

SECESSION AND SEPARATIST CONFLICTS IN POSTCOLONIAL AFRICA

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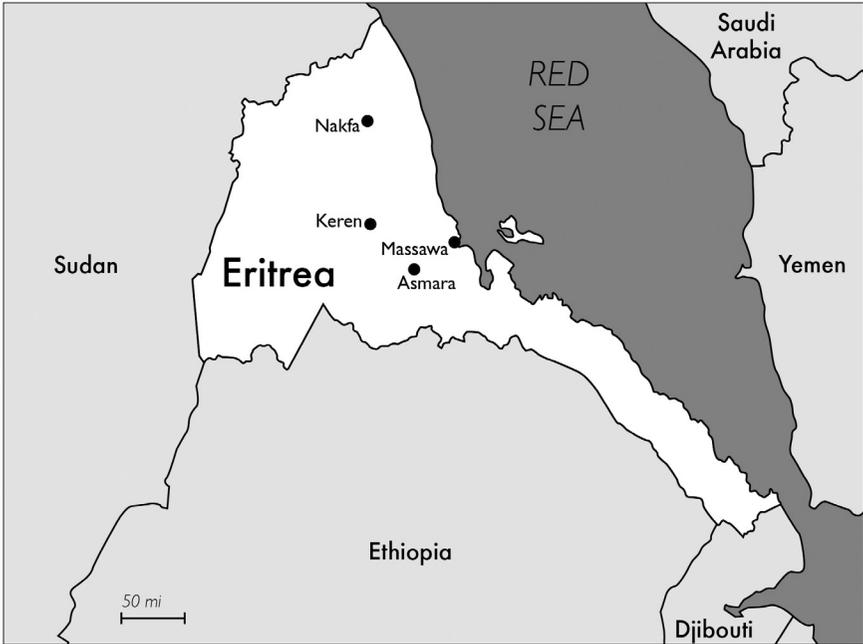
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Map of Ethiopia and Eritrea



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The Anomaly of Eritrean Secession, 1961–1993

It is nearly impossible to truly pin down the starting date of any of the long conflicts for secession in Africa, as one may choose the formation of the mass movement that sustained it, the pivotal action that drove the mass movement, or the creation of the context which surrounded this action. The Eritrean Secession might be said to have begun in 1958 when a group of Cairo-based Eritrean exiles met and established the earliest clandestine organization for the liberation of Eritrea. It equally might be said that those seeds were sown in the 1952 joining of the former Italian colony of Eritrea to Ethiopia or in the following years when various political factions fought to direct the impotent Eritrean Assembly. There is also the obvious jumping-off point of the Italian conquest of Eritrea in the late nineteenth century and subsequent intense development of the region following their crushing defeat at the hands of Menelik II at Adowa in 1896. Some scholars have even gone so far as to trace the validity of Eritrean sovereignty and struggles all the way back to the Axumite kingdoms of central Ethiopia and their intermittent warfare against the coastal pastoralists. However, while all of these were to prove pivotal moments in the development of the nation of Eritrea, this study marks the beginning of the war proper on 1 September 1961, when a small guerrilla band led by early dissenter Idris Hamid Awate opened fire at an Ethiopian police post in Western Eritrea.¹ From this date until the United Nations referendum in 1993 that established Eritrea as a separate sovereign nation, Eritreans fought a protracted conflict against Ethiopia and their numerous backers that featured guerrilla raids, pitched

battles, a social revolution, the politicization of a population, and one of the worst famines the world had seen to date. What emerged from this crucible of conflict was the first successful secession in Africa since independence, a remarkable undertaking and one that forms the centrepiece of this volume, both as a case study of the difficulties involved in secession and the anomalous circumstances required to effect such a complete separation.

THE END OF ERITREA

When the shots were fired by Awate and his fledgling Eritrean Liberation Front guerrillas in 1961, it was in response to the rising pressures of Eritrean nationalism that had been unleashed following the Second World War. From the late nineteenth century until 1941, Eritrea had been a prosperous Italian colony, dubbed in the 1930s the centrepiece of dictator Benito Mussolini's new Roman Empire. The colony served as the staging area for fascist Italy's subsequent invasion of Ethiopia, and large numbers of Eritrean colonial troops were used to great effect against Emperor Haile Selassie's armies.² However, with the expansion of the worldwide hostilities to East Africa in the 1940s, the Italians were driven out of their holdings by British East African forces and both Ethiopia and Eritrea were placed under British control. While Haile Selassie was able to return to his throne in 1941, at the end of the war the British were left with the uncomfortable question of how to deal with Eritrea. In 1947 Italy formally renounced its claim to Eritrea or any of its other African territories, leaving the outcome even more uncertain.³ While political factions were already forming in the small state and agitating for their own particular hoped-for outcomes, the case was eventually handed over the United Nations for a final verdict.⁴ While the United States desired a consolidation of their ally Ethiopia's control over Eritrea, the Soviet bloc pushed for total separation between the two nations. It was an acrimonious struggle mirrored by that within Eritrea, where the Unionist Party pressed its traditional interests by supporting union with Ethiopia against those of the Muslim League and the Liberal Progressive Party, who favoured Eritrean independence. In the end, there was what might be at best termed a compromise, with Eritrea being joined to Ethiopia as a federated territory under the Ethiopian crown.⁵ This of course was not much of a compromise to those favouring independence,

as it still placed their foreign affairs, military, finance, and international commerce under the “federal” government of an absolute monarchy.

While the Eritrean nationalists were disheartened at the development, it was only the beginning of what would become complete Ethiopian dominance of the “federal” arrangement. Haile Selassie’s government completely nullified and then dismantled the Eritrean state over the next ten years through a combination of money, informal influence, and often naked military intervention. The very year of federation was the last year that free and open elections were held in Eritrea. The constitution was suspended shortly thereafter and the jailing of dissident politicians and journalists soon followed. In 1956 Amharic was made the official language over the protests of the majority of the nation, which had traditionally adopted Tigrinya or Arabic as their preferred languages.⁶ That same year the Eritrean Assembly was “temporarily suspended.” Although elections followed, they were without direction or organization, leading to bitterly contested results. The nascent labour union movement that had been growing in strength and organization was essentially driven from sight by a series of crushing blows dealt to it by the federal military during protest strikes in 1958.⁷ This was followed in 1959 by the leaders of the assembly voting to replace their own penal code with that of Ethiopia after one of their increasingly common visits to Addis Ababa. By 1960 the main political supports of a separate Eritrea had been dissolved, with most governmental and grassroots organizations having been reduced to irrelevancy or driven from the country. Even protests directed at the United Nations, which had created the rapidly crumbling federal system, were simply met with the response that all protests would have to pass through the federal government first—in this case the Emperor himself.⁸ The final curtain fell in 1962, when the assembly was at last “persuaded” to vote itself out of existence, a process aided by armed police and jets providing air cover. Eritrea was officially no more as of 14 November 1962.⁹

THE BIRTH OF THE ERITREAN ARMED STRUGGLE

While the first shots of the conflict were fired in 1961, since 1958 there had been a group of expatriate notables who were already beginning their resistance against the creeping imperialism of Haile Selassie. Formed in

Cairo, the Eritrean Liberation Movement (ELM) was the first major organized dissenting group and consisted of members of the disenfranchised educated upper classes of Eritrea. Many of its earliest known members were former members of the Eritrean Assembly, driven from their homes during the increasing violence of the Ethiopian repression. Woldeab Woldeariam was a common example of the early Eritrean nationalist leadership. A newspaperman and former representative from the Liberal Progressive Party, he was driven into exile by the events of the mid-1950s. He served as an early figure to rally around and still serves as a noble example of Eritrean nationalism. Another figure who proved to be pivotal in both the ELM and its successor movements was Osman Saleh Sabbe of the Muslim League.¹⁰ He too was a staunch nationalist and represented a consistent link of Eritrea's struggles with the greater postcolonial movements of the world, most notably Pan-Arabism. However, despite its growing organization and outreach, the Eritrean Liberation Movement was anything but a monolithic endeavour. While outreach was already beginning and underground urban organizing in Eritrea proper was underway, the movement itself fractured into several cliques and factions. While the ELM was still trying to organize itself as a party in exile, one of its splinter groups, the Eritrean Liberation Front (ELF), took centre stage and opened fire on the Ethiopians in 1961.

The decision to transform itself into an armed struggle was a momentous one for the ELF and quickly propelled it into the spotlight. Its guerrilla struggle brought it increasing attention and growth despite an incompletely articulated program, with little ideology aside from being fiercely devoted to the idea of Eritrean nationalism. This would prove to be enough as the struggle continued. The ELM, never fully organized or devoted to armed struggle, slowly came undone and during 1961–1965 the ELF made every effort to subsume or destroy its rival. By 1965 this goal had been accomplished, with the few remaining ELM cadres being absorbed into the growing power of the ELF. However, with its growth, the ELF had also inherited the same difficulties that the ELM had struggled with. Eritrea itself housed almost equal populations of Christians and Muslims, which were then even more divided amongst nine separate ethno-linguistic groups across what was now Ethiopia's fourteenth province. These divisions gave way to factionalism and competition within the front, threatening it even

as the Ethiopian military began to increase its pressure upon the nascent movement. Taking their cue from the earlier success of the Algerian FLN, the leadership of the ELF decided to divide the nation into five “zones,” each overseen by a different commander who often represented the majority confessional and ethnic group.¹¹ Unfortunately, this simply increased the rivalries, as each zone came to be run as a fiefdom and offered little cooperation to its neighbours in the face of increased resistance by the Ethiopian armed forces. While the struggle continued and the guerrilla forces increased their pressure on both the cities and the countryside, the Ethiopian forces were being rearmed by massive infusions of aid from the United States.¹² From 1960 on, the military aid alone to Ethiopia was staggering, with \$10 million a year in grants and loans being offered, and from 1964 on material and logistical support continued to arrive.¹³ This made the struggle all the harder on the Eritrean guerrillas, and the Ethiopian strategy continued to evolve to incorporate the massive advantages they accrued in armour, air superiority, and special counter-insurgency forces. By 1968 it was becoming obvious that the Emperor’s troops were taking increased advantage of the zonal divisions, attacking each region in turn and inflicting terrible losses on the isolated forces. As the situation deteriorated, cracks began to show within the ELF, culminating in the Anseba Conference in September 1968.¹⁴ This was to prove another pivotal moment in the struggle for Eritrea, as it established the unity of three of the zones following a largely democratic process supported by both the civilians of the regions and the guerrillas fighting in them. However, this action was not sanctioned by the ELF leadership, nor was it accepted by the remaining two zonal commands, giving rise to another rift with the united front of the Eritrean forces. However, with the increasing weakness of the ELF’s position and the positive military results garnered by the united zones, it became obvious which way the winds were blowing. In August 1969 the remaining ELF leadership and zonal commanders met with the united zones’ commanders at Adobha.

