

## **Dimtsi Hafash: Voice of Truth and Lifblood of the Revolution**



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*Dimtsi Hafash Eritrea* (Voice of the Broad Masses of Eritrea), the popular radio broadcasting service that was established by the Eritrean People's Liberation Front (EPLF) in 1979 marked its 40th anniversary on January 1st, 2019. *Dimtsi Hafash* has been very important to Eritrea and its people for the last 40 years. From its inception, the EPLF understood the importance of media and it published journals and magazines. To effectively support the print media, it began to broadcast on *Dimtsi Hafash*, on January 1st, 1979, from a tent in Sahel. During that time, the EPLF was in the midst of a strategic withdrawal, and *Dimtsi Hafash* helped raise the people's morale and counter Ethiopian propaganda.

The long struggle for liberation featured military confrontation, mass mobilization, and propaganda war. In the contest for the hearts and minds of people, *Dimtsi Hafash* played a significant role which other entities of the EPLF could not. Information warfare, in many ways, was just as important as direct armed confrontation. Despite their significance, the role of information and communication, particularly *Dimtsi Hafash*, are underexplored in the analyses of Eritrea's long struggle for liberation.

The EPLF's spectacular military victory has often been described as hard to believe. The political, ideological, and organizational prowess of the EPLF was also remarkable. The EPLF's victory was not only a conventional military

triumph, but a victory for justice. Eritrean freedom fighters, equipped with pens, pronounced cameras, and microphones, and using effective methods of information dissemination and collection, were able to win the hearts and minds of Eritreans.

*Dimtsi Hafash* managed to spread the truth about the revolution to Eritreans everywhere. The better-equipped Derg intelligence agencies left no stone unturned in trying to disrupt the communications of the EPLF. Armed by the Soviet Union and supported by numerous others, the Derg had powerful communication and surveillance equipment at its disposal to jam and cut the nerve center of the EPLF. However, *Dimtsi Hafash* continued to broadcast the truth about the struggle with virtually no headquarters and with very limited material resources or personnel. Despite all of the attempts to suppress its broadcasts, *Dimtsi Hafash* did not stop sharing the message of truth and freedom. It became the reliable bridge of information between the EPLF and the population, and it played a key role in strengthening the political awareness and morale of the people and the fighters. Despite the difficulties and risks associated with tuning into its broadcasts, *Dimtsi Hafash* became so popular that Eritreans could not live without.

*Dimtsi Hafash* was born during a critical period of the Eritrean struggle. By the end of 1977, Eritrean fighters were able to capture the whole of Eritrea except five cities: Adi Keih, Asmara, Assab, Barentu, and Massawa. However, the tide soon turned in Ethiopia's favor as the Soviet Union sent in massive military, tactical, technical, and financial support. In 1978, faced with successive Ethiopian offensives, Eritrean revolutionaries made a strategic withdrawal from the outskirts of Asmara. *Dimtsi Hafash* was established when the Eritrean revolutionaries were back in their stronghold, Sahel. Thus, the establishment of *Dimtsi Hafash* came at a critical juncture of the armed struggle, as it helped raise the morale of the people and fighters. The Eritrean revolution would not probably have reached the finish line and succeeded had the independence movement not had the flow of information provided by *Dimtsi Hafash*. In many ways, *Dimtsi Hafash* was the lifeblood of the revolution.

For the period, radio was one of the most effective means of communication. It was relatively easily accessible and affordable and allowed for messages to be quickly shared with the entire spectrum of the country's population. *Dimtsi Hafash* provided its audience with a steady diet of political awareness. Listeners tuned in not only to hear the news and latest developments, but also because it allowed them to be or feel a part of the struggle. By disseminating information across Eritrea, *Dimtsi Hafash* helped strengthen the sense of identity, patriotism,

and nationalism of the population. It facilitated communication between different geographical and cultural regions, and it helped in the exchange of ideas between different groups of people. This, without doubt, played a role in socialization and helped support the process of strengthening the population's sense of national identity.

*Dimtsi Hafash*, as the voice of the voiceless and a transmitter of reliable information, preserved the hope and dignity of the people. It was pluralistic, participatory, and democratic and it worked for social justice and national emancipation. Its programs were focused on an array of topics, including development, education, culture, independence, and more. The program was able to reach listeners and touch the audience in a way that traditional print media could not. It also aimed to strengthen the nation's identity and preservation of culture through the promotion of Eritrea's various national languages. During Ethiopian colonization, Amharic was imposed on Eritrea. No other language was allowed to be taught, printed, or broadcasted. Thus, *Dimtsi Hafash*, by helping to preserve Eritreans' culture, identity, and language, can be seen as an indispensable instrument for nation-building.

Eritreans have a long tradition of using journalism as a weapon of resistance against any form of injustice. In the 1940s and 1950s, Eritrean newspapers, written in Tigrigna and Arabic, defended and expressed Eritreans' interests and aspirations. These newspapers played an important role in strengthening the Eritrean national identity. They offered the public with an opportunity to explore important national issues and they became a platform for political debate. Undeniably, they also contributed to Eritrean nationalism.

When the repressive Ethiopian imperial government closed the newspapers and tried to muzzle Eritrean voices, many nationalist Eritrean writers like Ato Weldeab Woldemariam were forced to flee their country. However, some continued to advocate for Eritreans. Ato Weldeab, for example, began broadcasts from Cairo in the mid- 1950s. This helped enlighten Eritrean youth and it encouraged them to think about how to resist Ethiopian aggression. Commenting on the influence of the radio, Markakis notes that "The broadcasts created a sensation in Eritrea, and provoked Ethiopian complaints to Cairo." Decades later, the EPLF began its own broadcasts. When the ruling Ethiopian regime outlawed the broadcasts, this only served to increase the population's desire to tune in.

*Dimtsi Hafash* continues to play a great role in Eritrean society. Moving forward, it should continue to work to define and strengthen Eritrean national

identity and preserve our culture. Eritrean history is still being created and *Dimtsi Hafash*, like other media, has an important role to play in giving us an account of that history. Over the years, it has demonstrated its commitment to truth and justice. Moving forward, may the mighty voice of the masses continue to speak loudly and proudly.