

Eritrea: The Long Road to Independence



By: Shabait Staff
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Introductory note: Eritrea, strategically positioned along the Red Sea in the volatile Horn of Africa, is a country shaped by resilience, sacrifice, and an unrelenting struggle for self-determination. With its long, unspoiled coastline and deep historical roots stretching back to the dawn of humanity, the nation occupies a unique place in both African and world history. Yet Eritrea's modern story has been defined above all by decades of foreign efforts at domination, political betrayal, and one of the longest liberation wars on the African continent.

To understand Eritrea's modern struggle for sovereignty and identity, one must first appreciate the country's far deeper historical significance. This history stretches back to the very beginnings of human civilization.

Archaeological discoveries in Eritrea's Danakil Depression – particularly in Buya – have uncovered hominid remains estimated to be between 1.5 and 2 million years old, placing the region among the earliest known centers of human existence. Across the country, prehistoric sites containing rock art, stone tools, and ancient artifacts testify to a long and continuous human presence. At the same time, evidence of early farming and animal domestication dates back to roughly 5000 BCE.

Many historians and archaeologists have also identified Eritrea as the most likely location of the ancient Land of Punt, the prosperous trading partner frequently referenced in Egyptian records. This connection further underscores the region's

significance in the development of early civilization and long-distance trade networks.

Yet Eritrea's strategic location and economic importance also made it a frequent target for outside powers long before the colonial era. Different parts of present-day Eritrea experienced periodic invasions and occupations by regional empires and foreign rulers. Egyptian and Ottoman authorities controlled coastal centers such as Massawa and sections of the lowlands at various times. At the same time, neighboring monarchs, feudal chiefs, and rival armies launched repeated incursions into the territory. These occupations were often temporary and met with determined resistance from local populations.

These repeated foreign incursions eventually gave way to full-scale European colonialism. Toward the end of the nineteenth century, Italy began seizing territory along the Eritrean coast, then steadily expanding inland in pursuit of a settler-colonial project. Backed quietly by Britain, which viewed Italian expansion as useful in countering French influence in the region, Italy officially proclaimed Eritrea its "colonia primogenita" — or first-born colony — on January 1, 1890. Massawa initially served as the capital before the role was transferred to Asmara in 1897, where it remains today.

For the next half-century, Eritrea remained under Italian colonial rule. Eritreans endured land confiscations, racial segregation, forced labor, political repression, and systematic discrimination under a rigid colonial order. Educational opportunities for Eritreans were deliberately restricted and designed largely to produce a subordinate labor force that served colonial interests. Many sections of Asmara were inaccessible to Eritreans, while apartheid-style policies governed much of daily life.

At the same time, the colonial era transformed Eritrea's physical infrastructure and economy. The period saw the construction of roads, railways, ports, airports, hospitals, factories, and communication systems, making Eritrea one of the most industrialized territories in Africa. The Teleferica Massawa- Asmara, a 75-kilometer aerial tramway connecting the coast to the highlands, was once the world's longest cableway.

Writing in 2006, Eritrean scholar Rahel Almedom observed that when the British took control of Eritrea after Italy's defeat, they inherited "a thriving local economy." Brigadier Stephen H. Longrigg, who served as chief administrator of the British Military Administration between 1942 and 1944, similarly described Eritrea as "highly developed," noting that it possessed "superb roads, a railway, airports, a European city as its capital, [and] public services up to European standards."

Other foreign observers also remarked on Eritrea's level of development during the period. Asmara was regarded as one of the most modern and progressive cities across the region, while Massawa possessed one of the finest harbors between Alexandria and Cape Town. Elsewhere, cities such as Tessenei emerged as important transportation and commercial hubs, while Dekemhare — south of Asmara — became known for its concentration of factories and industrial activity, earning labels such as "zona industria" and "secondo Milano."

Tree-lined boulevards, bustling traffic, European-style architecture — 1940s Asmara was Africa's modernist jewel — proof of Eritrea's capacity for self-rule. Yet the UN federated Eritrea to Ethiopia, ignoring the people's vote and sowing decades of war.

