

The Military Organization and Strategies of the Patriots under the Leadership of Dejazmach Belay Zeleke

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Abstract

Ethiopian patriots protested the Italian occupation in different forms from 1936 to 1941. Dejazmach Belay Zeleke was one of the renowned patriot leaders who could organize tens of thousands of patriots and carried out successful military campaigns against the Italians and their collaborators in some parts of Gojjam, Wollo and Showa. This study explored the military organization and strategies of the patriots under the leadership of Dej. Belay. Primary data were gathered through in-depth and key informant interviews with 17 people. Descriptive and interpretive methods were employed to analyse the data. Findings revealed that Belay ensured hierarchical chain of command in the military organization, and assigned chiefs who commanded the patriots in their respective districts. The patriots were organized into five military units as Dereq Tor were well experienced and senior warriors; Yemetreyes Zebegnoch (guards of the machine guns) and Zuriya Safari or Mezezo Tor (rear guards in charge of patrolling the court of Belay and surrounding areas). The Gamme tor or Angach acted as security guards, patrolled military fortifications and nearby villages and took part in military campaigns. The Kemanianishae - literally not less than the other - largely includes young boys organized as guerilla units. Belay organized the council of military advisors responsible to make decisions on military matters. Basically, the patriots' military operation was characterized by guerilla fighting and they practiced different military strategies including hit and run, sudden attack, espionage, intercepting and ambushing the enemy, changing sites frequently, encircling camps and strongholds. The military organization and strategies created cohesiveness among the patriots, reduced the magnitude of casualties and contributed to the success of the patriots resistance.

Key words: Belay Zeleke, Military organization, Military strategy, Patriots,

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1. Introduction

Belay was born in 1912 from Basha Zeleke Laqew of Lamchan (in Enemay woreda, East Gojjam Zone) and Woyzero Taytu Assene of Chaqata (in Wogdi woreda, South Wollo Zone). The Abay river separates Lamchan and its surroundings from Chaqata. The inhabitants of Chaqata and Lamchan had close relationships for centuries and shared common history, socio-cultural, economic and religious entitles that perpetuate this day. Belay grew up in Chaqata and Lamchan and spent his banditry life and the period of resistance in these localities. Belay continued his life as a *shfta* (bandit) following the assassination of his father *Basha Zeleke Laqew*.¹

In Ethiopia the patriots resistance retains the attention of historians and it continues to be a research agenda. Previous studies shade light on the history of patriots resistance, yet there are unknown or under researched issues that necessitate further investigation. Among others, Salome Gebre-Egziabher (1969)², Manyazewal Assafa (1970)³, Yohannis Birhanu (1972)⁴, Zelalem Assefa (1983)⁵ and Seltene Seyoum (1999)⁶ explored various aspects of the patriots resistance in Gojjam, Gondar and Wollega.

Salome (1969)⁷ studied the patriots resistance in Ethiopia focusing on the roles of peasants, older people, priests and young boys; cooperation and rivalries among patriots, sources and shortage of food, and medication; and method of collecting information from the enemy. This study does not give wide coverage to the patriots military organization and strategy. Manyazewal Assafa (1970)⁸ explored the patriots resistance in the provinces of Begemdir, Gojjam and Wollaga focusing on engagement of the patriots in military campaigns, sources of arms and food supply, and problems of communication and transportation. Manyazewal explains that in the study areas as part of the strategy areas the patriots stationed advanced guards to ambush the enemy lines.

In another development, Yohannis Birhanu (1972)⁹ did a thesis research on the patriots of Gojjam and discussed cross-cutting issues. This study highlights hit and run or ambushing as a military strategy widely practiced by the patriots of Gojjam led by Bitwoded Negash Bezabih, Bitwoded Mengesha Jembere, Ras Haylu Belew and Dejazmach Belay Zeleke. Zelalem Assefa's (1983)¹⁰ biographical research explores the early life and growing of Dej. Belay's power to prominence and his achievements from 1912 to 1945. In relation to the patriots military organization Zelalem noted *Yemetreyes Zebegnoch, Mezezo tor or zuriya*

safari, and *Gamme or Angach* as the patriots military units and highlights their tasks. The work of Seltene Seyoum (1999)¹¹ is comprehensive and informative and it presents detailed accounts of the patriots resistance in Gojjam 1936 to 1941. Comparatively this dissertation research elucidates structures of the patriots forces and techniques of fighting mainly guerrilla warfare.

Previous studies utilized primary and secondary sources, and some of the interviewees were eyewitnesses and had proximity with Dejazmach Belay Zeleke and other patriots. These academic works shared valuable knowledge to construct the patriots resistance under the leadership of Dej. Belay Zeleke. However, further studies are needed to enrich the history of the patriots the military organization and strategies. The current study presents detailed accounts of the patriots military organization and strategies under the leadership of Dej. Belay Zeleke using primary and secondary sources. This study has relevance to build up the body of knowledge how the patriots organized themselves into military units, duties, responsibilities and leadership in the military units, and the patriots military strategies.

