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2 A Forgotten Fleet

The Imperial Ethiopian Navy, 1953–1974

Quentin Holbert

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Introduction

A landlocked Ethiopia garnered international attention when Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed announced plans to build a navy as a part of broader military reforms in June 2018.[1] This news followed prior revelations of Ethiopian investments in commercial ports in Kenya and Sudan, with an armed element intended as a supplement to existing security forces in the waters around the Horn of Africa. The Red Sea is especially important for international trade because of its connection to the Suez Canal. However, piracy exploded after Somalia's collapse in 1991 and increased significantly in the 2000s.[2] As the major military power in the region, it was within Ethiopia's interest to help protect this trade corridor. This project looked more realistic in 2019 when Ethiopia gained financial support from France and reached a deal with Djibouti to host Ethiopia's new navy. Serious development into an operational fleet and its requisite infrastructure largely stalled during 2020 and 2021, given the coronavirus disease (COVID-19) pandemic and the Ethiopian Civil War. Smaller tasks like designing a new Ethiopian navy uniform and insignia are complete,[3] but the new timeline for more substantive developments is presently unclear. France pulled out of its military cooperation agreement with Ethiopia in July 2021 amid concerns of Abiy's leadership during the then-escalating civil war.[4]

This is not the first time that Ethiopia sought a route to the Red Sea. Perhaps one of the more unusual episodes in Imperial Ethiopia's history was its efforts to procure a navy in the 1950s and 1960s. Traditionally a landlocked empire, the federation with Eritrea in late 1952 opened access to the Red Sea, which became a major avenue for international trade after the Suez Canal opened in 1869. Under the stewardship of Emperor Haile Selassie, the Imperial Ethiopian Navy (IEN) was formed in 1955 as a part of the country's larger modernization initiatives. The IEN, as one British intelligence report later described, served three purposes: to defend the Eritrean coast from blockade and attack, especially from Egypt; to prevent arms smuggling and human trafficking; and to garner "prestige."[5]

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This episode has received practically no scholarly attention. African naval history is a largely emergent field in the early 2020s, even for countries with a more significant navy like Algeria, Egypt, or South Africa. Meanwhile, countries like Ethiopia, which only had a navy for a brief period, remain ignored within this scholarship. Similarly, scholarship about Ethiopia largely omits discussion of the IEN. Even works that explicitly focus on the professionalization of Ethiopia's military after the Second World War rarely acknowledge the IEN. The best discussion of Ethiopia's navy appears in historian Gebru Tareke's *The Ethiopian Revolution: War in the Horn of Africa*. When describing Ethiopia's military before 1974, he provides a brief overview of the navy's formation and development, noting that it played a marginal role in Ethiopia's national security.[6]

Non-academic publications contain some fragmentary information about the IEN. *Jane's Fighting Ships*, an annual reference series about active warships, is among the only English-language publications with any detail concerning the IEN.[7] It is the best published source on the specific ships Ethiopia had available in any given year. However, reference guides like this provide little background information or context for major developments. There are also sometimes inaccuracies with the personnel numbers due to its reliance on, sometimes outdated, unclassified information. The only other notable non-academic source is from Ethiopia's Ministry of Information, Publications & Foreign Languages Press Department.[8] This imperial institution published a propagandistic history of Ethiopia's armed forces in the late 1960s, emphasizing increased strength since the 1940s. While it contains some useful references to the Navy's development and personnel, it is brief and limited in scope. There are no English language works that describe the IEN's history in any comprehensive way.

This lack of previous attention is disappointing as the creation of the IEN fits directly in line with both Ethiopia's development after the Second World War and with the empire's decay. Global developmentalist Fouad Makki notes that the two defining characteristics of post-war Ethiopia are the government's "construction of a dynastically centralized state and a state-sponsored project of nationalism."[9] Both parts of Makki's characterization apply to Ethiopia's motives for establishing the IEN. Framing the navy as a return to Ethiopia's greatness in antiquity, Emperor Haile Selassie poured vital resources into the IEN hoping to use it to project his strength, whether it was his choice of vessels or the canonization of the Navy Days celebrations. The navy grew from the late 1950s to the early 1970s, both in personnel and equipment. However, much of the early development was haphazard and ill-conceived. Nepotism informed the emperor's appointment of his grandson, Iskinder Desta, as the head of the navy. Educated aristocrats dominated the officer corps until at least the 1960s, and civil unrest brewed among enlisted personnel. Despite widespread discontent with pay and overall compensation, Selassie and Desta had a penchant for throwing money at impractical endeavours to make the navy look more powerful than it was. These attempts

to project strength are reflective of declining imperial control at a time of increased dissidence within Ethiopia.

The politics surrounding the IEN also highlights Ethiopia's attempts to become less dependent on European imperial states, especially Britain. Ethiopia's attempts to gain a port were rooted largely in reducing its dependency on conducting trade through neighbouring French or British colonies. After the Second World War, Ethiopia maintained positive relations with Britain and its allies, largely aligning with the Western bloc during the Cold War. Selassie especially favoured increased relations with the United States and Norway, which both provided significant support to the IEN. He also promoted diplomatic relations with communist states like the Soviet Union and Yugoslavia, which likely pressured Western states to concede to Ethiopia's requests lest it shift allegiance to these socialist states.