Beyond infrastructure and industrialization, the colonial era also played a major role in shaping the foundations of the modern Eritrean state. Despite the brutality and exploitation that accompanied colonialism, the period contributed to the emergence of shared political institutions, common historical experiences, and a distinct national consciousness among Eritrea's diverse communities



In April 1941, following the decisive British-led victory over Italian forces at the Battle of Keren, Eritrea was placed under British Military Administration. During

the war, British officials had promised Eritreans independence in exchange for assistance against Italy, but these pledges were quickly abandoned once victory was secured. British propaganda openly encouraged Eritrean nationalism, declaring: “Eritreans! You deserve to have a flag! This is the honorable life for the Eritrean: to have the guts to call his people a Nation.” In the end, however, such promises proved empty.

Instead of duly paving the way for Eritrea’s independence, the British dismantled and sold large portions of the country’s industrial infrastructure for profit. The prominent British activist Sylvia Pankhurst condemned the plunder as “a disgrace to British civilization.” At the same time, the British administration deliberately deepened social and political divisions inside Eritrea, seeking to portray the country as too fragmented and economically weak to survive as an independent state. British officials explored plans to partition Eritrea between the Anglo-Egyptian Sudan and the imperial Ethiopian Empire.

At the same time, Ethiopia aggressively advanced similar arguments. Ethiopian representatives insisted that Eritrea lacked the economic and political viability necessary for independence. In a speech delivered to the United Nations in 1947, Aklilu Habtewold argued that Eritrea “could not live by itself.” The United States, increasingly preoccupied with Cold War rivalries and strategic influence in the Red Sea region, echoed many of these claims.

In reality, however, Eritrea’s infrastructure, industrial capacity, and strategic location were precisely what made the territory so valuable to outside powers.

On September 20, 1949, the United Nations General Assembly sent a commission to examine Eritrea’s political future. The commission found that the overwhelming majority of Eritreans favored independence. Pakistani delegate Sir Muhammad Zafrulla Khan warned that forcing Eritrea into union against the wishes of its people would create lasting instability, stating that denying Eritreans their “elementary right to independence” would “sow the seeds of discord.”

Despite these findings, geopolitical interests prevailed. On December 2, 1950, the UN adopted Resolution 390 (V), federating Eritrea with Ethiopia under the Ethiopian crown. Strongly backed by the United States, the decision subordinated

Eritrean self-determination to Cold War strategic calculations. In words that are still bitterly etched into the hearts of Eritreans everywhere, US Secretary of State John Foster Dulles bluntly summarized Washington's position:

“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.”

Young Eritreans dig at the ancient port city of Adulis, unearthing a civilization that thrived long before colonial rule. Their work echoes the nation's own struggle: to reclaim a buried past and build a sovereign future.

Thus, unlike other former Italian colonies that achieved independence following the Second World War, Eritrea was denied the right to determine its own future. Only days after the UN decision, Emperor Haile Selassie declared a national celebration marking the illicit incorporation of Eritrea to Ethiopia and personally thanked the United States for its decisive support.

In return, Washington secured major military advantages in the region. On May 22, 1953, Ethiopia granted the United States permission to establish military installations in Eritrea, including Kagnev Station in Asmara, which would become one of the largest American intelligence and communications facilities outside the United States. Additional agreements soon followed, bringing extensive American military assistance and training to Ethiopia.

Under the United Nations-mandated federal arrangement, Eritrea was supposed to retain full and unencumbered autonomy over its internal affairs through its own legislative, judicial, and executive institutions. In practice, however, the Ethiopian monarchy steadily dismantled the “Federal Arrangement” from the outset. Eritrea's autonomous status was systematically eroded, its institutions weakened, and constitutional guarantees ignored. Finally, Ethiopia abrogated the Federal Act and annexed Eritrea in November 1962 with impunity. These escalating violations would ultimately ignite one of Africa's longest and bloodiest wars for national liberation.

