes suspect institution.⁴³⁵

With the Derg popularly conceived as atheists, the TPLF presented itself to the peasants as defenders of religion, and their propaganda, as one senior Front official put it, was "operating from Christ".⁴³⁶ The same official said that the TPLF "concentrated on exposing the suffering of people and practicing good as a way of appealing to the

⁴³³Interview: Solomon Inquai, Mekelle, January 7, 1993.

⁴³⁴P. Henze, *Rebels and Separatists in Ethiopia*, p. 72.

⁴³⁵Although the Church today does not have the land on which its imperial era power rested, it is the only institution of the former state that largely remains intact and, as some TPLF cadres privately acknowledge, some of the Church's leaders have at best a questionable loyalty to the new regime and continue to foster contrary values of the past.

⁴³⁶Interview: Aregesh Adane, Mekelle, April 8, 1993.

peasants' religious sentiments."⁴³⁷ 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.

The TPLF, unlike the Derg, recognized 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 who sometimes subsisted on small plots of land or were even landless benefited from the TPLF's land reforms. As a result of these and other reforms such priests usually became active supporters of the TPLF, and their support did much to win the peasants over to the Front.

Priests were frequently selected (with the TPLF's blessing) to participate in local administration and to serve as teachers in Front-established schools, although they were never permitted to dominate any of the mass associations.⁴³⁸ Some priests resisted the Church's prohibition against taking up arms and became TPLF fighters, but many were too old to keep up with the youthful fighters and instead joined *woreda* militias. Other priests were sent to recently liberated areas to introduce Front members to other priests and the

⁴³⁷Ibid.

⁴³⁸Priests 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. While rural *woreda* executives commonly have priests among their membership, in none of those visited during the course of this research was the chairman a priest. I am only aware of one priest represented on the executives of Tigray's four *zobas* (Father Makonen in the Central *zoba*); there are no priests among the Tigray-wide council executive in Mekelle, and no priests among Tigrayan representatives in Addis Ababa.

local people and to tell them that unlike the atheistic Derg, the Front's members were true Christians. Because priests were usually fluent in Amharigna and Geez, some were even taken by the TPLF beyond Tigray to preach their message. Many deacons and *datbara*, or lay priests, who were usually younger than the priests, did join the TPLF as fighters. According to one estimate about five hundred priests and 2,000 deacons were killed during the struggle.⁴³⁹ As a means of breaking links to the state and establishing an alternative network under TPLF auspices, the Front facilitated the formation of a provincial Church Secretariat separate from the official one under Derg auspices in Mekelle by organizing mass meetings and providing security for them in the liberated territories.

Although the TPLF's success in mobilizing Tigrayan peasants can in part be attributed to its commitment to operating within the structures of a deeply religious peasant culture, this also placed limitations 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 as a result beyond the largely secular cadres, Tigrayan peasants remained as devoted to their ancient and conservative religious traditions as they did during the imperial era. Many examples could be referred to that attest to this. In the Orthodox Church more than half of the days in the year denote a religious event or commemorate a saint and many Tigrayans celebrate them by fasting and not working, thus causing considerable damage to the economy and standard of living of the peasants. The TPLF endeavoured to reduce these celebrations, but with only mixed results, even in the woredas where the Front has 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 the hundreds in some woredas.

⁴³⁹Interview: Tsegaye Berhe, Mekelle, April 11, 1993.

The most striking example, however, of the unwillingness of the TPLF to carry out reforms in the sphere of religious life which could disrupt the 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 still retain their own land, while their monks farm land near by and may hold other land which is farmed for them in their home areas. In some cases monks still receive honey, 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 churches and monasteries, its reticence demonstrates the extent to which the Front would go to avoid confrontations that could upset its relationship with the peasantry and thus interfere with its military efforts.

The constraints on carrying out far reaching change imposed by a conservative peasant culture are also evident in the TPLF's approach to 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, and endeavouring to reduce women's heavy work loads and raise 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 unity in the villages upon which the war effort ultimately depended.

Although women were not initially welcomed as fighters into the TPLF, by 1982 the TPLF claimed that one-third of their fighters were women,⁴⁴⁰ it being recognized that the term "fighter" as used by the TPLF referred to a broad range of positions and not just those involved in combat. But shortly thereafter the number of women recruited was restricted. The TPLF argued that domestic life was being disrupted as a result of so many women becoming fighters; women could make a valuable contribution to the war effort through their activities in the home and their 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.⁴⁴¹ In spite of these reasons and the long debate over the issue, the Chair of the DATW, Romain, acknowledged that some men took a "chauvinist interpretation" of the decision and argued that it demonstrated women's weakness.⁴⁴²

What was not said was that many young women had joined the Front, frequently without their father's or husband's permission, in order to escape the harshness of domestic life in rigidly-structured patriarchal families. This was to be the cause of particular resentment in Moslem households where unmarried women were closely supervised, and the freedom, clothes, and weaponry of the female fighters caused embarrassment. Although war conditions encouraged more liberal attitudes, the decision of Moslem women to become

⁴⁴⁰Interview: Romain and Herti, Mekelle, January 6, 1993.

⁴⁴¹In the wake of this policy change the TPLF began emphasizing women's supportive role in supplying food to fighters and road-builders, and assuming sole responsibility for children and property if a husband was away or lost because of the war. Instead of becoming fighters, women were encouraged to participate in development work, particularly on such things as child care, food preparation, introducing wood conserving stoves, health and literacy.

⁴⁴²Interview: Romain and Herti, Mekelle, January 6, 1993.

fighters against the express wishes of their fathers and/or husbands was frequently seen as "a crime in the holy book".⁴⁴³

It would appear that the TPLF's decision to restrict the numbers of women fighters 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. In this light it is significant that while large numbers of women became fighters, very few became militia members. In the TPLF stronghold of Zana only ten of five hundred 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 assignments as fighters where they were likely to be sent further afield.

Another example of the constraints placed on the TPLF's reforming zeal is provided by their aborted efforts to teach women how to plow. This program, 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 the rural areas a rigid division of roles had long existed between men who plowed and women who did the planting, weeding and harvesting.⁴⁴⁴ Moreover, 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, nonetheless, often had to give as much as half their harvested produce to male neighbours to do their plowing. The plowing program thus served to respond to particular problems

⁴⁴³Interview: Sheiks Mohous Abdel Kadir, Ali Mohammed Siray and Ali Ahmed, Abi Adi, March 19, 1993.

⁴⁴⁴So severe were the sanctions against women plowing that if a woman touched a plow it would have to be destroyed, see Beisel, p, 100.

caused by the war, as well as well as challenge the traditional restrictions placed on women.

Two years after it was started, the program was abruptly ended because, according to the TPLF, teaching women how to plow only served to increase their already burdensome responsibilities; as well, plowing was considered to be work too heavy for women. As a result, in Zana, which was one of the first woredas where this program was introduced, no women were plowing 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 disproportionate number of young men either killed as a result of the war or presently serving in EPRDF forces outside of Tigray. Moreover, female weakness was not a convincing reason for canceling the program when it is not uncommon in Tigray to see boys no older than ten plowing and women carrying heavy loads of firewood.⁴⁴⁵ If the official reasons for discontinuing the plowing program can be discounted, then the assumption must be that the TPLF feared that encouraging women to plow was causing offense by challenging core religious and social beliefs about women in rural Tigrayan society.

The TPLF's articulation of, and positive response to, the dissatisfaction of women with their role in Tigrayan society proved highly effective in the mobilization of women and in the strengthening of the movement. However, the TPLF's commitment to the advancement of women, as with its other social reforms, had to be balanced against fears that the program could divide the carefully cultivated consensus in the rural community

⁴⁴⁵The difficulty in plowing 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 plowed. While a dry season first plowing might well be too difficult for inexperienced women, that need not be the case for subsequent plowing or those carried out in damp soil.

deemed necessary to carry on the war against the Derg and ensure a high level of support for the TPLF.

Conclusion

The TPLF began its insurrection with a basis of support among the petty-bourgeoisie, but at best they only received sympathy from the peasants who made up the overwhelming majority in Tigray. The policies of the Derg and the authoritarian manner in which they were imposed alienated the peasants and ended any hope the regime had of winning their support, but peasant disaffection did not automatically translate into commitment to struggle against the regime. Critical to the success of the TPLF in gaining the allegiance of the peasants was in convincing them that the Front's cadres were devoted to their welfare and had the ability to defeat the other forces competing for their support. By 1978 the TPLF was victorious over its major challengers and so came to lead the insurrection against the regime. With a growing number of recruits from the youth fleeing the Derg's Red Terror in the towns the TPLF could both militarily challenge the Derg, and respond positively to the peasants' appeal for reforms.

As a result, by 1982 the mass of the Tigrayan peasantry had gone over to the TPLF. The failure of the Derg's Red Star campaign in the same year probably ended any prospects the regime had of defeating the EPLF and the TPLF. These developments also stimulated important changes in the TPLF's crucial relationship with the EPLF. The TPLF had developed its military skills through its association with the ELF and EPLF. It had learned much about political organization and mobilization from its contacts with these Fronts, and it had benefited from the EPLF's technical skills and possession of heavy weaponry. But even before the Red Star campaign the benefits of the TPLF-EPLF relationship were clearly going in both directions: TPLF attacks on Derg convoy traffic to Eritrea were

having an important impact on the war in the north and as the Front grew in strength the Derg was forced to devote ever larger numbers of troops to the defense of Tigray that could have been assigned to Eritrea. Although the TPLF would continue to need the EPLF's specialized skills, its participation in the defense of the Sahel served to mark the TPLF's coming of age.

The Derg's defeat in the Sahel passed the strategic initiative to the EPLF and TPLF. However, the famine of 1984 which, if not directly caused by the Derg, was stimulated and manipulated by the regime to further its military objectives, temporarily set back the efforts of the northern based Fronts. Even the famine, however, could not alter the fact that the balance of forces was rapidly shifting in favour of the opposition, particularly the TPLF, which by the late 1980s had a larger fighting force than the EPLF. The stalemate ended in 1988 with the EPLF's defeat of Derg forces at Afabet and the TPLF's capture of the Tigrayan towns. Although the regime was to make a last attempt to recoup its losses, the TPLF overwhelmed the Derg's garrisons in Tigray in 1989, and the final two years led an ethnically-based coalition of resistance movement to gain state power in Addis Ababa.

The role of leadership provided by the revolutionary party in shaping the peasant uprising is either largely ignored by moral economists or, in the case of Scott and Paige, explicitly denied in favour of peasant spontaneity. This chapter has demonstrated that party-directed organization and mobilization in the pursuit of war, rather than peasant initiative, better explains the course of the Tigrayan revolution. So central was war to the fortunes of the TPLF and the success of the revolution that the very reforms which underpinned the revolution were formulated and constrained by their anticipated impact on the capacity of the Front to wage war against the Derg. It is thus a critical function of political leadership to construct a program of reforms which meets both the needs of the peasants for better

services and democratic administration, as well as the needs of the party for growing numbers of fighters committed to the armed struggle.

Ideological struggle, as much as armed struggle, is intrinsic to revolutionary parties and it is also the field on which many such parties founder. The next chapter will examine key ideological issues that engaged the TPLF, and again highlight the role of political leadership. The most contentious ideological issue for the TPLF, both internally and in its relations with other opposition movements, was related to the rights of nations to self-determination, and that issue and others will be examined because of how they speak to the political character of the Front. But what is also of interest, given the organizational stress caused by these issues, was the capacity of the TPLF to survive and advance as a movement, which again brings to the fore the issue of political leadership.

CHAPTER 6: THE POLITICS OF TIGRAYAN NATIONALISM

Introduction

The TPLF launched its armed struggle in 1975 with an untested leadership, a vaguely formulated political program which emphasized Tigrayan nationalism, and the mixed support of the EPLF and ELF. As a result of experience in the countryside with the peasants of military and political struggles with opponents and allies, and of debates within the TPLF leadership, ideological, and to a lesser extent leadership, concerns became increasingly critical to the character and even survival of the movement. Because of the importance of the TPLF's relationship with the EPLF, the part played and positions taken by that movement were of particular importance to the course and outcome of these disputes. Conflict over ideology and leadership are invariably difficult to distinguish and understand within revolutionary movements since they are committed to conspiracy and secrecy. Thus, the following analysis is almost certainly subject to revision as more information becomes available. However, what the disputes involved and how they were resolved largely determined the organizational viability and the political character of the TPLF. Therefore they cannot be ignored by students of revolution.

The most contentious disputes within the TPLF, and in its relations with other revolutionary movements, were over different interpretations of and the implications to be drawn from the right of nations to self-determination. This controversy, which took many forms over the years, sometimes reflected major differences in the objectives being fought for, and in other cases simply to differences over the means by which these objectives were to be pursued. The principal task here is not to develop a theoretical explanation of the role of nationalism in revolutionary struggles, but instead to analyze the different dimensions of this conflict within the TPLF and between the TPLF and other

revolutionary movements. Although problems related to national self-determination were the most prominent and enduring, they were not the only areas of ideological contention for the TPLF. There was also controversy over the class basis of the Tigrayan revolution and over the role of the Marxist Leninist League of Tigray (MLLT) in the TPLF, and these problems will also be discussed in this chapter.

Conflict with the TLF and ELF

Apart from the EDU which had its roots in the old nobility, almost all of the Ethiopian opposition forces derived their origins, and certainly their inspiration, from the student movement. A central premise of that movement was that Ethiopia constituted a prison of nationalities. The students thus affirmed the right of Ethiopia's nations and of Eritrea to self-determination, although what self-determination meant and to whom it applied were, and are today, matters of considerable dispute. Nonetheless, it is clear that 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.

Very quickly after launching their armed struggle the TPLF found themselves at odds with competing nationalist movements, first with the Tigray Liberation Front (TLF) and then with the ELF. In the period 1972 - 1973 a group of Tigrayans founded the clandestine Tigray Political Organization and with the support of the ELF began operations in 1975 under the name of the Tigray Liberation Front.⁴⁴⁶ Led by Yohannis Tekle Haimanot, a teacher, and Gebre Kidane, a pharmacist, its program was devoted to achieving an independent Tigray.⁴⁴⁷

⁴⁴⁶Kahsay Berhe, "The National Question in Tigray: Myths and Realities," 1991, p. 6.

⁴⁴⁷Markakis, *National and Class Conflict*, p. 254. There is some confusion in the literature regarding the TLF with Ottaway (1980:86) and Halliday and Molyneux (1981:206) 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 confusing the TLF with Teranafit and they are also mistaken in having the TPLF emerge as a faction from

The TLF largely focused its activities in northeastern Tigray, particularly around the town of Adigrat, where it drew its support from the intelligentsia, and in the isolated Asimba area where it attempted to gain the support of local peasants. Peasant informants from the area report that the TLF did little political work and did not organize a militia or distribute arms.⁴⁴⁸ Little is known about this small and short-lived organization except that it was explicitly nationalist. Taking its direction from the ELF, the TLF held that Tigray, like Eritrea, was a colony of Ethiopia and the primary objective of its rebellion was to achieve independence for Tigray. In its pursuit of Tigrayan independence the TLF wanted to achieve the widest possible united front and to this end it developed relations with the noble-led EDU. The TPLF objected to the exclusive nationalist focus of the TLF, labeling it "a die-hard, narrow nationalist organization".⁴⁴⁹ The TPLF was also incensed with the TLF's alliance with the Tigrayan nobility whom it considered class enemies.

In spite of these differences and their divergent Eritrean attachments,⁴⁵⁰ the joint commitment of the TLF and the TPLF to Tigrayan nationalism led them to come together and begin unity negotiations which resulted in an agreement in November 1975 to unite the two organizations 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. These facts are not at issue, but their interpretation is. Former TPLF member Kahsay Berhe considered the killings to be part of an internal power struggle led by the present TPLF chairman,

the TLF in 1976. In fact the TLF was entirely separate from the TPLF and the EDU, although it did ally itself with Mengesha.

⁴⁴⁸Interview: Mabrat Adhana and Tuku Beyene, Sobia, March 8, 1993.

⁴⁴⁹*Tigray*, February 1980.

⁴⁵⁰The TLF was affiliated with the ELF, while the TPLF was affiliated with the EPLF.

Meles Zenawi,⁴⁵¹ while TPLF sources argue that the "executions" were due to the murders of Tigrayan nationalists carried out by Yohannis and Tadesse.

The absorption of the TLF members, most of whom came from Agame and Enderta in eastern Tigray, into the TPLF also led to problems, as some of these members were to accuse the TPLF of being dominated by members from Shire, Axum and particularly Adwa (the "SAA group" as it was called by its critics). Indeed, there is some evidence that from its beginning in the TNO, the TPLF drew a disproportionate amount of its membership from these areas and the Front's three leaders to date all came from Adwa. 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 was discriminating against them because their homes were outside the SAA nexus. The TPLF subsequently appealed to them to re-join the fold, thus giving some credence to the defectors' claims.

The TPLF had a much more substantive relationship with the ELF than with the TLF, but it too foundered over competing nationalisms and the two movements' ties with other organizations. Although the TPLF launched its armed struggle with the support of the EPLF, it was soon to develop closer relations with the ELF, in large part because of the more common practice of the latter Front to carry out 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 to include parts of northwestern Tigray, a conception

⁴⁵¹Kahsay, pp. 9-10.

that the nationalist TPLF could not possibly accept. A further source of tension was the ELF's alliances with movements with which the TPLF was at war. The ELF was engaged in a tactical alliance with the EDU, to which the TPLF could not reconcile themselves for the same reasons that they could not accept the TLF's affiliation with that organization. Further, the ELF was also on friendly terms with the EPRP⁴⁵² which was challenging the TPLF in eastern Tigray and after September 1977 the EPRP, according to the TPLF, joined an alliance with the EDU.⁴⁵³

According to the testimony of TPLF sources⁴⁵⁴ and that of former ELF fighters, the ELF also endeavoured to get the TPLF to accept its analysis and political positions over those of its rival, the EPLF, which the TPLF was very reluctant to do. A detailed examination of the ELF - EPLF dispute cannot be taken up here, but some elements of it must be referred to because of their obvious influence on the TPLF. From its beginning the ELF leadership had given a pan-Arab and Islamic character to its struggle and this involved building close ties with lowland sheiks and ethnic leaders. This approach was opposed by the EPLF which had broken away from the movement because it considered the ELF to be sectarian and feudal, while its own program was specifically anti-feudal, secular, and of course nationalist. The EPLF's program also proved more effective in gaining the support of the Christian half of the Eritrean population, particularly the youth who joined the Front in large numbers in the mid-1970s, as well as the peasants who were attracted by its land reforms and establishment of local government bodies.

The EPLF's secularism and anti-feudal programs appealed to the TPLF, but almost as influential was the structure of the EPLF's organization and its leadership. The ELF

⁴⁵²See *Eritrean Revolution*, January - April 1976, p. 30.

⁴⁵³*Woyeen*, August 1978, p. 39.

⁴⁵⁴Interview: Tsegaye Berhe, Mekelle, April 11, 1993.

evolved from the disparate Moslem communities in Eritrea's lowlands and it produced a leadership which frequently suffered from ideological and programmatic confusion on the one hand, and in factionalism and party division on the other.⁴⁵⁵ Established by Eritrean exiles in the Middle East, the ELF leadership frequently operated from outside the country and this led to demands for "leadership in the field". In contrast the EPLF evolved among the largely ethnically homogeneous and Christian groups inhabiting the highlands, and its leadership developed organizational structures that encouraged debate until a decision was reached and then demanded absolute loyalty to that decision. The result was a far more united leadership, and a rank and file more faithful to their movement than was evident in the ELF.

While the ELF's armed struggle helped to raise awareness of the nationality question in the Ethiopian student movement, the movement's Islamic character, its support from Arab nations long and widely viewed as enemies of Ethiopia, together with the Front's ties to ethnic and feudal leaders, and its lack of an explicitly socialist program meant that it could not be considered "progressive", and hence could not be supported by the students. The birth in 1970 of the Marxist oriented EPLF whose early membership was drawn in part from the Ethiopian student movement, however, could not be so easily dismissed. Indeed, it encouraged trends towards greater radicalism within the student movement and led to a more sympathetic approach to Eritrean self-determination and the rights of Ethiopia's own nationalities.

But the EPLF's largely Tigrigna-speaking leadership from lands bordering Tigray had their greatest influence on the Tigrayan students who joined the TNO and the TPLF. Imbued with similar political values as those which motivated the Ethiopian student movement,

⁴⁵⁵See David Pool who argues that this was itself reflective of the segmentary character of lowland Eritrean society from which the ELF leadership emerged. Interview: Asmara, April 20, 1993.

they were naturally drawn to the Marxist EPLF and their experience with the two Eritrean Fronts in the countryside reinforced this attraction. In spite of the TPLF's affinity for the EPLF, the movements' different approaches to national self-determination were to be a lasting source of tension. An understanding of the TPLF's approach to the right of nations to self-determination must begin with an examination of how it interpreted that right with respect to Tigray.

The "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."⁴⁵⁶ With those words the TPLF unleashed a controversy both within the movement and outside it which continues. Opponents of the TPLF and the EPRDF which assumed state power in 1991 charge that such statements demonstrate the goal of these organizations is to dismantle Ethiopia along ethnic lines. While such largely frivolous charges need not be considered here, the demand for an independent Tigray, or Tigrayans' right to independent statehood, raised divisions within the TPLF and were a source of tension in its critical relationship with the EPLF.

Although it can be presumed that the Manifesto was produced by elements within the leadership, no names accompany the document, and in the present environment of denial, finger-pointing and accusations of "narrow nationalism", discovering which cadres were responsible for it, or how it spoke to ideological currents within the Front, is almost impossible for an outsider. In spite of TPLF claims to the contrary, it is not inconceivable that the document did represent the thinking of important elements within the Front

⁴⁵⁶"Manifesto of the TPLF," February 1976, p. 24.

leadership at the time it was written, and that it continued for some time to reflect significant political currents in the leadership.

It is noteworthy that the Manifesto's appeal for Tigrayan independence was published only a short time after the TPLF liquidated the TLF which it had accused of "narrow nationalism". This suggests that either the ideological and violent attack on the TLF had more to do with the TPLF's desire to lead the anti-Derg opposition than with any serious objections to its platform, or that the TPLF leadership was not of one mind on the demand for Tigrayan statehood. Both explanations seem possible, but the weight of evidence would suggest that the majority, or the dominant elements, within the TPLF leadership favoured, or at least did not rule out, Tigrayan independence at this time.⁴⁵⁷

The Manifesto claimed that "Tigray lost its autonomy and independence" after the death of Yohannis IV,⁴⁵⁸ 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. Instead, the Manifesto argued that demands of the TPLF's National Democratic Revolution for "secession and democracy are but transitory ones to socialism and communism rather than being demands or ends of the struggle."⁴⁵⁹

In any event shortly after the Manifesto was published it was disowned and has been a source of embarrassment for the TPLF ever since. Why it disowned the document subsequently is not completely clear. The TPLF's explanation is that the document was

⁴⁵⁷See Kahsay Berhe; Interview: Aregowie Berhe, The Hague, June 22, 1993.

⁴⁵⁸"Manifesto," pp. v-vi.

⁴⁵⁹Ibid., p. xiv.

distributed without the authorization of the leadership whose views it did not represent, but that is not entirely convincing. Moreover, while disowning the Manifesto, the TPLF never repudiated the commitment to the principle that all nationalities had to right to self-determination up to and including the right to independence, in the words of the Ethiopian student movement. But increasingly the TPLF emphasized the tactical value of this demand.

Thus 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."⁴⁶⁰ The nationalist basis of the opposition to the state was further justified in terms of the animosity of the country's ethnic communities which were a product of the 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."⁴⁶¹

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 "

[i]f 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."⁴⁶²

⁴⁶⁰TPLF Foreign Relations Bureau, "Tigray a nation in Struggle," 1980, p. 12.

⁴⁶¹*Revolt*, No. 1, 1st Year, Tiri, 1968 EC.

⁴⁶²"The Just Struggle of the Tigrayan People," December 11, 1981, p. 2.

In 1988 TPLF General Secretary Sebhat Nega was using more temperate language, but was still affirming, "the nationality question is a primary issue" and claiming "We don't believe that the unity of Ethiopia should be pursued at all costs."⁴⁶³

Indeed, for almost two decades the TPLF held "the primary contradiction in Ethiopia at the present time and space is the national contradiction,"⁴⁶⁴ and that all Ethiopian nationalities had the right to self-determination, up to and including the right of secession. In spite of this conviction the Front disowned the Manifesto and moved away from at least publicly proclaiming Tigray's right to independence. The reason for the TPLF's change of emphasis is almost certainly due to the opposition of the EPLF.

The EPLF and the National Question

The TPLF - EPLF alliance, although never without tension, was critical to the course and outcome of the revolutionary wars they were both 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."⁴⁶⁵ But what provided the glue for their relationship was their mutual need for one another. The fledgling TPLF welcomed outside support, and in the wake of the massive Soviet backing for the Derg, the Eritrean Fronts, and particularly the EPLF, recognized that their success depended on working closely with other armed opposition forces in Ethiopia, and notably and increasingly as it demonstrated its capability, with the TPLF.⁴⁶⁶ But that did not mean that the TPLF and EPLF were always in agreement on ideological matters.

⁴⁶³ Alfred Taban, "Inside Tigray," *New African*, August 1988, p. 39.

⁴⁶⁴ *Tigray*, May/June 1978.

⁴⁶⁵ "EPLF Political Report and NDP," adopted at the Second and Unity Congress of the EPLF and the ELF-Central Leadership, March 16, 1987, p. 152.

⁴⁶⁶ Andreas, p. 93.

The TPLF's most fundamental conflict with the EPLF arose from the fact that the right to independence it claimed for the Ethiopian nationalities also applied to the various Eritrean nationalities. The TPLF categorically stated "[i]f 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."⁴⁶⁷ Elsewhere the TPLF noted that to "rule out the possibility of secession [of Eritrea's nationalities] would amount to contradicting its own democratic principles."⁴⁶⁸

Unlike Tigray with its largely ethnically homogeneous population, Eritrea possessed some nine different nationalities. And faced with the difficult but necessary task of welding these nationalities into a united force in the struggle for independence, the EPLF was reticent about taking on board the TPLF's interpretation of the rights of nationalities to independence. In response to the TPLF's claims, the EPLF argued that all Ethiopian nationalities had the right to self-determination, but they did not all have the right to independence. The EPLF argued that the right to independence was conditional on first, the Ethiopian nationalities in question previously having had an independent status, and second, on their being economically cohesive entities. Moreover it 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."⁴⁶⁹

⁴⁶⁷"On Our Differences with the EPLF," *People's Voice*, Special Issue, 1986, p. 7.

⁴⁶⁸"A Great Leap Forward," *People's Voice*, 1986, p. 6.

⁴⁶⁹*Adulis*, May 1985, p. 5.

Though both convoluted and self-serving, the EPLF's interpretation of national self-determination had three objectives. First, it denied Tigrayans and other Ethiopian nationalities the right to independence. Second, it affirmed the right of Eritrea as a colonially-defined territory the right to independence. Lastly it denied its own nationalities the right to independence by restricting anti-colonial struggles to those of "multinational peoples"⁴⁷⁰ which it assumed Eritreans to be. Moreover, while initially the EPLF had maintained 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 the above position was a "precondition" for the formation of a united front of all national and multinational organizations in Ethiopia.⁴⁷¹

A related area of controversy that divided the TPLF and EPLF was the place of multinational movements in the united front that both movements were trying to organize. The EPLF held that multinational Ethiopian opposition groups, such as the EPRP and MEISON (All-Ethiopia Social Movement), were eligible for membership in the united front, but the TPLF only grudgingly accepted this position: it acknowledged the right of multinational organizations like the EPRP to operate in Tigray, but held that they should instead carry on their activities in areas of Ethiopia where no "vanguard organizations" (such as the TPLF) already existed to lead the people.⁴⁷² In the struggle to become the vanguard organization in Tigray (and there could only be one such organization) the EPRP was defeated by the TPLF because it lost the political debate, lacked the support of the people and was weakened by internal contradictions.⁴⁷³

⁴⁷⁰Ibid. ,p. 6.

⁴⁷¹Ibid. , pp. 6-7.

⁴⁷²"A Great Leap Forward," *People's Voice*, 1986, p. 7.

⁴⁷³Ibid. , p. 7.

Generally the TPLF attacked multinational revolutionary movements, arguing that "[a]ny 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.⁴⁷⁴ As a result the TPLF accused the EPRP, the premier example of a multinational movement, of Amhara chauvinism because by not acknowledging the primacy of the national contradiction the movement simply affirmed the dominance of the Amhara within a unitary state, a condition no different from that existing under the regimes of Haile-Selassie and Mengistu. Indeed, 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."⁴⁷⁵

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 were better positioned to confront the Derg and lay the basis for the nation based federalism with which the TPLF hoped to replace the centralized state. Moreover, there was a widespread view among both the TPLF leadership⁴⁷⁶ and the Tigrayan peasantry that only a solely Tigrayan based movement should struggle for the liberation of Tigray, and similarly based movements should be established among the other nationalities of Ethiopia. In addition to this ideologically grounded opposition to the EPLF position, the TPLF also had political difficulties in working with multinational movements, at least within Tigray. From an early stage of the armed struggle the TPLF's relationships with the EDU and EPRP had been fraught with

⁴⁷⁴Ibid., p. 7.

⁴⁷⁵Markakis, *National and Class Conflict*, p. 255.

⁴⁷⁶This will be demonstrated in chapters seven, eight and nine.

difficulties which produced war and a sea of mistrust that was still in existence a decade later.

Stretching credibility, the TPLF further argued that the multinational Ethiopian Peoples Democratic Movement (EPDM), 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."⁴⁷⁷ Indeed, EPDM leader Tamirat Layne (currently Prime Minister of Ethiopia) acknowledged that the policies and programs 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.⁴⁷⁸ 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. Although the EPDM was sometimes considered an Amhara-based movement, it drew its membership from a number of Ethiopian nationalities. It also began operations in Wollo, a province with a mixed population of Amhara and Oromo, neither of whom held strong national sentiments like the Tigrayans. An organization operating in Wollo was thus ill-placed to gain popular support for a program based on nationalist demands such as that pursued by the TPLF in Tigray.

Another element in this 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 because of its early support for Eritrean independence. After the ELF began military operations against the regime of Haile-Selassie, the socialist bloc further cemented

⁴⁷⁷"A Great Leap Forward," *People's Voice*, 1986, p. 7.

⁴⁷⁸Interview: Tamirat Layne, Mihanse, Tigray, May 2, 1988.

their ties with the Eritrean nationalists by becoming more actively involved diplomatically, and indirectly militarily, through the Cubans and other allies in the Middle East, who provided the insurgents with important sources of arms and training facilities in the early period of the revolution.

Although this was to change abruptly as 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.⁴⁷⁹ Sympathy for the socialist bloc was due to their 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 anticipation that after the attainment of Eritrean independence that the country would take its place internationally within the Soviet dominated "progressive" camp. There are also unconfirmed reports that the Soviets maintained low level relations with the Eritrean Fronts even after they committed themselves to the Derg. Although still not prepared to completely condemn the Soviet Union, by the mid-1980s the EPLF was prepared to approach the Soviets more critically.⁴⁸⁰

In contrast, the TPLF held the post-Stalin Soviet Union to be "social imperialist", and believed that it along with the Derg "should be singled out as the principle enemy against whom a broad alliance should be formed."⁴⁸¹ The issue of the Soviet Union, according

⁴⁷⁹The 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 Connel, *Against All Odds*, p. 169.

⁴⁸⁰In an interview with S. Holland in 1984, Isseyas Aferworki, a founding member of the EPLF, attributed Soviet opposition to their movement to its global interests, see J. Firebrace and S. Holland, *Never Kneel Down: Drought, Development and Liberation in Eritrea*, (Trenton NJ: The Red Sea Press, 1984) pp. 128-9.

⁴⁸¹"A Great Leap Forward," *People's Voice*, 1986, p. 8.

to Meles Zenawi, was "the main dividing point between the EPLF and the TPLF."⁴⁸² Unlike the EPLF leadership which traveled widely abroad, TPLF leaders rarely left the Tigrayan countryside and favoured self-reliance policies that led them to look favourably at Albania without, however, having any formal relations with that isolationist outpost of socialism which condemned both the Soviet Union and China. Paul Henze calls this independent approach of the TPLF characteristic of "Ethiopian particularism", and writes that unlike Eritreans the Tigrayans "do not readily ally themselves with external forces",⁴⁸³ although who the "external forces" with whom the Eritreans were alligned are not identified by Henze.

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", did not go down well in the Eritrean camp. Clearly referring to the TPLF, but without mentioning them by name, the EPLF Central Committee held in its harshest rhetoric that, "[t]he 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."⁴⁸⁴ Parties which held such views were also not eligible for membership in its proposed united front, concluded the EPLF. It is indicative of the narrow and isolated ideological environment in which the TPLF and EPLF operated that such language, which would not have been out of place in the 1930s, was being expressed on the eve of the collapse of the socialist bloc in the mid 1980s.

⁴⁸²Interview: Meles Zenawi, Dejena, April 29, 1988.

⁴⁸³Henze, p. 74.

⁴⁸⁴*Adulis*, May 1985, p. 8.

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 - 1981 began this process, and it was furthered as a result of the TPLF's role in the defense of EPLF Sahel positions during the Red Star campaign in 1982. 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 in the last chapter, 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 TPLF considered their relationship to be only of a "tactical" nature. The EPLF found that, since 1979,

"the TPLF had concluded that the EPLF was not a democratic organization 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 realized 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."⁴⁸⁵

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. It thus did not share a common view with the EPLF on political

⁴⁸⁵"EPLF Political Report and NDP," Adopted at the Second and Unity Congress of the EPLF and the ELF-Central Leadership, March 16, 1987, pp. 148-9.

or ideological concerns, and hence the long-term viability of their alliance was in doubt. Moreover, by claiming their relationship to be only tactical, the TPLF was calling 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), which opposed EPLF hegemony, was organized with TPLF support.⁴⁸⁶

Although not without significance, the EPLF's decision to end relations with the TPLF 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. The principle one was over the national question. But, having learned to live with these differences for ten years in return for the obvious benefits they derived from their relationship, questions arise as to why the EPLF ended ties with the TPLF, and why it did so in 1985. Although the TPLF does not discount their differences, its explanation is that after long being the senior partner in the alliance, the EPLF could not accept the TPLF as the equal it demanded to be. 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 - 1985.

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

⁴⁸⁶According to widespread but unconfirmed reports the DMLE was still operating from bases in Tigray with TPLF support in 1993.

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 on Derg positions in the towns of Tigray.⁴⁸⁷ Indeed, one of the reasons the TPLF launched these attacks was to draw the EPLF's attention to its power and of the need to overcome their differences and form a military alliance that would bring the war with the Derg to an end. And this objective was realized within months of the TPLF's capture of the towns when the EPLF agreed to negotiations in Khartoum.

Three other factors also encouraged an agreement at this time. First, the leadership of the two liberation movements must have been mindful also of the implications of the agreements recently reached between Somalia and Ethiopia over the Ogaden. This, the TPLF Secretary-General Sebhat Negga told me, had freed up fifteen to twenty thousand troops for deployment in the rebellious northern provinces.⁴⁸⁸ Second, Tigray was again facing drought and would have to import grains from the Sudan over its road link to Gederef, passible only until it was closed through the onset of the main season of rains that normally began in late June. Agreement with the EPLF would hopefully, and in the event did, provide access to the all-weather road connection through Eritrea to Kassala in Sudan. Thirdly, although denied in 1988, TPLF officials in 1993 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.

⁴⁸⁷Interview: Meles Zenawi, Dejena, April 28, 1988.

⁴⁸⁸Interview: Sebhat Negga, Wolkait, April 27, 1988.

After four days' meeting from the 20th to the 24th of April between the politburos of the two Fronts, it was announced that an agreement had been reached to coordinate their struggle on the basis of their common views and aims.⁴⁸⁹ 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.⁴⁹⁰ Their 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 an commensurate basis with the TPLF gave the latter organization 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, as well as by the EPLF which had focused its ire on the western imperialists. 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 what the TPLF claimed was the right of Eritrean nationalities to self-determination and independence. The statement did not explicitly grant Ethiopian nationalities the right to independence which the TPLF had also repeated 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

⁴⁸⁹*People's Voice*, May 1988, p. 8.

⁴⁹⁰"EPLF and TPLF Joint Statement," *People's Voice*, August 1988, pp. 16-7.

1988 when its days as a superpower appeared to be numbered. The TPLF in turn may have been less concerned with emphasizing 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 to me 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 would be fulfilled. Ultimately, however, the agreement demonstrated the pragmatism of both Fronts and an acknowledgment that they needed each other if victory was to be achieved.

Internal Power Struggles

The controversy over the TPLF's Manifesto almost certainly involved questions of the Front's leadership but, to date, they are not publicly known and therefore cannot be addressed. The problem posed by the make-up of the TPLF's proposed class alliance in Tigray was, however, publicly debated and so served to highlight the involvement of different individuals and groups contending for power within the movement. Unfortunately in the absence of sufficient data the connection between TPLF internal debates, such as those over the class alliance, the marginalization of key figures in the movement, and the rise to dominance of those associated with the Marxist-Leninist League of Tigray, cannot be firmly drawn. Nonetheless, a consideration of the debate over class and the rise of the MLLT are important in their own right because of what they convey about the ideological orientation of the TPLF.

As a national liberation movement, the TPLF embraced all classes with the exception of the "comprador bourgeoisie" and the more common "feudalists". Poor, middle and rich peasants were defined in economic terms, but they also had to be understood in relative

terms and considered in their geographical context. Generally, poor peasants were defined as those without land or insufficient land to survive on, middle peasants had sufficient land and oxen not to depend on wage labour, and rich peasants were defined as those who hired labourers or rented out the use of their oxen. It was the place of the rich peasants and the national bourgeoisie in the class alliance that became a particular source of controversy.

