

“PRISON OF NATIONS?” AN EXAMINATION OF THE
IDEOLOGICAL ROOTS OF CONTEMPORARY
ETHIOPIA’S NATIONALITY POLICY

Sarah Moody

History

March, 2023

Faculty Adviser: Dr. William Burghart

Essay completed in partial fulfillment of the requirements for graduation with Global Honors,
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Table of Contents

Introduction	3
Methodology	5
Literature Review	7
Analysis.....	9
Soviet Nationalities Policy	10
Ethnicity and Ethnic Oppression in Imperial Ethiopia	13
Nationality under the Derg	16
TPLF Comes to Power	19
Ethnic Federalism, The 1995 Constitution, and Nationality Policy under the EPRDF	21
Conclusion	24
Bibliography	26

Introduction

Due to its unique history, the state of Ethiopia can serve as a novel case study in political development in Africa. Aside from the Italian occupation during the second World War, Ethiopia is the only territory in Africa to avoid European colonization. A centralized imperial government based on ancient feudalist structures existed in Ethiopia all the way until 1974, when a severe famine sparked a wave of student protests that paved the way for a bloody military coup that did away with the old regime in favor of a military government known as the Derg. By 1978, the military regime had received military and diplomatic aid from the USSR and was firmly in the Soviet orbit.

Despite breaking away from the imperial regime in novel and radical ways, Ethiopia under the military government largely continued the trend of autocratic centralized rule. Almost immediately after the Derg came to power it was met with resistance by several political parties across the country, many of whom met the central government with armed resistance. Some of these opposition parties were ideological in nature including the Meison and the Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Party (EPRP), both of which emerged from the popular student movements that gave the Derg the chance to come to power. Both parties were avowed Marxist organizations fighting for a socialist future for Ethiopia.¹ Many other resistance groups were defined more along ethnic lines rather than ideological lines. Prominent among these groups was the Eritrean Liberation Front (ELF), which fought for total independence of the Northern province of Eritrea, as well as the Western Somali Liberation Front (WSLF), a puppet military force of the irredentist regime of neighboring Somalia that fought for unification with Ethiopia's

¹ Gérard Prunier, *Understanding Contemporary Ethiopia: Monarchy, Revolution, and the Legacy of Meles Zenawi* (London: Hurst & Company, 2015), 219.

Somali-majority Ogaden region. Other military/political parties formed along ethnic lines, including the TPLF, OLF, SALF, and ALF (the Tigrayan, Oromo, Sidamo, and Afar People's Liberation Fronts, respectively), though these groups held differing views on the issue of independence for their respective ethnic groups vs. greater representation under the central Ethiopian government.²

A key issue for all of these groups was how the central government dealt with regional autonomy and the rights of historically marginalized ethnic groups within Ethiopia. Declaring the People's Republic of Ethiopia as a modernizing socialist state, the Derg also claimed to be putting forward policies to recognize the full range of diverse ethnic groups and nationalities within Ethiopia and address historical inequalities perpetuated by the previous imperial system. Opposition parties weren't convinced by the gestures made by the regime and believed that the military government simply perpetuated the long-standing policy of centralization and post-feudal structures that maintained imperialist inequalities.

The Tigrayan People's Liberation Front formed a coalition of the ethnicity-based parties resisting the Derg called the Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF) and managed to successfully overthrow the Derg and come to power in 1991. The new regime was based on the idea of ethnic federalism and the regions within Ethiopia's borders were redrawn and assigned to the major ethno-linguistic groups in the country. In this way, the EPRDF's regime attempted to address the demands of its various constituent nationalist parties while maintaining a centralized state structure within the borders of Ethiopia.

Though the successive governments under the Derg and the EPRDF/TPLF were ostensibly Marxist states, their approach to socialist governance and policy was specific to the

² Ibid., 220-221.

unique cultural and political conditions of Ethiopia. These regimes faced the issues other communist states attempted to address in both Europe and Africa in unprecedented and radical ways. The Derg was aligned with the USSR, but its actual policies differed from the other Soviet Bloc states so much that historian Gerard Prunier described the Derg's policies as "a completely independent, bizarre and contrary form of 'Ethiopian Socialism' that even [the USSR] didn't approve of."³ The TPLF, the leading party of the successive post-1991 government, had begun as an avowed Marxist-Leninist party fighting for national liberation. When they came to power as the leading party of the EPRDF coalition, they implemented a novel political ideology they called "revolutionary democracy," which incorporated the vanguardist ideas of their Leninist roots while leaving room for electoralism and meaningful democracy, at least in theory.

