Caught in the Legacy of Post-Colonialism: The Eritrean-Ethiopian War

Introduction

The Eritrean-Ethiopian War, from 1998 to 2000, is known for its escalation from a simple border dispute into a full-scale conventional war. While this may be the general discourse of the conflict, it is evident there were more prevalent factors at play than a one-dimensional border dispute. For instance, as a consequence of Italian colonization, Ethiopia and Eritrea have different understandings of their borders and different ethnic and racial groups that contend with one another over power. Another factor to consider is the relationship between the liberation parties in Ethiopia and Eritrea respectively, as a consequence of economic relations, and a border dispute. Although border alignment and economic relations played a significant role in the rationale behind the war, the relationship between the political interests and beliefs of the liberation parties holds more weight in explaining the build up to war.

Historical Context

The historical link between Ethiopia and Eritrea provides imperative insight into why the Ethiopian-Eritrean War took place. Although many know Ethiopia as one of the few African states never colonized, the war with Eritrea was nevertheless rooted in the consequences of colonization. In 1882, Italy occupied Assab, a port city in the south part of the Red Sea. By 1890, Italy had laid claims to three pieces of territory along the African Red Sea coast, which it then combined to construct the state of Eritrea.1 Eritrea’s construction is important in understanding the origins of the Eritrean-Ethiopian War because the Italians played a major role in defining the borders that would eventually be a catalyst in the 1998-2000 conflict. Following the creation of Eritrea in 1980, the Italians oversaw Eritrea as colonizers for the next 40 years. From their proximate position in Eritrea, Italy attempted to confront and engage Ethiopia in their colonial enterprise. Ethiopia was able to defend its state in the Battle of Adwa in 1896 from falling into the hands of Italian colonizers. Although Ethiopia resisted formal colonization, this sovereignty came at a price in 1889: Treaty of Wuchale. The treaty allowed for Italians to have complete control over Eritrea and a protectorate role over Ethiopia. Perhaps the most important outcome of this treaty would be the border agreements that followed, delineating a 1000 kilometer border between the two states.2

Italy’s main objective during this colonial period was to use Eritrea as a trade and communications hub. Thus, a bi-product of the Italian occupation was a newfound infrastructure in Eritrea that included education, agriculture, and commerce. Certain scholars have argued that Eritrea has had a long-standing superiority complex, which developed around this time with regards to Ethiopia.3 Ethiopia was composed of two closely related ethnic groups, the Tigrayans-Tigrinya and the Amhara. Due to Italian occupation, the Tigrinya became part of Eritrea and were separated from their once close neighbors, the Tigrean people and their Amhara cousins in Ethiopia. This importance of this separation was not the loss of proximity between two groups of people, but the beginning and overall formulation of a new identity for the Tigrinya. The Tigrinya under Italian occupation developed a new identity that distanced them from their now estranged relatives in Ethiopia. This happened over time as the Tigrinya were exposed to Italian propaganda that argued Ethiopian socio-economic inferiority, and the group would actually fight under Italian rule against Ethiopia.4

After the World Wars, Italy was incapable of maintaining its empire, and the British, who were tasked with administering Eritrea, left. This removal led to the United Nations’ decision in 1952 to make Eritrea a federal component of Ethiopia. This agreement failed to understand that Eritrea had developed its own identity. The country sought sovereignty and by no means to merge with the Ethiopian state. Conversely, Ethiopia benefited greatly from this particular UN decision due to an increase in territory that included profitable Eritrean

“... the Tigrinya were exposed to Italian propaganda that argued Ethiopian socio-economic inferiority, and the group would actually fight under Italian rule against Ethiopia.”

From a detailed map of Eritrea and Ethiopia, it is evident there were more prevalent factors at play than a one-dimensional border dispute. For instance, as a consequence of Italian colonization, Ethiopia and Eritrea have different understandings of their borders and different ethnic and racial groups that contend with one another over power. Another factor to consider is the relationship between the liberation parties in Ethiopia and Eritrea respectively, as a consequence of economic relations, and a border dispute. Although border alignment and economic relations played a significant role in the rationale behind the war, the relationship between the political interests and beliefs of the liberation parties holds more weight in explaining the build up to war.
industry that had been built up during Italian colonization. As one scholar notes, “it was argued that more than thirty-four percent of Ethiopia’s industries were located in Eritrea by the mid-1970s.” In 1962, Ethiopia proposed full integration of Eritrea into their state. In this tense context, border disputes were beginning to flourish in light of poor delineations.