The TPLF leadership's concern with achieving the widest possible unity in its war against the Derg largely overrode whatever misgivings they might have had about embracing the national bourgeoisie and rich peasants in their alliance. They held that such groups were crucial to the development of the province, but too small to threaten the goals of the revolution.⁴⁹¹ Moreover, capitalism was so little developed in Tigray as to largely preclude the existence of a comprador bourgeoisie, but the TPLF meant their definition to include classes that might emerge in the future as well as elements of these classes that resided outside Tigray.

'Rich peasant' is a relative term in Tigray where poverty was (and is) endemic and consumer goods, particularly during the war, were so limited as to largely inhibit significant differences in consumption patterns. Distinctions in wealth probably had their largest impact on the opportunities for children to acquire a formal education, but this was more likely to result in opposition to the imperial regime than support for it. A further difficulty arises from the complexity of land tenure systems in Tigray where, to provide but one example, poor peasants were typically 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 plow additional land beyond the owner's risti

⁴⁹¹Interview: Gebru Asrat, Mekelle, January 25, 1993.

entitlements. Historically in Tigray, classes were always in flux as rich peasants might lose their position in society from one generation to the next through famine, war, loss of land through court cases, or by a reduction in livestock holdings.

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 mobilizing peasants. According to a TPLF cadre with a long involvement in land reform,

"Class analysis of rural Tigrayan society was based on a division between feudalists on the one hand, and rich, middle and poor peasants on the other. There were no hard criteria and there were different definitions of these terms across the zones of Tigray."⁴⁹²

This is a very different approach to that of the Eritrean and Chinese revolutionaries who in many spheres had an enormous influence on the Front.⁴⁹³ TPLF leaders contend that rich peasants were often easier to organize than peasants from other classes because they were more conscious of the benefits to be gained from supporting the Front's reforms. TPLF officials noted that rich peasants gained security over their land and possessions under the Front.⁴⁹⁴ Pragmatism also figured in the TPLF's approach to rich peasants, with one

⁴⁹²Interview: Afera, Mekelle, January 2, 1993.

⁴⁹³Materials prepared for EPLF cadres involved in carrying out land reforms make clear that their detailed class analysis and accompanying stratagems were designed precisely so that cadres could combat efforts of feudals, traditional leaders, and rich peasants to gain control of mass organizations by working with poor and middle peasants to ensure that they gained majority positions in these organizations (See the EPLF's "Creating a Popular, Economic, Political, and Military Base," December 1982). Studies of the Chinese Communist Party's land reforms, with which the TPLF leadership were closely acquainted, also point to the Party's direct involvement in keeping rich peasants out, and getting poor peasants into positions of power in mass associations.

⁴⁹⁴Abraha, 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, p. 68.

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.⁴⁹⁵

Moreover, while rich peasants had more opportunities to ingratiate themselves or marry into privileged families, they still faced real barriers and may well have come to the conclusion that they had more interests in common with the poorer peasants beneath them than with those richer and more powerful above them. Certainly 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."⁴⁹⁶

However, the very success of the TPLF's approach to rural mobilization prompted Gidey Zerai, former vice-chair of the TPLF and one of the leading Marxist theoreticians of the movement, to oppose the policy, arguing that the national bourgeoisie and the rich peasantry would come to dominate the national struggle through control of the mass organizations. In the view of Gidey and his supporters, these peasants would use their traditional power and their possession of capital which the TPLF reforms did not interfere with⁴⁹⁷ to gain control of local government institutions and so subvert the land reforms.

The TPLF leadership implicitly gave some credence to Gidey's concerns by acknowledging that rich peasants "wavered" in their alliances since they supported the TPLF when the revolution was going in its favour, and the government when it was not. Although the

⁴⁹⁵Interview: Tsegaye Berhe, Mekelle, January 23, 1993.

⁴⁹⁶Beisel, p. 69.

⁴⁹⁷It remains unclear whether the TPLF's decision to not distribute capital was a response to peasant values which did not favour such a distribution, a desire to win the support of rich peasants, part of a long-range conception that held the need for Tigray to pass through a period of capitalism before socialism could be introduced, or a recognition that in largely poverty-stricken Tigray even relatively well off peasants could not readily be considered oppressors. It is the last explanation that TPLF respondents give to questions as to why the Front did not distribute the capital of rich peasants.

TPLF did not officially encourage any particular class of peasants for leadership in mass organizations, they did establish a criterion for selection based on "devotion to the peoples' cause", and this could have been used as a means to preclude anyone whose loyalty was in doubt from acquiring a position of leadership. Available information suggests that rich peasants did gain some local positions of power through the TPLF organization of local administrations but rarely greater it would appear, than their negligible proportion of the total population.

It is difficult to piece together the threads of Gidey's concerns about rich peasant domination of the rural areas since it was 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 organization, the most important defections to date. Gidey usually found himself at odds with the rest of the TPLF leadership over his espousal of left wing positions such as that discussed above, while Aregowie criticized the TPLF's approach to forming a united front and argued that it should include multinational movements like the EPRP; he also accused the leadership of "narrow nationalism".⁴⁹⁸ Aregowie was also strongly committed to a non-conventional military strategy which emphasized multiple guerrilla actions throughout the country, a strategy his critics dubbed the "war of the fleas".⁴⁹⁹

Current TPLF leaders hold that 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 was not based on ideological differences, but was due instead to a growing recognition that he did not have the military capabilities required to take advantage of the new opportunities arising in the military sphere in the mid-1980s.

⁴⁹⁸Interview: Aregowie Berhe, The Hague, June 22, 1993.

⁴⁹⁹Interview: Gebru Asrat, Mekelle, January 25, 1993.

The TPLF thus claim that Aregowie left the movement because he refused to accept a transfer from the position of Military Commander to a position he considered to be of lesser importance.

Further details of these quarrels need not be considered here, but they climaxed with a sixteen hour debate before the TPLF army between Meles and the man he called his friend and teacher, Gidey. The outcome of the debate was a vote that favoured Meles which prepared the ground for Gidey and Aregowie to leave the organization shortly thereafter. The clearest impact of these internal quarrels was the appointment of Seye Abraha and Tsadkan Welde Tinsai to lead the TPLF army.⁵⁰⁰

For Aregowie and Gidey, a power grab by Meles and his ally, Abaye Tsehaye lay behind the whole series of disagreements on theoretical and strategic issues that afflicted the TPLF in the 1980s. Their vehicle was the Marxist-Leninist League of Tigray (commonly called "Malalit") which was established after a thirteen day conference ending on July 25, 1985. The League was designed to serve as a "vanguard party" within the TPLF and Abaye was selected as its first chairman. The MLLT claims that "communist elements played a big role in founding and consolidating the TPLF", and that these elements went on to establish a "pre-party organization" called the "Organization of the Vanguard Elements" in 1983 which was a precursor to the MLLT.⁵⁰¹

The actual relationship of the MLLT to the TPLF is not clear, but the League's publicly issued statements hold 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

⁵⁰⁰Presently Seye holds the position of Defense Minister in the EPRDF Government and Tsadkan is the Military Chief of Staff.

⁵⁰¹*People's Voice*, July/September 1986, p. 12.

consummation of the Peoples Democratic revolution are one and the same."⁵⁰² 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 ...etc.)"⁵⁰³ The fact that the TPLF leadership (including Gidey and Aregowie) joined the MLLT en masse meant that in practice there was little to distinguish its politics from those of the TPLF.⁵⁰⁴ However, there appears to be one notable exception to this and that is that the MLLT's stated objectives did not make clear any support of Tigrayan nationalism. Indeed, a principal objective of the League was the formation of a unitary multinational Marxist-Leninist party of Ethiopia and consistent with this Ethiopia-wide perspective the League announced that it would accept members irrespective of their national origin or place of residence.

This highly influential, but virtually impenetrable (for an outsider) organization was dominating most of the TPLF's mass organizations soon after its founding and ensuring their "communist" direction. In the field TPLF respondents typically deny any knowledge of the MLLT, but one more forthcoming vice-chairman of a rural woreda admitted to the author 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 organizations. In 1988, however, Meles Zenawi denied that MLLT members formed a majority of the leadership of the TPLF.⁵⁰⁵ Although an elitist organization, anecdotal information suggests that it has a powerful following at the local level and in the rural areas, principally among teachers, but also among peasants.

⁵⁰²Ibid., p. 12.

⁵⁰³Ibid., p. 12.

⁵⁰⁴The extent of the adoption of the MLLT's perspective within the ranks of the TPLF is illustrated by a Front "political commissar" who described his task to me in April 1988 as, "teaching Marx, Engels, Lenin and Stalin and exposing Trotsky and Mao" to new recruits.

⁵⁰⁵Interview: Meles Zenawi, Dejena, April 29, 1993.

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."⁵⁰⁶ Some critics contend that the MLLT paved the way for Meles's replacement of Sebhat as chairman of the TPLF and of the EPRDF in 1989, but even if that was the case there is no evidence that there was any serious ideological divisions between them, as had been the case with Aregowie and Gidey. TPLF respondents invariably explain the leadership change-over by maintaining that Sebhat wanted to relinquish the leadership and that Meles was younger and deemed more suitable to meet future challenges. The fact that in 1993 Sebhat was still a member of the powerful Politburos of both the TPLF and the EPRDF gives credence to the argument that there were no major differences between him and his younger colleague.

The strong adherence of the MLLT/TPLF to self-reliance and, until recently, its international isolation, led its leaders to look favourably on Albania. While there is no evidence of any relations between the TPLF and the Albanian Labor Party, Sebhat has spoken of his admiration for the Party because of its independence of both superpowers.⁵⁰⁷ And after becoming TPLF Secretary General, Meles too praised Albania for maintaining its independence and its freedom from debt, but emphasized, "we do not believe in models".⁵⁰⁸

Whatever else the formation of the MLLT accomplished, it clearly served to block the leadership ambitions of Gidey and Aregowie in spite of their popular following in the TPLF. After a year at the rear base at Dejena in western Tigray, Gidey engineered his

⁵⁰⁶Hammond, p. 170.

⁵⁰⁷Interview: Sebhat Negga, Wolkait, April 28, 1988.

⁵⁰⁸*People's Voice*, January/June 1990, p. 23.

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.⁵⁰⁹ The TPLF holds that the survival of these two top defecting leaders is indicative both of 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 with ideological divisions that led to many deaths, this is true. However, Aregowie is convinced that he and Gidey had to leave the TPLF and Tigray because their lives were in danger.⁵¹⁰ 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. 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, at least in the short run, on the conduct of the war.

Although there were genuine areas of concern over the implications of the class alliance that the TPLF was attempting to achieve, the struggle around the issue had far more to do with the distribution of power in the organization. Thus Gidey made common cause with Aregowie who did not share his ideological sentiments, rather than with Meles and Abaye whose creation, the MLLT, seemed to better reflect his leftist perspective. This suggests that the MLLT was used, as its critics charged, as a vehicle for the advancement of some

⁵⁰⁹Interview: Aregowie Berhe, The Hague, June 22, 1993. In 1993 Gidey was living in exile in Norway and Aregowie in exile in the Netherlands.

⁵¹⁰Ibid.

individuals within the TPLF at the expense of others. But the MLLT also had other functions: first and as stated, as a means to give the Front's politicization a more Marxist-Leninist flavour, and secondly, as a means to appeal to a wider audience outside Tigray.

The emphasis on Marxism-Leninism and the avoidance of references to Tigrayan nationalism would seem to be part of an effort to provide a basis for the TPLF to establish relations and make alliances with other Marxist oriented opposition movements. Establishing a united front against the Derg was always a premier objective of the TPLF and building alliances must have been even more important in July 1985 when the MLLT was officially launched, just one month after the EPLF broke its relationship with the TPLF. Clearly the TPLF needed support quickly and presenting itself in a more orthodox Marxist-Leninist light was the most viable option given the circumstances then existing within Ethiopia.

Conclusion

This chapter has focused on the politics of nationalism and the TPLF's ideological struggles. One of the objective has been to demonstrate that, contrary to the perspective of moral economists, these concerns need to be figure prominently in any explanation of revolution. 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 movements and they often lead to divisions or even the complete break-up of such movements. The marked divisions within the ELF, TLF and EPRP and the open warfare that broke out between the Eritrean Fronts in spite of their joint commitment to independence, are cases in point.

The TPLF did have ideological divisions and other problems which resulted in some members of the leadership defecting to the Derg, others going into exile and doubtlessly still others being killed. Nonetheless, and quite unlike the experience of other revolutionary movements in Africa, none of these disputes produced significant schisms or break-away movements. Moreover, in its nineteen year history from 1975 to 1994 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 are indications that a number of cadres and peasants were jailed for their perceived opposition to the leadership. However, there is no evidence to date which would support Kriger's finding, based on her study of the Zimbabwean revolution, that coercion by revolutionaries was of central importance in winning the compliance of the population.⁵¹¹ Kriger attributes the revolutionaries' use of coercion as being due to their inability to provide utilitarian benefits to the peasants in return for the costly sacrifices they demanded,⁵¹² but that bears little resemblance to the circumstances in Tigray where the TPLF provided a wide range of services including the provision through REST of relief supplies.

The TPLF's success in not allowing potentially explosive issues of ideology and leadership to interfere with the war against the Derg or its continuing efforts to reform Tigrayan society cannot be completely understood given the lack of knowledge about the inner workings and decision-making processes of the movement. However, three features of the TPLF can be identified that were important in this respect: the leadership's pragmatism; the Front's refusal to allow a personality cult to develop, and the extent of democratic participation in the movement.

⁵¹¹N. Kriger, p. 17.

⁵¹²Ibid. p. 12.

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."⁵¹³ Tigray's first governor under the Derg, Colonel 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."⁵¹⁴ 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 was not due to Marxism-Leninism, but rather in spite of it, and should be attributed largely to the Front's pragmatic espousal of community grievances. From this perspective Marxism-Leninism was for outside consumption and Maoism was useful internally for its practical approach to the conduct of guerrilla warfare.

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 was renowned for its commitment to what it considered an ideologically pure Marxism-Leninism. Part of the explanation may be because the Front, unlike organizations such as the EPRP, originally lacked a clearly formulated political agenda and thus was more prepared to base its program 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 organizations it understood from the beginning that its success depended upon winning peasant support. And to win that support it placed far greater emphasis than the EPRP and the EDU did on

⁵¹³Gebru Tareke, "Resistance to Liberation," p. 44.

⁵¹⁴Interview: Colonel Kalechristos Abbay, Addis Ababa, June 4, 1993.

learning from the peasants, gaining their respect and developing a program that met their needs.

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 in the movement. 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.⁵¹⁵ 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 outbreak of 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 participation in combat; their presence in the countryside rather than on the diplomatic circuit often favoured by other opposition elites; and the easy going relationships between leaders and rank and file fighters that I observed in Tigray in 1988. Further striking evidence of the lack of a personality cult in Tigray compared to many parts of the Third World is evidenced by the absence in the province, either during the rebellion or during the period of my research in 1992 - 1993, 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

⁵¹⁵Interview: Aregowie Berhe, The Hague, June 22, 1993.

tabia, woreda and zoba administrations, the mass associations and the people's courts. These institutions, however, are remarkably similar to those established by the Derg which in practice used them to restrict popular participation and to serve as instruments of control. Therefore the populist character of these institutions under the TPLF cannot be attributed to their structure, but rather to the dynamic role they played in confronting and resolving the everyday problems of the people. Although TPLF cadres dominate such councils, peasant participation was actively encouraged.⁵¹⁶

The TPLF also made regular use of long, and usually widely attended, mass meetings to achieve a high level of agreement on the goals of the revolution and the means to pursue them.⁵¹⁷ What gave the meetings their appearance of consensual decision-making when they were largely orchestrated by the TPLF was the leadership's willingness to accept criticism collectively and individually and to allow virtually unlimited debate on issues. 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 they knew that while their opinions might not carry the day that they would have their views heard. While this process cannot be compared to true consensual decision-making,

⁵¹⁶According to John Bruce who did research in Tigray between 1971 and 1974 and returned to the province in late 1993,

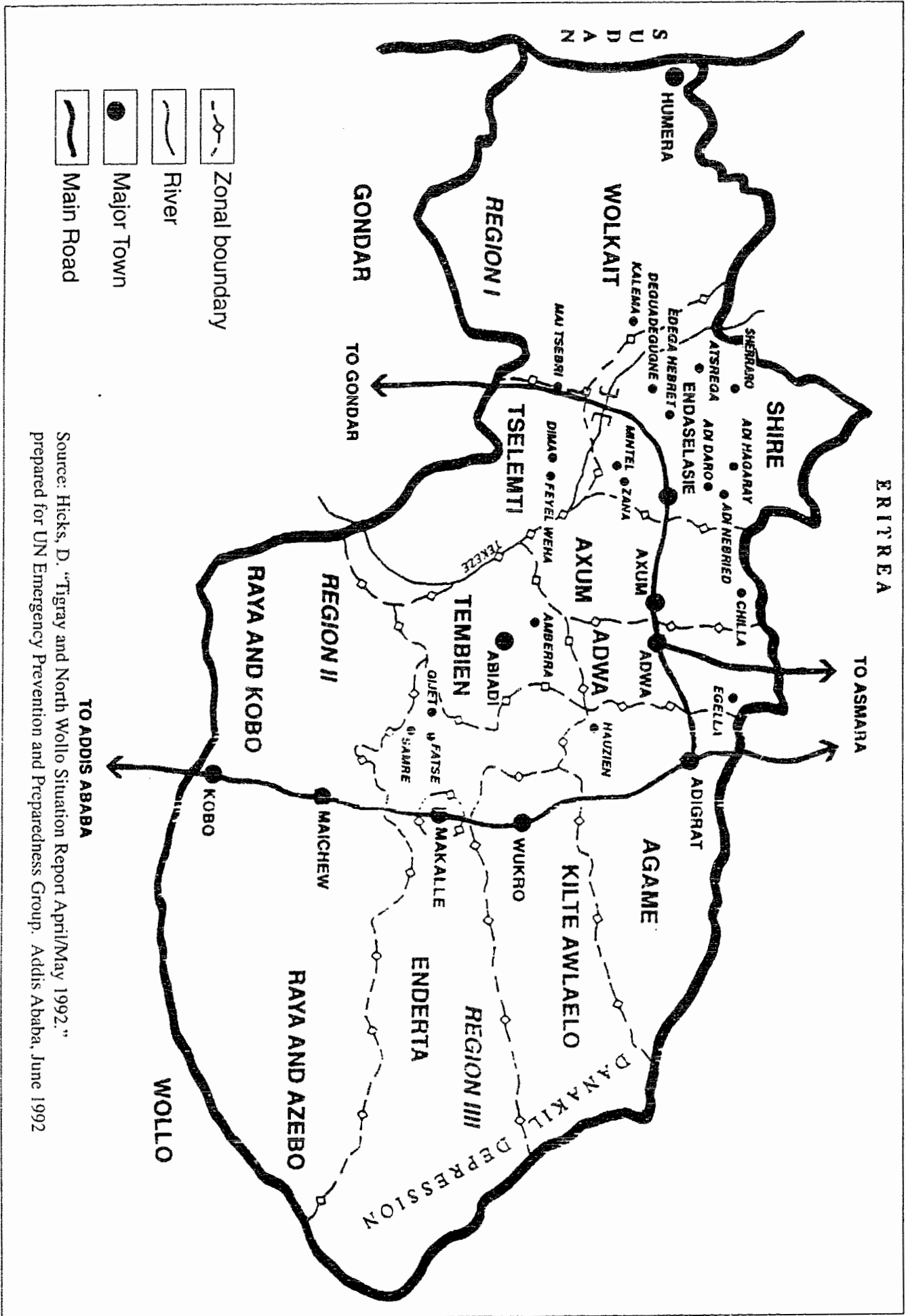
"There is genuine engagement on issues in the meetings. There is, of course, a certain amount of direction by cadres. After all, the party cadres and fighters leading the meetings have seen themselves in a vanguard role, with their task as mobilization of the peasantry. But they are open to objections 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."


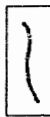


(John Bruce, in a letter to the author, November 29, 1993).

⁵¹⁷Illustrative of these meetings was 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 held, 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.

it did give peasants and fighters a voice in their government and established a measure of accountability that had never existed before in Tigray.

After considering the origins of the TPLF in chapter four, the Front's military struggles in chapter five and its ideological struggles in this chapter, the thesis will now examine the background and course of the revolution in rural Tigray in the next three chapters. These chapters correspond with the three regions into which the TPLF divided Tigray for the purposes of its mobilization of the peasants and the conduct of its war against the Derg. Generally Region I corresponds to western Tigray and will be considered in chapter seven; Region II corresponds to central Tigray and will be considered in chapter eight, and Region III corresponds to eastern Tigray and is considered in chapter nine. With the exception of the southern part of Region III the temporal focus of these chapters is on the early period of the war, usually from 1975 to the early 1980s. This is because, as has been made clear in the last two chapters, by 1982 the majority of the Tigrayan peasants were supporting the TPLF led revolution.



-  Zonal boundary
-  River
-  Major Town
-  Main Road

Source: Hicks, D. "Tigray and North Wollo Situation Report April/May 1992."
 Prepared for UN Emergency Prevention and Preparedness Group. Addis Ababa, June 1992

CHAPTER 7: THE STRUGGLE FOR WESTERN TIGRAY

Introduction

Although Tigray forms an identifiable cultural and political unit within Ethiopia, it is also true that Tigray is a province of regions and the province's revolution is best understood by studying its development within those regions. None of this, however, is to say that there was not a marked similarity in the condition of the Tigrayan peasantry and in their political response to the collapse of the Haile-Selassie regime and to the policies and administration of the Derg and the TPLF. But Tigray does possess sometimes significant regional variations in topography, production of cash and subsistence crops, ethnic makeup, infrastructural development, personal wealth, presence of shifta and other factors that impact on political conditions and hence on the course and conduct of the TPLF-led revolution. Thus these differences must be noted, explained, and placed within the context of an overall explanation of peasant revolt in Tigray.

Topography is critical to understanding the human environment of Region I or western Tigray and the context in which the TPLF-led revolution began. In the west the highlands that contain most of the province's population give way to a much lower and less hospitable climate and environment. The Ethiopians, or at least the Amhara-Tigrayan component, built their ancient civilization in the highlands, and the lowlands not only represent the heat of the plains, prevalence of diseases like malaria, less infrastructural development and more lawlessness, but also an alien land largely inhabited by their historic foes, such as Moslems, Turks, Mahdists and Arabs. The western region then, despite its attractions of better soil fertility and a much lower peasant/land ratio has, until the virtual collapse of the Tigrayan rural economy in this century, been largely avoided by the highland bound peasantry.

The temporal focus of this chapter will largely be the period from the TPLF's arrival in what they called Region I in 1975 to the early 1980s, by which time most of the peasants in the area were supporting the Front. The chapter will begin with an examination of the geo-political context for revolt in western Tigray and then move on to an analysis of the challenge posed by the former nobility and their followers to the TPLF's goal of domination of the anti-Derg struggle. Only after these movements were defeated could the TPLF devote its efforts to confronting the Derg. However, the regime's policies, particularly its agrarian reforms and its attempt to eliminate urban opposition by unleashing the Red Terror, were estranging many Tigrayans in the west even before the TPLF was able to mobilize them and this will be examined. Although land reform was not the crucial issue in western Tigray that it was in other parts of the province, it was nonetheless an important component of the TPLF's reform program and critical to their mobilization of peasants. The western region woreda of Adi Nebried to the north of Endaselasie provides the best documented example available of a TPLF land reform and for this reason it will be examined. Lastly, a brief case study describes the woreda of Zana which lies to the east of Endaselasie and became an early TPLF stronghold in this area.

Geo-political Context for Revolt

In western Tigray the TPLF first took up its struggle and competed with rebel elements of the old regime who also selected this area in which to launch their insurrections. There are a number of factors which explain why these movements were drawn to Tigray's western periphery and they will be examined. But the foremost attraction was the area's isolation and weak links to established authority. Migdal's contention that revolutionary situations are likely to emerge in areas of poor administration, communications and

transportation⁵¹⁸ thus has considerable merit with respect to western Tigray. Unfortunately moral economists have proven to be more successful at explaining the structural context in which revolutions emerge than in providing insight as to how revolutions develop. Western Tigray is a valuable area in which both subjects can be examined.

Western Tigray is one of only two surplus food producing areas in the province; the second area is in the southeast of the province and is less significant. The major crops of the west are common throughout Tigray: sorghum, sesame, finger millet, sunflower, lentils, and maize, but they serve more commonly as cash crops in this region. The grain staple *teff* is grown at higher elevations everywhere in Tigray and is most commonly used for making *injera*, a spongy bread like substance used for scooping up other food items. Many small peasant farmers and a smaller number of large landowners regularly brought surpluses to market which were bought by traders from Adwa and Endaselasie, the principle town of the west. Endaselasie's relative proximity to Sudan also fostered a vibrant cross-border trade with oil seeds being the main export and consumer goods being the biggest import.

Humera on the Sudanese border, Wolkait, and the much less significant region around Sheraro town became centres for commercial agriculture. These areas not only produced a disproportionate share of Tigray's exports, they were also critical to the survival of many thousands of Tigrayan farmers who lived so close to the margin that they depended on the wage labour they could get here. Those who hired wage labourers were usually middle or rich peasants who produced small surpluses. However, in some areas and notably

⁵¹⁸Migdal, *Peasants, Politics, and Revolution*.

Humera, members of the traditional aristocracy employed large numbers of poor peasants and possessed vast lands, exporting their products to Sudan, Asmara and Addis Ababa.

In spite of western Tigray's enormous agricultural potential, its social and physical drawbacks have meant that it has not been until this century that the region has attracted significant numbers of peasants escaping from conditions of high taxation and feudal exploitation, and the not unconnected physical constraints of the declining size of farm plots and soil fertility. Not surprisingly many of the western peasantry, particularly those who now inhabit the more harsh lowlands, have moved (or their parents moved) in recent times from areas where these conditions were particularly severe, such as the awardjas of Axum and Adwa in central Tigray, and Agame in the northeast.⁵¹⁹

The frontier-like conditions in the west meant the complaints of a large and powerful landowning Church exploiting the peasantry with its tax demands are not commonly heard. The Ethiopian Orthodox Church had virtually no gulti or riim land in the far west, in large part because of the small size of the peasant population to work its lands. The weakness of the Church was also to mean that parish priests, who as local spokesmen of the poor peasantry played such a prominent role in the TPLF in some other areas, were far less significant politically in western Tigray.

The secular nobility was less dependent also on gulti land in the west than elsewhere in Tigray, but that did not mean that its members were any less grasping than other parts of

⁵¹⁹Typical of this is Haile, a peasant resident in Adi Hagari who was born in Filfili, Axum awardja in 1939 and moved west in 1959 specifically to get 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 .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 plow 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 2.5 hectares) and the tools to plow it, Interview: Haile, Adi Hagari, February 3, 1993.

the province. A large land owner on the eve of the 1974 revolution might easily farm 300 pairs of oxen plowing land, or 75 hectares. Moreover, older western peasants complained of feudal lords arbitrarily demarcating large sections of the most fertile lands for their personal use, and having few compunctions about impinging on the much smaller plots of their non-noble neighbours. The existence of these problems, however, points to the growing commercial value of these lands. The intimate connection between large land holders and government officials clearly facilitated arbitrary land takeovers. As in other regions of Tigray, peasants complained of the inequity of land distribution, but for the most part, and unlike their more eastern counterparts, the peasants here were not driven to desperation by land shortages or declining soil fertility.

The burning issue for the western peasantry was the "unfair" administration under which they lived. Complaints about the lack of justice under the old regime are common to all of Tigray and encompass both the inequity of the land division between the rulers and the ruled, and the related corrupt noble favouring court system to which the peasants had to appeal. Most of these cases, as the historical record confirms, related to land disputes.⁵²⁰ In western Tigray, however, peasant complaints centred on the lack of security and the multitude of *shifta*.

There are many factors that explain *shifta* activity on such a scale in the far west of Tigray. The primary cause was the lack or weakness of government institutions, or to put it differently, the steady decline in effectiveness of the central feudal state as distance increased from the core. And state in this context refers not only to the government in Addis Ababa, but also to the regional centres of political control such as Mekelle, and its integrally related centres of Church dominance, the most prominent in Tigray being Zion

⁵²⁰See Ministry of Land Reform Report.

Mariam Church in Axum and its auxiliary churches. Without established state institutions or the traditions of social control they provided, constraints of a political or social nature were less developed in western Tigray than in other parts of the province.

The attraction of shifta to the far west was also facilitated by the physical environment. Although shifta require a settled population to prey on, they also need under-populated areas in which to hide and escape from authority and western Tigray provided such areas. Security for the shifta was also facilitated by more tree cover than is found elsewhere in Tigray, and a hostile climate that detracted would-be pursuers coming from the highlands. Even adjacent areas provided a measure of protection: to the north is the Mareb River and the sparsely populated regions of southwestern Eritrea; to the south is the Takezze River Gorge, itself a region notorious for shifta, and to the west lie the ill-defined and long fought over border areas of Sudan.

Shifta groups operated with little threat from the weak organs of established authority and this led many peasants in the west and throughout Tigray to hold that the nobility and shiftas worked in conjunction. As one peasant put it, the educated nobles took on the positions of local government while their uneducated relatives become shiftas.⁵²¹ While this direct link between members of the aristocracy and shiftas is hard to either prove or disprove, there is no doubt that it produced two consequences. First, the inability of the imperial state and its regional organs to protect the peasantry from the depredations of the shifta did much to reduce the state's legitimacy in the eyes of the peasantry. Second, the conditions of lawlessness meant that many, if not most, of the peasant inhabitants were forced to arm themselves and were familiar with the use of guns, both factors which favoured the establishment of movements prepared to challenge the state.

⁵²¹Interview: Haile, Adi Hagari, February 3, 1993.

Endaselasie, at the junction of all-weather, but unpaved, roads east to Axum and Adwa, south to Gondar, and dry season tracks west to Humera and north by a circuitous connection to Asmara, was the urban centre of western Tigray. But under the imperial regime the town of less than five thousand had no high school,⁵²² no paved roads, and only a small and ill-equipped hospital. Endaselasie did, however, have an important market where local traders purchased grains and using their trucks sent it out of the region.

In spite of its limited urban attributes, Endaselasie was not immune from the intellectual ferment of the 1960s and 1970s that swept all of Ethiopia. Local residents report that although party identifications were largely absent, demonstrations which called for equality, land to the tiller, and opposition to the Amhara nobility were held in the town.⁵²³ There were only a handful of Amhara in western Tigray, and most of them were poor and not the focus of public ire, but anger over limited educational opportunities, poor hospital facilities, the poor condition of the roads upon which the town and area's commercial economy depended, corrupt administration and the prevalence of crime expressed itself in resentment of the Amhara rulers.

Challenge of the Nobility

The collapse of the imperial regime created the same ideological confusion and dislocation in the west that it did elsewhere in Tigray, but the political forms it took were to some extent different. Common to the rest of Tigray, the peasants of the west held that exploitation flowed downward from an Amhara ruling class and that their local exploiters,

⁵²²The nearest high school was in Adwa.

⁵²³Interview: Mohammed Esumane, Nurehysne, Melite Beyene, Endaselasie, February 6, 1993.

Tigrayan nobles, were often only agents of their Amhara masters. The overthrow of their Tigrayan leader, Ras Mengesha, thus seemed to herald a new era of even more harsh Amhara rule through the vehicle of the Derg, or so it was widely believed in the confused environment created by the collapse of the Haile-Selassie regime.

Appeals to Tigrayan national sentiments were thus *de rigueur* for any political group appealing for support among the peasantry, and the first significant group in the field was the quasi-shifta Teranafit. Well known and feared local shifta leaders like Alem Shett joined the Tigrayan nobility to create a body organized on traditional lines with squads made up of nobles and men from their home woredas. Teranafit combined common crime with an allegiance to Ras Mengesha, opposition to the "land to the tiller" promises of the Derg, and support for Christianity that was assumed to be threatened by the Derg and later the TPLF. In turn Teranafit promised risti land for all peasants, opposition to the atheism of the Derg and, crucially, an appeal to Tigrayan nationalism. Combined with assurances of food and security at a time when both were threatened, it was initially highly successful and brought thousands of poor western Tigrayan peasants into its ranks.

Thus when the fledgling TPLF began its armed struggle with perhaps a total of one hundred largely untrained and poorly equipped fighters it was confronted by the forces of Teranafit, estimated to possess approximately ten thousand men. Teranafit was most active in the Adi Dabo area of Shire which extends up to the Eritrean border, but the movement operated throughout western Tigray and had smaller bases of support in central Tigray, Tembien, and beyond to Gondar. Not initially able to militarily challenge the forces of Teranafit, TPLF efforts were directed at emphasizing the origins of Teranafit in the old regime and to lay before the peasants a program of land reform and democratic rights, both anathema to Teranafit.

Trying to distinguish peasant support drawn to Teranafit and its successor organization, the Ethiopian Democratic Union (EDU), from those later drawn to the TPLF⁵²⁴ is not easy. Indeed, one former Teranafit/EDU member said, "[p]olitical 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."⁵²⁵ However, it is clear that Teranafit/EDU disproportionately drew support from the commercial farming areas of Humera and Wolkait in the far west of Tigray, Metemma in the far west of neighbouring Gondar province, among Tigrayans working on plantations and commercial farms in the Sudan, and among Tigrayans who went to the Sudan as refugees because of the war-related disruptions to their lives. Metemma, like Humera, was an area of surplus production and served as 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 destruction of the imperial regime to which they were intimately linked, but even more for its Land Proclamation of 1975 which brought about their own destruction. 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 reactionary opposition groups as the result of their lower level of political consciousness and lack of integration into local communities.⁵²⁶ Such critics further contend that farm labourers were only mobilized and kept active with promises of loot, and that this degenerate politics largely explains the violence and crime with which Teranafit/EDU were associated. In addition the Teranafit leadership was not above using intimidation as a means of recruitment. Nonetheless, it cannot be contested that many poor and middle land-owning peasants in what were soon to be the TPLF strongholds of

⁵²⁴The TPLF was not in existence when Teranafit began operations.

⁵²⁵Interview: Tekle Berhane, Gondar May 6, 1993.

⁵²⁶Interview: Aregesh Adane, Mekelle, April 8, 1993.

Shire and Sheraro, were also quick to join these aristocratic-led movements in their opposition to the Derg. One such peasant said that he joined "as did many other peasants when we heard that the Derg was trying to kill our leader, Ras Mengesha."⁵²⁷

Few educated youth were drawn to Teranafit because it was led by remnants of the old regime and shiftas who did not readily accommodate intellectuals. The formation of the EDU was designed in part to appeal to a broader ethnic and class base than Teranafit. Although led by former aristocrats⁵²⁸ it tried to project a more liberal, anti-monarchist image, stressed that its membership came from all regions of Ethiopia, and in its program favoured a Western democratic form of government.⁵²⁹ From the beginning the EDU cooperated with the Eritrean opposition movements, although as Ethiopian nationalists their ideology prevented them from supporting Eritrean separatism.⁵³⁰ The EDU's greatest contribution to the Eritrean struggle, however, was not through military cooperation, but in their field strength in Gondar and western Tigray which seriously disrupted Ethiopian army traffic to Eritrea at a time when the TPLF and the EPRP were exerting pressure on the main Addis Ababa - Asmara road in the east.

As the Derg's policies took an increasingly radical turn the EDU gained support from the Sudanese and the Saudis whose conservative anti-communist regimes grew concerned at the revolutionary tilt their region was taking. The Sudanese supplied the EDU with

⁵²⁷Interview: Tesema, Adi Hagari, February 3, 1993. Tesema was a self-described "middle" peasant and former chikka shum from the village of Adi Hagari, near Sheraro, who was appointed a Teranafit squad leader of 170 men, 140 of whom were armed, with their own weapons. His mobile squad traversed as far as the outskirts of Axum pillaging and drawing peasant support in its wake. But after only two and a half months as a member of Teranafit Tesema said that he became disgusted with the organization and its activities, quit it and joined the TPLF, where he became the Front's first militia leader in his home woreda.

⁵²⁸As well as Mengesha Seyoum, there was General Nega Tegegn who had been governor of Begemdir and was a relative of Haile-Selassie, and General Iyassu Mengesha, former ambassador to Britain.

⁵²⁹M. and D. Ottaway, *Ethiopia: Empire in Revolution*, p. 88.

⁵³⁰Erlich, *The Struggle Over Eritrea*, p. 73.

territory from which to operate a radio station and to train and house their fighters and political cadres; the Saudis provided them with money, and the CIA was also a regular source of funding. With ample resources and international backing the EDU should have been well positioned to capitalize on the growing discontent among the urban middle and upper classes as the Derg, under civilian pressure, moved further to the political left. But in Tigray the EDU was too closely associated with the former nobility and the crimes of Teranafit. Moreover, as it bid for support across Ethiopia it necessarily played down Teranafit's strengths, its Tigrayan character and opposition to a state dominated by the Amhara.

It was not until Ras Mengesha was able to reformulate the movement under the EDU that it attracted some support from the small middle classes of the towns in Tigray, but it had little support among Tigrayan students, and with the emergence of the TPLF in the western region students in the towns rapidly gravitated to the Front. Western Tigray did not have a single high school, but the presence of the development project, TAIDL,⁵³¹ with bases in the region's two major towns of Endaselasie and Sheraro, made them centres of intellectual ferment. A number of TAIDL's professional staff such as Aregesh Adane (presently Secretary of Tigray Region), had been sent to the project at the behest of the TNO with the objective of mobilizing peasants in anticipation of the emergence of the TPLF. The EPRP was also well represented in TAIDL, and the two groups competed for the support of the unaffiliated staff. TAIDL itself eventually collapsed when the TPLF learned that the project offices were to be attacked by the EDU, and Front supporters within the organization raided its finances, turned them over to the TPLF and then joined the Front in the countryside.⁵³²

⁵³¹See page 115 for a brief description of the background to this organization.

