

1. BACKGROUND TO WAR AND FAMINE IN ETHIOPIA

"The introduction of billeting into Gayint led to the death of a peasant. The king's response to an appeal for justice was terse. 'Soldiers eat, peasants provide.'"¹

Histories of Ethiopia

There is no impartial history of Ethiopia: every presentation of historical facts is laden with modern-day political implications.

Ethiopia is a multi-ethnic and multi-religious state -- Christians and Moslems are present in approximately equal numbers, and there are also followers traditional religions and -- until very recently -- there was a community of Jews. Ethiopian nationalism, however, is largely based upon political and cultural symbols that derive from the Amhara-Tigray tradition of the northern highlands: Orthodox Christianity, an almost unbroken tradition of independence, literacy in the ancient Ge'ez script, and the use of ox-plough agriculture. One of the main reasons for the last thirty years of warfare has been the unwillingness of marginalized people in Ethiopia to accept the northern-highland definition of national identity.

Ethiopia as we know it today is the product of the expansion of a state centered in the northern highlands into adjoining areas, mostly to the south. The northern highlands are inhabited by the Amhara and Tigray, who are culturally and politically dominant, and a range of minorities, notably the Agau. The Ethiopian Jews, known as Falasha, are ethnically a sub-category of the Agau. The states located in this region claim a continuous tradition going back to the kingdom of Axum in the early middle-ages and beforehand, to the offspring of King Solomon and the Queen of Sheba. Until 1974, the Emperors claimed to rule by virtue of royal descent in the line of Solomon, and by being anointed by the Patriarch of the Ethiopian Orthodox Church. Until the mid-twentieth century, this state was known as "Abyssinia," and in the historical context, will be called that in order to distinguish it from the larger area of modern-day Ethiopia. In the region, highland Amhara and Tigray are commonly called "habash," a word with the same derivation.

History lives in Ethiopia. The question of whether the ancient Abyssinian state controlled all or part of modern-day Eritrea generates acrimonious dispute among scholars and politicians. Contemporary claims and counter-claims on the Eritrean issue are based on

¹ Quoted in: Donald Crummey, "Banditry and Resistance: Noble and Peasant in 19th Century Ethiopia," in D. Crummey (ed.) *Banditry, Rebellion and Protest in Africa*, London, 1986, p. 142. The king in question was the Emperor Teodros, who ruled the northwestern part of modern-day Ethiopia from 1855 to 1868.

differing readings of historical texts, which purport to show either that the territory was traditionally independent of north-central Ethiopia, or the "cradle of Ethiopian civilization," and inextricably linked to Ethiopia.

A similar dispute rages over the origins of what today are the southern provinces of Ethiopia. South of Gojjam and north Shewa, Ethiopia is dominated by the Oromo (the largest ethnic group in the country), with significant representations of a range of other ethnic groups. Advocates of "greater Ethiopia" claim that these areas -- and sometimes territories even further afield in Sudan, Djibouti, Somalia, Kenya and Uganda -- were ruled by Abyssinian Emperors in the middle ages, until the sixteenth-century "invasions" of the Moslems from the east and the Oromo from the south. Others argue that the homelands of the "invaders" fall within the boundaries of modern Ethiopia, and that a reading of history that regards them as extraenous to Ethiopian history gives undue primacy to an Abyssinian version of events. They dispute the territorial extent of the Abyssinian empire, and claim that western historians have been seduced by the allure of the literate Christian legacy of Abyssinia into regarding its people as somehow superior to their non-literate Moslem and pagan neighbors, thereby endorsing the legitimacy of Abyssinian imperial expansion -- and facilitating it through the supply of firearms.

What is certain is that from the sixteenth to the nineteenth century there was no hegemony of a single group over modern-day Ethiopia. At times, independent Amhara kingdoms appeared to be on the point of being vanquished by the Moslems and the Oromo. In the mid-nineteenth century, this began to change, as the northern kingdoms began a process of political centralization, acquisition of European weaponry, and conquest of their southern neighbors -- a process called "unification" by its advocates and "colonization" by its detractors. This reached its climax under Menelik, King of Shewa and Emperor (1889-1913). The Emperor Menelik doubled the size of the empire within a few decades and established the boundaries of modern Ethiopia, and established the supremacy of the Shewan Amhara, not just over the Oromo and other southern groups, but over the Gonder, Gojjam and Wollo Amhara and the Tigray as well.

Ethiopia and the West

To an older generation of people in the west, the name "Ethiopia" is linked to the Italian fascist invasion of 1935; to a younger generation, it is linked to the famine of 1984. There is a common thread to these two momentous events: violations of the humanitarian laws of war.