These discussions require a brief narrative history of the IEN, which at present does not exist in any scholarly text, from its inception in 1955 to the Derg Coup in 1974. This 20-year period saw the formation of the navy under the leadership of Selassie and Desta, with significant support from several foreign powers. Despite gaps in relevant records, especially with Ethiopia's archives being presently inaccessible, it is still possible to offer a brief overview of the IEN's development and actions. This chapter will not comment about the Derg Era because it is a distinct period in the country's military history that merits dedicated attention, namely, from historians familiar with Soviet-era records.

This piece is only the beginning of the prospective work about the Ethiopian navy, as the COVID-19 pandemic significantly limited archival access in the Horn of Africa. It is impossible to know for certain how many documents about the IEN survive within Ethiopia or Eritrea without visiting their respective archives, as no online library catalogue presently lists any materials about the IEN in either country. However, it is still possible to trace significant developments through correspondence and reports among major foreign powers. The National Archives in the United Kingdom are especially useful considering Great Britain's key role in Ethiopia's post-war modernization projects.

Background Information

The Red Sea represented a rich commercial world of regionally based kingdoms and a connecting corridor between international powers.[10] Ethiopia's predecessor, the ancient Kingdom of Aksum, accessed the wider Indian Ocean world via its ports along the Red Sea. The largest of these was Adulis, which was an official imperial trading centre for the Roman Empire in the first century CE.[11] This connection with Rome precipitated Aksumite-Indian Ocean trade in the first through third centuries CE, with Aksum a more active player within the Indian Ocean trade networks by the fifth century.[12] Aksum also engaged in some naval warfare. For example, King Kaleb's invasion of the

Arabian Peninsula in 518 CE relied heavily on 70 ships constructed at Adulis.[13] Even after the kingdom's decline in the eighth and ninth centuries CE and the abandonment of Adulis, commerce continued for several centuries. It was ultimately the Ottoman Empire's conquest of the Red Sea port of Massawa in 1557 that isolated Ethiopia from its naval trade routes. The Ottoman Empire held claims over this territory for the following 300 years, though it did not exercise consistent control over the area's peoples. As Ottoman influence waned in the Horn of Africa, the corridor along the Red Sea fell into contention: Egypt, the Mahdist state in Sudan, and Italy all vied for control of this land during the nineteenth century. Egypt expanded along the Red Sea's coast and "monopolized most African contacts [sic] with the Arabian shore" through the ports of Suakin and Massawa in the 1860s and 1870s.[14] These seaports facilitated Egyptian cotton exports, which drastically increased during the American Civil War (1861–1865) and continued to increase in the following decades.[15] The Red Sea became more important when the Suez Canal opened in 1869, which reduced the distance for ships travelling between Europe and Asia. This Egyptian expansion was short-lived as the Mahdist uprising in Sudan contested the frontiers between Ethiopia and Egypt, challenging both states in their respective frontiers. However, the most significant challenger was Italy, who officially gained a foothold in Assab in 1882. The European power expanded, conquering Massawa in 1885, and attempted to push into northern Ethiopia in the late 1880s. Ethiopian Emperor Yohannes IV was preoccupied with protecting his northern frontiers from these external threats.[16] His successor, Emperor Menelik II, was more preoccupied with southward expansion rather than acquiring coastal territory. Attempting to prevent further conflict with Italy, he signed the ill-fated Treaty of Wuchale on May 2, 1889, which defined the borders between the two powers and gave way for Italy's formal creation of Italian Eritrea in 1890. However, this treaty mandated that Ethiopia had to channel all foreign correspondence through Italy first, functionally turning the African empire into a protectorate. The fallout from Menelik II's withdrawal from the treaty in 1893 led to the outbreak of the First Italo-Ethiopian War (1895–1896). He decisively crushed the Italian invasion force at the Battle of Adowa on March 1, 1896, securing Ethiopia's independence from European imperialism.

Despite Italy's defeat, Ethiopia did not attempt to advance into Italian-controlled territory on the coast. Italy heavily fortified Massawa and neighbouring towns in the 1880s,[17] requiring a full-scale invasion to penetrate. Despite Ethiopia's large feudal army, Menelik II did not have the resources to sustain major offensive operations long enough to besiege the Italian-controlled ports. Menelik II also had no way to prevent Italian naval reinforcements from breaking the siege. There was no viable path for Ethiopia to capture any coastal territories, even after its historic victory at Adowa.

The boundaries between Ethiopia and Italian colonial territory remained largely unchanged for the next 40 years, greatly limiting Ethiopia's potential trade. While there was regular correspondence concerning the precise

boundaries between Ethiopia and the neighbouring European colonies, none of the proposed borders gave Ethiopia direct access to the Red Sea. Ethiopia was instead dependent on shipping goods through European-controlled territories, granting much less profitable indirect access to global markets. Projects like the Franco-Ethiopian Railway, which began construction in French-ruled Djibouti in 1894 and reached Addis Ababa in 1917, became the dominant channel for Ethiopian exports like coffee beans and ivory.[18] Considering that it would later become one of the most expensive freight lines in the world to run and that Ethiopia had to pay substantial taxes to France for its exports,[19] this dependency on a European power likely constricted Ethiopia's economic growth.