THE SPLIT OF THE NATIONALISTS

The Adobha conference would prove to be one of the last attempts at a truly united front in Eritrea for nearly a decade.¹⁵ While the independent-minded

unified zones had seen better results in the recent struggles with Ethiopian troops, the ELF and its remaining zonal commanders still controlled the purse strings through their connections to the Arab states that offered money and weaponry. These offsetting dynamics, combined with a strong desire for unity at any cost, led to the resolutions adopted at the Adobha. All the zones were reconnected under a sole leadership council, which now styled itself the General Command. This General Command would consist of thirty-eight total members, six apiece from each of the three linked zones and ten each from the two remaining zones. This led to a structure that was inordinately stacked against the more independent and increasingly dissident unified group. Beyond this, the General Command would still serve under the previous Supreme Council of the ELF, which remained in the hands of the previously unsupportive leadership. While this arrangement temporarily re-established the ELF as a politically united force under its central leadership, it remained an untenable structure. The three unified zones continued to chafe under the current leadership and the often conservative directions in which it was taking the organization. By 1970 the General Command erupted into violence, with six members of the command itself being jailed and over 300 guerrilla fighters being executed. The progressive and dissident elements of the ELF, already dissatisfied with the politics, strategy, and leadership of the Supreme Council, began to splinter off and slowly coalesced into the second major combatant group of the war, the Eritrean People's Liberation Front.

This split of the armed forces would not be the last but was certainly the most important of the conflict. The literature since the independence of Eritrea has followed various paths to analyze the reasons behind the divergent characters of the ELF and the EPLF, covering aspects of religions, ethnicity, class, even economic backgrounds of the various member groups, but perhaps the simplest explanation is that a rising tide of student recruits in the late 1960s brought with them newer radical ideas that had been absent in the earlier leadership of the ELF. These progressive philosophies were brought to the fore as these students assumed leadership positions and participated in overseas training courses in such revolutionary countries as Cuba and China. By 1970 the rising ambitions of these younger aspiring leaders and the faltering grip of the older conservative leadership simply could no longer coexist, and the split occurred. The ELF remained

a fiercely nationalist but loosely disciplined group of guerrillas and older intellectuals while the EPLF took a more rigorously revolutionary tack and began organizing a disciplined peasant base from which to grow its infrastructure. Despite their shared goals of Eritrean liberation, the two fronts immediately found themselves in military conflict, leading to a weakening of both sides as well as a reduction of sabotage, ambushes, and guerrilla strikes on the Ethiopian forces in Eritrea. The Ethiopian army launched a strong ground offensive in late 1970 that battered the ELF regions and followed this with a vigorous bombing campaign by the Ethiopian Air Force.¹⁶ Although neither of these proved decisive, they enhanced Ethiopian control over the regions and allowed for the building of further infrastructure to maintain that hold, such as a series of roads in Western Eritrea that increased the Ethiopian influence near the Sudanese border, a vital gateway for the ELF's arms and food.

Despite the military setbacks for both nationalist movements embodied in both the Ethiopian offensives and their own civil war, the early 1970s would prove to be fruitful for the nationalist movements. The Ethiopian forces treated the "pacified" regions of Eritrea like occupied enemy territory and committed numerous atrocities and indignities on the Eritrean populace. Villagization schemes were attempted to cut back on guerrilla support without adequate food supplies or sanitary considerations.¹⁷ Livestock and crops were simply seized. Entire populations saw their homes burnt to the ground. This had the obvious effect of inciting the populace against Haile Selassie's troops and caused a resurgence in membership in both liberation fronts. The war continued to be fought in the countryside and the cities, with fighters of the ELF and EPLF striking numerous targets during hit-and-run raids. Both nationalist fronts were showing an increased sophistication in their strategy and tactics and were slowly building their constituencies in both urban and rural settings. While neither front was charitably inclined toward its rival, signs were pointing to a *détente* between the two that would allow for a greater degree of organization in their activities. However, while the war ground interminably on, events were unfolding in Ethiopia that would alter the war in ways that neither front could be prepared for.

THE RISE OF THE DERG

In 1974, Haile Selassie, King of Kings, Lion of Judah, the Elect of God, who had been Emperor of Ethiopia since 1930, was overthrown in a popular coup, arrested, and later killed by his military forces, which subsequently took control of his empire. The group behind this, the Derg,¹⁸ was a loose council of 120 military officers who saw themselves as enlightened technocrats who could navigate Ethiopia through its current crises and restore its power and prestige. Although nominally headed by General Aman Andom, the committee was the site of several vicious behind-the-scenes struggles for power that ended with a former major in the Ethiopian Army, Mengistu Haile Mariam, as the main wellspring of power in the nation. General Andom was executed in November 1974 and Mengistu assumed one of the two chairs of the Derg, which he would dominate for the next seventeen years. However, the upshot of this activity was that the already over-extended Ethiopian military was thrown into general disarray. During the course of the year-long confusion, the two Eritrean nationalist fronts continued their slow rapprochement and patched together a ceasefire in October,¹⁹ leaving both organizations free to focus on fighting the disorganized Ethiopians as well as reaching out to the numerous new dissident groups that sprang up in the confusion and bloodshed following the Derg's coup.

The next four years would prove crucial to the eventual success of Eritrean nationalism. The backlash against the growing excesses of the Derg (which shortly blossomed into what became known as a "Red Terror" as thousands of Ethiopians and Eritreans were summarily executed or imprisoned and tortured) drove massive amounts of recruits into the guerrillas' camps and opened new opportunities for alliance with other revolutionary groups such as the Tigrayan People's Liberation Front (TPLF).²⁰ The ELF consolidated its control in Western Eritrea and grew its numbers of both trained fighters and militia. The EPLF used this period to establish several "liberated zones" where an astonishing number of social programs were established, from land reform to literacy programs to gender liberation. Both fronts continued their harassment of Ethiopian forces and slowly began to drive them out of the Eritrean borders as best they could. In early 1975 the Eritrean fronts launched an attack on Asmara, which, although it was beaten back, set off an orgy of violence by the Ethiopian troops directed at

the city itself, further alienating the urban populace. The military success of both fronts continued with the defeat of the incomparably inept “Peasants’ Crusade” set up by Mengistu’s government in 1976, where 50,000 ill-equipped and untrained Ethiopian peasants were unleashed upon Eritrea with promises of conquered land. These forces were casually picked apart by veteran fighters of both Eritrean fronts and the TPLF, with few if any Ethiopian peasants actually ever setting foot in Eritrea.

1977 saw continued confidence on the part of both liberation fronts. Early in the year the EPLF captured Nacfa and Afabet, two major trading centres on the northern Sahel province of Eritrea. These conquests were followed by Decamare and Keren, both important industrial centres. Beyond this, Keren was a natural fortress that commanded the passes that gave the easiest access to the Sudan, which continued to be both a humanitarian and logistical base for the Eritrean struggle. In the same period of time, the ELF captured the town of Tessenei and followed this feat with its liberation of Agordat, Adi Quala, and Mendefera. These successes reduced the Ethiopian presence to several isolated garrisons and the important cities of Asmara, Massawa, and Barentu. Massawa was particularly important as it was the primary port for Eritrea and therefore a primary entry point for the food and weapons that the Ethiopian forces needed to keep their flagging cause alive. The EPLF managed to cut the road between Asmara, the capital, and Massawa in October 1977, and the end of Ethiopian resistance to Eritrean nationalism appeared to be in sight. With Mengistu’s Ethiopia caught between the liberation fronts in the north and a brutal war with Siad Barre’s Somalia in the west over the Ogaden territories,²¹ it seemed impossible that the state could last much longer.

