

Advances and Questions in War against the Ethiopian Government



A WORLD TO WIN 1989/13

By a contributor to the *Revolutionary Worker**

Over the past year, the political and military situation facing the Soviet-backed regime in Ethiopia has seriously deteriorated. This has raised the possibility that the Dergue, the military junta ruling Ethiopia, could fall or suffer serious splits, sparking major realignments and conflicts in the strategic Horn of Africa where both the U.S.- and Soviet-led imperialist blocs have their claws deeply embedded.

In the wake of major battlefield victories by the armed insurgents in Eritrea and in the northern Ethio-

pian provinces of Tigray, Gonder and Wollo in which the Ethiopian army suffered heavy casualties in the spring and summer of 1988, the regime responded by declaring a "state of emergency" and unleashing a major assault on the civilian population, but it has so far failed to decisively reverse its defeats. Meanwhile, the Soviet social-imperialists have continued their military and political support for the Dergue, while the Western powers prop up the regime economically and manoeuvre to bring Ethiopia fully back under their control. And as millions in Eritrea and Ethiopia face the recurring threat of famine, control over the distribution of food aid has become a major weapon both in this imperialist contention

and in the Dergue's attacks on the people.

Rebel Victories

After years of relative stalemate between the rebel forces and Ethiopian government troops occupying Eritrea, in March 1988 the armed forces of the Eritrean People's Liberation Front (EPLF) broke through the Dergue's lines on the Nacfa front. The Ethiopian army suffered a devastating military reversal as, according to press reports, the EPLF killed or captured over 20,000 government troops. The insurgents also captured three Soviet military advisers and a major chunk of the Dergue's military arsenal: fifty tanks, over

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100 military vehicles, and many rockets, artillery, and light arms and ammunition. Ethiopian troops fled their positions in disarray at several points along the battle front, with many reportedly deserting.

At the same time, the popular insurgency in northern Ethiopia was also dealing major blows at the reactionary regime. In late March liberation fighters in Tigray under the leadership of the Tigray People's Liberation Front (TPLF) took

the two major towns of Axum and Adwa in Tigray province. And in Wollo province, fighters from the multi-national Ethiopian People's Democratic Movement (EPDM) reportedly defeated two battalions of government troops.

Since then the Dergue has retaken a number of towns in Eritrea and northern Ethiopia, but the Ethiopian army has hardly regained the initiative. In Tigray, for example, the rebel fighters evacuated major

towns as the government forces were approaching and then staged a surprise attack in which they killed or captured an estimated 19,000 additional government troops. And in July the TPLF reported putting another 8,000 government troops out of action in battles along the Dansha front.

In response to these dramatic military setbacks, the Dergue had to desperately scramble. In April the
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The Horn of Africa: An Imperialist Battleground

By a contributor to the *Revolutionary Worker*

Ethiopia is an oppressed country dominated by imperialism and is itself a kind of "prison house of nations". Its history has been one of brutal oppression against the Tigrayan, Oromo and other peoples. And in the 1950s Ethiopia took over Eritrea with the backing of the imperialist powers. This history provides the basis for the crucial role of the national question and the issue of self-determination in the Ethiopian revolution and has called into existence the strong national-democratic movements that are now shaking the region.

Correctly understanding and resolving the national question, within the context of the overall struggle against imperialism and local reaction under the leadership of a proletarian party (or parties) led by Marxism-Leninism-Mao Tsetung Thought, is key to advancing the new-democratic and then socialist revolution in the Horn. As the *Declaration of the Revolutionary Internationalist Movement* points out:

"Due to the establishment of a central state structure prior to the process of capitalist development, semi (or neo) colonial countries, in the main, have multi-national social formations within them; in a large number of cases these states have been created by the imperialists themselves. Furthermore, the borders of these states have been determined as a consequence of

imperialist occupations and machinations. Thus it is generally the case that within the state borders of countries oppressed by imperialism, oppressed nations, national inequality and ruthless national oppression exist. In our era, the national question has ceased to be an internal question of single countries and has become subordinate to the general question of the world proletarian revolution, hence its thoroughgoing resolution has become directly dependent on the struggle against imperialism. Within this context Marxist-Leninists should uphold the right of self-determination of oppressed nations in the multi-national semi-colonial states." (p. 37)

