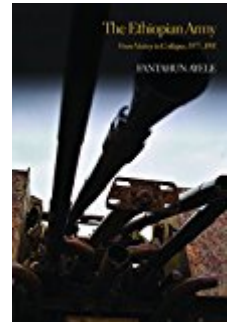


Fantahun Ayele. *The Ethiopian Army: From Victory to Collapse, 1977-1991*. Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 2014. 328 pp. \$79.95, cloth, ISBN 978-0-8101-3011-1.



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Writing good postcolonial African military history is a daunting endeavor. Beyond the commonplace challenges involved in writing African history, such as translation issues, problematic infrastructure, and high travel costs, researching the state's military often adds an additional layer of bureaucratic obfuscation and secrecy. Given this, Fantahun Ayele's comprehensive study of the Ethiopian army from its triumph in the Ogaden War of 1977-78 to its eventual ignominious collapse against a rebel coalition in 1991 is extraordinarily impressive. Ayele has gathered a massive trove of previously unseen information and synthesized it to produce a singular volume that, although marred by some confusing editorial issues, should find a home on the shelf of any military historian with an interest in Africa or any Africanist who carries an interest in the Horn of Africa.

Ayele's work takes little time to dive into the impressive research he has marshalled. After a brief two-page introduction outlining a few basic

particulars of the research and the central question of how the Ethiopians lost their wars of the late twentieth century, he immediately plunges into a relatively meaty chapter on the late imperial Ethiopian army of 1941-74. Serving primarily as background material to discuss how the army of Haile Selassie's empire was reformed and fractured during and after the Second World War, it does an excellent job setting the table for a larger discussion of what the army would become during the late 1970s under Communist influence. Indeed, given the general rarity of any treatments of the Ethiopian army during these earlier periods, even when it was an actor on the world stage, such as during the Korean War or the Congo Crisis, this chapter even serves as an excellent stand-alone study for a pivotal case study of an independent, modern African military.

From here, Ayele develops a series of three painstakingly detailed thematic chapters on the Ethiopian army from the reception of massive Soviet and Cuban aid in 1977 to the eventual collapse of that same force in 1991. These chapters

cover topics as far ranging as the massive expansion of the army from a smaller professional force to a conscripted horde of over three hundred thousand soldiers, the failures involved in developing an effective corps of military leaders, the problems this new military encountered with supplying the massive war efforts it was undertaking, and the paucity of effective military intelligence structures within the Ethiopian military during these years. Each of these chapters traces the development of these themes over the whole of the covered period and connects them to the eventual breakdown of the Ethiopian military system during the long conflicts it waged. This is accompanied by detailed descriptions of particular incidents throughout the narrative as well as straightforward tables illustrating the initial successes and then precipitous decline in all of these areas.

Ayele then follows these chapters with two narrative chapters discussing the actual conflicts of the wars that would tear apart the military of Ethiopia. The first is a discussion of what Ayele discusses as “fighting on two fronts”: Ethiopia’s military had to fight the increasingly strong insurgency of Eritrean secessionists in the North while staving off the massive Somalian invasion of the Ogaden in the East. The second is a more detailed study of the Ethiopians’ longer counterinsurgency campaign against the Eritreans and other northern rebellions from a period of relative weakness in 1976 through their high-water mark in the early 1980s, and then to the final collapse of the Ethiopians in 1991. Both of these are presented well and include effective discussions of the challenges that the multiethnic populations of Ethiopia offered to these conflicts, the integration of massive Communist aid, the faltering of Somali nationalist goals, and the explosion of northern rebel support. While there is not necessarily much new in the general narrative of these conflicts compared with older works, the detail offered by Ayele’s sources allows for a much more granular discussion of these conflicts.

Ayele concludes the book with a brief discussion of how the Ethiopian Revolution changed the army and then a formal conclusion, where he again addresses the question of why the Ethiopian army ultimately collapsed in 1991. The brief chapter on changes offers a quick overview of how the revolutionaries changed the army and the additional alterations caused by the influx of Soviet aid in 1977. The latter delves more deeply into the root causes of the defeat, which were engendered by the failings covered in the detailed chapters, including weak command and control and a loss of public support following the massive conscription and military failures. The conclusion does yeoman’s work tying together the massive research Ayele has brought together into a concise and effective summation of his thesis.

The research is laudable and the amount of information conveyed in this volume is impressive, but these admirable aspects are somewhat undermined by some confusing editorial decisions. While the main question of the volume is why the Ethiopian army ultimately collapsed despite winning an impressive victory in one of its two concurrent conflicts, the overall narratives of those conflicts are not covered until well past the halfway point of the book. What this means is that a reader who is unfamiliar with the Eritrean insurgency or the Ogaden War will spend well over a hundred pages reading in detail about how events of these conflicts influenced the Ethiopian army before actually learning anything about those events. Simply switching the two conflict chapters to be ahead of the thematic chapters would have been an easy fix for this problem and made the volume far more useful for interested but not expert academics. The same can be said for the short chapter on the effects of the revolution of 1974 and Russian aid to the army. It simply makes no sense as a final fragment before the conclusion, especially when its contents are a natural bridge across the gap from the imperial army to the military operations in 1977. Simply put, all the information is there, but the order it is pre-

sented in makes engaging Ayele's work far more difficult than it needs to be.

In terms of its coverage of the subject and the obvious efforts to which the author went to attain his source material, *The Ethiopian Army: From Victory to Collapse, 1977-1991* is a triumph. While other treatments have touched on these events from a number of viewpoints, none has been as comprehensive or as well researched. Unfortunately, due to the ordering of the chapters and the depth to which much of the information depends on context that is not generally known, this book will likely prove challenging for readers who are not already familiar with the Ogaden War or the secessionist struggles of the Eritreans. Therefore, this book is best read in tandem with something along the lines of Gebru Tareke's *The Ethiopian Revolution: War in the Horn of Africa* (2009) or Dan Connell's *Against All Odds: A Chronicle of the Eritrean Revolution* (1993), which present narratives and viewpoints that will offer additional context to this vital and timely volume.

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