

# **ETHIOPIAN CIVIL WAR**

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**The Ethiopian civil war, between the Ethiopian government and nationalists from Eritrea (an Ethiopian area along the Red Sea), has raged off and on and has been tightly interconnected with Ethiopia's internal political problems and conflict with neighboring Somalia. In the 1880s Italy captured Eritrea. By 1952 Ethiopia regained control, but eight years later, in 1961, Eritrean nationalists demanded independence from Ethiopia. When the Ethiopian government rejected this demand, civil war erupted.**

**The civil war was a symptom of profound changes within Ethiopia, involving a confrontation between traditional and modern forces that changed the nature of the Ethiopian state. The last fourteen years of Haile Selassie's reign (1960-74) witnessed growing opposition to his regime. Ethiopians demanded better living conditions for the poor and an end to government corruption. In 1972 and 1973, severe drought led to famine in the northeastern part of Ethiopia. Haile Selassie's critics claimed that the government ignored victims of the famine. In 1974, Ethiopian military leaders under Lieutenant Colonel Mengistu Haile-Mariam seized the government and removed Haile Selassie from power.**

**The Ogaden region of southeastern Ethiopia also became a trouble spot, beginning in the 1960s. The government of neighboring Somalia claimed the region,**

which the Ethiopian Emperor Menelik had conquered in the 1890s. Many Somali people had always lived there, and they revolted against Ethiopian rule. In the 1970s fighting broke out between Ethiopia and Somalia over the Ogaden region.

Until then, Ethiopia had enjoyed U.S. support, while the Soviet Union had sided with its rival, Somalia. In fact, in the space of just four years (1974-1978), the USSR concluded a Treaty of Friendship and Cooperation with Somalia, Ethiopia experienced a revolution in 1974, the Soviet Union dramatically shifted massive support from Somalia to Ethiopia, and then played a key part in the military defeat of its former ally in the Ogaden conflict of 1977-8. During the conflict about fifty Soviet ships passed through the Suez Canal to the port of Assab to unload fighter aircraft, tanks, artillery, and munitions--an estimated 60,000 tons of hardware--for delivery to Mengistu's regime.

After the 1974 revolution, the new military government under Mengistu adopted socialist policies and established close relations with the Soviet Union. The government began large-scale land reform, breaking up the huge estates of the former nobility. The government claimed ownership of this land and turned it into farmland. But the military leaders also killed many of their Ethiopian opponents, further alienating former U.S. supporters who opposed the human rights abuses.

Eritrean rebels stepped up their separatist efforts after the 1974 revolution. Mengistu's regime invaded rebel-held Eritrea several times, but failed to regain control. Ethiopia's conflict with Eritrea also had a strong East-West dimension. The Soviet Union, along with some Arab states, advocated complete independence for Eritrea. In a speech to the United Nations, the Soviet delegate rejected the federalist

“compromise” solution advocated by the United States, claiming that the Eritrean people had not given their consent. Soviet scholars also backed Ethiopia’s claim to Eritrea on both historical and economic grounds. They noted that the Soviet Union had favored Ethiopian access to the Eritrean port of Assab as early as 1946. Despite an influx of Soviet military aid after 1977, Mengistu’s counterinsurgency effort in Eritrea progressed haltingly. Talks between the two sides continued well into the 1980s. Fighting between Eritrea and Ethiopia erupted again in May 1998. In June 2000, the two sides signed a cessation of hostilities agreement, and a United Nations peacekeeping force of 4,300 military personnel was dispatched later that year.

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