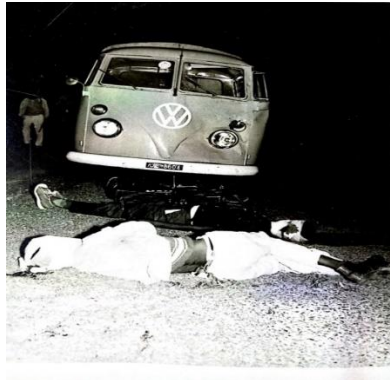


## The Asmara Massacre 50 Years Later



By: Awet Tesfay

In Eritrean history, the crimes and atrocities committed by Ethiopian colonial rulers against the Eritrean people before and throughout the armed struggle for independence are delineated into four escalating phases: 1967, 1970-1973, 1974-1978, and 1978-1991. During the first phase, military aggression was viciously directed at Eritreans, particularly Eritrean Muslims. The Ethiopian rulers attempted to create division by portraying Eritrean Christians as supporters of the union while vilifying Eritrean Muslims as enemies. This strategy aimed to drive a wedge between the close-knit population but ultimately failed to take hold.

By 1970, this unsuccessful attempt at division was abandoned in favor of indiscriminate mass killings and continuous onslaughts of devastation as the primary weapon against Eritreans. It is important to note that atrocities were not absent before 1970. In 1967, mass killings in the settlements around Asmara terrorized village residents to such an extent that 22 Eritrean members of the Ethiopian parliament petitioned Emperor Haile Selassie, expressing their grave objections to the unprovoked killings of innocent Eritreans. In November 1970, fighters of the Eritrean Liberation Front (ELF) assassinated the commander of the 2nd division of the Ethiopian army along the Asmara-Keren road. This act of resistance shocked and enraged the emperor, prompting a brutal crackdown on the Eritrean people. The western lowlands of Eritrea were declared dangerous zones, suspected of harboring ELF fighters, derogatorily referred to as “bandits.” Consequently, villages in these areas were decreed to either abandon their homes and aggregate near Ethiopian army camps or face destruction.

The Ethiopian army terrorized numerous villages and villagers, with the objective of either annihilating them or devastating their settlements beyond habitability,

forcing them to relocate to cities or flee into exile. Thousands of civilians perished in towns such as Geleb, Ajerbeeb, Fafi'da, S'nqa, F'ledarb, Hantol, Musha'ayg, Fana, Shef'shifit, Rora biet Gebru, Baskdira, and many others in the provinces of Semhar and Sahel. In Ona alone, 750 innocent residents were massacred. The killings were characterized by a profoundly callous and sadistic spirit, involving deception and false promises of relocation before mercilessly executing the people.

The overarching goal of these atrocities was to distance the populace from the armed struggle, which the Ethiopian rulers claimed was the direct cause of their suffering. However, these acts of brutality only galvanized the Eritrean people, leading many to join the armed struggle or stand against Ethiopian rulers. This defiance was exemplified by four desperate and brave Eritreans who hijacked an airplane en route from Bahir Dar to Benghazi, Libya, to draw global attention to the plight and suffering of the Eritrean people. In September 1974, the combined opposition of Ethiopians and the ongoing war in Eritrea led to the overthrow of Emperor Haile Selassie. His brutal regime was swiftly replaced by the Derg's equally oppressive military tyranny.

This transitional period in colonial leadership provided a unique opportunity for the Eritrean liberation movements to advance their cause. At this juncture, the Derg's rule was newly established and thus lacked robust security and intelligence infrastructure. Consequently, the weakened Derg administration allowed liberation movements to cement their influence in and around Asmara. They recruited numerous Fedayin and conducted several strategic hits against the colonial forces, raising the people's hopes that freedom from brutal regimes was within reach. The Derg regime summoned a substantial portion of its military from Ethiopia to regain control and assert dominance, reinforced by air and naval forces and special forces units. Meanwhile, the Fedayin continued their operations in Asmara, culminating in a highly effective operation that involved bombing three locations: Bar Babylon, Bar Gondar, and Bar International. This resulted in the death of several Ethiopian and high-ranking military officials, with many soldiers sustaining serious injuries.

