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AGAINST ALL ODDS

DAN CONNELL

*A Chronicle
of the
Eritrean
Revolution*



AGAINST ALL ODDS

Journalist Dan Connell weaves a tapestry of anecdotes, observations and analysis to recount how the Eritreans - fighting with captured weapons, uncommon courage, ingenuity and determination - defeated not one, but two Ethiopian armies to win their long-sought independence.

After a commando attack in the besieged Eritrean capital triggers brutal reprisals, we travel behind the lines to meet the liberation fighters - engineers, doctors, teachers, flight attendants, auto mechanics, farmers and shepherds who make common cause not only to free their country but to recreate it. We encounter them in remote villages, clandestine camps and front-line trenches where they school their diverse fellow citizens - Muslims and Christians from nine ethnic groups - in the arts of grassroots democracy. Campaigns for land reform and women's equality strengthen, rather than divide, the nationalist movement.

Connell takes us from Eritrea's near victory over Haile Selassie's U.S. backed army in the 1970s to the final rout of the Soviet-backed military junta that later ruled Ethiopia. During the sharply escalated combat, more than a million people are displaced. Then drought and famine ravage the country. Connell shows how international aid brings temporary relief but fails to address the causes of the disaster.

In the 1980s the Eritreans recast the left politics with which they, like most 1960s movements, began. The result, Connell shows, is a unique fusion of nationalist and democratic values. Newly independent in 1993, the Eritreans embark upon the next phase of their bold social experiment - one that bears watching closely by all those animated by egalitarian values and commitments to social justice.

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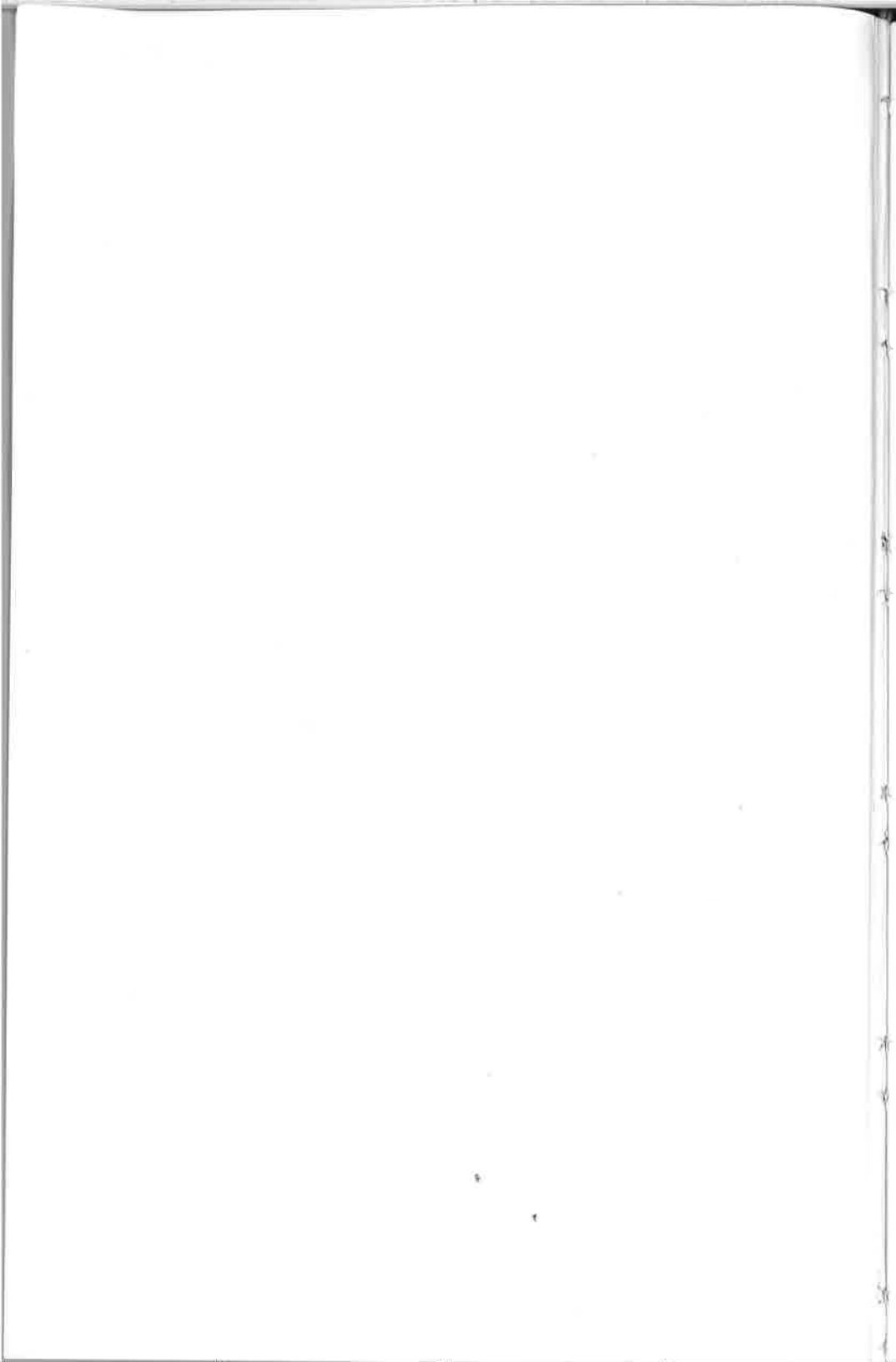
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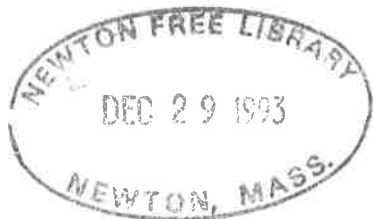
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Eritrean Revolution

Dan Connell



THE RED SEA PRESS

Publishers & Distributors of Third World Books
15 Industry Court
Trenton, NJ 08638



963.507
C76A
1993

The Red Sea Press Inc.

15 Industry Court
Trenton NJ 08638

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First Printing, 1993

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Jacket Cover Design by Debbie Hird

Book Design by Jonathan Gullery

Library of Congress Cataloging - in - Publication Data

Connell, Dan

Against all odds : a chronicle of the Eritrean revolution / Dan Connell.

p. cm

Includes bibliographical references and index.

ISBN 0-932415-89-X : \$24.95

1. Eritrea (Ethiopia) --History--Revolution, 1962-1991.
2. Connell, Dan. 3. Eritrea (Ethiopia) --Politics and government -- 1991 - I. Title.

DT397.C67 1993

963'.507--dc20

93-1010
CIP

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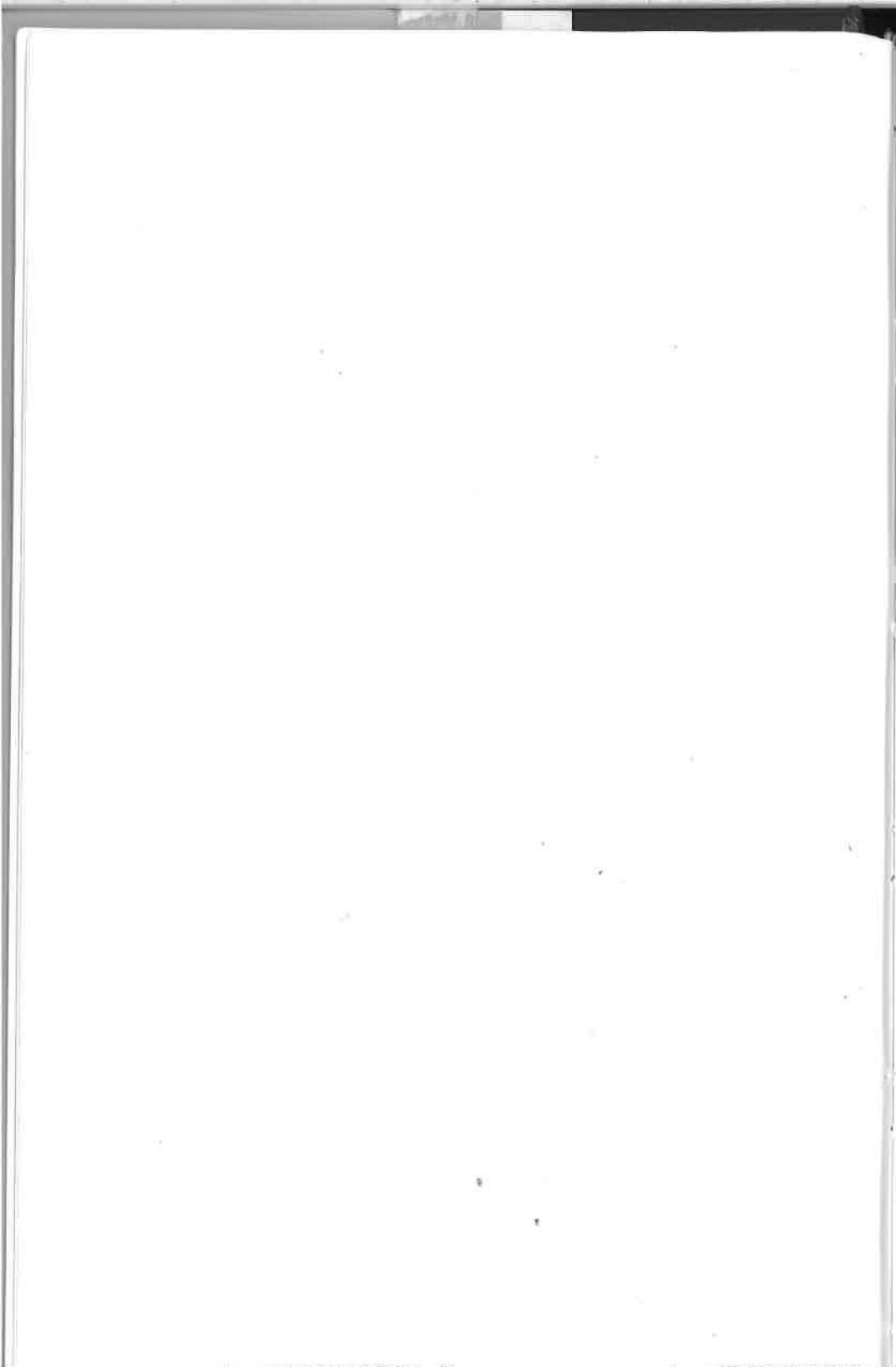
Debbie Hird -- Gamma-Liaison, New York, NY

Sarah Putnam -- Picture Cube, Boston, MA

Mike Wells -- Aspect Picture Library, London, U.K.

Bruce Parkhurst -- Jamaica Plain, MA

To Comrade Fana
and to the memory
of the many other women and men
who gave their lives
that Eritrea might be free.



A C K N O W L E D G M E N T S

Many people contributed to this book who are not quoted or cited. Over the sixteen years covered by this account, hundreds of Eritreans helped me to navigate the complex social, political and cultural terrain of this emerging African nation, motivated primarily by a burning desire that their land be seen, their aspirations heard, their pain witnessed by the outside world. They were peasants who took me into their homes, fighters who crouched with me in their trenches, military and political leaders who provided me with information, guidance and generous hospitality. They are far too many to name without burdening the reader with a list of unmanageable length or inadvertently omitting some whose insights and inspiration grace these pages. They have my undying appreciation and gratitude.

I must, however, single out a few individuals who directly supported this project, though it took a decade longer than originally planned. Sebhat Ephrem, Haile Woldetensai, Askalu Menkerios, Yemane Gebreab and Hagos Gebrehewit not only facilitated travel, set up contacts and interviews and provided other forms of critically important logistical assistance, they also went out of their way to explicate the profound changes through which

the liberation movement went during my time with them. For this, I am particularly grateful, though it goes without saying that if I have not got it all right, it is not their fault for trying.

Goitom Asghedom, my friend and guide through many of the treks I made across Eritrea, also deserves a special mention. Without his untiring, creative assistance much of the firsthand material presented here would have remained unrecorded.

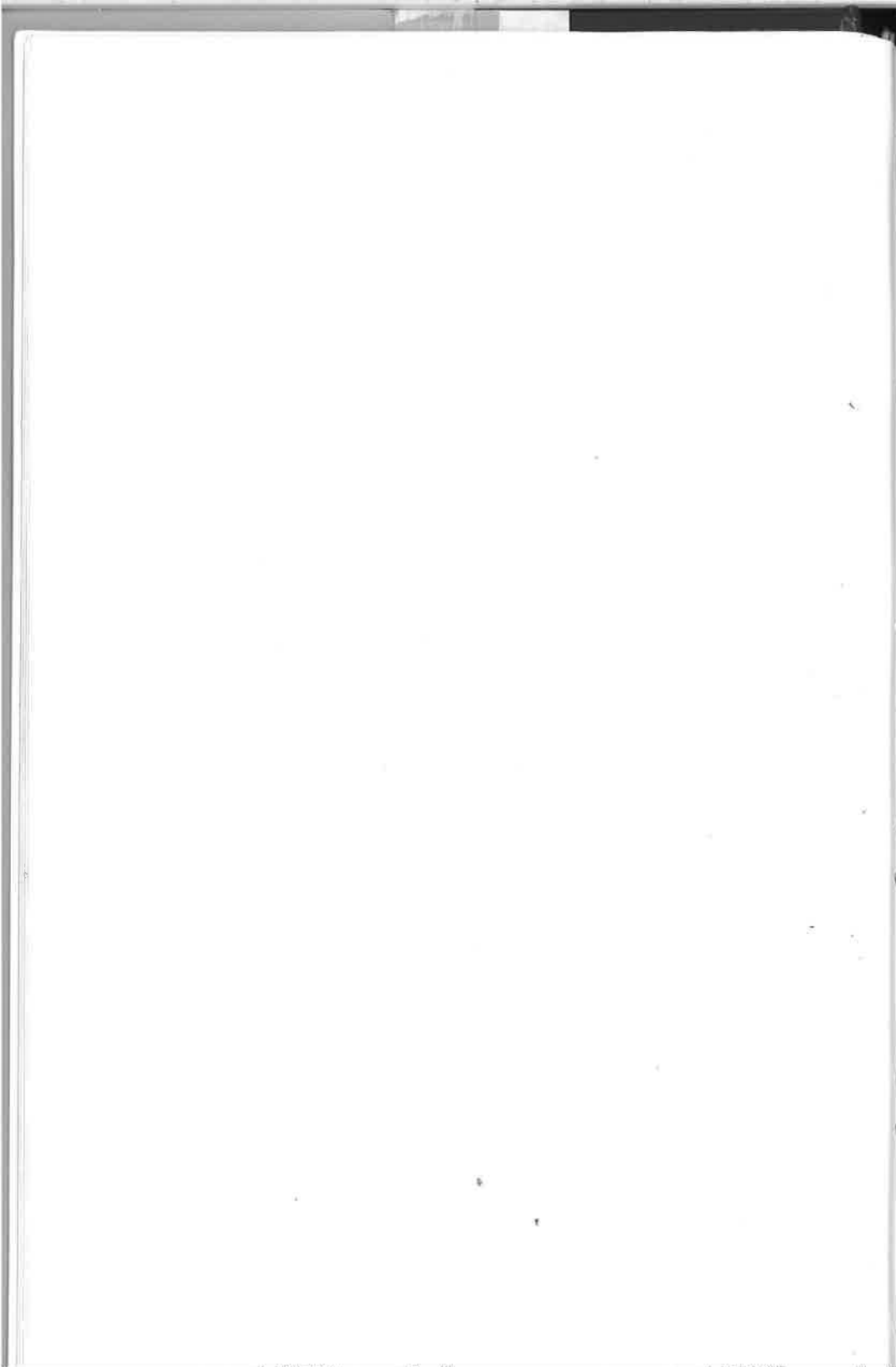
But undigested observation and experience are not enough to make a book. I owe *Middle East Report* editor Joe Stork an enormous debt for his rigorous, continuing, voluntary editorial assistance. He read the manuscript chapter by chapter and then went through it again once it was complete, providing invaluable criticism.

Thanks, too, to Jon Holmes, Vicky Rentmeester, Trish Silkin and Zemihret Yohannes, who read drafts at various stages and contributed helpful suggestions; to Debbie Hird, Bruce Parkhurst, Sarah Putnam, and Mike Wells, who contributed photographs; to Jerry Alexander, Chris Cartter, and Debbie Hird, who produced and donated the maps; to Terry Bisson, who edited the final draft and shaped the finished book; and to my agent, Phil Spitzer, and my publisher, Kassahun Checole, who stuck with the project despite continuing uncertainty over its commercial prospects.

Several institutions also provided invaluable support. Two gave political and financial help at key junctures: the New York-based *Guardian* newspaper and the Boston-based development agency Grassroots International (see Appendix). People's Assistance for Rural and Urban Development in Manila provided me office space to work and occasionally floor space to sleep during the nine months I spent in the Philippines in 1991 writing this book. Two months in residency at the Vermont Studio Center in 1992 were enormously stimulating and productive, and the facilities made available to me at Simmons College where I taught journalism in 1992-93 were quite helpful. Occasional interludes at the Richmond Sauna in Maine provided balance.

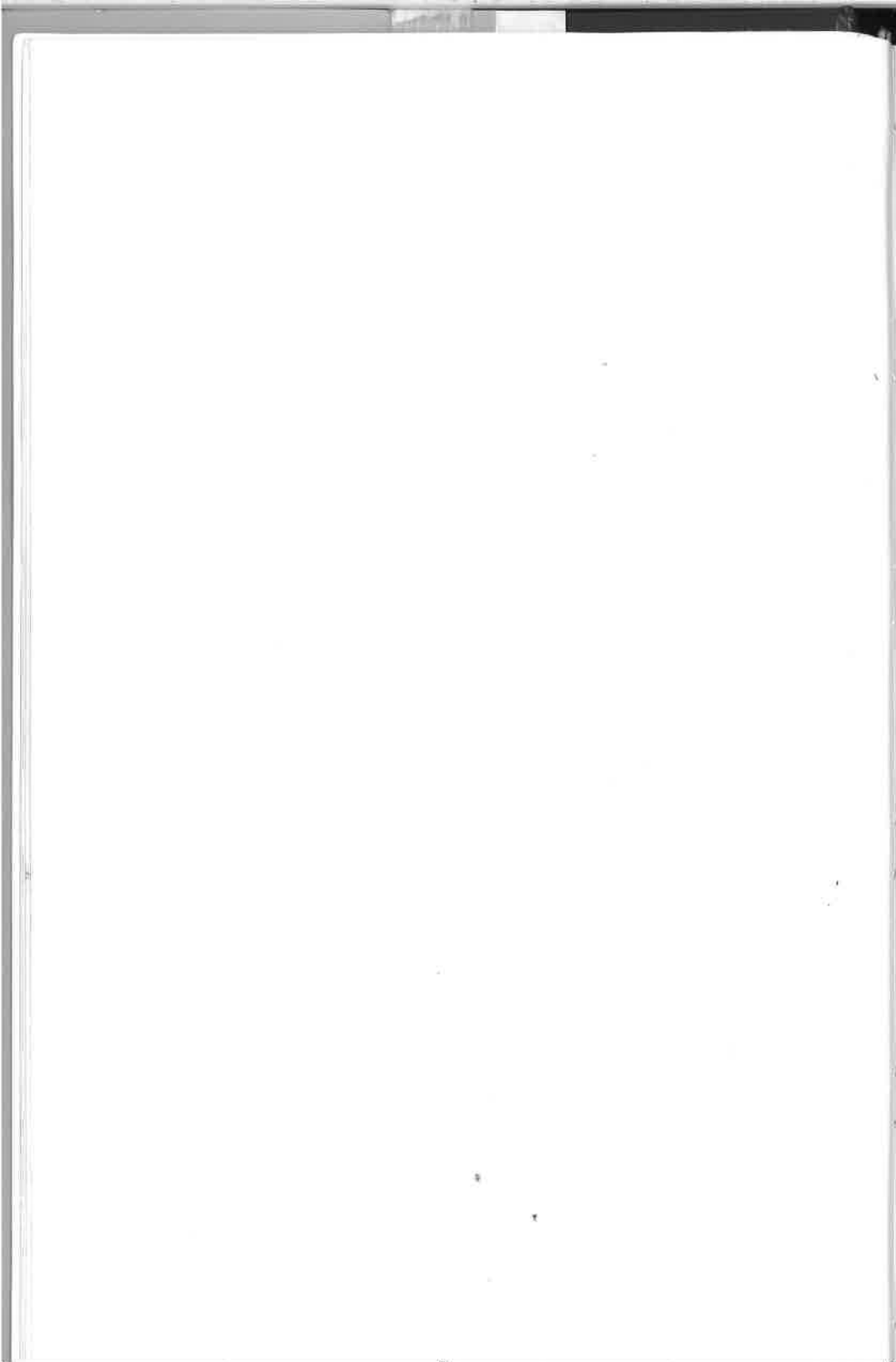
It was the patience, the prodding and the abiding faith of Debbie Hird, however, that got me through the final two years of this project. And it was my daughters, Joanie and Laura, who paid the heaviest price for the energy and time that I put into it through the early years.

To all who contributed, I acknowledge you heartily and humbly. I have been deeply privileged to spend so much of my life among such remarkable people, at home and abroad. I thank you for that gift, and I remind the reader that this is after all not my story—I am only a messenger.



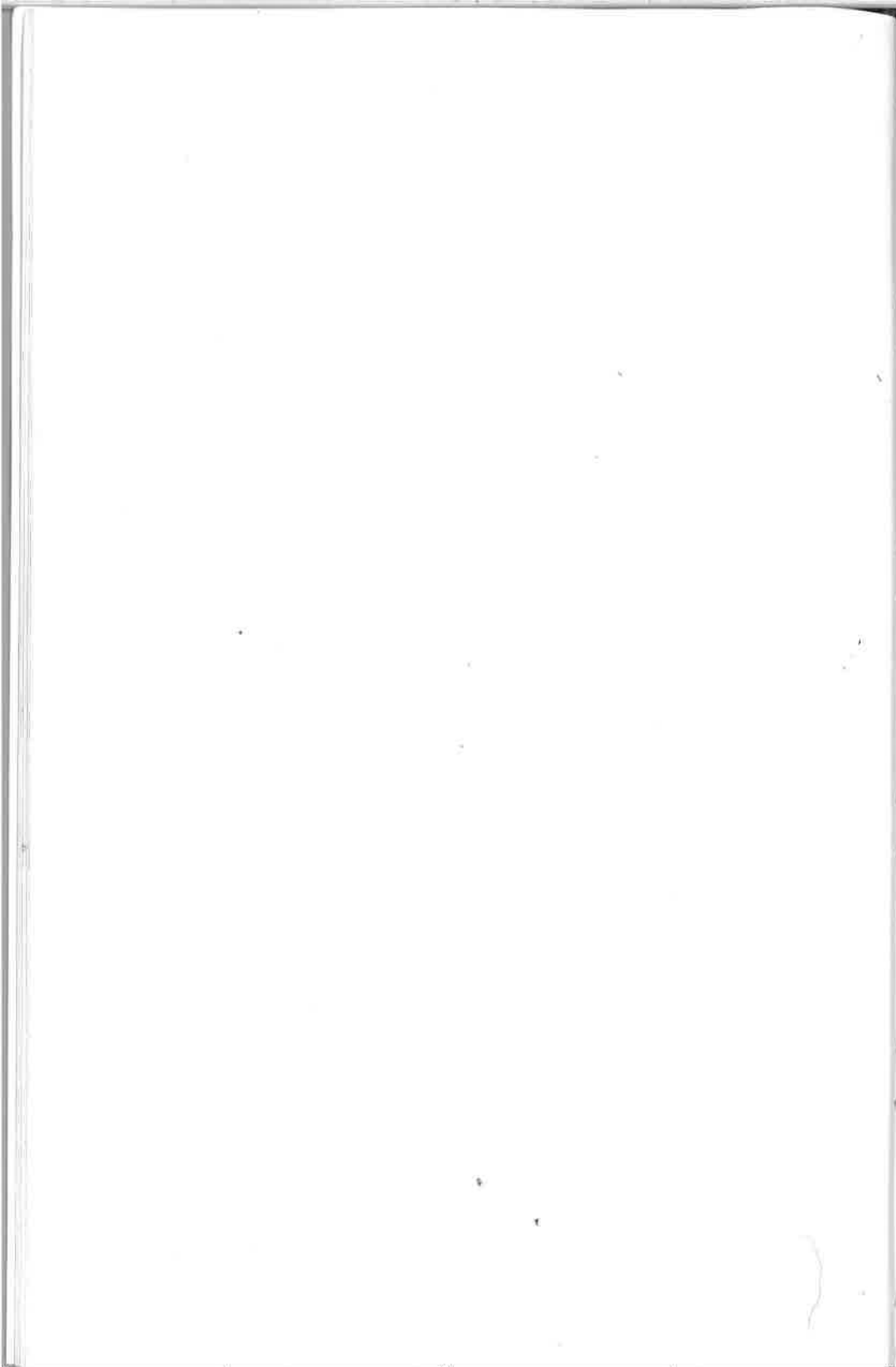
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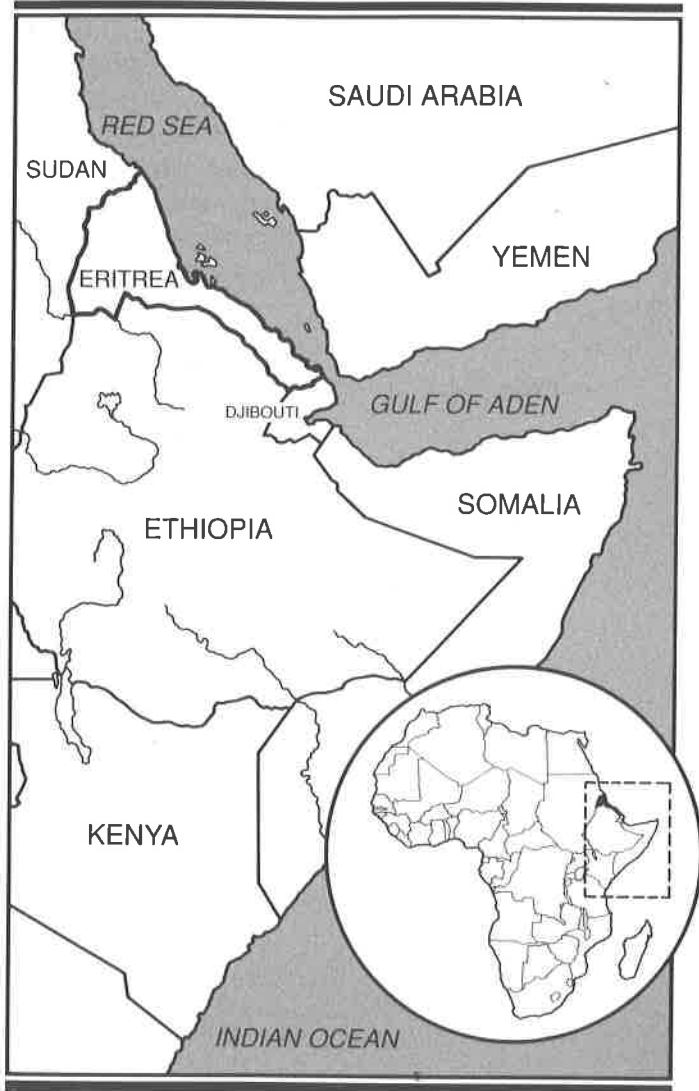
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All paths lead to the same goal: to convey to others what we are. And we must pass through solitude and difficulty, isolation and silence, in order to reach forth to the enchanted place where we can dance our clumsy dance and sing our sorrowful song—but in this dance or in this song there are fulfilled the most ancient rituals of our conscience in the awareness of being human and of believing in a common destiny.

—Pablo Neruda, *Toward the Splendid City* (1972)

HORN OF AFRICA



Map By Jerry Alexander

Prologue

ON THE ROAD TO ERITREA

Most of my trips to Eritrea were with guerrilla armies. We moved at night to avoid attack by the Ethiopian jet fighters that prowled the war zone throughout the daytime. On my first expedition, though, I hitchhiked into the contested Red Sea territory in broad daylight with a heavily armed Ethiopian government supply convoy. The aircraft buzzing the road at treetop level and the aging U.S.-supplied M-41 tanks and Korean War-era armored cars on our flanks were there to protect us. They did their job—there was no blood spilled until we reached Asmara, the besieged Eritrean capital.

The announcement of the convoy's departure spread rapidly by word of mouth across the northern Tigray frontier in the late afternoon of Wednesday, March 24, 1976. From the somnolent, medieval Ethiopian market towns of Enda Selassie, Axum and Adigrat, and from remote peasant villages tucked away in the nearby mountains came scores of rickety pick-ups, rusted passenger cars, crowded buses and overloaded trucks, some packed to three times

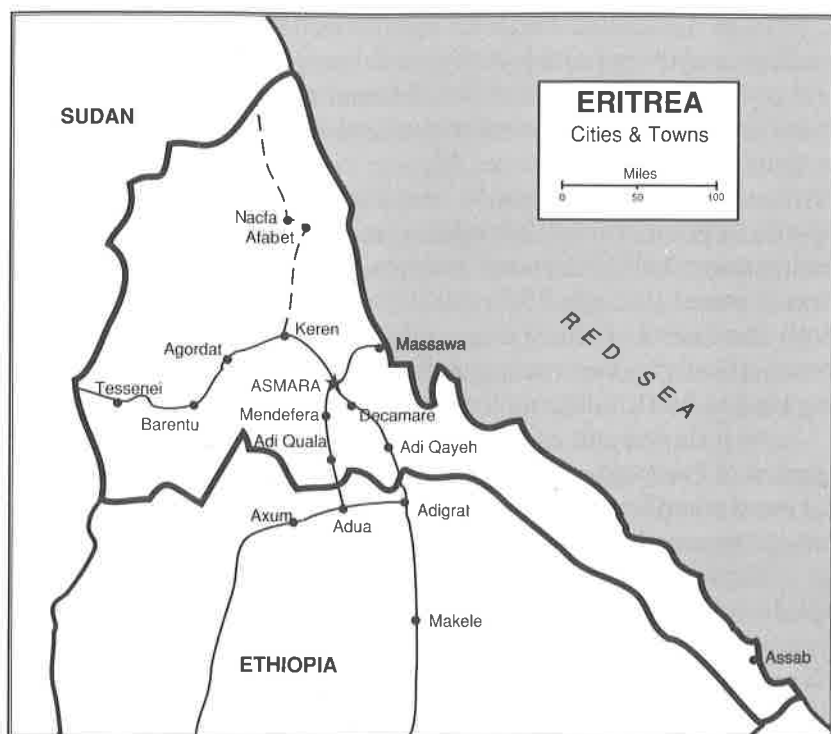
their normal height. They hauled sacks of grain, bundles of firewood, construction materials, spare parts, fuel drums and bales of cotton. The roar of unmuffled engines echoed off the granite hills as they converged on Adua, at the intersection of the Addis and Asmara roads.

I rode in a green Volkswagen from the Ethiopian Department of Telecommunications. Araya Teklemikael and Kuflom Araya, the driver, were telephone company workers. Both described themselves as Eritreans, not Ethiopians. Kuflom was a former soccer star, known throughout Ethiopia. (Eritreans generally go by their first names, as their surname is their father's first name, and it changes from one generation to the next.) He and Araya were *en route* home to Asmara after picking up the new cars in Dire Dawa. They had picked me up in a driving rain in the southern Tigray village of Maichew a week earlier, where I stood dripping wet by the side of the road in ankle-deep mud, trying to hustle a lift as far north as anyone would take me.

Now, at 5:00 A.M. on a Thursday, we were zipping toward the outskirts of Adua where more than 400 vehicles jockeyed for position. No one wanted to be first, but most seemed to prefer the front half of the line, which slowly took shape under the direction of Col. Beshew Gebre Tekla. The slightly built Ethiopian Army officer was dressed simply in army-issue fatigues, but he exuded authority as he walked along the queue, swinging a riding crop.

There were a dozen public buses, with passengers two and three deep on each narrow, plastic-covered bench. Dozens more dangled off the mountains of luggage on the roofs. Their position in the convoy was important, as the guerrillas avoided civilian targets, especially the buses. Riding just in front or behind them provided informal life insurance.

Because our VW carried white government license plates, we were able to dash about as we pleased, though it surprised me that my white face did not seem to attract more direct attention. Despite the fact that Eritrea was officially off-bounds to journalists, no one asked who I was or even checked my papers. I was registered in Addis Ababa, the Ethiopian capital, as a tourist, and I carried permission to visit drought rehabilitation camps in the Wollo Administrative Region, just south of Tigray. This permit had been



Debbie Hird & Chris Carter

extended in Makele, the Tigray capital, to include Tigray and Eritrea through the intervention of a friend of Araya's who was later arrested and executed.

These were early days for the new Ethiopian military regime, only eighteen months after the overthrow of Emperor Haile Selassie, and officials acted largely at their own discretion (or risk). Within a year or two, no movement would be possible in Ethiopia without an elaborate series of official forms and stamps, and all access to Eritrea would be tightly controlled.

The convoy to Asmara was my introduction to a people and a conflict that would profoundly change my life. It occurred halfway through a year I spent exploring and writing about Africa. The continent held a powerful attraction for me, both as a drastically undervalued source of North American culture and as a vital social frontier where people were struggling to redefine and create entire societies.

I left the United States in September 1975, after a year spent reading everything I could get my hands on about the diverse cultures and the modern history of Africa. I began in Cairo and traveled up the Nile, intending to traverse the continent from north to south and to write about my experiences. My aim was to compare and contrast "African socialist" Tanzania, revolutionary Mozambique, and apartheid South Africa. Ethiopia seemed so far out of the African mainstream that I had tended to skip over it in my studies. However, once I passed through Addis Ababa *en route* south, and discovered both the extent of the changes taking place there under the new "revolutionary" government and the depth of U.S. involvement, dating back to 1941, I determined to learn more.

As it turned out, maneuvering through the Tanzanian bureaucracy and even entering newly-independent Mozambique proved far more complicated than I'd anticipated. Reconsidering my itinerary, I returned to Ethiopia in January 1976.

What drew me most powerfully was the promise of the social revolution under way—at least as I understood it from the radical pronouncements emanating from the military junta known as the Derg (Amharic for committee), which had recently overthrown Emperor Haile Selassie. When I began talking with ordinary Ethiopians, I learned quickly that the gap between word and deed with the new self-described "socialist" regime was considerable. Gradually, too, information about the conflict in Eritrea began to reach me—information that contradicted the claims of a new, progressive social order.

Starting in 1976, I toured Eritrea more than fifteen times. Most of these trips took place in the 1970s, when the Eritrean independence movement was beginning its experiments with social transformation; when it functioned as an alternative government after liberating most of the country in 1977-78; and when, under pressure from a massive Soviet intervention, the liberation movement retreated into the mountains to regroup and start again. Between 1976 and 1981, I reported on the conflict under five different names for a wide range of print and broadcast media in North America and Europe.¹ *

I returned three times to Eritrea in the 1980s for Grassroots International (a nonprofit development agency based in Somerville,

Massachusetts, which I founded in 1983 [see appendix]), assessing the country's social and economic needs in the face of a chronic famine produced by the war and recurrent drought. In 1990, 1991 and 1992, I returned as an independent journalist to complete research for this book.

What pulled me back again and again was the unique social experiment that Eritrea is—both for itself and the world. The liberation movement's main achievement was the direct engagement of much of the Eritrean civilian population in the process of social change and nation-building. The main themes of this book center on that process—on Eritrean efforts to create a functioning democracy, unique in Africa, with broad social equality and popular participation across clan, ethnic, religious, gender and class lines.

The central challenge throughout the thirty-year independence war was the achievement of national unity. The Eritrean population is made up of nine distinct ethnic and linguistic groups; it is further divided among a modern urban elite, settled farmers, and nomadic and seminomadic (seasonal) pastoralists. Half the people are Christian and almost half Muslim, with a small minority who practice traditional religions. In the mid-1970s, there were three competing "liberation" armies vying for popular support. This already daunting arena was made even more complex in 1977 when the U.S. and the Soviet Union abruptly traded places in the region, leaving the leftist Eritrean movement to face, virtually alone, a new Soviet-backed Ethiopian regime.

What made the Eritreans so effective in this shifting social and political terrain was their ability—and willingness—to learn from their own circumstances and to continually adapt ideology, politics and program to new realities. Despite a mind-boggling sequence of natural and man-made disasters, the liberation movement found novel ways not only to articulate a compelling vision of a better life but to offer concrete samples of it to a hard-bitten population that would have long since abandoned the revolution if its benefits were any less tangible. They managed this at a time when much of the rest of the third world was sliding ever deeper into despotism, sectarian violence and chronic poverty.

This book is a personal account of the Eritrean Revolution as I've known and experienced it through the critical sixteen years

that immediately preceded independence. Most of my contacts (and my sympathies) were with the Eritrean People's Liberation Front, the movement that prevailed in the end. There is much to be learned here about the *methodology* of social change. It is not that Eritrea's experience can be imitated—if this revolution teaches nothing else, it is that there are no interchangeable models for transforming a society, only illustrations of how others have attempted it. But the Eritrean experience provides a rare instance of self-reliant social development that works. Such examples are valuable not only for what they teach, but for what they demonstrate is possible.

The pre-dawn light gave a surreal cast to the scene that unfolded before me in Adua the morning of my first trip to Eritrea. Hundreds of vehicles lined up with a swiftness and efficiency I'd not have dreamed possible the day before. Orders were barked, and engines were revved. By 5:30 A.M., the military vehicles started rumbling past. The unsmiling faces of Ethiopian troops stared out at us from behind the wooden slats of the World War II surplus U.S. Army trucks. Some carried soldiers of the Territorial Army, a reserve force called up recently to cope with the Eritrean "emergency." Many of these aged troops, cradling ten-pound U.S. M-1 semi-automatic rifles and bolt-action British Enfields, were veterans of the U.S.-led United Nations forces in Korea in the 1950s and in the Congo in 1960. They were nicknamed the "Father Warriors."

Younger combatants stood at the corners of each vehicle, facing outward with the defiance that only eighteen- or twenty-year-olds can pull off. Most held M-14 automatic rifles and wore bandoliers across their chests like Hollywood-style Pancho Villas. Each army truck had a heavy machine gun mounted over the cab, with a soldier scanning the road ahead and to each side. The civilian vehicles followed in a rag-tag procession that, once under way, stretched over two miles from beginning to end.

In mid-morning, we reached Rama, a Tigrayan border village, seventy-six miles from Asmara, according to the stone markers I was counting down, one by one, from Adua. Rama consisted of a crooked row of drab adobe buildings with corrugated iron roofs, surrounded by clusters of mud huts with small corrals of spiked aca-

cia branches to protect the family goats and sheep. The only plants that didn't have thorns were a few spindly papaya trees that looked like green umbrellas stuck in the dust and gravel plain.

A crippled tractor and a charred trailer stood in front of the ruins of a government agricultural extension office. Another blackened wreck partially blocked the road. Guerrillas had swept into Rama two days earlier to knock out local communications, to destroy government property, and to round up thirty-five teenage boys for a cram course in the politics of the independence movement before releasing them.

A carnival atmosphere prevailed in Rama as we rolled through. Children lined the single street to wave, and women ran back and forth, trading flirtatious banter with the truck drivers and offering them frothy enamel mugs of *sewah* (a coarse homemade beer, brewed from leftover bread) as they pulled over, like auto-racers at a pit stop, before resuming the grinding three-mile-an-hour pace. Meanwhile, the military escort moved through silently, without pausing.

At the Mereb River that marks the southern fringe of Eritrea, we halted for a two-hour rest. While Ethiopian infantry units went ahead on foot to reconnoiter, the civilian vehicles spread out in a broad circle. I got out to stretch my cramped legs and buy hot, sweet tea and a rock-hard, army-issue wheat biscuit at one of the lean-tos, known as *shai-bets* (tea houses), that seem to line all the highways, byways and footpaths of northern Ethiopia. I pulled out my blue plastic frisbee for a game of catch with Kuflom that drew the attention and the amused grins of nearly everyone in the convoy.

I later learned that Colonel Beshew had taken note, as he paced up and down issuing last-minute instructions before we crossed the border. According to his Eritrean girlfriend, whom I interviewed fourteen years later, he had intended to call on the white foreigner in the convoy once he was settled in Asmara, his home base. As it happened, he didn't live that long.

Two days later, we lined up at the edge of Mendefera for the final dash to Asmara. On this last leg, we had to travel tightly bunched together. The blackened chassis of a Fiat tractor-trailer lay by the side of the road. Farther on, a gaping hole in the pavement indicated the work of another land mine. Since the local vil-

lagers were routinely held responsible for such attacks, most houses along this section of the road were deserted, the windows and doors filled with stones. Several had been razed in retribution for the attack on the convoy. On distant hills, there were open houses and corrals with neat stacks of dried cow dung and hay, but there were no signs of human or animal life.

Our entry into Asmara was joyous, if anticlimactic. I recall a flurry of boisterous welcomes, salutations and introductions that started in the afternoon over locally brewed beer in a working-class bar, continued through a multicourse lunch at Kuflom's home with his and Araya's entire extended families, and finished with cups of Italian *gelati* at a downtown *pasticceria*. I was clearly the most novel show-and-tell item they'd had in months. Finally, I was bundled off to the Lake Tana Pensione, a neat and secure budget hostel on Abuna Yared Street near the Roman Catholic cathedral that dominated the central commercial district.

I was utterly exhausted from the trip and the tension of the past seventy-two hours. I have a dim recollection of strolling down Haile Selassie Avenue late the next morning, past sidewalk espresso bars where white-haired Italian men talked incessantly, gesticulating with their hands as if it were any other Sunday in Naples. Yet my prevailing feeling throughout the day was still an unfocused sense of apprehension. When the bullets finally flew that evening, it was almost a relief.

Chapter 1

INSIDE ASMARA

The curfew in Asmara went into effect at 7:30 P.M. I was back in the open-air courtyard of my *pensione* at about seven when two young Ethiopian boarders came bursting in with the news that someone—they thought he was a bank official—had just been assassinated only three blocks away.

"He was in the street...on his back...his feet still in the car...his arms stretched out...this way!" gasped Abraham, gesturing grotesquely to illustrate the pose he was describing.

"And there was another man in back," blurted out Solomon. "Both dead!"

"We heard two shots, then we saw the bodies and a taxi racing away. We ran here," said Abraham, dropping exhausted into a wicker armchair as we heard the first shots of reprisal echo through the city.

The firing built steadily to a continuous crescendo by nightfall—"la musica della notte," the Eritreans called it—short staccato bursts of automatic weapons fire, punctuated by blasts from

distant cannons aimed out of the jittery capital at the surrounding guerrilla-controlled villages. From over the courtyard walls, we heard shooting on all sides, we heard army jeeps race by, but we heard no human sounds—no shouted commands, no hostile challenges, no cries of protest. Only the clatter of vehicles and guns that lasted throughout the long and terrifying night.

We learned the next morning that the dead men were Colonel Beshew and his bodyguard. They were killed by a team of urban commandos from the Eritrean People's Liberation Front (EPLF) after being lured to the site by Beshew's Eritrean "girlfriend," Nebyat. The first troops to arrive on the scene immediately killed eight people at random on the street. Surprisingly, there were no other casualties in spite of all the ammunition expended over the next twelve hours. The commandos got away clean. So did Nebyat.

The killing of Beshew, the commander of Ethiopian forces in Asmara, was one of the highest-level guerrilla assassinations of the war. The thirty-eight-year-old colonel had been revered by his fellow warriors as a "soldier's soldier," mixing freely with enlisted men as well as officers, leading a spartan life, and reputed to be both a shrewd tactician and a pitiless adversary. Trained by Israeli counterinsurgency specialists, he was nicknamed "Dayan" after the Israeli general. The Eritrean-born Beshew was despised by his countrymen, though, who considered him an arrogant, boastful turncoat, as well as one of the cruelest representatives of the Addis Ababa government.

I met Nebyat the following year in Keren, where she was working as an EPLF community organizer, but she was not yet ready to talk about her role in the killing. Later, I pieced together the story from a Norwegian collection of interviews with Eritrean women¹ and from a long conversation Nebyat and I had in 1990 near her underground bunker in the Sahel mountains.

Nebyat was twenty-nine, twice-divorced with one young son, and the manager of the Kebabi Bar in downtown Asmara in mid-1975 when the EPLF asked her to set up the colonel. The EPLF at first wanted to abduct him, but Beshew was far too wary and too unpredictable in his movements for them to pull it off.

"He knew he was a target," said Nebyat. "He had guards all around, and he shifted cars four times a day. In eight months, we

never went to his place or mine or inside my bar. And we never talked about politics or the war."

In January 1976, Beshew traveled to southeastern Eritrea and Tigray and was away two months before returning with the convoy. By this point, the guerrilla unit assigned to ambush him had been pulled out of Asmara, leaving only two fighters behind who were camped out on mattresses behind Nebyat's bar. She was told that the operation would have to be postponed again, but, she said later, she felt that she couldn't keep up the pretense of the relationship any longer—it had to be now or never. When Beshew arrived in Asmara that Saturday, he called to invite her out the next day. She countered with a request to rendezvous at her bar. He drove up on Sunday evening and sat by the curb in the driver's seat with the door propped open and the key in the ignition. Nebyat brought out a bottle of whiskey and two glasses.

"He was lifting his glass and saluting the girl he fancied, when I said, 'We need music. I'll go into the bar and get a cassette,'" Nebyat told me. She went inside and stood with her back flat against the wall, holding her breath, as the fighters rushed out and fired two quick shots before either Beshew or the lone bodyguard could react. She, her son and the two fighters then jumped into two waiting cars—not a yellow taxi, as nearly all the stories of the day seemed to have it—and sped away from the scene. Minutes later, they escaped the city on foot, just as the shooting was getting started.

"I was afraid he wouldn't die, that he would wake up and know it was me, his breath-taking Nebyat, who had double-crossed him," she said. "I was blushing at the thought of everything he had done for me. But if you had seen the women who had been raped, their eyes gouged out and their bodies thrown by the side of the road...if you had seen with your own eyes the people trapped in their churches and mosques, being slaughtered...if you had seen what I've seen, you would have done the same."

By 5:00 P.M. the day after the assassination, the metal shutters of most downtown shops were sealed tight. The streets of the city were filled with people scrambling to get under cover before the second round of collective punishment began. By six, there was no one about but police and soldiers. As we double-locked the heavy wood-

en door of our *pensione*, after a careful head count to make sure everyone was in, an eerie silence settled over Asmara. Throughout the evening, eight of us sat huddled around a candle at a small table. For some reason, we thought the dim, flickering light was safer than the usual fluorescent bulb.

As the night wore on, we heard an occasional, isolated gunshot, but I was told that this was normal, and there was a general feeling of relief that the troops had calmed down and the previous night's rampage was not being repeated. It was not until after breakfast the next morning that we learned how wrong we'd been.

During the night, the soldiers had rounded up dozens of suspected Eritrean nationalists from a secret list. Rumor placed the total of those detained at more than 300, held incommunicado at the old imperial palace and at the site of a 1967 industrial exposition, long since sealed off to nonmilitary personnel and said to hold a hidden mass grave. At least thirty-seven of those rounded up were summarily executed, their bodies dumped around the city to terrorize the populace. Twelve corpses were stacked in a hideous tableau in the plaza where Besheva had been hit.

The morning brought a temporary truce to the dazed city. Except for the odd jeep cruising the downtown streets, the army was nowhere to be seen, though air force jets roared back and forth overhead much of the day. Bicycles had long since disappeared, prohibited under the fifteen-month State of Emergency imposed by the government in early 1975. That day the canary yellow Fiat taxis were also banned. The city buses were running, but people moved mostly on foot, scurrying about to stockpile enough food, fuel and other goods to weather what many feared might be a prolonged storm of reprisals.

Young children skittered along the sidewalks, their schoolbooks slung over their shoulders on brown leather straps. Older men moved silently but unhurriedly to factories and shops, most of which were idle due to shortages of raw materials and customers but which were kept open by the government in a show of forced normality. There was a striking absence of men and women between the ages of sixteen and twenty-five. The overall population was estimated to have dropped from more than 250,000 to roughly 175,000 over the past year. I was told that thousands of young peo-

ple had fled the city, both to escape the wrath of the occupation army and out of fear that they might be forcibly conscripted.

On this day and throughout the following week, I wandered the streets of the Eritrean capital. Asmara was a remarkably clean and comfortable tropical city, a lovely melange of African, Arab and Italian cultures, without either the sprawling, garbage-strewn ghettos of most third world capitals, or the sterile, high-rise, Western-style office and apartment buildings that so often grow up side by side with the slums.

The city's location on the lip of the highland plateau, some 8,000 feet above sea level, gave it a balmy, temperate climate, with cloudless pale blue skies for nearly eight months of the year. Towering palms bordered what was then called Haile Selassie Avenue—the main commercial street of the city—and billowing shade trees formed a protective canopy over the wide intersecting boulevard named for Queen Elizabeth II, who once visited Asmara. Both thoroughfares were lined with bustling stores, shops, offices and hotels that rarely rose above two stories tall. Due to the nightly curfew, all socializing took place during the daylight hours, so restaurants were jammed at lunchtime and cinemas began their last showings at 3:00 P.M.

Each block had at least one sidewalk cafe and *pasticceria* with shelves of delicate cream- and custard-filled pastries and fresh-baked cookies on display. In between were shoe stores, boutiques, souvenir shops and delicatessens with pyramids of imported Israeli oranges in the windows. One could find Perugina chocolates individually wrapped in glittering foil, Kellogg's breakfast cereals with plastic prizes inside, imported tinned meats and smoked fish, and stereo components with the latest cassette tapes from Europe and the U.S.

These shops, geared toward either the local elite or the expatriate market, were well stocked, but I did not run into a single other customer all week. As many as 50,000 Italians had once lived in Asmara, but only a few remained after 1975, due both to the stepped up fighting and to the nationalizations carried out by the new military government. Several hundred elderly Italians were left, along with a few dozen Greeks, Armenians, Indians and others. The lone Englishman, the honorary British consul, had been

kidnapped by the guerrillas the previous year.²

On the smaller side streets, bright red and orange bougainvillea hung over smooth, whitewashed walls beneath the lavender blossoms of spreading jacaranda trees. Moving away from the downtown area, the residential neighborhoods showed clear social class differences in the sizes and proximity of the houses and the quality (or absence) of pavement in the streets, but each seemed well ordered and attractive. The poorest area was the Muslim quarter, which also showed the worst effects of the war. Row after row of shops, family businesses and houses wore the pockmarks of thousands of rounds of ammunition that I was told were fired whenever an "incident" took place, under the assumption that all Muslims were at least sympathizers with, if not members of, the nationalist movement. Nevertheless, this neighborhood, too, had a coherence and a vitality to it that was unmistakable.

The larger transport garages, factories and assembly plants made up an industrial belt on the outskirts of the city. Eritrea experienced an industrial boom in the 1930s, as the Italians prepared to launch their campaign to conquer East Africa. In the early 1940s, with the Suez Canal closed and the Italians defeated, Asmara was developed under British rule into one of the most highly industrialized cities in black Africa. Under Ethiopian rule, Eritrea's development was intentionally stunted to shift economic activity south to Addis Ababa, but Asmara retained a surprising number of manufacturing plants, including five major textile factories, several shoe factories, a match factory, a beer-brewing and bottling plant and a host of smaller companies.

In the early 1970s, the city had also been an active center for international trade in fresh vegetables, bananas, citrus fruits, sesame and other agricultural products, with almost daily flights to Europe and the Middle East out of the Asmara International Airport. By 1976, with the large Italian-built plantations either nationalized or in guerrilla hands, the trade in fresh produce was reduced to a trickle for mostly local consumption. Asmara's outdoor markets in the center of the city were crowded with women shoppers, many with small children strapped to their backs, but few were buying anything. I saw an abundance of spices and dried beans but little grain, a sure sign of crisis for a people whose traditional diet is based on

small quantities of heavily spiced meat and vegetables served over layers of a soft, fermented flatbread known as *injera*.

I spent one lunch hour with Berhe, a twenty-six-year-old government clerk, who took me home to show me how it was to live under siege. Since his father had been laid off from the newly nationalized factory where he had worked all his life, Berhe was the sole supporter of the family. He lived with both parents, three brothers and one sister in a two-room adobe bungalow that was set back from the street and reached by a narrow, shaded corridor that led between two larger homes to a cement courtyard that all three houses shared. Here Berhe's family often took their meals. There were two beds in each room, occupying most of the floor space, but one room had a cramped sitting area and the other held a hand-made charcoal stove. A religious calendar and a collection of carefully posed, black-and-white family photographs decorated the bare, whitewashed walls.

Berhe's mother ladled steaming *shiro*, a thick sauce of ground chick peas customarily eaten during the Lenten season, onto a stack of freshly cooked, light-brown *injera* made from wheat rather than the traditional *teff*. Berhe apologized for the break with convention, showing a bundle of expired ration coupons and explaining that the preferred grain was now too expensive even when it was available, which wasn't often.

As we took turns dipping handfuls of the spongy, sour bread into the highly spiced puree, he pointed to the chipped plaster over his parents' bed and described the night in the spring of 1975 when a rocket-propelled grenade exploded in front of their house.

Sporadic fighting had been going on throughout the city since the afternoon of January 31, when the rebels launched an assault on Asmara. At ten o'clock one evening, the guerrillas attacked a base not far from his house, and government forces responded by raining bullets indiscriminately on the entire neighborhood. Berhe and his family were asleep when the grenade burst in the courtyard next to the water tank. The doors to the house were blown open, and water sprayed in from the perforated tank. Two chunks of shrapnel hit the back wall, very nearly wounding the elderly couple as they lay in their bed. The next morning, Berhe found a fragment

of metal casing inscribed "U.S. 1954," which he showed me with no further comment.

Days after the September 1974 coup that brought down Haile Selassie, Asmara residents got their first taste of the new order, according to stories I heard from Asmara residents during this visit. "A boy from my street was going to the shop to buy aspirin," explained a twenty-two-year-old factory worker (who, like almost everyone I spoke with then, declined to give me his name). "He and two others were picked up that night by the soldiers. We don't know why. They were little. All three were strangled, but one lived. He had burns on his hands and arms and marks on his neck from wire. His mind was gone. He didn't even recognize his mother." This was the first of what became known as the "piano wire stranglings" that peaked in December 1974 when a dozen young Eritreans perished in a single night.

Another story I heard more than once was of an incident that occurred in June 1975, while the Ethiopian security police—known as *afagne guad*, Amharic for "death squad"—were searching for a female suspect. Accounts differed over whether it was a birthday party or some other family event that brought a group of young female friends together that day. Seven girls and young women, ranging in age from thirteen to twenty-two, were in an Asmara house when the *afagne* burst in at four in the afternoon. All seven were taken off to an army camp in a pair of Volkswagen Combis, where they were gang-raped. Their bodies were found the next morning in the street near their homes, one with her breasts cut off, another with an eye missing, all badly slashed with knives, and all shot dead.

In a restaurant near my *pensione*, I met a young boy, perhaps eight, whose widowed father was one of hundreds arrested during the two months of street-fighting and near-anarchy in early 1975. Relatives were caring for the boy, but his older brother said that each day he asked when his father was coming back. No formal charges had ever been filed, and the brother, who declined to give his name, said that he still didn't know if their father was alive or dead.

At this, another man who was listening to this conversation jumped up and shouted, "You don't save your life by staying out of the front! I might die tomorrow or next week! Why shouldn't I

fight with the front? What are we doing sitting here while our brothers are dying all around us?"

The Provisional Military Advisory Committee or "Derg," as it was popularly known, seized power during a spontaneous popular revolt that gripped the Ethiopian Empire through most of 1974. As the year began, land seizures in the countryside were becoming increasingly common; the constraints of the anachronistic feudal economy were frustrating the ambitions of a rising middle class; the students, steeped in more than a decade of antigovernment protests, were thoroughly radicalized; and over half the army was pinned down in an unwinnable war in Eritrea. In February, sharp oil price hikes added pressure to an already strained economy and triggered a taxi strike in Addis Ababa. Overnight, the streets filled with demonstrators. The army, which might have moved to restore order, instead mutinied. Taken together, these uncoordinated actions comprised a generalized, though leaderless popular uprising. Against the backdrop of an unfolding scandal over the emperor's cover-up of a famine that claimed the lives of a quarter-million peasants, the autocratic regime of Haile Selassie slowly crumbled and then collapsed under the pressure of antigovernment protests from virtually all sectors of the society.

The eight months from February through September 1974 were characterized by a dual power as the armed forces gradually usurped the emperor's prerogatives. On June 28 a shadowy military committee of 120 anonymous members—the Derg—began arresting his ministers. On September 12 they arrested Selassie, carting him off to prison in the back seat of a nondescript Volkswagen. Next, they installed the Eritrean-born General Aman Andom in a figurehead role as commander in chief while they struggled behind the scenes over both the control and the direction of the revolution. A thirty-three-year-old major named Mengistu Haile Mariam was a leading contender. On November 23, 1974, Aman was killed in the first round of executions by the new regime. Mengistu emerged then as one of two Derg vice chairs (the other, Atnafu Abate, was executed in late 1976). The restructured committee was formally under the leadership of General Tefere Bente, another caretaker candidate chosen to avoid a showdown between con-

tending Derg factions. He was killed in a bloody shoot-out with Mengistu in early 1977, after which Mengistu became the unchallenged ruler.

While the Derg had not spelled out a political program when it seized power in 1974, the general trend of nearly all political forces in and out of the military at that time was to the left. The two leading civilian parties—the Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Party (EPRP) and the All-Ethiopia Socialist Party (Me'ison)—both favored a radical restructuring of the empire, starting with land reform and the nationalization of all large-scale agricultural, industrial and commercial enterprises. Where they differed was mainly in their views of the role of the military in Ethiopia's political life and their positions on the Eritrea question. The EPRP called for a rapid transition to civilian rule, while Me'ison argued that the military was a malleable political force with which collaboration was appropriate. Both parties nominally supported Eritrea's right to self-determination, but the EPRP was more inclined to extend that right to the level of full independence. For its part, the Derg began its tenure under the slogan of "Ethiopia Tikdem" (Ethiopia First) and said little more about its intent.

Responding to popular pressure, the Derg in December 1974 proclaimed its intention of building "socialism." In early 1975 the junta issued sweeping proclamations nationalizing banks, insurance companies, large industries, major trading companies and all rural land. In July the state seized all urban land. These measures pre-empted—and went far beyond—the reforms called for by the civilian political parties. On the critical issues of democratic rights within Ethiopia and a peaceful solution to the Eritrea conflict, however, the regime offered less flexibility than its predecessor. There would be no public dissent, and there would be no compromise on the Eritrea question. Challenges to the regime from any quarter would be considered treason and dealt with accordingly.

When the EPRP stepped up its drive to unseat the military, the Derg cracked down heavily. Responding to a spate of EPRP assassinations in the fall of 1976, the junta launched a two-year rampage of mass arrests and street executions known as the "Red Terror." Amnesty International later estimated that more than 10,000 people—mostly students and intellectuals—were slaughtered in a cam-

paign that effectively crushed the EPRP as a significant political force.³ During this time Me'ison allied itself with the Derg and drafted the regime's political program. Me'ison leaders also launched national organizations of peasants, women, workers and youth and started the mobilization of a massive new peasant militia, to be known as the Red Army. When Me'ison leaders demanded a share in political power in the summer of 1977, however, the party was driven underground and its leaders arrested. The armed forces had established an absolute dictatorship. Over the next fourteen years, they would pour much of Ethiopia's scant resources into a futile effort to crush the Eritrean revolution.

"Torture is standard procedure for all prisoners. The Ethiopians beat the soles of their feet and use electrodes all over. Nothing very sophisticated," said a disaffected diplomat I met at the U.S. Consulate in Asmara in March 1976. More than 450 civilians were killed and at least 1,000 arrested and taken to political prisons in Asmara over the nine months prior to my arrival, he said in an interview conducted away from his office after I promised him anonymity. The violent reprisals for Beshew's death were, according to him, also standard procedure.

"What you saw here this week is common practice. We routinely report it to the embassy in Addis and directly to the State Department in Washington. Every time there's a new weapon introduced here, we protest it, but we're told that it's our policy to respond to the requests of the Government of Ethiopia without challenge. The consulate has repeatedly asked for limits on military aid and pressure on the Ethiopian government to negotiate an end to this war, but if we're not ignored, we're told we're biased because we're here. You have to understand that [then Secretary of State] Henry Kissinger is a rigid man. He brooks no dissent on his policies, and his main concern is the Middle East—he knows nothing of Africa."

U.S. policy toward Ethiopia in the mid-1970s was languishing in the parochialism of the post-Vietnam period and was eclipsed by more pressing international issues elsewhere. The original U.S. ally in Africa, Ethiopia was getting left behind by new developments—

political and technological—that were rendering the country nonessential to U.S. interests both within Africa and as a part of a global communications network set up after World War II.

At the start of the almost forty-year U.S. alliance with Ethiopia, most of the African continent was owned and operated by Britain and France. Ethiopia provided a convenient entry point to influence the emergent states during postwar decolonization. To facilitate the match, Washington became Selassie's patron; during his forty-four-year reign, the emperor personally met five U.S. presidents.⁴

Despite the fact that Haile Selassie presided over an unimaginably backward feudal kingdom—slavery was still practiced and even members of the nobility lacked any recognized democratic rights—the emperor held an almost mythical status as Africa's most distinguished elder statesman. For a short while, at least, Addis Ababa was the unofficial diplomatic capital of the continent. In the early 1960s, the Organization of African Unity was founded and headquartered there, followed by the U.N.'s Economic Commission for Africa and several other multilateral institutions whose presence added to Selassie's aura.

Eritrea was also extremely important in its own right to U.S. strategy during and after World War II. The first U.S. involvement in Eritrea, and in the region for that matter, came in mid-1941, according to the former British governor of the trust territory, G.K.N. Trevaskis. Weeks after British-led forces defeated Italy there, the private U.S. firm of Johnson, Drake & Piper, Inc. began implementing a series of military projects in the colony that the U.S. Army took over as soon as Washington formally joined the war effort. An aircraft-assembly plant was constructed at Gura, workshops in Asmara were converted to a repair base, naval facilities were established in Massawa and the harbor was modernized for commercial and military purposes.⁵

The U.S. also began working with the British to develop a communications facility in Asmara, called Radio Marina, which roving ambassador Averell Harriman visited in 1942.⁶ In the early 1950s, Radio Marina was enlarged and transformed into the Kagnew Station complex, for two decades one of the most important overseas U.S. intelligence facilities in the world. Kagnew was

an electronic listening post for all of Africa and the Middle East, reaching as far as the Persian Gulf and parts of the Soviet Union. It was also a key relay station for communications with U.S. ships and nuclear-armed submarines in the Indian Ocean and for links to forces in Southeast Asia, as well as for coded diplomatic traffic from throughout the region. Kagnew was staffed by over 3,000 civilian and military personnel, intercepting radio, telephone and telegraph messages in a half-dozen or more languages from Soviet missile crews in Cairo, French diplomats in Senegal, African revolutionaries in Mozambique, and Arabs plotting uprisings against the British in Aden.

Eritrea's coastline, facing Saudi Arabia and Yemen and stretching to the narrow mouth of the Red Sea at Bab el-Mandab, gave the Italian colony a special importance after the war. Control of this coastline was seen as critical for keeping open the sea lanes connecting Europe and North America with East Africa, the Persian Gulf and Asia through the Suez Canal.

The newly independent state of Israel took a special interest in Eritrea because, with the Suez Canal under Egyptian control, the Straits of Bab el-Mandab provided the only access to its southern port of Eilat. Israel also struck up an early alliance with Ethiopia, which endured with few interruptions over the next forty years, based on a common hostility toward the Arab states in the region. For its part, the U.S. viewed Ethiopia more as a strategic part of the Middle East than of Africa and placed relations with the emperor under the supervision of the State Department's Bureau of Near Eastern Affairs.⁷

In the late 1940s, Washington became the main champion of Ethiopia's claim to Eritrea. The debate over the colony's future started among the "Four Powers" (the U.S., Britain, France and the Soviet Union), then moved to the newly formed United Nations. A typically British proposal to split the colony in half, giving the Muslims to Sudan and the Christians to Ethiopia, fell by the wayside as the debate shifted to the question of whether to join all of Eritrea to Ethiopia, as the emperor preferred, or to give the disputed territory its independence, as happened to Italy's other African colonies, Libya and Somaliland. A classified National Security Council memorandum in 1948 argued that the U.S. should oppose

Eritrean independence for fear that a weak emergent state might be "exposed to Soviet aggression or domination."⁸ In the end, over strong Eritrean protests and over the objections of the Soviet bloc and several newly independent third world states, the U.N. passed a U.S.-backed plan to link the two neighbors in a federation under the emperor's control. Said U.S. representative John Foster Dulles during a 1950 Security Council debate:

From the point of view of justice the opinions of the Eritrean people must receive consideration. Nevertheless, the strategic interests of the U.S. in the Red Sea basin, and considerations of security and world peace make it necessary that this country has to be linked to our ally, Ethiopia.⁹

The federation went into effect on September 15, 1952. On May 22, the following year, the U.S. and Ethiopia signed a pair of agreements that would shape events in the region for decades to come. The first gave Washington a twenty-five-year lease on military and intelligence bases in Eritrea. The second pledged the U.S. to provide military aid and training to Ethiopia.¹⁰ In 1954, Israel also signed a secret security pact with Ethiopia as part of the Jewish state's strategy of alignment with non-Arab states of the region.¹¹

Between 1953 and 1960, U.S. military advisors built black Africa's first modern army, with three divisions of 6,000 men each, equipped largely with surplus weapons and equipment from World War II and the Korean War. After an attempted coup against the emperor in 1960, and as Selassie moved to annex Eritrea, this aid escalated rapidly. That year a secret agreement was signed pledging U.S. support for "the territorial integrity of Ethiopia" (a key phrase that guided U.S. policy on the Eritrea question for the next thirty years). The pact also promised to double annual U.S. military aid from \$5 million to \$10 million, and it included a commitment from Selassie to send troops to the Congo under the U.N. flag, as he had to Korea earlier.¹²

As the war heated up, U.S. support to Ethiopia steadily escalated. In 1964, President Lyndon Johnson quietly sent fifty-five counterinsurgency specialists and approved the transfer of twelve F-5A "Freedom Fighters," the first supersonic jet fighters in black Africa. The next year, 164 more U.S. specialists arrived under "Plan

Delta" to teach the new antiguerrilla techniques being introduced in South Vietnam.¹³ By 1966, Israel also had a 100-man military mission in Ethiopia, training an estimated 1,000 troops a year in counterinsurgency warfare.¹⁴

U.S. military aid to Ethiopia from 1946 to 1975 totaled \$286.1 million in grants and loans, making up more than two-thirds of Washington's annual military assistance to all of Africa during most of those years. At its peak, there were over 6,000 U.S. citizens working there in one capacity or another, including 925 Peace Corps volunteers, almost twice as many as in the rest of the African continent. From 1946 to 1975, the U.S. also provided Ethiopia with over \$350 million in economic assistance, and the U.S. was Ethiopia's largest trading partner, taking about forty percent of its exports (mainly coffee).¹⁵

By the mid-1970s, however, Addis Ababa was no longer central to influencing or gaining entry to the newly independent African states. Many, like Kenya, Ivory Coast and Nigeria, had far more modern infrastructures, were more integrated into the world market and held more opportunities for U.S. investors. Southern Africa, with its rich mineral wealth, its potential for growth and its long-term strategic value, was also attracting increasing attention from Washington, especially in the wake of the Portuguese empire's collapse and the emergence of new Marxist-oriented governments in Mozambique, Angola and Guinea-Bissau.

Nor was Kagnew Station as important as it had been for the U.S.—its facilities were being replaced by satellite systems and by the Diego Garcia naval base in the Indian Ocean, where a powerful alternative radio center was opened in March 1973. As a consequence, the communications complex in Asmara was quietly scheduled for phaseout when the twenty-five-year treaty with Ethiopia expired in 1978.

A little less than a year after my 1976 trip to Asmara, President Carter would "sacrifice" Ethiopia as part of his highly touted (though selectively applied) new human rights policy toward third world clients and allies. This, ironically, opened the door for the Soviet Union to charge in with an unprecedented flow of arms, military training and political support for Ethiopia, creating what one U.S. diplomat later described to me as "a negative strategic

interest" in Ethiopia—getting the Soviets out.¹⁶

During the last year of the U.S.-Ethiopia alliance, the new military regime in Addis Ababa was pressing Washington hard for new and better arms to fight the Eritreans. In the aftermath of the loss in Vietnam and faced with a growing balance-of-payments problem, the U.S. wasn't giving away many weapons—Congress had placed a \$40 million ceiling on military loans and grants to all of Africa—but arms were for sale. In 1975, as Ethiopia was recovering from the worst famine in its history, the ruling Derg bought close to \$100 million in military hardware from the U.S., up from \$22.3 million in grants and sales the year before.¹⁷

When I got back to Addis Ababa in mid-April, determined to get out the story of what I'd seen in Asmara, I learned from a contact in the U.S. Embassy that the regime had just purchased sixteen sophisticated F-5E jet fighters for \$72 million in cash. Large quantities of small arms were scheduled to come in from Eastern Europe, Italy, Turkey and Israel, and Israeli counterinsurgency specialists were training a new elite Ethiopian force of 4,000 to 5,000 men to be known as the "Flame Brigade."

The Ethiopian government was secretly preparing a massive peasant crusade against the Eritreans, while publicly floating a nine-point peace plan that the guerrillas were certain to reject. (The plan offered a return to a form of limited autonomy that echoed the abortive federation agreement of the 1950s.) Preparations for the campaign were already under way. Tens of thousands of poor farmers were being conscripted to go to the front in a matter of weeks. Five hundred doctors, nurses and medical aides were impressed into service in and around Addis Ababa, and had already been sent to key government-held towns in Eritrea. Workers at a local factory and women prisoners in the Addis Ababa penitentiary were being put to work packaging dried *injera* in plastic bags to serve as combat rations for the enormous peasant militia, projected at three-quarters the size of Ethiopia's regular army. A convoy of sixty trucks had set out from the port of Assab for the front lines on March 26 with fresh ammunition. Filling stations along the road from Addis Ababa to the Tigrayan towns of Adigrat, Adua and Axum were ordered to keep full inventories of diesel fuel and gasoline, while bus

companies and trucking firms were put on alert for possible emergency service.

Meanwhile, a relief worker from the London-based relief agency Oxfam told me that all relief workers and foreign missionaries in the Eritrean countryside were being ordered back into the towns or sent south to the Ethiopian capital.

When I went to the U.S. Embassy with this information to formally request a statement, I was refused an interview with the ambassador, with the terse comment: "We favor an immediate end to the fighting and a negotiated settlement."