Of interest for this paper is how the successive leftist regimes of Ethiopia addressed the issue of ethnicity and national identity through their policy. The Bolsheviks took their own novel approach to solving the "nationality question" during the first few decades after the Soviet Union was founded based on Joseph Stalin's ideas. As the first communist state, these policies were immensely influential in the Soviet Bloc states. In this paper, I will examine how these policies influenced the successive left-wing governments of Ethiopia and how these regimes departed from the USSR's nationality policy in favor of local ideas that accounted for the unique conditions of Ethiopia.

Methodology

My paper uses a political science perspective to examine the ideas of nations and nationalities as they have been applied by the Ethiopian central government. Ethiopia is an

³ Ibid., 223.

extremely diverse state that houses numerous ethnicities, languages, and religions as well as long-standing tensions between ethnic groups. Bringing these groups under a central government has been the project of the state of Ethiopia since its inception as a modern state in the 19th century under Emperor Menelik II. The question of how to handle the diversity of Ethiopia's ethnic groups persisted when the government changed hands from the imperial regime to the Soviet-backed military government under Mengitsu Haile Mariam. Mengitsu and the Derg claimed to apply neo-Leninist concepts of nations and nationalities to the Ethiopian context but, as my paper shows, continued to put forward policies that ensured Amharic ethnic and linguistic primacy.

When the Derg government fell in 1991, it was overthrown by the nominally Marxist Tigray People's Liberation Front (TPLF), which had created a coalition party of various ethnic parties under the Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF). While in power, the TPLF engaged in what they called "revolutionary democracy" with the EPRDF as a vanguard party and expanded neo-Leninist concepts of nations and nationalities into a form of "ethnic federalism." As my paper shows, despite there being the trappings of a democratic government in Ethiopia, the central government is fundamentally undemocratic and co-opts ideas of plurality and ethnic autonomy in order to maintain centralized autocratic control.

To write this paper, I've consulted scholarship that has appeared in the *Journal for Ethiopian and Eritrean Studies* and the *Journal of Eastern African Studies*. Accounting for the relative lack of English-language primary sources written in Ethiopia, I've also consulted the works of European observers of elections in the state.

It's important to note as well that my paper covers specific periods of time and regime changes in Ethiopia's history. This paper does not seek to explain the immediate situation in

Ethiopia as it stands in early 2023. The military and government situation has changed drastically as a result of the ascension of Abiy Ahmed to the Prime Minister position in 2018 and the Tigray War that came as a result of election disputes in 2020. This paper will examine the nationality policy in the late Imperial Era, under the Derg government from 1974-1991, and the first decade of the contemporary government under the EPRDF/TPLF following the ratification of the 1995 constitution.

Literature Review

Scholars of modern Ethiopia broadly agree that the EPRDF government is undemocratic. As a vanguard party in the Leninist sense, there was no question that the EPRDF would head the government after the overthrow of the Soviet regime while the country transitioned into a democratic system. There remains the question of whether or not the EPRDF regime's model of "revolutionary democracy" was genuinely seeking a democratic government or if the goal of democracy fell to the side as the TPLF (and, therefore, the EPRDF) consolidated state power and moved away from its initial socialist ideology and towards a centralized government focused on capitalist development. Further, it's important to analyze the work of the TPLF/EPRDF and their model of ethnic federalism as it was implemented in the 1995 constitution to determine if the system is truly democratic or simply a method by which the ruling party can pit opposition parties against one another.

Scholars tend to argue that the 2005 Ethiopia general election, the second democratically held elections since the establishment of the federalist government, was the beginning of the fall towards full democracy in the country, but that the 2000 election was largely democratic and saw the EPRDF come into power legitimately. However, some European observers, as explained in

Ethiopia Since the Derg, found that there were serious irregularities in the 2000 general election.⁴ Ethiopian scholar Asnake Kefale argues that there were more barriers to full democratization in federalist Ethiopia than just the authoritarian tendencies of the EPRDF. Asnake writes that opposition parties in states that are transitioning to democracy are often disadvantaged compared to the ruling party due to being fractured and prone to in-fighting.⁵ This is especially true in the case of Ethiopia, where virtually every political party is tied to an ethnic group.

Of course, it can be argued that this political fracturing was intended from the inception of the ethno-federalist government. In the article "A Nation without a City [A Blind Person without a Cane]: The Oromo Struggle for Addis Ababa," Getahun Benti argues that the transition from the Derg to the EPRDF regime was essentially the changing of the reigns of power from the Amhara ethnic group to the Tigray ethnic group and the continued dominance of the Abbyssinians (i.e., highland ethnic groups) over historically marginalized and displaced Ethiopian ethnic groups such as the Oromo.⁶ Scholar Terrence Lyons argues that the establishment of ethnically homogenous regions in Ethiopia concealed the complicated social realities throughout the country and exacerbated existing ethnic tensions to keep the opposition movements against the ruling EPRDF fractured and weak.⁷ Founding member of the TPLF and senior fellow at the World Peace Foundation Mulugeta Gebrehiwot Berhe writes in his book *Laying the Past to Rest*:

⁴ Siegfried Pausewang, Kjetil Tronvoll, and Lovise Aalen, eds., *Ethiopia Since the Derg: A Decade of Democratic Pretension and Performance* (London & New York: Zed Books, 2002).

