

THE BATTLE OF ADWA

TIGRAYAN ARMY USES ENVELOPMENT, FRONTAL ATTACK TO ANNIHILATE ITALIAN FORCES

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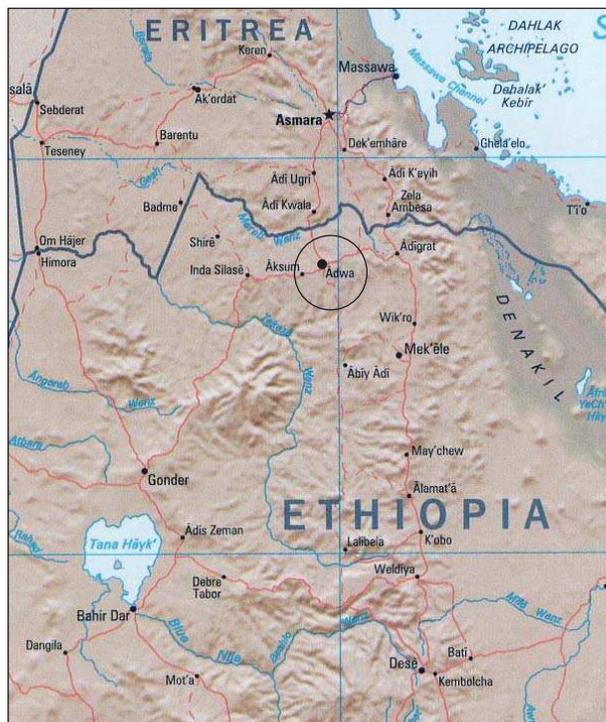
On 1 March 1896, in the vicinity of the Ethiopian town of Adwa, a local army led by Emperor Emmeye Menelik, also known as Menelik II, cut a colonialist Italian army to pieces.

Historians consider the Battle of Adwa, culmination point of the Italo-Ethiopian War (1895-1896), to be one of the most important events in the world. In fact, it was the first victory of an African nation against a European counterpart since Hannibal's successful battles against Rome during the Second Punic War 2,200 years ago. In the introduction to their book *The Battle of Adwa, Reflections on Ethiopia's History against European Colonialism*, editors Paulos Milkias and Getachew Metaferia wrote, "Adwa holds a significant place in Africa's history ... it challenges the

demeaning Western conception of African cultures; it demonstrates that being targeted for colonization is not a prelude to fatality and that colonialism can be defeated..."

Beyond those historical, sociological, and geostrategic considerations lies a deep tactical lesson. Conducting a spoiling attack, the Tigrayan army made successful use of two forms of maneuver — envelopment and frontal attack — to annihilate an Italian brigade led by MG Matteo Albertone.

A look into the genesis of the Italo-Ethiopian War allows the assertion that the roots of the Battle of Adwa lie, at least, down to the triangular relations between Emperor Yohannes IV of Ethiopia, who was politically based in Tigray; King Menelik II of Showa, who was known for being ambitious and ingenious; and



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the Italian government, which wanted to colonize Ethiopia. During the second half of the 19th century, the Horn of Africa experienced a period of turmoil punctuated by significant events including internal and external battles, alliances and betrayals, friendship treaties and commerce treaties. Before and during this period, European nations like Germany, France, Great Britain, and newcomer Italy were eagerly willing to carve their empires throughout the African continent. This feverish imperialist obstinacy also known as the "Scramble for Africa" reached its climax at the Berlin Conference (1884-1885). It was obvious that the Horn of Africa and the adjacent Suez Canal — opened in 1869 — constituted a great strategic interest and it logically triggered the European imperialist nations' desires. Guided

only by the principle of *divide et impera* (divide and conquer), they established contacts and relationships with many local chiefs and kings through a multitude of treaties. The main consequences of these Machiavellian politics, chiefly based on the provision of armament to their local — temporary or long-term — allies were the modernized weapons proliferation and the constant destabilization of the Ethiopian empire.

One of the major treaties that set the guns firing of the Italo-Ethiopian War was the Treaty of Wuchale (or "Ucciali" as the Italians spelled it); its primary goal was to secure Italian possessions in eastern Africa (Erytrea). Concluded on 2 May 1889 by the intermediary of Count Pietro Antonielli, in his dual role of official envoy of the Italian government and close friend of Emperor Menelik II,

the "Italy-Ethiopia Treaty of Friendship and Commerce of Wuchale" had been established in a dual language — Amharic and Italian — version. Owing to the light linguistic discrepancy induced by or due to simple diplomatic chicaneries, this agreement failed to be read "like a typical non-capitulationist international document willingly entered into by two sovereign polities mutually seeking to normalize and enhance positive relations for present and future generations and regimes," according to Ayele Negussay's chapter "Adwa 1896: Who Was Civilized and Who Was Savage" that appeared in *The Battle of Adwa*. The main dispute rose over the interpretation of one of the treaty's articles, which stated that the Ethiopian king would involve the Italian government in matters dealing with other powers or governments. As

the months went by, the Italians read the article as Ethiopia being their “protectorate” and notified the other European powers. Menelik II refused point blank to admit to any kind of subjugation. He argued that his agreement to use the Italian government as a middleman was supposed to be if he so desired and not that he would be obligated to do so. This contradiction was the proximate cause of the Italo-Ethiopian War. During 1895 and 1896, the conflict moved from skirmishes to bloody battles (Amba Alagie, Mekelle), interspersed by many attempts to settle the dispute, and finally reached its culmination point at the Battle of Adwa.