THE DERG STRIKES BACK

It was at this point that an astonishing international realignment altered the balance of power in Ethiopia once again. Mengistu’s Ethiopia had already proclaimed itself a Marxist republic since shortly after its inception, although this had always been taken as at best a philosophical stopgap for what was essentially an ideologically empty revolt and coup. However, by 1977 the ailing Ethiopia continued to declare its devotion to Marxist ideals and had completed an arms agreement with the Soviet Union. This new

arms agreement, alongside the belated recognition of the human rights violations of the Derg regime, caused President Carter and the US Congress to deny any further military support to Mengistu's Ethiopia. Sensing an opportunity for a greater presence in the Horn, the Soviet Union immediately filled the military vacuum in Ethiopia, consequently abandoning its current proxy of Somalia. By July over \$500 million worth of Soviet arms flooded into Ethiopia, dwarfing the previous US aid.²² Beyond the military hardware, which included everything from MiG-21 fighters to SAM-7 anti-aircraft missiles, military personnel from the Soviet Union, the Warsaw Pact nations, Cuba, the People's Democratic Republic of Yemen, and Libya arrived to bolster and train the Ethiopian Army.²³ During the siege of Massawa it was reported that Soviet advisors took a direct part in the fighting against the Eritreans and even that Soviet naval vessels provided shore bombardment to help drive away the EPLF advance.²⁴ Over 11,000 Cuban troops served openly in the Ogaden War, helping to halt their recently abandoned Somali allies and aiding in their eventual defeat over the next year.²⁵

This massive aid continued, with 1978 shipments of advanced arms raising the total price of material aid to over \$1 billion.²⁶ Tanks, rocket batteries, fighter planes, and long-range artillery were all provided, along with the expertise to effectively use them. Small arms arrived in almost obscene amounts as the Ethiopian army rose like a phoenix from its past four years of defeats. This staggering amount of military aid could only have one effect on the Eritrean struggle: strategic stalemate and eventual losses. As mentioned in passing previously, the EPLF had made a bold strike at Massawa in late 1977, driving the Ethiopian troops from the city to the fortified naval base and two small islands off shore. However, this was to be the high-water mark of the liberation struggle for the next seven years, as the EPLF could not attain complete control of the city and were then left to face the counteroffensive of the resurgent Eastern Bloc-backed Ethiopian Army, which was able to focus its energies on Eritrea following their victory in the Ogaden in 1978.

The Ethiopian counteroffensives of 1978–79 were not tactically or strategically brilliant, but the massive amount of men and material mustered meant that even a blunt series of assaults achieved significant battlefield results. By 21 June 1978 there were reportedly 70,000 Ethiopian troops massed

in Tigray preparing for the upcoming offensive, and by July those numbers had risen to over 100,000, which, even if they were not superbly trained, were at least equipped with new and effective materiel.²⁷ By mid-July the offensive was underway, as multiple spearheads of Ethiopian armour and troops penetrated Tigray and southwestern Eritrea, with the heaviest blows landing on the ELF areas. By 21 July the ELF had been driven from the majority of their captured cities and towns in the western lowlands and the central highlands, exposing the western edge of the EPLF domains. Offensives also began from the Ethiopian garrisons of Massawa and Asmara, further sowing confusion and battering the overstretched Eritrean forces. The responses of the liberation fronts took different forms: the ELF attempted to hold its ground against the Ethiopian steamroller while the EPLF announced several “tactical withdrawals,” in the process abandoning recent gains around such cities as Decamare and Massawa.²⁸ The results also differed: in their attempt to hold their ground against the massed Ethiopian forces the ELF inflicted great casualties against them but also sealed their own fate. Already battered by years of warfare and having been waning in prestige in comparison to the more radical and organized EPLF, the ELF was essentially broken as a military force following the Ethiopian attacks of the late 1970s, and its remaining forces were slowly absorbed into the EPLF over the next several years. The EPLF lost a great amount of territory and also abandoned many carefully cultivated base areas, but it escaped complete destruction and instead re-entrenched in Keren and the Sahel region of the northwest, which continued to serve as safe liberated base areas for the Eritreans.

Of course, this had only been the first counteroffensive of the Ethiopian forces. The second round of attacks was directed at the EPLF stronghold of Keren in November 1978.²⁹ Featuring vicious struggles between veteran EPLF guerrillas and heavily armoured Ethiopian columns, the second offensive again showcased the military skill of the EPLF in inflicting significant casualties against the Ethiopian forces, but the disparity in men and materiel remained too great. This is not to say the Ethiopians simply came on in waves; since the influx of Soviet advisors and material, their tactics had evolved, and by using multiple columns of armour and advancing along several parallel paths, they forced the EPLF to spread their already meagre forces more thinly, exacerbating the disparity in numbers.

These new tactics had their effect, and on 26 November the EPLF forces abandoned Keren and fell back on their base areas around Nacfa and in the mountains of the Sahel, their last safe haven in the country. It was to prove an especially effective one, however, with the mountainous terrain and prepared logistical and defensive positions serving the Eritreans very well in the months to come.

RECOVERY AND VICTORY

1979 and 1980 saw the Eritrean forces at bay but certainly not defeated. Ethiopian forces launched their third, fourth, and fifth offensives in 1979 and achieved nothing against the prepared and veteran EPLF. These strikes comprised over 50,000 Ethiopian troops supported by massive amounts of armour and artillery and yet were unable to make any measurable headway against the base areas of the EPLF.³⁰ In eight days between 14 and 22 July, the Ethiopian army lost approximately 6,000 men. Indiscriminate bombing against the base regions was resumed but caused little damage, as the Eritrean workshops, schools, and hospitals were generally either well camouflaged or subterranean by this point in the war. 1980 brought a general stalemate on the front while the army continued to “pacify” its reclaimed regions of Eritrea. These efforts included the return of numerous human rights violations and often indiscriminate violence, especially against the restructured villages that the EPLF had created in their previous zones of control. However, due to the popularity of the EPLF social programs which had been established, this harsh treatment simply continued the alienation of the Eritrean populace and allowed the EPLF guerrilla activities to continue almost unhindered behind Ethiopian lines.

The last major event of 1980 was the final destruction of the ELF. While its military forces had been essentially broken in the fighting and retreats of 1978–79, the last guerrilla vestiges still existed in the very western reaches of Eritrea near the Sudan border. With their strength almost gone and yet still standing astride the vital lifeline to food relief shipments, the ELF was more of a hindrance than a help to the EPLF’s continued struggle. A brief conflict ensued wherein the EPLF, aided by their erstwhile allies in the TPLF, finally drove the remnants of the ELF into the Sudan where they would serve no further role in the conflict.³¹ There now officially remained

only one dominant Eritrean nationalist force carrying on the struggle, but it was one that had withstood years of civil and external war and had established itself as the more revolutionary and pragmatic of the two. By 1982 its strength would again be put to the test against the massive Ethiopian “Red Star” offensive.

The personnel gathered for the “Red Star” campaign (so named by Mengistu as a parallel to the contemporary “Bright Star” US exercises in the Mideast) was the largest concentration of military manpower seen so far in the conflict. The total military strength for Ethiopia at this point stood at 245,000, by far the largest army in Africa. The offensive itself saw 120,000 troops deployed against the Eritrean forces, although most of these were conscript troops with little training who were mostly used for massive blunt assaults against the EPLF positions.³² Thus, although they outnumbered their Eritrean opponents by eight to one, the assaults often ended in bloody repulses, and by the end of the campaign over 40,000 of these Ethiopian conscripts would be casualties. By May 1982 the offensive had not even captured Nacfa, and in June the Ethiopian armed forces ceased operations. Despite it being their largest campaign to date, the Ethiopians still could not dislodge the Eritreans. With the failure of the “Red Star” campaign and its small follow-up “Stealth Offensive” of 1983, the strategic initiative returned to the battered Eritrean forces, and they began to hesitatingly advance against the spent Ethiopian forces in 1984. Although the Ethiopian forces continued to expand (topping 340,000 men in total in 1983 alone) and launched several counteroffensives in 1984 and 1985, they would never come so close to winning the war again.

The 1985 offensive was the largest yet and drove the Eritreans back from their recent gains with their largest losses to date (approximately 2,000–4,000 personnel killed and wounded), but this setback was primarily due to the Eritreans’ switch from guerrilla to mobile warfare (which will be covered later in this chapter). The Eritrean repulse of the 1984–85 offensives saw the EPLF consolidate their hold on their western liberated zones and grow their forces from approximately 12,000 formal fighters to 30,000 by 1987, when their major counteroffensives began.³³ Drawing strength from their liberated areas and transforming the villages and cities they captured, the EPLF drove the Ethiopian forces back step by step and used their extremely effective social and relief organizations to help

mitigate the effects of the massive famine that had been underway since the early 1980s. It was in these advances that the Eritreans began functioning effectively as conventional forces, taking and holding the ground they were traversing and forcing an Ethiopian response. The mobile warfare phase of the EPLF finally drew the Ethiopian forces into a decisive battle at Afabet on 17 March 1988, and over the next two days proceeded to annihilate the Ethiopian Northern Command.³⁴ Over 15,000 Ethiopian soldiers were killed and massive amounts of small arms, artillery, tanks, and ammunition fell into the hands of the ever-stronger EPLF.³⁵ Although the Ethiopian forces still existed in strength throughout Eritrea and would continue to struggle against the Eritrean liberation, they would never pose an adequate threat against the Eritreans after Afabet and were, despite their size and equipment, a broken force. In February 1990 Massawa fell to a rapid advance of the EPLF forces, who this time conquered the island bases with a small flotilla of rubber craft. By February and March 1991, Asmara fell to EPLF siege. The remainders of the Ethiopian garrisons of Asmara and Keren attempted to retreat to the Sudan and the vast majority of the combined force was captured en route. The struggle in Eritrea was essentially over, but one last act remained.

In January 1989 the TPLF had joined with a number of other ethnic liberation fronts in Ethiopia to form the combined Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF). As the most veteran of all the organizations, the TPLF took the lead in the organization, and by February 1989 had driven the Ethiopian army completely from Tigray. Although relations had ruptured between the EPLF and TPLF in 1985, they had been restored during the successes of 1988, and the EPLF had sent a detachment to aid in the final liberation of Tigray and beyond.³⁶ Working side by side with the EPRDF from 1989 on, the combined force held Tigray and built its strength until February 1991. Despite the obviously growing threat from the combined forces of the various liberation fronts, the Ethiopian government found itself unable to muster an effective response. Beginning in the late 1980s, their Soviet benefactors had already been reducing their aid as internal tensions fostered by the strain of the Cold War weakened them from within. By 1989 the arms shipments and logistical support from the Soviet Union had dried up, leaving the already ailing Derg regime without its most important patron. While some smaller allies such as North Korea

would offer Mengistu's regime aid until the end, it would not be enough to revive the Derg's strength.

