

Rationale Behind Re-Opening the Haile Selassie I Military Academy: Undoing Past Blunders

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This paper is sponsored by the former Graduates of the
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Abstract

This paper discusses the challenges facing the current government of Prime Minister Dr. Abiy Ahmed in re-structuring the existing Ethiopian Defense Forces to create a modern defense force worthy of providing high quality service in guarding the peace for the Ethiopian people and deterring hostile activities foreign or domestic. It draws upon experiences that span from the time of Haile Selassie I to the present. The paper advocates for the need for highly competent line officers who are knowledgeable, skilled, and qualified in the concepts, methods, and tools of modern warfare. The paper also strongly emphasizes the rebuilding of institutions like that of the Haile Selassie I Military Academy to guarantee the resource needs of the modern Ethiopian Defense Forces if it is to achieve its National Defense Objectives in this modern age of warfare and Cyber Warfare.

Keywords: Haile Selassie I Military Academy, Modernization, Ethiopian Defense Forces

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It is believed that the quality of service and performance of combatants is directly proportional to the leadership and management of a fighting force. (Malana & Fox, 2011) This has been shown to be true during the many instances where Ethiopians have fought wars against foes, foreign and domestic. At the great Battle of Adwa, it was not only the superb expertise of Emperor Menelik's in "human intelligence," but also the exemplary leadership of his "Gobez Alekas" that saved the day and made the Ethiopian forces to be victorious over Mussolini's Italians. At the Battle of Michew, however, the warriors of Ethiopia who were ill trained, ill equipped, and disorganized, and were no match for the invading Italian Army. In that day and age, the modern Italian contingent were trained in military tactics and strategy, equipped with the modern weaponry of European origin, and were supported by a ferocious and well-trained Air force. In the Battle, the Ethiopian Army, led by the Emperor himself, were defeated, disbanded, and demoralized in no time. At that time, it was not possible for the Ethiopian Army to fall back and re-organize, so they had to disband and let the enemy march to Addis Ababa to start the occupation of Ethiopia for the next five years. The Ethiopian forces, though disbanded, were able to organize themselves into small guerilla units and attacked the occupying Italians with small group strikes that were lethal and very effective. Soon it was the end of World War II where the Allied Powers prevailed and the Axis powers, in which Italy was a member, lost.

Emperor Haile Selassie was back in Ethiopia and resumed his reign with the help of the British. Taking the lessons he learned at Michew to heart, his priority was to establish a standing Army--trained and equipped to safeguard the sovereignty of Ethiopia and ensure peace and security of the African Horn Region. His focus was to not repeat the mistakes of the past and to not rely on ad hoc farmer fighters, like those assembled by decree of Emperor Menelik for the Battle of Adwa. Emperor Haile Selassie had a

lofty vision for the Ethiopian Defense Forces (Makinda, 1982). From the time of his return from exile until his overthrow from power, his desire was to build and transform the Ethiopian military to be one of the formidable fighting forces in the whole of Africa. Contingents of the Ethiopian military were deployed to international theaters of operations under the United Nations Expeditionary or peacekeeping missions so officers could be exposed to the military leadership styles of other nations. The deployed units were able to demonstrate their fighting skills, and they performed very well under their Ethiopian commanders. Commendations soon followed from the likes of General MacArthur, Commanding General of forces fighting the Korean War, who was a USA West Point Military Academy graduate. The interaction of Ethiopian officers with other officers of units of other countries revealed the need for well-rounded and educated Ethiopian officers in the military.

