

A brief expose of the war crimes committed on innocent Eritrean civilians.

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“Dry up the sea to kill the fish”¹

Prologue

The winds of change and hope that have been blowing across the Horn of Africa should inspire the peoples of this long troubled region to fully appreciate the long term socio-political and economic implications to the peoples of the region. The tested wisdom and experience of the Government of the State of Eritrea (GSE) and the resilience of the Eritrean people triumphed over the potential existential threat emanating from a volatile and rapidly deteriorating political and social situation in Ethiopia. The untenable situation in Ethiopia was a product of rampant corruption and inept ethno-political system. Touted as a regional anchor state it was the beneficiary of unfettered military, financial and diplomatic support from successive US administrations and European Nations. What aggravates the political turmoil in Ethiopia is the fact that the current regime, preceded by an expansionist “socialist” government, were imposed on a population whose collective psyche is still influenced by a deeply rooted feudal culture. Additionally, the self-serving and fear mongering narrative, promoted by the leaders in Ethiopia, that any reform or changes to the status quo in Ethiopia would result in its disintegration was discredited and proven wrong. It is also worth noting that the relentless efforts of the Eritrean government under the leadership of President Issaias Afwerki , to support the democratic movements, played a critical role towards the development of political consciousness among Ethiopians. Lastly, the persistent struggle for genuine democracy of the Ethiopian people in general and the youth in

¹ This infamous statement was found in a confidential Ethiopian government document and exposes the military strategy of the Ethiopian Government to exterminate the civilian population in Eritrea. The sea, in this case, is a metaphor for the civilian population and the fish represent the National Liberation Forces.

particular, under the leadership of Dr Abiy Ahmed , was a significant factor in bringing about democratic change and preserving the integrity of the Ethiopian nation.

Just as the identity of a person is shaped and maintained by socio-political, psychological and emotional life experiences, collective historical and political experiences mediated by social values, traditions, cultural institutions and beliefs (McAdams, 2018) are critical factors that contribute to the development of a cohesive national identity. For more than a century, the historical and political experiences of the Eritrean and Ethiopian peoples took divergent paths and resulted in their respective national identities. Regardless, it bodes well for both nations and the region as a whole that the ushering in of peace and cooperation has been enthusiastically embraced by both peoples. To reap maximum benefits from such an unprecedented development and ensure their sustainability, the respective historical and political experiences of the two peoples should be properly understood. Any intentional effort to advance a distorted narrative of their respective histories and dismissal of each other's socio-political experience will only result in mutual resentment and distrust.

Introduction

In this brief article I aim to take a glimpse at and walk the reader through a painful but salient aspect of the history of the Eritrean people and, thereby, make a modest contribution toward a deeper mutual understanding and sustainable cooperation between the two peoples.

Due to strategic geo-political and economic factors, selective gross human rights violations and war crimes have historically claimed a monopoly with regards to international news media coverage and exposure within academia. Others deemed less significant and, therefore, inconsequential have been relegated to oblivion and still remain shrouded in the annals of human history. The extermination of six million Jews in World War II and the Rwanda Genocide of 1994 that resulted in the deaths of almost a million civilians, mostly Tutsi, have justifiably been the beneficiaries of continual international attention. However, crimes committed against marginalized populations with insignificant

political and economic clout such as the Arawak Indians (Zinn, 1995); The African Holocaust and the Slave Trade (Clarke, 1992); Aborigines of Tasmania; the Herrero and Nama of Namibia; the Gypsies in Europe; the Kurds in Iraq (Lemarchand, 2011) to name a few did not until relatively recently capture the long overdue attention of legal scholars and historians. Despite the fact each of the above mentioned cases was a product of a unique interaction between socio-political conditions and historical events, the undeniable truth is that in every case the systematic extermination of innocent and defenseless civilians was an important motivating factor.

Therefore, the gross human rights violations committed against innocent Eritrean civilians by successive colonial powers in Eritrea should remain intact in our collective memory lest some segments of our people become victims of what of (Scobie, 1992) calls a sense of pastlessness. Realizing the potential danger of historical amnesia, the GSE utilized massive human and material resources to investigate and document, in a stunningly vivid detail, virtually every incident of atrocity committed by Ethiopia on defenseless Eritrean civilians. These invaluable historical materials have been accessible to a large segment of our people; however, for the benefit of our youth in the diaspora in particular and the international community in general, the importance and urgency of translating them into English and Arabic must be underscored. An accurate reconstruction, meticulous documentation and effective generational transmission of this painful aspect of our history is, needless to say, highly significant to the development of our cohesive national identity

The GSE and the Eritrean people should not be deterred from fully exposing and disseminating the abhorrent acts committed against innocent Eritrean civilians. The danger of allowing our history to be told from the perspective of our former colonizers and present detractors is to relegate the atrocities and humiliation we endured to obscurity. We should also be constantly vigilant against persistent attempts to gradually bleach out our collective historical memories by those who advance a revisionist and disparaging narrative of our history and political experience. We should never forget that the crimes committed by successive Ethiopian governments and the

subsequent horrible sacrifices endured by our defenseless and innocent civilians are an integral part of our history.

