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ERITREA & ETHIOPIA: FROM CONFLICT TO COOPERATION TO CONFLICT

Guest-Editor's Introduction

Tekie Fessehatzion

Eritrea (Mereb-Melash) and Yohannes IV of Abyssinia

Jordan Gebre-Medhin

A Study of the Evolution of the Eritrean Ethiopian Border Through Treaties and Official Maps

Ghidewon Abay Asmerom and Ogbazgy Abay Asmerom

Some Latent Factors in the Ethio-Eritrean Conflict

Kidane Mengisteab

Mass Expulsion of Eritreans and Ethiopians of Eritrean Origin From Ethiopia and Human Rights Violations

Gaim Kibreab

Approaches to Resolve the Conflict Between Eritrea and Ethiopia

Gebre Hiwet Tesfagiorgis

COMMENTARY

The Eritrean-Ethiopian Conflict or How Ethiophilia Blinded Susan Rice

Safêh A.A. Younis

Against All Odds: The Second Siege of Eritrea

Dan Connell

"The March of Folly" Re-enacted: A Personal View

Alemseged Tesfai

Explaining the Unexplainable:

The Eritrea-Ethiopia Border War

Tekie Fessehatzion

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“THE MARCH OF FOLLY”

RE-ENACTED: A PERSONAL VIEW

Alemseged Tesfai

In one of her celebrated books, *The March of Folly*, the late American historian Barbara W. Tuchman discusses “the pursuit by governments of policies contrary to their own interests.” In answer to the question of why holders of high office “so often act contrary to the way reason points and enlightened self-interest suggests,” she digs out examples from history where patently wrong policies led otherwise powerful and viable states to doom and self-destruction.

For analysis, she chooses the Trojans, who, in spite of adequate warnings, dragged the wooden horse within their walls, only to be slain by Greeks hidden, undetected, inside its body. The Renaissance Popes, with their “grotesque extravagance and fixation on personal gain” and their rejection of “any steady or coherent policy either political or religious” that led to Luther’s rebellion and the rise of Protestantism, serve as her second example. She then goes on to describe how similar folly and vanity led to Britain’s loss of her American colonies in the eighteenth century and ends, of course, with a dissection of the

Alemseged Tesfai, who until 1997 was the Acting Head of the Eritrean Land Commission. He was Head of the Cultural Division of the EPLF and the Cultural Centre of the Department of National Guidance in the Provisional Government of Eritrea. He is the editor (with Martin Doornbos) of Post-Conflict Eritrea: Prospects for Reconstruction and Development. (Red Sea Press, 1999).

United States of America's inexplicable twentieth-century blunder, the Vietnam War.

All these landmarks of the defeat or fall of great power and authority, Tuchman in great part attributes to "folly or perversity," also referred to as "the pursuit of policy contrary to the self-interest of the state involved," "self interest" being "whatever conduces to the welfare or advantage of the body being governed"; while "folly is a policy that in these terms is counter-productive."

To qualify as folly, Tuchman argues, the policy adopted must meet three criteria. First, "it must have been perceived as counter-productive in its own time, not in hindsight." In other words, policies of the past must not be judged by the standards of the present. Second, "a feasible alternative course of action must have been available." Third, the policy in question "should be that of a group, not an individual ruler, and should persist beyond any one particular lifetime." The Vietnam war, for example, started with John Kennedy, brought Lyndon Johnson down, and ended with Richard Nixon's pathetic search for a trace of glory in returning American prisoners of war.

If Tuchman were alive today, she would probably have been tempted to add a fifth example to her list of inquiries—the consistently suicidal pursuit of successive Ethiopian regimes to own Eritrea or parts thereof.

Let me explain.

When the British re-installed Haile Selassie back to his throne in 1941, the central theme of his internal and external policies became the acquisition of Eritrea, or gaining access to the sea through one of Eritrea's two ports. No effort was spared by the regime to realize this dream. History was fabricated and re-written; Eritrea was depicted as a long-lost, orphaned daughter rushing across the Mereb to the outstretched arms of the ever-so-kind and magnanimous Mother Ethiopia; Western scholars and historians—later to be known as Ethiopianists or Ethiopists—were lured, persuaded or paid to sing the praises and argue the cause of the "land of Prester John" in international arenas; and little Eritrea was subjected to the British threat of dismemberment as an economically unviable "artificial Italian creation, without the makings of a state."

