

The Making of Modern Ethiopia: From Unification to the End of Empire (1855–1974)

Introduction: The Dawn of a New Era

The history of Modern Ethiopia begins in 1855 with the coronation of **Emperor Tewodros II**, marking the end of the *Zemene Mesafint* (Era of Princes) and the start of a concerted effort to reunify and modernize the fractured empire. This period, spanning over a century, is characterized by a series of dynamic and ambitious emperors who successfully defended Ethiopia’s independence against European colonialism, expanded its borders to their present configuration, and initiated fundamental political, social, and technological reforms. The era culminates with the long reign of **Emperor Haile Selassie I** and the eventual collapse of the ancient Solomonic monarchy in 1974.

I. The Era of Unification and Reform (1855–1913)

The three emperors of this period—Tewodros II, Yohannes IV, and Menelik II—are collectively responsible for forging the modern Ethiopian state.

Emperor Tewodros II (r. 1855–1868): The Visionary Unifier

Tewodros II, born Kassa Hailu, rose from a regional warlord to become the first emperor in over a century to effectively centralize power. His reign was driven by a passionate desire to modernize Ethiopia and restore its former glory.

Government Structure and Reforms Tewodros’s reforms were radical for their time, aimed at dismantling the feudal system and creating a modern, centralized state [1].

Reform Area	Action Taken	Significance
Military	Created a professional, standing army, replacing the decentralized feudal levies.	Essential for ending the <i>Zemene Mesafint</i> and projecting imperial power.
Administration	Attempted to reform the tax system and establish a unified legal code.	Sought to create a centralized bureaucracy independent of regional lords.
Infrastructure	Encouraged the manufacture of modern weapons, including cannons, at his capital, Maqdala.	Demonstrated a commitment to technological self-reliance and modernization.

Tewodros's reign ended tragically with his defeat by a British expeditionary force in 1868, after which he committed suicide at his fortress in **Maqdala** rather than be taken captive.

Emperor Yohannes IV (r. 1872–1889): The Defender of the Faith

Yohannes IV, a powerful *Ras* from Tigray, succeeded Tewodros and focused his reign on defending the empire from external threats, primarily from Egypt and the Mahdist state of Sudan.

Military and Diplomatic Successes Yohannes IV's forces achieved decisive victories against the invading Egyptian army at the **Battle of Gundet (1875)** and the **Battle of Gura (1876)**, securing the northern borders. He later faced the Sudanese Mahdists, dying in battle at **Metemma** in 1889. His reign is a testament to the fierce national unity that emerged in the face of foreign aggression.

- **Monuments:** The **Yohannes IV Palace** in Mekelle, built in the 1880s, served as his primary residence and a symbol of his authority in the north.

Emperor Menelik II (r. 1889–1913): The Founder of Modern Ethiopia

Menelik II, King of Shewa, is arguably the most successful of the modernizing emperors. He completed the territorial expansion of the empire and secured its place as the only African nation to successfully resist European colonization.

The Battle of Adwa and National Independence Menelik's most famous achievement was the decisive victory over the invading Italian army at the **Battle of Adwa** on March 1, 1896. This victory is a landmark event in world history, as it preserved Ethiopia's sovereignty and inspired anti-colonial movements across Africa and the Black diaspora [2].

Government and Capital Menelik II founded the new capital city of **Addis Ababa** (New Flower) in 1886, a permanent center for the rapidly expanding empire.

Administrative Innovation	Description	Impact
Modern Cabinet	Established the first Council of Ministers, a formal cabinet of officials, in 1907.	Introduced a degree of specialization and bureaucracy into the imperial administration.

Administrative Innovation	Description	Impact
Infrastructure	Introduced the first railway (Djibouti to Addis Ababa), telephone, telegraph, and postal system.	Connected the vast empire and facilitated trade and communication, key to modernization.
Territorial Expansion	Expanded the empire's borders to the south, east, and west, creating the modern map of Ethiopia.	Consolidated the multi-ethnic state under central authority.

- **Monuments:** The **Menelik II Palace** in Addis Ababa remains the seat of government. Other key monuments include **St. George's Cathedral** and the **Entoto Maryam Church**.

II. The Transition and the Reign of Haile Selassie I (1916–1974)

The period following Menelik's death was marked by a power struggle that eventually led to the ascendancy of **Ras Teferi Makonnen**, who would become Emperor Haile Selassie I.

Empress Zewditu (r. 1916–1930)

Empress Zewditu, Menelik's daughter, was the first and only empress regnant of the Ethiopian Empire. Her reign was a period of conservative reaction, but she was forced to share power with the progressive Regent, **Ras Teferi Makonnen** (later Haile Selassie I). Zewditu focused on promoting the Ethiopian Orthodox Church and building new churches, while Teferi pushed for modernization and international engagement, including Ethiopia's entry into the League of Nations.

Emperor Haile Selassie I (r. 1930–1974): The Last Emperor

Haile Selassie I is the central figure of 20th-century Ethiopian history. His reign was defined by his commitment to modernization, his role as a symbol of African independence, and his eventual overthrow.

The Italian Occupation (1935–1941) The most challenging period of his reign was the **Second Italo-Ethiopian War**. Following the Italian invasion in 1935, Haile Selassie led the resistance before going into exile. His impassioned plea to the League of Nations in 1936, where he warned the world of the dangers of appeasement, made him a global icon [3]. He returned in 1941 to reclaim his throne, symbolizing the triumph of national resistance.

Government Structure and Modernization Haile Selassie's post-war reign focused on creating a modern, centralized, and bureaucratic state.

- **Constitutional Monarchy:** He promulgated the **1931** and **1955 Constitutions**, which, while maintaining the Emperor's ultimate authority, introduced a bicameral parliament and a framework for a modern legal system.
- **Bureaucracy:** He established a modern civil service, ministries, and a centralized military, effectively abolishing the old feudal *gult* system.
- **Education:** He prioritized modern education, sending thousands of students abroad and establishing institutions like the Haile Selassie I University (now Addis Ababa University).
- **International Role:** Haile Selassie was a key figure in the Pan-African movement. He hosted the founding of the **Organization of African Unity (OAU)** in Addis Ababa in 1963, and the city became the diplomatic capital of Africa.

Institution	Date Founded	Significance
Africa Hall	1961	Headquarters of the United Nations Economic Commission for Africa (UNECA) and the OAU.
Holy Trinity Cathedral	1942	Burial place of Haile Selassie and a major symbol of the restored monarchy.
Jubilee Palace	1955	Built to commemorate his Silver Jubilee, serving as the primary imperial residence.

The End of the Monarchy

Despite his efforts, Haile Selassie's regime faced growing internal dissent due to economic stagnation, famine, and a rigid political system. In 1974, a military coup, known as the **Derg**, overthrew the Emperor, ending the 3,000-year-old Solomonic Dynasty and ushering in a new, tumultuous chapter of Ethiopian history. The end of the monarchy marked the final, dramatic break with the ancient imperial tradition, though the legacy of the modernizing emperors remains foundational to the Ethiopian state.

References

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