This remained the case until the Second Italo-Ethiopian War (1935–1937) when Fascist Italy conquered Ethiopia incorporating it into Italian East Africa. As such, the Italians built roads between Assab, Dessie, and Addis Ababa to better connect Ethiopia's hinterlands to the wider Italian Empire.[20] This colonial project only lasted until 1941, with British-led forces liberating Ethiopia and capturing Italian Somaliland and Eritrea. In 1942, the British Military Administration officially began to oversee Italian Eritrea and Italian Somaliland. While the administration believed that the colonies would return to Italian control at the end of the war,[21] the colonies' ownership became more ambiguous by the mid-1940s. The Council of Foreign Ministers of the Four Powers, which was composed of Britain, France, the United States, and the Soviet Union, agreed in 1946 that Italy had to renounce its control over its former colonies, rendering "the entire period from 1946 to 1950 one of acute uncertainty for Eritreans and Ethiopians alike."[22] The post-war negotiations involved a complicated array of possible policy positions concerning Eritrea including: the British-American position of a trusteeship over the former colonies; a Latin-American bloc advocacy of returning the colonies to Italian control; the Soviet position of a United Nations– (UN) led administration for each colony; and an Asian bloc suggesting a UN trusteeship but, unlike the Soviet position, one where major powers did not play a prominent role.[23]

Ethiopia's opportunity to gain an oceanic corridor lay amid this disagreement over Italian Eritrea's administration. Given the possible significant strategic benefits, Selassie advocated for Ethiopian control over Eritrea with its Red Sea coast. Selassie requested in April 1942 that Eritrea not be returned to Italy after the war, arguing that "apart from the racial, linguistic, religious, economic and historical reasons … it was regarded as just compensation for Ethiopia's recent suffering."[24] He repeated this view over the following six years, emphasizing both the historical ties between Ethiopia and Eritrea, and that Ethiopia deserved reparations for its occupation by Italy. After signing a formal peace treaty with Italy in 1946, Selassie further pressed Britain to hand over both Italian Eritrea and Italian Somaliland to Ethiopia.[25] In 1948, Britain proposed to the Four Powers that Ethiopia should administer Eritrea for ten years. Britain suggested that if the ten-year period went smoothly, then the UN General Assembly could allow Ethiopia to oversee Eritrea

indefinitely.[26] The other powers disliked this proposal but, since they could not reach a consensus, referred the matter to the UN.[27]

However, nothing was guaranteed for Ethiopia since it was possible that the UN could reject Britain's proposal. Recognizing this possibility, Ethiopia entered a series of secret negotiations in the late 1940s and 1950 concerning Zeila, a port town situated in British Somaliland. Ethiopia and Britain discussed trading Zeila and some surrounding land in exchange for some of the Haud, a plateau situated in the Ogaden in eastern Ethiopia and a historically significant strip of land for some Somali pastoral communities. Historian Tekeste Negash characterizes this proposed trade as Ethiopia's insurance policy that, if the Eritrea vote did not turn out in Ethiopia's favour, then Ethiopia could still have some level of maritime access through British Somaliland.[28] The main reason why these negotiations failed involved ownership and maintenance of rail lines and motor vehicle friendly roads between Ethiopia's major cities and Zeila.[29] The UN's decision to approve an Ethiopian-Eritrean Federation in December 1950 rendered these discussions moot, but it highlights how important accessing the sea was to the emperor. On September 15, 1952, Britain formally handed over the administration of Eritrea to Ethiopia.[30] Selassie finally had his path to the sea.

1953–1958: Early Developments and the Department of Marine

The first attempt to build an Ethiopian navy began within a few months of the country's federation with Eritrea, with the emperor taking "a personal interest" in the establishment of such a force.[31] However, the preliminary stages of the navy's development were largely informed by a series of improvised policy ideas stitched together. With little relevant infrastructure and almost no trained personnel, Selassie was in a difficult position. From 1953 to 1958, Ethiopia's naval development comprised two categories: material and administrative.

Material progress represented the emperor's initial priority as Ethiopia did not inherit any deep-sea ships. Police and Customs services conducted patrols only within Eritrea's harbour waters because the two small boats available were unsuitable for the Red Sea.[32] Only a few months after federation, Selassie ordered vessels from Automarine, a British shipbuilder. The most conspicuous items in this initial order were two luxury yachts. The smaller yacht was a 60-to-70-foot craft intended for day voyages around neighbouring islands. Selassie requested the other yacht to be around a thousand tons and able to comfortably accommodate 35–40 passengers, move at 15 knots, and have a radio with a range of 2000 miles. When the Automarine staff inquired about the size of the latter vessel, Selassie's representatives responded that nothing but the best would suffice for the emperor.[33] Selassie believed that having items like this yacht or other extravagances like luxury cars were "required of a relevant nation in the contemporary international order" regardless of practicality.[34]