When in 1950 the UN General Assembly decided to "fed-

erate Eritrea to Ethiopia under the sovereignty of the Ethiopian crown,” it did so without consulting the people. Cries of arbitrariness and calls for a plebiscite to determine the wishes of the Eritrean people went unheeded. The Soviet Union and its East European allies and some Arab and Latin American states tried to argue that there was no “federation” in the UN plan; that what was proposed was a “marriage that allowed no divorce” and, therefore, was bound to fail. More importantly, it was proved to the UN that the majority of Eritreans wanted independence and their leader, Ibrahim Sultan, never failed to remind the world that a federal arrangement not agreed to by the people of Eritrea would, sooner or later, bring disaster to both countries. But the US led its majority followers in not listening. Primarily, of course, for its own strategic reasons; but then, the US is often also suspected of a weakness for royalty and majesty—something it has always lacked and secretly hankered for. Hence, some of its detractors say, its fascination with and support for Haile Selassie’s Eritrean policies!

Well, Eritrea became a federated unit within the Ethiopian Empire, but Haile Selassie was not satisfied. Kings have subjects, not “an autonomous unit” with another constitution and government and parliament. Thus, the 1950s saw him dismantling the “UN formula” piece by piece. The UN Commissioner, who instituted it, and his legal advisors had appealed for its maintenance. In his book on Eritrean politics of the 1940s, British colonial official Brigadier G.K.N. Trevaskis also had given a ringing and, some say, almost prophetic warning of the disaster that would follow an Ethiopian annexation of Eritrea. And, of course, the Eritrean Assembly, students, and workers had protested and demonstrated against Ethiopian high-handedness. But the temptation—a whole country with 1,000 km. of coastline—was simply too great to let go. So, the great Haile Selassie went ahead and annexed Eritrea. He did what three Emperors before him—Theodore, Yohannes, and Menelik—had failed to do: he brought the Red Sea to Ethiopia or Ethiopia to the Red Sea, whichever way one may see it. His sin of having run away in the face of the Italian invasion of 1935 was instantly forgiven. A statue, with himself bestriding a horse and pointing far to the Red Sea, was constructed right at the gates of the Port of Massawa. The dream had come true.

But, not quite. A year earlier, in an obscure corner of an obscure area called the Gash region, some shots had been fired by a ragged band of armed men calling themselves the Eritrean Liberation Front. Soon enough, and in spite of Ethiopian attempts at downplaying it, this seemingly insignificant event grew to occupy center-stage in Ethiopian politics. For Ethiopia, the history of the 1960s and early 1970s became the history of a desperate attempt to repress and crush the Eritrean revolution. The more the repression, the greater the resistance; the more the resistance, the faster the growth of the revolution; and the more vulnerable the regime became to internal strife, famine, and total incapacity to handle more simple everyday state affairs. When Ethiopia's army, tired and frustrated with an Eritrean war it was losing, rose in rebellion, the die was cast. From the outset, the regime had been set on a course of self-destruction.

Did it have an alternative? Yes: not to covet Eritrea too much and never to disregard the will and desire of its population. It did precisely the opposite and it fell—pomp, ceremony and US support notwithstanding. The first “lifetime” (to borrow Tuchman's terminology) of Ethiopian folly had come to pass.

Enter the second in the form of Mengistu Hailemariam and his gang of army and police majors, lieutenants, and corporals. Little military minds one and all, they cleverly usurped the political base and popular support built by a more enlightened, but hopelessly divided and disorganized opposition to the Haile Selassie regime. Right from the start, the junta, known as the Derg, took a no-nonsense, “do-as-we-say” attitude and left no room for compromise on practically every issue, especially the Eritrean case.