Circumstances Surrounding the Opening of the Haile Selassie I Military Academy

One fateful day at the 1955 Bandung Asia-Africa Conference where the core principles of the political self-determination, mutual respect for sovereignty, non-aggression, non-interference in internal affairs, and equality were of central importance to all participants in the conference, most of which had recently emerged from colonial rule. The African delegates at the Bandung conference of 28 Non-aligned Nations took it upon themselves to speak for other colonized peoples of Africa that had not yet established independent governments. Emperor Haile Selassie was in the forefront of other African Nations who took up the cause of the other African Nations who are still under the yoke of colonialism (Milestones: 1953–1960 – Office of the Historian, n.d.). At Bandung, Emperor Haile Selassie shared his vision of establishing a military academy the likes of the British Sandhurst and the Indian Poona Academies to be an institution not only a source of educated elite officers for the Ethiopian Defense Forces, but also a center of training for militaries of other African Nations and freedom fighters. Jawaharlal Nehru supported the idea and dispatched a team of elite officers from the Indian Army to perform a feasibility study and establish the Military Academy—the kind the Emperor had in mind. Within few years, the Haile Selassie I Military Academy was founded in city of Harar. Young boys

between the ages of 17-19 were recruited from various high schools of Ethiopia. The selection criteria were set so high only the best and brightest could attend various college level academic courses and varied military subjects. The three years training was rigorous, and graduates were the best all-round officers of the highest national and international stature.

Apart from the need to be a beacon of African freedom, there were many other compelling reasons that led to the opening of the Haile Selassie I Military Academy, also referred to as the Harar Military Academy. To begin with, before the founding of the Haile Selassie I Harar Military Academy, the geo-political landscape was no different than that of today. Back in 1956, Africa was in the middle of the Apartheid and freedom movements. The Horn of Africa was rife with regional conflicts and foreign interventions (Lefebvre, 1996). Haile Selassie, and the then elites of Ethiopia, were convinced of the need for a modern Ethiopian Defense Force. That need and the then Geo-political situation in the Horn of Africa were reasons that drove to the establishment of the Haile Selassie I Military Academy. As intended, the Academy supplied highly qualified and competent officers to modernize the Ethiopian Defense Forces (Pankhurst, 1956). The Military Academy supplied college-level officers that are highly trained in the art of war that later achieved stellar performance, integrity, honor, and complete allegiance to their country.

Secondly, one of the visions of the Emperor was to modernize the Ethiopian Defense Forces by staffing the military leadership with educated graduates who excel in modern warfare just like those from academies such as Sandhurst. To that end, a military academy was established in the 1950s that was chartered to produce future military leaders whose code of honor was integrity, leadership performance, and allegiance to the Emperor and Country. The Haile Selassie Military Academy was true to its charter right from its first graduates all the way to the last graduating class of 1977. At that time, Ethiopia was engaged in a protracted civil war with Eritrean and TPLF rebel forces. Mengistu's regime was at war on multiple fronts, such as the Eritrean civil war on the North and the Ethio-Somali war in the Southeast. The fighting forces were spread thin and wide in all fronts. The protracted nature of the wars had its toll on the Ethiopian Defense Forces. Active recruitment was enforced, and the military doubled its number

from 100,000 to 230 members strong in a short time to provide fighters to all fronts. With a high sense of urgency, young civilians were recruited, lightly trained, and were shipped to the fronts. Officers were minted, commissioned, and sent to assume command of those same ill-trained units, and eventually were led into combat. The efforts of the new Ethiopian Defense Force were very poor. Defeats and defections were rampant across all fronts. One of the many factors that brought the demise of the formidable Ethiopian Defense Forces was the lack of competent officers, especially the likes of those that came out of the Haile Selassie Military Academy. Therefore, by closing the Military Academy, the Mengistu Regime inadvertently weakened its forces and set up the Military Defense Force for failure. By multiple accounts, this was one of the many blunders that accelerated the downfall of the Regime and the defeat of the Ethiopian Defense Forces. Even Mengistu Hailemariam recognized this grave mistake when he wrote the Letter to the Minister of Defense regarding the importance of education and manpower organization in the military.

During the following 28 years, the TPLF led government did not recognize this important vision when it took over and created its own Ethiopian Defense Forces along ethnic lines and allegiance to the TPLF party without considering competence of its officer (Roennfeldt, 2017). This was a repeat of the mistake committed by the Mengistu Regime, and it cost the current Ethiopian Defense Forces. The Ethiopian Defense Force is being relegated from its position of number three to number six among the Top Ten Defense Forces in Africa.