From February on, the EPRDF launched a series of offensives, including "Operation Teodros," "Operation Dula Billisuma Welkita" (Oromo for "Equality and Freedom Campaign"), and finally "Operation Walleign," which finally brought an end to Mengistu's Ethiopian regime when the dictator fled on 21 May 1991.³⁷ This effectively ended Ethiopian resistance and brought the TPLF-led coalition to power in Ethiopia. One of its first acts was to keep its previous promise to the EPLF and sponsor a resolution in the United Nations for the recognition of Eritrea as its own sovereign state. The thirty-year struggle for Eritrean liberation was over, and following a 1993 referendum, Eritrea joined the world as the first successful secession on African soil.

THE REASONS FOR SUCCESS

Of course, the first major question that must spring to mind is: Why was this secession, of all attempts, successful? It did not have the foreign support or uncertainty regarding the concept of secession that Katanga had in its attempt. It did not have the humanitarian outcry of Biafra. The same factors that doomed all previous attempts and have since hobbled all subsequent attempted secessions applied to Eritrea: a lack of international recognition, a limited supply of arms, a finite and tenuous resource base, and an international consensus against the feared "balkanization" of African states. So what was it about the Eritrean case that allowed its anomalous success? What factors did the Eritrean conflict (and the EPLF in particular) have that set it apart from all the others so far and since? The answer is a tight combination of four interwoven factors that allowed Eritrea to achieve its successes. These four factors are (1) its unique historical development and the effects this had on the framing of the conflict, (2) the brilliant and ultimately successful application of the Maoist concept of Protracted War, (3) the simultaneous social revolution undertaken by the victorious party and its ultimate effect of forging a national identity, and (4) lastly, the pragmatic and decisive relations the EPLF constructed with the reform insurgencies going on in Ethiopia at the time of their revolt.

An Anomalous History

To deal with these factors in order, the first is the anomalous history of Eritrea in terms of its relations with Ethiopia. The historical basis of secessions has always been seen as a vital factor in separating a body politic from its host state. Katanga argued for its independence from the Congo based on its previous separate administration during the colonial era under the *Comité spécial du Katanga*. Biafra pointed to the historically separate administrations for each Nigerian region as well as their political separation from the North prior to 1914 as the grounds for both a confederal solution and their own secession. For Eritrea, their history with Ethiopia allowed for an even stronger and perhaps more effective argument. Although Ethiopia argued that Eritrea was their fourteenth province and was historically part of the Ethiopian empire, Eritrea could, would, and did maintain that their history not only placed them well outside the Ethiopian sphere of influence but that also that their development during the colonial period culturally and socially severed whatever historical ties might originally have been extant.

To begin with the history of Eritrea, the earliest connections that can be made to Ethiopia were to the Axumite kingdoms of the inland plateaus. By the fourth century CE, the Axumite expansion introduced Coptic Christianity to the highland plateaus that would form the heartland of both Ethiopia and Eritrea.³⁸ These kingdoms waxed powerful and even exerted a small amount of influence on the non-Christian peoples who lived along the coastal plains by the Red Sea, particularly at the economically thriving port of Adulis. However, these early links were severed permanently by the Muslim expansion of the seventh and eighth centuries CE.³⁹ By approximately 750 CE the Muslim influence had driven the power of the Axumite kingdoms and their Coptic faith from both the coastal lowlands and the Sudan. This spread of Islamic strength helped the nascent Beja kingdoms coalesce, and they quickly expanded their own influence onto the central plateau region, essentially severing the ancient “Ethiopian” control over whatever regions might now constitute Eritrea. In the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries the resurgent Ethiopians themselves had become recentralized and strong enough to challenge the Muslim states again and contested the central highlands, in a period that marked increased Christian influence. However, control of the lowlands still eluded the Ethiopians,

and these plains would continue to be both an alien region and a staging ground for invaders for the next five centuries.⁴⁰ Throughout the sixteenth century the various Islamic empires of the region, especially the Ottomans, would give military aid to the Muslim coastal groups, leading to a contested existence for the fertile plateaus. By the end of the century a variety of sources referred to the region encompassing the coastal plains and the central plateau region as *Medhi Bahri* and viewed this nascent Eritrea as politically and culturally separate from Ethiopia.⁴¹ In fact, from Eritrea's growth as a regional economic hub to its sublimation into the Egypt of Muhammed Ali and his successors from 1823 to its eventual fate as an Italian colony, Ethiopia could only claim partial control of the region for a period of nine years between 1880 and 1889.

Even following this partial control, in 1889 the Italians claimed full sovereign rights to the territory, as stipulated first in its recognition by the other European powers at the Berlin Conference of 1885 and later by Ethiopia itself in the Treaty of Uccialli in 1889. Admittedly the Treaty of Uccialli was and remains a controversial document. While the Amharic translation signed by Menelik II was written as saying that the Ethiopians "might" use Italy as intermediaries to the rest of Europe, the Italian version essentially subordinated Ethiopian foreign policy to Italy.⁴² However, despite this argument of interpretation, the treaty still clearly demarcated the boundaries of Eritrea and recognized the Italian sphere of influence over the *Medri Bahri*. Tellingly, even after the destruction of the Italian army at Adowa in 1896, Menelik did not conquer Eritrea as an Ethiopian possession. Instead the Treaty of Addis Ababa (signed 23 October 1896) reaffirmed Italian hegemony over an expanded Eritrea.⁴³ From this time until their defeat in 1941, the Italian occupation would serve to physically and culturally develop Eritrea as a separate and distinct entity far different from the feudal empire that Ethiopia remained.

Italian development played a decisive part in the creation of Eritrea. While admittedly the Eritreans themselves were seen as second-class subjects, the development of the Eritrean colony would have far-ranging implications for their culture and society. The displacement of previous notables in favour of Italian elites was perhaps the first major change, altering the traditional power structure of the region.⁴⁴ Mass plantation farming and wage labour was introduced, as large farms producing cotton, fruit, sisal,

and coffee were set up and large numbers of Eritreans were recruited to work these fields to grow and harvest the produce for Italian consumption.⁴⁵ Mining was also introduced and continually expanded to produce the raw materials that the developing Italian state needed. Gold, iron, nickel, chromium, and other minerals were found and an effort was made to increase the exploitation of Eritrea's mineral wealth all the way into the 1930s and 1940s.⁴⁶ To help support this economy and develop other forms of it for their benefit, the Italians introduced improved medical and veterinary practices. In addition they instituted secular education for young men up to the fourth grade. The introduction of heavier industries and economic development also meant an expansion of infrastructure to take full advantage of the growing economy. A railway was built between Massawa, Asmara, and Agordat in 1922. An intricate network of all-weather roads was completed in 1935, primarily to aid in the military mobilization taking place in the colony. Telephone and telegraph lines were laid, and eventually airports were built to connect the burgeoning cities to the rest of the Italian Empire. Even the cities were expanded, as row houses were built to house the workers of over 300 small-scale workshops and industries around the major urban centres of Massawa, Asmara, and Assab, where increasing numbers of young Eritreans moved to earn wages to pay the new taxes being levied on them.⁴⁷ By 1935, the year that thousands of Eritrean soldiers invaded Ethiopia along with their Italian colonists, Eritrea no longer resembled its highland neighbour socially, economically, or culturally.

From 1936 to 1941, Ethiopia and Eritrea were briefly linked, but this was under the domination of Benito Mussolini's fascist military forces following the driving of Haile Selassie from his kingdom. This five-year period saw Eritrea continually used as a logistical base for the further expansion of the Italian Empire in East Africa, an empire that would be contemptuously dismantled by the British East African forces in 1941. While Ethiopia was handed back to Haile Selassie, Eritrea remained under the rule of a British military commission, which continued to use it as a light industrial centre for the war effort in the region. The United States used the former colony as a depot for its regional shipping and even constructed an airplane assembly plant at Gura. Britain leaned even more heavily upon the former colony, using its facilities to create trade goods for markets in the Horn that had been isolated by the closure of the Suez Canal to Italian trade early in

the war. The Eritrean economy experienced a boom as it produced soap, matches, hand tools, beer, wine, and paper for regional trade. Simultaneously, Eritrean social structures were experiencing an “Eritreanization” under British auspices. Lesser administrative positions were opened to the Eritreans and the colour bar was slowly lowered on a variety of social functions. Education was again revitalized, and Arabic, Tigrinya, and English were taught in over sixty schools.⁴⁸ Public health services again became available and the colony continued its modernization.

Following the war the boom dried up, but the social and cultural changes remained. However, there was still the sticky question of what must be done with Eritrea. The outcome of this question has already been dealt with at the beginning of this narrative, but the import of it to both sides remains the key issue here. While Ethiopia can and did point toward the earnest desire of large swathes of Eritrean society that did indeed wish for union with Ethiopia, those who dissented had a powerful argument against union and one that they continued to use to support the cause of secession. That argument was a simple one: at no point could Ethiopia point toward a historic connection between the two nations, at least not one that was of recent enough vintage to truly matter. Even the brief periods of late nineteenth-century influence were themselves either not indicative of any formal connection or, as in the terms of the Treaty of Ucciali, formally renounced under international law. Furthermore, the Eritreans could and did argue that their separate evolution both socially and culturally in the decades of colonialism certainly put themselves outside any Ethiopian state that had existed throughout those decades. Whereas Ethiopia remained a largely feudal agricultural state that was run by a small aristocracy living off masses of downtrodden peasants, Eritrea was a semi-industrialized state with light industry, cash crop plantations, wage labour, and a flourishing administration, including a burgeoning political system made up of educated elites. As such, any claimed “union” between the two, whether it was historical or present, was spurious at best.