One of the Derg's first acts, the adoption by proclamation of the Marxist ideology as its official doctrine, was meant to pre-empt or circumvent what it saw as a similar stance by both the Eritrean revolution and its Ethiopian opposers. No one could tell the little corporals that ideology could not be proclaimed, that it needed time to ferment, grow, and mature. So they just went ahead with cadre-schools and special courses to cram *Das Kapital* and *The Origin of the Family* in a few months. Soon they became very good at reciting communism by rote;

so much so, a joke went in those days, that Mengistu himself became unable to start any theoretical discussion without beginning right at the beginning: “The history of hitherto existing human society, is the history of the class struggle.” This may have embarrassed some of his followers, but, it pleased the Soviets. You see, the Soviets too had this weakness for military juntas that suddenly turned Marxist. It did not matter how Marx or Lenin were quoted, as long as they were. So, the Derg and the Soviets embraced each other and out went the US and its thirty-year old rendezvous with Ethiopian royalty.

When history repeats itself, it does so with gusto, and this is what the Derg and its ally allowed it to do. For both of them, the Eritrean struggle was a thorn pricking somewhere and it had to be extracted. A Soviet diplomat is supposed to have told an EPLF official he had accidentally come across that the EPLF needed “to be slapped on both cheeks” so it could come down to its own size. At the same time, the Derg believed that the Front had been allowed to thrive by the military and administrative incompetence of the “feudo-bourgeois and bureaucratic-capitalist” regime it had overthrown—and, of course, through the Arab “petro-dollars” that it perceived being pumped to the Eritrean revolution across the Red Sea.

Thus doom was pronounced on Eritrea. In 1978-79 Ethiopian armed forces, drunk with victory over Somalia and armed to the teeth by the Soviets, turned their might on Eritrea, and historians (at least those who cared) started to get ready to write the epitaph on the grave of a revolution that would never make it.

As we all know, it did not happen that way. The wrath of the Mengistu regime descended upon the Eritrean people and the EPLF, which had emerged as the sole front by 1981. Mengistu was, of course, a fighter, with plenty of experience in bar-room brawls. I don't know whether this should count as military credit, but it was in his case and, as Commander in Chief of the armed forces, he led Ethiopia's war against Eritrea, eight major offensives included, through to total defeat and humiliation. It was a highly contested, bitterly fought-out, elongated war. Ethiopian military commanders trained in the best schools in the world employed every trick of the trade to end the Eritrean struggle, to no avail.

Mengistu was a furious dictator, whose rhetoric and cruelty, many observers say, concealed a great deal of cowardice. The fact that fear of Haile Selassie's ghost led him to secure the Emperor's body underneath his own office is pointed to as proof of his paranoid nature. But he could put up a bold exterior, decide on difficult matters, kill if need be, bulldoze and terrorize even friends and children, work himself to hysterical levels in public addresses. He constructed a make-believe world where he placed himself as the unifier, a man of destiny that history chose not only to set Ethiopia, but even Africa on a track of grandeur. Haile Selassie was a monarch who never had to seek flattery, as it came to him by tradition, by law. Mengistu sought and organized it—he actually created offices for that purpose. They boasted on his behalf, attributed to him glories that never existed, stopped short of elevating him to Lenin's level as a Marxist thinker and even lauded him as a man of action who inspired the rank-and-file on the battlefield. That, of course, went a bit too far, as no one really ever saw him leading troops into action. They lied, as they quite often did.

But reality was another matter. Eritrea simply refused to go. Mengistu even dismembered it into autonomous units in the hope of wiping it and its name off the face of the earth. Eritrea resisted and the EPLF grew by leaps and bounds. Not only this, but it allowed some Ethiopian opposition groups, and especially one known as the TPLF, to hang on its coat-tails and flourish. The latter did, to become the dominant fighting front in Ethiopia.

After years of war, death, and destruction, Mengistu too fell in utter humiliation. He was no hero, neither the Theodore nor the lion his flatterers had painted him as being. Like the Marcoses and "Baby Doc" Duvaliers whom he looked down upon, he too ran away in the face of troops of the TPLF and, yes, the EPLF too, advancing towards his capital.

