

The Military Socialist Regime: The Derg and the Ethiopian Revolution (1974–1991)

Introduction: The End of Empire and the Dawn of Revolution

The **Derg** (Amharic for “committee” or “council”) was the military junta that ruled Ethiopia from 1974 to 1991. Its rise to power was the culmination of the Ethiopian Revolution, which began with popular unrest against the archaic, feudal system of Emperor Haile Selassie I. The Derg, officially the **Provisional Military Administrative Council (PMAC)**, dismantled the ancient monarchy, abolished the aristocracy, and declared Ethiopia a socialist state aligned with the Soviet bloc. This seventeen-year period was marked by radical social engineering, political terror, devastating famine, and protracted civil wars, fundamentally reshaping the political, economic, and social fabric of the nation.

I. The 1974 Revolution and the Rise of the Derg

The revolution was triggered by a series of crises in 1974, including military mutinies over pay, widespread strikes by workers and teachers, and the revelation of the devastating Wollo famine. The initial revolutionary fervor was a broad-based movement for democratic reform, but it was quickly hijacked by a secretive military committee.

Formation and Consolidation

The Derg was initially formed as the Coordinating Committee of the Armed Forces, Police, and Territorial Army, composed of junior officers and non-commissioned

officers. Its members were largely drawn from the lower ranks of the military, reflecting a deep-seated resentment of the imperial elite.

Key Revolutionary Actions (1974)	Significance
Deposition of Haile Selassie I (September 12)	Ended the 3,000-year-old Solomonic Dynasty and the imperial era.
Abolition of the Monarchy (March 1975)	Formally established Ethiopia as a military-led provisional government.
Declaration of Socialism (December 1974)	Aligned Ethiopia with Marxist-Leninist ideology, setting the stage for radical economic and social change.

The Derg quickly eliminated its internal rivals, executing the former imperial officials and consolidating power under a centralized military authority.

II. The Red Terror and Political Repression

The most infamous chapter of the Derg’s rule was the **Red Terror** (1977–1978), a brutal campaign of political repression orchestrated to eliminate all perceived opposition to the military regime.

The Struggle for Power

The Derg faced opposition from various civilian groups, most notably the Marxist-Leninist **Ethiopian People’s Revolutionary Party (EPRP)** and the more moderate **All-Ethiopia Socialist Movement (MEISON)**. The EPRP, advocating for immediate civilian rule, launched a campaign of assassinations against Derg members and supporters, known as the “White Terror.”

Mengistu Haile Mariam and the Campaign of Terror

The response was the Red Terror, personally directed by **Colonel Mengistu Haile Mariam**, who emerged as the undisputed leader of the Derg after eliminating his rivals, including General Teferi Banti. Mengistu’s campaign was a systematic, state-sponsored urban counter-insurgency, primarily targeting the EPRP and other student and intellectual groups.

“The Red Terror was a period of intense political and inter-communal violence in revolutionary Ethiopia during the late 1970s. It was characterized by mass arrests, torture, and extrajudicial executions, with thousands of young people killed and their bodies often left in the streets as a warning [1].”

The campaign effectively crushed organized urban opposition, allowing Mengistu to consolidate a totalitarian dictatorship. The **Red Terror Martyrs Memorial Museum** in Addis Ababa now stands as a monument to the victims of this period.

III. Socialist Transformation and Economic Policy

The Derg’s commitment to Marxist-Leninist principles led to a radical overhaul of Ethiopia’s economic and social structure, centered on the principle of **scientific socialism**.

Land Reform and Nationalization

The most popular and far-reaching reform was the **Proclamation No. 31 of 1975**, which nationalized all rural land.

