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War and state formation  
in  
Ethiopia and Eritrea

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## Introduction

An extensive and generally convincing literature suggests that the experience of warfare has played a central and indeed essential role in the processes of state and nation formation in Europe.<sup>1</sup> European societies, faced by the ceaseless struggle for survival in a Darwinian world in which the weakest went to the wall, have been forced to develop effective states through which they could defend themselves against rivals, who had to create similar states in their turn. In the process, war has consolidated the control of central governments over quasi-independent vassals, and has imposed the need for an effective process of *encadrement*, through which the resources of the society could be mobilised and organised for purposes of protection. In particular, this has led to the creation of national bureaucracies capable of extracting resources in the form notably of men (through conscription) and money (through taxation), and using these resources to deploy the citizen armies that shaped the modern European nation-state between 1792 and 1945. Most important of all, this process shaped the 'imagined community' that was essential to provide the coercive apparatus formed by the state with the moral basis that was needed to ensure the willing participation and often self-sacrifice of its citizens. This imagined community in turn eventually also formed the foundation for popular participation and democratic accountability, and for the transformation of the state into a mechanism for promoting social welfare.

From this perspective, the evident inadequacies of state formation in Africa may be ascribed to the fact that modern African states have missed out on the all-important experience of war. They were for the most part formed by external conquest, by imperial powers whose military superiority over African peoples was so great that these could at best derive from the experience only a memory of futile resistance. The territories thus conquered were formed into states that had no internal rationale, and whose frontiers were established by agreement between the imperial powers that had conquered them. The 'nationalist' movements that were formed to demand independence from colonialism were far too feeble and shortlived to provide any real equivalent to the experience of warfare, despite the attempts of nationalist leaders in a number of former colonies (Ghana, Guinée and Mali, to take three examples) to promote state and national formation in opposition to the colonial 'other'. Even after independence, the continued survival of African states was assured, not by their own efforts at state and nation building, but by the norms of 'juridical sovereignty' that were provided and policies by the international system.<sup>2</sup> These norms enabled African states to develop generally supportive relationships between one another, which obviated the need for the more intensive processes of resource mobilisation required in Europe; and on those occasions when these states were threatened, whether by internal division or by external attack, they could call on the diplomatic and military protection, and if need be direct military intervention, by the former colonisers or superpowers whom they had enlisted as their patrons. They thereby averted the need to build up their domestic state capacities, which indeed could only be weakened by external dependence. However difficult it may be, on

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<sup>1</sup> The classic text is, of course, Charles Tilly, *Coercion, Capital and European States, AD 990-1990* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1990). See also Linda Colley, *Britons: forging the nation, 1707-1837* (Yale U.P., 1992); William McNeill, *The Pursuit of Power: technology, armed force, and society since A.D. 1000* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1983); Martin van Creveld, *The Transformation of War* (New York: Free Press, 1991).

<sup>2</sup> See Robert H. Jackson, *Quasi-states: sovereignty, international relations and the Third World* (Cambridge U.P., 1990).

moral grounds, to argue in favour of warfare, the conclusion would thus be that African states have had it too easy, and that their weaknesses, as *states*, is the result.<sup>3</sup>

In the aftermath of the end of the Cold War, and the progressive withdrawal of both the superpowers and the former colonial powers from their previous commitment to state preservation in Africa, this situation is certainly changing, and African states are increasingly being left to face the challenges of statehood alone. It is likely that the resulting upheavals, most strikingly illustrated by the wars in the Democratic Republic of Congo since 1996, will promote new processes of state consolidation or decay, which may either alter or confirm the continued demarcation of the continent along the lines created by colonial conquest. The outcomes of this process, however, remain extremely uncertain, and can only be guessed at with the aid of a great deal of speculation. There is, however, one region of Africa, the Horn, in which the relationship between war and state formation has been far more intensive, and of much longer duration, than elsewhere, and where this relationship can correspondingly be tested far more effectively than in other parts of the continent. Even within this region, of course, the results have so far proved very variable. In the Somali Republic, the Horn provides Africa's clearest example of state collapse, under the pressure of war first with Ethiopia, and subsequently between different factions within the state itself. The survival of the microstate of Djibouti is still to a great extent assured by the patronage of the former colonial power. But the two closely linked (and currently warring) states of Ethiopia and Eritrea do appear to provide the clearest examples of the relationship between war and state formation on the African continent, and it is with these that the remainder of this paper will be concerned. It will examine first the case of Ethiopia, as the largest and potentially hegemonic state in the region, which incorporated Eritrea between 1952 and 1991; and then Eritrea, as a remarkable example of a state formed by the war of secession against Ethiopia, which achieved military victory in 1991, followed by recognised sovereign statehood two years later. It will then conclude with some broader observations on war and statehood in Africa.