The event sent shockwaves throughout the Derg military. Amidst these developments, many of Asmara's youth had begun collaborating with the liberation movements. In response, the Derg regime, seeking to terrorize the city's residents and deter them from supporting the liberation movements, unleashed a series of inhumane crimes. Armed soldiers were dispatched to parks

and other gathering places, where they opened fire on civilians. Special military units, known as “snuffers” (ዳፊንቲ), specialized in the brutal kidnapping and execution of civilians with complete impunity. Another horrific tactic was “operation piano wire,” in which scores of young people and university students were abducted and strangled with piano wires, and their bodies were displayed on the streets to dissuade the population from supporting or even associating with the liberation struggle.

Many families discovered the fate of their loved ones through these gruesome street displays. Amidst these unspeakable events and mounting tensions, the Derg army embarked on an uncontrollable killing spree in and around Asmara for over a week. This horrendous period is part of the larger stretch of atrocities that occurred during the third phase (1974-1978). It began on January 31, 1975, when the Derg, having funneled its army into Asmara and feeling secure in its strength, set out to push the liberation forces further from the city outskirts. They launched an attack on encampments to the northwest of Asmara. The liberation movement armies held their ground and retaliated, resulting in an exchange of fire that lasted until dawn. In Asmara, soldiers barged into homes, either shooting or stabbing civilians with their rifles, accusing them of “hiding the bandits.” The next day, February 1, the Derg armed forces advanced to Wekiduba, Adi Shimagle, and Adi Habteselus to attack the ELF units around the villages, continuing the slaughter of innocent civilians they had begun the night before. In Wekiduba alone, 87 people were massacred. Throughout the day, Ethiopian forces, aided by aerial reinforcements, mounted offensives against liberation forces garrisoned to the northwest and east of Asmara. Despite their superior artillery, the Ethiopian army faced determined opposition and lost two fighter jets.

This triumph provided a moment of optimism for Eritrean freedom fighters and civilians alike. A similar fate awaited the Ethiopian Derg army on February 2, when they mounted an offensive around Adi Nefas and Emba Derho and sustained serious defeats. The following day, February 3, began with the sounds of shots as the battle continued near Adi Nefas, Adi Yaeqob, and Beleza. The liberation forces, supported by civilians of all ages – women, children, the elderly, and youngsters – held their ground. The Beleza power plant was destroyed in the process, leading to a power blackout that plunged Asmara into darkness. Ethiopian fighter jets directed their lethal ammunition towards villages and civilians, bombing them relentlessly. However, these dirty tactics did little to advance the Ethiopian army, and they could not dislodge the Eritrean liberation

forces from the outskirts of Asmara. The threat of Asmara falling into the hands of the liberation forces was significant enough that the Derg resorted to pulling over 60% of its military stationed throughout Eritrea into Asmara. Hospitals across the city were filled to capacity with injured Ethiopian soldiers, providing the liberation forces an opportunity to inflict severe damage on the Ethiopian army. On February 4, units of the EPLF infiltrated the Settanta-otto infantry hospital, opening fire on Ethiopian soldiers and causing heavy casualties within the infantry. Each defeat encountered by the Ethiopian army was frequently retaliated against Eritrean

civilians. Consequently, the enraged Derg army embarked on a vengeful and bloodthirsty rampage, targeting the residents of Asmara. Homes were forcibly entered, and families were violently murdered. The Derg army persisted in this path of killing and looting, wiping out entire families in the process. Scores of civilians, in a desperate bid for safety, abandoned their homes and sought refuge in churches. For example, the Church of Saint Francis provided sanctuary to over 3,000 individuals. Many families found themselves with no alternative but to flee the city entirely, hoping to preserve what remained of their kin. The neighborhoods of Gejeret and Ziban Snqey bore the brunt of these barbaric acts. Hospitals were overwhelmed with injured civilians and corpses. The week marked a truly dark period in Asmara's history. The number of innocent civilians killed during this week-long one thousand. These dreadful days, which tore the city apart, came to be remembered as the Havoc of Asmara.