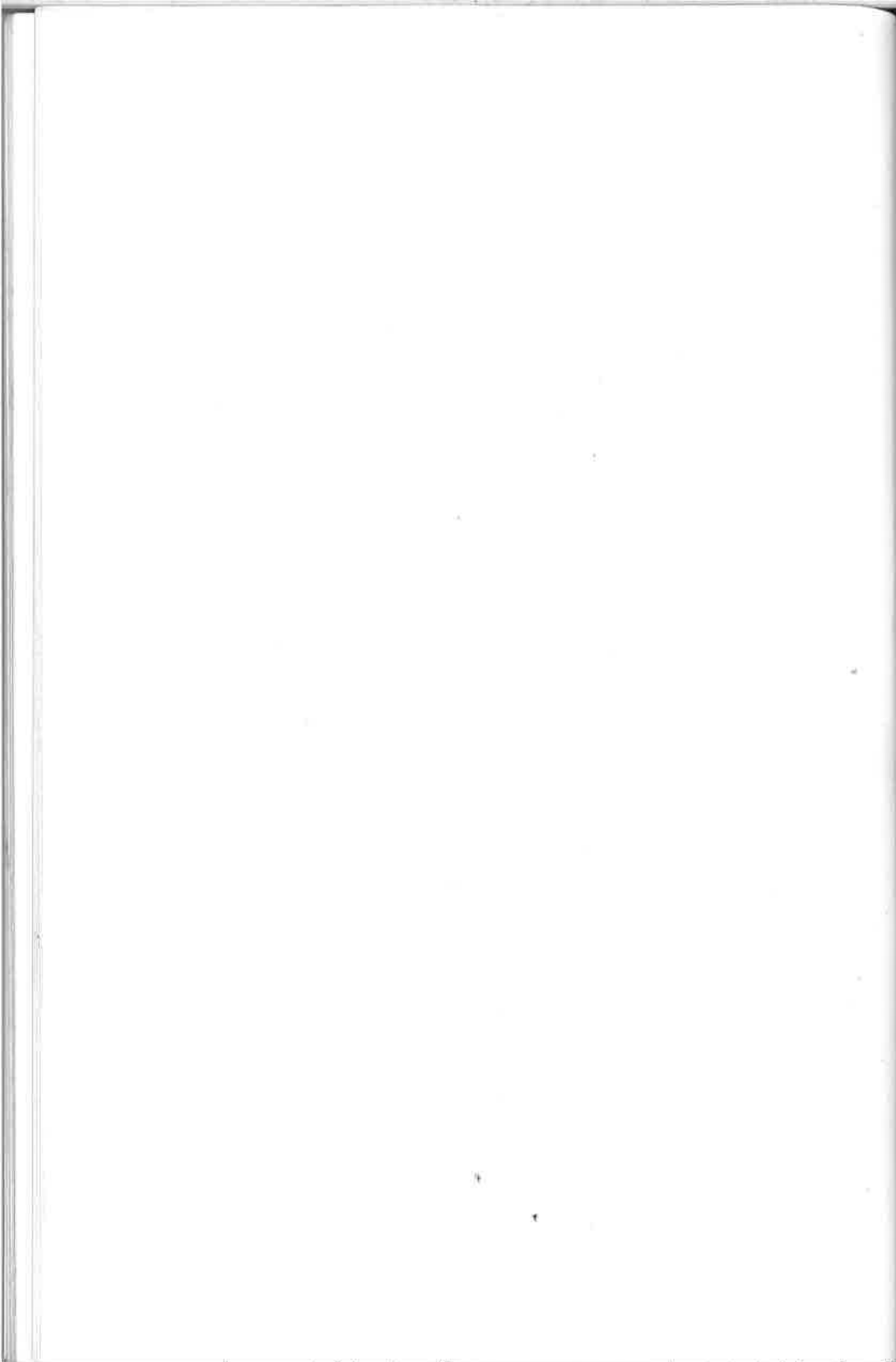
I was not then an experienced journalist, but I knew I had a hot story that needed to be told and told quickly. I had earlier discussed the possibility of writing a feature article on the aftermath of the 1973-74 drought with *The Washington Post's* Africa bureau chief, David Ottaway, then based in Addis Ababa. I went to him now with the account of my trip to Asmara, and he encouraged me to write it up. Meanwhile, I was sitting on the information about the coming crusade.

After a day or so, I decided to send it to a publicist-friend in New York with strong media contacts. She took my notes to a *New York Times* editor, who apparently passed them on to a reporter who later told me he fact-checked the material with U.S. government sources in Washington before writing up the account with all the specifics and some of my speculation for a front page article in *The Times* on Wednesday, May 12. (I wasn't mentioned or credited in the piece, but he thanked me for what he called a "tip.")

My lengthy first-person account of events in Asmara, coupled with the same details on the coming military campaign, arrived on the desk of *Washington Post* foreign editor Ronny Koven the day that *The Times* piece appeared. Seeing the competition with the story, Koven checked me out with his reporter in Addis Ababa and put my bylined piece on *The Post's* front page the next day. The rest of my fifteen-page narrative ran during the following week.¹⁸

With the publication of these articles, my first ever in a major newspaper, I was off and running as a fledgling war correspondent. I flew straight from Addis to Khartoum, where I sought out the offices of the two Eritrean guerrilla movements and asked to see the conflict from their side.

Six weeks later, I was on a train headed for the border.

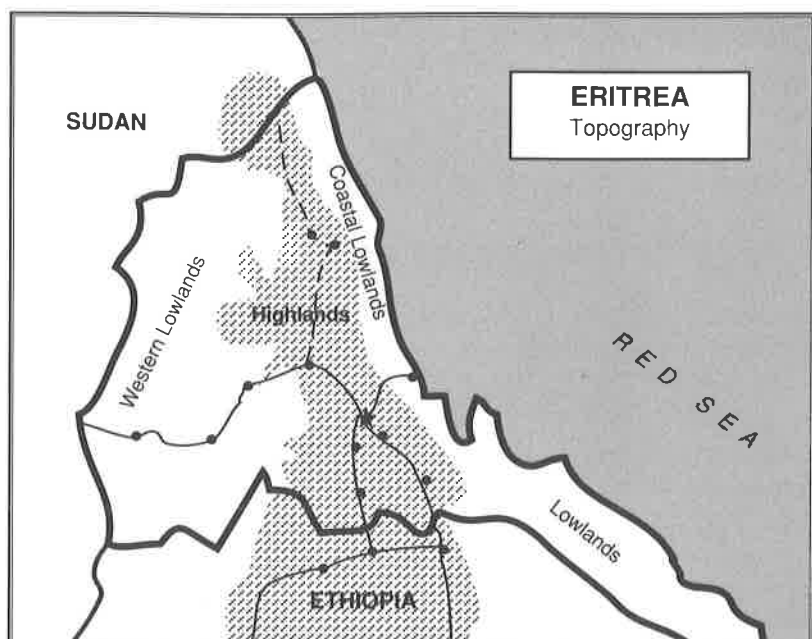


Chapter 2

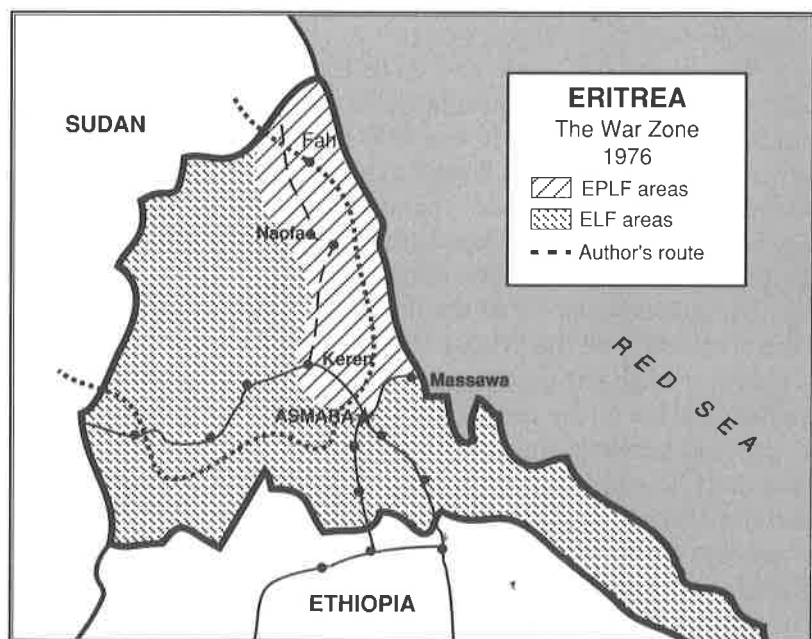
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The highways, roads and trails that crisscrossed rebel-held Eritrea were busy with guerrilla traffic, moving at night to avoid attack by Ethiopian jets. It was as if life in the countryside were turned inside out, as dusk brought thousands of fighters and non-combatants out of their underground bunkers and camouflaged shelters, just as those in the besieged cities and towns were closing their shutters and hunkering down for the night.

My guides insisted that the liberation movement had effective control of nearly all the Eritrean countryside and many of its smaller towns, though the government still had the ability to penetrate contested areas in the central highlands or to run heavily defended convoys between the main cities. Otherwise, rural Eritrea was defended and administered by the two nationalist movements, the Eritrean People's Liberation Front (EPLF) and the Eritrean Liberation Front (ELF). During five weeks with the two loosely allied insurgent armies, I was able to move unhindered, though not without difficulty, throughout the territory. I began my journey with



Debbie Hird & Chris Cartier



Debbie Hird & Chris Cartier

Note: EPLF and ELF units overlapped around Asmara.

the EPLF, which promised to take me to Fah, a narrow, winding gorge in the Sahel Mountains that served as the heart of the EPLF's fortified rear base area.

After six interminable weeks in Khartoum negotiating travel permissions—first with the two liberation fronts, and then with a seemingly endless string of gracious but inefficient Sudanese bureaucrats—I had finally gotten the go-ahead. There was then a ninety-minute flight to Port Sudan and forty-eight more hours of red tape before I set off on a grueling two-day drive by truck and reconditioned Land Rover. The trip, interrupted for several hours by a ferocious, blinding desert dust storm, known as a *haboob*, finally ended in Eritrea some time in the middle of the night on Monday, June 21, 1976.

I awoke in midmorning on top of my sleeping bag on the dirt floor of a ten-by-twenty-foot bunker dug into the floor of the valley and roofed with dirt and brush to make it invisible from the air. It was hard to guess the time, as the only light seeped in from a small slit in the stone wall and from behind the woolen blanket that hung over the doorway. My body was bruised in places I never would have imagined possible, and my throat was still raw from consuming huge quantities of airborne dirt in the *haboob*.

When I managed to limp out of the bunker, I was stunned by the brightness of the day. The sunlight seemed to ricochet off the dun-colored cliffs around me with dazzling force. When my eyes adjusted to the light, I saw little that was familiar in the austere volcanic terrain, among the harshest environments in the world. There was a subtle majesty in the stark landscape. Hard-edged peaks towered over the valley. Huge boulders teetered on jagged ledges. Delicate, curved pieces of rock lying next to them looked like bits of baked shell cracked off by the blistering tropical sun. The effect was humbling.

The first sign of life was the bleat of a goat somewhere above me, followed by a trickle of loose sand and gravel sliding down the valley walls. Then there was the twitter of small yellow birds perched in one of the spiked grey acacia trees that dotted the canyon. Behind that I thought I heard giggles. Far down the valley, I was sure there were people, probably young women.

The first living beings I caught sight of were a troupe of

baboons loping across the empty riverbed. Moments later, a short-haired woman in green fatigue pants, unmistakably a fighter, appeared out of the brush and walked over to me with a tray of crusty flatbread—*kitcha*—and a tin of Norwegian sardines, which she placed on a small wooden stool. She pointed out a brown goatskin filled with water that was hanging from a tree limb near the doorway. Then she turned and left without a word.

Much of the next two days passed like this—I was largely left alone but always with the sense of being watched by others. I felt as if I were being evaluated to see if I could adapt to the climate, the food and the rigors of travel—and perhaps also to the constraints of life in a tightly run political organization.

I learned later that I was not the only foreigner in Fah at the time. Two batches of British hostages were stashed in tents out of my line of sight. Lindsay and Stephanie Tyler and their children had been taken by the Tigray People's Liberation Front (TPLF) for ransom in early May in northern Tigray where Lindsay was vaccinating cattle, and *London Sunday Times* reporter Jon Swain had been kidnapped off a public bus by the TPLF in mid-June. All were eventually released after considerable play in the British media, which is probably all the Tigrayan guerrillas, then in the early stages of launching a revolt against the new military regime, wanted or expected. The EPLF, though it supported the TPLF and allowed the Tigrayans to use Eritrea as a rear base, seemed to want no association with the kidnapping—I was told nothing of the hostages until I returned to Khartoum.

Fighters occasionally strolled by in twos and threes, glancing at me but not stopping to talk. Most wore mismatched uniforms consisting of blue jeans, T-shirts and camouflage-style fatigues. Everyone wore patched black rubber sandals made in Sudan. Most wore webbed belts with a tightly packed sheet tied directly behind the back and an assortment of wooden-handled grenades, ammunition clips, leather pouches and perhaps a water bottle.

There was no insignia or sign of rank on anyone. Several fighters slung AK-47 assault rifles over their shoulders. A few carried .45 caliber pistols. Women and men alike wore colorful sarongs tied around their heads and trailing down their backs. The only way to distinguish who was in charge was by their demeanor, or by the way

others grew silent when they spoke.

Through those first days, the only thing that was regular was the meal schedule. Almost as soon as I emerged each morning, I was greeted with fresh brewed *shai* (strong black tea with at least a half cup of sugar). This was served hot in small, clear glasses along with chunks of hard, chewy unleavened bread. Tangy lentils laced with *berbere*, the piquant staple Eritrean spice mixture, and heaped on several layers of soft, fermented *injera* appeared at midday. In the evenings there was rice, eggs and canned vegetables, food usually reserved for hospital patients. When things got really slow, I lay on my sleeping mat and watched the mice dart across the floor. Or I swatted flies with my notebook. By the end of the second day, I also began scratching under my arms and in the seams of my clothing for body lice—known here as “the revolutionary heat.”

On the second day, I met three Eritrean photographers who came by to say they would be traveling with me. Typically, they gave only their first names—Solomon, Berhane and Zerai. They were friendly but stiff, even more so than most fighters I met, and they became quite overbearing and dogmatic at times, especially in discussions that related to the U.S. Berhane asserted with almost religious conviction that scientists in the U.S. were killed whenever they discovered something a major corporation wanted suppressed. I chalked this notion up to the fact that the U.S. was their enemy and that they were unsophisticated and zealous. (What I didn't find out until later was that the three had recently arrived in Eritrea directly from Washington, D.C., where they had been recruited by the EPLF.)

I would see all three frequently during the next few years, though by the end of 1978 the fate of the trio seemed to symbolize the terrible trials and tensions the entire movement went through after the Soviet Union intervened on the side of Ethiopia. Solomon was killed in a skirmish with the ELF. Berhane deserted and went to Europe, apparently in frustration over the battlefield setbacks and the political confusion that they occasioned. Zerai was the only one who stuck it out. When the war ended in 1991, he was the resident photographer at the EPLF's Information Department in Orola.

My first excursion was to meet Ethiopian prisoners captured in the highly touted peasant crusade, launched (and finished) in late May. We left Fah well before dawn and drove two hours along a maze of interlocking riverbeds before pulling the vehicle under a thorn tree and covering it with a tattered green tarp to hide it from aerial view. After breakfast, we set off on foot, scrambling over a steep ridge on a thin, winding trail that dropped down four miles later into another gorge.

The POWs were led out, chattering among themselves, by a half-dozen armed fighters who seated them across the dry wash from us in the checkered shade of several acacias. A few men had on long pants, but most wore the patched shorts and threadbare cotton shirts and jackets that were the universal dress of northern Ethiopian peasants.

There were forty-five farmers from Wollo and Tigray provinces, captured in raids and clashes on the Tigray side of the border as they awaited orders to march into Eritrea. The peasants—the youngest sixteen, the oldest sixty, and most in their mid-forties—seemed cheerful. They expected to return home soon. One can never take the stories of prisoners in the presence of their captors at face value, but the easy banter contrasted with the edginess of regular army soldiers whom I saw later, and argued for truth. Besides, it was hard to imagine anyone making up such tales.

None, they said, had ever served in the police or the armed forces or had any training or experience in war. Asked why they had volunteered for the campaign in Eritrea, they spoke angrily of deceit, trickery and kidnapping. A middle-aged peasant from Tigray's Enderta region said a government representative had demanded five "volunteers" from each village in his district, and his neighbors had selected him to go. Several said they'd been told they were going to a pro-government political rally and that they would be fed and then driven home afterward. One said that peasants who had been resisting the government's new taxes were told they'd be pardoned if they turned themselves in—those who did were put into trucks and shipped north. One said he was walking to the local coffeehouse when he was forced into the back of a police van and later transferred to a truck going north. Perhaps the oddest anecdote came from an irate farmer who said he was having

his pants mended at the local tailor when he was whisked away to join the campaign. He stood up to show that all he had to wear around his waist was a burlap sack because he had not been allowed to wait for his trousers to be finished.

Some said they were given primitive, single-shot rifles. Others were issued British .303s or Italian rifles left over from World War II. Many were not armed at all, but were told they could take guns from dead guerrillas, described as "Arab-backed bandits." None was given any kind of training or instruction before being marched into battle near Zal Embassa, a mountain pass north of the Tigrayan town of Adigrat, with Ethiopian troops behind them to shoot any who tried to run away. Thousands were slaughtered, according to the prisoners arrayed in front of me, all of whom seemed quite thankful to have survived.

There were predictable declarations of how well they were being cared for, but there was genuine excitement from several of the peasants as they talked of their literacy lessons. The EPLF was teaching them to read and write in Tigrinya or Amharic, and they had been told they would be released when they mastered their letters. They also received daily lessons in history and politics from EPLF cadres.

As I stood to leave, one white-haired peasant demanded my attention, berating the Eritreans for not giving him a chance to speak. The sixty-year-old farmer said he had been "recruited" along with his thirty-year-old son, who sat nearby grinning shyly at the ground as his father spoke. When they had resisted the call-up in their village, his son's house had been torched and both men were forced to go. He said that he had known nothing of Eritrea before, but now he saw that the Amharas (his term for the Ethiopian rulers) were trying to join it by force and that was not right.

"These militaries are worse than the old landlords were," he exclaimed. "I'll tell that to anyone who will listen, here or in my village!" Clearly, the EPLF had won him over—there was no doubt in my mind that he meant what he said, gesturing in the air with a twisted wooden cane as he gave his peroration.

My second excursion in the mountain labyrinth of Fah began with the sound of children's laughter. We had come upon Deba'at, a camp for families displaced by the fighting who chose to stay

inside Eritrea rather than flee to the safe but squalid international refugee camps in Sudan.

A cross between a gypsy caravan and an urban ghetto, the camp had been relocated three times over the past eighteen months to evade Ethiopian aerial bombardment, but it seemed to hold together as a community, and its hardy residents were fiercely loyal to it.

"We are no longer escaping from the past. This is our home for now," said one young woman upon our arrival, an event that drew a rather large crowd. Here, as with most stops on our itinerary, I was among the first foreign journalists they'd ever seen, certainly the first from the U.S.

Unlike the crowded, chaotic and horribly dispiriting camps that I'd seen in Sudan, Deba'at had an air of efficient calm, and there were signs of productive activity at every turn. Our first stop was a small stone "office." Over the door hung a bright red banner proclaiming: "Victory to the masses!" Within, the walls were decorated with photographs of dancing villagers, an EPLF paramedic examining a small baby, and peasant farmers plowing their fields. A dented metal filing cabinet stood in the corner with detailed records of all the camp's inhabitants, and a fighter sat on a bench nearby, reading a dog-eared paperback copy of *The Foundations of Leninism*.

At the rickety wooden table in the center of the room sat Askalu Menkerios, the administrator of the camp. Later, in 1987, she was among the first women elected to the EPLF Central Committee. She accompanied us on our walk through the camp.

Askalu was dark, unusually tall, broad-backed and lean. She strode rather than walked. She looked directly at whomever she was speaking with, pausing to ponder questions as if to make sure her answer was as accurate as possible. Her power was most evident in her easy rapport with the people in the camp, many of whom she physically touched as she chatted with them about family members, special projects, or other details of their lives.

As we picked our way through the tangled underbrush, we found people trying to make the best of their tenuous new community while still nursing deep emotional wounds. A few families had begun to dig bunker-style houses that would double as bomb

shelters. Others lived in Israeli-made canvas tents taken by EPLF raiding parties from Ethiopian army camps. Most were living in makeshift lean-tos stitched together out of scraps of cloth, cardboard, plastic and branches. Benches and chairs were improvised out of logs, stones and molded adobe with bits of animal skin or cloth spread over them. In a break with Eritrean custom, cooking facilities—usually a small stone and adobe grill with a dome-shaped cover for baking *injera*—were outside, often shared by several families, making socializing among the traditionally isolated women much easier. As is often the case in refugee situations, there were few able-bodied men present—the camp was a society of women.

The first tent we approached housed a woman with four small children. Her husband and two sons had left to join the EPLF. They had come from Emberemi, a coastal village about ten miles north of Massawa, Eritrea's main port. "We were attacked at nine in the morning," she said in a clipped voice while staring past us, struggling with the memory. "First there was bombardment from the ships. The soldiers landed at three places and surrounded our village. Those who remained were taken to the mosque. Finally, they opened fire on the people and burned the village."

The accounts were depressingly alike, relating random killings and the destruction of whole communities by Ethiopian troops. Those who fled left abruptly, almost always with nothing but the clothes on their backs and whatever little they could carry on the arduous trek north through the desert. More than 30,000 had passed through this area on the way to Sudan over the last two years. Only 800 had so far opted to stay, but Askalu clearly hoped their social experiment at Deba'at would induce more to do so rather than leave their homeland.

By this time there were 120,000 Eritrean refugees in Sudan. Most were in camps established near the border after 1967 when the first large influx crossed over to escape a sudden escalation of the war, providing the seeds of an exile population in Sudan that would eventually reach a half-million people. In 1976, the camps were run by Sudan's Commission for Refugees, and they were serviced by a small number of international aid agencies, including United Nations agencies and a handful of European church groups and nongovernmental organizations. (U.S. agencies did not become involved until

1978, after the Soviets "landed" in Addis Ababa and Khartoum fell into the Western camp.)

The ELF set up the Eritrean Red Cross and Crescent Society (ERCCS) and the EPLF sponsored the Eritrean Relief Association (ERA) to channel funds directly into Eritrea and to carry out relief programs in the Sudanese camps, but they had difficulty getting cooperation from either local officials or foreign donors. The Sudanese feared a situation like that of the Palestinians in Lebanon should the Eritrean refugees become autonomous. Most foreign agencies preferred to run their own operations with expatriate personnel in charge. As a result, the exclusion of Eritreans from positions of power and the demoralization of most of the refugee population were permanent, structural features of camp life in Sudan.

The opposite was true in Deba'at. People there were busy. They had lost everything, some of them more than once, but they were rebuilding again. Perhaps more importantly, they were using their disparate and formerly divisive cultural and social backgrounds to enrich the new community they were trying to fashion from scratch here in the Sahel wilderness. In this respect, they not only reflected the suffering and social disruption brought on by the war; they were also a window into the future of the multicultural, egalitarian society the EPLF revolutionaries proposed.

Deba'at residents were insistent that they be directly involved in meeting their own needs. Members of the camp committee kept records of every family's resources and maintained a regular list for each distribution of food, clothing or other relief goods. They arbitrated disputes, organized self-help projects, helped new residents find shelter and brought suggestions and demands from their constituencies to Askalu to transmit to the appropriate EPLF department.

They also organized volunteer squads for the liberation front. When word came that the Central Hospital needed construction help, thirty-eight men went to build fortified underground wards and eight women spent a month helping to organize the new facilities. Truckloads of laundry were brought from the mountain clinic to the camp regularly, and a volunteer brigade was waiting to help gather the grain harvest at a small plot the front had sown to feed hospital patients. Meanwhile, camp members had also organized a

community vegetable garden to supplement their own food supplies, and an EPLF offer to train people as tailors had turned up 150 volunteers.

When they weren't working, camp residents attended classes. Political study followed a standard EPLF curriculum covering Eritrean and Ethiopian history, the aims and goals of the revolution and the rudiments of political economy. Literacy classes were also held three times each week in Tigrinya and Arabic to give people from different communities of Eritrea a common language. Field-trained EPLF paramedics visited Deba'at to run seminars in sanitation and nutrition.

Many classes were practical, with direct relevance to their immediate living situation, but political themes clearly held center stage. The most crucial political challenge, according to Askalu, was getting the residents to see beyond their parochial ethnic and religious identities to make common cause with one another as Eritreans.

"We tell them how the Italians, the British and the Ethiopians have used our differences to their advantage," she said. "We have also relocated some of the families to mix people of various nationalities with each other. The more you put them together, the more they lose their prejudices. They had completely different cultures when they came here, but now they're beginning to share a single one."

Dr. Nerayo Teklemichael—a short, stocky, balding man in his early forties and the director of the EPLF's Central Hospital—scampered up a steep, rocky path. I trailed behind him on the way to the carefully dispersed and camouflaged medical facilities of the guerrilla hospital, which would eventually stretch six miles across two major ravines, making it the biggest public hospital in the world.

Nerayo's smile was radiant. His eyes twinkled. His excitement and enthusiasm were infectious. Educated in Addis Ababa, Beirut and London, he gave up a lucrative career at an Ethiopian hospital to join the liberation movement in January 1975 as an unpaid volunteer (like all members of the front). Eighteen months later, dressed in a faded beige T-shirt and olive green shorts, he seemed like a small boy at summer camp for the first time. On the way to the hospital I asked him an offhand question about the medical

department's administrative structure, and he stopped suddenly on the precipitous trail to draw a flow chart in the dust with his thin walking stick.

Nerayo led me through a narrow gorge between walls of grey rock, chattering nonstop about the rapidly expanding EPLF health department. The first "ward" we came to was for patients with tuberculosis, the most common problem requiring hospitalization in this windy, dust-filled environment. There was one large canvas tent covered with thorn branches, its flaps rolled up to reveal two rows of empty bed frames and army cots. The forty or so TB patients were outside, lying on burlap sacks in the sun.

A short hike up the gorge was the hospital's laboratory, a ten-by-fifteen-foot stone structure disguised by the valley's only tree, whose upper reaches had been thickened by weaving in dead branches to give it the odd appearance of a thatched umbrella suspended above the lab. Inside, two field-trained medical technicians were doing smear tests with a pair of Czechoslovakian microscopes that I was told had been "donated" by the Ethiopians. In the corner stood an X-ray film processor and a kerosene-powered refrigerator, also captured from the government. On the wall was a colorful chart—"The Developmental Cycle of Malaria." Malaria was a leading killer, along with diarrhea, largely because its victims, especially children, were already sapped by malnutrition when they were infected.

On the way to the next ward, we came upon a herd of goats kept for meat for the patients. There was also a small vegetable garden, and fighters trucked in fresh fruits from a formerly Italian-owned plantation that had been nationalized by the government and then seized by the EPLF. "Food is the best medicine we can offer most of these people," Nerayo commented, as we rounded another bend and came to a series of tents and improvised shelters where thirty-five civilians with a variety of wounds, infections and simple ailments were recovering. Around still another bend was the chronic ward for patients expected to remain for six weeks or more. Here, too, most people were outdoors. Most had been wounded by air raids in their home villages. The worst cases—largely amputees—were in a separate tent at the head of the canyon, where an air attack was least likely.

Inside, a literacy lesson was in progress, with five patients

grouped around a young EPLF paramedic teaching from a Tigrinya text produced by the front with "liberated" mimeograph machines. All the patients, including civilians, had three political discussions each week, plus classes in literacy, geography and elementary math. Even here in the hospital, it was rare to see anyone idle for long.

In the hospital's storehouse, I saw stacks of newly captured equipment, including mattresses, bedside tables, autoclave sterilizers and cases of bandages. I was told that certain guerrilla raids were planned with specific objectives set by the medical department. The shopping list now included surgical sets, gowns and masks, syringes, catheters, bone cutters and traction sets. Meanwhile, the front had only nine fully qualified doctors, two former medical students and a handful of hospital-tested nurses and dressers. The EPLF needed to multiply this core group into an effective field staff that could serve thousands of patients scattered over hundreds of miles. The next challenge, according to Nerayo, would be to identify and train midwives and health providers within each village so that the entire edifice of health care was rooted in the community and not injected into it from outside.

The EPLF workshops presented another illustration of the egalitarian values of the movement. The first I visited was located in the dome-shaped sanctuary of a tree whose long, trailing branches had been weighted at the tips and reinforced with other foliage to make it look like a giant, hollow haystack. As we approached it along a barely discernible trail, swept that morning to make it invisible from the air, I could hear a peculiar clatter. We climbed through the dense outer thicket to discover ten men and women working in pairs to make wooden crates for fruits and vegetables.

A short climb up the valley wall, there was another shop carved out of the mountain. Inside, a dozen people worked with hand tools to fabricate crutches, gun stocks, checkerboards, small boxes and chalkboards. A hand-lettered banner in Tigrinya and Arabic read: "Work and Struggle." A professional woodworker from Asmara ran the shop. The others said they had learned their craft here over the past few months. One woman was carving a Kalashnikov-style replacement stock for a captured U.S. M-14. "The fighters prefer this grip, so we're changing them," she said. It

was an attitude that I would run across again and again in the EPLF's Eritrea: take nothing for granted; anything can be improved.

Farther up the escarpment was another embryonic cottage industry—a leather shop where nine men and three women turned out pouches and cartridge holders from a four-foot high stack of hides captured in a February commando raid into Asmara. When the hides appeared, the EPLF searched their personnel files to find a fighter with experience in leathercraft and assigned him leadership of the group. So far eleven apprentices had been trained.

Also tucked into the hills or hidden under rock overhangs were repair shops for electrical equipment, watches, radios and armaments, a welding operation, a general machine shop and a sheet metal "factory." Much of the work here was directed at keeping ailing vehicles in service, but workers also repaired agricultural equipment, duplicating machines and electrical generators. They said they could fix virtually any weapon they found on the battlefield, either by cannibalizing parts or by making their own. By this time, they said, they could manufacture most of the smaller parts for the commonly used AK-47 assault rifles and for machine guns up to .50 caliber. They were optimistic that with new machine tools they would soon be making the barrels as well.

"These small shops are going to be the base for the new Eritrea," said the head of the machine shop, a U.S.-trained veteran of the Ethiopian Air Force who had come over to the EPLF in February 1975. Confidence was clearly not their problem, but the diversity of the equipment they were capturing produced some frustrations. An assistant in the radio repair shop bemoaned the time wasted having to master the idiosyncracies of each manufacturer: "We need books with circuit diagrams and instructions," he said. "We are not just technicians here—we are inventors, studying the field for the first time."

They did more with less, treating everything that fell into their hands as a potential resource, as I saw in the sheet metal factory, the smallest, loudest and most animated workshop in the valley. Ten workers and apprentices were crowded into an eight-by-ten-foot stone bunker. Two burlap sacks stuffed with tin cans collected from all the camps in the area partially blocked our entry. A young boy was taking the cans out and cutting the tops and

bottoms off with a thick-bladed carving knife. Others were flattening the tins and trimming them to make rough rectangles of sheet metal, which were then used to fashion water buckets, oil lamps, bowls, sterilizing dishes, water scoops and cooking utensils. That evening, at a cultural show staged by young EPLF recruits known as the Vanguard, several earnest teenagers read poems they had written on the insides of the labels stripped off these same cans.

Everything was used.

This was an extraordinary moment in Eritrean history, and everyone seemed to feel it. The defensive posture of the government, starting in early 1975, had opened new possibilities for an array of social, economic and political programs and projects. The repressive policies of the new military regime drove thousands of young people into the arms of the two fronts during the next twelve months, many of them skilled workers or students. For the first time, the EPLF fighters could build something they would not have to pack up and run with at a moment's notice, and they now had the personnel to staff these new projects. The base at Fah and the network of nonmilitary offices and departments that I visited had only been in their present sites for six months or less. The structure of the movement was just being hammered out.

At the end of 1975, the EPLF leadership reorganized the front to reflect the new field situation. The military wing was separated from the departments, which came to function much like cabinet-level bureaus in a government. The Eritrean People's Liberation Army (EPLA) was organized, U.S.-style, in tiers of three units each, starting at the squad level and building up to battalions. The command structure drew on socialist models, with a three-person leadership composed of a military commander, a vice commander, and a political commissar, with no other forms of rank within front-line units. Decisions were made collectively by the three leaders, but once in battle the military commander had undisputed authority.

The departments lacked the tiered structure of the army, but shared the concept of collective authority. The departments were staffed by fully trained fighters who could at any moment put down their tools and take up arms. Both the EPLA and the departments reported to subcommittees of the front's Central Committee, a small

group originally elected in 1971 that had managed to survive the hazards of the struggle to this point. A congress in January 1977, six months after my visit, formalized both the programmatic foundations and the leadership that would carry the front through the next ten years.

There was a palpable excitement throughout the EPLF's base area and a seemingly boundless enthusiasm that was as infectious as it was seductive. There was also an extraordinary, if not surprising, naivete about the outside world and an unsettling level of rhetorical uniformity about nearly everything. Though I was repeatedly assured that the EPLF was a broad united front made up of people from many different political persuasions, there was little evidence of this throughout this first trip. The EPLF looked and acted like a highly disciplined political organization. Whatever its internal debates and differences, there was a tight lid on sharing them with outsiders.

The EPLF, like most national liberation movements of that era, ran on Leninist principles of "democratic centralism." In theory, this meant that new issues were discussed broadly within the organization, but once a decision was taken, every member of the front obeyed it and publicly supported it. Ambiguity was not a part of the political culture. This made it difficult to detect shades of political difference, and it was often frustrating to receive answers that sounded more like textbook recitations than thoughtful opinions.

The EPLF's political insularity at that moment was also encouraged by the final, acrimonious break with their Foreign Mission, headed since 1970 by an old-line conservative Eritrean nationalist, Osman Saleh Sabbe. The relationship had long been an alliance of convenience: Sabbe solicited arms for the EPLF, largely from conservative Arab emirs, in exchange for a limited measure of influence at home and for prestige abroad. For their part, EPLF leaders were willing to tolerate Sabbe's rightist politics so long as he contributed to the national struggle. As the left-leaning character of the field leadership became more pronounced, Sabbe tried to manipulate the field command by withholding weapons and ammunition at critical moments. His leverage declined, however, as the units in the field began capturing more weapons than they could use. The falling out came in late 1975, when Sabbe tried to nego-

riate a swift merger between the EPLF and ELF without the knowledge of the EPLF field command, which immediately disavowed the agreement, triggering a rupture with Sabbe. One result of this break was that while the EPLF grew by leaps and bounds within Eritrea, it had virtually no links to the 'outside world except through its student supporters abroad.¹

The ELF also benefitted from the exodus of young people from Eritrea's towns and villages; it, too, grew rapidly. In 1976, the ELF was larger than the EPLF and spread over a greater geographical area, but different methods of organizing and variations in types of membership make precise comparisons difficult. It is safe to say, however, that together the two movements that year grew to outnumber the 20,000-man Ethiopian army in Eritrea, half the empire's total armed forces.

The Vanguard, the EPLF's youth brigade, were part of a flood of volunteers who joined the liberation front in 1975, transforming the organization almost overnight from a small band of hit-and-run guerrillas into a complex national movement that was beginning to look and act like a shadow government.

They were boys and girls from eight to fifteen years old, who had been orphaned or lost or who had fled back into Eritrea from refugee camps in Sudan. Too young to be fighters, they were assigned to regular units as "go-fers" and helpers. Their typical day started before dawn when they arose for calisthenics that might last until breakfast at seven. They next divided into small groups for either political study or military training on alternating days. In the afternoons, they might do forced mountain marches or military drill and more exercises.

As with the adult recruits, Vanguard girls and boys trained separately to give the girls peer support. There was no gender separation in the ranks of the army or the departments, however. A basic requirement for "matriculating" into the front was full literacy. All newcomers also received instruction in military strategy and tactics, Eritrean history, political theory and the basics of first aid and public health, and their education continued in their assigned units, where they served as apprentices, carrying water and food to the trenches for the other fighters instead of guns, though they

would have just as many bullets aimed back at them as any battle-hardened adult. Like the grown-up fighters, the Vanguardians were permitted a day of rest each week. The EPLF had designated Wednesdays for this to avoid favoring one religious observance at the expense of another.

Toward the end of my stay in Fah, 200 chattering, giggling adolescents crowded together under the canopy of a rare broad-leaved tree. For two hours, they took turns performing skits, reading poems and singing songs—a typical summer camp scene, except that each number had a political theme. The song that aroused the most fervent choruses was “Where Is My Comrade Fighter?”

When the last strains of this ballad died down, I was introduced, and the assembled youths were invited to ask me questions.

“Are there poor people in your country?”

“Are there progressive organizations in the United States?”

“Are these organizations legal or underground?”

“Will you have difficulties from your government when you return from visiting our camps?”

“How much is the C.I.A. involved in Ethiopia?”

“What did your government learn from the Vietnam War? What did the American people learn from the Vietnam War?”

When it was my turn, I asked the assembled group what they saw as their future role. One thirteen-year-old stood up and asserted, “One day we will lead the revolution because, having been brought up in it, we are the most revolutionary of all!”

Chapter 3

THE BATTLE FOR THE PAST

"By all we were oppressed and exploited," said the fiery forty-four-year-old peasant woman nicknamed "Comrade Fana," as we sat in the smoky kitchen area of her small stone house in Zagher village, less than twenty miles from Asmara.

Her black eyes flashed as she spoke, all the while busying herself with the elaborate hour-long ritual of roasting, grinding and serving coffee to the growing number of guests.

I sat on a dried goatskin draped across a narrow adobe bench carved out of the wall, as Fana crouched over a square metal charcoal stove. A ceramic stand the size and shape of a cupped hand stood near the open doorway with a sprinkling of tree-sap incense smoldering over glowing embers. A light breeze blew swirls of the aromatic smoke over me as I sipped coffee out of a tiny china cup with no handles. Since there were only a few cups, I drank quickly, slurping loudly and vigorously to cool the liquid, as was the custom, before handing the thimble-sized vessel to one of the others.

As Fana poured the first of three rounds, a wizened, sixty-year-old peasant woman burst in, did a double-take, and demanded of my escorts, "Is he a progressive or a reactionary?" Once assured that I was a friend, she squatted on her heels and joined the group. Sitting with me were Ababa Haile and Stefanos "Bruno" Afewerke, organizers from what was termed an EPLF Armed Propaganda Team. The three Eritrean photographers—Zerai, Berhane and Solomon—were also present. Several of Fana's five children wandered in and out, and an elderly peasant farmer known as "Father Omar" sat hunched against the wall, nodding his head ever so slightly as if listening to a distant cadence beyond the grasp of the rest of the gathering.

Zagher was the headquarters of a new EPLF community organizing drive in the Hamasien region around Asmara, a campaign made possible by the defensive posture of the Ethiopian army and a shaky truce with the rival ELF. This was the front's first chance to demonstrate its commitment to sweeping social change for the territory's impoverished peasant farmers. The organizing team consisted of sixty members, spread among at least a dozen villages. Zagher was to be the model community, and Fana's house was the nerve center.

Barefoot and wearing a drab, ready-made dress of indeterminate tint and pattern, Fana darted about the cramped room like a swallow, swatting chickens off the adobe ledge that served as her bed, fussing over her children, pouring coffee from the spherical clay urn, and keeping up a running commentary on every subject that arose among her visitors. Fana stood about five-foot, three-inches tall. Her black hair was tightly braided in thin rows running back from her forehead to the thick mass that fanned out across her bony shoulders, in the traditional manner of Tigrinya-speaking peasant women. This accentuated her large, brilliant teeth that sparkled each time she smiled, which was often.

Fana was one of the first in the area to join a clandestine cell of the EPLF when the front began operating there at the end of 1974. She had spent her childhood on an Italian plantation at Sabur, twenty miles east of Zagher. Her father worked as a cook for the wealthy white families who came to the countryside on weekends. At the age of six, in 1938, Fana overheard one of the visiting

gentry ask his host, "Why are these *habashas* [blacks] here? They are flies, not humans. Someday we will skin them to make our shoes." Fana got so angry that she demanded that her father quit his job and go back to living as a farmer. When he declined, she took the issue to her grandfather. Two months afterward, the family packed up and returned to Zagher.

These reminiscences brought Father Omar to life. After a bit of prodding from Bruno, he leaned back against the mud wall, hugged his knees against his chest and began to tell his story in calm, measured tones. Omar was born during a period of starvation and famine in the coastal lowlands; he guessed his age at "more than fifty." He also insisted that he was a member of the EPLF, even if he wore the clothes of a farmer.

"I don't remember much about the Italian rule before the war," he said. "There was poverty, but there was no terror. I had no concept of liberation or freedom. We only knew working in the day and dancing at night. When the British came [in 1941], we began to know more and to realize what was good and what was bad. Later, they called a meeting to learn who we wanted to stay with—Italy, Sudan, or Ethiopia—but they only spoke with the sheikhs. This began to create divisions within the society. *Shiftas* [bandits] from Tigray who supported the Ethiopian option started intimidating people, and asking for ID cards for the Unionist Party that they were distributing. I joined the Muslim League, which favored independence.

"During this time there were three blocs: the Muslim League, the Unionist Party, and Eritrea-for-Eritreans, a Christian party supporting independence. The Unionist Party suppressed the activities of the other two with the help of the *shiftas* and the Ethiopian government. The British did nothing to stop them. Gradually, the *shiftas* turned these divisions into a conflict between the Muslims and the Christians, and the Muslim League started losing power. At this time, the federation [between Eritrea and Ethiopia] was arranged by the United Nations.

"The Ethiopians opened schools, teaching the youngsters Amharic and prohibiting the use of Tigrinya and Arabic. When the workers in Asmara went on strike [in 1958], the government killed and wounded hundreds. There was a nominal assembly in Asmara,

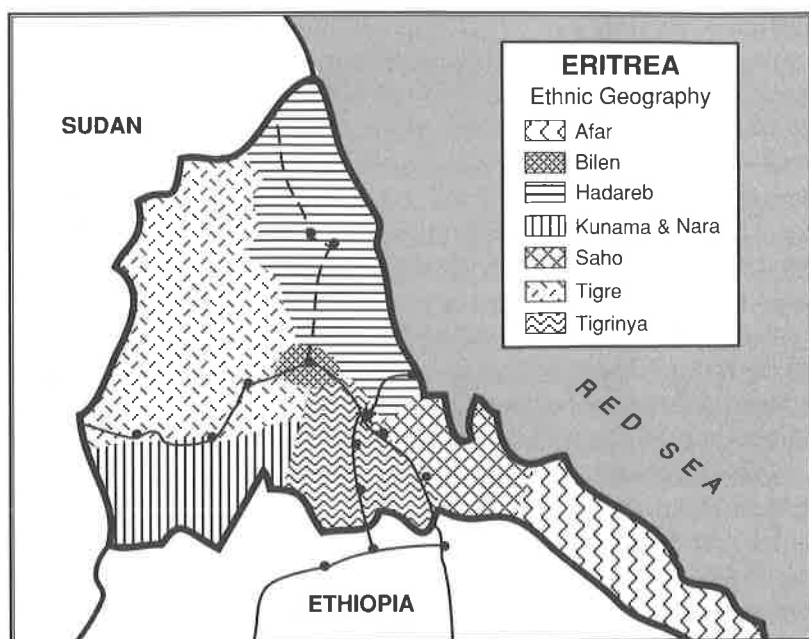
about sixty Eritreans who cooperated with the Ethiopian government to pull down our flag while the Ethiopian army took over the big cities and the small villages. As the anti-Eritrean campaign increased, the Eritrean armed struggle was launched by Idris Hamid Awate, a former member of the Muslim League. This was the start of the ELF.

"I collected taxes for them around the Red Sea area, but all the money went to Kassala [in neighboring Sudan] where the leaders were. After a time, we heard that some of the ELF leaders were jailed. When we asked why, the ELF accused us of being spies and threatened us. In this way, we learned that there was no questioning anything concerning the front. One day Isaias Afwerki and a group of fighters came near our village and said that people were being killed and imprisoned; they asked us to protect them, so we fed them. They said they were part of a new front—the EPLF.

"After this we organized ourselves into a committee and went to the ELF to tell them that we didn't understand why they were split, and that unless they became united we would not give them any kind of aid. They told us that this was not our concern. Their answer was to put two of our number in prison, but we attacked them with sticks and stones and took the prisoners from them. I escaped to Sudan with some EPLF fighters. After this, there was a civil war between the two fronts until we forced them to stop [in 1974]. Now we are waiting to see them unite and win our independence."

Eritrea's borders, like those of most third world colonies, were arbitrarily drawn and did not reflect ethnic boundaries. At the close of the nineteenth century, the Italians lumped together peoples from nine nationalities, who were roughly divided between two major religions (Islam and Coptic Christianity) and between two radically different modes of economic and social life (settled agriculture and nomadic pastoralism) to form the new country.

The colonial rulers displaced or killed many of the traditional leaders, shattering the local economies and suppressing the indigenous cultures. As the colonized peoples lost their social roots, individuals from widely differing backgrounds were thrown together into multicultural urban populations, a rural and urban work



Debbie Hird & Chris Carter

force and a large colonial army. This new social formation became the basis for an emergent Eritrean identity, though the inherited ethnic and religious differences, together with the widening social class distinctions, lingered to provide fertile ground for conflict within the nationalist movement when it arose later.

Once the Europeans departed, the debate over the history of the region became a battleground. Successive Ethiopian governments and a wide range of Ethiopian opposition movements from both the left and the right claimed a three-thousand-year unity between Ethiopia and Eritrea. To give Eritrea its independence, they argued, would dismember one of the world's oldest nations and set a dangerous precedent for many emergent African states. The Eritreans answered that they had as much right to self-determination and independence as any other former colony in Africa.

The weight of the evidence is on the Eritrean side of the argument: there simply was no modern nation-state of either Ethiopia or Eritrea until the end of the nineteenth century. There were dis-

continuous economic, political and cultural ties among some of the peoples who now make up these countries, but to advance an argument for Ethiopian sovereignty over Eritrea on the basis of these tenuous and inconsistent connections would be like making a case for contemporary Italian control of France based on Rome's conquest of Gaul.

The first settlers probably migrated to Eritrea across the desert from the Nile Valley four to five thousand years ago. They were joined around 1000 B.C. by Sabaeans from the Arabian peninsula who crossed the Red Sea to establish trading centers along the coast and in the northern highlands. Their written language, Ge'ez, became the basis for Tigrinya, Tigre¹ and Amharic, and their settlements eventually provided the foundation of the Axumite Empire.

The Axumites, close allies of Byzantium, dominated the region for more than six centuries, until Arab invaders conquered the Dahlak islands and Axum's main port at Adulis in 640 A.D., and then took Egypt the next year. The Arabs took over Axum's Mediterranean trade routes, upon which the empire depended heavily, and isolated the Axumites, already in a state of internal decline.²

Over the next nine centuries, much of the coast was ruled or strongly influenced by Middle Eastern powers and independent Islamic sultanates, while Beja tribes controlled much of the Eritrean interior. During this time, the cultural and political center of what evolved into Abyssinia shifted southward, into the nearly impenetrable mountains of the plateau. The Islamic Afar kingdoms to the southeast remained independent until the Italians came in the mid-1800s. The peoples of the northern plateau periodically battled Muslim invaders and Christian Abyssinian warlords, paying tribute to each at various times but remaining independent for most of this period.

Eritrea's modern history began with the coming of the Egyptians, then nominally under Ottoman sovereignty, who leased the port of Massawa from the Turks in 1848. By 1872, the Egyptians controlled much of what was to become Eritrea, linking many of the towns by roads and telegraph lines for the first time. Meanwhile, the opening of the Suez Canal in 1869 gave this area a new strategic importance to the European colonial powers.³

In 1884-85, the European imperialists sat down at a conference in Berlin to carve up the last major unconquered continent. They

defined new colonies with no regard for local cultures, pre-existing economies or traditional political structures. Sharing in the distribution of the spoils were Britain, France, Spain, Portugal, Germany, Italy and Belgium, among others. The Kingdom of Abyssinia was given observer status at the conference, during which Italy was assigned the right to the Red Sea coast from Sudan to the French military base at Djibouti. There is no record of Abyssinian objections.

Italy's claim to Eritrea rested on advance work done by Italian missionaries. Giuseppe Sapeto, a Roman Catholic monk, came to Eritrea in 1837 to begin his evangelizing mission, first in the Akele-Guzai highlands and later in the slope areas near Keren.⁴ In 1859, the Kings of Sardinia and Ethiopia signed a commercial treaty. Ten years later, Father Sapeto formally acquired land in the Assab Bay on behalf of an Italian company, operating with the tacit support of the Italian government, laying the groundwork for the first Italian outpost in Eritrea.⁵

Italian expansion inland followed soon afterward, but the intruders met stiff resistance. A series of ambushes in which Italian explorers and soldiers were killed in the early 1880s provided a pretext for a larger-scale invasion, and Italian forces moved rapidly to take control of the territory. Local resistance continued, but in 1889 the Abyssinian Emperor Menelik II signed the Treaty of Ucciali, recognizing Italian claims to the new colony and fixing Eritrea's modern borders.

Some Eritreans embraced the new conquerors to counter the frequent pillage of their villages by Tigrayan warlords. Others took to the hills to fight a running, low-level guerrilla war against the Europeans that lasted well into the 1890s. Eritreans fought on both sides of the Battle of Adua in Tigray in 1896, where Menelik dealt the Italians a stunning defeat and drove them back into Eritrea. This ended Italian expansion in the area until the onset of World War II. In the Addis Ababa Treaty, signed in October 1896, Italy formally recognized Abyssinia's sovereignty and Menelik confirmed Italy's claims to Eritrea.⁶

The Eritrean resistance appears to have discouraged Rome from going through with a plan to settle large numbers of Italian peasants on the fertile Eritrean plateau, but it did not mitigate the impact the Italians had on the existing economy and the indigenous social struc-

tures. In the last four months of 1889, colonial officials executed about a dozen dissident Eritrean chiefs and 800 of their followers, cutting the size of the native elite by half. In 1893, the Italians began expropriating large tracts of land from the highland peasant farmers; within twelve months, over one million acres, fully one-fifth of the cultivable land, was taken.⁷ These measures stripped the nobility and the native church of the material base for much of their power, thoroughly destabilized the autonomous feudal and semicomunal societies, and set the stage for their integration under Roman rule into a unified though unevenly developed nation.

While the Italians were taking over Eritrea, Menelik turned his attention southward. With arms and money supplied by Britain and Italy to block French expansion in the region, he swept out of the Abyssinian highlands to conquer vast new territories stretching from the Somali-populated Ogaden desert in the southeast to the plains of Bale and Sidama and the southwestern Oromo jungles, effectively tripling the size of his kingdom and establishing the boundaries of the modern state of Ethiopia.

The choice of this name was a stroke of public relations genius. The term "Ethiopia"—meaning "the land of the burnt faces"—first appeared in classical Greek, referring to black people and often used as a generic expression for all of Africa. The name also appears repeatedly in Judeo-Christian literature, and its use reinforced Menelik's claim to direct descent from the legendary union of King Solomon and the Queen of Sheba.

Ethiopia's singular status as the only independent African state in the early twentieth century (apart from the U.S.-dominated neo-colony of Liberia) added to its mystique. It became a powerful symbol for people of color throughout the world, especially among African Americans and Afro-Caribbeans influenced by Marcus Garvey and his "back-to-Africa" movement. Menelik's successor, Haile Selassie—known prior to his coronation as Ras (prince) Tafari—even lent his name (albeit unknowingly) to a religious and political cult, the Rastafarians, that persists in Jamaica and elsewhere to this day. Selassie's appearance before the League of Nations to protest the 1935 Italian invasion of Ethiopia also left a lasting impression on European and North American public opinion that

served him well when he sought to enlist support for his post-war claims to Eritrea.

During this period, Eritrea was undergoing an intense process of separate development. Its name was also taken from antiquity—from the Greek word for red—and reflected the colony's identification with the peoples of the Red Sea. While Ethiopia remained economically and politically stagnant under the despotic rule of a landed and clerical aristocracy, Eritrea experienced spurts of transformative economic growth under the domination of a semi-industrial capitalist state, Italy. By the early 1930s, the colony was crisscrossed with new roads. A railroad linked the port of Massawa with the highland capital of Asmara and ran through Keren to the western lowlands. More than 300 small workshops and industries were established around Asmara and the ports of Massawa and Assab, and large labor-intensive farms and plantations were started in the countryside.⁸

Mussolini characterized Eritrea as “the heart of the new Roman empire.” In 1935, he introduced conscription there and built the Eritrean army to 65,000 men, forty percent of the national work force.⁹ These troops served Italy in both the Ethiopian and the North African campaigns (sowing resentment among Ethiopians that has not yet disappeared).

Meanwhile, the continued seizure of Eritrean land and the imposition of new taxes forced impoverished farmers and pastoralists into the new towns in search of work. The mobilization of large numbers of able-bodied men into the labor force, the army and the towns provided the social base for an emerging Eritrean nationalism. New multiethnic classes and sectors evolved, superseding clan and tribal identities with a fresh set of economic aspirations and political loyalties. By October 3, 1935, when Italian-led forces rolled out of Eritrea to conquer Ethiopia, they included 35,000 Eritreans of mixed race who fit into no preexisting tribal category.¹⁰

The conquest of Ethiopia coincided with the capture of British Somaliland, and gave the Italians control of the entire Horn of Africa for a brief five-year period. This was the only time Eritrea was linked with what we know as Ethiopia (and, for that matter, with the territory that became independent Somalia in the 1950s), but

the temporary linkage had little effect on either country.

The Italians used Eritrea as a base for their operations in the region, and accelerated the development of the colony by constructing new military bases, warehouses, storage depots, tracts of modern urban housing, two airports, a complex network of roads and an expanded rail system. To accomplish this, they brought in an army of Italian engineers and workers, increasing the resident Italian population from 5,000 to 50,000 in five years.¹¹

In 1937, the colonial authorities imposed strict racial segregation, sharply limiting the access of all Eritreans, including those of mixed racial backgrounds, to schools, jobs and social services. As if to underline their racist views, the Italians founded a Vaccine Institute to support the growing export trade in hides and skins while coincidentally restricting Eritrean rights to basic medical services.¹² All this encouraged a growing anticolonial sentiment within the multiethnic urban populace, by then almost one-fifth of the general Eritrean population of approximately one million.

After Italy declared war on Britain in 1940, London catered to this budding Eritrean nationalism by air-dropping leaflets that said: "Eritreans! You deserve to have a flag! ... This is the honorable life for the Eritrean: to have the guts to call his people a nation."¹³ These inducements proved to be just as hollow as those the British used to encourage the Arabs to rebel against the Turks in World War I.

Italian East Africa collapsed quickly under assault by British-led troops in early 1941. Upon their victory, the British immediately returned Haile Selassie to his throne. A British Military Administration was established in Eritrea, and the colony's human and material resources were redirected into the war effort. With the Suez Canal closed, Eritrea became a light industrial center for supplying Allied forces in the region, and its economy experienced a four-year boom.

During their occupation, Eritrea's British masters did little to alter the basic Italian administrative structures, though the racial laws were repealed, sixty schools and several new hospitals were established, and Eritreans were hired into the local police force.¹⁴ After the war, the British allowed new forms of organization that

nurtured the nationalist aspirations of the Eritreans and provided an institutional base for new forms of political action—trade unions, Eritrean-run publications and national political parties.¹⁵

In 1947, Italy formally renounced its claims to its African possessions in the peace treaty drafted by the victorious Allies. The disposition of these colonies eventually fell to the newly formed United Nations, but Selassie got the jump on the Eritrean independence movement by backing the establishment of the Society for the Love of Country in 1942.¹⁶ Led by remnants of the local nobility and members of the Orthodox clergy (who together comprised the precolonial elite disempowered by the Italians), this group saw an alliance with the feudal regime of Ethiopia as its ticket to renewed prominence. It was eventually succeeded by the Unionist Party as the main proponent of a merger with Ethiopia.

The independence-oriented Muslim League was founded in Keren in 1946, and a Christian-based independence movement, the Liberal Progressive Party (also known as Eritrea-for-Eritreans) was launched the following year with journalist and trade union activist Woldeab Woldemariam—considered a founding father of the Eritrean nationalist movement—as a prominent member. Together with several smaller political groups, these two parties formed what became known as the Independence Bloc, and they represented their respective constituencies to the United Nations in the late 1940s in the prolonged debate over Eritrea's fate.¹⁷ Through the end of the decade, however, armed gangs of *shiftas*, financed by the emperor and based in northern Tigray, waged a vicious campaign of fear and intimidation against the independence movement, while Orthodox priests threatened church members with excommunication if they failed to support unionist forces.¹⁸

In August 1949, the British Embassy in Addis Ababa cabled the U.S. State Department that the "Independence Bloc commands seventy-five percent of Eritrea."¹⁹ Nevertheless, the final U.N. committee charged with recommending a position to the General Assembly came up divided in its assessment. After only six weeks of casual observations and random conversations in the colony, the delegation presented two separate reports and three different proposals. Norway supported full union with Ethiopia. South Africa and Burma favored some form of federation between the two states.

Pakistan and Guatemala recommended independence.²⁰

In the ensuing debate, the Eastern Bloc was adamant in its support for Eritrean independence. Soviet delegate Andrei Vishinsky, speaking in 1950 at the fifth session of the U.N. General Assembly, declared:

The USSR has consistently supported the proposal that Eritrea should be granted independence and has continued to do so at the current session. We base our argument on the fact that all peoples have a right to self-determination and national independence.... The General Assembly cannot tolerate a deal by the colonial powers at the expense of the population of Eritrea.²¹

Contesting the U.S.-backed proposal for a federation, the Czechoslovak delegate warned:

The federal form of government which would be imposed on Eritrea is not based on the free, spontaneous and democratic expression of the will of two sovereign states. It is merely a mask for the annexation of little Eritrea by a larger and more populous state.²²

But the fix was in. Given the strong views of the U.S. in support of federation and the dominant role Washington played in the U.N., the outcome was a foregone conclusion: the two countries were joined in 1952 in the political equivalent of a shotgun wedding.

The federal agreement termed Eritrea "an autonomous unit federated with Ethiopia under the sovereignty of the Ethiopian crown."²³ Under the accord, Eritrea was granted authority over the police, control of all other domestic affairs not specifically granted to the "federal government," and the right to levy taxes and adopt its own budget. Ethiopia was to retain control over defense, foreign affairs, currency and finance, and international commerce and communications. Eritrea had its own constitution with a U.S.-style bill of rights, a separate parliament (the Eritrean Assembly), a flag (light blue with a laurel wreath, similar to the U.N. flag) and two official languages (Tigrinya and Arabic).²⁴ In the first elections, Tedla Bairu, the Secretary General of the Unionist Party and a former offi-

cial under the British occupation, was chosen to head Eritrea's new government.

There were many flaws in this agreement, but perhaps the most serious was the notion of a "distinct federal government," a euphemism for the emperor himself. Thus, a small, relatively advanced but internationally isolated European colony was grafted onto a far larger, feudal kingdom that had no constitution, no rights of free speech, press or assembly, and no tradition of religious independence. As this kingdom was ruled by an autocrat who claimed divine right and who could call on the most powerful country in the world, the United States, for political, economic and military support, Eritrea's chances for democratic self-rule were nil.

Over the next ten years, Haile Selassie dismantled the federation. He decreed a preventive detention law, and his minions ordered the arrest of newspaper editors, shut down independent publications, drove prominent nationalists like Woldeab Woldemariam into exile, banned trade unions and political parties, forbade the use of native languages in all official transactions and in the schools, and seized Eritrea's share of the lucrative customs duties. Selassie forced whole industries to relocate from Asmara to Addis Ababa, and ordered the Eritrean flag replaced with that of Ethiopia. In a last humiliating act, the emperor's representatives in Asmara forced the parliament to vote itself out of existence. The measure only passed after armed police surrounded the assembly as Ethiopian jet fighters buzzed the city.²⁵

Richard Johnson, the U.S. Consul in Asmara at the time, described the final scene in a confidential memo to the State Department:

The "unification" was prepared and perpetrated from above in maximum secrecy without the slightest public debate or discussion. The "vote by acclamation" was a shoddy comedy, barely disguising the absence of support even on the part of the Government-picked Eritrean Assembly.²⁶

Throughout the 1950s, before there was any armed opposition to the Ethiopians, the Eritreans protested vigorously but to no avail. Calls to the U.N. for remedial action were met with the bizarre response that protests should pass first through the federal govern-

ment—which was to say, the emperor himself.²⁷

In August 1955, Tedla Bairu was forced to resign his position as Chief Executive. (In 1967 Tedla joined the ELF.) He was replaced by the emperor's vice-representative in Eritrea, Asfaha Woldemichael, who called new parliamentary elections, prohibiting individuals and parties that opposed union with Ethiopia from participating.²⁸

With official channels of protest shut off, the Eritreans took to the streets. In 1957 students mounted mass demonstrations against this creeping annexation, and on March 10, 1958, the underground trade unions launched a general strike in Asmara and Massawa. The response of the Addis Ababa government was swift and brutal—troops opened fire on the protestors, killing or wounding more than five hundred.²⁹ Like the Sharpeville massacre in South Africa two years later, this incident sent a powerful message to the Eritrean nationalists: peaceful, public protest was no longer a viable option.

Following the 1958 crackdown, a group of Cairo-based exiles formed the Eritrean Liberation Movement (ELM). Known in Eritrea as the *Mahber Shewate* (the group of seven) for its seven-person clandestine cells, the ELM attracted widespread support and carried out highly visible acts of agitation and propaganda, but it had no armed wing.

In July 1960, a faction of the ELM met in Cairo with other nationalists, including Idris Mohammed Adem, the former president of the Eritrean Assembly, to establish the core of an armed movement, which came to be known as the Eritrean Liberation Front. On September 1, 1961, Idris Hamid Awate and ten other guerrillas armed with seven antiquated Italian rifles fired the first shots of the armed struggle on a remote police post in western Eritrea.³⁰ The aim of the ELF was straightforward and simple—full national independence.

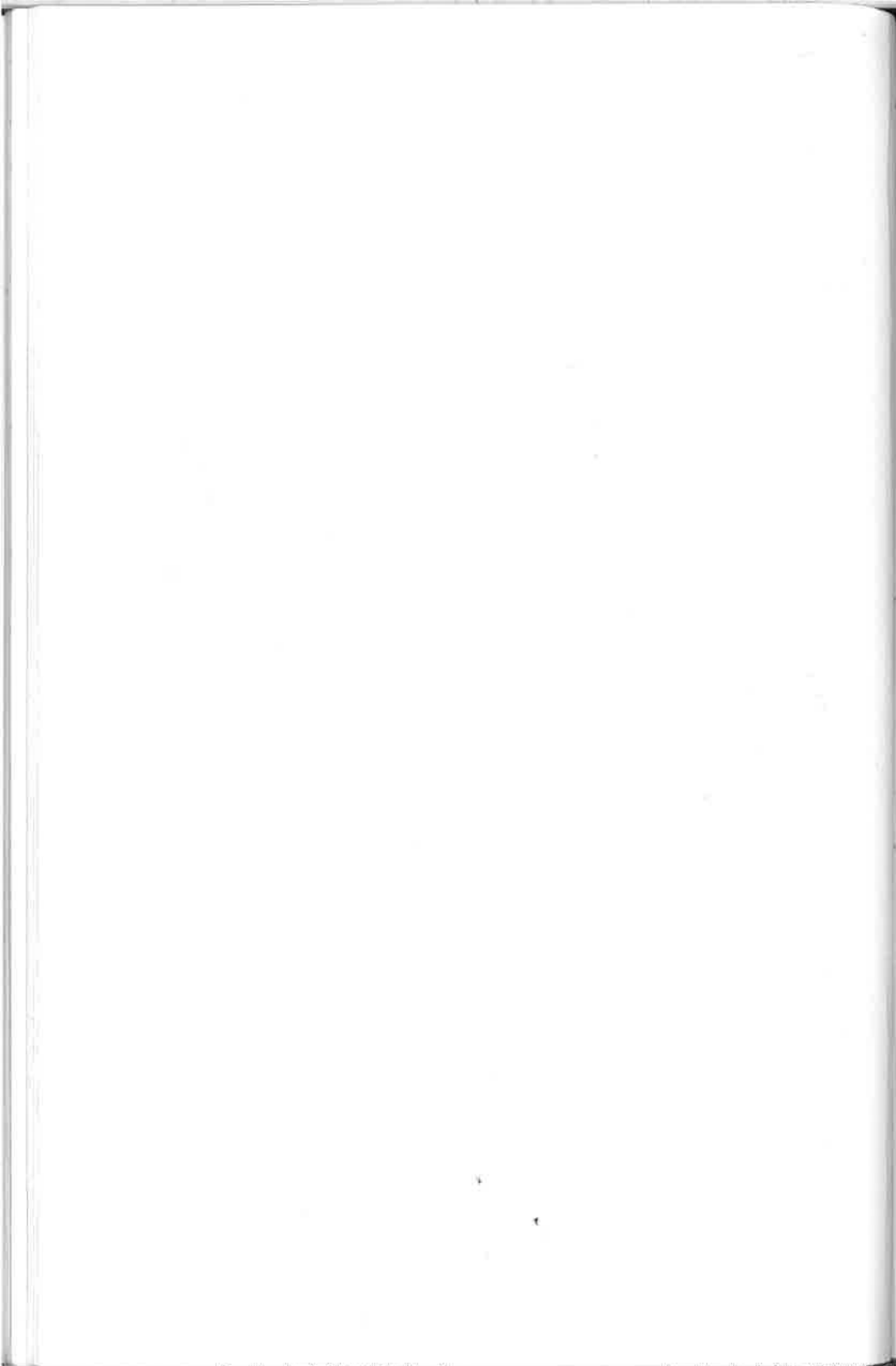
Many older Eritrean men and women I met in the 1970s spun long personal stories of how they came to support the independence movement after initially accepting the federation with Ethiopia. In most instances, the reason had to do with the suppression of their culture.

Zagunfo's case was typical: "One day, I went to Asmara because I wanted to submit a proposal to the government," said the aging

guerrilla veteran during a conversation in 1977 in the newly liberated town of Decamare. "Before, we used to write the proposals in Tigrinya and pay one-and-a-half birr, but this time the judge asked me to write in Amharic and pay two-and-a-half. I said, 'Why do I have to write in Amharic? Amharic is not my mother tongue, and I don't know how to write it. Secondly, I don't have two-and-a-half birr.' Because I spoke frankly, he asked me, 'Am I the one to give the orders or are you?' 'I know the orders come from you, but for this thing I cannot agree,' I said. 'If that is the case, you are going to pay thirty birr or spend thirty days in jail,' he answered. Then the policeman began going through my pockets for I said I would go to jail. All of a sudden he found my money. 'If you have money, why don't you pay?' asked the judge. 'I have money but I am not going to pay for this—I will die first for my language!' I told him. I stayed one day and one night in the jail before my relative came to get me out. The next day I went to join the ELF."

By the mid-1970s, a revolt within the movement had deposed the militant but politically conservative leadership and split the nationalist movement into rival liberation fronts, the ELF and the EPLF. Each used Marxist terms to describe itself, and each insisted it was waging not only a war for national independence but also a revolution for the democratization of civil society.

When the Ethiopian military seized power in Addis Ababa in 1974, they, too, began to describe themselves as "socialists." This gave all three parties to the conflict a remarkable, if superficial, similarity. Each supported the establishment of a "people's democratic state." Each supported nationalizations of large farms and plantations, big industries, mines, banks and insurance companies, and most other large-scale economic institutions. Each called for public campaigns for literacy and for equality for women and all nationalities, and each claimed to support the development of mass organizations of the basic sectors of the population (peasants, workers, women and youth). Reading their programs at that time, it was difficult to tell them apart. Only with a firsthand view of their implementation, did their politics come clear.



Chapter 4

HEARTS AND MINDS

It was a small thing, but the incident has stuck in my mind, perhaps because of the contrast with an episode that took place a week later when I was with the ELF.

One morning, an hour or so after dawn, we were racing through the Eritrean highlands in our dilapidated Land Rover with an eye on the sky for hostile Ethiopian aircraft. We were on our way from Zagher to an EPLF agricultural experiment station when a peasant farmer stepped into the dirt road to block our path. After the obligatory greetings, repeated seven or eight times—How are you? How is everything? How is your family? How is your health? Is everything okay? How are you?—he asked us if we would stop at his house to drink coffee with his family. My guide graciously declined, explaining that we had places to go and too little time. Also, it was daylight, and we should not be driving on the open road. Perhaps we could stop on the way back. The peasant finally accepted our regrets and waved goodbye as we drove on.

We spent several hours at the experiment station, watching a

group of "barefoot veterinarians" practice trypanosomiasis inoculations on a piece of rubber inner tube stretched between two trees. Then we drank several rounds of freshly brewed coffee in the elaborate, hour-long ritual that Eritreans reserve for special guests.

Early in the afternoon we returned past the house of the peasant who had halted us that morning, only to find the road blocked by several large boulders. Within seconds, he was dashing down the hillside. His wife followed with a tray of steaming hot coffee in a half-dozen small cups. We must drink, he insisted.

The EPLF was enjoined from taking anything from people without paying for it. They were a highly disciplined force, and they adhered strictly to this dictum. But custom was custom, and the fighters were equally bound to accept hospitality. So we sat in the car and drank the coffee, while our host chatted happily with my guide and the three EPLF photographers.

A week later, on my first day of traveling with ELF fighters, I stopped to rest in a small farming village. Striding through the door of a stone house with an iron roof (a sign of relative affluence), my guide announced our arrival to the woman who lived there—I was told she was an ELF supporter, but we were never introduced—and he asked me if I would like coffee. When I said yes, he commanded her to prepare it. She balked. They argued. Perhaps they haggled. At length, she agreed to fix it, and he sheepishly handed her money. She did not join us when we drank the single round that was served in silence a half hour later.

Over the course of a week with the EPLF in the highlands around Asmara, I visited plantations run by the front, new cooperative stores, more small workshops, field clinics, schools and elaborate underground supply depots, but the most impressive achievements were the least visible. In my view, they were the rising social and political consciousness and the new forms of organization among the peasants.

The barefoot doctors and the mobile agricultural extension workers were an important part of this organizing process; they won the confidence of people through their work, and they opened a dialogue with individual peasants on political issues. Military units in the area also stopped to help peasants in their fields and to talk pol-

itics informally with them. This provided a wedge for attracting the most enthusiastic people into small, secret study circles—cells—for weekly sessions with trained EPLF political cadres. The shops and stores added to the front's presence, not only by giving basic services but by engaging people in the running of these institutions and by serving as examples of cooperative politics.

Despite the impact of Italian and British colonial rule on the urban population, people in Eritrea's rural areas remained steeped in feudal traditions. Pockets of serfdom lingered in some areas where peasants and seminomadic pastoralists (seasonal farmers) were still forced to give a share of their crops and specific labor services to powerful local landlords. Land not seized by the Italians, British or Ethiopians was still held by the community, but the traditional practice of periodically redividing it had atrophied, and substantial inequalities had developed among the peasants. Basic social services did not exist in most rural areas: few Eritreans had ever seen a trained doctor or nurse, and the overwhelming majority were illiterate.

