



Bahru Zewde. *The Quest for Socialist Utopia: The Ethiopian Student Movement, c. 1960-1974.* Eastern Africa Series. Oxford: James Currey Ltd., 2014. 317 pp. \$90.00, cloth, ISBN 978-1-84701-085-8.

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The Ethiopian student movement was one of the most influential student movements in history, because of its profound and long-lasting influence on Ethiopian politics, including the events that led to revolution in 1974. Although it may in many aspects be seen as part of the global 1968 movement, it grew out of domestic factors. In Ethiopia, the student movement was the most potent force of opposition against the imperial regime. Some of its central demands, notably radical land reform, informed the policies of the Dergue regime (1974-91), which was eventually overthrown by a liberation movement that had itself grown out of student radicalism. The ethno-federal structure of the post-1991 regime, a major source of recent protests against the government, is another legacy of theoretical struggles fought out in the student movement. In short, the Ethiopian student movement is historically significant both for its impact on the past and for its long-term effects, which can still be felt today.

Despite its outstanding historical significance, the number of extensive scholarly studies of the movement is fairly limited. Bahru Zewde, the leading historian of Ethiopia's modern history, set out to produce the standard work on these turbulent years. The aim of *The Quest for Socialist Ethiopia: The Ethiopian Student Movement c. 1960-1974* is to go beyond Randi Rønning Balsvik's

comprehensive study from 1985 (*Haile Selassie's Students: The Intellectual and Social Background to Revolution, 1952-1974*; also, *The Quest for Expression: State and the University in Ethiopia under Three Regimes, 1952-2005* [2007]) and push back against Messay Kebede's more recent interpretation of the movement (*Radicalism and Cultural Dislocation in Ethiopia, 1960-1974* [2008]). Bahru takes strong exception to Messay's argument that the students' radicalism was a "cultural dislocation" brought about by Marxism-Leninism. According to Bahru, this is a misconstrued understanding that fails to acknowledge the regime's structural problems. It also cannot explain why the students' rallying calls—most notably, "Land to the tiller"—were embraced by other segments of the population, leading to protests that eventually overpowered the imperial regime's inflexible structures. Radicalization, Bahru argues, resulted from the regime's autocracy and failure to accommodate more moderate demands. Still, to be fully understood, it also needs to be inserted into the global political context.

Chapter 1, "Youth in Revolt," embeds the Ethiopian student movement in a broader historical framework. Student movements originated in quantitatively small groups, but wherever their rallying cries appealed to broader sections of society, their impact could be substantial. Alluding to

the impact of student movements in Europe, Egypt, Iran, Sub-Saharan Africa, China, and elsewhere, Bahru suggests that student activism is marked by its longevity (it has been with us even since 1848) and universality (having occurred in all continents and in both capitalist and communist countries). The Ethiopian movement ultimately became part of the global 1968 movement with its shared symbols, heroes, and methods of activism.

Chapter 2 returns to the national context and sketches the structural contradictions of Haile Selassie's reign. Progressive measures of political and fiscal centralization (1930-55) morphed into an increasingly reactionary rule that brought about economic growth, but not any substantial improvement in the standard of living (1955-74). Increasing authoritarianism bolstered by a cult of personality characterized Haile Selassie's reign ever since his return from exile in 1941. The "land question," as it would become known in the student movement, was the most important of these issues. The rigid class divisions entrenched in patterns of landlordism, prevalent especially in the country's South, held peasants in tenancy and left them vulnerable to shocks like the 1973 famine. An important turning point was the 1960 abortive coup d'état which marked the "beginning of open defiance" (p. 55). The coup's manifesto made references to Ethiopia's "backwardness" in relation to other African countries; and, following the coup, some groups within the ruling circles pointed out the urgent need for political reforms. Additionally, the regime was pressured by the first ethno-nationalist uprisings (often informed by resentment against Amhara rule) in Eritrea as well as the Tigray and Oromo areas. Given these factors, the emperor's modernization program, including an expansion of secondary and tertiary education, ultimately turned against him.

Chapter 3, "In the Beginning," explains the fallout between the political establishment and the aspiring educational elite. It traces how stu-

dents increasingly took up political concerns that went beyond their narrow group interests. In 1962, Tamiru Feyessa's poem "The Poor Man Speaks Out" set a new, markedly critical tone. Criticism that had been unheard of became open and frequent. The emperor was not amused about allegations of arrogance, insolence, inequality, and injustice and retaliated with the withdrawal of royal patronage, yet suspensions and other disciplinary measures only served to estrange growing numbers of students from the regime. This process extended to overseas countries where Ethiopians were studying. They lived and studied at their government's expense, but this did not preclude their association with hotbeds of discussion and politicization.

