**Book Review**

*The Battle of Adwa: Reflections on Ethiopia’s Historic Victory Against European Colonialism*

Edited by Paulos Milkias and Getachew Metaferia  
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Reviewer: Dr. Leslie Wilson  
Professor of History  
Montclair State University

The Battle of Adwa in 1896 is considered one of the most important events in modern African history. Its significance has been studied by numerous scholars most often in response to Italy’s failed attempt to secure Ethiopia as a protectorate. *The Battle of Adwa* counters the prevailing interpretation revealing that this limited framework minimizes the true significance of the battle and its role in world history. Editors Paulos Milkias and Getachew Metaferia argue, that a phenomenon such as Adwa is a complex nexus of various historical processes with wide-ranging but as yet not fully explored meanings. Their work, featuring an introduction, prologue, and nine solid chapters, dissects Adwa as a social, political, national, religious, and military event broadening its scope to begin a new evaluation of this African victory.

The prologue indicates how this story affects the past, present and future. It places Ethiopia’s origins in ancient history and the Bible. The editors link each of the historical ancient Ethiopia, including the Axumite Empire of Ezana, the Christian state of Zagwe, and the Solomonian Empire that traces its lineage from King Solomon and the Queen of Sheba, to the emerging modern nation. This approach solidifies both context and contacts within world history. By focusing on the vastness of the territory that will become modern Ethiopia, they establish that these were people of different ethnic and religious affiliations that were still in the process of unification at the time of the victory at Adwa.

Emperors Tewodros II and Yohannes IV are central to the rise of Menelik II who will become the nation’s ruler shortly before the war with Italy. Both Tewodros, who ruled from 1855 to 1872, and Yohannes, who ruled from Tewodros’ death to 1889, were frequently engaged in military conflicts with regional rivals and European forces. Each died in battles that were influenced by European powers. Menelik, Yohannes successor, was a beneficiary of those conflicts. His ambitions to become emperor encouraged him to challenge the authority of both men by withholding allegiances and entertaining overtures from British and Italian envoys to gain their support.

The Italians, who like the British and French, sought a colonial empire in the Horn of Africa approached King Menelik during Yohannes’ reign. Before the emperor’s death, Count Pietro Antonelli and Menelik agreed in principle to a document that would become the Treaty of Wuchalé. The document had numerous points, with the most important being the debated section authorizing Italy to be Ethiopia’s agent in the
European world. Essentially, this made Ethiopia an Italian protectorate. Emperor Menelik signed both an Italian and Amharic version of this treaty in 1889.

Theodore Vestal builds the case for the Battle of Adwa by recalling Italy’s involvement in Ethiopia in Chapter One: “Reflections On The Battle Of Adwa And Its Significance For Today.” He suggests that the Italians underestimated Ethiopia’s rulers and European support for the treaty. In fact, Vestal sees Italy’s missteps as the cause for the war. While Italy’s colonization of Eritrea was minimally accepted, the expansion of the Italian role within local Ethiopian affairs was not. Military actions “fuelled the anger of the Ethiopian masses and leaders alike, who viewed the invasion as a threat to their nation’s sovereignty.” (26) The forthcoming war can be seen as the foundation for true nationalism and the advent of the modern Ethiopian state. While the Berlin Conference establishes policies for non-military action between European parties in their quest for colonial empires, Vestal shows that it did not constitute uniform support for each nation’s colonial desires. In 1892, he hints that Britain supported Italy in Ethiopia more to keep France out of the region rather than to support Italian imperialism and national development. Additionally, the flaws in the Treaty of Wuchale were known before the war and it also raised the concerns of European competitors. The Russians, for example, denounced the treaty in 1894, and shortly afterwards Tsar Nicholas sent the Ethiopians rifles and ammunition.

Yet the key point in the chapter was, not only did the military victory humiliate the Italians, it countered Italian comments that the Ethiopians were barbarians. Ethiopia went to great lengths to be fair in a difficult situation. Before the war, Menelik repaid the loans provided by the treaty, and afterwards allowed the Italians safe passage out of Ethiopia. Further, Vestal argues that Menelik wanted peace and did not pursue the Italians and allowed them to remain in Eritrea.

While installing national pride and unity, Menelik’s victory did have a price. His failure to remove the Italians from Eritrea became one of the nation’s greatest problems. It set the tone for the hostile relationships between the two regions which most see as part of Ethiopia.

Similar themes are echoed in the next chapter, “The Battle of Adwa: The Historic Victory of Ethiopia over European Colonialism.” In examining Italy’s interests in African colonization, Paulos Milkias notes the similarities in the development of the two countries during the nineteenth century. However, he makes the obvious point that Italy used colonization as part of its unification process.