The wanton killings of civilians, the illegal expropriation of our arable and grazing lands and unfettered exploitation of our natural resources have historically been justified as actions necessary to ostensibly preserve international and regional stability and promote national interests and security. On the contrary, our indomitable spirit and persistent resistance against these gross human rights violations have been vilified in order to serve the geopolitical and economic interests of Western nations. As a people we should be cognizant of the fact that we owe our existence as a sovereign people in a sovereign state to the protracted valiant struggle and enormous sacrifices of our heroes and heroines.

Atrocities against Eritrean civilians did not begin in the recent past. Referring to the harsh conditions during the Ottoman Empire's rule in Eritrea from the 16th to the 19th centuries for example, our ancestors coined a phrase that captures the essence of their suffering and the brutality of the Turkish rule. The phrase is still used to this day in casual conversations among Eritreans.²

Atrocities committed by Italian Colonial Authorities

In addition to seeking to secure geo-political interests, exploit economic resources and effect religious conversion (Almedom, 2006)³, Italian colonialism in Eritrea was also perversely inspired by a racist ideology as manifested in the preposterous reason to "civilize" a barbarian population. General Antonio Baldissera, the first colonial commander, did not mince words when expressing his racist views nor did he hesitate to use the *curbash*, a whip made of hippopotamus hide that lashed backs raw. It became an institutionalized weapon frequently used to strike terror into the civilian population in order to obtain submission.

² Gizat Turki: it literally means "Turkish Rule" but, more importantly, it also implies a proclivity toward ruthlessness.

³ Almedom posits that an important motivation for Italian interest in Eritrea was to strengthen its political stronghold by subjugating the Orthodox Christian Church of the Eritrean highland. Of course history has proven that this effort was a by and large a failed mission.

It is also worth noting that the perception of “literate” Italians about the colonized population was not at variance with that of the racist colonial functionaries. For the most part Italians viewed the indigenous population,

“as not civilizable, promise breakers, deceitful, anarchic, unteachable, and in any case destined to vanish because of famine and vendetta” (Bruner, 2017, p. 3).

The imprisonment, torture and murder of the civilian population based on trumped up accusations of treason and espionage were not only rampant but also executed with impunity. According to (Bruner, 2017), a prominent Italian journalist, Napoleone Corrazini, seemed to be on a mission to expose the corruption and unruly savagery that possessed the colonial police in the city of Massawa in 1891. The following paragraphs quoted in (Bruner, 2017) clearly illustrate the unhinged character of the Italian colonial police force and its callous disregard for Eritrean life and dignity. The first appalling incident in Massawa in 1891, is about Getheon,

“a wealthy Eritrean merchant who had been arrested at Massawa, Italy’s colonial port on the Red Sea and imprisoned on espionage and treason charges pursuant to Livraghi’s orders. A search of Getheon’s house discovered a large sum of cash which Livraghi claimed as prize money, contending that the sum represented funds meant for obtaining arms and ammunition for use by rebel tribes. Awaiting trial in December 1889, Ghetheon disappeared from colonial prison. According to Corazzini⁴, Livraghi recognized that the proof of Getheon’s crimes was flimsy and therefore decided to have him killed. Indigenous police dragged Getheon out of prison in the middle of the night, took him some distance away from Massawa, and then shot him twice. Not dead after two shots, the merchant was finished off with stones and clubs. Livraghi witnessed the killing from horseback and then dismounted to verify that Getheon was in fact dead. The body was thrown into a grave, and Livraghi helped conceal the grave by smoothing out the earth” (Bruner, 2017, p. 6).

