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The Federal Experience

Tekeste Negash

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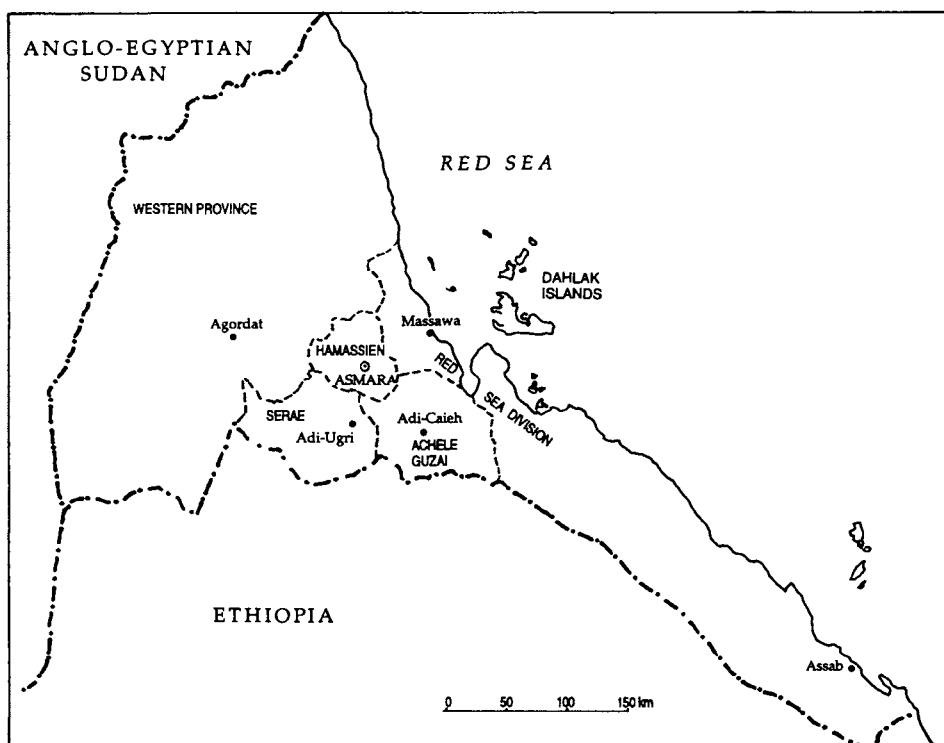
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ACRONYMS

ASMAE	Archivio Storico del Ministero degli Affari Esteri
ASMAI	Archivio Storico dell'Africa Italiana
ASMAI, AE	ASMAI Archivio Eritrea
BBCWB/ME	British Broadcasting Corporation, Middle East
BCA	British Consulate, Asmara, Eritrea
BCE	British Consulate, Cairo
BEAA	British Embassy, Addis Ababa
BMA	British Military Administration
CAS	Comitato azione segreta
CRIE	Comitato Rappresentativo degli italiani in Eritrea
EDF	Eritrean Democratic Front
EFLNA	Eritreans for Liberation in North America
ELA	Eritrean Liberation Army
ELF	Eritrean Liberation Front
EPDM	Ethiopian Peoples Democratic Movement
EPLF	Eritrea Peoples Liberation Forces
EPRDF	Ethiopian Peoples Revolutionary Democratic Front
EWN	Eritrean Weekly News
FO	Foreign Office (London, UK)
FPC	Four Power Commission
JAH	Journal of African History
JMAS	Journal of Modern African Studies
LPP	Liberal Progressive Party
MEF, HQ	Middle East Forces, Headquarters
ML	Moslem League
MPR	Monthly Political Report
NEAS	Northeast African Studies
NTEN	New Times and Ethiopia News
PLF	Popular Liberation Forces
PLO	Palestinian Liberation Organization
PRO	Public Record Office
ROAPE	Review of African Political Economy
SDF	Sudan Defence Forces
SDO	Senior District Officer
UK	United Kingdom
UN	United Nations
UP	Unionist Party
WO	War Office (London, UK)
WWM	Woldeab Wolde Mariam

THE PROVINCES OF ERITREA IN 1950



Source: Report of the United Nations Commission for Eritrea, New York 1950

Preface

On December 2, 1950, the United Nations passed resolution 390A (V) on the fate of the former Italian colony of Eritrea. The said resolution which came to be known as the Federal Act stipulated that "Eritrea shall constitute an autonomous unit federated with Ethiopia under the sovereignty of the Ethiopian crown". The resolution further stipulated that the Eritrean government would possess legislative, executive, and judicial powers in the field of domestic affairs. A United Nations Commissioner was simultaneously appointed to draft the Eritrean Constitution in consultation with the British Administering Authority, the Ethiopian government and the Eritrean people.

In pursuance of the UN resolution, the United Nations Commissioner supervised the election of a Constituent Assembly, drafted a Constitution, witnessed its coming into effect, and wound up his responsibility when the Union Jack was replaced by the Eritrean and Ethiopian flags on September 15, 1952. The federation between Eritrea and Ethiopia had only a ten year lease of life; it came to an end on November 15, 1962. A year earlier, Eritrean exiles in Cairo had formed an organization called the Eritrean Liberation Front.

This study was conceived in the summer of 1988 when the war between the Eritrean nationalist forces and the Ethiopian state appeared to have reached a stalemate. The victory that the Eritreans scored at Afabet in the early months of 1988 had brought to the attention of the leaders of Ethiopia that there was not going to be a military solution to the problem. The same view prevailed among the Eritrean camp even though this was camouflaged by the rhetoric of the Victory to the Masses. By 1988, the Eritrean war was entering its 28th year and was described as early as 1981 as Africa's longest war.

However, as late as 1988 the causes of Africa's longest war were very obscure indeed. There were few studies on the period preceding the era of conflict and these were either biased or were inadequately documented. There was a clear predominance of the interpretation of the conflict that had been handed down by the Eritrean Liberation movements. In the search for a peaceful solution, there was then a need for an exhaustive study on the period following Italian colonial rule, namely, 1941–62.

Why did the UN come to the decision to unite Eritrea with Ethiopia? Important as this question might be, it has been of marginal interest as far as this study is concerned. Apart from the fact that the resolution of the Eritrean case by the UN falls very much under International Law rather than Eritrean history, we have sufficient though slightly biased studies on the subject. The impact of the British period on Eritrean society, however, needs to be closely looked at because of its relevance towards a better understanding of the background to the conflict and also because it forms part of Eritrean political and social history.

The period where our knowledge remained least developed was, however, that covering the federation between Eritrea and Ethiopia, 1952–62. The Eritrean parties were quick enough to denounce the Ethiopian government for violating the federation thereby providing a precipitant condition for the conflict. In contrast the Ethiopian government remained with folded hands and watched the rewriting of an important part of the social and political history of the country by nationalist forces who by their nature were bound to twist and distort the past in order to suit their current objectives.

By 1988 prospects for a political solution did not look positive; there did not exist the preconditions for a negotiated settlement. There was also an awareness that a military solution was not within reach. At the level of research, our knowledge was extremely sketchy on far too many aspects of the conflict. The Eritrean nationalist forces and the Ethiopian government believed strongly in the justness of their cases. These strong beliefs, made visible by the pursuance of Africa's longest war, were no doubt based on subjective perceptions of the background, causes and nature of the conflict. Subjective perceptions about one's actions could, however, be altered through experience and above all through knowledge. The relevance of this study was, therefore predicated on the argument that a negotiated settlement could hardly be expected without the existence of a pool of knowledge on the subject available to both parties.

In May 1991 the Eritrean nationalist forces together with other nationalist cum regionalist forces defeated the Ethiopian government forces and thus brought the 30 year long war to an end. Contrary to what many observers, including this author, had earlier believed, the Eritrean war was resolved militarily.

What is presented here is very much the story of the slow but steady dissolution of the federation as seen and observed by the British diplomatic corps. Between 1952 and 1962, there were about 30 British nationals seconded to the Eritrean government. These expatriates kept in touch with the British Consulate-General whose responsibility was to protect the interests of British nationals as well as to report the developments to London. The conclusions and interpretations are, therefore, to a great extent based on that documentation with all the shortcomings inherent in such material.

Moreover, this study is a reconstruction of Eritrean history from 1952 to 1962. It is also a first attempt towards a synthesis. However, a more complete work of synthesis is several decades away due to the closeness of the period and the intensity with which some events and aspects are discussed. Furthermore, the ambiguities and ambivalences of the nationalist movement make it virtually impossible to even contemplate such a task. Yet the history of the federation has been told by a number of researchers; with very few exceptions these studies are either based on hearsay or on the ideologised interpretation of the Eritrean liberation organizations.

Finally this study is the first of its kind to follow the rise and decline of the federation. The dangers inherent in undue reliance on semi-colonial and

entirely western documentation notwithstanding, it is my firm belief that this study can be seen as a challenge to young as well as veteran students of Eritrean affairs.