The Italians invaded Ethiopia, deployed chemical weapons, bombed Red Cross

ambulances, and when in control massacred most of the country's educated elite. These abuses, against a fellow member of the League of Nations, scandalized liberal public opinion in Europe and America, and led to widespread sympathy and support for the exiled Emperor Haile Selassie. Ironically, Haile Selassie was later to violate international law in his annexation of Eritrea, and his army was to engage in gross violations of human rights in combatting insurrection in different parts of the empire -- but he was still able to play upon the west's conscience and exploit his image as "victim." John Spencer, Haile Selassie's longstanding advisor on international law, with unconscious irony concluded his book Ethiopia at Bay with a quotation from Herodotus: "thank the gods that they have not put it into the heart of the sons of the Ethiops to covet countries which do not belong to them."²

Similar but intensified methods of warfare conducted against subjugated peoples in Ethiopia by the Emperor's successor, Colonel (later President) Mengistu Haile Mariam were instrumental in reducing much of the rural population of Ethiopia from a state of poverty and hardship to one of outright famine. International sympathy for Ethiopia's plight led to the greatest outpouring of charitable donation in modern history -- a sympathy which again deflected attention from the gross human rights violations in the country.

Ethiopia: Military and State

Army and state in Ethiopia are traditionally so close as to be at times indistinguishable.

The traditional Abyssinian state (or self-proclaimed empire) was founded upon the principles of conquest of neighboring peoples, and the settlement of soldiers on peasant communities. The soldier-settlers were entitled to administer the locality, raise taxes and requisition produce from the farmers. Their chief obligation in return was to be prepared to fight for the king, and to raise a levy of peasants to do the same. One Ethiopian historian has described the system of conquest and rule thus:

All the Christian provinces of the north were originally acquired by wars of conquest ... [The king] appropriated all the people and their land, and reserved the right to dispose of them according to his wishes. He executed all resistance fighters who fell into his hands, and reduced to slavery other captives of war ... These acts of cruel repression were deliberately committed ... to force the people to surrender and to give them a terrible example of the destructive force of the Christian army in case of further revolts.³

² John D. Spencer, Ethiopia at Bay: A Personal Account of the Haile Selassie Years, Algonac, Mich., 1984, p. 369.

³ Tadesse Tamrat, Church and State in Ethiopia, 1270-1527, Oxford, 1972, p. 99.

The twin themes of brutality in conquest -- including the use of exemplary violence to instil fear and subservience -- and the military mode of administration, which are here referred to in the context of the 15th century, recur in more recent history.

Traditional Forms of Warfare

There were two basic forms of traditional warfare in Ethiopia. One form was that practiced by centralized states, including the Christian Abyssinian kingdoms located in the northern highlands, and the Moslem sultanates in the east. The second type of warfare was practiced by non-centralized states, including both small-scale societies on the peripheries of Ethiopia, and the large but decentralized confederacy of the Oromo.

Warfare by Centralized States

Abyssinian armies consisted of a group of permanent soldiers attached to the court, and a mass levy in times of emergency. Only the permanent soldiers were trained. The levy method could be remarkably effective in raising huge armies, though for relatively short campaigns. Armies of over 100,000 men were not uncommon in the late 19th century. In 1935, Haile Selassie raised an army of up to 350,000 to fight the Italians.

A central element in traditional warfare in Ethiopia was the unremitting brutality of armies, in wars of conquest, rebellions and counter-insurgency campaigns. "Whose face have you not disfigured? Whose wife and child have you not captured?" ran a soldier's song from the 14th century.⁴

In the absence of the institutions of civil society, the principal way for the ambitious to advance themselves was through warfare. Banditry was a traditional mode of social mobility: a frustrated local leader would become a bandit (Amharic: *shifita*) for a while, obtaining wealth, a warlike reputation, and a retinue of like-minded followers, until his ruler was compelled to bestow a high office upon him. The most famous example of the successful use of banditry for political advancement was the case of Ras Kassa of Quara, who rose to become the Emperor Teodros, ruling Abyssinia from 1855 to 1868. Some such bandits, such as the Moszagi brothers in Eritrea in the 1940s, have been described as "social bandits,"⁵ but undoubtedly the majority were predators rather than protectors of the poor. The robbery,

⁴ Quoted in: Richard A. Caulk, "Armies as Predators: Soldiers and Peasants in Ethiopia, c. 1850-1935," *International Journal of African Historical Studies*, 11, (1978), p. 460.

⁵ Eric Hobsbawm, *Bandits*, New York, 1981, p. 14.

destruction and general insecurity created by banditry rendered rural people vulnerable to famine.