Eritrea was Mengistu's major undoing. He repeated Haile Selassie's mistake in believing that it could be bombed and terrorized into submission. When his junta came to power in 1974, he had the chance to negotiate a peaceful solution. A recognition of Eritrean independence with a friendly access to the sea would have saved both nations and peoples the pain and suffering of the longest war in Africa. He would also have saved

himself from being exposed as the paper tiger that he turned out to be. But the second “lifetime” of Ethiopian folly had to march, on bringing Mengistu and his henchmen crashing down. His regime had been warned that it was engaged in a “no-winner, no-loser” war, that it should let go of Eritrea. The Derg refused, with characteristic Ethiopian ruling-class arrogance, and Eritrea won a deserved independence and the TPLF came to power in Addis Ababa.

For all intents and purposes, it finally looked like “folly” had ended its long march. Two friendly governments were installed in both capitals. Two war-weary fronts with two development-oriented leaders were at the helm. The referendum sailed through and the people of Eritrea voted a resounding “yes” to independence. Meles Zenawi, then President of the Transitional Government in Ethiopia, was on hand for the fireworks of Eritrean independence day. He told a deliriously happy and enraptured audience that “wounds should not be scratched by either side.” An engaging speaker with a voice you would trust, he ushered in a new age of friendship and cooperation. The arrogance and adventurism of past regimes was over, so let us go to work.

Isaias Afwerki, too, heralded a new age. There were to be no reprisals against the Derg’s spies, murderers, and bureaucrats, and there were none. Freedom of movement between the two countries became free. For the first time in decades, Ethiopian trucks could pass through Eritrea to its two ports and back without convoys. One said good things about the other. When Tigrayan supporters of the Derg ran out of the country with the defeated army, some claimed that they had been robbed and tortured by the EPLF. It was Siye Abraha, a member of the TPLF Politbureau, who rebuked them sternly. He told them that even if what they had said were true, they would have had no right to expect less, considering what they had previously done to the Eritrean people. But he also rejected their allegations as false.

Many Eritreans did marvel at the intensity with which the TPLF leadership expressed its love for Eritrea and Eritreans. Its relationship with the EPLF had not been just love throughout. It actually started with love, turned to hate and, by independence time, reverted back to love again. People did make a

mental note of this. There was something strange about the whole thing, something almost childish. The love of the '70s, the hatred of the '80s, and now another round of love in the '90s were all expressed with equal ardor.

Normally, love takes time to wane and hatred needs years to heal. This, I think, is in human nature. But not with the TPLF leadership or the Weyane, the name they prefer. I don't know if this is a "cultural thing" or merely a characteristic of this closely-knit group of leaders. But the way they loved, hated, and loved us again was wierd, though welcome under the circumstances.

My own personal experience with the Weyane leadership came in 1979, when two of their leaders visited the base areas of the EPLF and made a speaking tour. I attended one of these and heard the speaker lament and condemn the indignities and insults suffered by the people of Tigray. He even ran down the list of degrading "nicknames" that other peoples (including, by the way, Eritreans) attached to them. All that, he said, was to be put right. I remember distinctly, leaving the meeting puzzled by the speech. He discussed neither ideology, which we had all expected, nor Ethiopian nationalism, which would have been natural. There was no doubt, we all concluded, that the TPLF's loyalty was to Tigray, not Ethiopia as a whole. The thing that worried us most, however, was the reasons he listed as grounds for their struggle. The question was whether an armed organization whose leaders think they are looked down upon, belittled, and ignored by all around them, can ever feel rectified. Ours was a war of independence pure and simple—we wanted the enemy out of our country. Theirs, we felt, had a frightening psychological aspect. Satisfaction for them could only come, we agreed, if they rose above the common run, from which elevated status they could "do unto others as had done been unto them". Danger there, somewhere!

