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John Young

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Introduction

My interest in Ethiopia, and specifically the northern province of Tigray, developed during the course of my tenure as a journalist for *The Sudan Times* between 1986 and 1989 in Khartoum, a city which hosted many thousands of Eritrean, Tigrayan, and other Ethiopian refugees and their political organisations. Unlike an earlier generation of Western scholars who were drawn to the study of Ethiopia because of the country's ancient history, fascinating cultures, absence of a colonial tradition, or the person of Emperor Haile-Selassie, I was attracted by the epochal scope of the struggles the Eritreans and Tigrayans were engaged in, and the determination and sophistication which they brought to them.

Editorially *The Sudan Times* had strong sympathies for the peoples of southern Sudan and I closely followed the revolt of the Sudan People's Liberation Movement (SPLM) which, like the revolts of the Eritrean People's Liberation Front (EPLF) and Tigray People's Liberation Front (TPLF), was for national self-determination and opposed by a hegemonic state. However, while these movements shared conditions of national oppression and resistance, they were in many ways very different. The fact that the SPLM was a significant beneficiary of the government that the EPLF and TPLF were dedicated to overthrowing, while various Sudanese governments provided erratic support for the latter movements, was one such difference, but it was not critical. Far more important was the contrast between the political, administrative, and military skills, the level of commitment, and the close relationship between peasants and revolutionaries achieved by the EPLF and TPLF, and the confusion, division, and ethnic conflicts that plagued the SPLM.

My first introduction to Tigray in April 1988 provided ample evidence of the TPLF's skills, commitment, and ties to the peasants. The journey from the sweltering plains of Sudan to the cool highlands of Tigray was over a road built at the height of the 1984–5 famine through the mobilisation of some 100,000 peasants. Organisation and dedication to the revolution were evident everywhere I was to go during my two-week stay in the province – in the relief distributions, formation of local administrations of towns captured only a

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month earlier, repairs to medical clinics, domestic water supplies and electrical generators destroyed by retreating government troops, and in the prisoner of war camps, recently enlarged by the capture of thousands of Derg soldiers.

But if this all too brief visit served to confirm TPLF claims as to the extent of their liberated territories, and their capacity to wage war against the Ethiopian government, and was at least suggestive of the Front's support among the peasants of Tigray, it none the less raised more questions than it answered. What conditions produced this revolutionary upheaval? How was the TPLF able to acquire and retain such peasant loyalty? What was the background to the Tigrayan demand for national self-determination? What was the relationship of the TPLF to the EPLF? And crucially, how were the largely youthful fighters of the TPLF and their young leaders who inhabited one of the most destitute lands in Africa able to challenge (and soon defeat) the most powerful army in black Africa?

In 1989 I was forced to leave the Sudan only weeks before the military coup that overthrew the government of Sadiq el Mahdi, but my interest in the Tigrayan revolution had taken firm hold and these questions were to serve as a starting point for this research. I would also leave Africa with the conviction that the TPLF and its recently established Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF) would, as its adherents claimed, soon capture power in Addis Ababa. However, I would soon discover that while journalists had used much ink writing about Ethiopian famines, they had remarkably little of value to say about the Tigrayan revolution. Conversely, the by no means insignificant scholarly writing about Ethiopia was concerned almost exclusively with developments at the centre, or to a lesser extent with the Eritrean revolution.

The research for this study began in 1990 and the fieldwork took place over a nine-month period in 1992-3 and after revisions was extended and updated as a result of investigations carried out in Ethiopia over four months in 1995-6. Trying to develop an understanding of the Tigrayan revolution has proved more difficult than I first imagined and as a result the analyses developed and conclusions drawn from this study are not as unequivocal as I would have desired. However, if this study serves to stimulate debate and encourages further research into the Tigrayan revolution and the remarkable movement which led it, dominated efforts to overthrow the Derg, and was critical to the formation of the post-military government, then my efforts will be warranted.

Background to Research

Ethiopia has a long history of literacy, but the documents and materials bequeathed contemporary researchers suffer from a number of drawbacks.

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First, apart from the published memoirs of a handful of Western travellers,¹ the recorders of history until this century were almost exclusively officials of the Ethiopian court and the Church, and this is reflected in both their interests and biases. The history and struggles of the various peasantries who inhabited the Ethiopian highlands barely figure in such reports. Secondly, historical writing on Ethiopia concentrated on the central state, and according to Triulzi, '[m]ost Ethiopian history was political or diplomatic, and since this took place at the centre most Ethiopian history was the history of the political centre and of its institutions.'² Research of the periphery has been seriously under-represented, and as a result there are no comprehensive historical studies of Tigray.