The Horn of Africa first assumed great importance for the imperialist powers after the opening of the Suez Canal in 1869, and ever since then the region has been a battleground of contending imperialists. The modern Ethiopian state took shape in the 1890s and was as much the product of modern imperialism as was every other state in Africa. Under the reign of Abyssinian monarch Menelik II, power passed decisively into the hands of Amhara feudal lords and the bloody conquest of the Oromo and other nationalities was accomplished with the use of European advisers and great quantities of modern firearms provided by the French, Italians, British and Portuguese.

The French imperialists' ambition was to extend their holdings from "French West Africa" across the continent to Djibouti. The British imperialists, who had effectively occupied Egypt, hungered for a British dominion stretching from "the Cape to Cairo". The dreams of these two plundering jackals collided precisely in Ethiopia. Since neither was in a position to decisively oust the other, the British and the French signed a treaty in 1888 to "protect the independence" of Ethiopia. Menelik took full advantage of the imperialist rivalries to press south and east, overrunning the Oromos, Somalis, Afars and others. These peoples were subjected to forced conversion to Christianity and the mandatory use of the Amharic language. In the newly conquered regions, two-thirds of the land was immediately confiscated and turned over to Amhara lords, while the remaining one-third was left for the indigenous population and dominated by local rulers who had collaborated with the Amhara conquest. Meanwhile the French, British and Italians proceeded to divide up the coasts of Eritrea and Somalia among themselves.

Following the Second World War the United States quickly moved to replace Britain as the dominant imperialist power in the Horn, seeing control of Ethiopia as key for U.S. domination of this strategic area

overall. Menelik's successor, Emperor Haile Selassie, proved a loyal regional gendarme for U.S. imperialism. Ethiopia was made a charter member of the United Nations and a loyal U.S. vote. In 1953 the U.S. and Ethiopia signed a mutual defence pact and U.S. military advisers replaced the British in training the Ethiopian army.

Nowhere was U.S. imperialist domination more blatant than in the 1952 forced "federation" of Eritrea into Ethiopia. During the war the British had dropped leaflets on Eritrea promising independence if the Eritreans would help expel the Italians. Yet as soon as the war was won, the British pushed for a partition of Eritrea between the Western colonial powers. At the United Nations, however, the U.S. proposed a federation with U.S.-dominated Ethiopia as an alternative to either partition or independence for Eritrea. As U.S. Secretary of State John Foster Dulles put it with imperialist arrogance: "From the point of view of justice, the opinions of the Eritrean people must receive consideration. Nevertheless, the strategic interests of the United States in the Red Sea basin and considerations of security and world peace make it necessary that the country has to be linked with our ally, Ethiopia." As a token of gratitude for being given Eritrea, Haile Selassie sent a battalion of his imperial bodyguard to fight with U.S. forces in Korea.

In 1974 a wide spectrum of Ethiopian society rose in a mighty storm and toppled the Haile Selassie regime. This followed a massive famine in Tigray and Wollo provinces in 1973 in which over one million perished. Even the educated elite were infuriated when the emperor not only completely failed to provide emergency assistance but even tried to keep the existence of the famine a secret from the rest of the world and international relief agencies. There was a breakdown in the military, exhausted and demoralized from the reactionary wars to put down rebellions of the Oromo and Somali people in Bale Province and the Eritrean struggle in the north. Soldiers revolted, took over the city of Asmara in Eritrea, and

began broadcasting their demands over the radio to the whole country. Within weeks students at Haile Selassie University were on strike, unions called a general strike and 100,000 Moslems marched through the capital demanding equality in religion. The emperor, in an unprecedented sign of weakness, accepted the resignation of his prime minister and promised a range of concessions to the opposition. The new prime minister formed a "coordinating committee" of reliable military officers which occupied the capital with troops. Thus the Dergue, which means "committee" in the Amharic language, was formed.