In order to explore the patriots military organization and military strategies primary data were collected through in-depth and key informant interviews with 17 people who were selected purposively considering their knowledge related to the topic. The researcher conducted field work in Bichena, Lamchan, Debre Work, Yegossa, Dimma, Yeduha, Debre Markos (in East Gojjam Administrative Zone), Wogdi, Chaqata, Gota Maryam, Sabella (in South Wollo Administrative Zone) and Addis Ababa in different years. Open ended questions pertinent to the patriots military organization and strategies were prepared in Amharic. In addition articles, books, theses, dissertations were used as secondary data sources, The data were organized, field notes and transcriptions were read, coded and categorized and analysed using descriptive and interpretive analysis.

2. Military Organization

In the five years of resistance movement against the Italians peasants constituted the basic unit of fighting force in many parts of the country. The patriots of Showa, Gondar, Gojjam and other regions led by chiefs organized at village and district levels and waged a stiff resistance.¹² Some of the patriots' leaders like Dej. Belay Zeleke who had a *shifta* (banditry) background that enabled them to get rich experience in military leadership, became successful in guerilla fighting.¹³ Here is a brief transition from banditry to resistance fighter to avenge the "blood of Ethiopia" (in the words of Belay Zeleke) that is defeat the Italians and restore its

independence. Dej. Belay Zeleke started the resistance movement with 13 to 15 followers and many of them were his relatives.¹⁴ Belay's personal character, military skills and quality of leadership contributed to rallying thousands of patriots to his side. Belay was ambitious, aggressive and energetic.¹⁵ He was committed to achieve his goal and utilize existing opportunities towards that end. In order to strengthen his force Belay established close relationships with brigands who hid themselves in the bushes after having committed crimes.¹⁶

Leadership among the patriots was based on ability and experience. Authors Shibru and Sibhat Gebre-Egziabher confirmed that Belay was elected by the patriots on the basis of his ability.¹⁷ Belay gained a reputation as an able military leader and he was well versed in military tactics. The British journalist Edmund Stevens expressed his appreciation of Belay as follows,

Lij Belay Zeleke was the ablest soldier among the patriot leaders. He -was the only one with a professional understanding of military tactics, the only one who could impose regular military discipline on his column. He was the only irregular commander capable of moving his host from place to place in secrecy and silence.¹⁸

Greenfield strengthened the reflection of Edmund Stevens, and put Belay on the forefront among the patriot leaders who could build trust among the people and win support.¹⁹

Different sources suggested different figures regarding the number of patriots led by Dej. Belay Zeleke. According to the estimation of Kebede Tesema, in October 1941 the size of the army which had been under the command of Belay was greater than those of Bitwoded Negash Bezabih, Bitwoded Mengesha Jembere and Ras Haylu Belew. However, Kebede does not provide the specific number of the troops of each patriot's leader.²⁰ According to Nega Ayele "Belay started his resistance movement with 20 men. In 1941 the number of troops reached 30,000."²¹ Zelalem Assefa pointed out that in April 1941 Belay marched to Debre Markos to welcome Emperor Haile Silassie and to show a victory parade and he had 40,000 troops.²² Sibhat estimated that in 1941 the number of patriots under the command of Belay was more than 44,000 men.²³ Considering the figures suggested by the authors, it is possible to estimate that in 1940 and 1941 on the average the number of troops was estimated between 30,000 and 40, 000.

The growing size of troops and the need to coordinate the resistance movement necessitated the organization of the patriots under military units. Abera and Mockler elaborate that the

patriots were organized into three military units in accordance with seniority and military experiences of the patriots as *arbanna alaqa* (forces of the great chiefs), *gobaz alaqa* (a leader of the brave), and the group of *kemananishe* (literally meaning not less than the other fighting groups and it included youngsters who were between 12 to 15 years old). This division was used also by other patriot leaders of Gojjam including Bitwoded Negash Bezabih, Bitwoded Mengesha Jembere and Ras Haylu Belew.²⁴

There were different forms of organizational structures of the patriots forces. As cited in Seletene (1999, p.183)²⁵, Amdetseyon identified *Teklay Tor Aleqa* (General or Central Military Command), *Tor Aleqa* (Commander of the Patriots), *Kifle Tor Aleqa* (Sub-Division of the Patriots), *Gobez Aleqa* (Leader of the patriots at the village level in charge of mobilizing forces for military campaign), and *Tewagi Arbegna* (a patriot assigned to fight against the enemy). This form of hierarchical chain of command was common among the patriots fighting in different parts of Ethiopia including Showa, Gondar and Gojjam.

Yohannis (1972)²⁶ questioned existence of military structure among the patriots forces in Gojjam. However, the works of Zelalem (1983)²⁷, Mockler (1984)²⁸, Abera (1990)²⁹, Samson (1991)³⁰ and Seltene (1999)³¹ come up substantive evidences and confirmed formation of indigenous-based military organizations and hierarchies to command the patriots.