The Closure of the Haile Selassie I Military Academy and its Consequences

The Haile Selassie I Military Academy was closed and left barren by order of Mengistu Hailemariam, the then Chairman of the Derg, which were the ruling Military Junta that took over the reins of power in a military coup from the Emperor. The Academy was closed despite the exemplary performance of cadets at home and abroad at Academies such as the British Sandhurst Academy or the French National Military Academy at Saint-Cyr. It was closed despite graduate officers achieving national recognition for their gallantry and combat leadership. Two graduates of the Academy were the

only Medal of Honor recipients in the history of the Ethiopian Defense Forces—Tesfaye Haile Mariam and Legesse Tefera. Other graduates have excelled in many public or private fields and have achieved national and international recognition. The decision to close the Academy by Mengistu Haile Mariam was driven by sheer jealousy and vengeance as attested by distinguished Ethiopians such as Prof. Mesfin Woldemariam and Tekelign Gedamu.

In 2010, Professor Mesfin Woldemariam writes in his book, “Inzech Enboch”:

“...When he became the Supreme Commander of the Defense Forces, Major Mengistu Hailemariam--the graduate from Holletta Military School--destroyed the higher Harar Military School because it was dense for him to comprehend. In other words, Mengistu Hailemariam who graduated from an inferior school destroyed the Harar Military School because he thought it will reveal his inadequacies and throw a shadow upon him. A small person can not stand with a great person” (pp 240).

Similarly, in 2011, Tekalign Gedamu, in his book “Republicans on the Throne, writes:

“He (*Mengistu Hailemariam*) likewise showed hostility bordering on inferiority complex towards graduates of the Harar Military Academy, a college level institution modeled along the lines of Britain’s Sandhurst. Mengistu himself graduated from a junior military training school which accepted primary school students” (pp 292).

All in all, the closing of the Academy not only killed the burgeoning vision of the Emperor for a strong and modern military, but it also dried the supply of skilled, educated, and competent military leaders to help manage and lead the Ethiopian Defense Forces. The Geo-political and security landscape of the Horn of Africa was unique and dire when the doors of the Academy were abruptly closed in 1977. In addition, at that time its 22nd course-in-training was shipped to the Genet Holetta training center by the Mengistu Regime. Ethiopia was in the mildest of a civil war that was consuming 2/3 of its national budget, and the war was not going in favor of Ethiopia. To make matters worse, another boarder war with Somalia was raging, and it consumed a sizable fighting force until a Cuban contingent came to the rescue. To meet the demands of the wars of the two fronts, it was necessary for the Ethiopian regime to actively and forcibly recruit soldiers thereby doubling the Ethiopian Defense Force from 100 Thousand troops to over 230 Thousand members.

The sudden increase in the military not only created a logistical and administrative nightmare, but it also created a drastic dip in confidence and morale of the war fighters. This also created an acute

shortage of line officers that were competent both in leadership and in the art of warfare. One way of meeting this shortage could have been to expand and furnish existing officer training centers such as the Harar Military Academy and the Holletta Genet Military Training centers. Instead, the Mengistu regime closed the Academy and started several centers across the country that produced young, ill-trained officers within six to nine months. The young and in-experienced officers were no match for the seasoned Eritrean and Tigran rebel forces. Entire Ethiopian units fell prey or defected as fast as they were deployed. In the opinions of many historians and witnesses to the demise of the Ethiopian Defense Forces of those days, it was the Mengistu Regime that effectively undid the Ethiopian Defense Forces and literally killed the Forces from within rather than it being defeated by the invading rebel forces (Ibrahim, 2017).

It is safe to say that the closure of the Military Academy at Harar did contribute to the fall of the Mengistu Regime and the ultimate disbandment of the Ethiopian Defense Forces as the vanquished party to the 30 years civil war. Can the current government do any better in modernizing the current Ethiopian Defense Forces to meet the demands of modern warfare that requires competency, integrity, honor and a high level of leadership ability? The answer is yes--by providing knowledgeable, skilled and competent officers to fill the military's officer corps.