It is with pleasure that I acknowledge the institutions which contributed to the making of this book. First and foremost, I wish to extend my profound gratitude to the Swedish Agency for Research Cooperation with Developing Countries (SAREC) for generously financing the project. I am also grateful to SAREC for a substantial publication grant. My publishers, Nordic Africa Institute and Transaction Publishers have patiently guided me to take into account their readers' comments. At my department, the editors of *Acta Studia Historica Uppsaliensis*, professors Torstendahl, Lindgren and Jansson approved as well as encouraged me to publish this study outside the prestigious but not so well distributed *Acta*. At Addis Ababa University, the History Department and the Institute of Ethiopian Studies (IES) provided moral support as well as institutional affiliation. I am particularly indebted to professors Tadesse Tamrat, Tadesse Beyene, Bahru Zewde, and the librarian Ato Degfie Welde Tsadik.

After several years of haggling and a few weeks before the completion of this study, I was given the privilege of looking at the papers of the Ministero dell'Africa Italiana (ASMAI) for the 1947–50 period. It was too late to incorporate more fully this new Italian material; however, it ought to be mentioned that it is well organised and rich in variety and detail. Those who undertake to study the role of Italy in Eritrean political history will not be disappointed with it. I wish to thank Dr. Giovanni Cassis, superintendent of the historical archives at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (where the MAI papers are deposited), and his colleagues Dr. Vincenzo Pellegrini, Dr. Stefania Ruggeri and Dr. Cinzia Aicardi for tolerating my persistent laments on the state of Italian archives and the arbitrariness of their archival rules.

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December, 1996

Chapter One

Introduction

THE LEGACY OF COLONIALISM: ITALIAN COLONIALISM

Although the creation of Eritrea as a colony is legally dated to the beginning of 1890, the process of colonization was set in motion the same year as the inauguration of the Suez Canal in 1869. Partly due to lack of interest and to the inherent weakness of the newly united state of Italy, interest in African colonies lay dormant until the beginning of the 1880s. The port of Assab, which had been purchased by a shipping company in a tacit agreement with the Savoy dynasty, was bought by the government in Rome in 1882. A few years later, the British, preferring Italy to France, encouraged and facilitated the Italian occupation of Massawa. Finding themselves owners of one of the hottest coastlines that stretched over one thousand kms., the Italians felt more or less compelled to push their way up into the highlands where the climate is temperate. This timid attempt at expansion was nipped in the bud in the early months of 1887 by the Ethiopian state of the period, which had its centre in the northern part of the country.

Unable to penetrate to the highlands, the Italians, pursuing the next best strategy, began to expand northwest, namely to the Semhar and Sahel regions. By the end of 1888, the Italians had established contacts with the Tigre, Habab and Beni Amer leaders. They were preparing the ground for eventual colonization by pushing protectorate treaties on the local leaders (Rubenson, 1976; Conti Rossini, 1935; Battaglia, 1958; Del Boca, 1976; Grassi & Goglia, 1981). By the end of 1888, Italian possessions in the Red Sea area stretched over a thousand sq.km. with, however, virtually no hinterland, and quite rightly, the Italians used the term possessions to denote the vast area which they had just colonized. The area from Massawa to Assab was different in every aspect from the area north of Massawa up to the vicinity of Port Said in the Sudan

The death of Emperor Yohannes (1889) and the shift of the centre of power from Tigray to Shewa created favourable conditions for Italian colonial expansion. As early as 1887, Minilik, the King of Shoa, had expressed readiness to negotiate with the Italians for the supply of arms in exchange for a cession of territory, if this would ensure his speedy accession to power (Rubenson, 1976; Gebre Sellassie, 1975). Minilik seized the opportunity provided by the political vacuum created by the death of Yohannes and sealed an Italo-Ethiopian pact, i.e. the treaty of Wichale, in May 1889. A small area of northern Tigray was thus ceded to Italy. In return the Italians agreed to supply him with arms and to support his bid for the emperorship. However, since the treaty of Wichale had

to be ratified by the Italian government, the Italians in Eritrea used the period between the signing of the treaty and its formal ratification, which took place in October, to expand their possessions well beyond the areas designated in the document of May 1889. On January 1, 1890, these disparate possessions were consolidated into a single political entity henceforth to be known as Eritrea. For the first ten years of its life, the colony was administered by the Ministry of War from the port town of Massawa.

Eritrea contained ethnic and ecological diversity; a small part with Asmara at its centre was the homeland of the Tigreans.¹ Adherents of the Ethiopian Orthodox Church, the Tigreans together with the Amhara and the Oromo of Wello were the main pillars of the Ethiopian/Abyssinian polity (Markakis, 1987; Erlich, 1982). Most Italian economic activities and most of the colonial infrastructure were to be found in the highland plateau where the Tigreans were dominant. The western lowlands were inhabited by numerous ethnic groups with bitter memories of raid and plunder at the hands of Tigrean and Ethiopian leaders. For Tigrean leaders the western lowlands were either a buffer zone or no-man's land. The Beni Amer, Habab, Mensa, Marya, Baza, Kunama, and Bilen had suffered greatly under Tigrean/Abyssinian plunder. The arrival of Italian rule was highly welcomed (Negash, 1987). Islam was the dominant religion, followed by small pockets of Catholic and Protestant followers. (Arén, 1978; Da Nembro, 1953). The Saho and the Afar occupied the eastern escarpment and the long southern coastline. Largely because of hostile ecology, the Saho and Afar were for the most part left on their own. (See ethnic map on page 17.)

Once ensconced in the temperate zone, the Italians began to implement an ill-developed policy of settlement for landless peasants from southern Italy. This policy of state financed settlement aroused considerable resistance from the Eritrean peasantry which eventually led to a series of small scale wars with Ethiopia, culminating in the famous battle of Adwa in early March 1896 (Rubenson, 1976; Conti Rossini, 1935). The Italians lost over 4,600 of their co-nationals in that one day battle. In the aftermath of the debacle, Italy renounced the treaty which had given them a foothold in the highlands and the fate of their new colony hung in the balance.²

In the new treaty of October 1896 signed with the victorious emperor Menelik, the Italians were allowed to keep the territory which was delimited in 1890 in return for a modest financial compensation (Martini, 1946, vol. 2, p. 350; Batt-

¹ There is still no agreement as to the best designation. The present Eritrean government uses the term Tigrinya to describe the same ethnic group. I have also earlier used the term Tigrinya.

² The main cause of the battle of Adwa has hitherto been explained as a result of a controversy over article XVII of the treaty of Wichale whereby Italy claimed that Ethiopia had consented to be an Italian protectorate. Italian rejection of Ethiopian protests that the Amharic version of article XVII of the Treaty did not contain such a binding commitment led to war. The outcome of the war and the Addis Ababa Peace treaty signed in October of 1896 do indeed lend strong support to such argument. There is, however, another dimension of the conflict which has not been given due attention. According to this interpretation, the objective of the war was to expel Italian rule from Ethiopian territory (Negash, 1996a).

aglia, 1958; Rossetti, 1910). However, having learned a severe lesson, the post-Adwa Italian rulers of Eritrea as well as the leadership in Rome set out to keep what they had managed to negotiate with the Ethiopians. As evidence of goodwill, the Italian government sent to Eritrea as civilian governor Senator Ferdinando Martini, one of the most competent statesmen of the period. Ferdinando Martini was empowered to rule if he could or otherwise liquidate the colony in the best possible manner. The sale or transfer of the colony to the King of the Belgians was under consideration (Rainero, 1971).

With his prior knowledge of Eritrea Ferdinando Martini was, however, determined to keep the colony for Italy, not so much for what the colony had to offer, but largely for prestige (Martini, 1913). As civilian governor, he toned down the military dimension and was intelligent enough to realize that a great deal of work had to be done before colonies could begin to be of some profit to the mother country. During his decade-long governorship, 1897–1907, Martini succeeded admirably well in laying down the foundations of a colonial government, more or less along the lines used by Britain and France.

By the time Ferdinando Martini left Eritrea (later to assume primary responsibility as the Minister of Colonies), the Italian position in Eritrea was very secure indeed. Through the recognition of their inalienable rights to the land, Eritrean peasants were pacified. The law and order which Martini established had already begun to pay dividends. The new colony of Eritrea became a haven for fugitives, job-seekers, and slaves from the northern part of Ethiopia.¹ As early as 1907 the policy of good neighbourliness and strict non-interference in the internal affairs of the areas adjoining Eritrea was beginning to distinguish the Italian colony from the adjoining areas administered by Ethiopian authorities.

As the power of Emperor Minilik, owing to prolonged sickness, continued to decline, the outlying territories were increasingly left to their own devices. In the meanwhile the Italian administered colony continued to gain from *Pax Italica*. This was reflected in the increase of trade. Moreover, a new venue for employment had begun to attract surplus manpower in the form of recruitment to the colonial army, a first contingent of which was sent to Somalia as early as 1906.

It did not take many years for Governor Martini to assess the potential of the colony. Short of conquering Ethiopia, the Italians perceived that the best they could do was to use Eritrea as an outlet for Ethiopian products (Martini, 1913). On the eve of their occupation of Ethiopia in 1935, up to 25 per cent of Ethiopian exports, as well as imports, were channelled through Eritrea (Santagata, 1935; Misghena, 1988; Negash, 1987).