⁵ Asnake Kefale, "The (un)making of opposition coalition and the challenge of democratization in Ethiopia, 1991-2011," *Journal of Eastern African Studies* 5, no. 4 (November 2011): 681-701.

⁶ Getahun Benti, "A Nation without a City [a Blind Person without a Cane]: The Oromo Struggle for Addis Ababa," *Northeast African Studies* 9, no. 3 (2002): 118-119. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/41931283>.

⁷ Terrence Lyons, *The Puzzle of Ethiopian Politics* (London: Lynne Rienner, 2019).

The EPRDF and the Challenges of Ethiopian State-Building that the leading causes of the federalist government's faltering transition to democracy were the internal restructuring of the EPRDF after it came to power as well as disagreements among the heads of the party as to what a democratic Ethiopia would look like in practice and how exactly they should go about the transition.⁸

Neo-Leninist ideas around nations and nationalities and party vanguardism have been argued to be contributing factors to the failing of democracy in Ethiopia. Scholar Jon Abbink writes that the EPRDF's suppression of opposition voters in the 2005 general election proved that the regime was dedicated to a path of undemocratic governance and would not allow for threats to the ruling vanguard party.⁹

Analysis

Following a wave of popular protests and a military coup in 1974, a Soviet-backed military junta came to power in Ethiopia. Popularly called the Derg (meaning "committee" in Amharic), the centralized government implemented various Soviet policies and maintained autocratic rule. The Derg was immensely unpopular, and was overthrown by the left-wing coalition party the EPRDF (Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Democratic Front), led by the TPLF (Tigray People's Liberation Front) in 1991. The TPLF had Marxist roots but was able to unify the various rebel factions along ethnic lines. The new government of Ethiopia was established as a system of "ethnic federalism." This analysis will examine the ideology of the

⁸ Mulugeta Gebrehiwot Berhe, *Laying the Past to Rest: The EPRDF and the Challenges of Ethiopian State-Building* (London: Hurst & Company Publishers, 2020), 185.

⁹ Jon Abbink, "Ethnic-Based Federalism and Ethnicity in Ethiopia: Reassessing the Experiment after 20 years," *Journal of Eastern African Studies* 5, no. 4 (November 2011): 596-618.

USSR's nationalities policy and link it to the successive socialist government under the Derg and the later "democratic" government under the EPRDF.

Soviet Nationalities Policy

In the book *The Affirmative Action Empire: Nations and Nationalities in the Soviet Union, 1923-1939*, Terry Martin explains the ideological basis for Soviet nationality policy at the start of the Russian Revolution can be summed up in three parts: the Marxist premise, the modernization premise, and "Greatest Danger" principle. The Marxist premise states that National consciousness is not productive in the development of socialism, as it gives the people a rallying idea that supersedes class as a reason to organize. The modernization principle dovetails with the Marxist principle by stating that nationalism is an inevitable historic phase in societal development that is explicitly tied to the development of bourgeois capitalism. In Marxist historical materialist terms, nationalism, tied to liberal democracies, is a painful but necessary step that all peoples must go through on their way to eventual socialist internationalism. The "greatest-danger" principle was ultimately an articulation of the difference between the nationalism of oppressed peoples and the nationalism of historically oppressive peoples, especially of the "Great Russians," i.e. the Russian ethnic group led by the Czars that were considered the dominant ethnic group of the Russian Empire under the Czar.¹⁰ The unique effect of the greatest-danger principle is that in the early years of the Soviet Union's nationality policy there was increased emphasis on anti-assimilationist ideas. In this way, the Soviet Union was the

¹⁰ Terry Martin, *The Affirmative Action Empire: Nations and Nationalism in the Soviet Union, 1923-1939* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2001), 4-8.

first great power to actively define itself as "anti-imperialist," and leaders of the early USSR actively rejected the label of "empire."¹¹

The synthesis of these ideas led Lenin and Stalin to the novel idea at the eve of the revolution that the Soviet nationalities policy would involve uplifting and encouraging the diverse range of national identities and movements in the former Russian Empire rather than attempting to do away with national identity altogether. By actively encouraging the development of nationalities in the former empire, the Bolsheviks hoped to encourage the phase of development of nationalism in a way in which the centralized state could hold some influence and to discourage the elements of "bourgeois" nationalists in the new republics.