In the ensuing struggle the Dergue moved to crush the popular uprising, killing over 30,000 opponents in 1976-1978, according to Amnesty International. Between December 1977 and February 1978 alone, the army murdered some 10,000 people, mostly rebellious students, and finally consolidated its rule. Through a series of internal purges, the Dergue eventually took its present form, headed by the U.S.-trained Lt. Col. Mengistu H. Mariam.

The year 1977 also witnessed a sudden shift in the military and political alignments in the Horn of Africa. The Soviet social-imperialists struck a deal with the Dergue, abandoning their phoney "support" for the Eritrean liberation struggle and dropping their praises of "socialism" in Somalia. Soon Lt. Col. Mengistu began calling himself a "Marxist-Leninist" and Soviet-bloc military hardware and advisers began pouring into Ethiopia. The U.S. lost its significant political and military influence in Ethiopia and turned to backing the reactionary Siad Barre regime in Somalia to maintain a foothold in the Horn.

The Dergue's Soviet-supplied armaments and new-found "socialist" rhetoric allowed it to consolidate its rule and drown the popular rebellion in blood. But its recent military defeats and the deepening economic and political problems have presented the Dergue with the most profound crisis of its bloody reign. □

Ethiopia

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Ethiopian government suddenly dropped previous preconditions and signed a truce in the long-running border conflict with its southern neighbor, Somalia, in order to free up soldiers and materiel for the Eritrean and northern Ethiopian fronts. Although Mengistu, the head of the Dergue, had previously refused even to admit publicly that there were any armed rebellions in Eritrea or among the oppressed nationalities in Ethiopia, in May he announced that the government was in a "life-and-death struggle" with the rebels and called for a national mobilisation. Thousands of raw recruits were sent to the north and a state of emergency declared in Eritrea and Tigray. Mengistu also reacted to the military defeats with a shakeup in the military high command, executing and demoting top generals who were blamed for the defeats.

The Ethiopian army is continuing to prepare for a major new offensive against the liberation forces. According to the EPLF, the Soviet Union has replaced most of the equipment lost in last year's defeats, and the Dergue has gone shopping for further military supplies from North Korea and East Germany. But by all accounts the government has had difficulty reasserting its control over most of the territory it lost. Indeed, the EPLF reported that their forces inflicted another 5,000 casualties in renewed battles with government troops in late January and early February of this year.

The Dergue is now confronted with the nightmarish prospect of the kind of turmoil which overthrew Haile Selassie in 1974 and which they themselves rode to power. At that time a series of famines and military defeats sparked massive popular unrest and open revolt within the military. (See accompanying article.)

The Dergue has tried to mask its reactionary character and growing instability by declaring themselves the leaders of a phoney "Marxist-Leninist" party, the "Workers

Party of Ethiopia". In 1987 they proclaimed the "People's Republic of Ethiopia" amidst extravagant fanfare in the capital city of Addis Abba, even as massive famine was threatening the lives of millions in the countryside. Now, however, the "revolutionary" rhetoric that has helped keep the Dergue in power is wearing very thin.

Food as a Weapon

Recurring famines and the threat of massive starvation have fanned widespread discontent against the Ethiopian government. Recognising this, the U.S. and other Western-bloc countries have consistently used their control over food relief to pressure the Dergue to break with the Soviets. The Dergue itself has a sordid record of using food as a weapon against the people and the rebel armies. The government has long worked to prevent safe passage of food aid to rebel-held areas. But in April 1988, as a major new drought threatened the people, the Dergue ordered all relief agencies to leave even areas controlled by the government forces.

According to a report at the time in the *Christian Science Monitor* on the famine situation: "Of three million at risk, more than two million are now in rebel-held areas. There is a special concern for these people because all along the Ethiopian government has allowed relief food to be distributed only in government-held areas. Those areas have shrunk dramatically as a result of military advances by the Eritrean People's Liberation Front and the Tigray People's Liberation Front.... [I]t is clear that war has taken priority as the government fights to recapture territory lost to the rebels this year. A mass mobilisation is underway to get troops to the northern fronts where war has been raging for 27 years. A top Ethiopian aid official said full relief operations would not resume until these areas 'are cleaned of bandit activity'."

