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Ethiopia - Eritrea civil war (1974 - 1991)

Eritrea's war for independence from Ethiopia coincided with armed struggles by other Ethiopian ethnic groups against the government. The wars ended in 1991 when the regime of Mengistu Haile Mariam was toppled and Eritrea secured independence from Ethiopia. The two leading insurgent groups, the Eritrean People's Liberation Front (EPLF) and the Tigray People's Liberation Front (TPLF), collaborated during the conflict. When they succeeded in overthrowing Mengistu in 1991, they negotiated independence for Eritrea and a TPLF-led government took power in the Ethiopian capital, Addis Ababa. Peace lasted until 1998 when a border dispute triggered a new war between the former allies (see Ethiopia/Eritrea: international war profile).

In the late 1800s, Italy colonized Eritrea and attempted to colonize Ethiopia, but failed. Eritrea became a British protectorate after World War II. Though Eritreans pushed for independence, the United Nations backed federation with Ethiopia. Ethiopian emperor Haile Selassie annexed Eritrea in 1962, imposing edicts to suppress the Eritrean language and national identity, and an armed Eritrean resistance movement began to grow. When Mengistu's revolutionary socialist "Dergue" overthrew Selassie in 1974, an all-out war between Eritrean nationalists and the Ethiopian military began.

The Eritrean Liberation Front (ELF) was founded in 1958, with a predominantly Muslim leadership. The rival EPLF, which bridged Eritrea's Muslim and Christian communities and had a Marxist orientation, was founded in 1970, and ultimately displaced the ELF. Meanwhile, the ethnic Tigray in northern Ethiopia, frustrated by the concentration of government power in the south, formed the TPLF in 1975 with the goal of overthrowing the Dergue and creating a loose federal structure for Ethiopia. The EPLF provided arms and training to the TPLF and the two groups often fought side-by-side against Ethiopian government forces.

In 1984 Ethiopia was struck by a devastating famine. Mass displacement and insecurity in agricultural and pastoral areas compounded drought and the ongoing fighting compromised aid efforts. An estimated one million people died from hunger. In the course of the war, the Ethiopian government committed widespread human rights abuses including targeting civilians and forcibly recruiting child soldiers. In 1989 the TPLF joined other anti-government groups to create the Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF). The EPRDF overran Addis Ababa in 1991, ousting the Mengistu regime. The EPRDF and the EPLF negotiated independence for Eritrea but left some border regions undefined. The two countries initially enjoyed good relations, but tensions over demarcation of the border ultimately led to a new war.

Print Resources

Gilkes, Patrick and Martin Plaut (1999) *War in the Horn: The Conflict between Eritrea and Ethiopia*. London: Royal Institute of International Affairs.

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Duffield, Mark and John Prendergast (1994) *Without Troops & Tanks: The Emergency Relief Desk and the Cross Border Operation into Eritrea and Tigray*. Lawrenceville, NJ: Red Sea Press.

Online Resources

Human Rights Watch. *World Report 1992*.

United States Library of Congress. *Ethiopia: A Country Study*.

Reuters Alertnet. *Country Profile: Eritrea*.

BBC News. *Country Profile: Eritrea*.

BBC News. *Country Profile: Ethiopia*.

Timeline

1952 - Eritrea federates with Ethiopia

1958 - Eritrean Liberation Front (ELF) formed

1962 - Ethiopia annexes Eritrea

1970 - Eritrean People's Liberation Front (EPLF) formed

1974 - Haile Selassie overthrown by Dergue, Teferi Benti becomes president of Ethiopia

1975 - Tigray People's Liberation Front (TPLF) formed

1977 - Benti killed, Mengistu Haile Mariam becomes president

1981 - EPLF forces ELF out of Eritrea

1984 - famine strikes Ethiopia

1989 - TPLF and other groups ally in Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF)

1991 - EPRDF outs Mengistu, EPLF organizes own government

1993 - Eritrea officially becomes independent