Stalin broke from other European socialists on the definition of nationality in his famous 1913 essay *Marxism and the Nationalities Question* by tying national identity to territorial boundaries and rejecting extraterritorial national identity. He argues that while some groups might share a language or a religion across territorial borders, they will almost certainly hold different beliefs, values, and political interests from one another if they are living in different spaces and under different regimes. In Stalin's formulation, the most important factor in the formation of a national identity is the territorial bond.¹² In practice, this idea led to the creation of thousands of national demarcations of groups in the former Russian empire, sometimes down to the village level. Martin argues that the creation and elevation of these granular national identities actually encouraged existing inter-ethnic tensions rather than alleviating them, as it forced some people living within new boundaries designated for other national/ethnic groups to

¹¹ Ibid., 19.

¹² J. Stalin, *Marxism and the Nationalities Question*, 1913.

flee from their newfound minority status.¹³ This is a pattern that will repeat in Ethiopia years later.

The policy of creating socialist nations and defining nationalities came alongside an effort to uplift and educate these nationalities and to define national cultures as independent from other minority nationalities and especially Russian national identity. This policy, called *korenizatsiia*, involved creating national alphabets for various minority nationality languages (such as Bashkir and Kyrgyz) and the creation of native language schools in the soviet republics, most significantly in Ukraine, where the policy was also referred to as "Ukrainization."¹⁴ The policy of *korenizatsiia* was tied with the broader cultural revolution put forward by the central Bolshevik government in which mass literacy of the proletariat was a central goal.

By 1930, Soviet nationality policy showed mixed results. The process of uplifting minority nationalities was successful, but the fears that early Bolsheviks had that national identity would supersede class struggle as a reason to organize turned out to be true in many cases. As an example, ethnic Poles that lived in the Polish National Region of Ukraine found themselves identifying much more closely to independent Poland rather than their National region demarcated by a centralized Russian state and were skeptical that a "Polish proletariat culture" could ever be established in the USSR.¹⁵ The reversal of *korenizatsiia* had its beginnings in terror campaigns leveled at Ukraine following the grain requisition crisis of 1927-1928, which

¹³ Martin, *Affirmative Action Empire*, 33.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 75.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 46-47.

was incredibly unpopular among Ukrainian peasants and intelligentsia alike and sparked a wave of anti-Soviet and anti-Russian sentiment.¹⁶

Ethnicity and Ethnic Oppression in Imperial Ethiopia

Ethnic tensions in Ethiopia have a much longer history than modern European concepts of race and nationality. The modern Ethiopian state came about after Emperor Menelik II, then King of Shoa, was crowned King of Kings of Ethiopia in 1889 and established a centralized modern state. Shortly after Menelik came to power, he signed a treaty with the Kingdom of Italy, which was in the midst of its own colonial project in the Horn of Africa. The treaty recognized the northern territory of Eritrea as an Italian possession, cutting off Ethiopia's access to the Red Sea and making the country landlocked for the first time in its history. The treaty of Wuchale had discrepancies in the version written in Italian and the version written in Amharic. In essence, the Italian version of the treaty stated that Ethiopia was required to consult with Italy for major foreign policy and economic decisions, while the version written in Amharic merely suggested that Ethiopia consult Italy first as a sign of allyship. A dispute over the terms of the treaty sparked an Italian invasion in May 1896 and the battle of Adwa, which saw a remarkable Ethiopian victory against colonial aggressors. Following this victory, Ethiopia was recognized as an independent state by the other European powers, and Ethiopia remained the only African territory to successfully resist colonization during the scramble for Africa.

Following the defeat of the Italian aggressors, Emperor Menelik signed various treaties with European powers to define Ethiopia's borders with surrounding colonies. Menelik's empire was unique in Africa not only for being able to resist European aggression, but also for actively

¹⁶ Ibid., 293.

engaging with the European powers with bilateral diplomatic and trade agreements. From 1897 to 1902, Ethiopia signed treaties with the United Kingdom and Italy that defined modern Ethiopia's borders in relation to surrounding European colonies. They even signed a treaty with the French that called for a railway line to be built with neighboring Djibouti (then French Somaliland), once again connecting Ethiopia to the sea and to the European-dominated global trade network.¹⁷