⁵³²Interview: Aregesh Adane, Mekelle, April 8, 1993.

The origins of the TPLF, like that of the other opposition movements that proliferated in the late Haile-Selassie period, lay in the cities, but the TPLF took form in rural western Tigray and in the context of a battle for survival with Teranafit/EDU. Important to the political success of that battle for the TPLF, and insightful of the political character of Tigray, 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 1935,⁵³³ 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 Endaselasie.

Constantly in battle against authority, he gained fame while mayor for his opposition to the policy of Ras Mengesha's Gum Arabic Corporation (another state development company established to reduce Tigray's dependence on agriculture) of not hiring locally. 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 to the position of head of the Gum Arabic Corporation. But Suhul remained a populist and Tigrayan nationalist and, after leaving the Corporation three years later, was elected as one of two Tigrayans to the Ethiopian Senate of Haile-Selassie. Thus even before his involvement with the TPLF Suhul was widely held to be both a spokesman of the peasantry in their struggles against feudal power, and a foremost opponent of Amhara dominance in Tigray.

As noted earlier, Suhul developed close relations with the students and left his Derg appointed position to the Council of Regions to lead the TPLF at their first base camp at Dedebit, approximately sixty kilometres west of Sheraro in western Tigray which he had

⁵³³The title was 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 the regime.

selected. More important than his survival skills and knowledge of the region, Suhul gave the fledgling revolutionary movement legitimacy among the peasantry of western Tigray and to a lesser extent in the rest of Tigray. In early 1976 Suhul was active in Agame where the TPLF confronted the EPRP and carried out its first model land reform, and he also went on a number of diplomatic missions to Sudan. 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."⁵³⁴ Many older peasants in western Tigray still maintain that Suhul was the leader of the TPLF (Aregowie Berhe and Sebat 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 regarding other TPLF leaders.

However, even Suhul's involvement in the TPLF was not able to overcome the Tigrayan peasants' belief that both Teranafit/EDU and the TPLF were "sons of Tigray" and that they should set aside their differences and build a united opposition to face the "Amhara" Derg. This created something of a dilemma for the leadership of the TPLF who were irreconcilably opposed to the EDU, but not at all comfortable at openly opposing the peasants. Nonetheless, they recognized that the EDU had a large peasant following to which they wanted to gain access and as both organizations were opposed to the Derg, negotiations with the EDU were undertaken to achieve what the TPLF called a "tactical alliance" How sincere the Front 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 the Teranafit killing of Suhul in June 1976⁵³⁵ ended any possibility of an alliance at that time.

⁵³⁴Interview: Medhin, Sheraro, January 29, 1993.

⁵³⁵Suhul 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, an account of which will be given in

Political parties are often defined in contrast with their opponents, but in the chaotic conditions that descended upon all Ethiopia in the wake of the overthrow of the imperial regime policy differences were not widely recognized, particularly when both opposition groups in Tigray were anti-Derg and nationalist. This proved to be the case even though Teranafit/EDU had its origins and drew its leadership from among the nobility and shifta, social stratum less known for their sensitivity in dealing with the peasantry than for robbing them in various guises. 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 a political organization at all, but simply a gang of marauders.⁵³⁶ One former member Teranafit also said as much, stating:

"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 didn't know its aims and distrusted it until EDU formed under Mengesha."⁵³⁷

Surprisingly for theoretically oriented students, the TPLF seemed to appreciate the limitations of trying to gain the support of the peasants by strictly relying on either appeals to party programs or class interest. Instead the Front attempted to gain the confidence and ultimately the support of the peasants by displays of self-sacrifice, commitment to the

chapter seven. Sazabed was later captured by the TPLF in Gondar and handed over to the peasants' 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 also killed in another incident by Teranafit.

⁵³⁶One peasant who had been jailed, tortured, and fined 50 *Birr* (\$US 25. at then official rates of exchange) by Teranafit for being a suspected TPLF supporter said, "What I know is of their worst conduct - taking the property of the poor, taking their cattle and selling them, taking women's ornaments and gold, abducting women." (N.B. Reference to women being "abducted" or "kidnapped" invariably mean they were raped.) He did not understand how Teranafit could have any political policies since, "We didn't see any [among them] who knew how to read or write." Interview: Haile, Adi Hagari, February 3, 1993.

⁵³⁷Interview: Tekle Berhane, Gondar, May 6, 1993.

peasants' interest, and highly disciplined behavior. Where robbery and rape were for Teranafit considered virtual rights of membership, such activities resulted in summary executions for TPLF members. Even consensual sex for TPLF fighters could result in the death penalty because, as one of their cadres explained, the Front wanted peasant farmers to know that their wives and daughters were as safe with the fighters as they were with their parish priests.⁵³⁸ Moreover, the TPLF leadership inspired its fighters by going into battle with them, and dying in large numbers with them, and this also impressed the peasants.

In February 1975, when the TPLF went to Dedebeit, the area was uninhabited because of the presence of shifta. Indeed, the TPLF itself could have been mistaken for a shifta group thus serving to discourage peasants from settling in the area.⁵³⁹ The Front, however, also fought with the local shifta, made it safe for peasants to take up residence in the area and after the peasants returned established a rough but fair system of justice through popularly elected tribunals that were neither dominated by powerful land owners nor subject to bribes, but had the confidence of the peasants.

Peasants also speak of such everyday occurrences as TPLF cadres arranging a doctor's visit for a sick man or helping a husbandless woman with her plowing. Such activities have led some TPLF members to refer to this as their "social work" stage of political mobilization. Through experience the TPLF cadres learned that the most effective way to win peasant support and politically differentiate themselves to their advantage in the eyes of the peasantry was to combine the traditional arts of politics with selfless acts that

⁵³⁸Interview: Aregey, January 31, 1993.

⁵³⁹In 1978 Tesfai, a peasant and self-described religious man, said that he was the first person to move to what is now the "village" of Dedebeit, some eight dwellings spread out over two hillsides. It was safe for Tesfai to move there, he said, because the TPLF had eliminated the traditional scourge of shiftas. Interview: Tesfai, Dedebeit, February 1, 1993.

materially improved the living condition of the peasants. The TPLF also gained in the contrast between their poverty and dependence on "country guns" and begging, and the EDU's apparent wealth and display of sophisticated weaponry. With its origins in the nobility and its reverence for heritage the EDU tried to demean the TPLF before the peasants by calling its leaders "wade butana" (sons of whores), but instead the TPLF proudly wore the label as indicative of their closeness to the people.⁵⁴⁰

The fighters of Mengesha initially had superior marksmanship skills to those of the TPLF; they were better equipped, and they vastly outnumbered the TPLF. But in spite of these advantages and the basis of support that Mengesha had among many Tigrayans, these forces also had major liabilities. They fought under local ancestral leaders and their loyalties were to the leader and not the cause and they were poorly motivated and ill-disciplined. Nonetheless, until the TPLF was able to develop its military and political skills sufficiently, it was more often the loser than the victor in its many contests with the EDU. And while most of the contests could better be described as skirmishes rather than as battles, given the small number of fighters involved and lives lost, the numbers nonetheless constituted a significant proportion of the TPLF membership.⁵⁴¹

The TPLF was badly defeated in its first three military encounters with the EDU. One former Teranafit member said that the students of the TPLF initially knew little about fighting and were easily defeated, but they learned fast. TPLF veterans of this period report how after each battle they analyzed their failings and tried to supplement their growing practical experience with readings and videos on military strategy and tactics.⁵⁴²

⁵⁴⁰Interview: Zemichael, Mekelle, January 17, 1993.

⁵⁴¹See p. 169 for estimates of TPLF losses during the struggle with the EDU.

⁵⁴²Interview: Yemane Kidane, Addis Ababa, December 1, 1992. These videos were probably acquired in the thriving illicit trade across the Red Sea and passed on to the TPLF by wealthy supporters.

In defeat the TPLF fighters retreated to safe havens to recuperate, receive inspirational speeches and prepare for their next encounters.⁵⁴³

There were many engagements with Teranafit/EDU in the period from 1976 to 1978 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 probably centred in the Shire-Sheraro area. As their military skills increased the TPLF would typically send out squads of sixty to one hundred fighters who traveled at night and slept during the day while in search of the EDU. Upon finding an EDU encampment, a reconnaissance team was sent out to observe them and decide where to attack. Ambushes were usually at night with the TPLF attempting to surround the enemy, enter into their midst and, in traditional Ethiopian fashion, concentrate on attacking the core of the enemy camp where the leaders were most likely located.

The constant movement across Tigray exposed the Front to large numbers of peasants with whom they met and tried to win over. Although most peasants remained sceptical and unwilling to commit themselves to armed struggle, they slowly moved from positions of neutrality to passive support for the TPLF: first, not giving away their presence to the EDU, and then alerting the Front to the presence of the EDU and supplying Front fighters with food. In isolated cases the TPLF was able to distribute the EDU leaders' land among the 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 November 4, 1979, and is known as "War No. 4" as it took

⁵⁴³Interview: Aregey, Sheraro, January 31, 1993.

place on the fourth day of the fourth month of the Ethiopian calendar and lasted four days.⁵⁴⁴ 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 in Sudan, where it remained until the total collapse of the Derg in 1991.

In spite of its efforts to develop modern organizational techniques and a political vision appropriate to the post-imperial period, the EDU was, and remains, a creature of the imperial past that has simply proved incapable of responding to the changed conditions of the Tigrayan peasantry. The TPLF's organizational structure, political program, and means of mobilizing the peasantry were clearly more in tune with the changed circumstances of post-imperial Ethiopia. But having become the sole opposition to the Derg in the west, it was now challenged in the east by the EPRP.⁵⁴⁵ In the west the TPLF could begin its war with the Derg.

War with the Derg

The Derg's presence in western Tigray was negligible until 1977 and it was not until the marginalization of the EDU the following year that its struggle with the TPLF began in earnest. Although land shortages were not as severe in the west as elsewhere in Tigray, because of the political forces in the area and the chaotic conditions, the Derg's Land Proclamation of 1975 received a mixed reception. Teranafit/EDU held that the government's reforms were based on nationalization of the peasants' land, while their own program promised risti land for all. Nonetheless, in the absence of compulsion, the payment of gulti taxes was stopped as soon as peasants heard of the Proclamation. Actual land distributions were much slower to take place because of the government's lack of

⁵⁴⁴Interview: Negusie Lilly, Endaselasie, February 6, 1993.

⁵⁴⁵The TPLF-EPRP struggle will be examined in chapter nine.

resources and the insecurity afflicting the area, and as a result it is difficult to comment on the extent to which the land reform took place. Certainly land distributions were carried out near towns garrisoned by the army, but farther from these towns they were less likely to be carried out or, if they were, they were likely reversed by the TPLF. Consequently the Derg did not always reap the political benefits of the land reforms even when they improved the conditions of peasants.

In the far western region of Humera the Derg's land reform provoked insurrection among the large farmers and it also angered peasants hurt by the Proclamation's provisions which made it illegal to hire farm labourers. These provisions were deeply resented by peasants throughout Tigray who regularly depended on such wage labour for their survival, particularly during years of drought. Meles Zenawi has argued that the prohibition against hired labour affected an estimated 200,000 Tigrayans and was a major stimulus to the peasant discontent in the province.⁵⁴⁶ In a futile attempt to bring down the regime, the large Teranafit and EDU supporting Humera based land-owners 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.⁵⁴⁷ 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.⁵⁴⁸

In addition the Derg alienated large sections of the small but significant urban population of western Tigray by its controls on trade and movement. Repeated Teranafit attacks on traders and a June 1976 EDU attack on Endaselasie led the Derg to begin organizing convoys to Asmara and a smaller number to Mekelle, while trade with Gondar virtually

⁵⁴⁶Paul Henze interview with Meles Zenawi, Washington, February 1991.

⁵⁴⁷Interview: Mohammed Esumane, Nurehsyne and Melite Beyene, Endaselasie, February 6, 1993.

⁵⁴⁸Ibid., This trade did not resume for fifteen years.

ended. Convoys left Endaselasia at different times, ranging from once a fortnight to once every two months in an unsuccessful attempt to avoid detection by the rebel movements. With the demise of the EDU, the TPLF and EPLF were principally responsible for attacking the convoys, most of which were carrying supplies and rations for the army. The TPLF had its own underground cells in Endaselasia that informed them of such things as the type of convoy and the number of Derg soldiers and amount of armour carried, and with this knowledge the TPLF decided whether to attack the convoy, when, and where.

Those private vehicles of traders that were not confiscated ("nationalized") by the Derg could only be used by the merchants upon payment of 1,000-2,000 birr (\$US 500 - \$1,000) to transport goods to Asmara and a further payment or bribe of twenty birr (\$US 10.) per quintal shipped, to senior military officers. By the late 1970s the only way for private citizens to move between towns with Derg permission was to fly, or more commonly go on foot. Travel between the towns and the countryside was fraught with danger as the traveler could be suspected of being a TPLF agent and imprisoned or shot.

The town based intellectuals of western Tigray, as elsewhere in the province and in the country, had been strong advocates of overthrowing the old regime and warmly welcomed the new regime in their anticipation of civilian rule and democracy. However, the Derg's failure to meet their expectations turned the intellectuals into their strongest opponents and as a result the intellectuals became major targets during the Derg's Red Terror campaign. Youth who spoke Tigrigna were accused of being TPLF supporters and arrested or shot, their bodies being left in the streets as a warning to other citizens. This precipitated the movement of youth and students from the towns of the west to the countryside to join the TPLF. With the assistance of the TPLF others too began escaping from the towns to find security 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. The TPLF's repeated attacks on towns "to show its power" further increased tension.

Endaselasie became the Derg's largest military encampment in Tigray and as it grew to meet the rising threat posed by the TPLF, the morale and discipline of its soldiers declined. Tensions between the soldiers and the civilian population swelled and "women (who) have always been the most vulnerable to the violence of war and occupation" were increasingly the victims of assault and rape.⁵⁴⁹ Many young women who had no means of support were forced into prostitution.

Apart from a handful of peasants, in the early years the TPLF was composed almost exclusively of intellectuals, as the Front did not actively recruit peasant fighters. The Front did not have the necessary resources or weapons; it was highly mobile and, crucially, there were probably few peasants prepared to make the necessary commitment. But after the initial period of establishing itself, the TPLF did encourage the formation of village militias. The main function of the militias was to arrange the escape of women, children, and movable property in the event of a Derg attack. They also helped collect financial and material contributions for the TPLF and, during major battles such as those in 1988 and 1989, they also provided the Front with rations. Usually these militia members did not initiate contact with the army; more often their role was to assist the small core of TPLF fighters.

Typically peasant militia members took three months' training in the countryside near Dedebit. Most of the training was of a military nature, but for one or two hours every day trainees were taught the meaning of "class struggle", why Tigrayans had to struggle, the

⁵⁴⁹Hammond, p. 146.

meaning of "rights", how to form a people's government, the means to support the Front against the Derg and the feudal land owners and, lastly, how Tigray could become rich through the development of its resources. One peasant reported that "studying was oral as I didn't know how to read."⁵⁵⁰

Militias were established in rural areas that were brought under TPLF control, but the Front also drew considerable support and militia members from the villages on the 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 insure the security of passing convoys which were then removed when the convoy had passed. The movement of convoys along this road which continued to Eritrea and Asmara was critical to keeping the Derg's supply lines open, but holding Sheraro in an area almost completely hostile to the Derg proved too difficult and the much damaged town was eventually abandoned.

Although TPLF strength clearly lay in the countryside, the first baito was established in the town of Sheraro in 1980.⁵⁵¹ Sheraro, together with Edega Arbi in the southwestern Region 2 woreda of Adi Ahferom, and Zana, were selected as pilot projects because of their organizational capacity, combativeness, political awareness of the people, and the closeness of the people to the TPLF. Anyone over the age of sixteen and a member of a TPLF mass association could stand for election to the baito which assumed responsibility

⁵⁵⁰Interview: Aregey, Sheraro, January 31, 1993.

⁵⁵¹*People's Voice*, September/December 1989, p. 11.

through three standing committees for administration (justice, security, and self-defense), economics (agriculture, cottage industry, road building and technical development), and social affairs (health, education, relief and rehabilitation). Shortly after the Sheraro baito was organized the Derg captured the town and until they were forced to evacuate it, many citizens and the baito administration took up residence in the surrounding countryside and continued working at expanding their operation to include the entire woreda.

The Adi Nebried Land Reform

Land reform was not the burning issue for the majority of peasants in western Tigray that it was in much of the rest of the province for reasons explained above, but that is not to say it was not relevant. Equity was an issue of importance to the peasants and a fair land distribution spoke to that need, as well as being a critical element both in the restructuring of the rural political economy and the in establishment of popular mass organizations. Almost the only detailed description of a TPLF land reform completed anywhere in Tigray is that carried out in Adi Nebried over a five months' period beginning in mid-October 1980. Although the report can be criticized for its obvious sympathies (it was written by a TPLF cadre, Tekeste Agazi, who led the land distribution, and his description is published by a TPLF support group, the "Friends of Tigray in the UK") it is a unique and detailed report that requires examination.

While Tekeste wrote that the Adi Nebried land reform had begun in mid-October, his own description points to earlier beginnings: the decision to carry out the land reform was made at a "regional meeting of Agit-Prop cadres of the TPLF" and conveyed to the 31 men and women already "recruited and trained from among the peasants" of the nine

tabias of the woreda.⁵⁵² The timing of the reforms was 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 which started in late June or early July. Thus the "heated part of the reform movement" took place when peasants had considerable time to attend meetings and actively participate in the struggle.⁵⁵³

After discussions in the peasant committee on ways of combating the expected sabotage of the feudal land-owners and of mobilizing the people for the reform, the committee set about studying the amount and type of arable land in each tabia; how much of it was owned by the feudals, churches and monasteries, rich peasants, middle and poor peasants and the attitude of these various land holders to the reform. While this process was going forward, "intensive agitational work" in the form of general meetings and dramas was 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 actively into the process of mobilizing their communities and combating attempts by large land owners to sabotage the reforms.

The next step was the election of delegates to draft the rules for the agrarian reform and to carry out the complex task of redrawing the boundaries, both with the surrounding woredas and with the 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 had a "hot and intensive discussion" of the TPLF-prepared draft rules for carrying out the actual land reform.⁵⁵⁴ When agreement was reached, both the committee of nine and the TPLF agit-

⁵⁵² Tekeste Agazi, *Agrarian Reform in Tigray: A Case of the Land Reform in the District of Adi-Nebried*, (Published by the Friends of Tigray in the UK, 1983), pp.9-10.

⁵⁵³ *Ibid.*, p. 25.

⁵⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 14.

prop cadres went to each tabia, explaining and discussing in some detail the rules which were eventually endorsed with few significant amendments.

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, forty middle peasants, thirty poor peasants and eleven rich peasants, were elected to actually execute the reforms. This committee met for two and one-half days of intensive study of 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 according to its location to ensure that everyone was given a certain proportion of land near their home while other land further afield was shared by lots. Land was also divided according to its fertility with, ideally, each peasant getting some of each land of each quality and, where this was not possible, land of another quality would be given in the proportions agreed. In addition, land distribution was based on the number of family members and unmarried, divorced or widowed men and women received commensurate shares. Hence the land reform was held to be "an important milestone in the liberation of the women" of the woreda. Under the old regime women lost their rights to land when they divorced, but with the land reform this ended. Further, the beating of women by their husbands which had been an "everyday phenomenon in pre-revolutionary Adi Nebried" and had frequently precipitated divorces, was reported to have almost completely disappeared because men now feared the loss of half the family land if their marriage ended.⁵⁵⁵

⁵⁵⁵Ibid., p. 29.

Land previously held by churches and monasteries was nationalized and priests, monks, and nuns were given land shares equal to that of the peasant population at large. Distribution of church and monasteries' lands were held by the TPLF to be critical to destroying the economic basis of a class that had been a crucial component of Ethiopian feudalism. At the same time the reforms served to divide the clergy along economic lines and identify the interests of the poor priests with those of the poor peasants and thus make clear that the reforms were not part of an organized attack on the Christian faith.⁵⁵⁶

At the end of the distribution it was reckoned 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 significantly reduced.⁵⁵⁷

This was the formal process and its 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 land owners had been militarily and politically defeated as a class, armed opposition was not an option, but that did not stop "intensive feudal intrigue and sabotage".⁵⁵⁸ It began with attempts to set woreda against woreda and tabia against tabia during the boundary revisions, but these attempts by the former nobles and their agents were exposed and discussed, and their perpetrators disciplined. Some of them appealed directly to the Derg to disrupt the agrarian reforms and then spread rumours that those actively participating in the reforms would have their property burned and endanger their lives when the Derg came. Again the key conspirators were exposed in mass

⁵⁵⁶Ibid., p. 30.

⁵⁵⁷Ibid., p. 19.

⁵⁵⁸Ibid., p. 19.

meetings and "severely punished",⁵⁵⁹ the opportunity being used to explain the links between the struggle for agrarian reform and that against the Derg.

Tekeste 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 be in breach of their code of conduct and they were required to resign, and others were elected to replace them.

Anti-reform elements, particularly those from the upper clergy, tried to use the peasants' religious faith as a means to undermine the land reform, arguing that God had ordained inequality and that it was evil to try to change the will of God and forcibly impose equality. Priests of poor and middle peasant background were organized and used effectively to counter these notions.

Feudal elements tried to enlist the support of rich peasants by arguing that the TPLF's plans included the confiscation of all their land, cattle and farm implements, and this manoeuvre apparently was successful to the extent of bringing "a significant number of rich peasants to their side".⁵⁶⁰ 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. We also told them that the reform movement had no intention of sharing out farm animals and implements and that was clear from the rules of the reform."⁵⁶¹ It took several such meetings, together with a number of one on

⁵⁵⁹Ibid., p. 21.

⁵⁶⁰Ibid., p. 24.

⁵⁶¹Ibid., p. 24.

one talks with the more influential among them, to neutralize dissent from this quarter. In an attempt to foil sabotage by the anti-reform forces, poor and middle peasants were organized separately and repeatedly had explained to them the nature of the opposition to the reforms.

The feudal landowners were also approached directly during the course of the agrarian reform. The aim of the TPLF was to "divide them and prevent the formation of a solid feudal conspiracy against the reform movement" and to "intimidate them" with threats of severe punishment should they not accept their fate which had been "sealed by history".⁵⁶² Those who cooperated were assured that they would be treated benevolently. Tekeste acknowledged that this feudal-inspired opposition to the reforms was not broken; however, many were intimidated into passivity and their solidarity was impaired.

On March 23, 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. And the process was finalized two days later when Tekeste held a final meeting of the peasant cadres who had played a decisive role in the reforms, to assess the movement, compare this experience with that of others in Tigray, and record their achievements.

There will be occasions to refer to other, but less well documented, examples of land reform in Tigray and to compare TPLF reforms to those of the Derg and the EPRP. The Adi Nebried land reform provides a useful basis for comparison, but some points should be borne in mind. Land reform in western Tigray was generally not the critical concern to peasants that it was in other parts of the province, and this may explain its delayed

⁵⁶²Ibid., pp. 24-5.

implementation in an area where the TPLF had been strong from the early days of the struggle. Adi Nebried had a negligible number of Moslems, and many of them under the imperial regime were deemed to have "no country", and hence were denied access to land. Thus, a critical element of the land reforms in some parts of Tigray was for Moslems and other communities which suffered discrimination, such as blacksmiths, weavers and potters, to acquire land. In addition, Church and monastery lands were far smaller in the west than elsewhere in Tigray.

It is noteworthy also that nowhere in the description of the Adi Nebried land reform was any reference made to *gulti* land, and the assumption must be that the Derg's land proclamation had had the effect of already wiping out this category of land holding. It is not clear in fact whether the Derg had attempted, or carried out, its own land reform in the area. Certainly, as the document does make clear, prior to the TPLF's land reform the feudals had already lost their political power, and the decline of their economic power was well advanced.

The land reform in Adi Nebried 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, to problems stemming from the first reforms that came to light later, or to the need to make adjustments based on population changes. For example, the land reform in the neighbouring woreda of Adi Hagari was started in 1979, but not finalized for a number of years. Although by 1981 the TPLF had considerable experience in carrying out land reforms, there were always differences in what was done between woredas, based on when and where they were carried out, and a host of minor factors ranging from the physical to the political.

In spite of these qualifications some preliminary generalizations based on the Adi Nebried experience can still be made. The dynamic of the TPLF-peasant relationship was critical to the success of the entire land reform process. The demand for the land reform came from the peasants, who also carried it out, but it was the TPLF which decided when the land reform was to take place, provided the general guidelines, and directed the over-all process. Unlike most peasants, the TPLF cadres did not see land reform as an end in itself. For the TPLF, land reform was critical in breaking down feudal structures, which was believed to be necessary to establish a vibrant rural economy. However, and more importantly, it was the key component in a broader effort to mobilize the peasantry and bring them over to the banner of the TPLF. It is significant that although class figured in the TPLF's mobilization, the Front did not encourage class struggle or explicitly identify with the interests of the poor peasants as was the case of the CCP during the Chinese revolution.⁵⁶³

However, it is all too easy to focus on the role of the revolutionary party and under-rate that of the peasantry. The Adi Nebried reforms point to the importance of not only bringing the peasantry and their representatives actively into the process at each step, but also of ensuring that peasant sensitivities and values were not affronted. Christianity was not challenged and the church was not interfered with, although those elements within the church who used their land holdings to oppress the majority of the peasantry were distributed. Capital largely in the form of cattle was not redistributed apparently for two reasons. First, allowing the rich to keep their capital reduced the prospect that they would actively oppose the reform. Second, as my own interviews with peasants across Tigray suggest, while peasants felt strongly about the inequity of land holdings, they accepted inequities in the holding of capital to be part of the natural order of things.

⁵⁶³See A. Hamza, "Peasants and Revolution: Russia, China, India," *Socialist Register*, (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1965).

Zana

The woreda of Zana is located well to the south of the main Endaselasie - Axum highway in the east of Region I and doubtlessly its isolated location facilitated it becoming an early TPLF stronghold. With 47,000 people spread across three different elevation levels, average family size farms of 1.5 hectares, fertile soils and, by Tigrayan standards, plentiful water supplies that could be used for the production of off-season garden crops, Zana had a relatively high standard of living, and real potential for economic growth.⁵⁶⁴ Perhaps ten percent of the woreda's population could be considered "rich" which meant that through irrigation of their lands they produced two crops and owned at least five cows, small stock and/or honey bees.

Nonetheless, until the land reform there was a minority group within the woreda without land as well as small landholders who regularly had to sell their labour in Humera to supplement their meagre incomes. Moreover, probably half of the farmers did not have cattle (among single women or Moslems the figure would rise to more than ninety percent) and had to rent them, paying one-third of production for the oxen, and one-half if the owner was hired to do the plowing. Zana's fourteen tabias are evenly split between highlands and lowlands, and, since lowland farmers were more likely to have oxen, they often rented them to their typically poorer highland counterparts.⁵⁶⁵ Most production, because of its small scale and the difficulties posed by transport, was (and is), marketed locally. These difficulties were exacerbated by the war when local peasants were harassed by the Derg because they were coming from TPLF controlled areas and could be spies.

⁵⁶⁴Interview: Mulat Berhane and Gedeye Gebre Hiwat, Debre Krebae, February 23, 1993.

⁵⁶⁵Interview: Bailay Gebru Selassie, Negash Bogalay, Zemichael Taqala, Debre Kaebre, February 24, 1993.

There are only about 600 Moslems in the woreda, most of whom live in Debre Krabae, the woreda centre, where in spite of the fact that the administrative centre had less than 1600 people, Moslems and Christians lived in segregated neighbourhoods. Until the overthrow of the Haile-Selassie regime Moslems frequently could not own land (although those who had good relations with the district governor did on occasion own land in Zana), or participate in the administration or festivals, and while they were allowed access to the limited number of public elementary schools in the woreda, typically they did not avail themselves of the opportunity.⁵⁶⁶ Most Moslems were (and remain) employed as weavers and traders, and while all of them have been granted land, because of their earlier restriction to non-farming occupations, even today virtually none have oxen or plowing tools. Nonetheless, their standard of living now is higher and they are more accepted socially.

There were three monasteries and forty-two churches in Zana woreda, but none possessed gulti land and generally "people in the churches and monks lived the same as peasants."⁵⁶⁷ The last governor of the woreda during the imperial era, Dejasmach Haile-Selassie, owned a total of twenty-eight hectares of land, Fitwara Kasala twenty-five hectares and Ras Mengesha thirty hectares, and local people acknowledge that feudal land holdings were not large in Zana. Instead, as was the pattern everywhere in western Tigray, people more commonly complained of corrupt and inefficient government, being forced to speak Amharigna in the courts, and of shifta whose ties to local administrators ensured their safety.

⁵⁶⁶Interview: Sheik Awal Mohammed Yaksin, Abdul Mohammed Nuir and Neja Bito, Debre Krebae, February 24, 1993.

⁵⁶⁷Interview: Margate Arefyne Woldemelate, Halaka Amahamardos and Halaka Gebremedit Eysau, Debre Krebae, February 24, 1993.

With no high schools in the woreda, anti-regime propaganda was introduced by local students who went elsewhere for their education and returned to propagate ideas of democratic rights and of land to the tiller. Later Zemacha students spent three months in the woreda and lectured the peasants about socialism, land reform and democracy. A further source of political information on the land to the tiller campaign came from local peasants who resided for long periods in Addis Ababa while petitioning the courts over land concerns.⁵⁶⁸

Again distance from government centres and the proximity of lowlands, notably the Tekeze River valley, made southern Zana an attractive area for shifta. When the TPLF itself entered this area they gained popular support by chasing the shifta away,⁵⁶⁹ and Hermi in an isolated area on the Shire/Zana border and long a popular abode of shifta became an important Front base and Prisoner of War (POW) camp.⁵⁷⁰

In 1975 a small Derg administration was established in Debre Krabae, but the officials were not able to carry out a land reform because in the following year the TPLF entered the woreda, killed the Tigrayan governor when he refused to surrender, and took the remaining officials to the west for political education. During their brief stay in Zana the small contingent of Front cadres started introducing themselves to individual peasants, explaining their program, and distributing pamphlets. The EPRP never operated in the woreda, instead staying south of the Tekeze River in Gondar, but in 1976 a Teranafit contingent passed through the woreda.

⁵⁶⁸Ibid.

⁵⁶⁹Interview: Awal Mohammed Yaksin, Abdul Mohammed Nuir and Neja Bitto, Debre Krabae, February 23, 1993.

⁵⁷⁰After Tigray's liberation small numbers of shifta were again reported to be in the area, Interview: Goitem Gebre, Haile Gebremeska and Desta Gebremedi, Debre Krebae, February 23, 1993.

In the same year, 1976, a TPLF squad returned, and a peasant association was formed which began selecting militia members who were sent to a base near Sheraro for a month's training.⁵⁷¹ Most local peasants were familiar with weapons because they lived in isolated areas and had to contend with shiftas, but they lacked skills in warfare. Part of the militia training they were given was of a political nature and included an examination of the aims of the struggle, Tigrayan history, differences between the TPLF and Teranafit who, the TPLF contended in their lectures to the peasants, fought for the interests of the feudal lords and their gulti privileges. Moreover, the TPLF instructors told the peasants that the EPRP were the same as Teranafit, and both were enemies of the Tigrayan people.

Teranafit, reformulated as the EDU, returned to Zana in force in 1977 under the slogan "lunch at Endaselasie and dinner at Mekelle", but it was the TPLF they challenged and not the Derg, which was a negligible force in the woreda. The EDU leaders told the people that Mengesha was their leader and that they would give risti land to the peasants. They also told the peasants that the TPLF could not govern them and that it was an anti-religious movement. But according to local sources, a criminal element followed the EDU and took the property, cattle, and guns of the people, as well as killing two women "to show their power".⁵⁷² Some local people acknowledged a measure of sympathy for Ras Mengesha because he was Tigrayan, but even at this early stage it was not clear that they wanted to retain him as their ruler. Certainly the TPLF's commitment to genuine land reform offered more to poor farmers than the EDU's promise of risti rights. What ensued was a series of local military contests that were part of the larger TPLF-EDU struggle for supremacy, and in which the TPLF were the ultimate victors.

⁵⁷¹Interview: Temene Woldu and Nagash Gebre Mariam, Debre Krebae, February 23, 1993.

⁵⁷²Interview: Margate Arafyne Woldemelate, Halaka Amahamardos, Halaka Gebremedit Eyasu, Debre Krebae, February 24, 1993.

In 1977 the Women's Committee of the TPLF was formed and in 1979 the first Women's Associations were established in Sheraro and Zana, which reflected both the level of consciousness in these areas and the fact that these areas were among the first to be liberated, and hence suitable location in which to pursue such political work.⁵⁷³ The TPLF initially established separate young and old women's associations because of their different experiences and "level of consciousness", but the organizations were later dissolved in favour of a united organization of all women between the age of eighteen and fifty, after which women were deemed "aged, house-bound, not active."⁵⁷⁴

While the separation of women from men during mobilization drives would seem to suggest that their problems were unique, this was not the general philosophy subscribed to by the TPLF. Zana's Women's Association "Chairman" Negi Bito held that, "Women have the same problems as men ... Problems of the society are women's problems also."⁵⁷⁵ These views may reflect the TPLF's class perspective, but more likely they represented the Front's concern to mobilize the various components of rural society without opening up divisions, which was a perennial concern.

Because the TPLF's various reforms "had to be protected from those who wanted to destroy them" a much larger force of some 400 was selected from the woreda in 1977 - 1978 to take militia training. It speaks to the growing strength and resources of the TPLF that while most of Zana's first militia contingent were issued single-shot weapons and had to be taken to Sheraro undergo training, by 1978 all of the second contingent of militia were issued automatic weapons and trained within the woreda.⁵⁷⁶ In 1979 the TPLF formed a town baito in Debre Krabae, one of only three including those of Sheraro and

⁵⁷³Interview: Romain and Herti, Mekelle, January 6, 1993.

⁵⁷⁴Interview: Negi Bito, Debre Krabae, February 24, 1993.

⁵⁷⁵Ibid.

⁵⁷⁶Interview: Tamene Woldu and Nagash Gebre Mariam, Debre Krebae, February 24, 1993.

Adigarbi, that served as a model "to show the power of the mass and serve as a demonstration for other people in Tigray"⁵⁷⁷ In 1982 the Zana woreda baito was established.

While the onset of the Red Terror stimulated a flood of recruits to the TPLF from students, teachers, and others in the towns, local informants in Zana reported that the TPLF started recruiting large numbers of peasant fighters in 1979 - 1980. The presence of the TPLF in the woreda and the animosity it aroused for the Derg meant that by 1979 few of Zana's peasants went to town markets, while the Derg only infrequently entered the woreda. Hence, other factors than those operating in the towns must have been more important in encouraging peasants to join the TPLF as fighters. A local priest argued that the woreda became an early supporter of the TPLF because the Front "brought good public administration, organized the poor, killed the shifta and returned (stolen) property to the poor, and settled disputes and quarrels among farmers. Their political education was also good."⁵⁷⁸ As well as these benefits, the large scale recruitment of local fighters also points to the importance of the defeat of the EDU and the establishment of competent popular local administrations. The completion of the land reforms in particular gave the peasants the confidence and the incentive to commit themselves to the struggle to protect their gains and work to achieve the broader goals of peace and Tigrayan self-determination.

Seliklakla, on the main Axum - Endaselasié road, served as the main Derg army base and the start of the forty kilometre track which led to Zana's administrative capital of Debre Krabae, and it was down this road that attacking forces were sent until the final days of the war in 1989. The TPLF never had permanent bases in Zana, only mobile forces that

⁵⁷⁷Interview: Haile Gebremeska and Goitem Gebre, Debre Krebae, February 23, 1993.

⁵⁷⁸Interview: Margage Arafyne Woldemelate, Debre Krebae, February 24, 1993.

could be quickly activated when alerted by peasants who lived along the Seliklakla-Debre Krabae track. Although generally the militia was restricted to defending their local areas, militia members reported fighting further afield in Adwa to the east, Endaselasie to the west, and Rama on the Eritrean border.

The struggle had many means of activating people apart from involvement in actual fighting. Of particular importance in Zana was road-building, primarily to meet military demands to supplying and linking the various liberated territories, but also to encourage civilian transport and trade since the traditional communication link to Seliklakla was hampered by the war. In 1982 the Zana woreda baito passed a resolution to supply people and resources for construction of a southern road that would link Shire in the west with the woreda of Adet to the east running parallel to the government controlled main road. Plans and organization 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 the peasants were free from planting, plowing and harvesting, and most work was done at night to ensure safety from marauding MiGs. Participants included male youth and the middle-aged drawn from the mass organizations. Women did not work on the road, but prepared food for the five-day stints of those participating. There was no mechanized equipment and workers were entirely dependent on picks, axes, and hoes.⁵⁷⁹ By 1984 the road was completed.

While the TPLF doubtlessly initiated the project, the level of local organization was significant and, according to local respondents, the road also made possible the sending of food to neighbouring woredas during times of drought or Derg depredations. In the year

⁵⁷⁹In Tigray where peasants used ox pulled plows, hoes were only used for market gardening.

of its completion famine broke out and TPLF/REST led thousands of starving refugees over the road to Sudan, and then, later, over it as a means to return to their homelands.

Zana was one of the more wealthy woredas examined in this research and because of its adequate water supplies and soil fertility it had some of the elements necessary to develop real economic potential. However, due to a lack of irrigation resources, schools for the woreda's children, and roads to market peasant surpluses, it had stagnated 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 the Derg could not meet those needs, and the fact that its local representative was Tigrayan could not guarantee the peoples' loyalty. The TPLF was able to capitalize on the Derg's inadequacies and propose programs 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.

Conclusion

Earlier chapters have focused on the rise of revolutionary dissent in the towns and the role of the TPLF in the military and ideological spheres. However, beginning with this chapter the focus has been directed to considering the place of the peasantry in the revolution. Specifically the geo-political environment of western Tigray or Region I has been examined and the relationship of the peasantry to the three political parties competing for its support, Teranafit/EDU, the Derg, and the TPLF, has been studied.