The most important function of the colony remained as a supplier of colonial soldiers for Italian expansion elsewhere. It was, however, in Libya that Eritrea

¹ ASMAI, AE, 557 (1909–12). This file contains more than a dozen letters from the chiefs of Tigray asking for the return of their serfs and slaves who fled to Eritrea and to liberty.

and its inhabitants compensated Italy for the latter's perseverance. Up to 4,000 Eritrean soldiers were permanently stationed in Libya between 1912 and 1932. The war in Libya, which dragged on until 1932, would have cost the Italian taxpayers much more had it not been for the presence of loyal and efficient Eritrean soldiers. It is not an exaggeration to state that the Libyan occupation was made possible by the continuous supply of fighting forces from the 'first-born colony' (*la colonia primogenita*) at a cost which the Italian tax-payers and the state could easily sustain.

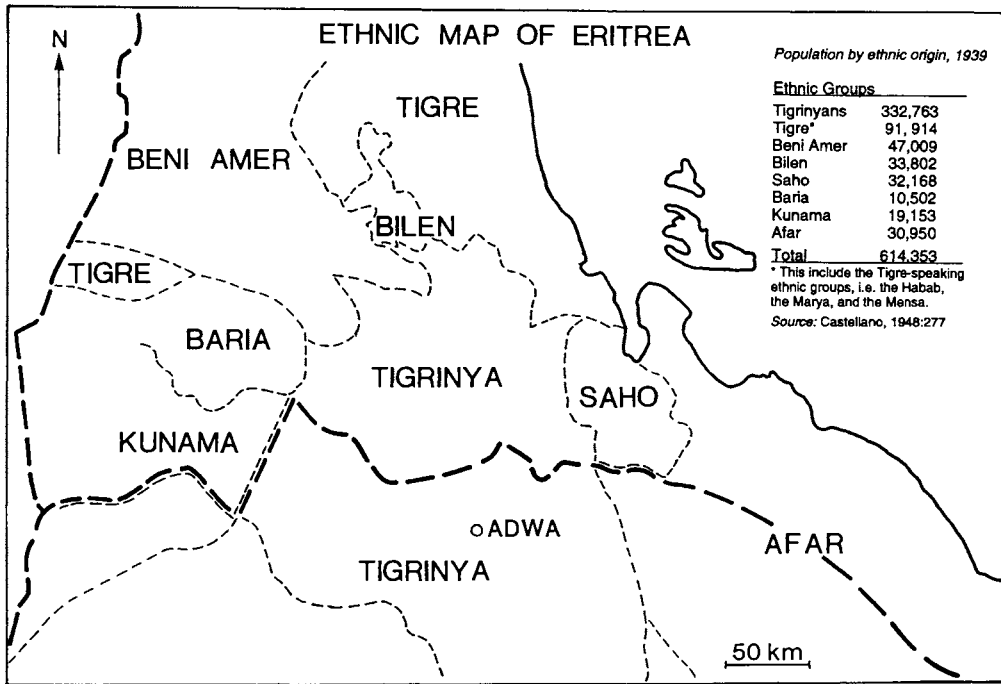
The continued presence of Eritrean soldiers in Libya had meant a rather radical change in the relations between the colonial government and the Eritrean population. The wanton expropriation of land was completely discontinued. Moreover, more attention began to be paid to the reinstatement of customary laws. During the 1920s, Eritrea settled peacefully and, we may even add, comfortably into its dual function: first, as a source of manpower for the Italian wars of pacification in Libya, and second, as an outlet for a considerable portion of Ethiopian imports and exports. Meanwhile, the modern sector of the economy began to establish itself with the continued assistance and even guidance of the Eritrean (colonial) government.

In as far as employment, food supply and the availability of consumer goods were concerned, the 1920s and 1930s were indeed good years. The colonial army and the steadily growing modern sector may have provided employment for up to 15 per cent of the population. About five per cent of the labour force may have been employed both in the colonial bureaucracy (clerks, interpreters, native judges, etc) and in domestic service in Italian homes and establishments. The financial flow from employers (the colonial government and the Italian community) in turn created and stimulated the growth of the service sector which catered to the needs of the Eritrean community. Drought virtually ceased to be a catastrophic experience, since the colonial government could avert hunger crises through food imports (Negash, 1987:151–153; cf. Iliffe, 1983; O'Connor, 1991). There were no armed conflicts among the various ethnic groups, and no subversive activities were launched from the Ethiopian side of the border. By the end of the 1930s an entire generation of Eritreans had grown up under the peace established by the Italian colonial system.

From the mid-1930s a combination of three factors further contributed towards the evolution of what may rightly be called the Eritrean consciousness. The first was the growing racist ideology which began to draw a distinction between the Eritreans who were fortunate enough to be under the civilizing umbrella of Italy and the inhabitants of the Ethiopian empire (Pollera, 1935; Negash, 1987). This policy, though devised to bolster Italian imperial or colonial ego, appeared to have trickled down to the Eritrean literati. The language of many Eritrean politicians in the 1940s betrays the pervasiveness of the colonial racist ideology of the 1930s.¹

¹ See Association of Eritrean Intellectuals, Asmara, 1949.

ETHNIC MAP OF ERITREA



The second factor was the economic boom that Italy's war preparation against Ethiopia had created in Eritrea from 1932 onwards. The Italian population, which in 1934 accounted for not more than 4,600 souls (including infants) soon increased to exceed 50,000 by the end of 1935.¹ The amount of money and materials poured into the colony and the shortage of Eritrean labour which ensued with this second Italian invasion distinguished the Eritreans even further from the inhabitants of the Ethiopian Empire.

Finally, the third factor was the Italo-Ethiopian War itself and the role the Eritreans were made to play, first in the actual conquering of Ethiopia and later in its pacification. Unable to pacify an empire, at least ten times as large as Eritrea, the Italians resorted to exhorting the Eritreans to continue with the admirable job of pacification. The first colonial army in Ethiopia was made up of slightly more than 50,000 Eritrean soldiers whose role was considered very crucial. In recognition of both the past and future contribution, Rome passed a decree in 1937 distinguishing the Eritreans from other subjects of the newly founded empire. The Eritreans were to be addressed as Eritreans and not as natives, as was the case with the rest. Furthermore, priority was to be given to Eritreans in certain categories of jobs and professions.

The three factors mentioned above appear to have contributed greatly to the rather widely spread belief in what one might call separate and distinct Eritrean

¹ In 1938, the population in Asmara was made up of the following: 53,000 Italians and 43,000 Eritreans according to Guida Dell'Africa Italiana, Torino, 1938.

identity or consciousness. The main characteristic of this identity was based on the belief that the Eritreans and their country were more developed than the rest of the empire.

On the whole, Eritrean resistance to colonial rule was not of such a threatening nature. However, as attempts to either Catholicize the Christian Eritreans or to create a separate Orthodox Church for them proved futile, the Italians were worried about eventual resistance. On the other hand, Italian policy of wooing the loyalty of Moslem communities had more success. Italian colonialism protected and encouraged the revival and consolidation of Islam. Since most of the Moslem communities were earlier often raided and pillaged by Tigrean and Ethiopian rulers, the presence of Italian rule brought to an end such raiding and pillaging (Erllich, 1982; Negash, 1987:121–136). Throughout the colonial period, the Italians felt secure of the loyalty of their Moslem subjects while they continued to suspect that their Christian subjects might one day make common cause with their co-religionists in Ethiopia.

Italian colonialism came to an end in April 1941. The Italians were defeated by a joint Ethio-British force from the Anglo-Egyptian Sudan. Eritrea was the first enemy territory to be freed. The British were to stay in power until 1952 when Eritrea was federated to Ethiopia through a United Nations Resolution.

THE LEGACY OF COLONIALISM: THE BRITISH MILITARY ADMINISTRATION

British policy on the future of Eritrea was put into effect soon after Italy declared war on the allies in June 1940. Working closely with Emperor Haile Selassie, whom the British flew from London to the Sudan, the British made it known that, if the Eritrean people so wished, they could be united with Ethiopia. As early as 1940, the British and the Americans were discussing the possibility of handing to Ethiopia the Abyssinian (Tigrean) parts of Eritrea. During the war, however, the job of communicating with the Eritrean soldiers who were fighting beside the Italian army, was undertaken by a small intelligence group led by G.L. Steer. The prime motive was to encourage desertion and the disintegration of the Italian colonial army where the Eritrean contingents formed the main fighting forces. In practical terms, British policy was limited to the printing and distribution of leaflets to Eritrea, inciting its inhabitants to join the forces of either Emperor Haile Selassie or those of Great Britain. Although no great significance can be attached to such subversive material, the exercise seemed to have achieved its desired objective. According to the account of G.L. Steer, thousands of Eritreans deserted from the Italians between November 1940 and February 1941 (Steer, 1942).