This is not a hindsight reconstruction, but what we all felt at the time. When in the '80s the TPLF launched its four or five year hate-EPLF campaign, therefore, it did not come as a complete surprise. The EPLF and its leadership were subjected to a tirade of verbal abuse that even put the Derg's insult-machines to shame. "Bourgeois apologists, agents of Soviet revisionism, traitors to the real aspirations of the Eritrean people,"—

you name it, they said it. When the EPLF replied in a terse sentence that it was not responding because it preferred to remain silent, the other side rose to frenzied anger. A typical example, they cried, of the EPLF’s “arrogant attitude” towards the TPLF.

Throughout most of the ‘80s, TPLF leaders were actually involved in a one-way ideological polemic against the EPLF. They were ardent followers of the Albanian brand of socialism—Enver Hoxha was their hero. The EPLF, was by the mid-eighties, widening its perspective and expanding its national democratic base. Prior to that, it had never openly attached its name or way of thinking to any brand of socialism, and old Enver Hoxha never figured as one of its declared heroes.

That, of course, was its own business, but the Weyane did not think so. So they vilified the EPLF and subjected it, as pointed out, to such unfettered scrutiny and abuse, as to make it look like they would never deal with it again. It was amazing how they kept this one-way polemic going. That is when they proved their adeptness at putting words into an adversary’s mouth and answering back with great anger and venom.

At about the same time, many EPLF members started to talk about a new political map of Tigray they had seen that was not only bigger than the one we all had known forever, but that also protruded to the Eritrean coastline. “It looked like a deformed bottle,” a colleague remembers, referring to the protrusion that apparently had the shape of the neck of a bottle just touching the Red Sea. This too was talked about within the EPLF rank-and-file, but, like the ideological argument, was generally shrugged off, probably seen as the youthful excesses of overzealous provincial revolutionaries trying to impress their own people. For Eritrea, it was a decisive decade. Some of the greatest battles of the twentieth century sub-Saharan Africa were fought on its soil in the ‘80s. Every effort had to be harnessed to attain and maintain the upper hand that had long eluded the Eritrean revolution. So there was no time for ideological gymnastics, nor were EPLF people really concerned, at the time, with the exact twists and turns of their border with Ethiopia. Not that it was not important, but it was a problem for when independence arrived. That is, definitely, why those who saw the TPLF map did little more than raise their eye-

brows and briefly wonder where it would all lead to at some future date.

Eritreans, on the whole, tend to be optimistic. Until they are awakened, sometimes the hard way, they tend to cling to the positive side of matters. They are, generally, a people whose immediate interests lie in the present and the future, with the past protected and revered as a source of unity and inspiration. An astonishing aspect of the Eritrean psyche is the fact that they are a people who have so far proved incapable of hating, sustaining a grudge, or even suspecting collectively. Their greatest suffering came under the Derg's rule, but they soon forgot. One ought to remember that they fed the Derg's escaping troops up to the border, gave their prayers of thanks, celebrated their liberation, and started to look forward. In the past seven years, they have shown practically no animosity or vengefulness to their former torturers and tormentors, even at the level of the individual.

This, more than any other factor, I believe, explains the reluctance by both the government and people of Eritrea to respond in kind to the rumblings of a border conflict that had been sounding since even before Eritrean independence. Those who have been believing that the present conflict erupted suddenly on May 6 or May 12 at Badme, depending on which version they accept as the truth, may as well dispel that notion. Thorny areas along the Akkele Guzai-Tigray side of the Ethio-Eritrean (or Eri-Ethiopian?) side of the border go back to Italian times—some of them preceding, by years, the settlement of the broad Badme plains by Eritrean “homesteaders” from the highlands. Let us always keep in mind that Badme is just a small town on the north-eastern side of a huge expanse called the Badme Plains. The border at this juncture, a straight line that joins the Mereb and Tekezze-Setit rivers, cuts right across the flat area creating an Eritrean and a Trigrayan flank. The town of Badme, incidentally, is secure on the Eritrean side.