This chapter does an excellent job of analyzing the famed Treaty of Wuchalé and how it led to the Italian-Ethiopian war. Milkias places the conflict within cultural values as well as diplomatic ones. The deception in paragraph XIX of the treaty, which has a different meaning in Italian than it does in Amharic, illustrates the immorality of the Italians. Not only did Count Antonelli betray Menelik’s trust, the entire affair reveals the alleged superiority that the Italians believed they had over their African allies. This racial superiority is compounded as Menelik discovers that many of the European nations, including England and Germany, honored the treaty despite being made aware of its improper wording.

Menelik had no choice but to dissolve the treaty in February 1893. In the process he and Empress Taytu forced Count Antonelli to reveal his attempt to deceive the Ethiopian ruler. While the Ethiopians pressed for peace, they also prepared for war.
The Italians offered another treaty on January 18, 1896. However, this was a more stringent one with the cession of Tigray and more formal protectorate status. Again, the Ethiopians refused. When the war began, it was solely because the Italians had to save national pride and its place in the European community.

Milkias offers pages of details about the battle and the resolve of the Ethiopians to save their homeland. Some 20,000 of the Ethiopian 90,000 troops fought without guns, yet they defeated a superior European army causing a loss of nearly 70% of its troops. Ethiopian women, led by Empress Taytu also played a role in the battle. The women provided water and medical care to the troops, and Taytu led her own forces in the course of the fighting.

In conclusion, Milkias posits that the battle of Adwa is important because it was “a victory for the underdog, a victory for right over wrong.” (37) He wrote: “they decisively defeated an invading European army and forced the architects of the Berlin Conference (who had carved up Africa among themselves, like a birthday cake) to formally acknowledge the sovereignty and territorial integrity of Ethiopia.” (88)

Furthermore, it was both the “birth and culmination of the struggle for freedom of the peoples of the Third World…sending out the message for self respecting human beings, it is infinitely better to die on one’s feet than to live on one’s knees.” (88)

Chapter Three, Dejazmach Zewde Gabre-Selassie’s “Continuity and Discontinuity in Menelik’s Foreign Policy,” …[discusses] a new foundation by critically examining Menelik’s entanglements with local rulers including Emperor Yohannes and Europeans, especially the Italians….Menelik emerges skillful and lucky in his endeavors…. Following his coronation, Menelik continues the pattern of secret diplomacy, but does so with both local rulers and European powers. The chapter gives additional credit to Empress Taytu who plays a role in these diplomatic missions. The treaty changes the course of these actions, forcing Menelik to appeal more to Ethiopia’s local rulers. Menelik’s ultimate victories over the Italians rests on his ability to get these rulers who were interested in gaining their own power to turn against foreign interests and stand solely with him. This coalition wins two key victories leading to Adwa. At Adwa, the victory not only creates the ideology for Ethiopian independence, but for Ethiopian nationalism. The great victory also ignites the “scar of Adwa” that will haunt Italy for four decades.

Harold Marcus’ essay returns to the questions of racial discourse that are an integral part of the volume. It is a short but influential piece….His focus explores a sampling of European writings. The sources indicate differences in religion, skin color, and intelligence. While many found the Ethiopians lacking in cultural values, it is important to note that after the battle, impressions of the Ethiopians had a marked improvement. Yet, Marcus concludes, “…even in its hour of greatest triumph, Ethiopia was not afforded full equality.” (237)

Chapter Four, “Adwa 1896: Who Was Civilized And Who Was Savage?” by Negussay Ayele continues to explore the concept of European racism found in the first two chapters. Ayele examines racism used to justify colonization, the war with Ethiopia, and continued European resentment of Africans after Adwa. It places Adwa at the end of centuries of European and African struggles as it serves as a turning point in these confrontations. While viewing many of the issues considered in the first two chapters, it adds useful and needed details to enhance the immorality of the Italians and the Treaty of
Wuchalé Ayele provides the treaty’s twenty provisions and carefully scrutinizes the flaws and controversial points in the document. He also covers the magnanimity of Menelik following the war to show that the Ethiopians were the civilized party in this defining chapter of African history.

Getachew Metaferia essay comprises chapter five. “Ethiopia: A Bulwark Against European Colonialism and its Role in the Pan-African Movement,” places Ethiopia in the center of Pan-Africanism that emerges in the late nineteenth century. He convincingly argues the connections between Ethiopia and numerous political movements in modern history. His work examines the historical images of Ethiopia, the growth of Pan-African movements throughout the Diaspora, Ethiopia’s ties to socio-political and religious movements, and current prospects of Ethiopianism. In many respects, this is the best chapter of the work as it offers rich examples that are hard to refute. Metaferia illustrates how Menelik became a role model for those in the Diaspora. He sparked the first legitimate invitation for Disaporans to come back home (to Africa). This connection enamored blacks to support Ethiopia when Mussolini attacked it during World War II, and led to the enthusiastic support of Haile Selassie during and after the war. Selassie, too, invited those in the Diaspora to return to Africa and was a spiritual champion for African independence. Additionally, Selassie convened the Pan African conference in 1958 and founded the Organization of African Unity in 1963.