Thus, following the forced federation of the two states in 1952, and especially following the dissolution of the Eritrean Assembly in 1962, the Eritrean opposition did not see themselves as a movement of a political body separating itself from a host nation. Instead they saw themselves as engaged in a decolonization struggle against an African colonizer. This

can be seen in a variety of literature, press statements, and even within the language used by the fronts themselves. Every group to emerge was a liberation front with nationalist intentions to free their nation from the control of an oppressive outside invader. The Eritreans would constantly make this argument throughout their struggle and made every effort to frame it as such. This was an important point for a very specific reason: as shown by the example of every secession struggle previous to that of Eritrea, the Organization of African Unity and the United Nations would brook no successful secession for fear of a domino effect and the balkanization of Africa.⁴⁹ Simply put, no international recognition could be expected and no international aid could be sought by a secessionist group. In fact, it would be far more likely to attract outright hostility and support for the host nation, in this case Ethiopia.⁵⁰ However, with the Eritrean struggle cast as one of decolonization, a whole new world of possibilities opened up. In terms of the OAU, which dominated any discussions of international interest on the continent, decolonization struggles were sacrosanct. Article II of the OAU Charter proclaimed that one of the primary purposes of the organization was “to eradicate all forms of colonialism from Africa,” and article III, while serving as an insurmountable barrier to secession, declared “absolute dedication to the emancipation of the African territories which are still dependent” as one of the core principles of the union.⁵¹ By casting their struggle as one of decolonization, then, the Eritreans avoided one of the key hurdles to every previous and following secession attempt on the continent of Africa. The OAU would never support the Eritrean efforts at any point during the struggle, but this recasting of the conflict as a liberation struggle did allow for legal wiggle room on what had been an airtight condemnation of any separation of African states, something that would have been doubly difficult in Ethiopia, symbol of African resistance and resilience and home to the OAU headquarters.

The Strategy of a Protracted Struggle

The legality of the secession/liberation would have been moot if the conflict waged to effect it had been crushed. Katanga and Biafra could argue their cases all they wished, but at the end of the day their states were overrun by enemy forces and their leadership was forced to declare an end to the

separation. In comparison, the military campaign for the future of Eritrea was brilliantly successful. While the conception of it as a Long War has already been touched upon in the introduction to Part II, Eritrea stands out even among other secession and liberation attempts for being an exceptionally successful application of the military dictums of Mao's theory of protracted warfare, a theoretical construct that served the purposes of Eritrea extremely well with only slight modifications. In this, Eritrea's success resembled nothing so much as the previous anti-colonial struggles of both China⁵² and Vietnam.⁵³ Their application of this theory cannot be especially surprising, given that contemporary African liberation fronts were taking advantage of it (most notably Amilcar Cabral's PAIGC against the Portuguese) and that many early figures in the EPLF leadership had received military training in China during their tenure in the ELF.⁵⁴ What is astonishing is the extremely clear application of these theories and their remarkable effectiveness against the Ethiopian enemy.

Mao laid out his military philosophy in a series of lectures presented over the period of the Chinese Civil War and the Sino-Japanese war of 1937–1945. Noting that the Communist Chinese forces were weak in comparison to both the Kuomintang (KMT) of Chiang Kai-Shek and the Army of Imperial Japan, he laid out the strategic vision necessary to effectively prosecute the conflict against these enemies for the ultimate victory of his revolutionary forces. Perhaps central to the military canon of Mao is his work "On Protracted War," which lays out the three stages that a revolutionary army must pass through during its protracted struggle with a superior enemy. The first is the period of Strategic Defence.⁵⁵ It is a given that the revolutionary forces will be smaller, worse supplied, and unable to resist the counter-revolutionary forces in the early stages of a conflict. The ability of a centrally organized and legitimate opponent to both generate its own support and gain outside aid will always outweigh that of a revolution in a semi-feudal nation to begin with. This early stage must of necessity be one of defence and retreat. The primary course of action for the revolutionary front must be that of survival while extending the enemy further and depleting his strength. For Mao this was easy given the vast distances involved in China. Without these distances, alternative methods of survival would have to be applied, as will be seen in the following analysis.⁵⁶ As the enemy reached the terminal edge of his operational distance and the threat

of imminent annihilation passed, the revolutionaries could transition into the second phase.

The second phase as delineated by Mao was the Strategic Stalemate.⁵⁷ This occurred when the enemy had extended himself to his current limit but the revolutionaries were not yet strong enough to take the initiative. In this phase the revolutionaries then had two primary goals: the prosecution of guerrilla warfare and the mobilization of the populace. In terms of the prosecution of the guerrilla war, it was assumed that it would still be impossible to combat the counter-revolutionary forces directly, but yet it was necessary to continue to reduce his strength, in order to both safeguard the revolution and create the factors necessary to transition to the third phase. The countryside would become the home of guerrilla bands, sent to harass and damage the enemy's extended supply lines and communications. The counter-revolutionary's food and ammunition were to be hijacked or destroyed, his ability to transmit information disrupted, and his security outside areas of concentrated strength compromised as much as possible. A simultaneous objective was the mobilization of the populace, which was to take place in several safeguarded base areas. These areas, made secure by remote location, strong defences, or secrecy, were to serve as centres of production, education, and social transformation. By offering a strong alternative to the currently unpopular counter-revolutionary government, these base areas would grow the strength of the revolution by mobilizing the populace to either directly serve the revolution as fighters or indirectly serve it by producing the logistical necessities for the prosecution of the conflict. Thus, during the second phase a process of the simultaneous weakening of the enemy and strengthening of the revolutionaries would take place until the balance of power had firmly tipped in the favour of the revolution, when the final stage of the protracted conflict would begin.

This final stage was that of the Strategic Offensive.⁵⁸ Having weakened the enemy, harassed his communications, taken the security of the countryside from him, and mobilized and organized its own strength in terms of both quality and quantity of forces, the revolution could now transition from its combination of guerrilla and defensive warfare to one of guerrilla and offensive mobile warfare. While the guerrillas could continue to exist and pursue their missions throughout the countryside, the main force of the revolution would now fight in mobile conventional formations,

seeking to stalk, confront, and destroy the now inferior counter-revolutionary forces. The entire purpose of the transition to mobile warfare was to use the greater agility of the revolutionary forces (who were not hampered by the great distances of communication or a hostile countryside) to concentrate an insurmountable force against the isolated enemy formations and force a decisive confrontation that would see the destruction of the opponent. With this achieved, it was simply necessary to repeat the process in the strategic offensive until all enemy formations were destroyed or driven from the revolutionary state. This would conclude hostilities and secure peace on the terms of the revolutionary front.

A key concept within this theory of protracted conflict (and one that we will see was decisive in terms of the Eritrean case), was Mao's enunciation and acceptance of the Strategic Retreat. While this was implicit in "On Protracted War," he had more fully delineated the concept in his earlier lecture "Problems of Strategy in China's Revolutionary War," where he began his exploration with the pronouncement "The objective of strategic retreat is to conserve military strength and prepare for the counteroffensive. Retreat is necessary because not to retreat a step before the onset of a strong enemy means to jeopardize the preservation of one's own forces."⁵⁹ This retreat would follow a number of strategic precepts to ensure the maximum benefit was to be gained even as the forces pulled back from a superior enemy. The first precept was that the retreat should always take advantage of prepared interior lines to safely fall back on prepared base areas from which the revolutionary forces could derive strength. The second was that the retreat should always be undertaken unless at least two of the following conditions could be met, if not more: the revolutionaries had the active support of the populace; the terrain was favourable for operations, all of the main revolutionary forces were concentrated, the enemy's weak spots had been discovered, the enemy had been reduced to a tired and demoralized state, or the enemy had been induced to make mistakes. When two of these conditions had been met, it would signal the opportunity to switch from the strategic withdrawal to the offensive yet again.⁶⁰ However, it must always be remembered that Mao intended the strategic retreat to create these favourable advantages, and thus to both preserve the revolutionary forces and enable their future success.

Finally, underpinning all of these concepts was Mao's stated Principles of Operation, as enunciated in his lecture "The Present Situation and Our Tasks."⁶¹ These were a list of ten operational concepts that would serve as the philosophical basis for the greater strategic thinking of the Protracted War. The first was to prioritize attacking dispersed and isolated enemies, leaving concentrated enemy strong points for later operations. The second instructed the revolutionaries to occupy large rural areas and small and medium-sized cities first, leaving large urban areas for later. The third directed the combatants to focus their efforts on the reduction and demolition of their opponent's effective strength before all other things; when the enemy's strength had been broken, cities, towns, and other strategic areas would fall far more easily. The fourth exhorted the revolutionary forces to only fight when absolute numerical superiority was on their side (at least double their opponent's strength) and then, when fighting, to seek to encircle and annihilate their foe—use their numbers and mobility to complete dismantle their enemy and avoid costly battles of attrition. The fifth instructs the revolutionaries to fight no battle unprepared and without absolute surety of victory. The sixth instructs the combatants to be selfless in combat and ignore fear of sacrifice and fatigue and be accepting of the necessity of fighting several successive battles. The seventh points to the advantage of using mobile warfare to overcome the enemy but advises not to neglect positional tactics when reducing the enemy's fixed points. The eighth commands the revolutionary front to resolutely seize all strong points if a city must be attacked, taking care to use timing and aggression to overcome them and waiting for opportune moments if one must attack the defences of a large city. The ninth addresses the material strength of the revolutionaries: they must "replenish [their] strength with all the arms and most of the personnel captured from the enemy. [Their] main sources of manpower and material are at the front."⁶² And the final principle explains the necessity of using intervals between fighting to rest, train, and consolidate, but also to not let these intervals grow so long as to let the enemy relax. These ten main principles served as the basic tactical thinking in the greater scheme of the strategic thought of the Protracted War.