## **War and the Ethiopian State**

Ethiopia is the clearest available case that can be used to answer Africa's great counterfactual conundrum: what would have happened had colonialism not carved up Africa in the way that it did, and had the indigenous process of state formation that was already taking place prior to colonial conquest been permitted to proceed? Like any such case, Ethiopia inevitably has its own peculiarities, and no direct conclusions for other parts of the continent can be inferred from its experience. It was already, by the time of colonial partition, one of the oldest and largest sub-Saharan states, and was distinguished by Christianity and a written language from all of the others. The mere fact that it was able, on one crucial day in March 1896, to mobilise an army of over 100,000 men close to the borders of its territory, many of them armed with rifles, and thus to defeat an invading European army, shows immediately how different it was from most of the indigenous African forces that confronted colonialism. Yet in many respects, Ethiopian state formation was broadly analogous to equivalent processes

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<sup>3</sup> This argument has been made in Edward N. Luttwak, "Give War a Chance", *Foreign Affairs* Vol.78 No.4, 1999.

elsewhere on the continent.<sup>4</sup> The core of the state lay in a zone of relatively dense population (though in Ethiopia, more than elsewhere, this was internally divided by major geographical obstacles), from which state power extended into less densely populated zones, in which its reach was progressively attenuated. State frontiers were not fixed, because they were not regulated by the clash with other states; instead, the state petered out into areas that did not in any very meaningful sense form part of any state at all. The extent of the state's territory at any given time was determined largely by the level of control that its ruler was able to exercise over the core territories, by his own personal military capability and determination, and by the economic resources that could be extracted from peripheral peoples and areas. Much of this periphery was exploited more by means of periodical raids than by any settled administration. Warfare was central to the entire process: the history of Ethiopia is one in which the control of the ruler over potentially rebellious vassals, and of the state over its peripheral territories, were constantly tested by arms. There was no time at which the empire as a whole could have been said to be at peace.<sup>5</sup>

However, this experience of continuous warfare at most only partially replicated the state-consolidating processes that it had promoted in Europe. The self-identity of Ethiopia as 'a Christian island in a Moslem sea' did help to consolidate a sense of territorial nationalism, but only during the jihad of Ahmed Gragn (1527-1543) did this seriously threaten the state. Most warfare was in essence cyclical rather than developmental. Economically, it was devastating, as war in peasant societies has always been, and provided no basis for the creation of increasingly effective institutions funded by a developing productive base. And ideologically, from the mid-sixteenth to the mid-nineteenth centuries, it did not foster the growth of any 'national' sentiment, because it was almost entirely internal rather than external: there was no significant 'other', against which a national identity could be defined.

There is room for dispute over how far this process was affected by the colonial partition of Africa, and the transformation of Ethiopia into an internationally recognised territorial state which was incorporated, far more closely than before, into the diplomatic, military and economic structures of the global system. Some important changes can nonetheless be noted. Ethiopia acquired formally recognised international frontiers, across which lay colonial jurisdictions that at one level posed a threat to Ethiopian 'sovereignty' but also (and in day-to-day terms more significantly) imposed a reasonably effective and settled administration on previously unstable borderlands. The capacity of the Ethiopian state to gain preferential access to imported weapons, coupled with a largely internal process of state regeneration, enabled Ethiopian rulers to consolidate their control over the core zone, and conquer far greater tracts of peripheral territory than under any previous government – the one major exception being in the north, where Italy created the colony of Eritrea, which incorporated previously 'core' areas of Ethiopia. The process of territorial expansion, however, rested on inherently discriminatory social and religious formulae, and the forcible incorporation of large Islamic populations diluted any previous sense of nationhood. The bases for wealth creation likewise changed significantly, notably through the increased value of conquered lands in southern and western Ethiopia,

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<sup>4</sup> Jeffrey Herbst's recently published *States and Power in Africa: comparative lessons in authority and control* (Princeton U.P., 2000) provides a superb overview of the problems and processes of state formation in Africa.

<sup>5</sup> There is still no better account of how the Ethiopian empire worked in the era before European colonisation than James Bruce, *Travels to Discover the Source of the Nile in the Years 1768, 1769, 1770, 1771, 1772 & 1773* (2nd ed., 8 vols, Edinburgh: Constable, 1804).

which could be used to produce commodities for the world market, notably coffee. A centralised machinery of government was established, the critical functions of which were the extraction of surplus value, and the maintenance of a permanent coercive apparatus. And external military alliances became a critical factor, both in defending the state against occasional threats of invasion, but much more importantly in attempting to maintain control over a potentially (and often actively) rebellious periphery.

The central question for the relationship between warfare and Ethiopian state creation was then whether this at least partially transformed state would be consolidated or fragmented by the kinds of conflict that it had to confront. Could it, in short, 'use' warfare for purposes of nation and state creation, according to the European model? Though the answer to this question eventually turned out to be negative, it was not by any means obviously so. There *was* a process of state formation, and at least partially of national development, which offered at least a prospect of creating a viable nation state, and in which warfare played a critical role. A key element in this was that the new global system created a real threat to independence, and hence an 'other' against which nationhood could be asserted. The two Italian invasions, of 1895/96, and 1935/36, were contested (successfully in 1896, unsuccessfully in 1936) by a very largely united state, and provided a ready source of unifying national mythologies. Although the eventual restoration of independence from Italian occupation in 1941 was achieved with significant external assistance, there was enough of a 'national' element in it to help promote a national identity. The incorporation into Ethiopia of former Italian Eritrea in 1952 was made possible by the emergence of a significant body of opinion within Eritrea that favoured 'reunification' with the 'motherland'.<sup>6</sup> And the development of a national economy and administrative (including military) apparatus, based though this was on the central region of Shoa, and on the cultural and religious foundations of the Ethiopian empire, at least allowed for some participation by individuals (especially educated Christians) from across the country. With the independence of other African states from the late 1950s onwards, Ethiopia gained an at least initially largely supportive international environment, in which states had a high level of legitimacy, and 'nation-building' became a continental preoccupation. The foundation of the Organisation of African Unity at Addis Ababa in 1963 symbolised Ethiopia's incorporation into the new continental order; the one African state to contest the OAU's insistence on maintaining existing frontiers, the Somali Republic, helped to provide an 'other' against which Ethiopian nationalism could be defined.