Counter-insurgency strategies consisted in attempting to buy off the leaders of the rebellion with promises of rank and riches, while wreaking destruction on the rural people in the rebellious area. The inhabitants of an insurgent area within the empire were treated no differently to a newly-conquered "enemy" population. One 19th century European traveller was given an explanation for the scale of destruction: "if an invasion did not completely ruin a country, the inhabitants would sooner or later rebel and it would be necessary to send a great *zemetia* [military expedition] and start all over again."⁶ Examples of this will be given in following chapters. The notion that wanton brutality towards ordinary civilians might make rebel leaders *less* willing to accept a political compromise does not seem to have figured in official military thinking. As a result: "a constant enmity exists between the military and the population in general" so that "country people slay remorselessly any fugitives of either side from the field of battle."⁷

Though most of the discussion has referred to the Christian kingdoms, the great Moslem Ethiopian warlord Ahmed al Iman Gran, who led a *jihād* (Islamic holy war) against the highland states in the 16th century, practiced similar forms of warfare, and was renowned for his lack of mercy.

Slaving and Pacification

One of the most common activities of Abyssinian armies was raiding for slaves. Vast areas of the country were depopulated, and entire peoples decimated by slaving raids. Some of those raided included highland peoples such as the Agau; in the last century, as the highland states expanded, the slaving frontier expanded towards the borders of what are now Kenya and Sudan.

The age-old Abyssinian system of settling soldiers on a rural population, which was then required to support them, was dramatically expanded in the late 19th century. This occurred when the state, centered in the highlands of Shewa, expanded to conquer the area known as southern Ethiopia. The conquest of the southern lands, which are mainly Oromo, was achieved by massive military campaigns using firearms provided by European powers. The pacification was achieved through the so-called *neftegna* system. *Neftegna* is Amharic

⁶ Quoted in Bonnie K. Holcombe and Sisai Ibssa, *The Invention of Ethiopia: The Making of a Dependent Colonial State in Northeast Africa*, Trenton, NJ, 1990, p. 108.

⁷ William Plowden, *Travels in Abyssinia*, London, 1868.

for "rifleman." The Emperor Menelik paid his soldiers with grants of land -- or, more precisely, grants of the services of the indigenous people who were required to till the land. An ordinary soldier was awarded a minimum of two serfs; ranking officers received tens or even hundreds. By these means, Menelik was able to reward his soldiers and also control the newly-conquered southern regions. The serfs, however, were obliged to pay half or more of their produce to their newly-imposed landlords. In times of hardship, this extra burden meant that the serfs descended into famine. The practice of rewarding soldiers and other state servants with grants of occupied land continued until the revolution.

Warfare among Non-Centralized Peoples

Traditional warfare among the Oromo followed a rather different pattern. Traditional Oromo society was organized according to a system of age-grades, known as the *gada* system. The leadership of the community changed every eight years to a new age-set. Each age set was required to engage in a war, involving important ritual elements, known as a *butta* war, before assuming leadership. The *butta* war could be a hunting party directed against wild animals, or a raiding expedition targetted on a community that had not been raided previously. It was preceded by a huge feast, in which many animals were slaughtered; one of the aims of the war was to replenish livestock by raiding.⁸

Such forms of warfare were central to the traditional Oromo religion. All young men of a certain age grade participated, with women, children and men of other age grades remaining at home.

When confronting the armies of Christian Abyssinia, the Oromo employed a version of guerrilla warfare. Relatively small and highly mobile bands would utilize night raids to weaken and demoralize communities. Obtaining booty was also an important component of the attacks. When the raided communities accepted Oromo domination, and became part of the expanding Oromo political confederacy, the area would become the base for guerrilla-style attacks on the adjoining region.⁹

The Oromo rules of warfare required that when Oromo groups fought among themselves, the level of violence was constrained, and captives should be returned after a peace agreement was reached. When the Oromo attacked non-Oromo groups, the level of brutality was certainly much greater. In general, in contrast to the huge and all-consuming Amhara armies, the smaller and faster-moving Oromo bands would leave less destruction in

⁸ Mohamed Hassen, *The Oromo of Ethiopia: A History 1570-1860*, Cambridge, 1990, p. 12.

⁹ Mohamed Hassen, 1990, pp. 22-4.

their wake.

In response to counter-attacks by the larger and better-armed "conventional" Abyssinian armies, the Oromo would simply disperse. The Jesuit Manoel de Almeida noted that the Amhara armies were unable to invade Oromo territory because the Oromo pastoralists did not grow food but instead relied on their cattle, which could be evacuated from the path of an advancing army, which could not therefore feed itself.¹⁰

In the 18th and 19th centuries, some Oromo states grew up in the south-west of Ethiopia, and developed patterns of warfare that were more akin to those of the northern highlands. An Italian missionary described the behavior of these Oromo armies when attacking neighboring, stateless peoples: "When 'foreign' soldiers enter a country, nothing is spared, families, villages, agriculture, cattle and everything disappears in a few days."¹¹

Marginalized people in southern Ethiopia traditionally practiced forms of warfare akin to mutual raiding for cattle and captives. While both common and violent, a number of factors necessitated a limit to the level of destruction. One such factor was the low level of military technology; a second was the need for a negotiated peace at the end of the conflict, so that both parties could resume basic economic activities such as cattle herding. A third was the ritual element in warfare. The development of trading relations with more powerful states to the north, which demanded slaves and ivory, and the introduction of firearms, upset this system in historical times, so that the last two centuries have witnessed peripheral warfare that has been just as bloody and destructive as that seen in the central highlands, and has at times verged on the genocidal.