The lowlands of western Tigray closely fit the profile drawn by moral economists of where peasant revolts are likely to break out, but these theorists appear wide of the mark in their

emphasis on agricultural commercialization as precipitating the revolt. It is true that agricultural commercialization was more developed in this region than anywhere else in Tigray but, because of land surpluses, it did not produce either a class of landless labourers, or of private capitalist farmers. Commercial farming was undertaken by members of the aristocracy who could acquire land without threatening that in the possession of peasant cultivators.

Opposition to commercial agriculture causing dislocation in the peasant economy was 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 revolutionary 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. Furthermore, Teranafit/EDU also raised the fear that the Derg's land reforms were a means to nationalize peasant land.

However, disruption of the peasants' moral economy proved to be an insufficient basis for them to engage in a revolt against the state. Thus it is significant that both the aristocratically led Teranafit/EDU and the petty-bourgeois led TPLF couched their appeals to the peasants in terms of Tigrayan nationalism and played on fears that the Derg represented a new and more powerful form of Amhara domination. 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, the western Tigrayan peasantry was dislocated and confused, but virtually united in opposition to the new government. And it is clear that fear of the pending introduction of a new form of Amhara domination was to be imposed was an important initial stimulus for revolt. Contrary then to the view of

moral economists, the Tigrayan case demonstrates that in the context of a multinational state in crisis nationalism can play an important part in the peasants' decision to revolt.

In addition, the moral economists' preoccupation with analyzing the structural context in which revolutions take place means they are ill-placed to pay heed or attempt to understand the varying forms the revolution takes in its critical early period. Although possessing more men, better armaments and more external backers, Teranafit/EDU estranged the western Tigrayan peasantry. The much smaller and poorly equipped TPLF with its program of popular government and land redistribution, and its involvement of the peasants in implementing these reforms, contrasted favourably with the noble led rebels, and increasingly won the support of the peasants. By the time the Derg was able to exert its power in the west the TPLF had survived its perilous birthing period and had replaced the EDU as the main opponent to the regime in western Tigray.

The success of the TPLF, however, depended on its ability to quickly move from its base area in the west and take the struggle to every region of the province. Therefore, the examination of the struggle must now extend to Region II, central Tigray.

CHAPTER 8: THE STRUGGLE FOR CENTRAL TIGRAY

Introduction

The area encompassed by Region II, central Tigray, is the historical heartland of ancient Axum, contains more than half of Tigray's population, and was a stronghold of the aristocracy and the Ethiopian Orthodox Church. After beginning the struggle for the liberation of Tigray in the west, and then carrying it to Agame in the northern part of the eastern region, the TPLF concentrated on central Tigray. It is by no means easy to capture the local dimensions of the struggle across the geographically diverse, but ethnically largely homogeneous, central region. The TPLF's establishment of Region II was an operational amalgamation of a number of awardjas, one of which, the isolated region of Tembien, had long had a separate identity and assumed a strategic role for the TPLF similar to that of Sheraro and Wolkait in the west during the war.

This chapter will begin, however, by considering developments in the central region towns of Adwa and Axum. Adwa has long been the commercial and intellectual centre of Tigray, while Axum served as the foundation of Ethiopian civilization and as the pre-eminent religious centre. These towns were important because they gave expression to the revolt against the imperial regime and shaped the new political forces that arose in the wake of the 1974 dissolution of the regime. Since Tigrayan towns also served as administrative and marketing centres, they are a focal point from which to examine conditions in the adjacent countryside. From the central towns the focus will turn to an examination of the evolving political and military conditions in the former awardja of Tembien and the two rural woredas of Adi Ahferom in the east and Adet in the southcentral part of the region. These areas were selected for examination because they were among the first to support the TPLF and carry out its program of reforms. They are

thus valuable points of reference in which to study the peasants' relations and attitudes to those who appealed for their support.

Towns in Revolt

Adwa has long been the major commercial centre of Tigray, traditionally linking the trade routes from Gondar and Shoa in the south 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 traveled from Adwa to Endaselasie 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.⁵⁸⁰

Adwa has also been an intellectual centre in Tigray and people in the town were quicker than most to see the benefits of secular education.⁵⁸¹ Foreign influences seem important in any explanation of this phenomenon. Apart from the favourable impact of trade, Adwa has long had contact with Jesuits and later with Swedish evangelical missionaries, some of whom were influential in encouraging education among the townspeople.⁵⁸² As a result Adwa possesses what is reputed to be the best government high school in Tigray and is also home to an important Swedish mission school. For some years students from the town have distinguished themselves in the professions, and three successive leaders of the TPLF, Aregowie Berhe, Sebhat Negga, and the present leader and president of Ethiopia

⁵⁸⁰Interview: Gebru Areyey and Berhane Desta, Adwa, February 21.

⁵⁸¹Rosen, "Warring with Words," p. 89.

⁵⁸²Ibid., p. 89.

Meles Zenawi, are all from Adwa. However, in contrast to much African experience where mission schools played an important role in the formative years of the continent's political leaders, all three Tigrayan leaders attended the government school.⁵⁸³

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 commonly 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.

It is indicative of the town's political sentiments that as early as 1962 a planned visit by Haile-Selassie to Adwa had to be re-routed because of the activities of an underground movement of teachers. Later, in 1971 - 1972 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.⁵⁸⁴ By this time local university students were politically active in the town and 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. Once it did do so, the committee continued to exist for almost a year before being disbanded by the in-coming administration.⁵⁸⁵

⁵⁸³Meles Zenawi was, however, to later attend Wingate Secondary School, the elite British school in Addis Ababa.

⁵⁸⁴Interview: Berhane Mengesha, Adwa, February 20, 1993.

⁵⁸⁵Ibid.

After the collapse of the old regime the Derg did not have the necessary resources to make its administrative and military power felt quickly. However, the Derg did organize an armed militia of its supporters and set about carrying out land reforms in the rural areas immediately adjacent to Adwa. Three of the sixteen tabias of the woreda were given over to gulti land, most of it held by descendants of Ras Michael⁵⁸⁶ and a number of churches and monasteries, notably Endaselasie Church and Zion Mariam Church of Adwa.⁵⁸⁷ The remaining land was largely risti held peasant plots.

But even peasant-held risti land was by no means secure. First, it was rarely easy to establish peasant ancestral rights to land if powerful nobles contested those claims. Secondly, even where claims could be established the power of the aristocracy was such that peasants might still be denied access to their land, made to pay rent on it, or be forced to pay bribes to the aristocrat in question.⁵⁸⁸ 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 weak and politically disinherited peasantry, and even, so my respondents claim, "a pretty woman" tax.⁵⁸⁹ The result was that both gulti and risti land holders were forced to regularly trek west to work on the commercial farms of Humera and Sheraro to supplement their incomes.

Although the secular and non-secular lords were quickly displaced and their lands distributed by the Derg, after the initial flush of optimism the peasants, as in other areas of

⁵⁸⁶See a brief description on this important Tigrayan noble on page 80.

⁵⁸⁷Interview: Terhe Taku and Gebre Kidan Wolnocha, Adwa, February 20, 1993.

⁵⁸⁸Interview: Haredgu Gebre Mariam, Gurish Gebre Miskel and Maressa Haile Mariam, Adwa, February 21, 1993.

⁵⁸⁹Ibid.

Tigray, grew disenchanted with both the process and the results of the land reforms. As one peasant reported, "[l]and distributors were agents of the Derg, not peasants; only those who had the means could get land from the agents."⁵⁹⁰ Moslems in the town traditionally worked as merchants and weavers, and under the Derg they received land for the first time on which to build houses, although today their leaders say the "distribution was not practical and you couldn't say it was equal between Moslems and Christians."⁵⁹¹

It was in the critical interim as disenchantment grew, and before the army came in large numbers in 1978 and was able to contain dissent, at least in the towns, that the EPRP, TPLF, and to a lesser extent the TLF, were able to actively and successfully propagate their programs. Teranafit was also operating in the rural areas of the central region in 1975 - 1976. In addition the ELF was expanding south into the region, from the Mareb River, which divides Tigray and Eritrea to disrupt the grain trade to Asmara, a forerunner of its later attacks on the Derg's military convoys. Thus until the Derg was able to assert its authority in the region its many opponents were well placed to challenge its legitimacy to rule and undermine its land reform program.

The Derg's most aggressive attempt to contain dissent was through its enforcement of the Red Terror. In Adwa the town's military governor began by organizing a meeting of all the teachers and students of the town and told those assembled that if they confessed to their participation in illegal organizations they would not be punished. Nonetheless, that same night mass arrests, largely of teachers and students, began, and corpses started appearing in the streets. Many local rural schools were closed when teachers were prohibited from going to them because of government fears of TPLF activities in the countryside. Apprehension at TPLF influence in the countryside also led to convoys being

⁵⁹⁰Ibid.

⁵⁹¹Interview: Sheik Mahmoud, Adwa, February 21, 1993.

introduced in 1976 affecting all movements outside the town, and by 1978 there were four or five checkpoints on the forty kilometre long road to Axum alone. Trade links with 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.⁵⁹²

In response to the Derg's campaign of terror young people, and particularly students, began leaving Adwa and joining the TPLF in the countryside. In the town TPLF cells were formed to pass on information about such things as Derg convoys, troop movements and the extent of their weaponry. According to local residents, by this time the TPLF was carrying out sabotage attacks within ten kilometres of Adwa, and one peasant interviewed reported that the Front was able to organize mass associations in his "homeland" only eighteen kilometres from the town.⁵⁹³

In 1978 the TPLF unsuccessfully attacked Adwa and in the following year the Front attempted to rob the town's bank, but was again unsuccessful. Apart from those incidents Adwa itself did not become the site of any major military confrontation until it was captured by the TPLF in 1988. Adwa was an intellectual and commercial centre which contributed significantly to the struggle in its formative period but, like the other towns of Tigray, was to play only a minor role in the conflict between 1978 and 1988.

The only other major town in the central region, 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

⁵⁹²Interview: Gebru Aregey and Berhane Desta, Adwa, February 21, 1993.

⁵⁹³Interview: Hardegu Gebre Mariam, Gurish Gebre Miskel, and Maressa Haile Mariam, Adwa, February 21, 1993.

went into a decline from which it has never recovered. Today it is still an important centre for the Ethiopian Orthodox Church, and under TPLF administration it has been made the central zoba administrative headquarters, but otherwise it is a small town in the shadow of its larger neighbour, Adwa. Like other towns in Tigray, Axum served as a market and administrative centre for the surrounding area, and despite its poverty, it was engaged until the late 1970s in a small export trade of agricultural products to Asmara and Addis Ababa.

To pre-1974 Tigrayans Axum's premier church, Zion Mariam, most clearly represented the economic and political power of Ethiopian feudalism. According to Church spokesmen, Zion Mariam held gulti land in most of the woredas of Tigray and even beyond, in Arsi and Gojjam provinces. Church officials reckoned that it possessed, and this is almost certainly an exaggeration, one-tenth of the Tigray's arable land.⁵⁹⁴ Its 350 priests claimed one-third of the peasants' produce on gulti held land, while risti land holders paid one-fifth of their produce in tax to the Church.

Apart from its centres of devotion, the Church operated a school in Axum and oversaw many rural church schools in Tigray. These schools taught religious poetry, singing and dancing, as well as interpreting the Bible and reading. There were no grades, classes did not go beyond the elementary level, and many of the teachers were blind because of the belief that sightless teachers were better at reciting. Anyone could attend these schools, but students "mostly came from the poor as they had no alternative."⁵⁹⁵ Geez and Amharigna were the languages of instruction in Church schools because, as Church officials explained, "[f]eudals and administrators used Amharigna and in order to make

⁵⁹⁴Halekay Fitzum Tafare, Lekarurynie Takaste Asaha, Lekarkarnat Gebre Medin Gebre Selassie, Axum, February 12, 1993.

⁵⁹⁵Ibid.

them happy, we taught Amharigna."⁵⁹⁶ By first becoming Church deacons and then, if they had the opportunity, 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.

Church power was not simply based on its accumulated lands, whose extent can probably never be accurately calculated, but also in its role as an exponent of the imperial system and its effectiveness in encouraging peasant submission. The Church also served as a means by which secular feudalists could hide their venality under the guise of religiosity. In the towns Church and State were virtually fused, commonly through blood relationships, always through mutual interests, and sometimes through an *awardja* or *woreda* governor engaging a Church official as a father confessor/advisor.⁵⁹⁷ But Zion Mariam, no less than other Ethiopian churches, was a rigidly divided institution, and while its bishops were usually wealthy and pillars of the dominant society, at the other extreme its monks and parish priests were often poor and had far more in common with Tigray's underprivileged peasants whose spokesmen they frequently became.

There would appear to be numerous incidents of individual peasants objecting to paying Church taxes, and Tigray's *shifita* tradition meant that there was at least the possibility of "going to the forest" to escape officialdom, but there are only a few cases of collective opposition to the demands of the Church. Nonetheless various respondents report a "revolt" against Church-levied *gulti* taxes by peasants in the Axum area in the early 1960s, but unfortunately the details are obscure.⁵⁹⁸

⁵⁹⁶Ibid.

⁵⁹⁷Ibid.

⁵⁹⁸Ibid.

As in other parts of Tigray, opposition in Axum to the Haile-Selassie regime in the 1960s was dominated by university students who during their vacations brought the issues to the people. By 1970 a local movement led by high school students was active in the town and, by 1973, students and teachers tried to destroy a quarry owned by Ras Mengesha that shipped marble through Massawa to Italy.⁵⁹⁹ Slogans including "Down with the regime", "Down with Amhara domination" and "Tigrayan Self-Determination" were raised in this protest. In another demonstration just outside Zion Mariam Church, police shot at students and in the confusion wounded an old woman who later died. In the same year peasants living near the town objected to Church taxes and raised the slogan, "You have to eat what is yours."⁶⁰⁰ Local police could not contain the problem and additional police reinforcements were brought in from Mekelle who arrested the peasants and crushed the opposition.

When news reached Axum of the overthrow of the Haile-Selassie regime it was welcomed by students, but older people were sometimes confused by the rapid turn of events and supported Ras Mengesha who briefly hid in Zion Mariam Church during his escape from Mekelle to the Sudan. Many secular nobles and government officials followed him west, but most Church officials, although in some cases reduced to poverty with the loss of their traditional lands and privileges, remained in Axum.

As in Adwa, the opposition forces took advantage of the Derg's initial weakness to commence their political activities. In 1975 with the arrival of the Zemacha students, town residents began finding pamphlets in offices and classrooms, some written in Tigrigna and others in Amharigna, that dealt with the history of the Tigrayan people, and with the regimes of Menelik, Haile-Selassie, and the Derg. Initially the people did not

⁵⁹⁹Interview: Sessay Medana Mariam, Axum. February 11, 1993.

⁶⁰⁰Ibid.

know who the signatories of these pamphlets, the TPLF and the EPRP, were. But in July 1975 the TPLF became known by all when it 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 80,000 birr (\$US40,000.)⁶⁰¹ It was the success of this raid that led to the subsequent failed attempt on the Adwa bank.

The Red Terror began in May 1978 in Axum, according to eye-witness reports. 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 that the army had an envelope containing all the names of TPLF supporters, and that if they failed to identify themselves in one-half hour there would be a bullet waiting for them. About 500-600 students (including elementary students) and 150 teachers identified themselves as TPLF 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 terrorize the people, to make them come to the Derg camp, to show their power."⁶⁰² The same source estimated that a further twenty teachers were killed in Axum in the next few years. Despite eliminating open expressions of dissent, such activity encouraged the movement of youth to the TPLF's bases.

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. The TPLF killed a number of Derg soldiers and robbed St. Mary's Hospital of medicines and an x-ray machine. But the Front's biggest coup was in capturing three Russian doctors who were later taken to the Sudan and released in a blaze of publicity.

⁶⁰¹Ibid.

⁶⁰²Ibid.

However, the story does not end there: six months later a leading TPLF cadre, Grimay Mouse, killed two TPLF fighters and then defected 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.

The Derg's approach to the established Church was as ill-adapted to winning popular support as its approach to the students and teachers. Distributing Church lands was widely approved of, but atheism and attacks on Church dogma and practices, and on priests, were abhorred by the conservative Tigrayans. "The Derg knew that the Ethiopian people followed their religion and if it opposed the Church directly, people will oppose the Derg, but at the same time he undermined the Church and religion indirectly."⁶⁰³ The Derg used its mass associations to urge the 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 preventing traders from selling grapes used for sacramental wines to the churches. 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 in the winter of 1993, some fifty-four church officials were killed by the Derg in Axum awardja, 110 were imprisoned, nine churches were burned, twenty-seven churches were damaged, and many wives of priests were "abducted".⁶⁰⁴ The Derg was badly mistaken to assume that because Tigrayans welcomed the destruction of the Church's feudal authority, their ancient ties to Orthodox Christianity could be readily severed also.

⁶⁰³Interview: Halaka Fitzum Tafare. LekaruryiniTakaste Asaha and Lekarkamat Gebre Medhin Gebre Selassie, Axum, February 12, 1993. Note that Tigrayans invariably refer to the Derg as "he".

⁶⁰⁴Ibid.

Although also professing Marxism-Leninism, the TPLF was far more circumspect, and ultimately more successful, in its approach to the Church and religion.

Tembien

Made up largely of middle and low elevation lands and with smaller population densities than are found elsewhere in Tigray, Tembien is one of the most underdeveloped parts of Tigray. Until the establishment of the post-Derg TPLF administration, Tembien was a separate awardja made up of six woredas with the small town of Abi Adi in the extreme south serving as its capital; now its woredas are simply constituent parts of the central zoba. It is considered second only to western Tigray in inaccessibility and in its weak infrastructural base, but it is also held to be one of the few areas of potential economic growth in the province because of its small population, soil fertility and, in the case of Abi Adi, its natural springs. Tembien was also home to two of Tigray's greatest nineteenth century heroes, Ras Alula and Emperor Yohannis, and is a stronghold of the Ethiopian Orthodox faith and host to many monasteries. For these reasons its peoples were considered by the TPLF to be strong Tigrayan nationalists. As a result Tembien, and particularly the area around Abi Adi, served as an early base area for the TPLF, and was one of the most fought over areas in the province.

Apart from some small tracks, there are only two roads that link Tembien to the rest of Tigray. The first runs from Adwa in the north to Abi Adi in the south, stretching the length of the former awardja, and was constructed during the Italian occupation so that the Ethiopian patriots, who made the surrounding rugged countryside their base area, could be attacked, and the awardja's capital defended. A difficult road even today, it passed out of the Derg's control early in the war. It was this road, however, which since

Italian times has served as the awardja's main trade link to the rest of the province. Tembien's traditional export, oil seed crops⁶⁰⁵ were taken along this route to Adwa and then on to Asmara. Tembien's second link to the outside was the even more arduous connection east to Tigray's capital of Mekelle. Starting in Mekelle the road ended in Hagar Salam on the edge of the plateau, where a mere path suitable only for donkeys began a rugged and very steep descent to the middle and lowlands that surround Abi Adi.⁶⁰⁶

As was the case in western and southern Tigray, few of Tembien's peasants suffered from landlessness, and only a minority could be said to suffer from land shortages. And because of smaller population densities, local farmers have typically had bigger plots than are found elsewhere in Tigray.⁶⁰⁷ This wealth by provincial standards is also indicated by the fact that few of Tembien's peasants under normal conditions were forced to leave the awardja in search of seasonal labour. Nonetheless, land inequities and the general lack of oxen for plowing were as bad in some parts of the awardja as elsewhere in Tigray. Emperor Yohannis's descendants, Rases Seyuun and Mengesha, together with other nobles, typically held enormous lands with the best soils, although few of them lived in these hot lands.

There is some dispute as to whether Moslems in the area near Abi Adi gained rights to land during the reign of Yohannis,⁶⁰⁸ or according to some Moslem sources as early as the reign of King Zeraias in the seventeenth century.⁶⁰⁹ Clearly, however, Moslems in at

⁶⁰⁵Oil seeds included nuke, rape, flax and sesame.

⁶⁰⁶Shortly after the TPLF's victory, a tarmac road was begun which by 1994 should connect Abi Adi to Mekelle.

⁶⁰⁷Interview: Teklu Woldegite and Mabratu, Abi Adi, March 19, 1993.

⁶⁰⁸Interview: Alesmu Hailu, Mengesha Gerechal and Gebrehaiwit Gebre Selassie, Abi Adi, March 18, 1993.

⁶⁰⁹Interview: Mohammed Said and Bedru Mohammed Yesaid, Abi Adi, March 18, 1993.

least southern Tembien have held risti land for more than a century, and hence lack of access to land was not a source of grievance here to the extent that it was for Moslems in other parts of the province.

The picture that emerges in Tembien is one similar to that of western Tigray. Peasant complaints about the imperial era are most likely to be of inadequate and corrupt administration, poor infrastructure, land insecurity, and of shiftas who emerged from the forests at night to prey on poor farmers who could not afford weapons to defend themselves. If the peasants worked gulti land they invariably objected to high rents and overbearing agents of the large landowners. Merchants in turn also complained of shiftas and the ineffectualness of local officialdom in overcoming them, where they were not accused of conniving at their activities.

Although many local shifta were drawn from the peasantry, in this area too it was widely believed that there was a link between the aristocracy and shiftas, it being assumed that the lower nobility became shifta because of disputes among the feudals which led to their going to the forest.⁶¹⁰ The Wari River on the Adwa - Abi Adi road was an area of particular dread for traders, but shifta bands would also hide out in the Tekezze and Gebere river basins. Not surprisingly, the TPLF was quickly able to bring traffic on the Abi Adi - Adwa road to a virtual halt for the entire duration of the war by first removing the shifta, and then taking over their positions along the Wari River on the Adwa-Tembien border, thus compelling the Derg to depend on the only marginally more secure Abi Adi - Mekelle route.

⁶¹⁰Interview: Sheiks Mahout Abdel Kadir, Ali Mohammed Siray and Ali Amhed, Abi Adi, March 19, 1993.

As in other towns of Tigray, Abi Adi experienced demonstrations led by junior high school students, teachers, and vacationing university students, from the 1960s onwards. Those who were students at that time report the wide availability of Chinese publications on Marx, Lenin, and Mao among teachers and students.⁶¹¹ The 1973 -1974 famine in Wollo and Tigray led the town's 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.⁶¹²

The national question also figured high in Tembien before the revolution in 1974, although the awardja governor, Dejzmach Sahale, came from Shire and was not related to Ras Mengesha who was deemed tainted because of his relationship to Haile-Selassie through his wife, the emperor's Amhara grand-daughter. It was Mengesha, however, who appointed the district and sub-district officials in the awardja, and 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. As one teacher and former student in Abi Adi put it, "Starting from Menelik, who people blamed for the death of Yohannis, the people have hated Amhara oppression and the upper class."⁶¹³

The Derg's presence only slowly began to be felt in the wake of the overthrow of the old regime, and again in the transitional period the opposition forces were able to carry out their political work. The EPRP only moved through this area in transit to its two base areas in Gondar and Asimba, while the EDU attempted to strike deeper roots based on its leader Ras Mengesha's ancestral ties to the area. But it was the TPLF that quickly

⁶¹¹Interview: Teishe Hagos and Mulu Hailu, Abi Adi, March 19, 1993. It appears that such literature was brought into Ethiopia by a handful of university radicals who then had it printed, and in some cases translated, and then distributed throughout the country.

⁶¹²Interview: Alesmu Hailu, Mengesha Gerechal and Gebrehaiwit Gebre Selassie, Abi Adi, March 17, 1993.

⁶¹³Interview: Tsighe Hagos, Abi Adi, March 19, 1993.

achieved a virtual hegemonic position in Tembien. The Front, with only minimal forces, was able to take over the lightly defended Abi Adi in 1976 and control the town for almost a year before being routed by superior Derg forces. Thus ensued a bitter struggle during which control of the town passed in and out of Derg hands until 1988 when it irrevocably fell to the TPLF.

In spite of its weak presence, the Derg was able to carry out land reform in various parts of Tembien which, at least according to peasants in the woreda adjacent to Abi Adi, Taquomlesh, "was according to family size and was fair."⁶¹⁴ As was the Derg's pattern, land reform was an in-house top-down affair where the "Derg merely looked at the land and then divided it up."⁶¹⁵ In time this led to grievances that the TPLF was able to exploit. The Front first came to Taquomlesh in 1976, but it was not until 1978 that their cadres mobilized the people and replaced the Derg established Peasant Association with their own. Surprisingly, it was not until 1981 that the TPLF carried out its land reform in the area, according to local peasants.

Nonetheless, it is worth noting that the families of the three peasants interviewed in the Adi Sumuon tabia of 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 respectively 2.0, 1.25 and 1.5 hectares, and under the TPLF their families collectively each held 1.25 hectares of land.⁶¹⁶ Although such unscientific surveys cannot take into account such differences as soil fertility and access to water, according to these men the decline in their land holdings was

⁶¹⁴Interview: Kashi Marasa Abara, Nagash Gebre Shidan, Girmay Esgabihir, Taquomlesh, Adi Sumuon tabia, March 19, 1993.

⁶¹⁵Ibid.

⁶¹⁶Ibid.

because the distribution was according to family size, and two of them had sons who had departed.

In Abi Adi there were only two hundred registered farmers, but similar questioning there found that Alesmu Hailu, Mengesha Gerechal, and Gebrehaimit 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 .5, .75, and .75 hectares of land.⁶¹⁷ The peasants attributed this result to the fact that Alesmu was a richer peasant to begin with and lost land, while the other peasants' plots decreased because former non-land holders 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 their right to land.

It does not appear that peasants who lost land as a result of TPLF land reforms were angry with the TPLF. They seemed to recognize that there was little they could do in the face of widespread support for the reforms, and it must also be remembered that most of those with larger land holdings before redistribution had more capital, which was not distributed, and this would allow them to retain a higher standard of living than their neighbours even with the loss of land. It must also be borne in mind that with springs in Abi Adi, it is possible to grow market crops all year around, which makes small plots considerably more valuable than in most areas of Tigray.

The struggle for control of Tembien, and in particular the area around Abi Adi, was crucial to the TPLF's Tigray-wide military strategy. In the early period of the war Tembien's isolation and its strong Tigrayan national sentiments made it a prime area in

⁶¹⁷Interview: Alesmu Hailu, Mengesha Gerechal and Gebrehaiwit Gebre Selassie, Abi Adi, March 17, 1993.

which to develop and train guerrilla forces. For the same reason it was a difficult area for the Derg administration to defend. Later the TPLF was to use the awardja as a base for political and public administration training schools, medical facilities, and an area suitable for holding conferences. Tembien also provided a link between the TPLF woreda strongholds of Zana in Region I and Adet, Samre and Bora in Region II. Under TPLF direction the people of the awardja built a road from Abi Adi to the border of Adet, and another road southwest to the border of Wollo, to transport weapons and rations for the fighters, and to serve as both a means to bring relief to famine victims, and as a route to safety in the refugee camps of the Sudan. Traders also sporadically used these routes until the victory over the Derg when the earlier traffic links to Adwa and Mekelle were resumed.

But the costs of the TPLF struggle for Abi Adi and Tembien were not borne lightly by the people. The Red Terror took a particularly brutal form in Abi Adi, doubtlessly because of the townpeoples' perceived allegiance to the TPLF who had only recently been routed from the area when the terror was unleashed. During a market day in July of 1977 the Derg had some 178 people killed on the spurious grounds that they were thieves. There is little reason to doubt eyewitness accounts that the victims were virtually all peasants, many of whom had journeyed from as far as Adet woreda to the north to buy salt because of shortages in their home area. Although such atrocities were designed to intimidate the population, they invariably had the effect of encouraging an evacuation of the town and surrounding countryside, particularly by youth, who were most often the Derg's target.

Apart from the market killings, 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.⁶¹⁸ In the face of this level of 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.⁶¹⁹ With the road to Adwa closed, movement to Mekelle confined to convoys, the issuing of trading licenses restricted, and the establishment of government trading corporations, only the older merchants and those close to Derg officials remained in Abi Adi, and even they had to pay bribes to ensure they were not killed.⁶²⁰ The remaining younger merchants went to the liberated territories or with the approval of the TPLF operated as mobile traders in the rural areas, in later years engaging in trade with *Asibi* (Afar) traders who went to the Red Sea port of Djibouti.

The early and extensive presence of the TPLF in Tembien meant that their administrators and militia members were repeatedly moving from countryside to the town and then back again. Abi Adi was one of the few places where TPLF militia members were not always peasants, but held urban occupations.⁶²¹ A training base for the militia was established at Ruwakazi, very near to Abi Adi. Tembien also became a major area 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.

Although Christian Orthodox authorities testify that some forty-three churches were destroyed and seventy-two priests killed in the six woredas of Tembien awardja,⁶²² Tembien was nonetheless deemed sufficiently secure for the holding of two conferences

⁶¹⁸Interview: Farada Hagos, Mohammed Abdel Kedir and Tabere Gebre Michael, Abi Adi, February 17, 1993.

⁶¹⁹Ibid.

⁶²⁰Interview: Mohammed Said and Bedru Mohammed Yesaid, Abi Adi, March 18, 1993.

⁶²¹See Woreda Teka, a trader, and Geogesgehe Abraham, a carpenter, both militia members from Abi Adi, Interview: March 18, 1993.

⁶²²Interview: Kashi Terka Abara and Melhakabraham Gebrujesus Gebremariam, Abi Adi, March 17, 1993.

of Orthodox priests from TPLF liberated territories. These conferences held near Abi Adi in 1983 and in Roba Kazi in 1984, did much to consolidate the TPLF support from the priesthood, a constituency of enormous influence in rural Tigray. Some 747 priests attended the first conference and 550 priests attended the second, at which the delegates agreed to reduce the large number of holy days celebrated, and also 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.⁶²³

Two further conferences were held in Ambara Metaga woreda of Tembien during 1987, where resolutions regarding religious laws, holy day celebrations, weddings, and the administration of monasteries and churches were passed. When Mekelle was captured by the TPLF in 1989, the Derg supported Tigrayan Secretariat took up residence in Wollo, and the TPLF supported Secretariat assumed responsibility for the administration of all Tigray. The TPLF organized all these conferences, provided the security, and took an active part in the proceedings, doubtlessly reaping considerable political dividends.

Many priests and deacons from Tembien joined the TPLF, the deacons being younger usually became fighters, while the typically older and slightly better educated priests became minor political cadres, serving in baito and woreda administrations and as teachers in the TPLF literacy program. Two such priests from Abi Adi, Kashi Terka Abara and 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 even beyond to Gondar and Wollo, as the Front took the struggle south in the final stages of the war.⁶²⁴ Amharigna and Geez were the

⁶²³Ibid.

⁶²⁴Ibid.

languages of the Church and they could be effectively employed throughout northern Ethiopia by the priests. Following the Front's fighters, these and other TPLF priests held conferences where the fighters would be introduced to the priests and peoples of newly liberated territories as "their children", and always the contrast would be 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.

Tembien's early role in the Tigrayan conflict as an area of security for the TPLF can be likened to that played by the west, but because of its strategic location in the centre of the province it was, until the great battles of 1988 and 1989, of even greater military and political significance than the west as evidenced by the many conferences held in the area, the amount of fighting, particularly over possession of Abi Adi, and the extent of the bombing. The Front was confident that the people would not be disheartened by the extent of the Derg's retribution which the Front's presence in the area would bring. In the event, the TPLF's assessment was correct, but it may have had less to do with Tembien's history and more to do with the radicalizing impact that the Derg's overwhelming violence had in driving the people to embrace the Front.

Adet

Adet woreda has a population of 51,602 largely subsistence peasants, and is only forty-two kilometres south of Axum over an unpaved road that took a four wheel drive vehicle about three hours, but the woreda passed out of Derg hands in the early days of the struggle and remained a TPLF stronghold throughout the war. Isolation, defined both in terms of distance and the difficulty of transport from the major Derg army base at Axum, is part of the explanation as to why the Front was able to quickly gain control of this woreda, but there are other factors, some of which have relevance to other parts of

Tigray. Certainly the primary class structure and ethnic homogeneity of Adet simplified the TPLF's task of mobilizing the population. Apart from a brief visit to the woreda by Teranafit in 1975, there were no other opposition political forces competing for the support of the peasants, and this was a marked advantage for the TPLF. Lastly, the support given to the TPLF by poor, but influential, Orthodox priests was critical to its acceptance by the people of the woreda.

Adet was, and remains, one of the most underdeveloped woredas in a province characterized by underdevelopment. That underdevelopment was expressed in a lack of infrastructure, dependence on an economy little changed for generations, and poor communications that limited trade to mule traffic, which translated into higher prices for the limited amount of consumer goods the woreda's peasants could afford. Urbanization was confined to two small villages whose functions barely went beyond that of holding weekly markets. Pre-1974 Adet society included a minuscule number of Church officials, local administrators and aristocratic land owners and about five hundred Moslems, most of whom were poor traders and weavers. Apart from the Moslems there were no identifiable minorities in the woreda. The woreda chairman in 1993 estimated the population as being almost ninety-nine percent peasant,⁶²⁵ and few of them could be considered wealthy even by local standards.

Gulti land constituted only a small part of the woreda and, unlike woredas where the power of Zion Mariam and other churches was great, taxation in Adet only constituted one-fifth of produce. This was, however, a poorer woreda than most in central Tigray. Typically the older peasants, as in other parts of Tigray, objected to insecurity of tenure, since even risti land could be taken away by the powerful landowning nobles during the

⁶²⁵Interview: Tkabo Berhe, Dagalousie, February 13, 1993.

imperial era. They also complained of a poor and corrupt Haile-Selassie administration, and of life under a regime where peasants were forbidden to enter the offices of officials without bowing at the door, quoting a saying of the times, "the poor peasant and the donkey need a stick".⁶²⁶

Adet did have a few isolated examples of peasants collectively opposing the government, although none that involved the entire woreda. There were area-wide disturbances in 1962 which led to protest marches and the jailing and fining of peasants. In the following year in Kuzat Awi kushette there was a revolt against the large landowners that led to farmers distributing land among themselves. Kashi Gebre Medhin, in 1993 a TPLF woreda executive member, was himself jailed in Axum and fined thirty birr for his involvement in these protests.

With only one small government elementary school and never more than three teachers in the entire woreda (there were no church schools), there was little in the way of a resident intelligentsia that could stimulate a process of radicalization. Some high school and university students secretly attempted to politicize the woreda peasants in the final days of the Haile-Selassie regime, but their influence could not have been great. Although older local peasants reported that no Zemacha students came to this isolated woreda, people did hear of student demonstrations in Axum and other urban centres. Upon further questioning, the same peasants speak of the influence of Suhul, but it is difficult to ascertain whether this was a factor as he has now become one of the TPLF martyrs whose history is known to most Tigrayans. Thus Adet, while not immune to the radical currents of events and thought in the period immediately prior to the collapse of the Haile-Selassie regime, could not be considered an area beset with tensions or subject to important

⁶²⁶Interview: Kashi Gebre Medhin Desta, Dagalousie, February 13, 1993.

outside influences. That this area became a minor revolutionary centre in the ensuing struggle owes a lot to the character of that society, its isolation, and to the manner of the Derg and TPLF's entry into that society.

In spite of their grievances against the woreda's large landowners and aristocrats, peasants seemed genuinely upset at Ras Mengesha's overthrow and welcomed his escape to Sudan (even though Mengesha himself held gulti land in the woreda). They were even more shocked at the brutality of the Derg in killing Haile-Selassie and local members of the nobility. As Kashi Gebre explained, "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."⁶²⁷ And of Haile-Selassie's death: "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."⁶²⁸

Although the old world was rapidly collapsing, the brutality of the Derg offended the peasants' moral views. In particular the Derg challenged their religious sensibilities, not by taking the lands of the rich churches or by ending the hated gulti taxes, but by attacking the local priests and attempting to undermine the place of the parish church in the community. It is difficult to verify the extent of the killings of priests and the destruction of churches that local people now report. However, the Derg's bellicose approach to local priests who served as both spiritual guides and leaders of their communities shocked the peasants who saw it as an affront to Christianity. This served to not only alienate the peasants, but to drive them, and particularly the priests, into the arms of the TPLF. As one priest put it, "The Derg came to destroy the *tabots* (arks), books, and kill priests. For this the priests had to fight for the Cross - in the left hand a machine gun and in the right a

⁶²⁷Ibid.

⁶²⁸Interview: Tasabet Hagos, Dagalousie, February 14, 1993.

Cross. The TPLF was supporting us and did not destroy the churches. There is a saying that to kill a big snake you need a big stick."⁶²⁹

Adet's distance from the core areas of the Teranafit and the EDU to the west, and the EPRP to the east, meant that the TPLF was only confronted by the Derg and by the time their first cadres passed through the woreda in 1976 the population had already been politically alienated from the Derg and was receptive to the appeals of the TPLF. At that time the Front had few members and was rapidly moving about the countryside, only staying in any one area for a short period, but long enough to tell the people something about what they were fighting for and to recruit people to operate in underground cells.

At the end of 1977 TPLF cadres returned to Adet and explained in greater detail their political program. The people learned that the TPLF did not rob and that they were opposed to the shifta gangs. Having virtually nothing in the early days, the TPLF representatives made a virtue of their poverty. A poor priest reported how the cadres at first refused to accept food from the peasants because they said the people were themselves too poor.⁶³⁰ 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."⁶³¹ The fact that many of the early TPLF cadres were from wealthy families, at least by the standards of these poor people, did not undermine their appeal. According to one peasant, "[e]ven 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

⁶²⁹Interview: Kashi Gebre Wolde Teckle, Dagalousie, February 14, 1993.

⁶³⁰Interview: Kashi Berhe Gerengi, Dagalousie, February 14, 1993.

⁶³¹Interview: Beher Teka, Dagalousie, February 14, 1993.

