



*Some of the Ethiopian warriors who fought the victorious Battle of Adowa.*

## The Battle of Adowa

by Richard Pankhurst

The Battle of Adowa of March 1, 1896, can best be seen in the context of the European Scramble for Africa, which opened a new, and greatly accelerated, phase, as a result of the British seizure of Egypt in 1882. The occupation, which was supposed to be "temporary" but was in fact to last until 1930 was a major cause of the success of the Mahdist Revolution in the Sudan, which in turn led to the collapse of Egyptian—and British—power in the area.

One of the results of the Mahdist Revolution was that many British and Egyptian troops—and a sizeable number of civilians—were isolated in the Sudan. The British Government reluctant at that time to embark on a major war of reconquest, decided in 1883 that the Sudan would have to be

evacuated and the soldiers and civilians extricated. Since many were by then hopelessly beleaguered in hostile territory, the British further decided to enlist the support of the then ruler of Ethiopia, King of Kings, or Emperor Yohannes IV.

With this end in view a British officer, Rear-Admiral Sir William Hewett, was despatched to negotiate with Yohannes on behalf of Great Britain and British-occupied Egypt. Yohannes expressed his willingness to cooperate in rescuing the garrisons, but stipulated that Ethiopian territories on the Sudanese frontier—or more precisely the Keren area which the Egyptians had then only recently seized—should be restored to Ethiopian rule. He also requested that Ethiopia should once more control the Red Sea port of

Massawa.

The first of Yohannes's demands were accepted by the British, but, as far as the port was concerned, Hewett would go no further than promise free transit, "under British protection," for Ethiopian goods, though he expressly agreed that this could include arms and ammunition. Yohannes greatly regretted that he had been denied complete control of the port which was essential for Ethiopia's economic and strategic well-being, but wrote to Queen Victoria, expressing gratitude for what the Treaty offered, and a prayer that "the gates of Heaven would open for her as she had opened Massawa for him."

### Short-lived Treaty

A Tripartite Treaty embodying the above principles, and binding Great

Britain, British-occupied Egypt and Ethiopia, was duly signed at Adowa on June 3, 1884. It included an article expressly guaranteeing Ethiopia's right to make use of the port of Massawa, for all purposes, including the import of arms and ammunition, under British protection; and the Preamble to the document proudly stated that it bound not only the contracting parties, but also "their heirs and successors".

In accordance with this Treaty, Emperor Yohannes's commander, Ras Alula, marched westwards to the Sudan, and duly relieved six beleaguered garrisons, the only such towns where the defenders were enabled to escape.

The Adowa Treaty, despite its pious reference to "heirs and successors", proved remarkably short-lived, for, as soon as the garrisons had been rescued by Ras Alula, the British Government saw no further need of Ethiopia—or further advantage in the Treaty. Instead of standing by the agreement of 1884 the British Government therefore decided, almost immediately, to jettison it.

The British Government abandoned the Treaty deliberately, in order to further its interests in the Scramble for Africa. Britain and France were then the principal rivals in that scramble and the British, with a view to curbing the expansion of France in this part of Africa, decided to bring in the Italians who were then just beginning to develop colonial ambitions.

Thus encouraged by Britain, the Italians decided on speedy action: an Italian force landed at Massawa, on February 5, 1885—only eight months and two days after the signing of the Tripartite Treaty of the previous year which had promised the use of the port to Yohannes. Treaties among European powers were often broken in the passage of time—but one with an African country in the era of the Scramble for Africa thus proved scarcely worth the cost of the paper on which it was written.