Armies and the Creation of Famine

The chronicles of the history of Ethiopia are filled with stories of famines. Richard Pankhurst, a leading historian of Ethiopia, documents that between the fifteenth and nineteenth centuries there was on average at least one famine every decade.¹² Prof. Pankhurst joins the majority of scholars who study Ethiopian famine and develops the theme that famine is a natural disaster, caused by drought, pestilence or other kinds of visitation, working upon a society impoverished by thousands of years of isolation and technological stagnation.

¹⁰ M. de Almeida, *Historia de Ethiopia a alta on Abassia*, quoted in R. Pankhurst (ed.) *Travellers in Ethiopia*, London, 1965, pp. 42-3.

¹¹ G. Massaja, quoted in Mohamed Hassan, 1990, p. 127.

¹² Richard Pankhurst, *The History of Famine and Epidemics in Ethiopia Prior to the Twentieth Century*, Addis Ababa, RRC, 1985.

However, in this history (commissioned by the government of Colonel Mengistu) Prof. Pankhurst makes little mention of the role of warfare, the state's forcible procurement of produce, or the failure of the state to undertake significant actions to prevent or ameliorate famine. This is conveniently close to the official view of the causes of contemporary famines that was propounded by that government.

The Ethiopian state has always been autocratic and unresponsive to the needs of its people. Many of the sources used by historians derive from documents written by officials at court, and so cannot be expected to give an accurate account of the official response to famine. In fact, like some modern publications on famine, their role is to glorify the ruler and present him as pious, generous and enlightened.

Prof. Pankhurst disparages "the long-established Ethiopian tradition of blaming natural calamities on the wickedness of the people."¹³ Both historical and contemporary evidence suggests that the opposite is more often true: famines brought about by the callous actions of powerful people are commonly blamed on nature -- especially by court chroniclers.

Requisitioning Food

The historical sources, despite their limitations, tell a story of centuries of state-created famine in Ethiopia.¹⁴ The manner in which wars were conducted was instrumental in creating famine. One way in which this occurred was the requisitioning of food by armies, which provisioned themselves from the local inhabitants. The Portuguese Jesuit B. Tellez visited Ethiopia in the 17th century, and wrote that famine was common on account of visitations of locusts and "the marchings of the soldiers ... which is a plague worse than the locusts, because they [the locusts] devour only what they find in the fields, whereas the other [the soldiers] spare not what is laid up in houses."¹⁵ Armies on campaign were described as leaving almost as much ruin and devastation as if the country had been invaded by the enemy. The mass armies raised for discrete campaigns were huge, even by modern standards. Noting that "an Abyssinian army often numbers 80,000 men, accompanied by 30,000 women, slaves and camp followers," the Englishman Colonel Berkeley wrote: "it will be understood that it leaves a desert wherever it goes."¹⁶ He was writing from experience in the 1860s --

¹³ Pankhurst, 1985, p. 46.

¹⁴ Many of these sources were utilized by Prof. Pankhurst in earlier publications written under the auspices of independent academic institutions.

¹⁵ B. Tellez, quoted in Margery Perham, *The Government of Ethiopia*, London, 1969, p. 163.

¹⁶ Quoted in *Horn of Africa*, 4.1, 1981, p. 29.

even larger armies were fielded in the following decades. Even the staff of the Ethiopian Relief and Rehabilitation Commission (RRC), reviewing the historical evidence for famines, were obliged to conclude that many famines were caused directly by armies' food requirements.¹⁷

In the 19th century, Emperors Teodros and Menelik both tried to introduce strategic grain stores for the specific purpose of feeding the army, but in neither instance was this consistently implemented and it is also unclear how the grain was obtained. Haile Selassie was the first ruler to introduce a standing army under unified central control, and to undertake systematic measures in order to provide for it.