Among the combat-capable vessels for the new navy, the most powerful ships Selassie requested were two corvettes, which were supposed to reach 15 knots, have long-range radio, Asdic sonar systems, and – for at least one ship – the ability to pick up submarine cable. For armaments, Selassie requested that each corvette have two 12-pounder guns, four Oerlikon 20mm cannons, one or two torpedo tubes, depth charges, and mine-laying capabilities. Complementing these two ships would have been nine Patrol Craft and three Harbour Patrol Craft. The list of support vessels includes four pilot cutters, five tugboats, three or four lighters for carrying water, 40 pulling boats, and a steamboat for training sailors. Rounding out this order was a single floating dock that could accommodate vessels up to 2000 tons. The order did not specify a timeline beyond stating that Ethiopia required one corvette and three patrol boats immediately. The only cost estimate available by April 1953 was for the larger yacht, valued at a minimum of £500 000. The British ambassador to Ethiopia Douglas L. Busk quoted Ethiopia's ship order at no less than 2 or 3 million pounds but possibly much higher, calling it "appalling nonsense" in a letter to British Minister Roger Allen.[35]

When the Automarine order fell through due to Ethiopia's limited finances, Selassie sought support from outside of Britain. His first ship was not a naval vessel but rather a yacht that Yugoslavia loaned him in 1955.[36] While it seems unusual that a communist state would aid an imperial one, President Josip Tito and Selassie bonded over their shared experience of fighting Italian fascism and they supported one another's territorial claims concerning Trieste and Eritrea, respectively.[37] Selassie became the first African leader to visit Yugoslavia in 1954, and the two countries entered a series of trade agreements over the following two decades. One of the consequences of this policy was Yugoslavia's supplying of ships to Ethiopia, including the yacht in 1955 and two motor torpedo boats in 1960.[38] While Ethiopia returned the yacht in the early 1960s,[39] this was an important developmental stage of the IEN.

In the Cold War context, Ethiopia's potential connection to a socialist state was unacceptable to American officials. In a 1956 policy paper, Executive Secretary of the National Security Council James S. Lay emphasized that it was important "to maintain close relations with an African state which has become a symbol of resistance to aggression and a champion of collective security."[40] As a result, the United States committed itself to bolstering Ethiopia's military further, including its fledgling navy. Beyond the 5 million US dollars that the United States provided to Ethiopia annually from 1953 onward,[41] Ethiopia received its first combat-ready ship, an American Patrol Craft, as a gift on June 4, 1957, with promises of future support.[42]

Selassie expected that the American funding would be lucrative "in light of the raging Cold War."[43] When Selassie offered to send a thousand soldiers to assist Western forces in the Korean War in August 1950, the original draft of his letter to Washington, D.C., demanded substantial armaments from the United States in exchange for the support.[44] While the final draft excluded the comment about armaments,[45] Selassie likely still expected something in

return for his loyalty to the United States. Later expansion of the American-operated Kagnew military base in Asmara also came with strings attached, namely, increased military funding to Ethiopia.[46] Selassie was willing to help the United States but not for free. Between 1950 and 1973, Ethiopia received over 151 million US dollars in direct support from the American government to develop its military.[47]

Compared to the United States, Britain became a much less significant contributor to Ethiopia's military development in the 1950s and 1960s. The Second World War shattered the British economy,[48] which made subsidizing Ethiopia's military impractical. The Foreign & Commonwealth Office instead shifted to developing secondary schools in Addis Ababa via the British Council over the following decades.[49]

Purchasing ships is useless without a place to dock and maintain them, so it is worth briefly considering the port facilities available to Ethiopia in the 1950s. When British-aligned forces expelled Fascist Italy from the Horn of Africa, they immediately assumed control over all Italian military facilities, including a well-developed naval base at Massawa, which had served Italy's Red Sea flotilla. British and American forces enlarged the base at Massawa as part of the Lend-Lease agreement with Ethiopia.[50] At the end of the war and after Italy officially lost its colonies, the British administration over the Italian territories assumed ownership. As recorded in a British parliamentary debate, Member of Parliament Anthony Nutting stated that "it was decided in 1947 to demolish the naval base, which had ceased to operate in 1945 and was falling into disrepair and costing the British Administration a great deal of money to maintain."[51] Notably, Nutting did not reference the infrastructure's status as plundered or the potential utility for Eritrea. He further commented that this was different from Britain's policy towards the territory's commercial ports, which would remain largely untouched. The fieriest public critique of this policy came from suffragette and anti-colonial activist Sylvia Pankhurst, who learned about the demolitions during a visit in 1952. She claimed that the British were "systematically destroying all the buildings in the port" and "the port will be left utterly desolate" for the Ethiopian government.[52] About a month later, on April 4, 1952, the Foreign Office notified correspondents in Asmara that there would be no more demolition unless a building was unsafe or condemned.[53]

Regardless of the specific legal dimensions or the British government's motives, Pankhurst's basic assertion is correct: if Ethiopia wanted to develop a naval base at Massawa, they would have to develop it from the ground up. This meant several years of work and hundreds of thousands of pounds in expenses for Ethiopia, which proved a major challenge in these early years. The admiralty estimated that initial facilities at Massawa would cost 4 million pounds not counting "armaments, armament stores, or moveable stores, which might cost very approximately another £1 million."[54] Ultimately, the construction of these facilities stagnated and remained incomplete for several years. Nonetheless, these new ports became a source of pride for

Selassie. When rumours of potential American leasing of the Massawa ports emerged in 1954, Caryl Ramsden of the British Foreign Office called them absurd because "The [Ethiopians] have had the use of Massawa for less than 18 months, and pride alone would prevent them from selling or mortgaging one of the brightest jewels in the imperial crown."[55] Selassie continued to visit these ports and proclaim that they would represent a vital part of Ethiopia's modernization.