While Ethiopia managed to avoid colonization by European aggressors, the imperial regime took efforts to expand its borders and to place disparate African peoples under Ethiopian hegemony. During Menelik's reign, the imperial Ethiopian state absorbed 90% of the Oromo people into its orbit. At the time, the Oromo were a large ethnic group that had roots in the Ethiopian lowlands as well as regions that make up modern day Northeastern Kenya and Southern Somalia. Menelik took over the Oromo city of Finfinne and claimed it as the capital of modern Ethiopia, renaming the city to Addis Ababa. In the process, Menelik displaced the existing Oromo peoples in the region and in the surrounding areas and imposed the Amhara language as the official state language. Now for Oromo people to succeed under the new government, they would need to give up their own language and culture and adopt the Amhara language. In essence, the Oromos were forced to assimilate to a new Ethiopian culture that treated the ethnic groups of the Abyssinian highlands (i.e., the Tigray and Amhara peoples) with primacy over the ethnic groups native to the lowlands, such as the Oromo, the Afar, and the Somali.

Scholarly analysis of this period in Ethiopian history often refers to this process as a form of colonization. Further modernization and centralization of the imperial state occurred under the

¹⁷ Mulugeta, *Laying the Past to Rest*, 23.

rule of Haile Selassie, who came to power as the emperor in 1930 and didn't step down until he was deposed by the Derg government in 1974.¹⁸ Originally a prince in the Shoa court, Emperor Haile Selassie consolidated his power throughout his long reign and embarked on a project of Ethiopian state-building that put all royal authority and legitimacy in the Shoa court as opposed to the other regional kings that were ostensibly his equals and pushed Amharic cultural and linguistic primacy.¹⁹

Haile's long reign was categorized by further modernization while still maintaining the old system of Abyssinian feudalism. His government further bureaucratized and centralized Ethiopia's economic structures. This led to further institutionalization of the existing power disparities between the ethnic groups native to the Abyssinian highlands and other groups in the lowlands. These policies also further entrenched Christian majority rule over Ethiopians that followed Islam and non-Abrahamic traditional faiths. In an address to the United States congress, Haile Selassie referred to Ethiopia as "a Christian nation in a sea of Islam" and didn't address any of the ethnic groups in Ethiopia aside from the leading Amhara group the emperor had his origins from, flattening the diverse makeup of Ethiopia in favor of modern state-building acceptable in the Cold War paradigms of the time.²⁰

Ethiopia was once again threatened by colonial aggression during the second World War. Italy invaded Ethiopia and designated it as part of "Italian East Africa" alongside the existing neighboring colonies of Italian Somaliland in the East and Eritrea to the North. After the Axis

¹⁸ Prunier, *Understanding Contemporary Ethiopia*, 188.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 178-179.

²⁰ "Text of Haile Selassie's Address to U.S. Congress," *New York Times*, May 29, 1954, <https://www.proquest.com/docview/112920410?parentSessionId=JW736MSN5okkorMb3RckfOt95kMEZj4ufz13vf%2B3ucA%3D&pq-origsite=primo&accountid=14784>.

powers were defeated, British troops invaded "Italian East Africa" and liberated Ethiopia and Eritrea. Eritrea was made independent from colonial rule for the first time since it was made an Italian colony in the late 19th Century, however due to Ethiopian and British pressure and a United Nations decision, Eritrea was placed in a "federation" system with imperial Ethiopia in 1955.

Nationality Under the Derg

Following a massive wave of student movements and a faltering imperial government, a military coup saw the rise of an ostensibly left-wing military government in Ethiopia. Student movements in Ethiopia emerged first in the 1960's to protest the Imperial regime, largely in Addis Ababa, where the largest university in the country is. Young graduates had little work prospects in the post-feudal economy under Haile Selassie other than education pathways, but due to cuts in education spending, these jobs were becoming more scarce as well. The junior officer corps was among the other primary group of belligerents in the popular protests, as they took issue with their inability to take jobs outside of the military.²¹

The radical student movement was heavily influenced by left-wing ideology and contemporary socialist governments of the Eastern Bloc and China. In this context, left-wing discourse around ethnicity and nationality influenced the thought of radical Ethiopian students. In the 1960's, the phrase "the nationality question," borrowed from Stalin and the early USSR nationality policy, began to circulate in these student groups and be applied to the Ethiopian context. An Addis Ababa University student named Wallegigne Mekonnen wrote an influential article on the topic titled "On the Question of Nationalities in Ethiopia" in 1969. In this paper,

²¹Prunier, *Understanding Contemporary Ethiopia*, 215.