Now, if we examine these concepts in terms of the Eritrean struggle, it is striking how often they align with the key events of the war itself and its eventual successful conclusion. The three stages of the Protracted War can

be clearly seen, with the conflict actually repeating part of the evolution of the struggle to adapt to the changing situation. The strategic retreat was to prove a decisive factor in the determination of the dominant liberation front. The base areas that were to provide so much of the logistical strength are obviously in evidence, so much so that an entire section following this one will be devoted to them and the social revolution they housed. And lastly, although documented evidence for all of them is certainly not forthcoming and sometimes the principles were ignored (often to the detriment of the cause), a great many of Mao's principles of operation can be seen quite plainly in the Eritrean prosecution of their struggle.

In terms of the protracted struggle itself, the experience of the ELF and (to a far greater degree) the EPLF reflected the Maoist thought at work in African liberation struggles of time. The Strategic Defence period can originally be seen in the early days of the struggle, specifically from 1961 to approximately 1968. During this time the ELF had fled from the urban centres that had originally been its political bases to the western Sahel region while its leadership existed in exile in Cairo. As pressure from the Ethiopian military drove them farther from their original base areas, they often found themselves retreating to new base areas across the border in the Sudan, where the new waves of university-educated recruits found them.⁶³ It was during this period of limited guerrilla activity and cross-border withdrawals that the liberation front husbanded its strength until it was ready to begin formal expansion within Eritrea proper.

After this limited example of the ELF facing an initial Ethiopian effort, the conception of the strategic defensive and retreat is seen far more clearly in response to the Soviet-backed offensives of 1978, where the EPLF found itself facing a massive resurgent Ethiopian army that had tipped the balance of power back in favour of Mengistu's state. The EPLF leadership determined that any attempt to hold on to their hard-won gains against the steamrolling Ethiopian forces would endanger the survival of the revolution itself. The EPLF therefore abandoned what they considered "secondary" objectives such as Massawa and Keren in order to consolidate their forces and attempt to bring about a future situation where the balance of power might be more equal. Their forces retreated in a series of holding actions all the way back to their base region around Nacfa, which had been prepared for a prolonged static positional defence. Tellingly, EPLF fighters

even referred to this withdrawal as their “Long March,” equating it with the 1934–35 long strategic retreat of Mao’s own forces to the vast spaces of western China. Once ensconced in Nacfa, the EPLF forces were able to bring about far more advantageous conditions, including better fighting terrain, a consolidation of forces, and a completely loyal and enthusiastic general population that would serve as an excellent logistical base. By the time the Ethiopians had prepared their next offensives, the Eritrean forces had already created the conditions to transition to the strategic stalemate and to begin dismantling their pursuers. On the other hand, the fate of the ELF over the same period perhaps does even more to reflect the efficacy of the Maoist strategy. Although they faced a far greater concerted assault than the EPLF, the ELF leadership refused to enact a strategic retreat and instead chose to fight the Ethiopians from their newly liberated areas. Within weeks the ELF lines were broken and they were retreating in a panic.⁶⁴ In the aftermath of the Ethiopian offensives the ELF was spent as a military force and the vast majority of its fighters were absorbed into the now safely entrenched EPLF.

As to the strategic stalemate, again several periods of the Eritrean conflict fit within the Maoist framework. From 1968 to 1974 both the ELF and the emerging EPLF were establishing those regions that would serve as their base areas and slowly expanding their guerrilla operations. During this time Haile Selassie’s army was under constant harassment and could not effectively deal with the swarming raids that were taking their toll on communications and logistics. It was also during this period that both fronts established their social programs, which defined the Eritrea they each hoped to bring about following the conflict. In spreading these ideals and social frameworks, they also established their base areas from which further expansion of their forces could come. Frontline fighters and militia were recruited, workshops and medical services were established, and new political organizations were formed. It was this process of winning over the populace that again created the conditions for the transition to the next stage of combat.

The strategic stalemate was also illustrated in the Nacfa period following the strategic retreat of 1978 and lasting until approximately 1984. Much as the “Long March” of the EPLF better illustrated the conception of the strategic retreat, the Nacfa period better shows the idea of the

strategic stalemate, reflecting the increasing maturity of the EPLF military command. As mentioned, the retreat to Nacfa accomplished a number of strategic objectives: it preserved the nationalist front's armed forces, it consolidated them in the face of overwhelming enemy forces, it established them closer to their own base of support in Nacfa and northern Eritrea, it established their forces in far more advantageous terrain, and it also forced the Ethiopian forces to extend themselves and their lines of communication even farther into rugged Eritrean territory. With these factors established, the Eritreans needed to accomplish two simple military goals: grow their own strength while reducing that of the Ethiopians in preparation for a strategic counteroffensive. To accomplish these goals, the Eritreans resorted to a combination of positional and guerrilla warfare.⁶⁵ The guerrillas wreaked havoc on the extended Ethiopian lines of communication, while the fortified lines of the Eritreans withstood four separate offensives in 1979 alone. These offensives cost the Ethiopians massive amounts of men and materiel, while the Eritreans reaped a large amount of captured arms and ammunition.⁶⁶ The lines were again tested in 1982 by the "Red Star" campaign, which again did little more than waste massive amounts of men and armaments while increasing Eritrean morale and arms caches. With this the Eritreans felt they were ready to enter the counteroffensive stage by 1983, but a series of local counterattacks by the still massive Ethiopian forces, including one of comparable size to the "Red Star," took place during 1983–1985, delaying but not denying the inevitable shift in strategic initiative and strength that signalled the beginnings of the final strategic offensive stage of the war.⁶⁷

However, the strategic offensives of 1987–1991 were not the first of the struggle. Following the strategic stalemate period of 1974, the downfall of Haile Selassie and the confusion and excesses of the Derg led to a tipping of the scales in terms of power and strategic initiative. Both the ELF and EPLF, flush with recruits and captured weapons, went on the offensive and slowly but surely expanded their territory to control the vast majority of Eritrea. This was the period during which Asmara was cut off from Massawa in the standard practice of isolating the cities and saving them for last. Local superiority allowed the EPLF to capture Keren in an astonishingly brief assault.⁶⁸ During 1974–1978 both liberation fronts did their best to liberate the countryside, educate and mobilize the populace, and

then slowly envelop the cities. This course was only reversed when the unexpected military intervention of the Soviets suddenly altered the balance of forces again and made the conditions supremely unfavourable for the strategic offensive of the Eritreans. This left 1978 as the high-water mark of the struggle until the reopening of the strategic offensive in 1987 by the EPLF and its allied liberation fronts.

The final counteroffensives beginning in 1987 were due to a combination of factors that weakened the Ethiopians severely and at least kept the EPLF from suffering the same fate. The failed offensives of 1979–1985 drained the Ethiopian forces of men and weapons and emboldened the large number of guerrilla fronts now actively fighting within Ethiopia itself. Beyond military overreach, Ethiopia was in the midst of one of the most severe famines the world had ever seen. Although food aid was diverted to their military, Ethiopia was slowly starving, and popular support of the Mengistu regime was almost nonexistent. In opposition to this the EPLF was as strong as it had ever been. It had absorbed what was left of the ELF's armed forces, it had captured a vast amount of military hardware from the Ethiopian forces over the course of their failed attacks in the north, it had fostered several of the now mature guerrilla fronts that were tearing their enemy apart from the inside, and while not well stocked with food by any means, their base areas produced some amount of food and their efficient social programs such as the Eritrean Relief Association ensured that they were at least not in as bad a shape as the Ethiopians.

The balance of power had shifted for the last time, and the strategic offensive began in December 1987 as the EPLF forces overran the Ethiopian defences outside Nacfa. Their mobile conventional forces sought out local advantages against the weakening Ethiopian forces in an attempt to obtain a decisive victory and on 17 March 1988 secured one. The Battle of Afabet raged for three days and saw the complete destruction of the Ethiopian Northern Command. There were over 15,000 Ethiopian casualties and the EPLF again captured vast stocks of arms and vehicles, including over fifty tanks. Whereas the Eritreans compared their earlier withdrawal with the famous "Long March," now the world took notice and compared Afabet with Dien Bien Phu, the decisive Vietnamese victory over the French colonial forces in the first Indochina war.⁶⁹ From this point the offensive was essentially unbroken and the Eritrean forces could even feel the momentum

on the ground level.⁷⁰ The crushing loss, combined with the drying up of Soviet support for Mengistu's regime, sapped the strength of any Ethiopian resistance. The countryside was overrun, in 1990 Massawa and Decamere were recaptured, and by 1991 Asmara and Addis Ababa were taken in the final offensives of the liberation struggle.

