# Eritrea: A Nation Forged Through Struggle

*This 1950s photo shows Kagnew Station in Asmara, a US military base gained through a 1953 agreement with Ethiopia. The establishment of such bases was prioritized over the Eritrean people's right to self-rule, as the US backed federation with Ethiopia for strategic Cold War advantages.*

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Located in the volatile Horn of Africa and blessed with a long, unspoiled Red Sea coastline, Eritrea is a nation with a rich, complex, and often turbulent history marked by successive external rules and occupation. After waging one of Africa's most prolonged and most devastating liberation wars, Eritrea secured independence from Ethiopia in 1991. This multipart series sheds light on the country's decades-long struggle for freedom and identity.

- **Origins at the dawn of humanity**

Archaeological discoveries in Eritrea's Danakil Depression – especially in Buya – have revealed hominid remains dating back approximately 1.5 to 2 million years, placing the region at the very roots of human history. Prehistoric sites scattered across the country feature rock art, ancient tools, and artifacts, while evidence of early agriculture and animal domestication dates back to around 5000 BCE.

Moreover, many scholars identify Eritrea as the most likely site of the fabled Land of Punt – an ancient trading partner of the Egyptians, which further emphasizes its significance in early human civilization.

Before the colonial era, various parts of present-day Eritrea experienced intermittent invasions and occupations by foreign powers. Egyptians and Ottoman Turks held sway over coastal cities like Massawa and swathes of the lowlands.

Meanwhile, rival warriors, feudal lords, and monarchs from surrounding regions launched periodic, short-lived incursions, often met with fierce resistance.

- **Italian colonization and the rise of modern infrastructure**

In the late 19th century, Italy began acquiring coastal territory and gradually extended its reach inland, seeking to establish a settler colonial state. With tacit British support – motivated by geopolitical rivalry with the French – Italy formally declared Eritrea its "colonia primogenita" (firstborn colony) on January 1, 1890. Massawa was named the capital before Asmara assumed the role in 1897, which it retains today.

Over the next 50 years, Eritrea remained under Italian rule. Eritreans endured systemic exploitation, racial segregation, forced labor, and land dispossession. Education was restricted to basic levels, meant only to serve Italian needs. Eritreans were barred from many parts of Asmara and suffered under colonial apartheid policies.

Yet amid this oppression, the colonial period saw significant infrastructure development and modernization. The period saw the building of ports, railways, airports, hospitals, factories, and communications networks, positioning Eritrea as one of the most industrialized regions in Africa at the time. The Teleferica Massaua-Asmara – a 75-kilometer aerial tramway – was the world's longest cableway when constructed.

In an enlightening 2006 article, the Eritrean scholar Rahel Almedom wrote how, after assuming control of Eritrea following Italian colonization, "the British had inherited a thriving local economy," while Brigadier Stephen H. Longrigg, a civilian who from 1942 to 1944 served as chief administrator of the British Military Administration (BMA) in Eritrea, described the country as "highly developed," and noted that it had, "superb roads, a railway, airports, a European city as its capital, [and] public services up to European standards."

Additionally, as noted by two Westerners who lived in Eritrea, "In 1935, Asmara, which was made the Eritrean capital in 1897, was the most modern and progressive city in Italian East Africa," while at the same time, the port of

Massawa boasted the most extensive harbor facilities between Alexandria and Cape Town. Other Eritrean cities also reflected progress and industrialization. Tessenei was a hub for transportation and economic activity, while Dekemhare, about 40 km south of Asmara, was referred to as “zona industria” and “secondo Milano” and was full of busy factories and industries.

Critically, the period of Italian colonial rule also forged the basis of an Eritrean state and created its modern territorial boundaries, while contributing to the formation and development of a common, shared social history and unique national identity.

- **British occupation and post-war betrayal**

In April 1941, after the decisive British-led victory at the Battle of Keren, Eritrea was placed under British Military Administration (BMA). Despite British promises of independence in return for assistance against Italian forces, these were quickly abandoned. British propaganda even promised, “Eritreans! You deserve to have a flag! This is the honourable life for the Eritrean: to have the guts to call his people a Nation.” These assurances proved hollow.