Wallegigne tied the concept of nation-states to ethno-territorial lines along the Stalinist perspective on the nationality question, rejected the pan-Ethiopian perspective on ethnic identity, and stated directly that "revolutionary armed struggle [is] the only way to establish a genuine and egalitarian national state in Ethiopia."²²

Amidst the student protests of 1974, a group of disaffected junior officers were who eventually came to power in the military government rather than the military elite at the time. These junior officers engaged in their own sort of "class struggle" and engaged with both the military elites as well as the imperial bureaucracy as a whole.²³ They formed the Provisional Military Administrative Council (PMAC, AKA the Derg), deposed the emperor, and declared the military government's aims at implementing socialism (absolute state control of the economy) and keeping Ethiopia united in the face of the Eritrean independence movement.²⁴

While the military government came to power amidst a genuine popular revolutionary movement largely inspired by left-wing ideas, it shouldn't be assumed that the Derg was as politically stringent as the movements that helped them get to power. The defining feature of the Derg's political outlook was the slogan *Ethiopia Tikdem* ("Ethiopia First" in Amharic). Critics of the Derg took issue with the regime's continuation of centralized control and the primacy of Amharic language in the name of modern "State-building."²⁵

²² An English translation of this section of Wallegigne's paper is provided in the article cited. Mulatu Wubneh, "Ethnic Identity Politics and the Restructuring of Administrative Units in Ethiopia," *International Journal of Ethiopian Studies* 11, no. 1 & 2 (2017): 118.

²³Prunier, *Understanding Contemporary Ethiopia*, 218.

²⁴ Ibid.

²⁵ Pausewang et al., *Ethiopia Since the Derg*, 27.

The Derg's nationality policy acknowledged the diversity and complexity of Ethiopia's national identities while doing very little to change the status quo of Amhara state power and hegemony. In 1977, the Derg created the Ethiopian Institute for Nations and Nationalities in an effort to promise historically marginalized ethnic groups in Ethiopia the right to develop their own cultures and languages. There was a mass literacy campaign for various local languages that resembled the *korenizatsiia* campaign of the early USSR. Peace calls were even made with rebels in Eritrea, but independence was out of the question and conflict between Eritrean nationalists and the central government persisted throughout the entire Derg regime.²⁶

Actual policy under the Derg did little to respect the right to national self-determination that was a part of the military government's revolutionary rhetoric. Amharic persisted as the lingua franca of the central government's institutions. One policy in particular that highlights the military government's insensitivity to issues surrounding national identity is the Derg's disastrous policy of population transfers. From 1984-86, the Derg reacted to a famine in Ethiopia's Northern provinces by forcibly moving hundreds of thousands of citizens in Wollo and Tigray to the less populated Lowlands. This forced displacement was conducted by the military and an estimated 50,000 people died in the process.²⁷ Additionally, nothing in the way of infrastructure was in place for these settlers, and many were unwelcome in their new homelands and were unable to speak the local languages of the South. Many of these settlers died in the aftermath as well, most notably from malaria due to having been born in the Northern

²⁶ Mulugeta Gebrehiwot Berhe and Feseha Habtetsion Gebresilassie, "Nationalism and Self-Determination in Contemporary Ethiopia," *Nations and Nationalities* 27 (2021): 100, <https://doi.org/10.1111/nana.12647>.

²⁷ Prunier, *Understanding Contemporary Ethiopia*, 223.

mountainous regions that were malaria-free and therefore not developing immunity in their lifetimes.²⁸

In sum, the Derg regime co-opted the language of the largely socialist student movements that paved the way for toppling the imperial regime but did little to address issues related to national self-determination, especially among ethnic groups within Ethiopia that had been historically marginalized by the imperial government. As a result, many of the resistance groups that formed in opposition to the military government maintained the socialist leanings of the 1974 student movements but formed around nationalist goals and ideology. These fragmented nationalist resistance groups were who eventually deposed the Derg and had an enduring impact on the transition to ostensibly democratic structures following the 1991 revolution.

TPLF Comes to Power

The Tigray People's Liberation Front (TPLF) was formed in the early years of the Derg regime by student radicals and Tigrayan nationalists that were immediately dissatisfied with the military government that their student movements inadvertently helped rise to power. The group that would become the TPLF was originally formed as the Tigray National Organization (TNO) by a small group of student radicals in 1974. In their first meeting, the founding group of TNO agreed upon four key principles to guide future organizing efforts and to define their ideology:

1. Ethiopia is a 'Prison of Nations' and the quest for national equality has made a national form of struggle as a primary form of the struggle for democracy. The national question can only be addressed by the recognition of the right of nations and nationalities for self-determination up to and including succession;
2. Marxism-Leninism is the correct ideology to guide the struggle for national equality as well as address class oppression;
3. Following the 12 September 1974 decree of '*Ethiopia Tikdem*' the space for peaceful forms of struggle seems to be closed making armed struggle the only option for the struggle for democracy;

²⁸ Ibid., 224.