So what went wrong? Even before the collapse of the imperial regime in 1974, there was two critical points at which the project of Ethiopian state formation was clearly failing. The most obvious was the failure of political integration in Eritrea, where the resistance that had started in the early 1960s had by ten years later turned into a major insurgency. The second, less immediately threatening but with still more damaging potential long-term consequences, was the failure of integration in much of southern and western Ethiopia, on which the country had become economically dependent, and which was subjected to a system of social, political and economic exploitation which would eventually become unsustainable. From the point of view of the radical intelligentsia who provided the intellectual basis for the 1974 revolution, both of these failures could be ascribed to the structure of the state itself. The project

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<sup>6</sup> This has inevitably been contested by the eventually victorious proponents of a rival Eritrean nationalism, but there is plenty of contemporary evidence for it. See Tekeste Negash, *Eritrea and Ethiopia: The Federal Experience* (Uppsala: Nordiska Afrikainstitutet, 1997).

that they espoused, far closer to that of France in 1789 than Russia in 1917, was essentially a Jacobin one: by destroying the corrupt and anachronistic superstructure of monarchical rule and the particularistic ideology on which it rested, and undertaking a revolutionary process of egalitarian social transformation, they believed that it would be possible to open the way to the creation of a modern nation state. The Ethiopian revolution – only uncontested social revolution that modern Africa has yet experienced – rested most basically on the abolition of the private ownership of land, which was widely and plausibly regarded as the principal element of exploitation, and on the development of a highly centralised state that was geared to ‘modernisation’ from the top down. Like all revolutions, it destroyed many of its own children, and rapidly came under the control of a militarist dictatorship; but this could well be regarded as a necessary element in the process of transformation. Claims that the revolution was ‘betrayed’ reveal only the naive expectations of the losers.

Again like all revolutions, the Ethiopian one was rapidly tested by war, and – initially at least – rose triumphantly to the challenge. Unlike most modern revolutions, certainly, it did not have a project of global or even regional transformation, or challenge the structure of the global system. The transformation that it sought was restricted to Ethiopia, which was seen as *sui generis*, and though the revolutionary regime entered into a close alliance with the Soviet Union and adopted Marxism-Leninism as the state ideology, it was not for export. The Somali invasion of 1977 occurred because the upheavals in Ethiopia appeared to offer an opportunity for the regime of Mohamed Siyad Barre in the Somali Republic to achieve the long-cherished goal of incorporating the Somali-inhabited region of Ethiopia into the republic. The result, however, was merely to confirm the validity of the maxim, ‘Never invade a revolution’. Like other revolutionary regimes from 1792 onwards, the Ethiopian one was able to call on the massive reservoir of popular support created – especially in the formerly exploited southern regions – by its programmes of social transformation, and to raise the citizen armies which, much more than Soviet and Cuban assistance, made the defeat of the Somalis possible. In the process, the Ethiopian state was able to create and consolidate just those elements of *encadrement* that had derived from revolutionary mobilisation in Europe, and apparently lay the foundations for a vastly more effective state.

The six years between the Ogaden war of 1977/78 to the great famine of 1984/85 mark the apogee of Ethiopian statehood. Despite their failure to subdue Eritrea, and the ongoing war in the neighbouring region of Tigray, the new military Marxist leadership pressed ahead with a project of top-down control which sought to mobilise all the resources of the society – in principle of social and economic development, but actually very largely for military purposes. Land reform, and the organisation of the rural and urban populations into peasants’ associations and urban dwellers’ associations, provided the basis for intensified taxation, military conscription, cooperativisation (never extending, however, to full collectivisation), villagisation, and resettlement (the long-distance movement of some 600,000 people from famine-prone areas into supposedly underpopulated zones). This was accompanied by the promotion of a composite nationalism, incessant bombardment with revolutionary nationalist propaganda, and the launching in 1984 of a Marxist-Leninist vanguard party, the Workers’ Party of Ethiopia, which proved to be the last such party to be formed, anywhere in the world, before the débâcle of 1989.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> I have examined this process of *encadrement* in Clapham, *Transformation and Continuity in Revolutionary Ethiopia* (Cambridge U.P., 1988, 2nd ed. 1990).