The British Government's volte-face in relation to events in far-off Africa was of course scarcely known to the British

public at the time, but at least one Englishman was aware and deeply shocked by it. Augustus B. Wylde, a sometime British Vice-Consul for the Red Sea, commented:

"Look at our behaviour to King Johannes from any point of view and it will not show one ray of honesty, and to my mind it is one of the worst bits of business out of many we have been guilty of in Africa ... England made use of King Johannes as long as he was of any service, and then threw him over to the tender mercies of Italy, who went to Massawa under our auspices with the intention of taking territory that belonged to our ally, and allowed them to destroy and break all the promises England had solemnly made to King Johannes after he had faithfully carried



Emperor Menelik.

out his part of the agreement. The fact is not known to the British public and I wish it was not true for our credit's sake; but unfortunately it is, and it reads like one of the vilest bits of treachery that has been perpetrated in Africa or India in the eighteenth century".

Yohannes was naturally no less shocked by the British Government's volte-face. He accordingly wrote to Queen Victoria, on August 28, 1884, expressing his surprise that a Treaty which was supposed to endure from "generation to generation" should have become invalid within less than a year, and went on to inquire whether the Italians had in fact come to the port with British permission. At the same

time he reported further disturbing developments which were soon to be portents of others to come: the Italians.

he informed the Queen, had already stopped the import of a consignment of firearms bound for Ethiopia—and Italian troops had advanced inland as far as "the edge of the salt plains". The Italians, it was thus clear, had already begun a policy of colonial expansion.

To understand the colonial spirit of the time one should recall that earlier that year, on February 26, 1885, the major European powers had signed the General Act of Berlin which laid down rules for the European Scramble for Africa. These were designed to facilitate the occupation of Africa by the European powers—as well to minimise potential conflicts between the latter. Article XXXIV—which was soon to have major relevance to Ethiopia—stated that:

"Any power which henceforth takes possession of a tract of land on the coast of the African continent outside of its present possessions, or which, being hitherto without such possessions, shall acquire them, as well as the power which assumes a protectorate there, shall accompany the respective act with a notification thereof, addressed to the other Signatory Powers ... in order to enable them, if need be, to make good any claims of their own".

The understanding at Berlin was in fact that the European occupation of any tract of land on the African coast—such as the port of Massawa and its adjacent mainland territory—carried with it the right of occupation of the hinterland—such as the Ethiopian interior.

The British Government, one of the signatories of the General Act of Berlin, was of course entirely uninterested in the disastrous consequences for Ethiopia of the scuttling of the Adowa Treaty. In reply to Yohannes's complaint at the Italian occupation of Massawa a letter bearing Queen Victoria's signature was accordingly despatched to the Ethiopian ruler, on December 8, 1885, expressing the pious, but in the circumstances entirely absurd, hope

that he would "be able to come to a friendly arrangement" with Italy. To make up for the manifest inadequacy of this reply the British Government also sent him two ceremonial swords as a token of thanks for Ethiopian assistance in releasing the Egyptian garrisons in the previous year. Yohannes was duly touched—but, in view of the imminent threat from Italy, would doubtless have preferred a consignment of modern firearms!

Greatly disturbed by the advent of Italian colonialism Yohannes wrote again to Victoria, on April 19 of the following year, asking her, not without a touch of irony, how he could make friends with the Italians—as she had urged—as, for his part, he "did not have the required knowledge or skill for this". The British Government was presumably no more knowledgeable or skilled—for it vouchsafed Yohannes no reply.

### Italian Colonialism

While this protracted, but largely pointless, diplomacy was proceeding, the Italians were preparing for their first outright invasion of Ethiopia. In August 1885 an Italian force accordingly marched inland from Massawa to seize the village of Sa'ati, 30 kilometres into the interior.

When news of this advance reached Ras Alula he at once called the Egyptian envoy, Marcopoli Bey, to complain. Recalling that Egypt, as well as Britain, had only eighteen months earlier guaranteed that Ethiopia should have the free use of Massawa, he said to the envoy, on August 12: "Why do you not turn the Italians out of here? Why have you allowed them to be there?" The patriotic Ras's complaints, like those of his master Yohannes, were, however, unavailing, for the Egyptians, then under British occupation, were of course unable to take any action on their own.