For women there were added burdens: female "circumcision," arranged marriages, and expensive bride prices and dowries were still common practice, and woman-initiated divorce was extremely rare. When divorce did take place (almost always at the behest of the husband), the wife was left without home or property and sent back to her parents. Yet, as bad as conditions were for nearly everyone, at the root of the belief system of most Eritreans was the conviction that the world was as it was because God made it that way, and there was nothing one could do—or should try to do—to change it.

There was much to challenge the EPLF in these highland villages, from the extreme poverty and the primitive patterns of land use, to the oppressive domination of women by men in every sphere of public and private life. There was also a deeply entrenched system of political and economic power rooted in kinship and ethnicity that controlled virtually every aspect of relations within most communities. But it was this overriding sense of the immutability of social reality that was the front's first and most difficult obstacle, for it tended to block people from becoming involved in the process of trying to reshape their destinies.

The EPLF didn't start with destiny: it began with the imme-

ciate problems of daily life, in an effort to build the base of experience that would support grander visions and organizing efforts later. The first actions of the front were aimed at curbing the frequent instances of banditry and the occasional murders that plagued poor peasants when they traveled to the market towns. Some offenders were arrested; others were shot. In a short time, the EPLF established law and order where low-level anarchy had prevailed.

Next, organizers used social services as points of entry into village life—teaching preventive health care, sanitation, nutrition, crop rotation, simple vegetable gardening, and initiating development projects that could be implemented without upsetting deeply embedded local traditions or demanding complex skills. These programs encouraged people to think about the possibility of change and to associate the potential for it with the liberation front.

The crucial takeoff step in the EPLF's development strategy was the effort to inculcate the notion that lasting change could only be brought about and sustained by the villagers themselves, not by the front acting on their behalf. The entire structure of political education and organizing was built around achieving this aim. In the EPLF's thinking, the process of awakening the masses of poor and oppressed Eritreans entailed an inherently contradictory stewardship role for the liberation front. In effect, they proposed to school the civilian population in the practice of democracy before turning over power to them.

The early instruments for this politicization were the small underground cells formed in the front-line villages and the government-held towns and cities. (In the areas behind the lines these groups of EPLF supporters were not secret.) The study circles were intended to form the base of new popular organizations of workers, peasants, women and youth (single boys and girls from sixteen to twenty-five). Each cell was made up of members of one of these social sectors. Each sector was also subdivided and organized according to class origin, modeled on a practice used by the Chinese Communists in the 1930s, that broke the peasantry down into subsets of "poor," "middle" and "rich." At this time, the cells functioned as the leading force within the newly formed village committees that were administering the communities under loose EPLF supervision.

"When we were elected, the main target of our work was to bring down the ones who were floating on the top and to raise up the ones who were oppressed at the bottom, to create fraternity and equality in the village," said one elderly committee member. All fifteen members of Zagher's village committee sat in a line on small flat stones under the thatched roof of the village meeting hall as a light rain spattered overhead.

It was Saturday, and they were gathered to hear disputes and complaints. Several held hand-carved walking sticks, and one waved an aristocratic horsehair fly swatter back and forth across his ankles. They wore faded white cotton *gabis* (blankets), but several had hand-sewn patches on their shirts and shorts. All were in their late fifties or older, and all were men. That much appeared unchanged. But there were both rich and poor, and none of the fifteen was from the village's former leading family. Each also seemed sensitive to the fact that he served at the discretion of the community; there would be new elections in several months. In addition to this, most of the village's adult women were present and encouraged to participate, an unprecedented innovation.

The first case involved a dispute between two half-brothers over a piece of land. One claimed the parcel as the elder son of the first wife, while the other argued for an equal division, citing a will that had apparently been lost. As the two fell to arguing, an elderly peasant in one of the back rows stood to say that he had witnessed the disputed will. At this, the assembled judges conferred with the two men and, without taking a formal vote, persuaded them to divide the land.

Other cases involved a woman's charge that she had been insulted by another villager, a boundary quarrel and a claim for compensation for bodily injury. One land dispute involved an absent EPLF fighter—the committee ordered the front to produce the accused, and the case was put over until he appeared. Then there was a lengthy public discussion of how to stop roving cattle from walking on young crops. The experience was very like sitting through a New England town meeting.

After the meeting, I spoke with the militias for Zagher and a neighboring village. They, too, were part of the new order, selected, organized and armed by the EPLF from among the more active

cell members. The militias would eventually become a military reserve, but in their initial stage, they functioned simply as a local police force. Like the village committee, they were all male.

"We are not in actual combat, but we bring food and help the wounded when there's fighting," said one peasant, standing stiffly at attention as he addressed me. "Our main jobs are security in the village and support in battle. When airplanes bombard the village, we care for the children and help people to shelter themselves. When a newcomer enters our village, we follow him. So far we have caught one spy who came here to poison a well of the family of a fighter."

"We aren't solving their problems, we just guide them," said Bruno, the EPLF's regional political leader, as we sat later with two women from the Armed Propaganda Squad in Fana's kitchen. Clearly, the EPLF organizers had definite ideas about the changes they wanted to see carried out. Land reform was only the first step, according to Bruno. The front's longer-term goal was to lay the groundwork for the establishment of cooperatives after the war.

EPLF organizers were often approached to solve problems between men and women, as the front was seen to practice gender equality within its ranks. A pair of women organizers at Fana's that evening had joined the EPLF in 1973. Up to that time, they said, the ELF had not accepted women, and there was growing support for the new, more radical EPLF among male and female students at Haile Selassie University in Addis Ababa. Bruno was then a clandestine EPLF member there. Ababa Haile worked for Ethiopian Airlines as a flight attendant when she was recruited to an EPLF cell. After an abortive attempt to hijack a plane, she fled to Eritrea with four friends to become the EPLF's first women fighters.

By 1976, the front's support for a woman's right to divorce and for an end to arranged marriages, among other issues, had encouraged many women to approach fighters for help with their personal problems. "Women who aren't in the front are saying to their husbands, 'If you won't let me do this or that, I can go to the front and fight there,'" said Ababa, grinning as she spoke. "The older women can now say, 'We'll take our grievance to the front, and they'll help settle it.' They've started to look up instead of down.

"One day we were passing through a village where a woman

had been severely beaten by her drunken husband," Ababa continued. "A crowd was around, and when the fighters asked what had happened, no one spoke for fear of what would happen to the husband. Finally one woman who was an EPLF cell member said, 'Her husband beat her.' Pulling at his sleeve, she demanded, 'Why don't you tell them? You're the husband!' We took him away and gave him work as a punishment—three days of digging out a bomb shelter for the village. The men in the village were shocked! They asked why he should be punished when it was a normal thing to beat your wife. But the women were really happy."

The EPLF organizers tried to use incidents like this as vehicles for educating the local village committees, rather than settling the issues themselves. "Six months ago, a young and beautiful woman came to us and said she wanted a divorce," Ababa related. "We asked her to bring her husband, and without explaining she went to get him. He was a very old man, maybe ninety. She told us straight out, 'I was forced to marry him by my parents. What do you want me to do with this old ox? Except for cooking and serving his food, I have no pleasure with him. I'm a slave. As you can see, I'm young, and I want another man.'

"We called the village elders together, and we asked the couple to explain the problem. He said that he wanted to keep her and would buy her anything she requested. She said she wanted nothing from him but a divorce. When we asked the elders for their opinion, they advised her to wait until he died. We said, 'No! You have to resolve it here and now.' At last they allowed the divorce and divided the property between them. The man went to live with his brother, and she moved out of the village because by tradition she could not remain after the divorce."

But it was not always the women who came to them for help, said Ababa, who laughed as she recalled a distraught peasant who came to them with a problem that he said was very big but that he would not describe. "We gathered the village elders and asked him to tell us about it. This was a very small village of only twenty families, and all the men and women came to listen. At last he said that he had been married for three years, and his wife still refused to get close to him. The women became angry, and they criticized her, but all she would say was that she wanted a divorce.

"Finally, we convinced her to explain the problem. She said that once when the village girls were gathering water from the stream, he came with a group of boys to tease her and said, 'I will never marry this girl even if she remains the only girl in the world.' Later, she was compelled to marry him by her parents, but she still remembered what he said, and she was still angry.

"After much counseling and talk about the incident, she agreed to stay with him, but he was not sure of the outcome and he asked all of us—there were sixteen in our team then—to stay nearby. He said he would provide food and shelter until the business was done. We stayed overnight and camped around his house. Early the next morning, he brought us a big breakfast and said we could go."

My EPLF guide in the highlands was a twenty-five-year-old, baby-faced political commissar who seemed even younger than he looked. He stood about five feet, seven inches tall and was slightly built with a thatch of black, wavy hair that spilled over the collar of his fatigues. He smiled often, revealing a gap in the front of his mouth where his front teeth had been shot out in a freak accident during his military training. Though he frequently joked with me, he was intensely serious, and he commanded a high level of respect, bordering on reverence, from my traveling companions.

His name was Sebhat Ephrem, but he was often called "Wed'ephrem" (son of Ephrem) by his comrades. The son of a prominent hospital administrator, he had attended the Evangelical Lutheran School in Asmara, an elite private school with science teachers from the U.S. base at Kagnew Station. He was a pharmacy student at Haile Selassie University in Addis Ababa in 1972 when he went underground and joined the EPLF.

I was struck by his low-key, almost shy manner as he explained the origin and substance of the EPLF's programs and policies. Like most EPLF political leaders, Sebhat prefaced nearly all his remarks with lengthy historical context. The front's public celebrations and educational events almost always began with a recitation of the past. Even their press releases started with lengthy historical explanations, a device guaranteed to lose the attention of Western reporters, but that the EPLF seemed to feel was necessary.

In early 1977, Sebhat was elected to the thirteen-member

EPLF Political Bureau and chosen to head the front's new Department of Public Administration. In this capacity, he was responsible for the movement's efforts to organize the entire civilian population, within and without Eritrea. Ten years later, he was reelected to the Political Bureau and appointed to head the general staff of the liberation army. Sebhat was part of the inner circle that built the liberation front through its most difficult years, and he commanded the forces that won the final military victory.

When, toward the end of my first tour with the EPLF, I made a formal request for an interview with a member of the leadership, Sebhat disappeared for an hour or so and returned to say that he himself would do it. At the time, not having any idea of his status and thinking him exceptionally young, I was a bit surprised. I was also disappointed, for when I posed questions for publication, he, like many EPLF leaders and fighters at that time, spoke in sweeping generalities and political recipes.

After the interview, as the next day was July 4, 1976, the bicentennial of the U.S. Declaration of Independence, I teased Sebhat with the suggestion that we take a holiday to celebrate my country's revolutionary history. Much to my surprise, that was what we did.

The Fourth of July celebration began with steaming pots of vegetables and peppery rice, together with a basket of goodies smuggled out of Asmara the night before. Ermias Debessai, the swash-buckling leader of a commando unit that regularly carried out raids into the capital, had brought out cookies, hard candies, cigarettes and gum, together with a fifth of Vat 69 scotch and a bottle of Melotti cognac.

The lanky fighter sat astride a bright yellow motorcycle—a trail bike with large, knobby tires—which he said he had “nationalized” the night before in Asmara. Ermias was a joker, and a nearly perpetual grin dominated his large, boyish face. This was a man who in 1970 had trekked across the scorching, sub-sea level Danakil Desert with a breakaway unit of the ELF, surviving on a diet of monkeys, snakes and at times even their own urine, to rendezvous with two other dissident groups in the highlands that together formed the core of the new EPLF. Elected to the Central Committee

in early 1977, Ermias would be assigned a role in the front's first formal attempt at diplomacy in Europe. Today he was just a genial host throwing a party.

The problem came when I was offered liquor—to drink by myself. “Revolutionary discipline,” said Sebhat, explaining that the fighters were prohibited from drinking alcohol. The EPLF was quite an ascetic movement in those years. Private property was proscribed, and all money and personal items, including wristwatches, were pooled upon joining up. Stealing was almost nonexistent, and I frequently left my belongings unpacked and untended with no fear of losing anything. I noticed, too, that EPLF members almost never used profanity. Fighters were severely punished for taking any kind of drugs which, due in part to the presence of the U.S. bases in Asmara and Massawa, were readily available, and they were forbidden to have any sexual relations with each other or with civilians. (Violators of the sexual taboo were punished by hard labor in salt mines on the Red Sea coast.)

Fighters even tended to drop their last names in an effort to detach themselves from their pasts and to make the front their adopted family. All units regularly put in time doing hard manual labor to “proletarianize” their outlooks. It did not seem a grim or dour movement—there was singing and dancing wherever I went, and fighters were always joking with one another—but it was an intensely serious movement. I could respect this, though I found it occasionally unsettling in its rigidity. Still, there was no way I was going to drink all that liquor alone.

The negotiations over this issue were difficult and protracted, as I suspect any challenge to EPLF rules would have been. In the end, however, policy yielded to circumstance, and we compromised. Hot, sugary tea was poured all around, and I followed the server, pouring stiff shots of brandy into each person's cup. The ensuing discussion was lively and emotional. No doubt our voice levels increased as the “tea” continued to flow, for a steady troop of peasants ducked their heads into the door to see what was going on.

We spent much of the day debating the social and political character of the United States. At one point, Sebhat quoted the letters of Thomas Jefferson and remarked, that all revolutions should be measured against the issues posed by their particular economic,

political and cultural conditions. "The U.S. revolution was a giant step forward in its time, one that revolutionaries everywhere still take inspiration from," he said. However, he argued, the "revolutionary" aspect of the break with European rule was not completed until the 1860s when the slave system was abolished.

"We learn from your achievements, but we also learn from other revolutions that have taken place since yours," said another fighter, offering a toast with her teacup. "We want real freedom. We fight not just to raise our flag over Asmara, but to end the exploitation of man by man."



C h a p t e r 5

"M A R X" V S . "M A R X" (V S . "M A R X")

"How the hell are ya?" asked the swaggering ELF fighter, a former sailor in the Ethiopian Navy, when we met in a small village outside Asmara that marked the dividing line between the two liberation fronts. "The weather is shit now and the fuckin' war is everywhere, but welcome to the ELF"

My straight-laced EPLF companions fidgeted in embarrassment at Fessahai's cursing, but the exchange went off without a hitch. The EPLF had earlier that week contacted ELF units in the area to arrange the crossover.

It was an hour's walk to the next village. By midday, the sun beat down with a force that seemed to double the weight of my backpack as we strolled into the hamlet in search of the ELF battalion commander. No luck. And no luck either in the effort to secure lunch, as Fessahai had no cash, and I had nothing but U.S. dollars, which were useless in these villages.

After another hour's walk, we found the battalion comman-

der. He was able to organize a meal but not a tour. He sent us after a regional ELF political organizer. Fessahai spent the rest of the day trekking from one settlement to another in search of the elusive cadre.

Late in the afternoon, another ELF military officer issued Fessahai fifty birr (equivalent to US \$25) to cover our travel expenses. We pushed on again, reaching the market town of Makarka by nightfall, where we were lodged in the house of a well-to-do sesame merchant who said he had owned a dozen houses in Asmara before they were nationalized by the government the year before. For the first time in three weeks, I had a bed with a mattress and springs. We dined on *tsebhe dorho* (a spicy chicken-and-egg stew) and bottles of warm Melotti beer, paid for out of the fifty-birr allotment. By the end of the evening, half the money was gone, but I was well-fed and able to rest up from the twenty-mile trek.

For four more days, we walked and walked. In between, we held scattered conversations and improvised interviews with fighters and villagers, but Fessahai was not experienced in this sort of work—though he tried hard—so most of the translations were rough summaries. Nonetheless, we met the village committee in Makarka and visited several ELF projects, where I got some insight into the ELF's methods of operation.

Our host of the first night turned out to be one of the five men on the village committee, responsible for local security. His brother, the former village chief and a well-to-do cattle merchant, was the chair. The other members, also small-scale traders, held responsibility for feeding and housing visiting ELF fighters, collecting taxes and fines from the civilian population (for the ELF), and managing the scarce forest resources. They had been elected in a village meeting called by the ELF several years earlier. Together, the five served as judges to settle simple disputes—difficult or controversial cases were passed on to the ELF. Along with my ELF guide, the committee members derided the EPLF for its "undemocratic" practice of clandestine organizing, but they made impassioned pleas for unity between the two rivals so that the independence war could be won soon.

During our travels, we also stopped at a small watch and radio repair shop, a photography workshop, an ELF store and a *bet-shai simret* ("unity" tea shop) run by ELF supporters. The two workshops

were each operated by one man with a young assistant. (Others I saw later in the tour had larger staffs, with about three-quarters of them experienced workers.) The workshops and the store served both the front and the civilian population, selling their products at discounted prices. Like those in EPLF areas, the shops and cottage industries were relatively new. However, there was no training program built into them. Growth, I was told, would come later.

"Our primary aim now is to eliminate Ethiopia from Eritrea," said the watch and radio technician, a young fighter who had worked in a similar shop in Asmara before joining the ELF two years earlier.

The ELF fighters were an easygoing, happy-go-lucky bunch, far less stiff and somber than the earnest comrades of the EPLF, but also considerably less efficient. Things seemed to happen more by chance than design, discipline was loose, and the guerrillas within the ELF appeared to have more diversity of outlook than those in the EPLF. Certainly they were more casual and less confrontational toward me. This made it easy to relax among the fighters. It also made for a more haphazard exposure to the movement.

The question of unity was the dominant issue of the day, and there were sharp differences over how to come together. To start with, the EPLF insisted that there were significant political differences between the two organizations; the ELF disagreed. The EPLF called for a gradual process of coordination and dialogue at all levels, from the top commanders to the rank-and-file fighters; the ELF opposed the idea of a long, drawn-out exchange and called instead for an agreement at the top to combine the two forces quickly through a movement-wide congress in which each front would be represented according to the size of its membership.

These positions reflected a bit of organizational self-interest, as the EPLF, with its highly politicized membership, would likely have the advantage in an extended political encounter, while the ELF, with its larger numbers, might have the edge where sheer size determined power. Their contrasting approaches to this issue, however, reflected consistent differences in each organization's way of dealing with political matters.

When the ELF launched the armed struggle in 1961, there was little thought of constructing an alternative society. A handful of peasants from western Eritrea, led by Idris Hamid Awate, a former soldier in the Italian army, was organized, armed, and turned loose without a strategy except to stir up trouble and gain attention. The rebel leaders apparently believed that a symbolic armed uprising would provoke the U.N. to intervene and either give Eritrea its independence or guarantee its autonomy, as called for in the original federal agreement. However, with the world body preoccupied by the decolonization of the rest of the continent and with the U.S. standing foursquare behind Ethiopia, Haile Selassie's illegal annexation aroused no active diplomatic opposition.

In June 1962, Awate died of an ulcer, but news of his demise was kept quiet, and his replacements were publicly identified as his "deputies" in order to sustain the myth of his courageous leadership on the battlefield.¹ The guerrillas carried out several dramatic operations that year, including an unsuccessful attack on General Abgiye, the commander of Ethiopian forces in Eritrea,² and a grenade attack in July in Agordat that left twenty-two killed and 120 wounded. (Among the latter was Hamid Faraj, the last pro-Ethiopia president of the Eritrean Assembly whom the ELF finally executed in 1974.)³

Despite these successes, the ELF was little more than a thorn in the side of the imperial regime. This began to change after Osman Saleh Sabbe, a former teacher from the coastal plains near Massawa, joined the self-appointed ELF leadership in Cairo and started soliciting help from abroad.⁴ When a coup d'état in Syria in March 1963 brought the Arab nationalist Ba'ath Party to power, the fledgling ELF found a patron in Damascus, and modern arms and military training began to flow its way. By the end of the year, the ELF had 250 fighters under arms.⁵ The next year that number doubled.⁶

Early in 1965, an armed unit from the original Eritrean Liberation Movement attempted to set up parallel operations in rural Eritrea, but the group was crushed by the ELF, which was already insisting on a monopoly over the armed opposition. As the ELF grew, though, there were increasing problems of factionalism and internal rivalry. Late in 1965, ELF leaders met in Kassala to reorganize the front into four independent zones, using the model

of Algeria's anticolonial revolt. (In 1966, a fifth section was organized in the mainly Christian highlands.) The design of these regions gave primacy to ethnic and religious loyalties and in effect established a system of allied warlords, each autonomous, who lived off the people in their areas by collecting taxes, levying fines and looting livestock and property.⁷ The leaders in exile appointed themselves the "Supreme Council" and established a "Revolutionary Command" in Kassala, Sudan, to coordinate the allied armies. In practice, the outside leadership had little control over the internal groups.⁸

Throughout these early years, the ELF succeeded in disrupting civil order in much of rural Eritrea, but it failed to consolidate its limited military gains. The low-level conflict seesawed back and forth with no decisive advances or retreats on either side. When the government, with U.S. and Israeli help, launched a major counterinsurgency drive against the rebels in 1967, the ELF was thrown into chaos and was unable to defend itself or the people in the areas where it was active. The Ethiopians attacked the zones one at a time, making them easy targets, as the rebel zones were not coordinated with one another. For the first time, widespread aerial bombing was used. Hundreds of small villages were destroyed, and thousands of Eritrean refugees fled to neighboring Sudan.

Meanwhile, far from Eritrea, another development took place that would have an impact on the war. When war broke out in the Middle East in June 1967 and Israel smashed the combined forces of Egypt, Syria and Jordan, there was a sudden, though temporary, break in outside supply to the ELF from its Arab benefactors, leaving the battered guerrilla forces in an extremely precarious state.⁹

These setbacks nurtured a rising tide of discontent within the rank and file of the ELF over the leadership's lack of either a coherent military strategy or a forward-looking political program. Instead of dealing with these issues, ELF leaders looked abroad for help to bail them out. Ironically, this helped to sow the seeds for their eventual destruction, for the aid they found—largely from socialist or radical nationalist regimes—only encouraged the internal political revolt by the growing tendency that came to be known as the "democratic forces."

The year 1968 was a watershed for the ELF, just as it was for

political movements from Paris to Beijing, as the post-World War II generation of young radicals throughout the world took to the streets to demand sweeping—and often utopian—economic and political changes. With the streets in Eritrea off-limits to protest, student militants joined the liberation movement instead, bringing with them a political agenda drawn from books by Marx, Lenin, Mao, Trotsky, Guevara and other left “classics” then circulating on the campuses. As a liberation movement fighting against a U.S. client, the ELF also attracted the attention of the international Left and the growing number of third world nationalists who identified themselves as “anti-imperialists.”

Coups d'etat in several African and Middle Eastern countries in the late 1960s had brought left-leaning military leaders to power, and the ELF picked up increasing support. Arms and money trickled in from Sudan, Somalia, Algeria, Libya, Iraq, the Palestine Liberation Organization and others, in addition to that coming from Syria. One of the more important contacts was the newly independent People's Democratic Republic of Yemen (South Yemen), also a center of activity for the Arab National Movement (ANM), a mainly Palestinian organization whose members included left-wing militants from throughout the Arab world. (The ANM spawned the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine, the Popular Front for the Liberation of Oman and the Popular Front for the Liberation of Bahrain.)

Although material aid from the socialist countries was insignificant—the Soviet Union never gave any—the ideas and experience that came from countries with a Marxist outlook, however much it was contradicted in practice, had a profound impact on the Eritrean struggle, both militarily and politically.

In 1967 and 1968, small groups of ELF fighters were trained in China, and in 1968 a group went to Cuba. Among them was Ibrahim Afa, who would command the EPLF army through the late 1970s and early 1980s before he was killed in battle.¹⁰ The group trained in China included Romedan Mohammed Nur, the EPLF General Secretary from the early 1970s until the front's 1987 congress, and Isaias Afwerki, EPLF Assistant General Secretary under Romedan and the General Secretary after 1987. Many of those

trained abroad—Christians and Muslims alike—became active in the reformist trend that arose to challenge the conservative, tribalist leadership of the liberation front.

For Isaias the disenchantment with the ELF came almost as soon as he and other student volunteers—mainly Christians from the central highlands—reached the front's headquarters in Kassala, Sudan, in 1966. For most of his high school years at the elite Prince Makonnen Secondary School in Asmara, Isaias had been active in nationalist politics. "In those days, it was something like an obligation for every student to join the movement," he told me years later. "Most of the active students were organized in clandestine groups. Emotionally and sentimentally, everyone was with the ELF. You never knew who was from what tribe or from what religion because there was not even a hint of that kind of thinking."

Isaias graduated in 1965 and went on to Haile Selassie University in Addis Ababa to study engineering. Before the next school year was out, he left for Sudan, carrying with him a somewhat romantic vision of a people's army. What he found came as a rude shock.

"Before I went to Sudan, the ELF was something like a magic organization to me—maybe some kind of fairy tale—but the first day I arrived I became frustrated. People began telling me about the ugly nature of the ELF, and Kassala became a nightmare for me. For some reason we were ostracized, even accused of being agents for the Ethiopians. Very narrow considerations of clan, tribe and religion were the basis for surviving or not surviving. We were living in an atmosphere of terror, where we had to go in groups, especially at dusk, to look after each other. It was definitely an awkward situation after all those years of fighting for this organization."

In late 1966, Isaias, Romedan and Haile Woldetensai—the core of the future political leadership of the EPLF—joined several other dissidents to establish a small study circle in Kassala. The key issue for the group, composed from the outset of both Muslims and Christians, was how to overcome the ethnic and religious sectarianism within the ELF.¹¹ "The inside of the ELF was always boiling, but you would never talk about Eritrea, always about tribes or clans or religious affiliations," said Isaias. "There were all sorts of leftist tendencies at that time, but the battle in the ELF was not one of

ideas or ideals—it was a question of whether there was nationalism or not. Revolutionary ideals had to be injected into the ELF to make it a genuine nationalist movement.” Despite their criticisms of the organization, members of the clandestine circle remained dedicated to the ELF as the only available vehicle to support the nationalist cause. Isaias still carries a tattooed letter “E” on his right shoulder as a symbol of his youthful exuberance from this period.

Ironically, it was Azien Yasin, a leading figure in the left-wing of the ELF in the 1970s, who brought the writings of Mao Zedong to the group, though China was fashionable then as a model for peasant-based revolutionary struggle even among the conservative leadership, which organized two training missions in China for ELF fighters.¹² Isaias and Romedan were chosen to be part of the first group. They left in early 1967 and spent most of the next year in China. Haile was sent to Addis Ababa to do clandestine organizing.

Under pressure from these increasingly politicized internal forces, the ELF leadership agreed in 1968 to unite the different armies. A meeting was held at Anseba in September 1968, where representatives of three of the zones came together to create a “Provisional Revolutionary Command.” One of the members of this new field command was Isaias.¹³ A second meeting was convened by representatives of all five zones in August 1969 at Adobah, where an agreement was hammered out to form a unified command with a coordinated field strategy. A compromise was also worked out to hold a congress to draft a political program for the movement within the next year.

“I remember when we got back from China,” said Isaias later. “It was the peak of politics within the ELF. The talk of reform was everywhere. Everyone trained in Syria and elsewhere joined hands. There were all sorts of revolutionary ideas. We had high hopes in those days. The reform movement was so strong that I wouldn’t have imagined it could be frustrated in a few months, but it was infiltrated, and survival was not possible.”

In the ELF’s version of subsequent events, the Adobah congress was a success, and the issues dividing the movement were either resolved or about to be resolved in the near future. The democratic forces, which they later termed the “rectification” movement, had won.¹⁴ In the EPLF version, those opposing the new revolu-

tionary politics—traditional and emerging ELF leaders alike—regrouped and launched a purge against the dissidents that left as many as 500 fighters dead and many more imprisoned. With compromise blocked and political struggle impossible, the result was the sundering of the organization.¹⁵

Long after the truce between them, both fronts continued to dispute each other's account of what took place and why at that critical juncture. The exact truth may not be known until those who participated directly in these events write or tell their full stories.¹⁶

In 1969, despite the internal strife, the ELF shifted to a classical hit-and-run guerrilla strategy, which proved surprisingly effective against the Ethiopian army and police. The front blew up a number of key bridges, stopped and destroyed trains after evacuating the passengers, and carried out several highly publicized airline hijackings.

This had the unintended but predictable effect of generating a powerful response from the government. First, the U.S. and Israel sharply increased their aid. Then, in December 1970, Haile Selassie declared a State of Emergency, suspending what few legal rights the Eritreans still had.

With U.S. and Israeli support and strategic direction, Ethiopia then launched a massive counterinsurgency campaign with what was at the time the strongest army in black Africa. Ethiopian infantry forces were supported by an armored division and new aircraft in a brutal campaign that raged across the coastal areas, the northern mountains and the western plains where the guerrillas were operating. Hundreds of villages were burned as peasants and nomads were rounded up in "strategic hamlets."¹⁷ Thousands more fled to Sudan where the number of refugees quickly surpassed 50,000.

This second major escalation of the war was accompanied by several Ethiopian diplomatic coups. First, the emperor established diplomatic relations with China, ending what little aid to the ELF had come from Beijing (and sending the Eritrean revolutionaries a powerful early message about the primacy of national interests over "internationalist" sentiments). Then he negotiated a pact with Sudan to close the border to guerrilla traffic. Though this agreement was honored more in the breach than in practice, it had a pro-

nounced effect on the ELF's ability to move in arms and other supplies.¹⁸ Most importantly, these Ethiopian successes coincided with the internal splintering of the ELF.

After Adobah, the old ELF leadership was deposed, but a bitter power struggle followed in which many dissidents were "arrested," killed or driven out, either to regroup and return as the EPLF or simply to disappear into the growing Eritrean diaspora spreading across the Middle East and Europe. No one disputes that this happened—only how many were affected.

In October 1971, the reconstructed ELF held its first organizational congress with delegates from its remaining military units and its outside supporters, at which a new leadership was selected and a militant political program was adopted. The ELF now called for the unity of all Eritrean nationalities; the engagement of the army in economic production and agricultural assistance to the peasantry; the establishment of mass organizations of workers, peasants, women and students; a campaign against illiteracy; and an anti-imperialist foreign policy. The program differed from that of the EPLF in reserving the main tasks of social reform for the post-independence period under the "revolutionary government," which would destroy colonial institutions and nationalize all land, industry, commercial and banking enterprises.

The ELF also pledged that the new state would "ensure the fullest liberty of speech, thought, press, free association, religious worship and conscience." However, it contained a chilling qualification (retained in the revised 1975 program): "Only those ideas, institutions, which have been carefully experimented and nurtured by the Eritrean Revolution shall be legitimate.... Only the revolutionary government and those who participated in the victory of the revolution shall be the exponents of the new economy and culture."

When the schism took place in late 1969, Osman Saleh Sabbe, whose anticommunist, Islamic orientation had enabled him to build strong ties with conservative Arab states, was the ELF Secretary General. In November, he broke away on his own.

Three ELF factions in the field also split off with a few hundred fighters.¹⁹ One group of less than a dozen under Isaias's command went to the eastern escarpment. Another took refuge in the

mountains of Sahel. The third fled to Aden and returned to Eritrea by boat, landing in the extreme south near the port of Assab. After a harrowing forced march north with neither water nor food, while being chased much of the time by Ethiopian soldiers and police, the survivors of this grueling journey met up with the other two groups and established a loose united front, known first as the PLF and, after they formally merged in 1973, as the EPLF.²⁰

In February 1972, two events took place that would define the political poles of the nationalist movement over much of the following decade. The PLF struck up a tactical alliance with Sabbe, in part to secure outside support. Sabbe changed the name of his small group to the "Foreign Mission" and remained the EPLF's overseas representative until March 1976, just before I entered Eritrea for the first time.

The second milestone occurred when the ELF declared war on the PLF, using much the same terms that the ELF used to describe the earlier annihilation of the rival ELM in 1965.²¹ Although the number of casualties in the ensuing three-year civil war was not very high, both fronts lost a great deal of equipment, and the independence movement lost immeasurable popular support. The conflict lasted until November 1974, when tens of thousands of Eritrean civilians converged on the twin villages of Wauki-Zagher, where the two fronts were holding indirect peace talks through a civilian mediation committee. The irate and impatient population prevailed upon them to call a formal truce.²²

Though the EPLF describes this phase of its history as a battle for survival, the period also marked a complex process of political contention among the various factions that made up the core of the new front. The embryo of the EPLF's vision was expressed in "Our Struggle and Its Goals," drafted and laboriously typed in early 1971 by Isaias—it was his first experience with a typewriter—before being reproduced on a primitive duplicating machine smuggled out of Asmara for the purpose.²³ This manifesto placed strong emphasis on overcoming ethnic and religious differences and on launching revolutionary struggle *during* the independence war.²⁴

In 1972 the EPLF established its first fixed-location rear base at Belekat in the Sahel Mountains, as part of its strategy of "protracted people's war," which called for building a strong army in the

countryside, encircling the towns, and eventually taking them, one by one. In Belekat, the new front carried out its initial political education, its literacy campaign and its military training, and it waged an intense political struggle over the issues that still divided the coalition.²⁵ When the EPLF finally emerged in early 1974 to begin its expansion into the plateau, it was as unified as most political parties.

The Ethiopians dominated the military scene through the early 1970s, though their penetration into rural Eritrea alienated the local population and laid the groundwork for a resurgence of guerrilla activity. Both fronts carried out urban sabotage, bank robberies and small hit-and-run raids, but the government held the initiative until early 1974.²⁶

These years also saw the onset of a severe drought and famine that claimed nearly a quarter-million lives in neighboring Tigray and Wollo provinces. The hunger crisis in Ethiopia—covered up by the emperor who shunned the embarrassing publicity that might come with international food aid—played a major role in weakening his grip on power. The disorder that accompanied military mutinies in Eritrea, starting in February 1974, gave the liberation movements a decided boost as confrontations between them and the government escalated.

Both fronts grew rapidly after the overthrow of Haile Selassie. Thousands of young women and men fled the cities and towns to avoid conscription into a hastily organized, government-sponsored rural development campaign that many young people saw as a vehicle for banishing them from the urban political scene.

During my travels with both fronts, I frequently asked fighters when they joined the liberation movement and why they chose one front over the other. Most answered that they came to the field after the Derg seized power in late 1974, and most said they joined one or the other front simply because they knew someone else in it or had crossed into one front's area when they fled their homes. Few knew the political differences between the fronts when they made their initial decision, but by this time almost all had formed extremely strong loyalties to their chosen organization. Precisely how real and how deep the differences were between them was at first hard to deter-

mine, but within a few days of travel with the ELF I began to get a number of indications.

We found Asghedom, the elusive ELF political cadre, at the end of my fourth day with the ELF. The first thing he did was to assign a lower level cadre from a nearby military unit to be my guide and to suggest that we go west to the lowlands, where the front's main facilities were. No regular transport existed, but he promised a walking route that would highlight the ELF's main political activities and parallel the exposure I'd had with the EPLF. I bid farewell to Fessahai, who returned to his post near Zagher.

My new guide, Mana Bahre, was a trained political organizer who served as an advisor without command responsibility in an ELF battalion. Born into a poor peasant family in southern Eritrea, he had been selected by the village chief for one of the scholarships that the emperor tossed out randomly to remote villages when the mood struck him, much as he threw coins into crowds on public occasions. As a result of his good fortune, Mana was educated at the elite Wingate Academy in Addis Ababa (together with Meles Zenawe, the Tigrayan rebel leader who took over the Ethiopian government in 1991 when the Mengistu regime finally collapsed). Mana said he looked forward to the end of the war when he could resume his education and become a teacher. His ceremonially scarred face reflected his peasant origins, but he was fluent in English, articulate on political issues and adept at translating. He took his new assignment quite seriously, and I was happy to be working with him.²⁷

Mana had little patience with the competition between the two liberation fronts. He said he was impressed with what he'd heard of the EPLF's social programs, but he resented the arrogance in the EPLF's claims that there were substantial political differences between the two organizations, as if this meant that the ELF was less developed. He argued that rivalry among the leaders of both fronts was at the root of the disunity.

"We are all nationalists, and we have one thing to do now—win our independence. The rest can be worked out later," he asserted, offering to show me the regional ELF library, which he promised would demonstrate that the ELF had no significant ideological dif-

ferences with the PLF.

A six-hour walk the next morning brought us to an isolated compound atop a rocky hill. Six rooms looked inward to a courtyard. Five contained dusty furniture. The sixth was locked. A man in peasant dress, apparently the caretaker, unlatched the door for us.

In one corner sat a wooden trunk—the library. In it were dog-eared tracts by Marx, Lenin, Engels, Stalin, even Mao, all in English. Tucked in among them was a hardcover textbook on “non-capitalist development,” published by Progress Press in Moscow. I had heard scattered references to non-capitalist development over the previous several days. Mana confirmed that it was the centerpiece of the front’s program of political education and the bedrock of its analysis of the developmental stage through which Eritrea was passing.

The Soviet-inspired concept of non-capitalist development proposed to explain how a third world society, just emerging from feudal backwardness and colonial distortions, could transform itself into a modern “socialist” state. As socialist countries were by definition workers’ states, and as there were few industrial workers in most third world societies, an intermediate stage was needed to accomplish the economic and social changes historically associated with capitalism, that is, the development of modern agriculture and industry and the socialization of the work force.

In the absence of a developed proletariat, a third force was needed to midwife the new society into existence. Any organized, progressive sector of the new middle class in these societies would do, including an enlightened faction of the army, as long as it carried out a specified set of reforms and so long as the country allied itself with the Soviet Union, whose experience would substitute for the missing working class until it was developed and ready to take power. The ELF called for these reforms and policies in its program.²⁸

The notion that the government was only a custodian for an as-yet-undeveloped working class was intended to excuse the generally undemocratic character of these states. The original example of non-capitalist development in Africa was Nasser’s Egypt. By the early 1970s, Egypt had been replaced by Siad Barre’s Somalia. Unfortunately for the ELF, by the end of the decade, Ethiopia would replace Somalia as the preferred model on the continent.

Mana was very earnest about this concept, insisting that it showed that the ELF, like the EPLF, was committed to building a socialist Eritrea and therefore had no structural differences with its rival, only disagreements over the style and pace of social change. He and other ELF members I spoke with, including higher ranking political "commissioners," termed the EPLF ultra-"left" for taking up class issues during the national struggle, at a time when the society, like the movement, needed unity more than anything else.

They levied a similar criticism at the EPLF for its aggressive efforts to change women's position in civil society. There were a significant number of women in the ELF serving in the army and in a variety of noncombatant roles—one woman sat on the front's forty-one-member Revolutionary Council—but Mana said that the ELF was not pushing radical reforms for women in the conservative rural villages for fear this would generate a backlash. He said he favored these changes when the time was right—after independence.

As we moved westward, I found increasing signs that the ELF was, for the time being at least, changing the form but not the substance of political and economic life in rural Eritrea. In village after village, I learned that the newly elected officials were the old leaders with new titles. By simply holding elections without an accompanying program of education and organization—and without building self-confidence and a desire for change among the people—the ELF was overseeing a process that left those who already held power and influence in the strongest positions to win.

In Adi Worehi Sub, a highland village almost completely destroyed by Ethiopian forces in April 1975, I stayed the night with the economic representative, a shopkeeper whose older brother had been the village chief before being elected committee chair. The main difference from the past, he said, was that a five-member committee adjudicated disputes instead of one man, so there was less favoritism in the judgments. In another small community of only 250 people—all farmers—in the Serai region, I was told that before the ELF came the people had been divided between two clans—now they were united. One former chief was now the committee chair, the other was the vice chair.

The most disturbing experience of the ELF tour came at a field clinic I visited near the edge of the plateau. I arrived at midday and

was sent to a small, windowless storeroom where I was asked to wait while they prepared for my visit. After several minutes, hearing movement, I looked out to see what was going on. Much to my surprise, more than a dozen ELF fighters were entering the clinic and being settled into hospital beds as if they were patients. By the time I was escorted around the makeshift infirmary, it was full to overflowing with "wounded" fighters who testified enthusiastically to their excellent treatment and expressed a strong desire to get back to their fighting units as quickly as possible. I left feeling confident that most would get their wish within minutes.

The next day, under cloudy skies on a muggy July morning, we rolled out of the clinic in a bright red captured Fiat truck. Twenty-eight people were crammed into the uncovered trailer—three (truly) wounded guerrillas, several healthy ELF fighters, a dozen or so refugees and half the official ELF band. Among the musicians were popular singers Imbaye Habtemikail and Bereket Mengisteab, whose melancholy love songs could still be heard over Radio Ethiopia. The two had joined the ELF in 1975 and would leave to pursue their careers in 1977, but for the time being they were traveling from village to village, performing nationalist anthems, with an occasional ballad thrown in for crowds of adoring fans.

On this day, they spent most of their time gasping for breath as we pushed, pulled, rocked and levered the truck through knee-deep mud. The rains started shortly after we set out, picking up intensity as the day wore on. Again and again we got stuck. An hour after sundown, ten feet from the top of a particularly slick hill, we finally quit. There was only enough room in the back of the truck for a third of the passengers to bed down, so a group of us set off in search of dry quarters in a nearby village. One fighter known for his long stride and remarkable endurance went ahead, without a flashlight. We found him at the bottom of a ravine, dazed but unhurt. Later, after hot tea and *shiro* in the village, I collapsed onto my sleeping mat, a hunting ground for hungry bedbugs.

Walking was easier, I thought to myself (somewhat prematurely), as we set out the next day on foot. A pair of camels and three donkeys were requisitioned from the village, supplies and personal belongings were tied on them, and off we went, all but the

wounded fighters and the driver.

For three days, we slogged through thick mud that clung in huge lumps to our sandals, making them look and feel like lead-soled combat boots. In the open and largely uninhabited plains, round seed pods covered with sharp spikes—nicknamed "sputniks" by the fighters—stuck to the bottoms of our rubber sandals, often poking through into our feet. When they became too painful, we would stop, scrape off the mud, and pull out the thorns.

We drank from puddles along the way. The water had the color and texture, though not the taste, of a chocolate milkshake. Fortunately, none of us got sick. Mana entertained me by pointing out edible grasses and other plants that he'd foraged on as a youngster, out for days at a time with his sheep.

When we finally reached the ELF's main agricultural project at Tekereret on the outskirts of their Barka base area, things began to run more smoothly. Within hours, we had a Land Rover assigned to us, and in two jam-packed days we made a lightning tour of ELF facilities, camps and offices.

The farm, a former Italian plantation nationalized by the government in 1975 and then captured by the ELF, covered 300 hectares (750 acres). It had been developed for cash crops of green peppers and bananas for export to Europe and the Middle East. There were also citrus orchards and vegetable gardens for local consumption and sale. ELF agriculturalists were experimenting with a wide range of other fruits, vegetables, pulses and grains, but perhaps most importantly, they were demonstrating the enormous potential of the area to become the breadbasket of Eritrea. The thick carpet of brown dust that covers the region is mostly dry topsoil washed down from the highlands during the annual floods. Under the arid surface, there is enough water to irrigate vast areas of the brush-covered plains.

Farther to the west, near the Sudan border, I visited the ELF's main garage, hidden in a cluster of rare broad-leafed trees. Bahata Tekie, a voluble thirty-six-year-old former service station owner from Asmara, headed a team of seventeen mechanics working on an assortment of vehicles that included a Toyota Land Cruiser having its motor rebuilt, a pair of Scania trucks being fitted with extra fuel tanks, and a Tigrotto bus having its springs and radiator

repaired. "We can repair anything that we have parts for," Bahata said, and I believed him.

The farms, the repair facilities, the workshops all seemed to run effectively. However, they were dependent entirely on skilled people who had joined with training and experience already behind them. A group of 500 Ethiopian prisoners of war camped near the garage appeared to be well treated, but there was no education program for them either (as there had been among the captured peasants with the EPLF). There was, for that matter, little emphasis on training anywhere in the ELF, except in the education section.

Hadgu Gebretensai, a thirty-three-year-old former teacher educated in the U.S., sat in his stick-and-grass office surrounded by stacks of papers, pamphlets and mimeographed school books. For months he and others had been designing and drafting their own simple texts in Tigrinya and Arabic, the official languages of Eritrea under the Federation and the two languages the ELF encouraged now among the country's nine ethnic groups. Some 160 teachers had been organized for the opening of twenty new elementary schools the next September, but most were occupied with a three-month literacy campaign among fighters. Apparently, literacy was not part of basic training for ELF fighters.

In another grass-roofed hut, I spoke with the head of the Department for the Support of Families. This office gave small monthly allowances to families of disabled or "martyred" fighters, and to families of active duty fighters if the family had been completely dependent on the ELF member. Over 4,000 refugee families were receiving support in Sudan and 3,000 were receiving stipends within Eritrea. There was no equivalent for this in the EPLF, which integrated disabled fighters into their departments and provided relief to needy families through village committees; but it was very like the system of family payments of the Palestine Liberation Organization and other well-funded nationalist movements that use such programs to build extensive patronage networks.

Before I left, I requested an interview with a member of the leadership, then engaged in a meeting to decide the ELF's position on the new "third force" of Osman Saleh Sabbe. I was invited to submit written questions to Ibrahim Totil, the vice chair of the front since 1975 and the head of its Political and Organizational Affairs Office.

The answers came back handwritten and covered seven pages. Perhaps the most interesting comments were on the differences between the two fronts:

We consider ourselves a political organization whereas the [E.]P.L.F. is in the majority a politicized military establishment. Moreover we consider ourselves more democratized. Organizationally the hierarchy of decision making in our case is far more developed than that of the [E.]P.L.F.²⁹

I didn't meet Totil face-to-face until 1990, after he joined the EPLF. When I reminded him of this characterization of his erstwhile rival, he shrugged and said, "All organizations have political objectives. Much of what was being said then was to secure propaganda advantages."



Chapter 6

LIBERATING THE TOWNS

"We arrived in Nacfa on March 22, the last day of the fighting. There were many battalions encircling the enemy. Those who had been there a long time directed the battle. In the morning, at about ten, we started fighting," recounted Ali Ibrahim, as he consulted a tattered personal diary for details.

Ali, a Muslim from the minority Saho nationality in southeastern Eritrea, had been working in Addis Ababa as a mechanic when he joined the tiny band of revolutionaries in 1971 that launched the new EPLF. In early 1977, he led a company into battle at Nacfa. By the autumn of that year, he was commanding an entire infantry brigade of over 1,500 men and women. When I met him in November, he was on the front lines east of Asmara where he and a comrade spent several days narrating the recent military history of the front.

The Nacfa battle was a key turning point for the EPLF. The capture of this strategic market center, the capital of Sahel province,

after a six-month siege was the first of a string of major EPLF and ELF military successes in 1977 that brought the nationalist movement to the brink of victory over Ethiopia, and thrust it into the role of a stable, if divided, *de facto* government in most of Eritrea.

The liberation of most of the country's occupied urban centers also triggered a second large-scale influx of new recruits to the two rebel armies. The more tightly organized and dynamic EPLF benefitted most from this growth spurt; a series of internal upheavals and mass defections within the ELF sapped its strength.

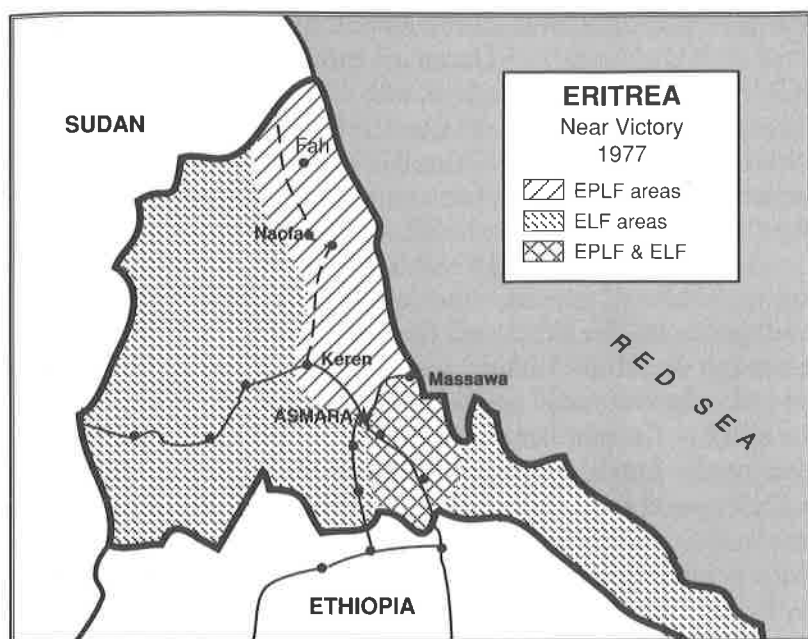
The fall of Nacfa also had a considerable psychological impact, buoying the Eritreans and demoralizing Ethiopian forces. Its recapture remained an obsession for the new Ethiopian regime throughout the following decade.

"There were land mines buried in the ground," Ali continued. "We walked on our toes and tried to step on big stones. Each fighter followed the steps of the one in front. During this time, the enemy was shooting at us. Our comrades behind us fired back so they could not hold their heads up to aim. In that way, we entered the town.

"The Ethiopians were in big holes, surrounded by sacks of sand. When we reached the place where the enemy could see us, we ran desperately, moving forward in two waves—one threw bombs, while the other charged ahead. At last they started to run from their holes. We killed many and captured many M-14s, 51-mm mortars, handbombs. It took us fifteen minutes. We began to fire at their other positions, and by radio we directed our other comrades to enter the town. In this way, the different enemy positions were taken, one by one. By six o'clock, the whole of Nacfa was under our control."

In April the EPLF overran the Ethiopian garrison at Afabet, a trading center on the plains east of Nacfa. In early July the front simultaneously captured Decamare, a light industrial center only twenty-five miles east of Asmara, and Keren, Eritrea's most important market center outside Asmara and the country's third largest city. Sixty miles northwest of Asmara, Keren marks the gateway to the Barka plains that border Sudan.

During this same period, the ELF took Tessenei in Barka. At the end of the summer, the ELF moved into Agordat, Adi Quala and



Debbie Hird & Chris Carter

Mendefera. As I entered Eritrea in early August, prior to these ELF victories, the EPLF was extending its sweep southward from Decamare, overwhelming the government garrisons at Segeneiti and Digsu. By September, only a handful of small garrisons and three cities remained in government hands. These included Asmara and the two ports, Massawa and Assab, as well as Barentu in Barka, Adi Qayeh and Senafe on the southeastern plateau near the border with Tigray, and a few posts along the road linking Massawa with Asmara. The end of the war appeared to be in sight.

The liberation of Keren was the most stunning single guerrilla victory from both a military and a political standpoint. A heavily fortified city surrounded by tall mountains, Keren was the site of the decisive British victory over Mussolini's army in 1941 that signaled the end of Italian colonial rule in Eritrea and the return of Haile Selassie to his Addis Ababa throne.

It took the British-led forces two weeks to dislodge the Italians. The EPLF took Keren on July 8, 1977, after a ferocious

four-day battle. This was all the more impressive because it coincided with the capture of Decamare on the other side of Asmara on July 6. Asmarom Gherezghier, who commanded the EPLF forces that took Keren, later told me that the front had planned to attack a third garrison that day at Gahtellai, on the coastal plain near the Asmara-Massawa highway, but when the guerrillas surrounded the town, they discovered that the Ethiopian soldiers had already fled.

The first steps toward Keren's liberation were taken by clandestine EPLF cell members inside the city, who gathered critical intelligence on the Ethiopian forces: their location, armaments, command structure, morale and specific unit composition (for example, the territorial police, special commando forces, the regular army, or the new Israeli-trained "Flame" brigade). In the week prior to the battle, the front prepositioned arms, ammunition, medicines and food, not only for the fighting forces but also for the civilians for whom they would become responsible in the event of victory. According to Asmarom, they prepared for a five-day battle.

On July 1 the guerrillas surprised the lookout post atop Mt. Lalmba, thus controlling the airport and shutting off the government's last channel of outside supply. On July 5, the fighters launched their main attack, storming government outposts on mountain ridges south and west of Keren and shelling the city with artillery captured at Nacfa. Over the next two days, they fought their way, block by block, into the city center under almost constant Ethiopian aerial and artillery bombardment, as government forces retreated to the Italian-built hilltop fortress that dominates Keren. At noon on July 8 they stopped fighting long enough to broadcast a final call for the Ethiopians to surrender. When government commanders declined, the EPLF trained all its artillery on the fort, pounding it for hours before driving in to take it at 5:30 P.M.

By this time, more than 2,000 Ethiopian troops lay dead. Another 1,784, many of them severely wounded, were taken prisoner. EPLF dead and wounded numbered 300, Asmarom told me in a rare disclosure of EPLF casualties. He added that twenty-three civilians had died and four or five had been wounded. Civilian casualties were low because the guerrillas spent much of the second and third days evacuating residents as they moved into the

heart of the city. By the time they stormed the fortress, less than five percent of the civilian population was left.

The captured weapons at the much-expanded arms repair shop in Fah told the story of the EPLF's spectacular victories, even as they foreshadowed the startling political shifts then on the horizon. There were scores of U.S.-made 60-mm and 81-mm mortars, M-60 light machine guns, Browning .50 caliber heavy machine guns, RPG-2s, 75-mm recoilless rifles, and a dizzying array of rifles and light assault weapons including M-1s, M-14s, M-16s, Thompson submachine guns, Belgian FNs and Israeli Uzis. There were also stacks of new Simenovs, Kalashnikovs and Grenov light machine guns made in the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe.

Israeli-made parachutes gathered at Nacfa were tacked onto the ceiling and walls of the underground bunker to keep the dust down. Nearby, at the watch and radio repair shop, technicians were pouring over new PRC-25 radio transmitters, trying to draw a workable circuit diagram.

By this time in 1977 the ruling Derg had enlarged the regular Ethiopian army to 70,000 men, nearly twice the size it had been under Selassie, and they had mobilized a new peasant militia of almost 100,000 men, Ethiopia's "Red Army." These numbers would double again within a year. The troops then showing up in Eritrea were well outfitted with arms and uniforms, and trained by either Israeli or Cuban specialists. Even so, POWs complained that their training was rushed and not effective. Conscripted militiamen from different corners of Ethiopia did not understand most of what was said to them and could not operate their new weapons. The truth of this showed in the soaring Ethiopian casualty rates.

My first exposure to the effects of war came on August 17, ten days after I entered Eritrea, as I picked my way through the carnage at Adi Hawsha, eight miles east of Asmara. A few days earlier a government counteroffensive had been crushed here. Scores of dead Ethiopian soldiers littered the battlefield, arrayed in grotesque tableaux of five, six or a dozen men, their bodies puffed up like circus balloons in the blistering heat. The stench of rotting flesh hung over the valley like smog, clinging to my sweat-soaked body and forcing itself into my unwilling nostrils. Though I was to see more

dead in the massive human wave assaults Ethiopia launched against the EPLF in the late 1970s—and much more gruesome killings while on assignment in Beirut in the 1980s—these first images of combat remain indelibly etched in my memory, a reminder of the ugliness and horror of war, even one that is just or necessary. I recall as if it were yesterday the sight of one soldier lying on his back with his brain splattered in the sand next to him from a gaping hole above his left temple. His lapel bore the insignia of a red hammer and sickle on a yellow background, and there was a red plastic star pinned to his cap. He was a member of the new Red Army.

A month after the EPLF liberated Keren, the city was returning to prewar normalcy. Traffic in and out of the market center was beginning to pick up. Bicycles were back on the streets after a two-year ban, and a nightly EPLF bus service linked the city with Decamare and with the border post at Karora. Families that had been dispersed to the countryside or to Sudanese refugee camps were reunited. Fruits and vegetables from rural farms were finding their way into the marketplace.

The day I arrived, the EPLF completed repair work on the generators damaged during the capture of the city and turned the electricity back on. To mark the occasion, the front lifted the 6:30 P.M. curfew in effect since 1967, and paraded captured U.S.-made tanks and armored cars through the streets to announce an evening rally and celebration at the football stadium. This was the first time in a decade that the city's 32,000 residents were allowed to walk the streets after dark; almost half the population turned out for the event.

Eritreans described their feelings during the battle as a jumbled mix of anxiety and elation. Abubaker Abdurahim, a prosperous forty-eight-year-old merchant and a longtime financial supporter of the EPLF, spoke with gratitude for the front's rescue of his wife and three children during the fighting. "What gave me great joy," he said, "was the discipline of the fighters. When we came back, we found all our homes as we had left them. We opened our locked doors with our own keys! In other wars, there was always looting. Here there was none."

"In the time of the Derg, no one lived happily," said Berhitai Begon, a fruit vendor in the central market. "After six at night, if

a man moved on the street, he was killed. We had no time to be with each other out of our houses. Soldiers came into our homes and took the money we had. If we complained, we were killed, so the best thing was to give them whatever they wanted. People stopped coming into the town and spending their money, so we had no work. I don't know what will happen next, but at least now we can work and we can sleep at night, so we are all very happy."

"I was just waiting for my death-time," said Gebremariam, a poor peasant widow living on the outskirts of town. "Now I no longer worry each day if my children will be killed or my house destroyed. I have never seen days like these!"

On a stroll through the hilltop fortress later that day, I found peasants grazing their goats and children playing war games in the abandoned Ethiopian trenches. On the floor of a concrete bunker were a burnt Bible and a scrap of paper, suggesting a peculiar last-minute English lesson for one of the defending Ethiopian soldiers. On the paper was scrawled: "God, good, help, must, should, go."

The main problem the EPLF fighters faced when they took Keren was that few people living there knew who the EPLF was or what it stood for. Western Eritrea had long been an operational area for the ELF, which had painted a disturbing portrait of its radical rivals. They described the EPLF as hardline communists and anti-Muslim Christian highlanders who would, if given the chance, expropriate the property and suppress the religion of the mainly Muslim merchants and traders who made up the core of Keren's population.

Many of the young people of the city were ELF supporters and had no firsthand knowledge of the EPLF's programs and policies. They and their parents were excited at their liberation from Ethiopian rule but skeptical of what lay in store for them under EPLF. As a result, the front's first priority was simply to win the residents' trust.

In 1977 the annual Ramadan fast fell in August. For one lunar cycle, Muslims did without food or water each day from sunrise to sunset. In the evenings, they traditionally feasted, going house to house to visit friends and family after dark. Lifting the curfew thus had a particular impact on Keren's large Muslim community. The

EPLF reinforced this gesture by trucking in bushels of wheat flour for special breads and sweets typically prepared during Ramadan. Ranking EPLF leaders even attended lay readings at many mosques on the Eid, the day that marks the end of the fast, to salute the traditions of the Muslims in the name of national unity. The front's official position was that freedom of religion was a democratic right, though one's religious beliefs and practices should be a private affair entirely divorced from politics.¹

The EPLF also assisted the merchants of the town by transporting goods at low cost on trucks and buses going back and forth to Sudan, in order to stimulate the local economy and to reassure the middle class that they were not to be the targets of redistribution programs. Price controls and profit ceilings for the larger merchants of ten percent of gross earnings were instituted in order to prevent gouging and to contain inflation, but small- and medium-sized enterprises were encouraged to do business as usual.

Only the largest industries, utilities, agricultural plantations and financial institutions—already nationalized by the Ethiopian regime—were run by the EPLF itself. Wages in most of these operations were raised slightly and taxes sharply cut, giving the workers significantly increased buying power. But the front's main efforts to improve living conditions were directed at upgrading or initiating a wide range of social services, from emergency relief for the destitute and homeless to adult literacy training and low-cost health care for the general population.

On my first evening in Keren over 15,000 civilians and hundreds of young guerrilla fighters jammed the football stadium for an EPLF cultural show that featured traditional songs and dances drawn from all nine Eritrean nationalities. These performances were interspersed between ringing speeches on the recent victories and more sober discussions of the front's prospects for the future and its specific plans for Keren.

At one point I addressed the crowd with messages of support I carried from a Boston-based solidarity committee and the New York-based *Guardian* newspaper. These brief readings took some time to communicate, as the emcee translated each of them into both Tigrinya and Tigre, the two most widely spoken languages in Eritrea. By the end, the audience was thundering its approval. The

messages were small things from small groups, but to the Eritreans, for so long isolated from the outside world, they clearly meant a lot.

As the music resumed, long lines of fighters and civilians, women and men, young and old, snaked out of the stands and began dancing in one unbroken spiral around the oval arena. They were ecstatic over the simple fact that they could be there, together, without fear. They were also expressing the widely shared conviction that, after sixteen long and bitter years, the war would soon be over and the country finally free.

All Keren's residents were registered with the EPLF's Department of Public Administration and issued photo identity cards. These cards were used to check movement in and out of the city, otherwise unrestricted. The registration process also served as a census, and it provided a starting point for the organization of the associations of women, youth, workers, peasants and members of the middle classes, collectively termed (and organized as) the "petit bourgeoisie."

The women, youth and peasant farmers were also subdivided according to class position into groups of up to fifty for political education sessions and for a variety of economic and social projects. Young people were mobilized to clear rubble from houses damaged in the fighting (and in later bombing raids) and to clean the city streets once a week. Later the women would set up drop-in centers and run craft workshops and job-training courses, while peasants planted trees and built grain mills.

Scattered throughout these new associations were long-time EPLF supporters who had been active members of the clandestine cells prior to the city's liberation. These were the people who had gathered intelligence and smuggled supplies out to the guerrillas in the hills.

"We dressed as shepherds or went out with camels as if we were merchants," one teenage partisan told me. "We took cigarettes, soap, paper and other goods to the fighters. We studied the location of the police and soldiers, and we took this information, too." The former cell members were now openly meeting with EPLF cadres on a daily basis, separately from the newly formed associations. They were taking an accelerated course of political study

aimed at preparing them to play the leading role in creating a new form of municipal administration in Keren.

Each subgroup of each mass association elected its own leader. These people served as representatives on neighborhood councils, eventually termed "people's assemblies." Like many early EPLF social experiments, the new political structures were a bit cumbersome and extremely complex. They took an inordinate amount of time to construct and maintain, but they served as a training ground for large numbers of people in the theory and practice of democracy. The sheer novelty of popular participation in public political life motivated many people to join in. Political activity became in many respects the national sport, with so many levels and points of entry that nearly everyone could play.

At a point yet to be decided by the EPLF, a city-wide assembly would be created from the various people's assemblies. The plan was for its executive committee to govern Keren, but it was obvious from conversations with EPLF leaders that this might not come soon. "Working class ideology will lead the new democratic revolution," Sebbat Ephrem, now the head of the Public Administration Department, told me as the associations were being set up. "The political education in all the associations will be left-oriented, and we will be strict in our line. Rich peasants will never be allowed to dominate the peasant associations, nor will we allow the youth associations to incline toward imperialism—neither culturally, politically nor economically. They will participate in production, and we'll not permit Western decadence such as hashish smoking."²

With the two nationalist movements now on the offensive, a steady stream of visitors began appearing in Sudan to visit Eritrea. They included journalists, trade unionists, members of solidarity groups and representatives of humanitarian agencies, all needing guides, translators, drivers and vehicles. To meet this demand, the EPLF set up a special section under its Information Department and organized tours to the liberated zone. At times I hooked into these package tours, but for most of the six months I spent in Eritrea that year I shuttled about the country on my own, riding atop supply trucks, paying a fare on the extensive public bus service, or simply walking.

The towns of Keren and Decamare and the village of Zagher were my main bases of operation, though I spent over a month at the end of my visit in and around Massawa. I also traveled extensively in Senheit, Hamasien and Akele Guzai provinces, and I made a brief side trip into Tigray with the TPLF, which fifteen years later led the opposition coalition that finally drove the Derg out of power in Addis Ababa.

I was given a photo ID card in Keren, and Sebhat gave me papers that introduced me to the local branches of the Department of Public Administration, with whom I usually stayed. This loose arrangement, one that was never repeated, gave me an extraordinary amount of freedom to explore the country and the liberation movement.

Decamare, with a population of 10,000 to 15,000, was roughly half the size of Keren and situated in far less precipitous terrain. It fell to the EPLF in a single, intense five-hour battle that ended not at a fortress or an army camp but at the entrance to the city's main bank.

A creation of Italian settlers and entrepreneurs, Decamare was the site of several light industries—the Red Sea General Mills (an exporter of biscuits and pasta), the Casagni winery, a shoe factory, a fava bean canning plant, and a large power and light authority. The political underground was more extensively developed and the EPLF much more widely known, so the mobilization of its citizenry proceeded much more rapidly than in Keren.

A single EPLF activist launched the clandestine organizing process in Decamare in 1975, establishing a cell of five partisans who each went on to set up separate cells of their own. These also multiplied until there were over eighty cells, and by 1977 hundreds of people were familiar with the EPLF and its political program through the agitation work these groups carried out. The underground partisans hid leaflets inside cigarette packs, which were given to government troops. They pasted EPLF posters onto buildings in the middle of the night and distributed EPLF publications to sympathizers throughout the town. By this time these publications, printed monthly in Fah in two or three languages, included *Vanguard*, the movement's official organ; *The Voice of the People*, a

magazine of poetry, creative writing and reportage; *Labor*, put out by the Economics Department; *Ray of Health*, an educational magazine of the Health Department; and *Spark*, a theoretical journal named after Lenin's *Iskra* ("Spark").

The cells also carried out commando raids that netted the front valuable supplies and equipment, as well as constituting small victories in an ongoing psychological war with the occupation forces. A few months before the town's capture, one cell of five teenage boys began to stake out a small herd of dairy cows seized by the government from an Italian-owned estate.

One of the boys described the action: "They were in the eastern part of town, near a police station. We studied the situation for about two weeks—the number of soldiers, the types of guns they had, the way the fighters could pass safely. We communicated this to the front outside the town, and they told us the time and date of the operation. On that day, we left the town one by one, so the enemy would not notice, and we spent the day with the fighters, going over the plans for that night. At 8:30, we led the fighters in.

"First, we started getting the cows—twenty-seven of them. Second, we arranged to get out the trucks. They were near the police station, so we pushed them about a half-kilometer out of town. We returned for typewriters, medicines for the cows, milking machines and other things, but we had many problems. For example, we found a small motorized cultivator, but we did not know how it worked. The brake was on, so when we pushed it, we made a lot of noise. By then it was almost 5:30 in the morning, so we were hurrying. Some things broke, and people began laughing and shouting, but no one came out.

"Two weeks later, some soldiers deserted, and we learned that the enemy had been awake all night listening to us, but they were afraid to come out because they thought this must be a very big raid with hundreds of fighters!"

In July, EPLF organizers held a series of three-hour mass meetings at the Imperial Cinema on successive Sunday mornings to introduce themselves to the general public. The first seminar, covering the history of the revolution, attracted 5,000 people. The second, on the history of the EPLF and its differences with the ELF, drew so

many people that children had to be sent out to accommodate the standing-room-only crowd of adults. After two more sessions on the front's program, twice-weekly political education sessions were instituted, following the front's standard curriculum, with variations for each sectoral group and its particular issues and interests.

A bearded, khaki-clad EPLF cadre was illustrating how workers were exploited in their jobs when I walked into the crowded schoolroom to observe. Some thirty-five industrial workers sat attentively at desks that were far too small for them, staring at the blackboard. For most of the men, it was the first time they had been inside a classroom since they were young children. For some, it was the first time ever. None seemed to think it incongruous for the teacher to have an AK-47 assault rifle leaning against the wall next to him.

"There are 3,000 workers," he said, drawing a box around the figure as he wrote it. "One woman makes 100 meters of cloth in a single day. Baratollo [the owner] sells one meter for 1.20 birr. For 100 meters, he receives 100×1.20 birr—120 birr. He may spend 20 birr on machinery, electric power and raw materials to make this 100 meters, leaving 100 birr after he sells it. The worker gets only 70 cents for one day's work and 99.30 birr goes to Baratollo. In one day, 3,000 workers earn 2,100 birr. Baratollo takes 297,900 birr for himself. This is how capitalism exploits you."

The young organizer argued that the basic interests of workers and owners were diametrically opposed—only social revolution would bring about lasting change. "If the struggle is going to succeed, the workers must first get organized, conscious and united. You must know who are your friends and who are your enemies, and you must build a broad national alliance against colonial oppression as well. In this mass association, you will learn to do this."

The presentation at the youth association branch I visited was similar, but it ended with a different message. Young people were urged to join the front, take up a gun and fight for their nation. They were also encouraged to help organize the townspeople of Decamare and "to set a revolutionary example" by volunteering for special projects, such as cleaning the streets and helping needy families, and by behaving like model citizens—not drinking, using drugs, gambling or mistreating others.

At the first meetings of the women's associations, participants

were given a historical sketch of patriarchal domination within a broader presentation on the "double oppression" of women. "You have to participate if liberation is to come for all the people," they were admonished. But they were also told that their emancipation as women could not be handed to them by the front—they must organize and fight for it themselves. They were told that one of their first projects would be literacy, as they could not play their revolutionary role effectively until they could read and write.

Members of the middle classes were meeting in two separate rooms. Civil servants, clerks, teachers and other white collar workers heard that they had a large responsibility in Eritrea, as in most third world countries, for they were the educated class, and it was up to them to help teach the rest of the population. Their accumulated knowledge was a form of social wealth that had to be redistributed. Playing a leading role in the literacy campaign would be their first project.

The second group, made up of merchants, traders and small shopkeepers, was encouraged to get organized and support the revolution, even if this only meant contributing money. This group had more questions than the others. As in Keren, most queries centered on the fear that the EPLF was "communist" and would nationalize their property. They were assured that the social revolution was aimed at "big capital," primarily large-scale foreign-owned enterprises, but many merchants appeared skeptical as they left the hour-long session.

Though the political formulas recited at the seminars sometimes sounded stilted and simplistic to an outsider, most of the people joining the associations found them empowering. Fired up with a sense of personal and social possibility, many people sought new outlets for their enthusiasm, and there was an explosion of creative activity.

"I wanted to show that independence comes only through pain and death," said Haile Woldemikail, a professional artist and former art teacher, as he showed me his first ventures into "revolutionary art." A golden star burst out of the ground in a violent battlefield tableau framed by a bucolic rural scene of working farmers, both traditional and modern, and by a tranquil depiction of the

Massawa port. The star represented the EPLF and was taken from the front's official flag. (Its five points stand for unity, liberation, justice, democracy and progress.) The detail was rendered with great care, and the colors were bold and bright, as is often the case with political art, but the small canvas was so crowded with symbols that it took the artist fifteen minutes just to explain what they stood for.

At thirty-two, Haile had taught in public schools for more than a decade. His students won national prizes, and his own modern paintings and multimedia collages fetched impressive prices. In elite art circles, he had been known for his experimentation with exotic materials. One of his better known works utilized animal skulls—oxen, sheep, even a dog—on raised backgrounds of tree bark, sculpted hardwood, and thick oil paint. Now he was working with a child's tin box of watercolors.

"I have an idea of forming some kind of club to exchange ideas and to work together," he told me. Within the next year, three of his paintings were printed as posters by the EPLF, and he was running a small art section within the cultural section of the front.

In the town of Segeneiti, southeast of Decamare, some 300 would-be students, ranging in age from seven to forty, had organized themselves and gone to the EPLF with a request to reopen the local public school, closed by the government in May 1976 as a collective punishment for one or another act of opposition to the regime. They were now studying arithmetic, language, health and hygiene, and, of course, politics and political economy. A group of twenty-five students, including nine women, had also formed their own theater company and begun improvising plays and dramatic readings. The night I visited them, they performed the history of the national liberation struggle in five acts.