Why did this project fail? Only very partially, in my view, is this to be explained by global events, and notably the collapse of the Soviet Union. However important the USSR may have been, as the supplier of military hardware and a model of economic and political development which appeared to be particularly well suited to the Ethiopian experience,<sup>8</sup> the failure of the Leninist model was becoming apparent before 1989. On the military side, in particular, the external supply of weapons proved to be far less significant than the domestic social structures which were required to put these weapons to effective use. Though Ethiopia has long experience of hierarchical military organisation, this was ultimately unable to cope with continuous exposure to warfare in Eritrea and Tigray, the attrition of what remained of the professional army, and its dilution with large numbers of poorly trained and poorly motivated conscripts. The faster the Soviet Union and its allies supplied these conscripts with weapons, the faster the same weapons found their way into the hands of the very movements against which they were supposedly directed. By the end of the conflict, the principal Eritrean nationalist movement, the Eritrean People's Liberation Front (EPLF) was armed with Soviet weapons up to the level of tanks and heavy artillery.

The military failure of the People's Democratic Republic of Ethiopia, as it was formally named in 1987, was thus no more than the superstructural manifestation of a more basic malaise, which in turn demonstrated the inadequacy of warfare as an instrument of state and nation building. One critical element in this malaise was, obviously enough, the economic failure revealed by the famine of 1984/85, and the alienation of the countryside that accompanied it. The impact of war on the development of a national economy is complex and variable, and in some modern cases, such as South Korea and Taiwan, it may indeed operate in the way that theories of state-creation through external threat suggest. In Ethiopia, this was simply not the case. Quite apart from the direct economic destruction brought about by warfare, which was actually quite limited and largely restricted to Eritrea and Tigray, the level of surplus expropriation was thoroughly counterproductive. This involved the reduction of available manpower through conscription, as well as a level of taxation that obliged peasants in famine areas to sell livestock in order to buy, on the open market, grain that they were then forced to sell at greatly reduced prices to the government. Most damaging of all, however, were the institutional mechanisms that the government established in order to maintain control. To the familiar disincentive effects of a state-directed economy were added notably the costs of villagisation, under which peasants were forced to abandon their previously scattered farmsteads, ideally suited to the needs of subsistence production, and form centralised villages through which they could be supervised at the cost of removing them from their fields. Agricultural producers' cooperatives and state farms absorbed a massively disproportionate share of investment in agriculture, with predictably disastrous results. When, under the pressure of economic collapse and military defeat, Mengistu Haile-Mariam was obliged to reverse his agricultural policies in 1989, peasants looted the abandoned cooperatives, and re-established the farmsteads which they had been forced to demolish.<sup>9</sup> Many of those who had been 'resettled' far from their areas of origin made their way back home. In short, there are significant limits to the capacity of peasant societies to sustain warfare, and these may be all the greater when this takes the form of 'modern' warfare, conducted with sophisticated imported weapons, and

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<sup>8</sup> The Ethiopian empire shared significant features with its Russian counterpart: Orthodox Christianity, an imperial tradition of state formation, the peasant question, the national question, and a sense of having been 'left behind' by developments in neighbouring states.

<sup>9</sup> In most cases: in some places, villages did provide useful services and were retained.

requiring the maintenance of large permanent armies, in place of the temporary levies and seasonal military activities characteristic of agrarian conflict.

Still more damaging was the failure of political integration or 'nation-building'. The revolution had initially, as already indicated, done much to remove the elements of ethnic discrimination and exploitation inherent in the imperial system of governance, especially as a result of land reform. Land reform certainly did little for the pastoralist populations, such as the Somali and Afar, but these were largely peripheral. Nor did it help the peoples of the northern highlands, since these largely controlled their own land, and could only be threatened by its nationalisation; some 'white' opposition to the revolutionary regime resulted, led by local aristocrats and gentry in a manner reminiscent of Brittany and the Vendée in revolutionary France, but – as in France – this was defeated. For the peoples of central, southern and western Ethiopia, whose support was critical for both economic and ethnic reasons, land reform brought undoubted initial benefits, and a corresponding commitment to the revolutionary regime. This commitment was however steadily eroded. It soon became clear that the nationalisation of land was very different from the 'land to the tiller' that had become a revolutionary slogan in the 1960s. The exactions imposed by villagisation and the Agricultural Marketing Corporation was most intense in the most productive areas of the country, and though open military opposition to the regime was largely (and paradoxically) restricted to regions that had formed part of the historic heartland of the Ethiopian state, alienation was increasingly expressed in the form of resurgent ethnic identity. As the state became increasingly embattled, so its appeals to national identity inevitably reflected the imperial and centralising mission of the state. Again, the limitations of warfare as a source of national unity are clear: it can only serve this function if the 'other' is sufficiently distinct from the 'nation', and if the 'nation' itself is defined in a sufficiently inclusive fashion. Where the opposition, as in this case, is very largely internal, and where the concept of nationhood has been superimposed on a divided society with historic legacies of central exploitation, then the result may well be to fragment rather than unite. The revolutionary regime that eventually fell in May 1991 crumbled from within, quite as much as (or more than) it was overthrown from outside.