2.1. Dereq Tor

Recent data obtained from oral informants revealed an organization of patriots into five military units comprising of *Dereq Tor*, *Yemetreyes Zebegnoch*, *Zuriya Safari* or *Mezezo Tor*, *Gamme/Angach*, and *Kemanianishae*. The patriots assigned in the *dereq tor* (it maybe described as a group of brave fighters that do not surrender to the enemy) and had better endurance to hostile environment, hunger and thirst compared with members of other military units. The *dereq tor* is the combination of two Amharic words “*dereq*” (dry) and “*tor*” (armed force). This military unit was recognized as *dereq tor* considering characteristics of the patriots who are eligible to join this military unit. Members of the *dereq tor* reached 500 and they were adults with extensive experiences in military campaigns. These patriots had endurance to hardships, hostile temperature, hunger, thirst and shocks. The *dereq tor* was under the direct command of Belay and it was mobilized to accomplish major military missions, and when patriots encountered strong confrontations from the enemy.³²

Making decision to order the *dereq tor* to engage in military campaign was not an easy task. There must be strong justifications supported by evidences regarding the military strength of the enemy (in terms of number, armament and composition of the army), geographical features of the area controlled by the enemy, duration of the campaign, availability of food and water, and the weather condition to order for the *dereq tor* to take part in the campaign. Dissemination of information about engagement of the *dereq tor* in the campaigns was a source of fear and anxiety to the enemy and it had psychological and military repercussions. Members of the *dereq tor* fought the battles of Dejen, Ayalfush and Wogdi and inspired patriots to fight gallantly and raised their military spirit.³³

2.2. Yemetreyes Zebegnoch

Ensuring security in and around the residence of Belay was a major concern. Nearly 200 patriots were assigned to serve as *Yemetreyes zebegnoch* (guards armed with machine gun) and they had the responsibility to maintain peace and order and to escort Belay. Dej. Ayalew Meshesha (Belay's maternal brother) was commander of *Yemetreyes zebegnoch*.³⁴ Fit. Zegeye Adela, Fit. Mitiku and Fit. Iwnetu were well known in operating machine guns in many battle fields and they provided technical assistance to members of *yemetreyes zebegnoch* and other military units on how to operate machine guns. Zegeye Adela, and the two brothers Belew Tesema and Dori Tesema were well known in firing of a machine gun. These individuals played major roles in many battlefields. Fighting was the main task of the *metreyes zebegnoch*. They were dependent on the tribute collected from the people, mainly in kind.³⁵

2.3. Mezezo tor or yeelfign zebegna

Among the patriots 300 people were assigned in the *mezezo tor or yeelfign zebegna* (special guards in the residence of Belay) to maintain peace and order near the residence of Belay. They were also considered as personal guards of Belay and other dignitaries and court attendants. The *mezezo tor* was also called *zuriya sefarias* it was stationed encircling Belay's residence. The *mezezo tor* was divided into two sub-units as *ye-gira zebegna* (the left guard) and *ye-qegn zebegna* (the right guard) and each group consisted of 150 men. *Ye-gira zebegna* was commanded by *Basha Deneqew Woregna*, and *Basha Kassa Tgegne* was commander of *ye-qegn zebegna*. Both the left and right guards patrolled villages in the vicinity of the residence of Belay and gates of Bokena and Yinfa, the headquarters of Belay.³⁶ The *mezezo tor* introduced rules that required people living around the residence of Belay to remain

indoor between the restricted times in the night. For security reason the *mezezo tor* imposed curfew, and fired a gun as a signal to urge people to stay in their houses. A detachment of the *mezezo tor* patrolled villages regularly and they had the right to take measures against people who violated the rules. Patrollers may shoot a person who refused to stop and disclose himself at night.³⁷

2.5. Gamme/Angach

The *Gamme* were very young. Those who could carry a gun (*angach*) were allowed to join this group. The *gamme* cut their hair in special style to distinguish themselves as the *gamme*, and the hair style was called *gammekurt*. The *gamme* shaved the centre of their head in a circular shape and left the other part to grow. Young people assigned under the *gamme* unit were large in number counted in thousands in different districts. Sometimes *gamme* and *angach* were used as titles. The *gamme* enjoyed warfare and knew about military tactics. They were under the command of Angach Adamu Nigatu.³⁸

The *gamme/angach* unit was divided into two sub-groups as *tiliku gamme/angach tore* (senior *gamme/angach* military unit) and *tinishugamme/angach tore* (junior *gamme/angach* military unit). *Angach Mengistie Melaku* and *Lij Shiferaw Gerbaw* (Belay's cousin) were heads of the senior and junior *gamme/angache* respectively. Following the death of *Angach Adamu*, fighting against *Dej. Chane Terefe*, who was the rival of Belay, *Lij Shiferaw Gerbaw* was appointed as commander of the *gamme tor*.³⁹ Besides their engagement in military campaigns, the *gamme* provided services in the residences of Belay, district governors, officials and senior patriots. They acted as security guards, patrolled military bases and villages, escorted and checked guests, served food and drinks, and accompanied guests.⁴⁰

2.6. Kemanianishe

During the battle of Adowa in 1896 and the second Italo-Ethiopian war of 1936 to 1941, young boys were active participants in military campaigns as camp followers and fighting groups. Under the military organization of Belay Zeleke, there was a separate military unit which was recognized as *kemanianishe* largely embraced boys between the age of 12 and 15.⁴¹ These boys were related to some of the senior and junior patriots. They were children, grandchildren, brothers, distant and close relatives or neighbors of the patriots themselves. The *kemanianishes* assisted senior patriots in carrying guns, cartridge belts, swords, shields, food, watching and feeding mules, donkeys and horses, and some of them participated in fighting wars against the enemy. Boys who were physically strong and had

the capability to operate guns were proposed by senior patriots to join the *gamme/angachtor*. Senior patriots shared their experiences to *kemanianishes* on military matters.⁴²