Chapter 4, "The Process of Radicalization," is an account of how radicalization further unfolded. The presence of students from other African countries who came to Ethiopia after 1958 helped to foster a pan-African spirit in tertiary institutions. With the establishment of a radical Marxist-Leninist group, the Crocodiles, in 1963, and the adoption of land tenure as a central issue, the movement gained impetus and embraced an anti-feudal, anti-American, and anti-imperialist rhetoric. By 1967, Bahru concludes, students at home and abroad had moved away from earlier reformist demands and felt that revolution was inevitable. Marxism gained traction in university circles as the Crocodiles and the Soviet embassy circulated theoretical and activist treatises; some organizations would even come to include Marxist oaths. This is where Bahru balances his generally sympathetic account of the movement with criticism. According to him, adherence to Marxism led to dogmatic agitprop instead of theoretically guided insights. As elsewhere on the globe, Marxist-Leninist categories were applied rather clumsily and obscured the complexities on the ground. The hypothesis of US imperialism and Ethiopia's "semi-colonial" status, for instance, hinged on the empirical fact that US capital had hardly penetrated the country and US influence

was “confined to politico-military and cultural spheres” (p. 133). Still, Marxism provided a powerful and unifying ideology.

Chapter 5, “Prelude to Revolution,” focuses on Ethiopia’s 1968—a misnomer, as the Ethiopian 1968 was, in fact, 1969. Secondary school students, frustrated about school fees, nontransparent scholarship awards, and a final examination failure rate of 90 percent, joined the protests with strikes, boycotts, and demonstrations. Over seventy thousand students, according to police reports, were protesting in the capital and in other cities, an astonishing number for a country in which secondary education was still the privilege of very few. The government chose to respond heavily-handedly with repression and jail sentences. Yet the “real showdown” between students and the government started with the November issue of the student magazine *Struggle* (p. 179). Its authors not only called for an armed struggle but—more importantly—opened the Pandora’s box of the “question of nationalities,” which is discussed separately in chapter 6. In December, the regime assassinated student leader Tilahun Gizaw and gave the movement its martyr. The crackdown on the ensuing protests produced an exodus of radicals abroad. Ethiopian students in several Western capitals, but also in Moscow, demonstrated or even occupied the embassies. In the coming years, the anniversary of Tilahun’s death would prove to be a sure occasion for further protests. As the majority of radicals had gone underground or abroad, high school students would become the most vocal group in the early 1970s, spearheading the opposition to the regime. As they carried powerful slogans, like “Land to the tiller,” to wider parts of the population, they also clashed with the police, in several instances with fatal consequences for the students. Popular grievances and demands for land reform, elections, and a constitution reached new heights after the 1973 Wollo famine. In 1974, protests of urban-based groups—including the military, teachers, students, and taxi drivers—signified a power vacuum that ultimate-

ly culminated in the revolution and the rise of the military regime. Bahru proceeds with two chapters that have a more topical and analytical focus.

Chapter 6 acknowledges that the student movement was driven by a “rejection of oppression in all its forms” and discusses how that applied to ethnicity (the national question) and gender (the woman question) (p. 187). As elsewhere on the globe in these years, female students waged a “battle of the sexes” against male dominance of the movement, fighting opinions like the one that “women should be sent to the kitchen rather than abroad” to study (p. 222). While there was considerable success in making the woman question part and parcel of political discussions, women themselves remained largely excluded from central functions. Discussing the national question, Bahru walks through the history of state expansion in the late nineteenth century to the policy of cultural assimilation after 1941. He shows that a “deconstructionist approach”—i.e., conceiving of the country as made up of ethnic differences rather than a common culture—appeared only in 1962 (p. 195). Until 1969, student writings in Ethiopia and abroad tried “to contain the perils of ethnicity” by putting class as the central category before “tribe,” “nation,” or “nationality” (p. 197). After 1969, the pan-Ethiopian position that the struggle should stick to the framework of the nation-state lost ground. The opinion that a dismantling of state unity was permissible—as long as the ethnic-based movement was not “feudal” or “reactionary” but “progressive” in character—became dominant. Bahru traces how these debates went back and forth between Ethiopia and congresses of Ethiopian students in Western countries and highlights how disagreement over the right of secession led to splits in the student movement.

Chapter 7 is a minute reconstruction of ensuing “fusion and fission” in the student movement, featuring a dizzying array of acronyms that accompanied dynamics of student activism and mil-

itancy. The national liberation movements further radicalized the movement, and some students joined the armed struggle. The intra-left rivalries were important because the student movement filled the vacuum produced by the authoritarian ban of political parties, yet factions were divided over questions of strategy, especially after the revolution. While the Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Party (EPRP) militarily confronted the Dergue regime, the All-Ethiopian Socialist Movement (Ma'ison) gained influence by offering its "critical support." Confronting each other, the factions ended up in a "duel that killed them both" (p. 288). In this formulation, Bahru perhaps overstates the role of these intra-left rivalries, as the killings and violence were, first and foremost, the result of the repression of the military government, especially with the Red Terror in 1976-78.