From July 1940 until March 1941 about twenty numbers of a military bulletin known as *Banderachin* (Our Flag) were dropped by the Royal Air Force on Eritrea and other parts of Ethiopia. Out of all these pamphlets only two were directly aimed at Eritrea. The first was a poster dominated by the seal of

Emperor Haile Sellassie with the full title of the Emperor neatly and beautifully engraved. On the lower part was a slogan in Tigrinya that read "Fight for your king and your own flag". The second, which contained the first Ethiopian Imperial Decree, was issued in July 1940 and jointly written by the Emperor and his Minister of Foreign Affairs, the Eritrean Lorenzo Tazaz. In this decree, described by Steer as most impressive, the Emperor and his minister addressed the major ethnic groups in Eritrea, exhorting them to join in the struggle at the side of their Ethiopian brothers. Eritreans were further advised to refrain from being tools in the hands of the Italians "against your motherland of Ethiopia".¹

The Ethio-British war against Italy that began in earnest in November 1940 came to an end, as far as Eritrea was concerned, in April 1941. The fifty year Italian colonial rule was over. On behalf of the Allies and until the end of the War, the British assumed responsibility over Eritrea with a bare skeleton of staff and with extremely tight financing. The subversive propaganda campaign carried out jointly by the British and Ethiopian authorities to undermine the morale of the Italian army, did indeed hasten the conclusion of the war in favour of the Allies. Once in power, the British immediately turned their attention to the future of Eritrea. Meanwhile, acting on the propaganda material showered over their heads, Eritrean leaders and elders formed Mahber Fikri Hager (Association for the Love of Country) in May 1941. The objective of this organization was immediate and unconditional union with Ethiopia. This organization functioned as the spearhead of what the British described as the unionist or irredentist movement.

The idea of restructuring the colonial boundaries was widely discussed in the corridors of power even before the war against Italy was won. As early as 1942 two alternatives were discussed. These were: i) to hand over the Tigrean parts to Ethiopia; and ii) to establish a greater Somalia (Louis, 1977:68). However, it was only in 1943 that the question of the future of Eritrea was seriously confronted. In a despatch from Asmara, the military administrator Stephen Longrigg, who more than anyone else shaped British Eritrean policy, argued

¹ In view of the importance of the decree, reference to which was repeatedly made by the UP and the Emperor himself it is worthwhile to quote its relevant parts.

First decree of Emperor Haile Sellassie. "Ethiopia Stretches her Hands unto God. Haile Selassie the First, Elect of God, Emperor of Ethiopia.
Brave worriers of Ethiopia!

I know the merits of every one of you, and I speed to see your feat of arms. You the fighters, according to your bravery; you the old men and the men of God, according to the counsel that you have given to your people; you the farmers traders and artisans, according as your work has aided your Fatherland; you will all receive your recompense.

And you, the people of Hamassien, of Akelegousai (Akele Guzai), of Serae, of Beni Amer, of the Habab and of Mensah, whether you are on this side or the other side of Mareb, join in the struggle at the side of your Ethiopian brothers. Let none of you be a tool in the hands of the Italians against your motherland of Ethiopia, or against our friends the English.

I know the prayers of your heart, which are mine also, and the prayers besides of all the people of Ethiopia. Your destiny is strictly bound with that of the rest of Ethiopia".

For a complete translation of the decree see Steer, 1942:231-232.

passionately that Eritrea be partitioned between Ethiopia and the Anglo-Egyptian Sudan.¹

Why did Longrigg argue consistently for the partition of Eritrea? Was he solely motivated by British imperial interests which he represented, or were his proposals based on his understanding of the history of the region, as well as on the unfolding political developments in Eritrea? British interests were no doubt in the forefront; however, in so far as these are documented, they were expressed in an extreme reluctance to use the taxpayers' money to administer an enemy-occupied territory whose future was unknown (Pankhurst, 1952). It appears to me fair to argue that for once Britain had no colonial ambition over Eritrea. However, as one of the Allies entrusted with the "disposal" of the colony, Britain had the obligation to make up her mind as how best to be relieved of her responsibilities after the end of the war.

Although detailed analysis of Longrigg's proposals would lead us into unwarranted digression, an outline of his views appears pertinent for clarifying the basis of British policy. His book (Longrigg, 1945), was written by the hand of a person who combined a solid knowledge of history and anthropology. In this book, by far the best introductory text on the history of the region, Longrigg argued that the Tigreans in Eritrea had always belonged to the Abyssinian political state system which in turn was made up of the Tigreans and the Amhara (Longrigg, 1945:169).

In March 1944, Longrigg once again returned to the subject in a long despatch on problems of the administration of Eritrea. After listing a series of problems related to security and administration, Longrigg attempted to justify his earlier position on partition on the grounds of the irredentist movement. In his capacity as administrator, he was in a good position to evaluate what he called "the problem of Ethiopian irredentism". Describing it as a major problem facing the BMA, Longrigg wrote that in addition to the anti-white and anti-foreign sentiment, the irredentist movement had certain specific elements of feeling or opinion that easily strengthened the pro-Ethiopian sentiment. "It goes without saying", reasoned Longrigg, "that the historical and cultural backgrounds of the Coptic Eritreans are identical with those in Tigrai. Linguistically, the Tigrinya of Eritrea is identical with that of the Tigrai and is first cousin to Amharic. The Tigrai, therefore, form a solid bridge connecting Eritrea with the main body of Ethiopia".²

After noting that the irredentist movement had thus far made little progress in the countryside, Longrigg proceeded, in an exemplary manner, to describe the features of the movement in Asmara—the movement's stronghold. In Asmara, a number of urban notables were favourable to it on the grounds of patriotic sentiment, of disappointment with the observed features of British rule, and of anticipated advancement under the Emperor. According to Long-

¹ WO 230/168. Longrigg to General Headquarters, Middle East Forces, Asmara, 12.10.43.

² WO 230/168. Longrigg to MEF, 12.7.44.

rigg, the younger intelligentsia, on the other hand, were all irredentists. Besides the Coptic Eritreans (who formed part of the Ethiopian Orthodox Church) the irredentist movement included Catholics and Protestants educated by the Swedish Mission. To this list of who's who in the irredentist movement might also be added a number of merchants.

That the irredentist movement was bound to create serious problems for the BMA as well as for the future of the colony appears to have been clearly perceived by Longrigg in the conclusion to his long despatch. He wrote:

The Eritrean irredentist movement will almost certainly persist and grow—grow perhaps from town to country, and from intrigue to violence. Unless its demands or a main part of them are met at the peace conference, the movement will doubtless conform to the usual pattern of local nationalist movements and constantly embarrass the European occupier of the territory, if such remains.¹

There could be little reason to doubt that the British were concerned about the anti-white and anti-foreign tones of the irredentist movement. Longrigg opposed strongly a private visit of the Ethiopian Crown Prince to Asmara on the grounds that such a visit would "give considerable strength to the present irredentist movement". In 1943, partly out of the classical imperial logic of divide and rule, and partly, I believe, due to his plausible notion about the viability of a Tigrai nation, Longrigg began suggesting to some Eritrean chiefs a new Eritrea different from that advocated by the irredentists. What exactly Longrigg intimated to those Eritreans whom he cultivated as counterforces to the irredentist movement cannot be known, since such intimation was presumably made verbally. However, from his own report on the impact of undercover work, it is apparent that Longrigg was engaged in spreading a political position that was essentially novel in Ethiopian political history. Longrigg reported that, one of the several solutions that a considerable section seemed to prefer was "the formation of a united Tigrai state under at least temporary foreign guidance".² Longrigg added that this view was increasingly held by leaders in Tigrai. The leaders of this view continued Longrigg, "would repudiate all connections with the Crown of Ethiopia, while pressing claims of the whole Tigrinya speaking block". It is in this despatch that Longrigg provides us with a glimpse of the workings of British colonial officers.

Longrigg left Eritrea at the end of 1944. A few months later, he published his *Short History of Eritrea*, a work most of which was presumably written in Eritrea and drawing heavily on the expertise of Kennedy Trevaskis and S.F. Nadel.³ In a sweeping synthesis, that hitherto remains unrivalled, Longrigg argued on a historical basis that the most populous and homogenous part of Eritrea had been for many centuries an integral part of the Ethiopian state (Longrigg,

¹ FO 371/41531. Overseas Planning Committee: Plan for propaganda for Eritrea, 6.10.44.

² WO 230/168. Longrigg to General Headquarters, Middle East Forces, Asmara, 12.7.43.

³ Kennedy Trevaskis was later to write *Eritrea. A Colony in Transition, 1941–1952*: 1960. S.F. Nadel the Anthropologist wrote on the Land Tenure systems in the Eritrean highlands and on the history of the Beni Amer of western Eritrea before he left for West Africa.

1945:169). Putting forward his personal opinion as to the future of Eritrea, Longrigg argued that the Moslem tribal areas adjoining the Anglo-Egyptian Sudan, be included with the Sudan, while the central Christian highlands of Eritrea, with the port of Massawa and the Samhar and the Saho tribes, should form part of a united Tigray state or province, under the sovereignty of the Emperor (Longrigg, 1945:174–175).

In London, the reports from Eritrea were primarily considered in the light of the administrative and security problems that might arise due to the growing irredentist movement. The British government was concerned with the avoidance of serious recurrent expenditure. On the basis of Longrigg's written and verbal accounts, the Interdepartmental Overseas Planning Committee laid down a strategy to counteract the challenge posed by the irredentist movement. This strategy called for "taking the initiative in our information services and searching for means to allow free discussion in the face of the propaganda in favour of union with Ethiopia".¹ In other words, London initiated a strategy for an open encouragement of opinion which could neutralise the irredentist movement.