“The TPLF and EPLF alliance brought victory to both sides in terms of fulfilling their agendas. The EPLF would achieve independence for Eritrea, which was officially recognized in 1993, and the TPLF formed multiple federated states in Ethiopia.”

As Eritreans became increasingly dissatisfied with Ethiopian terms and exploitation, they began armed struggles against the Ethiopian government in the form of the Eritrean Liberation Front, which eventually became the Eritrean People’s Liberation Front (EPLF). The main objective of the EPLF was to achieve Eritrean independence. The Tigrinya-speaking population that lived on the border of Ethiopia and Eritrea also began to form its own liberation movement, the Tigray People’s Liberation Front (TPLF). The idea that the Tigrinya-speaking population now saw as two distinct groups because their separation during colonialism was challenged by their still apparent common sense of identity. The main objective of this party was to liberate the Tigray people because it was argued they should be threatened to delegitimize the goal of liberating the Tigrayans under Ethiopian rule. As many of the ethnic groups present in Ethiopia were also represented in Eritrea, the Eritrean government felt that Ethiopian ethnic federalism posed a direct threat to its nation-building process.

The TPLF in Eritrea both rose to power in 1991, the Ethiopian War points to the complex relationship that arose at this time between the two liberation parties. The EPLF, which would eventually become the governing body in Eritrea, viewed the TPLF as inferior due to their leading role in training and arming its troops. Moreover, the EPLF was more confident in its defensive capabilities due to a trench warfare background. This mindset eventually became a cause of the war that erupted between the two countries in 1998. The EPLF did not see the TPLF as an actual threat, and considered its military strategies as superior to their counterparts. Thus, the eventual TPLF occupation of Badme, a border town which Eritrea and Ethiopia both opposing liberation fronts lay claim to, was received with great surprise and hostility. The EPLF found itself unprepared and unable to contain the TPLF forces, with its usual trench tactics falling short in the face of the TPLF occupation.

Though the TPLF in Ethiopia and the EPLF in Eritrea both rose to power in 1991, the resulting administrative systems and ideologies promulgated by the two were very different. The Eritrean government was only interested in a unified country and looked down upon Ethiopia’s ethnic federalism. Meanwhile for Ethiopia, the dismantling of the state best suited the interests of the new Tigrayan rulers. Fundamentally, the Eritreans felt the Ethiopian ethnic emphasis was a threat to their unified state, heightening hostilities. As many of the ethnic groups present in Ethiopia were also represented in Eritrea, the Eritrean government felt that Ethiopian ethnic federalism posed a direct threat to its nation-building process. This sense of insecurity inevitably fueled the possibility of war. Ethiopia did not want its multi-ethnic regions and Tigray influenced state to face direct conflict. Eritrea saw itself more powerful than it was, disregarding any threat the TPLF and Ethiopia put forth. Ethiopia, led by the TPLF, found itself fighting Eritrean political thought in hopes of establishing its independence.

Economic Causes for War

The second interpretation of the Eritrean-Ethiopian War directly correlates with the economic degradation of both states. Following Eritrean independence in 1993, both Ethiopia and Eritrea shared a tense relationship due to their opposing ideologies and practices. Consequently, when Eritrea introduced its own currency, the Nafka, Ethiopia was unsettled, as both countries had always relied on the Ethiopian Birr. Simultaneously, Ethiopia’s introduction of a new trade policy that taxed Eritrean exports to Ethiopia, while preventing Eritrea from importing Ethiopian products, led to unprecedented tensions between the neighboring countries. Rather than viewing the new Ethiopian tax policy as a protective measure, Eritrea interpreted this gesture as a sign of Ethiopian weakness and an attempt to undermine Eritrea. Eritrea smuggled enough coffee from Ethiopia that it became a major exporter while producing none of the coffee it was trading.

As previously mentioned, Ethiopia and Eritrea shared a tense relationship due to their opposing ideologies and practices. Consequently, when Eritrea introduced its own currency, the Nafka, Ethiopia was unsettled, as both countries had always relied on the Ethiopian Birr. Simultaneously, Ethiopia’s introduction of a new trade policy that taxed Eritrean exports to Ethiopia, while preventing Eritrea from importing Ethiopian products, led to unprecedented tensions between the neighboring countries. Rather than viewing the new Ethiopian tax policy as a protective measure, Eritrea interpreted this gesture as a sign of Ethiopian weakness and an attempt to undermine Eritrea. Eritrea smuggled enough coffee from Ethiopia that it became a major exporter while producing none of the coffee it was trading.

Ultimately, this interpretation of the war posits that Ethiopia was pushed into war in order...
Caught in the Legacy of Post-Colonialism

Kaleidoscope Journal Vol. 7 Issue 2

“Eritrea viewed war as a means of settling their long-standing dispute with Ethiopia.”