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."⁶³²

While the Derg land distribution involved violence and resulted in their friends getting superior shares, the TPLF emphasized that their program favoured an equitable distribution of land. A widowed and previously landless *suwa* (traditional beer) seller said that, initially, "[t]he 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."⁶³³

The very few Derg attempts to contain the rebellion in Adet proved futile. Alerted by TPLF supporters as soon as Derg forces left their bases, the army would then be attacked by the local militia and TPLF fighters called in for support. When Derg forces finally reached the woreda centre of Dagalousie they would find the village deserted as the people fled to take refuge with relatives in the rugged surrounding areas. During the Derg's stay in the area they would be constantly attacked and harassed, and when they left after being unable to inflict much damage on the TPLF militarily, the people would return to their homes. The last entry of the Derg with large numbers of troops into Adet was in 1985, but aerial bombardment, frequently timed to coincide with market days, continued until the end of the war, and in the final stages of the war the Derg began deploying small commando groups to terrorize the people.⁶³⁴ Nonetheless, by the early 1980s the Derg had irrevocably lost control of the woreda to the TPLF.

⁶³²Ibid.

⁶³³Interview: Tasabet Hagos, Dagalousie, February 14, 1993.

⁶³⁴Interview: Tkabo Berhe, Dagalousie, February 13, 1993.

The example of Adet makes clear that it was not Derg policies that led to the alienation of the peasantry, but the way in which they were enacted. The Derg's land proclamation was welcomed, but the dissolution of the old power structures served to bring to the fore the role of the parish priests, particularly in underdeveloped rural areas, such as Adet. Doctrinaire atheism and a fear of the respect that villagers held for their priests, however, led the Derg to attack the local Church and its representatives and this undermined the support they should have reaped from their reforms. The Derg's almost complete disaffection of Adet society prepared the ground for those who would challenge the new regime. The TPLF provided virtually the only opposition to the Derg in Adet and their success at winning the support of the peasants owes much to their respect for peasant sensibilities, particularly those of a religious nature.

Adi Ahferom

The woreda of Adi Ahferom in the far east of Region II is, like Adet, very poor and because of major water shortages, it has little potential for growth. Until the TPLF's victory the woreda did not possess a connecting track to the main east-west highway, and it is so isolated that zoba officials in Axum have trouble explaining how to get to it. However, Adi Ahferom's isolation and the anger of its people at the poor quality of the administration they were receiving encouraged the TPLF to come to the woreda and carry out their second land redistribution in Tigray, which is now a source of considerable pride for the inhabitants.

With a total population of 21,550 Adi Ahferom has ten tabias - two in the lowlands, three in the middle lands and five in the highlands.⁶³⁵ Even with peace most of the woreda's tabias are so poor as to require on-going food relief from REST, but two of the highland

⁶³⁵Interview: Makonnen Gebre Medin, Adegä Arbi, February 28, 1993.

tabias are considered "rich" because they grow *gayshum* which is used in beer making as a cash crop.

A considerable portion of Adi Ahferom's most productive lands was controlled by churches from outside the woreda. An Eritrean monastery held five kushettes of gulti land that supported approximately 700 families, while Debre Abey monastery in Shire had two kushettes in the woreda. In addition churches at Adwa and Endaselasie collected as much as one-quarter of the peasants' harvests in taxes, although they held no land in the woreda. The twenty-three local churches, each with twenty-five priests and approximately ten deacons, however, had few resources. Priests did not hold risti land, but only land in the name of the church, and this went back to the church when they died, thus leaving surviving members of their families destitute.⁶³⁶ Land owners from the nobility held an estimated one-third of the woreda's land, and peasants today testify that it was "forbidden to walk on it or graze cattle on it".⁶³⁷ Estimates of families without plowing oxen in the woreda range from fifty to ninety percent of the total, and land shortages were almost as severe as those in Agame. 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."⁶³⁸

Of three older peasants questioned, Woldelelanos Woldegergis reported that during the final years of the Haile-Selassie regime he held .25 hectares of land in separate plots and had to go to Asmara every year to find wage labour. Talanal Kassay said that his family had .25 hectares of land and that he worked for a noble as a farm labourer. Finally, Greorgiha Karberu reported that he also had .25 hectares of land, farmed for members of

⁶³⁶Interview: Melleas Adek, Adega Arbi, February 28, 1993.

⁶³⁷Interview: Woldelelanos Woldegergis, Adega Arbi, February 28, 1993.

⁶³⁸Interview: Kashi Gebremeden Gresgis, Adega Arbi, February 28, 1993.

the nobility and sometimes had to go to Asmara or elsewhere to supplement his income.⁶³⁹ As a result of the TPLF land distributions these peasants now respectively hold .5 hectares, .75 hectares, and .4 hectares of land, still not enough to live on, but they had land security and no longer paid taxes to the secular nobility or to the church. All local priests had their own lands.

Older peasants provided a familiar catalogue of grievances to explain their revolt, but with one addition. From the late 1960s local peasants petitioned the imperial regime's officials to separate the area presently recognized as Adi Ahferom and have it made a woreda. A large and rugged area with only long and rough paths linking it to the existing woreda administrative centre, the people wanted their own officials. The High Court in Addis Ababa replied positively to their request, but it was rejected in Mekelle. Later the Derg accepted their request, but it was never implemented. The TPLF eventually responded to the peoples' grievances and sense of isolation and made Adi Ahferom a woreda in 1977.

Woreda residents say that university students did not visit the area to politicize the people during the late Haile-Selassie period, and local students attending schools outside the region apparently did not attempt to arouse local peasants. Zemacha students under the Derg only stayed two months. None of this, however, seems to have had much bearing on the political thinking of the people. While other rural Tigrayans sometimes acknowledge that at least in the early period after the collapse of the imperial regime they retained some loyalties or sympathies for the regime, and for Ras Mengesha in particular, Adi Ahferom residents interviewed claim they were happy at the news of the fall of Haile-Selassie's and Mengesha's administration. According to one peasant, the people "didn't mind if he was killed as he was a feudal, an exploiter and a

⁶³⁹Interview: Woldelelanos Woldegergis, Talanal Kashesay and Greorgiha Karberu, Adega Arbi, February 28, 1993.

criminal, whether or not he was a Tigrayan."⁶⁴⁰

Because Adi Ahferom was not constituted as a woreda the Derg never established a local administration in the area, although they did send in agents to collect taxes. The TPLF put in a brief appearance in the area in 1975 "to show their Kalashnikovs and introduce themselves", and in the following year the EPRP started operating in Adi Ahferom. With eighteen mobile cadres who regularly returned to bases outside the woreda every few months, the EPRP dominated Adi Ahferom for about ten months in the period 1976 - 1977. In spite of the early EPRP dominance, peasants from the area sent four representatives to a TPLF base near the Eritrean border to take militia training and to invite the Front to begin operations in the woreda and carry out a land reform.

The two groups fought for political supremacy with the EPRP arguing that the peasants should not support the TPLF because it was poor and because it was concentrating its efforts in the rural areas when it should be in the towns where the enemy was. They also accused the TPLF of being "narrow" because they were only fighting for the liberation of Tigray and not for that of 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 peoples' enemies, the shiftas and nobles. In addition they were attracted to the TPLF precisely because of its members' poverty, which to them demonstrated the TPLF's selflessness. And, as always, the nationalism of the TPLF drew support. One peasant held that the Front's nationalism was essential since "only Tigrayans could solve Tigrayan problems,"⁶⁴¹ while the woreda vice-chairman said that the people

⁶⁴⁰Interview: Meles Adet, Adega Arbi, February 28, 1993.

⁶⁴¹Interview: Kashi Gebremeden Grasgis, Adega Arbi, February 28, 1993.

supported the TPLF from the beginning because of "the word 'Tigray' in the Front's name."⁶⁴²

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 TPLF supporters in early 1977. Although the 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 began systematically carrying out its propaganda work at weddings, funerals, and during religious holidays, organizing people into mass associations, and setting up baitos, a local militia, and carrying out its land reform. It was not until 1979 that the Derg re-entered the woreda and by then their position was untenable. The Derg's nearest and biggest base was at Inticho on the main east-west highway and this was the direction most attacks came from, but as there was no road, their soldiers had to make the very difficult trek by foot supported by MiGs and helicopters. Sometimes they got as far as the tiny village of Adega Arbi, the woreda administrative centre, but with enemies all about them in the countryside, they rarely stayed more than one night before retreating to their base areas. Although the woreda had little strategic value to either the TPLF or the Derg, the latter kept returning to Adega Arbi until 1987.

⁶⁴²Interview: Madonnen Gebre Medin, Adega Arbi, February 28, 1993.

According to statistics collected in the woreda, 109 militia members and thirty-seven civilians were killed as a result of the war. A total of 1667 fighters were recruited from the woreda (126 of them women), although to date no figures have been released anywhere in Tigray of the numbers of fighters killed. That these figures are almost certainly known is made clear by the rigour with which local officials have accumulated statistics on war damage. For instance, in Adi Ahferom 136 cattle, 522 goats and sheep, and 143 donkeys and mules were killed; 280 beehives were destroyed, as were 789 harnesses, 3837 metal plows, 654 wooden plows, 821 articles of clothing, 675 hide sacks, 873 quintals of grain, 52,120 kilograms of hay and straw, 314 hides and mattresses 350 glass bottles, and an undetermined amount of food; 32,722 birr in cash was taken, and 389 houses were burned down.⁶⁴³

The extent of Adi Ahferom's poverty and feudal oppression distinguished it from wealthier woredas such as Zana and Shire, but not from many other poor woredas in Tigray. The complaints of Adi Ahferom peasants were similar to those of peasants in other parts of Tigray, but what is interesting here is how a particular local grievance, the lack of administrative facilities, served to arouse and unite the local population in a collective pursuit. The people of the area took their grievance to three successive powers before the TPLF committed itself to establishing a woreda administration and delivered on its promise. Unlike the moral economists who assume that peasants are invariably opposed to the state and want to escape it, evidence in Tigray as illustrated by Adi Ahferom, is that peasants want an accessible and responsible public administration and will support the party or government that provides it.⁶⁴⁴

⁶⁴³Figures supplied by Makonnen Gebre Medin, see Interview.

⁶⁴⁴Although the demand of Adi Ahferom residents for their own woreda administration appears unique, the desire for effective and democratic local administration was strong among peasants across Tigray and was at the centre of the TPLF program.

Conclusion

In Region II, as elsewhere in the province, the picture that emerges is one of the TPLF-led revolution arising out of the student movement, taking form in the towns and then, with the onset of the Red Terror, moving irrevocably to the countryside. While there was scattered evidence of peasant resistance to the powers of the nobility under the old regime, it was invariably localized in terms of area and issue, and thus easily contained by the state authorities. The experience of the central region thus supports those moral economists who argue that peasant revolt can only take on a serious form when the intelligentsia goes to the countryside to lead it.

Although the overthrow of the old regime and the Derg's Land Proclamation ended the Orthodox Church's rights to land and taxes, it did not lessen the attachment of the peasants to their religious traditions and values. And with the destruction of the traditional power structure in the rural areas the importance of the parish priests increased. The Derg with its doctrinaire fixation on the establishment of a Marxist state in Ethiopia proved incapable of understanding the peasants. Like its victimization of the educated youth in the towns, the Derg's attack on the Church was a major factor in its estrangement of the peasants. The Derg's insensitive approach to the values and institutions of the peasants cannot alone account for the TPLF's accomplishments in the countryside, but it is inconceivable that the TPLF could have succeeded in gaining the support of the peasants if the Derg had not first alienated them.

A central theme of moral economy theory is that peasants revolt when the bureaucratic state challenges their cultural values, an important insight in the case of Tigray, but the moral economists' approach is nonetheless wide of the mark. While moral economists define the tensions which provide the impulse for peasant revolt in economic terms and

hold that state-peasant conflict arises from opposition to the efforts of state functionaries to eliminate pre-capitalist communal rights, the above analysis points to the importance of the Derg's assault on the religious values of the peasants. The peasants were not necessarily opposed to the Derg's economic reforms, but instead to the authoritarian manner in which they were implemented.

Moreover, in their emphasis on economic factors and values, moral economy largely ignores the role that nationalism played in radicalizing peasants. Peasants in this case study defined themselves as Tigrayan and the authoritarian state which intruded on their communities as Amhara. This definition also facilitated the efforts of the explicitly nationalist TPLF and reduced the prospects of the multinational EPRP, a reality which becomes a major consideration in the following chapter.

CHAPTER 9: THE STRUGGLE FOR EASTERN TIGRAY

Introduction

Although few in number, TPLF fighters quickly moved out from their base area in Region I in 1975 to cover all of Tigray, but they were particularly anxious to establish themselves in Agame awardja in the northern section of Region III for two principal reasons: first, the EPRP, with whom they were competing for dominance of the anti-Derg opposition in the province, had established a base in this area, and secondly, the area's peasants suffered more from land shortages than anywhere else in Tigray, and hence welcomed the TPLF's proposed land reform program. While the TPLF quickly established a base of operations in the northeast, the Front's move to the southern area of Region III was much slower, fraught with difficulties and involved the unique situation for the TPLF of mobilizing an ethnically and culturally diverse population. As a result the Front did not establish a base of operations in southern Tigray until 1980, considerably later than elsewhere in the province.

Because of these differences between the north and the south this chapter will be organized differently than the two that preceded it. After beginning with an examination of the political conditions in Region III's major towns, Adigrat, Mekelle and Maichew prior to the Red Terror, the chapter will examine separately the course of the uprising in the northern part of the region from that in the south. Moreover, while the time frame in examining the northern part of the eastern region will be approximately 1975 to 1980, as was the pattern in the two previous chapters, the time frame for the south will be 1980 to 1989.

Opposition in the Towns

The three towns in Region III to be examined here are Adigrat in the north, which was a commercial centre and administrative capital for the awardja of Agame; Mekelle in the centre, which was the capital of Tigray and the largest town in the province, and Maichew in the south, which was a commercial and administrative centre. It was in the towns that opposition to the regimes of Haile-Selassie and the Derg first took form and continued until the new regime's policy of terror ended civil politics and stimulated the armed struggles that took place in the countryside.

Adigrat possessed the only high school east of Adwa and north of Mekelle, Agassey Comprehensive High School. That institution and Adigrat's Catholic junior high school became centres for anti-regime dissent. They were strongly supported and influenced by local students in attendance at the university in Addis Ababa. The presence outside of Adigrat of a large military base served as a focus for the protesting students who, in both the late years of the Haile-Selassie regime and in the early years of the Derg, placed their hopes on a military coup. While the young dissidents had little sympathy for feudalism and the representatives of the old regime, the Derg's summary execution of members of the old regime was widely abhorred and Mengesha's escape was generally welcomed locally because, "he was a Tigrayan ... and people thought he would fight the Derg and not try to restore the feudal regime."⁶⁴⁵

Agame's, and particularly Adigrat's dependence on merchandising and trade, meant that the Derg's imposition of commercial and transport restrictions in response to security conditions in Eritrea, and increasingly in Tigray, were strongly felt.⁶⁴⁶ Under the Derg

⁶⁴⁵Interview: Kiros Beyene, Adigrat, March 3, 1993.

⁶⁴⁶Interview: Beranberas Seyum Meles, Melakus Asmlem Gebre Mariam, Berhane Hagos, Berhane Asgdam, and Svegai Masa, March 3, 1993.

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 Agricultural Marketing Corporation, which purchased virtually all marketed agricultural products at government fixed prices, also seriously interfered with the activities of the local business community.

Denied their livelihood, merchants left Adigrat and Tigray in increasing numbers as security conditions declined and government controls proliferated. 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. Small boats bringing luxury goods were linked to a network of smugglers using mules, donkeys, and camels. The Derg's economic programs reflected their opposition to private trade and their suspicion of the merchant class, and as a result this important class to the local economy was soon estranged from the new regime.

Beginning in 1977 the EPRP unleashed its White Terror against the Derg.⁶⁴⁷ Centred in Addis Ababa and the bigger cities of Ethiopia, it nonetheless had a local impact as the EPRP began an assassination campaign that included a government official responsible for land reform, a leading Derg cadre and a clerk, who was killed during a robbery involving cash for the teachers' monthly salaries.⁶⁴⁸ The Derg responded by penetrating virtually every component of civil society and carrying out its own and far more comprehensive terror. Local army administrators organized mass meetings of different occupation groups that would end with summary public executions and forced viewings of the corpses.

⁶⁴⁷For the background to the White Terror, see p. 128.

⁶⁴⁸Interview: Meskel Gebre Sadik, Adigrat, March 3, 1994.

Along with Tigrayans, Eritreans resident in the area were also targeted by the Derg campaign. As elsewhere this led to the desertion of many young people from the towns for the bases of the opposition, and primarily that of the largest opposition group, the EPRP.

Moslems, a community historically discriminated against in Tigray, were a significant minority in the former Kilte Awlalo awardja immediately to the south of Agame, but were found in significant numbers throughout the eastern parts of Region III. Only a small number of the area's Moslems escaped the imperial prohibition against holding land and farming, and therefore most Moslems in the north lived in the towns and worked as weavers and a smaller number as petty merchants. The land proclamation resulted in rural Moslems acquiring farmland, and together with the prohibition against religious discrimination, led them to initially support the Derg.⁶⁴⁹

However, as most Moslems lived in the towns few of them directly benefited from the land reform. Instead, as weavers they were frequently without work when Derg-imposed trade restrictions meant that they could not get the materials they needed. Moslem suspicion of the Derg grew when its opposition to religion became better known. However, present Moslem leaders do not point to any systemic Derg discrimination against their community to account for their alienation from the regime. They felt themselves to be little different from their Christian neighbours, and hence motivated by the same broad concerns.

These concerns were expressed in the early post-imperial era by the TPLF, EPRP and TLF, which were all politically active in Adigrat. In the short time before the curtain came down on what by Ethiopian standards could be called political pluralism, there were wide-

⁶⁴⁹Interview: Kadi Sharia Sheiks Musa Ibrahim, Yemane Negesse, Mohammed Arab Human and Omar Musa, Adegrat, March 4, 1993.

ranging debates, discussions, and the production and dissemination of political pamphlets. Students, teachers and government employees were active in all of the parties which fought for ascendancy, although the EPRP was clearly the dominant organization in the early years. With the rise in government repression the civilian opposition groups began forming underground cells in the urban areas. A former TPLF cell member reported that the Front had four cells in Adigrat, each with four members, most of whom were teachers. Initially the role of the cells was to continue politicization efforts, but after the TPLF launched its insurrection in 1975, they were largely concerned with passing on information and materials to those in the countryside and receiving instructions back. Most cells collapsed with the onset of the Red Terror and those cell members not captured joined their comrades in the countryside which became the focus of the war.

To the south of Adigrat and in the central part of Region III was Mekelle. As Tigray's biggest town and provincial capital in a revolution which had its origins in the urban centres, Mekelle played an important role in the formation and development of the TPLF-led struggle until the onset of the government's terror campaign. Mekelle was an intellectual centre and along with Adwa had the largest and best high school in the province; it possessed the province's major hospital also and served as an economic centre which attracted people from throughout the province.⁶⁵⁰ As a result Mekelle became a place where people met and talked about social and political issues of relevance to the province and country and this led to the emergence of anti-regime movements under both Haile-Selassie and the Derg.

Teachers were in the forefront of the Mekelle-based opposition to the old regime which took form in the mid-1960s and largely focused on nationalist concerns. Although the

⁶⁵⁰Interview: Chairman Mekelle baito, Mekelle, January 22, 1993.

teachers were organized in the Ethiopian Teachers Association, government control of the Association as well as its prohibition on participation in political activities, encouraged teachers to concentrate on cultural issues, particularly the preservation of Tigrigna and the popularization of Tigrayan songs and dances.⁶⁵¹ The teachers were able to use their position to surreptitiously introduce nationalist ideas to their students and the community and to mount a campaign against those who took Amharigna names. This campaign also focused on Ras Mengesha and others who were held to be pawns of the Amhara regime.

Indeed, Ras Mengesha became a symbolic figure for attack by the urban intellectuals who hated him for speaking Amharigna and oppressing Tigrayan nationalists, although the recriminations teachers experienced were to seem rather mild in light of what followed under the Derg. They doubtlessly also resented the fact that he was supported by the peasants who admired him because of his illustrious Tigrayan ancestry and personal commitment to hard work for the benefit of the province. Moreover, the regime's Amharization policies that Mengesha was introducing and were the focus of the protesting urban intellectuals' opposition had a far greater impact in the towns than in the countryside.

Although teachers could not strike over cultural issues, they did strike regularly over such things as late pay as a means to politicize their members. By the early 1970s Mekelle teachers were becoming more public in their opposition to the regime as they distributed Tigrigna leaflets and newspapers. In 1974, some were directly involved in the overthrow of the old regime. As was the case in other Tigrayan towns, urban civilian politics proliferated in the brief period before the Derg was able to exert its authority. Unlike Adigrat, in Mekelle the TPLF quickly gained ascendancy over the other opposition forces,

⁶⁵¹Interview: Gebregiorgis Gegziabher and Gebrekidan Abay, Mekelle, January 1, 1993.

notably the EPRP, because of the importance of the national question to the townspeople.⁶⁵²

Because Mekelle was the provincial capital the Derg was much quicker than in other Tigrayan towns in making its presence felt and this was accomplished in an even harsher manner than elsewhere. In the period 1976 - 1977,⁶⁵³ at any rate before the formal introduction of the Red Terror, some twenty-one teachers were arrested at the ETA offices in the town by the Derg for their support of the TPLF and taken from the province, after which they were never heard of again.⁶⁵⁴ It has only been since the EPRDF victory that it has been learned that the teachers had been taken to Wollo where they were set on fire and then buried by a grader.

Mekelle was to again fleetingly come under the political spotlight as a result of a daring TPLF raid on the town jail on February 9, 1986, which freed 1,800 inmates in fifteen minutes.⁶⁵⁵ However, normally Derg control was such as to largely preclude dissent for the duration of the war. Moreover, unlike the Tigrayan towns to the north and west, Mekelle was not captured by the TPLF in 1988 and it was not until 1989 and the final days of the conflict in the province that the town was liberated.

While Ras Mengesha was opposed in Mekelle and the other towns by the urban-based intellectuals for his identification with the Amhara-dominated regime in Addis Ababa, in Maichew in the southern extreme of Region III the Tigrayan governor was resented for his perceived negligence of the town and the area surrounding it. Mengesha was widely held to be opposed to the development of the south because of an inter-feudal quarrel that he

⁶⁵²Interview: Chairman Mekelle baito, Mekelle, January 22, 1993.

⁶⁵³Tigrayan ETA officials interviewed were not certain of the date.

⁶⁵⁴Interview: Gebregiorgis Gegziabher and Gebrekidan Abay, Mekelle, January 1, 1993.

⁶⁵⁵*People's Voice*, July/September 1986, p. 8.

had inherited from his father, Ras Seyoum, who had long fought the local awardja governor, Dejazmach Aberra Tedla. Mengesha drew his legitimacy from the fact that he was a grandson of Yohannis IV and was married to Emperor Haile-Selassie's granddaughter, Ayda, while for his part Aberra had imperial links through his granddaughter, Sara Gizew, who was married to Haile-Selassie's second son, Makonnen. As a result local people attributed the area's lack of civic amenities, and particularly a high school and good clinic, to discrimination because of 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 protesting against the lack of development in the awardja, and in particular demonstrating for a high school. Until 1973 when a high school was finally built in Maichew the awardja's schools only went up to grade eight, thus necessitating students going to Mekelle or Addis Ababa for further education.

Maichew citizens 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 arouse local students.⁶⁵⁶ Zemacha students were also politically active in the town. But it was probably local teachers, who were getting radical literature from China and other socialist countries and sources, and using it to appeal to their students, who had the biggest impact.⁶⁵⁷ Mobilizing around these local grievances went hand-in-hand with support for such Ethiopian-wide demands as "land to the tiller".

Members of the TNO and later some TPLF cadres organized cells in Maichew before the fighting forces of the Front reached the area. They also operated underground cells in both of the major towns of the eastern lowlands, Mahoni and Chercha, as the establishment of urban cells was held to be necessary before military operations could be

⁶⁵⁶See chapter four where there is commentary on this student.

⁶⁵⁷Interview: Berhe Belay, Maichew, March 25, 1993.

successfully carried out in an area.⁶⁵⁸ The TPLF was not alone: the EPRP also had a well-developed support apparatus among teachers, students, and civil servants.⁶⁵⁹ The EPRP was concentrated in the towns and advocated the setting up of a "people's government". In contrast local residents report that the much smaller TPLF identified themselves as Tigrayan nationalists and its propaganda emphasized the need to first free the province from the Derg. Political competition between the EPRP and the TPLF was fierce in the southern towns, sometimes giving way to fisticuffs, but the conflict between them went underground or largely disappeared with the advent of the Red Terror.

Since it had the largest number of supporters in the awardja's towns and posed a threat to the Derg in Addis Ababa which the TPLF did not, the EPRP suffered the most from the terror. The Derg's fear of the TPLF's espousal of Tigrayan nationalism, however, is evidenced by the fact that town residents were made to speak Amharigna publicly and many went so far as to change their Tigrayan-sounding names to Amharigna ones. Mere possession of an opposition pamphlet led to arrest and possible torture and death. The politically suspect, often teachers, were arrested and would be urged to become double agents; if they refused they would be imprisoned or shot, their bodies being left outside their schools to intimidate others.

Explaining life under the regime, a resident who grew up in Maichew said,

"People had to be clever or tactical. It was a soldier's government and you had to give soldiers food, *tej*, 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

⁶⁵⁸Interview: Somere Geresgi, Asfa Hailu and Woldegirgis Kiros, Mahoni, March 30, 1993.

⁶⁵⁹Ibid.

people, even with one's family as they might be employed by Derg security. You could only talk about sex, food and tej." ⁶⁶⁰

In the face of such persecution many possible victims evacuated their homes and left for Sudan, the forest, or to the base areas of the EPRP or the TPLF. After an individual's disappearance the Derg would arrest that person's parents and this often led to the other children leaving and joining the opposition. A former member of the Commission for Organizing the Party of the Workers of Ethiopia (COPWE), and thus in a position to know who directed the persecution, 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."⁶⁶¹

The Derg's authoritarian restructuring of civil life was probably felt most forcefully in the introduction of convoys in the face of the declining security in the area. By 1977 the Derg required that all vehicle traffic traveling north from Maichew or south to the Wollo border be restricted to convoys and beginning in 1980 convoys were deemed necessary to move from Maichew to Mahoni, a distance of only twenty kilometres.⁶⁶² Shortly thereafter citizens of Mahoni were required to get government permission to attend weddings two kilometres outside of the town.⁶⁶³ These measures invariably interfered with the livelihoods of merchants and traders, but they were also resented by ordinary people pursuing everyday activities.

Agame

⁶⁶⁰Interview: Berhe Belay, Maichew, March 25, 1993.

⁶⁶¹Ibid. Berhe's reference to "surviv[ing] tactically" should probably be understood to be collaborating when necessary.

⁶⁶²Interview: Kidane Hailu, Afarly Emir and Tadesse Woldelabanos, Mahoni, March 30, 1993.

⁶⁶³Ibid.

In a province known for its poverty, Agame in the northern part of the TPLF's Region III stands out to the extent that in Addis Ababa and Asmara, where the destitute farmers of the awardja were frequently driven in search of wage labour, the term "Agame" was usually one of abuse and equated with coolie or unskilled labourer, and referred to one called upon to lift and carry heavy objects.⁶⁶⁴ Like all of 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 the problems of the awardja were not different from elsewhere, but the scale of the problems were. And the very severity of the problems forced survival responses on the people of a different magnitude than elsewhere in Tigray.

With the exception of southern Tigray which in good years has two marked rainy seasons, allowing its farmers to plant two crops, the rest of Tigray's farmers are dependent on a single season of rain to grow their single crop. In parts of Agame farmers were able, indeed forced, to draw ground water, and by carrying it on their backs to their fields, could sometimes produce as many as three, usually tiny, crops. Despite this industry,⁶⁶⁵ farmers' plots were the smallest in Tigray according to studies carried out during the final days of the imperial regime⁶⁶⁶ In any case these conditions forced peasant families to depend to a significant degree on off-farm work for survival.

Much of the political economy of the area has resulted from the land crisis and the response to that crisis. First, as noted, has been the push to grow crops year-round, and beyond production of the basic subsistence grain crops, this encouraged market gardening

⁶⁶⁴Interview: Dada Mengesha, Adigrat, March 3, 1993.

⁶⁶⁵Agame farmers are renowned in Ethiopia for their commitment to hard work.

⁶⁶⁶See CSO, *Report on a Survey of Tigray, Wellega and Wollo Provinces 1963 - 1967*.

on a scale not witnessed elsewhere in Tigray. This in turn led to greater consumption of vegetables (and doubtlessly a more balanced diet than the largely grain dependent diet that is common in the province), and greater commercialization as the products were sold on the market. Again as elsewhere in Tigray, Agame farmers often went to the west to work on commercial farms after the rainy season. And in disproportionately large numbers they went to Asmara (a city in close proximity to Agame), and to Addis Ababa, where they have typically worked as unskilled factory labourers, sometimes forming a lumpen group in these towns, hence the derogatory inference sometimes attached to the term "Agame". Destitution and nearness to the Red Sea also favoured poor Agame peasants going legally, or more often illegally, to Saudia Arabia and other Gulf states, as labourers and small merchants.

Doubtlessly the most creative response to land shortage, however, was in the large numbers of people from Agame who become merchants and traders. Taking advantage of their strategic position on the Addis Ababa to Asmara road, these merchants dominated the transport of Tigrayan raw materials, chiefly grain and cattle, to the main metropolises of the country to exchange for the consumer and manufactured goods they returned with. Indeed, Agame merchants can be found throughout Ethiopia and abroad, and now rival the Gurage, traditionally the pre-eminent merchant and trading class of the country.

The Contest for Ascendancy over the Opposition

The TPLF's stated reason for its rapid movement from its base area in western Tigray to rural Agame was to propagate its program of land reform and local administration. In Sobia woreda in the northeast of Agame where the TPLF set up its base in early 1976 farm size per family rarely exceeded a minuscule .25 hectares even after the Front's

reforms, far too little land to support even a small family.⁶⁶⁷ However, the desire to implement land reform was not the only reason the TPLF was attracted to this area. 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."⁶⁶⁸

Indeed, the EPRP established rural bases in Agame at almost exactly the same time that the TPLF was moving into the area. As noted earlier, the EPRP was pre-eminently an urban-based multinational student organization that had hoped to assume national power with the collapse of the Haile-Selassie regime. But by 1975 the Party had begun to appreciate that the struggle for state power would be both longer and more difficult than had been thought earlier. Although 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, it also recognized a marginal role for the peasantry in this alliance.

The EPRP thus argued the primacy of the class struggle over the national Tigrayan struggle, and hence held that the TPLF should accept their political leadership. The EPRP did not recognize the Ethiopian peasantry as constituting a revolutionary force in its own right and therefore, unlike the TPLF, never considered the peasants to be critical to the outcome of the revolution. Thus the decision of the EPRP leadership to establish rural bases had far more to do with gaining control of the countryside as a means to exert pressure on the towns than with any notion of making a peasant based struggle the centre-piece of the Party's political strategy.

⁶⁶⁷Interview: Teklay Awash and Tadele Alemsiged, Adigrat, March 3, 1993.

⁶⁶⁸Interview: Aela Assesse, Sobia, March 7, 1993.

A further incentive to begin operations in the countryside was provided by the terrorism to which urban Ethiopian political life was being subjected as the Derg consolidated its power. Indeed, the rapid deterioration of civil life in urban Ethiopia beginning in 1975 was held to promote the conditions that would herald the coming to power of the EPRP and its allies. 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 the EPRP 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 Irop woreda in the northeast of the awardja which encompassed the remote Asimba Mountain, was chosen for a number of reasons, some of which bear a marked resemblance to those which led the TPLF to establish its initial base at Dedebeit. First, Asimba was remote and inaccessible and the revolutionaries were 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. Second, the EPRP 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. Third, 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 force included many non-Tigrayan and non-Tigrigna speaking members. Like the Dedebeit base of the TPLF, the government's presence was limited in the Asimba area and shiftas had free reign.

According to Bereket Simon, who was shortly thereafter to join the EPRP at Asimba, the initial group of seventeen EPRP fighters had been trained and equipped by the Palestine

Liberation Organization in the Middle East, and then returned to Ethiopia by way of Eritrea through the auspices of the EPLF which had relations with the PLO.⁶⁶⁹ Although the EPRP's position was to change, at this time they, like the TPLF, supported Eritrea's right to independence, a critical precondition to gaining the EPLF's support.⁶⁷⁰

The fate of the other EPRP contingents cannot be followed here, except to note that very early on virtually the entire Wollo force was destroyed by the Derg, leading the EPRP to order its forces in Tigray and Gondar not to engage in military operations without the explicit permission of the Party's Addis Ababa based leadership.⁶⁷¹ As these events took place at approximately the same time that the Agame contingent was taking up positions, it was to have a negative effect on its ability to acquire the necessary military skills and battle victories to gain prestige in the eyes of the peasants.

A greater obstacle to the EPRP's political success in Agame was occasioned by the Derg's land proclamation which was enacted shortly after the Party launched its armed struggle. Already doubtful of the revolutionary potential of the peasantry, this enactment drove a wedge into the Party, leading eight of the original seventeen Agame cadres to desert the EPRP.⁶⁷² The Derg's commitment to far reaching land reform demonstrated, in the view of the deserters, 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. How wrong the dissident EPRP members were about the land reform and its impact, at least on the Tigrayan peasantry, would soon become apparent.

⁶⁶⁹Interview: Bereket Simon, Addis Ababa, June 16, 1993.

⁶⁷⁰Andarachew Tirunch, p. 174.

⁶⁷¹Interview: Bereket Simon, Addis Ababa, June 16, 1993.

⁶⁷²Ibid.

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 further that even after the Derg was able to acquire a presence in the rural areas that its military and bureaucratic structure would preclude the reforms from having a democratic character. Lastly, the TPLF contended that the Amhara domination of the regime ensured that it would never be responsive to the national sensitivities of the Tigrayan peasantry. As a result the Front was confident that only its program of land reform could meet the needs of the peasants.

The TPLF was attracted to Agame by the presence of the EPRP, and to a far lesser extent, the TLF. The TPLF was probably too small and weak for its leadership to seriously contemplate challenging the larger and better financed and armed EPRP militarily at this early stage. However, it was not prepared to leave the field open to the EPRP and did want to compete with, and distinguish itself politically from, the EPRP, as well as perhaps work to 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. There was also a rough division of territory between the two groups for the purposes of their political work, with the EPRP centred in Irop woreda and the TPLF in the adjacent woreda of Sobia.

What these woredas shared was their isolation and their poverty: Irop was (and is) reckoned to be the poorest woreda in Tigray, and Sobia the second poorest. Irop, as noted, is inhabited by the minority Saho people who live on both sides of the Eritrean-Ethiopian border. The Saho are largely nomadic and for this reason no land reform was ever carried out in the area, either by the EPRP, Derg, or the TPLF. The Saho have their own culture, and speak their own unwritten language, although almost all are fluent in

Tigrigna.⁶⁷³ The majority of the woreda's approximately twenty thousand inhabitants are Roman Catholic, having been converted a century ago by Lazarist priests from France. Although disputes sometimes arose between the nomadic Saho and their settled neighbours over grazing rights and water, the communities have generally been well-disposed to one another.

To the west of Irop lies Sobia with a population of twenty-two thousand inhabitants spread among fourteen tabias, seven in the highlands, five in the middle lands, and two in the lowlands. The vast majority of the people are ethnic Tigrayans and most are Ethiopian Orthodox Christians. Approximately five percent of the population are Saho and a slightly larger percent are Catholic. The woreda of Sobia has a Catholic Church and an elementary school.

Irop's greater isolation and the nomadic character of its people probably served to protect it from feudal lords and the tentacles of the Orthodox Church. In Sobia this was not the case. The peasants generally held *risti* land under the imperial regime but, as has been the case everywhere in this examination of Tigray, these rights were frequently overturned by powerful lords or their agents. Peasants in the woreda reported that poor farmers had no place for cattle, goats and other animals as land was limited and the nobles had priority.⁶⁷⁴ In a province where possession of oxen is a key indicator of wealth, fewer than twenty-five percent of Sobia's peasants were reckoned to own any oxen.⁶⁷⁵ Rich farmers who had good relations with nobles and local administrators got farmland, but even they had to pay bribes. Usually the nobles simply chose the most fertile land and demarcated it for themselves.

⁶⁷³Interview: Aba Tesfa Michael Seyum, Sobia, March 6, 1993.

⁶⁷⁴Interview: Gersgeher Sebhat, Kashi Herur Merhiri, Biru Gese and Hagos Meginna, Sobia, March 7, 1993.

⁶⁷⁵Ibid.

There was no gulti land in Sobia, rich church officials or monasteries, but one-third of the land in each tabia was held by local branches of the Ethiopian Orthodox Church. This land was used by local priests, and although their descendants could not inherit it, they did benefit from having farming plots that were larger than their peasant neighbours. The priests also benefited from a "cross tax" and received injera and suwa for such things as performing baptisms and grieving ceremonies. Peasants were also required to pay an "archbishop tax" of ten kilograms of grain that went out of the woreda.

The initial EPRP contingent in Agame was minuscule, but by 1978 Bereket Simon estimated they had between 3,000 to 4,000 fighters,⁶⁷⁶ although some TPLF sources consider this estimate too high. In spite of the initial support received by the EPLF, the EPRP moved closer to the ELF, which managed through its Middle Eastern connections to supply it with weapons and equipment. The EPRP was also well financed, having funds taken from a bank robbery in Addis Ababa that netted over one million birr (\$500,000.), as well as finances supplied by affiliates of the Ethiopian Student Movement in Europe and North America.⁶⁷⁷ This meant, according to the testimonies of area peasants, that EPRP cadres paid for their food and lodging, and not surprisingly the peasants considered the Party to be "rich".⁶⁷⁸ 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

⁶⁷⁶Interview: Simon Bereket, Addis Ababa, June 16, 1993.