He cites another brutal killing that illustrates Livraghi’s depravity,

“the case involved Osman, a Moslem Chief. He was arrested in a town outside of Massawa on Livraghi’s orders, also on charges of espionage and treason. Delivered to the Massawa police, Osman disappeared. Colonial authorities told his family that he had been

deported to Italy. However, Corazzini claimed that the same police commanded by Livraghi led Osman one night through the countryside. At some point Livraghi ordered a halt and directed that a grave be dug. He told Osman that the grave was for him. Osman threw himself on the ground pleading for mercy, but Livraghi made him stand up and then “ laughing spasmodically” shot him twice. Remounting his horse, Livraghi smoked a cigarette while his squad threw the body into the grave and covered it over. Corazzini suggested that the body was buried “ perhaps while its heart was still beating.” Livraghi then trampled on the grave site with his horse.” (Bruner, 2017, p. 7).

Subsequent to the defeat of Italy by the Allied Forces in April 1941, the British Military Administration (1941-1952) in Eritrea allowed Italian bureaucrats to continue to serve in powerful civilian and military positions. As a result, the Italians continued to abuse their power and commit atrocities against with impunity. For example (Almedom, 2006) gives a chilling description of an event that occurred on August 7, 1941. The account clearly illustrates the depravity of the Italian officers, their total disregard for Eritrean lives as well as the complicity of the British:

“In Asmara, the families of Eritrean police officers had not been paid for several months following “liberation.” Those families signed a petition asking for their situation to be considered by the new administration. Twenty delegates were sent to deliver the petition to the BMA. They were met by a very hostile Italian officer, a member of the “ old guard”, who inspected the signed petition, ridiculed the delegates for trying to voice Eritrean grievances, and ordered one of his subordinates to shoot them. Many were killed on the spot and those who fled were pursued all the way to the Eritrean quarters of Idaga Hamus where some armed Eritreans fired back to stop the chase.” (Almedom, 2006, p. 115)

War Crimes committed by Ethiopia

According to (Erlich, 1996,) the Tigrean Ras Alula, King John the IV 's military strategist and ruthless administrator in Eritrea, frustrated with his repeated failed attempts to take Kassala from the Sudanese Mahdists, decided to cover up his military debacle and appease his King by exterminating the Kunama and Nara nationalities and pillaging their villages. The following excerpt from his book clearly illustrates the above stated point

“ On November 1886 the ras ordered his army to march some eight miles southward to the spring of Mogolo. There he camped again, became frustrated with his inability even to contemplate an attack on Kassala, and therefore ordered the greatest plunder in the history of the Baria tribes. During the last week in November, two-thirds of the people and cattle of the Baria and Kunama north of the Gash were destroyed. On 1 December 1886, ordered his army to march back to Tigre, even though, as in the previous year, he had not seen the gates of Kassala” (Erlich, 1996, p. 101)

The armed struggle for independence in Eritrea started in 1961 after all peaceful protests were exhausted. Gradually as it gained both military and political momentum it wreaked havoc within successive Ethiopian regimes. As the result, as the collapse of Haile Sellassie's feudal regime seemed imminent, Ethiopia's brutal war against innocent Eritrean civilians intensified. The result was an unprecedented loss of innocent civilian lives, razing of entire villages and immense scale of looting with the sinister intent of eradicating the basic foundations of their lives.

. During the struggle for independence and post-independence era, the PFDJ People's Front for Democracy and Justice), formerly the EPLF (Eritrean People's Liberation Front), embarked on a concerted effort to carefully and exhaustively document the atrocities committed by successive Ethiopian regimes. The massive unedited document painstakingly prepared by Tesfalidet⁵ provides a disturbingly graphic account of Ethiopia's crimes against humanity. Furthermore, the important task of shedding more light on Ethiopia's sordid

⁵ Personal communication with Tekie Tesfalidet from the Research and Documentation Centre in Eritrea in August of 2015 and 2016.

history has continued through rigorous academic work. Subsequently, important books and articles have been published. For example, the voluminous and invaluable piece of work by (Berhe et al, 2017) is replete with visual images, incriminating evidence from Ethiopia's military and security sectors and most importantly testimonials from victims who miraculously escaped Ethiopia's uncontainable wrath. In the introduction, the book provides a succinct historical context to help the reader gain a profound insight into the malicious thought process and intentions of Ethiopian rulers. The book also includes hitherto secretive Ethiopian documents, such as classified correspondence between high level civilian and military officials regarding its policy of extermination and copious reports on casualties for each incident of atrocity it committed.