Table 1: Areas under the influence of Dejazmach Belay Zeleke

District	Chiefs	District	Chiefs
Inarj –Inawga	<i>Bitwoded</i> Tiruneh Sahilu	Dabay Tilatgin	<i>Dej.</i> Bekele Bogale, later
Berrentta	<i>Dej.</i> Ijigu Zeleke	Derebie	<i>Dej.</i> Adimassu Alemu
Shabal	<i>Dej.</i> Ayele Adigeh, <i>Dej.</i> Gedamu Adigeh	Derra	<i>Dej.</i> Worqe Assene, later <i>Dej.</i> Imirru Abesha and <i>Dej.</i> Mengistu Tegegne
Inamay	<i>Dej.</i> Tadesse Laqew, later <i>Dej.</i> Ayele Tadesse	Gubaya	<i>Dej.</i> Chane Terefe, later <i>Fit.</i> Ashagrie Haylu
Siso Iji Inabsie	<i>Dej.</i> Dilnessa Yihun	Qinbuat	<i>Dej.</i> Chane Minalu
Nazireth	<i>Dej.</i> Ijigu Iwnatu	Wudmit	<i>Dej.</i> Gesesse Alemu , <i>Dej.</i> Yihunie Haylu
Borena	<i>Dej.</i> Legesse Assene	Awabal	<i>Dej.</i> Chane Mazengia & Belay Mazengia
Ararra	<i>Dej.</i> Abebe Belew	Chaqata	<i>Dej.</i> Yilma Nigussie
Aneded	<i>Dej.</i> Shiferaw Adigeh		

Although these were overlapping roles shared among the five military units, each unit had specified tasks. Fighting and ensuring security were common tasks that each member in different military units was expected to execute. At the district level chiefs created military units and organized patriots under the categories of senior patriots, the *gamme tor*, and *kemananishe*, and there were patriots who rendered services as the *dereq tor* and *mezezo tor*. There was a hierarchical chain of command among patriots down to the village level.

Belay appointed chiefs as commanders of the patriots in their respective districts. Belay was able to win the support of the people in east Gojjam (Enemay, Inarj –Inawga, Siso Iji Inabsie, Berenta, Shebel, Nazireth, Arara, Aneded, Derebie, Gubaya, Debay Tilat Gin, Awabel, Kinbuat, Borebor, Tilat Gin, Dejjen and Wudmit), part of south Wollo (Chaqata and Borena), and part of north Showa (pocket territories in Derra bordering Shebel along gorges of the Abay river). Chiefs started patriotic movement as *yegobez aleqa*, and became the voice of the local people, influential and popular. Chiefs had dual tasks of administering districts and commanding the patriots. Table 1 shows list of districts which

were under the influence of Belay and the names of chiefs.⁴³

Chiefs mobilized the patriots under their command during military campaigns. Some of the campaigns were ordered by *Dej.* Belay, but others were undertaken on the chiefs own initiative especially in their districts. Belay organized a Council of War which was composed of chiefs, commanders of the *dereq tormetreyes zebegnoch*, *mezezo tor*, the *gamme tor*, and influential personalities. The Council discussed on military campaigns, how to strengthen the patriots' struggle, military strategies, weapons and logistics, the need to strengthen mutual help, and exchange information.⁴⁴

Table 2: Members of the Council of War

<i>Dej.</i> Belay Zeleke	<i>Dej.</i> Chane Terefe	<i>Dej.</i> Chane Minalu
<i>Bitwoded</i> Tiruneh Sahilu	<i>Fit.</i> Ashagrie Haylu	<i>Dej.</i> Wubetu Trfe
<i>Ras</i> Temesgen Fenta	<i>Dej.</i> Gesesse Alemu	<i>Dej.</i> Yihunie Hayle
<i>Dej.</i> Ijigu Zeleke	<i>Lij</i> Siferaw Gerbaw	<i>Dej.</i> Ayalew Adigeh
<i>Angach</i> Adamu Nigatu	<i>Basha</i> Kassa Tgegne	<i>Angach</i> Mengistie Melaku
<i>Basha</i> Deneqew Woregna	<i>Dej.</i> Chane Mazengia	<i>Dej.</i> Yihunie Haylu
<i>Dej.</i> Ayele Adigeh	<i>Dej.</i> Abebe Belew	<i>Dej.</i> Beyene Bishaw
<i>Dej.</i> Gedamu Adigeh	<i>Dej.</i> Yilma Nigussie	<i>Dej.</i> Mengistu Tegegne
<i>Dej.</i> Tadesse Laqew	<i>Dej.</i> Worqe Assene	<i>Fit.</i> Temesgen Haylu
<i>Dej.</i> Ayele Tadesse	<i>Dej.</i> Imirru Abesha	<i>Fit.</i> Bekele Wassie
<i>Dej.</i> Dilnessa Yihun	<i>Dej.</i> Mengistu Tegegne	<i>Fit.</i> Haylu Galiya
<i>Dej.</i> Ijigu Iwnatu	<i>Dej.</i> Fenta Senbete	<i>Fit.</i> Teshale Alemu
<i>Dej.</i> Bekele Bogale,	<i>Dej.</i> Guanche Adela	<i>Fit.</i> Abetu Tesfaye
<i>Dej.</i> Kassa Engidasew	<i>Dej.</i> Ferede Adela	<i>Fit.</i> Tesema Laqew
<i>Dej.</i> Legesse Assene	<i>Ras</i> Tesema Nigussie	<i>Bejirond</i> Abate Adigeh
<i>Dej.</i> Adimassu Alemu	<i>Dej.</i> Belay Mazangia	<i>Lij</i> Degu Adigeh
<i>Lij.</i> Mekonnen Kassa	<i>Dej.</i> Ayalew Meshesha	<i>Dej.</i> Shiferaw Adigeh