### **War and the Creation of Eritrean Nationalism**

Eritrea, by contrast, presents one of the most extraordinary examples of war and state formation in the modern era. In origin an Italian colony established in 1890, it was every bit as artificial and divided as any of the colonial creations of that period. Its boundaries incorporated peoples whose populations lapped over into neighbouring territories, from its southern border with Djibouti, through its long frontier with Ethiopia to its northern limits with Sudan. It contained some nine significant ethnicities, and most important of all, the politically critical division between Christianity and Islam split it into almost equal populations of each faith. Though the Christian half had historically been part of Ethiopia, the Moslems had generally come under no more than intermittent Ethiopian control. And when its fate was determined by the United Nations after the Second World War, there was substantial support for the 'reunification' with Ethiopia that took place under a UN-designed federal system in 1952.

When armed opposition to Ethiopian rule started in 1961, this was initially confined to Moslem areas that had no commitment to the Ethiopian state, and was

divisive rather than unifying in domestic Eritrean terms. The organisation that formed to prosecute the conflict, the Eritrean Liberation Front (ELF), was heavily Moslem in membership and orientation, and its promotion of an 'Arab Eritrea', though useful as a source of external support, could only alienate Christian Eritreans who were becoming increasingly disenchanted with the Ethiopian regime. Not until 1973, when a number of Christians within the movement united with other alienated members to form the EPLF, was a serious attempt made to bridge the religious and ethnic divide, and this movement had to fight a bitter civil war against the ELF to establish its credentials as the standard bearer of Eritrean nationalism. Though (or because) its own leadership was predominantly Christian, the EPLF placed an intense emphasis on the secular and nationwide nature of its struggle, and adopted a Marxist ideology of liberation war in order to bridge over the ethnic and religious divide. This in turn involved much creative rewriting of Eritrean history, in the interests of 'national unity'.<sup>10</sup>

No entirely convincing account of the development of Eritrean nationalism has yet been written, and much of the literature is subject to the inevitable partisanship or 'commitment' that accompanies the analysis of revolutionary nationalist movements. The EPLF's own awareness of the importance of the 'correct' interpretation has induced many commentators to take a stand for or against it. Nonetheless, the most basic elements can be identified. Absolutely central is the role of the 'struggle', as it is universally known in Eritrea. Prior to the 1960s, Eritreans had very little conception of their own identity, and their experiences under Italian rule and the subsequent mobilisation of opinions on the future of the territory from the 1940s onwards had merely accentuated their divisions. Even the initial resistance to Ethiopian rule, as already noted, had been more divisive than unifying. The primary achievement of the EPLF was bring about a level of bonding, in opposition to the Ethiopian 'other', that was sufficient to sustain the long and extremely costly conflict that eventually resulted in victory. Even if this bonding never reached the level of unanimity that official discourse suggests, and some Eritreans maintained alternative viewpoints – in favour either of the Moslem ELF, or of continued union with Ethiopia – it was still an extraordinarily successful project.

It is not enough to ascribe this success merely to the need for unity in the liberation war. The history of armed struggle in Africa – in Angola, Sudan and Zimbabwe, to take three examples – is littered with divisions on ethnic, ideological and factional lines. Eritrea, with its religious and ethnic diversity, was apparently tailor-made for such divisions, which indeed marked the early years of the struggle. War in itself is as likely to intensify factionalism as to create nationalism. In explaining why Eritrea took the path it did, a very high emphasis must be placed on the leadership and organisation of the EPLF: its insistence on a unifying rather than a divisive ideology, its promotion of a national myth that was intensively inculcated into its cadres, its disciplined and centralised hierarchy of command, and the continuous presence of the leadership in the battle zone, rather than in the distant comfort of exile. The sheer organisational capacity of the EPLF – extending to hospitals, schools and workshops hidden underground to protect them from Ethiopian bombing, and to a very high level of technical expertise – was equally impressive. This organisational capacity in turn drew on the same social base and cultural values that likewise sustained the Ethiopian state against which it was directed. This was without doubt

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<sup>10</sup> See David Pool, "The Eritrean People's Liberation Front", in C. Clapham, ed., *African Guerrillas* (Oxford: James Currey, 1998).

one of the strongest insurgent movements of the modern era, not just in Africa but in the world.

Another critical factor was that although the leadership and much of the support of the EPLF was drawn, though not invidiously so, from the Christian highland zone known as the *kebessa*, its actual military operations were until very late in the war concentrated in the Moslem lowland zone or *sahel*. The Ethiopian army continued to control most of the *kebessa*, at least by day, until a year or two before the ultimate EPLF victory. An otherwise almost universal characteristic of African insurgencies is that they have been conducted in the region inhabited by the ethnic group from which the movement concerned drew its core support. The relationship between the 'fighters' and the local population thus reinforced the ethnic character of the movement. In Eritrea this relationship, strengthened as it was by the bonding effect of continual Ethiopian bombing, cut across the ethnic and religious divide, and could be constructed only on the basis of nationalism. A further important element was the extension of the 'nation' beyond the area of conflict to the large Eritrean diaspora. All insurgent conflicts generate large refugee populations, but the EPLF was extraordinarily innovative in its ability to mobilise the diaspora – which spread well beyond refugee camps in the Sudan to encompass large and well educated communities in Europe and North America – into the struggle. A systematic taxation system required exiled Eritreans to contribute two percent of their gross income to the cause, and many gave more. An active social network linked Eritreans across the world, its high point being an annual festival held at Bologna in Italy, which served alike to propagate the message, raise contributions in cash and services, and reinforce a sense of common identity. Further support mechanisms encompassed relief, medical and educational services, including periods of service by exiled Eritrean professionals within the conflict zone itself. There is in short no automatic connection between war and state formation: war, rather, provides conditions which a sufficiently dedicated and well organised leadership *may* be able to use to promote state formation.