The material developments of both ships and accompanying ports were only one part of the early Ethiopian navy's evolution: the administrative innovations were also important. Up until the early 1950s, Ethiopia's military was large but reliant on mostly poorly trained and poorly equipped infantry led by regional rulers. To professionalize its armed forces, the imperial government announced the creation of the Ministry of National Defence in November 1953, marking a "radical change in the organisation of the Imperial Defence Forces."[56] This ministry was the administrative arm of the three professionalized armed services: the Ministry of Army, the Ministry of Air, and Ministry of Marine. The Ministry of Marine oversaw both Ethiopia's naval combat capabilities and the civil administration of maritime resources. Gaitachew Bekele, a post-war educated elite who entered the civil service amid Ethiopia's modernization initiatives, provides some of the only commentary about the inner workings of the ministry available in English. He notes that alongside developing the military facilities at Massawa, the Ministry of Marine prioritized the expansion of commercial ports starting with Assab. The goal for this port was that it "would ultimately be able to accommodate all the liners passing through the Suez Canal."[57] The Ethiopian government improved the road systems between the hinterlands and Assab considerably, resulting in a doubling in the value of goods that passed through its port between 1953 and 1955.[58] While not strictly a military concern, decreased reliance on foreign ports was important to Ethiopia's national security.

Another important administrative innovation within Ethiopia was the establishment of the Massawa Naval Academy. The academy opened alongside the Massawa Naval Base in 1954, with the first recruits beginning their 52-month training regimen in 1955. Since Ethiopia had no trained naval officers at this point, the recruits studied under foreign officers until the mid-1960s. Selassie initially sought British instructors in 1952,[59] but no officers were available. He eventually reached a deal with Norway where the Scandinavian country provided around 25 officers.[60] While still reliant on foreign powers, the apparent goal was for Ethiopian nationals to take over training operations eventually.[61]

The Ministry of Marine laid the foundation for the IEN before its official formation in 1955. It organized the handful of police and custom boats in Eritrea into a cohesive coast guard and became the central body representing Ethiopia's maritime interests. Much of the work involved in establishing a naval academy or purchasing future equipment was tied to this ministry's efforts in the 1950s.

Figure 2.1 Rear Admiral Prince Iskinder Desta was the grandson of Ethiopian emperor Haile Selassie and commander of the Imperial Ethiopian Navy from 1958 to 1974.

Source: WikiCommons.

Desta and the Imperial Ethiopian Navy

The next stage of the IEN's development was related to the career of Iskinder Desta, who was the son of the Second Italo-Ethiopian War hero *Ras* Desta Damtew and the eldest grandson of Selassie. Following his studies at Wellington College in Britain from 1948 to 1951, Desta enrolled at the Britannia Royal Naval College in 1952. Desta was to assume control over the IEN after he completed his studies, only answerable to the emperor himself. Teferra Haile-Selassie, a civil servant under both the Imperial and Derg regimes, describes Selassie's post-war government as "a collection of loyalist individuals without any common political or ideological bond."[62] As such, it is unsurprising that Selassie entrusted one military branch to a loyal grandson.

Beyond the nepotism standard within the imperial government, the British government's involvement in the troubled training of Desta, is an excellent example of the deeply political nature of the IEN and its development. When finishing his fifth term at the Royal Naval College, he was at the bottom of his class and unlikely to pass the necessary exams "by any ordinary standards" to proceed with his training.[63] In early February 1954, the British Consul-General to Asmara B.J. Garnett met with Selassie to discuss Desta's options. The Admiralty proposed an arrangement where if Desta failed his exams, he

could still proceed to spend eight months aboard a training ship alongside the rest of his cohort. Selassie requested that Desta instead spend an extra term studying to gain sufficient theoretical knowledge before proceeding to his practical training. The Consul-General ultimately conceded and requested the Admiralty to consider making an exception for Desta to remain in good graces with Selassie.[64] Garnett noted in a subsequent letter that "our relations with Ethiopia are governed almost entirely by our relationship with the emperor, and a gesture such as this would be helpful in other ways."[65]

Subsequent correspondence discussed alternatives to having Desta repeat his fifth and sixth terms, including one proposal to finance a specially designed semester of study for Desta to polish his weaker areas.[66] The British Admiralty initially stated that Desta would proceed to his eight-month stint on a training ship, but that he would be unable to advance beyond this stage in the British Royal Navy due to a combination of poor grades in engineering and navigation and poor eyesight. Diplomat J.E. Killick, then stationed at the British Embassy in Addis Ababa, also said that he told Desta that further work in the Royal Navy required access to "a good deal of classified information which may only be available to British and allied officers" and would also likely disallow Desta's continued training.[67] Under most circumstances, it would have been impossible for Desta to continue further.

