

A Note on the Battle of Maichew, 1935

Gafuy

Today, May 28, I should have focused on the celebrations of the twentieth anniversary of May 28. I am just back from the celebrations at Mesqel Square, in Addis Ababa, to compose this piece. A sea of people of all ages, various slogans written in Amharic and English, cheerful singing and dancing, as usual a clear and brief address by Prime Minister Meles – this is a partial description of what I have witnessed wading through a human sea of my compatriots of both sexes and all ages.

A few of the slogans read: *abay maderiya allew; yehidasiyew gidib rasachin inserawalen; bager wust aqimachin inilemalen; abayin begara tirketachin inalemawalen; betiglachin wenzochachinin yemeteqem mebit inasikebiralen; Ginbot 20 leitiyopya; rasachin ina zegochachin ketafik adega tebiqen yehidasiyewun gidib iwun inaderigewalen; africa behizibochiwa tirket tilemalech*; ‘yes, we can’; etc. The Renaissance Dam was the fountain of the slogans as well as it constituted the dominant mode of expression for the popular sentiment. These sentiments of my fellow Ethiopians bestowed me with this feeling: All is on track in Ethiopia and all is for the best.

Histories and a history lie behind Ginbot 20, May 28. In this note, I focus on a case of unknown martyrs of an Ethiopian history of defeat. Ethiopians had won admittedly ‘a resounding victory’ over a royal army of Italy at the Battle of Adwa in 1896. Thirty-nine years later, in 1935, we sustained finally an ignominious defeat in the hands of a fascist Italy at the Battle of Maichew. Ethiopian historians have yet to supply us with a credible (profound) explanation for the ignominious defeat despite the previous resounding victory. All of us must also come to grips with as credible explanation for the popular sentiments of independence and self-reliance displayed on May 28, 2011.

As far back as 1932, Emperor Haile Selassie knew for certain that the fascist dictator Mussolini had decided to invade Ethiopia. In the same year, he gave instructions to his ministers to deliberate on how best to conduct a war of resistance. Ethiopian warriors were eventually deployed in five major fronts: the northwestern (Gonder-Shire), north-central (Aksum-Adwa), north-eastern (Hintalo-Mekelle), eastern (Ogaden) and the southern (Sidamo-Bale) fronts. Ethiopian deployments matched the enemy’s strategic and tactical directions of aggression.

The enemy had passed through the tough test of the imperialist European war of 1914-18, of which our Emperor was not oblivious. The enemy possessed advanced weapons, including tanks, warplanes, and nerve gas. If there were no technological parity between Ethiopia and Italy in weaponry and troop formation also in 1896, the disparity had become much greater by 1935. The chosen strategy was however positional (conventional) warfare, the same as in the battles of Gundet, Gura’e, and Adwa. The enemy had prepared well this time to conduct a murderous war. The Ethiopian strategy played handily into the enemy’s.

The enemy mounted its aggression in late 1935. The Gonder-Shire front collapsed speedily, but not without a few skirmishes. The enemy employed the nerve gas for the first time in this front. Ethiopian warriors in the Aksum-Adwa front were initially pushed back in the direction of

Tembien. The enemy met a major resistance at Amdeworq (Tembien). The character of the battle indeed caused a change in the command of the invading army: Badoglio for De Bono, a nationally renowned general for a general of the fascist party's choice. The enemy became now even more determined to use freely the nerve gas.

Ethiopian warriors in the Tembien front suffered ultimately defeat. The Mekelle corridor became open for the enemy as the political leader in charge, Haile Sellasie Gugsa, had already defected to the Italian side. Ethiopian warriors at Imba Ar'adom (Hintalo) under the command of Ras Mulugeta, the Minister of War, retreated disorderly as the enemy advanced to the point of Maiqeyah in the Mekelle-Maichew route.

Ethiopian warriors in the Ogaden front employed a form of mobile warfare. This slowed down Graziani's advance to Addis Ababa from Somalia (then an Italian colony). In fact, Graziani could not advance into Harar and Dire Dawa until after the emperor had left Ethiopia by train through Dire Dawa and via Djibouti (then a French colony).

Emperor Haile Selassie and his advisors had judged correctly the major Italian attack would come from the north. The emperor deployed more forces in this front than elsewhere. He also tried to coordinate personally the war effort first from Dessie and then from Ofla, to the immediate south of Maichew. Attempts were made to stop and regroup the warriors in disorderly retreat.

A battle followed at Maichew in March 1936. Perhaps it was not as stiff as in the battle of Amdeworq, but it was stiff enough nevertheless. Mussolini employed more heavily the nerve gas here than elsewhere. It proved the last major-conventional battle in the war of resistance. The surviving Ethiopian warriors had to leave haphazardly the battle scene. Confusion accompanied even the emperor's retreat to Addis Ababa via Lasta and Fiche. He had to leave the capital as hastily as he had reached it.

Perhaps the character and outcome of the war of resistance and its final conventional battle constitute a graphic commentary on the character of Ethiopian statehood negated by a history which May 28 marks. Perhaps the twentieth anniversary of May 28 signifies a maturity of the new phase of our history. The tangible legacy of the last battle of the war of resistance is however we find skeletons of unknown martyrs kept in makeshift arrangements for the last seventy-five years. No forensic identification has been made, but there is little doubt that they are of Ethiopian martyrs.

The battle and the larger war of resistance are a matter of history. The skeletons of the unknown martyrs of the murderous war on the other hand are a heritage of humanity. The skeletons require both safekeeping and forensic examination. If we cannot and should not look for the remains of all the martyrs of the war of resistance, we should at any rate identify and preserve properly those that have been passed on to us. The zonal and warada administrations have proposed to properly preserve them. But it takes the support of a lot more people who value the heritage to do so.

