

The Imperial Zenith and Collapse: The Era of Emperor Haile Selassie I (1930–1974)

Introduction: The Last Solomonic Emperor

The reign of Emperor Haile Selassie I, born Lij Tafari Makonnen, spanned nearly half a century and represents the final, most consequential chapter of the Solomonic Dynasty. Ascending from Regent to Emperor, his rule was a complex tapestry of modernization efforts, international diplomacy, and staunch imperial traditionalism. He sought to transform an ancient, feudal empire into a modern, centralized state, successfully defending its sovereignty against European aggression and establishing Ethiopia as a key player on the world stage, particularly in the Pan-African movement. However, his failure to address deep-seated social and economic inequalities ultimately led to his overthrow in 1974, marking the end of a 3,000-year-old monarchy.

I. Early Life, Regency, and Coronation (1892–1930)

Haile Selassie's rise to power began under the shadow of his great-uncle, Emperor Menelik II. As a young man, he was appointed Governor of Sidamo and later Harar, demonstrating administrative acumen and a progressive outlook. His political career took a decisive turn in 1916 when he was named Regent Plenipotentiary and Heir Apparent to Empress Zewditu, the daughter of Menelik II.

The Regency (1916–1930)

As Regent, Ras Tafari Makonnen became the de facto ruler, navigating a delicate balance between the Empress's conservative faction and his own modernizing agenda. His early reforms focused on opening Ethiopia to the outside world, culminating in the nation's admission to the **League of Nations in 1923** [1]. This diplomatic victory was crucial, as it provided an international guarantee of Ethiopia's sovereignty, a vital

defense against colonial ambitions. In 1930, following the death of Empress Zewditu, he was crowned Emperor Haile Selassie I, King of Kings, Lord of Lords, Conquering Lion of the Tribe of Judah, formally inheriting the mantle of the Solomonic line.

The 1931 Constitution

One of his first acts as Emperor was the promulgation of the **1931 Constitution**, Ethiopia's first written constitution. While it established a bicameral parliament and a framework for a modern legal system, it fundamentally reinforced the Emperor's absolute power. The document was a symbolic gesture of modernization to the international community, but in practice, it codified the Emperor's divine right to rule, ensuring that all power flowed from the throne.

II. The Crisis of Sovereignty: The Italian Invasion (1935–1941)

The greatest challenge to Haile Selassie's reign was the unprovoked invasion by Fascist Italy under Benito Mussolini in 1935. Despite Ethiopia's status as a League of Nations member, the international community failed to intervene effectively.

The Appeal to the League of Nations

In 1936, after the fall of his capital, Haile Selassie delivered a powerful and prophetic address to the League of Nations in Geneva. His speech, delivered with profound dignity, condemned the use of chemical weapons by the Italian forces and warned the world of the dangers of appeasement.

"It is us today. It will be you tomorrow. God and history will remember your judgment." [2]

This appeal, though failing to secure military intervention, cemented his status as a global symbol of resistance against fascism and colonialism. He spent the years of occupation in exile in Bath, England, maintaining the legitimacy of the Ethiopian government-in-exile.

The Liberation

In 1941, with the support of British forces and Ethiopian patriots, Haile Selassie returned to Addis Ababa, marking the liberation of the country. This victory, achieved after five years of occupation, was a profound moment of national pride and reinforced the Emperor's image as the indispensable leader who had personally saved the nation's independence.

III. Post-War Reconstruction and Modernization (1941–1960)

The post-war period saw Haile Selassie accelerate his modernization program, aiming to consolidate his power and build a centralized, bureaucratic state.

The 1955 Revised Constitution

The **1955 Revised Constitution** was a significant step toward a modern legal framework. It granted more power to the parliament, though it remained largely advisory, and introduced a bill of rights. Crucially, it formally abolished the feudal *gult* system of land tenure, though implementation was slow and often ineffective, leaving the vast majority of the peasantry in poverty.