The conclusion of the peace treaty with Italy in early 1947, triggered a renewed discussion on the future of the colony. According to the treaty, the Four Powers undertook to jointly determine how to finally dispose of Italy's territorial possessions after ascertaining the views and wishes of the population. The treaty also contained the provision that the Four Powers would send commissions of enquiry in order to supply the Deputies of Foreign Ministers with the necessary data. Responding promptly to the stipulations of the treaty, the British in Eritrea proceeded to define their position as well as to assist the Eritrean people on how to express their views on the future of their country. Moreover, it was also incumbent on Britain as a caretaker power to provide the Four Power Commission of Enquiry with the necessary background material that could facilitate the task of the commission.

Between 1946 and November 1947, the BMA tried to put into practice the advice of Frank Stafford, based on his recent mission to Eritrea. A former financial advisor to the Imperial Ethiopian Government, Stafford argued that people in Eritrea should be given every opportunity to learn of the alternatives that the Commission of Enquiry would raise: namely, a choice between incorporation into the Ethiopian Empire and administration under a trusteeship. "If the advantages of trusteeship were clearly explained", argued Stafford, "those uncertain of the benefit of becoming Ethiopian subjects would welcome the period of grace and the number of the Emperor's adherents would diminish".²

The salient points of this detailed memorandum dealt firstly with the method to be adopted to ascertain the wishes of the population, and, secondly, with the presentation of the alternatives, namely, incorporation into Ethiopia

¹ FO 371/41531. Overseas Planning Committee: Plan for propaganda for Eritrea, 6.10.44.

² FO 371/63175. F.E. Stafford to FO, Asmara, 2.12.46.

versus trusteeship. In so far as Britain's policy on the future of Eritrea was concerned, the most relevant section of the memorandum dealt with the definition of the alternatives.

Independence for Eritrea was entirely ruled out, partly due to the BMA's assessment of the viability of the colony and partly due to the resilience of the Unionist Party that campaigned for unconditional union with Ethiopia. It is worth noting here that the British wished that the majority of the Eritrean people would opt for a trusteeship, since "it would provide an attractive alternative to outright absorption into Ethiopia, whose present regime and status of development leave room for misgivings, particularly if the right to transfer to Ethiopia remains open during a period of trusteeship".¹ Britain would have liked to see Eritrea under British or Four Power trusteeship rather than be incorporated into Ethiopia.

In Eritrea, the chief administrator was laying the ground for the arrival of the Four Power Commission of Enquiry by supervising the formation of political organizations. The Unionist Party, reference to its existence had been made as early as 1943, was one of the first to be established in February 1947. The Unionist Party which campaigned for unconditional union with Ethiopia, remained the single largest party throughout the 1947–50 period. The Moslem League, next largest party, emerged after the chief administrator made it clear to the Moslem leaders that, "unless they are prepared to think for themselves, the plateau Christians will do the thinking for them". The Liberal Progressive Party that campaigned for the creation of a united Tigray—an organization allegedly created by Stephen Longrigg—came into the open in early 1947. The New Eritrea Pro-Italy party was also formed in the early months of 1947 and advocated the return of Italy in one form or another. By the time of the arrival of the Four Power Commission of Enquiry in November 1947, four major political parties were ready to make their views known on the future of their country. From that time onwards, the future of the colony ceased to be a concern of Britain only. The outcome was dependent on both internal and external factors, where the role of Britain was by no means decisive.

The Four Power Commission of Enquiry visited Eritrea between November 1947 and January 1948. It then proceeded to analyze the data it had gathered. As was expected, in those early years of intensive cold war no agreement was reached on the future of Eritrea. Britain, contrary to the views elaborated by Stephen Longrigg and Stafford, proposed that Eritrea be given to Ethiopia. The United States, France and the Soviet Union put forward proposals which were unacceptable to Great Britain. In accordance with prior agreement, the question of the "disposal of Eritrea" was duly submitted to the newly formed United Nations Organization.

British policy on the future of Eritrea was based on three considerations: first, a consistent belief in the economic poverty of Eritrea; second, a recognition

¹ FO 371/63175. F.E. Stafford to FO, Asmara, 2.12.46.

of an irredentist movement that espoused union with Ethiopia; and third, an appreciation of the "legitimacy" of Ethiopian claims to all of Eritrea, parts of it, or at least an outlet to the sea. Although Britain, as the other three powers, accepted the "just claims" of Ethiopia to an outlet to the sea, she by no means felt bound to hand over all the ports in Eritrea to Ethiopia.

On the economic front, the decade of British administration was characterized by a severe restructuring of the Eritrean economy. Up to 1945, the British and the Americans used Italian equipment and skilled labour for war purposes, as well as to provide for the needs of the Allies in the Middle East. Such an economic boom created by the massive Italian participation continued up to the end of the war. Soon after the end of the war, however, the Eritrean economy experienced a combination of recession and depression which hit the local urban population hard. The war factories which had employed several thousand were closed down. The Italians began to be repatriated. Many of the small manufacturing plants which were established between 1936 and 1945 were forced out of business due to stiff competition from plants in Europe and the Middle East. Moreover, unlike the Italians, the British were determined to achieve a balanced budget. The cumbersome and sophisticated bureaucracy created by the Italians was soon dismantled with the inevitable consequences on employment and cash flow. The social strains created by the shortage of money, increasing cost of living and growing unemployment were made to bite even more by the lifting of the ban against political activities. For the first time in the history of Eritrea, the people were not only allowed but even encouraged to establish appropriate political organizations. The implications were far reaching. Although the Italian and British presence in Eritrea cannot be satisfactorily compared, such a comparison was, nonetheless, made by the common man in Asmara. In the late 1960s, the story was told in more or less the following manner. During the Italian period the rule was: eat but do not talk. The British changed the rule to: talk but do not eat. In the 1960s a third experience was added, namely the Ethiopian experience where the rule was: do not eat and do not talk.

STATE OF RESEARCH AND ORGANIZATION OF THE STUDY

State of research

Research on the 1941–62 period, by and large, is dominated by Kennedy Trevaskis and by those who by persuasion worked along the broad interpretative lines developed by the Eritrean nationalist forces. The war for the independence of Eritrea, first waged by the Eritrean Liberation Front (ELF) and later continued to victory by the Eritrean Peoples Liberation Front (EPLF), had to a great extent determined the priorities of research. In broad terms the Eritrean nationalist organizations argued that the majority of the Eritrean people wished for independence and that the federal arrangement was imposed upon them by the

United Nations. The dismantling of this federation by the Ethiopian government, continued the argument, was further evidence of the Eritrean desire for independence. The unilateral abolition of the federation by Ethiopia in effect turned Eritrea into a colony and therefore the relationship into that of a colonial one.

From the mid-1970s onward, the EPLF chose to concentrate on the illegality of the UN-decision uniting Eritrea with Ethiopia and on the right to self-determination, as a direct remedy to as well as a consequence of the mistake committed by the UN. The 1941–62 period was referred to, if at all, very selectively.

There is also another reason for the paucity of research on the 1941–62 period. Archival sources for the period, which were inaccessible in Ethiopia, were also inaccessible in Britain, due to the thirty year rule. Although the 1941–52 period could be studied from the mid-1980s, the entire coverage of the federation period, 1952–62 had to wait until the early 1990s. However, from the mid-1980s onwards, it was possible, and certainly profitable to study the first half of the life of the federation. Only few took the opportunity to check the archival records and many of them did so in a very haphazard manner.

The bulk of the literature on Eritrean history during the 1941–52 period is exclusively based on the pioneering study of G.K.N. Trevaskis whose privileged position as colonial officer from 1943–50 gave him exaggerated authority. His book with the modest title of *Eritrea: A Colony in Transition, 1941–52*, was published in 1960. Trevaskis' book is well-written and quite informative and will remain a good source, albeit apologetic and obviously pro-British, on the record of the British Military Administration (BMA) in Eritrea (Rubenson, 1962:520–530).

The major influence of Trevaskis' book lies, however, in its treatment of the Eritrean Unionist Party (UP). In the following paragraphs, I shall first outline the account of Trevaskis as regards the evolution of Ethiopian nationalism among the Eritreans during the decade of the 1940s. Then I shall briefly sketch the wide discrepancies between Trevaskis' account and that which can be reconstructed from the British colonial archival records.

In his chapter on the growth of political consciousness, Trevaskis outlines the evolution of the Eritrean political organization which advocated unconditional union with Ethiopia. By way of introduction he sketches Ethiopia's claim to Eritrea on historical, strategic and economic grounds. He even comments on the propaganda leaflets which were scattered from the air by the British Air Force, and promised the Eritreans freedom under the sovereignty of the Ethiopian emperor (Trevaskis, 1960:58).