On 29 February 1896, after failing to lure the Ethiopian forces to attack his entrenched positions around Mount Enticho in Tigray (the Ethiopians’ most probable course of action), LTG Oreste Baratieri gave orders to his 20,000 Italian and native troops to conduct what was supposed to be a surprise attack on the Ethiopian troops massed in the vicinity of Adwa. For this mission, Baratieri’s troops were arrayed in four brigades, each commanded by an Italian army general. With a fighting power of 17,700 effective fighters, the Italians had 14,519 rifles, 56 artillery guns, and no cavalry, according to George Fitz-Harding Berkeley in his book *The Campaign of Adowa and the Rise of Menelik*. In the center of their disposition was MG Guiseppe Arimondi occupying Mount Belah; and at his rear, at Rehbi-Ariani, was the reserve brigade, commanded by MG Guiseppe Ellena. MG Vittorio Dabormida, with his brigade, was occupying the spur of Mount Belah at the right of the mount itself. MG Matteo Albertone had to move and occupy the left flank of the Italian front by arraying his brigade on the mountains of Kidane Meret. This last brigade, equipped with three and a half batteries of mountain artillery (14 guns), was made of four native battalions plus the irregulars of Okule-Kusai and Gheralta, for a total of 4,092 soldiers, wrote Berkeley.

In an impressive display of national unity, a 100,000-strong army composed of contingents from almost every region and ethnic group of the Ethiopian empire was eagerly awaiting the Italians. Faced with the Italian plan, the Ethiopian imperial army had a coherent organization — notwithstanding the sarcastic opinion of British historian Berkeley who described it as a “feudal army, with hardly an attempt at modern organization ... the arms in the hands of the Ethiopians were modern, but the organization was, in many respects, very similar to that of the English at the Battle of Agincourt ...”

In their defensive positions, “the Ethiopian formation near Adwa resembled a cross to enable it to respond in the same manner no matter from which side the enemy’s attack came,” according to Milkias in his chapter, “The Battle of Adwa: The Historic Victory of Ethiopia over European Colonialism.” The fighters, arrayed in a defensive position, were equipped with 40 cannons, 70,000 rifles (ranging from Remingtons to Martini-Henrys, Fusil Gras, Berdans, Mausers, Lebel, and Wetterlis), as well as spears and swords. Emperor Emmeye Menelik and his 35,000-strong imperial bodyguard and Empress Taytu with her 5,000 combatants were encamped at the monastery of Fremona in the center of the imperial army disposition. The Ethiopian main body was arrayed

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from the south of the Sheloda Massive (also known as Mount Selado) to the Mariam Massive.

When combined, the Tigrayan army numbered around 15,000 fighters, led by the charismatic and great nationalist Ras Alula. This is the enemy Albertone’s brigade was recklessly and blindly moving up to in his attempt to reach his assigned position,

according to Berkeley.

By dawn on 1 March, at the end of the three columns’ approach toward the Ethiopian defensive positions, the *Negus Negasti* army conducted a spoiling attack which caught the Italians off guard. The Tigrayan army engaged the forward element of Albertone’s brigade from the heights of Mariam Massive at 6 a.m. Reacting to this contact, the Italians’ artillery fired on the Ethiopian formations, which were massed within the cannons’ range. This caused many casualties. The Ethiopian troops scattered and attacked in smaller formations. Using their traditional half-moon formation, Ras Alula’s and Ras Mengesha’s infantries pressed the leading Italian forces while the two wings, supported by Ras Mikael’s Wallo cavalry, achieved an envelopment of the opponents. The first battalion of Albertone’s brigade was quickly surrounded and destroyed. Some Ethiopians, led by Dejazmach Balcha Abba Nefso, the hero of Adwa, deployed their quick-firing guns on the lower side of Mount Abba Gerima, setting an effective support by fire. This allowed Ras Alula and Ras Mengesha’s Tigrayan fighters to finish crushing the remainder of Albertone’s brigade by swift movements associated with a deluge of rifles firing, spears hurling, swords swirling, and hand-to-hand combat. They captured 14 artillery guns and destroyed the three other battalions. The annihilation of Albertone’s brigade was complete.