The disputes along the Akkele Guzai-Tigray border cannot be termed “border disputes.” They are mostly issues of land ownership, possession, or use typical of neighboring villages related by blood and kinship—a common trait among inhabitants on both sides of the border. It is not my intention to go into a detailed discussion of the history of these areas of

dispute. Let me just point out that these persisted through the years: first, because an international border happens to cross them, thus complicating their simpler nature; and, more importantly, because no genuine effort was ever made by past governments and administrations to settle them. When Eritrea became independent and the TPLF came to power, however, there was every reason to expect that these and other long-standing land-related issues would finally come to rest. Unfortunately, they did not.

Documents on the subject, many of them minutes of joint Eritrean-Ethiopian border committee meetings, tell a story. Coming from an “EPLF/Shah’ibiyah writer,” this will probably sound highly partisan. So be it. For in this instance, the truth is unreservedly Eritrea-friendly. The documents themselves, many signed by Weyane representatives, tell a partisan story, and thus, I am not worried.

The story the documents tell is of an Eritrean side that shows restraint and a conciliatory attitude that is firm and consistent, albeit at times overly so. Border disputes were not to be blown out of their proper proportion, as they were of a temporary nature and span of life and had to await the settlement of the whole border question at some future date. It was important, therefore, to relegate them to lower levels of priority. There are concrete examples where Eritrean administrators were willing to declare well-known Eritrean areas off-limits to both parties, pending the settlement of fresh disputes by bilateral agreements at the State level. More immediacy and importance was given to the maintenance of the atmosphere of good-will existing between the two governments, so that areas of strategic importance, joint development programs could flourish. Eritrean optimism at its most positive, I might add.

The directives on the other side do not seem to reciprocate this approach. At least, the realities created on the ground by Weyane officials tell a different story. Not only did the old border disputes get worse in every instance, but new and hitherto unheard-of trouble spots erupted after independence. The Adi Murug (Bada) dispute, now almost as famous as Badma, is such a new happening—a Weyane creation, as are the Endeli and Hazo-Irob troubles which did not exist previously.

Dozens of different-level meetings were held to settle ev-

ery dispute. A frustrating process of delays, postponements, side-issues, and accusations (sometimes of the “you look down upon us” variety) characterized these meetings. We cannot, of course, exonerate the Eritrean side from all responsibility (except, definitely, the “you look down upon us” variety), but the balance heavily tilts towards the Weyane. They broke agreements or implemented them selectively. Worse still, they created on the ground, facts that would contradict settled matters. Thus, disputes got worse.

The Badme conflict is no different in nature, except for the fact that, here, the Weyane actually arbitrarily and unilaterally demarcated a border on the ground that was inside Eritrean territory. No one, including the Eritrean inhabitants of the area (who incidentally, make up a large majority even of the population on the Tigrayan side of the border), was aware of these unilateral demarcations. As if that were not arbitrary enough, local Weyane officials indulged in a progressive extension of their unilateral demarcations much deeper into Eritrean territory. The problem came to the forefront when farmers inhabiting the area for decades started suddenly to be accused as “invaders” because they had “trespassed” every Weyane demarcation—demarcations they had not been aware of in the first place.

Another series of frustrating and fruitless meetings tried to calm down and settle the danger looming over Badma. The trend was the same, except that here, whole Eritrean villages were destroyed, Eritrean farmers rendered homeless, and, to add insult to injury, the demarcations moved deeper into Eritrea. Just to cite an example, the most massive Weyane campaign of destruction, expulsions and new border demarcation took place July 11 to 22, 1997, less than a month after a joint border committee meeting at the end of June that had specifically agreed to put a stop to such provocative activities.

On May 6, 1998, an Eritrean contingent on duty along the border was shot at by Weyane troops and several of its members got killed. This sparked off a border conflict that escalated, though in a limited way, over the next few days. On May 13th, a week after the initial skirmish, the world at large and the peoples of Ethiopia and Eritrea in particular, were shocked to learn, from an Ethiopian parliamentary decision, that the

two friends were virtually at war, unless Eritrea withdrew from

Badma. Few in Eritrea and Ethiopia had ever heard of Badme, but it soon became a household name.

