

The Ethiopian Army from Victory to Collapse 1977-1991. By Fantahun Ayele. Northwestern University Press, 2014. xviii, 309 pp. Bibliography. Index.

This book is organized into seven chapters with a general introduction and concluding remark. The first chapter gives detailed explanations on the Ethiopian army in the post liberation imperial regime. With a brief introduction about the history of Ethiopian military tradition, this chapter focuses mainly on the genesis, consolidation and organization of the army in the years between 1941 and 1974. Particularly, it discusses the serious challenges and problems such as material constraints, acute shortages of military expertise and other technical limitations in the creation, organization and modernization of the army. It also indicates the internal political challenges and growing external threats directed against the emperor as well as on the territorial integrity and sovereignty of the country. Still this chapter discusses the mounting dissatisfaction and secessionist move in Eritrea and growing threats from Somalia in the east that appeared as the severe test against the power and the very existence of the imperial government and the country as a whole. In addition, it shows the diplomatic and administrative skill and achievement of Emperor Haile Selassie in laying the foundation of the Ethiopian army and his earnest struggle in tackling the major threats and challenges the country faced. In other words, it explains how, amidst of those internal and external threats, did the emperor succeed in securing vital technical, material and financial resources for training, organizing and equipping the various sections of the Ethiopian army, including the opening of military academy that served as very pivotal institution in defending the country from external invasion.

Moreover, this chapter gives sufficient description regarding the involvement and heightened influence of foreign powers, mainly the British and later the Americans, in various aspects of the country's internal affairs. In the concluding section, this chapter also describes the changing situation in the interest of major world powers on the geopolitics of the Red Sea and Indian Ocean region and the resultant influences on the later history of the entire region. It thoroughly examines the declining American interest in the Red Sea region, subsequent reduction of their military support to the Ethiopian government, the growing pressure both internally and externally, and the eventual demise of the Haile Selassie's regime in 1974. It also shows the consequent reorientation of Ethiopian international relations and political order.

In chapter two, the author investigates the situation of the Ethiopian army during the *Derg* with an emphasis on its expansion, recruitment of new army, major reorganizations, consolidation and strengthening of the various groups of the army. The active role of the soviets in the expansion process, particularly in the provision of firearms, military vehicles and equipment, and their direct involvement in military training and other important activities such as military advice and command are discussed in detail. Furthermore, it indicates the preoccupation of the military government in combating the increased Somalia threats in the east, the intensified pressure from Eritrean rebels in the north, the evolving political dissents in the center and the general unrest in many parts of the country, especially in the early days of the *Derg*. It also deals with the various military campaigns the *Derg* launched against the Somali aggressors and Eritrean rebels in the subsequent years, the determination of the *Derg* to train huge and superior army, the challenges it faced in the process, the growing dissatisfaction among some generals and senior commanders against Mengistu and soviet military advisors. The chapter gives detailed evidence about the overall structure in the army including human resources, type and amount of armament, the budget allocated for the maintenances of the military apparatus, and loans and military aid supplied from other countries. In the last section of the chapter, the deteriorating situation of the Ethiopian government (both economically and politically), the retreat or decline of the soviet assistances, the consolidation of the rebels in Eritreia, the military sabotage and its daunting effect on Ethiopian army are treated in great depth.

In the third chapter, the author has presented the logistical and command problems prevalent within the Ethiopian army under the *Derg*. This section clearly shows the chronic shortage of supplies, problems of administration in the military logistics, and the deteriorating effects of these problems on the fighting moral and spirits of Ethiopian army at various fronts. It also deals with the nature and

main characterizing features of military organization and systems of command, and assesses how these affected the course of military engagements and the final fate of the army. It indicates the highly centralized nature of military command that denied the efficient and able army commanders and generals from taking independent decisions whenever necessary, or from launching timely military operations against the rebels. It on the other hand shows how this chronic problem helped the insurgents, in several occasions, to buy time to reinforce and reorganize themselves. In general, this chapter outlines logistical and command problems that had engulfed the Ethiopian army, and how these factors eventually brought about heavy human and material loss and destruction.