Institutional Development

The Emperor focused on creating institutions necessary for a modern state:

Institution	Date Founded/Reformed	Significance
Haile Selassie I University	1950 (reorganized)	Established a modern, secular education system to train the new civil service and military elite.
Imperial Bodyguard	Post-1941	A highly trained, loyal military unit designed to protect the Emperor and project centralized power.
Ethiopian Airlines	1945	A symbol of national pride and a vital economic link to the global economy, becoming one of Africa's most successful carriers.
Imperial Highway Authority	1951	Focused on building a national road network to connect the disparate regions of the empire.

The Birth of Pan-Africanism

Haile Selassie was a pivotal figure in the global decolonization movement. He championed African unity and used Addis Ababa as a diplomatic hub. In 1963, he hosted the founding of the **Organization of African Unity (OAU)**, with the organization establishing its headquarters in the city's iconic **Africa Hall**. This achievement solidified Ethiopia's role as the diplomatic capital of Africa and was arguably the peak of Haile Selassie's international prestige.

IV. Political Challenges and Dissent (1960–1974)

Despite the veneer of modernization and international success, the Emperor's regime faced mounting internal dissent rooted in political stagnation, economic inequality, and the suppression of political freedoms.

The 1960 Coup Attempt

The first major crack in the imperial edifice occurred in December 1960, when the commanders of the Imperial Bodyguard, led by brothers Mengistu Neway and Germame Neway, attempted a coup while the Emperor was abroad. The coup plotters cited the government's corruption and the failure to implement meaningful land

reform as their primary motivations. Although the coup was quickly suppressed by loyalist forces, it was a profound shock to the system, revealing deep dissatisfaction among the educated elite and the military. It signaled that the Emperor's absolute authority was no longer unquestionable [3].

Growing Student and Intellectual Opposition

Throughout the 1960s, student movements at Haile Selassie I University became increasingly vocal critics of the regime. They demanded genuine land reform, political liberalization, and an end to the feudal practices that kept the majority of the population impoverished. The students' rallying cry, "Land to the Tiller," became a potent symbol of the regime's failure to address the core economic issue of the country.

The Eritrean Conflict

The annexation of Eritrea as Ethiopia's 14th province in 1962, following the dissolution of the federation established by the UN, fueled a long-running separatist conflict. The Eritrean Liberation Front (ELF) and later the Eritrean People's Liberation Front (EPLF) launched a full-scale armed struggle, draining the imperial treasury and military resources.

V. The Final Years and the Revolution (1973–1974)

The final years of Haile Selassie's reign were defined by a catastrophic confluence of events that exposed the regime's incompetence and moral bankruptcy.

The Wollo Famine (1973)

A devastating famine struck the northern provinces of Wollo and Tigray between 1972 and 1974, resulting in the deaths of an estimated 200,000 to 400,000 people [4]. The imperial government, fearing political instability and international embarrassment, attempted to conceal the extent of the disaster. When a BBC documentary exposed the horrific reality of the famine, the public outcry was immediate and overwhelming. The image of the Emperor celebrating his 80th birthday in luxury while his subjects starved proved to be the final, unforgivable moral failure of the regime.

The Military Takeover

The famine, combined with rising inflation, military mutinies over pay, and widespread strikes, created a revolutionary atmosphere. In early 1974, a group of junior military officers and non-commissioned officers formed the **Coordinating Committee of the Armed Forces, Police, and Territorial Army**, which later became known as the **Derg**.

The Derg systematically dismantled the imperial government, arresting ministers and officials. On **September 12, 1974**, Emperor Haile Selassie I was formally deposed and placed under house arrest, ending the 3,000-year-old Solomonic Dynasty. The Emperor's failure to transition from an absolute monarch to a constitutional ruler, coupled with his inability to address the land question, sealed the fate of his regime and ushered in a new, violent era of Ethiopian history.

References

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