A Border Dispute

A third interpretation of the Eritrea-Ethiopian war is through the traditional lens of a border dispute. This interpretation claims that ultimately the border was tied to an Eritrean superiority complex and a responsive Ethiopian nationalism. Territorial disputes are not new to the Horn of Africa. After extensive colonization, Ethiopia, Britain, France, and Italy partitioned the region with little regard for the arbitrary divisions they were creating and the long-standing consequences these would inflict upon the people of the region. Supporting this interpretation is the fact that the Ethiopian-Eritrean dispute was already Ethiopia’s second-border-related conflict, having faced Somalia in a short war in 1982. Similarly, Eritrea was involved in maritime and border disputes with Sudan, Yemen, and Djibouti, alongside Ethiopia. The border dispute between Eritrea and Ethiopia escalated to war due to its relationship with each state’s sense of identity. The border was not simply a legal line of separation between two countries, but it was a representation of political identities. Eritrea, according to Dr. Christopher Clapham, former professor of African Studies at Cambridge University, is a “borderland,” meaning it has a fluctuating territorial history due to external influences. That is, the dilemma Eritrea faces when it comes to the construction of its borders has shaped the country’s violent, reactionary policies towards neighboring nations. The Eritrean government has stated, “We have accepted the war, the military path to assert ourselves as a people and a nation between the states. This option was left with no choice but to engage in combat, hoping to salvage its tarnished reputation.

The border dispute between Eritrea and Ethiopia escalated to war due to its relationship with each state’s sense of identity. The border was not simply a legal line of separation between two countries, but it was a representation of political identities. Because all other avenues were remain closed to us, Eritrea has been largely shaped by geopolitical factors. Ethiopia viewed the border as a source of redemption. Ethiopia due to its economic shortcomings, was by no means the regional hegemon that it had once aspired to become. In an attempt to regain its political esteem and power, it made the “recovery of the national territory its raison d’être.” Ethiopia saw the border conflict as a chance to restore national pride and legitimacy above all else.

Conclusion

To simplify the Ethiopian-Eritrean War to a mere border conflict would be an egregious oversight of both the economic and political landscape of the region at the end of the 20th century. In reality, the war was a case of different liberation fronts having opposing agendas and practices, economic divisions creating a motivation for war, and the unique significance each side afforded to the border territory. Ultimately, this analysis has concluded that the strongest correlation and regression to the cause of the war is the relationship between the TPLF and the EPLF. More precisely, it is the relationship of their opposing political interests and beliefs that would commence the war. The Eritrean-Ethiopian War was a conflict between two liberation fronts’ interests combined with their shifting identities.

Ronald Claude is an international Studies major, Class of 2016
The Role of Japanese Aid in Vietnam's Economic Development
By Stefany Pham

Caught in the Legacy of Post-Colonialism: The Eritrean-Ethiopian War
By Ronald Claude

1. JICA, Signing of Japanese ODA Loan Agreement with the Socialist Republic of Vietnam. 2013, 5
2. Ibid.
4. JICA, 2013, 4.
5. JICA, 2013.
6. Pan, Japanese ODA to Asian Countries, 23.
8. Ibid.
9. Shiraiishi, Japanese Relations with Vietnam, 19
10. Ibid., 17
11. DHD
12. Shiraiishi, Japanese Relations with Vietnam, 19
13. Ibid., 21
14. Ibid., 16
15. Ibid., 17
17. Ibid., 170
18. Ibid., 171
19. Muratana, 2008, 18
20. Pan, Japanese ODA to Asian Countries 15
23. GRIPS, Japan’s Development Cooperation in Vietnam, 2002, 16
24. Hanakaezawa, Japan’s Aid to Vietnam: Becoming an Intellectual Leader?, 2008, 352
25. JICA, 2013, 6
26. Ibid.
28. Ibid.
29. Ibid.
30. Ibid.
31. Ibid.
32. JICA, 2013, 6
33. JICA, 2015
34. GRIPS, 2
35. Ibid.
36. JICA, 2013, 13
37. Ibid.
38. Tran, Amendments to Vietnam’s Commercial Law and Civil Code, 2005
39. JICA, 2013, 13
40. Ibid.
41. JFTC, The JFTC Holds Training Course for the Vietnam Competition Authority on the Antimonopoly Act and Competition Policy, 2015
42. JICA, 2013, 13

Image 2: www.mofa.go.jp

Image 2: www.mofa.go.jp

Image 2: www.mofa.go.jp