Several hundred people sat on the rocky ground in a broad semicircle around the makeshift outdoor stage, lit by two strings of bare bulbs. The show opened with a tribal dance by a scantily clad boy carrying a long spear and wielding a wooden sword as he leapt about the stage to the beat of a hand-held drum. The audience murmured and giggled throughout, unsure how they were supposed to react.

Next, one of the players spoke to the audience on the need for a new "people's culture." Then he led the assemblage in a song of

praise for the martyrs who had given their lives for the liberation of their nation, before stepping off the stage and joining the audience.

Behind him a group of swaggering guerrilla fighters moved to stage left, opposite a man and woman at stage right dressed as nomads. (This was the ELF in its starting phase.) One of the fighters sashayed across the platform to demand taxes from the nomads. As the man started to pay, his wife demanded to know why the fighter was living an easy life at their expense while they suffered and starved. Her vehemence had the audience roaring.

Women were not supposed to involve themselves in politics, he snapped, as she made the Eritrean version of an obscene gesture at him behind his back. More raucous laughter, especially from the women in the audience. Back in the fighters' camp, the leader ostentatiously smoked a cigarette and threw the butt on the ground where his fawning comrades fought over it.

And so it went with a mixture of slapstick comedy and biting satire in scene after overacted scene, until the EPLF was portrayed as emerging in the 1970s to lead the people in a social revolution.

Chapter 7

A MODEL VILLAGE

One Sunday in late September 1977, more than three hundred mostly illiterate subsistence farmers crowded into an open air pavilion in Zagher. They came to hear Stefanos Afewerke launch an EPLF campaign to transform traditional village life. All but a few squatted on the hard-packed dirt, with their thin, ragged cotton *gabis* wrapped around their shoulders for warmth and their heels resting on the edges of small stones to give them balance through the two-hour presentation and discussion. A row of bearded elders sat on rough hewn logs at the rear of the gathering. There were no women present. They would meet later with Ababa Haile to hear a similar message.

"This is a new chapter for the village," said Stefanos, as he stood in front of the assembly to outline the liberation front's program for Zagher. The whispering stopped as the farmers strained to hear what this soft-spoken, university-educated cadre, living in their midst for more than a year now, was about to announce. There was a great deal of personal affection for Stefanos and political sympa-

thy for the EPLF in this audience, but Eritrea's peasants, like dirt-poor farmers throughout the world, are a skeptical bunch. Most were anxious to skip through the rhetorical flourishes to discover how the changes the EPLF was proposing would affect their daily lives.

Sixteen years after the start of the fight for independence from Ethiopia and seven years after the formation of the EPLF, Stefanos began, the liberation movement is poised to carry the war through to the finish. The enemy is on the defensive across Eritrea, and the EPLF is preparing for the final battles in Asmara. Under these circumstances, Zagher and the surrounding villages can now be declared "fully liberated," underground cells and mass organizations can be brought into the open, and the task of creating new democratic institutions for all the citizens of a free Eritrea can begin.

"If we are going to be victorious in our struggle, we have to organize ourselves and raise our consciousness to be free from backward thinking from religion, nationality or tribe. We must think and act as Eritreans, united in our commitment to form a people's democratic state," he said.

Already, one round of land reform had been carried through here. A village committee had been selected, the one I met in 1976. For the past year the committee had administered local affairs, mediated disputes and provided a new form of public, relatively accountable leadership to the community, though the elderly men who made up the committee still reflected the village's deep-rooted clan divisions. More than a hundred other villagers were members of clandestine EPLF cells, some for as long as three years. The most committed formed the core of the village militia, armed and trained by the EPLF. The plan was to use these local cadres to bring the whole population more directly into public life through a village-wide organizing drive and an open-ended process of social reform.

The basic building blocks in the villages, as in the towns, will be the mass associations, Stefanos told the assembled peasants. The men will be invited to join a peasant association and the women a women's association, each of which will be sub-divided into cells of poor, middle and rich. Each cell in each association will elect its own leader to sit on a village congress [later termed a "people's assembly"]. A central task of these mass organizations, after managing the affairs of the village, will be to support the liberation

struggle. They will be active in the economic life of the village, managing a cooperative store and building a cooperative grain mill to serve the surrounding villages.

At last Stefanos stopped to catch his breath. The men at his feet stirred a bit, though none at first got up. Finally, one rose. "We have understood what you said, and we willingly accept the principles of EPLF," he said, diplomatically. "Now we want to form our groups and continue our education, but we also have problems with our harvest. How will these new associations help us?" This was the core question in everyone's mind. On it turned the success or failure of the front's political plans—how would this new system help them grow food and feed their families?

Stefanos answered that the associations would be vehicles for improving farming practices, that the cooperative shop would provide low-cost goods to the community and relief to the very poor, and that the mill would free women from the daily three-hour burden of hand-grinding flour for their families. He also said that only members of the new associations would be able to use the shop and the mill. After a half-hour of further probing and explaining, all 312 men present registered for the new association.

When Ababa later gathered a smaller group of women in the same pavilion, she spoke passionately of "the struggle to eradicate the double oppression of women" by giving them equal access to education, work and land, by allowing women to participate in the national liberation struggle alongside men, and by abolishing backward customs that diminish the dignity of women. Though most in the group nodded vigorously at this, their questions, like those of the men, focused on the projects designed for the village—on the grain mill and on an EPLF-sponsored poultry-raising project. Ababa tied this discussion back to the need for women to play an active role in the village congress. What is at stake, she emphasized, is the transfer of economic and political power within the village from a tiny minority to the broad majority.

Since poor peasants made up sixty percent of the 3,000 residents of Zagher, they would dominate the new political institutions and, by extension, the new economic experiments. Women, too, would in theory be directly represented in the village congress

according to their share of the population, though in practice the obstacles to women's participation in the associations, upon which representation in the congress depended, would lessen their numbers. Opposition from their husbands was the main problem, but personal inhibitions and lack of experience in public life also played a part. This was demonstrated by the fact that fewer than one hundred women showed up for the launching of the association.

Ababa said that the women cadres—four of the six EPLF organizers then in Zagher—would go house-to-house, having coffee with women in small groups and encouraging those who were unable or unwilling to attend this first meeting to join.

The next day, political organizers from throughout the region met in Zagher to compare notes. Such meetings took place every two or three months. One cadre said that young people—girls and boys—were joining the youth association in his village in large numbers, but women were slow to join the association set up for them. This would lead not only to a gender gap but also to an increasing generation gap in the village congress, once group leaders were elected. Stefanos suggested that married women under twenty-five should be shifted from the youth association to the new women's association to seed its membership.

Another cadre from a community close to the front lines voiced concern about the security of villagers who publicly joined EPLF organizations. He was urged to keep the associations under cover for now. One from Kwazien, a village liberated only eight months earlier and barely through its first round of land reform, was cautioned to delay the formation of mass associations until a core of sympathizers was identified. "Take your time," was the theme—pacing is essential, and make certain both that the new forms of organization are embraced by a majority of the local population and that specific social reforms are initiated by the villagers and not by the cadres.

The social revolution—the struggle within the struggle—was at a key turning point. After seven years of agitating and two years of study and planning, the EPLF was setting out to reshape the society that it was simultaneously trying to liberate from foreign domination. There were tensions between these campaigns, even as they reinforced and invigorated each other, and they would have to

be carried forward at different speeds and in different ways from one community to the next. Under these circumstances, the local organizers were students as well as teachers, scientists as well as technicians. Zagher was an important laboratory for this social experiment, the model where plans and ideas could be pre-tested on a modest scale and where the results could be observed and evaluated before being applied elsewhere.

Close to 8,000 feet above sea level, Zagher sits atop a cluster of small hills on the now largely treeless plains, twenty miles northwest of Asmara. Houses are huddled together against the bitter winter cold, sharing at least one, often two common walls with their neighbors. Built of stone and mud with roofs of logs, rocks, dirt and brush, they ring the hills in tight spirals and form irregular rows along both sides of the village's spine, a sloping ridge that links two knobby hills. At one end of the village, perched on the hamlet's highest point, is the Orthodox Church with its distinctive diamond-shaped cross visible for miles. At the other end sits the small stone chapel of the Evangelical Lutheran Church.

In the 1970s, Zagher's 3,000 residents were mostly Orthodox, but there was a significant minority of Catholics and Protestants. There were no Muslims. All were Tigrinya speakers, members of the country's largest and historically dominant ethnic group, though the community was divided into three roughly equal *endas* (patrilineal clans), each with its own traditional chief.

On one hilltop that juts off the main ridge near the center of the village, there was an abandoned cement house with three small rooms that opened onto an enclosed courtyard. This building served as the EPLF headquarters in 1977 and 1978, and it was where I slept during the several weeks I visited Zagher. I was given a narrow bed of woven straw, one of only a handful in the village, together with a single rickety wooden chair on which I set a small oil lamp at night and in which I settled myself in the early morning facing the sun (for warmth as much as inspiration) to write in my journal.

The courtyard was surrounded by a five-foot-high concrete wall, over whose rim on cloudless evenings I could see the lights of Asmara twinkling in the distance. Below the wall was a narrow glen with a spring-fed stream where women washed clothes by rub-

bing them across flat stones and pounding on them with their hands until the water running out of them was clear. Once a week I joined them to do mine. The steep, rocky hillside was also where I and the villagers went to relieve ourselves. There were no latrines.

On the surrounding hills, a crazy quilt of tiny farm plots covered nearly every inch of available ground. The soil is ginger-colored, laced with rocks that range from the size of a fist to that of a basketball. That autumn, sheafs of wheat and *teff* dotted the landscape, with teams of oxen walking tight circles over the gathered grain in the traditional threshing cycle. In a few open fields, farmers followed pairs of oxen with handmade wooden plows, turning over the dense, stony earth for next year's planting. On the steeper hills were small gardens of potatoes and other hand-cultivated vegetables.

Land was scarce. Most families had the equivalent of only one-third of a hectare (slightly less than one acre). Most migrated part of the year to the eastern escarpment, known as Semanawi Bahri, where they cultivated a second crop for three to four months during the brief winter rainy season there. This seminomadic character made the community a bit harder to organize than others, as there was little year-round consistency to the resident population.

One afternoon I found a knot of older men sitting on a stack of eucalyptus logs. We fell to chatting about the village, and I asked them about its history. Felassie Chegir, an eighty-seven-year-old farmer who claimed that only two in the village were older than he, took the floor, so to speak. As I sat on the ground at his feet, he gazed out over the bustling village. Finally, he began rocking ever so slightly and told the following tale:

Our forefather, the first man of the village, came from a village in the south about 300 years back. In that village, there were two brothers. One was very rich. One was very poor. One day the poor one, who was very sick, went to the wife of the rich brother to ask for something to make soup. She gave him the head of a cow, but when the rich one returned he told her to go straight to his brother and get back the head. When she came to the poor one, he said to her, "Take the whole soup." Then he said, "I cannot live in this place," and he left to search out a new home.

His name was Abbie, but he was a great hunter, nicknamed "Zagura," after a big game bird. When he left his village, he took a handful of oil seeds and dropped them, one at a time, along the trail. At last he found a good place, very much like his old village, with a forest full of evergreen trees and good soil for farming. One day, he went back south, following the line of oil trees from the seeds he had dropped until he reached his old village. First, he entered and killed his brother. Then he went to the church and took the *tabot* [the book of the Ten Commandments, without which an Orthodox church cannot function] and brought it here. This was the start of Zagher.

For Zagher, as for most of rural Eritrea, land was at the center of village life. Songs and dances were devoted to it, legends built on it. Marriages were arranged around it, family alliances cemented or severed for it, clan and tribal feuds waged for generations over it—not for itself, as land was owned by the village and could not be bought or sold, but for what it could produce. For this reason, land reform was the core social and economic issue facing the Eritrean revolutionaries when they came to Zagher in the mid-1970s.

At the turn of the century, the villages along the northern rim of the plateau were frequently raided by southern warlords who sought booty and tribute. The Italian conquest ended this marauding, but it left the highland farmers far worse off than before. Throughout the early 1900s, Italian authorities seized hundreds of thousands of acres of prime land for colonial settlement and for the establishment of large-scale plantations and ranches. In one move, the Italians appropriated all land within fifty feet of any stream, the most fertile land in the country, under a decree that characterized it as *dominale* land, off limits to local residents. Zagher was left with only eighty hectares (200 acres) of land for the entire village. This was allocated under the *diesa* system of tenure in which village land was divided equally among all families and rotated every seven years or so to maintain rough parity. The Italians imposed this system, already common to other parts of highland Eritrea, in an effort to adjust to the land shortages created by their extensive expropriations. But no matter how the land was carved up, it was not enough.

After vehement protests by Zagher farmers, the colonial admin-

istrators allocated another eighty hectares for village use (though not community ownership) under a leasing arrangement known as *kelkel*. A powerful feudal lord was put in charge of collecting taxes from the peasants in the district, and the *kelkel* land was turned over to a group of thirty-four leaders from Zagher's three clans for distribution through a lottery. This plan was aborted when the Italians began conscripting villagers for a colonial army. The result was a windfall for clan leaders who held onto most of the *kelkel* land. Village life was turned inside out by the mobilization, which still left a bitter taste in the mouths of the elders I spoke with in 1977.¹

Habtu Hagos was one of those taken in 1934, at age seventeen, to fight first in the Libya campaign and later in Somalia and Ethiopia. "I was recruited because I was very poor," he told me. "When they said they would pay me a salary, I volunteered. The next year, they ordered every male youth but one from each family to join. During peacetime, the Italians walked in front, and we built the roads. During the fighting, we Eritreans walked in front, and the Italians came behind."

Meanwhile, among those who stayed home, the ones who collaborated with the Italians prospered most. The position of the rest declined. Highland peasants were forced to pay taxes on their animals and land; to get the money to pay the taxes, they had to sell animals, as they had no other cash income. This steadily impoverished the community. However, a chief in each village assigned to collect the revenue was permitted to keep ten percent for himself, and the Eritrean who administered the district under the Italians kept another ten percent from fifteen separate villages. When this administrator died, his son, then living in Asmara, continued to run the district. By the 1940s, when British-led forces took over Eritrea, a later descendant of the collaborating chief inherited the district, which was divided between him and his cousin, a man named *degyat Belai*.² Taxes remained about the same for the peasants, according to the Zagher elders, but the two cousins had to share a smaller cut while also collecting a salary from the British.

Swedish missionaries built a school in the nearby village of Azien, but it had little impact on most families. Though it was nominally open to everyone and though all the peasants in the district were taxed to build it, children attending the school were

required to wear uniforms, a policy that screened out a majority of the children because their families could not afford them. Fifteen Zagher families converted to Catholicism during the period of Italian rule in order to secure access to *dominale* land. Otherwise, most people remained passive members of the Orthodox faith, observing its many fast days and holidays, if not also regularly attending services. Their main preoccupation was eking out a diminishing income from the harsh land.

When Eritrea was federated with Ethiopia in the 1950s, the structure of village life remained largely untouched. *Degyat* Belai's son, *fitwari* Beragabur, took charge of the district. Taxes at first stayed as before. A new Orthodox church was built in Zagher, a school was erected that initially attracted 120 students, and petty trade increased steadily with Asmara. A decade later, when Haile Selassie annexed Eritrea into the Ethiopian empire, village life began to crumble.

After Selassie imposed the Amharic language on the curriculum, many students dropped out. Heavy taxes had depleted most people's herds. Land had not been redivided under the *diesa* system since the 1930s, and a yawning gap between rich and poor was developing. Clan leaders were taking care of themselves but not their memberships. Meanwhile, the emperor and his representatives were demanding more and more, exacting special taxes for education and health care which the villagers never saw.

Throughout the 1960s and early 1970s, conditions in Zagher worsened. When EPLF units first appeared there in 1974, they found a hotbed of discontent, and a wall of suspicion. The rival Eritrean Liberation Front had been there earlier and left a legacy of anger and mistrust toward all the guerrillas. "All the ELF ever did here was eat our food," one peasant told me.

Zagher and the neighboring village of Wauki were the site of massive civilian protests at the end of 1974 against the continuing civil war between the two liberation fronts. As many as 30,000 people gathered near the village in October to urge the feuding armies to settle their differences and turn their guns against the Ethiopian army, which, in the wake of Selassie's overthrow in September, was running amok in Asmara and the surrounding area. ELF and EPLF leaders then met in Zagher to hammer out a truce that not only

changed the character of the war, but radically altered the struggle behind the lines for the allegiance of Eritrea's rural poor.

Almost immediately, EPLF cadres spread out in the villages near Zagher to promulgate their views and to recruit supporters for training as organizers within their communities. As they did so, a growing debate over social and economic reform spilled over into questions of who should lead the villages at this critical juncture. It was, according to a later EPLF assessment, a rocky period for Zagher that did not at first go the way they wished it to:

The majority of the people, for whom the education and the organizing were entirely new things, could, at the beginning, only watch in surprise. Village dignitaries, on the other hand, gave a different picture of themselves. With their experience in chairing meetings, their oratorical skills, their techniques of hospitality, and economic standing, all of which they utilized, they set out to lead the new movement. They actively sought to establish that what was desired was nothing more than what had been and still was existing—the status quo.³

Under these circumstances, EPLF cadres trod slowly, working to build trust and confidence before they raised issues that might divide villagers. It was not until mid-1976, shortly before my first visit, that young people and women already organized into EPLF cells raised demands for a redistribution of village land on a more equitable basis. Their demands were modest: they called for land that was improperly held by rich farmers to be given back to the village, for landless farmers to receive their fair share, and for several changes in the method of redistribution under the *diesa* system. Among these changes was one of particular significance—that unmarried adult women should be included in the pool, alongside single adult men.

A tempestuous village assembly finally accepted reforms that translated into new land for only forty of 120 applicants. But the die was cast—everyone in the village now knew that land reform was on Zagher's social agenda. The reforms also opened the door to a broad debate over women's rights. From this point on, agitation and organizing steadily accelerated. The next step was another pub-

lic assembly at which villagers replaced the traditional *enda* administration with a committee of elders that was more representative and more open to change. This was the village committee of sixteen men that I met in July 1976.

Over the next year, EPLF cadres concentrated on broadening the base of this nascent political movement. During this period, the first women were inducted into the village militia. When a people's assembly was set up, women and unmarried youths were represented in village administration for the first time, along with a large number of poor peasant farmers. Together, these formerly excluded social groups made up a substantial majority in favor of social change.

At their first meeting, the assembly began another round of land reform, and 120 peasants received land for the first time. The *kelkel* land that had been monopolized by the thirty-four rich families since the 1930s was included in the redistribution, so everyone else doubled the size of their holdings.

Later, in a third round of land reform, farms were expropriated from collaborators and from villagers who had gone abroad. The most significant changes by then had to do with land use. The people's assembly set aside a large plot to be worked cooperatively by the farmers' association, with the surplus to be turned over to a new cooperative shop. Individual allocations were designed so that each person's land was contiguous instead of being divided into three small, scattered plots. Members of each section of the association now occupied land in the same general area. These changes were intended to facilitate the introduction of modern farming techniques and to foster cooperative experiments. The entire militia had already pooled its land to form a single producers' co-op. In the EPLF's view, the cooperatives would "serve as an example of the future socialist economic set-up."⁴

Organizing Eritrea's hard-working rural farmers was no easy task. Like peasants everywhere, they are ruggedly conservative, eminently practical people whose first loyalties lie with their families and their land. A parade of colonial powers, conquerors and would-be liberators had already trooped through Zagher, mixing coercion and brutality with sweeping promises in a largely futile effort to win

the fidelity of these peasants. Mostly, the peasants just nodded and went on about their business without paying much heed.

Several things made their response to the EPLF different. To begin with, the front's organizing team came to live among the villagers before they tried to change anything. There were six in the squad, four women and two men, ranging in age in 1977 from sixteen to thirty-five. None was from a peasant background. Stefanos joined the front directly out of the university in Addis Ababa. Aden Fassil, the oldest of the group, was a lawyer who had served on Ethiopia's Supreme Court. Ababa, the former flight attendant, was twenty-one when she joined the EPLF. The other three women were high school students when they joined. For all six organizers, the life of the highland farmer was utterly new. For most of the first year they were based in Zagher, they quietly studied and learned from the peasants.

During the time I spent in Zagher in 1976-78, much of the contact I observed between these cadres and the villagers was informal—in the fields, by the stream, over coffee in the afternoons or simply squatting in the dirt somewhere in the village. The organizers were humble and unhurried. They listened well. They joked and teased. They also gave concrete advice on how to increase crop yields, and they gave villagers new seed varieties and new crops such as flowers that could be sold in the towns. They brought a motor and other equipment for the grain mill, and they provided several white leghorns to the women for their poultry project. Most importantly, they never took a thing from the villagers without asking first and then paying for it. People in Zagher trusted these earnest organizers; more than this, they liked them.

Often, members of the EPLF team visited villagers in their homes to chat, with no agenda other than to promote dialogue and to listen. Fana's house, down the hill from where I stayed, was a frequent watering hole. So was Minya's, almost directly across from the guest house.

A tall, lean, middle-aged woman with broad shoulders and a penetrating stare, Minya was a person who smiled easily to convey a sense of unaffected amicability behind her no-nonsense inquiries. Oddly, perhaps, she was not active in the village committee, though after fleeing the highlands in the late 1970s when the government

reoccupied the area, she surprised family and friends by joining the liberation front and becoming a fighter.

I recall one day in 1977 sitting in the smoky darkness of her crowded kitchen when Minya suddenly looked up from the charcoal stove to ask Ababa, "Why does this white man like us? I've heard that whites in America don't like black people."

There was no hostility in the query, but it was intentionally provocative. What triggered the question, Minya said, was the coverage on the radio of the bitter racial struggles in Boston, my home city, over busing to integrate the schools. This was major international news at the time—a dramatic photograph appeared on the front page of many newspapers of a white racist charging a black lawyer with an American flag on a pole; and there were daily updates on the BBC and the Voice of America (broadcasting in Amharic as well as in English).

The common ground Minya and I found to talk about the incident lay in its similarity to conflicts in Eritrea between people of different ethnic and confessional communities, and in the way this worked against the interests of the disempowered of each community. We each had evidence from our distinctive pasts that racism and tribalism are two sides of the same ugly coin—the recognition of this gave us a bond.

Race had not been a central factor in the lives of most Eritreans since the departure of the European colonial powers, while suffering at the hands of black Ethiopians was ever fresh in their experience. Nationality, not race, was what they confronted in their daily lives.

There were times, however, that I felt isolated and lonely in Eritrea—not the target of anger or resentment, just left outside. At these moments, I gravitated toward visiting journalists and aid workers—mostly Europeans, though including one African American—who began to appear toward the end of 1977. Once that year I traveled all the way to Khartoum for a four-day break just to touch base with the outside world and to phone my children in the U.S. Culture, not color, was the source of this isolation.

The distinction between villagers and EPLF organizers—also to some extent outsiders in village life, but outsiders with very spe-

cific powers—was brought home at odd moments of crisis.

Early one September morning, a Tuesday, I was sitting in the courtyard of the EPLF office when an elderly peasant couple burst through the gate demanding to see a cadre. Both talked at once, much faster than I could follow with my rudimentary Tigrinya. I went for Ababa, who stumbled out, rubbing the sleep from her eyes, as they barraged her with their problem.

They said they had three sons. One got married and was given a share of the family land. Later, he divorced his wife, and the land reverted to the family. Then he remarried and was given the land again, but now he claimed it was not enough. The family had manured the rest of their land and turned over the soil, but now the son was demanding another section for himself. They refused. Last week their case had gone to the village committee, which put it over until next Saturday, but they insisted that they could no longer wait—they must plow now, so they needed a decision immediately.

Ababa counseled patience and cooperation but to no avail. "How can you ask that?" shrieked the mother. "You know this man! He is an opportunist and an exploiter. His father was sick six months, and he did nothing. The committee told us we should keep preparing our land until Saturday, but he is trying to stop us. You must do something!"

The fracas began to draw an audience. Curious children crowded the gateway, and a dozen or so adults peered over the wall to see what was going on. But before Ababa could get in another word, the father suddenly shifted his ground. "Perhaps we should wait," he suggested hesitantly. "If the committee decides in his favor, we should share."

"Never!" shouted the mother. "We will take this case all the way to Sahel [EPLF headquarters] if we have to, but we will not give in to this lazy lout. He is not a blessed one; he deserves nothing more from us."

The problem for Ababa was not one of deciding whom to believe or how to adjudicate the dispute; it was a question of how to avoid bypassing the new village committee. For their part, the irate peasants were simply doing what they had always done—seeking out someone in authority to intervene on their behalf. Adherence to "procedures" held no particular allure for them. What

mattered were winning their case and getting back into their field.

Yet it was precisely the importance—and the inherent fairness—of rule by law, law that is laid down as a part of a broad, participatory social contract, that lay at the heart of the EPLF's political campaign. Ababa tried to get this across by insisting that the family wait until Saturday for the committee to meet, that they must abide by the committee's decision, and that the EPLF would not overturn it no matter how high in the hierarchy any of the contending parties went.

At this point, the son appeared, raising the emotional pitch several notches. "My other brothers are not married, so I have a right to the good land for me and my wife," he argued, adding that this was not a new quarrel and that his father had refused to meet with a mediator once before. At this, his father lurched toward him and was physically restrained by another peasant, a member of Zagher's new village militia. Finally, with his help, Ababa sent the elderly couple away with assurances that the committee would listen to their side and decide the case fairly. She also warned that none of the other members of her team would act any differently, and that going to another of them with the same appeal would only complicate matters.

Then she sat down for ten minutes to make the same point to the son. He listened, sullenly at first, but at last, after a bit of teasing and friendly cajoling, he grinned and agreed to abide by the outcome before sauntering off.

When we were alone, Ababa laughed and said she was sure they would immediately seek out members of the village committee to influence them in advance, not on the merits of the case but on the basis of friendship, kinship or past or potential obligations. This was the way it had always been. And this meant that she, too, would have to sit down with committee members before the meeting to sort out the facts of the case and to make certain they decided it fairly. Each incident like this, and there were many, was a test of the new system.

The EPLF was the resident power in Zagher in 1977. While it was midwifing a new, more democratic and egalitarian order into the village, it nonetheless retained ultimate control, and everyone

knew it. Fighters were respected, even idolized in some instances, but they were also viewed with a certain detached reserve, as if they might threaten the basic traditions of these conservative peasants. Nowhere was this more true than in the relations between women and men.

It was one thing to have women like Ababa, born in the city and residing only temporarily in Zagher, to be dressed in pants, wearing an unbraided Afro hairstyle, carrying a gun and giving orders to women and men alike. It was quite another to imagine this coming from a village woman. When Mebrak and Showat, young women raised in Zagher, joined the militia that year, all hell broke loose. Neither woman cut her hair or stopped wearing traditional village clothing, but each carried an M-1 over her shoulder as she ambled through the village and patrolled the hills. Each told similar stories of how their families reacted to the shock of seeing their daughters carrying arms.

Mebrak came from a family of relatively "rich" peasants who farmed land in the slopes of Bahri during the off-season, in addition to their plot in Zagher. There, in 1975, she came into contact with EPLF fighters. At first she brought them water and made bread for them. Eventually she joined a secret cell with seven other young women and began studying political issues. When her parents learned of this, they sent her back to Zagher and forbade further involvement with the front. One of their sons had joined the ELF in 1967 and had not been heard from since. Another son had been killed by a land mine, and they blamed the liberation movement. They were adamantly opposed to their only daughter becoming involved. "At that time," she told me, "they gave me a choice—either I had to get married or leave the house."

When Mebrak refused to marry, the family relented, but she kept her membership in a local EPLF study circle secret for fear they would send her away if they found out. She appealed to the front to take her as a recruit for the army, but they declined, worrying that such a move would foster a rift between them and the village and insisting that Mebrak's organizing work in Zagher was more important. The next confrontation came when the EPLF opened a school for political activists in the evenings.

"My parents didn't want me near there," Mebrak said. "I start-

ed to go to the school every other day, but it didn't help. Sometimes they closed the house, and I had to stay in another house or outside. I once had to sleep on the ground for four days.

"When I had taken enough education, I wanted to take a gun, but first my family had to accept it. I was afraid, so I took some fighters with me to talk to my father. He said, 'Since she is not going to get married, I will let her do whatever she wants to do.' But my mother did not accept this, especially when our neighbors were saying, 'We have never in the world seen girls carrying guns. Girls should stay inside their houses.' Hearing that, my family got worse. Even now, I have a terrible life. I'm still struggling with them, and it's slowly getting better, but everyone around me still says bad things about me. They say, 'This girl should carry a baby, not a gun.'"

Showat's experience was similar. From a "middle" peasant family, Showat was married but her husband had disappeared—either imprisoned in Asmara for subversive activities or killed, she did not know which. She was living with her parents, who vehemently opposed her participation in the EPLF. After they learned that Showat joined a study circle in 1976, they sent her to stay with her older brother in Asmara. Three months later, she sneaked back to Zagher and resumed her organizing activities. When she joined the militia, her parents, primarily her mother, became furious. The problem was not Showat's carrying a gun—it was embarrassment over the fact that she was consorting with unmarried men.

It was not until I visited Zagher again in the fall of 1978 that I found the two families reconciled to their daughters' participation in the militia. Unfortunately, a few months later the Ethiopians recaptured Zagher, forcing all public members of the front to flee. Showat and Mebrak finally had no choice but to leave home to become full-time fighters.



Chapter 8

DESTROYING SHYNESS

All economic and social activity ground to a halt when hundreds of shouting, chanting women marched into Keren on November 1, 1977, demanding equal rights. The noisy crowd of civilians leading the parade strode behind a banner that declared, "Let women be organized, politicized and armed!" They were followed by two files of armed women fighters and four captured U.S. tanks with dozens of women hanging off them. A few celebratory rifle shots could be heard over the din as the marchers crossed the narrow stone bridge on the outskirts of Keren and passed the drab, two-story Red Sea Hotel where incredulous elderly men, clad in the loose-fitting white *gelabias* and tightly wound turbans favored by Muslims in this region, clustered on the balcony to watch the procession.

As the women moved up the hill toward the high-rise Keren Hotel, their numbers multiplied. The nearby fruit and vegetable market emptied in minutes, and people poured out of coffee bars, shops and guest houses to line the road. For an hour the rowdy cavalcade

snaked back and forth through every neighborhood in Keren, clapping hands, singing freedom songs and picking up women (and some men) as they went, swelling to over 4,000. At last they made their way to the football stadium for a fiery noon-time rally, the largest Keren had seen since the city was liberated four months earlier.

The march was the first instance of women standing together in public to demand equal rights, and it was all the more remarkable for taking place in Keren, a predominantly Muslim market town with conservative social traditions. It was also one of the first times that civilian activists and EPLF fighters took to the streets together. The march signaled both an escalation in the struggle over women's rights and a significant boost in the level of civilian political activism.

The impetus for the march came from women who complained to the new women's associations that their husbands were not permitting them to attend meetings. Association leaders went to the EPLF for support. The front responded by providing the armored vehicles for the parade and sound equipment for the rally.

Sebhat Ephrem kicked off the rally with a militant declaration of the EPLF's commitment to women's emancipation during and through, not after, the national liberation struggle. "Without the full participation of women, there can be no liberation in Eritrea," he said to the cheering crowd.

A succession of women—young, unmarried activists and greying housewives with children strapped to their backs, some bare-headed and others wrapped in traditional shawls—expanded on this theme. They argued for the political engagement of women as a patriotic duty, and they blasted the men who stood in their way. "There are no fathers who let their girl children go and fight," intoned one angry mother. "The women who fight now went on their own, and it is they who began the struggle for our emancipation."

The next speaker contended that many Keren women lacked the right to walk the streets of Keren without their husbands' permission. Some widows were even prohibited from bearing their husbands to the graveyard without the approval of the male head of their extended family. "Our husbands consider us as the dishes

and other kitchen goods. We are nothing to them. Now, let all women stand up and carry arms to liberate our country and ourselves," she said to sustained applause.

Later, speakers protested the plight of women factory workers, paid half the wage for the same jobs as men, and recounted the economic and social problems facing divorced women and widows. The last to take the platform urged women to bring their concerns to the newly formed women's association. Joining together would give the women the means to actively participate in the independence struggle and to improve their own lives. "Let us destroy shyness and struggle!" she concluded.

With few exceptions, women's traditional position in Eritrean society—Christians and Muslims alike—was as harsh and oppressive as that of chattel slaves. In the mostly Christian highlands, their marriages were customarily arranged at birth when their fathers bartered them to prospective husbands—or, more often, to the husband's father—in a deal shaped primarily by economic and social considerations. The wedding was commonly held when the bride reached the age of nine or ten, though she might live at home until she turned twelve.

Genital mutilation, known euphemistically as "female circumcision" (the removal of the clitoris), was widely practiced as a means of controlling women's sexuality. In the lowlands among some nomadic groups, this was done in a radical form where the labia were entirely cut away. The remaining flesh was crudely sewn together to create a human chastity belt that was ripped open by the husband during the first act of intercourse. Women routinely contracted dangerous infections from the operation, known as infibulation, and experienced severe pain with menstruation and urination afterward.

Death in childbirth was also extremely common, due to the malnutrition and chronic anemia that afflicted women, traditionally the last in their households to eat. The average life expectancy for rural women was barely forty years, though this varied widely among women of differing social classes.

Among highland farmers, women did not traditionally own land, though they had specific responsibilities for working it. Thus

they had no economic standing in the community. Nor did women participate in public life. In many cases, they could not even go to the local market or visit neighbors without their husbands' permission. Typically, a peasant woman started her day before dawn, grinding grain for up to three hours by rubbing one stone over another, and then preparing the morning and the noon meals for the rest of her family. She had the sole responsibility for the children and for all domestic chores. She was responsible for gathering firewood and hauling water, often over great distances.

At the end of a long day in the fields, the woman would leave before her husband in order to prepare his meal. This gave her time to wash his feet and then serve him as soon as he arrived. Next, she fed her children. If food was short, she went hungry. There was no tradition of even the most rudimentary social conversation between husband and wife. When chores and meals were done, the man either visited other men or retired to a single bed in the part of the house reserved for the animals. If his wife were lucky, she slept five hours each night with most of her children tucked in with her.

Life was even more cloistered for lowland women. Among the nomads, women were frequently required to remain within their tents when men other than their husbands were around. Outside, she was either veiled or covered with a shawl that exposed little more than her eyes, which were kept averted at all times. While her husband spent long periods wandering with the cattle or camels, the main source of the family's wealth, she had responsibility for the care of the children and for the smaller animals (sheep and goats), for all the household chores, and for setting up and packing the tent when the family moved. Unlike her highland counterpart, she was excluded from participation in any economic activity apart from limited craft production done within the home. From birth, she was taught to be obedient and passive, and for most of her life, her only society was that of her children and other women within her extended family.

If land tenure was the defining socioeconomic relationship for the peasant farmer in Eritrea, marriage fulfilled that function for peasant and nomadic women. Through this institution women were bought and sold, dominated and exploited, and, often in later life, either pushed aside or discarded altogether to make room for

younger rivals. Men controlled the selection process, set the prices and the obligations, ruled on any marital disputes, and presided over divorce—itself a male prerogative.

While Christian men could not legally take on second wives, they frequently (and publicly) kept mistresses. Muslim men were permitted to add up to seven more wives, so long as they could financially support them. Once cut loose, a divorced woman either returned empty-handed to the home of her parents, if they would accept her, or she made her way into the towns to fend for herself—frequently as a prostitute, as there were few alternative forms of employment for an unmarried woman living on her own, a pariah even in urban society.

There were significant variations among and within Eritrea's diverse cultures. One of the most striking departures from brutal patriarchal dominance was found in the Kunama people of the western Barka plains, where women had higher levels of equality and more sexual openness than anywhere else in Eritrea. A report from the EPLF's Public Administration Department described marital practices there:

When a girl of the Kunama nationality reaches puberty, her parents build her own separate cottage where she can invite and meet as many boyfriends as she chooses. There is no inhibition or taboo about her having sexual intercourse with any or all of them. When she finally settles on one of them as her choice, she marries the boy upon ceremonial agreement between the mothers of the pair. Fathers have no significant say in the matter.

On her wedding day, the girl invites all the other boys who had slept with her to the wedding ceremony and presents them each with a piece of raw meat on a sharpened stick, starting with the one who slept with her first. Her ex-boyfriends in return kill a black goat each. The belief behind this ritual is that the offspring of the girl would suffer from deformity or lack of health unless the demands of the ritual (*kala*) are fulfilled.¹

In most of rural Eritrea, marriage was a form of servitude in

which women had no fixed rights, little pleasure and few avenues of escape. Recognizing this, the EPLF made the restructuring of marriage customs one of their top political priorities. Halting the practice of genital mutilation also received considerable attention, but it was dealt with largely through an educational campaign at the village level, using health workers and the women's associations to reach women on a one-to-one basis rather than legislating through the new administrative structures.

In November 1977 the EPLF Central Committee adopted a comprehensive marriage law that applied directly to members of the liberation front, but that was also intended as a model for civil society. The new law banned child betrothal and child marriage and abolished the dowry and the bride price. The law called for marriage to be based upon the free choice of consenting partners, to be monogamous, and to incorporate equal rights for women and men. Finally, it provided that divorce could be initiated by either party, and it guaranteed the welfare and protection of children of the marriage. In most of its particulars, the radical new decree mirrored the Marriage Law adopted by the People's Republic of China in 1950.²

Within the EPLF itself, which until then had enforced chastity on all its members, the new law was relatively easy to implement. When two fighters decided to marry, they applied to the Department of Social Affairs, each filling out and signing a separate request and answering a questionnaire on such issues as whether they were sure of their choice of partners, whether they wanted children, and whether they had discussed the ramifications of these decisions with their prospective partner.³ The head of their department or military unit, functioning *in loco parentis*, was also required to file a supporting opinion. The couple was then required to wait three months before holding the ceremony. If the Social Affairs Department declined to approve the marriage, the couple had to wait another three months, after which they were free to act without official consent. The age limit for marriage within the front was eighteen for women and twenty for men, though in practice, since eighteen was the minimum age for joining up as a fighter, most EPLF members were well into their twenties before marrying.

Only a small number of fighters at first took advantage of this law, and midway through 1978 the worsening military situation

made it difficult for more to do so, but in succeeding years many fighters married and had children. Meanwhile, the application of the law to civil society was a far more difficult affair.

The main thrust of the EPLF's efforts to reform marriage was on the issue of mutual consent.⁴ At a minimum, this meant that children whose marriage was arranged by their parents had to be consulted about and agree to the bargain. It also meant that when a woman wished to get out of the marriage, she could initiate and secure a divorce, taking a fair share of family property with her. These related rights struck at the root of the system by which male elders used marriage as a means to enrich and empower their clans.

As to age, the rule tended to vary, with localities deciding threshold limits after being encouraged to consider the question by EPLF organizers. By the mid-1980s, most communities where the front had initiated a campaign on marriage reform set the bottom limits at fifteen to seventeen for women and at eighteen to twenty-one for men.

Perhaps the most important consequence of this was the establishment of an age limit for girls beyond their menarche. This ushered in a new developmental stage in personal and social life—adolescence—that had profound consequences for women. Not only did this open up, however briefly, the possibility of courtship prior to marriage; it also, by delaying marriage and childbirth, enabled girls to attend school and to participate in the broader society in other ways that were until then inaccessible to them. However, even in the most highly organized villages and towns, these reforms proceeded slowly and with considerable difficulty.

Gergis Abraha, thirty-four, and Tsehaitu Zeray, thirty-two, were early recruits to the Keren Women's Association, but their initial participation met with strong opposition from their husbands. I spoke with the two women a month after the Keren protest.

"I wanted to join the women's association from the beginning," said Gergis, the mother of eight and the young wife of a retired municipality worker who now stayed at home every day. "At first I didn't tell my husband, only saying I was going to visit friends or going to the hospital or to religious meetings. When my neighbors were coming back from their political education, I used to say

to him, 'Why am I lagging behind? The country belongs to all of us equally, so there is no reason I should not go with them.' But he said that I could not go because there were children at home, and they cried in my absence. After this, I told him whether he likes it or not, I will go to the association, even if he wants to divorce me.

"The first day I went to the school, he did not want to let me back in the house. When we started quarreling, the neighbors came. They asked us why we were shouting at each other, and I told them all my problems, but still the answer that he gave was that I had to look after the children at home. I told him that I could put the small child on my back and take them all to school. Finally, he gave me permission to go. Slowly, I started to tell him what we were learning at school, that it was to our benefit and to the benefit of all the oppressed people, women and men. Then he started asking me about what we studied, and he began learning things from me.

"There was no problem at home after this. I was obliged to be more attentive in class because when I got home I had these political discussions with my husband. Later, because of me, he also started to be conscious. Before that he was not participating in the workers' association, but later he started going to school. Now we discuss things equally. When I go to school or to the market, he takes the children. If I am late, he gives them dinner, though I prepare it in advance before I go out."

Tsehaitu, the mother of five small children and the wife of a poor peasant farmer, described a similar trial, though her husband at first reacted more violently to her political involvement: "Before my husband knew, I also gave excuses about going out. After two weeks, he discovered I was going to school, and he beat me with a stick. He accused me of cheating him. Again, when we did the demonstration, he met me on the street, and he beat me. Finally when the peasant association was organized, he began to understand. We started to discuss all sorts of political questions, and now we don't usually quarrel. If I want to stay at home because my child is sick, he says I have to go to school, and he will take care of the child."

Although this increased freedom of movement and association was a positive development, perhaps the most dramatic change taking place was within the marital relationship itself. For the first time, men and women were talking with each other about issues

beyond the hearth and home. Although Gergis and Tsehaitu were obviously putting the best possible gloss on their situations, things at home had clearly changed.

The appeal to patriotism was the most powerful incentive to change. One woman I spoke with in Keren said that the sight of women fighters helping to liberate Keren in the summer of 1977 led her husband to support her participation in the new women's association. By this time, thirty percent of EPLF members were women, functioning as teachers, doctors, mechanics, truck drivers, urban commandos and front-line assault troops. There were women who headed noncombat departments and women who commanded military units made up mostly of male fighters. This inspired many civilian women and moved some men to rethink their positions. Nevertheless, the most effective means of reaching men on this issue was through structured education and discussion led by EPLF cadres in the associations of workers and peasants.

The public demonstration in November also made a difference, according to Lette Berhan, one of the leading women's organizers in Keren then. Association membership shot up by over fifty percent in the week following the protest march, she said. Stories of women restrained and beaten by their husbands kept filtering in, however, and one woman I spoke with said her marriage had already ended in divorce over the issue of her participation in public life. Meanwhile, there were more mundane obstacles to the organization of women. Many peasant women had difficulty coming to meetings because of their obligation to work in the fields at harvest time.

The EPLF learned early that using male cadres to lead seminars for the women they hoped to organize did not work. Some women stayed away, assuming that this was just another male-dominated exercise or fearing exposure to men in the meetings. Others who came remained passive, too inhibited in male company to speak their minds. The front had started with the view that its members, men and women, were sufficiently "liberated" on this issue that it didn't matter which gender made the presentations. They soon discovered that women needed to be with women in order to speak openly and honestly about their personal living situations.

EPLF organizers also found that girls were far easier to organize

than adult women, because the prohibitions against their participation were often not as strong or as effective. Starting with the youth was a way to reach other members of families where there was resistance. In the case of women whose husbands or fathers blocked them from attending neighborhood seminars or other association meetings, female EPLF organizers began to seek them out in their homes, one by one, to talk with them informally. In conservative Muslim communities like Afabet, EPLF cadres held classes for girls and women in private homes to avoid provoking men who didn't want their wives and daughters congregating in public places. Recognition of deep-rooted traditions, however backward they were, did not have to mean compromise of principle, but it did demand tactical modifications.

Despite these adjustments, there was resistance. In May 1978 a coterie of well-to-do Afabet landlords, feeling threatened on all sides by the campaigns for land reform and women's emancipation, mounted a counterattack. They drew in local merchants and religious leaders and then gathered at the local mosque to express their opposition to the new order:

As if Afabet has no men, twenty-four women now sit in the People's Assembly. Abomination!! It is against the Sharia [Islamic law] for women to talk in public, to open their veils, to leave their families and go to work alone.

Our culture is being given to people who have not worked for it.

Our tribal land, our forefathers' land is being given to peasants from other tribes. Fight against this abominable People's Assembly.⁵

Not surprisingly, this demonstration backfired. Poor peasants who had received land for the first time joined with women to resist the landlords and their allies. In the process, the linkage between these issues was underlined for everyone.

As difficult as it was to organize women, it was hard to hold back the children. Young boys and girls, especially in the towns, were playing war games with an ardor that began to worry EPLF

leaders. Living with war as a fact of daily life bred a cult of the gun and made the fighters heroes to young people everywhere. This was constructive up to a point, but it was also dangerous in that it glorified violence independent of political or social content.

Members of the Public Administration Department in Decamare first organized the children in late 1977 into mock military units to instill a bit of discipline into their games. Once a week, cadres met with the would-be soldiers to give them lectures on the aims of the fighting. In doing so, they launched a homegrown scouting movement that rapidly spread throughout the country. Members were known as Red Flowers (named for the blood of the martyrs that watered the soil in which they grew), and they were identified by bright scarlet neckerchiefs. Those in Keren met daily, working in a vegetable garden set aside for the local hospital, learning military drill and taking courses in history and politics. A Red Flowers cultural troupe from Decamare began to travel around the country and abroad.

By the spring of 1978, efforts to mobilize people in the towns were losing momentum, largely under the pressure of the changing military situation. The main problem in Keren was a continuing influx of war refugees, arriving empty-handed. In the months since liberation the EPLF had reconstructed some three hundred houses and made them available at low, fixed rents, but three thousand people had come to the city in need of housing. These numbers grew steadily as the escalation of the fighting on the coast and in the central highlands made refugees of many thousands more. Insecurity about the situation also stimulated some to leave Keren and other rear-area towns for Sudan, while many young people were joining the EPLF to fight.

Under these circumstances, organizing stable civil institutions became harder and harder, until simply maintaining them was a challenge. The transience of the population made consistency difficult, and the sheer amount of time that the new political structures took began to seem a burden to people increasingly focused on short-term necessity. A campaign to construct a network of tunnels and bomb shelters was one of the few programs to generate broad public participation in Keren, underlining the shift in public attention toward matters of survival.



Chapter 9

TURNING POINT

On October 16, 1977, the EPLF cut the road linking the port of Massawa to Asmara. This highway was the government's lifeline. Severing it meant that all supplies to Ethiopian forces not only in Asmara but in the other besieged highland garrisons would have to be airlifted at considerable expense and great risk. It also meant that the end of the war might finally be in sight. Forces were being marshalled on both sides for further confrontations. Perhaps Massawa would be next. Or even Asmara.

Three days after the road was secured, I toured the area. The blackened corpses littering the stark landscape had been doused with gasoline and set afire because the EPLF had no chance to bury them and couldn't risk the health hazard of leaving them in the blazing sun. The temperature at midday here was 130 degrees Fahrenheit. The cracked, bleached earth was dotted with grey thornbushes whose spikes could knife through the thickest shoe leather. The only shade was that which we created with our vehicles. This place was the closest thing to hell I'd ever experienced.

At the seventy-three kilometer marker, a rusted truck chassis from a 1976 ambush marked the front line. To the east were the Ethiopian positions, guarding Massawa. In the shimmering distance, I thought I could make out a sliver of the Red Sea. Behind us was Mai Atal, a whistle stop on the defunct Italian-built, narrow-gauge railway and the site of an Ethiopian army camp abandoned a year ago. Six empty boxcars sat by the crumbling cement platform, but there was nothing to pull them and nowhere to go, as most of the tracks had been ripped up to fortify bunkers. The corrugated tin roofs had been torn off the three small adobe buildings, and scraps of wire dangled from telephone poles.

West of the depot, EPLF fighters were dug into a granite ridge. Opposite them, the Ethiopians were deploying in the foothills at the base of the plateau in an effort to stretch the battle lines. The Eritreans concentrated their forces near the road and maintained scouts beyond their flanks. "They can come out with more people than we have bullets to shoot," said one guerrilla commander, explaining that the liberation front had to avoid spreading itself too thin.

The battle for the strategic road began on October 12 at 8:30 in the morning when EPLF forces ambushed a convoy of 200 vehicles. The fighting raged for five days as first one side, then the other gained an edge. Outnumbered more than three to one, the guerrillas launched their final assault on the afternoon of the sixteenth.

"When we attacked, we were astonished," related the battalion commander, as we crouched behind a boulder at the crest of the ridge and gazed across the parched grassland at the Ethiopian positions. "They didn't know any tactics. In places which could be held by a platoon of twenty or thirty, there were 600 or 700. They went as herds of cattle. We followed them like a monkey chasing a dog. Enemy casualties were very heavy. On our side, there were almost none. After that, we knew that the mountains were our best defense, so we pulled back to here."

The fighters were still holding the same positions when I returned to Mai Atal December 9 on a tour of the front lines with a team of Scandinavian broadcast journalists and an English photographer. The Ethiopians attacked just before dawn.

I was jarred bolt upright in my sleeping bag by the sound of an

artillery shell exploding 200 yards away. We had arrived in the dead of night three hours earlier, after a grueling ten-hour drive. I learned later that the EPLF had planned a push toward the port on the following day. The Ethiopians preempted them by twenty-four hours.

As I struggled to gather my gear to move out of the target area (apparently the EPLF field headquarters), I noticed several brigade commanders casually washing their faces and chatting. Their nonchalance was reassuring, but it didn't slow me or my companions down. We made our way to a bunker south of the road, out of the line of fire, while our Land Rover was hidden in the brush, its tire tracks swept with thorn branches to make its position invisible from the air. A half hour later, when it was clear that the Ethiopian advance had been stopped, our little press crew mobilized to move out.

Traveling light, we threaded our way for six miles along a maze of footpaths that linked hidden supply tents, outdoor kitchens, first aid centers and communications posts with the forward positions. Every shrub and briar patch showed signs of a guerrilla presence, but the installations were almost entirely invisible from seventy or eighty feet away. Around us, spent bullets pinged into the soft sand. In the near distance, the sound of small arms fire was constant, like popping corn. This steady crackling was broken periodically by the rhythmic *whump, whump* of outgoing mortar fire and the sudden metallic crashing sound of incoming artillery, whose last-second whistle always made my knees go slightly weak.

At last we neared the trenches. Rounding a bend in the dry wash, we bent low and dashed fifty yards directly toward the Ethiopian positions, slugs zinging through the acacia trees on the river bank beside us. After what seemed an eternity, we lurched into a small ravine that gave us enough cover to catch our breaths. From there, I climbed the back of a stone ridge that looked out over the battlefield. Wedged into a crevice with two EPLF machine gunners, I watched the battle unfold.

Hundreds of trucks, buses, troop carriers and armored vehicles were lined up on the plain below, stretching back toward Massawa. Over 5,000 soldiers, mostly peasant militiamen, were spread out around the stalled convoy. Some two dozen Soviet-supplied T-54 tanks dotted the surrounding hills, belching fire and smoke in our direction. Somewhere further back, out of sight, were new Soviet-made Katusha

rocket launchers, also known as Stalin Organs, that simultaneously fired more than twenty rounds each at EPLF positions.

Not long after I arrived, U.S.-supplied F-5 jet fighters began bombing and strafing the trenches, and by mid-morning it became clear that Ethiopian warships were also shelling us from twenty-five miles away. The noise was deafening, but the effect of all this hardware was minimal. The Eritreans were deployed in a network of interlocking trenches and foxholes. Only a direct hit, which was extremely rare, could get to them.

Much of the impact of heavy weaponry is psychological. The din itself induces panic, which creates targets. The Eritreans, however, were unfazed. Instead, they used their small numbers of captured mortars and light artillery pieces—at that time mostly 76-mm howitzers—to unnerve their foes with deadly effect. Forward spotters called in fire on concentrations of government troops, often firing behind them to provoke them to run forward while machine guns raked the ground in front of the trenches. Meanwhile, snipers armed with M-1s and Belgian FNs picked off the panicked soldiers one by one, knocking them down like mechanical ducks at an arcade. The sight was both exhilarating and horrifying. At one point, a grinning EPLF fighter beckoned to me and offered his rifle. For one instant, swept up in the action, I hesitated before waving him off. Ever since, that moment has haunted me, tying me to the carnage in a far more intimate way than I wished to acknowledge.

As I watched from my hilltop perch, I saw EPLF units filtering around the lines to execute flanking maneuvers on both sides of the convoy, guided by radio-toting company commanders, as the main force in the center slowly dropped back to lure the Ethiopians into a classic trap. At exactly 11:00 A.M., the EPLF counteroffensive began. The guerrillas fired down into the canyon from three sides. Next to me, the two gunners, sweat pouring off their brows from the blistering heat of their captured Grenov machine gun, pumped concentrated bursts into the fray. A pair of fourteen-year-old Vanguarders squatted behind us, passing fresh cartridge belts to the gunners. Down the line similar teams worked feverishly to lay down a solid curtain of fire, as their commander raced up and down with a walkie-talkie at his ear.

Within twenty-five minutes, the Ethiopians began to retreat,

first singly and in pairs, then in whole units. Through field glasses, I watched them dart out of their foxholes, bumping into one another and dropping their weapons in their fright. One fell to his knees, apparently wounded in the leg. Dragging himself hand over hand, he disappeared behind a bush as dozens of his comrades dashed past. No one stopped to help. After a few moments, he reappeared, pulling himself another five yards before collapsing in the sand. He didn't move again.

At noon, a canopy of grey clouds rolled in from the sea, cooling the scorched battlefield and ending the threat of air strikes. One EPLF sharpshooter near me pointed to the sky, grinned, and said, "God is with us today." Minutes later, swarms of guerrilla fighters appeared out of the dun-colored hills to cut off the last avenue of escape. The Eritreans crouched low, screamed blood-curdling battle cries, and shot their automatic rifles from the hip as they charged full tilt at the fleeing Ethiopian troops.

By dusk, the Ethiopians were pinned down again four miles to the east in their base camp at Dogali, trying desperately to protect the main source of fresh water for the nearby port. Eighteen hours later they were routed, fleeing all the way to Massawa.

I entered Dogali that day in a VW Combi requisitioned for the press corps. Our vehicle bore the insignia of the Ethiopian Navy. A decal on the windshield proclaimed: "Revolutionary Ethiopia or death." Two rows of young fighters, shouting and laughing, were lined up at the door to the two-story pump house, passing wooden cases of ammunition down the line like a bucket brigade at a house on fire. The threat of renewed air attack was the incentive for speed. The Soviet-made bullets and bombs were being loaded onto heavy-duty U.S. Army Mack trucks captured at Keren earlier in the year.

The scene offered a reminder of the peculiar international alignments in this war. During the dizzying geopolitical transition from U.S. to Soviet backing for Ethiopia, such seemingly contradictory associations were common. Later, I witnessed Soviet MiG-21s dropping French-made cluster bombs supplied by Israel, the one relatively consistent supporter Ethiopia had throughout most of the thirty-year war. Israeli military specialists were training government recruits in central Ethiopia, less than 150 miles from a similar camp in Segameda, run by Cubans. (Israel continued to sup-

ply the Derg with spares for U.S. aircraft and other heavy weapons until February 6, 1978, when Israeli Foreign Minister Moshe Dayan confirmed the arrangement in public statements, embarrassing Mengistu and temporarily disrupting this peculiar covert alliance.)

Meanwhile, the captured Ethiopian army camp at Dogali was a shambles. Two eight-wheeled, Soviet BRDM-2 armored cars lay abandoned by the side of the road, their tires shot out from under them. The smoldering remains of a T-54 tank blocked the entrance to the pump station. Helmets, boots, web belts, canteens, tins of meat and other bits of gear were scattered everywhere. In a cluster of trees across the road was a shack crammed with sacks of grain marked "Gift of the European Community." There were no non-combatants in the area.

Hundreds of unopened duffle bags were stacked between rows of empty pup tents and straw huts. A deck of playing cards fluttered in the wind. Photographs of men in full battle regalia posing with their wives and girlfriends lay trampled in the dirt. A trail of blood led to the crumpled body of one who had failed to escape. My escort rolled him over and stripped him of his watch and money (both of which were later turned over to an EPLF commander). Similar scenes were repeated throughout the area, as the fighters rushed to salvage everything they could before the planes came. I counted fifteen tanks and armored personnel carriers in working order. A balding, middle-aged guerrilla mechanic, laboring to change the tires on one of the disabled armored cars, stopped long enough to quip, "How do you think the Ethiopians will like seeing their own tanks chasing them?"

The EPLF military strategy was like a perpetual game of cat-and-mouse. For years the Eritreans had played the mouse. Now they had transformed themselves into the cat.

The EPLF drew heavily on Mao Zedong's strategy of protracted people's war, probably the most useful theoretical knowledge to come out of the training Isaias, Romedan and others got in China in the 1960s. Mao proposed that a popular liberation army in a semifeudal, semicolonial country like China should carry out an agrarian revolution while also waging war. Such an army, despite its lack of modern arms and ammunition, would fight all the harder for the stake each member had in the outcome.

Starting at a great disadvantage, this army should wage a hit-and-run guerrilla war, according to the people's war theory. When popular support and armed strength were at a sufficient level of development, the movement should establish a secure base area within the country. The base would serve as proof of military success; it would give people an example of what the future might hold when the movement seized power; and it would provide the liberation army with a place to train and develop its forces, treat its wounded and supply its armed units in the field. When it reached this stage, the army should merge its guerrilla squads into larger, mobile units that could stand up to the full force of the enemy and engage in fixed position warfare to defend the base area. This second stage marked what Mao termed the "strategic stalemate." It followed the "strategic defensive."

The final and highest stage of war in this analytic framework was the "strategic offensive" in which the liberation forces encircled the enemy in the towns and cities and then captured them one by one. This is where the Eritreans saw themselves at the end of 1977. Mao also made a case for what he termed the "strategic retreat," a step to be taken by a weaker body to conserve its strength in moments of military crisis in order to buy time to rebuild. No one in Eritrea talked much about this possibility in 1977, but the decision to exercise this option the next year would prove the most brilliant military move of the thirty-year war.¹

The night after the Dogali battle, convoys of EPLF trucks began to roll into the guerrilla base camp filled with civilian volunteers singing: "Eritrea, my Eritrea, your cities become our camps." Fighters surrounded them and joined into the songs, clapping and laughing. Barefoot peasants cavorted with dapper urban teenagers; rural and urban women from vastly different backgrounds ululated in wildly enthusiastic harmony. The guerrillas formed circles in the road and danced around them.

Over the next twelve days, until the fighting resumed, these volunteers prepared food for the fighters, carried it to the front lines at great personal risk, tended the wounded and rallied the healthy at every opportunity. During the first week Keren residents collected and sent 8,445 birr and a truckload of donated *berbere*, sugar

and grain, together with a dozen live goats and two cows. Two bakeries began working twenty-four-hour shifts to make thousands of hard rolls for the fighters. Hospitals and clinics as far away as Afabet were flooded with volunteers to help with the wounded, who were moved to the rear as soon as their condition permitted. Many with flesh wounds returned to the trenches after their initial treatment and hiked back to emergency clinics each day to have their dressings changed.

During a brief interlude I spent in Keren, where virtually the entire city was organizing itself to support the troops on the eastern front, I met Isaias Afwerki for the first time. He stood slightly over six feet, though his lean physique and crisply pressed khakis made him seem taller. His demeanor was modest almost to the point of being shy until he began speaking about the military situation.

Isaias was then the Assistant General Secretary of the liberation front, but he was widely credited with being the driving force behind the movement's political and military strategy. At that point, he, like everyone else in the front, was still optimistic about the EPLF's short-term prospects. The fighting in Massawa would be over by Christmas, he predicted, and Asmara would be next.

"The city is under siege," he said. "We are waging economic war there now. The next step will be military. We are waiting for things to get ripe. When the time comes, we'll take action." When I asked him about the impact of the new Soviet arms being airlifted into Asmara, he shrugged and remarked, "If the weapons themselves could fight the battles, that could change the situation. But I think that people are the decisive factor—especially people fighting for their liberation."

The cutting of the Asmara-Massawa road marked the most dramatic advance in the war to that point. Now the capital itself was under siege, and the main port was threatened. This brought more attention to the conflict within Ethiopia and abroad, as it began to threaten the political viability of the Addis Ababa regime, which had publicly staked its future on its commitment to hold onto the strategic Red Sea territory.

From a military standpoint, this was a particularly delicate

time for the EPLF, as positions around Asmara had to be defended while keeping up two major fronts on the road and watching for potential surprise attacks from the rear. Pushing the government back to Massawa took some pressure off by compressing that battlefront, but it still left the EPLF spread thin.

In October, the EPLF and ELF finally initialed a unity pact that should have helped tighten the screws on Ethiopia, but the ELF stalled on implementing the plan for collaboration between departments and military units. The EPLF remained adamant in its insistence on fighter-to-fighter dialogue and political struggle. This lack of working unity hurt the Eritreans badly and contributed to a missed opportunity to seize the moment before the new regime in Ethiopia could pull itself together and counterattack. Even so, the rapidly changing external situation would likely have produced the same results in the long term, whether or not a more effective Eritrean alliance had been achieved.

From September 1974 through much of 1977, the Ethiopian government and the country's armed forces were in a state of radical and often chaotic transition. Throughout these early years, there was little ideological unity or coherent leadership and much dissension in the ranks. Though Mengistu's bloody coup in February 1977 ended contention at the top, there were detentions, purges and political executions throughout much of that year, also marked by the peak of the Red Terror campaign against the underground Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Party and by the suppression of the other major civilian party, Me'ison.

While the Ethiopians were fighting among themselves, and the Eritreans were advancing on the army's last garrisons in the north, Somalia invaded from the southeast in support of long-standing irredentist claims on Ethiopia's Ogaden region. However, the opportunistic strike backfired spectacularly on that country's Soviet-backed military strongman, Mohammed Siad Barre. The Somali invasion gave Mengistu the chance to rally patriotic support for his regime in Ethiopia, and it provided the rationale for massive, direct intervention by the Soviet Union and Cuba, both of which sent combat units to the Ogaden to help drive the Somalis out, after switching allegiance to Ethiopia.

Although the Cubans resisted Mengistu's exhortation to deploy combat forces in Eritrea, the impact of the startling realignment that swept the Horn of Africa in the spring and summer of 1977 was soon felt there as new arms, fresh troops and front-line combat advisors hit the battlefield. The first Soviet small arms to arrive in Eritrea showed up in September in fierce battles around Asmara. They were followed by the appearance of Soviet T-54 tanks with drivers from the People's Democratic Republic of Yemen (until January of that year a close ally of EPLF). The deadly effect of the weapons, reinforcements and military advisors increased steadily through the fall and climaxed in the battle for Massawa at the end of December.

With the Eritreans looking like imminent winners, journalists and other foreign visitors flocked to the field. The largest contingents came from Italy. They included delegations from trade unions and small far-left political parties, as well as reporters from *L'Unita*, the organ of what was then known as the Italian Communist Party, and from *La Repubblica*, the socialist daily with the second largest circulation in Rome. Reporters also came from Britain, France, Belgium, Kuwait and Japan, and there was one plucky relief worker, Mary Dines, from the left-wing British charity War on Want, who spent nearly a month in the field.

Dealing with these foreign guests was a new challenge for the EPLF. While journalists found Eritrea a hardship assignment, difficult but familiar, many political activists seemed shocked by the conditions they found. Some people brought provisions with them; others, mainly journalists, carried whiskey in their suitcases. Some managed to buy locally brewed cognac and gin in the newly liberated towns, and one Japanese TV crew found enough liquor to stay drunk throughout most of a two-week visit. Eritreans said little, but they were deeply insulted by the insensitive reactions of some travelers to the local hospitality.

Among the worst I recall was an Italian film crew with whom I traveled in my first weeks back in Eritrea in 1977. The plain, doughy flatbread and the spicy lentil stew were frequent targets of criticism. When canned sardines were served one morning, the filmmaker griped that fish was not a breakfast food. Finally, in

Decamare, we were presented with a four-course, sit-down banquet of the best national dishes: tangy *ziginy* (goat), *dorho* (chicken) with stewed hard-cooked eggs, a mild vegetable and beef dish, a mixed salad, and stacks of fermented teff *injera* with carafes of syrupy *meys* and filtered *sewah* to drink.

The leader of the film crew, a self-described revolutionary who professed sympathy for the Eritrean liberation struggle, asked for grilled chicken instead and offered to go to the market to buy it. Perhaps it was in a spirit of revenge that we were offered a special treat for an antipasto—stuffed green peppers. These “land mines,” as one fighter later termed them, were filled with minced onions and *berbere* paste, the hot spice used by the teaspoon to flavor entire stews. I recall these delicacies going in one end and out the other with lightning-like speed. It was rather difficult for the Italians to sit down for days afterward.

With the number of visitors steadily climbing, the EPLF reorganized its fledgling Reception Department and began controlling the movement of outsiders more closely. Starting in December 1977 and lasting until the war ended in 1991, I was officially guided. I could no longer hop on a bus or hitch a ride with a truck by myself. While I was rarely refused a travel request for security or other political reasons, I did find myself denied opportunities for interviews or tours when my guide was either exhausted or not in the mood.

A more subtle consequence of the new protocol was the distancing from the people and from rank-and-file fighters that came with visitors being served special—and separate—meals, and being lodged in hotels or guest houses. As my six-month tour wore on, I felt increasingly isolated and lonely, and I found myself gravitating toward visiting foreign correspondents for social as well as professional company.

I had gone back to Eritrea in the summer of 1977 with loose freelance arrangements with *The Washington Post* and the *Guardian*. In late September I began reporting for the BBC, sending a first-person account of a battle I witnessed outside Asmara. I began filing regularly by courier and occasionally by encoded radio messages sent via EPLF to Sudan for telexing. I also took it on myself to brief incoming journalists on the political and military situation and to

suggest places to go and people to interview. This led to proposals to file follow-up stories for them after they left. In this way, I began to write for Reuters, *Le Monde* and *La Repubblica* (in English).

On the December 20 evening news, Radio Ethiopia announced that EPLF forces had been repulsed outside Massawa and that the city was now quiet. Nothing could have been further from the truth. At dawn the next morning, the Eritreans charged into the port and took control of all but two small but strategically important islands and a heavily defended peninsula that jutted into the harbor. I arrived that night. "It was not actually a battle," one exhilarated fighter told me. "They were retreating and we were following."

I was with Simon Dring, a BBC-TV reporter traveling in Eritrea on his own time to do a book, and Mike Wells, a freelance photographer working with Simon. We waited till first light to enter the city. As I stepped out of the Land Rover to photograph the sign marking the municipal boundary, a pair of F-5 jets swooped toward us out of the sun, still low on the eastern horizon.

"Stay still!" barked our EPLF chaperon, Goitom Asghedom, a lanky young fighter who had escorted tourists in Asmara before joining the front. Now he was a guide and translator with the Reception Department. Over the next twelve years, we would share many months in each other's company, roaming about Eritrea by car, by camel and by foot. The next two days, however, were probably the longest we ever spent together.

The drill when jet fighters appeared was to squat in place to avoid presenting a target. The planes went so fast that a person on the ground was virtually invisible so long as he remained immobile. When the planes came overhead, you covered your watch and pointed your camera downward so no light glinted off the lens. After the planes passed, you could seek shelter, but first you had to make certain there was not a second or third aircraft lurking to watch for movement after the first pass.

This time, we knelt in the dirt by the roadside until the F-5s were gone. When the second pair appeared a few minutes later, accompanied by a slow moving T-33, we took cover in a culvert under the road. With us were several civilians fleeing the city.

At 10:30, we began to make our way into town, stopping at the police station for a rest. A tearful woman staggered into the room, dragging a small child; she mumbled that she had been without fresh water for ten days. Two of her children had been gunned down on the street by panicking government troops. Grief-stricken and disoriented, she was now trying desperately to get out of Massawa. A fighter took her to the road and linked her up with a group of other refugees hobbling out to the desert to wait out the fighting.

Threading our way deeper into the city, we came upon a small tree-lined park where a squad of fighters was dug in. Behind them, three 81-mm mortars periodically fired toward the distant naval base. While another pair of jets screamed overhead, we lay in the cool grass explaining to the suspicious artillery crew that we were journalists, not prisoners of war.

By late afternoon, we reached the main EPLF defense line. We camped in the shade of a concrete building whose walls provided security against a random hit from Ethiopian artillery that was lobbing shells into the neighborhood in a tit-for-tat with EPLF gunners. Throughout the night, the streets around us buzzed with the sound of EPLF trucks, moving without lights, ferrying supplies in and wounded fighters and civilians out. The exchange of fire slowed but never let up.

The morning of December 23 began quietly enough. There were sporadic explosions every few minutes, but nothing moved in the streets. By now the EPLF controlled three-quarters of the city. Almost all the civilians were gone. Government forces were isolated in the besieged naval base and on the two offshore islands. According to EPLF intelligence, most of the Ethiopian forces, some 6,000 troops, were holed up at the base.

Though the islands with the city's main port facilities were the real prize, the capture of the base would be the key to victory. The U.S.-built complex lay at the tip of a sandy peninsula, separated from the mainland where we were camped by 500 yards of salt flats, flooded to a depth of four feet. The EPLF held positions near a cement factory on the sea side of the peninsula, and fighters were dug into foxholes and shallow trenches along a fifteen-foot levee that looked over the salt pans. The press corps occupied the steps

of an abandoned bar a half-mile from the front lines.

At precisely 2:16 P.M., the neighborhood around us seemed to erupt with the sudden, simultaneous launching of hundreds of out-going mortar and artillery rounds.

Thunk, thunk, whump, whump, thunk, whump, thunk, whump. Then, in the distance: *kaboom! boom! boom!* rolling back over the water, like the grand finale of a fireworks display. From every direction, seemingly all at once, a barrage of murderous, unanswered cannon fire pounded the naval base and the two besieged islands.

I leapt to my feet, unsure what to do or where to go, but certain that I couldn't sit still. Two EPLF photographers casually rose and beckoned to our little group; we followed them in a ragged procession through the shantytown that separated us from the shore.

At the base of the sea wall, we came upon hundreds of fighters milling about with rifles cradled in their arms and heavy ammunition clips strapped to their web belts. There was a low level buzz, but no discernible conferring; everyone seemed to know what they were to do.

At 2:30, they went over the top. I clambered into a tiny foxhole at the crest of the ridge to watch.

Under the cover of the relentless mortar bombardment, the EPLF fighters surged through the chest-deep water in a broad arc that stretched several hundred yards. A second shorter line of fighters appeared from behind the cement factory, darting across the sandy spit to converge with the first force. At the halfway mark, the shooting started, sporadically at first and then from every corner of the base. Bullets whistled overhead and ricocheted loudly off the tin-roofed shacks behind me like hail on a barn roof.

An EPLF team rolled a U.S. army jeep up to the line with a 105-mm recoilless rifle mounted on the back and began firing. They were answered almost immediately by a sharp crack, like a bolt of lightning, from an Ethiopian tank directly opposite us. Then a second and a third tank joined the fray, as the first jet fighters shrieked overhead. The noise was deafening; the air was thick with the stench of cordite.