In Chapter four, the main issue focuses on another vital element of the army: the military intelligence devised and implemented during the military government. It outlines both the strategic and combat intelligence systems, and states how it was functioning and operating. It clearly pinpoints the incapacitation of the military intelligence system, the limitation in the training and in producing professionals capable of escorting, identifying insurgent positions, planning and establishing efficient counterinsurgency measures and interpreting enemy positions. It also discusses other problems such as delays to take actions, lack of willingness to cooperate each other, inability to surpass enemy intelligent systems and penetrate deep into their clandestine intelligence systems created within the local population. In addition, the indifference and ignorance among intelligence officers of the *Derg* and the military sabotages they committed are thoroughly discussed. This chapter in general gives details about how the weaknesses of the intelligence system resulted in severe destruction and loss on the side of the Ethiopian army. However, it shows that, in contrast to the situation in the north, the military intelligence was quite efficient in the fight against the Somali aggressors in the east.

Chapter five deals with the 1977/78 military campaigns of the *Derg*. It explains the critical challenges that the military government faced especially on Eastern fronts, and discusses how the government of Somalia purposefully calculated to exploit the internal division and political turmoil in the early years of the *Derg* to its best advantage. The author discusses the active involvement of the Somali government in recruiting, training and equipping large number of minorities living mainly in the Ogden, and how the Mogadishu government utilized these forces as an effective guerrilla force in the fight against Ethiopia. The chapter also indicates the dramatic spread of the invading Somalia forces deep into the Ethiopian territory particularly across vast stretches of eastern and southeastern parts of the country, including the occupation of Jijiga, attacks on Dire Dawa and several other towns in the region.

In addition, in this chapter, the author examines the worsening military situation in Eretria and the internal power struggle and political tensions while the Ethiopian army was preoccupied in the fight against Somalia. It also indicates the immediate actions of the *Derg* such as massive military mobilization and training supported by external powers mainly the soviet and Cuban governments, and the launching of protracted counter offenses and several battles against the invading Somalia forces. The chapter concludes itself by critically examining the cost of the war and the underlying reasons for the triumph of the Ethiopian troops. The author argues that several factors had contributed to the crucial victory scored over the invading army, yet the most decisive factor is the deep-rooted spirit of patriotism, nationwide indignation and determination of Ethiopians to fight for their territorial sovereignty and integrity.

In chapter six, the author treats the most protracted fighting between the *Derg* and the northern rebels from 1976-1991. This chapter provides very detailed discussions on the organization, tactics and strategies, intelligence system of the Eritrean rebels, and their sources of material gains. The evidence presented in this section gives an insight about the remarkable determination and efficient military strategies of the Eritrean rebels. It also deals with the renewed determination and military reorganization of the government to launch counterinsurgency assaults against the Eritrean rebels, particularly in the immediate aftermath of the decisive victory in the eastern front. Furthermore, it indicates the extensive training of Special Forces targeted for effective military operations to dismantle rebels fortified in the mountainous areas and harsh lowlands of western Eretria.

In general, this section of the book explains in detail about the several military operations launched by the Ethiopian government in the northern front, and the devastating military consequences that followed. It also explains the main reasons why the long awaited and so-called well-planned major military operations led to a total fiasco to the government troops. The book describes the major military operations: the siege and storming of Naqfa, operation Red Star, operation Bahra Nagash, the fall of Afabet, the intensification of rebel military operations in Tigray (operation Adwa, Aksum, the Shere disaster), the fall of Massawa in the hands of rebels, the fighting at Guna, Southern Wollo, northern Shewa (operation Flame), fall of Karra Mesheg and Maragna, Gondar, and the fall of the military government.

In the last chapter, the author goes back to the question how the revolution changed the army, and raises two major themes: the impact of the 1974 revolution and the Soviet military assistance. The army mutiny and growing discontent against Haile Selassie's regime dictated the need for change. Although the change of government was welcomed by the various sections of the population, the junior military officers who took power had failed to listen to the earnest demand for civilian government. In addition, it discusses the harsh measures undertaken by the *Derg* on various opposition or dissent groups and how such and other actions dissociated the *Derg* from the wider sections of the population, including the army. Another important issue raised in this chapter is the mixed blessing of the Soviet military assistance to Ethiopia. It argues that although the Soviets supported the Ethiopian government substantially in many ways, they were also part of the main problems to the Ethiopian government. The book states that Soviets were not willing to train Ethiopian mechanics and technicians. They had also obliged the Ethiopian government to send engines to Russia for maintenance that in turn caused significant delays in delivering them back. It is also mentioned that their military advisors were arrogant and unfriendly, which brought about serious discontent and bitterness among Ethiopian generals and commanders. This had also been a cause for the failure of many military operations. Generally, this chapter attempts to show how these situations influenced the Ethiopian army.