The systematic erosion of the Federal Arrangement, the intensification of repression, and the birth of the armed liberation struggle.

On December 2, 1950, after years of international debate and political manoeuvring, the United Nations General Assembly adopted Resolution 390(V). The resolution denied Eritreans their full independence and instead “federated” Eritrea with Ethiopia as “an autonomous unit...under the sovereignty of the Ethiopian Crown.” Under the arrangement, Eritrea was meant to retain legislative, executive, and judicial authority over domestic affairs, while Ethiopia assumed control over defence, foreign affairs, and international commerce.

Yet almost immediately from the outset, Emperor Haile Selassie’s imperial regime viewed the “Federal Arrangement” with open contempt. The regime regarded Eritrean autonomy not as a binding international obligation, but as a temporary obstacle to complete annexation. This attitude was made unmistakably clear in a speech delivered to the Eritrean Assembly on March 22, 1955, when the Emperor’s representative 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” piece by piece.

Just 19 days after the “federation” formally came into effect, the imperial regime issued Proclamation 130, placing Eritrea’s highest court under the authority of the Ethiopian Supreme Court, thus a direct violation of the Eritrean Constitution. In the years that followed, Eritrea’s constitutional autonomy was steadily stripped away. The Eritrean flag was abolished and replaced with Ethiopia’s, while Amharic was imposed as the official language. Eritrean languages were progressively excluded from schools and official administration.

The erosion of Eritrea’s autonomy extended far beyond constitutional matters. The country’s elected local officials were forced from office, while its customs revenues were seized, and foreign investors were pressured to redirect economic

activity toward Ethiopia proper. Eritrea's tax revenues increasingly served imperial interests, while profits generated by Eritrean industries were funnelled into the Ethiopian heartland.

At the same time, political repression against Eritreans intensified and all forms of peaceful dissent were met with violence. In 1957 and again in 1962, Eritrean students from across the nation and representing various ethnicities organized mass demonstrations against imperial rule. In February 1958, underground trade unions launched a four-day general strike that effectively paralyzed the country. Ethiopian security forces, as had become their wont, responded brutally, killing demonstrators, wounding many others, and arresting hundreds. Prominent nationalist leaders such as Woldeab Woldemariam and Ibrahim Sultan were also forced into exile, where they continued organizing opposition movements abroad.

Notably, although there were explicit provisions for protecting the "Federal Arrangement" as an international instrument and for the "UN to be seized of the matter in the event of any violation", loud and repeated appeals by Eritrean political leaders and activists against Ethiopia's brazen acts were met with abject silence. The international community, despite its central role in imposing the "federation", completely failed to enforce its own guarantees or hold Ethiopia accountable for violating the "federal arrangement". As the situation gradually deteriorated, Eritreans increasingly lost faith in the United Nations and in the possibility of securing justice through peaceful means.

The final bitter blow came in November 1962, when Emperor Haile Selassie formally dissolved the Eritrean Parliament and annexed Eritrea as Ethiopia's fourteenth province. The move was widely condemned by observers abroad, some of whom described it as a "putsch" and "a brutal and arbitrary act". Inside Eritrea, meanwhile, anger and disillusionment deepened, and many Eritreans refused to participate in the regime's orchestrated celebrations marking the annexation.

Despite the clear violation of Resolution 390(V), which stipulated that only the United Nations General Assembly possessed the authority to alter Eritrea's "federal" status, the international community once again remained silent. Rather than extinguishing Eritrean nationalism, however, the Ethiopian regime's annexation transformed it. The destruction of the federal arrangement became a

decisive turning point, convincing many Eritreans that peaceful political struggle alone could no longer secure their national rights or dignity.

Indeed, if Eritrea had first been denied decolonization in the 1940s, the international community's silence during the years-long systematic dismantling of the "Federation" convinced many Eritreans that armed struggle had become the only remaining path toward liberation and inviolable nationhood.

It was within this atmosphere of repression, betrayal, and growing political frustration that Eritrea's formidable armed resistance was born.