The Dergue also had an even more sinister motive for expelling the relief agencies from the rural areas. As an official of the International Committee of the Red Cross

in Africa pointed out, "No one will be a witness to the way the war is conducted." Unleashing wanton terror on the civilian population, the Dergue is using napalm and cluster bombs in Eritrea and Tigray, killing and maiming thousands. According to the EPLF, an estimated 400 civilians were killed in the government's bombing of the Eritrean town of Sheib on May 12. The TPLF reported that on June 22, MIG fighters bombed the town of Hauzien in central Tigray at the height of market day, killing over 600 people and wounding hundreds more.

While this death and destruction has been carried out with Soviet-supplied weaponry, the U.S. and its allies are hardly innocent bystanders in these crimes. For years the U.S. has tacitly backed the Dergue's policy of "starving the rebellion" by allowing most Western food relief to go through government-controlled channels. The U.S. has also supported the Dergue's policy of "resettling" peasants from the north to government-controlled regions in an effort to deprive the rebels of civilian support.

Recently, as part of increasing the West's "carrot and stick" pressure on the Dergue, some food relief has gone to agencies operating in rebel-controlled areas. But in contrast to some other countries where the U.S. has worked to topple pro-Soviet regimes, its main strategy in Ethiopia has been to try to pressure and woo the Dergue, or elements within it, back into the Western bloc. Like their Soviet rivals, the U.S. imperialists see the current Ethiopian regime as their best bet in averting the complete collapse of reactionary order in the whole region. One indication of the U.S.'s continued support of the Dergue was the cease-fire with Somalia last April. Given Somalia's dependency on U.S. imperialism, it seems unlikely that the Somali government would have agreed to the cease-fire without a nod of approval from Washington.

That all this might lead to a major new re-alignment or conflict in the region cannot be ruled out. In fact, in November Mengistu made new diplomatic overtures to

the U.S. and worried out loud that the Soviets might abandon him and move to cut their losses in the region through other means. It is also possible that the imperialists could reach some sort of mutual accommodation even as they each manoeuvre for greater advantage. In early February the *New York Times* quoted a U.S. State Department official as saying, "We have had quite an active dialogue with the Soviets about the situation in the Horn of Africa." Those seeking genuine liberation should be wary of any such imperialist-brokered "peace agreement", which would only be aimed at buying time for the local reactionaries and allowing the rival imperialist blocs to consolidate their domination of the peoples of the Horn.

The Revolutionary Forces

Beginning in 1961 in Eritrea and 1975 in Tigray, the armed struggle raging in the Horn of Africa has been the longest-running and is presently the largest-scale liberation war on the African continent. Yet as the reactionary regime faces its severest crisis and the opportunities for unprecedented revolutionary advance are ripening, now more than ever this armed revolutionary warfare is marked by a glaring weakness — the absence of a proletarian vanguard based on Marxism-Leninism-Mao Tsetung Thought.

Mao Tsetung correctly identified the forging of the proletarian party as the key link in building and wielding the "three magic weapons" crucial to the victory of the revolution in the oppressed countries: the party, the people's army and the united front under the party's leadership. Among the liberation forces in the Horn of Africa, however, despite the genuine revolutionary heroism of many, there has been a long history of either liquidating the role of the proletarian party altogether, indefinitely postponing the struggle to form a party, or subordinating this struggle to the building of a united front and an army. All these approaches have led to making the struggle for a democratic solution to

the national question in Ethiopia an end in itself, rather than an integral part of the new-democratic revolution which would sweep away imperialist domination and feudal relations and prepare the ground for advancing the revolution on the road to communism as part of the world revolution.

As the *Declaration of the Revolutionary Internationalist Movement* points out: "The key to carrying out a new democratic revolution is the independent role of the proletariat and its ability, through its Marxist-Leninist party, to establish its hegemony in the revolutionary struggle.... [H]istory demonstrates the bankruptcy of an 'anti-imperialist front' (or similar 'revolutionary front') which is not led by a Marxist-Leninist party, even when such a front or forces within it adopt a 'Marxist' (actually pseudo-Marxist) colouration. While such revolutionary formations have led heroic struggles and even delivered powerful blows to the imperialists they have been proven to be ideologically and organisationally incapable of resisting imperialist and bourgeois influences. Even where such forces have seized power they have been incapable of carrying through a thoroughgoing revolutionary transformation of society and end up, sooner or later, being overthrown by the imperialists or themselves becoming a new reactionary ruling power in league with imperialists."

