**Foreign Instruments used during the reign of Emperor Tewodros II of Ethiopia**

Tewodros II, English Theodore II, emperor of Ethiopia(1855–68) is seen as one of Ethiopia's most notable emperors and the first modern leader who unified the various kingdoms into one empire. Not only did he reunify the various Ethiopian kingdoms into one empire, but he also attempted to focus loyalty around the government rather than the Ethiopian church, which he sought to bring under royal control. He worked to abolish the feudal system and create a new nobility of merit, dependent on the ruler alone. Although he failed in these aims, his example was ultimately followed by his successors.

Before Tewodros’s time Ethiopia did not have a foreign policy, and her relations with other countries were sporadic and spasmodic. In 1848, at the battle of Debarki, he suffered the only serious defeat in his early career. This defeat in the hands of Egyptians shaped the attitude of the future Tewodros with regard to foreign policy, discipline and modern firearms. He had remarkably bold and original ideas regarding the foreign relations of his country.

He was very eager to build a strong modern national army. Above all, he wanted to import the technical know-how for manufacturing firearms locally. He did not fully appreciated the necessity of acquiring firearms only, but also the importance of producing them and restructuring the Ethiopian society as an effective response to the increasing pressures of European imperialism. With amazing resourcefulness he attempted to use its advance guard, the missionary and the explorer, in effecting the change.

Tewodros used foreign policy as an instrument to achieve Ethiopia’s national purposes. This is not to say that Tewodros’s foreign policy arose in a vacuum. It grew in the context of Ethiopia’s encirclement by the Muslim powers and her need to reach out to the world beyond in the face of the growing menace to her need to dependence by Turko-Egyptian imperialism. It was derived as much from Tewodros’s view of Ethiopia’s past and his hopes for her future as from his desire to acquire western technical aid and arms to modernize and strengthen Ethiopia, and his fears of European imperialism. It was inspired as much by his ideology of the Holy Land from the Muslims and to carry Ethiopia to heights of greatness.

His foreign relations also were affected to some extent by the prevailing beliefs of his own people with regard to all foreigners, by his own knowledge of the resident and visiting Europeans and by information acquired through his people returning from Jerusalem, Massawa and the Sudan.

Tewodros had clear foreign policy goals. He wished to develop close relations with Christian Europe, particular;y Britain and France as he hoped to procure from them the much aspired “technical aid” to modernize his country and the much needed firearms and ammunition to equip his army. An equally important aim was to check the Turko-Egyptian imperialism that threatened his country’s independence and to carry on a crusade against those Muslim power to achieve the ancient frontiers of Ethiopia. Thus close relations with Europe were fundamental to Tewodros’s foreign policy. He was also interested in forging diplomatic relations with as many European countries as possible. However, he was determined to treat with them on equal terms only, to initiate contacts with those powers who might advance his own aims, and to seek technical aid that would be offered without prejudice to his sovereignty.

His foreign policy was not just a response to Europe’s pressures; it was dynamic, anti-imperialistic and anti-Islamic. While it opposed outside imperialism it aimed to promote Ethiopian imperialism, and was thus a forerunner of the policies of the succeeding Ethiopian rulers, particularly Menelik II.

He wanted to reorganize and modernize the army. To get the necessary weapons, he demanded first that European missionaries and adventurers then living in Ethiopia build him a cannon (successful after much trial and error), and then he brought in artisans, especially arms makers, from England. Contemporary European accounts portray him as an Ethiopian Peter the Great, both for his hot temper and cruelty and for his courage, ambition, military genius, and interest in technology.

His [modernization](https://www.britannica.com/topic/modernization) program, however, failed. Several incidents in the 1860s, including a letter to Queen Victoria that remained unanswered, led Tewodros to feel insulted by [England](https://www.britannica.com/topic/history-of-United-Kingdom). When he imprisoned several British missionaries and envoys, accusing them of plotting against him, Great [Britain](https://www.britannica.com/place/United-Kingdom) sent the Napier’s expedition (1867–68) to rescue the prisoners. Aided by rebellious nobles along the way, the British force attacked Tewodros’s forces at Magdela on April 10, 1868. Here he fought the British courageously, lost the battle for reasons he could not help, and killed himself (ironically with the very pistol that had been a gift to him from Queen Victoria) rather than surrender in disgrace. He knew that a major cause of his defeat was the failure that attended his efforts to arm his country adequately. Yet if Tewodros failed to reach his foreign policy goals, it was because he lacked both the resources and the experience needed to handle the European powers properly. As his diplomatic experience was limited to the circle of neighboring princes, neither the real designs and capacities of France and England nor their global diplomacy which transcended religious considerations were within his powers to calculate.

In spite of these shortcomings, Emperor Tewodros emerges as one of the greatest rulers of nineteenth century Africa and as a champion of Africa's struggle for equality with the rest of the world.