The Rationale for Re-opening the Military Academy

The characteristics of current modern warfare are notably different than the concepts and methods prevalent in the 1960s and 1970s. The United States Military Academy now has added Cyber warfare training so future Army officers are competent to meet modern demands of Cyber Warfare. It has been shown again and again that a small expeditionary rapid deployment force under a competent line officer can bring a higher degree of success than a large conventional force of Titanic magnitude. Modern warfare includes the use of high-tech unmanned vehicles and systems that are powered by Artificial Intelligence. Top military leaders, line officers, and even soldiers must be competent at using these weapons of war to be able to survive the overt and clandestine attacks from foreign or domestic enemies

in this ever-growing Cyber age. It is important that modern officer training should emphasize changes in the technology of warfare (Abaido, 1986).

The threats to Ethiopia's Sovereignty, security, and prosperity are the same forces who are active, both openly or clandestinely, in disturbing the peace in Ethiopia. Currently, the Ethiopian Forces have an added responsibility of protecting Ethiopia's critical infrastructures such as the Great Ethiopian Renaissance Dam (GERD) and other dams, bridges, population centers, water systems, communication centers, and other command and control facilities. The current re-structuring of the Ethiopian Defense Forces to create an independent, homogenous defense organization that operates above ethnic interests is commendable. The resulting defense organization will make the protection and guarantee of Ethiopia's national interests as one of its main goals. It becomes necessary and beneficial if Ethiopia considers the need for infusing the force with a much needed, knowledgeable, skilled, and qualified cadre of line officers from institutions equipped to produce the required number of officers.

Provision of Defense Services for the Protection of Ethiopia's Peace & Security

As stated earlier, the Africa Horn is an active area of the world where socio-economic interests of governments and geo-political influences of superpowers collide to produce a plethora of actors with open and clandestine needs and interests. There are several external and internal issues that impact the delivery of a high quality protective and deterrence services to the Ethiopian public and government. The external and internal issues also affect the strategic direction the Ethiopian government has and will define now or in the future.

Table 1: Interested Parties and Their Requirements

Item	Interested Parties	Label	Requirements
1	Ethiopian Government	Active	Peace and Security
2	Ethiopian People	Active	Peace and Security
3	Nile Countries	Re-active	Water interests
4	Neighboring Countries	Re-active	Geo-Political Interests
5	Middle Eastern Countries	Re-active	Regional Influence
6	Red Sea Corridor	Re-active	Commercial Interests
7	Terrorist Groups	Re-active	Socio-Economic Interests
8	Internal factions & groups	Re-active	Socio-Political Interests
9	Ethnic groups	Re-active	Socio-Political interests

Item	Interested Parties	Label	Requirements
10	Religious Groups	Re-active	Socio-Political Interests
12	Political Parties	Re-active	Political Interests
13	Activists	Re-active	Socio-Political Interests
14	Contrabandists	Re-active	Economic Interests

Geo-Political Considerations

The table above is a list of interested parties in the Horn of Africa Region with their active and reactive interests that may define the scope of defense responsibilities that should effectively be met. As the second populous country in Africa, Ethiopia has the manpower needed to establish a defense force that can provide the highest quality of defense services to the Ethiopian Government and its people—acting at the same time as a deterrent force to any reactionary activity that could be perpetrated by such parties listed in Table I. A Global Firepower report puts the Ethiopian Defense Forces at 140 million and ranks it at number 6 out of 10 most powerful Defense Forces in Africa. Egypt stands at number 1 with 500 million personnel supported by an impressive line of lethal ground, air and naval firepower. It is estimated that over 2 million Ethiopian young adults will come of age for military service if there is a need for mobilization.

It remains, therefore, to establish the right and strong leadership mechanism so that the Ethiopian Defense Forces could deliver superior defense services to the Ethiopian people. It is imperative that a clear defense policy and measurable defense objectives be created and disseminated to the rank and file to ensure that expected defense services are realized. Integrity, dedication, high performance, and leadership stand out high among such defense objectives.