Most of the patriots armed themselves with modern and traditional weapons that they had. After the military campaigns many patriots returned to their villages to farm plots of lands, and when the need arose they joined chiefs for military duties.⁴⁵ Fundamentally, people joined patriot leaders to free their country from Italian occupation. The desire to get rifles, military titles and to collect booty motivated some people to join Belay and local chiefs. Even those who had guns wanted to have another which were considered as the best quality by the standard of the time. The quality of firearms had an impact on the degree of gaining respect among friends and local community.⁴⁶ Pankhurst discussed the psychological impacts of firearms in the Ethiopian society.⁴⁷

The practice of looting contributed to increase the number of patriots. Looting was the source of food and firearms. Belay encouraged looting and plundering to weaken the *bandas*, and to have more firearms to strengthen patriots' military might.⁴⁸ There were other sources of supply of firearms. The victories that patriots achieved in the various battlefields were the main source of arms. Belay carried out a series of military campaigns and won victories and collected much booty. As the number of campaigns increased the quality and quantity of firearms captured by the patriots increased. It was in 1937, that for the first time Belay's followers captured 62 *wochefo* (wetterly) and *minishir* (Manlicher) *wujigra* (Wijitra or fusil Gras) *dimotfor* (Lee metford), *mauzar* (mauser), *nasmasar* (a rifle which has a brass shoulder-strap) and *sinadir* (Schneider hunting rifle) from the *bandas*.⁴⁹ In the same year Belay and his followers captured four or five rifles each following their victory over the *banda* at the Battle of Abarra in January.⁵⁰

Capturing weapons or other materials from the enemy was a sign of bravery and an important criterion to get military titles and an award from Belay. In this case the patriots were ready to hand over the booty to local military chiefs. When patriots received guns as an award it was usual to swear in the name of Belay and Saint George to show their loyalty.⁵¹ Belay distributed the available guns and bullets to unarmed patriots or to those who were equipped with spears, shields and sticks after they were trained in operating guns.⁵²

Arms were purchased mainly from the *bandas*, Darra and Chaqeta were important trading centers for firearms and bullets. The process of buying and selling firearms and bullets was conducted in the form of bartering and in cash. There was variation in the prices of rifles depend on their quality. The price of one Belgig (Belgium's rifle) was equivalent to 40 Maria Theresa Thalers or one mule, one *achir minishir* cost 50-60 MT, 10 *yealbin tiyit* (bullet for Albanian made rifle) were sold for 1MT; and 30 *yebelijigtiyit* (bullets for Belgium's rifle) were sold for one MT.⁵³

Firearms were also obtained in the form of gift. In March 1941 Emperor Hayle Silassie sent 300 rifles to Belay from Omedla.⁵⁴ There was limited number of machine guns and field glasses owned by the patriots. *Dej. Belay Zeleke*, *Ras Temesgen Fenta*, *Dej. Mengistu Tegegne*, *Dej Ejigu Zeleke* had field glasses.⁵⁵ Belay was not able to arm the entire army with guns. For instance, when Belay and his followers launched a surprise attack on the *banda* on January 14, 1937 in Abarra with 60 men only 30 were armed.⁵⁶ The problem of shortage of

arms continued to exist until the close of the liberation struggle. In 1940 when the news of the return of the Emperor was heralded a large number of people including the *banda* started to join the patriots and that it became impossible to arm them.⁵⁷

Formal military training was not given to the patriots. The young patriots learned how to fight by watching and listening to the advices of senior patriots. However, sometimes, they were given orientation on how to attack the enemy and defend themselves.⁵⁸ The captive *bandas* taught the patriots how to handle machine guns, hand grenades and other weapons and how to exchange greetings as trained soldiers. They also taught the patriots military drill imitating after the Italians, but it was given up after a while considering it as irrelevant.⁵⁹ In 1938, 13 *banda* deserted the Italians and joined the forces of Belay at Yinfa and taught many patriots how to use machine guns. Occasionally, some of the patriots exchanged military salutes with *Dej. Belay*. Beshir and other *banda* fought on the side of the patriots in several military campaigns.⁶⁰

Patriots improved their knowledge and skills of operating rifles, machine-guns and implementing military strategies through mutual learning. Senior patriots including *Dej. Belay* gave instructions and briefings to inexperienced patriots on military issues and on how to open and assemble rifles, machine guns, hand grenades and pistols, fire rifles, shoot targets, ambush and disguise from the enemy.⁶¹