⁶⁷⁷Ibid.

⁶⁷⁸Interview: Aela Assesse, Tsefa Baliho, Desta Hadimey, Rossine Mahafu and Hale Dademos, Sobia, March 7, 1993.

carried around in their pockets.⁶⁷⁹ While the peasants held TPLF poverty to be a virtue, they argued that if the EPRP had come as liberators, as their sons and daughters to organize them, then they should not have to pay for their food and accommodation, but that it should be provided by those in whose name the struggle was being fought, that is the peasantry. The willingness of the EPRP to pay even higher than market prices for food items to gain peasant support may in fact have deprived the poor of badly needed food in short supply, 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. Repeatedly in interviews peasants referred to the EPRP's use of violence when peasants or their leaders refused to cooperate with the Party's plans. In addition peasants reported that the EPRP interfered with their sales of cattle and other livestock because they thought that if people were going to the town markets they would betray them to the Derg.⁶⁸⁰ But ultimately the EPRP's violence against the peasants demonstrated the political weakness of their program which advocated urban insurrection, but involved 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 program, which emphasized 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

⁶⁷⁹Interview: Gersheher Sebhat, Kashi Herur Merhiri, Biru Gese and Hagos Meginna, Sobia, March 7, 1993.

⁶⁸⁰Ibid.

did the EPRP, so there was no difference."⁶⁸¹ According to another peasant, "The people were confused when they heard EPRP's position that they were fighting for all of Ethiopia and knew that they needed their (Tigrayan) rights first so they waited."⁶⁸²

While the EPRP never questioned its belief in multinational-based revolutionary struggle, the land crisis in Agame and peasant pressure forced the Party to move on its weak commitment to land reform. Two land redistributions were attempted in Adi Aduka and Embeto tabias in Sobia woreda, apparently because the EPRP had members in those tabias.⁶⁸³ After a politicization 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, it is not surprising that accusations were subsequently made that the EPRP's friends got the best land.⁶⁸⁴

The TPLF were quick to advocate land reform, but the movement was in no hurry to actually carry it out. When the reforms were implemented they were carefully thought out, systematic in their execution, and involved the peasantry at every step of the process. The TPLF's first land reform 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. Although the Sobia land reform was to be a model for subsequent TPLF reforms in Tigray, the declining security situation in the woreda and the demands placed upon the tiny TPLF force elsewhere in the province meant that there were to be three more land reforms over

⁶⁸¹Interview: Mabrato Adhana, Sobia, March 8, 1993.

⁶⁸²Interview: Aela Assesse, March 7, 1993.

⁶⁸³Interview: Kashi Fescha, Adigrat, March 10, 1993.

⁶⁸⁴Ibid.

the next fourteen years. Even some of the principles laid down in Sobia, such as each family getting an equal portion of land rather than the individuals in the family, were later to be discarded. But the care with which the reforms were carried out and the active involvement and acceptance of the peasants in each step of the process were to be hallmarks in the TPLF land reforms that would distinguish them from those of the EPRP and the Derg.

The TPLF did not have the capacity to absorb large numbers of fighters during its first years of the armed struggle, but it did encourage the establishment of local militias. The major function of the TPLF militias was defense of their villages against the Derg, but at this early stage the Derg did not have the capacity to threaten outlying woredas like Sobia. Therefore, the militias' major task was to assist the TPLF in winning over other villagers. According to an early member of the Sobia militia, "we concentrated on poor and middle peasants, but there were no differences and we would agitate in any place where we met people."⁶⁸⁵

Political competition between the TPLF and the EPRP increasingly created tension, particularly as the peasants were clearly moving to the TPLF camp. As in western Tigray, the 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",⁶⁸⁶ and the upshot of this was a peasant initiative to decide formally at a woreda-wide meeting which organization to support.

The peasants' meeting was convened at Galat tabia in the centre of Sobia woreda late in 1978. Three to five representatives were selected from each tabia, again depending on the

⁶⁸⁵Interview: Mabrato Adhana, Sobia, March 8, 1993.

⁶⁸⁶Interview: Gersgeher Sebhat, Kashi Herur Merhiri, Biru Gese, Hagos Meginna, Sobia, March 7, 1993.

size of the tabia, and for four to six hours each day for eight consecutive days the peasants debated whether to support the TPLF or the EPRP. A local peasant, Assesse Nsgabe, chaired the meeting in which both organizations, together with the ELF, had observers but did not actively participate. According to participants, the delay in reaching a decision was due to the need to reach a consensus, since a minority of the representatives were members of the EPRP militia and they had to be won over to the majority position of supporting the TPLF.

Mabrato Adhana, an observer of the meetings, said, "People supported the TPLF because they felt that two political organizations 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."⁶⁸⁷ The meeting ended with a resolution being passed and presented in written form to the two organizations which concluded, "the EPRP was fighting for all of Ethiopia, but needed to organize each nationality first to get its own freedom, and therefore each nationality should fight in its own area."⁶⁸⁸ The EPRP was then asked to leave the woreda.

The EPRP did not accept the resolution and returned the next day and captured and tied up the chairman of the meeting, Assesse, and took him away, whereupon the peasants followed and demanded his release which they subsequently achieved.⁶⁸⁹ Other peasant leaders were subsequently captured, held for some time, and fined before being released. One peasant, Abraha Tecklehaimonot, was tied up and thrown off a cliff to his death by EPRP fighters.⁶⁹⁰

⁶⁸⁷Interview: Mabrato Adhana, Sobia, March 8, 1993.

⁶⁸⁸Ibid.

⁶⁸⁹Interview: Gersgeher Sebhat, Kashi Henur Merhiri, Biru Gese and Hagos Meginna, Sobia, March 7, 1993.

⁶⁹⁰Ibid.

A TPLF militia member from Sobia said that during his field training, "[w]e were told that if we can resolve our differences there will be no shooting as we don't want to kill them (the EPRP), so even if provoked don't do anything and try to resolve our differences."⁶⁹¹ Nonetheless, violent conflict between the TPLF and the EPRP was perhaps inevitable, but 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 suspected that the timing of the outbreak of fighting between the Front and the EPRP was based on the latter's collusion with the EDU. An ex-EPRP member gives credence to this suspicion, but said that in addition to this factor, the timing of the conflict was designed to defuse growing internal Party criticism by waging war against external forces.⁶⁹²

What is clear is that the peasants' rejection of the EPRP in Sobia served to precipitate the TPLF-EPRP war. 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 and then leaving their corpses on the road, which had the effect of infuriating the peasants. In the face of this aggression, TPLF fighters in the woreda and their local militia supporters retreated to central Tigray.

If the timing of the EPRP attack was made in the belief that the TPLF had been seriously weakened by its bitter engagements with the EDU, this was a serious error of judgment. The number of TPLF fighters had indeed been seriously depleted, both as a result of the

⁶⁹¹Interview: Tuku Beyene, Sobia, March 8, 1993.

⁶⁹²Interview: Simon Bereket, Addis Ababa, June 16, 1993.

war with the EDU and through defections in the difficult first two years since the Front had launched its armed struggle, but the result was a TPLF steeled in battle, confident of its skills, and increasingly supported by the Tigrayan peasantry.

In fact it was the EPRP that had been seriously weakened, both politically and militarily by the experience of the past two years. The EPRP was the primary victim of the Red Terror that the Derg unleashed in 1977, and by March 1978 the Derg was claiming, only a little prematurely, that the Party had been completely wiped out.⁶⁹³ And while the terror encouraged the movement of youth, particularly in northern Ethiopia, to join the EPRP in its rural bases, the Party's weak program and continuing devotion to an urban insurrection that it was increasingly incapable of leading, meant that it was unable to take advantage of the changed circumstances.

The EPRP's superior numbers and armament compared to the TPLF did not overcome its demoralization, internal political conflict, poor relations with the peasantry and, despite almost three years in the field, lack of military experience. The EPRP also ran afoul of the two Eritrean fronts. 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 jeopardized when the EPRP apparently referred to the ELF as one of its mass organizations.⁶⁹⁴

It was thus a very weak EPRP that confronted a small but emboldened TPLF. 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

⁶⁹³Andargachew, p. 174.

⁶⁹⁴Ibid., p. 174.

EPRP was roundly defeated. The TPLF then forced the EPRP to retreat to its base in Asimba, where after five days of fighting it completely disintegrated. 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 retreated 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 Peoples Democratic Movement (EPDM).

This victory thus left the TPLF in a dominant position in opposition to the Derg in the northeast at the same time that it had achieved dominance in the west. The TPLF, however, was too small and weak at this stage of the war to consolidate its position in the area and move to the south and it was not until 1980 that it would finally establish a base of operations in southern Tigray.

Developments in Southern Tigray

Unlike other parts of Tigray, the TPLF's struggle for the southern part of Region III took place within a different time framework and involved important ethnic considerations. While the TPLF was able to quickly establish itself in most parts of rural Tigray and largely complete the organization of local administrations and peasant militias, and start their land reform programs by 1980 - 1981, the Front was not able to effectively become established in the southern part of the region until about 1980.

War, geography and history are intimate bed-fellows and southern Tigray has a number of unique characteristics critical to the course and outcome of the struggle in this area. Perhaps the most distinctive geographical feature is its pattern of two annual rainfalls, the

short and more unpredictable *Belg* rains of February-March, and the much longer *Kempt* rains from June to September. Two rains so far apart usually allows for two growing seasons, and hence a different agriculture pattern than that of most of Tigray. For this and other reasons that will be referred to, the south is also held to be only second to the western region in terms of its economic or agricultural potential.

Geographically the south is very mixed, having densely populated highlands to the west, falling off rapidly to the middle level plains as one moves east. Similar to the rest of Tigray, the highlands suffer the ill-effects of soil infertility, over-grazing, and deforestation from long and intensive use. Except for pockets in the southwest of Agew-speaking people who tend to be well-integrated into Tigrayan society, and some Amharigna-speaking people in the south, virtually all of the highland peoples are Tigrigna-speaking. Most highlanders are followers of Ethiopian Orthodox Christianity.

The lower lands, or *kola* lands, are rich agricultural plains bound on the west by sharply rising highlands, and in the east less dramatically by gradually falling elevations as one passes into the Danikal Depression, going into what is now the independent state of Eritrea, and on to the Red Sea. Like the southern highlands the eastern plains are characterized by two seasons of rainfall, but they are even more unpredictable, leading to a boom-bust economic pattern.⁶⁹⁵ A tabia chairman put it thus: "When rains come people are rich, but with no rains they are poor and will sell their labour as far away as Humera and Sudan."⁶⁹⁶

⁶⁹⁵Television's portrayal of the starving masses huddled in the feeding camps near the town of Korem during the great Ethiopian famine of 1984-85 left a lasting impression of a destroyed land and a destitute people. But in 1993 the plains to the east of Korem were everywhere green and rich, and the people, if not always well-fed, were nonetheless not starving. However, in 1994 eastern Tigray was again suffering from drought, thus testifying to the vagaries of the climate.

⁶⁹⁶Interview: Berihun Gebre, Bela, March 27, 1993.

For similar reasons to those referred to in the discussion of western Tigray, the eastern plains with their low elevations have lower population densities than those found in the highlands, and largely because of this they do not suffer the same degree of soil infertility or the consequences of over-grazing. Land-holdings are typically two to three times greater than those of the highlands, and even after the TPLF land reform it was possible in some areas for a large family to collectively hold six or more hectares of land,⁶⁹⁷ something unheard in highland Tigray. Given a pattern of droughts, however, such large land holdings are sometimes necessary to carry the peasants over seasons and years of little or no production.

As elsewhere in Tigray it was possession of capital, largely in the form of cattle, goats and sheep, that distinguished the rich farmer from the poor. Unlike much of Tigray, however, most eastern plains' peasants did possess cattle, thus testifying to a generally higher standard of living in this area. Again like western Tigray, the kola lands have a less hospitable climate; diseases like malaria and typhoid are more prevalent, and social infrastructure in the form of schools, hospitals, roads and government services were less developed than in the highlands. The shifta culture was also an important feature of life.

The Political Economy of Ethnic Conflict

It is the particular mix of peoples and geography that largely shaped the course, character and outcome of the TPLF-led struggle in this area. The southern Tigrayan lowlands form a transition area between Tigrayan and Amhara peoples, but it is largely language that has historically separated these peoples, their cultures being very similar and long shared. Such tensions as existed were of a low level, with some of the population wanting to be

⁶⁹⁷Interview: Biru Kiros, Maichew, March 26, 1993.

associated with the dominant Amhara culture to the south, while others preferred the Tigrayan culture to the north.

To the far east⁶⁹⁸ were the lowlands of the still largely nomadic Afar people with their culture and economy bound up in cattle and camels. From the sixteenth century onwards they confronted the Raya and Azebo people who were originally Oromo pastoralists who migrated from lands to the south of Shoa during the course of Ahmed the Gran's military campaign and found these lands largely uninhabited. These same lands were used by the nomadic Afar to graze their cattle and the stage was set for a conflictual relationship which has continued into the present.

"The main conflict between the Raya and the Afar stemmed from similar cultures and customs for proving manhood," noted a Raya elder⁶⁹⁹ The economies of both peoples were based on cattle and nomadism (the Raya gradually adapting in time to settled forms of existence), thus ensuring disputes over grazing lands and water that had the potential always of ending in violence. This was particularly a problem during the Belg rains when the nomads brought their cattle to the higher lands for grazing. Both peoples also placed much value on the tradition of raiding, and in particular on castrating one's opponent to demonstrate manliness and as a necessary task for a young man to carry out before he could marry. An Afar said, "In the past the Raya people were horseman 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."⁷⁰⁰ A Raya might well have made a similar, and equally accurate, observation.

⁶⁹⁸This is the region of the former awardja of Maichew. After the EPRDF victory in 1991 it became the autonomous Afar area of Zone Two.

⁶⁹⁹Interview: Fitwari Kebede Arayah, Mahoni, March 30, 1993.

⁷⁰⁰Interview: Barento Abadayme, Chercha, March 27, 1993.

As has been observed earlier, the Raya managed to preserve their distinct institutions and way of life until they were defeated by Haile-Selassie's army during the Woyene. In the wake of this crushing defeat the Raya were forced to give up much of their semi-nomadic culture and become settled farmers, although often as tenants on lands they formerly owned. Moreover, in the past fifty years most of them lost their original language and religious affiliation and now speak Tigrigna and adhere to Orthodox Christianity. Until recently most Tigrayans saw the Raya and Azebo as "uncultured" peoples, but increasingly they are accepted into mainstream Tigrayan society and most other Tigrayans now identify the Raya and Azebo merely as the names of the areas which they inhabit,⁷⁰¹ not as a distinctive people.

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 southeastern plains, which has become one of the largest in the province as a result of the Afar trade. Here the Afar brought their cattle, consumer goods from Djibouti and, in some areas, salt to 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.

Cross-cutting the area's ethnic divisions is a Christian-Moslem divide, although this has not historically been a source of conflict here or elsewhere in Tigray. There were few Moslems among the trading population of the highlands of the southern part of the eastern region, but in the less populated eastern plains and lowlands (and specifically the strategic woredas of Chercha, Mahoni, Inda Mahoni and Adishuhu) Moslems constituted a

⁷⁰¹Interview: Abadi Marasa, Maichew, March 24, 1993; Interview: Fitwari Kebede Arayah, Mahoni, March 30, 1993.

significant minority.⁷⁰² Apart from the Afar, most Moslems were originally Oromo, although other Moslems led by Abdul Mohammed from Gondar also settled in the area.⁷⁰³ Moslems in this area have held land since the time of King Fasilidas (1632-1667), but they have never been part of the local power structure. Nowhere in Tigray did religious divisions have a significant impact on the struggle in Tigray, but the existence of a large politically marginalized and economically underdeveloped ethnic minority in the form of the Afar within the province's boundaries did pose difficulties for the TPLF.

Revolt in the South

In the southern parts of Region III the TPLF was most active in the isolated highlands to the west of the main Addis Ababa - Asmara road link, and later in the far eastern lowlands of the Afar people. From positions of strength in Tembien in the central region, the TPLF moved south in the late 1970s setting up a headquarters in Samre, a village whose only road link even in 1993 was with the distant capital of Mekelle. Like other early TPLF strongholds Samre was isolated and shifta-ridden, although the shifta were displaced with the arrival of the TPLF.⁷⁰⁴ The TPLF was on occasion forced to retreat from this area 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 of this area to the TPLF.

Operating from Samre the TPLF had the capacity to conduct further operations to the south, and this led to the early capture of Bora and the lands of the adjacent Agew peoples who had largely been assimilated into the dominant Semitic culture as evidenced by the extent of the inter-marriage with Tigrayans and Amhara in the area. From the position of

⁷⁰²Interview: Sheik Ahmed Ibrahim, Maichew, March 26, 1993.

⁷⁰³Interview: Sheik Nuri Barantu, Hussien Omar and Ali Mahdi, Mahoni, March 31.

⁷⁰⁴Interview: Merusue Woldemam, Maichew, March 25, 1993.

strength in Bora the TPLF was able to capture and briefly hold the key Wollo town of Sokota. Reinforcing the Front's political and military objectives, a rough road was constructed at TPLF urging, but with 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 southeast.⁷⁰⁵ Notwithstanding TPLF successes in this area, it was unable to use it 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 their areas of strength in the northern part of Region III along the eastern lowland corridor to Maichew awradja. They 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. Second, 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. Third, to use the territory as a base from which to launch attacks on the main Derg bases strung out along the main north-south road from Addis Ababa to Asmara. Lastly, operating from secure bases in the south, to carry out attacks on the road links from Kembolcha in Wollo to the Red Sea port of Assab. The latter attacks had the additional purpose of hijacking Derg military vehicles to acquire ammunition which the TPLF always needed.⁷⁰⁶ 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.

⁷⁰⁵Interview: Abadi Marasa, Maichew, March 24, 1993.

⁷⁰⁶Interview: Zemichael, Mekelle, April 11, 1993.

The move south proved very difficult for the TPLF. The corridor 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 membership of the TPLF. Transporting food was also a significant problem. The TPLF was largely dependent on its own farms in western Tigray for supplying its fighters during the early period of the war and this meant transporting food the length and breadth of Tigray. While the Raya were anxious to be mobilized, these local-bound people were not prepared to leave their homeland and go to the western bases of the TPLF for military training.⁷⁰⁷ But a bigger problem for the TPLF was the need to win the support of the Afar who inhabited the low lands, from where the Front might launch its attacks on Derg positions on the plains.

Winning Over 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 historically distinct Moslem 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 had no particular policy with regard to the Afar and simply concentrated on mobilizing them in a similar manner as other Tigrayans, but they soon learned that these people were different. A TPLF cadre working with the Afar reported his astonishment at finding that many of the Afar had never been in towns or had any understanding of the elements of modern society.⁷⁰⁸ As a trainer of an Afar militia

⁷⁰⁷Ibid.

⁷⁰⁸Ibid.

selected to defend their communities, this cadre found that they could not even explain why they were taking the training.

Afar support for the TPLF developed, as it did among other peoples in Tigray, against a background of Derg brutality and the Front's mobilization 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."⁷⁰⁹ Derg violence against the Afar was also stimulated by the government's suspicion that the Afars' long-standing trade in cattle with the Eritreans served as a cover for relations with the Eritrean Fronts and the TPLF. There was also little doubt that Derg violence against the Afar reflected the traditional disdain of highland Ethiopians for lowland nomads. As a result of Derg persecution many young Afar men living within Tigray joined the TPLF because it was the organization most militantly opposing the Derg in the area. Mobilization of Afar living outside the provincial boundaries who had less contact with Tigrayans and the TPLF, however, proved more complicated.

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 which might attract attention from aerial observers had to be wiped out each morning.⁷¹⁰ 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 of access for 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.⁷¹¹

⁷⁰⁹Interview: Barento Abadayma, Chercha, March 27, 1993.

⁷¹⁰Interview: Zemichael, Mekelle, April 11, 1993.

⁷¹¹Interview: Somere Gersgi, Asfa Hailu and Woldegiorgis Kiros, Mahoni, March 30, 1993.

From its Megale base the TPLF conducted operations in the agriculturally rich eastern plains and harassed traffic on what was still known as the Imperial Highway. In spite of its isolation, in the mid 1980s Rabat was discovered by the Derg who bombed it for a day and then launched a ground attack. TPLF forces escaped capture and at the very time the Derg was announcing its success over the national media the Front was carrying out a contingency plan of attacking Derg forces elsewhere in the area.⁷¹² After the departure of the Derg, the TPLF returned to its base in Rabat and resumed operations.

However, critical to the long-term success of the TPLF in this area was the need to overcome the age-old conflict between the Raya and the Afar. The fact that the leaders and followers of the early TPLF represented an alien cultural tradition made the task that much more difficult. But political and military unity and the need to establish themselves in the south necessitated bringing the Afar into the struggle. Derg depredations would not alone drive the people into the arms of the Front. As with other peoples in Tigray the TPLF had to gain Afar support by making positive contributions to their lives. In the case of the Afar this meant working to end the political and economic discrimination against them. This took a number of forms: economic development, political appeals and education and lastly, summary punishments of those who transgressed rules and laws

Since the Afar were among the most underdeveloped peoples in the province, it was apparent that building bridges to the community would entail a development component. However, unlike other areas in Tigray where resources were mobilized 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

⁷¹²Interview: Zemichael, Mekelle, April 11, 1993.

TPLF cadre involved in the development scheme, the Afar were sometimes reluctant to see their lands developed for fear that, given their political weakness, it would simply encourage highlanders to move in and reap the rewards.⁷¹³ 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 mobilized. Land reform was not a crucial issue for the predominantly nomadic Afar, but those few who were prepared to accept a sedentary life were given access to land under the same conditions as those made available to Tigrayans.⁷¹⁴

There were two other elements in the TPLF's strategy of gaining the support of the Afar. 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, Jiddah-based and anti-Derg Afar Liberation Front (ALF). Established in March 1975 the ALF was led by the Sultan's son, Hanfari, who had left Ethiopia for Saudi Arabia after the Derg's land reform proclamation in 1975.⁷¹⁵ 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 that the Sultan represented. Secondly, that in the strongly traditional clan society of the Afar the Sultan represented the closest thing to a popular leader. Nonetheless, the TPLF's strategy with respect to the ALF did much to undermine the position of the fledgling, but TPLF inspired, Afar Peoples Democratic

⁷¹³Ibid.

⁷¹⁴This is according to Barento Abadayma who availed himself of this opportunity; see Interview: Barento Abadayma, Chercha, March 27, 1993.

⁷¹⁵Erlich, *Struggle Over Eritrea*, p. 74.

Organization (APDO).⁷¹⁶ The policy, however, has proven successful in containing opposition to the EPRDF government, and bringing peace to the Afar autonomous area.

A second component in the TPLF's strategy of gaining Afar support, or at least reducing the prospect of their dissent, was to promise the Afar their right to self-determination. Although the TPLF's program 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 the unique cultural character of the Afar and the imprudence of administering them from Mekelle came from the TPLF. Both the Afar and the TPLF affirmed that the promise of Afar 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 Afar 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 the Tigrayans. Afar self-determination was realized with the EPRDF capture of Addis Ababa, after which Zone Two, as promised, was carved out of Afar populated lands in Tigray, Wollo, and Shoa.⁷¹⁷ At a more practical level the TPLF also attempted to revitalize, and apparently with some success, the traditional reconciliation council of elders, known as *Abagore*, which tried 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,

⁷¹⁶Interview: Ismail Ali and Mohammed Abdul, Mekelle, April 10, 1993.

⁷¹⁷Afar continued to live in Tigray, often on the border of Zone Two, and these people clearly 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 who would not accept the transfer of their land to Afar administration.

traditional values sometimes still prevailed and in those instances the TPLF resorted to rapid trials followed by summary executions.⁷¹⁸

In spite of its political achievements 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, *Uguma* group. *Uguma* was a creation of the Derg, often led by Derg officers, 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. The motivating factor for *Uguma* was the Derg's promise of Afar autonomy but, as the Derg pointed out, this autonomy could not be realized if the EPLF and TPLF "secessionists" were successful in their project of dividing up Ethiopia, with the inevitable result of the division of the Afar people between an independent Eritrea, an "independent" Tigray, a rump Ethiopia, as well as those in Djibouti.

Perhaps because this reasoning was not entirely erroneous, the *Uguma* 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 they received mixed messages: Afar elders urged them to go after the *Uguma*, while the Afar women stressed caution and patience.⁷¹⁹ Conscious of the danger of affronting national sensitivities the Front decided not to attack *Uguma* within Afar territory and risk alienating the wider population of the Afar which might do lasting damage to the TPLF's objectives in the area.

⁷¹⁸Although 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. One year previously a Raya killed an Afar at the Mahoni market and TPLF vengeance was quick and public as the transgressor was tried and executed that day and in the same market.

⁷¹⁹Interview: Zemichael, Mekelle, April 11, 1993.

However, this decision meant that Uguma was able to attack almost with impunity TPLF liberated territories and positions along a wide stretch of eastern Tigray and they usually only had to face the opposition of TPLF militia squads. Uguma's most serious impact was its virtual destruction of the camel trains that moved salt blocks from the deposits in the Danikal lowlands to the Tigrayan highland town of Wukro. They also repeatedly attacked TPLF positions at Berhale, near the Front's base area of Megale.⁷²⁰ Uguma's depredations continued as irritants to the TPLF up to, and even briefly after, the collapse of the Derg, and the organization was reputedly still in existence in the Afar autonomous region when this research was being conducted at the end of March 1993.⁷²¹ Nonetheless, TPLF's successes among the Afar meant they were better placed to carry the war to the plains.

The War on 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 objective proved far more difficult in the south where, apart from the need to overcome ethnic antagonisms, the TPLF had to launch its attacks from the hot dry eastern lowlands onto the plains which were guarded by the Derg-garrisoned towns of Mahoni and Chercha. Moreover, these towns could be easily defended from near-by Derg bases strung out along the main road in Alamata (then in Wollo), Kuha, Adichewu, and their major base of some 10,000 soldiers at Maichew, the regime's largest concentration of troops between Mekelle and the Wollo provincial capital of Desie.

⁷²⁰Interview: Mohammed Ibrahim Ibiahaym, Mohammed Mekela and Nur Muso, Mahoni, April 1, 1993.

⁷²¹Interview: Seyum Negus and Dejafum Gebrecherkos, Chercha, March 28, 1993.

Illustrative of the problem was the 1980 TPLF surprise attack and brief occupation 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 the TPLF forces quickly to evacuate the town. 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 evacuation of it without a fight in 1989.⁷²²

Meanwhile, Chercha by the mid-1980s was being regularly fought over with neither the TPLF nor the Derg able to hold the town for extended periods. For the Derg the town was simply too far from their main bases of Alamata and Mahoni to be able to keep their supply lines open. From the hill that towers over the town they could exert their control, but at the same time the Derg soldiers were largely restricted to the hill. TPLF attacks on supply lines, as well as constant sniping and ambushes, might force Derg troops to leave, but the Front in turn could not long defend the town from sustained ground and air attack by the Derg. Nor did they want to invite that kind of retribution on the town and its inhabitants. As a result of this constant 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.⁷²³ During the 1984 - 1985 famine the TPLF assisted these people in their movement to Sudan, and later facilitated their return by supplying them with rations and oxen.

The departure of the town's merchants furthered Chercha's decline, but in the desperate economic environment of Tigray a new and hardier breed of traders filled the vacuum. Often starting as day labourers employed by rich farmers, they slowly built up capital and

⁷²²Interview: Abadi Marasa, Maichew, March 24, 1993.

⁷²³Interview: Yemane Berhe and Kabede Gebriot, Chercha, March 27, 1993.

began transporting basic consumer items from Alamata and Maichew and later further afield, to Chercha and the other towns on the plains. The movement of traders in and out of TPLF-controlled territories made them suspect to the Derg, and in a contested area like that around Chercha they were constantly exposed to danger. The danger was worse when the TPLF was in control of a town since a Derg attack was a constant possibility. Agew merchants Kiros Abay and Mamo Demerka stayed away from living or trading in TPLF controlled towns, and it is to this caution that they attribute their survival when many traders operating in the area were captured, accused of being TPLF agents, and summarily shot.⁷²⁴

There were no such killings in Mahoni, but traders faced similar dangers, particularly of being caught entering the town with illegally imported goods. The Derg "nationalized" any illegally acquired goods they found in the possession of traders, but they also on occasion took legally acquired goods in the name of development, resettlement, or some other reason. Sometimes the extortion was more direct with Derg soldiers ordering the merchants to set artificially high prices for goods and then taking the extra money from the sales.

Derg rule was equally insensitive to Moslems who formed a significant proportion of the eastern plains population. The Derg's execution of Sheik Sadiq played an important role in antagonizing Moslems,⁷²⁵ and is still referred to with bitterness by Moslems from all parts of Tigray. Sadiq was a "known sheik", a hereditary Moslem leader in the area and under the old regime a large land-owner, and his murder was widely interpreted by Moslems as an attack on their faith.⁷²⁶ The effect of Sadiq's killing was to undermine

⁷²⁴Interview: Kiros Abay and Mamo Demerka, Chercha, March 28, 1993.

⁷²⁵Interview: Sheik Nuri Barantu, Hussan Omar and Ali Mahdi, Mahoni, March 31, 1993.

⁷²⁶Interview: Sheik Ahmed Ibrahim, Maichew, March 26, 1993.

support the Derg should have garnered from Moslems in the area who benefited from the greater religious tolerance of the new regime.

Acts of Derg brutality and atrocities did much to alienate many other local peoples and encourage them to go over to the TPLF. The worst such atrocity in the southern region was undoubtedly the MiG attack on Chercha during a market day in 1989 which killed an estimated 250 people.⁷²⁷ According to eye-witnesses MiGs flew low over the defenseless town strafing and bombing. All the victims were civilians. As was the case in the similar and even more horrific attack on the market in Hausien, there was no immediately discernible military reason to justify it, other than to terrorize the population. De Wall, however, argues convincingly that such attacks were part of a planned Derg attempt to disrupt markets across Tigray with the objective of intimidating peasants who the Derg implicitly acknowledged were almost universally supporting the TPLF.⁷²⁸ Such attacks in surplus-food growing areas such as the south had the additional effect of discouraging poor farmers from elsewhere in Tigray from going to the region to undertake farm labour to supplement their meagre incomes.

So terrifying was the aerial attack on Chercha that to this day the market, on which the economy of the town depends, has not recovered, the Afar in particular avoiding it. While formerly possessing a larger market than that of Mahoni, today Chercha's market is only a fraction of that of its neighbouring town. Indeed, representatives of the Traders' Association in Mahoni attribute the relative success of their market in part to Chercha's misfortune and in part also to the fact that Mahoni was only once, and very briefly, in TPLF hands and hence never a MiG target.⁷²⁹

⁷²⁷Interview: Yemane Bere and Kebede Gebriot, Chercha, March 27, 1993.

⁷²⁸De Waal, pp. 263-4.

⁷²⁹Interview: Kidane Hailu, Afarly Emir and Tadesse Woldelebanos, Mahoni, March 30, 1993.

Outside the towns in the TPLF liberated territories there were fewer problems. After sporadic attempts during the early years of the struggle, the Front did not interfere with or tax area trade. Instead traders were expected to make voluntary contributions to the TPLF, a system that the Front found to be administratively simpler than taxing, while also fostering less opposition and producing more revenue. However, if traders took cattle to Eritrea they had to pay taxes to the TPLF to cover the security costs of their escort and for the necessary receipt to present to the EPLF. Apart from this small and technically illegal trade, the area's long standing trade with Asmara virtually stopped during the war.⁷³⁰

Meanwhile the TPLF purchased rubber sandals, sugar, canned milk and grain from local traders.⁷³¹ Sometimes the TPLF would commission a trader to bring them essential goods in the possession of the Derg, a dangerous task which entailed indirectly trading with the Derg. Soldiers in Mahoni sold their rations and sometimes even bullets to traders, knowing that 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.⁷³² There was a not insubstantial number of merchants who worked closely with the Derg and were richly rewarded, but it appears that none of them were punished after the TPLF's victory because, it was reasoned, such activities were a result of the system and not the fault of the individual.⁷³³

As elsewhere in Tigray the TPLF was only rarely able to "liberate" territories, if by that it is meant that they had the power to stop the Derg from entering an area. Within these

⁷³⁰Interview: Haile Marasa and Woldu Kassa, Maichew, March 24, 1993.

⁷³¹Interview: Kidane Hailu, Afarly Emir and Tadesse Woldelebanos, Mahoni, March 30, 1993.

⁷³²Interview: Zemichael, Mekelle, April 11, 1993.

⁷³³Interview: Haile Marasa and Woldu Kasa, Maichew, March 24, 1993.

territories the TPLF were increasingly able to carry out their propaganda work, and mobilizing the peasants and organizing mass associations and militias often, as was the case in the Mahoni area, within a few kilometres of Derg bases. In the Raya areas the TPLF drew on the legacy of the Woyene, but emphasized by way of contrast that their "Second Woyene" had a political leadership of young educated people who came from the community.⁷³⁴ Unlike in other areas of Tigray, drama was apparently not used as a vehicle for political education in the TPLF appeals to the southern peoples. Moreover, while women and men were normally separated for purposes of political education, in southern Tigray they were brought together because women in the region were used to participating with men.⁷³⁵

Tabia baitos and mass associations were established, as were militias to provide the people some measure of security. When the TPLF took over an area, Derg-established militias were rapidly disarmed, but their members were not punished and they were allowed to stay in their villages and continue farming. TPLF militia members were selected at village meetings and had to appear regularly before such meetings and account for their activities. Recruits were generally given twenty days training at the TPLF Megale base and returned to their villages as armed farmers.⁷³⁶

Militia members' tasks included general security, defending their areas when Derg forces were small enough to challenge, bringing in TPLF fighters if the Derg 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

⁷³⁴Interview: Kiros Hawre, Hagos Barug and Manos Hailu, Mahoni, March 31, 1993.

⁷³⁵Ibid.

⁷³⁶Ibid.

crops would not be damaged and farmers would be free to participate in the fighting.⁷³⁷ Militia casualties varied enormously, but those units near Derg bases suffered the most. In one tabia near the Derg base at Mahoni where figures were available, of 130 militia members some forty-six were reported killed.⁷³⁸

In spite of the TPLF's political successes with the Afar, the Front was not able to dominate the eastern plains to the same extent as it did in much of the rest of the province. Although support for the Derg was never extensive the flat, treeless land dominated by army strongholds in the adjacent highlands made this a poor area in which to conduct a guerrilla war. As a result some of the key TPLF reforms, such as land reform, were not carried out in this area until after liberation.

Land Reform

Land redistribution was not the issue of importance on the plains of southern Tigray that it was in the northern part of Region III and in the central region. But lowland Tigrayan peasants, like those of the west and Tembien, were equally receptive to the TPLF's message of ousting the Derg, Tigrayan nationalism, administrative reform and popular government. In addition they supported a land reform that was fair and in which they would be directly involved in carrying out. As one respondent put it, land distribution was not a crucial issue here, but the rights of the people were.⁷³⁹ With the exception of Berhale near the Tembien border, where the TPLF carried out a land reform in 1982 -

⁷³⁷Interview: Yemane Berhe and Kebede Gebriot, Chercha, March 27, 1993.

⁷³⁸Interview: Kiros Hawre, Hagos Barug and Manos Hailu, Mahoni, March 31, 1993.

⁷³⁹Interview: Sheik Nuri Barantu, Hussien Omar and Ali Mahdi, Mahoni, March 31, 1993.

1983, no further reforms were carried out in the southern part of Region III until after the Derg had been removed from Tigray in 1989 when all the peasant associations were first organized.⁷⁴⁰ Thus this land reform was carried out under peaceful conditions, so that its course and end-results were different than the land reforms thus far considered.

The TPLF's land reform in the southern lowlands took a somewhat different form than that applied elsewhere in Tigray. Because of a land surplus in otherwise land-short Tigray, the Derg attempted to move poor peasants, largely from central Tigray and Agame, to the southeastern plains where various cooperative farms were organized. These cooperatives were resented by indigenous residents, some of whom were killed by the Derg for their opposition to them, and the present Mahoni woreda Peasant Association Chairman was himself forced to go into hiding for eight months because of his opposition.⁷⁴¹ In any event the scheme did not prove successful, apparently because of the difficulty individualistic Tigrayan peasants had in working cooperatively.⁷⁴² After the Derg's retreat from the area the TPLF organized a conference where various systems of land tenure were discussed, debated and voted on, and not surprisingly cooperative farming was overwhelmingly rejected. Migrants to the area were given the option of TPLF help in returning to their home areas, or assistance in acquiring their own individual plots of land in the eastern plains.

The first step in the TPLF's land reform was for each of Mahoni's forty-five kushettes to elect three representatives at a general meeting who then attended a woreda-wide course sponsored by the Front where they were supplied with rations, notebooks and other basic

⁷⁴⁰Interview: Aradie Bezabe, Mahoni, March 24, 1993.

⁷⁴¹Interview: Abchaftu, Mahoni, March 30, 1993.

⁷⁴²Ibid.

materials.⁷⁴³ They then went back to their kushettes and organized people for the land reform. Once again the representatives returned to the woreda centre and discussed the problems and issues they faced in land distribution and then collectively decided on the best way to carry out such things as land measurements, fertility studies and consideration of the proximity of the plots to water sources. Returning to their kushettes they discussed these matters with the inhabitants.

The representatives then registered the people, noting the age of the farmer, his wife and children and the size and quality of farmland in the kushette, after which they decided how much land to allocate to each household. If there was subsequently found to be a surplus of land it was distributed among all the families of the kushette. This was in addition to the establishment of communal grazing areas for the large numbers of cattle owned by the inhabitants of this area. Again the representatives went back to the people to explain the process, gain input and respond to problems before formally completing the reforms. In all the Mahoni land reforms required twenty-two days for the completion of the course, fifteen days for collecting data and carrying out surveys, and a further thirty days for the actual land distribution.