I popped up to photograph the action and was immediately knocked backward into my foxhole by the blast of a shell exploding at the lip of the sea wall. The shock left me dazed and without

hearing in one ear for thirty-six hours, but otherwise unharmed. However, wounded fighters were by then appearing behind us in growing numbers. The assault was not going well.

A dozen mud-soaked guerrillas slid over the ridge, bearing two of their fallen comrades. One man stopped in the open behind me, seemingly oblivious to the planes passing above us, to tear a strip off his bed sheet and bandage the bleeding head of another fighter. A woman, drenched to her shoulders, plopped down in the dirt to catch her breath. I offered her a drink of water. She declined, stared for a brief moment into space, then stood up to help carry one of the wounded back to a first aid station. At this point Goitom ordered us to pull back. It was 3:30.

One by one we dashed across the open area to regroup behind the first row of wooden shacks. Dodging from one alley to the next, and following the shadows to avoid being sighted from the air, we made our way through the single-story slums where most of the dockworkers had lived with their families. The houses were patched together from odd-shaped wooden slats, flattened tin cans and oil drums, sheets of cardboard, strips of plastic and jagged window-panes, scavenged from the nearby city. They were not built to withstand war.

The plaintive sounds of abandoned goats echoed off the shacks as we zigzagged through the neighborhood. A chicken with one leg blown off hopped in an aimless circle. An F-5 screamed behind us, and I dove for cover into an open doorway as a house forty yards away exploded, showering the street with splinters of wood, metal and glass. Up again for another fifty feet, adrenalin flooding my veins. A high-pitched shriek behind us. I threw myself at the base of a cement warehouse wall, as shards of steel struck a few feet above my head. The Ethiopian jets were dropping antipersonnel bombs that detonated in mid-air and sprayed death on those below.

We dashed across another fifty yards of open space and slid beneath an abandoned Soviet troop carrier. At the first lull, we raced out of the target area. By 5:00 P.M. we reached our home base, only to find an EPLF mortar set up where we had slept. In a poignant scene that was all too typical of this war, Goitom discovered a brother he hadn't seen in four years among the crew. After hurried embraces, he led us back another block to find shelter with-

in a thick-walled cement building, where we sat atop sacks of dried cow manure until the bombing finally let up at dusk. When we emerged, the artillery squad was gone, and much of the city was in flames from the first use of napalm, dropped on the shanties through which we'd raced hours ago.

The setback at the strategic port marked the end of an unbroken string of guerrilla victories. This was both the last major battle of the war against the U.S.-backed Ethiopian Army of Haile Selassie and the first confrontation with the new Soviet-built army of Mengistu Haile Mariam—the beginning of another era that promised to be even more brutal and destructive than the last.

An estimated 200 EPLF fighters were killed in Massawa and over 400 wounded in one of the worst losses of the war to that point, according to Petros Solomon, the top EPLF commander on the eastern battlefield and a member of the three-person military committee of the front's governing Political Bureau. This was one of the rare times that precise EPLF casualty figures were given out to reporters, as the liberation front generally viewed this information as intelligence that could benefit Ethiopia. These figures, high as they were compared to previous encounters, would pale in the intensified combat yet to come.

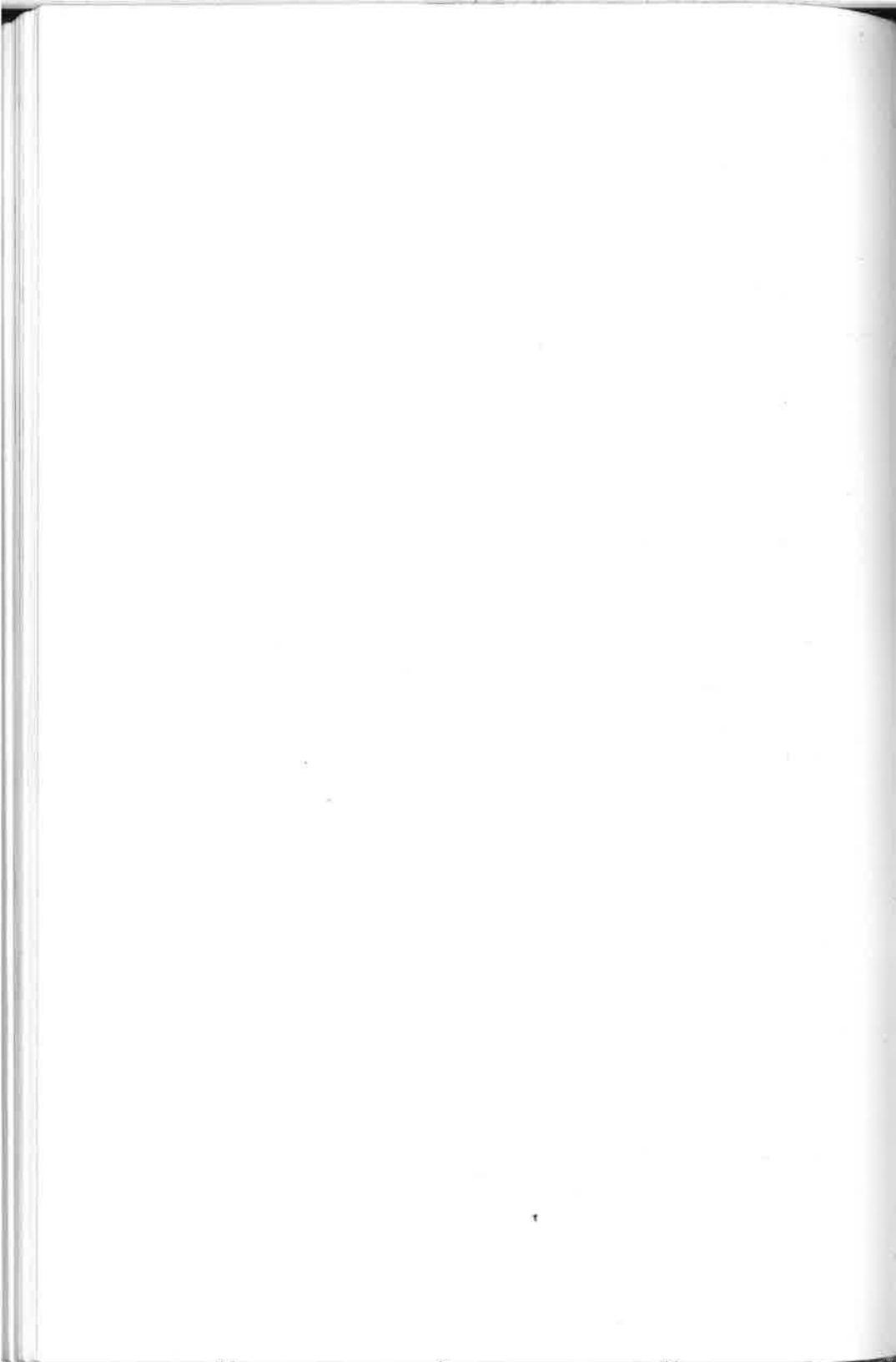
In retrospect, the EPLF clearly miscalculated the difficulty of taking the heavily fortified naval base and the two islands in the face of the added firepower the Soviets had brought to the fighting. Perhaps EPLF fighters should have followed the retreating Ethiopians directly into the naval base in the first battle instead of waiting to regroup. Yet nothing they might have done here would have mattered very much, for the overall balance of forces was rapidly tilting against them.

I stayed around Massawa for almost a month more, waiting to see if the EPLF would make another move on the Ethiopian positions. They did not.

Interviewing defectors and recently captured Ethiopian prisoners, I learned that Soviet advisors had taken a direct combat role in the Massawa fighting. Soviet technicians had operated the rocket launchers and the new long-range artillery, and Soviet ships lying offshore had joined in the bombardment of EPLF positions.

"I saw them firing the BM-21s without any Ethiopian assistance, because we did not yet know how to use them," said one army major who defected after the first of the year. Other Ethiopian soldiers, interviewed separately, confirmed that vast quantities of sophisticated new arms were pouring into Massawa and Asmara and were being operated by a host of foreigners. Three squadrons of MiG-21 and MiG-23 jet fighters were already in Ethiopia, and two more were on the way. They were being flown by South Yemeni veterans while sixty Ethiopian pilots finished their training in the Soviet Union. Yemeni pilots were also flying helicopter reconnaissance missions; eight high-level Soviet advisors in Asmara were said to be overseeing regional battle planning; and Soviet and Yemeni personnel were filling in as air traffic controllers at the Asmara airport, while 120 Yemeni tank and artillery specialists backed by Ethiopian foot soldiers guarded the strategic landing field.

From this and other anecdotal information, it seemed clear that the Soviet Union was not going to let Mengistu or Ethiopia go down to defeat in Eritrea if it could be helped.



C h a p t e r 10

R E T R E A T

May 29, 1978—In Khartoum, the EPLF claims that two Ethiopian attempts to break out of Asmara this month were crushed. A third try that met with brief success was also reversed after two weeks of heavy fighting, according to Central Committee member Andebrhan Wolde Giorgis.

Meanwhile, he tells me, the EPLF has launched a joint attack with the ELF on the government base at Barentu in the western plains. For the first time, the EPLF is using captured Soviet tanks in a frontal assault.

"Barentu will not have a long life. It will be captured soon," he says.

May 30—TPLF guerrilla leader Seyoum Mussa says that government forces are building rapidly in northern Tigray for attacks on several towns held by the ELF, probably Adi Quala and Mendefera, through which I'd ridden on the convoy two years earlier.

Two mechanized brigades and two infantry brigades of the

newly mobilized peasant militia are on standby in Axum and Adua. "The total number of Ethiopian forces in Tigray two months ago was 10,000, but this number has increased threefold," Seyoum tells me, adding that a new military air base is under construction in Makele, the Tigray capital.

Seyoum is optimistic that coordinated EPLF, TPLF and ELF forces can stop them, though he acknowledges that the Tigrayan rebels, operating in small hit-and-run squads, cannot by themselves stand up to the massive firepower being assembled for the campaign.

June 6—Vowing to fight for generations if necessary, Derg leader Mengistu Haile Mariam announces a total mobilization of every able-bodied Ethiopian for the war in Eritrea.

On Radio Ethiopia, Mengistu accuses a long list of Arab regimes of inciting and funding the conflict. He charges the U.S. with placing sixty military advisors on the Sudan border. He claims the EPLF is sending youngsters into battle hopped up on hashish, after forcing them to join the front. Eritreans are forced to eat donkeys, he says, because the "bandits" are stealing everything from them and executing those who protest.

In a surprising admission, Mengistu says that 13,000 government troops have been lost in the Eritrea fighting, while 30,000 to 50,000 civilians have been killed and 200,000 made refugees. This is a "life-and-death" struggle for Ethiopia, he concludes.

June 11—Thousands of Ethiopian troops are moving through northern Tigray in what Tigrayan and Eritrean guerrilla leaders describe as the largest military operation ever attempted there.

One brigade (1,500 soldiers) pushes out of Enda Selassie in western Tigray, driving northwest on a little-used dirt road that leads into Eritrea's ELF-controlled western plains. Two mechanized brigades are moving out of Adigrat and Adua toward the TPLF-held town of Intechew, a jumping-off point for attacking the EPLF in southeastern Eritrea. More troops are preparing to press directly northward on the road to Asmara.

"If they come in such a large force, we can't stop them, but they will suffer a lot," says TPLF spokesperson Yemane "Jamaica" Kidane,

a former EPLF fighter of mixed Eritrean and Tigrayan parentage (and a former college roommate of Andebrhan in Cambridge, Massachusetts, in the 1960s) who joined the Tigrayan insurgents in 1975 to help launch the new Ethiopian opposition movement.

June 13—A combined EPLF and TPLF force retakes Intechew. More than 500 government troops are killed and three tanks destroyed in five hours of heavy fighting, Jamaica says in Khartoum. "They have got a good lesson that they can't reoccupy the liberated areas," he remarks.

June 17—There is no formal announcement, but I learn from unofficial sources that the joint EPLF/ELF Barentu assault is over, a stunning failure.

Coordination apparently broke down. The EPLF lost 150 fighters and one tank. The ELF reportedly executed one of its commanders for dereliction of duty.

June 21—Opposition forces battle the Ethiopian army on three simultaneous fronts near the Eritrean frontier.

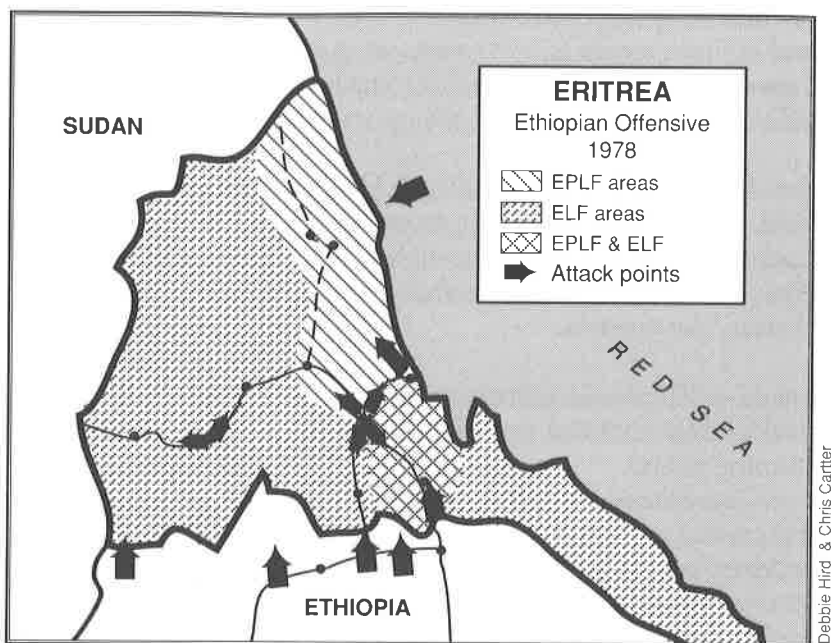
The ELF reports heavy fighting south of Om Hajer, near the border with Sudan. ELF forces are also engaged in a joint operation with the TPLF north of Enda Selassie, while EPLF and TPLF forces are struggling to hold Intechew against a two-pronged government assault.

There are now 70,000 Ethiopian troops in Tigray for the campaign. More arrive daily. It is clear that we are only seeing skirmishes designed to position government forces for the main onslaught.

June 29—Division-size Ethiopian units (6,000 soldiers each) are advancing toward western Eritrea on three fronts out of Gondar, Enda Selassie and Adua. More than 80,000 government troops are now in position for the main offensive.

"The Ethiopians have more men and more weapons than before, but we are also stronger," Andebrhan tells me. "The bigger the Ethiopians try, the bigger they will lose."

"However they come, it will still be mass, blindfolded attacks,"



Debbie Hird & Chris Carter

a leader of the ELF maintains in an interview in Khartoum.

"There is much more aerial and artillery bombardment in every battle now, but the decisive factor is the fighting on the ground. The Derg cannot push on the ground," says the TPLF's Yemane Kidane.

July 4—Five separate Ethiopian forces, driving through Tigray and Gondar, have reached the border and are pushing north into Eritrea. Other units are probing the lines around Asmara. Full-scale attacks are expected any day out of the besieged capital and from Massawa, Adi Qayeh and Barentu.

The total number of Ethiopian troops poised for the campaign now exceeds 100,000. With the main forces beyond their reach, the TPLF is redeploying its fighters in small guerrilla bands to harass government supply lines and rear bases. The weaker ELF appears to be the Derg's primary initial target.

July 6—I am dashing back and forth from office to office, meeting leaders of the EPLF and the TPLF, reopening relations with the

ELF, establishing contact with the Ethiopian ambassador, occasionally interviewing staff at the U.S. embassy and firing off telexes. I'm on retainer with Reuters and *The Financial Times* of London, and I'm stringing for the BBC and nine newspapers. I am in Sudan with my two daughters, Laura and Joanie, ages ten and twelve, for most of the summer. I will stay on alone through the fall.

My children limit my mobility, and I'm committed to join a Reuters team to report on the biannual heads-of-state meeting of the Organization of African Unity (OAU) in Khartoum in the third week in July, so I do not cross the border to cover the early stages of the offensive. Instead, I tour the burgeoning refugee camps, my two wide-eyed girls at my side. It is a distressing experience.

One Eritrean peasant, who declines to give his name out of fear of reprisal from Sudanese authorities, invites us into his small straw hut. There is one narrow wooden cot, an improvised stick table, a charcoal stove made from an old vegetable oil can, a dented teapot, and several ragged floor mats. He lives here with his wife and five children. We sit on the edge of the bed as he tells his story.

The family fled to Sudan from Om Hager in 1975 after the town was burned by the Derg. They had no money or property. Now, he collects wood in the forest, a two-day walk from here, to sell for fifty piasters (less than one dollar) per donkey load. During the summer rainy season, he does day labor for a Sudanese farmer. His wife spends her days grinding grain, hauling water from the river in large ceramic urns balanced on her back and caring for the family. There is no school and nothing for the children to do but wait.

"We never have coffee or tea," he says soberly but with no hint of self-pity. "At times we eat, at times we don't. We have not had meat for three years."

Asked when they will return home, he says, "I don't know. It depends on God."

There are now between 300,000 and 450,000 refugees in Sudan from Eritrea and Ethiopia. More than half are in squalid camps along the border. The rest, mostly townspeople, are scattered in the slums of Sudan's major cities, seeking work or awaiting transit to destinations across the Middle East, Europe and North America. With the OAU summit approaching, Sudanese officials are threatening to round up urban refugees and dump them in the

overcrowded border camps to remove them from sight. This frightens relief workers as well as refugees.

"One feels totally inadequate here," says a young Swedish health worker, as a refugee just arrived from Tessenei with four small children tugs at her sleeve. TB, measles and malaria are rampant. Diarrhea from the polluted river water is chronic. Malnutrition is also endemic, says the nurse, who is now treating 9,283 children for the condition.

Back in Khartoum, the foreign ministers of Africa's nearly fifty independent states are arriving for the preliminary OAU session that opens on July 7. There is no room left at the Hilton.

July 11—Two-and-a-half hours late, the aging British-built passenger train stutters out of the Khartoum station for Kassala, at a halting clip of ten miles per hour. I have begged off covering the OAU conference, arranged child-care for two weeks, and convinced a harried ELF representative to send me to the front lines for a quick visit.

The pomp and ceremony in Khartoum are too much for me, with the largest military campaign in modern African history taking place just over the border. The Eritrea issue is not even on the agenda of this chummy club of African governments, who deal best with issues of European decolonization but duck almost anything that challenges their collective image or their individual prerogatives.

To complicate matters, the government has closed the offices of the Eritrean and Ethiopian opposition movements for the duration of the conference to avoid embarrassing Ethiopian officials. A curtain descends on this drama that almost completely obscures it from public view.

I perform a maverick media service before I leave by inviting the press corps to an informal open house at my flat to meet representatives of all the liberation fronts. The rest is up to them. I am going to the battlefield to file a firsthand report.

July 13—I roll into Kassala, thirty-one hours late, riding on a bus that ferries passengers the last forty miles after the train breaks down altogether in Kashm el Girba.

I clear my papers with the local Sudanese security office and receive permission to cross the border. The ELF says no transport is available today. I wait. Much of my day is spent searching for toilet paper. I am not successful.

July 18—I am still waiting. I've written several features after interviewing refugees and visiting a TPLF clinic for wounded fighters, but there is no way to file them. The airplane to Khartoum is canceled, the train is not running, the roads to the capital are washed out, and there is no telex.

I hear rumors that Ethiopian forces have taken Om Hajer and are driving toward Tessenei. I was supposed to leave for the front with the ELF yesterday, but they tell me that the roads are impassable. They also claim they still hold Om Hajer. Mostly, they say nothing, leaving me alone at the guest house where the only English language publications are political tracts from the Arab Ba'ath Socialist Party of Iraq.

July 19—An Ethiopian force numbering 21,000 rolls into Tessenei, as panicked ELF guerrillas flee across the border into Kassala. Independently, I interview two of them.

Back at the guest house, a high-ranking member of the ELF's General Union of Eritrean Women races in and out, bringing fresh-baked bread to the arriving ELF fighters. She refuses to identify herself to me and, speaking in Tigrinya, she orders the other ELF personnel not to tell me anything, as I am close to the EPLF. I understand her but do not comment. "Everything is okay," she says to me in English. "Just sit tight. When there is transport, you will move."

I know I am going nowhere, and I am tired of lies. I file a story via TPLF radio to Khartoum and prepare to return to the capital.

July 21—Ethiopian forces break through ELF lines in the central highlands and recapture Adi Quala. The fall of Mendefera is a matter of days, perhaps hours, away. All the towns formerly under the ELF in the western lowlands except Agordat are now under government control. This leaves EPLF positions extremely vulnerable.

"We are confident that we can defend all the areas we control," says Andebrhan in Khartoum, though he concedes that defending

Decamare may be difficult as it is now threatened from four directions. "We are sure we will take these places again," he says, referring to the ELF losses. "This will just prolong our struggle."

July 25—I fly to Kassala with my daughter Laura in a Belgian Air Force C-130, painted in camouflage colors. The hold is crammed with blankets. Antiaircraft guns are fired at us as we approach the Kassala airstrip. We are coming in unannounced, and they think we may be an Ethiopian bomber. They miss.

Sudanese relief officials meet us and pose for photos. In the town market, I see sacks of grain and vegetable oil from the European Community and from the U.S. Agency for International Development. There are also relief tents and blankets for sale. Angry relief workers in the camps charge that emergency shipments do not reach the refugees.

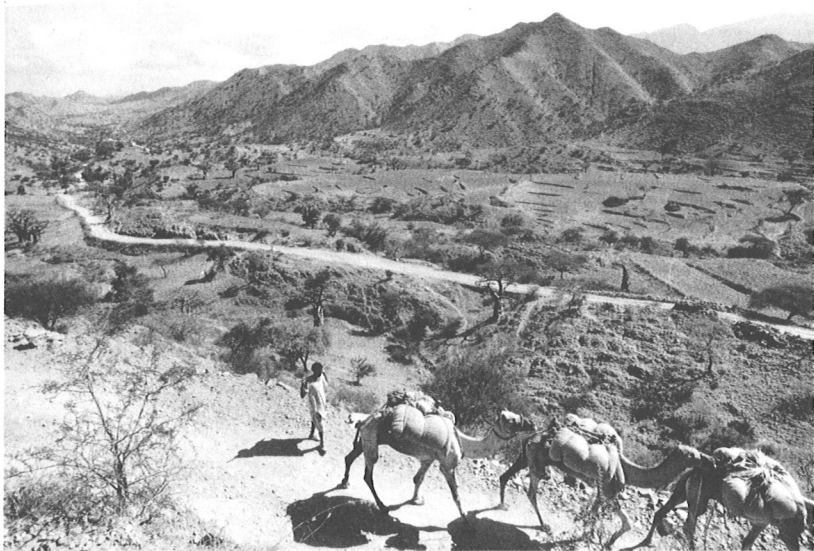
July 28—EPLF leaders announce "tactical withdrawals" from several unidentified positions in Eritrea. I learn that they include the port of Massawa and the towns of Decamare, Segeneiti and Digsä. The EPLF still holds most of the Massawa-Asmara road, and fighters are digging in around Keren.

Mendefera and Agordat are now in government hands. The ELF no longer occupies any urban centers. It is redeploying its battered forces in small, mobile guerrilla units.

"The Ethiopians have taken what they are capable of taking, and that's the end of their advance so far as we are concerned," Andebrhan tells me, adding that thousands of people have been displaced by the fighting. He worries that this will add new pressures to the liberation front in the midst of the rapidly escalating war.

August 10—With the collapse of the ELF and with the EPLF evacuations, refugees stream across the border into Sudan, where freak summer floods cut off virtually all transport to the desert camps outside Gedaref and Kassala. I fly to Kassala with British relief worker Kirsty Wright to visit the camps the day before Laura and Joanie fly home to Boston.

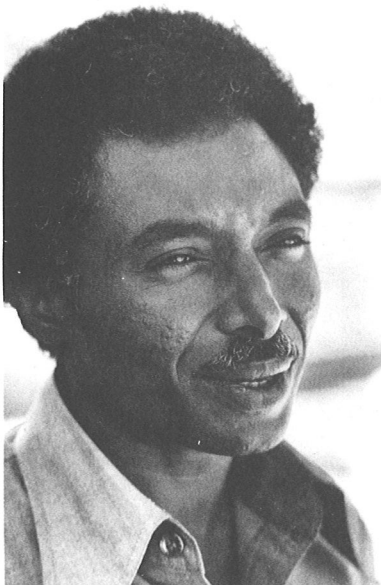
When we enter a camp near Kashm el Girba through a corridor of barbed wire, we are surrounded by throngs of children.



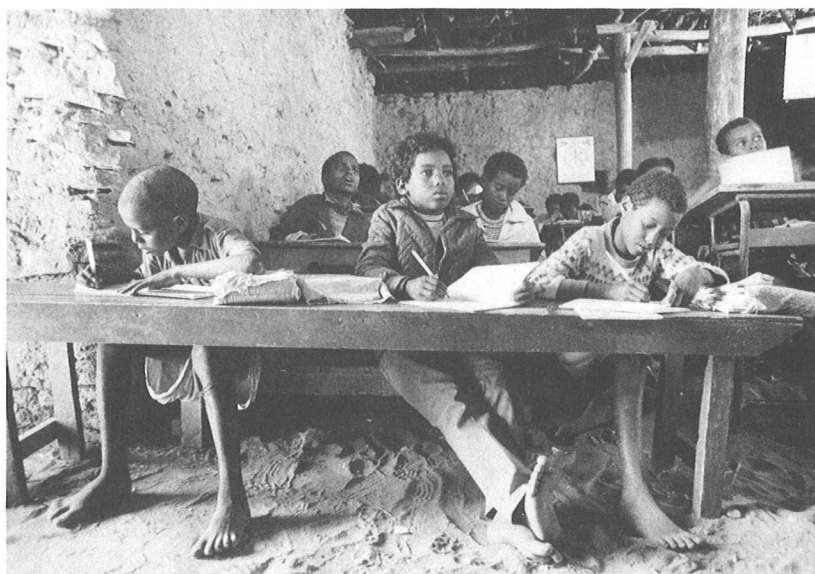
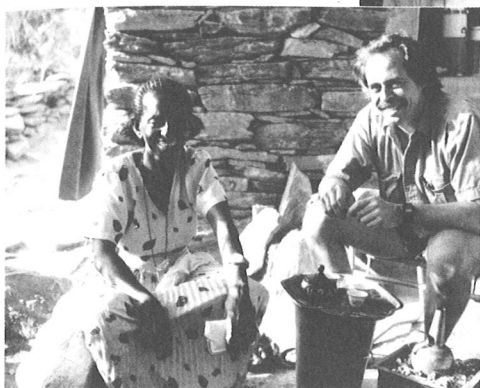
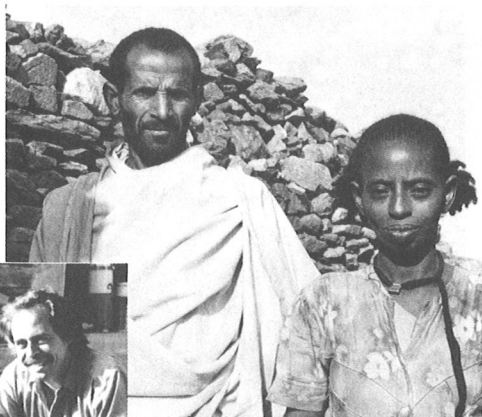
The road from the EPLF's desert base winds south toward the densely populated central highlands. (Photo by Mike Wells.)



EPLF guerrillas move freely on foot throughout most of rural Eritrea in the mid-1970s. (Photo by Mike Wells.)



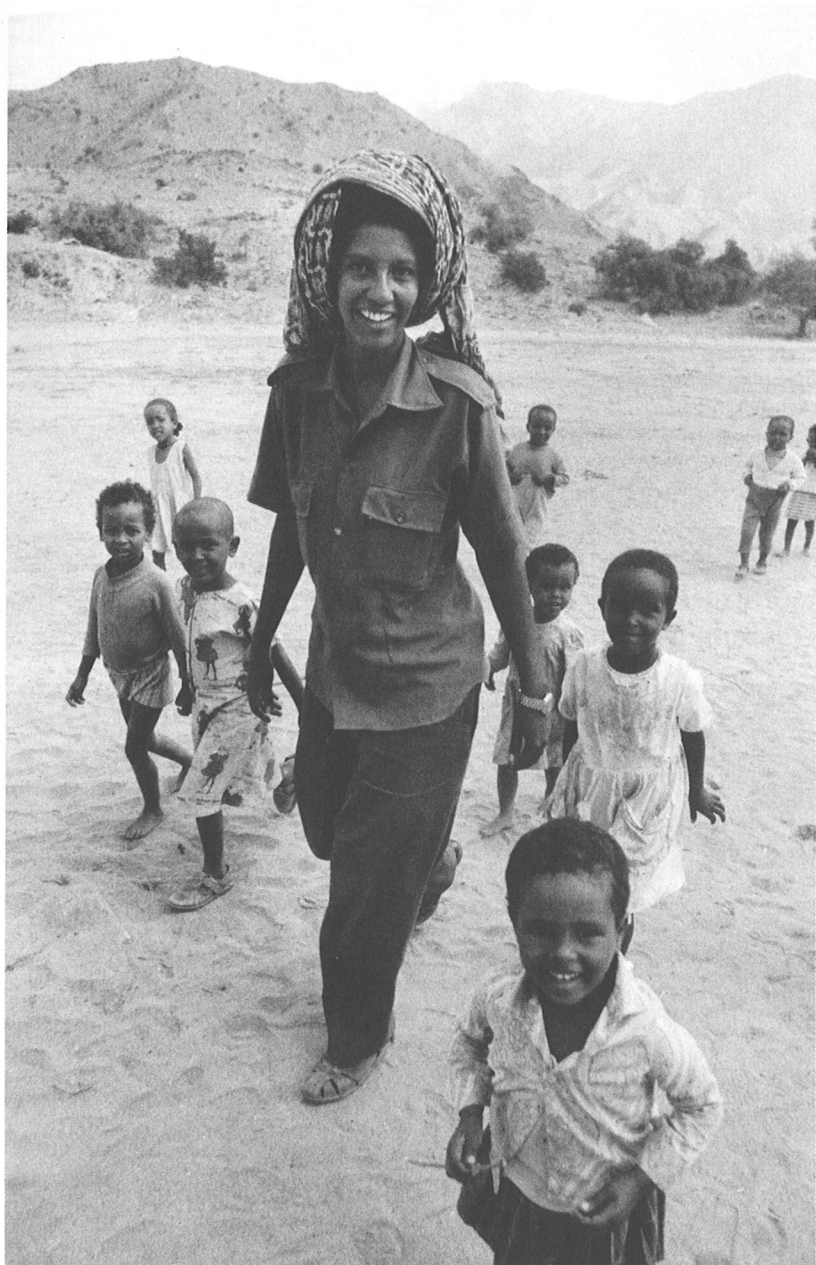
EPLF leaders in 1977: Romedan Mohammed Nur (top left),
Isaias Afwerki (right), Sebhat Ephrem (bottom left).
(Photos by Mike Wells.)



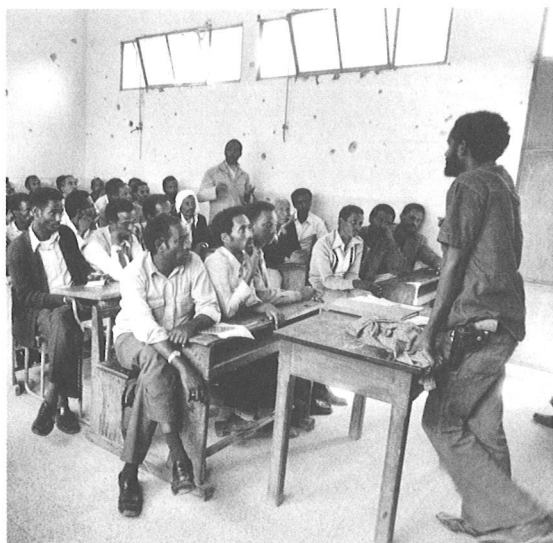
Fana and Gebrezghier at their house in Zagher in 1976 (top right, photo by Bruce Parkhurst). Fana with the author in 1989 (top left). Peasant children attend an improvised EPLF school in Zagher (bottom, photo by Mike Wells).



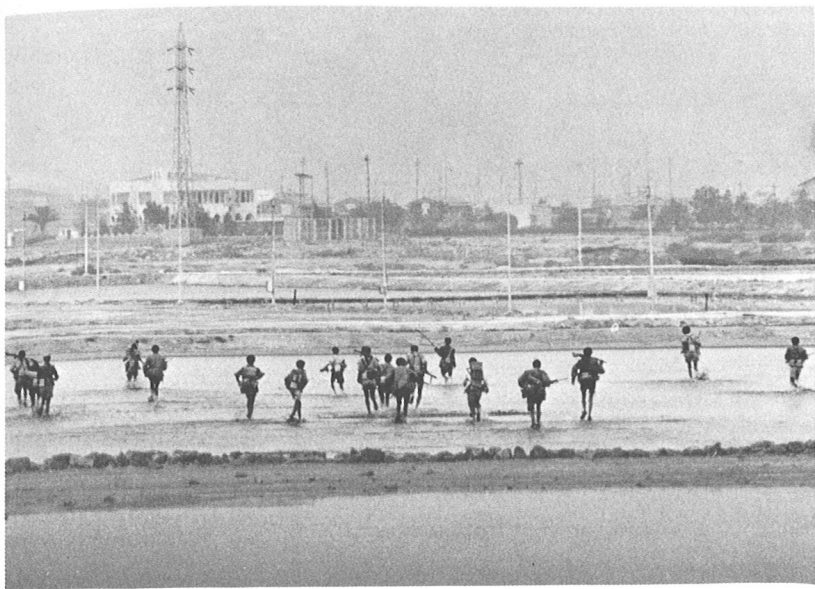
EPLF fighters attend school behind their trenches during lulls in the war (top, photo by Sarah Putnam)⁷. A field-trained technician repairs radios in an underground workshop (bottom, photo by Mike Wells).



Askalu Menkerios leads her charges across a dry riverbed at the Deba'at camp for war-displaced civilians. (Photo by Mike Wells.)



An EPLF cadre teaches history and politics to Decamare workers (top, photo by Mike Wells.) Field-trained "barefoot veterinarians" practice vaccinations on a scrap of inner tube (bottom, photo by Bruce Parkhurst).



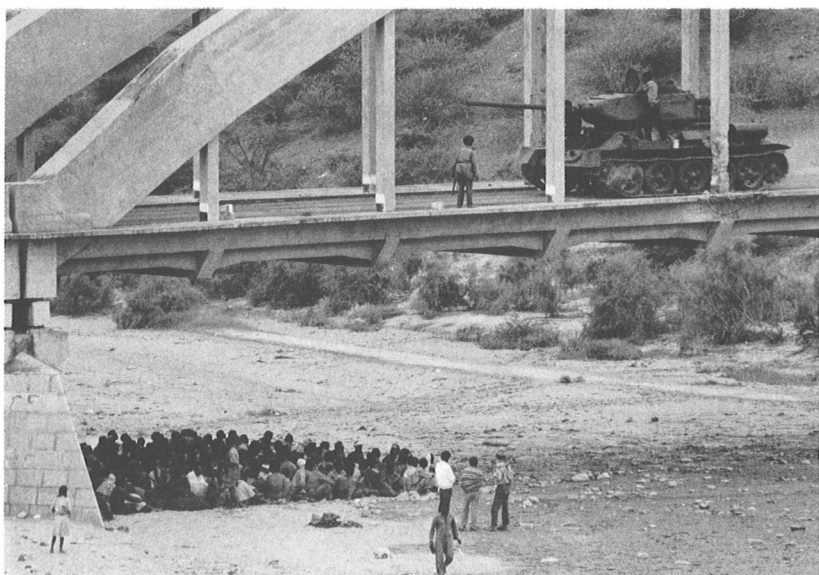
EPLF fighters charge government positions in the battle for Massawa under heavy fire from Ethiopia's new Soviet arms, Dec. 23, 1977. (Photo by Mike Wells.)



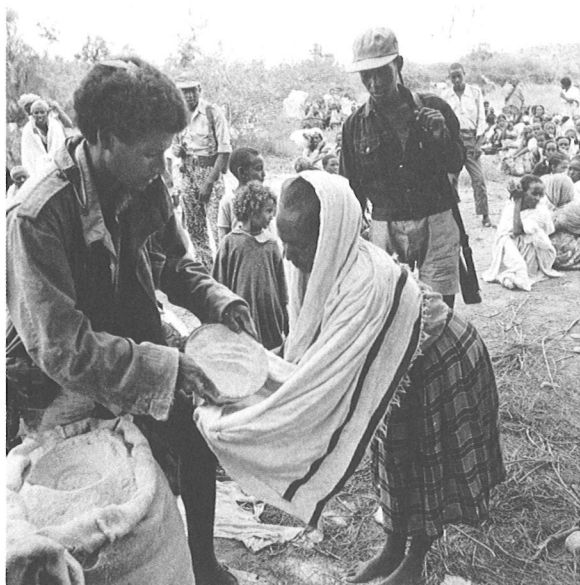
Captured Soviet T-54 tanks are moved to the rear.
(Photo by Mike Wells.)



Women recruits train at a secret EPLF camp in the Sahel mountains. (*Photo by Dan Connell.*)



Captured Ethiopian soldiers are hidden from aerial view in the midst of battle. (*Photo by Mike Wells.*)



War-displaced civilians receive grain from EPLF food stocks during the fighting. (Photo by Mike Wells.)



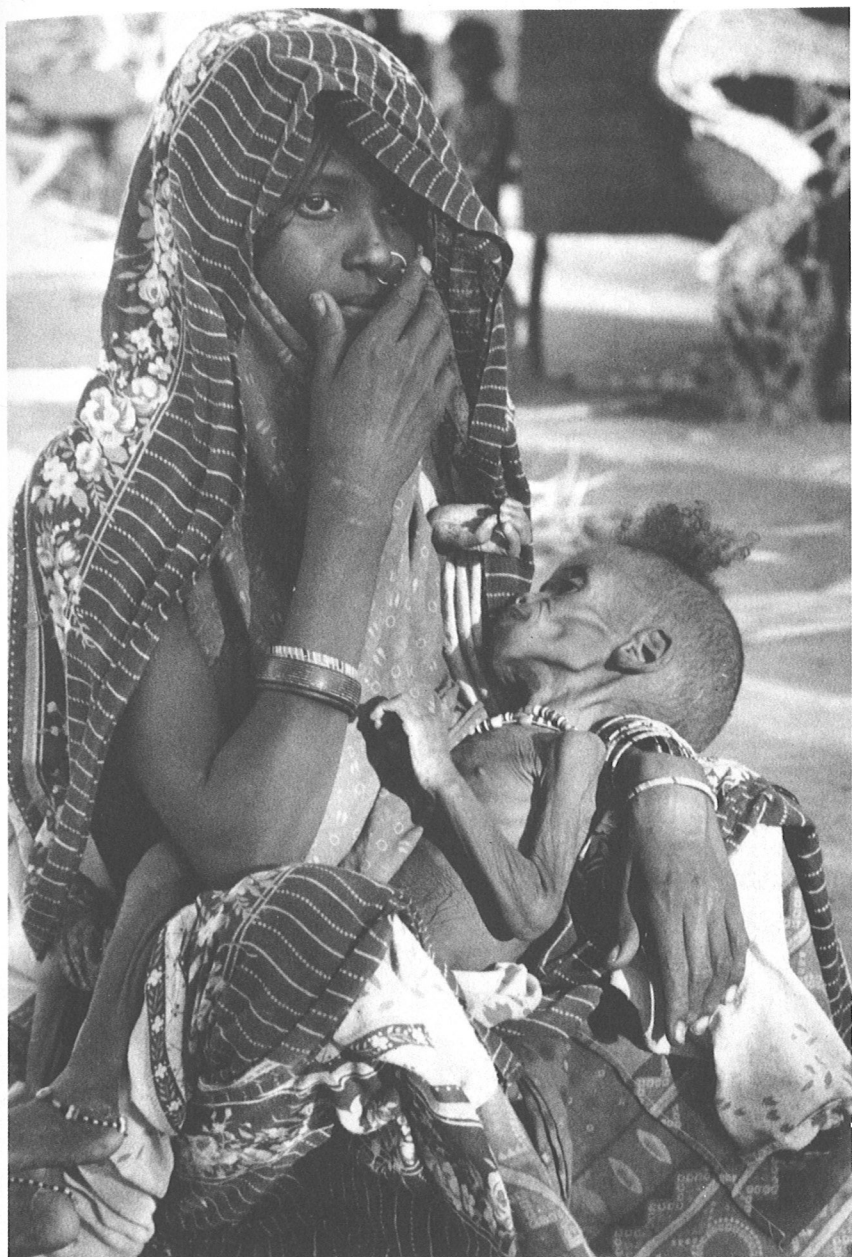
A wounded child is treated by an EPLF paramedic. (Photo by Dan Connell.)



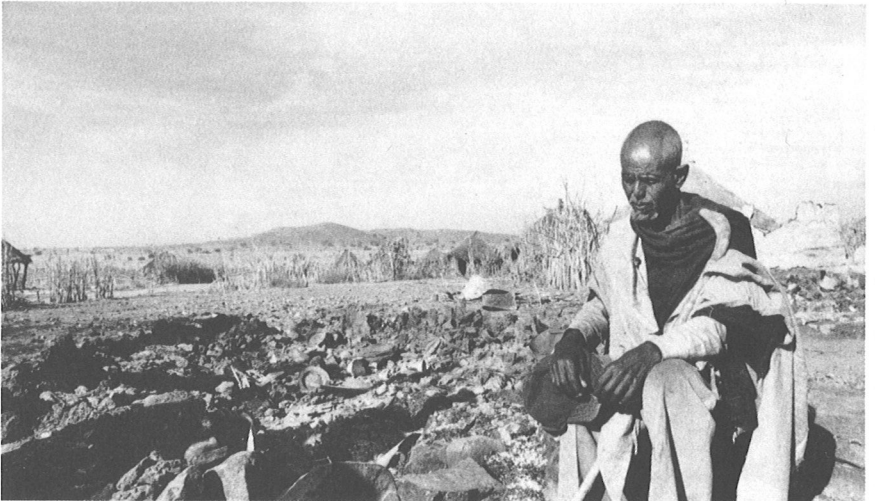
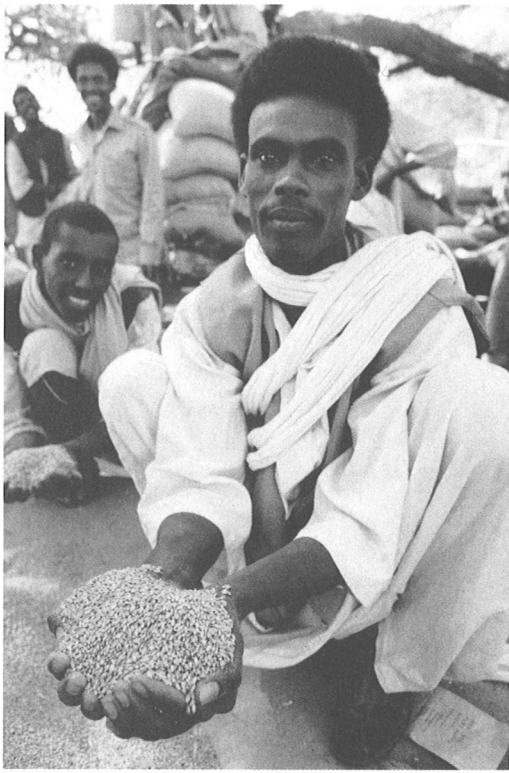
Peasants turn over the arid, rocky soil with hand-made wooden plows. (*Photo by Dan Connell.*)



War disrupts an already precarious existence for drought-stricken farmers. (*Photo by Dan Connell.*)



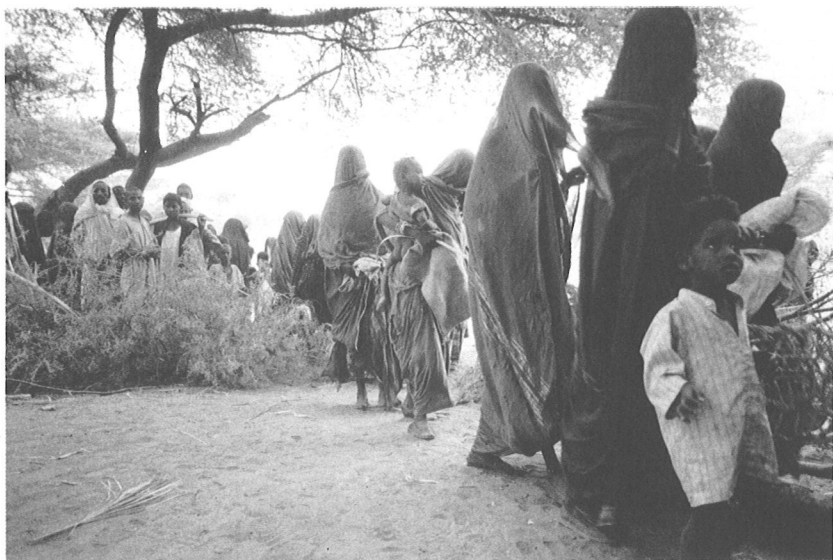
Fatna, 15, holds her dying son at an ERA feeding center in Barka in 1984. (Photo by Dan Connell.)



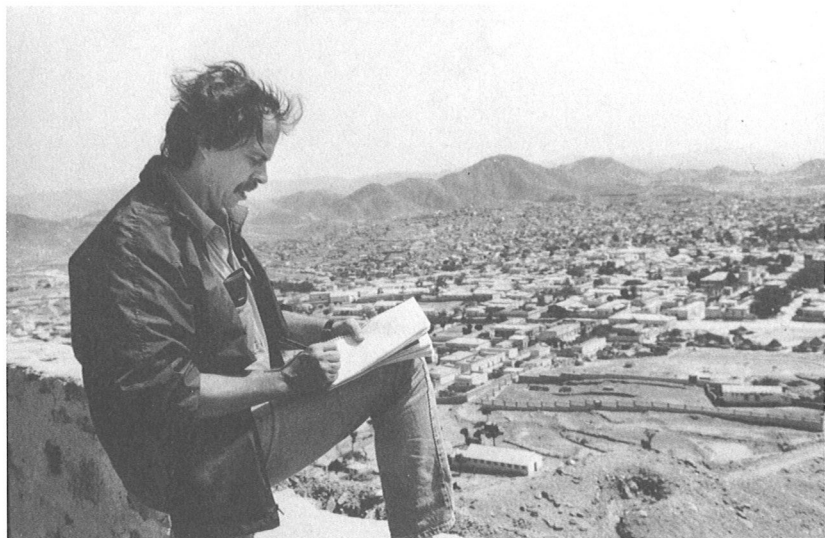
The ERA transports relief supplies from neighboring Sudan to remote villages throughout Eritrea during the 1985 famine (top, *photo by Sarah Putnam*). Berhe, 69 and blind, mourns the loss of his home after an Ethiopian air raid (bottom, *photo by Dan Connell*.)



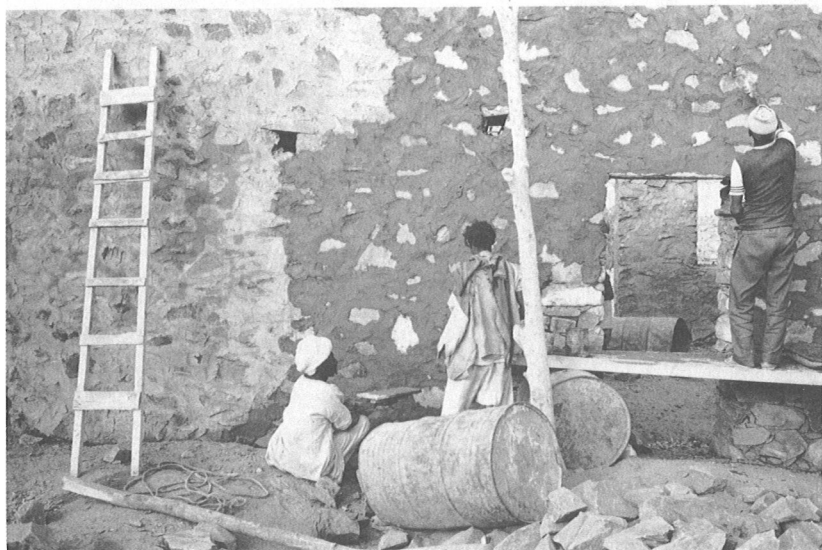
A hungry child scavenges for food after an ERA relief distribution. (*Photo by Sarah Putnam.*)



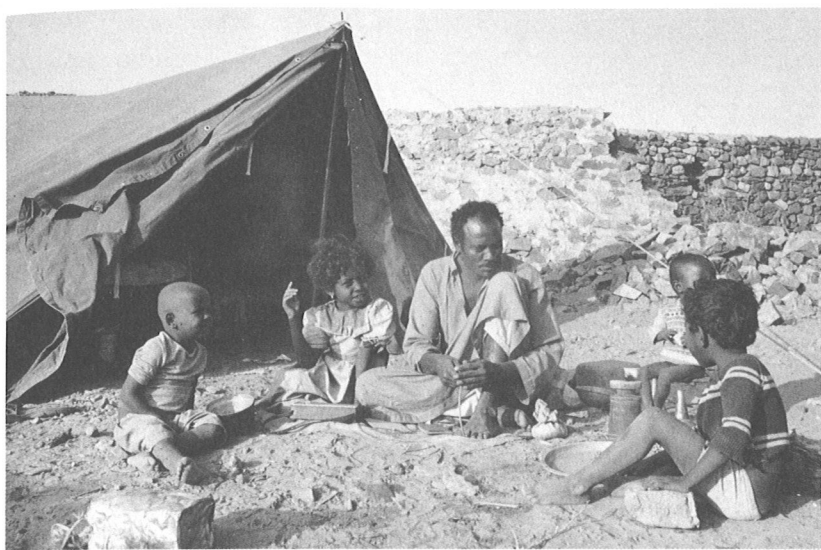
Veiled women line up for emergency food at an ERA camp in Barka. (*Photo by Sarah Putnam.*)



The author surveys liberated Keren in 1991.
(Photo by Debbie Hird.)



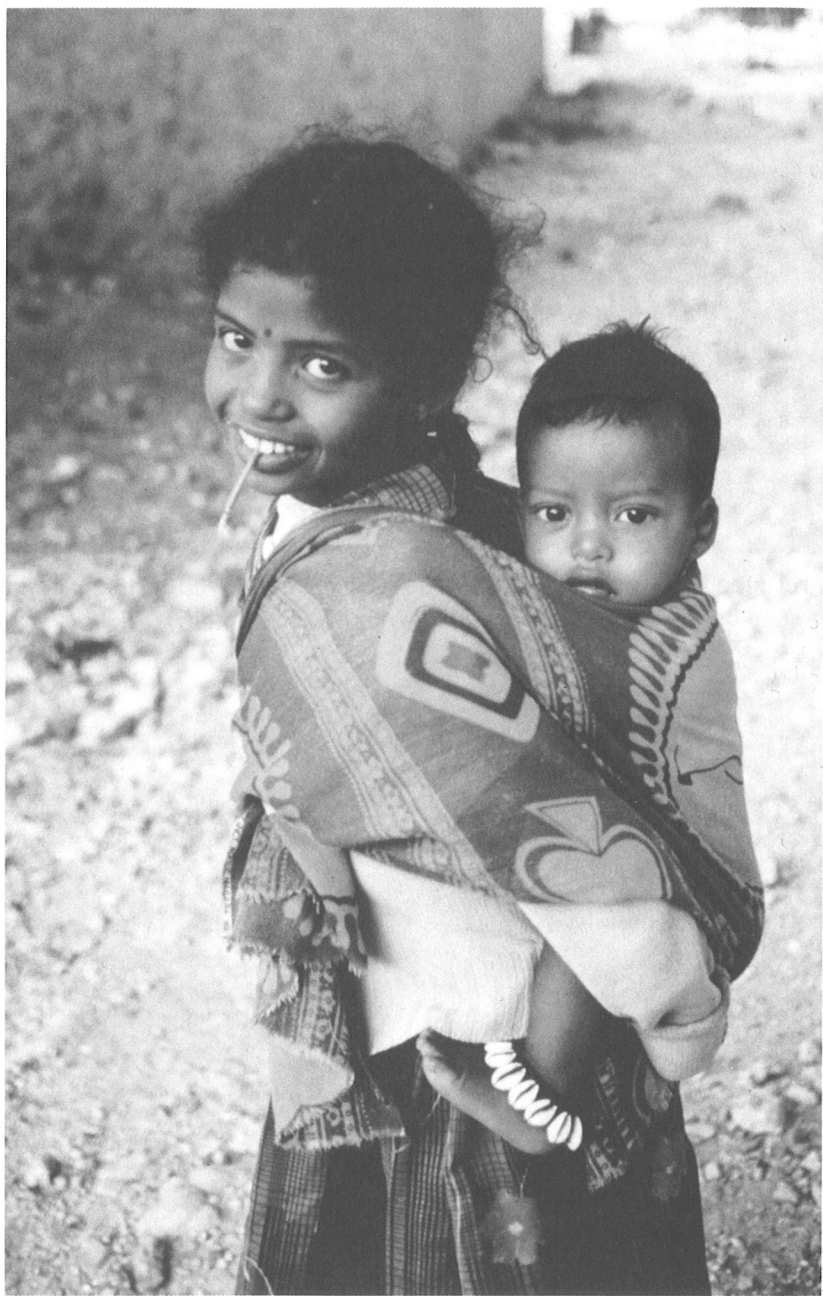
War refugees return to Nacfa to rebuild their shops.
(Photo by Debbie Hird.)



A refugee family camps in the ruins of its destroyed house, preparing to rebuild. (*Photo by Dan Connell.*)



Amba Derho residents join together to build a massive dam outside their village in 1992. (*Photo by Dan Connell.*)



Peace brings renewed hope. (*Photo by Debbie Hird.*)

Listless adults sit in the scant shade of newly erected tents. One mother struggles to grind her ration of sorghum between two stones, her whimpering infant strapped to her back. She does not look up as I stoop to photograph her. An old man lies shivering with malaria on the veranda of an abandoned elementary school, where forty refugees are crammed into a single classroom.

Mohammed Ali, in his late fifties and the father of eight children, sits in a drab canvas shelter donated by the U.N. High Commission for Refugees, with nothing but his straw prayer mat and his dog-eared Koran. He and his family rushed across the border from the village of Teletasher when they heard Ethiopian artillery. "We were afraid, so we could only bring enough food to get to Sudan," he says.

Four hours later, we discover that the small plane that ferried us to the border has inexplicably left without us. I snap, alternately ranting and pleading with local military authorities for help. At last, they send Kirsty and me to Gedaref in the cab of a huge ten-wheel dump truck that crawls through the deep mud and sand where the "road" once was.

We reach Gedaref at 6:00 A.M. and hire a taxi for the 150-mile run on paved highway to Khartoum, but arrive an hour after my daughters' plane has departed. I am disconsolate and exhausted, whipsawed by both the emotional demands and the physical difficulties of covering this war while parenting my children.

The ripple effects of what has come to be known, simply, as the "first offensive," reached round the globe. They were accompanied by an intensive Soviet-orchestrated campaign to isolate the Eritrean nationalist movement from its former followers and supporters.

Within Eritrea, the political landscape was profoundly altered. The ELF, rent by internal upheavals, had suffered a crushing blow from which it would never recover.

After the 1976 decision to recognize a new "third force"—the right-wing ELF-PLF of Osman Saleh Sabbe—thousands of ELF fighters mutinied in protest. Hundreds were reported killed by ELF leaders in a reprise of the 1970-71 crisis, and over 1,200 fled to join the EPLF. Another 3,000 crossed into Sudan to form yet another splinter group, the Eritrean Democratic Movement, also known as

the *falloul* (Tigrinya for "anarchists").¹ When the ELF did an about-face and signed a unity pact with the EPLF in October 1977 that excluded the new ELF-PLF, thousands more fighters defected, this time to join Sabbe.

Clinging to its line of non-capitalist development and excusing Soviet participation in the war as an unfortunate "mistake," the ELF lost more members to both its left and its right as its political credibility plummeted. In this weakened state, the ELF also backed off from the unity accord with the EPLF. Relations between the two fronts remained strained, occasionally erupting into armed clashes, until renewed civil war broke out in 1980.

During this period and in the next round of fighting, the EPLF, too, yielded significant territory, including key urban centers with tens of thousands of civilians who would remain under Ethiopian administration for over a decade. The painstaking organizing in these towns, aimed at establishing self-rule, was undone; the people's assemblies were smashed. Collaborators surfaced, forcing civilian leaders and cadres to flee. In the villages, the occupation forces dismantled the new social and political institutions. They seized livestock, poultry and grain stocks owned by local cooperatives under the pretext that they were guerrilla property. In the Hazumo and Allah valleys, they destroyed large tracts of land used to grow food for the liberation front.

Still, by effecting the withdrawals methodically and by giving the civilian population assistance with evacuations, the EPLF retained its core military strength and much of its popular support. The capture of huge quantities of new military hardware and ammunition in battles around Asmara and Keren even enhanced the front's military capacity, though it was still no match for the massive new Ethiopian Army arrayed against it. Despite its disclaimers, the EPLF was now clearly on the defensive.

The ELF-PLF played no direct role in the 1978 fighting, though Sabbe issued impassioned press releases about fictional confrontations that were duly reported by a muddled press corps. Lurking in the mountains of northern Barka, where the ELF had given it a base area, the Sabbe group simply stood pat and absorbed the defections from its larger rivals, including the EPLF, which lost

some fighters, too. (EPLF leaders still characterized the Soviet Union publicly as a member of the "socialist camp" and as a strategic, if errant, ally of the Eritrean revolution.) Dissatisfaction in the ranks fed a trickle of movement between all the liberation fronts throughout this tumultuous period.

The ELF-PLF was less an active party to the war than a political stalking horse for Western governments and conservative regional powers like Iran (under the Shah) and Saudi Arabia. A C.I.A. spokesperson described the ELF-PLF to me in a formal interview at the spy agency's Langley, Virginia, headquarters as one of three roughly comparable nationalist forces in Eritrea. Perhaps this reflected wishful thinking, but it probably signaled something more.

The ELF-PLF also received recognition at that moment from a more peculiar source—an eccentric U.S. Trotskyite named John Duggan who happened into Eritrea in the spring of 1978 to write a book on the EPLF. After a disappointing three-month experience marred by chronic illness and by a failure to secure interviews with EPLF leaders, he returned to Sudan and made contact with both the ELF and the ELF-PLF, as well as with the new *falloul* group.

Duggan managed to get into Eritrea with the ELF at the end of September, but he found himself driven about in tight circles close to the Sudan border (according to readings on his hand-carried compass), while he was told he was covering vast areas of Eritrea. He left feeling cheated, though he interviewed many ELF members and was impressed by their openness to political debate. The ELF-PLF toured him through their small base area in August, where he found fighters reading Marx, Lenin, Mao, and Régis Debray, despite the anticommunist bent of their leaders. He came away enthusiastic and wrote: "The ELF-PLF is confident, growing daily with—by my estimate—at least 5,000 full-time fighters and 3,000 well-trained militias."²

Duggan's assessment that the differences between the three organizations were largely superficial was picked up by British political analyst and author Fred Halliday, who added his own spin. In his book with Maxine Molyneux, *The Ethiopian Revolution*, Halliday—citing Duggan as his source for information on Eritrea—contended that history had outrun the rival nationalist movements: "Therefore, the choice facing the Eritreans in the period after 1978

was not whether to exercise the right to secession but whether to continue to fight the Ethiopians indefinitely, with no realistic expectation of victory, or to negotiate for whatever measure of autonomy the PMAC [the Provisional Military Advisory Council, or 'Derg'] was willing to concede."³ In other words, the war was lost. Moreover, it was no longer worthy of progressive support.

This theme was voiced in different forms by a wide range of Soviet-oriented governments, political parties, liberation movements and individuals. The Eritrean war for independence had been a "progressive" struggle when it was waged against the feudal, U.S.-supported regime of Haile Selassie, the argument went, but the revolution in Addis Ababa and the realignment of Ethiopia with the Soviet Union changed the context, rendering Eritrean nationalism a regressive political force. Saudi aid to Sabbe was often cited (without distinguishing the ELF-PLF from the other fronts) to damn the entire Eritrean movement.

Earlier that spring Soviet representatives told the EPLF in secret talks in East Berlin that it was time to abandon their petty bourgeois nationalist objectives and join the club or be destroyed. The Soviet line was echoed by many communist parties around the world, by the African National Congress of South Africa, by factions of the Palestine Liberation Organization, by the Polisario (fighting a similar anticolonial war against a neighboring African state, Morocco), and by other nationalist movements that had formerly supported the Eritreans.⁴

The Ethiopian case against Eritrea was perhaps most ardently argued by Cuban novelist and foreign affairs specialist Raul Valdes Vivo in his paean to Mengistu Haile Mariam, *Ethiopia: The Unknown Revolution*. Vivo dismissed the seventeen-year-old nationalist movement as a tool of the Arabs: "Anxious to protect their oil route—but, above all, to prevent the triumph of the revolution [in Ethiopia] where the chance of its catching hold seemed so improbable and remote—Arab reaction and imperialism are making plans for direct intervention, which might be hidden behind the proclamation of an Arabian or Muslim republic in Eritrea—which would then ask for foreign aid."⁵

The EPLF was also spurned by China after the front declined to characterize the Soviet Union publicly as "social-imperialist" or

to denounce China's "Gang of Four" (on the grounds that this was none of its business). "Chinese leaders are only concerned to know whether we share their little formulas, if we are disposed to brandish their slogans in exchange for a little aid," Isaias told an Italian reporter. "We don't need friends like these."⁶

The worst loss the front suffered abroad was the August 1978 defection of the Associations of Eritrean Students and Women in North America, among their strongest backers and an important source of money and skilled recruits. Both groups broke ranks with the EPLF over the front's characterization of the Soviet Union, adopting the "left" line of communist Albania, which described the Soviet Union as a reconstructed capitalist state that was a greater danger to world revolutionary forces than the declining U.S.

A core group within the two EPLF support organizations plotted the rupture in advance, working with the Central Organization of U.S. Marxist-Leninists, a political sect linked to the Communist Party of Canada (Marxist-Leninist). The annual August congress of the Eritrean associations was advertised as focusing on the theme of National Democratic Revolution. However, disciplined cadres were planted in each seminar to suggest that the EPLF had "capitulated" to the Soviet Union and was retreating not for military but for political reasons. The plotters spread rumors throughout the conference, already abuzz over the tactical withdrawals, that EPLF leaders were refusing to do battle with the Soviets, executing dissidents (including former members of the U.S.-based student organization) and leaving fighters who declined to retreat without any ammunition.

When one AESNA leader tried to argue to the assemblage that they were being manipulated, he was denounced in biting personal terms and finally driven off the stage.⁷ Shortly afterward, the plenary voted to break with the EPLF and start a new organization. Such manipulation was possible because the student activists had been drilled to a very high level of ideological agreement, while lacking any practical experience with the political concepts. They were "religious Marxists," easily herded in a new direction by their political priests.⁸ In October, the newly rechristened Eritreans for Liberation in North America published *Eritrea: Revolution or*

Capitulation, denouncing the EPLF, the ELF, the ELF-PLF, Ethiopia, the Soviet Union, Cuba and other domestic and international enemies. The polemic called on all true Eritrean Marxist-Leninists to form a new political party to lead the revolution.⁹

In late September 1978, I made a hurried tour of the field to assess the damage. Traffic was heavy each night. Fighters shuttled from one front to another while equipment salvaged from the abandoned towns was being stashed in the countryside. I met scores of breakaway ELF fighters in Fah where they were getting oriented and reassigned to EPLF battalions. One turned out to be Fessahai, my irreverent ELF guide in 1976. I also spoke with Ethiopian prisoners from the latest fighting who said they feared they would be executed as deserters if they went home. "They told us no military should be captured," said twenty-year-old Bika Atnafu, a militiaman from Gama Gofa. "They said we should fire to our last bullet and then shoot ourselves. If any go back, the Ethiopian Revolution will judge them and shoot them."

Keren was relatively peaceful, but it was bulging with civilians displaced from the reoccupied towns south of Asmara. The population was swollen to almost 40,000, up more than fifty percent from the previous year. In the center of town, there were new social clubs for women and for young people, though most teenagers had left to join the EPLF. There was also a workshop for manufacturing artificial wooden limbs run by a deaf fighter and a laboratory where fighters were trying to make supplies for the front's hospitals. It took them three nights to prepare a half-liter of distilled alcohol, but they were persevering. Nearby, field-trained veterinarians were working with caged rabbits and mice to prepare vaccines. It was not a city that looked to be in crisis.

Dongolo, Ghinda, Nefasit and the other towns on the eastern front showed more active preparations for war, with hundreds of armed fighters trooping back and forth on foot, even in the daytime, but the markets were bustling, people were maintaining the lush citrus plantations outside the towns, and there were rows of freshly planted trees along the road to Asmara.

In Zagher, the peasants had constructed a new assembly hall, of which they were justifiably proud. Ethiopian aircraft were fre-

quently in the skies overhead, but people had dug bomb shelters and were going about their business. None had yet fled. In fact, they had just carried through their third round of land reform, and one-third of the village was now farming cooperatively. EPLF cadres were optimistic, but they cautioned that they had much work still to do. "Socialism is two steps away, and we are very careful to go slowly," said Aden Fassil. "Lasting change has to be voluntary. It is a campaign of the mind, so to speak, and it is a very long journey."

A waning, rust-orange moon silhouetted the jagged horizon as I rode south from the border into the Sahel mountains on November 21, on my second visit to the field that fall. Inside the cab of the darkened Fiat, it was silent but for the rise and fall of the throaty engine and the occasional muffled purr of the *freno motore*, a motor brake used on steep downhills. It was a time of heightened awareness and uncommon serenity amid the stark splendor of the desert at night. It was the last moment of tranquility I would experience for weeks.

The second round of the Ethiopian offensive had begun four days earlier, with assaults launched out of Agordat and Asmara and aimed at Keren, the shadow capital of liberated Eritrea. Three more battlefronts were opened on November 18, aimed at EPLF positions on the Asmara-Massawa road. The EPLF was retreating from Massawa and all the towns between there and Asmara.

Government forces were hitting the EPLF with multiple columns of armor and artillery on each front, spreading out the Eritrean defenses and bludgeoning them with superior firepower until they gave way. "They came at us in three lines near Mai Atal," a wounded eighteen-year-old fighter named Zahara told me that evening on the road. "There were twenty tanks and much artillery and rockets. We pushed them back at first, but they came with more tanks and reinforcements. I saw fifteen tanks burning, but still they came, so we had to retreat again."

On November 25, as I rolled into Keren, the traffic was all moving in one direction—to the rear. The fiercest fighting of the war raged twelve miles outside the city, in Elabered. At dawn, ninety tanks charged into the narrow canyon, a lush agricultural plantation lined with rows of citrus trees, without meeting any

resistance. The armored vehicles stretched the full length of the valley when EPLF fighters leapt out of the brush and opened fire with hand-held rocket-propelled grenades and homemade firebombs.

"It was humans against tanks," said one fighter I spoke with afterward. The tanks broke formation and tried to retreat, but some thirty were cut off and abandoned. For almost forty-eight hours, the battle raged up and down the canyon, with the Ethiopians almost breaking through on the morning of November 26, only to be pushed back at day's end.

"The valley was full of tanks, dead bodies and trucks. All the dry grass was burned, and rows of trees were down everywhere," said Zerai, the fledgling EPLF photographer from my 1976 trip, now, two years later, a hardened veteran covering the battle for the Information Department. "The planes never stopped coming. They were dropping different kinds of bombs, including napalm, and at times the valley was so filled with smoke you couldn't even see. On the road behind us I counted twenty-five tanks and seven trucks captured and about five more burned. We heard them on the radio saying they had no way out and didn't know what to do. Helicopters landed with Soviet officers, and soon they tried another counter-attack, but we pushed them back. Then the sun set, and the battle was over."

Before dawn on November 26, under the cover of this battle, the EPLF retreated from Keren.

Small fires flickered in empty doorways and on abandoned corners. Darkened vehicles, piled high with electrical equipment, machine tools, school desks, cabinets, mattresses and anything else movable, rumbled through the streets. The EPLF, headquartered here for the past fifteen months, was erasing all traces of its shadow republic prior to the final departure, only hours away.

"This is our 'Long March,'" quipped EPLF Political Bureau member Haile Woldetensai, as we climbed into a battered Land Rover to make our escape. I sat at the back under a tattered canvas and clung to the overhead bar, as we careened over the rutted road toward Afabet. With the first grey streaks of dawn, I glanced occasionally at the eastern sky for signs of the deadly jets, but my attention was riveted on the crowds trudging north toward the EPLF's

base area in the Sahel Mountains.

Tens of thousands streamed out of Keren, bearing small bundles in their arms or on their heads. Men and women wept as they were forced to discard luggage in order to hang on to their children. Many carried flashlights, giving the procession the appearance of a torchlit cortege. A flatbed truck cruised up and down with seven women who had lost their children in the confusion of the mass flight.

Late the following afternoon, three MiGs hit a makeshift camp twenty-five miles north of Keren where nearly 3,000 refugees were clustered along a dry riverbed that served as the road. At dusk, paramedics appeared to tend the sixty-five wounded, tearing their shirts into strips to use as bandages and rinsing the jagged shrapnel wounds with water from their canteens. Ten were killed outright in the raid. Thirty more would not survive the night.

A little after 8:00 P.M., an unmarked beige Land Cruiser rolled up to where I was standing, carrying Isaias. When I met him the night before, he had been distraught. "It's finished," he had muttered, shaking his head. Now his anger seemed to override his grief.

"The face of the war has changed," said the thirty-two-year-old field commander, above the shrill keening from the families of the wounded. "We're not fighting Ethiopia anymore—now it is the Soviet Union. Whatever their intentions, whatever their interests, we will continue to fight."

Taking me by the elbow, he led me aside and apologized for his rattled state the night before. He remarked on how "fantastic" the battle of Elabered had been, how effectively the EPLF had fought in the face of so much firepower.

"After the failure of their first campaign, they had to increase the number of Soviet experts everywhere. The command in these battles was entirely under the Soviets. They were in the tanks, behind the artillery, in the helicopters," he said. "We have to change our tactics now. We have to prepare ourselves for a protracted war. It has to be more organized, more sophisticated. It will take time."

When I asked him about this moment years later, he remarked: "When I am challenged, I become more stubborn—more and more rigid. I'm very emotional. I get sad, but I don't get discouraged."