However, by late June, the Admiralty's policy shifted yet again. The admiralty proposed that Desta complete an additional 16 months of training, with 12 of them spent aboard one or more Royal Navy vessels. The British received official approval from the emperor for this proposal on August 13, 1954. Desta continued his training, serving as a midshipman on the cruiser *HMS Gambia* in 1955 and early 1956.[68] During this training, Busk characterized Desta as "extremely pro-British" and incredibly likely to secure a high-ranking position in the Ethiopian Navy post-training.[69] Selassie proved Busk correct about a year and a half later when he appointed Desta as Deputy-Chief of the IEN on January 25, 1958.[70] While Desta's rank changed over the following 16 years, he would remain the highest authority in the IEN – other than Selassie himself – until the Derg coup in September 1974. This meant that any substantial policy decisions within the IEN were conceived of or approved by members of the imperial family.

Desta was an interesting pawn in a larger series of negotiations between Ethiopia and Britain. British diplomat Killick stated that it would have been "very unfortunate" for Desta to continue his training with the Royal Navy because "the possible consequences on our future relations with the Ethiopian Navy, and particularly on our chances of obtaining contracts, are obvious."[71] A subsequent letter outlines that Britain would be negotiating a Treaty of Friendship and Commerce "from which the United Kingdom may expect to gain rather more commercial benefit than Ethiopia."[72] The Admiralty admitted that they were offering a rare concession because of "special political considerations obtain [sic] in the case of Desta and that his position as a member of the Imperial Family justifies his being accorded exceptional treatment."[73]

Desta himself had a positive reputation among the British officers that worked with him. In several of the letters sent during Desta's training, the authors all emphasized that he was a hard-working and bright young man,[74] albeit lacking some of the formal education needed to excel in certain subjects. Following Desta's appointment as head of the IEN, some surviving correspondence portrayed him as a pragmatic person open to constructive feedback and innovation.[75]

This pragmatism was sometimes at the British government's expense. Despite generally liking the British government and modelling much of the IEN's doctrine around the British Royal Navy, Desta was willing to receive assistance from either NATO or the Eastern Bloc. He stated in a 1960 phone call to the British Ambassador to Ethiopia, Denis A.H. Wright, that if the British did not supply a requested Algerine-class minesweeper, and the Americans did not have a viable replacement, then he would accept the Soviet Union's offer for support.[76]

The next phase of the IEN's development arguably began with Desta's appointment. One of Desta's first actions as Deputy-Chief of the IEN was the formulation of an ambitious ten-year plan for the IEN in early 1958, which he shared with Captain C.K.T. Wheen of the British Royal Navy. Desta stated that Ethiopia would develop the existing military facilities at Massawa as the country's principal naval base between 1958 and 1960. Ethiopia would also receive two patrol boats from the United States for training cadets in 1958. Desta planned to replace the patrol boats with a single training ship in 1960 and to redeploy the smaller vessels for active service. Between 1961 and 1966, he wanted to purchase two Motor Torpedo Boats (M.T.B.) per year from the British shipbuilder Vospers & Company. This plan stated that the United States would pay for these 12 M.T.B.s as part of the mutual defence agreement between the two countries, although there is no evidence that the United States authorized this specific expenditure. Ethiopia would then purchase three more M.T.B.s in 1968 and 1969, bringing the total to 18. The roadmap ended in 1969, with Desta's proposal to acquire two minesweepers per year on an ongoing basis. The estimated annual expense fell somewhere between ¾ million and 1 ¼ million pounds per year, excluding the upfront cost of purchasing ships.[77]

Initial progress towards this ten-year plan was promising. From the Americans, Ethiopia received two United States Coast Guard cutters, the WVP 95304 and WVP 95310, in 1958 under the Mutual Defense Assistance Program.[78] The naval base was also completed without any major complications. The first major hiccup emerged with the acquisition of a training ship. In Desta's discussions, he indicated interest in procuring a Greenwich-class seaplane tender from the United States but was open to using a smaller, more practical ship. Seaplanes were not in any substantial service among major naval powers by the early 1960s nor did Ethiopia have any seaplanes,[79] so the cranes and other specialized equipment would not have been superfluous.

However, Ethiopia ran into a roadblock in finding an alternative. C.K.T. Wheen, Britain's naval attaché to Ethiopia but based in Beirut, noted in a February 1960 report that Desta was growing desperate for a ship. The two patrol boats Ethiopia had could only accommodate about 30 crewmembers out of the approximately 450-and-growing personnel of the IEN.[80] In early March, the United States told Desta that an almost 20-year-old 2800 tonne and 95-meter-long A.V.P. class seaplane tender might be available for Ethiopia's use. Desta disliked the idea because the A.V.P. would have required a crew of 130 when the Massawa Naval Academy was only going to have 30–40 graduates per year after the initial cohort graduated.[81] Desta also later expressed that he did not want "another second-hand U.S. Ship."[82]

One slight advantage in the A.V.P.'s favour was its upfront cost. The A.V.P. retrofit would have cost 800 000 US dollars,[83] which would have equated to approximately 286 000 pounds in 1960.[84] While early estimates to refit a Second World War era Royal Navy Algerine would have been cheaper at 150 000 pounds,[85] the Admiralty's April 1960 estimate ranged between 300 000 and 400 000 pounds.[86] These figures do not include future maintenance or operational costs.