During rest time and on holidays Belay watched patriots exercising and practicing target shooting, usually skull of a cow or an ox, running, riding a horse in the open field of Yinfa. *Angach Wasse* and *Abate Worya* from Enebe Worya were famous runners among the patriots; *Fitawrari Ayalew Tefera* and *Biazin Niguse* from Yedagwat were winners in horse riding. Champions of shooting, running and horse riding were awarded rifles, bullets, horses and money, and were respected by the patriots.⁶²

As far as provision of food is concerned, in time of military expeditions patriots used to eat bread, roasted grain and dried meat prepared in their homes; people also served them with foods and drinks. The largest proportion of the army was composed of peasants and practiced both agricultural and military activities at the same time.⁶³

The Italians appointed Ethiopians who collaborated with them as local governors regardless of their background. They were given honorary titles such as *ras*, *dejazmach*, *fitawrari* and

grazmach. Titles were given even to the butchers, tailors, waiters, cooks, drivers and gardeners.⁶⁴ Belay granted military titles to the patriots as *ras*, *bitwoded*, *afengus*, *dejazmach*, *fitawrari*, *qegnazmach* and *girazmach*⁶⁵ to counteract the Italians attempt to increase the number of the *bandas* by offering honorary titles. In other words it was a preemptive measure to discourage the inclination of patriots from joining the Italians; to upstage the Italians by projecting an image that Belay had an able military leaders with lofty military titles; to strengthen their morale to fight the enemy and to make them obedient to Belay.⁶⁶ Belay had no desire to award himself with the highest military titles. He reasoned that his mother had already given him the name Belay meaning above all. But many of the patriots called him *leul* Belay, and the *bandas* called him *atse begulbetu* (majesty by his own strength).⁶⁷

In addition, Belay created incentives and a spirit of competition among his followers. A patriot who killed an Italian soldier or captured weapon from the enemy was given the privilege of drinking *tej* in the special vessels which were called *genbaw*, *ye wodaj mescha*, *deboch* and *sale* Belay. Patriots with such achievements were also allowed to seat near Belay Zeleke when there was a banquet, and the guests who were invited to the banquet would welcome them warmly standing from their seats after they performed their valor traditionally called *fukera* meaning a war dance. Patriots who captured enemies enjoyed more prestige.⁶⁸

3. Military Strategy

The patriots did not rush to the battle fields spontaneously, rather they explored their potentials and tried to get informed about the existing situations on the Italians side through *yewust arbegnoch* (Ethiopians who had contact with the Italians and the *bandas* but they assisted the patriots underground) and the *qabi* (ቃቢ, *Qabi* is an Amharic word used to describe patriots who were assigned to spy the Italians and the *bandas*). The Council of War, the chiefs and their followers considered the arms and logistics, size of the army, topography and weather condition of the battlefield as inputs to plan feasible strategies. There were debates over the proposed strategy before reaching consensus on the proposed strategies. The strategies were designed to reduce casualties on the side of patriots and to resist and defeat the enemy.⁶⁹

The patriots used several strategies in the campaign against the Italians and the *bandas*. Guerilla warfare was a common strategy widely used by Ethiopian patriots.⁷⁰ Dejachas Mengesha, Negash, Lej Haylu Belew were popular leaders chosen by the people. Another

reason that contributed to the the continuity of the struggle was the guerrilla warfare the patriots adopted as a method of struggle against the enemy. The patriot chiefs Abebe Aregay of Showa, Belay Zeleke of Gojjam and Wubneh Tesema of Armachoho, who all adopted guerrilla warfare, are particular examples.

Yohannis Birhanu and Nega Ayele explained that the form of fighting in Gojjam was characterized by guerilla warfare that involved hit and run tactics. The patriots controlled strategic places, attacked the enemy and advanced forward or retreated depending on the strength and weakness of the enemy.⁷¹ The patriots ambushed the enemy in the jungles and valleys, and they used mountains and caves as strongholds. The enemy was unable to destroy the patriots' strongholds in Somma, Filaw and Bokena which were inaccessible and demanded huge sacrifices.⁷²

Deploying a group of patriots along the Italians lines to intercept and ambush them⁷³ and diverting attention of the enemy through disseminating misleading information about location of the patriots were important strategies employed by the patriots. The patriots moved elsewhere rapidly after they fired from a certain point to mislead the enemy in order to attack it when it moves into the intended target.⁷⁴ Belay **did** not stay in the same place for a long period of time.⁷⁵

Salome Gebre-Egziabher has emphasized the contribution of information gathering as part and parcel of military strategy utilized by the Ethiopian patriots.⁷⁶ Actions taken by the patriots against the enemy were supported by information gathered by spies known as *Qabi* in Amharic. The *qabi* disguised themselves and approached the *bandas*, Italians and women cooks as if they were their supporters and observed day-to-day activities. The *qabi* focused on Debre Markos, Dejjen, Bichena, Debre Worq, Derra and Wogdi where there were Italian camps, Italians and *bandas* as well. The *qabi* infiltrated the enemy and established contact with the *yewustarbegnoch* and worked together to dig out information about the enemy and communicate it to *Dej. Belay* and the chiefs. The *qabi* disseminated fake information among the *bandas* and the Italians about the patriots that might have negative implications to the enemy and positive outcomes to the patriots. Fake information influenced the enemy to make wrong decisions.⁷⁷