By holding true to Mao's conception of protracted warfare and not being afraid of adopting a defensive or even withdrawing pattern, the Eritrean Liberation movements endured the worst that an opponent alternatively armed by the two superpowers could throw at them. The idea of withdrawing from an enemy's strength until advantage was regained was internalized within the EPLF in particular and proved to be a decisive lesson. Without the outright defeat of the Ethiopian forces, no doubt the political separation of the two countries would have been an impossibility. However, Mao's lessons revolve around the idea of base areas and the loyalty and support of the people—the peasants and proletariat that provide the raw material for the struggle.⁷¹ Without these men and women, the armed forces would never win their victories and the guerrillas would be fish attempting to swim in a hostile sea. As such, the military victory of the Eritreans, again the EPLF in particular, stemmed ultimately from the social revolution they effected in the countryside and cities, which created an Eritrean identity and mobilized the populace. This mobilized populace in turn not only formed the base areas that offered succor and strength during the conflict but also served as the strong foundation for the emergent Eritrean nation.

A Social Revolution

While both fronts stressed the social transformation of Eritrea as a component of the struggle, the ELF was not as radical as their brethren in the EPLF and consequently did not effect such a startling transformation. While the ELF did establish medical and relief services under the Eritrean Red Cross–Red Crescent society, they did not expand the medical services well beyond this. In terms of their village restructuring, they tended to establish village committees but leave them in the hands of traditional powers of the village. While they did establish several mass organizations such as the General Union of Eritrean Workers, the General Union of Eritrean Students, the

Eritrean Women's General Union, the General Union of Eritrean Peasants, and the Eritrean Democratic Youth Union, these and the subsequent contributions to the struggle itself were more in the nature of reactions to the more radical political transformations going on in the EPLF.⁷² This was a pattern that was all too familiar, as the ELF tended to view the struggle as paramount and the social revolution as a secondary objective that could be handled after the war had been won. The ELF was forced to then react when the more developed and mature social programs of the EPLF began to draw in much greater support from the populace. To put it simply, the social programs of the ELF were generally shallow and reactive and consequently only generated shallow support for their cause. The effect of this policy can then be seen again in the aftermath of the 1978 reverses, where the ELF was displaced and shattered by the Ethiopian advance, whereas the EPLF had prepared loyal base regions to retreat through that welcomed them again when they returned to the offensive.⁷³

To create those loyal base regions the EPLF initiated an entirely transformative program and ideal for the emergent Eritrean consciousness. By building on a basis of five major mass organizations (for workers, peasants, women, students, and youth, just like the reactive organizations of the ELF) that began to operate openly in 1977 after years of clandestine organizing, the EPLF enunciated a completely transformative program that would alter the very fabric of Eritrean society. This program's stated goals would completely rebuild Eritrea in terms of agricultural production, industrial production, education, health care, and even gender relations.

In terms of agricultural production and relations, the Eritrean general program for reform called for a socialized agricultural sector with control placed back in the hands of the producers. In theory the program claimed its goals as including the nationalization of the lands expropriated by the Ethiopians and their feudal collaborators and revising this into larger collective farms for the use of the masses. It also sought to introduce more modern farming methods, including the use of machinery and modern fertilizers to help increase the productivity of the peasant class. For the still existing pastoralists, veterinary and breeding aid would be provided as well as financial aid to help them become sedentary and successful animal breeders. Beyond all these (and several other small provisions) it purported to allow for the amicable and fair resolution of land inequality

and ownership disputes while providing for the organization and collectivization of peasants so they might look after their own affairs.⁷⁴ For the most part these goals were reached. Self-sustaining cells of peasant organizers set up village committees that represented all strata of agricultural life. In such model villages as Zagher they oversaw the redistribution of land that had been monopolized by richer farming families and settled disputes within the community.⁷⁵ While this was a long process, by the end of the land redistribution large numbers of peasants who had never had land had plots of their own to tend to. Often surplus land could then be farmed collectively by the newly created farmers' association, the produce of which then went into a cooperative shop. The individual plots as well were allocated along the lines of the association membership, which organized them so as to allow the easier introduction of new farming techniques. The front even trained "barefoot veterinarians" along the lines of China's famous barefoot doctors to offer free veterinary services to the pastoral and agricultural population's animals.

Under the EPLF's guidance, similar alterations were made to the structure of industrial production and relations. Much as with the Ethiopian- and collaborator-owned land, the industries held by these proscribed groups would be nationalized along with the vital large industries of the nation itself, such as the ports, mines, public transport, and power. Meanwhile foreign-owned industries of a small scale would be allowed as long as the owners were from nations that had not opposed Eritrean independence.⁷⁶ To aid growth in the industrial sector, urban land would be made state property along with excess urban housing. The rent for this housing would then be set at a reasonable level for the standard of living in the region by the managing government. The citizens whose property was thus nationalized would be duly compensated for their losses.⁷⁷ In terms of the workers themselves, their rights were to be strictly safeguarded, partially by the organization and politicization of the workers themselves. These stated rights included an eight-hour work day and at maximum a six-day work week, as well as social safety nets for age and disability. The nationalized urban property would be made available to these organized workers to assure them decent living conditions. Most tellingly, the politicized workers would be given the right to "participate in the management and administration of enterprises and industries."⁷⁸ By offering the workers organizations,

security, and strong interest in the continuation of the national industries, the EPLF theoretically offered a complete revolution to the working class. Again, much as in the agricultural reforms, the EPLF were able to implement the vast majority of these programs while the struggle was still going on. During their administration of Keren in 1977 they retained the status of the previously nationalized housing but slashed the price of the rents, particularly the lowest rents, to further aid those distressed by the conflict.⁷⁹ They also changed the pay scale for workers, lowering those that were highest while dramatically increasing those that had been lowest.⁸⁰ As to the industries themselves, even as early as 1975–76 the EPLF liberated zones had a plurality of small cottage industries sustained by and sustaining the revolution. Woodworking collectives altered weaponry while machine shops fabricated parts for everything from weaponry to generators and agricultural machinery. The collective work, reform, and politicization of the industrial base of the revolution played a vital role in the conflict.

In every sector the greatest emphasis was placed on education. Free compulsory education, grants and scholarships, the establishment of more primary schools and institutes of higher education, and most importantly the pledge to “combat illiteracy to free the Eritrean people from the darkness of ignorance”⁸¹ were central to the educational revolution that the EPLF insisted on for their nation. While it might be thought that most of these goals could only effectively be pursued in peacetime, perhaps more than any other sector of its revolution the EPLF made education a ubiquitous part of their struggle. The EPLF demanded that all members serving in the front be literate in Arabic or Tingrinya and established this training for the both the older members and the “Vanguards,” the youth who were inducted into the struggle initially in non-combatant roles until they reached adulthood. These new inductees were also given education in history, political theory, first aid and public health, and other basic subjects. In the EPLF-run refugee camps and liberated towns, classes were given in political theory, the history of Eritrea, and most of all literacy. These same literacy courses were run out of the hospitals for those rehabilitating from injuries, as well as courses in geography and elementary math.⁸² Astonishingly these same sorts of courses were also provided to Ethiopian prisoners of war, the vast majority of whom were illiterate conscripted peasants and often from marginalized ethnic groups like the Oromo. Beyond the

training in the field, the EPLF established and ran over thirty-six schools in 1976 alone.⁸³ While it cannot be said that the education was given for entirely selfless reasons, as a cynical observer can easily claim that such education is better labelled indoctrination, it cannot be denied that the mass teaching of literacy altered the entire philosophical base of the nation and helped spread the conception of Eritrea as more than a collection of nine separate nationalities.

Hand in hand with education was the complete overhaul of public health services. The EPLF sought to establish a system of free public health care that not only treated the populace at large but served as a basis for locally manufactured medicines and as centres for the eradication of contagious diseases.⁸⁴ Public health was paramount, and by focusing their energies the EPLF made remarkable headway. Two tiers of medical training (a basic and an intermediate) were established to produce a greater number of qualified medical personnel to man the expanding programs as the movement gained maturity. As of 1977 alone the EPLF was operating four major hospitals with a combined capacity of nearly 1400 patients.⁸⁵ These facilities were equipped with basic medical necessities such as microscopes, refrigerators, and X-ray machines. Beyond these central hospitals, the front operated over twenty intermediate clinics established in liberated or semi-liberated areas to deal with regional patients, and even had limited in-patient capabilities. To supplement these formal facilities, teams of doctors were trained to travel the largely rural areas, in the mould of the “Barefoot Doctors,” to inoculate the populace as well as offer free medical care to the villages. Over the course of their struggle the EPLF extended medical services to the populace at large where there had been essentially no formal health services previously.

Lastly, and perhaps the most radical step taken in their social revolutionary program, the EPLF obliterated the previous conceptions of gender roles in their liberated areas. Whereas Eritrea had long been an extremely conservative and patriarchal state regardless of region, the EPLF explicitly stated their goals for women’s rights. Women were to be freed from domestic confinement and assured full rights of equality in representation, pay, and participation, and progressive marriage and family laws were to be established.⁸⁶ Beyond this the EPLF promised to respect the right to maternity leave, to provide maternal services, and even to try and eradicate

prostitution, which they viewed as a violent act against women. It would be right of an observer to be skeptical, though, as it is common for revolutionary movements to exalt women's rights and yet do little to attain them.⁸⁷ However, as with all other provisions within its programs, the EPLF did a remarkable job in attaining its goals under the pressures of wartime. First and foremost, women were organized as an important part of the front and were always given equal representation within the political structure of the EPLF itself. They were not barred from serving in any capacity within the front, and women commonly took combatant roles, with women constituting 13 percent of the army by 1977.⁸⁸ The education programs offered by the front were perhaps even more revolutionary for the women involved, as literacy had been even rarer amongst women than men before the conflict. However, the alterations to women's rights did not stop within the boundaries of direct service to the front. In liberated areas the land reform was just as open to women as men, and women were amongst those who claimed plots of land in Zagher and other model villages. As the EPLF's programs became more ingrained in the social fabric of communities, they often began trying to redefine the traditional practice of marriage to offer more egalitarian roles. This was a revolutionary step, as marriage was a defining characteristic in traditional Eritrean society, where it essentially relegated women to a servile role.⁸⁹ With the new laws being put into place, concepts of mutual consent for marriages became common, as well as a woman's right to divorce. Beyond this, ages of consent began to be established, doing away with child marriages, which had the effect of opening up a whole new world of independent adolescence for young women, transforming their possibilities in education, employment, and even newer ideas of courtship. Although this is not to say that all communities accepted these changes quickly or easily, the balance of sexual power was altered by the social revolution of the EPLF and women were to a great degree liberated from their previous servitude.⁹⁰