The book consists of forty-three cases narrated by twenty nine authors. Each story begins with a demographic and brief socio-economic description of the village, town or city that was targeted for annihilation and destruction. As the editors admit this is not, by far, an exhaustive document but the accurate and graphic narration of each incident indisputably proves the brutality of the Ethiopian regimes and the extent to which they were determined to go to annihilate the civilian population. The book also demonstrates that this was not a case of whimsical acts of cruelty by deranged individuals but premeditated and carefully planned state sponsored crimes against humanity.

It is noteworthy that each incident narrated in the book was thoroughly investigated and carefully analyzed. The following is a list of the Eritrean villages, town and cities targeted by the Ethiopian regimes with the year in which the incident took place in parentheses:

Atrocities committed under Haile Sellassie's reign:

Rora Bet Gebru (1966); Adi Ibrahim(1967); Emberemi (1967); Mogolo(1967); Hazemo(1967); Ailet and Gmhot (1967); Melebso (1967); Adi Shuma (1968); Geleb (1970); Besikdira (1970); O'na (1970); Habrengessa (1970); Kubub- Abena (1971); Dighe Adie Atba (1971); Um Hager (1974);

Atrocities committed by the Ethiopian Military Junta:

Asmara (1974-1975); Gegeret ((1975); Weki-Duba (1975); Agordat (1975); Mai Idaga (1975); Hirghigo (1975); Dekemhare (1975); Adi Keih (1976); Alale (1976); Mendefera (1977); Debarwa (1977); Digsa (1977); Damba Siharti (1981); Imbahara(1983); Asmat (1983); Molki (1984); Adi Qeretz (1985); Arierb(1985-6); Hamertoq (1987); Shie'b (1988); Hedglene (1988);(Massawa (1990).

Under the guidance of PFDJ, formerly EPLF, the Eritrean people never contemplated to exact revenge on the military that dehumanized them for decades. On the contrary, according to (Ogbamichael, 2016), following the total military defeat and eventual collapse of the Ethiopian Military Junta in May 1991, the Eritrean civilian population, still reeling from the long and brutal Ethiopian rule, was able to forgive and summon the emotional strength to offer food and water from its depleted resources to the well-armed occupation army as it chaotically trekked, in droves, towards the Sudan in the west and Ethiopia in the south.

Such acts on the part of Eritrean civilians, which are consistent with EPLF's history of magnanimity, demonstrate their nobility and benevolence. Furthermore, the decision by the Eritrean National Assembly on June 26th, 1998 to protect the rights of Ethiopian civilians in the midst of the "border war" demonstrates the government's principled stand on the issue of human rights. This should be juxtaposed with the Ethiopian government's decision to expel and expropriate the property of over 70,000 Eritreans and Ethiopians of Eritrean descent because it did not like the color of their eyes. In fact, anecdotal and circumstantial evidence suggests that the government was bent on exterminating the Eritrean civilian population and even commit instant shooting of Eritrean POWs (Gebreyesus, 2018) during the " border war". Thus, to watch innocent Eritrean civilians see off the brutal colonial troops with a tremendous outpouring of forgiveness must have been surreal just as it was a clear testament to their nobility.

Lastly, one can justifiably argue that the United Nations (UN); the African Union (AU), formerly the (Organization of African Unity) (OAU and the Western Nations were complicit in the commitment of these heinous crimes. They chose to turn a blind eye and remain silent despite the fact that they had the regional and international legal instruments⁶ to invoke in order to bring pressure to bear on successive Ethiopian Governments. But their appalling inaction emboldened the oppressive system in Ethiopia regime to carry on with its reprehensible policy with impunity.

What makes this matter utterly ludicrous is the audacious duplicity of these regional and international organizations to level politically motivated accusations of “human rights violations “ against the GSE in order to advance the geopolitical and economic interests of Western nations and their puppet regimes. Needless to say, the GSE, as the current diplomatic and political developments illustrate, continues the bastion of a fiercely independent policy and a staunch promoter of genuine social and economic progress in the region.

Conclusion

The main objective of this brief article is not, to borrow a phrase from (Zinn, 1995), to grieve for the victims. Rather, for Eritreans in particular and the international community in general to come to grips with the fact that the Eritrean victims did not suffer and perish in vain. Their sacrifices were made for a noble cause, the outcome of which all Eritreans will relish for generations to come. As survivors of this painful aspect of our history, we shoulder the responsibility of taking stock of their horrible experiences and integrate the new historical awareness into our individual and collective national identity. Just as important is also the task of educating our youth about this important facet of our history.

⁶ The African Charter on Human and People’s Rights, adopted in June, 1981
The United Nations Declaration of Human Rights, adopted in December, 1948

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