Over the next few days the EPLF fought a series of pitched bat-

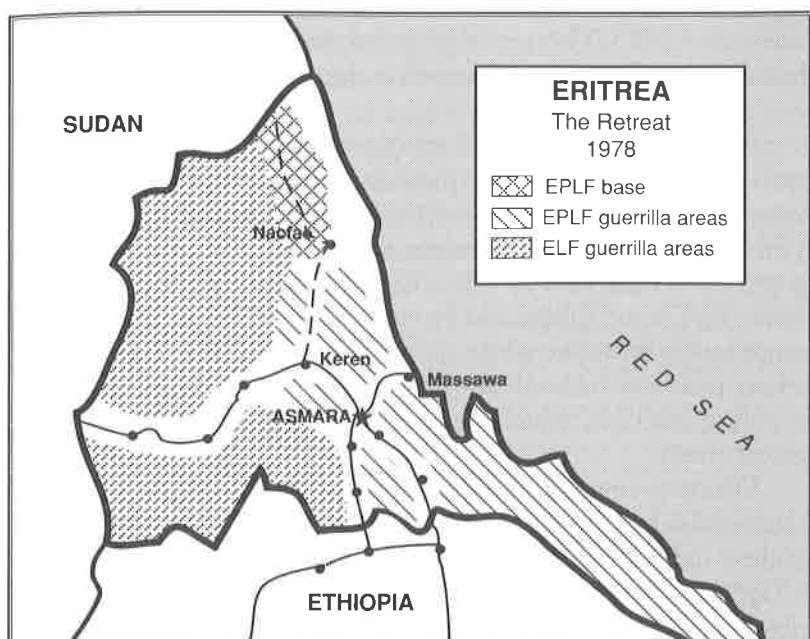
ties just north of Keren. The new lines held. However, the front also faced fresh incursions along the Red Sea coast from government forces making amphibious landings at Marsa Gulbub and Marsa Teklai. In the next round of heavy fighting at the beginning of 1979, the EPLF retreated further inland from Afabet to the mountain redoubt at Nacfa. Each move backward was calculated on the basis of the balance of forces at that moment. If necessary, the EPLF would have retreated indefinitely, even dispersing its forces to operate as mobile guerrillas without a fixed base. The point was to avoid a crippling battlefield defeat.

As it happened, the liberation front grew stronger during the retreat, capturing over two dozen new Soviet tanks and armored cars to bring the total number in their hands to more than eighty. This was more than the Ethiopian Army had possessed under Haile Selassie only four years earlier, and more armor than that of all but a handful of other African states. Still, it was not enough to go up against Mengistu's new Soviet-supported armed forces.

The Ethiopian Army had previously depended mainly on its infantry, using limited air power, artillery and armor to support the ground forces or punish civilians through random raids. Now the government was using its new Soviet-supplied hardware and its access to sophisticated reconnaissance as key components of its offensive operations, designed in many cases by high-level Soviet advisors. The Ethiopians now attacked in multiple columns, elongating EPLF lines and then pounding weak points until armor could break through, followed closely by ground troops. In several cases, government forces also used armor to execute flanking maneuvers in the midst of battles that took the EPLF by surprise.¹⁰ These were clever moves, not seen before in the Eritrean theater.

For their part, the EPLF came up against one of the limitations of the Maoist model of "people's war," which relied heavily on vast population reserves. Here, the Ethiopians had the advantage of superior numbers, as well as a seemingly endless supply of material support from abroad. To counter this, EPLF leaders improvised, using the terrain to stalemate the fighting, while using mobile units to weaken the enemy from behind and within.

Once in the labyrinthine Sahel Mountains, the EPLF used the steep ridges and narrow dry washes to curtail the mobility of the



Debbie Hird & Chris Cartier

Note: Some ELF guerrillas operated in the southern highlands & southeastern lowlands.

Ethiopian armor, reducing the tanks from assault vehicles to the equivalent of movable artillery. The rugged terrain also helped to neutralize the impact of air power as an offensive weapon. However, in the absence of any significant external support, the EPLF never acquired anti-aircraft missiles and could not altogether escape the deadly effect of Ethiopia's dominance in the air. This had its most serious consequences for the civilian population in EPLF-controlled areas and for food-producing projects, though small facilities like workshops and clinics could be dispersed and camouflaged to limit their exposure to attack.

Meanwhile, with the bulk of the Ethiopian army tied down in a broad arc reaching from Nacfa to the sea coast and then north to the Sudan border, the government's extended supply lines became vulnerable. EPLF guerrilla units began filtering behind the lines to carry out hit-and-run raids. In mid-December, less than a month after the withdrawal from Keren, EPLF units launched three attacks on posts along the Asmara-Massawa road. In the first six weeks of 1979, the front claimed to have penetrated into Asmara itself with

a commando raid. This sent a powerful message to the civilian population throughout the country that the war was not over.

Recognizing the limitations of a one-on-one military contest that might fail to produce a durable political solution, the EPLF stepped up its long-standing attempts to aid opposition forces within Ethiopia. Over the next decade, the EPLF would arm, train, back up and even fight side by side with the Tigray People's Liberation Front, the Oromo Liberation Front and several other underground groups inside Ethiopia, while opening dialogue with virtually every serious political force that opposed the Addis Ababa regime—including Me'ison, which had earlier been allied with the Derg against them.

Efforts to cement relations with rival Eritrean groups were not as successful, but the EPLF took this opportunity to launch an independent radio station, *Dimtsi Hafash*, broadcasting six hours a day in Tigrinya, Tigre, Arabic and Amharic. Simultaneously, the EPLF published the first comprehensive expression of its political philosophy for the general public outside Eritrea.

The forty-one-page memorandum was targeted mainly at U.N. member states, in keeping with EPLF insistence that the United Nations was the appropriate forum for the international community to deal with the Eritrea issue. The booklet presented the front's analysis of the present political situation (from a regional and a geopolitical perspective), the case for the Eritrean people's right to self-determination and a call for a peaceful solution to the conflict based upon the exercise of that right.¹¹ There was no response.

Perhaps the most bitter lesson of this period was that nations, movements and parties throughout the world acted in their own narrowly construed self-interest, though they often cloaked this under a mantle of dense political rhetoric. "Eritrea's darkest hour in the eighteenth year of its war against 'absorption' (which means genocide), says much about the game of nations as it is currently played: a game in which small nations are pawns, to be moved at will, to be declared 'unimportant', depending on their resources and the opportunities for exploitation, or to be declared expendable," wrote British journalist John Pilger in January 1979. "Eritrea's 'mistake' is to be allied with no one, to go it completely alone, to

grow its own socialism, to have no political debts."¹²

With the retreat into the mountains, the EPLF could no longer command an audience for its appeals to justice and democratic process. Over the next few years, the movement entered a phase of extreme isolation, as the Soviet-led political embargo took effect, and the West simply walked away. This lasted until regional famine pushed Eritrea back into the news in the mid-1980s.



C h a p t e r 11

B E H I N D E N E M Y L I N E S

Sitting on the forward edge of the EPLF's defense perimeter, Nacfa became a symbol of the liberation front's resistance. It also became a target for every type of bullet, bomb and missile in Ethiopia's growing arsenal. The modest market town of 8,000 lay cradled in a shallow dish behind the lip of a mountain ridge that dropped off precipitously to the battlefield, thousands of feet below. Facing south, it guarded the gateway not only to the EPLF's hidden base area but also to the main trade routes to neighboring Sudan. For these reasons, it was the prime target of large-scale Ethiopian assaults for more than a decade.

Upon my return to Eritrea in May 1979, I found the town's broad main street divided almost in half by bomb craters. Its neat rows of bleached adobe buildings were closed and shuttered. Twisted shards of metal from destroyed roofs littered the ground; loose stones spilled into the rutted dirt lanes. Standing atop a hill in the courtyard of what was once the Ethiopian governor's office, and later the

headquarters of the EPLF, I saw irregular gaps in all the rows of houses and shops, the results of six months of steady bombardment. Below me, a lone peasant herded scrawny cattle through the town cemetery. Otherwise, there was no sign of life.

Preparations were under way for the fifth round of Ethiopia's relentless, Soviet-backed military campaign. (The fourth round in the spring had yielded no changes in the situation.) EPLF trenches ringed the mountain citadel, while captured tanks and artillery pieces were dug in behind the lines. EPLF command headquarters were set up outside Nacfa in bunkers tunneled deep into the mountain. In an interview there, Isaias Afwerki predicted another round of fighting, but he was optimistic about the outcome.

"The Ethiopians, despite all their weaknesses, are doing their utmost to mobilize. We are prepared to face that, and we feel that this will be the last round," he told me.

The dirt walls and ceiling of the bunker were covered with parachute nylon; two stuffed chairs and a couch surrounded a wooden coffee table in the center of the small room; a military map of Eritrea hung on the wall behind the couch; and the ubiquitous thermos of tea sat on the rock floor next to us. Isaias, his khaki shirt and slacks neatly pressed, as usual, looked relaxed and confident as we talked. He said that as many as 40,000 Ethiopian troops, one-third the total in Eritrea, had been put out of action since the opening of the campaign twelve months earlier. He added that EPLF losses had been "one-tenth" of this, without citing specific numbers. (A loss to the EPLF of as many as 3,000 fighters—out of a total of probably 15,000 to 20,000—was considerable.) Nonetheless, in his view, the tide had definitively turned—after four rounds of fighting, the EPLF had forced a stalemate.

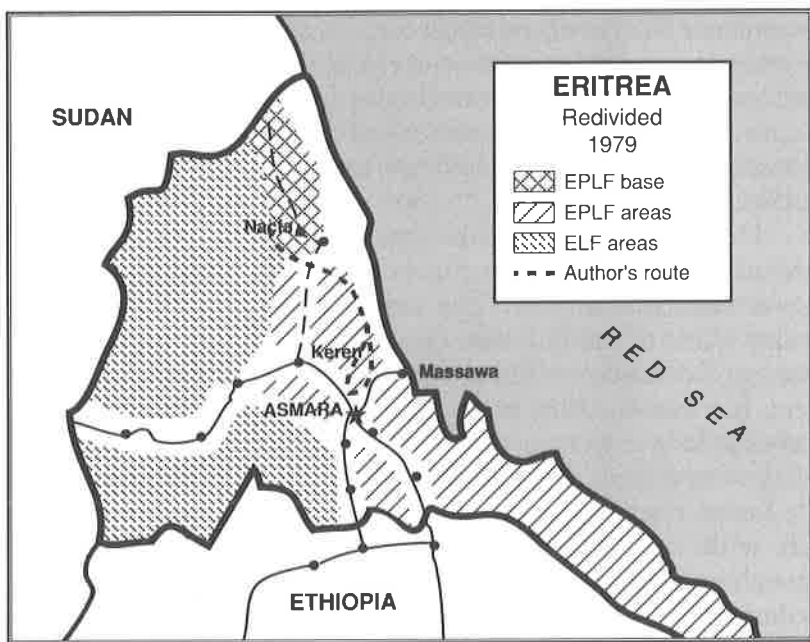
"Our main strength is flexibility," Isaias said. "We have exploited this strong point to the maximum in successfully demolishing the enemy's forces and in maintaining our military initiative." The front could now hold the line around the base area, and its rear was secure. Units were in place to wreak havoc behind Ethiopian lines, and the spirit of the fighters was high.

Among government forces, morale and combat effectiveness were low. Ethiopians were now trained to operate the new Soviet arms and had taken over from most of the Russian advisors, but the

government was facing growing contradictions within its forces—between regular soldiers and conscripted militiamen, between the rank and file and the officers and between whole units and the high command. Setbacks in the fourth round of fighting had led to arrests and executions of front-line officers, and one unit near Nacfa had mutinied.

The main Eritrean weaknesses were in logistics and supply, particularly in securing ammunition for the many different weapons they'd recently captured. They were also plagued by continuing rivalry. Units of the ELF were deployed with the EPLF along the coast on the northeast Sahel front as part of a new unity agreement, but this was more symbolic than substantive. The ELF still operated alone in western and southern Eritrea, but it was no longer a major force. Near the end of 1978, as the EPLF was fighting outside Keren, clashes had broken out between the ELF and the EPLF, with the latter driven into Sudan, where it remained throughout the rest of the war, churning out press releases claiming credit for the actions of other organizations and mobilizing support among the refugees with a well-funded system of social services. By the middle of 1979, the war had resolved into a confrontation between the Derg and the EPLF, with the other Eritrean forces on the periphery.

After my interview with Isaias, I set out on my primary mission, an expedition to the outskirts of Asmara to report on the extent to which the guerrillas were still a force beyond their mountain base. I had physically prepared myself by jogging and roller skating ten miles each day. I had even quit smoking (no mean feat), and I was as fit as ever in my thirty-four years. I had also secured backing for a feature article from the recently launched U.S. edition of *GEO* magazine, and I was filing stories for *Time*. In spite of all this, I got stuck initially in the base area behind a new layer of EPLF bureaucracy. After trying unsuccessfully for three weeks to convince EPLF leaders there to let me embark on this trek, I went out of channels and sent a note to Isaias. Two nights later I was summoned to Nacfa with Goitom Asghedom as a guide, translator and companion.



Debbie Hird & Chris Carter

Note: Some ELF units operated in the southern highlands & southeastern lowlands.

Goitom and I set out at 11:00 P.M. on June 16. We headed west at first, on one of the regularly used footpaths that led past Ethiopian positions to the highlands. We were escorted by seven fighters and a half-dozen camels laden with medicine, food supplies and EPLF publications. One of the ornery pack animals carried my green canvas backpack, stuffed with my two beat-up Nikons and eighty rolls of color film, plus a small recorder for a BBC radio documentary, notebooks and pens, a first aid kit and other odds and ends linked to my overlapping media assignments. I wore a khaki shirt and pants to blend in with my surroundings, and I wrapped a Palestinian *kaf-fiyeh* around my head. I carried a spare T-shirt and a pair of shorts but little else in the way of clothes. Goitom had packed a case of "emergency" rations that included sardines, apricot jam, powdered milk, sugar, tea, flour and rice. He also had Ethiopian money to buy supplies along the way.

We followed a chain of centuries-old trails worn ankle-deep into the volcanic mountains. We trod slowly, stumbling in the darkness until a thin sliver of moon appeared. As dawn broke, we

reached a narrow pass at the upper end of the Wogret Valley, where a huge, hidden camp for war-displaced civilians would be set up in the mid-1980s. Now there was only an occasional white-robed merchant striding by with a string of camels on the way to Sudan, and odd groups of incongruously well-dressed city folk making their way to Sudan to seek political asylum.

Over the next five days we walked in four-hour shifts, halting at obscure, unmarked water holes to refill our canteens with brown frothy stuff that looked more like cappuccino than water. The rule Goitom set was that we had always to reach the next source of water with some left over. I learned to take a small sip and swish it around in my mouth for five or ten minutes as we walked, before it either got swallowed or evaporated.

By the end of the first day, despite my fitness training, I found myself walking in a trance and collapsing in a heap as soon as we arrived at a well. Minutes later, Goitom would waken me with hot tea, which I drank quickly before dropping off to sleep again. When we resumed walking, I tottered on limbs as rigid as wooden stilts until my muscles finally loosened up, yet each day became easier until I was no longer aware of my legs. Step after step, my eyes would fix on the stark terrain unfolding around me. The effect was hypnotic—time seemed to stand still as we knifed through it.

Away from the front lines at Nacfa, things had settled into stable patterns. The Ethiopians now controlled all the towns and had established posts along the main roads. The EPLF had also established outposts in the countryside around and between the Derg's camps. Each surrounded the other, like the concentric circles in an advanced game of Go.

We walked around Afabet in absolute silence late one night, passing within two miles of the town with a battalion of 600 heavily armed men and women for an escort. In the mountains along the coast, we spent one night at an EPLF radio relay station. In the remote hamlet of Geleb, virtually destroyed by government troops in 1970 and again in 1974, I found EPLF cadres working with a local people's assembly to implement an advanced land reform program. At Filfil, at the base of the escarpment northeast of Asmara, EPLF agricultural specialists operated a fruit and vegetable plantation.

Nearby, doctors and field-trained paramedics ran a field hospital. On the slopes we encountered a silent file of 400 fighters carrying automatic rifles and grenade launchers, returning from an overnight raid on an Ethiopian-controlled village. We saw no sign of a government presence during most of our journey, apart from the overflights of MiG fighters.

The EPLF had moved back into position throughout much of Ethiopia's exposed and thinly defended rear. The fighters were maintaining links to supporters in the occupied towns and keeping the Ethiopians off balance with a stream of commando raids and propaganda operations. EPLF partisans opened prisons in the towns to release political detainees, kidnapped collaborators in the villages, posterized the walls of government buildings and distributed pamphlets under the noses of the occupation forces. The EPLF claimed that their "engineering squads" had destroyed 560 trucks with land mines and put 150 armored vehicles out of action during the past six months. It was their contention that they had stalemated the Derg's forces in the Sahel and regained the tactical initiative in the rest of the country.

A veil of grey-brown haze lay over Asmara as I peered through a thicket of evergreen trees on the crest of a ridge near Zagher. Less than a mile away, across a shallow valley of uncultivated farmland, was the deserted village of Wauki through which I'd wandered with Sebhat and others in 1976.

"That is where their artillery is," whispered the guerrilla fighter next to me, pointing toward a small hill opposite us. He said there were only 350 Ethiopian soldiers stationed there, with their ammunition and supplies loaded on a truck to allow for a sudden retreat. To either side of the stone fortification where we knelt was a chain of bunkers, constructed of rocks and dirt, that stretched along the spine of hills ringing Asmara.

"The whole of the Ethiopian force is in Sahel now," said Bruno when I bumped into him later. He was still responsible for the public administration work in the region, including clandestine work in Zagher, now occupied by government forces. "Here, in the cities and towns, they are completely isolated. When they are defeated in Sahel, the whole thing will crumble, and they know it."

I had many reunions in these hills, but the most moving was with Fana. When she heard we were in the area, she trekked more than twenty miles with a basket of eggs and a chicken to prepare a festive *tsebhe dorho* for Goitom and me. We met at Sabur, the former Italian plantation where her father had worked as a cook. Now it was a headquarters for EPLF units north of Asmara. She arrived in her best dress—a bright white print with green and blue flowers—and barefoot. We sat together under an ivy-covered arbor that looked out over a forested escarpment that plunged into a bank of frothy clouds below. After dozens of hugs and an almost endless chain of greetings, Fana described the village's first meeting with the Ethiopian government's community organizers, both of whom spoke only Amharic.

"First they collected us. Then they told us, 'You have been under the EPLF four years. They are revolutionaries, and we are revolutionaries. The difference is that they are secessionists—they want to separate, and we want unity. You tell us your problems, and we will solve them.'

"People began to speak loudly to each other, saying, 'This is a test to know our stand—no one should reply.'

"The Derg cadre said, 'We'll give you fertilizers. We'll make pipes for water. We'll build you mills. We'll prepare your plows. Especially you women who have been oppressed, you will not have to grind your grain by hand any longer.'

"Then one man stood up and said, 'The fighters built us mills. They were teaching us to read and write. They were teaching us politics. They gave us free medication. Five kilos of grain used to cost five birr in Asmara. They made a cooperative shop and sold it for two-fifty. They brought us kerosene, oil, onions and coffee with their trucks. In these four years, we didn't know imprisonment or insults—everything was solved by understanding and criticism-self-criticism and we governed ourselves by a people's assembly.'

"When the cadre heard this, he pointed to the village meeting hall: 'You were oppressed by this—you had to build it yourselves. If it was done by us, the soldiers would have built it for you.'"

Shortly after this meeting, Fana said, government officials set up a *kebele* (the Derg's term for a peasant committee) under the direction of Shirba Woldezion, a rich farmer who did all the trans-

lating for the government cadres. Several weeks later, an EPLF squad entered Zagher and carried off all twelve committee members. Eleven returned and immediately resigned from their posts. Shirba did not return.

"Shirba was a traitor," Fana said vehemently. "He was a big landowner, and he was always against the land reform. I remember when we set aside a section to farm collectively, he said it was a waste of time, so we had better split it up among those who could plow it—meaning him. When the Derg called us together, he alone stood up and denounced the people's assembly. The Derg cadre immediately appointed him chairman of the *kebele*, and he picked eleven of his friends to be on the committee. I stood up and denounced him, but he interrupted and said I entertained fighters in my house. Then another from the women's association pointed at him and said, 'You had better be ready to repeat that.' Nothing more. Now he is gone, and there is no one from our village who will replace him."

One night several weeks after this incident, EPLF commandos, acting on a tip, sneaked into the village and took Fana and her daughters to safety. The next day, soldiers encircled her house, but they found her gone. Her husband Gebrezghier was devoted to Fana, but he was not an activist, so he stayed behind to work their land and maintain their animals. In the fall of 1979, after I was gone, Gebrezghier was arrested anyway and taken to a political prison in Asmara. That winter Fana finally trudged north with her children to the EPLF's camp for displaced people, formerly Deba'at, now known as Solomuna.

The strategic withdrawal not only redrew the lines of the war and relocated vast numbers of people and facilities, it also triggered a gradual rethinking of the EPLF's general strategy. There was an acceleration of the trend toward the "Eritreanization" of the movement on the organizational, political and ideological levels. The intervention of the Soviet Union and also the behavior of the rest of the world, socialist or otherwise, confirmed the EPLF's view that when the chips were down, there was no one to trust but the Eritreans themselves.

Yet fault lines had appeared within the Eritrean community,

too. There were collaborators and deserters at home. There were political renegades abroad. And there were organizational divisions within the nationalist movement that sapped its strength and played into the hands of the enemy. What emerged after the retreat was a strengthened commitment to pull together the population at home and to rebuild the revolution from that foundation.

Shirba Woldezion was not the only Eritrean to collaborate with the occupation forces, though the number who did so was surprisingly small. Often they were people who had lost land, status or power through the reforms pushed by the liberation front. Some who had merely gone with the tide when the EPLF seemed ascendant were now shifting their loyalties when the government appeared to be on top. The EPLF's response was a combination of punitive action against the turncoats and a concentrated effort to assure the general population that the movement was still alive and well.

EPLF guerrilla units first sent warnings and then abducted people who cooperated with the regime, subjecting them to intensive political "reeducation" sessions. In a few cases, they executed persons associated with specific acts of government violence. The front also stepped up its education and information work—distributing publications, producing daily radio programs in several languages and holding public meetings.

After the retreat, the front began to differentiate its organizing work in the rural areas according to the degree of security in the area and the level of internal political coherence in a particular village or town, using three models of local administration: people's assemblies, challenge committees (sometimes termed "resistance committees") and people's committees. The people's assemblies had the broadest social representation, were the most democratic in the way they functioned and had the most autonomy from the EPLF.¹ The mass sectoral associations—peasants, women, youth, workers—remained the basic building blocks for people's power, whether they were organized clandestinely in contested areas or openly in more secure villages and towns.²

Sometime in the early 1980s, the front stopped subdividing these organizations on the basis of class. EPLF leaders suggested later that the procedure was abandoned as too mechanical an application of Chinese-derived political formulas.³ This form of class

analysis began to fade in part in response to the flattening of Eritrean social differences that accompanied the drought in the early 1980s, and it fell into disuse with the political demands placed on the front after the demise of the ELF in 1981.

Belai Araya, a member of the Department of Public Administration since 1975, recalled after the war that community organizers stopped classifying peasants by class altogether by 1984. "The main reason then was the vastness of the area under EPLF," he told me. EPLF cadres were also finding that such categories—however well they indicated group trends—were not useful in predicting the behavior of individuals.

"We found that on an individual basis, people acted for many different reasons—religious reasons, the extent of Ethiopian atrocities on their village, even family relationships," said Yemane Gebreab who headed the Department of Information in the immediate post-war period. "Class attitudes were factors, but they were not the only ones—sometimes not even the main ones. Seeing this, we began to rethink our strategy—this simplistic attitude we had that a peasant who had just one donkey and so many square meters of land was supposed to have a certain attitude toward the revolution."

Though a more elastic social analysis guided the organizing process, there was, if anything, an even stronger emphasis on socio-economic development in the liberated and semiliberated areas. Land reform remained at the core of this work in the densely populated highlands, where it was still seen by the EPLF as a springboard to social revolution.⁴

The centrality of the land question was enhanced by the peculiar effect of Eritrea's occupation by a state, Ethiopia, more economically backward than its colony. With productive activity stagnant in the towns and cities, there was a downward pressure on the urban dwellers to depend upon the rural economy. Some workers returned to their villages to work the land that remained available to them under the *diesa* system of communal tenure. Others migrated back and forth. These and other first-generation urban dwellers tended to identify themselves with the land and with village life, adding to the EPLF's conviction that its work with the peasantry was its most crucial organizational and political challenge.⁵

As the EPLF became a more complex political organization,

the armed forces were reorganized into three main levels to reflect the new situation. At the core was the EPLA, a national army with modern weapons, extensive combat experience and tight military discipline that operated at brigade strength in Sahel and in smaller, mobile units elsewhere. At the outer edge of the new structure were the village militias, organized in squads as small as five people. Between the EPLA and the militias were zonal armies, made up of people who lived at home but who were well-trained members of mobile military units that joined EPLA units for specific operations and played a key role in regional defense. There was also a fourth level, made up of clandestine guerrilla cells operating in occupied areas. Their main work was intelligence gathering, sabotage and occasional assassinations.

Political education was a constant feature of life in EPLF areas. It took place in periodic meetings, through sustained courses of study or in large, one-shot public seminars. Its aims were to discredit the enemy, to build commitment to the EPLF, to transmit specific lessons on the meaning and method of political struggle, or simply to increase morale and self-confidence. After the retreat, this process opened up to include more dialogue and the frequent exploration of topical issues. Organizers were advised that meetings should be short and "untiring" and that they should be conducted to ensure active involvement. Sessions in early 1981 included such subjects as the difference between Ethiopian-imposed *kebeles* and the more democratic, EPLF-supported peoples' assemblies; the continuing problems between the EPLF and the ELF; and the significance of the EPLF marriage law.⁶ Later seminars focused on Middle East politics, the meaning of democracy and the importance of sexual satisfaction for both partners in marriage, among a wide range of other subjects.⁷

Adult literacy was still a major focus of the mass organizations, and front-line combat units routinely met behind their trenches to study language, mathematics, geography and other primary subjects, as I witnessed repeatedly during my trek to the highlands. Each unit also had its own cultural troupe, which regularly performed for the fighters and for villages where they were stationed. Most military units also managed their own vegetable gardens, raised goats and helped local farmers in their fields.

Though an extraordinary range of organizing and mobilizing was going on across Eritrea, the pace of this work had slowed substantially from the frenetic tempo prior to the retreat. Now it was more thorough, more patient, more modest in its expectations and less ideologically rigid or politically derivative.

So far as I could see, the EPLF had emerged from the withdrawals stronger, not weaker: its values were intact, if some of its early political formulas and timetables were in question, and its relationship with the people of Eritrea was as solid as ever. Throughout my journey behind the lines, I was struck by the depth of identification people from all walks of life had with the liberation front. They did not perceive themselves to be caught in the middle between two contesting armies. There was a foreign army in their midst, and their sons and daughters were on the front lines trying to drive this army out of Eritrea. The EPLF was them; the war was theirs.

On the fertile eastern slopes of the plateau, I met Dahab Zereghaber, Fana's widowed cousin. She lived in a windowless one-room house in Fishe, once a thriving trade center for the aromatic coffee that grew in the surrounding hills. The Italianate cement houses were in advanced states of disrepair, with bougainvillea growing wild around them. Displaced by the fighting in Nacfa, where she had owned four houses, Dahab was squatting in one of the abandoned buildings, many of which bore scars from a 1975 bombing attack. She eked out a living by baking bread and by braiding women's hair. Her only son was a fighter with the EPLF. A single jeweled silver ring dangled from her right ear, signaling her relatively affluent past.

Her house was empty but for a narrow wooden bed, a charcoal stove and a painting of Jesus and Mary hanging on the bare wall. When I asked her if she wanted the war to end so she could resume a normal life, she reacted indignantly: "Of course I want to finish it, now, this night, but I don't want the war to stop if the enemy does not go out from our country. I want a victory."

At a meeting of the Fishe people's assembly, residents spoke of the growing burden of caring for refugees while the local economy was deteriorating under them. They would have to further tighten

their belts, but they were prepared to do so, knowing the fighters were worse off than they. "If the fighters are eating twice, now they have to eat once," remarked one older man, caricaturing a current government appeal to civilians to eat less in order to support the Ethiopian Army. "This they have done before, and we know they will do it again if necessary."

I asked if they were prepared to compromise with the government to bring the war to an end. The response was impassioned. "There is none among us who has not buried one who was close, but we know that our victory is certain in the end, so we will not stop fighting," said Tekea Hagos, a thirty-two-year-old wife and mother active in the local women's association. "Before we were very oppressed and exploited. When the EPLF came, we started having many good things, like a grain mill and a cooperative shop that we managed ourselves, and schools and clinics. Most of all, we were organized, politicized and even armed. Now we have tasted freedom, and we will never go back."

As Goitom and I rose to leave, Nur Himedai, who, after much debate among the assembled citizens, reckoned himself to be seventy-five, hushed the group with one wrinkled hand and spoke. "We have been struggling for eighteen years. We have been beaten. We have been imprisoned, killed, cut to pieces by the enemy. But the strategic withdrawal taught us a lot because even inside us, we discovered who were the real enemies and the real friends of the revolution.

"This is our land!" he declared, pounding the hard ground with his gnarled walking stick. "We don't want anyone else's land, just our own! Even if Russia and Cuba help Ethiopia, we will fight until there is only one man left."

It had taken us nine days to reach the highlands from Nacfa. It took us only six to get back.

On the first afternoon Goitom and I camped at the entry to a broad valley up the coast that wound out of the hills and spilled a trickle of muddy water onto the flat prairie from the summer rains then falling on the plateau. We dined on roasted gazelle, shot by the driver who brought us this far and seasoned with salt tablets from my first aid kit, the only spices we had. After dark, we moved uphill

on foot with two camels carrying our goods, led by a crotchety, small-time merchant hired to guide us. By this time in the journey, I was concerned that I was falling behind schedule for my return to the States where I was due back to take custody of my daughters. As a result, we pushed harder, walking through most of the night.

At 7:00 A.M., we unpacked our camels and spread out under the sparse shade of an acacia to brew tea and rest. During the next two hours, several camel caravans plodded past in the dry riverbed, laden with curved wooden tent poles and long rolled mats and topped with straw canopies, decorated with red and blue motifs to announce new marriages. The families passing us were migrating inland to seasonal farms in the highlands, with their oxen, sheep and goats trailing behind and their children running alongside.

Shortly after nine, we heard the two jets overhead. "They're going to bomb the people," said Goitom, but I was skeptical. These were obviously not guerrillas—what was the point?

The high-pitched whine of a MiG-21 shattered the morning stillness as it raced up the narrow, barren canyon, a second warplane in its wake. Seconds later, we heard the first explosion. Then, close behind, another blast echoed off the rocky hills. For six or seven minutes we listened in mute horror as the aircraft went into repeated dives and peppered the area around the bend ahead of us with bombs and rockets. Then, abruptly, they disappeared.

Almost immediately, the parade of people with their camels, cattle, goats and sheep resumed. By the time we reached the site of the attack, the only sign of what had happened was a pool of blood in the sand. Nearby, lay a twisted bomb fragment with Russian letters on it, but the toll was surprisingly light—two women and a seven-year-old boy with minor shrapnel wounds, five camels hurt, one dying. Goitom tore cotton strips off the bed sheet he carried on his belt and bandaged the injured. Before we moved on, he told them where to find the nearest EPLF clinic.

Oddly, our closest brush with disaster came the next day, as we emerged from a steep-walled gorge onto the sloping rim of the plateau. The first hint of danger was a distant bubbling sound. Looking up the ravine, I saw a menacing foam oozing toward us. As it gathered speed and spread across the gorge, we raced to safety, scrambling up the bank and barely clearing the crest as a torrent of

black water suddenly rushed past, carrying whole trees ripped out of the ground by their roots and propelling huge boulders as if they were corks. Had we been a few steps back in the gorge, we would never have known what hit us.

At 4:00 A.M. on July 14, I rolled over and shook Goitom awake to ask whether it was thunder or artillery I heard. "It's only the wind," he muttered, but he rose groggily to load our camels for the last hike up the ridge to Nacfa. By the time the first light of dawn gave shape to the trail which climbed the steep cliff, the sounds of war were clearly discernible—a deep, syncopated pounding under the steady clatter of small-arms fire. The fifth round of Ethiopia's year-long military campaign had begun.

At the summit, we staggered into a small base camp, and from there we watched the drama unfold. The din was unrelenting, as 15,000 Ethiopian soldiers surged forward on two fronts, east and west of the town. MiG-23 jets, flying in pairs, soared high overhead in wide circles before swooping down to disgorge their bombs and then speed away. Ethiopia's tanks and other armor were useless in this terrain and were not present in large numbers.

The charging government troops were met with murderous automatic weapons fire from the nearly impenetrable EPLF trenches carved into the mountainsides. After an hour, the human wave assault collapsed, only to resume again at ten. After another hour of bloody battle, the Ethiopian soldiers retreated in disarray, leaving hundreds of bodies strewn about the arid landscape.

Late in the afternoon, Goitom and I dashed into town, leaving our gear with a fighter who promised to move it up after dark. We followed a dry streambed as volleys of tank and artillery fire flew over us in opposite directions from dueling cannons. In Nacfa, I found the fighters ebullient, certain they had already taken the strongest punches Ethiopia had to throw. Before dusk, the EPLF counterattacked and drove government forces back two miles before stopping to regroup and return to their mountain fortress. Promptly at 8:05 P.M., as if a curtain had dropped over this first act, the shooting ceased except for intermittent bursts of machine gun fire that lit up the horizon with streams of tracer bullets.

The fighting raged on for ten more days, outside Nacfa and

north on two separate fronts along the Red Sea coast, before finally sputtering to a stop with no change in position on either side. EPLF leaders claimed 12,000 government casualties. They also expressed confidence that this would be the last attack of this magnitude for some time. They were right. It would be almost three years before the government would mobilize another full-scale offensive—dubbed “Red Star”—that very nearly succeeded.

Chapter 12

THE DISPOSSESSED

Ogba Gabriel struggled to prop himself up on his elbows. A young nurse lifted his head and wedged his partially paralyzed hand under his cheek. Glancing up at me, Ogba flashed a brief smile before disappearing back into himself as he struggled to winch his body into a comfortable position. A glossy scar just above his collarbone marked the spot where a bullet had entered his body to lodge in his spinal column a year earlier. The twenty-six-year-old farmer was one of 167 paraplegic patients at the new "Peace Hotel" in Port Sudan, run by the Eritrean Relief Association (ERA).¹ I stopped to visit the clinic in April 1980 on my way to Eritrea.

Music blared from a tape player in the next room, where a group of patients clustered together in rickety wheelchairs to hear a shrill chorus of pre-teen voices singing Eritrean freedom songs on an EPLF-made cassette. "What keeps them going is the wish to go home," remarked the nurse. On one wall there was a chalkboard for morning classes in geography, history and math. Another wall was

blanketed with overlapping maps of the world, the region and Eritrea. The youngest patient, a thirteen-year-old girl injured in an air raid near Asmara, tapped her foot and sang along with the tape.

One hundred and fifty miles to the southeast, in an austere settlement sprouting out of the scorched Red Sea hills, a squad of one-legged men and women painted colorful murals on the clay walls of a newly constructed cafeteria, as a blind veteran stirred the home-made pigment with a branch cut from a nearby acacia tree. The new town housed 11,500 people, mostly civilians, of whom 5,500 were children and 2,000 were disabled. Among them were 350 orphans from the fighting over the past two bloody years. This was the latest incarnation of Deba'at, moved across the border after the strategic retreat and renamed Solomuna. It was now under the administration of the ERA, to which Askalu Menkerios was assigned. She escorted me around the campsite.

Stacks of logs and neatly tied bundles of sticks trucked in from Eritrea lay alongside the dirt road through the settlement. Large pits gaped up at me from which clay was being dug to make adobe bricks. In the middle of a bone-dry riverbed was a hand-dug well from which barefoot children hauled rusty tins of water to vegetable plots scattered among the newly constructed buildings. The flurry of construction was meant to establish shelter before the summer months, when temperatures would soar over 120 degrees Fahrenheit. It was also an effort to keep residents active in this debilitating climate by creating usable indoor space. Camp leaders were determined not to succumb to the inertia and despair that characterized most refugee camps in the Sudan.

There was already a library, an eight-room school, an arts studio, a half-dozen small workshops, and dormitory-style quarters for amputees and other disabled fighters. Displaced families were scattered about in tents and huts made out of brush, plastic and cardboard. Most people stayed inside during the day, but there was little for them to do. In the library was a 1950 World Book Encyclopedia, a dozen English and American novels, and several copies of Lenin's *State and Revolution* in Tigrinya. The recreation hall housed a single ping-pong table. In one shelter, woodworkers disassembled captured ammunition cases to build desks and chairs for the school. A

banner on one wall proclaimed: "Labor Changes Nature." Nearby, metalworkers cut up discarded Soviet tank and artillery shells to make buckets, lamps and crutches. The detritus of war was the community's only resource.

Solomuna residents were trying hard to turn this inhospitable piece of desert into a permanent home, but Sudanese authorities were already making noises about taking it over from the ERA, expressing concern at the prospect of a Lebanon-style situation in which the Eritreans would constitute an independent political presence.

In the early 1980s, the EPLF was having increasing difficulty with the Sudanese, as the Mengistu regime began supporting rebels in southern Sudan to put pressure on Khartoum to close down the Eritrean supply lines in the north. The Ethiopians also pressed Sudan to clamp down on news coverage by restricting access to Eritrea. When I arrived in April, I found it impossible to get clearance to cross the border. I had to enter Eritrea wrapped in a wool blanket in the back of a Land Rover, masquerading as a fighter shivering with malaria. When I emerged several weeks later, I filed my stories under the name of John Currie—my third pen name in as many years.

That summer the *Horn of Africa Journal* commissioned me to do a regional profile of the refugee situation.² I started my journey in Somalia in June, stopped briefly in Djibouti in July, and visited Sudan and Eritrea in August. By this time the conflicts in Eritrea, Ethiopia, Somalia and Sudan had displaced almost six million people. Close to half that number were counted officially as refugees, giving the region the ignominious distinction of hosting the largest concentration in the world prior to the exodus from Afghanistan. (When people are driven from their homes, they are classified as "displaced people." When they cross a recognized international border, they become "refugees.") Refugee relief—the misery industry—was becoming big business, both for the nearly bankrupt third world regimes that hosted them and for the growing number of first world agencies that lived off their pain and need.

By the early 1980s, the foreign debt held by Ethiopia, Sudan and Somalia—three of the poorest countries in the world—was skyrocketing, not least because of the cost of arms each needed to fight its

wars. Under these conditions, relief became a prime source of cash and kind income. Whole populations became dependent on donated food, clothing and medicine, under the not unreasonable assumption that poor nationals must receive at least as much support as incoming refugees.

Bureaucrats carved out careers and built elaborate bases of support with the patronage that flowed from this aid. Local economies were disrupted, and corruption among poorly paid civil servants became rampant. Worse yet, for the long term, the refugees were reduced to passive receptacles in a system of international welfare that undermined their ability to return to productive lives at home.

In Sudan, the government of Gen. Gaafar el-Nimeiri proclaimed 1980 the "Year of the Refugee," with little noticeable impact on the 520,000 refugees in the country—a divided nation that was itself in the early stages of economic and political crisis. The largest country in Africa, with an indigenous population of about twenty million, Sudan was being inundated on all sides. An estimated 360,000 refugees came from Eritrea; another 60,000 were from Ethiopia. The rest came mainly from Chad, Uganda and Zaire, though some arrived from as far away as Nigeria. With a \$4 billion foreign debt and a *per capita* annual income of less than \$100, Sudan was one of the poorest states in Africa, yet it had a generous open-door policy for those fleeing oppression and conflict. But tensions between the dominant Arab, Muslim north and the impoverished black, mostly Christian south were heating up.

Sudan was at that moment receiving more U.S. aid than any other country in Africa, apart from Egypt, and it was among the top six recipients of U.S. aid in the world. This was due mainly to the Nimeiri government's endorsement of the 1978 Camp David accords between Egypt and Israel (the only Arab state to do so) and to the discovery the same year of large oil reserves in southern Sudan. Overnight, Sudan became one of Washington's top-ranked clients, as U.S. aid officials combed the country for projects to fund.³

Sudan's economic and political insecurity translated into efforts to contain the refugees in defined camps and to make use of them to develop the country's extensive agricultural resources. Less than twenty percent of its 200 million acres of arable land was under

cultivation, and there was no surplus work force. Outside powers, from the British to the Soviets to the Americans, funded show-piece projects that included the largest sugar-refining plant in the world and one of the largest irrigated cotton-growing schemes, along with a host of smaller irrigation projects. Impoverished refugees provided a fresh source of cheap labor for these schemes.

The first Eritrean refugee camps appeared spontaneously near Kassala and spread southward along the border in the 1960s. After 1970, the U.N. and Sudanese authorities began relocating them to new sites in the vicinity of the large agricultural projects, where the refugees were pressured to take seasonal work at wages and under conditions that Sudanese would not accept. Hundreds starved at Wad el Hilewi in 1978 when the government shut off emergency supplies for months in an effort to force refugees to relocate to Awad es Sid, on the state-owned Suki cotton and peanut plantation.

A visit to Wad el Hilewi in 1980 found many families determined to remain where they were. The family of Mohammed Ali Mahmoud was typical. The father of six children, Mohammed was bedridden with tuberculosis. His wife Salihah told me she started each day at 5:00 A.M., grinding low-grade sorghum, all the food the family could afford, for their two regular meals. Their sole income came from their fourteen-year-old son, Siraj, who hauled water on the family donkey to sell in the camp. On a good day, he could move five or six loads, each one for the equivalent of less than fifty cents.

At Awad es Sid, many who had relocated were angry and disillusioned. "In Wad el Hilewi, we retained at least some of what we had before," Gerenzay Teklemikail said. "Yet when we were forced to move, we had to sell the limited property we had—like goats, donkeys, sheep and a few cattle—at very cheap prices because we were not allowed to take them with us."

Sudanese tenants at the Suki plantation were each allotted ten acres of land, half to be planted in cotton and half in peanuts. The cotton was taken by the government, which fixed the prices, deducted land rent and production expenses, and left the tenants dependent on income from the peanut crop. The role of the refugees was to provide supplementary labor to the tenant farmers. In 1980 the World Food Program (WFP), the main U.N. agency providing food to the camps, shut off its emergency rations, claiming that

people could now support themselves. Sudanese authorities prohibited the cutting of firewood, forcing residents to purchase charcoal in the local market. At the same time, residents were forbidden to leave the camp without an official permit, rarely given for any reason other than to seek employment. "We are puppets of someone else's game, whether Sudanese or Ethiopian," one man said. "I am weary. I shall just wait now for death."⁴

The other resettlement program in Sudan in 1980 involved land grants of up to ten acres to refugee families. Officially aimed at fostering self-sufficiency, this scheme also had problems. The new plots were located mainly on clay plains that were extremely difficult to cultivate; they had a growing season of only three to five months, and access during the summer rainy season was almost impossible. If timing was off at any stage of the growing cycle, the crops failed. A February 1980 WFP assessment warned: "The long term viability of rain-fed agriculture on plots of only ten feddans [approximately ten acres] is extremely uncertain."⁵

Relief workers also noted that malnutrition was endemic—eighty percent of all children in Um Gargur were underweight in a June 1980 survey—and the refugees were in no condition to work such inhospitable land. As a result, yields at nearly all these settlements were extremely low. A survey done in January 1981 by students from the University of Khartoum found that the average household harvest produced enough income to sustain a family for only seven weeks.⁶

Life in these camps was as precarious as it was trying. Overcrowding and poor planning made most camps death traps to the inhabitants. Grass-and-stick huts were clustered together, offering major fire hazards. Shortages of latrines encouraged people to defecate in open fields around the settlements, leading to an extremely high incidence of intestinal parasites; in Um Gulga, a camp of only 10,000 people, the clinic treated over 300 cases each month. Disease also spread rapidly through the water supplies, often shared by people and animals. Though outright starvation was infrequent, death from tuberculosis, malaria and diarrhea was common.

Frustration and despair were the collective condition of most refugees, but perhaps the worst off from a psychological standpoint were those in the towns and cities. Mostly townspeople themselves,

the urban refugees seemed to have the most difficulty adapting to their new situation. They also found little assistance or support.

Many were young men and women seeking school, work or a way out of Sudan to the Middle East, Europe or North America. Most were disappointed. Employment opportunities for educated but unskilled workers were scarce in Sudan, school places were few, and slots for asylum abroad for black Africans, already limited to begin with, were shrinking even more as European and North American countries tightened immigration quotas. The Islamic trends then evident in Sudan added to the alienation felt by many Christian Eritreans, who found themselves discriminated against in the workplace and confronted with hostility in their day-to-day lives. Many retreated into inertia and despondence. Those who didn't faced a constant uphill battle.

Across the border, in the trenches outside Afabet, the days passed slowly, but morale among the fighters was surprisingly high, despite EPLF intelligence reports that the Ethiopians were preparing to use gas in their next offensive. The Eritreans had pushed government forces forty miles from Nacfa the previous December, driving to within striking distance of Afabet, only to melt back into the mountains in March as the Ethiopians prepared a counterattack.

"The moment they were ready, we weren't there," Petros Solomon, the commander of the military forces on the Nacfa front, told me, grinning impishly. "They can't use their tanks in the area we're in now, so they have to plan all over again."

A maze of shoulder-deep trenches wound back and forth along the ridges south of Nacfa for over twenty-five miles in a random pattern that made precise targeting by Ethiopia's long-range artillery and aircraft almost impossible. The high cliffs had become a medieval fortress, with gun emplacements hollowed out of the hard-packed shale. Mobile units roamed the plains, their task to slow and disrupt any Ethiopian assault. Captured tanks, mortars and artillery were hidden behind the trenches, their barrels trained on the hills. Just to reach this vantage point had taken two hours during the night, zigzagging up the backside of the escarpment on trails barely wide enough to walk single file.

A typical day began at dawn as the fighters crawled out of

their positions to gather firewood from scattered thornbushes and to fetch water in goatskins and empty 122-mm artillery shell casings. By 8:00 A.M., small groups were clustered in underground caverns for classes led by cadres assigned to each unit, while lookouts were posted to keep watch for a surprise attack.

After a lunch of *injera*, lentils and tea, the fighters broke up into work teams to carry on the unending process of strengthening their defense works. The structure was always changing; the fighters were always busy. Late in the day, as the danger of air attacks waned, construction yielded to individual chores—sewing patches on uniforms, cleaning weapons or going over the morning lesson. One group descended the mountain to play a game of soccer on a field marked with small rock piles at the goals. Others gathered by a campfire to strum handmade *karars* and sing nationalist ballads. The mood was light but for one telltale sign of the forthcoming campaign: a woman working on a makeshift gas mask fashioned out of canvas, plastic and charcoal.

Back in Nacfa, I found Political Bureau member Sebhat Ephrem concerned with problems behind the battle lines. Tensions were fast reaching a breaking point with the ELF, and the unity agreement appeared to be in danger of imminent collapse. With 40,000 to 50,000 Ethiopian troops mobilizing for an offensive, the EPLF was worried that the ELF was becoming a "fifth column" threat. Political struggles within the declining ELF also rendered the front extremely unstable. There was a bitter contest under way between the entrenched, pro-Soviet political leadership of Ahmed Nasser and the conservative, tribalist military wing led by Abdella Idris.⁷

On July 7, the ELF suddenly and without explanation withdrew 1,000 fighters from the trenches along the northeastern sea coast, the only spot where the two fronts were engaged in joint military operations. Sebhat also claimed that ELF units were harassing EPLF political cadres and attacking EPLF guerrilla units in southern Eritrea. "Things are escalating rapidly. I think now we are reaching the peak," he told me, indicating that if the EPLF fought back, it would not pull its punches.

ELF deserters in the Araq base area echoed Sebhat's charges, adding a political twist that explained some of the internal turmoil. "Starting from two months ago, our leaders began telling us that

Ethiopia is 'democratic' like ELF, and that without fighting there will be a democratic solution to our liberation," said Hadgu Aradom, a four-year veteran of the ELF.

Hadgu had arrived days earlier with five of his buddies. They would train for three months before being assigned to EPLF units. I spoke with them for two hours without an EPLF member present. They said they had not seen any combat against Ethiopian forces since the middle of 1978. They said that ELF cadres were telling the fighters that the Soviet Union would mediate an end to the war. "They told us the Soviet Union is on the side of the Eritrean struggle, and we are making an understanding with the Russians not to give arms to the Ethiopians to use against Eritrea," Hadgu said.

ELF representatives did, in fact, travel to Moscow three times that year for talks with the Soviets. One high-ranking ELF leader insisted to me later in Khartoum that these meetings had been aimed exclusively at convincing Soviet leaders to rein in Mengistu and to organize peace talks. Whatever the truth, the fact that ELF cadres in the field were at the same time whipping up sentiment against the EPLF fed wild rumors and speculation. Whether coincidence or not, the Ethiopians launched a surprise assault in August along the northeast Sahel front precisely at the point from which ELF units had recently withdrawn.

By the end of the summer of 1980, conditions in Solomuna were becoming desperate. Rainfall was negligible. The vegetable gardens had withered and died. The construction of the new buildings was completed, but there was nowhere near enough food. The international community was not responding to the ERA's pleas for help, and U.N. agencies, which managed most of the food relief that entered Sudan, would not support this camp so long as they could not control it.

A report put together by Dr. Nerayo showed a marked increase in malnutrition among children of all age groups and a sharp rise in infectious diseases. He began and ended his report with an account of his treatment of Frewein Araya, a nine-year-old refugee whose weight dropped from fifty to only twenty-six pounds over two and a half years of sporadic visits to the clinic. The badly weakened child died when a minor infection spread from her left elbow to her

neck and suffocated her. Nerayo stapled her photograph to the mimeographed report he gave me. Her case was all too typical of the parade of frail, hungry people who trooped into ERA camps, feeding centers and clinics through much of the next decade.

Already, in 1980, the human crisis in the Horn of Africa was spiraling out of control. Millions of people were displaced from their homes, hunger was endemic, minor diseases threatened to explode into killer epidemics. Persistent drought contributed to the crisis, but the various wars and wars-within-wars across the Horn were at the root of the problem. Aid was flowing into the region, but it was not enough, and it was often misdirected.

The most serious shortcoming of the relief agencies, particularly those from the U.S., was the refusal to channel aid directly into the war zones. To have done so might have prevented, or at least seriously mitigated, the escalating crisis. Refugees removed from their homes needed far more aid than those who remained in place; once they crossed the border, they were no longer in a position to produce anything themselves, and they became ever more dependent and passive as they remained in the camps. Worse yet, more people died in the camps from unsanitary conditions than from hunger.

What was especially tragic was that a rare opportunity to provide aid aimed at fostering self-sufficiency existed in both Eritrea and Tigray through the ERA and its Tigrayan counterpart, the Relief Society of Tigray (REST), and through the community structures established by the EPLF and TPLF in their respective liberated areas. Instead, the concentration of aid on the Sudan side of the border served to undermine these experiments in participatory democracy and self-reliant economic development by pulling people out of their communities.

What was needed most was an international effort to arrange and enforce a cease-fire, and then to provide a forum for settling the political issues. Instead, the major outside powers—led by the U.S. and the Soviet Union—continued to pour more arms into the region. At the least, there needed to be an agreement among the warring parties to permit relief aid to pass across the battle lines. Instead, the Mengistu government—while denying the existence of the wars in Eritrea and Tigray—prohibited agencies from working

outside its jurisdiction. Most agencies, governmental and non-governmental alike, respected this ban without a murmur of protest.

When I flew home to Boston at the end of August 1980, I was confronted with a personal crisis—my younger daughter, then twelve, balked at switching custody for the winter and chose to stay with her mother. Her sister would remain with her, I was told, to avoid “splitting the family.” Dazed and alone, I returned to Africa to take up residence in Khartoum.

For the first time I began to function as a stable foreign correspondent, making rounds of government offices, movement headquarters, embassies and nongovernmental agencies and filing frequent stories through the Sudan News Agency. I used two names—my own and “James Donaghue”—because I was writing for competing wire services (Reuters and Associated Press), two radio networks (BBC and Voice of America) and a long list of individual newspapers. The volume of my weekly copy was considerable. Then two incidents, not unrelated, conspired to disrupt this arrangement: a threat on my life from the ELF and an expulsion order from Sudan.

On August 28, the EPLF had launched what it termed “a pre-emptive strike” against the ELF, claiming they had documents detailing ELF plans to attack them in Sahel while they faced Ethiopian forces on the coast. EPLF forces quickly overpowered ELF units near their base area in Sahel and chased them south. By October, ELF fighters were retreating on all fronts across Eritrea and fleeing into Sudan.

My coverage of these events, particularly my descriptions of the ELF as a spent force, rankled ELF leaders, who were still describing their front as the largest nationalist force in Eritrea and the main army fighting the Derg.

I received a telex from Peter Sharrock, the Reuters bureau chief to whom I reported. “Our Beirut office has had a call from head of Eritrean News Agency Omar Alim in Damascus saying ELF could ‘not guarantee safety’ of yourself if you continue to file copy which was ‘occasionally hostile, usually inaccurate, often misleading and frequently vaguely sourced and not properly checked,’” Peter cabled. “He declined to give specific examples but our Beirut

and Rome offices think it should be taken seriously.”

I began to carry a small pistol in my shoulder bag, but this did not, by itself, affect my reporting. At the same time, ELF officials were lodging complaints with Sudanese authorities, urging them to take action against me. These complaints, coupled with Ethiopian moves, did have an impact.

In late November, Sudan's President Gaafar el-Nimeiri traveled to Addis Ababa for talks with Mengistu Haile Mariam on reducing tensions. The day after Nimeiri returned to Khartoum, I was stopped on the street by a security official and told that I had twenty-four hours to leave Sudan. It seemed that I was one of the tensions to be reduced.

My first reaction was shock. I challenged my messenger to explain why I was given only twenty-four hours when a Cuban accused of aiding Sudanese opposition groups had recently been expelled with seventy-two hours notice. That afternoon, I received a message that I, too, would be granted seventy-two hours to prepare my departure, but there was no budging on the order to go. Nicky Cowan, a British freelancer who covered the war in Tigray for the BBC, was also told to leave.

During the next three days, we did everything we could to get the order rescinded. Visits to the U.S. and British embassies yielded sympathy but little else. I filed copy on the ouster for Reuters and various individual papers for which I wrote. The stories were published, but they seemed to have no effect. The Italian Press Association launched a protest—it was not answered. At one point I telexed London to arrange a press conference at Heathrow Airport, hinting at growing instability within Sudan. I assumed security people read all my telexes and would relay this tidbit to their superiors—but even this seemed to have no tangible impact.

In fact, I was getting no reaction from the people behind the expulsion order. Much of my time was spent trying to see the man who had issued it, General Osman Sayed, the deputy head of the Ministry of State Security. His office was located in a large, walled compound, surrounded by barbed wire. I could not get through the gate, and he would not answer my calls. Everyone else claimed to have no authority to countermand his order.

On the third day I gave up and packed my belongings. There

was a noon flight to London for which I had decided to show up, though I had not purchased a ticket. My position was that since it was not my decision to leave, it was the government's responsibility to arrange my reservation. I appeared at the gate with nothing to show but my passport. In a turnabout that was utterly typical of Sudan, it was this document that broke the impasse.

"Where is your ticket?" the security officer asked politely.

"I have none," I told him. "Your head office told me to leave the country today—it is up to you to give me a ticket."

"Let me see your passport," he asked after a long pause, resuming his ritual as if I had said nothing about the ticket. I showed him the passport. He flipped through it once, twice, three times. "You have no exit visa," he said matter-of-factly. "You cannot leave."

"My orders come from General Osman," I said. "If you send me back to him, I'm certain we can straighten this out."

Minutes later, I was in a government jeep on the way to security headquarters. I sailed through the gate and was ushered into General Osman's outer office where his secretary announced me.

The general was not pleased to see me, but he seemed amused at my temerity. He offered coffee and tea and exchanged pleasantries. He asked after my children. He was candid about the problem: "The Ethiopians have 'Dan-phobia.' They want you out." Also, he added, the ELF was making a lot of trouble over my reporting—wasn't I being too hard on them?

I said that I thought not. Life was hard for the ELF these days, and I was simply reporting this. Meanwhile, I said, I had never made trouble for Sudan, had not even reported on the country, apart from the problems of the refugees. Now, when I was asked about my expulsion, I would be forced to—was this what he wanted?

Perhaps there was a better way. I suggested instead that I would leave the story of my ouster in the public domain, pleasing the Ethiopians who could claim a minor victory in the propaganda war, but I would stay on in Khartoum, filing stories under another name and keeping a low personal profile. After much hemming and hawing—and after telling me that I would not be permitted out of Khartoum until I left for good—Osman agreed.

By early November up to one hundred ELF fighters per day were streaming into Kassala, where they were disarmed by Sudanese security forces. On November 9 the government closed the border to the EPLF, blocking access to supplies in an effort to force a halt to the fighting. Days later, Osman Saleh Sabbe flew into Khartoum to begin talks with the ELF (which had driven his tiny ELF-PLF out of Eritrea in 1978), about forming an anti-EPLF alliance. In the midst of this chaos, Osman Agyp, the leader of an Iraqi-supported splinter from the ELF-PLF, was ambushed and murdered in the New Extension section of Khartoum, the main enclave for expatriates living in the capital. His killers were never found. At this point, the Nimeiri government weighed in to referee a cease-fire, threatening all the organizations with indefinite closure if the fighting spilled into Sudan.

The following March a new unity agreement was hammered out by all the Eritrean factions, including the EPLF, at a conference in Tunis sponsored by the Arab League, but fighting resumed inside Eritrea in June. By the end of August 1981, the last ELF units were pushed across the border into Sudan where the front disintegrated into a half-dozen competing fragments. Alliances and counteralliances among the various grouplets were formed and dissolved with clockwork regularity, often with outside encouragement. Saudi Arabians traveled frequently to Sudan to meet with Eritrean factions and invited former ELF leaders to Jeddah for talks aimed at creating an Islamic alternative to the EPLF; according to Ibrahim Totil, the head of the ELF's political section and number two in the ELF leadership through most of the 1970s.

In an interview later, Totil said that after the ELF was driven out of Eritrea by the EPLF, he had tried to organize the ELF factions based in Sudan into a coalition that might then unite with the EPLF. Before the groups met, though, Saudi officials arrived in Khartoum and summoned the leaders of each faction to consult with them. When Totil's turn came, he was ushered into a suite at the Hilton Hotel and given a lecture on why the ELF lost the civil war with the EPLF.

"The cause of your defeat was the Christians within your organization who were accomplices of the EPLF," one of the Saudis said, adding: "The solution lies in all the Muslims coming together now."

Were he willing to organize a new formation out of the remnants of the ELF that was based upon a commitment to Islam, the Saudis told him, they would provide the arms, the money and even the personnel in the form of Eritrean Muslims then in Saudi Arabia. Totil declined the offer, though other exiles did not.⁸

The Mengistu regime took this opportunity to strengthen its alliances in the area before launching the next military offensive. In the summer of 1981, Ethiopia, South Yemen and Libya signed a mutual defense pact. Libya gave Ethiopia \$250 million, most of which went to pay the country's spiraling arms debt to the Soviet Union. Libya's increasing involvement provided Sudan with the grounds for an emergency weapons request to Washington, which promptly agreed to a \$100 million military aid package.

For its part, the EPLF, shunning external entanglements, invested heavily in alliances with opposition movements in Ethiopia, training and arming units of the TPLF and the OLF while opening lines of communication with Me'ison, former EPRP supporters and others. EPLF strategy was focused increasingly on building a common front against the Derg that would bring down the regime, democratize Ethiopia and recognize Eritrea's right to go its own way.

Though the long-awaited sixth Ethiopian offensive did not materialize in 1980 or 1981, there was a steady rise in the level of fighting. More than a billion dollars in new arms poured into Addis Ababa, and tens of thousands more troops were shipped north to the battlefield. Soviet MI-24 helicopter gunships made their first appearance in November 1980 in battles with the TPLF in Tigray. Government forces launched an abortive ten-day mini-offensive outside Nacfa on December 2, a day after Sudanese officials announced that Nimeiri had been given the green light by Mengistu to mediate the conflict. The military thrust was quickly crushed. Nothing came of the peace initiative either, but it coincided with the EPLF announcement of a seven-point peace proposal on November 23 that would remain the core of its negotiating position over the next decade and that would eventually provide the basis for the end of the war.

Meanwhile, a high-ranking member of the EPLF Central

Committee showed up in Addis Ababa, after defecting for the second time. Teklai "Aden" Gebremariam (nicknamed for his brief exile in the South Yemeni capital after leaving the ELF during the purges at the end of the 1960s) was the head of the EPLF's internal security section. His defection to Ethiopia, apparently sparked by personal problems, did not have any impact on the war, though it proved disruptive to the EPLF, but it had a rather unpleasant effect on me.

Teklai knew the location of all the underground offices and installations in the Sahel base area. To guard against aerial attack on these facilities, the EPLF was forced to relocate every one of them, from the command headquarters to the workshops, schools, hospitals and prisoner-of-war camps. In effect, the EPLF had to move and reconstruct its entire rear base.

Three months later, Teklai began appearing in public in Ethiopia to present a series of sensational "revelations" intended to discredit the EPLF. Teklai claimed that Isaias and other EPLF leaders trafficked in prostitutes brought in from Sudan, fed drugs to the fighters and received their orders from the C.I.A. He also singled me out as a top C.I.A. agent with extensive experience in Vietnam, close ties to the racist Ian Smith regime in what was then white-ruled Rhodesia and with a "palace" in the U.S., paid for with blood money. While these charges were ludicrous, they did not make life any easier for me in Sudan. I suppose I should not have been surprised when the ELF reprinted the charges and distributed them in the U.S. and Europe.

By this time the pressures on me began to take a toll. The ban on travel out of the capital reduced my sources to press releases and official interviews. My stories began to take on a hackneyed familiarity. At the same time, I lived with the threat of personal attack, and I worried that the rift with my children would only worsen the longer I stayed out of the U.S. It was time to go home, though I knew that once I departed I was unlikely to be granted a visa to come back to Sudan. The decision to leave would end my five-year stint as a freelance foreign correspondent on the Eritrea beat.

What was new there in early 1981 as I was preparing to go were the disquieting reports of persistent drought and growing hunger. An ERA study in February reported 105,000 animals lost to

drought. The hardest hit areas were in Sahel and around Keren. New camps for displaced people were sprouting up in these areas, their impoverished populations entirely dependent on the ERA.

The specter of famine loomed on the horizon. My last story from Khartoum at the end of March began: "A Biafra-type human disaster may be in the making in the embattled Red Sea territory of Eritrea, as the twin scourges of drought and war threaten thousands with mass starvation."⁹



Chapter 13

F A M I N E

Fatna, a frail fifteen-year-old nomad, arrived at Hawasheit Camp in western Eritrea shortly after Christmas in 1984, too late to save the lives of her two children. Her three-year-old son whimpered at her withered breast as she sat in the dirt talking with me. There had been no milk for a long time. The boy's spindly arms hung limp from his shrunken body, his yellowed skin stretched tight across protruding bones and joints, his gaunt face a painted skull with two round black eyes staring blankly into space. He died that evening, with seven other children in the ERA feeding shelter.

Hawasheit was the fastest growing of thirty ERA camps for 100,000 starving, displaced people in Eritrea as famine swept the Horn of Africa at the end of 1984. Up to 150 more arrived each day at this emergency center, made up of a cluster of ragged tents in a thicket of acacia trees. There was a simple outpatient clinic and a treatment center for severely malnourished children deemed capable of recovery. Food was the main resource on hand—sacks of *durrah* (low-grade sorghum) purchased in Sudan and donated wheat

shipped in from Canada and Europe. (Only later would there be U.S. wheat channeled to the ERA through Lutheran World Relief.) The bulk of this grain was apportioned to people from surrounding villages who came on designated days, accompanied by a member of their local people's assembly.

Most of those camped in the surrounding thornbush were women and children who, like Fatna, had given up waiting in their villages for husbands and fathers to return. They patched together waist-high hovels from discarded bits of paper, plastic and grass to create, almost overnight, an improvised community bigger than most local villages. EPLF cadres were already organizing Hawasheit, mobilizing residents to clean the site, to space their shelters and to camouflage them from aerial view. Ethiopian aircraft prowled the skies each day looking for such encampments.

The continuing impact of the war on this growing crisis was illustrated to me in Bademeh in southwestern Eritrea, close to the border with Tigray. An early December Ethiopian air raid destroyed 139 houses and sent the 7,000 inhabitants scurrying to the surrounding hills for safety. The once-thriving market center was a patchwork of rubble when I arrived two weeks after the attack.

On the outskirts of town, four people sat quietly in the shade of the local Orthodox church. They included a widow who gathered firewood for a living, a merchant whose shop was only open a few hours each evening (and whose wife was killed in the attack), a formerly well-to-do farmer with no harvest in the previous three years and an unemployed young worker. They represented a microcosm of Eritrean society at that moment—all dependent on the ERA for their survival.

"Instead of working day and night to solve our problems, we are forced to do nothing because of the bombardment," remarked the merchant, Tabor Abraham. "Now I am simply sitting. There are no people here, there is no work, and I am afraid."

By the end of 1984, there were close to a half-million Eritrean refugees in Sudan, including 25,000 in a new camp at Wad Sherife near Kassala. Five months later the population of Wad Sherife reached 140,000, making it the second largest concentration of Eritreans in the world, after Asmara, and the third largest city in

Sudan. Some two million people within Eritrea, almost two-thirds of the country's population, were affected by the famine, with half receiving relief from the ERA.¹

Up to eighty percent of the Eritrean countryside was under the control of the EPLF, but almost ninety-five percent of donated relief was going to the Ethiopian government for distribution in the towns to urban residents, to the few desperate peasants who risked conscription or imprisonment to cross the battle lines and to the government militia that occupied the country.² The ERA was left to feed three-quarters of those in need with minimal resources, which had to be trucked into Eritrea from Sudan in the dead of night to avoid Ethiopia's merciless air force.

The situation in Eritrea was not the worst in the region. Next door, in Tigray, people were dying by the thousands in drought-stricken villages cut off by war from international relief. Whole districts were depopulated. An exodus of biblical proportions was under way as more than a quarter-million people uprooted themselves to make the desperate journey to Sudan.

They chose this option after hearing of widespread harassment and massive abductions in the government shelters. The Ethiopian camps were run like military garrisons, with nightly curfews and barbed wire enclosures. Many people were denied food because of purported sympathies for the Tigrayan rebels or because they lacked papers showing membership in government-sponsored *kebeles*. Over 80,000 were compelled to relocate to southern Ethiopia when they showed up for help. Many of those drafted for resettlement were separated from their families and communities, forcibly remarried to other draftees to create new family units, herded together like cattle and then moved out in buses and cargo planes before they knew what hit them.

In Zelazelai, one of fifty feeding centers run by REST along the route out of Tigray, I met a group of 5,000 starving peasants hobbling from one water hole to the next, moving after dark each night to avoid government aircraft. There was nowhere near enough grain on hand to feed everyone—REST officials said that 60,000 people passed through each month, while small convoys bearing donated grain only arrived every eight to ten days. Among the mass of wraith-like human forms were 120 children, ages five to fifteen, whose par-

ents had either died or lost them along the way. One REST worker improvised a school for them, but it was difficult to keep their attention; many showed sudden dizziness in the midst of conversations. Nine-year-old Medhin Gebrezghier stood barefoot, her baby brother tied to her back, looking dazed as she answered my questions. Her father was killed in the war; her mother died of hunger last year; she had no idea where she was going; she had merely followed other villagers to get here. Now she was a ward of REST.

This was an unparalleled human catastrophe from any distance one viewed it. It was also a bizarre global media event in which famine claimed the lives of an estimated one million people in Eritrea and Ethiopia while hundreds of millions around the world watched on television. This was, however, a disaster—and a spectacle—that could have been averted.

The famine put Eritrea back on the world map, though under circumstances far from advantageous to the liberation movement, and it marked the reentry of Western institutions to the region, as relief workers, reporters and a parade of politicians and celebrities—the new missionaries of Western culture—rushed in to “save” the peoples of Eritrea and Ethiopia.

I returned to Eritrea in December 1984 for the first time in four years, with a television crew from Boston. I was no longer a practicing journalist. Instead, I was directing a new independent development agency, Grassroots International, which I had founded eighteen months earlier. This was the third trip by a Grassroots staffperson to the war zone with the object of focusing media attention on the political causes behind the famine and on the alternative avenues of assistance that existed in the liberated zones through the ERA and REST.

I spent four weeks on this trip, traveling through Barka with the EPLF, which had taken the area from the ELF in 1981, and crossing into northern Tigray with REST and the TPLF. What I saw shocked me deeply, though I had known this disaster was coming for years.

Almost as disturbing as the agony and the death was the absence of most of the international community from the scene of the crisis in Eritrea and in Tigray, and the refusal of most aid agen-

cies operating in the region to level with the public about the political causes of the famine.

Drought was the catalyst for this catastrophe, but it was not a "natural disaster." It was no accident that the worst famine-affected countries in Africa in 1984 and 1985 were Ethiopia, Eritrea, Sudan, Chad, Mozambique and Angola. Each was engaged in a war (or wars) that so squeezed its internal economy—disrupting food production and distribution systems, adding tens of thousands to already thin social services, triggering large-scale displacement, and blocking effective relief efforts—that a potentially manageable problem became an uncontrollable emergency. To those up close, there were no surprises.

Ethiopia's much-touted "Red Star" military campaign had finally gotten under way in February 1982, after two years of preparations and nearly a month of punishing aerial bombing throughout most of liberated Eritrea. Big Soviet Antonovs were brought in to supplement the MiG jet fighters. For the first time, the bombardment ran day and night, without let-up. "We worked in caves the whole day," Yemane Gebreab, then the director of the EPLF's clandestine radio station, told me later. "When we went to our places at night, it was impossible to sleep."

There was no firsthand foreign media coverage of the offensive, which lasted almost four months, but from interviews done afterward it is clear that this was one of the largest battles fought in Africa since World War II. By the time it was launched, the government had over 150,000 troops in Eritrea, including 40,000 to 50,000 special forces troops in four new divisions recently trained in the Awash Valley just for this campaign.³ Helicopter gunships saw combat for the first time in Eritrea, and a form of toxic gas was used on at least one occasion, though with little impact.

Prior to the campaign, Mengistu successfully concluded a deal with Sudan to close the border to the EPLF, and Ethiopian troops crossed Sudanese territory during the fighting, apparently with Sudanese permission, in a surprise move to seal off the EPLF's rear. For weeks no food, fuel, ammunition or other supplies moved into Eritrea but that which was smuggled past Sudanese authorities.

Fighting broke out initially on three broad battlefronts—along

the coast in northeast Sahel, outside Nacfa and in Barka, southwest of the EPLF's base area. When government units made a surprise drive toward Nacfa from the seacoast, between the two main battlefronts to the north and east, they very nearly broke through. With all the EPLF's regular army units and its reserve militia already engaged, guerrilla leaders called on members of the nonmilitary departments to plug the gap. Amazingly, the hastily assembled army of woodworkers, mechanics, accountants, tailors, teachers, nurses and barefoot veterinarians held the line in three days of ferocious hand-to-hand combat.