In Chapter Six, Richard Pankhurst uses the Times of London to gauge European reaction to the Battle of Adwa. “British Reactions to The Battle of Adwa; as Illustrated by the Times of London for 1896,” is another examination of the persistence of European racism and concepts of superiority to justify colonial designs. Pankhurst introduces the material by focusing on a 1895 Times article suggesting that the French were secretly willing to support the Ethiopians over the Italians. Though the alleged pact was denounced by the Paris Temps, the Times acknowledged that while the French were not happy with Italy as a rival, they would not side with an African nation over an European one.

However, once the war began, the attitude towards the Italians began to waver. The trickery of the treaty was noted, but Italy was still favored “qualified only by a criticism of Italian tactical mistakes.” (223) Menelik’s honorable actions earned the Ethiopians a distinction between itself and other African nations. (222) In such a light, the paper admitted “Ethiopia was a civilized power both in her methods of warfare and in her diplomacy.” (223)

Pankhurst stresses that the British periodical was concerned with the actions of other European nations to protect its nation’s investment in Africa. It was fearful of French involvement throughout the continent and Russian support for the Ethiopians. Yet, when the Italians published a Green Book that blamed its failure on the lack of support from the British, the Times had to respond. Pankhurst concludes that the British paper insisted that it was loyal to the Italians as the two countries were related by common interests “too deep and solid to be affected by petty questions in remote parts of Africa.” (227) Such a statement, he concluded revealed the true motives of the paper and British government.

“Contemporary Ethiopia in the Context of the Battle of Adwa, 1896,”is the title of Chapter Eight. In this section, Mesfin Araya posits “Adwa represents a bold critique on the current ethnic politics in Ethiopia” and “Adwa has its own contradictions which
still plague Ethiopia; contradictions whose resolution is also contained in Adwa itself.”

At the heart of this chapter is the spirit of Adwa to sustain the Ethiopians during the Italian occupation of World War II, the role of the ruling class to unify during Adwa leading to both national and class unity, and Menelik’s failure to pursue the Italians into Eritrea and eventually attempt to unify this section with the rest of the nation. Araya argues that the Ethiopians did not compliment the “military Adwa” with the “intellectual Adwa.” As a result, the nation evolved into a socialist government that continues to maintain a stranglehold on its true development. According to Araya, the nation failed to apprehend its realities in ways that identify the real aspirations and “possibilities embedded in their life circumstances.”

This concept blends nicely into Chapter Nine: “Ethiopian History and Critical Theory: The Case of Adwa.” Maimire Mennasemay’s ideological essay serves as a fitting conclusion. He begins by challenging the idea that the “uniqueness of Adwa lies not in the defeat of a European power by an African country, but in the fact that Adwa is, to use Alain Badiou’s term, “a Truth-Event,” a singular event that exceeds the circumstances out of which it emerges such that what appears impossible becomes real, giving rise to radically new political problems.”

This approach considers collective memory and critical theory to fully understand Adwa. He urges readers to look beyond Eurocentric analysis of events, especially Marxist models. In many ways he is contesting the current state of Ethiopia as well as the European context for Adwa. Instead he suggests that Adwa is an unfinished battle tied to the quest for national unity and freedom and equality.

Milkias and Metaferia have compiled an impressive volume. It is filled with important information and makes for a great read. Many of the chapters read as if they were written solely for this collection and at points it flows easily from one selection to the next. …

The strength of the collection rests in its ability to visualize the multiple meanings of Adwa. As highlighted in chapter nine, Adwa is an internal and external event. Adwa elevated Menelik and Taytu into national heroes and world icons. The treaty illustrated how Europeans underestimated the intelligence and global awareness of African peoples. It changed the course of Ethiopian history because it stemmed the flow of European colonization, and gave birth to the world’s only true independent black nation.

For generations of Africans born after 1896, on the continent and throughout the Diaspora, this battle represents the spiritual victory of black people over the forces of evil. It gave hope to the generation of those fighting against colonialism and for freedom in Africa, in the Caribbean, and the rest of the Third World. Adwa set the stage for the New Negro, Negritude, Pan African, and Black Power movements. And in many respects, the spirit of Adwa contributed to the success of the American Civil Rights Movement.