He wrote that during the Italian colonial period the Tigreans in Eritrea had been surprisingly indifferent to their historical links with Ethiopia. When the Italians invaded Ethiopia in 1935, they had received the most loyal and whole-hearted Eritrean cooperation (Trevaskis, 1960:59). The Ethiopians, Trevaskis continues his reconstruction, were profoundly shocked to find out that the British treated Eritrea as "legally Italian territory". Italian officials were allowed

to retain their positions, and there was a widespread belief among the Italian community that Italian authority would return to Eritrea no matter what the outcome of the war (Trevaskis, 1960:59). With this background, Trevaskis approached the evolution of irredentism in Eritrea as a phenomenon that was wholly inspired from outside of Eritrea. He wrote:

If they were not to lose their case by default, the Ethiopians had to arouse some Eritrean support. To this end they first turned to the Coptic Church. The Church had always been the custodian of Abyssinian tradition and could consequently be expected to exercise an exceptional influence amongst the Abyssinians in Eritrea and Ethiopia and, in its own interests, to work for their political union. By 1942 every priest had become a propagandist in the Ethiopian cause, every village had become a centre of Ethiopian nationalism, and popular religious feast days ... had become occasions for open displays of Ethiopian patriotism. (Trevaskis, 1960:59–60)

Such a description is, I maintain, far from correct. The Tigreans in Eritrea were far from indifferent to their historical links with Ethiopia. The Italians had failed to create loyal subjects of the Christian Eritreans. In fact one of the main factors which pushed Italy to invade Ethiopia was to preempt the growth of Ethiopian nationalism in Eritrea (Negash, 1987:127–131). Not even during the invasion of Ethiopia, 1935–36, did the Italians fully succeed in relying on their colonial army. Up to 20 per cent of the Italian colonial army had defected to the Ethiopian opposition forces and continued to engage Italian forces until Italy was finally defeated in 1941 (Negash, 1986:55–72).

Trevaskis' reconstruction of the Ethiopian situation is equally based on an inadequate understanding of Ethiopian history. Ethiopia was liberated from the brief but intensive Italian colonial rule in May 1941. During the following three years the Ethiopian government had other more important issues to deal with. The Second World War had not yet ended, and the Ethiopians had accepted the decision of the Allies that some parts of Ethiopia remain in British possession. Moreover, the British had a tight control over Ethiopian public finance. As regards Eritrea, the British had neither the mandate nor the juridical obligation to hand over Eritrea to Ethiopia. Italian occupation of Eritrea was of a long standing, whereas Rome's occupation of Ethiopia was part of the diplomacy of the 1930s which eventually led to the Second World War.

The government of Emperor Haile Selassie had neither the funds nor the human expertise to exercise such influence over the Church. Aware of the close links between the Church and Ethiopian nationalism, the Italians had made great efforts to weaken irredentist sentiments. Initially they tried to Catholicize the Coptic Christians with dismal results. Later on they attempted to separate the Ethiopian Orthodox Church in Eritrea from the Ethiopian Church by putting the former directly under the Patriarchate in Alexandria. From 1930 until the Italian occupation of Ethiopia, the Eritrean Orthodox Church was officially outside the spiritual jurisdiction of the Ethiopian Church. However, once the Italians gained control over Ethiopia, they undid their 1930 achievement by assimilating not only the church structure, but also the colony of Eritrea, into

their Ethiopian Empire. Between 1936 and 1941, Eritrea constituted a province of the Italian East African Empire with its capital in Addis Ababa (Negash, 1987:127–129). The Italians affirmed the hegemony of the Ethiopian Church over all the orthodox churches of the empire (including Eritrea). Unwittingly the Italians did a memorable service to Ethiopia by declaring the Ethiopian Orthodox Church autocephalous thus breaking the sixteen hundred year long dependence of the Ethiopian church on Egypt (Negash, 129–130).

The Ethiopian Orthodox Church in Eritrea did not have to wait for mobilization by the Ethiopian state for its union with Ethiopia, since it had long been part of the Ethiopian establishment. Neither were the Eritreans as passive and docile as Trevaskis imagined them to be. Though not seriously bothered by Eritrean resistance, the Italians were, nevertheless, aware of the historical and cultural links between the Christian Eritreans and their co-religionists in the rest of Ethiopia. It appears that Trevaskis found it virtually impossible to understand how the Eritreans “who were loyal to the Italians” could at the earliest opportunity rise up against the dying Italian rule and challenge *Pax Britannica*.

The activities of the “Coptic Church”, continues Trevaskis, prepared the way for the development of an organized political movement, which was brought about in 1942 by Ethiopian intervention. Ethiopia managed to achieve such a basis of support, presumably by a procession of young Ethiopian officials who were despatched to Asmara and made contact with the Eritrean intelligentsia. “In the event”, Trevaskis concludes his account, “a society known as the Mahber Fikri Hager or Association for love of country, and dedicated to uniting Eritrea with Ethiopia, came into being during 1942” (Trevaskis, 1960:60). The Mahber Fikri Hager (officially converted to a political party with the name of the Unionist Party in early 1947) was established in 1941 and not as Trevaskis stated in 1942.¹ It was formed the same day as the exiled Emperor Haile Sellassie made his triumphal entry into Addis Ababa on May 5, 1941. It has to be clearly stated that by 1942 the Ethiopian government hardly existed. It was run to a large extent by Great Britain (Marcus, 1983:8–20; Spencer, 1983). How was it that the Eritreans were so quick to get organized and demand immediate and unconditional union with Ethiopia? Perhaps unwittingly the British had greatly contributed to the articulation of Eritrean demands. Between July 1940 and April 1941, the British and the small Ethiopian contingent were busy encouraging Eritreans to betray their Italian rulers and fight for their emperor and country.

Most of the background to and the success of the joint British and Ethiopian intelligence operation have been recorded by one of its architects (Steer, 1942). The main thrust of the campaign was to entice Eritrean soldiers away from the Italians.

The British, as Trevaskis quite rightly pointed out, did not feel committed to assist either the Eritreans or the Ethiopian state in uniting Eritrea with Ethiopia.

¹ On the early history of the Mahber Fikri Hager, see EWN no. 227 (9.1.47) Ethiopia, no. 103 (17.4.49).

However, neither Trevaskis nor the British Military Administration were prepared to consider the impact of their war propaganda on the Eritreans. Instead, Trevaskis and his colleagues chose to interpret the existence of the Unionist Party as a challenge to their rule.

The earliest mention of the Unionist movement, in the British archives, was in 1943. By this time the irredentist movement was predominant in the urban areas and was mainly made up of "young men of the educated class, supported by the wealthy merchants and also by certain prominent religious leaders above all the two bishops of the Coptic Christians and the Catholics of the Ethiopian rite" (Negash, 1987).

The chiefs were reluctant to support the "nationalists", continued Trevaskis, lest they displeased the British and they would have preferred to remain safely on the fence until they knew on which side to alight had it not been for the "sudden emergence" of an opposition movement to the nationalists during 1943.¹ The activists of the Mahber Fikri Hager, by now described as the nationalists, were suspicious of British support to the Separatist Movement and had by the end of 1943, according to Trevaskis, begun to canvas for signatures to a popular petition demanding immediate union with Ethiopia (Trevaskis, 1960:64). This opposition movement, which came to be known as the Separatist Movement (and later as the Liberal Progressive Party), had no clear goal but was known to be anti-Ethiopian and pro-British (Trevaskis, 1960:62). It was natural, argued Trevaskis, that the British officers should feel better disposed towards those who professed respect for them than towards those who were known to abuse them. Such a provocative attitude was caused by the quite overt British support of the Separatist movement and by a promise made by the British military administrator that Eritrean wishes would be taken into account when the time came for the future of the country to be decided (Trevaskis, 1960:64).

The archival sources confirm the suspicions of the Unionist Movement. The Separatist Movement did not as Trevaskis alleges suddenly emerge. The idea for such a movement was suggested to some Eritrean chiefs by Stephen Longrigg, the chief administrator of Eritrea. Although the foundation of the Separatist Movement was instigated by the British and enjoyed their full support, it remained confined to a few villages in the southern part of the highlands.

In an atmosphere of rumour and suspicion tension mounted, which made the British flex their muscles. The Eritrean police strike in February 1944, where the strikers demanded the removal of Italian police, the annulment of Italian laws, and the dismissal of Italian judges, created an opportunity for the BMA to dismiss a large number of active Nationalists in the police, thus breaking the strike at once and giving a severe setback to the Nationalist Movement (Trevaskis, 1960:65). Suppressed in Eritrea, the Nationalist cause, continued Tre-

¹ The separatist movement did not emerge suddenly. It was instigated by Stephen Longrigg as part of his plans to weaken the position of the Nationalists. For a more detailed discussion on the origins of the Separatist Party, see Chapter Two.

vaskis, was taken up in Ethiopia by the Ethiopia-Hamasien Society, an organization of supposedly Eritrean residents in Ethiopia whose declared objective was the union of Eritrea with Ethiopia. According to Trevaskis, this organization was known to be financed and directed by the Ethiopian government. It is probable that the British may have caused the Unionist movement a severe setback, by showing favour to the Separatist movement and by the draconian measures taken against the police strike. But the UP was far from dead.

When the question of the disposal of Eritrea was first discussed in the autumn of 1945 at the London Conference, Ethiopian claims to Eritrea were not viewed with any sympathy. Not only were Ethiopian claims disregarded in the peace talks preceding the formation of the United Nations, such claims were also seen with great suspicion at the United Nations where the issue was finally resolved. The position of Ethiopia vis à vis Italy on Eritrea is a subject studied with great eloquence by Amare Tekle in a dissertation which unfortunately remains unpublished (Tekle, 1964). Virtual disregard of Ethiopian claims, wrote Trevaskis, "led to the dismay of the Nationalists and the jubilation of the Separatists who drew up a number of petitions addressed to the Foreign Ministers of the Allied Powers in which they demanded British trusteeship" (Trevaskis, 1960:66).