This neglect was also encouraged by a number of widely held and erroneous beliefs: first, that Ethiopia had existed as a continuing political entity since the founding of the Axumite kingdom almost 2,000 years ago; secondly, that the vast expansion of the country in the final years of the nineteenth century did not so much represent imperial aggrandisement, but a return to historical boundaries of the past, and lastly, that although many nations and nationalities exist within Ethiopia, they were not bound to the state because of its power over them, but because they shared common elements in their culture. Such notions have long been part of the dominant ideology in the country, but they have been given their most sophisticated expression in the work of the anthropologist Donald Levine, in his book, *Greater Ethiopia: The Evolution of a Multiethnic Society*.³ Levine holds that as a result of generations of war, conquest, trade, and religious proselytisation, the various peoples of Ethiopia have evolved into a single societal system.

Although widely accepted, Levine's thesis has not been immune from criticism. Analysts have argued that a critical distinction must be made between Abyssinia, which is a geographical area that roughly embraced the northern highland provinces of Tigray, Gondar, Gojjam, Wag, Lasta, northern Shoa, and much of highland Eritrea, which generally shared a common polity, social structure, system of land tenure, culture, and religion, and the modern state of Ethiopia, which largely took form as a result of military conquest in the last quarter of the nineteenth century of mostly non-Semitic, non-Orthodox, and frequently, lowland peoples.⁴ The historian Gebru Tareke has argued that Levine's desire to assert an Ethiopian nationhood within a unitary culture has only been accomplished by de-emphasising the ethnic, linguistic, and religious plurality of the society.⁵ Another critic, Markakis, maintains that Ethiopian nation-building did not end with the hegemony achieved by the Amhara elite from Shoa at the end of the last century; rather this development merely set the stage for the nationalist and anti-feudal struggles that have characterised this century.⁶

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However, the most serious challenge to Levine's thesis has not come from scholarly critics, but from the emergence of a host of national liberation movements that emerged in the wake of the 1974 insurrection. Ethiopia has a long history of revolts led by nobles from the periphery, and they were either overcome by the centre, produced long periods of turmoil, or led to the establishment of new regimes which maintained the old state. But the assumption of power by the EPLF and the birth of an independent Eritrea, and the establishment of the TPLF-led government in Addis Ababa, with its commitment to grant the country's ethnic communities the right to self-determination, encourages a rethinking of prevailing conceptions of Ethiopian history. It has also opened the door to new understanding of the central state and its relations with the nations and nationalities of the periphery.

Among the very few analysts who have examined the Tigrayan revolution are Firebrace and Smith,⁷ Peberdy,⁸ Solomon Inquai, historian and former chairman of the Relief Society of Tigray (REST),⁹ and the German journalist, Dieter Beisel.¹⁰ Jenny Hammond has produced a sympathetic study of women in the Tigrayan revolution.¹¹ Gebru Tareke has written a valuable article that contrasts the Tigrayan peasant rebellion of 1943 with the TPLF-led insurrection of 1975.¹² Former TPLF Chairman, Aregowie Berhe, produced an unpublished polemic¹³ in opposition to the leadership of the Front after his defection in early 1988, and another past senior TPLF cadre, Kahsay Berhe, has written two useful tracts highly critical of his former colleagues.¹⁴ Apart from these works, there are studies conducted by non-governmental organisations (NGOs), and many reports on conditions in Tigray during the war prepared by journalists, that will be considered shortly. Although primarily concerned with human rights, Alex de Waal's *Evil Days: 30 Years of War and Famine in Ethiopia*, a study of conditions in the war zones of Ethiopia and Eritrea between 1961 and 1991, is the most authoritative work to date on military and relief matters.¹⁵ Hopefully a harbinger of future academic work is Sarah Vaughan's MA study of the 1991 Addis Ababa conference which laid the basis of the post-Derg Ethiopian government.¹⁶

The best source of documents is the EPLF-established Research and Information Center on Eritrea (RICE) which is now in Asmara after being based in Rome for many years. Although primarily concerned with the Eritrean revolution, the Center has a good, if by no means complete, selection of Ethiopian political party publications, including those of the TPLF. Of particular interest are the TPLF's various English-language publications including *Woyene* (which means revolt), *Tigray*, a publication of the Union of Tigrayans of North America, and *People's Voice*, published by the Foreign Relations Bureau of the Front, the EPLF's *Adulis*, the Ethiopian

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People's Revolutionary Party's *Abyot*, and the Eritrean Liberation Front's *Eritrean Review*. A further useful source for its collection of newspaper articles on the Eritrean and Ethiopian war, is the Research Center of Asmara University. There is also a considerable amount of material and documents in private hands. To date the TPLF has not released party and related documents for scholarly study. Front officials maintain that such materials have not been collected, or that they have not been organised, and thus are not available for examination.