Sometimes, the number of patriots who participated in the campaign was decided based on the strength and size of the enemy. Belay deployed his troops systematically to save time and

energy and to take quick military actions. If the campaign was in Inebse patriots would be mobilized from surrounding areas e.g. Enarj Enawga. Chiefs of neighbouring districts supported each other to boost their strength.⁷⁸ The *qabi* gave misleading information to the spies of the Italians. For example when Belay planned to attack the enemy which was stationed at Debre Worq in August 1940. spies of the enemy were informed that the campaign was directed towards Dejjen. They misinformed the enemy about the date of the launching of the fighting.⁷⁹

Belay thought that stationing a large number of patriots in the same place might have the risk of vulnerability to enemy attack. Patriots were dispersed in different sites to watch for movement of the enemy. For security reasons the patriots used the roads which were not frequented by the enemy, and launched an attack from different directions to split and exhaust the enemy. Belay and other chiefs arranged contingents and logistics to reinforce troops.⁸⁰

It was a common practice that Belay and other chiefs fired the first bullet to the sky as a signal to alert the patriots to start fighting.⁸¹ The patriots had respect for their leaders, they accepted orders and put them into actions.⁸² The patriots used codes (in words) to indicate their affiliation to Belay and other commander/s of the campaign. The code may be changed, so every person should update himself. For instance, the patriots used this code in a certain campaign: To which group do you belong to? Belay Zeleke! What did he say? Kill the enemy! (የየትኛው ቡድን/ጭፍራኑም! የበላይዘለቀ! በላይምንአለ? ጠላትን ግደልአለ!)⁸³

4. Conclusion

During the period of resistance 1936-1941, mainly voluntary peasants from different walks of life and age categories formed the nucleus of patriot forces under the leadership of Dejazmach Belay Zeleke and his chiefs assigned in different localities. Organizing the patriots (considering their military experiences, age and type of weapons they used) under the military units of the *Derek Tor*, *Yemetreyes Zebegnoch*, *Zuriya Safari* or *Mezezo Tor*, *Gamme Tor* or *Angach*, and *Kemanianishae* is a major achievement. The patriots assigned in each military unit had defined roles and responsibilities, however, whenever necessary every patriot was expected to take part in military campaigns. Indigenous forms of military organization served as anchor institutions to hold patriots together and ensure continuity of the resistance movement. The patriots military organization had functional structures linking

the patriots at the village and district levels to facilitate chain of command to deploy forces and to fight against the enemy. The patriots used diverse military strategies to attack the enemy including guerrilla fighting, hit and run, sudden attack, intercepting, blocking roads, infiltrating in to the enemy camps, espionage and misleading the enemy. There was flexibility and the practice of blending different strategies that fit the existing contexts leading to success. The patriots put stiff resistance against the enemy, this was attributed partly to the formation of military organization, implementation of feasible military strategies, and existence of good leadership, mutual respect and devotion among the patriots.

Footnotes

1. “Belay Zeleke *sime tir arbegna* (Belay Zeleke the renowned patriot)”, Addis Zemen, Amharic Daily, April 6, 1983, p.2.
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2. Salome Gebre- Egziabher. “The Ethiopian Patriots, 1936-1941”, in Ethiopian Observer, 12(2), 1969.
3. Manyazewal Assafa. “*The Resistance in Begemdir, Gojjam and Wollaga.*” BA thesis. Haile Silassie I University, 1970.
4. Seltene Seyoum. “*A history of resistance in Gojjam (Ethiopia): 1936 – 1941.*” PhD Dissertation. Addis Ababa University, School of Graduate Studies, Department of History. 1999.
5. Yohannis
6. Zelalem
7. Salome
8. Manyazewal
9. Yohannis
10. Zelalem
11. Seltene
12. Salome; Seltene

13. Seltene; Yohannis
14. Sibhat Gebre –Egziabher, Jagnaw Balay Zalaqa, in *Yekatit*, Hamle 1972 EC (July 1980)pp. 10-13.
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20. Kebede Tesemma. *Ya-Tarik Mastawasha*. (Amharic). Addis Ababa: Artistic Printing Press, 1965.
21. Nega Ayele. "*Centralization Versus Regionalism in Ethiopia: The Case of Gojja, 1932-1969.*" BA thesis, Haile Silassie I University, 1970.
22. Zelalem
23. Sibhat Gebre –Egziabher, Hamle 1972 EC (July 1980)
24. Aberra Jambare. *Abba Kostir*. (Amharic). Addis Ababa: Kuraz Publishing Agency, 1990.
Mockler
25. Seltene
26. Yohannis
27. Zelalem
28. Mockler
29. Abera
30. Samson
31. Seltene
32. Informants: Tesemma Laqew, Kassa Tegegne, Kebede Fenta and Mammo Kefale
33. Kassa Tegegne, Kebede Fenta and Mammo Kefale
34. Samson; Zelalem
Informants: Kassa, Tesema
35. Ketintawit Ethiopia Jegnoch Arbegnoch Mahiber Office; Samson