By the beginning of 1946, Trevaskis wrote that the Nationalists had to win international sympathy somehow if they were not to lose their case by default. The decisive step was, according to Trevaskis, taken by the Ethiopian government in appointing Colonel Negga Haile Selassie, as Ethiopian Liaison Officer with the evident intention of reviving the Nationalist Movement. While Colonel Negga presumably was settling into his job, Trevaskis wrote that the first part of 1946 witnessed an exceptionally bitter campaign against Arabs and Italians, carried out by the Nationalist Movement. These anti-Italian and anti-Arab campaigns were supported by a number of nationalist demonstrations and processions.

When appointed Colonel Negga Haile Selassie was a young man in his twenties. He was appointed as a consular liaison officer and had a junior rank in the Ethiopian service.¹ As an Ethiopian he was most probably looked up to by the Eritrean unionists. As an Ethiopian too, he supported, sympathised with and advocated the Unionist cause. Throughout the 1940s, the Ethiopian liaison office was staffed by two people, namely, Negga Haile Selassie and his secretary. How could two individuals revive a moribund movement, when the British with the entire power apparatus in their hands had only succeeded in creating a tiny Separatist Movement? How could Colonel Negga and his secretary breathe life into a severely crushed movement when the Italian community with full support from Rome was virtually² unable to soften the anti-Italian feel-

¹ In a conversation Negga Haile Selassie intimated to me that whatever he knew of Ethiopian history he learned it in Eritrea from the leaders of the Unionist Party.

² For further discussion and reconstruction of Italian political activities during the 1945–50 period, see Chapter Two.

ings in Eritrea? The archival sources do not provide any proof that the Ethiopian liaison officer was doing the job of the Unionist Movement.¹

In the summer of 1946, Trevaskis continues, the British decided to put an end to the nationalist demonstrations. During one of the unauthorized demonstrations, the British colonial soldiers from the Sudan who had been stationed in Eritrea since 1941 intervened, thus breaking the demonstration and arresting a number of ringleaders. However, within an hour rioting broke out; a mob invaded the police station and freed the ringleaders. The British decision to re-arrest the ringleaders caused even more serious rioting. The Sudanese Defence Force was called into action and, according to Trevaskis "a few rounds were fired, four of the mob were killed, and order was immediately restored". The Sudanese Defence Force was made up of Sudanese soldiers who were brought to Eritrea during the Anglo-Italian campaign and were stationed in Eritrea to enable the British Military Administration to "keep law and order" (Trevaskis, 1960:67–68). Trevaskis did not deem it necessary to discuss whether the demonstrations were of a nature which called for provocative intervention. Both the Unionist Party and the Pro-Ethiopian weekly *New Times and Ethiopia News* argued strongly that the demonstration was a peaceful one. The British decision to break up the assembly and arrest the ringleaders in the middle of the procession was indeed a deliberate provocation (NTEN, August, 1946).

What Trevaskis generally described as "nationalist demonstrations" had in reality their origins in more concrete economic issues. The Eritrean Christians experienced daily the rising cost of living and dwindling job opportunities, while the Italians not only dominated the modern sector of the economy but were also heavily represented in the administration of the country. Moreover, Arab merchants and the Eritrean Moslem trading community known as *Jeberti* were seen as exploiting the little surplus that the peasantry and the urban workers managed to scrape together. In the rural areas, it was widely known that peasants sold their crops to Eritrean Moslem and Arab merchants many months before the crops were harvested. So, the demonstrations were not simply occasions for affirming the commitment of the Unionist Party to an unconditional and speedy union with Ethiopia; the demonstrations called for the Eritreanization of the administration and of the economy.

The incident of July 1946, where the Sudanese Defence Force killed four of the rioting mob revived deep-seated prejudices and ill-feeling between Sudanese and Abyssinians. Exactly a month later a Sudanese soldier was stoned to death by a mob, probably as revenge for the incident of the previous month. A few hours later about 70 soldiers from the Sudanese Defence Force surrounded the native part of the city killing 46 people and wounding more than 60. The British were held responsible for the murderous spree of their colonial

¹ The conspiratorial thesis of Trevaskis can be further disproved by citing what happened fifty years later. In the 1980s, the Ethiopian government had an army of ca. 100,000 stationed in Eritrea in an attempt to keep it within the Ethiopian state. By then the Ethiopian government had alienated the majority of the Eritrean people.

soldiers and they did not work very hard to dispel the wide spread suspicion and mistrust among the Christian Eritreans. The wave of indignation following the Asmara incident writes Trevaskis, swelled the Nationalist camp. After that incident the majority of the Christian Eritreans viewed alien European rule with bitter disillusionment and saw no other solution to their problems than Eritrea's union with Ethiopia (Trevaskis, 1960:68).

As can be seen from Trevaskis' own reconstruction, it was hardly the young Ethiopian liaison officer Negga Haile Selassie who revived and welded together the Unionist movement. By unleashing a reign of terror, it was the British themselves who provided the Unionist movement with the ammunition it required to consolidate its hold over the Christian population.

Trevaskis condemns the Mahber Fikri Hager (The Unionist Party) as an Ethiopian creation. Why was he not able to see it as, by and large, an Eritrean organization? Three factors appear to have influenced Trevaskis in shaping his points of departure. The first one was the reluctance of the BMA officers in Eritrea to come to terms with an anti-colonialist movement in the form of the UP. In the early 1940s it was commonly believed that British rule in Africa would endure for many decades, if not centuries. The winds of change that began to blow soon after the independence of India in 1947 were in the case of Africa grudgingly acknowledged only in the middle of the 1950s. Therefore, it was much easier for a number of BMA officers, including Trevaskis, to look upon these as Ethiopian subversive activities rather than as the autonomous action of the UP in Eritrea. The UP was far ahead of its time.

The British who were conducting a war and who were also beginning to evolve the restructuring of the map of Africa along ethnic lines were not pleased with this political cum cultural movement. The colonial ethos, after all, remained intact. So, no wonder that the British were not well disposed towards the Unionist Party. "Among some British", wrote Trevaskis, "there was undoubted resentment at the challenge to their authority (British power) implicit in Ethiopian pretensions and many British officers found it difficult to conceal their dislike of the bitter and touchy young men in the Mahber Fikri Hager" [Unionist Party] (Trevaskis, 1960:61).

The second factor was most likely related to the policies the BMA pursued in the formation of public opinion in Eritrea. It was, for instance, the British who provided the initial impetus in 1943 for the formation of the Separatist movement that later emerged as the Liberal Progressive Party (LPP). It was also the British who twisted the arms of the Moslem leaders in Eritrea to form the Moslem League (ML) towards the end of 1946. Trevaskis, who during this period was in Eritrea and who no doubt was deeply involved in the formation of British policy in Eritrea, must have found it rather natural to perceive the Ethiopian state as playing a game similar to that of the BMA. Even if we were to concede that the Ethiopian government did indeed play a similar game, it would have required much more manpower and funds at its disposal. These were in short supply. Moreover, the available research on Ethiopian foreign

policy of the period suggests that Ethiopia's main expectation was an outlet to the sea (Spencer, 1983; Tekle, 1964; Marcus, 1983).

The third factor may well have been Trevaskis' profound knowledge of the role of the Ethiopian state in undermining the federal and autonomous status of Eritrea, facts widely known in the period when he was finalizing his book toward the end of 1958. There are strong reasons to believe that Trevaskis was reading history backwards, sometimes an irresistible temptation not only in the hands of amateurs but also among those trained in the historian's craft.

One of the most pervasive impacts of the Trevaskian treatment of the UP has been that later historians have continued to treat the UP in the same fashion. Even historians who ought to be aware of the biases of colonial writers appear to have fallen victim to the eloquent, albeit mistaken, reconstruction of Trevaskis. The most important of these authors are discussed in the chapter dealing with Eritrean political parties. However the greatest impact of Trevaskis has been on the Eritrean Liberation Fronts which were determined to re-write history. Like other nationalist movements elsewhere, the Eritrean organizations fighting for the establishment of an independent state continued to treat the Unionist Party as a movement which was hardly related to Eritrean history.¹ Trevaskis' description of the Unionist Party suited perfectly the objectives of those Eritreans who either rejected the federation or regretted it afterwards.

An examination of the British colonial sources, the local Eritrean sources, as well as the Ethiopian position on the future of Eritrea, will, I believe, enable us to redress the shortcomings of the Trevaskian account. It will also, I hope, do some justice to the Unionist Party, an organization which single-handedly played a crucial role in the history of Eritrea.