The conclusion inserts the Ethiopian case into a broader historical and global context. Bahru sums up that Ethiopian students were "driven by what has driven youth everywhere and throughout the ages—the quest for social justice and equitable development" (p. 279). However, in contrast to Western experiences, historical dynamics were significantly shaped by "an authoritarian system that had no room for organized political opposition, pushing the students to arrogate to themselves the role of that opposition," up to the point that student unions "effectively became political parties" (p. 266). The movement's most important legacies are found, according to Bahru, in the ethno-nationalist outlook of the contemporary state and a political culture that knows no compromise. Events that have taken place after the publication of the book seem to confirm his view. Widespread protests of Amhara and Oromo youth against a Tigrayan-dominated government and its land policies were quelled by the state's heavy-handed repression; following a state of emergency declared in October 2016, tens of thousands of citizens have been arrested.

Overall, Bahru has produced a nuanced account of the student movement that is neither "celebration [n]or castigation" (p. 9). The work is based on student publications from both within and outside the country, official documents including university files and police reports, and government newspapers. Bahru's masterful command of Ethiopia's modern history shines through on every page, making the book suitable for non-specialists as well, while specialists will appreciate his painstaking love of detail. That the author himself took part in the movement—initially, as a participant observer and later as a committed activist, as he notes—is hardly noticeable in the book's dry, matter-of-fact tone, and, with few exceptions, balanced judgments. As Bahru draws attention to the "semi-autobiographical" character of the book in the introduction, one might expect insights into emotions and thoughts of the time that are not visible in the written sources the work so heavily relies on (p. 10). Yet this is hardly the case (a notable exception to this would be the brief discussion of the unifying and mobilizing role played by revolutionary songs). Also, given that Bahru has edited a volume of reminiscences of former activists (*Documenting the Ethiopian Student Movement: An Exercise in Oral History* [2010]), it is surprising that his use of oral narratives—or the memories put in writing, several of which have been published in the last two decades—is fairly limited. One example is the oral account of the female activist Abebech Bekele. She established contact with the Black Panthers, participated in Ethiopian study groups in France and the Soviet Union, and eventually established herself as the leader of a global research and publication network that investigated the oppression of women and discussed their role in revolution. Bahru's major interest in dealing with personal accounts such as Abebech's seems to be distilling information about chronology and past events. Confining his analytic gaze to "hard facts," he misses the opportunity to learn more about the subjectivity of this generation that came of age in

these years of radicalization, revolution, and Red Terror, a terror that thousands of educated youth were not to survive. There is much more to say about identities, personal motifs, and biographies of militants (or more moderate participants like Bahru himself). The structuralist argument that the “country’s political culture ... made the movement inevitable” and “conditioned their behaviour” cannot fully explain for what reasons the movement split into factions (p. 279). None of these aspects, however, diminishes the outstanding contribution of *The Quest for Socialist Utopia*.

Due to its wide range and unrivaled research, *The Quest for Socialist Utopia* will undoubtedly take its place as the standard work on the Ethiopian student movement. Its empirical substance can pave the way for new interpretations. Beyond that, it also expands our understanding of the subject in some respects. Unlike earlier studies, *The Quest for Socialist Utopia* firmly places the student movement in the global tides and transnational networks of activism from Algiers to Stockholm to West Berlin and to the United States. Bahru connects these threads and shows how the internal and external dynamics of the movement shaped and reinforced each other. This, as well as the observations on the movement’s legacy in contemporary Ethiopia, provides insights that go beyond Balsvik’s work.

The year 1968 was a movement that, as Bahru shows, was a global outcry for liberation and social justice, but also a national affair with both a genesis and outcomes highly dependent on particular structural contradictions. The book provides a highly necessary corrective to Western bias in the literature on 1968 and is relevant far beyond Ethiopian historiography. Together with other recent works that have shown Third World students’ catalyzing function in the west European student movement or analyzed their dissenting role in eastern Europe, it puts their agency center stage and takes their impact seriously.[1]

Note

[1]. Maxim Matusevich, “Probing the Limits of Internationalism: African Students Confront Soviet Ritual,” *Anthropology of East Europe Review* 27 (2009): 19–39; Niels Seibert, *Vergessene Proteste: Internationalismus und Antirassismus 1964-1983* (Münster: Unrast, 2008); and Quinn Slobodian, *Foreign Front: Third World Politics in Sixties West Germany* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2012).

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