

2.4. Italian Colonialism in the Horn of Africa

You have seen the Egyptian and Mahdist invasions and the Italian aggressive expansion into northern Ethiopia. Already, in 1869, an Italian private shipping company had bought the port of Assab from local chiefs. Thirteen years later, the possession of the port was transferred to the Italian Government. On February 1885 the Italians landed at the port of Massawa. After landing at the port, Italy used Massawa as a springboard to her colonial expansion into Ethiopia.

At the early stage of their expansion, Italians occupied the coastal regions of Aylet, Wia and Saati with inland extensions up to 30-40 kilometers. Their expansion headed to the direction of the highlands of Mereb Mellash. In violation of the Hewett Treaty of 1884; Firstly, they took control of Massawa. Moreover, they blocked the import of firearms into Ethiopia. Then, began demanding heavy taxes from Ethiopian merchants.

Emperor Yohannis complained to the British government about the violation of the Hewett Treaty and Italian occupation. At the same time, he requested the British to help in the restoration of the occupied regions and the port. The British government's response to Yohannis was not satisfactory. Queen Victoria of England wrote to Yohannis advising him to live in love and peace with the powerful Italians.

Meanwhile, Italians continued their expansion into Mereb Mellash. The then governor of the Mereb Mellash, Ras Alula Engida (Aba Nega) warned the Italians to clear out of the Ethiopian territory. The Italians were not willing. To stop their further advance, Ras Alula marched to Saati and attacked their fortress on 25 January, 1887. The next day, he ambushed and destroyed a force of about 500 Italians sent to save Saati, at a place called Dogali. The event came to be known as the victory of Dogali.

The Battle of Dogali created a deep shock and an urgent desire for revenge in Italy. To this end, the Italian imperialist government allotted an additional budget. The Italian troops of Massawa were reinforced with additional contingents. In Ethiopia, Italy began to recruit collaborators. Internal conflicts in Ethiopia laid the ground for divisive activities. Regional lords welcomed foreign allies in order to secure modern arms with which they could defeat their rivals. Regional lords, including Menelik, became promising candidates for Italian subversion. As a contender of the throne, Menelik was relatively more powerful and had already been in contact with the Italians.

Italo-Shoan relations had officially started in 1876. At this time, an Italian Geographical Society under Antinori, came to Shoa. Menelik gave the Italians a camping site at Let Marefia in Shoa. That site, however, was used as a station and a base of intelligence work in Ethiopia. In 1883, an Italian envoy Count Antonelli and King Menelik signed the Treaty of Commerce and Friendship. In the treaty, they agreed upon consular exchange, free movement of people, free trade and free propagation of religion. The major objective of the treaty was to strengthen the Assab Shoa trade. The Battle of Dogali had increased the value of Menelik to the Italians. The Italians wanted Menelik to fight Yohannis from the south. However, Menelik was not willing to

fight Yohannis. Instead, he preferred to mediate between the Italians and Yohannis. The Italians were not interested in mediation, but at least they wanted his neutrality in the event of war with Yohannis. Italians approached Menelik by promising him 5000 rifles. Menelik signed the Convention of Neutrality in October 1887 on condition that the Italians would not take an inch of land in Ethiopia.

Meanwhile, Italy sought British intervention to fulfil her colonial ambition in Ethiopia. The British government intervened as a negotiator by sending Sir Gerald Portal. Portal met Yohannis in November 1887. By the Portal mission, Yohannis was asked to apologize for Alula's "unjust attack" on the Italians. It also demanded the retention of the regions of Saati and Wia by the Italians. The Portal mission also proposed Italy's protectorate right over Assawrta and Habhab and occupation of Saati. Yohannis was not at all ready and willing to accept these peace terms. Thus, Portal's mission failed. Yohannis was highly offended by British diplomatic dishonesty. He sent a letter to Queen Victoria of Britain, in which he made clear his anger over the violation of the Hewett Treaty, and Italian aggressive expansion. He also informed Britain of his readiness and preference for war rather than let the Italians take Ethiopian territories.

Yohannis also wrote to the French government about British diplomatic mischief. Meanwhile, he declared war on the Italians and called his people to arms.

The response of the Ethiopian peoples was immediate and whole-hearted. Within a short time, the emperor mobilized about 70,000 troops. He marched north to fight the Italians at Saati in March 1888. The Italians had built a strong fortification at Saati. The Ethiopian army provoked the fortified Italians, but the Italians refrained to come out of their fort and face the numerically superior army of Yohannis. The situation lasted for about a month that way.