Access to food supplies was therefore central to military strategy. This has already been noted with regard to Amhara-Oromo warfare. Lack of food to feed armies played a critical role in the Tigray rebellion of 1913/14. Local Tigrayan nobles wrote to Ras Wolde Giorgis, head of the Shewan army, imploring him not to invade Tigray to put down the revolt, because a crop failure meant that the province could not support two armies. When Wolde Giorgis did invade, many of his soldiers deserted on account of lack of food.¹⁸

War against the Economic Base

A second manner in which warfare contributed to famine was the economic nature of many wars. Wars between Abyssinian principalities were in part designed to remove the power of the adversary to raise an army -- with the implication that the destruction of grain stores and other essential items in the economy was a military objective. Thus the Emperor Yohannes deliberately despoiled Gojjam in the 1880s so that King Teklehaimanot could not support his soldiers -- instead the King invaded the independent principality of Keffa and quartered his army there.¹⁹ Wars of conquest, fought mainly against people in southern Ethiopia, were designed to subjugate the people so that they could be brought under Amhara domination. Most of these people were Oromo, and many were pastoralists. The empire required a class of serfs, tied to the land. This was clearly impractical if the subject populations had their own independent source of livelihood. Other reasons for confiscating cattle and crops and destroying villages were desire to break the spirit of resistance, the need to obtain food for the army, and the tradition of wanton brutality. These coincided with a

¹⁷ RRC, "Food Shortage Report on Tigray, Annex: A Historical Perspective on Famine in Tigray," Addis Ababa, 1979, p. 39.

¹⁸ National Records Office, Khartoum, File Intel 2/19/160.

¹⁹ Perham, 1969, p. 161.

strategic politico-economic imperative of destroying the independent source of sustenance of conquered people.

Another aspect of the relationship between armies and famine is also worthy of note. One is that armies were carriers of disease, and themselves disease-ridden. Many more soldiers died from illnesses contracted on campaign than from the wounds of battle. In Menelik's campaign against Gojjam in 1882, 3,000 soldiers were killed by disease, as against 900 in battle (plus 50 killed by peasants while looting).²⁰ Local populations would flee before approaching armies for fear of contracting diseases. In 1913/14, for example, the Shewan army was responsible for introducing a cholera epidemic to Tigray, at that time on the verge of famine.

The Great Famine of 1888-92

The great famine of 1888-92, popularly known as *Kifu Qen*, ("Evil Days") was possibly the worst famine in Ethiopia's recorded history, and some estimate that as much as one third of the population died. A rinderpest epidemic decimated cattle herds, while a combination of drought, locusts and army worms damaged crops. The actions of the state, however, were also important in deepening the famine for many sections of Ethiopian society, while helping others to survive and even benefit.

The famine struck at a time when the Emperor Yohannes was fighting the armies of the Sudanese Mahdi, and when King (after 1889, Emperor) Menelik was waging large campaigns of destruction in the south. Menelik was able to procure grain to help feed his new capital at Addis Ababa, so that it was described as a "Noah's Ark" amid general devastation. It appears that much of this was obtained by the confiscation of "concealed" grain in the rural areas.²¹ A common traditional storage method uses underground pits -- the grain stored there is not a hoarded surplus, but the family's diet. Sources do not reveal whether this was the origin of Menelik's famine relief for Addis Ababa, but it is probable that rural people suffered so that townspeople could eat. Magazines were set up to feed the army - - by levying a new tithe on the peasantry, which contemporary chroniclers optimistically recorded as "popular." The Emperor also made some symbolic gestures such as no longer eating meat at his court, and going to a field to dig with a hoe.

However, Menelik's chief response to the famine was to try to export it by invading his southern neighbors. Amhara lords reacted to the famine by plundering the rich Oromo

²⁰ Caulk, 1978, pp. 476-7.

²¹ Pankhurst, 1985, p. 101.

province of Arsi (three different governors participated) and raiding cattle in the Ogaden. Menelik authorized the sending of northern garrisons to southern towns such as Bure and Nekempte to be fed by the local population -- presumably without the latter's consent.²² The Gojjami army occupied Keffa to feed itself there, and thousands of Shewans migrated to the highlands of Harerghe.

Yet, if official sources are to be believed, "the reaction of the Emperor Menelik to the emergency was one of the few bright spots in an otherwise gloomy picture."²³ The despot was, we are told, "very distressed to see his army famished"²⁴ and ordered provincial governors to supply famine relief to the troops -- the sources of supply of this generous relief are not mentioned. Parallels with the late twentieth century need not be stressed.

An Outline of Vulnerability to Famine in Ethiopia

This section consists in a discussion of the socio-economy of rural Ethiopia, with a focus upon Tigray and the adjoining areas. This analysis is important because it provides the framework in which the governmental actions of the 1980s can be appreciated. The government's counter-insurgency methods tore at the very sinews which kept the rural economy together, turning a period of hardship into one of outright famine. Some of those sinews are obvious, such as peasant farming, some of them are less obvious. It is necessary to analyze how they held the economy together in normal times.

The most common view of the socio-economy of Ethiopia centers on the relationship between the soil, the peasant and those who tax the peasant. The focus is upon the agricultural system. In the central and northern highlands, farmers grow a variety of crops in the spring (*belg*) and summer (*meher*) growing seasons (Eritrea and much of Tigray receive only the *meher* rains). Ox-plows are used to prepare the land, using technology that has changed little over millenia. Ethiopia is one of the original loci of cereal cultigens, and there is a huge variety of strains of each of the major crops: *teff* (the most prestigious staple), wheat, barley, millet, sorghum and maize.