However, Asmara's plight did not end there. On February 8, along the Asmara-Dekemhare road, fighters from the liberation forces successfully laid siege to 25 military trucks delivering arms from Ethiopia to the Derg's military in Asmara. The ELF and EPLF subsequently executed a joint attack on Qagnew, the large military camp in Asmara, inflicting a devastating blow to the Derg's forces. Unable to crush the liberation forces, the Derg administration opted to continue terrorizing the city in an attempt to regain some measure of control and carried out a series of civilian killings. Numerous units from the Ethiopian Air Force, navy, and even Special Forces were summoned to Asmara as the situation grew increasingly dire. Amid the chaos of attacks and counterattacks, these units operated without centralized command, leading to unchecked civilian killings and other atrocious acts. The mass slaughter and hanging of young men and women became so rampant that many freedom fighter commandos, horror-stricken by the extermination of their people, abandoned their posts in the camps around Asmara and rushed into the city to engage in close combat with

enemy soldiers. This action relatively stabilized the situation. Nonetheless, the indiscriminate killings and cruelty so completely antagonized Eritreans, especially the youth, that many left the city and their civilian lives to join the liberation forces. Rather than quelling the people's will, these atrocious acts only intensified their desire for freedom. The year 1975 is remembered as the most brutal and horrific in Asmara's history, witnessing unspeakable horrors. Although Asmara experienced the most brutality that year, other towns and villages throughout Eritrea suffered similar crimes. During the last months of 1974 and the early months of 1975, an estimated 10,000 recruits flocked to both the ELF and EPLF, eager to fight alongside freedom fighters to rid their country of the oppressive Derg regime. Most of these recruits, hailing from both Eritrea and Ethiopia, were under 20 years of age. Among them were individuals from various walks of life: professors, teachers, university students, doctors, members of the police force, and government officials.

Notably, many women were recruited alongside their male counterparts. The year 1975 marked a significant period when the predominantly male liberation forces welcomed large numbers of female fighters into their ranks, altering the face of the movement and revolutionizing the cultural and religious outlooks of the Eritrean people. This influx of young fighters strengthened and fortified the liberation forces to the point where the prospect of freeing the country from Ethiopian oppression seemed within reach. However, throughout the fourth phase (1978-1991), the Ethiopian military administration received considerable foreign support and, for over a decade, continued its devastation of Eritrea, prolonging the war and delaying Eritrea's independence. Despite this, independence was inevitable. This week, we remember the horror and pain suffered by the people of Asmara. This beautiful city endures fifty years on, as does the rest of the country. The minarets and church towers stand side by side, adorning the unmistakable urban skyline. Its residents walk its streets with pride and assurance. The sounds of life and laughter echo throughout the city as the sun rises and sets boldly on its safe streets. Known, besides its quaint charm, for the peace and security it embodies, Asmara remembers the price that was paid fifty years ago. Strolling on the sidewalk, I imagine a time when my Asmara was wrought with strife and death.

Yet, wherever I look, etched in the faces of the people and marked on the city's architecture, there is only calmness and quiet dignity. The roads and streets, once bloodied by the bodies of Eritreans, are now bustling with a vibrant population. Many young people my age rush about, preparing for a weekend in

Massawa. I, too, am hurrying to drive down to Massawa to celebrate Fenqil. At this thought, I am reminded of the distasteful refrain uttered by Ethiopian colonial rulers and adopted into a deadly policy in their war against Eritreans: “drying the sea to kill the fish.” It never fails to astound this notion of scorching Eritrea to rid it of Eritreans. Echoes of this barbaric sentiment can still be heard today. Yet, Eritrea remains strong, and Eritreans flourish – along with their sea and fish.

**Eritrea profile,**

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