When EPLF forces routed the government on the Barka front at the end of four days and quickly moved two brigades to reinforce positions outside Nacfa, the situation stabilized. Heavy fighting continued for ninety-five days, but the government never got any closer to a victory than in the first ninety-six hours of the campaign. By the end, the Ethiopians had lost 43,000 troops. The EPLF suffered 4,000 casualties, many wounded two and three times—their heaviest losses of the war. When the dust settled, the positions of the two badly bloodied armies had not changed.

The Ethiopian failure in this campaign marked the turning point in the war. Though the Derg engineered one more campaign, a less-publicized but no less fierce five-month affair in 1983, this was the last time the government threatened the liberation movement. By early 1984, the EPLF launched an offensive of its own, first capturing the town of Tessenei in Barka and then smashing the entire Ethiopian front line in northeast Sahel. In July 1985, the EPLF took Barentu. This freed one-fourth of the country from any government presence and set the stage for a further EPLF push on the main highland towns, but the effects of the drought and a massive Ethiopian redeployment from the Ogaden halted the budding counteroffensive. In the fall of 1985 the government reoccupied Barentu and Tessenei in the last Ethiopian offensive operation of the war. Then the conflict settled into a tense stalemate for two years before the EPLF resumed the initiative, not to lose it again.

Throughout these years, the combined effects of war and drought wreaked havoc. The signs of an imminent cataclysm were already visible in 1983 when European church agencies sent Dutch

photojournalist Frits Eisenloeffel on the most extensive foreign tour of liberated Eritrea since 1977. What he found confirmed what the ERA had been saying for months—animals were dying by the thousands, and people had long since used up their reserves. Famine stalked the land.⁴

Hunger has an insidious effect long before the bodies begin to pile up. As people become desperate for cash to buy food, they sell off the very things they need to grow it—their animals and their implements. A reliable indication of approaching crisis could be found in the marketplace where the price of goats, sheep and cattle plummeted while the cost of grain soared. It could also be seen coming in the clinics where malnourished women were having a sharply increased number of miscarriages. In Tigray, relief workers reported that cows had stopped giving milk and that diseases normally limited to animals, such as deadly anthrax, were appearing among humans. By 1983 massive migrations began in Tigray as whole villages uprooted themselves in search of food, but they were not yet crossing the frontier to reach camps in Sudan. As a result, they were largely invisible to the outside world.

Meanwhile, the Mengistu regime was preoccupied with the institutionalization of its political power. The Workers' Party of Ethiopia—with Mengistu at the head—was to be launched on September 12, 1984, the tenth anniversary of the coup d'état that deposed Haile Selassie. More than \$100 million was allocated for the festivities.

That April, Ethiopian Relief and Rehabilitation Commission (RRC) head Dawit Wolde Giorgis had led members of a ministerial fact-finding committee to visit the shelters in Tigray. "We saw horrible things wherever we stopped," he wrote later. "Every village was full of suffering and death. Whenever we stopped hundreds of people rushed to our cars, pressing up against the glass, faces twisted with the pain of hunger, crying for help.... There were corpses everywhere, lined up in rows in ragged sackcloth shrouds or still uncovered in the midst of the crowds. Others were dying of slow starvation as we watched. Some bodies twitched helplessly, some writhed in agony as hunger ate away their living tissue, some lay still, alive but barely distinguishable from the dead. It was like walking through an open graveyard."⁵

The committee members returned to Addis Ababa stunned and horrified. Their first act was to deliver an impassioned plea to Prime Minister Fikreselassie Wogderese for a massive, immediate relief effort. They also recommended that Mengistu make a personal visit to the famine areas. Mengistu sent word that he was too busy even to see the committee.

When Dawit returned from a much-publicized fund-raising trip to Europe a month later, he was called in to see the mercurial dictator, who was incensed at the negative publicity Dawit's talk of famine was bringing to Ethiopia. Mengistu ordered him to make no more public statements about the crisis and to restrict foreign travel into the drought-affected countryside until after the September celebrations.

At the end of June 1984, the death rate in the camps in Tigray and Wollo reached 12,000 people each week. Relief workers estimated that as many as sixty percent of the people who left their homes to go to the shelters perished on the way. As the summer wore on, thousands began to migrate toward Addis Ababa in a hideous parade of skeletons, with hundreds dropping dead by the wayside. Police were ordered to block their entry, while beggars were rounded up within the city to avoid any hint of penury in the gaily festooned metropolis.

The famine story finally broke open on October 23 and 24 with the dramatic television report by BBC reporter Michael Buerk and Visnews cameraperson Mohamed Amin, rebroadcast the same evening in the U.S. by NBC-TV. The two networks ran an unprecedented six-minute segment that opened:

Dawn. And as the sun breaks through the piercing chill of night on the plains outside Korem, it lights up a biblical famine—now, in the twentieth century. This place, say workers here, is the closest thing to hell on earth. Thousands of wasted people are coming here for help. Many find only death.⁶

Early in 1985, as the public began to weary of the horrifying images from the camps and as the Reagan administration sought to capitalize on the crisis, media attention finally shifted to the polit-

ical issues. U.S. policymakers saw the famine as an opportunity to recoup American influence in Ethiopia. Much was done to highlight the Soviet Union's poor performance and to draw attention to the U.S. rescue effort. No U.S. money at first went to the government itself. The policy was to funnel donations through private agencies whose high visibility would carry a strong message of American concern. For six months starting with Mengistu's "coronation" in September, Washington kept up a drumbeat of criticism of Ethiopia's relief efforts, laced periodically with references to the people in Eritrea and Tigray not getting enough help from the RRC.

These charges reached a peak in March 1985, when vice president George Bush went to the border camps in Sudan and said that if the Ethiopian government could not get help to these people through its channels, more would have to be done through the cross-border operation. Shortly afterward, top U.S. State Department officials met privately with Dawit and Ethiopian foreign minister Goshu Wolde to offer a deal: U.S. concerns would be met if the government would let two private U.S. agencies—World Vision (WV) and Catholic Relief Services (CRS)—distribute relief in the war zones.

Dawit readily agreed to a list of specific sites where (unknownst to Bush and the U.S. negotiators) the RRC already had small programs. This "Food for the North Initiative" was the closest thing to a concession the Reagan administration ever wrung from the Derg. Little was gained beyond the positioning of WV and CRS (which operated through the Ethiopian Catholic Secretariat) in six military garrisons in Tigray and Eritrea.⁷

After this brief public flirtation with stepped-up support for the cross-border operation, the U.S. lowered its anti-Derg profile in Sudan, abandoning an ambitious plan to build roads into Eritrea and Tigray for a fleet of trucks to be operated by CARE (which never did get involved in cross-border relief). At home, a policy study done for the White House by the conservative Rand Corporation strongly opposed support to what it termed the "Marxist dissident movements" of the EPLF and TPLF, arguing instead for continued efforts to win influence in Addis Ababa.⁸ In Congress, right-wing Republicans led by Utah senator Orrin Hatch also opposed associating the U.S. with the Eritreans and Tigrayans.

In a *Wall Street Journal* opinion piece, Hatch echoed the Rand Corporation's negative assessment of the "Marxist-oriented" EPLF and called instead for the U.S. to provide more support to the rightist Ethiopian People's Democratic Alliance, a motley collection of former monarchists and well-to-do exiles based in London and Washington that had been receiving \$500,000 each year since 1981 through the C.I.A.⁹

A month after Bush's visit, a military coup in Khartoum ousted Nimeiri from power, ending 17 years of erratic and autocratic rule. Sudan subsequently edged closer to its neighbor Libya and away from the U.S. Out of the spotlight, the war in Eritrea ground on relentlessly—during renewed heavy fighting between July and November, the EPLF reported 26,000 Ethiopians put out of action in what they described as the eighth and last Ethiopian military offensive.¹⁰ By 1986, the U.N. estimated that there were more than a million refugees in Sudan, 786,000 from Eritrea and Ethiopia.

One of the most poignant personal moments of my 1985 trip to Eritrea was the encounter with Fana—captured on film and later broadcast in Boston by WNEV-TV—when we visited the Solomuna camp in northern Eritrea where she and her family were living. Spread across a broad, arid valley, the mobile community, now in its fifth site since 1975, housed 7,000 displaced people. A small concrete dam built by the refugees held a reservoir of drinking water from the single rainfall that year. Otherwise, the hills were bone-dry.

The moment we reached Fana's tent, my wizened peasant friend came bursting out, whooping with delight. I dropped my camera bag in the dust, and we embraced ten, twenty, thirty times, endlessly repeating Tigrinya greetings and ritual inquiries about each other's families, much to the amusement of the Boston film crew. Fana's five daughters and one son were nearly all grown, she said, producing a collection of wrinkled photographs. To my surprise, Fana's husband Gebrezghier was also in Solomuna, though he was still recovering from the torture he underwent in prison.

Pulling the flaps down over the entrance to the tent, the slight fifty-year-old farmer sat me down with another peasant, Haile Kahsai, who had been imprisoned with him. Gebrezghier said they

were kept in a dark room for the first eight months and tortured to coerce them into providing names of EPLF sympathizers. He pulled his elbows tight behind his back to show how he was bound while a hot iron was used to burn his arms.

"We never knew if it was day or night," Haile interjected. "I never saw the sunshine. My family didn't know if I was alive or not. They brought food, but I never saw it—it was given to the army."

For a moment, the two men were silent. Then Gebrezghier made a slight motion with his hand, and Fana ushered their two daughters out of the tent. He dropped his shorts and showed the scars on his penis where electric wires had left quarter-inch furrows in three places. He was also shocked regularly on his wrists and ankles, he said. He had seen many people brought in for torture, including 180 mutinous members of the Ethiopian Navy who he said were later executed.

By this time, nearly every family had a tale like Gebrezghier's, as the protracted war and military occupation exacted a steadily rising price from almost all the country's citizens.

There was a thorough social leveling taking place in rural Eritrea. What passed for a middle class was disappearing back into the peasantry, and the peasantry was becoming an undifferentiated mass of below-subsistence farmers. By the middle of 1985 almost eighty-five percent of the people in most EPLF-administered areas were on relief.

Mengistu Futour, a seventy-eight-year-old farmer near Shilalo was typical. Formerly a rich peasant, he looked out over the barren stubble and described how he had watched the resources of the area disappear under the pressure of new settlers and then prolonged drought; how the war had claimed the lives of many animals, taken two of his sons away and ended trade in the region. He had no markets for his animals, which were dying, and no crops were growing in his fields.

"Now we have nothing on hand," he said. "What we get from the ERA we eat, but we have no guarantee for the future." At this, an ERA official traveling with me remarked: "There is no rich or poor—they are all equal. They are all at zero."

The famine triggered the reengagement of Western institutions with Eritrea on a continuing basis. While the scale of aid was relatively modest, the impact of the nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) was considerable. They made the largest monetary contribution to Eritrea throughout the 1980s of any single outside source—outdone only by Eritreans in exile, many of whom tithed themselves up to twenty percent of their salaries.

Though NGO support went almost exclusively to the civilian population, it relieved the EPLF of a major financial burden, and it helped the front expand its transportation and distribution systems. It also brought with it renewed Western influence on this otherwise insular nationalist movement.

From 1985 onward a steady stream of Western technicians, monitors and other agency personnel came to the field, along with Eritreans living abroad who were not prepared to become full-time fighters but who wished to do more than contribute money. Foreigners and Eritrean exiles alike were often motivated not by explicit ideological factors, as had been the case with most visitors in the 1970s, but by pragmatic and humanitarian considerations.

The NGOs helping the ERA covered a broad political spectrum, ranging from left-of-center groups like Oxfam Belgique, the London-based War on Want and Grassroots International to more traditional mainstream charities like Christian Aid and CAFOD (respectively, the main Anglican and Roman Catholic service agencies in the U.K.) and Oxfam U.K. Throughout, Norwegian Church Aid was the most consistent donor, channeling a steady flow of aid into Eritrea from Protestant denominations across Europe and North America.

Other factors combined with these trends to foster a moderation of the radical politics of the 1960s and 1970s. The end of the civil war with the ELF encouraged the EPLF to be more inclusive, as the front reached out to Eritreans of all political stripes. Meanwhile, seeing nearly every socialist-oriented movement and government in the world troupe in and out of Addis Ababa had the effect of undermining faith in the litanies of the left that had informed so much of their early ideological development. Within the EPLF, too, the front's experience in governance and in eco-

conomic development was fostering a growing recognition of the limitations of state-centered models.

This process of political reflection found formal expression at the front's second organizational congress in March 1987. While the National Democratic Program adopted there contained few dramatic changes from the 1977 version, the dialogue that preceded and accompanied the meeting reflected a profound, ongoing reorientation within the front.

The preparations for the congress were an exercise in participatory democracy. The EPLF's civilian support organizations throughout the world were tapped for delegates in order to reflect the views and experiences of the dispersed population, as well as the liberation front and the resident civilian population in Eritrea. A preparatory committee circulated a draft of a revised National Democratic Program to every member of the EPLF, including the fighters and those in the mass organizations at home and abroad, soliciting comments that were incorporated into the document during a year of intense debate.

Among the changes from the 1977 program in the final draft were the deletion of references to "imperialists" and "zionists" in favor of allusions to "foreigners hostile to Eritrean independence." The "masses of workers, peasants and other democratic forces" became "the people." "Antifeudal and anti-imperialist" popular organizations became "nationalist" associations. More significantly, the rights of "nationalist political parties" were for the first time explicitly guaranteed, formally committing the movement to multiparty politics. Pledges to establish large-scale, state-run farming cooperatives were dropped; trade was to be "regulated" by the state rather than "handled" by it; and more emphasis was given to public education, treatment of prisoners of war and attention to the rights of Eritreans living abroad. While the rhetorical level dropped a notch, the most important pattern in these changes was a diminished view of the role of the state in Eritrean development.

There were 1,359 delegates at the congress, with civilians outnumbering military personnel three to one. A quarter of the participants were women, and every nationality in Eritrea was represented. Discussions on the floor were open, with participants encouraged to raise issues, ask questions, challenge the leadership and debate

among themselves. One of the major events at the meeting was the formal merger of the EPLF with Ibrahim Totil's ELF fraction, *Saghem*, after almost three years of dialogue. (A month after the congress, Osman Saleh Sabbe died of natural causes in Cairo, ending another of the long-standing rifts in the national movement.)

A new seventy-one-member Central Committee was elected by secret ballot from among 120 nominations taken from the floor. The former members of the EPLF Political Bureau were the top vote-getters, with Isaias and Romedan coming within one vote of each other. The newly elected Central Committee then unanimously chose Isaias to be General Secretary.

Throughout the meeting the statements made, the actions taken, and the structures created pointed toward the transition to a postwar society, though it would take four more bloody years—longer than the entire span of U.S. participation in World War II—for the Eritrean war for independence to finally draw to a close.¹¹

Chapter 14

NEW DIRECTIONS

Peering through a thicket of brush from a stone bunker atop Seseb Hill outside Decamare in November 1990, I could see the open trenches of the Ethiopian Army only a hundred yards away. In the distance, the white stone houses of Asmara were visible. As the EPLF closed in on the besieged capital, the end of the war was also, finally, in sight.

Just after dawn, two MiG-23 jets buzzed the trenches, but they were discouraged from bombing by a barrage of anti-aircraft fire. The air was filled with the hissing of thousands of flies above the dead left on the hillside from the last battle. The stench was overpowering. I breathed through my mouth as Goitom and I followed the EPLF battalion commander along the maze of waist-deep channels carved out of the sandstone ridge. Behind us, fighters were hauling away tree branches, dropped off by EPLF trucks in the middle of the night, to build roofs over the trenches.

The EPLF was within striking distance of Decamare. Other units east of Asmara controlled the road to Massawa, taken in

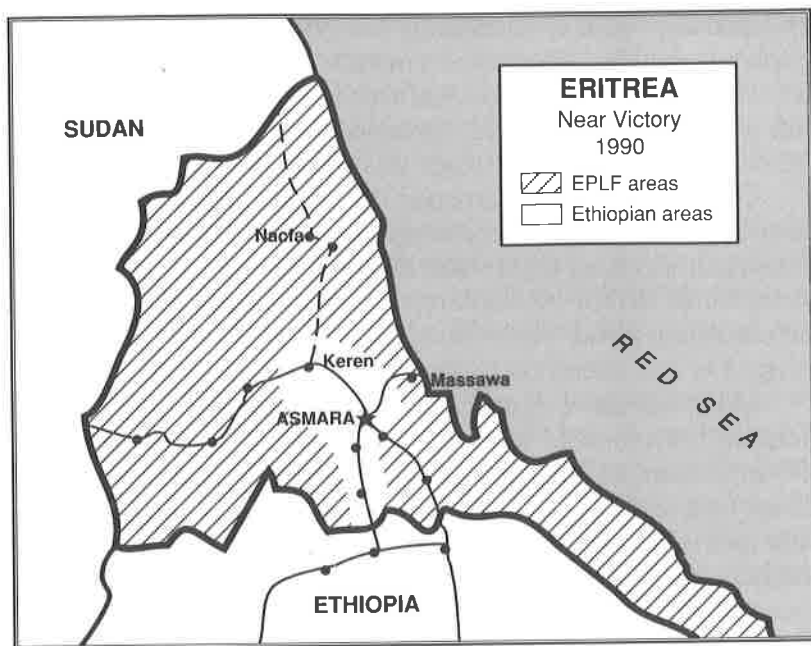
February. They threatened to tighten the noose around the capital at any time. A small advance on either front would position the fighters to close down the Asmara airport and strangle the Ethiopian forces trapped in a taut triangle that ran from Asmara south to Mendefera, northwest to Keren and back to the capital.

Once again, the tables had turned on the battlefield, and, again, the political lineups were undergoing dizzying new twists. The EPLF had 150,000 of Ethiopia's most experienced troops under siege; a TPLF-led coalition known as the Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF) was rolling south toward Addis Ababa; the Soviet Union was finally winding down its multi-billion-dollar military support for the Mengistu regime; and Israel and North Korea were stepping into the gap with new arms, while the U.S. stood on the sidelines, apparently hoping to pick up the pieces once the dust settled.

"The war is more or less over," said Sebhat Ephrem when I ran into him at a seaside restaurant in the recently captured port of Massawa. Sebhat was now the head of the EPLF's General Staff, reassigned from the Department of Public Administration to command the army in a major reshuffle within the leadership that followed the 1987 congress. "We have the upper hand now, and we can take the offensive at any time," he said with casual conviction. "Given the low morale and fighting spirit of the Ethiopian Army, we are confident that we will be victorious."

The decisive battle of the thirty-year war took place at Afabet on March 17, 1988. Breaking with the conventions of people's war, the EPLF hit the Ethiopians at their strongest point, taking advantage of their enemy's demoralization to shatter the ten-year stalemate. In forty-eight hours, Eritrean forces wiped out three crack Ethiopian divisions and overran the largest ammunition and supply depot in Eritrea, capturing enough heavy weapons, ammunition and equipment to supply (and substantially expand) their army over the next year.¹ British historian and author Basil Davidson described it on the BBC as "one of the biggest [victories] ever scored by any liberation movement anywhere since Dien Bien Phu in 1954."²

Over the next two weeks, panicked Ethiopian troops fled bases at Barentu, Tessenei and Agordat, leaving all of northern and west-



ern Eritrea under the control of the EPLF. I toured the area eleven months after the Afabet battle, in February 1989. The results of the fighting were still apparent on the road into town, where scores of charred government trucks and tanks littered the mountainside.

My EPLF guide was nicknamed Chu-chu ("beautiful one"). She was an Eritrean by descent who had grown up in a remote town in southwestern Ethiopia and traveled alone to Eritrea in 1977 to join the liberation front in part, she said, to recapture her identity. We covered nearly the same territory in five days that I had trekked across on foot in five weeks with Goitom in 1979. Much had changed. Driving into Eritrea through the base area at night, we passed sophisticated underground machine shops, clothing factories, mills, printing presses, hospitals and other facilities. Long truck convoys snaked toward the plateau under cover of darkness, traveling on newly constructed, graded roads. Everywhere we stopped, there were large numbers of children, born to fighters wed under the new marriage law. The EPLF seemed a family operation.

I noticed also that there was more grey hair among the fight-

ers, especially those in command. We were all growing older. The people who had brought the movement to this point had now passed forty. The Sixties generation had reached mid-life. Conversations with old friends and comrades revealed that the liberation front was mellowing in its politics. Perhaps this was no coincidence.

The guest house, nicknamed the "Sahel Hilton," now had a dozen beds divided among six semiprivate rooms, electricity for four hours each night, an improvised shower with running water and a lovely stone terrace overlooking the valley where tea was served each morning—and where Fana, sporting a new dental bridge—dropped in one afternoon to chat about old times.

More impressive than the facilities for visitors was the Central Hospital down the road where doctors were now treating more than 400 inpatients and performing open heart surgery in operating rooms fashioned out of discarded cargo containers. Pharmacists were spewing out millions of basic drugs from chemical compounds purchased at bulk rates abroad. There were three dozen certified doctors, hundreds of nurses and technicians and almost 2,000 bare-foot doctors in the vastly expanded civilian primary health care system. Similarly, the underground school system, headquartered in Orota, had close to 2,000 teachers with over 30,000 elementary students studying in three languages, plus a three-year adult literacy program in full-swing.

The base camp hummed with activity and brimmed with optimism. The vision had become more modest, as the Eritreans reigned in their expectations of what was possible to accomplish and how long it might take, but the excitement was palpable.

Six hours drive to the south of Orota lay the decimated town of Nacfa, a monument to the intensity of the war. Hardly a building had more than two walls still in place. Rows of bustling shops, restaurants and residences lay in ruins. The mosque stood alone at the rear of the town—a symbol of the Eritreans' stubborn staying power—with a gaping hole in its side.

A half-hour away in the Wogret Valley, through which Goitom and I had walked in 1979, was a series of displaced peoples' settlements known collectively as Filfil Camp. Together, the string of settlements illustrated the extraordinary cultural diversity of this

small country. At one bend in the valley was a cluster of stick houses and dome-shaped tents made by Tigre-speaking traders and pastoralists from the coastal lowlands. The men wore long, flowing white robes and dark suit vests or jackets; women with large gold rings in their noses were clad in brightly-colored dresses and wore brilliant shawls.

Bilen people from the Keren area were nearby. Bilen men wore white shirts and dark, baggy shorts and carried large wooden combs in their bushy Afros. The women covered their heads and wore thin plaits across their foreheads. Bilen houses were round with cone-shaped roofs.

A few hundred yards away were the rectangular stone houses of Tigrinya-speakers from the plateau. These men wore faded white cotton shirts and billowy pants; women wore knee-length dresses and were bare-headed, their tightly braided hair flowing off their shoulders. The hills around their houses were covered with small terraces where they grew tomatoes, onions, peppers and other vegetables to supplement the relief grain trucked in from Sudan.

Children from all these communities mixed freely in the dry riverbed between them, and members of each group were beginning to meet, trading tips on how to build houses to withstand the variable mountain weather and how to manage hand-irrigated gardens.

As I strolled up the valley with my tape recorder, an old man shouted to me. Kahsai Debessaw, a seventy-eight-year-old farmer from Fishe, remembered me from when I hiked into his village in 1979. He described how the community had been leveled in April 1988, during what may have been the most concentrated bombardment of civilian targets of the war: "They started bombing us with artillery before it was light. No one knew where to go, what to take, or where to hide. We were running in every direction; the people and the animals were all mixed together. At nine that morning the planes started to come—first four, then two, then four again, all day. It became so hot the soil itself was burning. This continued for four days. Then the infantry came, and we went into the hills. They took the roofs from our houses, harvested our crops and killed our animals. We had nothing left, so we came here."

ERA field workers said that 400,000 people were displaced in the three months after the Afabet battle, as the government

unleashed a reign of terror on the countryside around the remaining cities under their control.

The most remarkable thing about the situation in this valley was that a coherent "community" was forming out of the disparate peoples who were thrust by circumstances into it. The first thing I noticed, as in Deba'at years earlier, was the buzz of voices—children shouting and giggling, women and men chattering in small groups on the hillsides. People called out to passersby and waved. Everywhere there was motion and at least a modicum of good cheer.

People were hungry but not starving, deprived but not complaining. The ERA regularly distributed grain and vegetable oil (mostly from the U.S., as it turned out) but little else—supplementary food was not arriving in significant quantities. Most people in Wogret added to their diet with tiny gardens. Teenage boys and girls could be seen working the plots early in the morning, though much of their day was taken up with classes. Adults and children were learning new languages, as well as politics, history and the usual array of elementary academic subjects.

Closer to the front lines, life was more difficult. Normal economic activity was constantly disrupted by the war, and intermittent drought steadily sapped local resources. In the She'eb area on the coastal plains north of Massawa, farmers raced against time to reconstruct simple irrigation dams that had been wrecked in January when a fleet of Ethiopian tanks drove through the area.

She'eb had been the site of a brutal massacre on May 12, 1988, after the Ethiopian defeat at Afabet, when troops herded 400 townspeople together, then mowed them down with machine guns before driving over the bodies with tanks. Amna Mohammed, whom I met at Wogret, survived the carnage by feigning death and lying still in the pile of bodies with two of her children for three days.³ When the Ethiopians came through She'eb again in 1989, the people fled, but the town was plundered. Some 148 small shops were destroyed, but damage to the mosque, ransacked and gutted in the attack, left the most lasting residue of anger. Charred pages of the Koran fluttered in the breeze as one embittered village elder described the scene to me. "I can't understand why they did it, but they turned our food and everything else completely into ashes," he said. "When they can't kill us, they try to kill our town."

After Afabet, the war settled into a random pattern of skirmishes. Ethiopian air raids, shellings and ground forays were common, with civilians bearing the brunt of the frustrated occupation army's quite considerable firepower. For their part, the Eritreans kept up a constant barrage of hit-and-run attacks aimed at keeping government forces off balance, scoring political victories in the ongoing propaganda war and securing essential resources. Three times in as many years, EPLF commandos penetrated Asmara to blow up military aircraft on the runways of the international airport. Guerrillas in speedboats attacked the oil refinery in Assab; others destroyed three Ethiopian warships in Massawa. Meanwhile, the Eritreans continued to nurture revolts elsewhere in the empire in a concerted effort to bring down the Mengistu government.

At one point in the mid-1980s, relations between the EPLF and the TPLF soured to the point of a formal rupture, but this was patched up in 1988. In February, EPLF forces joined with the TPLF to deliver a devastating blow to government forces at Enda Selassie in northern Tigray, after which the Ethiopian Army retreated out of Tigray for the duration of the war. The EPLF carried out a joint attack with the small Afar Liberation Front in January 1989 on a supply depot at Dubti in Ethiopia's Wollo province on the highway that links the port of Assab with Addis Ababa. Several joint operations were also carried out with the Oromo Liberation Front (OLF), including one in January 1990 at Asosa, deep in southern Ethiopia. These actions signaled the Derg to guard all its flanks.

Outside the region, there were several abortive attempts to start peace talks during this period. The most prominent were formal meetings between Ethiopian and EPLF leaders arranged by former U.S. President Jimmy Carter in 1989 and again in 1990. As with earlier contacts between the two adversaries, neither bore fruit, though each seemed to slow the military momentum.⁴ The Carter talks were held at venues in Africa and the U.S. after protracted debates between the two sides over technical details. Substantive negotiations never got started. Not surprisingly, it was in the field that serious negotiations almost did take place one time—when the leaders of the two opposing armies dealt directly with each other.

On May 17, 1989, a day after Mengistu left the country on a visit to East Germany, Ethiopian Army units mutinied. As the

revolt spread, the EPLF declared a unilateral cease-fire and made formal contact with representatives of the rebellious Free Soldiers Movement, a clandestine group in the Ethiopian military with which the front had maintained links for months. If successful, this uprising might have ended the war without another shot being fired. The rebellion failed, however, when Mengistu returned to take charge on May 21. Dozens of high-ranking officers were killed during the suppression of the revolt, and hundreds more were rounded up afterward to be executed, jailed or demoted in a sweeping purge of the armed forces. Those either killed or sacked included the Chief of Staff, the entire Ministry of Defense staff, the Air Force command, the Asmara command and many individual division commanders.⁵ This left the armed forces without any experienced commanders for the rest of the conflict.

As if to underline the extent to which Mengistu had lost control, students in Addis Ababa launched a public protest against the government on May 22 for the first time since the Red Terror in the 1970s. Twenty student leaders were arrested and many more were badly beaten by police, but defiant students boycotted classes for days afterward.⁶ The regime was beginning to unravel.

In 1990, the noose tightened further. The EPLF took Massawa in February, using a flotilla of speedboats to mount a surprise attack on the offshore positions that had eluded them before. Eleven Ethiopian warships were sunk and three captured; nearly 100 tanks were also taken or destroyed. Though the battle went quickly and decisively in the EPLF's favor this time, the aftermath was brutal. The Ethiopians bombed the city for ten straight days once their ground forces surrendered.

When Grassroots International program coordinator Chong-ae Yu visited the liberated port two weeks later, she found huge stacks of relief grain still smoldering. Close to 50,000 tons of food had been set afire and 500 barrels of donated vegetable oil destroyed on the pier in what appeared to be a deliberate Ethiopian effort to deny the insurgents, or the civilians for which they were responsible, access to food.

On a former Ethiopian Army base, Yu found a shed with sixty ammunition crates stuffed with human bones, mostly skulls and legs. Some had on combat boots, suggesting the dead were recently exe-

cuted members of the army. A month after the battle, the EPLF restored electricity and running water to most of the city. On April 4 the government resumed bombing, starting with a strike on the busy traffic circle at the start of the causeway that links the mainland with the offshore port area, a loading station for public transport in and out of the city. In four days of repeated attacks, sixty-six people were killed, all civilians, and 196 wounded.⁷

Weeks later the EPLF swept south and took Senafe, Adi Qayeh and Segeneiti, pushing to within shelling distance of Decamare and within one major advance of ending the war. When I visited the trenches in October, the fighters were supremely confident. They faced 40,000 Ethiopian troops on this front, including several "Sparta" brigades, special forces trained by North Koreans in martial arts and knife-throwing. (Each soldier reportedly carried ten knives.) The fighters in the trenches joked about this. The EPLF was now fully mechanized, operating as a conventional army, while their foe was reduced to gimmicks and gadgets. "They are strategically defeated, so they have no morale left. The soldiers are only fighting now to obey their commanders," remarked Eyob Halibay, a division commander, as we toured the battlefield. "They have lost it."

On my way into the field, I was greeted by distressing news: Fana, my friend of fifteen years, was dead, the victim of a truck accident while on a work detail to gather wood. I found her husband Gebrezghier grieving at their small house in Solomuna. By chance their eldest daughter, a fighter, was home from the front lines on maternity leave; she'd given birth a week ago to a healthy boy. Visitors streamed in and out to offer both condolences and congratulations.

Gebrezghier was consumed with the loss of Fana. "She was very strong and always went her own way, but I always stood by her," he said to me as we talked over coffee. Everything around him triggered memories, he said mournfully. He could not live here anymore. They had been together forty-one years, since his father had arranged the marriage. She was fifty-six when she died; he was now sixty. He was glad to see the war winding up, pleased to see a new grandson born to freedom, but the spark had gone from his life.

After so many years of personal sacrifice and steadfast dedication, Fana would miss the joy of final liberation. The thought was difficult for me to process, as it embodied so much of the senselessness and injustice of war. As the war neared its end, nearly 50,000 fighters were dead, and 10,000 were disabled. At least five times that many civilians had perished, while a third of the country's population was homeless. As the nation approached emancipation, it was reeling from the terrible cost of getting there.

"Our country is in ruins, our cities are destroyed and our population is displaced or dispersed," remarked Central Committee member Andebrhan Wolde Giorgis when I met him one afternoon in Orotta. "A gigantic task of reconstruction awaits us."

Again, in 1990, drought ravaged the land. From the outskirts of Asmara to the border town of Senafe, the ocher hills and barren mountainsides told a hauntingly familiar tale of failed harvests. Eritrea's two seasonal rivers, the Anseba and the Barka, which normally carried the runoff from the plateau into the western lowlands, did not even flood that summer. The country was bone-dry. ERA's field staff reported that precipitation in Sahel province fell from the already low annual total of 18.9 centimeters in 1989 to only 1.08 the next year. Norwegian Church Aid field monitor Jarl Honore described one farmer who borrowed seeds to plant but was only able to harvest half of what he sowed. "He would have been better off eating the seeds than planting them," said Honore.

A landmark study in 1988 established that a large majority of the rural population had not recovered from the 1984-85 famine. Making extensive use of EPLF and ERA cadres in data collection, the assessment team gathered detailed information on fully one-fifth of Eritrea's 1,774 villages in what turned out to be the closest thing to a census done in the country since the 1930s. They estimated the total Eritrean population at slightly more than three million, with approximately 2.5 million living in the rural areas. Some sixty-two percent of those in the countryside belonged to the agricultural sector and thirty-three percent to the agropastoral sector. Only five percent, located mainly in the arid northern mountains and in the coastal plains of southern Dankalia, lived a purely nomadic existence.⁸

The investigators discovered that the average farm family was

able to produce only enough grain to last five months of each year due to the effects of drought and war. Animal sales showed up as the most oft-cited source of nonfarm income to make up for this shortfall. (Wage labor was second.) The survey found that the oxen population in the highlands had dropped by half during the famine and that the number of goats, sheep and cattle throughout the country had been cut by almost three-fourths. With families forced to sell animals to survive, prices remained low despite the overall shortages, which meant that poor farmers and herders had necessarily to sell even more animals in a cruel cycle.

The Eritrean population was structurally impoverished. To cut back on food aid under these circumstances would undermine people's ability to rebuild their herds. Whether or not the rains came, the continuing supply of relief was essential to the rehabilitation process.⁹

The study also provided fascinating insights into the composition of Eritrean society and the effects of the protracted war. Analyzed by economic status, sixty-two percent of all peasants, nomads and seminomads were classified (using EPLF criteria) as poor, twenty-six percent as middle and twelve percent as rich. Over eighty percent of the villages surveyed had some form of popular committee initiated by the EPLF, and forty percent had carried out land reform—figures that reflected the fact that the survey took place in areas where the EPLF was strongest. The average area of land cultivated by a single household in the agricultural sector was one hectare (2.5 acres), enough to produce only 175 pounds of grain per person for the entire year. This, the surveyors found, was due less to land shortages than to the lack of resources—tools, draft animals, seeds, and other inputs—needed to cultivate the land, and to the loss of labor power and the direct effects of the war.

In Barka and Sahel less than half the arable land was in use. Even in Semhar and the more densely populated plateau, up to a fourth of the available land was not planted. Should the farmers prove unable to rebuild their shattered economic lives, the study warned, the rural population would face another disaster of an even greater magnitude and depth than that in 1984-85. By 1990 this prediction was proving unerringly on target.¹⁰

Eritreans fleeing the occupied cities faced conditions almost as

desperate. In Asmara, factories were closed, and normal economic activity was at a standstill. Grain prices had soared to more than ten times their usual levels, fresh water was scarce and there was no fuel or electricity for much of the civilian population. Entire streets were declared off-limits to Eritreans by the jittery municipal administration.

The human rights monitoring group Africa Watch issued a scathing report in September that accused the Ethiopian Army of confiscating food from civilians and that charged that the population was being held hostage. "Civilians are forced to remain at the front line to deter EPLF attacks, and the government has made an implicit threat to destroy the city and its inhabitants should it fall to the EPLF. Worse even than the hunger and the hardship of the present is the fear of the future."¹¹

Twenty-five miles behind the front lines, Adi Qayeh, the administrative capital of Akele Guzai province, was experiencing a sudden boom as the transit point not only for the liberation front, but for all civilian trade in southeastern Eritrea. EPLF engineers had carved out a precarious road straight up the escarpment, linking Adi Qayeh with Massawa and the road north to the base area and the Sudan border. Each night, convoys of trucks roared up the narrow ribbon of highway that was chiseled out of the cliffs. Increased trade was offset, however, by the collapse of most other economic activity. Prior to liberation, Adi Qayeh's main business had centered on bar and restaurant trade. With the large occupation army replaced by EPLF fighters who received no salary at all, the entertainment industry took a sharp dive.

The desire for honest, accountable government was the single concern most often cited by the newly liberated residents of Adi Qayeh when I asked what "democracy" meant to them. People said they wanted a fast and fair response to inquiries and requests that reflected the merits of their case and not whom they knew or to whom they were related. Many people spoke excitedly about their new freedom to travel, with no curfew in effect and with no need for special applications or bribes.

The sequence in Adi Qayeh after the capture of the town reflected the new, more measured EPLF approach to mass organizing. It began with a series of public seminars, which drew a relatively large

turnout. Then cadres invited people to further meetings at the *kebele* level where they were encouraged to ask questions. This was a slow process, as most people were afraid to speak up. After several sessions, EPLF officials moved to abolish the old structures and to reconstitute the town into three new zones. Two months after liberation, elections were held and a people's committee (the most basic form of self-organization) was established.

The electoral process started with mass meetings in each zone to hold open nominations—a raucous convention process during which each nominee was dissected in public for his or her past behavior. In one zone, ten were criticized for being lazy and untrustworthy. In only one case was a nominee dropped, I was told. This occurred when a woman was nominated who had publicly criticized students during the occupation for refusing to sing the Ethiopian national anthem as part of a rare (and risky) protest after the bombing of Massawa. She spoke up at a public assembly to suggest the dissidents should be killed. Committee members said that the woman's traitorous words prevented her from being a part of the new government, but did not warrant any other punishment.

Almost six months after liberation, EPLF cadres began to mobilize sectoral associations of workers, women, peasants and youth. There was no effort to subdivide the unions further according to class position, and the main criteria for membership hinged on support for the national struggle. At one organizing session for women that I attended in Adi Qayeh, the difference from the 1970s was readily apparent: the meeting was lower key, the turnout was somewhat smaller and the presentation was less strident. The ensuing discussion was earnest and militant. The meeting was held at four in the afternoon in an empty school building with 150 women, many with children tied to their backs. The discussion that day was on Eritrean history, with a focus on cultural and ethnic diversity. The initial presentation included many details of particular cultures and religions. The general EPLF line on the nationalities issue had not changed, but there was more anthropology and less polemic in the lesson.¹²

The front's political education program for fighters and civilians had evolved considerably since the 1970s. Study groups that used to meet three times weekly now met once at most. The lessons

came from a new political manual published in 1989. The main focus was on Eritrea, with less political theory and more emphasis on practical issues. The formulas were absent, but the underlying values remained.

"Our political education is based on our philosophy: nationalism, social justice and the development of the Eritrean personality (morality)," Haile Woldetensai, who supervised the redrafting of the manual, wrote across the top of an outline that he gave me in Orotta.¹³

Political seminars focused on practical issues that the country would face in the near future: the nature of a "mixed" economy; how a multiparty political system might work; the EPLF's policy toward questions of democracy in Ethiopia and the front's experiences with various Ethiopian opposition groups; the EPLF's foreign policy; and the issue of national unity within Eritrea. These were two-way discussions at which EPLF cadres presented the front's views and solicited responses, much as they had with the redrafting of the National Democratic Program in the lead-up to the 1987 congress.

The new economic policy preoccupied many EPLF leaders then. Already, dramatic policy shifts had been announced, repudiating earlier commitments to nationalize much of the economy. In fact, due to the war and drought, there was little left to nationalize in Eritrea. The main concern of the front as it headed into the reconstruction phase of the liberation struggle was how to attract capital and skills back to Eritrea from abroad.

"We're entering into a new stage—practically another war—of reconstruction and development," said Stefanos Seyoum, an economist educated at the University of Wisconsin who was the head of the EPLF's Agriculture Commission when I met him in Adi Qayeh. "Our first priority is to rehabilitate our agriculture and to rebuild the basic infrastructure so that people can return to normal work. Our main resource for this is our people. Our main problem is the lack of capital."

In this vein the EPLF had since 1987 encouraged the formation of what it termed "call committees" among the exile community, designed to attract Eritreans of all political stripes to contribute their experience as well as their material resources to the rebuild-

ing of the country. One result of this was a sort of Eritrean "peace corps." Dozens of volunteers—mostly young Eritreans living abroad part or all their lives—were coming to the field to serve as teachers, mechanics, technicians, financial planners, even computer programmers. In June 1990 a group of Eritrean entrepreneurs living in Sudan responded to a personal appeal by Isaias to invest in Eritrea by chartering the Nacfa Corporation to trade in basic commodities in the liberated areas. Thirteen well-heeled merchants and entrepreneurs had put up \$100,000 themselves and raised another \$2 million from other refugees for the venture. When I asked several of them why they decided to launch the venture, Esayas Demsas said, "I am out of my country and don't even know my name. I do this to get my identity back."

If independence would reestablish the national identity of those who had been forced into exile, what would it mean to others who had struggled within Eritrea to carve out new personal identities and social roles, particularly Eritrean women? I met Askalu at her underground house a few miles to the south at Hishkub, where she directed the National Union of Eritrean Women. I asked her what would prevent women from sliding back into traditional positions of subservience, as had happened so often in revolutionary situations once the fighting stopped.

"I do not think they will ever go back to the way they were before," she said. "The biggest change is in the attitude of women and men. Women have learned to believe in themselves, and many of the men, too, have changed their ideas.

"Secondly, women have achieved a lot in the field of education. Before the Revolution, very few girls went to school; for those who did, reading and writing was enough. Now many stay in school up to the age of fifteen, even among nomadic families.

"Women have shown they can participate in all activities—driving trucks, working as mechanics and barefoot doctors, producing agricultural implements. In Himer [Barka] and Wogret, Tigre women who never went into the fields are now tending gardens. This is completely new for them, and it goes against hundreds of years of tradition. And women are participating actively in political life for the first time.

"The most difficult changes are those at the grassroots level. It is easy to make changes at the top, but these are seen by people in the villages as exceptional. Now, we have women in all the people's assemblies, doing all the things that men do, even acting as judges. This is something you could never have imagined fifteen years ago—women judges in Sahel. Then it was only the old religious leaders, the sheikhs, that held all the power, and they would never allow a woman to decide things for the community. We consider what we are doing at the grassroots as the best guarantee of change in the future at the higher levels.

"We know that the struggle of women is far from over. We still have husbands hindering women's participation in these activities. There are families who don't want their girl children going to school, and there are people—women as well as men—who argue that a women's place is in the kitchen. Also, women with many children have so many responsibilities that it is very difficult for them to participate, and there is little we can do about that now.

"But the biggest problem we've had in the last five years is drought. Our literacy programs and all our organizing have been disrupted by the displacement of so many people. It is very difficult to ask someone who is starving to come to a literacy class. If the women are to be socially active, they have to be economically secure. When they are not, women who become politicized automatically want to join the EPLF instead of organizing their own villages. So this presents another challenge to us. Up to now all our activities have been voluntary, and women worked without pay. Now we are trying to pay them to give them economic standing in their villages. Voluntarism is good, but we want to prove that women can be self-reliant, too.

"We believe that if we change the attitude of people based on convictions, not laws, this will last. Once you bring these changes to the very small circles at the local level, it will not be easy to dismantle them. We are still pushing hard on education and literacy. This will be even more important when the war is finished and women begin to return from Sudan. Almost 10,000 people have come in just the past few months. There are at least 400,000 more in Sudan and almost one million people in the parts of Eritrea still under the Derg. We will need to do much more training, more lit-

eracy programs, more health programs and more skill training so women can support themselves. This will be our main challenge in the next period."

The sheer cost of the EPLF military success—and the daunting prospect of the reconstruction process that lay ahead—had humbled these heady revolutionaries, not undermining their ideals but altering their sense of what was possible.

Gone were the facile slogans and formulaic prescriptions of the 1960s and 1970s. I discussed these changes at length in Orotta with Haile Woldetensai. He no longer tossed off witty comparisons to China's revolutionary experience. Nor did anyone I met on this visit use the abstruse Marxist jargon that so permeated most discussions, documents and public pronouncements in the 1970s. During the 1980s, the movement had turned inward to redefine itself in concepts that arose directly out of Eritrea's own national experience.

"We were carried away by the revolutionary and leftist upheavals of the 1960s," said Haile during a late-night interview conducted by candlelight in the underground EPLF guest house. "From the beginning, our objective was to create social justice, but we tried to find models in other people's experience. The Strategic Retreat gave us a good time—a hard and a good time—to reassess this. We came to understand that we had to cool down, to stand on our two feet on our own soil."

Grey flecks showed in his clipped beard for the first time, as the forty-three-year-old revolutionary reflected on the maturation of the liberation front over the past two decades. Like most of the EPLF's core leadership, Haile came of age in the 1960s and lived an ascetic guerrilla life in the bush through most of the 1970s—interrupted when he was captured by the Ethiopians. He was severely tortured before escaping in 1974. In the 1980s he married and parented one child. Now he co-directed the Department of National Guidance, responsible for education, culture, information, cadre development and the front's overall political direction.

Reflecting on the EPLF's first years, Haile described them as a time of almost cult-like revolutionary purism. The reaction to the conservatism of the ELF and the revolutionary zeal brought into the

field from university-based political groups combined to foster a lurch to the far left. In the 1970s, EPLF members shared all their material possessions, took an absolute vow of chastity, and broke all ties with their personal pasts. Fighters often passed through their home villages without acknowledging their families.

"In the early EPLF, we sometimes failed to connect our ideal to reality," Haile said, shaking his head and smiling ruefully. "When you don't care about your family, you can't care about the society at large." Despite these excesses, he insisted, the commitment to basic values remained intact: "The struggle itself was a school. We have learned to base our struggle on the objective reality, but we have not detached ourselves from our aims. The fighters who formed the EPLF were purely committed to national unity and to justice, and this has worked."

Chapter 15

THE CHALLENGE OF PEACE

The last major battle of the Eritrea war began on May 19, 1991, near Decamare, less than 25 miles from Asmara. After three days of fierce combat, Ethiopian lines collapsed, leaving the capital vulnerable to imminent capture. With EPLF forces grinding south along the Red Sea toward Assab and with Ethiopian opposition forces closing in on Addis Ababa, there was no longer any doubt that the Derg was doomed. On May 22 Mengistu boarded a twin-engine Ethiopian Airlines DH-5, ostensibly bound for a military base at Awassa in southern Ethiopia. Once airborne, he instructed the pilot to fly instead to Nairobi, Kenya, where he transferred to a flight to Zimbabwe to join his wife and children in exile.

Despite repeated Ethiopian threats of a bloodbath in Asmara in the event of an EPLF assault, there were few casualties when the city fell. On May 23 the commander of the Ethiopian General Staff in Asmara hopped aboard a waiting helicopter and fled to Saudi Arabia. That evening scores of mid-level Ethiopian officers con-

vened a hasty conference to plan their own escape. After moving the nightly curfew up from 9:00 to 8:00 P.M., they ordered a wholesale retreat through Keren to Sudan. At this point, the more than 140,000 troops in and around Asmara began to panic. The next day, as EPLF tanks rolled into the city, the Ethiopians were still fleeing northward.

When Asmara residents in the southeastern suburbs saw the EPLF fighters entering at 10:00 A.M., they crawled out from under their beds and emerged from makeshift bomb shelters to fill the streets, dancing and cheering. One civilian produced an EPLF flag and draped it over the lead tank so there would be no mistaking whose troops were rolling into town. Others phoned friends across the city, sparking a riotous celebration throughout the tense metropolis before the Ethiopians had finished their helter-skelter evacuation. This made it impossible for the fighters to catch up to the escaping government forces and inadvertently prevented a last battle.

"It was complete hysteria!" said one Eritrean afterward. "Nobody bothered to lock doors or wear shoes. Every resident was in the streets. People were dancing a few meters away from the retreating Second Army as if they were in a dream."¹

There was no command structure and little order to the Ethiopian stampede. Unable to halt it, EPLF forces fanned out on both flanks of the frenzied escape in an effort to protect civilians in its path. Thousands of frightened government soldiers perished in the blistering Barka desert as they ran, crawled, and scratched their way to the border, leaving a trail of abandoned vehicles, heavy arms and military equipment behind.

Meanwhile, in Addis Ababa, a rump military government under the command of Lieutenant General Tesfaye Gebre Kidan, a former commander in chief of Ethiopian forces in Eritrea, desperately tried to negotiate a cease-fire with the advancing armies of the Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF), composed largely of TPLF fighters, by this time only twenty miles from the capital. On May 24 and 25, Israel airlifted 14,000 Ethiopian Jews from Addis Ababa to Tel Aviv in a bizarre, last-minute, U.S.-brokered deal with both the Ethiopian government and the EPRDF. At almost the same time, the EPRDF—with direct EPLF support—captured the main Ethiopian air force base at Debra Zeit.

On May 27, General Gebre Kidan announced his decision to surrender and sought refuge at the Italian embassy. At dawn the next day the EPRDF marched into Addis Ababa and took charge of the country. One of its first official acts was to acknowledge Eritrea's right to self-determination and to confirm its agreement with the EPLF to allow a popular referendum in Eritrea to decide the territory's future political status. The thirty-year war was finally over.

When I arrived five months later, having left my position with Grassroots International to return to journalism, the Eritreans were still celebrating, though they were already engaged in the enormous challenge of constructing Africa's newest nation-state out of the ashes of the continent's longest and most brutal armed conflict.

In the evenings Asmara's tree-lined boulevards and wide sidewalks were crammed with people strolling from one end of the city to the other. Several times I met people near my pension, the Bristol, who marveled at the opportunity to saunter by unobstructed, after two decades of nightly curfews. For thirteen years the street had been off-limits to pedestrians because it ran past the telecommunications office, and the government feared an act of sabotage. Toward the end of the occupation, official paranoia became so extreme that many sidewalks were crisscrossed with strings of tin cans that jingled like homemade burglar alarms when anyone touched them, bringing armed guards dashing into the street. Now the cans were gone, along with the barbed wire and the sandbags that had surrounded every government building.

Surprisingly, there were no guns visible—EPLF fighters were required to check their weapons at police posts on the outskirts of this city of 460,000, and the police didn't carry weapons at all. Where one might have expected swaggering soldiers gloating over their victory, there were instead modest young men and women shyly exploring the city, most for the first time.

Most people appeared anxious to achieve some semblance of normalcy. In October the Provisional Government of Eritrea, as the EPLF now termed itself, opened schools across the country with newly designed curricula in four local languages. Weeks later, the government announced new criminal and civil codes and appointed dozens of civilian judges to run the courts. A commission began drafting a

national constitution, while community organizers oversaw local elections for people's assemblies in villages and urban neighborhoods across the country.

The provisional government's central priorities were the creation of democratic political institutions and the reconstruction of the country's war- and drought-ravaged economy. During a five-week tour by bus, flatbed truck, four-wheel drive vehicle and, occasionally, by foot, I spoke with scores of officials, private citizens, local and foreign relief workers and visiting diplomats about Eritrea's prospects. For the first time in fifteen years, I traveled with no escort and no restrictions, the first foreign reporter to do so.

Eritrea's antiquated physical infrastructure was in ruins. Its subsistence agriculture was reeling from chronic drought and severe environmental degradation; its limited light industry was largely destroyed by the war. An estimated eighty percent of the country's 3.5 million people, many of whom were displaced by the fighting, were surviving on international relief. "Almost every individual is now living on the edge," said Jarl Honore, the field monitor for Norwegian Church Aid whom I had last seen behind the battle lines in Adi Qayeh a year earlier. Widespread starvation seemed unlikely due to the efficiency of the ERA-run relief operation, now supported by the full panoply of United Nations agencies, but little improvement was likely without significant investment in rehabilitation and longer-term development. This depended almost entirely on the political situation, which continued to defy conventional categories.

In May the EPLF had agreed to delay Eritrea's separation from Ethiopia for two years in order to give the EPRDF a chance to stabilize its position in Addis Ababa. Ethiopia remained shaky, rent by deep-seated ethnic divisions and facing internal paralysis from a recalcitrant bureaucracy that was little affected by the radical changes at the top and that strongly opposed the "loss" of Eritrea. Nevertheless, the Addis Ababa government appeared firm in its commitment to let the Eritreans decide their own future. When I asked Ethiopia's Foreign Minister, Seyoum Mesfin (a former TPLF guerrilla leader known as Seyoum "Mussa"), if he still supported the referendum proposal, he told me: "There is no doubt about it." There was also no doubt that the Eritreans would vote to leave

Ethiopia. Meanwhile, they were in political limbo, no longer functioning as a province of Ethiopia but lacking formal status as an independent state and thus cut off from most sources of bilateral and multilateral aid.

Nonetheless, the new government plunged ahead with its own development priorities. High on the list were universal primary school education and improved and expanded public health, key components in a strategy that identified the work force as the country's strongest asset. Unfortunately, a new complication arose with liberation. Routine testing for sexually transmitted diseases in Asmara, Keren and Massawa—the cities that had housed the bulk of the occupation army over the previous decade—found over 300 cases of AIDS. Extrapolating from this figure, doctors estimated that there were at least 15,000 people likely to be HIV-positive in the major urban centers where prostitution had become widespread.

Despite the enormous burdens on the health care system and the conservatism of the society, the government embarked immediately on a comprehensive public campaign. The EPLF broadcast radio messages, carried stories in the press, convened seminars around the country, and presented units on the issue in the newly opened elementary schools. Condoms, though in short supply, were freely dispensed at government clinics and hospitals. The EPLF set out to run a model campaign to contain the impact of the disease—the problem was one of available means.

One of the first tasks for the new government was to rebuild the country's infrastructure. To that end, the entire EPLF army would stay on without pay until the 1993 referendum. In November 1991 a compulsory "national service" was announced, requiring all citizens between eighteen and forty to register. Those not employed or in school were liable for a call-up of twelve to eighteen months. University students were tapped for a rural literacy campaign. Soldiers and draftees were to rebuild roads, terrace hillsides and construct earthen dams and catchment basins, much like the Civilian Conservation Corps in the U.S. in the 1930s.

Meanwhile, the new government accelerated efforts to attract capital from abroad to regenerate Eritrea's industrial sector. Prospective investors were promised guarantees against uncom-

pensated nationalization, the right to full repatriation of profits and a minimum of red tape in setting up businesses or restarting old ones. Most enterprises nationalized by the Ethiopians were targeted for return to their original owners or for sale to new buyers. Well-heeled Eritrean exiles in Europe and North America were urged to come home.

Despite these moves, the government had difficulty gaining recognition, aid or investment. This was due in part to the unresolved status of the territory, but it also reflected the continuing wariness of many industrial countries toward this maverick revolution. The Sudanese, longtime supporters of the Eritreans, were the first to establish an official presence in Asmara. Egypt and Yemen followed suit, but formal ties with Western nations proved harder to come by. Several high-level U.S. and European delegations toured Eritrea after the end of the war, but little came of them. In early February 1992 a team of experts from the U.S. Agency for International Development arrived in Asmara. Though relief was stepped up, there was no development aid forthcoming for the entire year.

Negotiations over U.S. assistance broke down when the A.I.D. team presented a rigid formula for privatization of the economy. Though such "conditionalities" for U.S. aid had become common practice during the Reagan-Bush years, there had been no warning in the informal contacts the EPLF had had with U.S. officials, and the Eritreans were taken entirely by surprise, and no agreement was reached. During the first full year of peace, Norway was the only country to pledge significant development assistance—estimated at \$20 million—without strings attached.

The drive to attract educated and skilled Eritrean exiles back home stalled over the government's inability to pay market salaries or to assure adequate housing, schools or other social services. The EPLF stepped up efforts to fundraise from Eritreans at home and abroad by levying a voluntary two-percent "martyrs' tax" in June 1992 on all income, in addition to the front's regular solicitations for relief and reconstruction that still provided the largest single source of unrestricted cash support for the movement.

At home, the government pushed ahead with its civilian organizing in order to bring the population in the central cities and

towns into the process of institution-building that had been going on for years in outlying communities. Elections got under way at the local level by the end of 1991, setting the stage for the establishment of provincial legislatures the next year. The local elections were carried out by secret ballot and were hotly contested, with terms of office frequently limited to six months or less to give communities a chance to evaluate their elected officials. "This is part of a continuous process of educating our people to the practice of democracy and then turning over power to them," said Sebhat Ephrem, the head of the General Staff of the Eritrean army when the EPLF marched into Asmara. (A year later he was appointed the city's governor.)

"The EPLF, as a separate entity, is already disintegrating," he told me. "After the referendum, our mandate is finished, and the Front will disappear." This was an extraordinary proposition: to dissolve the EPLF rather than turn it whole-cloth into the ruling party, as nearly every other third world nationalist movement in recent history had done. Isaias and others echoed the pledge many times over the next several months, not as a concession to outside pressure but as an investment in political pluralism believed by the EPLF leadership to be necessary to the country's development.

The EPLF's commitment to pluralism extended to the economic, political and cultural spheres—an outgrowth of the front's long experience as a social movement and a shadow government. Nevertheless, they were concerned about the pitfalls inherent in unconstrained competition on uneven social terrain, terrain that would only become more uneven if and when the large exile community began to return from abroad, and when foreign investors and multilateral financial institutions arrived on the scene. A key question they confronted in the transition was how to balance the need for growth with their deep-seated commitment to social justice.

Movement leaders spoke of steering clear of power blocs, of maintaining their political independence and of constructing a regulated market economy in which the state would play a mediating rather than a commanding role. As social pragmatists they were prepared to experiment. They were aware that their postwar development would have to be negotiated and fine-tuned as they went along.

Born in significant part out of the struggle for cultural diversity, the EPLF set out early on to acknowledge, celebrate and build on these differences, embracing a radical version of what has come to be termed "multiculturalism" in the U.S. Curricula were written in Tigrinya, Tigre and Arabic during the late 1970s and early 1980s, with the aim of eventually offering primary school instruction in all nine Eritrean languages. Cultural workers learned the traditional music, dance and arts of the country's various nationalities and taught them to everyone.

It was not only that minorities could now practice their traditions without fear of repression (though this was itself an advance)—what was truly pathbreaking was the embrace of the traditions of cultural minorities by other nationalities as a part of a new, richer Eritrean culture. In furtherance of this objective, the Public Administration Department carried out extensive research on traditional economic, social and political practices. Cadres began in the 1980s to record oral histories from tribal elders and to collect data on village histories as part of a conviction that national social and economic reform had to grow out of and extend this heritage. At the same time, the EPLF appeared certain to ban political parties in the postwar era whose central appeal was based on religion or ethnicity.²

In social policy, the early commitment to radical redistribution of income was giving way to a more thorough redistribution of opportunity, a commitment to a high degree of *social equality* that allowed for individual inequalities, so long as they were not acquired or maintained at too high a social cost to others. What this might mean would have to be decided as the new state evolved. A key task for the new state would be to find ways for people to lead productive lives and to participate actively and fully in the construction and development of the nation. Work, not debilitating relief, was what the front proposed for the less fortunate in the society. This approach was illustrated in the efforts the EPLF made to put disabled fighters to work throughout the war years—in the underground workshops, in the new schools and in the various other nonmilitary departments. The commitment to equal opportunities was also reflected in efforts to locate productive activities in backward regions and to set up schools and public health facilities among

the poorer and less advantaged areas of the country.

Each November afternoon a cold wind howled over the lip of the plateau, sending clouds of dust swirling through Adi Qayeh's empty streets, deserted but for swarms of scantily clad children. Their parents were for the most part out in the countryside trying to salvage a harvest from their scorched grain fields.

Under Ethiopian rule Adi Qayeh had been an administrative center for the province of Akele Guzai, an agricultural region with almost a half-million inhabitants, most of whom were subsistence farmers so poor that they lacked seeds to plant for the next season. Employment in the town had centered on the many government departments headquartered there, now closed. Agricultural specialists, doctors, teachers, political organizers and others in the new EPLF government worked without pay, so they added little stimulus to the local economy. Many of Adi Qayeh's *sewah* bars were boarded up and closed. Even the civilian traffic that came with the EPLF's arrival in 1990 had dissipated, shifting to the main roads up the escarpment nearer Asmara, leaving southeastern Eritrea cut off from much of the country's limited commerce. This shift left the desolate outpost dangling at the outer edge of Eritrea's depressed economy.

Almost overnight Adi Qayeh was reduced to a shell of its former self. Under the veneer of a modest boom during the previous decade, the town had been steadily deteriorating, due to an almost total lack of investment in basic infrastructure. The water system, installed by the Italians in the 1920s, had not been serviced in years. It now leaked over a third of its supply into the ground. Water was being trucked to many neighborhoods instead of run through the rusted pipes. Electricity was intermittent, powered by antiquated diesel generators; the telephone system—a few dozen hand-cranked machines—was erratic at best and often out of order; and there was no municipal sewage system. All roads but parts of the one to Asmara were dirt; most of the town's buildings were constructed of adobe and needed repair; and the surrounding hills, once thickly forested, were stripped clean of tree cover and severely eroded. "Thirty years of war have taken everything to zero," remarked the town's mayor, Luel Gebreab, the only woman to head a major municipality at that time.

Barely two months after the end of the war, in July 1991, the provisional government convened an economic policy conference in Asmara that drew dozens of Eritrean expatriates from Europe and North America, together with representatives from key EPLF departmental planning commissions. This was not the first such "in-gathering" of Eritrean professionals—the Research and Information Centre on Eritrea sponsored conferences on social and economic issues in 1983 and 1988, and there had been several smaller consultations—but this was the largest to date and the most ambitious in its sweep. It provided a window into the next phase of Eritrea's national development. It also revealed the great gaps not only in perspective but in political orientation between Eritreans at home and those abroad.

Perhaps the most notable aspect of the conference was its openness. There was no "line" to adhere to—the meeting was a brainstorming session designed primarily to draw a broad spectrum of Eritreans into the planning process, as much as to elicit specific ideas. The departmental reports were, predictably, practical assessments of short- and medium-term development priorities. In contrast, most of the papers presented by Eritreans living outside the country, particularly those in the U.S., were notable for their high levels of abstraction and their conservatism. From the ultra-"left" politics of the 1970s, the exile community in the U.S. now embraced many of the tenets of neo-liberal, "free market" economic theory. Nevertheless, there was a broad consensus that while Eritrea's post-war economy would be driven principally by the private sector, the state would play a critical role in managing the transition to peacetime production, in regulating investment and commerce and in setting national priorities, chief among which was a commitment to rural development focused on peasant producers.

Food security would be "a paramount priority," Isaias said in his opening remarks to the conference. The government's direct role in production would be limited, but the relationship between various sectors of the economy, between internal and external trade, between public and private capital, and between national and international capital, would have to be "balanced and appropriate." The economy would be open to a wide range of initiatives and experiments so long as they fit within national priorities. The state would

act as referee, the rules would be developed and adjusted over time, and each player in the economic arena would be held accountable for their impact on the general welfare of the population. Isaias closed with a call to abolish bribery and corruption. He also cautioned against a development strategy characterized by "a widening gap between an extremely rich few and the impoverished majority," warning that this would be a recipe for instability.³

The departmental reports were remarkable not only for the plans and programs they proposed but for their candor in assessing past work and raising thorny questions about future policy. The Agricultural Commission report, signed by economist Stefanos Seyoum (soon to move over to chair the Finance Commission), pointedly criticized the front's historic land reform program for creating disincentives for peasants to make improvements on their land and for perpetuating the fragmentation of agricultural holdings. He urged a change in the land tenure system that would consolidate holdings and provide security of tenure. "Rural development can be regarded as a means of fighting poverty by better utilization of local resources," he wrote.⁴

The Commerce Commission endorsed a "free trade policy" in which the domestic distribution of goods would be privatized as soon as possible, but in which the state would maintain price ceilings in the transition period and would regulate trade through licensing and other means. The report included a list of nearly one hundred areas of trade—domestic and foreign—with notes on those that should be reserved for Eritreans and those to be open to foreign nationals (less than twenty percent).

The Finance Commission report warned that runaway state bureaucracy was one of the major obstacles to development in most third world countries and recommended that the government keep its size and its salaries as low as possible. The report also noted that most revenue in developed countries comes from direct, progressive taxes, while most in third world states comes from indirect and inherently less equitable taxes. It called for a reversal of this phenomenon.

A consistent thread through most papers—both those produced at home and those written abroad—was a vision of Eritrea as a hub for regional development. The enforced isolation of Eritrea

needed to end. Strong relations with neighbors, especially with Ethiopia, were essential. Peace and stability within neighboring states were also important, and Eritrea should play a role in bringing this about. The free movement of labor, capital and goods should be encouraged, and the potential for a regional customs union should perhaps be explored.

The first task was to clean up the mess from the war. The road to Keren was lined with the rusting remains of Ethiopian Army vehicles as I rolled through the scarred, brown hills in a public bus in early November, jammed with people, goods and small animals. We jounced over the shredded highway, careening forward for a few seconds only to grind to a near stop at potholes that could swallow the bus whole if the driver were not careful. For miles outside Asmara grain fields lay fallow because farmers feared land mines. Where grain had sprouted, much of it was stunted from lack of rain. One of the most fertile stretches of Eritrea resembled arctic tundra.

Little had changed in the center of Keren except that the Keren Hotel was more run-down, and there were no longer any elderly Italians in view. Keren had grown, however, as drought and war had driven thousands out of the perilous countryside. The population was now 75,000, more than double its size when I fled the city during the 1978 retreat. As I walked the dusty streets, I recalled my last night there, racing about in the half-light of hundreds of small fires as the EPLF prepared to leave. The buildings looked the same now, but there was little else that was familiar. EPLF offices were in new locations, and there was no guest house—visitors this time were on their own. The liberation front's presence, as in Adi Qayeh and Asmara, was far more discrete than it had been in the towns liberated in the 1970s.

When I toured the Keren Hospital, I found three boys who had been herding cattle the previous day when one of their cows stepped on a land mine. Fifteen-year-old Idris Hamed lost one eye and suffered a compound leg fracture. Nuredin Farig also lost an eye. Eighteen-year-old Jamel Ali Jaber lost both his legs, cut off just above his knees. Doctors said these were the latest of over 200 civilian injuries since the official end of the war five months earlier. Almost ninety percent of the injuries the doctors treated were the

result of land mines. With severe drought in its second year and with the local economy otherwise at a standstill, people were anxious to get back to their fields as quickly as possible, despite warnings from the provisional government, which had already removed 200,000 of the deadly booby traps.

As villagers returned to their homes around Keren, other refugees were filtering back into the area from Sudan where many had spent the past decade. This influx heightened the land mine problem, for most had no idea where the battle lines had been drawn in their absence. It also produced poignant moments as families long severed were reunited.

On my way to Nacfa, I ran into Sadia Omer, a young EPLF schoolteacher, shortly after she met her parents for the first time since 1977. Sadia was ten years old when she became separated from her family during the battle for Nacfa. In the confusion, her mother, father and siblings made their way to Sudan; Sadia ended up with an EPLF guerrilla unit whose leaders deposited her at the Zero School in Sahel where she learned to read and write during six years of elementary education. Then she was assigned to a village in Barka as a teacher in her own right. Only a month earlier, on a leave from her post, did she run into her mother in the border town of Karora. "I felt something very deep when I kissed my mother," she told me. "I had forgotten them. All I knew was my learning and teaching. But when I saw them, I had all these new feelings."

Hamed Nur squatted in ankle-deep dust outside Nacfa and stoically swung his wooden-handled scythe at the brittle stalks of dried sorghum that dotted his arid field. "There is no grain, only fodder for the animals," he told me dejectedly. The dead plants were casualties of yet another drought, the eighth in ten years. For Hamed, as for thousands of others, this meant that there would be no food apart from emergency relief for him, his wife and their ten children. Frustration and despair, along with hunger, gnawed at his belly. The dependence that this crisis engendered also worried many leaders of the new government.

By November 1992, 2.8 million people were receiving regular grain rations, turning Eritrea into the equivalent of one massive refugee camp. Crop failure throughout Eritrea was estimated at over

eighty percent, following a ninety-five percent failure in 1990-91. As if to underline the depth of the crisis, the route from Afabet to Nacfa was strewn with the carcasses of dead cattle, goats and camels. Even the thorny *belas* (the fruit of prickly pear cactus), which provided a food of last resort, was a casualty of the drought as desperately hungry camels devoured them together with entire cactus plants, leaving only jagged brown stubs by the roadsides.

A second needs assessment survey (carried out by the same Leeds University team that did the 1987 analysis) found that consistently low levels of emergency relief in the 1980s had masked a steady attrition of most peasants' "asset base." In the four years between assessments, livestock herds shrank by more than fifty percent as hungry families sold their animals to buy grain. As a result, they were reduced to a level of structural poverty from which they could not recover, even if the rains came. The number of families classified as "poor peasants" rose from sixty-two to seventy-eight percent of the rural population during this period, while those deemed capable of producing a surplus shrank to only six percent.

What emerged from the second survey was that low levels of relief after a disaster can undercut recovery, resulting in lingering dependence and chronic crisis. Relief is needed not only to keep people alive, but to help them return to a level of sustainable production. This relief was not provided to Eritrea, and most of the population still teetered on the brink of catastrophe.⁵

Several hundred families were camped in and around Nacfa, small tea shops were sprouting up along the road and a handful of enterprising merchants was already assembling permanent shops with gleaming new corrugated iron roofs. A brigade of fighters was camped outside the rubble of the town, breaking rocks and hauling them into Nacfa to rebuild homes. The EPLF had also built a new elementary school, and a regional hospital was under construction.

On a walk outside the town, I met members of a planning committee of EPLF technicians and civilian engineers from Asmara that was meeting to chart the municipal development needs for a future population of up to 80,000 people. Someday, they insisted, Nacfa would be a model city. This was a rather difficult concept for me to grasp as I watched a family of gaunt camels rolling in the thick

brown dust of a dry riverbed, but not, in this remarkable country, impossible to imagine.

My visit to Zagher came a few days before I left Eritrea near the end of 1991. I had been trying to get there for several weeks but had been unable to secure both a vehicle and a translator at the same time. At last Askalu offered to drive me out to visit the village where she, too, had spent a considerable amount of time in the 1970s.

We set out early in the morning, winding through the knobby hills and narrow ravines of the district known as Karnesium. The land through which we passed was bleak. The only crops were in the valleys, where water occasionally flowed.

We stopped in the center of the village opposite the old guest house, almost directly across from Minya's place and around a bend from Fana's. Several older women recognized us and drew us immediately into a nearby house. We were the first to return to Zagher from the crew of cadres, fighters and foreign visitors that had once made this village our base, and our appearance created a minor sensation. A crowd soon gathered. Three donkeys hee-hawed now and then from one corner of the smoky house as we reminisced about Zagher's revolutionary past and as I heard about life under occupation after 1978. As we talked, we were served one round after another of roasted corn, aromatic coffee and *sewah*.

"Life was very difficult," remarked Tesfamariam Gede, a fifty-one-year-old farmer with six children, ages nine through twenty, still living in the village with him. "We were scared to death much of the time, especially in the last days, and the drought was very bad. This is our first crop in three years."