While agriculture is central to the Ethiopian economy, the view that focusses upon it to the exclusion of other aspects of rural life can be misleading. James McCann, a leading

²² Richard Pankhurst and Douglas Johnson, "The Great Drought and Famine of 1888-92 in Northeast Africa," in D. Johnson and D. Anderson (eds.) *The Ecology of Survival: Case Studies From Northeast African History*, London, 1988, pp. 56-7.

²³ Pankhurst, 1985, p. 98.

²⁴ Pankhurst, 1985, p. 101.

authority on the northern highlands, considers that "the image of the insular, long-suffering Ethiopian peasant" and the view that sees "highland farmers and highland agriculture as static and self-contained ... [have] obstructed understanding of the rural economy and social history of northern Ethiopia."²⁵ Ethiopian highland peasants do not survive just by growing things in the fields -- migration, trade and animal rearing are important too.

Rather than conceptualizing rural Ethiopia as an agglomeration of independent peasants each provisioning himself or herself from farming, it is more useful to see the region as a pattern of geographically-specialized areas, with a set of links between them. This is particularly the case for the north.

The fundamental dichotomy is between areas which are normally surplus-producing, and areas which are regularly in food deficit. In the north, the surplus areas include: Gojjam province, southwestern Wollo, central Gonder and Simien, Raya district in eastern Tigray and Shire district in western Tigray. These areas are not particularly drought-prone; even when drought hits other parts of the country, they normally continue to produce adequate crops or surpluses. When these areas do suffer a partial crop failure, it is usually localized and may be due to hailstorms, frost, infestations of pests such as locusts or army-worms, or indeed too much rain.

The food deficit areas include most of the rest of northern Ethiopia, especially some parts of eastern Gonder, northern and eastern Wollo, most of Tigray, and almost all of Eritrea. They form an arc along the eastern escarpment of the highlands, with an extension into the Tembien-Wag area, where there is a rain shadow on account of the Simien mountains. Many of these areas have been in chronic deficit for a hundred years (since the great famine of 1888-92). They produce a good harvest perhaps once or twice a decade, and a run of six or seven years of crop failure is not unusual.

While adequate rains and the absence of pests are important to production in all areas, for many farmers the critical factor causing them to fail to grow adequate crops is lack of oxen to plow the land. The more times a field is plowed, the higher the yield. Investigations have shown that in poorer areas of northern Ethiopia, approximately one third of the farmers have one ox, and one third have none -- only one third have two or more. A farmer with one ox is traditionally known as "half a man". He must team up with a neighbor in order to put together a plow team, which then divides its time between the farms. A farmer with no ox must try to hire a plow team, and can usually only afford to make one or two passes with the plow, instead of an optimal higher number. The single most important short-term constraint

²⁵ James McCann, *From Poverty to Famine in Northeast Ethiopia: A Rural History 1900-1935*, Philadelphia, 1987, p. 69.

on higher food production is shortage of plow oxen.

Oxen are expensive. Farmers must save in order to buy one, and the loss of an ox is a devastating blow to a poor household.

Treated as a whole, northern Ethiopia is very rarely in overall food deficit. Conceding that statistics are very unreliable, perhaps the only year in recent times when there was such a deficit was 1984. In all other years between 1975 and 1991 there has been a net surplus, though sometimes a small one. The problem is not food availability, it is food distribution.

This leads to the question: how do the people who live in the deficit areas make good that deficit? The answer is, through four basic means:

- * Working for money. Large numbers of rural Ethiopians undertake paid labor, either close to home, or migrating to surplus-producing or coffee-producing areas, cities, or farming schemes. Migrant laborers buy food where it is cheaper and more plentiful than in their home areas, in effect redistributing it from surplus to deficit areas.
- * Engaging in petty trade. In the seasons when agriculture is not possible, many men engage in trading, using donkeys and mules. One researcher in the village of Adiet, near Axum in Tigray, found that more than half of the adult men in the village were part-time traders, in salt, grain, animals and consumer goods. Some travelled as far afield as Gojjam to buy grain.²⁶ For the pastoralists of the lowlands, trade is even more important. By these means, food is moved from surplus to deficit areas.
- * Selling animals. Not only the specialist pastoralists of the lowlands, but many highland farmers, earn a considerable income from selling animals. Animals are kept for sale and for milk. One of the few investigations of the role of animals in the highlands was done by Noel Cossins and Bekele Yemeron in the 1970s.²⁷ They concluded that in many areas, animals played a role at least as important as farming. One of these areas was the Tembien-Wag area in Tigray-Wollo, which was the epicenter of the famine of 1983-5. In the Eritrean highlands this is also the case, and many farmers are in fact semi-nomadic, migrating with their animals out of the highlands to the eastern and western escarpments.
- * Remittances from relatives working in towns and abroad are important, particularly in Eritrea, which has larger cities, more industry, and more ready access to neighboring countries.