Looking at the whole border issue from this vantage point, I maintain that it was by pure coincidence that Badme has taken the limelight, for what it is worth. Any of the other disputed areas around Menekuseito, the Endeli, Sheshet, and, of course, Adi Murug (Bada) were long-standing candidates for the title. True, tensions had reached a peak in Badme, but so had they at Adi Murug about a year earlier.

So much, as far as this personal analysis is concerned, about the border issue. If the Eritrean contingent had not been fired upon on May 6th and had Eritrean soldiers not been killed, no battle would have taken place and Badme would have remained obscure. Conversely, if a similar incident had taken place at Adi Murug, the Eritrean response would probably have been the same and Adi Murug would instead have hit the headlines. Unless very strong and better documented contrary evidence is presented, I will stick to this line of conviction. The border conflict, in other words, cannot explain the Ethiopian Parliament's virtual declaration of war.

Now let me go back to where I originally started from by posing a question: Are we witnessing a third “lifetime” of the Ethiopian “march of folly”? Could it be that the Weyane leaders are intent on pursuing the Haile Selassie and Mengistu fixation on “owning Eritrea or parts thereof”?

Obvious questions being asked in this connection are the following: Why did the Ethiopian Parliament pass a resolution that is tantamount to a declaration of war over a border conflict at Badme? Why, instead of limiting the confrontation to Badme did the Ethiopian government deem it necessary to amass a military build-up at Zalambessa and far-away Assab? Why the bombing raids on Asmara and the attempted air and sea embargo? Lastly, and most important for this personal view, why the second round of hate? Let me elaborate the last point.

This time, the hate is consummate. It is no longer an ideological indictment of the government or the EPLF. It is rather a solemn declaration by the Weyane leadership that there is something basically wrong in Eritrea and that it has to be put

right. The Eritrean economy has fallen beyond recovery, as far as they are concerned. Agriculture is so ignored, they are alleging, that Eritrean farmers are dying of starvation *en-masse*. So much repression and lack of democracy in Eritrea, we are being told, that the whole population is suffocating. Here is another one: there is no government in Eritrea; the government and the people have so fallen far apart that the latter need an alternative, they are praying for a savior. Need I go on and need I name Eritrea's new-found Christ?

In just three months, the Weyane propaganda machine, and especially its Radio Weyane Tigray broadcasting from Mekelle, has painted a most horrible picture of Eritrea, complete with horrendous stories. It is impossible to believe that all this steam and invective was prompted by a mere border incident at Badme. Neither can the Weyane ever convince us that the mass expulsions of Eritreans living in Ethiopia was the result of the dispute, a spur-of-the-moment decision and not a premeditated, well-planned TPLF policy awaiting an opportune moment.

And then, as usual, they have talked too much, exposing themselves in the process. "Eritrea has three million people and two ports, we are 60 million with no port, that is unfair!"—Radio Weyane's own words. "We will give you the port of Assab"—and that was their Vice Minister of Foreign Affairs, trying to win the hearts of a hostile Amhara audience somewhere in the US.

It is an unfortunate situation that defies a decent analysis or explanation. One cannot any longer discuss the Weyane or respond to their allegations without fearing for one's own reputation and sense of decency. I used to think that pathological lying was an individual psychological illness. We now learn from the Weyane, that governments too can be seized of the malaise. It does not matter if a lie is disproved, it comes back double; two lies become four and four jump to eight . . . in arithmetic progression.

Alas, power has, once again, gone astray in Ethiopia and nestled on the wrong lap. The first impression we got of the Weyane leadership, the one that pictured them as provincial and ideologically unsound, stands out even louder and clearer today. When the story of their "transcendence" from Tigray to

Ethiopian nationalism is finally told, it will definitely make very interesting reading as a masterpiece of intrigue, fraud, and deception. In the meantime, their new 1997 map of Tigray tells us, in no uncertain terms, that Tigray still reigns supreme in their agenda. Unlike the map of the 80s, this one does not protrude to the sea. But then, who said maps need to tell a whole story? They can always, as they did in Badme, progressively demarcate on the ground, so that the “deformed bottle” eventually kisses the shores of the Red Sea!