Tekie Ashew, a member of the people's assembly when Zagher was reoccupied in 1978, said he was imprisoned for eighteen months on charges of collaborating with the EPLF. At sixty-five, Tekie still cut an imposing figure. He sported a closely cropped, snow white beard that framed his chiseled face and set off his smooth, bald pate. He sat ramrod straight on the adobe ledge next to me, a brown felt hat resting on his knees and a white *gabi* wrapped around his shoulders. He gestured forcefully with long, slender fingers, as he recounted how people were punished by having their animals shot

if they wandered too near the buried land mines. During the last two years, no one was allowed in their fields. After one year of this, villagers began to starve. "The years from 1988, after the capture of Afabet, were the worst," he said.

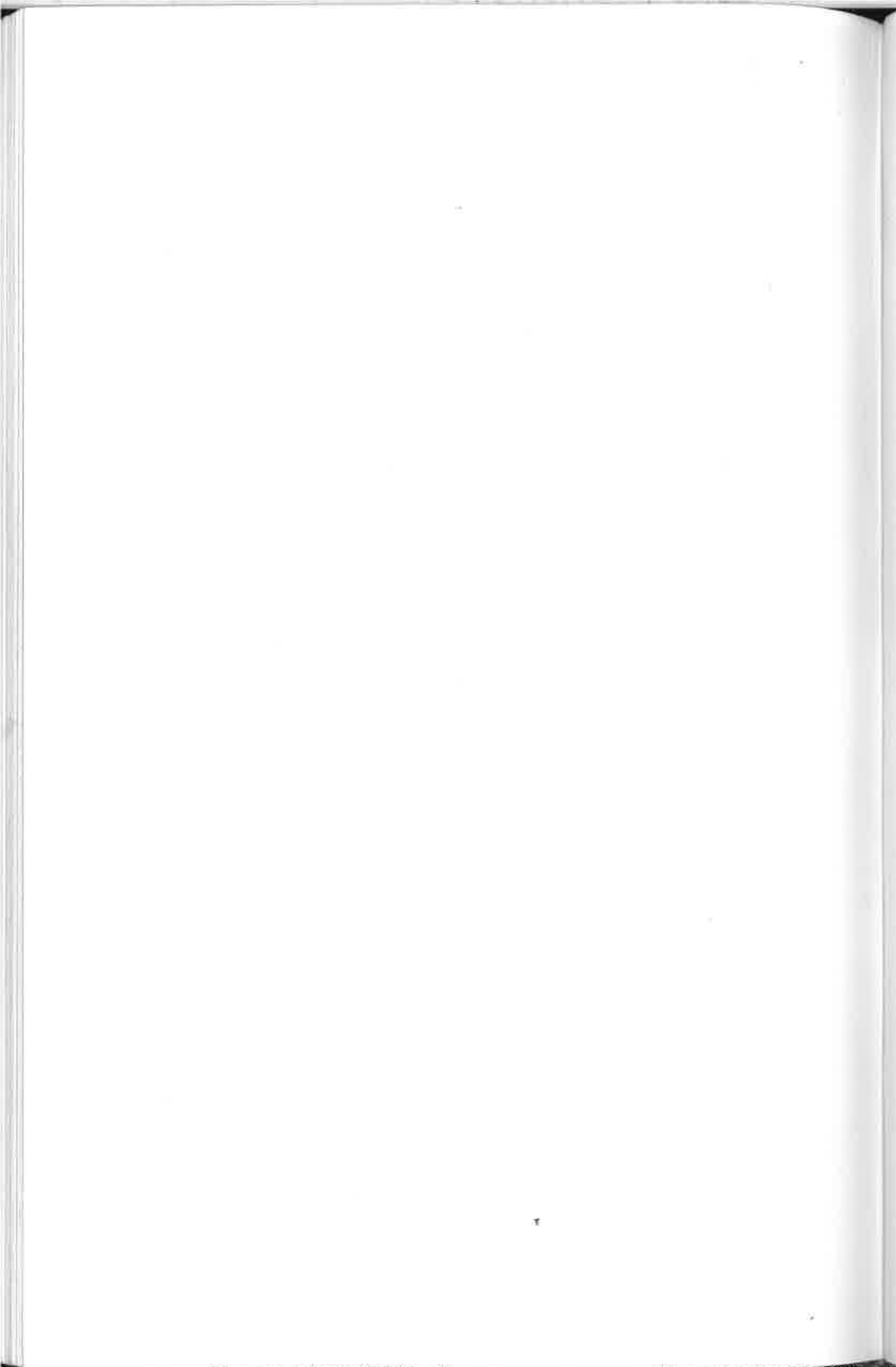
Taking me by the hand, Tekie led me through several nearby houses to show me where people had hidden to avoid imprisonment or where they had stowed their children to prevent them from being taken as conscripts. A shallow tunnel in one kitchen area was covered with a large wooden box. Next door, an adobe bed turned out to have a hollow core. One grain bin had a false bottom. "We are lucky to be able to speak of how life was, because we are some of the few who lived," said Tekie.

This was the closest I came to a true "homecoming," but it was emotionally disorienting without Fana there—fascinating, filled with memories, but oddly remote. The Zagher I had known, like Keren and Nacfa, no longer existed. How much this was also true for the EPLF cadres who had lived and worked in Zagher would remain to be seen. A central question in the coming years was whether the liberation movement, now transformed into an urban government, would be able to maintain its ties with the rural population, the backbone of the society.

EPLF cadres were back in Zagher in 1991 reorganizing the village, but they were starting almost from scratch, and there were significant differences from the mobilization in the 1970s. Associations of women, youth and peasants were being set up, but they met far less frequently—once or twice a month—and they were focused primarily on self-help projects rather than on the intensive political education of the earlier phase. Years of enforced participation in government-run *kebeles* had tired the peasants of sitting in meetings, but they were quick to help each other plow fields, rebuild houses or perform other community services. I was taken to the assembly hall they had constructed in 1978, of which they were still proud, and I was told that the local school would soon be refurbished. The grain mill built in 1977, however, was long gone, seized and dismantled by Ethiopian authorities who had claimed it was EPLF property. Despite such setbacks, there was no shortage of energy, so long as it was directed at practical activities.

In Zagher, as in most postwar villages, political discussions

usually took the form of public seminars held in the evenings, hosted by an EPLF organizer and open to everyone. The elected administrative body was a people's committee—the first step toward the self-governing people's assembly—with limited autonomy under the stewardship of the EPLF, as was the practice in all newly liberated communities. There were sixteen members, four of them women. Tekie was the only holdover from 1978—otherwise the entire body was composed of people engaged in politics for the first time. Zagher, the model village of the 1970s, was starting over.



Epilogue

LOOKING AHEAD

For three decades the Eritreans waged an armed political revolution to establish an independent state. For much of that time, they conducted a social revolution to recast their nation into a more unified, egalitarian and just one.

In 1991 they won the political battle. Whether and to what extent they "won" the social battle is more difficult to assess. What is abundantly clear in the aftermath of the cold war is that there is no single event or milestone that would confirm it; there are no reliable checklists against which to measure it; and the process is an ongoing one.

A social revolution has to be evaluated not on the basis of how close it mimics a previous historical phenomenon or resembles an abstract paradigm, but in terms of how much and in what ways it transforms a particular society. The key measures will be embedded in the history and the culture of that society, not in the external idea. In these terms, the Eritreans have achieved a great deal, though the odds were stacked against them from the start. Where

they are likely to go from here can best be surmised by grasping how they arrived at this point and then extrapolating.

On my last visit to Eritrea before independence—in November 1992—the country was calm, but it was caught in the eye of a terrible political storm ravaging much of the Horn of Africa. This turmoil was both a legacy of the cold war and a harbinger of the “new world order” that succeeded it. Somalia was in a state of almost complete disintegration; Sudan was rent by a brutal but largely unreported civil war; rival ethnic groups battled one another in Djibouti; and sporadic fighting threatened to erupt into renewed civil war in southern Ethiopia. Only in Eritrea were the guns silent.

The abrupt departure of the U.S. and the Soviet Union, coupled with the collapse of the regimes the geopolitical giants had alternately propped up, triggered a chaotic scramble for power throughout much of the region that had little to do with previously dominant political and economic philosophies. The main contending ideologies of the twentieth century—communism and capitalism—no longer gripped the popular imagination. Not only had the socialist projects in the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe collapsed, but the socialist-oriented experiments in Mozambique, Nicaragua and other third world states had been reversed, forcibly abandoned or placed under siege. Meanwhile, crushing debt, grossly unequal terms of trade, local corruption and chronic mismanagement rendered capitalist development an unreachable objective for most poor countries.

The disenchantment that accompanied this new reality created an ideological vacuum that was increasingly filled by either anarchic criminality or militant ethnic or religious revivalism. As economies declined and political legitimacy evaporated, many people grasped at what was closest and most familiar—asserting religious, ethnic, clan or even subclan identity with a terrifying ferocity toward “outsiders” and showing little or no tolerance toward dissenting members of the group itself. Against this discouraging backdrop, Eritrea was born as a democratic, multicultural nation. This context gave the emergence of the new state enhanced regional and global significance, even as it posed new challenges within Eritrea.

In 1992, the Eritreans were already trying to play a stabilizing role in the Horn of Africa. EPLF leaders engaged in mediation efforts among warring Somalis and among contending Ethiopian groups; they held talks with rival Djibouti factions; and they initiated diplomatic contacts with states throughout the region, even Israel and Saudi Arabia, despite the long-standing hostility of both states toward the Eritrean revolution.¹ The EPLF's main attention, though, was directed at consolidating the struggle for unity and justice within its own society.

In the newly liberated villages and towns, organizers worked with elected administrators to institutionalize popular participation as they transferred power over local affairs. To the surprise of some, the provisional government did not legislate the social transformation that had been so painstakingly achieved in the liberated zones over the previous two decades, but neither did it allow these gains to be rolled back in the localities where they had taken root. Instead, the reform process remained focused at the local level. Changes in traditional practices—from simple adjustments in local customs to land and marriage reform—were implemented (or not) on a village-by-village basis.

For the restructuring of the society to continue, the initiative would come primarily from the base of the society. No doubt such development will prove more difficult and will take longer to accomplish in peacetime than in the unstable social conditions of war, where the EPLF enjoyed a uniquely influential position. But the Eritrean experience suggests that even radical change carried out through bottom-up mobilization in such conditions can be ephemeral. World views may not be so malleable as once imagined, cultural traditions so disposable as once hoped, new ideas so easily transplanted as once dreamed. Under these circumstances, one of the most important investments in the revolutionary process is the engagement of the population in politics at a level and in a form that is sustainable. Lasting social change then has to be achieved one step at a time, with retreats as well as advances depending upon the relative strengths and weaknesses of contending social forces, much as the war itself was waged and won.

The organization of the April 1993 referendum on the question of Eritrea's independence provided a signal of the direction in which the country was headed. Teams were dispatched across Eritrea and to Ethiopia, Sudan, the Middle East, Europe and North America to enroll potential voters. Citizenship was broadly defined to include those born in Eritrea prior to 1933 (the time of the last formal census) and those born since with at least one parent whose lineage traced to this point. Naturalization was also available for foreigners who had lived in Eritrea for extended periods since 1933.

Once people were registered, voting was made as easy as possible. Private voting booths were constructed, and nonliterate voters were schooled in how to cast color-coded ballots. This was to be as inclusive an exercise as possible. The precedent being set was as important as the outcome—which was never in doubt. The referendum was, among other things, a model for national elections that would follow independence.

Another signal of the liberation movement's commitment to functional democracy was to be found in the efforts to launch autonomous popular organizations prior to independence. The mass organizations of the front—the National Unions of Workers, Peasants, Women and Youth—were slated for transformation into self-sustaining, nongovernmental organizations.

Perhaps the simplest transition was that for the National Union of Eritrean Workers (NUEW), set up during the war to mobilize workers, most of whom were in the occupied towns or abroad as refugees. The organization's main aim was to support the liberation struggle rather than to advance the particular interests of workers. This was an association based on class position, not a union linked to specific workplaces.

Less than six months after the end of the war, the provisional government set the parameters for independent, industry-based trade union organizing. The new unions would have the legal right to strike and the right to affiliate with each other to form a national alliance. By the end of 1992 there were over sixty locals in Asmara alone, and plans were under way to hold the founding congress of a labor federation in June 1993.

In the case of the National Union of Eritrean Peasants (NUEP), the provisional government took a different tack, linked

to a broad push to decentralize the new state. (In 1992 a decision was taken to move all government offices out of Asmara that did not have to be there in order to disperse the seat of bureaucratic power.) As the peasants were essentially local in outlook and orientation, the EPLF dismantled the NUEP and reorganized it on a regional basis in each of the nine rural provinces.

For the peasants, the central issue remained land—access to it and tenure on it. What the EPLF did at the national level was to decree that all rural land would remain a public trust while a commission was set up to consider long-term land policy. The effect was to leave most small-plot farmland under community control, preventing it from being bought or sold at a time when postwar poverty could easily have triggered a massive, market-driven land redistribution that would have thoroughly destabilized the society. In an intriguing display of local initiative, the new legislative assembly in Akele Guzai voted in the fall of 1992 to carry out land reform throughout that province.

The National Union of Eritrean Women (NUEWmn) did not have to be radically restructured, but it did have to grapple with the redefinition of its mission and with dramatic changes in its membership. The NUEWmn had encouraged women not only to participate in the liberation struggle but to take part in the country's economic and social life for the first time. The union supported women in bitter struggles around marriage reform, ownership of land and direct participation in the new political institutions. It also taught women literacy, trained them for jobs and even set up and managed projects. This dual identity—between that of a popular movement and that of a service organization—always contained an inherent tension. No longer subordinated to the task of national liberation, this tension took on new force.

Women's union leaders had sparked a heated debate within the male-dominated EPLF Central Committee over the lack of women in the top levels of the provisional government when it was set up in 1991. In a major reshuffle in mid-1992, four women were appointed to head departments, with two sitting on a new Advisory Council, the equivalent of a national cabinet. Despite these changes, some felt the organization was focused too much on self-improvement through education and training and not enough

on direct challenges to institutional oppression.

Some women in the front—invited to join the NUEWmn after the EPLF lifted a twenty-year, war-time ban on fighters participating in other political organizations—questioned whether the union could meet their particular needs, accustomed as they were to a far higher degree of gender equality than civilian women. At the same time, the union was inundated with members from the newly liberated towns—some 45,000 out of a total of 120,000 were residents of Asmara when the union held an organizing congress in September 1992. Though filled with nationalist fervor, these women had no direct experience of the revolution and were far less “feminist” in their outlook than their counterparts in the liberated countryside, let alone the highly politicized women fighters. Still, enthusiasm for the continuing struggle for gender equality was strong throughout the newly autonomous union.

In early November 1992, 400 women, many of them veiled, gathered under a cluster of shade trees in Hagaz, fifteen miles northwest of Keren, to hear a report from representatives who had attended the restructured NUEWmn’s founding congress a month earlier. It was remarkable to see so many local women turned out in this conservative, largely Muslim community, only coming under EPLF administration at the end of the war, where most men were opposed to their wives’ and daughters’ participation in politics.

The excitement at the gathering was palpable, as speakers detailed the union’s commitment to struggle for a long list of women’s economic and social rights. When the audience was asked for questions, the first one was whether the NUEWmn was a government organization. “This organization is independent. If the government goes against us, we will challenge them,” answered the local NUEWmn leader to rousing applause.

In Zagher in late 1992, the women’s union, already organized into several subgroups of sixty members each, was engaged in intense discussions of women’s needs within the village. Education was a high priority, according to Melite Woldai, the leader of one of the women’s groups. A grain mill was needed to relieve women of the crushing burden of hand-grinding each day so that they could participate more fully in village social and political life. There were

no new laws yet on marriage, but most women were now sixteen or seventeen when they were wed, she told me, adding that the village committee had decided there should be no more expensive ceremonies that bankrupted some families or prevented poor children from marrying at all. Issues of gender equality in social affairs were being discussed in the union but not yet struggled out in public meetings, she said. Hearing this, I was struck by how closely the agenda mirrored that taken up in Zagher in 1977. Melite had been a small child then—for her this was all new.

Poking around the village, I found that some members of the older generation had changed very little. I ran into the mother and father of Mebrak, the teenager I had met in 1977, the first woman to join Zagher's militia—over her mother's strong objections. Mebrak had been forced to flee Zagher at the end of 1978 when the government reoccupied the village. She then joined the EPLF as a full-time fighter. Later, she married another fighter and had a baby.

I reminded her mother that she had once admonished Mebrak that she should carry a baby, not a gun. I asked her what she thought now. "I still feel the same," she said with a defiant shrug. Once she stepped out of the room, however, Mebrak's father said that in his eyes his daughter was a hero. "I was on Aden's side when he was teaching her," he added—referring to the EPLF cadre responsible for mobilizing the Zagher youth in the 1970s, but taking care not to say it in his wife's hearing.

The arrival of the rains in 1992 seemed to overshadow everything else for most Eritreans. The hills and valleys around Asmara were radiant with the rich hues of autumn after the strongest, most sustained rains since the late 1970s. The harvest was projected at four times the size of the 1991 crop, though this was still only half what Eritrea needed to feed itself. It would take two or three more good years for the farmers to get back onto their feet, but it was an encouraging start, and people were infused with a new sense of hope despite their immediate crushing poverty.

Everyone was turning over their soil, anticipating the 1993 rains. To many with whom I spoke it was as if the heavens were rewarding them for their efforts over the previous winter—fifteen earthen dams had been constructed, scores of roads graded and

repaired, 25,000 miles of rocky hillside terraced and 22 million trees planted. The Agriculture Department's goal for 1993 was thirty-five new dams, 31,000 miles of new terracing (together with 14,000 miles of terrace repair) and the planting of 24.2 million tree seedlings. All this was being accomplished by local villagers participating in food-for-work programs and by unpaid fighters and young people doing their national service. Hard work, personal sacrifice, social unity and sheer determination were powering a recovery that was all the more remarkable for the contrast it offered with the much-publicized human tragedies unfolding nearby in Somalia and Sudan. But could it really work?

The next phase of Eritrea's national development will be marked by new and unfamiliar economic challenges in a largely economic arena far different from the military one in which the EPLF waged the struggle to win independence. Commitments to allocate resources to enhance equity and promote social justice will immediately come under fire from forces like the International Monetary Fund, the World Bank, Western governments and private investors with other priorities. At the same time, pressures will build for rapid, measurable improvements from a population that supported the liberation movement in the expectation that victory would change their lives, particularly those returning from exile.

The new government will enter the global economy in a weak position, but there are no alternatives today to doing so. Under these circumstances, it will have to negotiate the best possible short- and medium-term arrangements with investors and lenders and try to improve them once its position strengthens. At least the Eritreans begin with no debts—financial or otherwise.

The EPLF also starts out with considerable political capital at home, not only for winning the war but for the way in which the fighters conducted themselves during and after the conflict. There were few recriminations when the fighting stopped; instead, moves were made to draw nonmembers into the process of reconstruction and transitional governance. Massive efforts to repair war damage, extend basic services and rehabilitate the rural economy yielded measurable results within months. Throughout this period, even the acting president, Isaias Afwerki, served without salary. Once inde-

pendence is secured, however, the grace period may not last long—demands from competing sectors and interests are certain to arise.

Refugees returning from urban centers in Europe and North America will bring with them cultural habits and assumptions that will clash with the local setting. They will also come with education, skills and money that, while badly needed, will tend to give them a sense of entitlement and foster a level of impatience that will conflict with the feelings and attitudes of those who have suffered, struggled and endured within the country. Inevitably, this will compound the tensions between rich and poor, urban and rural, capital and periphery, that mark every former colony, ushering in forms of social contention long absent from the Eritrean scene.

The return of nearly a quarter-million impoverished refugees from Sudan will bring a very different set of social and political problems. Throughout the late 1980s and early 1990s, Islamic fundamentalists, led by an offshoot of the Muslim Brotherhood, held sway in Sudan. As Eritrea neared independence, small breakaway ELF factions continued to operate there with the support of Saudi Arabians and others not happy with the direction the EPLF was taking.

The overwhelming majority of Eritreans in the camps and many in the urban slums were poor, uneducated and conservative. Most were out of reach of the EPLF's organizing efforts. The degree to which they were influenced by the Sudan-based political and religious trends remains to be seen, but there is bound to be some friction, particularly in the western plains of Barka and Gash-Setit, when they come home.

The liberation movement's greatest asset as it faces these and other trials is the depth and breadth of national feeling it has engendered among Eritrea's diverse citizens. This nationalism, however, could become a problem in its own right if taken to extremes and divorced from an overarching vision of a larger human community.

Eritrea's experience encourages a bunker mentality and an us-versus-them attitude in external relations. One danger now is that the country's long isolation may have bred such a depth of mistrust toward outsiders that Eritreans will find it difficult to deal effectively with the governments, multilateral institutions and others with which they will be forced to negotiate for access to capital, markets and other resources. At the same time, the EPLF's involuntary dis-

connection from other social movements that share its egalitarian values strips the liberation front of potentially useful stocks of experience and familiar frames of reference as it enters this new phase of social and political development, largely on its own.

When I met Isaias Afwerki in his modest presidential office in Asmara, I asked him how his views had changed over these long and bitter years to meet the new challenges facing Eritrea.

"I am not shy about the ideals I entertained twenty years ago, ten years ago, but now I don't think they work," he said matter-of-factly. "There are simply things one cannot do because of human nature. You cannot have a society of angels except in heaven. My ideals now are more concrete. Now I can say from very long experience that I have something in mind that is more real than a floating ideal.

"Because of the isolation of the Eritrean national movement and because of the conditions here, it was very natural for extreme ideas to appeal to everyone, but I don't think it's proper now to relate everything to those 'isms.' They are a liability, not just because people are disappointed by them, but because trying to live them is to live an obsession. Once you are obsessed, you never come up with anything new.

"I still believe that the main problem that has to be solved is the economic and social status of everyone in the society, but I think it has to be worked out within the context of a realistic policy. One political party cannot be the solution—this is a very dangerous and risky game. The only alternative is a pluralistic political system, though there are many questions about how this should work.

"More important than anything else, the state has to be limited in its role and should not be expected to do everything for everybody. We have to abolish this kind of thinking. People talk about classes and class struggle, but my impression is that what is damaging third world societies above everything else is corruption. The institutions of government and of the state have been the main cause of these problems. Before we tackle other problems, we have to tackle this—the state has to be out of all areas that are not best served by its interference.

"I remain committed to better the living standards of everyone in this country, but my attitude has changed about how to accomplish it. It is impossible to make a poor man a rich one by simply wishing it. What can be done is to give him an opportunity to do it himself. This does not mean imposing something or halting development in one area so someone from somewhere else can catch up. But the opportunities have to be there.

"I do not like to predict, but there are many changes I would like to see in Eritrea: a full-fledged, efficient infrastructure—roads, railroads, that sort of thing—and education in all the remote areas so that children who have never had the opportunity to go to school could use their talents and their gifts. The question for us now should be how to go about doing this.

"One good thing about the experience of our armed struggle was that there was no damage done by the ideals we had. We were never obsessed by them. Now, we look into the future with open eyes and an open mind."

The ideology guiding the liberation front evolved considerably during the twenty years after the EPLF's formation in 1970. However much the EPLF may have resembled a "Marxist" organization—and most EPLF leaders now hotly contest that it ever was one—it was not that at the end of the war. Instead, the EPLF was a broad front with many political tendencies under its nationalist umbrella, none of which exercised a monopoly of political influence.

Despite the efforts of many Eritreans to downplay the past influence of Marxism, however, left concepts and analytical methods had a strong influence on many of the movement's leaders in the early years, and they were thoroughly infused into the political education taught to fighters and civilian supporters throughout the 1970s and early 1980s.² Though many of these ideas were either rejected or stripped of their doctrinaire quality, the radical egalitarian values they reflected remain a force within what has always been an essentially indigenous Eritrean political movement.

From the outset, the EPLF was made up of nationalists who searched for tools to strengthen an already existing struggle to liberate their land and free their people. In the 1960s and 1970s, the

tool box of revolutionaries throughout the world was jammed with Marxist manuals. Though many Eritrean intellectuals took them up and sought to make use of them, they were not unduly constrained by them. They had no trouble jettisoning procedures or tactics when they didn't work; nor did they have qualms about continuing to use concepts or methods associated with Marxism when experience confirmed their utility. Being or not being Marxists was never the issue—liberating Eritrea was.

Throughout the front's history, most individual EPLF members were probably not "Marxist" in their outlook, and many who appeared to be were simply aping the prevailing political vocabulary, popular at that time with all third world nationalist movements. Though there was considerable proselytizing once a person joined the EPLF, no one was accepted or rejected by the EPLF on the basis of views on anything but Eritrean self-determination.

The leaders of this movement were anchored in their own experience, and they looked to Eritreans as their only reliable supporters and allies. In this context, perhaps the most unsettling political blow they suffered was the 1978 defection of the Eritreans in the U.S. Yet even this break did not last long, and it provided further impetus to combat the dogmatic Marxism that was already in disfavor in the field.

Yemane Gebreab, the former EPLF journalist and Information Department head who became the deputy secretary of the Department of External Affairs in 1992, was an activist in the U.S. through the mid-1970s. He came to Eritrea shortly before the rupture with the students. He tells of an emotional encounter he had with Isaias in 1978 after the Soviet intervention in Eritrea forced the front to retreat to the mountains: "We were discussing the nature of the Soviet Union. I tried to prove my point by quoting Lenin—saying Lenin said this, and Lenin said that—and Isaias said, 'So what? Lenin could be wrong.' For me that was a shock. Everybody was questioning Stalin, Mao, whoever, but no one was questioning Lenin. What this showed was that no one was an absolute authority, and there were no models for our struggle."

In a 1984 interview with Stuart Holland and James Firebrace, Isaias insisted that some variant of "socialism" was the only path to development open to most third world nations—some form of social

and economic construction based on egalitarian principles that operated primarily through the mechanism of a centralized state, though not necessarily mimicking a particular model. "Theories should not be taken as they are," he said then. "Third world societies should come out with new theories about their socialist transformation."²

While the thinking about social change has evolved in Eritrea since then, there remains a need to articulate in more systematic form the vision that now guides the liberation front. A pragmatic method without a set of explicit, unifying premises, however fluid, will not be enough to rally the society for the challenges it will face in the next period. This may have to wait for the formation of a political party (or parties) after independence, but it cannot be postponed much longer than that without creating openings for negative alternatives—appeals to religious traditionalism, ethnic sectarianism, narrow nationalism or personal ambition.

If any one assumption guided left thinking through the 1970s it was that the seizure of state power by a political vanguard marks the decisive transition to a more advanced level of socioeconomic development. Experience in Eritrea and elsewhere has shown this to be wrong on several counts.

Social revolution is not a linear process that moves in only one direction; it can be reversed, leading to conditions worse than those that gave rise to it, or it can be diverted in altogether different directions from those originally anticipated. "Vanguard" politics in the context of continuing economic and social instability—an inevitable characteristic of all revolutionary projects in the twentieth century—fosters an ever-widening gap between party and people, justified or excused in the short term by the continued existence of external and internal threats. This can lead to increasing resort to repression and coercion in the political sphere and to reliance on undemocratic and opportunistic centralism in the economic sphere. Under these circumstances, the preservation and development of the state, detached from its social base, turns into an end in itself. The result is likely to be a bloated, corrupt and ineffective bureaucracy that little resembles the people's democratic republic imagined by either its founders or its followers.

In a sharp departure from this model, the EPLF on the eve of independence was striving to whittle down the state while creating a public arena for political and economic struggle that would drive the society forward through a dynamic, continuing creative tension. The role of the state would be to mediate the struggle and to guarantee the openness of the arena. The state would have to be accountable to the people for its adherence to this mandate. The assumption was that while formal independence in 1993 would mark the end of one era of struggle and sweeping social and political change, the transition to a developed democratic society would continue for years, perhaps decades to come, as Eritrea moves out of its feudal and colonial past into the modern world. Setting the course will be a major focus of contention in the next phase, as political parties and other social formations sort themselves out.

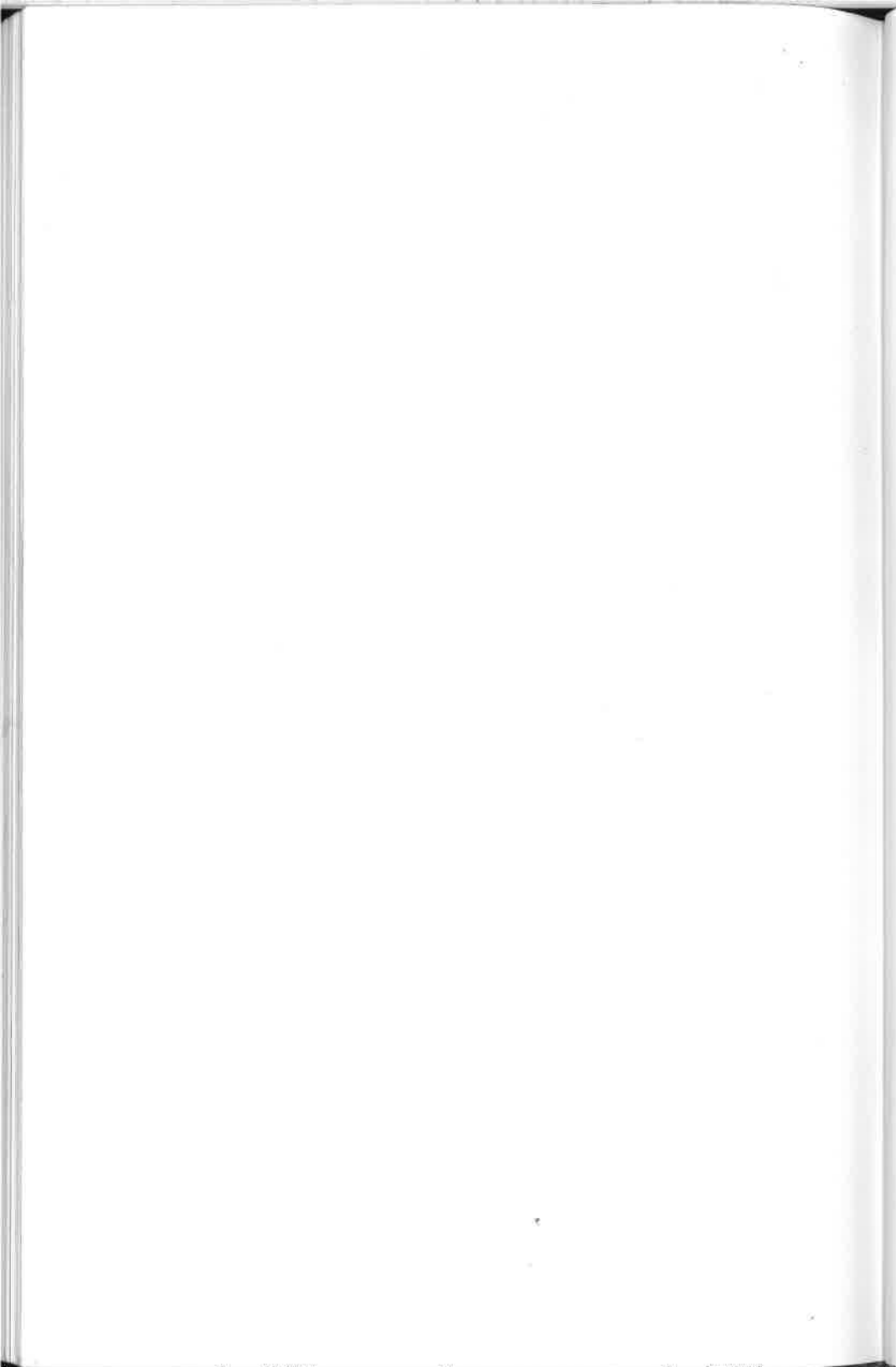
The foundation for much of Eritrea's social revolution has already been constructed and, in significant parts of the country, carried out. The maintenance and development of democracy in the political sphere will be a key to the continuation of the revolutionary process. For this to happen, ordinary citizens must be the guardians of the revolution as well as the agents of future change.

The mechanisms now available for this—outside the very important structures of local, regional and national government—are the popular associations and other emerging nongovernmental organizations. These building blocks of civil society are yet fragile and lack a historical tradition to sustain or anchor them—their growth and development will be critical to Eritrea's democratic future. There will be parties, too, whose role will depend a good deal on the strength and character of their popular base and on the degree of their internal democracy.

As Eritrea emerges on the international stage, at last in charge of its own political destiny, predictions are risky, but one can safely hazard a few educated guesses about its prospects. In the short term, small opposition parties will likely spring from within the exile communities to challenge the EPLF's leadership and its vision of the country's future. Effective, competing parties with broad popular support will likely take years to emerge, however, and will probably arise from trends now under the EPLF umbrella, as alternative

visions of national development differentiate themselves in the postwar era.

This unique experiment in democratic social and economic development is rooted in the experience and the institutions constructed during the liberation of the country. It is driven today by the values that brought the nationalist movement to this point; it is still led by principled people whose basic instincts are cautious, compassionate and pragmatic; and it remains directed toward building a more egalitarian, just and open multicultural society. Though it will take considerable time and many adjustments before its ultimate viability or its enduring character are etched in stone, what is certain is that the road will be long, the outcome will be distinctly Eritrean, and there will be surprises along the way.



Appendix FOR FURTHER INFORMATION...

Eritrea

Eritrea is a small country whose institutions and leaders are surprisingly accessible. To contact a government department or a nongovernmental institution described in this book, simply write to it in Asmara, Eritrea, and be patient. To get specific post office box numbers for departments or nongovernmental organizations or for information on visa requirements and travel, call or write the embassy:

Government of Eritrea
P.O. Box 65685
Washington, DC 20035
tel: (202) 265-3070
fax: (202) 462-2355

Solidarity

Grassroots International was founded by the author in 1983 to provide material aid and other forms of solidarity to the people of Eritrea. In 1993 Grassroots projects in Eritrea included an organizing and job-training program for women run by the women's union, start-up support for other emerging nongovernmental organizations, a rural primary health-care station, emergency relief to needy families and the construction of small earthen dams.

Grassroots International also supports movements for radical social change in the Middle East, South Africa, the Philippines, Haiti and Mexico, and it channels relief and development aid through like-minded European and North American counterparts to projects in other third world countries. For more information on the agency's work or to make a tax-exempt donation, contact:

Grassroots International
48 Grove Street
Somerville, MA 02144
tel: (617) 628-1664
fax: (617) 628-4737

News & Information

The Eritrean Embassy in Washington, D.C., publishes "Eritrea Update," a monthly summary of national news, for \$20/year (\$30/year for overseas subscriptions) and distributes a general information packet for \$5. Grassroots International distributes a quarterly newsletter and periodic special reports to donors who give \$10 or more each year.

Several regional newspapers—notably *The Atlanta Journal-Constitution* and *The Philadelphia Inquirer*—have published outstanding special reports on Eritrea. National media available in the U.S. that cover Eritrea well, if sporadically, include:

National Public Radio
(see your local affiliate for programming details)

BBC World Service
(available in the U.S. on short wave and on FM
on some NPR stations)

Africa News
P.O. Box 3851
Durham, NC 27702

The Christian Science Monitor
1 Norway Street
Boston, MA 02116

In These Times
2040 N. Milwaukee Avenue
Chicago, IL 60647

Middle East Report
1500 Massachusetts Avenue, NW
Washington, DC 20005

Books

James Firebrace and Stuart Holland, *Never Kneel Down: Drought, Development and Liberation in Eritrea*, Trenton, N.J.: Red Sea Press, 1985. A primer on the EPLF in the early 1980s. Includes an interview with Isaias Afwerki and the EPLF's 1977 program.

Lionel Cliffe and Basil Davidson, eds. *The Long Struggle of Eritrea for Independence and Constructive Peace*, Trenton, N.J.: Red Sea Press, 1989. An EPLF-sponsored anthology on history, politics, culture and aid. Includes organizational charts and the 1987 program.

Robert Papstein, *Eritrea: Revolution at Dusk*, Trenton, N.J.: Red Sea Press, 1991. Photographs, interviews and observations from liberated Eritrea in the late 1980s.

G.K.N. Trevaskis, *Eritrea: A Colony in Transition*, Westport Conn.: Greenwood Press, 1975. A portrait of colonial Eritrea by the British administrator in the 1940s.

Amrit Wilson, *Women and the Eritrean Revolution: The Challenge Road*, Trenton, N.J.: Red Sea Press, 1991. Stories of women fighters and civilians near the end of the war, with analysis of women's issues. Includes the EPLF's marriage law and other documents.

NOTES

Prologue

1. Among the more frequent outlets for which I filed were: the British Broadcasting Corporation, the Voice of America, Pacifica radio, Reuters, Associated Press, *The Washington Post*, *The Boston Globe*, *The Miami Herald*, *Time* magazine, *The Guardian* (New York), *The Nation*, *The Toronto Globe and Mail*, *The Financial Times*, *The Observer*, *The Irish Times*, *Aftenposten* (Oslo), *Le Monde* (Paris), and *La Repubblica* (Rome).

Chapter 1

1. Ingeborg Eliassen, Betten Fosse, Anne Rode, *Mor Eritrea* [Mother Eritrea], Oslo, 1988.
2. Michael Dobbs, "Once Lively Night Life Now a Bump and Grind," *The Washington Post*, Saturday, November 20, 1976.
3. The wave of killings reached its peak between mid-December 1977 and February 1978. In June 1979 Amnesty International issued a report documenting as many as 10,000 government

executions and estimated that at the height of the mass arrests more than two million people were detained.

4. These were Franklin Roosevelt, Dwight Eisenhower, John Kennedy, Lyndon Johnson and Richard Nixon. The emperor also attended Kennedy's funeral.
5. G.K.N. Trevaskis, *Eritrea: A Colony in Transition*, London: Oxford University Press, 1960, p. 37.
6. Richard Sherman, *Eritrea: The Unfinished Revolution*, New York: Praeger, 1980, p. 142.
7. Jeffrey A. Lefebvre, *Arms for the Horn: U.S. Security Policy in Ethiopia and Somalia, 1953-1991*, Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1991, p. 58ff.
8. Lefebvre, p. 66. The U.S. State Department opposed Italian rule over Eritrea at this time out of fear that the Italian Communist Party might come to power in Rome, according to Lefebvre who notes that Secretary of State George Marshall met with Ethiopia's foreign minister in 1948 and pledged full U.S. support for Ethiopia's claims on Eritrea in exchange for unrestricted use of military and communications facilities there.
9. As quoted by Association of Eritrean Students in North America and Association of Eritrean Women in North America in *In Defence of the Eritrean Revolution*, New York: AESNA, 1976, p. 54.
10. Sherman, p. 143.
11. Roy Pateman, *Eritrea: Even the Stones Are Burning*, Trenton, N.J.: Red Sea Press, 1990, p. 95.
12. Lefebvre, p. 99.
13. Jack Shepherd, *The Politics of Starvation*, New York: Carnegie Endowment for Peace, 1975, pp. 5-6.
14. Pateman, p. 97.
15. Sherman, p. 144.
16. Ronald Reagan's future Assistant Secretary of State for African Affairs Chester Crocker said this to the author in a 1980 interview in Somalia.
17. Shepherd, p. 67.
18. "War Signs Seen in Ethiopia," *The Washington Post*, Thursday, May 13, 1976, p. 1; "Death, Hunger and Fear in Asmara," *The*

Washington Post, Friday, May 14, 1976; "U.S. a Puzzle for Eritreans," *The Washington Post*, Tuesday, May 18, 1976.

Chapter 2

1. The EPLF has always been secretive about its size for security reasons. In 1976, Western intelligence sources estimated the front at 15,000. At the time, EPLF leaders declined to comment on these figures, but they later told me the actual size was under 10,000.

Chapter 3

1. Tigre is Eritrea's second most widely spoken language, used in the western lowlands, parts of the Sahel region and along the northern coast.
2. Sherman, pp. 4-10.
3. Pateman, pp. 31-37.
4. Pateman, p. 38.
5. Pateman, p. 48.
6. Sherman, pp. 11-13.
7. Pateman, pp. 49-50.
8. Sherman, pp. 13-16.
9. Pateman, p. 55.
10. Pateman, p. 57.
11. Trevaskis, pp. 36-37.
12. Trevaskis, p. 39.
13. Pateman, p. 59.
14. Trevaskis, p. 35.
15. Sherman, pp. 17-20.
16. Trevaskis, p. 60.
17. Pateman, pp. 68-69.
18. James Firebrace & Stuart Holland, *Never Kneel Down*, Trenton, N.J.: Red Sea Press, 1985, p. 20. See also Trevaskis, pp. 95-98 and 103-13.
19. U.S. Department of State, Incoming Telegram Control 8528, No. 171 of August 19, 1949, as quoted in Araya Tseggai, "The History of the Eritrean Struggle," *The Long Struggle of Eritrea for*

- Independence and Constructive Peace*, ed. Lionel Cliffe and Basil Davidson, Nottingham, U.K.: Spokesman, 1988, p. 73.
20. Trevaskis, pp. 99-100.
 21. United Nations, *General Assembly Official Records*, Fifth Plenary Session, pp. 536-37.
 22. United Nations, *General Assembly Official Records*, Fifth Plenary Session, p. 540.
 23. United Nations General Assembly Resolution 390 (V) adopted December 2, 1950 as reprinted in Sherman, pp. 161-65.
 24. Trevaskis, p. 113-21.
 25. Pateman, p. 73. See also Sherman, pp. 27-28, and Semere Haile, "Historical Background to the Ethiopia-Eritrea Conflict," *The Long Struggle of Eritrea*, pp. 27-29.
 26. Firebrace & Holland, p. 21.
 27. Pateman, p. 72.
 28. Semere Haile, p. 27.
 29. According to one participant in the demonstration interviewed by the author in Rome in 1978, nine were killed and 534 wounded.
 30. Araya Tseggai, "The History of the Eritrean Struggle," *The Long Struggle of Eritrea*, p. 76.

Chapter 5

1. Eritrean Liberation Front, *Eritrea: The National Democratic Revolution Versus Ethiopian Expansion*, Beirut: ELF Foreign Information Center, 1979, p. 32. In a 1980 interview with the author, Osman Saleh Sabbe, the secretary of the ELF in 1962, said there were sixteen men in the first armed group that had five clashes with Ethiopian police between September 1961 and June 1962. Shortly after Awate's death, the ELF brought five rifles in from Aden and recruited nine non-commissioned officers from the Sudanese army to turn this band of desperados into a disciplined armed force, according to Sabbe. One of them, Mohammed Omar Abdella (known by his *nom de guerre*, Abu Tayara) became the group's new leader.
2. Pateman, p. 96.
3. ELF, "A Glimpse into the Past," *The Eritrean Newsletter*, Issue

- No. 29, November 1, 1978, p. 10.
4. Sabbe said that when he visited the guerrillas in the Gash area in 1962, there were forty-three men with only eighteen usable rifles. The rest were armed with swords.
 5. Sherman, p. 73.
 6. Pateman, p. 98.
 7. Sherman, p. 74.
 8. ELF, *Eritrea*, pp. 33-34.
 9. Sherman, p. 76.
 10. Ibrahim Afa was the son of a poor water-seller from the Hirgigo area near Massawa who left school after the eighth grade to join the Ethiopian Marines where he became an officer before deserting in 1967 to join the ELF.
 11. Romedan Mohammed Nur, the son of a trader, was a Muslim from the coast who went to school in Cairo from 1957 through 1963. During his second year of university, he resigned a course in mathematics and architecture to join the ELF and then spent six months in Syria receiving military training with the first externally trained guerrilla contingent. He was twenty-five years old in 1966.

Haile Woldetensae, a Christian from the highlands and an engineering student with Isaia in Addis Ababa in 1966, was nineteen when he joined the ELF. Haile headed the EPLF's political department through much of the 1970s and 1980s and became the Secretary for Economic Development and Cooperation after the war.

Another Muslim activist who became part of this political circle was Ali Sayid Abdella, the son of a Hirgigo shepherd and an eleventh-grade student in Massawa when he went underground in February 1967 after organizing clandestinely for the ELF during the previous year. Ali, a leading EPLF military commander through the 1970s and 1980s, became the provisional government's Secretary of Internal Affairs in 1992.

Al Amin Mohammed Said, a Muslim who was for many years the head of the EPLF's foreign relations department and who became the Secretary of Culture and Information in the provisional government, studied in Saudi Arabia and received six months of military training and medical instruction in Syria in

1965 before going to the field.

Among a number of others who gravitated toward this group of radical reformers were Mesfin Hagos, one of four EPLF army corps commanders in 1992, and Mahmud Ahmed Mahmud (known as Sherifo), the Secretary of Foreign Affairs in 1992. Religion and ethnicity played no role in the composition of this political circle as it evolved during the late 1960s. This group has remained at the center of power of the EPLF from its earliest days.

12. Yasin was one of the founders of the pro-Soviet Eritrean Labor Party in the late 1960s. This party is said by its former cadres to have controlled the ELF's official political direction from behind the scenes throughout the 1970s, though the front as a whole remained deeply divided over basic political issues up to its final disintegration in the early 1980s. Among the ELP's leading members were Ahmed Nassar, Abdella Suliman and Ibrahim Totil, key figures in the ELF in the 1970s, according to an account by former ELF leader and ELP member Hurui Tedla Bairu given to the author in a 1980 interview. Hurui, the son of Eritrea's first governor during the federation period, left the ELF in June 1977 to form his own exile organization, which formally reconciled with the EPLF, and returned to Eritrea in 1992.
13. ELF, *Eritrea*, p. 37
14. ELF, *Eritrea*, p. 38-42.
15. Sherman gives the figure of 300 (p. 44). The Eritrean student organization in the U.S., presumably with EPLF approval, gave the figure of 500 killed between 1967 and 1969 in their 1978 polemic against the Ethiopian Student Union in North America (ESUNA)—Association of Eritrean Students in North America, *In Defence of the Eritrean Revolution*, New York: AESNA, 1978, p. 103.
16. Isaias Afwerki and several other EPLF leaders have kept detailed private journals throughout their tenure with the liberation movement.
17. Sherman, pp. 79-80.
18. Sherman, p. 81.
19. AESNA, *In Defence*, p. 103.

20. Interviews with EPLF fighters who participated in these events, including Ermias Debesai.
21. A resolution passed at the 1971 ELF congress declared: "This congress grants the leadership full powers to undertake ... military measures ensuring the unity of the organization and the revolution." On May 15, 1972, the ELF Revolutionary Council issued a statement confirming the start of the war: "In its meeting of February 22, 1972, the Revolutionary Council basing itself on the urgent plea and strong demand of the Executive Committee decided to annihilate the counter-revolution [i.e., the PLF] by military force.... The implementation of this revolutionary decision began on February 29 in Barka Laalai." A declaration issued by the ELF leadership in July of that year announced that the PLF was wiped out and the war was over: "Presently, there is not a single fighter outside the Eritrean Liberation Army." All quotes are taken from EPLF, "Whom do they think they are fooling?" *Selected Articles from EPLF Publications (1973-1980)*, Rome: EPLF, 1982, p. 184.
22. Sherman, p. 82, citing an October 18, 1974 story in *The Washington Post*.
23. Reprinted in Eritreans for Liberation in North America (the forerunner of the Association of Eritrean Students in North America), *Liberation*, Vol. II, No. 3, March 1973.
24. The basic thread of the EPLF's National Democratic Program was drafted in 1972 and formally adopted at its first organizational congress in January 1977. An early summary appeared in the first issue of the front's official organ, *Vanguard*, in January 1973:

We fight:

* So that the people may own the land and be the beneficiaries of its fruits.

* In order to transfer ownership of factories and commerce into the hands of a people's government so that the democratic rights of workers may be fully safeguarded.

* So that women may regain their full rights and participate in work and politics with equality.

* In order to work for the development of industry and agriculture, for our country cannot move forward without such development.

* In order to eradicate diseases and ignorance so that our people can be enlightened and healthy.

* In order to protect the rights of all nationalities in Eritrea so that they may develop with equality. To abolish war and aggression and bring about peace and prosperity for all our people.

* In order to bring about conditions of progress for every Eritrean and to guarantee him/her adequate nutrition, clothing, health care and education, which are now exclusively enjoyed by the feudalists and imperialists who control the fertile land, industries and trade.

* For complete independence from colonialism and imperialism and feudalist exploitation. We are waging a national democratic revolution and are fighting with all our might against Ethiopian feudalism and U.S. imperialism.

25. AESNA, *In Defence*, p. 129.
26. Sherman, pp. 80-82.
27. Both Asghedom and Mana survived the war, finishing as members of the EPLF.
28. In November 1976, the ELF published a lengthy summary of the concept of non-capitalist development in its internal bulletin *Ghedli Hizbi Eritrea*. In the ELF's words:

The non-capitalist way of development is one type of social revolution. This system's unique characteristic is that it peacefully transforms the feudal tendencies of the various socio-political groups and the backward subjective factors to an advanced level. Moreover, the small and still weak working class is molded into a strong proletariat and the backward economic system geared to the socialist socio-economic structure. The main task here is to develop capital without capitalists, bring about quanti-

tative and qualitative changes in the working class, and reorganize the land-holding system and the national economy as a whole through radical reforms. This new phenomenon indicates the transition to socialism without the vanguardship of the working class.

...

Countries marching towards socialism by bypassing the capitalist stage are obliged by their ideological outlook and their objective problems to have a strong relationship with socialist countries and the Socialist Camp. This is because the said countries must have the Socialist Camp's backing: (1) to confront imperialism and internal as well as external reaction; (2) to get guidance and advice on how to solve their problems in the process of their economic and social transformation; and (3) [to] receive technical assistance to fight economic backwardness and foreign capitalist domination, establish their free national economy and make best use of their natural resources by themselves.

29. Unpublished interview by the author on July 25, 1976.

Chapter 6

1. The National Democratic Program adopted at the EPLF's January 1977 congress guaranteed "every citizen's freedom of religion and belief." However, it called for strict separation of church and state, banned "compulsory religious education," and specifically opposed "all the imperialist-created new counter-revolutionary faiths, such as Jehovah's Witness, Pentecostals, Bahais, etc." This last qualification was dropped in the EPLF's 1987 program.
2. The political education for fighters and civilians alike followed a formal curriculum contained in a book produced in Fah in 1975 titled "General Political Education for Fighters." Each chapter provided a focus for several discussions. Organizers ran through the contents once at a relatively superficial level and then repeated the course in more depth. Roughly translated

and summarized for the author by members of the EPLF Office of Public Administration in Decamare, October 1977, the contents of the manual ran as follows:

Part I

1. Introduction to Eritrea—location, nationalities, main towns and villages.
2. Origins of the Eritrean people—early cultural history through annexation, including the origin and traditions of the various nationalities.
3. Political history—how a country and a nation are defined, Eritrea's development from the nineteenth century onward, foreign interventions and their effects.
4. Eritrea's economy—distribution of land and resources, modes of production.
5. Eritrean society—class analysis of Eritrean society, with an emphasis on the make-up and role of the working class and on forms of exploitation.
6. History of the Eritrean Revolution—from resistance to Turkish rule in 1875 through the launching of the armed struggle in 1961; the formation of EPLF in 1970; civil war with the ELF; EPLF experience on the political front, the military front and the organizational front up to 1975.

Part 2

1. Why political education?—its uses inside the revolution and outside with both friends and enemies.
2. The Eritrean people's revolution and its goals—why we are fighting, the difference between freedom and liberation (political independence and social emancipation), what is democracy, what kind of organization do we have (a national democratic front), after freedom what kind of government will we have (political democracy, economic democracy, cultural democracy).

3. Who are our friends and who are our enemies?—friends include the workers and oppressed peoples of Eritrea and of the world, all progressive forces, and the socialist countries; enemies are Ethiopian colonialism, imperialism, zionism and internal reaction.
4. Our armed struggle—why we fight with arms, why our victory is inevitable (the strength of the mass movement, the progressive forces of the world on our side, the use of revolutionary discipline, the nature of just and unjust war, the difference between a revolutionary army and a reactionary army).
5. The tactics of our revolution—national united front, problems of “leftism” and rightism.
6. Our cultural revolution—against bad customs, ideas and beliefs arising from feudalism, imperialism, opportunism and liberalism.
7. On the handling of contradictions—the nature and origin of contradiction, types of social and political contradictions (external and internal, antagonistic and non-antagonistic, primary and secondary), resolving contradictions, the role of criticism-self-criticism.
8. Ethiopia—the governments of Ethiopia from the nineteenth century to Haile Selassie, the Ethiopian people, progressive Ethiopians, relations between the Eritrean and Ethiopian peoples (common oppression—the people are not the enemy).
9. Political economy and the historical development of society—primitive communal society, slave society, feudal society, capitalism before the monopoly stage, monopoly capitalism (imperialism), problems of capitalist culture (prostitution, drug addiction, antagonism between workers and peasants on religious and ethnic grounds, liberalism), the fall of capitalism, colonialism, the fall of colonialism, neo-colonialism, people’s struggles in the era of imperialism, socialism.

The last chapter concluded: "If you fight against imperialism as a united people, organized and led by the workers, you step toward socialism." On the back cover was inscribed the slogan: "An army without a revolutionary ideology is like a man without a brain. An army without a brain can never defeat the enemy."

Chapter 7

1. The historical detail for much of this section is drawn from interviews with Zagher elders and members of the Armed Propaganda Team, as well as EPLF, Department of Public Administration, "Creating a popular, economic, political and military base," 1982 (an unpublished report prepared for a January 1983 conference in Eritrea). Copies of this and other departmental reports from that period are in government archives in Asmara.
2. *Degyat* and *fiturari* were titles for the feudal nobility.
3. EPLF, "Creating a ... base," p. 51.
4. EPLF, "Creating a ... base," p. 53.

Chapter 8

1. The Special Study Group of the Public Administration Department, EPLF, "The Experiences of the Study on the Formation of Eritrean Society," 1988 (an unpublished paper presented at the second R.I.C.E. conference held in Eritrea July 26-28, 1988), p. 13.
2. See Patricia Jane Silkin, "Changes in the Negotiation of Marriage in Those Areas of Eritrea Controlled by the Eritrean People's Liberation Front," 1989 (an unpublished M. Phil. thesis, Department of Anthropology, Goldsmiths' College, University of London).
3. Silkin, "Changes," p. 73.
4. According to Article 3 of the 1977 marriage law: "Marriage should be based on the absolute will of the two partners. Neither partner should use any kind of pressure. Nor should any third party interfere in the matter."

5. Eritrean Women's Association—Europe, "Women and Revolution in Eritrea," Rome: EWAE, June 1979, p. 28.

Chapter 9

1. For one of the most comprehensive elaborations of Mao's strategy for protracted people's war, see: Mao Zedong, "Problems of Strategy in China's Revolutionary War (December 1936)," *Six Essays on Military Affairs*, Beijing: Foreign Languages Press, 1972. See also: "Problems of Strategy in Guerrilla War Against Japan" and "On Protracted War," both written in 1938.

Chapter 10

1. Interviews with former ELF Revolutionary Council members Teraki Beraki and Fesahai Gebremikail, Khartoum, Sudan, August 1978. See also Richard Trench, "Eritreans Face Bitter Fight," *The Observer Foreign News Service*, May 5, 1978.
2. John E. Duggan, "Politics and Organization of the Eritrean Guerrilla Movements: A Firsthand Report," unpublished manuscript, 1978, p. 26.
3. Fred Halliday and Maxine Molyneux, *The Ethiopian Revolution*, London: Verso, 1981, p. 192.
4. The bipolar world view took a rather personal twist when one pro-Soviet newspaper in New York lashed out at my reporting in the *New York Guardian*, describing me as "a former Washington Post reporter" whose dispatches supported U.S. attempts to undermine "the Ethiopian Revolution." Writing on the editorial page of the weekly *Workers World* on February 3, 1978, Deirdre Griswold maintained: "There is no such thing as unbiased reporting. Either an article describes events from the point of view of the historical interests of the imperialist ruling class or of the oppressed masses. Maybe some radicals think that in this case the imperialists don't understand what is going on in the Horn of Africa and are airing the views of Mr. Connell by mistake. But we think the opposite is true."
5. Raul Valdes Vivo, *Ethiopia: The Unknown Revolution*, Havana: Editorial de Ciencias Sociales, 1978, p. 115.

6. From an interview with Pietro Petrucci that originally appeared in *Afrique-Asie*, No. 201, November 26, 1979, translated and reprinted in *Eritrea Information*, Vol. II, No. 1, Rome, January 1980, p. 3.
7. After a period of rest and recovery, Gebremichael "Lilo" Mengisteab went to the field to play a leading role in the Eritrean Relief Association as it mobilized to deal with the famine of the 1980s. At the end of the war, he became the provisional government's foreign affairs expert on North America.
8. There is a tendency among many third world activists living in Europe and North America and caught between the benefits and the burdens of their uncommon privilege, to be more-militant-than-thou in their politics the further they are from the struggle itself, whether their views are of the left or the right. An added factor pushing the Eritreans to more extreme positions was the fact that in the 1970s the only people in North America who spoke the political language of their movement were fringe elements of an already marginalized U.S. Left and various other ultra-"left" exile groups, such as the badly fractured Iranian student movement.
9. EFLNA, *Eritrea: Revolution or Capitulation*, New York: EFLNA, 1978.
10. This is what happened in the battle for Keren, when Ethiopian units raced down the coast from Massawa to join sea-borne forces at Marsa Gulbub for a thrust toward Afabet from the northeast while the EPLF was facing south and west toward Asmara and Agordat.
11. Eritrean People's Liberation Front, *Memorandum*, EPLF: New York, August 1978, pp. 18, 19.
12. John Pilger, "Genocide Unobserved," *New Statesman* (London), January 12, 1979, p. 40. Pilger visited Eritrea in July 1978.

Chapter 11

1. People's assemblies were only found in well-defended communities behind EPLF lines where extensive preparatory work could be done. People's committees, found in contested areas, were adaptations of existing village structures aimed at bridging the gap between tradition and change without polarizing the local population or playing into the hands of the enemy. In villages with such committees, sectoral organizations were underground, public gatherings were less frequent, and there were no attempts at radical reform. Challenge committees were instituted in early 1981 after the civil war with the ELF and phased out by the mid-1980s. These were a halfway measure designed to cope with the enormous pressure on the EPLF's political resources when it tripled the size of its operational area after the ELF collapsed. They had a nine-member structure of elected representatives, each with specified duties, and with a mandate to include at least two or three women among their number. In 1982 the Public Administration Department reported that it organized 17 people's assemblies, 418 challenge committees and 147 people's committees. EPLF, "Creating a ... base," p. 95.
2. Shortly before the retreat, members of the peasants and the students associations held founding congresses. The military situation prevented women and workers from holding planned congresses that year, but in November 1979 they managed to do so, launching "national unions," with chapters around the country and abroad.
3. Interview with Sebhat Ephrem, November 17, 1991.
4. EPLF, "Creating a ... base," p. 41.
5. The EPLF's land reform policy called for all farm land to be treated as *diesa* land, distributed equally to all eligible families. Unmarried men and women over 25 were eligible for a half share; widows or divorcees with children were eligible for a full share. Former feudal lords had the right to a share equal to that of other villagers. People living outside Eritrea or serving the enemy had no right to land at the time but could receive an allotment if they returned home. Village land could not be

either bought or sold. See EPLF, "Creating a ... base," pp. 42-43.

6. EPLF, "Creating a ... base," p. 133.
7. To support the intensified political education, the EPLF reopened its cadre school once conditions permitted, training over 400 new organizers from 1979-82 (compared to 266 in 1975-78). EPLF, "Creating a ... base," p. 142.

Chapter 12

1. Until 1979, ERA had functioned almost solely as a fund-raising committee for programs implemented by the EPLF's Social Affairs Department. After the withdrawal, ERA was substantially reorganized to play an operational role in Sudan and in the field. Dozens of organizers and administrators were transferred to ERA whose field staff linked up with the popular committees in civil society. ERA also took charge of the camps for displaced people and special projects like the Port Sudan clinic.
2. The report was published as a special issue in the spring of 1981 titled "6 Million Dispossessed in the Horn of Africa: A White Paper," *Horn of Africa Journal*, Vol. IV, No. 1. Three people with extensive local experience with refugee issues—Jon Bennett, Kirsty Wright and Gayle Smith—worked on the project with me and wrote large sections of the report that appeared under the pen name of Susan Santini.
3. Foreign aid also streamed into Sudan from Saudi Arabia, whose conservative regime used it to encourage Nimeiri—already under pressure from Islamic revivalists within Sudan—to "Islamicize" the country. In 1983 Nimeiri took the first steps to make the Islamic *shari'a* the law of the land, a decision that triggered renewed civil war between north and south (which had battled for seventeen years until Haile Selassie mediated a truce in 1972), fought this time around with the latest U.S. heavy arms.
4. "6 Million," HOAJ, p. 57.
5. "6 Million," HOAJ, p. 63.
6. "6 Million," HOAJ, p. 64-65.

7. EPLF leaders claimed that more than 1,400 ELF fighters had deserted to Ethiopia, 830 had come over to EPLF and an uncertain number had fled to Sudan during the past eight months, leaving the ELF at a strength of under 5,000.
8. Interview by the author, November 1990. At that time, Totil was serving as the head of the EPLF's Information Department.
9. "Eritrea Disaster," Reuters, March 1981.

Chapter 13

1. By ERA's calculations, they needed 15,000 metric tons each month to keep up with the burgeoning food needs; from September through December the agency received a monthly average of 1,050 tons.
2. Dawit Wolde Giorgis, the head of Ethiopia's Relief and Rehabilitation Commission during the height of the famine, confirms that donated food was diverted to members of the peasant militia as early as June 1984. See his book, *Red Tears*, Trenton, N.J.: Red Sea Press, 1989, p. 158. Dawit, who defected to the U.S. in December 1985, says that in June 1984 Mengistu also ordered him to divert relief supplies to John Garang's Sudan People's Liberation Army, which Ethiopia was supporting in southern Sudan. While Dawit says he declined this particular request, it is widely believed that substantial stores of donated food were diverted to Ethiopian military forces throughout the 1970s and the 1980s. The author and many other journalists found such supplies in army camps after EPLF military successes.
3. Dawit Wolde Giorgis served as governor of Eritrea during the Red Star campaign, prior to his appointment to head the RRC. He says there were as many as 200,000 government troops involved in the operation. See *Red Tears*, p. 107.
4. See Frits N. Eisenloeffel and Rev. Inge Ronnback, *The Eritrean Durrah Odyssey*, Utrecht, Netherlands: Dutch Interchurch Aid, 1983.
5. Dawit, *Red Tears*, pp. 138-39 and p. 140.
6. As quoted in Mary Kay Magistad, "The Ethiopian Bandwagon: The Relationship Between News Media Coverage and British

- Foreign Policy Toward the 1984-1985 Ethiopian Famine," a Final Master's Thesis in International Relations at the University of Sussex, U.K. (1985), p. 74.
7. Dawit, *Red Tears*, p. 321. See also Jonathan Tucker, "In Ethiopia, Food Is a Weapon," *The Nation*, February 8, 1986, pp. 140-42.
 8. Paul Henze, "Rebels and Separatists in Ethiopia—Regional Resistance to a Marxist Regime," Rand Corporation, December 1985. Henze is a former C.I.A. station chief in Ethiopia.
 9. As cited in Kaplan, *Surrender or Starve*, p. 83. The op-ed appeared in *The Wall Street Journal* on April 4, 1986.
 10. EPLF, *Adulis*, Vol. III, No. 1, January 1986, p. 7.
 11. This summary is taken from interviews with participants and from Richard Leonard, "Popular Participation in Liberation and Revolution," *The Long Struggle of Eritrea*, pp. 115-22.

Chapter 14

1. The EPLF claimed to have captured fifty new tanks, over 100 military vehicles, sixty large rocket launchers and artillery pieces and twenty anti-aircraft guns, plus enormous quantities of medium and light weapons in the Afabet assault. The EPLF also seized three high-ranking Soviet advisors and put out of action some 18,000 Ethiopian soldiers there. EPLF, *Adulis*, Vol. V, No. 3, April 1988, p. 2.
2. BBC news broadcast, Monday, March 21, 13:10 hours GMT, as transcribed and reprinted in EPLF, *Adulis*, Vol. V, No. 3, April 1988, p. 3.
3. John Kifner, "After Rebels' Gains, Ethiopia Vents Its Wrath on Civilians," *The New York Times*, August 30, 1988, p. 1.
4. The EPLF and the Derg had held talks twice before with no concrete outcome: in East Berlin prior to the series of Soviet-backed military campaigns that began in June 1978 and again in the early 1980s at various sites in Europe after the Red Star campaign.
5. "Ethiopia: A blow-by-blow account," *Africa Confidential*, London, Vol. 30, No. 11, May 26, 1989, pp. 1-3.
6. "Ethiopia: Under Control," *The Indian Ocean Newsletter*, Paris,

- No. 384, May 27, 1989, pp. 1-4.
7. Chong-ae Yu, "Eritrea Trip Report" (unpublished), Grassroots International, April 17, 1990.
 8. Lars Bondestam, Lionel Cliffe & Philip White, "Eritrea: Food and Agricultural Production Assessment Study (Final Report)," Agricultural & Rural Development Unit, Centre of Development Studies, University of Leeds, U.K., March 1988, pp. 17-21.
 9. Bondestam, Cliffe & White, "Food Assessment Study," pp. 24, 68, 117.
 10. Bondestam, Cliffe & White, "Food Assessment Survey," pp. 22-23, 33-40.
 11. "Ethiopia: 200 Days in the Death of Asmara," Africa Watch, New York, September 20, 1990.
 12. The women's union had held a national congress of its own in January 1988 to reorganize itself in the wake of the EPLF's congress the year before. By then the NUEWmn had 60,000 registered members in Eritrea and almost 13,000 abroad. Reflecting the in-gathering of the EPLF that marked the front's new policies, the union voted to move its main office from Milan, Italy to the field and to marshal its main resources to mobilize women in the newly liberated towns—first Afabet, Agordat and Tessenei, now Adi Qayeh and soon Asmara. The central programmatic priorities were increased literacy, improved mother and child health care and a decrease in woman's daily workload through the construction of grinding mills and improved access to water. Organizers argued that the sinking of a new village well would free women from as much as three hours of daily labor needed to fetch water in heavy ceramic jars from distant streams, time that could be used instead for literacy study. Cadres sought to make this link explicit in order to help women make the case at home to attend the classes, which also included basic political education.
 13. The topics covered by the new political education text as summarized for the author in 1990 by Haile Woldetensai were:

I. Eritrea

1. The country & its people
2. The history of the Eritrean people from precolonial times to the Ethiopian colonial period
3. The history of the armed struggle
4. Eritrean national identity
5. The national call & national obligation
6. EPLF—the organization & its workings
7. Important policies & experiences of the EPLF
8. The Revolutionary Army & its qualities
9. The Eritrean Woman
10. Immigration & the question of Eritrean refugees
11. The legitimacy & justness of the Eritrean cause
12. The People & the Revolution
13. Popular associations (mass organizations)
14. People's Power (popular administrative organs)
15. People's Militias
16. Cooperatives

II. Organizational & Theoretical Issues

1. The Program & Constitution of the EPLF
2. The importance of political education
3. Our victory is certain
4. Revolutionary & counterrevolutionary morality
5. Revolutionary discipline
6. Theory & practice
7. Education, work & development
8. Revolutionary consciousness, vigilance & initiative
9. Helping & taking care of the members
10. Cadre
11. Institutional methods of work
12. Armed struggle—why & what kind
13. The handling of the P.O.W.
14. Contradictions & their resolutions
15. The history of social development
16. Colonialism & neo-colonialism
17. Colonialism & liberation struggle

18. Social Revolution
19. Cultural Revolution
20. National Democratic Revolution
21. The national question & the right for
self-determination
22. The experience of liberation movements
23. Protracted War
24. Classes & class struggle
25. The state & government
26. The government & political parties
27. Democracy

There were also short sections on Ethiopia, Africa and the Horn of Africa; the Middle East; and the International Situation. The syllabus was prepared for discussions at three successive levels, starting with a basic introduction to the concepts, then going into more descriptive and explanatory detail, and finally, in advanced sessions, approaching the material from a more in-depth, analytic perspective.

Chapter 15

1. Cited in an unpublished field report by Eritrean Inter-Agency Consortium coordinator Martine Billanou (1990).
2. In an interview broadcast in Tigrinya over the EPLF radio in seven parts, starting August 29, 1990, Isaias said that "a prerequisite for a healthy pluralist system is to stipulate by law that eligible political parties must safeguard national unity and interest. Religious parties in Eritrea would, sooner or later, spark civil strife and hence jeopardize national unity. So while the freedom of faith must be respected and religious institutions enabled to proselytize without restrictions of any kind, there must be a ban on religious political parties. The same rule should apply to regional and ethnic movements." Translated and reprinted in *Adulis*, Vol. VII, No. 10, October 1990.
3. *Emergent Eritrea: Challenges of Economic Development*, ed. Gebre Hiwet Tesfagiorgis, Washington, D.C.: Provisional

Government of Eritrea and Eritreans for Peace and Democracy, 1992, pp. 4-7.

4. Stefanos Seyoum, "Problems, Prospective Policies and Programs for Agricultural Development in Eritrea," *Emergent Eritrea*, p. 95.
5. See "Eritrea 1991: A Needs Assessment Study," Centre of Development Studies, University of Leeds, U.K., May 1992, available from Lutheran World Relief, New York, and Norwegian Church Aid, Oslo.

Epilogue

1. Early in 1992 the EPLF, after quietly negotiating an agreement with the main Somali factions, prepared to send a battalion of fighters to Mogadishu to secure the port, the airport and food distribution centers. At this point the United Nations pre-empted the Eritrean initiative with an intervention of its own that went forward without either an adequate plan, sufficient forces to deal with the problem or a grasp of the situation on the ground. Nearly a quarter-million Somalis perished from starvation before U.S. forces unilaterally took over the rescue operation at the end of the year in a reprise of the pattern of first holding back, then rushing in that characterized the 1984 response to the Ethiopian famine.
2. EPLF fighters attended three three-hour political study sessions each week and attended seminars on topical issues every other week, according to Haile Woldetensai in an August 1980 interview with the author. Cadres were schooled in the fundamentals of Marxism-Leninism, starting with dialectical and historical materialism and, at the higher stages, taking up the complex issue of revisionism.
3. Firebrace & Holland, p. 131.

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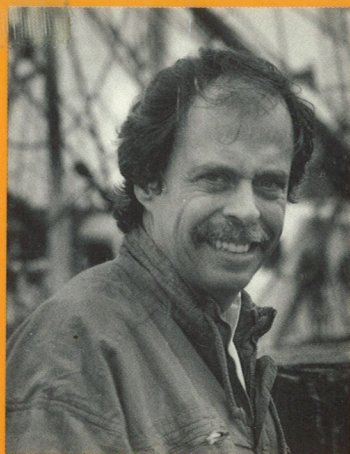
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In 1976 Dan Connell hitchhiked into Eritrea to investigate the unreported war there. He has been going back ever since.

Connell has written on Eritrea for the BBC, Pacifica Radio, Reuters, the Associated Press, the Guardian (New York), The Nation and more than a dozen daily newspapers in the U.S., Canada and Europe. He founded the Boston-based development agency Grassroots International in 1983 to provide direct aid to Eritrea and other third world "hot spots."

Connell now divides his time between teaching, writing and public speaking on democracy and social change. He shares his life with photographer Debbie Hird in Cambridge, Massachusetts.

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