The social revolution altered Eritrea irrevocably and even at the time was noted for its far-reaching consequences. No less a scholar of revolutions than Gérard Chaliand wrote that "the EPLF is by far the most impressive revolutionary movement produced in Africa in the past two decades."⁹¹ This complete social revolution would prove to be vital to the success of the Eritrean struggle for two primary reasons. The first was that the revolution

and the acceptance of its precepts more than anything else helped the Eritrean cause overcome the regional, linguistic, and confessional barriers to national unity. While earlier attempts in Katanga and Biafra both faltered when ethnic differences helped fracture efforts of secession, following the adoption of the social revolution there never was a credible threat of ethnic or religious divisions within the Eritrean front. Even later attempts at secession that will be discussed constantly found (and still find) themselves hobbled by the disunity often flippantly referred to by the press as “tribalism.” The South Sudanese efforts, as will be discussed, were consistently riven with Dinka and Nuer conflicts within the larger struggle, often leading to suboptimal military results in the field. Other subsequent efforts such as the Azawad movement or the Casamance separatists have been hobbled not so much by ethnic divisions as by their lack of an overarching ideology that can transcend their narrowly defined nationalisms and attract a wide enough base of support to succeed. By adopting a social revolution and using it to advance precepts that created a national ideology and identity which was accepted and proliferated by the populace, the EPLF created a nation in the process of liberating it.

The second major reason for the importance of the social revolution has already been discussed in the previous paragraphs: the creation of loyal and productive base areas are a necessity for the pursuit of a protracted conflict. By instituting large-scale agrarian reform, workers’ rights, women’s rights, education, and healthcare, the EPLF created a popular front that earned the peoples’ loyalty and efforts. More than this, in the model villages and towns and amongst the workshops and hospitals in the remote regions, they created a popular society that then had a vested interest in seeing their revolution succeed in the only way that mattered: the military overthrow of the oppressive power. Thus the EPLF’s social revolution created areas that were loyal and productive for their efforts and which turned barren for their opponents.⁹² Put in Maoist terms, strategically they always had one of the necessary conditions for advantage, and tactically the guerrillas always had a deep popular sea to swim in. Put simply, the implementation of the social revolution created the conditions necessary for their military triumph.

Pragmatic Alliances

Last of the decisive anomalous factors that allowed the successful political separation was what has been termed the EPLF's pragmatic relations with other liberation fronts. Given the long duration of Eritrea's conflict and Ethiopia's autocratic governmental structure from shortly after the Second World War until 1991, it was inevitable that other resistance movements would have come into being. A particularly large number were constituted shortly after the coup against Haile Selassie and the beginning of the Derg's oppressive Marxist turn in 1974. Although most of these never grew to a size where they could be considered a significant ally in the larger anti-Derg struggle, one in particular would prove to play a deciding part in the success of the secession of Eritrea. The Tigray People's Liberation Front began their armed struggle against the Ethiopian government in 1975 and quickly established relations with the two working Eritrea fronts, the ELF and EPLF.⁹³ Both Eritrean fronts offered aid to the fledgling group, with which they shared linguistic and educational ties. Although ties were severed with the ELF in 1976 due to disputes over boundaries between Eritrea and Tigray, the TPLF established a strong relationship with the EPLF.⁹⁴ The two fronts shared a Marxist viewpoint and a common goal of self-criticism to keep their movements ideologically pure. The EPLF even offered aid in material and training for the Tigrayans, with between three and four thousand Tigrayan fighters being sent to the Sahel for training with the Eritreans. These troops were to prove decisive in blunting the Ethiopian offensives in the early 1980s directed against the Eritreans.⁹⁵

This is not to say that the two fronts always saw eye to eye. There was widespread disagreement between the two as to the tactics to be employed for the struggle. In 1980 the EPLF had transitioned into a conventional and increasingly professional military structure in their strategic stalemate with Ethiopia, fighting battles from fixed positions and holding their liberated territory in open battle.⁹⁶ The Tigrayans felt that this distanced the fighters from the populace as well as increasing needlessly the losses inflicted on the front. The TPLF remained adamant that a guerrilla war from the countryside was the only method that would allow success against the Soviet-backed Derg. Beyond this, there was a fundamental difference in their goals. While the EPLF was a secession insurgency, looking to

physically separate their nation from the state, the TPLF was a reform insurgency, intent on using the state apparatus to carry out a social revolution in all of Ethiopia. As part of the TPLFs goals, they embraced the concept that each separate ethnic group of a state can and should form its own front and have the right to self-determination. This concept was unthinkable to the EPLF, which fought for the centrality of a nation and denied the concept of ethnic self-determination.⁹⁷ This fundamental difference led to deep tensions, exacerbated by the Tigrayans' insistence on denouncing the Soviet Union due to its support of the Derg versus the Eritreans' continued pursuit of an alliance.⁹⁸

In 1985 the two fronts formally severed diplomatic ties due to these continued tensions, with the TPLF going so far as to offer support to a minor rival opposition front in Eritrea.⁹⁹ However, the TPLF continued to support the concept of Eritrean independence, which left the door open for a rapprochement that was not long in coming. This new agreement was hastened by Ethiopia's settlement with Somalia over the Ogaden region in 1988,¹⁰⁰ which freed up massive numbers of troops to continue the conflicts against the regional insurgencies. From 1988 on the TPLF and EPLF formed a coordinated front with agreed-upon goals and aims for their partnership. This united front between the Eritreans and the Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Democratic Front (the multi-ethnic coalition that the Tigrayans welded together and headed) launched a series of offensives that finally caused the Ethiopian regime to crumble in 1991. This was the deciding moment for both insurgencies.

One cannot overestimate the importance of the common goals and aims adopted between the Eritreans and the Tigrayans. Initially the two provided shared intelligence and logistics to pursue the protracted struggles that would bleed the Ethiopian regime dry. By broadening the base of the conflict, the two fronts working in combination crushed attempts by the Derg to bring an end to the conflict for over a decade. The so-called "Ethiopian Peasant Crusade" was destroyed with little fanfare in 1976. The two fronts also worked together to stymie the efforts of the Ethiopian "Red Star" campaign in 1982, the defeat of which essentially doomed any further efforts by the Derg to crush either front. Beyond this military coordination was the decisive nature of their relationship. By maintaining relations with the Tigrayans and aiding in the success of their reform insurgency,¹⁰¹ the

Eritreans ensured their own reward at the completion of the campaign. With a sympathetic government now in power over their previous colonial oppressor, the Eritreans claimed their share of the spoils: a declaration of recognition of their independence in 1991.

The importance of this declaration of recognition is especially critical given the political difficulties that had been established in terms of secession in Africa. For the OAU to recognize a seceding region would require a motion to be brought before it by a member state. However, not just any member would do—as the case of Biafra amply shows. If an external power tried to bring forward a motion to recognize a separatist or secessionist movement, the “host nation” could invoke article III and argue that it was their own internal business and their sovereignty in such matters must be respected. It was this dynamic that made the alliance with the TPLF and their greater organization the EPRDF so vital. Without the EPRDF driving out Mengistu’s forces and achieving their own sovereign rule over the nation of Ethiopia, there would be no guarantee of recognition at all. It was only through their effective and pragmatic relations with the now-ruling party of Ethiopia that the EPLF was able to gain the sponsorship of their own host nation for their separation and the agreement to allow a referendum two years later to determine the future political status. With the ruling regime in Addis Ababa giving their blessing to the actions within their own territory, there was little that the international community could see wrong with the formal separation of the two states in 1993. Simply put, without the simultaneous reform insurgency within Ethiopia, the secession of Eritrea would have been an impossibility.

ERITREA: SECESSION OR LIBERATION?

There is one final matter to discuss on the case of Eritrea, one of classification and its place as a case study in this volume. Eritrea, and the EPLF in particular, offer a remarkably anomalous case—one where there was a vast social revolution and reconstruction and where the struggle itself was fought and discussed as a liberation. In fact, the secession of Eritrea in its historical roots and practical applications often bears a far greater resemblance to such notable liberation struggles as Guinea-Bissau or Namibia, a comparison that might be well to the Eritrean fighters’ liking. So then,

given its historical argument of a struggle against an African colonizer and its strategic characteristics of a revolutionary liberation, can we actually classify Eritrea's case as secession? Does it actually fit within the scope of this volume?

The answer to the former question is still being argued within the contentious realm of Eritrean and Ethiopian scholarship. There are compelling arguments on each side, and this volume does not want to wander into minefield of "Greater Ethiopianism versus Eritrean Nationalism" so familiar to all sides of the discussion. Instead, what is important in this case is the answer to the second question, that of its place within this volume. The answer to the second question, regardless of that to the first, must be that it remains a central case study in the arc of secession in Africa. Whether or not one classifies the Eritrean struggle as a formal secession, it remains the first instance of a recognized political separation in Africa, and one can't help but look at the circumstances that brought it about and feel that these circumstances are indeed necessities for the separation to occur. By this fact alone it must be included in this volume, if only to show what was necessary for a separation to take place and why any other successful subsequent separation has seemed to follow much of the same blueprint.