Finally, clarity is necessary on two possible points of misunderstanding. Ethiopia and Italy today are friendly countries today. All issues of war reparation had been settled during the reign of Emperor Haile Sellasie. This is, as I see it, no longer an outstanding issue. Secondly, the

skeletons of the unknown martyrs are a national heritage as much as they are human heritage. We will have to cooperate also with the concerned federal agency in matters of forensic examination and safekeeping. In matters of funding, however, it should be emphasized we cannot expect the federal government to take up the issue given the burden of the fundamental developmental issues and tasks with which it is rightly engaged. Hence, our resort to fund-raising!

A Note on Tilahun Gizaw

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“Farsighted in thought, short in life” is a statement accompanying one of Tilahun’s discovered photographs. It may be a generic statement used freely. In Tilahun’s case however it is an apt epigram.

Born in Robit (near Qobbo) in 1933 (E.C.), Tilahun died at the age of 29 in December 1969. He fell in the hands of a government assassin after a week of orchestrated campaign by government media. The theme of the campaign was “a snake must be nipped in the bud” (*ibabin megidel binchichu new*). Why did the old regime accordingly slate Tilahun for assassination and carried it out?

Tilahun had a royal connection which he could have tapped for his personal advancement. He abjured personal gains. He chose instead to take up the cause of the peoples of Ethiopia and the country Ethiopia itself. He had the conviction that the old regime must go and Ethiopia ought to be reconstituted as the home of all of its peoples.

A revolution was necessary. The revolution should lead to a new political system that ought to be reflective of its constituent peoples. The peoples of Ethiopia were then viewed as mere *gossa* or *neged* (tribes). Tilahun and his comrades opposed this view. Instead, they saw the peoples of Ethiopia fundamentally as nations, with the right to self-determination “including and up to secession.” Although this thought must have crystallized among a few of the university student leaders much earlier it was pronounced in public, including in print, in late 1969.

After the abortive coup of the Niway brothers of 1960, it was a university-student movement that took up the cause of revolution against the old regime. It succeeded to emerge as an organized force consistently opposed to the old regime. The movement had its own pre-history, which we can afford to ignore. It suffices to note the movement had emerged as a revolutionary-democratic force by 1965, when it raised the banner of ‘Land to the Tiller.’ By 1965, the political movement in Eritrea had transited to armed struggle. At the beginning, since 1961, the demand was merely for the restoration of the federation, which the regime of Emperor Haile Selassie had found both expedient and strategic to abrogate. Gradually, it would develop into a movement for independence.

In 1968/69, Tilahun entered the race for the presidency of the University Students’ Union of Addis Ababa (USUAA). He was defeated in the race. The evidence indicates irresponsible insinuation of his connection with the Eritrean movement had done the political mischief to tip

the balance against him. According to the constitution of USUAA, he could not have run for the second time if he had continued his education.

Tilahun officially discontinued his education for a year. He spent the time on self-taught political education. It is quite likely, although I have not come by incontrovertible evidence, he also engaged along with his comrades like Walleigne in leading the country-wide student rebellion of 1969. The rebellion involved university and high school students in the country. The rebellion, accompanied by dissemination of leaflets, openly defied the authority of the emperor. This set the background for the election of late 1969.

Tilahun re-enrolled in the academic year 1969/70 (1962 Ethiopian). He was elected president of USUAA. The inauguration ceremony took place at X-mass Hall in December 1969. Walleigne presented a paper at the inauguration. It was on the question of nationalities in Ethiopia. To put it succinctly, the paper declared the peoples of Ethiopia were nations and deserved the right to self-determination “including and up to secession.”

The Ethiopian student movement thus challenged not only the imperial-feudal but also the empire foundations of Ethiopian statehood. For the old regime, it had become “a snake” that ought to be nipped in the bud. Hence, the government mounted an orchestrated official campaign, thus preparing the ground to use brute force to repress the movement, ostensibly once and for all. The university students were so angered by the campaign that their talk centred on a repeat of the 1969 country-wide rebellion.

It had been the tradition of USUAA that such matters were decided by a majority vote of a general assembly of all university students in Addis Ababa. A student assembly was convened and discussed the issue. One speaker after another called for action. Tilahun was mature enough not to give in to sentiment. He understood the government was engaged in provocations to justify its planned repressive measures. This was how he summed up the situation: “Their position is that of a cat and our position is that of a rat. When the cat corners the rat, it strikes back.” He thus swayed the student general assembly not to give in to provocations.

Denied a convenient political pretext, the regime decided nevertheless to go ahead and assassinate Tilahun and it did in the same month. He had been conveyed alive to the hospital at Sidist Kilo (now Yekatit Hospital) from Afincho Ber, where the assassin had assailed him. He died in the hospital without receiving the necessary medical attention. A murderous repression of mourning students took place the following day inside the Sidist Kilo campus, where students were in possession of the body of their fallen hero. Finally, his family took possession of the body which they buried in Maichew.

Given the subsequent history of revolution in Ethiopia and its culmination in a democratic constitution, it is necessary its antecedent ideas, the crucible (the student movement) and its martyrs must be passed on to subsequent generations also in the form of a modest memorial edifice. Tilahun as the first martyr of the movement offers a convenient figure. The city and rural warada administrations of Maichew and Endamekhoni, including the zonal administration of South Tigray, have proposed to raise funds for this purpose as well.