The history of the revolutionary struggle in the Horn of Africa and the objective needs facing the revolution today have laid the basis for Marxist-Leninists there to seriously sum up this lesson.

The rich legacy of the international communist movement, especially the influence of Mao Tsetung and revolutionary China, has in many ways left its mark on the liberation struggle in the Horn. In the 1960s Eritrean fighters received political and military training in China. Many of Mao's writings have been translated and disseminated among the masses, and there are numerous examples of how aspects of Mao's military theory have been studied and applied, although in a piece-meal way, by the

liberation fighters. Historically, the EPLF, TPLF and EPDM have all emphasised self-reliance in waging warfare and transforming the areas under their control, and they have declared their intention of waging armed struggle as a war of the masses. In the liberated areas there are signs of genuine efforts at social transformation, land redistribution, and combatting the oppression of women.

Yet the Marxist-Leninists have not stepped forward to shoulder their responsibility of developing proletarian leadership and formulating a new-democratic line and programme capable of leading the masses through the many twists and turns in the struggle. This has left the masses of all nationalities ideologically and politically disarmed and divided.

In Eritrea, for example, where the armed liberation struggle has gone on for almost three decades, the revolutionary forces under the influence of the EPLF refused to side with supporters of Mao Tsetung in the "great debates" against revisionism in the 1960s and attempted to play a centrist role around the decisive questions confronting the revolutionary movement internationally. Perhaps this was in part because the Soviet Union, in a bid to gain influence in the Horn, was giving some diplomatic and military support to the Eritrean struggle at the time. But even after the Soviets dropped their "support" for the Eritreans and embraced the Dergue in 1977, the EPLF, while courageously leading the Eritrean masses against the Soviet-trained and equipped Ethiopian army, has remained unwilling to fire *polemics* at the social-imperialists and has continued to call on the "fraternal" Soviet Union to recognise its "mistakes" and cease support for the Dergue. The EPLF has also publicly condemned others who have argued for the correct analysis of the imperialist nature of the Soviet Union.

Among the revolutionary forces in Ethiopia, including supporters of the TPLF and EPDM who came out of the upsurge of the mid-1970s influenced by Mao Tsetung Thought, many have correctly iden-

tified and condemned the capitalist, and hence imperialist, nature of the Soviet Union and have denounced both Western-style imperialism and Soviet social-imperialism. Yet they have failed to take up the science of Marxism - Leninism - Mao Tsetung Thought in an all-around way. Although there have been instances where forces have proclaimed their intention to work towards building a multi-national communist party in Ethiopia, these have tended to degenerate into the dogmatorevisionism of the Enver Hoxha type and falsely identified Mao Tsetung Thought as the source of the bourgeois-democratic and nationalist deviations that have worked against the formation of a party.

In fact, however, the root of the problem has been precisely the failure to thoroughly grasp and uphold the contributions of Mao Tsetung as a fundamental dividing line, and this remains the most decisive ideological question facing Marxist-Leninists in the Horn of Africa today. "Upholding Mao Tsetung's qualitative development of the science of Marxism-Leninism represents a particularly important and pressing question in the international movement and among class conscious workers and other revolutionary-minded people in the world today. The principle involved is nothing less than whether or not to uphold and build upon the decisive contributions to the proletarian revolution and the science of Marxism-Leninism made by Mao Tsetung. It is therefore nothing less than a question of whether or not to uphold Marxism-Leninism itself.... Without upholding and building on Marxism-Leninism-Mao Tsetung Thought it is not possible to defeat revisionism, imperialism and reaction in general." (*Declaration of the RIM*, pp. 14-15)

The recent impressive military victories by the liberation fighters reveal the tremendous potential for developing a powerful people's war under the leadership of a proletarian party (or parties) in the Horn of Africa and uniting the oppressed of all nationalities in their common struggle against national oppression and imperialist domination. □