Media and the war

Ethiopia's wars and famines attracted considerable media attention, but the quality of the reporting has generally been poor and as a result has not been widely used in this study. Part of the problem lay in the centrist focus of journalists. With its pleasant climate, good facilities, and the opportunity to fly out to a site of interest and file a story the same day, Addis Ababa was the location of choice for correspondents. Since it was virtually impossible to cross battle lines to the north from government positions, the Eritrean and Tigrayan Fronts could only be reached by taking an arduous and lengthy journey that began in Sudan. As a result, reporting from behind the liberation movements' lines was largely neglected.

The difficulties involved in getting to Tigray, as I can confirm from my own visit to the province as a journalist, were considerable. First, approval had to be acquired through TPLF or REST offices in Europe or North America, after which visas needed to be obtained from Sudan, not always an easy task. Khartoum had few of the amenities of Addis Ababa, a trying climate, and even more bureaucratic obstacles, including the necessity of acquiring internal travel visas. When these difficulties were overcome the TPLF arranged the day-long transport to the TPLF-REST centre in Gederef in eastern Sudan. From there visitors hitched rides on relief convoys that spent a further night en route to the Ethiopian border. A difficult night journey (to avoid MiGs) took visitors from the Sudanese plains to the Ethiopian highlands and on to the western Tigray TPLF base of Dejene. It was only then, only at night, and only when vehicles were available, that visitors could be taken to various locations around Tigray. In these circumstances it was almost impossible for journalists to get in and out of Tigray in much less than ten days, and as a result few of them, particularly those from large media organisations, reported from the Tigrayan side of the combat zones. These same obstacles also hindered on-site scholarly studies in Tigray.

In spite of similar problems in Eritrea, that war was much more widely reported and analysed by academics than its counterpart in Tigray. Unlike

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the EPLF, which moved quickly to conducting a largely conventional war with fixed positions and secure liberated territories that were more accessible to non-combatants, the TPLF emphasised mobility and remained pre-eminently a guerrilla movement until the final stages of the war. Furthermore, the Eritrean movements made a greater effort to encourage journalists to visit their liberated territories, and when they did so, they demonstrated greater skills in dealing with them. Contrary to the EPLF, few members of the TPLF leadership had lived or studied abroad before 1974 and, apart from the Sudan, they rarely left Tigray during the course of the revolution. As a result, the Front's leadership was very inward-looking, its international public relations poorly developed, and it tended to be wary of allowing journalists and other foreigners to visit territories under their control. While the Eritrean revolution has been called the 'unknown war', because of the limited media coverage given to it, this description is far more apt of the revolution in Tigray.

When journalists did visit the war zones in Eritrea and Tigray they were usually accompanied by liberation movement armed guards to ensure their personal safety, but this also identified them with these movements and therefore the information they obtained was less than ideally independent.¹⁷ A further difficulty, particularly in the early years of the war, was that many of the correspondents were closely associated with either the TPLF or EPLF and their aid agencies, and thus open to charges of bias. None the less, according to de Waal, whether sympathetic or unsympathetic to the Front in question, none of the journalists who visited Eritrea or Tigray has complained of lack of access to the civilian population, or that those interviewed in the field were influenced by the presence of Front officials who usually selected them.¹⁸

Additionally, media reporting suffered from political bias and opportunist considerations. Beisel noted that articles which presented the TPLF's administration in a favourable light were difficult to publish in the mainstream German press when key reporters and editors were opposed to the Front.¹⁹ It was also feared that publishing such articles might antagonise the Addis Ababa government and make future visits to the country difficult or impossible.²⁰ This kind of self-censorship, however, was not unique to Germany or the media; many scholars, aid officials, and foreign government representatives refused to speak publicly about their knowledge of conditions in the liberated territories, or of Derg atrocities, for fear that the government would refuse them visas, contracts, or other benefits.