Selassie ultimately accepted the American A.V.P. Seaplane Tender, as it was the ship that was available the quickest and, assuming he did not remodel it, without any significant upfront expenses. The United States loaned the *USS Orca* (AVP-49) to Ethiopia in 1962, although Selassie accepted it as a gift rather than a loan and renamed the ship the *HMS Ethiopia*. Selassie stated that the *H.M.S. Ethiopia* would "serve as a symbol of Ethiopia's determination to guard her extensive coastline and to protect her maritime interests" and that the development of the IEN will continue "until the Ethiopian Navy attains a capacity to make her a proper and equitable contribution to the sea faring tradition of the days of Adulis. Though Ethiopia was robbed of her sea ports we remain sea-farers in spirit."[87] He portrayed the *H.M.S. Ethiopia*, and by extension the IEN, as a path to recreating the great fleets of ancient Aksum.

This sentiment was not universal among Ethiopia's allies. At minimum, some British and American officials believed that Ethiopia did not need a flagship. The British Ambassador to Ethiopia John Russell called the ship "an absurd extravagance and totally unnecessary" during his visit in early 1966.[88] One American intelligence report from the early 1970s called the *H.M.S. Ethiopia* an awfully expensive ship to maintain. Robert E. Pursley, then military assistant to the United States' Secretary of Defence, noted that trading a modern coastal minesweeper in exchange for the *H.M.S. Ethiopia*'s return would cost the IEN significantly less than just keeping the antiquated seaplane tender.[89]

Throughout the 1960s and early 1970s, Ethiopia purchased ships as its budget allowed, albeit at a slower pace than Desta's ten-year plan. By 1974, Ethiopia had one training ship, one minesweeper, five large patrol craft, four coastal patrol craft, and four landing craft in active service. All these

ships originated in the United States except for the minesweeper, which the Netherlands sold to Ethiopia in 1971.[90]

Personnel: Growth and Discontent

Just as a navy cannot function without equipment, well-trained and disciplined personnel are essential. Despite already having Norwegian officers training the IEN, Desta wanted instructors from the Royal Navy. During the late 1950s and early 1960s, he twice approached the British to request officers from the Royal Navy to train the IEN.[91] On both occasions, the British told Desta, and repeating their comments to Selassie a decade earlier, that no serving officers were available. The British noted that aside from a shortage in qualified officers, the pay offered by Ethiopia was lower than the Royal Navy's minimum salary. The Admiralty suggested instead that they could advertise the positions among retired naval officers as private contracts. As such, Desta privately approached retired Royal Navy Captain S.H. Beattie, a Victoria Cross recipient and prisoner of the Germans during the Second World War, with a job offer in July 1964. Foreign Office records indicate that they discovered this offer only after Beattie had accepted the position of "naval advisor" in Ethiopia.[92]

There is little information presently available about the sailors within the IEN. As with the army and air force, officers came from royal families while sailors were usually born to humbler beginnings. From what British and American intelligence notes, navy morale stayed relatively high in the late 1950s, with the only documented incident being a minor mutiny in autumn 1958 among some fresh recruits.[93] Naval academy staff and the British Foreign Office attributed the mutiny to unfamiliarity with the hierarchy and disciplinary standards within the IEN. Despite this optimistic beginning, morale deteriorated in the 1960s. Essential items like uniforms were scarce, with many sailors not having received their full kit even several years after completing training.[94] Complaints about working conditions, food, and pay became common. Another frequent complaint was that the IEN did not discharge enlisted personnel after they served the seven years their contracts mandated.[95] While most militaries can require that personnel remain enlisted during crises, this was not the case for Ethiopia. Strikes over poor conditions and compensation were also common at Ethiopia's ports in the 1950s and 1960s.[96]

There were general fears among British analysts that a mutiny would erupt at Massawa, especially as Desta and other high-ranking officers were absent while discipline and morale eroded.[97] One prominent issue was that Selassie's promise of a monthly food allowance for all sailors never materialized. Desta initially refused to supply this money at all, and in October 1966 advocated for a special allowance that he alone controlled. Sailors found this policy repugnant, preferring that they receive the promised money outright. After reaffirming support for this policy on December 13, 1966, sailors led by

Lieutenant Commander Ayele launched a nonviolent protest on December 15. This disobedience campaign lasted until Desta promised to revisit the issue.[98]

This episode highlights a major fracture within the IEN. Despite their grandiose statements about the IEN, Selassie and Desta struggled in delivering on their promises to the sailors. IEN personnel were not insulated from ongoing famines and growing economic inequality, which led to protests and uprisings in rural areas in the 1960s and 1970s.[99] Meanwhile, officers were unable to implement policies to improve their sailors' lives because Desta held the top position in the IEN and could overrule any proposals. Furthermore, officers had few opportunities for advancement because they could never reach the top position in the IEN, and Desta likely had near-absolute control over promotions. It is then unsurprising that a lieutenant commander launched the mutiny; there was likely no other recourse.

These issues within the IEN parallel other challenges to Selassie. After the Imperial Bodyguard's failed coup in 1960, popular movements and uprisings represented most of the opposition to Selassie.[100] The student protests in Addis Ababa and the Eritrean liberation movements of the 1960s and early 1970s challenged Selassie's regime and demanded greater political rights. Revolts became widespread in the 1960s because of increased hardships across the country and to challenge political corruption.[101] The 1966 Mutiny in the IEN represented a microcosm of these wider issues.