As for their general attitude towards Eritrea, I don't believe that the two spells of “love” we saw on the first and third rounds were genuine. They now have irreversibly proved themselves to have been mere tactics in a strategy of hate aimed at the “final solution” of the Eritrean question—its recapture or, failing that, the recapture of parts thereof.

Thus, as far as the approach towards Eritrea is concerned, we find no basic difference between the policies of Haile Selassie, of Mengistu, and of the Weyane. The only difference, maybe, is that the former two were open about their greed, the latter is more wily in its approach, more transparently clever. It turns out now that the Weyane never genuinely and whole-heartedly supported Eritrean independence and sovereignty. I have read, somewhere, an interview that Meles Zenawi gave to Paul Henze in 1990. Here, he openly declared that he was not supportive of Eritrea's independence, that he preferred to see a federal solution. When, three years later, he was pleading to end “the scratching of wounds” on Eritrean independence night, it must have been with a supreme effort. It is hard to believe that his heart, or to be more fair to him, the heart of the Weyane leadership, said something else.

Even today, we hear speeches and platitudes by Meles, Seyoum Mesfin, and the rest, of the inviolability of Eritrean sovereignty; that Ethiopia is not interested in taking “even an inch” of Eritrean territory. Isn't Badme an inch? And Adi Murug... and unless we are to take Vice Minister Tekedah as a lunatic, isn't Assab also, at least, an inch? This is a personal view and I will take the liberty of giving a personal response to the questions I have posed. There is no doubt that we are now on the third “lifetime” of the march of Ethiopian folly. I think the Weyane have rekindled—no, not just rekindled, in fact, they

never even lost—the Haile Selassie and Mengistu obsession or fixation of “owning Eritrea or parts thereof.” I don’t know why this Weyane government thinks it can do what its predecessors failed to do. I don’t know why it thinks its military commanders are superior to the Sandhurst-West Pointers of the previous regimes. I don’t know why the alternative they have been peacefully enjoying over the past seven years—including almost unlimited access to the sea—ceased to appeal to them. I don’t know why they have made it their business to play Messiah in their imagined “absence of government” in Eritrea. When they know very well precisely who got whom where they are, I don’t know why they are deluding themselves into believing that they granted Eritrea its independence. Worse still, I don’t know why they think they can take it back.

Ambition does strange things to some people in power. We said that Mengistu sought and organized flattery and had it come to him by force of will, just as it came to Haile Selassie by right of birth and tradition. The Weyane, on the other hand, thrive on unabashed self-flattery. They don’t need to seek and organize it, it is there, within them. It does not matter what other people say, they are the ultimate in the embodiment of democracy. It does not matter what they are doing to innocent Eritrean civilians living in Ethiopia, they respect human rights and, by their own declaration, they consider the phrase “anti-people” a great shame and insult. That is why they are very very angry with Mary Robinson and the US Government for having voiced their concern over their human rights violations. They are hurt and heart-broken in a most shamefully self-serving manner.

Once folly starts marching, it loses touch with reason and rationality. It does not matter that force is not needed to solve border disputes. It does not matter that the hate campaign is threatening to create a permanent rift in the relationship of two neighboring, friendly peoples. Neither does it seem to matter that the Weyane’s policy of belligerency is also a threat to Ethiopian unity. Nor do the present leaders of Ethiopia seem to realize that two previous, more potent governments tried to do what they are poised to do and miserably failed in the process. It does not matter that what is happening to the politics and economy of Eritrea is none of their business.

“The March of Folly”

Nothing is more odious, more hateful than war—we know, in Eritrea, we just went through one. I don't know how much of war Weyane leaders have really seen. There is a certain amateurishness in them that continues to give an eerie feeling to a lot of us. Would someone, please, do some research on their actual field experience?

In the meantime, these brave-hearts seem bent on the pursuit of a policy manifestly “contrary to Ethiopia's national self-interests.” This is the third time within the past sixty years that we are witnessing the repetition of this proven exercise in futility. Barbara Tuchman must be shaking her head from the grave and wondering when governments will ever learn.

....And so their folly marches on—no tunes of glory will be sung for them this time around either.