On September 1, 1961, Hamid Idris Awate fired the opening shots of the Eritrean armed struggle in the Gash Barka region. Leading a small group of fighters equipped with only a handful of aging rifles, Awate launched what would become a thirty-year war for independence.

Awate, a veteran soldier respected for his military skill and long history of resistance against colonial and imperial authorities, had earned a formidable – and even feared – reputation among Italians, British officials, and Ethiopians alike. Only months after the armed struggle began, Abdu Mohamed Fayed became the first martyr of the Eritrean revolution after being killed near Adal, close to Sawa. Awate himself would die from illness less than a year after initiating the uprising, but the movement he sparked would ignite in a blazing wildfire across the country.

For Eritrean people, the armed struggle emerged not out of ideological extremism, but from the suppression of their right of decolonization, accumulated injustice and the systematic denial of basic political rights. As one scholar observed, the Eritrean revolution became “the expression of the indignation of a people whose rights [were] flagrantly and ruthlessly suppressed.”

Another wrote more succinctly: “Three times denied their dreams, the Eritreans now had no other recourse than to take their destiny into their own hands.” Like a spark igniting a raging wildfire, what began as isolated, small-scale guerrilla attacks would, over time, grow into a fierce, nationwide liberation movement that spread steadily across the country.

Over the next three decades, Eritrean fighters waged one of the longest and most demanding wars of liberation in modern African history. Largely isolated diplomatically and receiving little meaningful international support, they confronted successive Ethiopian regimes that benefited from extensive foreign military assistance and geopolitical backing. At different stages of the conflict, Ethiopia received support from the United States, the Soviet Union, Israel, Cuba, East Germany, Libya, and South Yemen – reflecting the Horn of Africa’s immense strategic importance during the Cold War. (In fact, at certain points, both Cold War superpowers supported Ethiopia simultaneously, which was an unprecedented development.)

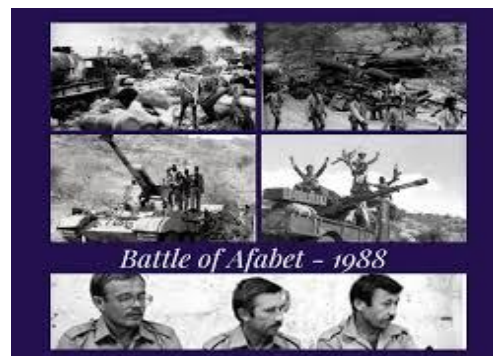
In the early years of the war, the United States emerged as one of Emperor Haile Selassie’s principal international backers, providing substantial military and financial aid to the imperial regime. Israel also established close security ties with Ethiopia, dispatching military advisers, intelligence personnel, and elite training units. Yet despite this external support, Ethiopian forces struggled to suppress the rapidly expanding Eritrean resistance, which evolved from a small insurgency dismissed as “banditry” into an increasingly organized and formidable liberation movement.

By the early 1970s, mounting military pressure from Eritrean fighters, combined with severe famine and rebellion in the Ogaden, had begun to destabilize the Ethiopian state itself. In 1974, Emperor Haile Selassie was overthrown by the Provisional Military Administrative Council (commonly known as the Derg), led by Lieutenant Colonel Mengistu Haile Mariam. The new regime eventually aligned itself with the Soviet Union. However, American and Israeli assistance continued for a period, underscoring the complex and shifting geopolitical calculations surrounding the Horn of Africa.

By late 1977, Eritrean liberation forces had gained control over most rural areas and encircled key urban centers, including Massawa and Asmara. At the same time, Ethiopia found itself engaged in a major war with Somalia over the Ogaden region. Alarmed by the potential collapse of its ally, the Soviet Union intervened decisively, supplying Ethiopia with massive quantities of arms, military advisers, and logistical support. Thousands of Cuban and South Yemeni troops were also deployed to assist the Ethiopian war effort.