Italian troops meanwhile continued to consolidate their control at the coastal area. Towards the end of the year 1886 they proceeded to seize the tiny

port of Zulla and the village of Wi'a, some twenty kilometre inland. Within two years of Italy's first seizure of Massawa in 1884 the area of Italian colonial rule had thus expanded to cover about a thousand square kilometres.

Faced with this continuing colonial expansion—and the violation of Ethiopian territorial integrity which it entailed—Alula sent a message of protest to the Italian commander, General Gené, on January 12, 1887, demanding that Italy should withdraw from both Zulla and Wi'a. In his letter Alula declared:



Ras Makonnen.

"The troops that are at Wi'a must be removed by 21 January, and those that are at Zulla must be removed within a month. If friendship is to continue, you must do this". Otherwise, he warned, "you must know that friendship is at an end".

The Italians were, however, intent on further colonial expansion and extensive penetration into the Ethiopian interior. Gené therefore brusquely rejected Alula's ultimatum, and spurned any suggestion of possible future friendship.

### The Battle of Dogali

Faced with Italy's rejection of his ultimatum Alula had little option but to act—which he did with his customary promptness. On January 24, 1887, he left his camp at Ghinda on the edge of

the Ethiopian plateau, and rode to Sa'ati where he attacked the newly established Italian camp. The Italians were by then so well entrenched that hundreds of Ethiopians were killed, for the loss of only four of the enemy. To strengthen his position General Gené had, however, decided to send up some five hundred men as reinforcements. These Ras Alula attacked, on January 26, near the village of Ted'ali (now better known as Dogali). Fighting was again very fierce, and the Italians, in this engagement unprotected by any fortifications, suffered heavy losses: only eight wounded troops survived.

Though the fighting at Dogali was a direct consequence of the abandonment of the 1884 Treaty, and had resulted from the on-going Italian advance against Ras Alula, the British Government continued to display no interest in Ethiopia's predicament. On the contrary Britain sided with Italy, which it regarded by this time as a fellow colonial power. With advice from the Italian Ministry of Foreign Affairs the British foreign Office accordingly drew up a letter to Yohannes which was signed by Queen Victoria. It declared that the Italians were "a powerful nation", and added—with palpable untruth—that they had "friendly and good intentions" towards Ethiopia.

The Italian Government, so far from displaying any such "friendly and good intentions", was in fact preparing for further expansion at Ethiopia's expense. Immediately after the battle of Dogali the Parliament in Rome voted a credit of five million lire to strengthen military forces at Massawa, and began despatching additional troops, with large quantities of arms and ammunition; and on June 1888 a further military vote of twenty million lire was given for use in Africa.

Faced with the resultant powerful military build-up in and around Massawa, and the imminent threat of a further Italian advance, Yohannes strengthened his defence in the area facing the coast. This he did by transferring from the west forces previously stationed at Gallabat on the Sudan

frontier. Finding the frontier thus inadequately guarded the Sudanese Mahdists (against whom Yohannes had taken action at the request of Britain in 1884) attacked and broke into Ethiopian territory at that point. Yohannes hastened to Gallabat to repel them but at the close of a victorious battle, in March 1889, was mortally wounded by a sniper's bullet.

News of the death of Yohannes—and the resultant struggle for the succession—created great confusion throughout northern Ethiopia. This was intensified by the fact the country was then suffering from the Great Ethiopian Famine, a tragic event almost unprecedented in its long history. These difficulties, economic as well as political, destroyed any immediate possibility of effective Ethiopian resistance to Italian penetration. The Italians were thus at last enabled to fulfil their ambition of advancing into the northern Ethiopian plateau. By the end of 1889 they had succeeded in occupying a large stretch of highland territory, including the then tiny village of Asmara. This occupation gave them a strong strategic stronghold. "Once they had made good their foothold on the upper plateau and fortified themselves", A.B. Wylde wrote, "no Abyssinian force could drive them out". The stage was thus set for the official proclamation of the Italian colony of Eritrea which took place in the following year, 1890.