The biggest problem with media reporting on Tigray, however, was the limited interest in the province and a focus almost exclusively devoted to the problem of famine and the role of Western governments and NGOs in

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helping famine victims. This focus meant that there was virtually no analysis of the Ethiopian politics which fuelled the violent conflict and caused, or exacerbated, the famines that engulfed the region during the 1970s and 1980s.

Interview-based research

The paucity of documents and records, the limitations of historical and political studies, together with the problems of media reports, means that the generation of data for a study such as this could only be provided by interviews. In particular, academic studies and journalist accounts provided little information on the role of peasants in the Tigrayan revolution. As Kriger has pointed out in her examination of the Zimbabwean revolution, the failure of most studies of revolution to consult peasants about their mobilisation 'creates the potential to misread evidence and to neglect or omit issues that are important to peasants'.²¹ In this study some 200 interviews of about 500 people were conducted and recorded, and the majority of them were peasants. Peasant voices, the subtitle of Kriger's book, have thus been listened to, used to construct the history of the Tigrayan revolution, and speak to the theoretical concerns of this study.

None the less, research of this nature cannot focus exclusively on peasants. Peasants and local government officials were invariably available and co-operative, provided valuable information on the local economy, society, nature and extent of their contacts with the TPLF, the general form and course of the revolution at the local level, and also provided insight on what motivated them to revolt. They were, however, usually ill-equipped to answer questions on military and political objectives, strategies, tactics, national and international developments; nor were they party to the ideological issues that preoccupied the TPLF leadership. Moreover, posing broadly similar questions to peasants and local government officials and to TPLF leaders, provided a critical check on the accuracy of their answers, and a stimulus for further questions. Unlike the peasants, interviews of TPLF officials were almost always one-on-one affairs, conducted in English, and focused on the individual's particular areas of expertise. With few exceptions it was not possible to tape, fully record all the officials' answers at the time in writing or, in some cases because of their requests, attribute information directly to them.

There were, however, a number of subjects that TPLF officials at all levels of the administration were reticent to consider, both during my first research visit in 1992-3 and in my attempts to update my work in 1995-6. These included ideological struggles that went on in the TPLF, back-grounds of TPLF leaders, and the role of the Marxist-Leninist League of

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Tigray (MLLT) in the TPLF. The TPLF has also been reluctant to reveal information on the number and organisation of its forces and equipment possessed. Information on these subjects can and was to some extent acquired from other sources, but this is not to deny that a more complete understanding of the Tigrayan revolution is dependent on the TPLF leadership being more forthcoming on these subjects. Opening up their archival materials for examination by academic and other investigators would be a valuable first step.

Consistent with the eclecticism of the methodology employed here, interviews were also carried out with former TPLF members, academics, former Derg officials, present and past representatives of REST, a host of former and present members of friendly and opposition movements, non-TPLF members of the TPLF-dominated Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF), Afar nomads inhabiting the Tigrayan border areas, former officials in the Haile-Selassie government, representatives of the church and the mosque, foreign missionaries, Ministry of Agriculture (MOA) officials, NGO officials, and members of the diplomatic community. Because of the ready access to Tigrayan interviewees (who with few exceptions supported the TPLF), efforts were made to gather as many perspectives as were available, particularly those likely to be critical of the TPLF. Opponents of the TPLF were readily found, and it says much for the relatively liberal environment that existed in the country during the course of this research that they had little hesitation about speaking openly. Unfortunately, only a few of the critics were able to comment knowledgeably on the nature and course of the struggle within Tigray.

Under the present regime in Tigray the province has been divided into four *zobas*, or administrative zones, which in turn are divided into *woredas* or districts (of which there were eighty-one), and then further into *tabias*, the lowest level of government. *Zobas*, *woredas*, and *tabias*, together with the regional government, each have their own system of administration and elected assemblies called *baitos*. Permission to carry out field studies begins with a letter of authority signed by the Chairman of Tigray Region or his representative that is presented to the various chairmen of the *zobas* the researcher wishes to visit. This letter grants permission to carry out research at the *zoba* level, and the *zoba* administration in turn provides further letters of authority to *woredas* within its boundaries that the researcher wishes to visit. Interviewing at the *tabia* level requires a letter of authority from *woreda* officials.