In an attempt to assist his endangered left wing, Baratieri ordered his right wing to move up and link up with Albertone. After maneuvering for hours and despite one of Arimondi’s battalions offering him an effective support by fire, Dabormida was unable to meet his commander’s expectations due to the mass of Ethiopian forces isolating Albertone’s brigade. As soon as the Italian’s right flank was destroyed, the Ethiopian troops oriented their efforts toward the main body. They then decisively engaged Arimondi’s brigade and successfully seized objectives in the rear of Ellena’s reserve brigade. In fact, the Ethiopian army’s intent was to seal off the whole Italian army and prevent it from withdrawing to Enticho, Adigrat, and Akele Guzay. One by one, all of the Italian brigades were destroyed; Dabormida’s brigade was the last to face the “*furia ethiopian*.” Around 6 p.m., only the remnants of the four Italian brigades succeeded in withdrawing from the battlefield in a manner far from being orderly. Just before the Ethiopian forces declared victory, Baratieri fled the battlefield. The commander of the Italian army was later brought to trial by the Italian government “... for having abandoned his command from 12:30 p.m. on 1 March until 9 a.m. on 3 March (i.e. during the retreat) and having thus omitted to give orders, or take measures, such as the circumstances required,” according to Berkeley.



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Italian officers pose for a photograph. Eight of those pictured were killed during the Battle of Adwa.

There are many historical accounts of the battle's toll. According to two of the most reliable, around 6,500 Italians soldiers were killed or wounded and 2,500 taken prisoner for the first, and 7,560 were killed or wounded and 1,865 taken prisoner for the second. Meanwhile, the Ethiopians suffered almost 7,000 killed and 10,000 wounded. As a result of this bloody battle, Italy recognized the independence of Ethiopia and revised her East Africa extension plans.

A close look at the role played by the Tigrayan component of the Ethiopian army gives a clear insight to how the Ethiopians used the two forms of maneuver — envelopment and frontal attack — to destroy Albertone's brigade. As a reminder, the Ethiopian offensive was, overall, a typical spoiling attack. According to the FM 3-0, *Operations*, offensive operations are conducted to defeat and destroy enemy forces and seize terrain. They can be launched from defensive positions. There are four types of offensive operations: movement to contact, attack, pursuit, and exploitation. An attack — hasty or deliberate — can have a special purpose; the six doctrinal special purpose attacks are: ambush, spoiling attack, counterattack, raid, feint, and demonstration. FM 1-02, *Operational Terms and Graphics*, defines "spoiling attack" as "a tactical maneuver employed to seriously impair a hostile attack while

the enemy is in the process of forming or assembling for an attack." This clearly validates the spoiling nature of the attack launched by the Ethiopian army on a poorly deployed enemy in the early hours of 1 March 1896, with the Tigrayan army being the first to engage the Italians.

Many accounts established the decided doctrinal inclination of the Ethiopian imperial army towards a specific form of pincer movement; they called it *afena* and achieved it from a half-moon formation during their offensive operations.

According to Milkias, "When they encounter a battalion or large body of an invading Army, they employed *afena*, the poor man's blitzkrieg. In *afena*, the Ethiopian fighters surrounded the enemy and advanced towards the center, using whatever cover was available for them. Encirclement was conducted with Fitawrari's troops dividing into two and making a detour around the flanks of the invaders. The army would then go to direct attack from every side ..."

There are five doctrinal forms of maneuver: turning movement, penetration, infiltration, envelopment and frontal attack. Only the two latter apply to this case study. The term "envelopment" is defined as "a form of maneuver in which an attacking force seeks to avoid the principal enemy defenses by seizing objectives to the enemy rear to destroy the enemy in its current positions. At the tactical level,

envelopments focus on seizing terrain, destroying specific enemy forces, and interdicting enemy withdrawal routes" (FM 1-02). By using *afena*, the Tigrayan Army and the supportive Ethiopian forces succeeded in destroying each and every battalion of Albertone's brigade. The lateral movement of Ras Alula's and Ras Mengesha's fighters associated with a withdrawal denial establishes a strong and obvious link between the Ethiopian *afena* and a classic and doctrinal envelopment. The slight discrepancy is that the *afena* commanded to use a divertive force in the central portion of the half-moon formation instead of "avoiding the principal enemy defenses."

This diversion was critical to allowing the lateral elements, mainly the cavalry, to slide, encircle the enemy, and crush his flanks; and in fact, this associated maneuver, in light of modern war theory, is a frontal attack. As stated in the FM 3-90, *Tactics*, "a frontal attack is a form of maneuver in which an attacking force seeks to destroy a weaker enemy force or fix a larger enemy force in place over a broad front." Given the ratio of forces — more than 15,000 Ethiopians versus 4,092 Italians — the Tigrayan army used its overwhelming combat power to strike directly his weaker enemy in his positions, prior to the envelopment achievement.

All in all, the Ethiopian's form of maneuver called *afena*, a variant of pincer movement, was effective and decisive in the overwhelming and glorious victory achieved by Emperor Menelik II and his Ethiopian troops at the Battle of Adwa. By applying this subtle combination of two forms of maneuver — envelopment and frontal attack — the Tigrayan army led by Ras Alula annihilated Albertone's brigade and called for further destruction of the Italian army. This resounding success propelled the Ethiopian empire into the league of independent nations and later served as a compass for many anti-colonialists and pan-Africanists in the quest of their identity.

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