### The Wuchalé Treaty

On the death of Yohannes, Menelek, the then King of Shoa, succeeded him as King of Kigs, or Emperor of all Ethiopia. He it was who had thereafter to face the continued—and soon greatly expanded—threat of Italian colonialism.

Relations between Menelek and the Italians were, however, at first cordial for the latter, concealing their colonial ambitions, offered him the hand of friendship. On May 2, 1889—less than two months after the death of Yohannes—a Treaty of Perpetual

Peace and Friendship between the two countries was accordingly signed, at the village of Wuchalé, often written by the Italians as Ucciale contained articles of advantage to both signatories. Menelek, who was at that time still virtually unknown to the outside world, obtained Italian recognition of his status as Emperor of Ethiopia, and permission, specified in Article VI, to import arms and ammunition through Italian colonial territory. The right to import weapons, earlier specified in the Adwa Treaty was thus restored. Italy, on the other hand, for its part received Menelek's recognition of its occupation of the northern Ethiopian plateau.



Ras Alula.

The most famous article in the Wuchalé Treaty was, however, Article XVII, which was soon the basis of dispute. This arose from the fact that the Treaty had two texts, one in Amharic and the other in Italian, the sense of which, though elsewhere identical, in that article differed materially. The Amharic version stated the Menelek should have the power to avail himself of the services of the Italians for all communications he might wish to have with other Powers. The Italian text, in contrast, made this obligatory.

Though the Italian text was soon to be used by the Italian Government for entirely untoward purposes, the Treaty seemed at first to provide a basis for valuable economic and other co-operation. Menelek accordingly despatched his cousin, Ras Makonnen, then gover-

nor of Harar, to Italy to negotiate the implementation of the Wuchalé Treaty. An Additional Convention was duly signed in Rome, on October 1, it specified *inter alia*, in Article IV, that Menelek would introduce his country's first coined money since ancient times, and that this would be accepted in the Italian colonies, while Article VI laid down that the Italian Government would provide the necessary guarantees to enable an Italian bank to grant Menelek a loan of four million lire.

While these negotiations were in progress in Rome, Italian troops were, however, rapidly advancing into the northern Ethiopian plateau, thereby greatly strengthening Italy's colonial position. Within a week or so of the signing of the Additional Convention the Italian Government felt itself strong enough to proclaim a Protectorate over the whole of Ethiopia. The Italian Foreign Minister, Crispi, accordingly wrote a letter to his country's diplomatic representatives abroad, on October 11, asking them to inform the Governments to which they were accredited that "in conformity with Article XXXIV of the General Act of Berlin" Italy served notice that "under Article XXII of the perpetual treaty between Italy and Ethiopia ... it is provided that His Majesty the King of Ethiopia consents to avail himself of the Government of His Majesty the King of Italy for the conduct of all matters which he may have with other Powers or Governments".

It was in this manner—almost, one might say, by this slight of hand—that the Italian Government turned the Treaty of Perpetual Peace and Friendship, with its seemingly trivial Article XVII on communication with foreign powers, into a claim to a Protectorate over the whole of the country with which it was supposed to have perpetual peace and friendship.

Despite its preposterous character, the Italian claim was duly accepted by most of the other European colonial powers—whose title deeds to African lands were in many cases scarcely more valid than that of Italy. Among those

recognising the supposed Protectorate was the British Government which entered into three Protocols with Italy, on March 24 and April 15, 1891, and May 5, 1894, defining the frontiers between British colonial and Protectorate territory and the assumed Italian Protectorate.