Other strategies, such as eating wild foods and borrowing, are also commonly followed. Another strategy followed is going hungry: rural people will reduce consumption in order to preserve essential assets such as seed, farm tools and plough oxen. The meager

²⁶ Richard Baker, interviewed by Alex de Waal, November 1990.

²⁷ Noel J. Cossins and Bekele Yemeron, "Still Sleep the Highlands: A Study of Farm and Livestock Systems in the Central Highlands of Ethiopia," Addis Ababa, Livestock and Meat Board, 1973.

diet upon which Ethiopian peasants are able to survive appears to contradict the basic tenets of nutritional science, but is remarked upon by all who have studied famine survival strategies.

A Digression into Statistics

There are no reliable statistics for Ethiopia, especially the northern regions. This is for three main reasons: (1) there have been no systematic investigations of most aspects of the rural economy of the north, in part because of prolonged warfare in the area, (2) even the most basic facts are subject to political manipulation, and (3) peasants are reluctant to divulge information to outsiders.

Information is power. The Imperial government withheld information about famines, and news about the famines in the post-revolutionary period was subject to both censorship and distortion. Similar considerations apply to basic facts about rural production, rainfall, and the human population.

For many years, even rainfall data were regarded as a state secret (the logic behind this will become evident in this report). In addition, due to the war, many rainfall monitoring stations ceased to function.

The size of the human population is not known for sure to within several millions. In part this is due to problems with counting people. Some peasants remain totally unreached, hiding in the mountains: "since the state provides very little that is beneficial to the peasant but siphons off a good deal of the latter's harvest, a large number of these mountain peasants will soon be driven to break their ties with the outside world, and to retreat to their rugged fortresses to live a life of independence in sublime isolation."²⁸ When the first national census was conducted in 1984, the enumerators found 29 per cent more people than expected in the areas in which they were able to survey -- suddenly, an extra eight million Ethiopians were "discovered."

The most contentious population issue in northern Ethiopia is the question of the number of people in Tigray. This was an issue of dispute throughout the 1980s. On one side, the government claimed that Tigray contained between two and 2.8 million people. On the other, the TPLF claimed that figures collected from village committees indicated a population of between 4.5 and 5 million. In 1989/90 the population estimates were 2.73 million (government) and 4.82 million (TPLF) respectively. This issue became important in 1985

²⁸ Dessalegn Rahmato, "Famine and Survival Strategies, A Case Study from Northeast Ethiopia," Addis Ababa, Institute for Development Research, 1987, p. 51.

when the government claimed that most of the famine victims in Tigray were receiving rations -- a claim that could only be made if the government's 1984 population figure of 2.41 million was accepted.

Demographic data from Ethiopia are extremely poor. Nobody knows how many people there really are in Tigray. However, the evidence that is available does allow a set of preliminary estimates to be made. These show, that while the population may not be as high as claimed by the TPLF, it is undoubtedly much higher than that claimed by the Mengistu government. There are several elements to the revision of the population estimate.

I TPLF-defined Tigray includes parts of Raya Kobo, Tselemti, and Wolkait, which are in government-defined Wollo and Gonder. According to the TPLF in 1989, these extra areas contained 400,000 people. The following discussion will be confined to the smaller government-defined Tigray.

II Tigray was not enumerated in the 1984 census, because of the war. The population estimate given by the government was therefore derived from the 1969 National Sample Survey, which estimated a population of 1.56 million, with 2.7 per cent per annum added on for population growth. However, the results of the 1969 survey were suspect. The figure first announced was 1.36 million, down from the estimate based on the 1965 sample survey, of 1.41 million; in January 1970 it was revised upwards. A more detailed survey in the early 1970s estimated the population at 2.04 million, but internal evidence in the survey results indicate that is likely to have been an underestimate.²⁹

A major source of inaccuracy for the figures for Tigray was the large number of temporary outmigrants from the province, probably more than ten per cent of the total population. After the revolution, most of this temporary outmigration ceased, boosting the local population accordingly. Thus it is likely that in 1969 the real population was at least 2.2 million.³⁰ This would imply a 1989 population of 3.65 million.

III In the areas where enumeration was possible, the 1984 census found an additional 29 per cent of people compared to estimates derived from the 1969 survey.³¹ It is safe to assume that, had enumerators actually visited Tigray, they would have found an additional number of people. An additional 29 per cent on the official figure would imply a 1989 population of 3.62 million.

²⁹ Hunting Technical Services, "Tigray Rural Development Study, Annex 3: Population," Borehamwood, 1975. The survey found a relative shortage of young girls.

³⁰ It is notable that the 1970 language survey found 3.56 million Tigrinya speakers, about 400,000 more than could be accounted for in the total estimates for the settled Tigrinya-speaking populations of highland Eritrea, Tigray and its borderlands, Addis Ababa and elsewhere.