It was agreed that land was to be redistributed every four years, but that was later deemed impractical as such a redistribution would disturb soil conservation efforts that the community is participating in. From reserves in each kushette land may be allocated to children upon their reaching maturity. Where the parents have a lot of land, the son will inherit from his father upon reaching the age of twenty-two. Daughters receive their land entitlements at age sixteen because this is considered the age they normally marry, although land is given to them irrespective of whether they marry. Land from the reserve

⁷⁴³Information on the land reform is taken from the testimony of Mahoni PA officials who were directly involved in the land distribution.

is also being used to meet the needs of those displaced during the war and for those who were still returning to the woreda when this investigation was carried out in March 1993.

Conclusion

Although for purposes of peasant mobilization and war the TPLF linked northeast and southeast Tigray into Region III, they were in many ways quite distinct as this chapter demonstrated. After defeating the EPRP in Agame in the early years of the conflict the fledgling TPLF largely withdrew from the area and concentrated its field of operations elsewhere in the province. And in the south the TPLF was not able to establish a base until 1980.

In the north Agame suffered from poverty and lack of development, but that did not set this area apart from the rest of Tigray, most of which could be described as poor and lacking in development. Nor does oppression, either of a secular or religious nature, seem any greater here than elsewhere in Tigray. Although probably a higher proportion of people from this area than anywhere else in Tigray 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 moral economists' contention that agricultural commercialization encourages peasants to revolt is not supported by the evidence from Agame. The Agame peasants' participation in the market was not a response to modernization and capitalist-created consumer demands, but was a necessary 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 a neighbouring Eritrea in revolt heightened political consciousness in Agame. Indeed, one peasant

informant who had long worked in Asmara claimed he did not pay that much attention to the revolt going on in Eritrea, even when Eritreans told him that Tigrayans would also have to struggle against Haile-Selassie for their freedom.⁷⁴⁴ Another peasant thought that the Eritrean war only had a significant influence on the thinking of Tigrayan intellectuals.⁷⁴⁵

Events in the northeast of Region III, however, did have a significant impact on the course of the Tigrayan revolution. First, the political contest with the TLF and the EPRP helped to clarify and define the TPLF's position on Tigrayan nationalism and the role of multinational movements in revolution. Secondly, the land reform in Sobia gave the TPLF valuable experience in mobilizing peasants and Sobia was to serve as a model for other land distributions that were to be carried out in the province. Thirdly, the TPLF's struggles with the EPRP helped to distinguish the Front, both in political terms and by the character of its cadres, in the minds of the peasants. 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 the wealth and arrogance of the EPRP cadres. Lastly, the TPLF's defeat of the much larger and more prestigious EPRP began to undermine peasant scepticism about the Front's military capabilities.

In the southern part of Region III attempts at nation building figures prominently. Nation building has been a prominent feature of national liberation struggles carried out in pluralist societies, but the TPLF had the advantage of operating in a largely homogeneous ethnic environment where most of the inhabitants had a strong sense of national identity. Southern Tigray, however, with its Agew and Amhara peoples, the Raya whose culture

⁷⁴⁴Interview: Geresgeher Sebhat, Sobia, March 7, 1993.

⁷⁴⁵Interview: Tesfa Baliho, Sobia, March 7, 1993.

(and certainly origins) was different from most of highland Tigray, and particularly the Afar, was in sharp contrast with the rest of the province. Although the TPLF's political mobilization in the southern region had much in common with those conducted in other parts of Tigray, the fact that it was not able to establish a base from which to carry out operations in the south until the 1980s speaks to the difficulty the Front had in moving down the Derg-defended eastern corridor, but more importantly, it speaks to the greater time and effort expended in mobilizing the population in a pluralist context.

Such strategic and ethnic factors rarely figure in structurally formulated attempts to explain the course of revolutions, but they must be considered in any attempt to understand why it took the TPLF approximately five years longer to establish a base of operations in the south than in other parts of Tigray. And moral economy theory can provide little insight into the ultimate success of the TPLF in overcoming the divisions within southern Tigray and uniting the various communities in war against the Derg. For that one must turn to the Front's political leadership. In trying to win the support of the Afar the TPLF implemented its program of community development and empowerment, but for the nomadic Afar land reform could only play a marginal role while economic development was dependent upon the importation of outside resources. Attempts to reconcile the Raya and the Afar involved education, the use of councils to arbitrate their disputes, and a willingness to resort to summary justice when those efforts failed. But when the TPLF recognized the limits of its program it promised the Afar self-determination, made a tactical alliance with the traditional leader of the Afar, Sultan Ali Mira, and dispensed with their own creation, the APDO, which was competing for the support of the Afar against the Sultan's ALF.

Not for the first time the TPLF put pragmatism and problem-solving before doctrine or political philosophy. The same pragmatism was evident in the Front's decision to allow

the Agew people an autonomous region outside Tigray and to redraw the Tigray-Wollo boundaries to include the mixed Amhara-Tigrayan inhabitants of the southern towns of Alamata and Korem within Tigray, a move which has caused some resentment among the Amhara of the area. The TPLF also demonstrated its willingness to work within the constraints of peasant society by accepting the decisions of the eastern plains' peasants to end cooperative farming and reintroduce private farming. In a political environment dominated by the stridency and dogmatism of the Derg and the various student based political parties, the TPLF's more flexible approach stands out.

CHAPTER 10: CONCLUSION

Introduction

This chapter begins with a critical evaluation of moral economy theory in light of my explanation of the peasant-based revolution in Tigray. The specific areas of concern that will first be addressed are those raised in chapter two: peasant social structure and proclivity to revolt; agricultural commercialization as the antecedent of peasant revolution; and factors outside the peasantry in precipitating revolt. The chapter then turns to the examination of other factors not considered or emphasized by the moral economists which have been found through this study to be critical in explaining the Tigrayan revolution. These include the regime-generated stimulus to rebel, the nationalist basis of the revolution, and the role of political leadership in revolution.

Social Structure and Rebellion

Moral economists diverge widely in their understanding of the effect of peasant social structure on revolution. Wolf identified the middle peasantry and peripheral peasants as playing leading roles in the struggle against state incorporation because of their tactical mobility. With some revisions this latter conception is of value in understanding the Tigrayan experience, but Paige's class conflict model which holds sharecroppers to be the bearers of agrarian revolution when they confront a class dependent upon income from land has little relevance. The same can be said for Scott's identification of subsistence tenants. Tigrayan peasants, who proved to be the most revolutionary in Ethiopia, were not sharecroppers or tenants but more likely to be in possession of their own land than peasants from anywhere else in the country.

Although there are many difficulties in economically differentiating the peasantry in the Tigrayan context, class nonetheless did figure in the TPLF's mobilization of peasants and in the Front's model of rural transformation. Class was briefly a source of controversy as Gidey and his supporters argued that the TPLF's embrace of rich peasants in its coalition threatened to undermine the Front's efforts to transform the class basis of power in rural society. In Adi Nebried it was seen how the TPLF tried to convince the rich peasants that the Front's land reform would provide them with security of land tenure and corruption-free administration and did not involve the confiscation of their cattle.

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 and other revolutionaries.

In spite of the support the TPLF was to win from rich peasants, it was clear that the agrarian reforms were designed to benefit the middle, poor and landless peasants. In the Adi Nebried land reform the middle and poor peasants were organized separately from other classes of the community, but not from one another. Nonetheless, interviews of Front cadres make it clear that apart from a minority group headed by Gidey, the TPLF leadership were 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 organizations were operational. Moving further in achieving rural equality could only come about by redistributing capital and intensifying class conflict and

this would cause divisions among the peasants that would threaten to jeopardize the TPLF's capacity to conduct war against the Derg.

This is a very different approach from that of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) whose revolution was often a source of inspiration and instruction for the TPLF. In China middle and poor peasants were first enjoined to struggle against the political dominance of the rich peasantry, after which the better mobilized middle peasantry assumed a dominant position in the countryside.⁷⁴⁶ It was only after the rich peasantry had been isolated that the poor peasant leadership acquired the perspective and confidence to begin, with the assistance of the Communist Party, to displace the middle peasants. The Chinese experience was that initially the poor peasants were the least militant rural class, and according to Alavi this was because they were more subject to the authority of the gentry and local officialdom.⁷⁴⁷

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 under the Derg's reforms, and the local administrations had collapsed, before the TPLF began their rural reforms. In any case, while it can be confidently asserted that the poor peasantry formed the primary support base of the CCP in the final stages of the revolution, a similar conclusion cannot be made with respect to the TPLF.

Although there are reports that in the late 1970s the TPLF carried out a campaign against former members of the nobility who obstructed their rural reforms, it would appear that those killed were selected on the basis of their political affiliations, either with the EDU or the Derg, and not because of their class origins per se. Pre-revolutionary Tigray was a

⁷⁴⁶See Alavi.

⁷⁴⁷Ibid., p. 274.

society characterized by patron-client relationships and a weakly developed sense of class consciousness, as the initial acceptance by the peasants of the noble-led EDU demonstrated. There are strong indications that personal or family ties or displays of loyalty could overcome unfavourable class backgrounds in the eyes of the TPLF and this is not surprising given the privileged origins of many of their leaders.

Rural class conflict thus did not assume the significance in the Tigrayan revolution that it did in the Chinese revolution or as Wolf anticipated. Much of Wolf's emphasis on the critical part played by middle peasants in leading a revolution was based on their tactical mobility and he also identified peasants or minority groups on the periphery of society as possessing tactical mobility. But surely he misses the point: it is the revolutionaries' interaction with the peasants that their peripheral position allows that is of importance, not merely the peasants' isolation. Peasant support for the anti-Derg revolution was by no means restricted to peripheral parts of Tigray, but the peripheries' relative inaccessibility from the organs of the state and their proximity to Eritrea attracted revolutionaries and it was this characteristic which linked the otherwise disparate woredas that became early TPLF strongholds.

The mobility of peripheral peasantries would also seem to be strongly shaped by their communal structures, as evidenced by minority peasantries such as the Raya and the Wejerat who did not inhabit isolated areas, but for many years successfully managed to retain much of their traditional culture and avoid state incorporation. What sustained the struggle of the Raya and Wejerat, ensured that the unique character of their communities were preserved long after most Tigrayan peasants had been forcefully linked to the state, and led to their leading role in the Woyene, were their communal institutions and egalitarian values.

In spite of this tradition of militancy and 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 their 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 the Derg land reforms which gave many Raya and Wejerat peasants lands they had lost as a result of the Woyene won their support or at least acquiescence. But the explanation that is favoured here is that the communal structures of the Raya and Wejerat societies were more effective at mobilizing resistance to their own incorporation into the state than in leading a Tigray-wide rebellion for national self-determination.

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 and 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.

Following Marx's famous comment on French villages likening them to a sack of potatoes,⁷⁴⁸ it might appear that description would also fit the Tigrayan peasants, but it does not. The development processes which were creating divisions between peasants on the one hand were also actively breaking them down on the other. Incorporation and centralization involved a more intrusive role for the state in the lives of peasants, which in

⁷⁴⁸K. Marx, *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte*, (New York: International Publishers, 1963), p. 123.

turn made the state a focus for their anger that transcended region, class, religion and other divisions. Modernization involved the development of infrastructure and this also served to weaken or break down primordial loyalties which had long divided Tigrayans. The construction of roads in particular fostered the growth of commercial agriculture and 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.

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 its Land Proclamation of 1975 served to complete the task of destroying the basis of patron-client relations.⁷⁴⁹ Thus when the TPLF launched its rebellion the Tigrayan peasantry were less divided than at any time in the past and were also linked only weakly to the state.

As Wolf has noted, revolutions take form in areas with the weakest links to the state. The EDU, EPRP and TPLF all established their first bases in the outlying areas of Tigray to avoid the security apparatus of the state and thus be positioned to carry out peasant mobilizations, be near their Eritrean supporters and, in the case of the EDU and TPLF, proximity to Sudan where they maintained political offices and attempted to mobilize refugees. This did not, however, mean that the TPLF's supporters were restricted to the rural areas because among the earliest followers of the TPLF were the 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

⁷⁴⁹In similar fashion Alavi concluded that the Chinese gentry's departure from the countryside served to loosen social control in the villages and enabled the peasants to gain more confidence and allow peasant militancy to develop, see Alavi, p. 252.

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 early Front leadership came from this area and this would serve to attract local support. The second point to note is that Dedebit, like the EPRP's base at Asimba in the east, became a magnet for the Tigrayan youth terrorized by the Derg and the nearest inhabitants to Dedebit were those living in the villages along the Endaselasie-Sheraro road.

A more fitting explanation of isolation from authority must recognize that it cannot be simply evaluated in terms of physical distance. In western Tigray the limited infrastructure, weakness of administration and prevalence of *shifita* and frontier-like conditions led to the state being perceived by local inhabitants as distant and ineffectual. Secondly, the Derg was slow to gain effective control over the organs of the state because of its own internal weaknesses and the chaotic conditions prevailing in the wake of the collapse of the old regime. Thus for a time the state was indeed largely absent, particularly in the peripheral areas of the country.⁷⁵⁰

It was also in the context of this political vacuum that the opposition movements began their operations. This transitional period continued until about 1978 and the development of the Red Terror campaign, by which time the Derg was in the process of establishing a far more effective, centralized, and militarized state than existed (or could have existed) under the old regime. It was this Soviet-supplied and increasingly monolithic state that confronted rebels and their supporters, including those living along the road between the towns of Endaselasie and Sheraro. Confronted by such power and military resources the TPLF initially withdrew from the roadside villages, but their basis of support never

⁷⁵⁰It was also the case that the Derg neither anticipated revolt in Tigray nor, when it broke out, grasped its potential seriousness since it arose in a province popularly held to be destitute and unable to sustain a rebellion.

wavered and they made conditions so difficult for the Derg that very soon the Front gained de facto control over the villages and by the early 1980s the army was forced to withdraw from Sheraro.

Agricultural Commercialization and the Rebellion

Theorists working within the moral economy school contend that peasants revolt to maintain the old ways when traditional institutions and relationships are upended or made ineffective by agricultural commercialization. Wolf, Migdal, Paige, and Scott all emphasize the role of commercial agriculture in undermining the social and economic basis of traditional peasant societies and forcefully linking the peasantry to the world economy. According to them commercialization produces a loss of subsistence, security and welfare, and peasants respond by rebelling. Wolf identified the middle peasant as the bearer of the revolution in part because he sees this class as particularly vulnerable to agricultural commercialization. Paige focuses on the destructive impact of systems of export-based agriculture, while the approaches of Migdal and Scott largely stress the failure of traditional institutions to meet the manifold crises created by capitalist penetration.

Such an explanation, however, has limited application for Tigray. Outside of Humera and parts of Wolkait there was virtually no large scale production of cash crops for export and at the time of the collapse of the old regime there was only the beginnings of a market in the peasants' land. Patron-client relations were not dissolved as a result of agricultural commercialization because the dominant elements in this process were from the nobility who served as patrons. Moreover, commercial enterprises were largely restricted to the lowlands which were areas of land surpluses. This pattern of agricultural commercialization is at odds with Marx's model which held that the interests of industrial and commercial capitalists were incompatible with those of feudal landowning classes.

Instead, Tigrayan experience supports the views of Moore who recognized that agrarian capitalism could emerge from within the traditional landowning (or in the case of Ethiopia, landholding) classes.⁷⁵¹

Agricultural commercialization thus did not have a markedly disruptive impact on indigenous systems of land tenure or on the rural economy in highland Tigray and thus could not have produced the kind of reaction that moral economists argue was the stimulus for peasant revolution. Indeed, there is no indication that Tigrayan peasants opposed agricultural commercialization and good reason to suspect that it had become critical to the survival of many of them. This is the view of the TPLF leadership who held that the peasants attributed their poverty to the lack of modern development in the province.⁷⁵² 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 one of their survival strategies. Unfortunately the agricultural commercialization 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 expansion of agricultural commercialization in the highlands where most Tigrayan peasants lived was limited by the *risti* land tenure system which made land alienation extremely difficult. It was affected also by the poor quality of the soils and the absence of valuable cash crops. It was most advanced in southern Ethiopia where most of the land had been alienated by the northern-based *neftengna* in the last century and the soil was fertile and suitable for growing coffee. However, agricultural commercialization brought

⁷⁵¹Taylor, p. 26.

⁷⁵²*Revolt*, No. 7, 1st Year, p. 27.

few benefits to the indigenous peoples of the south and, significantly for this discussion, it did not serve as a stimulus for peasant revolt.

Not only was agricultural commercialization not resisted by peasants in Tigray under the old regime, but the Derg's attempt to eliminate it by introducing agricultural marketing corporations and restricting commodity and labour markets helped drive peasants into the arms of the TPLF. The Derg's prohibition on the hiring of wage labour, most of which took place on the commercial farms in Humera and other western centres, was a source of particular anguish for the peasants, and as such it proved highly beneficial to the TPLF as Meles Zenawi has acknowledged.⁷⁵³

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 mobilization. It was thus not a product of agricultural commercialization as anticipated by moral economists. Economic relations in Tigray had not become "bureaucratic and impersonal", which Wolf held was a necessary pre-condition to peasant revolt. Nor had Tigrayan peasants been reduced to the status of sharecroppers as argued by Paige.

Even when turning to recent Ethiopian history there is little evidence that would support the contention that agricultural commercialization fosters or produces peasant revolt. In the thirty-one years prior to the 1974 revolution there were three significant peasant revolts in Ethiopia: Tigray in 1943, Bale between 1963 and 1970 and the 1969 revolt in Gojjam. None demonstrate any linkage between agricultural commercialization and peasant revolt. As noted earlier, agricultural commercialization had little direct impact on

⁷⁵³Paul Henze interview with Meles Zenawi, Washington, February 1991.

the Tigrayan peasants at the time of the Woyene. In in the southeast province of Bale there was a concern over land alienation, but more significantly the indigenous Somali Moslem peoples revolted against ethnic and religious domination. In Gojjam peasants revolted because of fear that a new tax law was a prelude to the alienation of their lands.⁷⁵⁴

Far from peasants revolting because of the impact of agricultural commercialization and the growth of capitalism, in each of these cases the peasants could be seen to be revolting against feudal structures which interfered with the commercial economy. The revolts were "anti-feudal in content through perhaps not in intent" is the way Gebru Tareke has put it.⁷⁵⁵ This finding draws into question the work of moral economists who argue that peasants are anti-capitalist in content, though not necessarily in intent. Tigrayan peasants wanted development and feudal structures were obstacles to that objective.

The Tigrayan experience reinforces the conclusions of Popkin who found in his study of the Vietnamese revolution that peasants did not rebel because of their desire to reinstate traditional institutions threatened by capitalism, but instead because of their opposition to feudalism.⁷⁵⁶ Popkin found that contrary to the views of moral economists who held that patron-client relations resting on mutual obligations were the linchpin of the village, they were instead related to power and strategic interaction among individuals⁷⁵⁷ and typically resented by peasants who found them restrictive.⁷⁵⁸ However, Popkin's contention that peasant involvement in commercial agriculture is not usually due to declining situations and was often opposed by the nobility is not supported by the experience of Tigray. In

⁷⁵⁴See Gebru Tareke, "Rural Protest in Ethiopia."

⁷⁵⁵*Ibid.*, p. iv.

⁷⁵⁶See Popkin.

⁷⁵⁷*Ibid.*, p. 22.

⁷⁵⁸*Ibid.*, p. 29.

Tigray the rural crisis forced peasants into commercial agriculture which was dominated by leading members of the old regime. Popkin's view that this involvement is a response to new opportunities and often benefits poor peasants is backed up by this research.

Moral economy's 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 commercialization is both untrue in the Tigrayan context and unduly romantic. It is worth noting that in spite of their devotion to Marxism-Leninism, the TPLF were not taken with such fanciful conceptions of pre-capitalist agrarian life and, after initially pursuing restrictive economic policies in the areas under their 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.⁷⁵⁹

Factors Outside the Peasantry in Explaining the Revolution

Theorists of moral economy theory 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 done at a time when behaviouralists were largely ignoring peasants as a social group and Marxists saw peasants as at best assuming a supportive role to the proletariat in revolution. But in bringing the peasantry to the centre of their explanation of revolution, moral economists have tended to ignore or not fully appreciate the significance of other groups to the course and outcome of revolutions. And

⁷⁵⁹In the early period of the struggle the TPLF attempted to closely control trade and merchandising, and to this end prices were fixed and taxes introduced as a means to finance the war. The result was that trade declined, commodity shortages developed and popular resentment arose, particularly among the many traders and merchants who were often poor peasants forced to pursue such activities to supplement their meagre returns from farming. After consultation with the peasantry, the TPLF ended these policies and found they gained more financially and had less problems because merchants preferred to make "contributions" to the Front, rather than pay taxes; Interview: Aregowie Berhe, The Hague, June 23, 1993.

while for the most part they acknowledge the role played by the petty-bourgeoisie in providing the leadership for the revolution, the structural focus of the moral economists has meant that they have not comprehended the nuances and consequences of the relationship between the peasantry and the petty-bourgeoisie in struggle. Nor have they appreciated the importance of the revolutionary party in organizing, leading and setting the agenda of the revolution.

The work of Paige and Scott must be singled out for criticism in this regard. Paige posits the emergence of the revolutionary party from within the peasantry and only in exceptional cases does he accept that cultural constraints within peasant society may result in political organization being introduced from outside.⁷⁶⁰ Paige would thus contend that the Tigrayan revolution where the TPLF played a critical role was an exception, but there is good reason to think he is badly mistaken and that his analysis does not hold up for his case study of Vietnam.⁷⁶¹

Scott in turn argues that the isolation of the peasantry from the cultural and institutional life of the ruling elites make them, rather than the proletariat which is enmeshed in that world, uniquely placed to be the bearers of the revolution. However, the Tigrayan peasants' strong attachment to the values of the Orthodox Church which was a critical component of the feudal state provides strong evidence that they did not maintain a set of values different from those of the ruling nobility. 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 organization and values. Through its participation in the modern economy, Ethiopia's urban working class was influenced by the values of individual liberty, representative

⁷⁶⁰Paige, p. 68.

⁷⁶¹Popkin, p. 245.

democracy 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 the peasants were largely passive.

Scott argues that the peasants' lack of political organization gives them a revolutionary advantage. In fact this constitutes their major weakness and necessitates their alliance with forces which are organized, notably the petty-bourgeoisie and the working class. The weakness of the working class in turn is due to their small numbers in non-industrial societies and the fact that as a result of their presence in the urban areas they are much easier to control by the state than 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 apparently does not appreciate that this 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 youth of the urban petty-bourgeoisie. 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": they were able to appropriate the knowledge and ideas of world history, particularly socialism and social revolution, and they attempted to put them to use in the transformation of Ethiopia. Led by students, it was the petty-bourgeoisie with the support of workers and soldiers who inhabited the cities and towns of Ethiopia that brought down the Haile-Selassie government, and the peasants only became revolutionary later as a result of mobilization by outside forces. And it was primarily students and teachers from the towns who not only led the Tigrayan revolution, but who also numerically dominated it in the early years.

Although moral economists have generally neglected the role of urban elements in agrarian revolution, with the exception of Paige they have recognized that it is the town-based petty-bourgeoisie who lead the revolution. However, because of their over-riding concern with the structural context from which revolutions emerge, they have demonstrated little appreciation of the nuances of the petty-bourgeoisie - peasant linkage in struggle. 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, but 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 revolution.

This study of the Tigrayan revolution has demonstrated major weaknesses in moral economy theory. The theory attributed peasant revolt to a rural crisis caused by capitalist agricultural commercialization. But in Tigray the rural crisis had its origins in the old order and it unfolded in the context of peasant resistance to a new regime attempting to establish state socialism by eliminating the commercial economy on which peasants were becoming increasingly dependent. This study also serves to question the emphasis of moral economy theorists on a crisis in the rural economy when dislocation was also being experienced by the inhabitants of the towns. While the class of peasants clearly figured in TPLF mobilization campaigns, their role in stimulating revolution in Tigray was, to follow Scott, "ambiguous and allows no easy generalizations",⁷⁶² and neither Wolf's identification of the middle peasant nor Paige's identification of sharecroppers as peasant classes that lead revolts is confirmed by this study.

⁷⁶²Scott, *The Moral Economy of the Peasant*, p. 201.

This research has also revealed three major shortcomings of moral economy theory which will now be taken up because of their importance in framing an understanding of the Tigrayan rebellion. The first shortcoming of the theory is in not recognizing that the form, course and outcome of the rebellion are shaped in important ways by the character and policies of the regime the rebellion is struggling against. Secondly, in arguing that peasant revolt emanates from a rural crisis that is defined solely in economic terms, moral economists have neglected the equally important part played by non-economic factors, and notably nationalism, in stimulating peasants to revolt. Lastly, in focusing on the structural context in which revolutions occur, moral economists have failed to seriously analyze the process of revolutions and hence have largely ignored the importance of political leadership provided by revolutionary parties.

The Regime Stimulus to Revolt

The experience of revolution in Ethiopia and Tigray provides strong evidence in support of Moore's contention that upper classes provoke rebellions. As an example, Moore drew attention to the importance of the Japanese occupation of China in fostering peasant resentment and thereby creating the conditions for peasant solidarity that were prerequisites to the Communist Party's victory.⁷⁶³ An analogy can be made with respect to the Derg's role in Tigray. But Tigrayan experience also points to the significant part played by the regime in influencing the form of the rebellion. The devotion of both the Haile-Selassie and Mengistu regimes to extending state centralism and preserving Amhara hegemony produced ethnic-based rebellions and culminated in a TPLF-dominated government which has facilitated Eritrean independence and appears (in 1994) committed to decentralizing state powers to ethnically based provincial administrations.

⁷⁶³Moore, p. 223.

Until the 1960 coup attempt by the emperor's palace bodyguards, most opposition to the old regime took the form of inter-feudal rivalry which was resisted by the age-old methods of the country's rulers: political marriages, loss of titles and gulti rights, banishment and in extreme cases, execution. The 1960 coup attempt marked a turning point, however, after which most opposition to the regime came from the urban-based petty-bourgeoisie and principally the students. Their ideologically driven struggle was not for power within the old state which had been the objective of most earlier dissidents, but was premised on the conviction that the state was a product of politically bankrupt social system and had to be replaced. Moreover, while feudal dissent was expressed through individual revolt, conspiracies and the organization of private armies, petty-bourgeois opposition in the post-1960 period was expressed through mass political mobilization. The centralized and increasingly decrepit state which had its basis in inter-linking patron-client relationships was ill-prepared either to ideologically confront or to overcome this opposition, whose strength did not depend on personal ties to regime leaders.

The inheritors of the state after the demise of the old regime came from a section of the petty-bourgeoisie, the military, and they used political mobilization, bureaucratic measures, terror, and the appeal of socialism and of nationalism to establish their rule and to attack other elements of the urban petty-bourgeoisie who pressed for democratic civilian rule. Even before the mass organizations constituted by the Derg were formally assigned the task of directing the Red Terror against the urban dissidents, civil and political life in Addis Ababa had so deteriorated that many student activists had left the capital for the provincial towns.

However, the onset of the Red Terror not only foreclosed challenges to the Derg emanating from urban centres. In Tigray it also drove frightened youth and other potential victims to seek security by either leaving the country or joining the principle rebel groups

in the countryside. While the experience of more than a decade of political mobilization in the towns and the ideology of the student movement attracted educated youth to revolutionary organizations like the EPRP and TPLF, it is clear that the Derg's victimization of young people in the towns of Tigray served to drive them into the ranks of the rebels.

The Derg's initial weakness and disorganization after assuming state power, together with its pre-occupation with the more serious problems posed by urban dissidents, the Somali invasion, and the Eritrean insurrection, provided the fledgling TPLF with an important opportunity to establish itself. That opportunity was not lost. It marked the beginning of a period which began in 1975 when the TPLF went to Dedebit, a time when the instruments of the state were barely functional in Tigray, and it ended with the onset of the Red Terror. During the interim, the TPLF was able to develop its political program, make its first contacts with the peasants, establish relations with the Eritrean Fronts, carry out its first model reforms and distinguish itself from other anti-Derg movements.

Unlike the discontent of the petty-bourgeoisie which was fueled by their aspirations for state power, peasant discord flowed from the crisis in the rural economy. The dissatisfaction of both the petty-bourgeoisie and the peasants thus had its roots 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. While Tigrayan peasants looked upon Haile-Selassie and those who dominated the old regime as usurpers of state power that rightfully belonged to the descendants of Yohannis, they nonetheless were loyal to Ras Mengesha, a functionary of that regime, but a true descendent of the late Tigrayan emperor.

Haile-Selassie well understood the value of Mengesha in preserving the legitimacy of his regime in Tigray, but Derg legitimacy depended on fulfilling its revolutionary goals, and this necessarily meant destroying feudal power. 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 unintentionally undermined the Tigrayan peasants' most fundamental link to the central state. Although the Derg was aware of the Tigrayans' loyalty to their native leaders, they discounted the threat posed by rebellion in such a destitute province. However, with Mengesha's hasty retreat to the Sudan the 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 Teranafit, the TLF and the TPLF, all bearing the nationalist banner and promising to defend the province from an Amhara government committed to state centralization and the elimination of Tigray's last vestiges of autonomy.

The destabilizing effect of replacing traditional power-holders with military elites has been noted elsewhere. Heeger holds that the military's forced removal of central political elites from positions of authority breaks the primary linkages between the central government and political periphery and the linkages that those leaders had with their personal followings.⁷⁶⁴ As Sherman points out, this accurately describes pre-revolutionary Ethiopia, with its great emphasis on personal politics.⁷⁶⁵ Sherman goes on to say that while "the Dergue has striven to concentrate more and more power in its own hands, Ethiopia, divested of its feudal underpinnings, has become increasingly susceptible to centrifugal forces. What the Dergue inherited from Haile-Selassie may have been a single polity but in no sense was it a unified nation."⁷⁶⁶

⁷⁶⁴G. Heeger, *The Politics of Underdevelopment*, (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1974).

⁷⁶⁵R. Sherman, "Center-Periphery Relations in Ethiopia," *Horn of Africa*, Vol. 2, No. 2, April/June, p. 46.

⁷⁶⁶*Ibid.*, p. 47.

It was thus an already deeply suspicious peasantry that heard the news, typically second hand or over the radio, of the Derg's land reforms. Peasants were quick to end their gulti obligations, but they feared that elimination of the risti land tenure system was a means enabling the government to gain control over their land. 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 not well developed, there were virtually no non-indigenous land holders, and in the highlands there were few large concentrations of land.

Land reform might still have served as a valuable means of gaining the peasants' support had it not been for the authoritarian means the Derg used to implement it and establish local administrations. Because of the political threat the Derg faced its land reforms were carried out too quickly and became the source of many grievances, while the domination of the Peasant Associations by the government's allies caused bitterness and undermined peasant support for the government. Peasant disaffection increased further when the Derg began forcibly procuring agricultural surpluses at less than market prices and restricted the employment of seasonal farm labour which many peasants depended upon for survival. The introduction of state farms at Humera and cooperative farms at Mahoni also caused peasant anger. As the rural insurrection of the TPLF spread, the government 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 unwillingness to share power with its civilian critics from the urban petty-bourgeoisie led these critics to mount a militant challenge against the government. But the Derg's position of power in the urban centres forced opposition into the countryside and ensured that it would take the form of a peasant-based rebellion. The government's

policies in turn alienated the Tigrayan peasantry and by the early 1980s most of them supported the TPLF. What sustained and gave focus to the rebellion was hostility to the Derg, Tigrayan nationalism, and the political leadership of the TPLF.

Tigrayan Nationalism and the Revolution

Moral economists acknowledge the importance of the peasants' sense of social justice in their decision to revolt, but this social justice is only understood in narrow economic terms. Largely lacking is any appreciation that the peasants' national sensitivities could figure in their resolve to revolt. The evidence of this study demonstrates that Tigrayan nationalism formed the unifying link in the rebellion and had the support of the peasantry. However, evidence was not found to support the TPLF's contention that nationalism could be explained as being simply a product of the province's lack of development in an Ethiopia dominated by Shoan Amharas.

It cannot be stated conclusively here when Tigrayan national sentiments began to emerge, but they were evident among nobles as early as the thirteenth century during the competition with Amhara nobles for domination of the northern highlands after the destruction of the Zagwe dynasty. While national sentiments were also in existence during the Woyene, the dominant theme of that rebellion was opposition to the feudal state. Moreover, the fact that the rebellion did not gain significant support from either the peasants or nobility outside eastern Tigray, and that among key participants such as the Raya and Wejerat primordial loyalties outweighed Tigray-wide sentiments, provides further evidence that the Woyene cannot be characterized as pre-eminently a nationalist revolt. A fully developed nationalism assumes the impact of modernization in breaking down primordial loyalties and linking peoples beyond their local communities into a national unit and that had not happened in Tigray in 1943. However, in the thirty-one

years following the Woyene, modernization and state centralization had largely undermined local loyalties and seriously advanced the process of uniting Tigrayans into a national unit. Revolutionary struggle and the TPLF mobilization completed the process.

The source of Tigrayan peasant nationalism is less easily discerned than that of the petty-bourgeoisie, which largely took form as a result of their competition for position and status in a multiethnic state dominated by Shoan Amharas, a common pattern in both the developing and the developed world. Theorists of nationalism have generally concluded that contact and competition between ethnic groups foster nationalism and, because these processes are less widespread among peasants than among elites, peasants are held not to be subject to the same forces that produce nationalism.

It is true that Tigrayan peasants had little contact with non-indigenous ethnic communities in the past, and even with the expansion of schools, systems of transport and agricultural commercialization, they, unlike the petty-bourgeoisie, did not directly compete with other Ethiopian communities. However, in spite of their limited interactions with the ruling Amharas, under the impact of modernization accelerated by Italian occupation and expanded in the period following the Woyene, their contacts with the Amhara-dominated state were increasingly poignant. 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 traveled outside the province either in pursuit of employment or trade or to settle court cases in Addis Ababa.

Tigrayan peasants also had great pride in what they took to be their cultural heritage: Semitic descendants of the union of King Solomon and Queen of Sheba; heirs to the

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 by Levine as the "cultural aristocrats" of Ethiopia, Tigray's decline, and in this century its poverty, fueled a sense of national grievance which readily found expression in hostility to the Amhara elite who dominated the central state.

Unlike the peasants, few among the Tigrayan petty-bourgeoisie had any attachment to their provincial nobility and to Ras Mengesha in spite of his Tigrayan origins and illustrious ancestors. For most of the petty-bourgeoisie he was hated as a feudal reactionary and as an agent of the regime of Haile-Selassie. The nationalism of the petty-bourgeoisie was a result of their encounters with the Amhara in the state, in the university, and particularly in the competition for employment, but it was also infused with the Marxism of the Ethiopian student movement which provided a critique of feudalism and Tigray's place in an empire dominated by a Shoan Amhara elite. It was the task of the petty-bourgeois led TPLF to transform the national sentiments of peasants, based on culture and anti-statism, into a program which linked the demand for national self-determination with the necessity of social transformation.

Almost all Tigrayans attribute their province's lack of development to the country's Shoan Amhara rulers, but the TPLF has framed this conflict in terms of Shoan Amhara state hegemony which developed under feudalism and continued under Derg fascism. And it linked the struggle against the Derg with the need to carry out a social revolution in Tigray. Development in the Third World during the modern era, Tigrayan nationalists argue, has been furthered by state investment in the economy, in the physical infrastructure and in human resources, and in these terms Tigray presented the starkest evidence of neglect. On the eve of the revolution and with a population of possibly 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.⁷⁶⁷ The transfer of some of the province's most productive lands in the west to Gondar and in the southeast to Wollo by Haile-Selassie both weakened the regional economy and confirmed the prevailing view of Tigray's victimization 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. These same circumstances go part of the way also to explaining the large-scale migration from Tigray, the prevalence of shiftas in the province, and the nature of the efforts made by those Tigrayans with the necessary resources to gain an education. But can the malevolence of the Shoan Amhara ruling class alone be held responsible for Tigrayan underdevelopment as claimed by the TPLF? The view here is that Tigray was not singled out for discrimination and that Shoan Amhara state hegemony is at best only part of the explanation for the province's lack of development. Brass contends that the perception of inequality is an indispensable justification for the existence of nationalist movements, but it cannot provide an explanation for them,⁷⁶⁸ and that is affirmed by Tigrayan experience.

While it is true that lack of state investment in Tigray clearly limited development, there is little evidence that Tigray suffered disproportionately from many other parts of non-Shoan Ethiopia in this respect. A 1982 international study of the Ethiopian economy found that it 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

⁷⁶⁷"Forced Labour but no Relief." *Horn of Africa*, Vol. 4, No. 1, 1981.

⁷⁶⁸Brass, p. 43.

inequalities."⁷⁶⁹ The study did not find, however, that Tigray was singled out for discrimination under this system. Indeed, historically Tigrayans never suffered the loss of their land like many Oromos in 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.⁷⁷⁰ Commercial agriculture, as has been noted, had little potential in highland Tigray and, if it had been encouraged it would have benefited largely the existing dominant classes who had access to capital.

In the absence of opportunities within Tigray, investment in human resources such as schools would also 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 Tigrayan claims that they were discriminated against in

⁷⁶⁹Griffin, p. 42.

⁷⁷⁰Even 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 of poor farmers and evict sharecroppers in favour of mechanized 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 - 1974. 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.

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 they made up a significant proportion of those accepted into the national university in spite of its discriminatory admission policies.

In addition, the TPLF contention that Tigrayan peasant nationalism was a response to the immiseration of the province at the hands of the Amhara elite begs the question of why Oromo peasants who suffered from the loss of their land to non-indigenous northern conquerors were never able to launch a sustained revolt against either the old regime or against the Derg. There are many elements that would have to be considered in any convincing answer to this question, but for the purposes of this study two factors are crucial. First, unlike the Oromos, Tigrayan peasants have a deep pride in the part their cultural and political heritage has played in Abyssinia and Ethiopia. Even the long dominance of the Shoan Amhara rulers and Tigray's poverty of the last century did not undermine the peasants' certitude and faith in their status within an Ethiopia which their ancestors once ruled. Oromo peasants did not have such sentiments because the contribution of their ancestors to Abyssinian and Ethiopian civilization has never been fully acknowledged, much less appreciated.

