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Author(s): Gebru Tareke

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THE ETHIOPIA-SOMALIA WAR OF 1977 REVISITED*

By Gebru Tareke

The Democratic Republic of Somalia invaded Ethiopia in mid-1977 to realize a dream that had eluded its leaders for 17 years: the annexation of the Ogaden, a first step toward the creation of a Greater Somalia co-extensive with the Somali people in the Horn of Africa. The invasion ignited a major war of attrition that involved many external actors and brought the Somalis very close to attaining their strategic goal. For the Ethiopians, who were in the midst of a profound social transformation, military defeat would have cost them about a third of their territory. It might also have precipitated not only the fall of the still-fledgling government in Addis Ababa, but possibly also the defeat of the Ethiopian revolution and the dismemberment of the country. Because of a serendipitous confluence of forces and events, however, Ethiopia averted catastrophe and turned the tables on the aggressor. The dramatic and massive intervention by socialist countries enabled the Ethiopians to crush and repel the invading army, which never recovered fully from its stunning defeat.

The Ethiopia-Somalia armed conflict was one of the two biggest wars between African states in contemporary times² and its repercussions were felt far beyond the continent. Yet we do not know enough about how the war was won or lost. The causes of the war, the dynamics of Cold War politics, and the related international realignments that brought about dramatic reversals in the politico-military fortunes or misfortunes of the two states of the Horn have been thoroughly analyzed. Accounts of the war's operational history are insufficient, however. Two of the three most substantive accounts of the war are based almost solely on Somali oral testimonies and the third is constructed mainly from secondary and a few unnamed primary sources.³ Inescapably, there have been significant omissions because the Ethiopian materials have not been tapped, largely

^{*} Research for this article was carried out in 1994 with support from the Social Science Research Council and the MacArthur Foundation as part of a larger project in progress. I am grateful to both institutions, as I am to the then-Transitional Government of Ethiopia for granting me access to some of the archives in the Ministry of National Defense. I also wish to thank my colleagues, William Atwell and Derek Linton, as well as two anonymous readers for this journal for their discerning remarks and helpful suggestions.

¹ Greater Somalia would have included the then Republic of Somalia, the Republic of Djibouti, the Ogaden, and the Northern District of Kenya.

² The other is the more recent war (1998–2000) between Ethiopia and Eritrea.

³ John Markakis, National and Class Conflict in the Horn of Africa (Cambridge, 1987), 222-31; Patrick Gilkes, "Revolution and Military Strategy: The Ethiopian Army in the Ogaden and in Eritrea, 1974-84," in Bahru Zewde et al., eds., Proceedings of the Eleventh International Conference of Ethiopian Studies, II (Addis Ababa, 1994), 721-26; and Bruce D. Porter, The USSR in Third World Politics (Cambridge, 1986), Chap. 9.

because the official information long was kept in classified files, out of the analysts' reach. Some of those files have since become accessible. The purpose of this essay is to provide a more complete picture of the conflict, primarily by drawing from unrevised Ethiopian sources, both written and oral.⁴ Despite the detailed nature of this essay, it needs to be stressed that certain aspects of the war will remain foggy until all the relevant Ethiopian and, more importantly, Somali official documents are released and until veterans of the war begin to tell their own stories. The Ethiopian documents I have used are often incomplete and at times inconsistent; there is also a tendency to exaggerate the enemy's losses while minimizing one's own. Once in a while one finds a zealous commander exalting the "bravery" of his unit in order to meet the expectations or win the pleasure of his military or political superiors. These shortcomings are, of course, not peculiar to the Ethiopian military. In spite of them, and since there were no independent reporters at the battle sites, the official reports are our only and most valuable sources. It is impossible to reconstruct the operational history of the Ogaden War without them. I am not aware of primary historical sources that are more informative, authentic, and indeed more reliable and credible. To a large extent, my oral informants have complemented or corroborated these official reports and the published material does not contradict them.

The essay will also demonstrate that, although the Somalis were able to snatch the initiative by making good use of their mechanized forces, they ultimately failed to achieve their aim for two reasons. First, the Somalis had planned for a short war without carefully balancing means and ends. They had an arsenal of Soviet weaponry, but their command and logistics systems were inadequate. Second, by taking advantage of those defects and their own numerical superiority, the Ethiopians were able to drain the Somalis and win. Still, it was external interventionists that tipped the balance in their favor. Ethiopian patriotic ardor and firmness held the Somalis to a virtual standstill, but Cuban and Soviet assistance undeniably broke the impasse, ensuring Ethiopia's victory.

The Setting

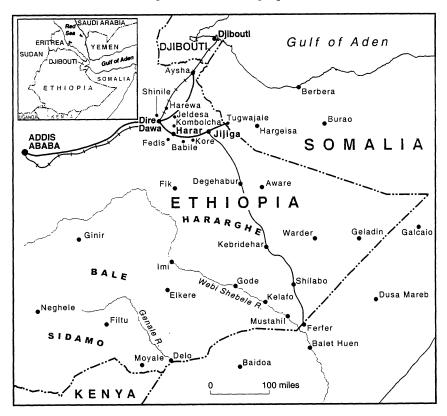
The 1977 war between Ethiopia and Somalia is known as the Ogaden War precisely because the Ogaden region of Ethiopia was both the main cause and the main site of armed conflict. About 200,000 square kilometers (125,000 square miles) in size, the Ogaden is mostly desert; only thorn vegetation thrives and

⁴ These documents cover a wide range of subjects, from recruitment to battle operations and foreign relations. They consist of field reports, internal memos, and communiques, as well as correspondence with other governmental agencies and public organizations. Accuracy of the field reports pertaining to campaigns, operations, and battles is variable. Overall, the Ministry's archives are as reliable as any other state's official records. Consultation is not easy because documents are not yet properly catalogued. Generally, they are arranged or classified by subject and year.