Finally, the author concludes the book with detailed investigations of the fundamental factors that led to the collapse of the Ethiopian army. The author argues that the departure of Mengistu in May 1991 not only led to the demise of the *Derg*, but it had also sapped the fighting morale of the Ethiopian army and eventual demise of the entire military apparatus. Under this section, the author eloquently explains to the weakness of the military government in handling the local population as one of the serious mistakes that forced the *Derg* to pay high-price in the course of the war. The author also shows that inappropriate ways of treating and handling the people in the rebel-dominated areas allowed the rebels to tap vital military information from the local population. The leakage of top military secrets had helped the rebels to launch unexpected attacks on the government troops. He also discusses how decisive was the conflict and rivalry among top military commanders for the eventual success of the rebels. The deployment of various groups of army units, having different training background and fighting experience, in the same front or battle was another source of disaster for military government. In general, this section of the book critically discusses the several factors that contributed to the downfall of the *Derg* and the collapse of the military apparatus of the country. These include loss of public support due to unpopular measures of the military government, weak counter-insurgency strategy, intelligence failure, problems of command and control, conscription and training problems, organizational weakness, and war-weariness and disillusionment.

Methodology and Organization of the Book

The book appears to be reconstructed based on a narrative style of writing history involving a focus on presenting the factual evidence and description of the data. This approach gives readers the opportunity to interpret and understand the issue and the period better.

Thematically the book is very well organized, clear and precise that demonstrates the authors' fascinating command of language. The extraordinary huge volumes of data are systemically

scrutinized and coherently presented, which makes the book more interesting and readable. Abundant primary sources mainly from defense minister archives are consulted and exploited. Several archives are attached in the appendix. We found the extensive use of such sources as one of the most important qualities of this book. Supportive sources such as oral information, video records and extensive interviews are utilized. In search of first hand information, the author also devoted much of his time in finding and interviewing several leading army commanders and generals. He explored and travelled to most of the major battlefields located in different parts of the country. All these efforts further witness the courage and commitment of the author to the discipline and ethics of the profession, as well as his ability in the selection and use of relevant sources. In general, the book is well organized, substantiated and balanced.

The contribution of the book

This brief review cannot adequately explain the contributions of the book. The book primarily deals with the military history of the country, but its enormous data is also very valuable for social scientists in general, and politicians, policy makers, administrators and others in particular. For example, it provides rich knowledge on the art of diplomacy and world politics in the cold war era that in turn allows an exemplary opportunity to infer how the political tensions and rivalry of major world powers have been affecting the life and history of innocent societies in the developing world. The detailed accounts on each battlefield, organization, structures and security issues give crucial lessons for people involved in the fields of military science. The multifaceted challenges and issues that both rebels and government forces encountered practically at several battlefields can also be invaluable for the better understanding of our future if they are cautiously explored and investigated. The atrocities and destructions in those protracted military engagements also offer a very clear impression of the severe pains that the country had been exposed for about the last fifty or more years. The book clearly demonstrates the heavy-handed measures of the *Derg* against its own people, and the resulting consequences and sacrifices the *Derg* paid that in turn can be instructive for rulers to consider the society at the grass root level.

In conclusion, the book gives vital lessons for readers interested to explore the magnitude of the problems or the challenges the country encountered for more than a quarter of a century, and the resulting repercussions upon our present socio-economic and political development. The book will in short be valuable to academicians, government bodies (policy makers and executives) and other stakeholders interested to gain important lessons from the recent history of the country. However, the book fails to investigate the role of external forces and bodies that might have directly and indirectly been involved in the country's affairs during the military government. The influence of the neighboring countries including the Arab world could have been incorporated and thoroughly treated. In terms of the structure or organization of the chapters, the issue raised "how the revolution influenced the army" towards the last section of the book should have been treated in the initial part of the book.

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