

# Reflections on the Battle of Adwa and its Significance

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## I. INTRODUCTION

Ethiopia has been subjected to the expansionists and colonial military pressures by the Ottoman, Egyptian, British, and Italian invaders. The British and Italians had launched multiple military engagements against Ethiopian, the Sudanese and the Somali people in the nineteenth century. On the other hand, an Ethiopian military general, Ras Alula personally engaged in thirteen major serious battles against Ottoman or Egyptians, Mahdists, and Italian intruders in the Horn of Africa from 1875 to 1896.

Italy was entered the horn of Africa through a window of commercial opportunity. Subsequent to the opening of the Suez Canal in 1869, an Italian steamship company (Rubattino), leased the Port of Assab on the Red Sea coast of Raheita as a refueling station. The Company was hoped to make money by controlling the slave trafficking and arms smuggling. The government of Italy was over ambitious and sought various ways to prove its bona fide certificates on the eyes of the rest of the world. Though, Italy was demanded African lands across the Mediterranean, Italy's attempts was failed to occupy Tunisia and Egypt in North Africa. Thus, in 1882, the Italian government bought Assab from Rubattino for \$43,200, thereby providing the company a lucrative profit on its investment and unofficially establishing the first Italian Colony in Africa since the days of Caesars.

Bolstered by its real estate acquisition on the Red Sea coast, Italy participated in the Berlin conference in 1884-1885 and partitioned what was left of Africa after the initial wave of European imperialism. At the Berlin conference, Italy was awarded Ethiopia and all that remained was for her troops to occupy the prize. This would take time and cautious expansion from Assab. To ensure the safety of its new port, Italy moved to the surrounding interior. From its Assab base and through the good office of Great Britain, Italy occupied the port of Massawa in 1885. Parallel to this time, the Ethiopian emperor Yohannes, was distracted by wars in the highlands and Mahdists in Sudan, who finally claimed the emperor's life at the battle of Mattama.

In the larger scheme of European colonial adventures in the red sea region, Adwa was no episode. It was the last dramatic act in a long play, the culmination of a struggle that had begun decades earlier. The Ethiopian protest was slow and patient, but unyielding. Indeed, European colonial encroachments into the Horn were underway very early in the nineteenth century.

The battle of Adwa (1896) was the greatest military operation between Africans and Europeans since the time of Hannibal. For winners, it was the most deceive and for the vanquished, it was the most catastrophic. The Italian colonialist soldiers were crushed totally and in every manner. Indeed, their defeat was extraordinary in scale and it was estimated that the

casualty of the Italian was 70 percent; their artillery pieces were totally captured; one out of four of their generals were taken as captive and nearly half of their staff officers were killed on the battle. Thus, the Battle of Adwa was the reflections of historic victory of Ethiopia against European imperialism.

For Africans in general and Ethiopians in particular, the victory of Adwa against European colonialism is a historic miracle when the charismatic leader such as Emperor Menelik, empress Taytu and many other notables engaged in a series of battles from Ambalage to Adwa. The determined and well equipped European colonial invading forces in northern Ethiopia culminated finally in the decisive Battle of Adwa in March 1896.

## II. SIGNIFICANCE AND LESSON OF THE BATTLE OF ADWA

The victory of the battle of Adwa was complete when the news was immediately heard and resounded all over Europe and United States, the Black communities were received with a sense of pride and delight. Thus, the battle of Adwa was neither the first nor the last military operation between Italy and Ethiopia and such military engagement between African and European forces was unique to the Horn of Africa. If one could trace African and European conflictual relation was trace to Punic wars between Carthage and Rome in the third century B.C., and culminating in Hannibal's victory over the Roman forces at Cannae in 216 B.C.

The Battle of Adwa qualifies as a historic miracle apparently in the following ways. As a historic miracle of the century, it represented the first time since the beginning of the European colonial expansion that a black people had defeated the civilized and well equipped European nation. The Battle of Adwa also had two fateful consequences i.e. the preservation of Ethiopia's independence from Italian colonization, and the confirmation of Italy's control over the part of the country that Italy had named Eritrea in the northern parts of Ethiopia. Both consequences had repercussions throughout the twentieth century. Italy experienced her defeat at Adwa as intensely humiliated, and that humiliation became a national trauma which used by leaders as a pretext to strive revenge. It also played no little part in motivating Italy's fascist expansion policy in 1935. After the defeat, the Crispi government of Italy sacked Baratieri and appointed General Baldissera as the governor of Eritrea. Following the victory of the battle, the Treaty of Wuchalé was annulled, ending Italy's self-proclaimed protectorate over Ethiopia.

The decade after the victory of Adwa, Menelik was at his height of the internal power and external prestige. Internally, the architects of the war, emperor Menelik was accomplished the process of territorial expansion and the creation of modern empire state. Externally, after the victory of Adwa, recognition of Ethiopia's independency by the external powers had expressed

through diplomatic representation i.e. the European governments set up their respective consulates at foot hills of Entoto and the delimitation of Ethiopia's current boundaries with the adjoining colonies.

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