The intervention was a pivotal lifeline, as it enabled Ethiopia to reverse Somali advances in the Ogaden and, crucially, redirect its military focus toward Eritrea with renewed force. Backed by extensive Soviet assistance and reinforced by foreign troops and advisers, Ethiopia launched major counteroffensives aimed at crushing the Eritrean liberation movement “once and for all”.

Forced into a strategic retreat, the EPLF regrouped in the rugged Sahel region and transformed Nakfa into both a military stronghold and a powerful symbol of resistance. Between 1978 and 1981, Ethiopian forces launched five major offensives to capture the area, but each failed. In 1982, Mengistu escalated the campaign through Operation Red Star, deploying more than 136,000 troops in one of the largest military offensives of the war. Despite overwhelming numerical superiority and extensive Soviet backing, the operation failed catastrophically, costing Ethiopia tens of thousands of casualties and severely damaging military morale.



Following these defeats, the balance of the war increasingly shifted in favor of the EPLF. A decisive turning point came in March 1988 during the Battle of Afabet, where Eritrean forces inflicted a crushing defeat on Ethiopia’s Northern Command headquarters. Often compared to battles such as El Alamein and Dien Bien Phu for their strategic significance, the Battle of Afabet became one of the largest and most consequential military engagements fought in Africa since the Second World War.

Then, in February 1990, the EPLF launched Operation Fenkil, a meticulously coordinated land-and-sea offensive that liberated the strategic port city of Massawa. The operation severed one of Ethiopia’s most critical military supply routes and inflicted devastating losses on Ethiopian forces, with thousands killed, wounded, or captured. More importantly, it signaled that Eritrean independence was no longer a distant aspiration, but an approaching reality.

With Massawa secured, only Asmara and Assab remained under Ethiopian control. In May 1991, Eritrean forces defeated Ethiopian troops at Dekemhare before rapidly advancing through surrounding towns and entering Asmara on May 24. Assab, along the Red Sea, fell the following day. Remnants of the demoralized

Ethiopian soldiers, which had long been regarded as part of Africa's largest and best-equipped military force, surrendered in tens of thousands. Just days earlier, on May 21, Mengistu Haile Mariam had fled into exile in Zimbabwe.

As Eritrean fighters entered the capital that they had fought so long to control, they were greeted by scenes of jubilation and celebration. After thirty years of war, immense sacrifice, and widespread devastation, Eritrea had finally secured its freedom. Against extraordinary odds, Eritrean fighters had defeated a far larger and heavily armed military backed for decades by powerful international allies.

In the months following liberation, preparations began for an internationally supervised referendum intended to formally affirm Eritrea's right of decolonization and complete the final diplomatic chapter of the independence struggle. On May 29, 1991, Isaias Afwerki, then Secretary-General of the EPLF, called upon the United Nations to "shoulder its moral responsibilities" and assist in conducting a free and fair referendum without delay.

Two years later, in 1993, Eritrea formally joined the international community as Africa's fifty-second nation-state following an internationally monitored referendum in which Eritreans overwhelmingly voted for independence. Supervised by the United Nations, the Organization of African Unity, the Arab League, and observers from numerous countries, the referendum recorded a turnout of approximately 98.5 percent, with 99.81 percent of voters supporting independence – figures with few parallels anywhere else in the world.

Eritrea's path to nationhood remains one of the most determined and resilient liberation struggles of the twentieth century. Against immense military odds, constantly shifting geopolitical alliances, and prolonged international indifference, Eritreans fought, endured, and ultimately prevailed. Their victory represented not simply the defeat of an occupying power, but the realization of a collective aspiration for sovereignty and dignity that generations had struggled to achieve.

Today, more than three decades after independence, the legacy of the liberation struggle continues to shape Eritrea's national identity and historical consciousness. It remains a powerful reminder of the sacrifices demanded by freedom; the consequences of the flagrant breaches of international law; and the enduring determination of a people unwilling to surrender their national rights. As Eritreans commemorate the 35th anniversary of independence, the history of that long struggle continues to stand as both a source of national pride and a defining chapter in the broader history of liberation movements.