- Informants: Kassa, Kebede, Tareqegn Melesse
36. Informants: Kassa, Kebede, Gedamu Beyene,
37. Informants: Kassa, Mammo, Kebede
38. Samson; Zelalem
- Informants: Kassa, Mammo, Tesemma
39. Informants: Kassa, Mammo
40. Informants: Tesema, Ayalew Desta, Mammo, Kebede, Kassa
41. Informants: Mammo, Kebede, Kassa
42. Informants: Kebede, Mammo
43. Samson, Aberra, Zelalem, Addis Zemen 1975 EC, p.2
- Manuscript – Biography of Fitawrari Tesema Laqew 28/04/1982 E.C.) Informant: Menber
44. Abba Kostir, Ketintawit Ethiopia Jegnoch Arbegnoch Mahiber Office No h 329 Kibur Dej. Belay Zeleke; p.1
- Manuscript – Biography of Fitawrari Tesema Laqew 28/04/1982 E.C.)
- Informants: Teshale & Tesemma, Mammo, Kebede, Menber
45. Samson, Abarra, Zelalem
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46. Informants: Kassa, Chanyalew Kassa, Admasse Waasse
47. Pankhurst, Richard. *Economic History of Ethiopia: 1800-1935*. Addis ABABA: Haile Silassie I University Press, 1968.
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- Informants: Eshetu, Ayalew, Admasse, Chanyalew
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50. Manyazewal;
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51. Informants: Ayalew, Kassa, Mammo, Kebede
52. Informants: Members of Yeshebel Berenta worda patriots association
53. Informants: Tesema, Kebede, Mammo
54. Informants: Ayalew, Tesema
55. Informant: Kebede
56. Manyazewal
- Informants: Teshale

57. Manyazewal

58. Salome

59. Salome

Informants: Ayalew, Kassa

60. Informants: Kebede, Mammo, Tesema

61. Informants: Members of Yeshebel Berenta woreda patriots association, Mammo, Menber, Kebede

62. Kebede

63. Manyazewal; Aberra

Informants: Kebede, Ayalew, Admasse, Endalew, Libanos,

64. Sbacchi, 1985

65. Kebede; Nega; Yohannis

66. Manyazewal; Ketintawit Ethiopia

Informants: Alamirew, Ewnetu, Tesema, Ayalew

67. Mockler; Kebede

68. Abera; Zelalem

Informants: Zenebe Hayle, Admasse Wasse.

69. Informants: Tesemma, Mammo, Kebede, Menber

70. Sbacchi

71. Yohannis; Nega

72. Samson; Zelalem

Informants: Menber, Mammo

73. Manyazewa

74. Salome

75. Aberra

76. Salome

77. Informants: Abate, Alamirew, Mammo, Tesema, Kebede

78. Informants: Mammo, Kebede, Ayalew

79. Informants: Kebede, Mammo, Alamirew

80. Informants: Menber, Mammo, Kassa

81. Sibhat Gebre-Egziabher. *Eneho Jegna*. (Amharic). Addis Ababa, 2007 EC. (2015)

Informant: Ayalew

82. Yohannis

83. Informants: Abate, Alamirew

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Manuscript – Biography of Fitawrari Tesema Laqew 28/04/1982 E.C. (Obtained from the family.)

Appendix 1.

List of informants

Name	Remark
Abate Endalew (Ato), Age 92	Interviewed in Dimma in August 2013. Joined the patriots in his childhood, under the service of Belay.
Admase Wase (Ato), Age 70	Aug. 6&24/1990. Bichena, He was a patriot under Belay
Alamirew (Ato) Age 92	Interviewed in Zekort, Geday Iyasu (Yeduha-Berenta) in August 2013. Well known patriot, under the service of Belay.
Ayalew Desta (Ato), Age 75	July 26/1990, Yegefet Abbo (Bichena). Under the service of Belay.
Chanyalew Kassa (Dr.), 45	Addis Ababa, April 15/1990. He was well informed about the patriots.
Eshetu Ewnetu (Kegneta), 73	Bichena, July 23/1990. Attended church education. Knowledgeable about Belay's military organization
Gedamu Beyene (Blatta) Age 77	Agam Borebor, July 14/1990. Under the service of Belay
Kassa Tegegne (Basha), Age 80	Gabarma, August 5&6, well known patriot, member of yemetreyes zebegnoch and leader of yeqegn zebegna
Kebede Fenta (Ato), 90	Lemichen, June 2009. Had close relationship with Belay since his childhood. A patriot and eye witness.
Libanos (Merigeta), 77	Debre Markos, June 27/2013. Attended church education. Knowledgeable about patriots struggle.
Mammo Kefale (Abba), 90	Bichena, Mar.20-22/2013; July 21/2018. Under the service of Belay since childhood.
Menber (Ato), 50	Bichena, August/2013. Secretary of Patriots Association. Well informed about patriots struggle.
Tarekegn Melesse (Ato), 74	Yashabab (in bichena), August 5. Angach of Belay
Tesema Laqew (Fit.), 76	Bichena, August 6&20/1990, July 18/1990. Belay's uncle, known patriot and an eyewitness, had reach knowledge.
Teshale Alemu (Fit), 83	Bichena, July 29/1990. Belay's cousin, known patriot, grew up with Belay. Eye witness about patriots struggle
Yeshebel Berenta	woreda yEthiopia abat arbegnoch mahiber abalat. Yeduha, August 2013. they were 50 and older, informed about patriots struggle, Their parents and relatives were under the service of Belay.
Zenebe Hayle (Ato), 38	Bichena, July 25/1990. His father was member of yemetreyes zebegnoch.