Instead, the British plundered Eritrea’s industrial assets and infrastructure, selling them off for profit. Sylvia Pankhurst condemned this exploitation as “a disgrace to British civilisation.” Meanwhile, the BMA sowed division among Eritrean communities, seeking to fragment the territory and portray it as too weak and divided to be viable as an independent state. They aimed to partition Eritrea between the Anglo-Egyptian Sudan and imperial Ethiopia.

- **Federation by force**

Ethiopia, too, portrayed Eritrea as economically dependent and politically fragile. In a 1947 speech to the UN, Aklilu Habtewold claimed Eritrea “could not live by itself.” The US echoed this narrative, fearing that an independent Eritrea might fall under Soviet influence during the Cold War. In reality, one of the main reasons the British, Ethiopians, and Americans worked so hard to portray Eritrea as weak and so heavily pressed their claims regarding the country was that it was full of development and considerable economic potential.

On September 20, 1949, the UN General Assembly dispatched a commission to assess Eritrea's future. The delegation confirmed that the overwhelming majority of Eritreans favoured independence. Pakistani delegate Sir Zafrulla warned, "An independent Eritrea would obviously be better able to contribute to the maintenance of peace (and security) than an Eritrea federated with Ethiopia against the true wishes of the people. To deny the people of Eritrea their elementary right to independence would be to sow the seeds of discord and create a threat in that sensitive area of the Middle East."

Nevertheless, on December 2, 1950, UN Resolution 390 (V) imposed a federation with Ethiopia, making Eritrea an autonomous unit under the Ethiopian Crown. Sponsored by the US, the resolution prioritized Cold War strategic interests over Eritrean self-determination. The American Secretary of State John Foster Dulles infamously declared:

"From the point of justice, the opinions of the Eritrean people must receive consideration. Nevertheless, the strategic interest of the United States in the Red Sea basin and considerations of security and world peace make it necessary that the country be linked with our ally, Ethiopia."

Unlike other Italian colonies granted independence after World War II, Eritrea was denied its right to self-rule. Days later, Emperor Haile Selassie declared a national holiday celebrating the "restoration" of Eritrea. During a luncheon attended by the US Ambassador, the Emperor expressed gratitude for America's decisive role in the UN decision.

In return, the US gained key military advantages. On May 22, 1953, Ethiopia granted the Americans the right to establish military bases in Eritrea, including Kagnew Station in Asmara, which was then the world's largest overseas spy facility. Subsequent agreements included comprehensive military aid and training for Ethiopian forces.

The UN-mandated federal arrangement granted Eritrea legislative, judicial, and executive autonomy in domestic affairs. But from the outset, Ethiopia treated it with contempt. The monarchy began systematically dismantling Eritrean

autonomy, paving the way for annexation – actions that would eventually spark one of Africa's longest wars of independence.

Situated in the volatile Horn of Africa and blessed with a long, pristine coastline along the Red Sea, Eritrea is a country marked by a rich, complex, and turbulent history due to successive occupation and aggression. After one of the longest and most destructive wars for liberation in modern African history, Eritrea finally achieved independence from Ethiopia in 1991.

This is Part 2 of a series that seeks to illuminate the country's decades-long struggle against colonial occupation. While Part 1 explored the foundations of Eritrea's colonial experience and early political aspirations, this instalment focuses on the systemic erosion of the "Federal Act" under Ethiopian rule and the pivotal events that gave rise to the armed liberation struggle.

**Resilience amidst efforts to quash independence**

On 2 December 1950, following a protracted international process, the United Nations General Assembly passed Resolution 390(V) with a vote of 46 to 10. This resolution dashed Eritreans' hopes for full independence, instead federating Eritrea with Ethiopia as "an autonomous unit … under the sovereignty of the Ethiopian Crown." According to the resolution, Eritrea was to retain legislative, executive, and judicial autonomy in domestic matters, while Ethiopia would control defence, foreign affairs, and international trade.

However, Ethiopia's absolute monarchy, under Emperor Haile Selassie, viewed the Federal Arrangement with disdain. This contempt was laid bare in a 22 March 1955 speech to the Eritrean Assembly by the Emperor's representative, who declared:

"There are no internal or external affairs as far as the office of His Imperial Majesty's representative is concerned, and there will be none in the future. The affairs of Eritrea concern Ethiopia as a whole and the Emperor."