4. There is a need to create an urban-based clandestine organization that would provide information, supplies, and manpower for the eventual launch of armed struggle.²⁹

TNO began preparing for armed struggle almost immediately after it was formed.

Leaders of TNO made contact with the Eritrean People's Liberation front (EPLF), who were engaged in armed struggle with the central government for independence for the neighboring province of Eritrea. It is during this contact with the EPLF that TNO became the TPLF. Groups of student activists involved with TPLF went to Eritrea and received military training from the EPLF. From their barebones military training from the EPLF and their studies on guerilla warfare engaged in by Mao and the People's Liberation Army during the early stages of the Chinese Civil War, this small group returned to Tigray to recruit more insurgents and begin their campaign of armed resistance against the military government.³⁰

The TPLF took strategic and ideological cues from communist governments, but their version of nationalism was unique and was developed from their own ideas stemming from the USSR's experiment in creating national demarcations for the ethnic groups within the former Russian Empire and the writings of Stalin as well as the unique historical conditions of Ethiopia.

The TPLF and EPLF split on various ideological issues regarding the nationality question and a vision for post-Derg Eritrea and Ethiopia. For the EPLF, there was no question regarding independence. The EPLF was largely made up of Muslims who fought to liberate Muslim-majority Eritrea from the state of Ethiopia, which they perceived to be a continuation of the centralized Imperial regime that prioritized Christian and Amhara primacy. The TPLF shared the

²⁹ An English translation of the founding charter is provided in text. Mulugeta, *Laying the Past to Rest*, 45.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 48-50.

same goal and fought for national self-determination for the Tigrayan people but were split on the question of succession.

EPLF criticized the TPLF for colluding with the "reactionary" nationalist liberation parties operating in Ethiopia against the Derg. The TPLF acknowledged that they were engaged in United Front tactics against the Derg and had the explicit aim of forming a coalition party to replace the military government.³¹ While the TPLF actively worked towards coalition-building, they rejected calls to fight alongside pan-Ethiopian resistance movements and were committed to their core ideology of national self-determination. The TPLF managed to create a united front of nationalist parties under the name Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF) in 1989 and were able to take over the military government in 1991.

Ethnic Federalism, the 1995 Constitution, and nationality policy under the EPRDF

After the EPRDF came into power in 1991, the coalition was able to create a new federalist constitution in 1995 that demarcated new regional states to the various ethnic groups within Ethiopia's borders. This experimental system of "ethnic federalism" was an attempt to fulfill the promise of national self-determination and to give enhanced rights to the varied ethnic groups within the borders of Ethiopia alongside their own regional governments with ostensibly equal representation in the federal government.

Inherent issues arose from the new ethno-federalist system. Under the new borders, many Ethiopians woke up to find themselves to be minorities in their new states. Like in the early

³¹ A full English translation is provided alongside other contemporary primary source texts in this edition of the journal cited. According to the editor, there exists a formal statement in response from the TPLF, but the journal was unable to acquire an English translation. The original statement was published by the EPLF in the monthly journal *Adulis*, which was published through a contemporary institution called the "Central Bureau of Foreign Relations of the EPLF" in May, 1985. "Nations and Nationalities in Ethiopia and Eritrea," Briefings, *Review of African Political Economy* 35, (May, 1986): 85, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/4005588>.

Soviet national demarcations, these new national boundaries didn't reflect the complicated ethnic and national realities in many of the areas created. This is illustrated by the newly created "Southern Nations, Nationalities, and Peoples" state of the Southwest. A number of minority groups were lumped together into a single district without their promised equal representation in the federal system. Critics of the ethno-nationalist regime have called the new borders "gerrymandered" and somewhat arbitrary. The ability for any central government to adequately demarcate the ancestral homelands of the many ethnic groups within a state with such a long history as Ethiopia is questionable in the first place, but it also erases the identities of the many Ethiopians who have ancestry tied to two or more ethnic groups or reject ethnic identity in favor of a secular identity based on citizenship ostensibly promised by the federal government. These Ethiopians are failed by the post-1991 system of dual-citizenship whereby citizens have different documentation given by the federal government than the local governments of their home region.³²

Further systemic issues exist within the electoral system of post-1991 Ethiopia. True to its Marxist-Leninist roots, the government of Ethiopia under the TPLF/EPRDF has imposed a system it calls "Revolutionary Democracy," which is based off of Leninist ideology that requires a vanguard party to "protect" the revolution from counter-revolutionary/reactionary forces. In the EPRDF's formulation, there is valid democracy in place due to the existence of local elections and the numerous political parties that are aligned with the EPRDF. Unfortunately, independent election observers paint a less than democratic picture. In 1992, so-called "snap elections" were held in roughly 75% percent of the new electoral administrative zones whereby new councils of