The Ethiopian army began to suffer from shortage of food. The majority of the troops were peasants who wanted to go back home to work on their fields. Meanwhile, Yohannis received news about fresh Mahdist invasions of Gondar. He also heard the plot of his vassal kings, Menelik and Tekle Haymanot, against his imperial power. Italy's refusal to engage in battle combined with internal rebellion and Mahdist threat, drew the attention of the Emperor to the South. He first attacked Gojjam and got the submission of its king. The plan to fight Menelik was dropped. Instead, Yohannis went to Mettema where he died fighting against the Mahdists. King Menelik of Shoa declared himself Emperor of Ethiopia. The Italians viewed the removal of Yohannis as a great opportunity for further expansion. Indeed, they occupied many districts of the Mereb Mellash.

The Treaty of Wuchale, The Birth of Eritrea as an Italian Colony, and the Battle of Adwa

The Wuchale Treaty was signed on 2 May 1889 between Italy and Menelik. The treaty was so named after the place in northern Wollo where it was signed. Count Pietro Antonelli represented Italy.

The Italians had already occupied a considerable part of the Mereb Mellash region before the signing of Wuchale Treaty. As he had not yet established a firm imperial power over his empire, Menelik seemed to have found it difficult to dislodge Italians by force. Secondly, Menelik feared that any disagreement with the Italians would result in their subversive activity among his rivals for the throne, mainly the Tigrean princes like Ras Mengesha Yohannis.

Article Three of the Treaty of Wuchale deals with the bound 60 delimitation between Ethiopian and Italian occupied of Merb Melash. By this article, the Italians were promised considerable territories in the region of the Mereb Mellash as far as Asmara. Yet, they were not satisfied with this. Additional Convention was signed in October 1889 between Italy and Ras Mekonnen who went to Rome to get the ratification of the Wuchale treaty. The Italians inserted in the convention the clause of "Effective Occupation". This clause stated that boundary demarcation would depend on the basis of actual possession. This allowed the Italians to occupy more and advance further south as far as the Mereb river. By late 1889 they had taken control of all areas north of the Mereb river which they declared to be their colony of Eritrea on 1 January 1890. Menelik's protest over the violation of the boundary agreement bore no fruit,

Article seventeen of the Wuchale Treaty was about the role of Italy in Ethiopian's foreign relations. The Italians wanted to use this Article as a Legal document for their claim of protectorate over Ethiopia. Article Seventeen of the Treaty was written in two contradictory versions. The Amharic version says Ethiopia could use the services of Italy in her foreign relations with Europe, whereas the Italian version bound Menelik to make all his foreign contacts through the agency of Italy. By implication, the Italian version of Article Seventeen reduced Ethiopia to the status of an Italian protectorate. Accordingly, in October 1889 Italy notified the major powers of Europe that Ethiopia had become her protectorate. Most of them recognized the air protectorate thaim based on Article Seventeen. Only Russia and France had reservations.

Emperor Menelik was unwilling to accept the loss of his sovereign right. He requested the Italian King Umberto of Italy to correct the Italian version of Article Seventeen, Italy was not willing to change the Italian version and tried its best to convince Menelik to accept it, Menelik, however, notified European powers the fact that he was a ruler of an independent nation and that he had no obligation to use Italy in foreign relations. Nor did he accept the Italian version despite repeated attempts to convince him in February 1893, he declared the abrogation of the Wuchale Treaty, and notified major European powers including Italy.

In the meantime Italians were engaged in subverting local peoples and above all the Tigrean princes. In December 1891, they met Ras Mengesha Yohannis and other Tigrean local rulers near River Mereb and managed to conclude what to called the Mereb convention in which they swor an oath of friendship. Generally, however, the Italian policy of subversion failed. The Eritrean people including collaborators were against Italian racist activities and above all their policy of white settlement on peasant lands. The Tigrean regional rulers, too, soon broke their allegiance] Ras Mengesha and Ras Alula left the Italians and renewed their loyalty to Menelik in June 1894. In December of that year, the Italians faced a peasant rebellion in Akale Guzay, in

Eritrea, under the leadership of their former collaborator, Dejazmach Bahta Hagos. The rebellion was crushed, but it led to further resistance to Italian colonialism. The Italians also fought with Ras Menegsha at the battles of Qoatit and Senafe in 1895.