Economic Reform	Action Taken	Impact
Rural Land Reform	Abolished private ownership of land; redistributed land to the tillers; established Peasant Associations.	Ended the feudal land tenure system and was initially popular, but later hampered agricultural productivity due to lack of security and state control.
Urban Land and Housing	Nationalized all urban land and extra houses.	Aimed to address urban inequality but led to a severe housing crisis and bureaucratic mismanagement.
Industry and Finance	Nationalized all major industries, banks, insurance companies, and large private enterprises.	Created a highly centralized, inefficient command economy that stifled private sector growth and led to economic stagnation.

The 1984–1985 Famine

The Derg's economic policies, combined with severe drought and the ongoing civil wars, culminated in the catastrophic **1984–1985 famine**. While the drought was a natural disaster, the regime's policies—including forced collectivization, resettlement programs, and its refusal to acknowledge the crisis until it was too late—exacerbated the human toll, which is estimated to have reached over 400,000 deaths [2]. The government's use of food aid as a political weapon against rebel-held areas further compounded the tragedy.

IV. Wars and Conflicts

The Derg's rule was dominated by internal and external conflicts, which consumed the vast majority of the nation's resources and manpower.

The Ogaden War (1977–1978)

In 1977, Somalia, seeking to annex the ethnically Somali Ogaden region, invaded Ethiopia. The Derg, initially supported by the United States, quickly switched allegiance to the Soviet Union after the Soviets and Cuba offered massive military aid. The intervention of Cuban troops and Soviet military advisors proved decisive, pushing the Somali forces out of the Ogaden by March 1978. The **Tiglachin Monument** in Addis Ababa was later erected to commemorate the victory and the Cuban-Ethiopian alliance.

The Ethiopian Civil War

The Derg faced multiple, well-organized insurgencies throughout its rule, leading to a protracted civil war.

Insurgent Group	Region of Operation	Goal
Eritrean People's Liberation Front (EPLF)	Eritrea	Independence for Eritrea.
Tigray People's Liberation Front (TPLF)	Tigray	Overthrow the Derg and establish a new political order.
Oromo Liberation Front (OLF)	Oromia	Self-determination for the Oromo people.

The TPLF, in particular, grew into a formidable military force, eventually forming the core of the **Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF)**, which would ultimately topple the regime.

V. Collapse and Legacy

The Derg's collapse was a direct result of its military failures and the loss of its primary international patron.

The Fall of the Regime

The end of the Cold War led to the cessation of Soviet military and financial support. Facing overwhelming military pressure from the EPRDF and the EPLF, the Derg's army began to disintegrate.

- **1989:** The TPLF-led EPRDF captured key towns in Tigray and Amhara regions.
- **1991:** As rebel forces closed in on Addis Ababa, Colonel Mengistu Haile Mariam fled the country to Zimbabwe on May 21. The EPRDF forces entered the capital a week later, officially ending the Derg's rule.

The Human and Political Cost

The Derg regime left a devastating legacy:

1. **Human Rights:** Hundreds of thousands of people were killed during the Red Terror and the civil wars.

2. **Economic Ruin:** The command economy left the country impoverished and dependent on foreign aid.
3. **Political Fragmentation:** The regime's brutal repression fueled ethnic nationalism and separatist movements, directly leading to the independence of Eritrea and the subsequent adoption of the ethnic federalism system.

The Derg's period remains a dark chapter in Ethiopian history, a cautionary tale of how a revolution intended to liberate the masses can devolve into a brutal, totalitarian dictatorship.

References

- [1] Clapham, C. (1988). *Transformation and Continuity in Revolutionary Ethiopia*. Cambridge University Press. [2] De Waal, A. (1991). *Evil Days: Thirty Years of War and Famine in Ethiopia*. Human Rights Watch. [3] Bahru Zewde. (2002). *A History of Modern Ethiopia, 1855-1991*. Ohio University Press. [4] Human Rights Watch. (1991). *Ethiopia: Human Rights Crisis*. [5] Wikipedia. *Derg*. Retrieved from <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Derg> [6] Wikipedia. *Ogaden War*. Retrieved from https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ogaden_War