

First Italo- Ethiopian War

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NOVEMBER 16-19, 2017 | MONTRÉAL, QUÉBEC



Socio-economic crisis: the Great Ethiopian Famine 1888-1892

1888. Ethiopia is ruled by Emperor Yohannes IV. Under Yohannes's rule, the geopolitical interest of the Ethiopian Empire is moving, and the state finds itself in the grip of serious internal and external challenges. One of these challenges is the disastrous famine that begins in 1888 in Northern regions of Ethiopia and lasts four years. Ethiopia's great famine starts with a rinderpest epidemic (also known as "cattle disease"), affecting Ethiopian cattle and agricultural lands.¹The cattle disease originates with Italian importation. Indeed, in February 1885 and November 1887, the Italians start a policy of expansion in the African region and seize the port of Massawa in Eritrea.² The army brings along cattle, mainly from India, which appear to be infected. Many Ethiopians who are aware of Italian ambitions in the Ethiopian Empire believe that the disease is being deliberately spread to weaken the Empire.³

The epidemic spreads throughout the country southwards and eventually affects all of Ethiopia in four months, causing most of the cultures to perish.⁴ In the late

¹ Bahru Zewde, *A history of modern Ethiopia, 1855-1991* (Oxford: James Curry, 2001).

² Richard Pankhurst, "The Great Ethiopian Famine of 1888–1892: A New Assessment Part I," *Journal of the History of Medicine and Allied Sciences* XXI, no. 2 (1966), p.100

³ Ibid, p.101

⁴ Ibid, p.102



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nineteenth century, farming is the mainstay of Ethiopia's economy, but the activity produces no surplus.⁵ Therefore, when the cattle disease spreads, the Empire is unable to overcome the problems of shortages.⁶ The absence of market economy means that Ethiopians, from the rich owner to the farmer, do not have effective manner of storing food and resources.⁷ Yohannes IV, thus, succeeds in keeping his Empire prosperous, but lacks tactical strategies to develop a modern state.

The result is that the prosperity of the Empire gives way to serious instabilities. Yohannes IV eventually dies in 1889 and Menelik II is crowned in March 1889. Since his coronation, Menelik II has proven himself to be an effective ruler for the Ethiopian Empire: he wants to transform and modernize the state. However, Menelik II is unable to deal with the famine crisis that the Empire is going through. Few areas in Ethiopia have now escaped the spread of the disease. The lack of rainfall since 1888 leads to crop failures and famine: throughout Ethiopia, the rate of malnourished people increases.⁸ Conditions worsen in 1889 with the outbreak of smallpox, cholera and typhus epidemics in the regions. By that time, 90 percent of Ethiopia's cattle have perished. The state becomes fragile and its population completely vulnerable.

⁵ "Ethiopian Great Famine – 1888-1892," Devastating Disasters, accessed May 28, 2017, <http://devastatingdisasters.com/ethiopian-great-famine-1888-1892/>.

⁶ Richard Pankhurst, "The Great Ethiopian Famine of 1888–1892: A New Assessment Part I," *Journal of the History of Medicine and Allied Sciences* XXI, no. 2 (1966), p.96

⁷ Ibid, p.96

⁸ Ibid, p.95



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Despite his Empire's misfortune, Emperor Menelik II is dedicated in comforting his people.⁹ Menelik orders his soldiers to provide actions in the devastated regions and to supply the population with his personal resources. The Emperor's leadership and moral support during the crisis proves to the Ethiopians his desire to recover from the crisis and emancipate the Empire.¹⁰ Menelik II is loved and respected by his people and demonstrates a very tenacious character during the Great Famine. Although the Emperor has gained his people's trust, it is not sufficient to deal with the widespread crisis. Four years after the beginning of the famine, 3.5 million Ethiopians have died and Ethiopia is completely destroyed.¹¹

In Italy, the government looks at the Great Famine as an opportunity to seize the coveted region of Africa and expand Italy's colonial empire to compete with its European neighbours. Indeed, while the famine spreads in Ethiopia, Menelik II and the Italians sign the Treaty of Wuchale in May 1889.¹² Although the text does not say the same thing in the two countries, the Italian version establishes an Italian protectorate over Ethiopia.¹³ The social crisis is now increasingly becoming a political crisis. Ethiopia is about to lose its supremacy.

⁹ Richard Pankhurst, "The Great Ethiopian Famine of 1888–1892: A New Assessment Part II," *Journal of the History of Medicine and Allied Sciences* XXI, no. 3 (1966), p.291

¹⁰ Ibid, p.286

¹¹ Richard Pankhurst, "The Great Ethiopian Famine of 1888–1892: A New Assessment Part I," *Journal of the History of Medicine and Allied Sciences* XXI, no. 2 (1966), p.95

¹² "First Italo–Ethiopian War," New World Encyclopedia, accessed May 27, 2017, http://www.newworldencyclopedia.org/entry/First_Italo%E2%80%93Ethiopian_War.

¹³ Ibid.



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Abolition of Slave Trading

Since his ascension on the Ethiopian throne, Menelik II aims to create a modern Empire that competes with European colonial powers. The Emperor wants Ethiopia to be a commercial pioneer in Africa. Therefore, he establishes a thriving economic market, based on importations and exportations of coffee, firearms, ivory and slaves.¹⁴ Menelik is determined to extract as much as possible from the trade business with Europe, so that Ethiopia becomes powerful in the region.

However, Menelik is aware of the disfavour in which the slave trade is held.¹⁵

The Great Famine that is currently devastating the Empire brings him closer to the

¹⁴ Raymond A. Jonas. 2011. *The Battle of Adwa: African victory in the age of empire*. Cambridge, Mass: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, p.80

¹⁵ Ibid, p.81



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population and he develops a moral compass towards his subjects. Furthermore, Menelik faces many external challenges on the diplomatic stage. Italy has been actively trying to extend its colonial Empire, which allows uncertainty to persist in Ethiopia. If Italy declares war on Ethiopia, slaves would want to revolt against Menelik's Empire. This goes against the Emperor's ambition of a united nation. Managing tactical changes is part of the Empire's plan to achieve sovereignty.¹⁶ Menelik leaves his right-hand man, Makonnen in charge of diplomatic strategies.

Therefore, at the Treaty of Wuchale in August 1889, Menelik agrees to suppress slave market, and gives preferences to Italians in trade and commerce with Ethiopia.¹⁷ Both nations seem to find satisfaction with the abolition of slavery.

Months after the signing of the treaty, the Italians move up from Massawa to the south getting closer to Ethiopia's borders.

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<http://public.eblib.com/choice/publicfullrecord.aspx?p=3301007>.

¹⁶ Ibid, p.82

¹⁷ Ibid, p.73