Menelik refused, however, to accept the Italian interpretation of the Wuchalé Treaty. On September 27, 1890, he accordingly wrote to King Umberto I of Italy, declaring that, on re-examining the two texts of Article XVII, he had discovered that they did not agree, and added: "When I made that treaty of friendship with Italy, in order that our secrets be guarded and our understanding should not be spoiled, I said that because of our friendship, our affairs in Europe might be carried on with the Sovereign of Italy, but I have not made any treaty which obliges me to do so, and today, I am not the man to accept it. That one independent power does not seek the aid of another to carry on its affairs your Majesty understands very well".

Determined not to become further dependent on Italy, the Ethiopian ruler at once stopped drawing on the Italian loan agreed to in the Additional Convention, and began paying back the part already utilised.

Relation between the two countries, it was becoming increasingly apparent, had reached a stage that could, and would, be solved only by resort to war. During the ensuing discussions the Italian envoy, Count Antonelli, said to Menelik, "Italy cannot notify the other Powers that she was mistaken in Article XVII because she must maintain her dignity". Menelik's consort, Queen Taytu, who was present, is reported to have thereupon intervened, exclaiming: "We have also made known to the Powers that the said article, as it is written in our language, has another meaning. As you, we also ought to respect our dignity". And proudly she added, "You wish Ethiopia to be represented before the other Powers as your Protectorate, but this shall never be!".

Menelik, scarcely less forthright, also

refused to countenance any foreign Protectorate over his age-old country. Faced with the Italian Government's insistence on its interpretation of the Wuchalé Treaty he took the dramatic step, on February 12, 1893, of denouncing the Treaty itself. Informing the European Powers of this act—and alluding to the Italian claim embodied in Article XVII as well as to the well-known reference to his country in the Bible—he wrote to them, on February 27, prophetically declaring, "Ethiopia has need of no one; she stretches out her hands to God".

The stage was thus at last set for the Adowa war, which began in January 1895. The invaders, who at first had the upper hand, forced their way through Tegrè to capture the heights of Amba Alagi. Later in the year, however,



Some of the Italian generals at the Battle of Adowa.

Menelik moved north at the head of a large army, defeating the enemy at Amba Alagi in December and at Makalé at the turn of the year. The Italians were accordingly obliged to fall back on Adowa.

The first weeks of 1896 witnessed a period of inaction, as neither commander wished to take the initiative of attack, with its consequent risks of heavy casualties and possible defeat. Then, on February 25 Crispi exasperated by the delay, despatched a faithful telegramme to the Italian Commander

General Baratieri." This is a military phthisis", it read, "not a war ... a waste of heroism, without any corresponding success ... It is clear to me that there is no fundamental plan in this campaign, and I should like to have one formulated. We are ready for any sacrifice in order to save the honour of the army and the prestige of the monarchy". Baratieri responded by ordering his army to attempt an immediate surprise attack, which, in large measure thanks to Ras Alula's alertness, miscarried.

The Battle of Adowa began early on the morning of March 1—and resulted that same day in the almost complete destruction of the invading army which lost over 40 per cent of its fighting force, as well as all its cannons, and most of its rifles and other supplies which were left on the field of battle by the retreating army.

Adowa, the greatest victory of an African army over a European in the era of the Scramble for Africa, preserved Ethiopia's age-old independence. On October 26, little over half a year after the battle, the Italian Government agreed to a new treaty—the Treaty of Addis Ababa, which formally annulled the Treaty of Wuchalé—and recognised Ethiopia's absolute independence. Menelik, whose army was by this time almost starving, was, however in no position to send his army more than a short distance into the well-fortified Italian colony of Eritrea, which thus continued to exist—and was to be the springboard for fascist Italy's invasion of Ethiopia only forty years later.

### Old Flag

What shall I say to you, Old Flag?  
You are so grand in every fold,  
So linked with mighty deeds of old,  
So steeped in blood where heroes fell  
So torn and pierced by shot and shell  
So calm, so still, so firm, so true,  
My throat swells at the sight of you,  
Old Flag!

Hubbard Parker *Old Flag*