³¹ The census was conducted shortly after the government began a program of systematic conscription of young males into the army. The data show a relative shortage of young males -- presumably concealed from the census enumerators by themselves and their families.

IV The results of the 1969 survey were manipulated for political reasons. The most well-known example of that was the underestimation of the number of Oromo. Though the Oromo actually outnumbered the Amhara, this politically-sensitive fact was suppressed, and the results claimed that 7.8 million Amhara outnumbered 6.8 million Oromo. There were also allegations (never systematically investigated) that the total population of Tigray was also reduced for political reasons, and that the district-by-district totals added up to much more. As this possible distortion cannot be proved or quantified, it will not be considered.

Factors II and III should be combined. Even if the corrected results of the 1969 survey had been known, the 1984 census would still have found more. Combining factors II and III results in a total 1989 population estimate of 4.70 million. A more conservative estimate would assume that factor III operated at "half strength", which would imply a total 1989 population of 4.20 million (for government-defined Tigray) and 4.60 million (for "greater" Tigray).

This shows that in 1989/90 the government of Ethiopia underestimated the population of Tigray by at least 1.4 million people (i.e. one third).

Figures for rural production are highly suspect. Most estimates for areas of farmland derive from tax records, which are arrived at by processes of negotiation, influence and bribery. One scholar studying land before the revolution noted that only two per cent of the farmland in Tigray had ever been measured, which was better than Gojjam (0.1 per cent) and Gonder (none at all). He concluded: "on two fronts, ownership and boundaries, these farmers have succeeded in preventing the government from learning the substantive details that would allow any forceful application of the land taxes."³² As a result, accurate knowledge of farmed area was non-existent. After the revolution, as the Agricultural Marketing Corporation (AMC) gradually extended its procurement in the late 1970s, sample surveys were begun in selected villages to assess the crops. In Wollo, the assessments of cropped area and harvest, which had been approximately stable up to 1978/9, suddenly more than doubled in 1979/80, remaining at comparable levels thereafter. It is likely that pressure to identify surpluses available for procurement by the AMC influenced the sudden increase in harvest estimate. In 1981, the Food and Agriculture Organization of the UN (FAO) gave technical assistance to the Ministry of Agriculture, enabling it to double the number of surveys. The result was a huge increase in the estimated yield. Overruling objections from the statisticians who wanted to double-check the figures, the central government published the unchecked first estimate -- because the high figure could be used to demonstrate the claimed "success" of the government's newly-launched campaign to increase agricultural production.

³² Peter Schwab, *Decision-Making in Ethiopia: A Study of the Political Process*, London, 1972, pp. 30-1.

Figures for amounts of grain in storage or numbers of domestic animals are even more unreliable -- the information must be obtained by asking peasants, who are reluctant to divulge anything to an outsider who is likely to be seen as wanting to assess taxes, recruit soldiers, confiscate land, or otherwise interfere with the peasant's autonomy. Official statistics are thus politically loaded facts based on varying degrees of ignorance about the reality.

Figures for those "in need" on account of famine are similarly suspect. Figures from the government Relief and Rehabilitation Commission were based on village reports (in government-held areas) and gross estimates elsewhere. In 1983, the total for Tigray was exactly one million; for Wollo, it was given down to the last individual. Examples of political manipulation of the figures will occur in this report. Figures produced by the FAO are based upon satellite imagery of vegetative growth and ground surveys. Satellite imagery of vegetation is useful for assessing the extent of drought, but cannot evaluate the impact of war, trade disruptions, taxation or pests, limiting its value for Ethiopia in the 1980s. In addition, throughout the 1980s, UN teams could not travel to rural areas of Eritrea, Tigray and north Wollo to conduct ground checks.

Ethiopian peasants are notoriously unwilling to divulge even the most basic information to outsiders. This stems from the well-founded fear that information is liable to be used against them. One of the peasants' few weapons against excessive exactions by the government is the latter's ignorance about their real condition, including how many of them there are. Several rural revolts (notably in Gojjam) have been sparked by government attempts to measure farm land. Peasants prefer the "sublime isolation" alluded to above.

The Ethiopian peasantry cannot be counted against its will. Hitherto, that will has almost always been lacking. Only with the advent of famine relief and more democratic forms of government are reliable statistics about the number of Ethiopians and their condition likely to be produced.

One tendency is certain: the closer an investigator probes into the rural economy of northern Ethiopia, the more he or she finds -- whether it be people, farmland, animals, or any other form of resources. One fact is equally certain: any attempt to quantify any aspect of Ethiopian society is a hazardous enterprise; and those who put figures on their claims for things such as rural production, the extent of environmental degradation, or the numbers dead in a famine, are speaking either in ignorance of the truth, or with the intention of concealing it.