The conditions of warfare are themselves, however, peculiar and artificial. Though war is an extremely important source of national mythologies, to which leaders constantly appeal in times of peace, the solidarity and dedication which (even after making allowance for official exaggeration) characterise the struggle cannot by any means automatically be replicated after it is over. Both Ethiopia, where the revolutionary regime and the state which it had sought to create fragmented under the pressure of conflict, and Eritrea, where the victorious insurgent movement emerged with its self-confidence enormously enhanced, faced peculiar problems of adaptation to the changed conditions after 1991, which in turn helped to account for the reversion to war only seven years later between what were then two sovereign independent states.

## **Reconstruction and Renewed Conflict**

The defeated are notoriously far better able than the victorious to respond to the demands of peace. While the victors are hardened in their belief in the rightness of their cause and the virtue of their leaders and institutions, the losers have to assess what went wrong, and look for ways to remedy it. In Ethiopia, the TPLF-dominated Ethiopian Peoples' Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF) regime that took power in May 1991 identified the source of the problem in the rigid centralism not just of its immediate predecessor, but of the whole Ethiopian tradition of government; and after

accepting Eritrean independence as a *fait accompli*, it established a system of ethnic federalism, in which each 'nation, nationality or people' was accorded rights of internal self-government, coupled with a formal right to secede entirely from the Ethiopian state. Based anachronistically on Stalin's theory of nationalities in the then crumbling Soviet Union, this led to the establishment of seven ethnically-delineated regions, together with two autonomous cities, and the introduction of political parties which – uniquely in Africa – were explicitly ethnic in their representative ambitions. This could be regarded as a process of national *deconstruction* in the wake of military defeat, and was bitterly resented by those (principally but not entirely Amhara) who clung to the centralist ideal of Ethiopian nationhood. For them, indeed, it represented the deliberate dismantling of the state in the interests of the new Tigrayan rulers. The most significant effect of the new system was the boost that it gave to the ambitions of the Oromo, the largest single 'nationality' within Ethiopia, who now received a region of their own. At the same time, since it rapidly became clear that the EPRDF was not prepared to accept the dismemberment that full ethnic separatism would have involved, ethnic representation was actually restricted to parties affiliated to the EPRDF itself, and considerable tensions resulted, especially in relations between the central government and the Oromo.

The new Eritrean government, meanwhile, was founded on principles totally at variance from those applied in Ethiopia, with an intensive emphasis on the 'unity' created by the struggle. No parties other than the EPLF (which was renamed the People's Front for Democracy and Justice, or PFDJ) were permitted to form, and at the same time that the regional boundaries in Ethiopia were redrawn to conform to ethnic divisions, those in Eritrea were redrawn in order to cut across the communities that they had previously represented. In a manner characteristic of victorious insurgencies, the liberation movement became the vanguard party that guided the conduct of the state, and the habits of centralised command inherited from the struggle were carried over into the conduct of peacetime administration. Inevitably, this created tensions, which in turn were suppressed. Some elements in the ferociously disciplined EPLF armed forces mutinied on being told that there would have to continue serving on the same unpaid basis that had operated during the struggle, while a demonstration by disabled veterans was also harshly dealt with. A new law on land reform, which clearly reflected the interests and values of the highland Christian population, raised the sensitive issue of the relationship between *kebessa* and *sahel* in the construction of the new Eritrea.<sup>11</sup> In numerous ways, the new state and the nationalism on which it rested were imposed from above, not constructed from below.<sup>12</sup>

It is almost axiomatic that such a state should externalise its domestic tensions, a course of action in any event promoted by the aftermath of liberation war. The first significant issues arose in Eritrea's relations with Sudan, where the Islamist regime in Khartoum, which had generally supported the EPLF during the struggle, now sought to promote Islamist elements in Eritrea through the Eritrean Islamic Jihad (EIJ), which had been associated with the ELF and drew support from Moslems in Eritrean refugee camps in Sudan. Any mobilisation of religious identities within Eritrea struck at the heart of the new state, and would invalidate all the achievements of the struggle, and the Eritrean government reacted with outspoken public support for the opposition

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<sup>11</sup> See Sandra Joireman, "The minefield of land reform: comments on the Eritrean Land Proclamation", *African Affairs*, Vol.95 No.379, 1996, pp.269-285.