The academic literature on the federation period, 1952–62, though largely based on the political background sketched by Trevaskis shows, with few exceptions, glaring errors related to chronology and the unfolding of events. This is indeed unfortunate. Continuing a reconstruction of the history of the Eritrean armed insurrection against Ethiopia, Dr Tseggai wrote: "The new Eritrean government—a democratically elected government with a democratic constitution—would not coexist with Ethiopia's absolutist and archaic monarchy. With its labour unions and independent political parties, Eritrea was anathema to the Ethiopian entity" (Tseggai, 1988:74). With such a preamble, the 1952–62 period is treated with great ease as that of the dismantling of the Eritrean government apparatus by Ethiopia. The suppression of labour unions, and political parties, the introduction of the official language of Ethiopia, and the incursions into freedom of speech and assembly are all cited as the steps allegedly taken by the Ethiopian government between 1952 and 1962. These have all happened. But the question which writers like Tseggai appear keen to avoid was the role of the Eri-

¹ While Trevaskis' book was translated into Arabic by Othman Saleh Sabby, (leader of ELF), the essential points of the book have been used by the EPLF (1975) in its primers for political education.

trean government in the process of the dismantling of the federation. Tseggai further wrote: "A whole country was illegally reduced to a mere province of a neighbouring country, and the Eritreans were put under the rule of yet another occupier, this time a neighbouring black African power" (Tseggai, 1988:75). A simple reading of the Eritrean constitution and a cursory investigation of the functioning of the Eritrean government make it abundantly clear that the members of the Eritrean government were not as helpless as we are made to believe. This study shows that the Eritrean government on its own initiative dismantled the federation.

A far more flagrant example of the impact of Trevaskis as well as that of the knowledge derived from the Eritrean nationalist fronts is the study of Ogbazghi Yohannes (1991) which depicts the process of the termination of the federation as exclusively an act of the Ethiopian government. His account (described as the best documented) is so replete with factual and interpretative errors that it is virtually impossible within this context to point out its main weaknesses. Neither is the more recent study by Ruth Iyob different from this depiction of the Unionist Party as a supine instrument of the Ethiopian state (Ogbazghi, 1991; Iyob, 1995:82–107). This study shows that scholars like Tseggai, Iyob, and Yohannes would certainly have refrained from making such wild statements, if they had taken the trouble to look into the record of the Eritrean government.

Another author who has followed Trevaskis is John Markakis. In his major study (1987) Markakis attempted to steer a middle course, while at the same time restating the basic assumptions of Trevaskis. His wide knowledge and experience of Ethiopian society enabled him to explain satisfactorily the foundations of pro-Ethiopian ideology, as well as the politics of the most important Eritrean nationalist organization (The Eritrean Peoples Liberation Front). Yet his failure or reticence to consult the rich archival documentation on the 1941–62 period seriously weakened the value of his efforts. The same goes for David Pool, Richard Sherman, Haggai Erlich and many others as well. In an article entitled "Eritrean Nationalism", Pool takes for granted Trevaskis' interpretation as regards the 1940s and that of the liberation fronts for the 1950s, while Keller based his argument solely on biased pro-nationalist sources (Markakis, 1987; Pool, 1983:175–193; Keller, 1990:95–114; Erlich, 1981:171–182).

Another scholar who has studied the history of the federation is the prolific Bereket Habte Sellassie, not as a subject on its own but as part of a much wider field involving the United Nations. An Eritrean nationalist *a priori*, Habte Sellassie was neither interested in explaining the process nor in contextualising his bold statements. As a spokesman of the Eritrean Nationalist Movement, Habte Sellassie was too inclined to read history backwards. Fully satisfied by the biased statements of Trevaskis, he readily blamed the Ethiopian government for the dissolution of the federation. His main line of argument is that the marriage of democratic ideas and institutions (which presumably prevailed in Eritrea) to an imperial and feudal power was a fatal combination. Here Habte Sellassie took for granted that the Eritrean leaders (the executive and the legis-

lative organs) were capable and willing to implement the constitution which was drafted for them by the United Nations. This study shows that long before the Eritrean constitution was approved by the Ethiopians, the Eritreans themselves had violated it. Further explaining the inevitable dissolution of the federation, Habte Selassie dwelt, firstly on the "inordinate ambition of Emperor Haile Sellassie to incorporate Eritrea as an integral part of his feudal empire". Secondly, he mentioned, "the fear and uncertainty of a feudal regime harnessed to a modern bourgeois democratic government" (Habte Selassie, 1989:42).

This study shows that Bereket Habte Sellassie had hardly any knowledge of the composition and functioning of the Eritrean government which came into existence in 1952. It was far from being modern, democratic or bourgeoisie. Emperor Haile Sellassie did not have an inordinate ambition to incorporate Eritrea. Already in the mid 1960s Dr. Amare Tekle's study on the creation of the Ethio-Eritrean Federation showed clearly that Ethiopia's claims had few supporters and that it stood no chance against the Vatican-Mecca-Latin American Axis at the United Nations (Tekle, 1964).

Not all authors are such victims of the Trevaskian legacy as those cited above. Lloyd Ellingson's thesis on Eritrea substantially refutes the Trevaskian legacy by its recognition of the role of Eritrean actors during the 1941-52 period (Ellingson, 1986). In particular, Ellingson discussed the role played by the Italian community and the extent to which this provoked Eritrean organizations into action. Although Ellingson, as Trevaskis before him, exaggerated the role of the Ethiopian government, he, nonetheless, drew the conclusion that the Unionist Party had considerable autonomy and functioned with a clear objective (Ellingson, 1986:41-54). Ellingson completed his thesis in 1986 and was thus able to look into the archival material until the end of 1954 deposited at the Public Record Office (PRO).

An author who in my opinion has a clear grasp of the role of the Unionist Party is Thoma Killion. In his study, Killion had no problem in arguing that the federal state of Eritrea was run by the Unionist Party, working closely with the Ethiopian government. For Killion, the government in Eritrea was Unionist/Ethiopian. By this he meant that whereas the actual running of the business of the government was carried out by the former members of the Unionist Party, Ethiopian presence and power was felt in the areas which fell under its domain, namely, foreign and interstate trade, railways and communications, defence and foreign policy (Killion, 1985).

Organization of the study

This study is introduced by a long chapter on the Unionist Party and its relations with the other parties on the eve of the UN resolution of 1950. The Unionist Party (UP) campaigned for unconditional union between Eritrea and Ethiopia. Unfairly treated by Trevaskis, the Unionist Party was even more relegated to the sidelines by the Eritrean nationalist fronts as well as writers. In my opinion

despite the archival documentation leaving a great deal to be desired, and the deplorable fact that very few memoirs have been left behind, the available sources are sufficient to undertake a reconstruction of the Unionist Party and its role in the destiny of Eritrea.

There is also another reason for paying particular attention to the political parties in general and the Unionist Party in particular. The events preceding the UN resolution, I believe, can be best understood when studied in the context of Eritrean political responses. Moreover, a study of the Eritrean political parties and their constantly shifting alliances provides a continuity as well as background to the main theme of the book, namely the rise and the fall of the federation between Eritrea and Ethiopia.

The story of how the federation came into existence and the first three years of the life of the federation are treated in the third chapter. The documentation is exclusively archival and given the nature of its collection (by consulates and embassies) the material is indeed satisfactory. Already in the first three years of the federation, we notice that the former members of the UP, now in government positions, were busy undermining the federation and calling for its dissolution. It is complete union that they were after and they were frustrated by the federal arrangement which they considered as foreign to their political conception and vocabulary. We also see clearly the transformation of some of the earlier political parties, namely the Moslem League, into champions of the federation.

Only three years after the launching of the federal arrangement Eritrea was for all intents and purposes a part of Ethiopia. In the process of dismantling the federation, the UP, now heavily dominating the Eritrean government, had a great role to play.

The protracted struggle of the ML against the Eritrean and Ethiopian governments is the main emphasis of the fourth chapter. Once again, the British archival documentation allows a satisfactory reconstruction. The continuity between the pre-federation agitation and post-federation protest can be clearly followed as well as established. The role of the Ethiopian government, firstly as a federal partner and secondly as the supreme authority over the country including Eritrea, is dealt with but perhaps not to the desired extent. It was more difficult for the British diplomatic corps to gather information inside Ethiopia since most of the decisions were taken by Emperor Haile Sellassie himself. Moreover, the Ethiopians did not have any serious worries as the federation was slowly but surely being dissolved, largely by Eritrean forces themselves. The chapter is concluded by a short discussion on the reasons for the dissolution of the federation and the role of the Ethiopian government in the process.

The unfolding of events after the incorporation of Eritrea into the Ethiopian empire (1962) is discussed in chapter five. The Eritreans initiated armed opposition against the dissolution of the federation but were divided as to the nature of the goals of the opposition as well as to who would assume power after the expulsion of Ethiopian rule. The issues which surfaced in the late 1940s contin-

ued to dominate the relations between the various Eritrean nationalist armed forces. By the 1970s all Eritrean armed opposition organizations had modified their political demands to that of complete independence. Yet as the chapter demonstrates, the Eritrean nationalist forces were divided into two irreconcilable camps which involved an articulation of the image of an independent Eritrea. Would Eritrea be part of the Arab and Moslem world, as the ELF argued or would Eritrea continue to be dominated by the Christian Eritreans with strong cultural and economic links with the central parts of Ethiopia? The latter position, argued by the EPLF was eventually to win.

The issue which had united the Eritrean nationalist forces since the 1970s was the independence of Eritrea. On this issue, there was a clear discontinuity of political objectives. Whereas there was a clear continuity between the ML and the ELF, there was no such continuity of objectives between the defunct UP and the EPLF. The EPLF cannot be described as a successor of the Unionist Party, although it promoted some of its programme, namely the hegemonic position of the Christian Eritreans (Tigreans) in the country.

The final short chapter attempts to sketch the challenges both internal and external which the newly independent state of Eritrea is likely to face in the foreseeable future.

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