Given the extent of nationalist and pro-TPLF sentiments among Tigrayans it was anticipated that finding a translator free of overt biases to conduct interviews with peasants would be a major problem. In the event it was not. The person ultimately selected, and who was employed during

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my entire stay in Tigray, had no affiliations with the TPLF or REST, had resided outside Tigray during the revolution, and did not have strong political opinions.²² While it was not usually possible to check the accuracy of specific translations, and thus individual misunderstandings almost certainly occurred, the sheer number of interviews carried out, together with their length and consistency, ensure the validity of the general conclusions reached.

The terrain of Tigray is very rugged with almost no paved roads and few all-weather roads. More than 85 per cent of the population live in rural woredas and many of them are very difficult to reach, and neither time, resources, nor energy, were in sufficient supply to even begin carrying out interviews in all, or even a substantial number of them. In the event interviews were conducted in about twenty woredas. In the first instance interviews were carried out in woredas that contained major towns because they were accessible along the main highway. The towns gave birth to political dissent, and because Tigrayan towns are principally administrative and marketing centres, they are good locations from which to carry out interviews of government leaders, merchants, teachers, religious leaders, and visiting peasants and local officials who live and work in adjacent rural areas.

The majority of peasant interviews, however, were carried out in a small number of woredas specifically identified by TPLF officials as being liberated early in the revolution. A common characteristic of these areas was their isolation which made them difficult to reach. It can readily, although mistakenly as will later be argued, be held that peasants from such woredas are not representative of Tigrayan opinion. But the principal objective in canvassing the opinion of their inhabitants was not to achieve representation. In the first place it was to evaluate whether there was something unique or characteristic about these woredas and their inhabitants that would explain their early support for the TPLF. Secondly, I wished to examine TPLF-peasant relations and TPLF-stimulated changes and institutions where they had the longest opportunity to develop. Moreover, it was from these 'liberated territories'²³ that the TPLF developed its political and military skills, carried out its first land reforms, and established its original local government institutions that were to serve as models for the rest of Tigray. Hence, the history of these early liberated territories is critical to understanding the course and outcome of the revolution.

Having chosen the woredas where interviews would be carried out, there then arose the question of which people to interview. The 1974 upheaval led to the political and economic emasculation of the traditionally dominant classes and the land reform of the following year produced largely egalitarian land-holdings among peasants resident in the same *tabia*.²⁴

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Significantly, capital goods such as buildings, cattle, and ploughing tools were not redistributed by either the Derg or the TPLF. However, with few investment opportunities, and a dearth of consumer goods, there is usually little to distinguish wealthier from poorer peasants in terms of culture, much less politics.²⁵ Hence, while economic differentiation is proceeding that may well foster class divisions, at the time these interviews were carried out the process had not crystallised. Therefore ascertaining these capital differences was considered to be of questionable value and was not attempted.

However, differentiating peasants in terms of gender, religion, occupation or position, and political office, is an important means to gather and evaluate experience and opinion, and to measure the impact of change on different sections of the community. In particular, efforts were made to seek out older people who could talk about conditions and change under the Haile-Selassie, Derg, and TPLF regimes. In a society where life expectancy is under fifty years, 'older' is a relative term. The transformation Tigray has undergone has led to the elevation of younger people to positions of power at the expense of elders who, it might be assumed, would be more critical of the changes and the new regime. Indeed, expressions of sympathy for the former hereditary governor of Tigray, Mengesha Seyoum, were occasionally voiced by elderly peasants, but these sentiments were clearly for the person and his ancestry, and not the regime he represented, and there was no indication that older people were any less likely than younger people to support the TPLF-led insurrection.

A recurring problem for investigators in the past has been the suspicion Ethiopian peasants had of them. Writing more than two decades ago, Pausewang reported that it was common for peasants to refuse to be interviewed or deliberately falsify information, and on many occasions interviewees showed open hostility to the interviewer.²⁶ He attributed this to the peasants' distrust of the government, apprehension at the imposition of new taxes, or fear they would lose their property through land reform. However, under the present regime in Tigray there can be little secrecy over an individual's land-holdings since they were acquired through public meetings and all peasants in a *tabia* have land of approximately the same value.

While peasant suspicion was by no means absent during the course of this study, it was never a serious problem; there was never any hostility, and on no occasion did any of those questioned terminate interviews before they were completed. There was little indication that Tigrayan peasants feared their government and they often complained about the lack of resources in the *woreda* and expressed their desire that the government provide them with food for their participation in conservation projects.