State-Sponsored Nationalism

To an extent, the procurement of a navy is tied to national pride. For many people across different nationalities, a ship can take "on board a range of meanings beyond itself and become a universal cultural symbol rich in allegorical and metaphorical significance."[102] Great naval empires like Britain tied their power to naval imagery including battles and famous warships.[103] Similarly, the creation of the IEN fit directly in line with Ethiopia's broader post-war development. It supported the goals of promoting a centralized dynastic state and state-sponsored nationalism as defined by developmentalist scholar Fouad Makki.[104]

One of the clearest examples of symbolism tied to the IEN was with the annual Massawa Navy Days Celebrations, which began in 1959 and continued well into the 1980s. British intelligence noted that the graduation of cadets from the Ethiopian Naval College has "become a set piece in the calendar of international military activity" with ships from the United Kingdom, the Soviet Union, and the United States expected to attend every year.[105] The Navy Days Celebrations was also the "only international review still held regularly" as of the early 1970s,[106] making it a unique venue for representatives of various countries to meet and discuss ongoing naval affairs. That Ethiopia, also venue for the headquarters of the Organization of African Unity (OAU) by this time, was the host further placed Selassie in a prominent role internationally. This

aligns with historian Elie Podeh's argument that countries hold celebrations to satiate "the desire of the elite to create a national identity, linking the citizen more firmly to the state and nation, and cementing solidarity among community members."[107] Yet despite these distinctions, memory of the Navy Days Celebrations largely survives in fragmentary references in newspapers, official correspondence, and trade publications.

This annual event appears to have emerged as a top-down initiative from Selassie. It began in 1959 with the graduation of the first cohort of cadets from the Massawa Naval Academy, for which Selassie invited representatives from foreign powers. There are no concrete records of who attended this event beyond a small British delegation. Commodore G.F.M. Best, representing the Britannia Royal Naval College, presented Selassie with a Sword of Honour at the ceremony on January 22, 1959.[108] The United States, the Soviet Union, Great Britain, and France tried to contribute at least one ship for subsequent events. Representatives from other countries, ranging from Pakistan to Italy, attended each year although did not necessarily send ships. The main event appeared to involve major nations' ships regardless of Cold War allegiances sailing in formation with Ethiopia's flagship,[109] and putting on subsequent performances as available. Military band performances were especially common during these celebrations.[110]

This event also occupies an interesting place within the broader Cold War. A major part of the celebrations was the dinner party that followed the day's graduation ceremony, which allowed for more off-the-record discussions between the emperor and diplomats from major powers. For example, during the January 1966 celebrations, Selassie was reportedly anxious about the coup attempt in Nigeria that happened a few days earlier.[111] Considering this unique access to the emperor, it was in the interest of both communist and capitalist countries to accept his invitation. This meant regular attendance from major world powers, giving Selassie's claim that Ethiopia was a major player in international affairs greater credence.

Conclusion

The IEN was scarcely around for 20 years when the Derg coup ended Selassie's reign in September 1974. No longer the IEN, the navy survived throughout the Derg's reign, with significant contributions of Soviet equipment and advisors after 1977. As the Ethiopian Civil War ended in the early 1990s, surviving ships and crews fled to Yemen and disappeared. The ships were most likely broken down and sold for scrap and the whereabouts of the sailors is presently unknown. The independence of Eritrea in 1991 landlocked Ethiopia once again and ensured that it could not have a blue water navy.

While brief, this episode in the history of Imperial Ethiopia is a fascinating case study. The IEN was the result of both Ethiopia's modernization efforts with its military and Ethiopia's regained access to the Red Sea. Naval development from 1953 to 1958 largely revolved around building infrastructure in

Eritrea and securing vessels and training from foreign powers. The Ministry of Marine was successful in establishing the Massawa Navy Academy and centralizing Ethiopia's coastguard services but had little success procuring deep-sea capable ships. Desta's appointment as the Deputy-Chief in 1958 was pivotal to the growth of the IEN. He oversaw expansion of Ethiopia's fleet, the increased training of personnel, and the completion of the naval base at Massawa. By 1974, Ethiopia's navy had 1380 active-duty officers and sailors operating a modest fleet of 15 ships.[112] Despite this growth, there were issues. The financial strain the navy placed on Ethiopia was evident to outside observers, especially with the maintenance costs of the *HMS Ethiopia*. Sailor morale was also tenuous, with a mutiny in 1965 highlighting broader social issues present in Ethiopia.

There is still potential for future research on Ethiopia's naval past. Archival research in Ethiopia and Eritrea may reveal previously unavailable records that would address existing gaps. Correspondence between officials within the Ministry of the Marine or the IEN could prove especially useful. The National Archives of Norway may contain some documents that address the Norwegian training officers at Massawa and the potential reasons for Desta's chilly attitude towards them. For studies on the Derg-era Ethiopian Navy, the most useful avenue would be to examine archives from the Eastern Bloc, as Soviet support was massive from 1977 to 1989.

The future of Ethiopia's nautical exploits remains ambiguous as it is presently a landlocked state. While the Ethiopian Navy will not exist as it did from 1953 to 1991, perhaps there will once again be a ship flying Ethiopia's flag on the Red Sea.

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