However, 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 were to form the TPLF developed their ideology in the Ethiopian student movement which fought the old regime and the military dictatorship on a pan-Ethiopian basis. Aregowie, Meles 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

proved to be an accurate assessment of the revolutionary possibilities in the country at that time.⁷⁷¹

Unlike Eritrea, where Italian colonialism had largely eliminated feudal structures in the highlands, thus allowing nationalism to be pursued with little fear of challenge from an aroused aristocracy, in Tigray the TPLF was initially confronted by the noble-led nationalist forces of Teranafit. The Front's response, particularly in the west where these forces were strongest, was to emphasize the anti-feudal and transformative elements of its program. This served to both define its political character as a movement and to ensure that its nationalism was not insular. But raising the nationalist banner is no guarantee that revolutionaries can strike roots among the people, as is evidenced by the experience of the TLF, Teranafit and the OLF. Political leadership was also essential.

Political Leadership in Tigray

While moral economists have recognized that the linkage between the peasantry and the revolutionary intelligentsia is a critical element in agrarian revolutions, most have not fully appreciated the importance of political leadership in revolutions. The view of most activists in the Ethiopian student movement who went to the countryside to launch rural insurrections, was that peasants did not have a political existence independent of the revolutionary intelligentsia. Formulating the "correct line" was thus the primary task of the revolutionary party and this was done without any reference to the values and cultural traditions of the peasants.

⁷⁷¹Kassahun Berhanu helped me reach this conclusion. See Interview: Kassahun Berhanu, Addis Ababa, June 4, 1993.

In contrast to moral economists whose explanation of revolutions was largely limited to a consideration of their structural context, the TPLF recognized that structure only sets the parameters of the revolutionary project and does not determine its course and outcome. That left a critical role for political leadership. But contrary to the views of many of their former colleagues in the student movement, the TPLF discovered from experience in the countryside that leadership involved more than merely following rigid formulas. While ever increasing the capacity of the movement to wage war against the Derg remained the Front's objective, it was conditional upon gaining and keeping the support of the peasants, a task that brought to the fore the role of pragmatic political leadership.

Although initially ideologically driven students, the TPLF cadres demonstrated an ability to adjust their program in light of practical experience, a skill not readily absorbed by other revolutionary movements in Ethiopia. One of the ways they did this was in recognizing that although largely homogeneous, there were nonetheless differences in material conditions and in the culture of peasants across the province, and that necessitated study and appropriate political responses. Thus according to one senior cadre, "Agitation was tailored to meet particular conditions and to respond to particular institutional frameworks of the peasants."⁷⁷² The same cadre noted that the peasantry "had different governing institutions in different parts of Tigray, but they all had a large amount of democratic participation and we had to operate through these institutions."⁷⁷³ It also meant designing reforms to meet the needs of the particular community, such as emphasizing local government in western Tigray, but stressing land reform in much of the remainder of the province. The TPLF appeal also paid heed to differences of gender, age, religion, and nationality, and reforms were carried out only after detailed study of local conditions, as the land reform at Adi Nebried demonstrated.

⁷⁷²Interview: Gebru Asrat, Mekelle, January 25, 1993.

⁷⁷³Ibid.

The TPLF tried to distinguish itself from its opponents but, given conditions of state collapse, massive social dislocation and a barrage of frequently similar sounding propaganda, peasants were understandably confused as to whom to support. TPLF cadres learned that their political education had to be reinforced by demonstrating exemplary personal behavior which they did by working with and assisting the peasants, and by sharing their deprivations. Older peasants who had contact with the various revolutionary movements can usually distinguish their main ideological differences but, significantly, it is the personal characteristics of the fighters that they emphasize in interviews, thus confirming the validity of the TPLF's approach. It also confirms both Cabral's finding that revolutionaries have to identify with the deepest aspirations of the people,⁷⁷⁴ and the conclusion of Popkin that peasants measure revolutionaries by their personal credibility.⁷⁷⁵

After distinguishing their movement from those of their competitors for the leadership of the anti-Derg opposition, the next step for the TPLF was to militarily defeat them. For TPLF members who had little or no military skills when they first launched the armed struggle this was probably the most testing period of the entire war. By the time the EDU and EPRP were defeated, the TPLF had lost an estimated half of its original membership, either in battle or because of defections. But in victory the TPLF had significantly advanced its standing and the prospects of victory in the eyes of the peasants.

A demonstrated commitment to the peasants' well-being, together with the TPLF's military victories, helped win peasant sympathy for the Front, but they could not in and of

⁷⁷⁴See Cabral; 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.

⁷⁷⁵Popkin, p. 259.

themselves produce mass peasant commitment to the struggle. That could only come about, as Basil Davidson has pointed out, when the liberation movement was able to meet "the material and cultural needs of everyday life" of the peasantry, which included the provision of both services and democratic political structures.⁷⁷⁶ What has been of interest to this study is precisely how the TPLF gained the support of the peasants by meeting these needs. Migdal's notion of a "social exchange" between revolutionaries and peasants, and Popkin's concept of the revolutionary party as a "political entrepreneur"⁷⁷⁷ have both cast light on this process. And both are typified by Gebru Asrat who found 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."⁷⁷⁸

The image of the Tigrayan peasant that emerges is thus not a creature that takes precipitous or spontaneous actions as suggested by Scott or Paige. Nor are such peasants readily manipulated by revolutionaries as was argued by many in the Ethiopian student movement. Although apparently 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 programs of the movements contesting for their support,

⁷⁷⁶B. Davidson, 1978:353-4.

⁷⁷⁷Based 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 organizations that offered utilitarian appeals could induce ration, cost-calculating peasants to participate." (p. 15) However, the research on which this dissertation has been based has listened to, and frequently made reference to, peasant voices in Tigray and they do not support Kriger's emphasis on the role of coercion in mobilization.

⁷⁷⁸Interview: Gebru Asrat, Mekelle, April 6, 1993.

considered the personal credibility of the revolutionaries, and judged their prospects of defeating the Derg, before pledging themselves. While the 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 the war, and as this study has demonstrated they did employ it.

Working within the peasants' cultural milieu to gain their support meant accepting the constraints those values imposed. It also meant constantly evaluating their impact 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 program of reforms served as both an instrument with which to transform rural society and as a means of mobilizing popular support for the war. However, these are not always complementary goals since the social tensions caused by the transformative project may open up divisions that undermine the widest possible consensus needed to carry on a revolutionary war. It is thus a crucial function of the political leadership of revolutionary parties to construct an appropriate balance between the need for reform and that for social peace. This study examined how the TPLF managed the resulting tensions while attempting to alter the peasants' religious practices and gender relations, but the Front was equally circumspect in every sphere of peasant life in which it operated and attempted change. And as a result of its sensitivity in dealing with the peasants the TPLF was able to command great loyalty, oversee a major program of social change, and in the process give form to the most powerful political and military movement in Ethiopia.

Summary

According to moral economy theory revolution occurs in underdeveloped societies undergoing rapid and destabilizing change brought about by agricultural commercialization. Analysts working on the basis of this theory concentrate on economic

structures and pay little heed to the historical background of revolts, the role of other groups in revolution, and the importance of political elements in fostering and directing opposition. This research on the Tigrayan revolution has provided evidence which questions basic assumptions of moral economy theory and it has also established a basis from which to argue for the inclusion of a range of political factors in formulating explanations of revolution.

Tigrayan nationalist and anti-state sentiments developed in the historical context of Amhara hegemony in the state and took a revolutionary form in the 1970s as a result of modernization, the collapse of the old regime and the political mobilization of the TPLF. No evidence can be found to support the contention that Tigrayan peasants were opposed to commercial agriculture and there are many indications that peasants were favourably disposed to the labour and commodity markets upon which they were becoming increasingly dependent for their survival. Indeed, peasant resentment of Derg policies that placed restrictions on the rural commercial economy proved to be a major stimulus of the Tigrayan revolution.

This study has shown how Derg policies and the authoritarian manner in which they were implemented prepared the ground for revolution by alienating the mass of Tigray's peasants. While the Derg's insensitive approach to the values and institutions of the peasants cannot alone account for TPLF's success, it is inconceivable that the Front could have acquired the level of support among peasants that it did if the regime had not first estranged them.

Although moral economists tacitly recognize that the urban-centred middle strata, or petty-bourgeoisie, in underdeveloped societies assume positions of leadership in peasant-based revolutions, they seriously misrepresent its role. The function of the Tigrayan petty-

bourgeoisie was not restricted to that of providing the leadership of the revolution as held by moral economists. Indeed, it has been estimated that the petty-bourgeoisie made up the majority of the TPLF membership during the early years of the movement's existence.

Revolutionary momentum, however, is dependent upon peasants joining the revolution, but in the case of Tigray peasant unhappiness with the regime did not mechanically translate into commitment to take up arms against it. The TPLF had to win their support by first defeating the Front's opponents to lead the anti-Derg opposition in Tigray, and then respond positively to the peasants' demands for reforms. This research has found that the organization and mobilization of the peasants in pursuit of war, rather than the peasant spontaneity ascribed to by the moral economists, better explains the means by which mass resentment is channeled into revolutionary struggle.

While moral economists concentrate on structural crisis and do not closely analyze the role of political parties in revolution because they consider such approaches to be voluntarist, this study has largely revolved around the TPLF and its relationship with the peasantry. This research, however, does not endorse party-centric analyses which ignore the critical part played by the peasantry 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 to the rest of Ethiopia - the peasants had a marked, and at times determining influence, on the decision-making process.

Moral economy has also given short shift to the role and importance of nationalism in peasant-based revolutions. In contrast, this study has found that an analysis of Tigrayan nationalism is crucial to an explanation of the revolution. Moreover, it was established

that nationalist sentiments were not restricted to the petty-bourgeoisie, but also served to politically motivate the peasants.

This was perhaps most graphically illustrated in western Tigray where the TPLF fought Teranafit. In spite of the radically different social composition and political programs of the two movements, they both found it necessary to couch their appeals to the peasants in terms of Tigrayan nationalism and played on fears that the Derg represented a new form of Amhara domination. The TPLF's defeat of the EPRP in eastern Tigray in turn owed much to the Front stressing the national question, while the EPRP's pan-Ethiopian appeal did not find favour with the peasants.

For the peasants and the petty-bourgeoisie nationalism was an affirmation of a Tigrayan identity increasingly being undermined by a centralizing state, as well as an expression of resentment at their own poverty and at the province's underdevelopment. This anger was directed at the Amhara dominated Ethiopian state and took a political form in the demand for national self-determination. The capture of provincial power by the TPLF in 1989 and then power in the central state by the TPLF-dominated EPRDF in 1991 largely fulfilled the demand for Tigrayan self-determination.

The findings of this research have served to both challenge key elements of moral economy theory as well as to argue for the inclusion of a range of political factors in developing explanations of peasant-based revolutions. It was found that moral economy's structural premised analysis and focus on the peasant economy undergoing capitalist transformation did not provide the causal framework for understanding revolution that its proponents claimed. Nonetheless, this case study has not found reason to completely reject moral economy theory. It does, however, raise doubts as to the ability of this or any

other macro-level theory to provide the conceptual framework with which to explain the actual course and outcome of such complex phenomena as revolutions.

This is not to negate the importance of theory construction to the study of revolution, but it does point to the limitations of grand theories and makes clear that there can be no theoretical shortcut to understanding revolutions that are not based on empirical studies. Instead, theory construction must move from the lofty goals of positing broad structural frameworks to the more modest objectives of developing generalizations, formulating hypotheses and constructing middle-level theories. In line with the approach of this study these processes must be derived from the findings of empirical studies of revolution, and specifically of those whose lives are being transformed, the peasants.

This study makes no claims to having contributed to any causal explanation of revolution writ large, but it has generated a large number of generalizations and hypotheses that may be of value to other students of revolution. Probably of most theoretical significance was the examination of the factors that explained the TPLF's success in mobilizing the peasants of Tigray. This explanation, if developed in a comparative framework, could provide the basis of a middle-level theory of the role of revolutionary parties in peasant societies.

As was repeatedly emphasized in this dissertation, structure only frames the parameters of revolution; it cannot govern its process and consequences. In this light the revolutionary party, which moral economists virtually ignore, assumes a crucial role. And the key to the success of the TPLF was its ability to reconcile the extreme commitment required of revolutionaries with a reasoned assessment of the constraints and opportunities provided by the context in which they were operating. Crucially, the TPLF needed to win the overwhelming support of the Tigrayan peasantry, a political project that as has been demonstrated demanded both sensitivity to peasant values and an ability to balance

competing interests within peasant society. In a word the TPLF's political success can be attributed to its pragmatism.

Pragmatism is not an attribute readily associated with revolutionaries who are generally considered extremists. But the TPLF leadership's decision to launch a revolution was guided by their undoubtedly correct conclusion that the Derg would not share, much less relinquish, power to civilians. Nor would the Derg willingly shift from its devotion to an Amhara dominated central state. The Front also recognized the opportunities for revolutionary movements in the interim between the collapse of the old regime and the imposition of the in-coming regime. In turn, the timing of the TPLF's decision to launch their agrarian-centred revolution was based on both the growing Derg-imposed constraints on political activities in the towns, as well as fears that remnants of the old regime, and possibly the EPRP, might soon dominate the anti-government opposition in the Tigrayan countryside. It was thus a reasoned and realistic appraisal of conditions existing in Ethiopia that led the TPLF to launch its revolution.

The same approach is evidenced in the TPLF's joint commitment to Tigrayan nationalism and to a revolutionary transformation in the province. It remains unclear whether, or to what extent, this approach was formulated before the Front launched its movement, or if it was developed in response to the positions of the alternative opposition movements it confronted politically and militarily in Tigray. Whatever the case this approach, and the political program that followed from it, proved both remarkably apt in the circumstances and also demonstrated the superiority of the TPLF over its narrow and ideologically driven competitors.

The TPLF's pragmatism, however, is most evident in its mobilization of the Tigrayan peasants. Time and again this research brought to light tensions that developed in rural

Tigrayan society as a result of social transformation, as well as their impact on relations between the peasants and the Front. The TPLF recognized that only through the transformation of rural society could all of the elements of society be freed from traditional constraints and thus be mobilized to fight the Derg. But in spite of its commitment to social transformation the Front made clear that it was not prepared to let this inherently disruptive process cause divisions within its carefully cultivated alliance. It thus repeatedly revised and compromised its social agenda in the broader interests of its political objective of defeating the Derg and achieving state power.

Moreover, neither arrogance nor dogmatism, both of which typically characterized relations between revolutionary elites and peasants in Ethiopia, were evident in the TPLF's mode of dealing with the peasants. Instead, the TPLF focused on addressing the immediate needs of the peasants and - through the Front's political campaigns - communicating the linkages between the problems the peasants faced and the need to achieve Tigrayan self-determination through revolutionary action.

While the TPLF did use compulsion and violence to maintain the discipline of its members and to counter its opponents, it rarely or never used such means in dealing with peasants en masse. Indeed, in what appears to be a unique case, the Front's attention to the concerns of the peasants was briefly lost sight of in the fading days of the Derg when opposition developed within the army and among the civilian population to the decision to carry the struggle beyond Tigray's borders. In confronting that opposition the TPLF did not respond by forcing its agenda or by disciplining its fighters, but instead it consulted and eventually won over the peasants, and at the same time it allowed the dissident fighters to return to their fields in Tigray. Although the consultation more closely resembled a mobilization, it nonetheless served to affirm the TPLF's dependence on peasant support, its willingness to acquire anew that support at every stage of the struggle

and its refusal to consider force or violence in gaining and keeping peasant support. The TPLF's triumph was thus in a very real sense the triumph of pragmatic decision-making.

Afterword

Now that the major political obstacle to Tigray's development has been overcome, the TPLF and the people are confronting the task of rehabilitating the war-ravaged and long neglected province. Just how daunting that task will be was made clear by the outbreak of famine in parts of southern and eastern Tigray in 1994. However, while the deep-seated problems of the past weigh heavily on Tigray, the revolution has bequeathed the province two invaluable assets with which to confront these problems: a system of popular administration and a mobilized population. It thus remains to be seen whether the hopes and aspirations of a generation of peasants who committed themselves to revolution will be fulfilled.

GLOSSARY

- Abagore: Afar council of elders used to settle disputes
- Abun: bishop, the highest ecclesiastical title of the Ethiopian Orthodox Church until the appointment of the first patriarch in 1959
- Akni Abat: founding father for purposes of land inheritance
- Asibi: Afar trader
- Asrat: tithe on land
- Ato: a term of respect similar to Mr.
- Awardja: administrative sub-region under imperial regime
- Baito: administrative council of the assemblies organized at tabia, woreda, zoba and provincial levels
- Balabbat: originally hereditary owner of risti land; since the nineteenth century used to denote the hereditary head of a southern people.
- Balambaras: "commander of a mountain"
- Birr: Ethiopian currency for many years officially exchanged at 2.07 Birr = \$1.00; as of October 1992 was allowed to float at a range around 5.00 Birr = \$1.00.
- Blatta: a title of respect given in the twentieth century
- Chika shum: lowest ranked title holder; tax collector
- Crocodiles: activist students operating underground
- Datbara: lay priest
- Dejazmach: commander of the gate
- Derg: the military committee which was to form the Ethiopian government in the wake of the overthrow of the imperial government
- Ferenj: foreigner
- Fitwrari: commander of the vanguard
- Geez: Semitic language of the Ethiopian Orthodox Church
- Goth: parish
- Grazmach: commander of the left wing
- Gulti: non-hereditary right to collect tribute, bestowed on members of the nobility and clergy by the emperor
- Hobbo: characteristic embodying determination, integrity and desire for revenge
- Jachawa: children of the well born
- Kashi: priest
- Kebelle: urban residents' association
- Kenyazmach: commander of the right wing
- Kola: plains
- Kushette: administrative grouping of rural homesteads; does not have a baito
- Lazarist: a member of the Congregation of the Priests of the mission formed by St. Vincent de Paul in 1624
- Meisson: All-Ethiopian Social Movement; student based Marxist-Leninist party that initially worked with the Derg
- Neftegna: gunowners; Abyssinian settlers in the south
- Negus: king

Ras: commander of an army, a title which has generally been held by heads of provinces
Risti: a lineage system of land-ownership, giving usufruct rights to the claimant
Shifta: bandit or rebel
Suwa: village made beer
Tabia: group of villages; has an elected baito
Tabot: holy ark of the Ethiopian Orthodox Church
Teff: staple cereal cultivated in Ethiopia
Tej: honey wine; in former times restricted to the upper classes
Teranafit: feudal organized dissident group active in Gondar and Tigray; became basis of EDU
Uguma: Afar militia established by the Derg to oppose the EPLF and TPLF
Woreda: administrative district that groups together a number of tabias; possesses an elected council
Zemacha: campaign; refers to the Derg's Development Through Cooperation Campaign where students were sent to the countryside to initiate the land reform in 1975.
Zoba: administrative region that groups together a number of woredas; possesses an elected council.

SOURCES CONSULTED

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. In cases where the person was interviewed more than once, they are recorded where they were first interviewed.

Interviews: Addis Ababa

Asmelash Beyene, Project Co-ordinator Economic Commission of Africa, Addis Ababa, December 9, 1992.

Eschetu Chole, Faculty of Business and Economics, AAU, Addis Ababa, December 23, 1992.

Kasshun Berhanu, PSIR Department, AAU, June 4, 1993.

Merara Guidina, PSIR Department, AAU, December 24, 1992.

John Markakis, AAU, June 10, 1993.

Tecklehaimanot Gebre-Selasie, Department of History, AAU, November 2, 1992.

Adhana Haile, Department of History, AAU, December 4, 1992.

Haile-Selassie Woldegirma, Department of Education Administration, December 5, 1992.

Zaria, Representative for Tigray in PMO, Addis Ababa, December 3, 1992.

Netsannet Asfaw, Presidential Advisor, Addis Ababa, December 9, 1992.

Gashaw Kassie, AAU Student President, Addis Ababa, December 25, 1992.

Saleh Abdulkader Kebire, President African Jurists Association for East African Region, Addis Ababa, December 4, 1992; June 10, 1993.

Gayle Smith, journalist and author and long observer and associate of TPLF, Addis Ababa, November 9, 1992; December 12, 1992; December 20, 1993.

Gebregzi Tsehay, Tigrayan businessman, Addis Ababa, October 23, 1992; November 3, 1992; June 4, 1993.

Dawit Yohannis, (former AAU student activist), EPDM, Vice Chairman Election Commission, Member Council of Ministers, Addis Ababa, December 18, 1993.

Colonel Kalechristos Abbay, (former Governor of Tigray 1976 - 1978), Addis Ababa, June 4, 1993.

Abraham Fiseha, Regional Director Hope International NGO, Addis Ababa, October 28, 1992; November 20, 1992; December 12, 1992; June 2, 1993.

Bruce Bond, Director Sudan Interior Mission, Addis Ababa, December 22, 1992.

Colonel Asaminew Bedane, (former Deputy Commander of 17th Division), presently the Ethiopian Defence Forces and Member of the Council of Representatives of the TGE, POW Camp at Kalema in western Tigray, May 5, 1988; Addis Ababa, June 13, 1993.

Yemane Kidane ("Jamaica"), Ministry of Defence official, Addis Ababa, December 1, 1992; December 15, 1992.

Haile Kiros, Director EPRDF Foreign Relations Bureau and Member of the Council of Representatives of the TGE, Addis Ababa, December 2, 1992; December 16, 1992; June 4, 1993.

Interviews: Mekelle

Tsegaye Berhe, Vice-chairman Region 1 (Tigray), Mekelle, January 23, 1993; April 11, 1993.

Ahmed Kadawi, (former) Sudan Commissioner of Refugees, Mekelle, January 7, 1993; Addis Ababa, May 28, 1993.

Solomon Inquai, (former Chairman REST), Mekelle, January 7, 1993; January 8, 1993.

Zemichael, Director TPLF Natural Resources, Mekelle, January 16, 1992; January 17, 1992; January 19, 1992; January 25, 1992; April 11, 1993.

Chekol Kidane, Regional Manager REST, Mekelle, January 4, 1993.

Mertta Christos, Bishop of Ethiopian Orthodox Church for Tigray, Mekelle, January 4, 1993.

Ismail Ali, Chairman Afar Peoples' Democratic Organization, Mohammed Abdul, Central Committee member, Mekelle, April 10, 1993.

Gebre Meskel Hadgu and Hailu Gebre Yessus, EDU Co-ordinators, Mekelle, April 6, 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, peasant from Tembien, retired Ministry of Health employee, unemployed woman, former convict, and former employee at Assab port, Mekelle, April 9, 1993.

Gebrekidan Abay, President Ethiopian Teachers' Association, Tigray branch; Gebregiorgis Gegziabher, Secretary, Mekelle, January 1, 1993.

Gebregiorgis Gegziabher, Secretary ETA, Mekelle, January 5, 1993; January 22, 1993.

Sheik Kadir, head sheik for Tigray, Mekelle, January 5, 1993.

Wolde Yohannis Tedela, former member of Teranafit, Mekelle, April 11, 1993.

Tadesse Haile, Planning Bureau of Tigray, Mekelle, January 18, 1993.

Veronica Rogers and Hawa Fafana, research consultants for DATW, Mekelle, January 14, 1993; January 18, 1993.

Afera, TPLF MOA, Mekelle, January 1, 1992; January 2, 1993.

Chairman Mekelle baito, Mekelle, January 22, 1993.

Gebre Desta, TPLF Department of Education, Mekelle, January 1, 1993.

Gebre Asrat, Chairman Region 1 (Tigray), Mekelle, December 28, 1993; December 30, 1993; January 25, 1993; April 6, 1993.

Romain, Chairman DATW, Herti, Vice-chairman DATW, Mekelle, January 6, 1993.

Interviews: Mixed

Ayafew Solomon, Secretary EDU, Gondar Region, Gondar, May 4, 1993.

Tekle Berhane, (former peasant in Shire; former shifta; two years in Teranafit/EDU), presently merchant in Gondar, May 6, 1993.

Bereket Simon, (former EPRP cadre at Asimba), EPDM official and Member of the Council of Representatives of the TGE, Mihanse, Tigray, May 5, 1988; Addis Ababa, June 16, 1993.

Tamirat Layne, Chairman of EPDM and Prime Minister in TGE, Mihanse, May 5, 1988.

Teclawani Asfaw, Chairman REST, Tigray, May 1 - 8, 1988.

Tadesse Eba, former Chairman OLF, Khartoum, January 8, 1989; February 28, 1989; April 2, 1989.

Robert Thompson, former official in Haile-Selassie administration, Fort Langley, October 22, 1991; February 18, 1992; April 16, 1992.

Wolde Selassie Asfaw, former TPLF member, London, June 26, 1993.

David Pool, researcher, Asmara, April 19, 1993; April 20, 1993.

Girma, former ELF fighter, Karen, April 27, 1993.

Aregash Adane, Secretary Region 1 (Tigray), Endaselasie, May 3, 1988; Mekelle, April 8, 1993.

Fiseha, former TPLF Representative in Sudan, Khartoum, April 14, 1988; October 19, 1988; March 16, 1989.

Sebhat Nega, former Chairman TPLF, Wolkait, April 28 - 29, 1988; Addis Ababa, November 7, 1992.

Meles Zenawi, President TGE, TPLF base at Dejena Wolkait, April 29, 1988.

Aregowie Berhe, (former Chairman of TPLF), The Hague, June 22, 1993; June 23, 1993.

Interviews: Region 1 (West)

Seboah, Vice-chairman Adi Hagari Woreda, Adi Hagari, February 2, 1993.

Tsema, (former member Teranafit and leader TPLF Adi Hagari militia), Adi Hagari, January 29, 1993; February 3, 1993.

Haile, peasant, Adi Hagari, February 3, 1993.

Asefa Habte, Vice-chairman Adi Nebried Woreda, Adi Nebried, February 5, 1993.

Roman, wife of late dejazmach of Adi Nebried and mother of TPLF military leader Hayloum, Adi Nebried, February 4, 1993.

Mebrat, Chairman Sheraro Woreda and Kiros, TPLF cadre, Sheraro, January 29, 1993.

Kiros, TPLF cadre; Aregey, Executive member Sheraro Woreda; Medhin, DATW Representative on Sheraro Woreda; Zagdy, guard, Sheraro, January 30, 1993.

Michael, Executive member of Sheraro Woreda and teacher, Sheraro, January 30, 1993.

Aregey, early TPLF peasant fighter, Sheraro, January 31, 1993.

Tesfai, peasant, Dedebit, February 1, 1993.

Mohammed Esumane, trader and farmer; Nurehsyne, trader; Melite Beyene, DATW, Endaselasie, February 6, 1993.

Neguse Lilly, Secretary Enda Seleasie Woreda, Endaselasie, February 6, 1993; February 8, 1993.

Dangwe Ayele (brother of Suhul); Makale Ayele and Zoditu Ayele (sisters of Suhul); Asano and Mulu Akim (nephews of Suhul), Endaselasie, February 9, 1993.

Mulat Berhane and Gedeye Gebre Hiwat, MOA officials, Debre Krebae, February 23, 1993.

Haile Gebremeska, Vice-chairman Zana Woreda; Goitem Gebre, member Woreda Executive; Desta Gebremedi, member of Woreda baito, Debre Krebae, February 23, 1993.

Awal Mohammed Yaksin, Chairman of Zana Moslem Association; Abdul Mohammed Nuir, Vice-chairman of Moslem Association; Neja Bitto, member of Moslem Association, Debre Krebae, February 24, 1993.

Negi Bitto, Chairman Woreda DATW, Debre Krebae, February 24, 1993.

Tamene Woldu and Nagash Gebre Mariam, Woreda militia members, Debre Krebae, February 24, 1993.

Margate Arafyne Woldemelate, Woreda Chairman Ethiopian Orthodox Secretariat; Halaka Amahamardos; Halaka Gebremedit Eysau, Debre Krebae, February 24, 1993.

Bailay Gebru Selassie, member of Woreda PA Executive; Negash Bogalay, peasant; Zemichael Taqalal, trader, Debre Krebae, February 24, 1993.

Interviews: Region 2 (Central)

Makonnen Gebre Medin, Vice-chairman Adi Ahferom Woreda, Adega Arbi, February 28, 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 Gragis, Adega Arbi, February 28, 1993.

Mulu Gebesadga and Safutafer, DATW, Adega Arbi, February 28, 1993.

Farada Hagos, Vice-chairman Abi Adi Woreda Council; Mohammed Abdel Kadir, Secretary Woreda Council; Tabere Gebre Michael, Woreda Council, Abi Adi, March 17, 1993.

Tabere Gebre Michael, Judge, Abi Adi, March 17, 1993.

Alesmu Hailu, Mengesha Gerechal, Gebrehaiwit Gebre Selassie, all peasants from Abi Adi, March 17, 1993.

Kashi Terka Abara, priest from St. Mary's Church; Melhakabrahan Gebrujesus Gebremariam, Ethiopian Orthodox Church Secretariat, Abi Adi, March 17, 1993.

Mohammed Said and Bedru, traders from Abi Adi, March 18, 1993.

Woreda Teka and Geogesgehe Abraham, militia members from Abi Adi, March 18, 1993.

Worku Ulif, Vice-chair regional DATW; Asafu Tesfay and Sodu Mabat, members of DATW, Abi Adi, March 18, 1993.

Teklu Woldegite, Department of Natural Resources; Mebratu, REST, MOA Offices, Abi Adi, March 19, 1993.

Tsighe Hagos and Mulu Hailu, teachers, Abi Adi, March 19, 1993.

Sheik Mohous Abdel Kadir; Sheik Ali Mohammed Siray; Sheik Ali Ahmed, all from local mosques, Abi Adi, March 19, 1993.

Kashi Marasa Abara, Nagash Gebre Shidan, Girmay Esgabibir, peasants from Taquomlesh Woreda, Adi Sumuon tabia, March 19, 1993.

Tkabo Berhe, Chairman Adet Woreda; Kashi Gebru Medhin, member Woreda Executive; Kashi Gebre Wolde Aregey Teckle, member Woreda Executive, Dagalousie, February 13, 1993.

Kashi Gebri Medhin Desta and Kashi Gebri Wolde Teckle, Dagalousie, February 14, 1993.

Tkabo Berhe, Chairman Adet Woreda, Dagalousie, February 14, 1993.

Behar Teka, Debre Genet, Kashi Berhe Gerengi, Debre Genet, Tsabet Hagos, Makonnen Adane, peasants, Dagalousie, February 14, 1993.

Tkabo Berhe, Chairman Woreda; Kefzion Mahari, member of Woreda Executive, Dagalousie, February 14, 1993.

Berhane Mengesha, former Adwa school director; Berhane Girma, district Education Officer, Adwa, February 20, 1993.

Terhe Taku, member Woreda Executive and judge; Gebre Kidan Wolnocha, member Adwa Woreda Executive, Adwa, February 20, 1993.

Vice-chairman Adwa Woreda, Adwa, February 20, 1993.

Haredgu Gebre Mariam, Gurish Gebre Miskel, Maressa Haile Mariam, all peasants from Adwa, February 21, 1993.

Gebru Aregey and Berhane Desta, traders, Adwa, February 21, 1993.

Haji Mahmoud, head sheik for Adwa Woreda, Adwa, February 21, 1993.

Likemesemoran Isak Teklehaimanot and Kasis Ariah, Ethiopian Orthodox Church officials, Adwa, February 21, 1993.

Sesay Medana Mariam, Axum school inspector, Axum, February 11, 1993.

Kashi Makonnen, member of Executive Central Zoba, Axum, February 17, 1993.

Makonnen Haile-Selassie, trader, Axum, February 17, 1993.

Bura Mohammed, Chairman DATW, Axum, February 17, 1993.

Haleka Fitzum Tafare, Lekarurynie Takaste Asaha, Lekarkamat Gebre Medhin Gebre Selassie, all of Zion Mariam Church, Axum, February 12, 1993.

Twolde, Lalay Machew Woreda MOA Co-ordinator, Axum, February 11, 1993.

Gazey Kassa, Gebre Medhin Wolde Gebriel, Kasha Berhe, all peasants, Axum, February 13, 1993.

Haile-Selassie and Kassa Gebru Mariam, Zoba MOA, Axum, February 10, 1993.

Interviews: Region 3 (East)

Teckle Awash and Tadele Alemsigel, Eastern Zoba Agriculture officials, Adigrat, March 3, 1993.

Dada Mengesha, Chairman Adigrat baito, Meskel Gebre Sadik and Kiros Beyene, all teachers, Adigrat, March 3, 1993.

Seyum Meles, Melakus Aemlem Gebre Mariam, Berhe Hagos, Berhane Asgdum, Degai Mara, all merchants and traders, Adigrat, March 3, 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, March 4, 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, March 4, 1993.

Father Keven Mahoney, Adigrat Catholic Seminary, Adigrat, March 4, 1993.

Kashi Geresger Hailu, Dasey Gebre Meskel, Hadish Teklehaimanot, all peasants from Gane Afashum Woreda, Adigrat, March 5, 1993.

Dada Mengesha, Chairman Adigrat Woreda baito, March 3, 1993.

Kashi Fesaha, priest from Embeto tabia Sobia, Adigrat, March 10, 1993.

Aklulu G/Michael, teacher and former member of both TLF and TPLF, Adigrat, March 10, 1993.

Aba Tesfa Michael Seyum, Catholic parish priest, Sobia, March 6, 1993.

Ladese Alamayo, Secretary Sobia Woreda Executive; Arahale Terage, member of Woreda Executive; Gebre Gergis, member of Woreda Executive, March 6, 1993.

Gebre Gergis, Judge, Sobia, March 6, 1993.

Aela Assesse, Tsefa Baliho, Desta Hadimey, Rossine Mahafu, Hale Kademos, all peasants from Sobia tabia, Sobia, March 7, 1993.

Gersgeher Sebhat, Kashi Herur Merhiri, Biru Gese, Hagos Meginna, all peasants from Sobia tabia, Sobia, March 7, 1993.

Ladese Alamuyu, Secretary Sobia Woreda, Sobia, March 7, 1993.

Mabrato Adhano and Tuku Beyene, members of militia, Sobia, March 8, 1993.

Medhin Gebrahaus, Chairman Sobia Woreda DATW, Sobia, March 8, 1993.

Kashi(s) Abraha Gedey, Berahi Tesfa, Berahi Abay, Hagos Kidan, Mulu Hasay, all priests from Sobia tabia, Sobia, March 8, 1993.

Aradie Bezabe, South Zoba Secretary, Maichew, March 29, 1993.

Abadi Marasa, South Zoba PA Vice-chairman, Maichew, March 24, 1993.

Alamash Girma, Chairman Zoba DATW, Maichew, March 24, 1993.

Haile Marasa and Woldu Kasa, both from Zoba Traders Association Executive, Maichew, March 24, 1993.

Kashi Halefome Desta, Zoba Ethiopian Orthodox Church Secretariat Organizer, Maichew, March 25, 1993.

Meruse Woldeman, Zoba Judge, Maichew, March 25, 1993.

Hagos Tesfay, school director Tilhun Yigzaw Senior Secondary School, Berhe Belay, teacher and former COPWE member, Maichew, March 25, 1993.

Sheik Ahmed Ibrahim, Sharia Court Judge for Chercha, Mahoni, Indamahoni and Adishuhu, Maichew, March 26, 1993.

Biru Kiros, MOA Natural Resources Co-ordinator, Maichew, March 26, 1993.

Berihin Gebre, Baito Chairman Bela tabia, Chercha Woreda, Bela, March 27, 1993.

Yemane Berhe, Vice-chair Chercha Woreda; Kabede Gebriot, member Woreda Executive, Chercha, March 27, 1993.

Berento Abadayma, Dawit Awul, Mistapha Baalgeli, Marto Mogoley, all Afar from Chercha Woreda, Chercha, March 27, 1993.

Gebre Abraha, retired court secretary; Arada Berhe, retired farmer, Chercha, March 28, 1993.

Kiros Abay and Mamo Denmerka, Agew merchants from Chercha, Chercha, March 28, 1993.

Seyuun Negus and Dejafum Gebrecherkos, members of militia from Chercha, March 28, 1993.

Abraha Tekle, MOA, Chercha, March 29, 1993.

Iyasu Nigse, Zoba PA Secretary and Chercha Woreda Secretary; Kasha, auditor of Woreda and member of Woreda DATW Executive, Chercha, March 29, 1993.

Somere Gersgi, Vice-chairman Mahoni Woreda; Asafa Hailu, Woreda Propaganda Organizer; Woldegiorgis Kiros, Secretary of Woreda, Mahoni, March 30, 1993.

Abehaftu, Chairman Woreda PA, Hagos Gebre, member of PA Executive, Faradja Mohammed Amma, member of PA Executive, Mahoni, March 30, 1993.

Fitwari Kebede Arayah, Woyene vetran, Mahoni, March 30, 1993.

Kidane Hailu, Chairman Mahoni Traders' Association; Afarly Emir, Secretary Traders' Association; Tadesse Woldelebanos, member of Association, Mahoni, March 30, 1993.

Kiros Hawre, Hagos Barag, Manasu Hailu, all militia members, Mahoni, March 31, 1993.

Abraham Aley, Abey Gobast, Kashi Bercher Kasa and Grazmach Berhe Dumzu, all veterans of the Woyene, Raya peasants, Mahoni, March 31, 1993.

Sheik Nuri Barantu, Mahoni Woreda kadi; Hussien Omar, Secretary Woreda Moslem Association; Ali Mahdi, town resident, Mahoni, March 31, 1993.

Mohammed Ibuahaym, nomad from Megale; Mohammed Mekela, trader from zone two Nur Musa, farmer from Mahoni, all Afar, Mahoni, April 1, 1993.

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