³² Mehretu, Assefa, "Ethnosymbolism and the Dismemberment of the State in the Horn of Africa: The Ethiopian Case of Ethnic Federalism," *International Conference on African Development Archives* 132, (2009): 6-7. https://scholarworks.wmich.edu/africancenter_icad_archive/132.

local representatives came together to vote in representatives. According to Pausewang et al., these elections were “thoroughly orchestrated” to put into power EPRDF-affiliated candidates, and in instances where these councils did not elect the “correct” candidates, the results were annulled by the federal government and repeated, sometimes up to three times.³³

Similar to the sort of asymmetric federalism implemented by the USSR, the new regime designated some key cities with their own boundaries and rules as special districts as illustrated by the new constitution. This includes the economically important city of Dire Dawa and, problematically, the capital city of Addis Ababa.

Addis Ababa is unique in the sense that it is significantly less ethnically homogenous than other districts within Ethiopia. Addis Ababa sits in the center of Oromia, the district designated for the Oromo ethnic group, but has a population of only twenty percent Oromo people. Addis Ababa as the capital of Ethiopia remains a point of contention for the Oromo people, as it represents the imperial regime's colonization of historically Oromo land and the forced displacement and assimilation of Oromo people into Amhara culture when Emperor Menelik II established the city as the capital.

The issue of Addis Ababa continues to rile ethnic tensions in Oromia. Technically speaking, Oromia claims the city in opposition to the federal constitution. In addition, with the implementation of the so-called “Addis Ababa Master Plan” in 2014, the capital city is developing and expanding at the expense of surrounding Oromo land which is getting annexed for development purposes.³⁴ The constitution gives no guidance for how to deal with the issue of

³³ Pausewang et al., *Ethiopia Since the Derg*, 31.

³⁴ Getahun, *A Nation Without a City*, 121.

Oromo people losing their allotted land, but many Oromo nationalists have taken to the streets in protest over the loss of their land and promised sovereignty within the federalist system.

Conclusion

As I write this, the system of ethnic federalism in Ethiopia is facing its most pressing challenges. A period of conflict from 2020-2022 between the regional government in Tigray and the central government has been put on halt by a ceasefire agreement, but the underlying ethnic tension exasperated by the system and the possibility of further conflict remains present. Developments in the last few years of conflict in Ethiopia are beyond the scope of this paper, however, it is possible to analyze the nationality policy of the successive governments of Ethiopia to determine how these governments exacerbated existing ethnic tensions.

We can take an example from the USSR's attempt to solve the "nationality question" through a Marxist lens and compare it to the situation in Ethiopia. The USSR followed Stalin's take on the issue that defined national identity by regional borders over other considerations. This led to the creation of many small national boundaries that did much more to divide people on the basis of granular national identities than to bring people together under the banner of socialism. Moreover, the attempt at giving national minorities their own regions and National Soviets within the USSR's borders in hopes that they wouldn't develop nationalist leanings that aligned with their respective nation-states outside of the Union proved to be a failure. In general, national minorities defined themselves by nationalist considerations outside of the narrow definitions provided by the central government and were aware that the "representation" allotted to them by the National Soviets amounted to little. By the late 1930's, the government had flipped its nationality policy and began to rehabilitate Russian ethno-nationalism and began the

infamous pogroms against Jewish individuals living within the Soviet Union, among other “enemy nationalities” as determined by the state.

Conclusions we draw from the failures of the USSR's nationality policy can be applied to the successive governments of Ethiopia. The student movements that allowed the Derg to come to power were focused on economic considerations as well as nationalist considerations. Many of the students that took to the streets in Addis Ababa were informed by academic ideas of national identity and used the same language of "national self-determination" as their Soviet predecessors. There was, unfortunately, a large rift between the members of the Derg and the student radicals. While the Derg used much of the same academic language and put into place a dedicated institute dedicated to studying the "Nations and Nationalities" of Ethiopia, actual policy did little to change the status quo of Cold War era state-building. I would argue that the institutions and rhetoric created by the Derg to address issues surrounding nationality were designed to orient the country closer to the USSR's standards rather than grant national self-determination in a meaningful way.

The inadequate authoritarian rule of the Derg gave rise to the ethnic resistance movements led by the TPLF that instituted the system of ethnic federalism. This new government imposed a radical new system to promise national self-determination but in doing so injected ethnic identity into every facet of Ethiopian politics. By maintaining a vanguardist approach to governance through its model of "Revolutionary Democracy," the central government has failed to deliver the democratic institutions it had promised. Much like Stalin's USSR, this novel experiment in National self-determination gave way to the exacerbation of existing ethnic tensions and the continuation of authoritarian rule.

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