<sup>12</sup> See Kjetil Tronvoll, "The process of nation-building in post-war Eritrea: created from below or directed from above?", *Journal of Modern African Studies*, Vol.36 No.3, 1998, pp.461-482

National Democratic Alliance in Sudan. It was equally part of the legacy of struggle that the EPLF should have an intense commitment to the sanctity of Eritrea's colonial frontiers, coupled with an assessment of where these lay that was as favourable as possible to Eritrean claims. This led first to an attack on Yemeni-administered islands in the Red Sea, which Eritrea claimed as its own but which were subsequently allocated to Yemen by international arbitration, and to a claim on Djiboutian territory beside their frontier on the Red Sea, which likewise appeared to be without foundation. These conflicts were however insignificant, compared with that which broke out with Ethiopia in May 1998, over contested territory on the border between Eritrea and Tigray.

There is no evidence that this extremely destructive war resulted from any deliberate calculation of its potential nation-building benefits on either side. The most plausible account of its origins suggests that it was caused by an ill-considered Eritrean reaction to provocation by local officials on the Ethiopian side of the border, and then escalated beyond the capacity of either government to control.<sup>13</sup> The action that most clearly precipitated war was the forcible occupation by Eritrea of disputed territory (of negligible economic value) that had previously been administered by Ethiopia, and appears to have been undertaken in an unthinking confidence (derived from the liberation war) of Eritrean military superiority, coupled with the assumption that an ethnically fragmented Ethiopia would be unable to offer serious resistance. However, given that each side has subsequently committed resources to the conflict that are out of all proportion to the material benefits at stake, some further explanation for its duration and intensity is clearly needed, and this can be found only in the relationship between war, the state and nationhood on either side.

For a start, a sense of territoriality is deeply entrenched in each state, and derives from the social values of the peasant societies of Christian highland Ethiopia and Eritrea. The importance of territory had already been demonstrated in Eritrea by the conflicts with Yemen and Djibouti already referred to, and in Ethiopia by the bitter wars over Ogaden and Eritrea. The 'invasion' by Eritrea of what was perceived by Ethiopians as 'their' territory thus prompted a far wider and more nationalist Ethiopian response than could otherwise have been expected from a small local conflict over land that most Ethiopians had never heard of. This response was not promoted by the government in Addis Ababa, which was taken completely by surprise, and had in any event been promoting a very different conception of Ethiopia as a congeries of disparate nationalities. Only after an initial period of shock, and a swift reinvention of itself as an Ethiopian nationalist regime (reviving, in the process, much of the rhetoric that had previously characterised the Mengistu government that it had overthrown), was the EPRDF able to recover, and make the recovery of the national territory its principal *raison d'être*. The rejoicing that greeted the Ethiopian victory at Badme in February 1999 was popular rather than government-orchestrated. In Eritrea, too, though the war has helped to revive memories of the 'struggle', and consolidate a sense of Eritrean nationalism that was in danger of being lost amidst the problems of peacetime administration, a war against an opponent with some twenty times its own population was so strikingly at variance with the country's desperate need for post-liberation development and rehabilitation that it is difficult to believe that it can have been deliberately embarked on. When, after the defeat at Badme, the

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<sup>13</sup> For a rare balanced account, see Martin Plaut & Patrick Gilkes, *War in the Horn: the conflict between Eritrea and Ethiopia* (London: RIIA, Discussion Paper 82, 1999).

Eritrean government rapidly accepted the OAU peace plan that it had previously rejected, it discovered that the war had passed beyond its own control, and that it was committed to a long-term conflict that it lacked the resources to sustain.

One of the most significant effects of the war has been to redefine, especially on the Ethiopian side, the idea of national citizenship. The thirty-year war that culminated in Eritrean independence was fought, from the Ethiopian perspective, in support of the belief that Eritrea and Eritreans were part of Ethiopia itself. The war that broke out in May 1998 instantly reversed this perspective. In a mirror-image of the Ethiopian 'other' against which Eritrean nationalists had defined their struggle for independence, now Eritreans became the other against which an Ethiopian identity was to be defined. Nowhere was this clearer than in the brutal and counterproductive expulsion from Ethiopia of almost anyone who could be defined, under the new conception of nationality, as Eritrean. For this, certainly, the Eritrean government was in some respects responsible. Some Eritreans with close connections with the EPLF had been placed during the period of alliance between the regimes in sensitive positions in Ethiopia, and now clearly represented a threat to Ethiopian security. The Eritrean leader Isaias Afewerki, was quoted as saying that he could bring Ethiopia to a standstill, a remark interpreted as indicating the presence of an Eritrean 'fifth column' within Ethiopia, and helping to prompt a search for potential saboteurs. Eritrea's broad definition of its own nationality, under which any person with Eritrean ancestry through either parent was entitled to become Eritrean (and be issued with an Eritrean identity card and vote in the 1993 referendum on Eritrean independence), classified such people as Eritrean once dual nationality became unsustainable as a result of the war. The wholesale expulsion of Ethiopians from Eritrea after the EPLF victory in 1991 likewise left resentments. Even so, disentangling 'Ethiopians' from 'Eritreans', given the level of migration of Eritreans to the rest of Ethiopia and the widespread extent of intermarriage, was a task as impossible as distinguishing 'Irish' from 'British' in the United Kingdom after 1922. The dumping of many thousands of 'Eritreans', many of whom spoke no Eritrean language and had scarcely if ever visited Eritrea, not only offended basic principles of humanity, but deprived Ethiopia of the services of a generally skilled and productive section of its own population.