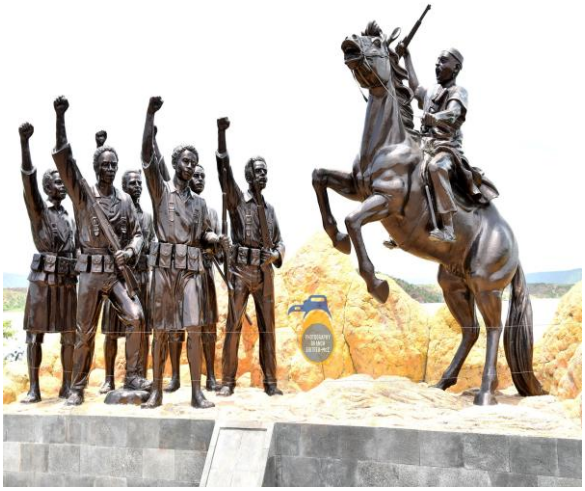
Over the following decade, Ethiopia systematically dismantled the Federal structure. Merely 19 days after the Federal Arrangement came into force, the regime issued Proclamation 130, placing Eritrea's final Court of Appeal under the Ethiopian Supreme Court – an overt breach of the Eritrean Constitution. Eventually, the Eritrean Constitution was abolished altogether, the national flag replaced by Ethiopia's, and Amharic was imposed as the official language, with Eritrean languages banned in schools and official transactions.

The Ethiopian regime resorted to additional draconian measures. Elected local leaders were forced to resign. Eritrea's share of Customs revenues was confiscated, and foreign investors were pressured to divert investments to Ethiopia. Eritrean tax revenues served imperial interests, and profits from successful Eritrean industries were siphoned to the Ethiopian heartland.

Repression also intensified, while peaceful opposition was violently crushed. In 1957 and 1962, students in Eritrea staged mass demonstrations, and in February 1958, a four-day general strike by underground trade unions brought the country to a standstill. Ethiopian troops responded with lethal force, killing dozens, wounding many, and arresting hundreds. Prominent nationalist Eritrean leaders like Woldeab Woldemariam and Ibrahim Sultan were forced into exile, where they continued the resistance and helped form opposition movements.

Although Eritreans were promised the right to appeal to the UN in case of violations, repeated petitions by Eritrean leaders to protest Ethiopia's actions were met with deafening silence. The UN and the international community failed to uphold their commitments. Ultimately, "Eritreans' hopes and faith in the United Nations waned as the situation worsened."

Finally, in November 1962, Emperor Haile Selassie formally dissolved the Eritrean Parliament by force and annexed the territory as Ethiopia's 14th province. Western observers described the move as a "putsch" and "a brutal and arbitrary act." Eritreans, dismayed and outraged, refused to participate in the regime's staged celebrations.



As these events unfolded, the international community remained silent, time and again, despite the clear violation of Resolution 390A(V), which stated that only the UN General Assembly had the authority to alter the Federation. Rather than defeating the Eritrean national movement, this betrayal galvanized it. The imperial annexation became a turning point, spurring the transition from peaceful protest to armed struggle. Indeed, if Eritrea was denied the right of decolonization in the first place in the 1940s, the international community's complicity by its silence when the bogus "Federal Act" was wilfully and utterly abrogated by the Ethiopian regime, nudged them to resort to armed struggle as the only option for regaining their inalienable national rights and human dignity.

**The birth of armed resistance**

On 1 September 1961, Hamid Idris Awate, a seasoned soldier with a reputation among Italians, British, and Ethiopians as a rebel, fired the first shots of the armed struggle in the Gash Barka region. Leading a small band of fighters armed with a handful of aging rifles, Awate initiated what would become a 30-year war for independence. Awate had earned medals for bravery during his time in the colonial army and was respected for his military acumen. A few months after the

start of the armed resistance, Abdu Mohamed Fayed became the first martyr of the struggle when he was killed in Adal near Sawa. (Fayed's grave is now in Sawa, and Awate died of illness roughly 10 months after launching the revolution.

For the peace-loving Eritrean people, the armed revolution was "the expression of the indignation of a people whose rights [were] flagrantly and ruthlessly suppressed." As one scholar succinctly put it, "Three times denied their dreams, the Eritreans now had no other recourse than to take their destiny into their own hands."

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