The above Ethiopian Defense Forces military objectives will be measured by the keeping of peace for the Ethiopian people and by “preventing war that results in death, dismemberment, displacement sickness, and poverty,” (documented on the foundation plaque of the Haile Selassie I Military Academy). It is clear that the various levels of military ranks, high level officers and line officers, are responsible and accountable for the successful achievement of military objectives. Line officers who do not understand these objectives and those who do not strive to achieve them have a direct

impact in the success or failure of any war effort, as manifested in the late 1970s of the Mengistu Regime (Ayele. 2014). Back then and as stated elsewhere, there was an acute shortage of competent line officers, morale was at rock bottom, logistics was a nightmare, and the war fighters did not have understanding of the governments defense policy and military objects. The result was failure in the defense of Ethiopia and the ultimate demise of the Ethiopian Defense Forces.

Conclusion

The foreign policy of the current Government of Prime Minister Dr. Abiy Ahmed is spearheading the policy of peaceful co-existence and mutual prosperity with neighboring nations—the bedrock of the Bandung Conference advocated by Emperor Haile Selassie. Yet, the opposing geo-political interests in the Horn of Africa region could have a tremendous impact in presenting formidable challenges to the military in meeting its objectives. The challenges of protecting the peace and security of Ethiopia and its people are real and pose an on-going danger. Ethiopia should not have problems in increasing the combat personnel of its military. Millions of young adults come of age for military service every year. However, the provision of line leadership for the increased combat personnel will be a formidable challenge unless a steady stream of highly competent officers are available to fulfill the leadership requirements (Carper, 2008). In addition, the demands of modern warfare require highly competent, knowledgeable, skilled, and qualified officers (National Defense University: Educating, Developing and Inspiring National Security Leadership, n.d.).

During the opening of the Haile Selassie I Military Academy, the Emperor said,

“The mastery of modern techniques and methods of warfare calls for unremitting study, constancy of purpose, and intellectual attainments of the highest order. Modern military science, in this nuclear age, is a perpetual spring, and the officers who graduate from this Academy must continue their pursuit of military knowledge long after they have taken place in the field” (*Haile Selassie I – Selected Speeches, October 6, 1958*).

Although the recent re-structuring of the Ethiopian Defense Forces to make it a neutral, non-political institution focused on an impartial service in protecting the sovereignty of the country and the peace and security of its people, the force will face challenges if it does not adequately prepare itself to be

combat ready and battle worthy to operate in a modern warfare environment by revamping its leadership ranks with knowledgeable, skilled, and qualified line officers (Mawhinney, 1990). Using an objective approach, a quantitative measure of leadership ability and performance of line officers should be evaluated to ensure training provided by the Military Academy has achieved its goal of producing knowledgeable, skilled, and qualified officers. As shown in the short history of the Haile Selassie I Military Academy, its graduates have and should continue to play a central leadership role in the Ethiopian Defense Forces. The Academy has been a major leadership development source of exemplary military leaders. Although very little is written to document the impact of the leadership principles inculcated onto the Academy's cadets, the Academy's high entrance requirements and rigorous academic and military training of the cadets has resulted in their success and exemplary performance after their graduation.

Having an institution like the Haile Selassie I Military Academy will ensure the current and future Ethiopian government will avert the mistakes committed in the Mengistu Era—namely the need for competent leadership in time of war or peace. The need for competent line officers can be met by reopening a training institution for higher military officer, such as the Haile Selassie I Military Academy. Since the buildings and other infrastructure of the former Haile Selassie Military Academy still exist, reopening the Academy at its former location at Harar would result in tremendous cost savings. Since many of the former graduates of the Academy are still alive, and hold varied academic, technical, health, legal, military and administrative specialties, there could be an abundant source of consultative services to help in the-organization and re-starting of the operation of the Academy. To this end, the re-opening of the Haile Selassie Military Academy is highly recommended.

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