The extent to which the war is indeed consolidating a sense of nationhood on either side remains, however, very difficult to assess, and it is only after it has been brought to some kind of conclusion that any serious appraisal can be attempted. In the short term, war helps to promote a sense of solidarity from which the incumbent governments benefit, but the sustainability of such war-induced nationalism is highly questionable. There is a limit to the length of time for which very significant human and economic costs can be accepted in exchange for purely symbolic gains, and as those costs mount – not least as a result of both countries' chronic dependence on food aid – so the perceived value of the benefits can only diminish. On each side, the effect is likely to damage not only the standing of the political leadership, but also the sense of national solidarity that conflict has helped to promote. Both in Ethiopia and in Eritrea, any challenge to the existing structures of government is likely to raise, in particular, the issue of the relationship between the Christian highland communities on which – despite all claims to the contrary in both countries – the state is still heavily based, and other (and in Eritrea especially, notably Moslem) peoples who have to a large extent been excluded from it. That process carries the potential to fragment, disastrously, whatever sense of national identity has been created through the war in which Eritrea and Ethiopia have foolishly become entangled.

## Conclusions

It is important to remain aware of the dangers of drawing grand comparative conclusions from brief time-scales and recent events. The relationship between war, states and nationhood in Europe has been constructed over many centuries, and been subject to all manner of vicissitudes and upheavals. Such a relationship in Africa can only be equally long-term. However tentative our conclusions may be, nonetheless, they indicate that the capacity of warfare to promote the creation of effective states and nations, even in that part of Africa which appears to present that relationship at its most persuasive, is subject to considerable limitations. In both Ethiopia and Eritrea, certainly, warfare has indeed promoted a level of *encadrement* that makes these states, as states, among the most effective on the continent. The contrast between the disciplined and effective military forces that both states can put into the field, and the chronic level of organisational incapacity that characterises much of the fighting in such countries as Sudan, Congo, Angola, Liberia and Sierra Leone, is for example very striking indeed. Both states have been able to institute what are, certainly by African standards, efficient systems of tax-gathering and military conscription. If governments could be run as essentially top-down bureaucratic operations, both Ethiopia and Eritrea would operate relatively well. In much of Africa, even after decades of warfare, there is no evidence of any remotely comparable impact on levels of organisational capacity, and it is plausible to suppose that the effectiveness of both Ethiopia and Eritrea in this respect is due more to the legacy of the long-established social and political structures of the highland regions than to anything specific to warfare itself.<sup>14</sup>

Modern state formation critically relies, however, on the creation not just of effective bureaucracies, but of the common identities or 'imagined communities' that are needed to endow the institutions of the state with legitimacy in the eyes of their populations. In this respect, even the European experience is open to reinterpretation: it can very plausibly be argued that European nationhood has far deeper roots than the school of thought that sees it as merely the creation of the period since the French revolution supposes;<sup>15</sup> and that the development of European nationalisms over the last two centuries indicates, not the capacity of the state to create identities through purposive political action, but rather the dependence of effective states on largely pre-existing communities. The collapse since 1989 of attempts at multinational socialist state-creation in the Soviet Union, Yugoslavia and Czechoslovakia further reveals the limitations of state action, and strengthens the case for once despised 'primordialist' theories of nationalism. The failure of warfare to promote nationhood in Africa is not the result of solely African variables, but reflects much more widespread difficulties in constructing multi-ethnic political communities.

In this respect, nonetheless, the problems facing African states are exceptionally great. The construction of effective states and nations ultimately requires structures of incorporation and accountability, through which individuals and social groups are both recognised as integral parts of the political community, and are able to ensure that the community is answerable to them – if not in any explicitly democratic sense,

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<sup>14</sup> Two states that *have* achieved a significant level of military organisation, Rwanda and (to a lesser extent) Uganda, help to confirm this hypothesis; the forces both of the RPF in Rwanda and of the NRA in Uganda are heavily based in societies with a similarly long history of hierarchical organisation.

<sup>15</sup> See, notably, the brilliant critique of this school in Adrian Hastings, *The Construction of Nationhood: ethnicity, religion and nationalism* (Cambridge U.P., 1998).

then at least through its adherence to the basic values that regulate acceptable behaviour within their own societies. That in turn means that such a political community must have an ethnic base, even if that 'ethnicity' is such that social or physical 'immigrants' can be incorporated into it. The problem in this respect about states such as Ethiopia and Eritrea is that the state itself ultimately derives from the social values of its highland Christian populations, and though warfare may in some respects provide a mechanism through which other peoples can be incorporated into the state, it also accentuates the ethnic basis of the state itself, and can readily lead to the politicisation of its underlying ethnic divisions. In states such as the great majority of formerly colonial African territories, which have not been formed through warfare in the same way, the problems of state creation are even more intense. In short, there is very little evidence to suggest that 'giving war a chance' offers the prospect of a process of African state creation comparable to that in Europe.