⁵ Dawit Wolde Giorgis, Red Tears: War, Famine and Revolution in Ethiopia (Trenton, NJ, 1989); Gilkes, "Revolution and Military Strategy," 726; Christopher Clapham, Transformation and Continuity in Revolutionary Ethiopia (Cambridge, 1989), 61–62.

underground water is the main source of life. Except for the fertile belts along river basins where limited sedentary life exists, it is a barren and bleak landscape of flat-topped hills and arid plains that slope southward from the Harar plateau (elevation 2,000 meters) and stretch to the Somali border where the elevation drops to 500 meters. To the west, the Ogaden is bound by the Webi/Shebele River, which separates it from the agricultural region of Bale, believed to be the cradle of the Oromo people but the southern parts of which are also inhabited by Somalis belonging to various clans. The Ogaden itself is inhabited exclusively by a Somali population that comprises many clans, the dominant one being the Ogaden, which gave the territory its name.

Soon after its establishment in 1960, the Somali state sought to wrest the Ogaden from Ethiopia on ethnic and cultural grounds. What the Somali irredentists called Western Somalia extended almost as far as the Awash River, embracing the whole of Hararghe where two of Ethiopia's largest cities, Harar and Dire Dawa, are located as well as large portions of Bale and Sidamo provinces. This claim conflicted with the multiethnic composition of the area, in which the Somali are a distinct minority. Apart from the Ogaden proper, Somalis are confined to the northern lowlands of Hararghe, mainly the Dire Dawa district, and the southern lowlands of Bale. In the midst of the Oromo majority also live clusters of Harari, Afar, Argobba and Amhara peoples.



Even though the Somalis made their claim on the basis of ethnicity, economic interest also lay behind their expansionist impulses. With its rolling plains and lush valleys that are watered by numerous rivers and ample seasonal rains, Hararghe is one of Ethiopia's richest agricultural regions. There some of the country's staples such as teff, barley, wheat, and coffee are cultivated and its finest cattle are raised. Hararghe is also home to the stimulant called chat (qat), quantities of which are annually exported to Djibouti and some Middle Eastern countries. The pivotal railway linking Ethiopia's capital, Addis Ababa, with Djibouti to which Somalia also lay claim, passes through Hararghe. It is a variegated area dotted by mountain chains, the more imposing of which are the Amhar that rise in the center of the plain between Harar and Jijiga. The Marda Pass that cuts through the mountain range is a fortress of great natural strength with enormous military significance. It is this vast and scenic stretch of land that the Somali state wanted to appropriate. During the first decade of its independence, Somalia stirred up political unrest inside Ethiopia and even instigated an interstate armed conflict in 1964 in which its own army was badly mauled. The invasion that began in July 1977 and ended in March 1978 was the culmination of those frustrated adventures.

For Somali irredentists the political situation in Ethiopia in 1977 and the state of the country's military could not have been more alluring. First, though the Ethiopians had a clear numerical advantage in fighting men (47,000 to 35,000), they were at an overall technical and tactical disadvantage in the air and on the ground. The Somalis outnumbered the Ethiopians in mobile battalions, tanks, combat aircraft, artillery, armor, and armored personnel carriers (APCs). Not only were the Ethiopians far less well equipped, but much of their weaponry was outdated and inferior. Somalia had nearly three times as many tanks-250 T-35s and T-55s, which had bigger guns, better armor, greater range and more maneuverability than Ethiopia's aging M-41 and M-47 tanks—and twice as many APCs. Ethiopia also lacked Somalia's ground-to-air missile capability. The underequipped army was thinly spread, since some of its best units were tied up in the north. Thus, along the entire border with Somalia there were only 4 infantry brigades, one of them mechanized, 2 tank battalions, 2 artillery battalions, and 3 airborn battalions. Somalia reportedly had 23 motorized and mechanized battalions, 9 tank battalions, 9 artillery battalions, and 4 airborne battalions.⁶

Second, the new and unsteady government in Addis Ababa was beset by murderous power struggles at the center and multiple revolts on the periphery. In other words, the country was faced with the chasm of civil war and dissolution and the military's resources were fully stretched. Eritrean insurgents had captured most of that province, while Afar, Oromo and Tigrean rebels were causing havoc in their respective areas and beyond. Another organization that called itself the

⁶ Armed Forces Headquarters (AFH), "Sile Sumalia Tor Hayloch Giziawi Yemereja Gimit," enclosure, Col. Alemayehu Kassa, ka Tor Hayloch Huletegna Memria la Tor Hayloch Sostegna Memria, Miazia 25, 1967, Addis Ababa, Ministry of National Defense (MOND). General Oleg Sarin and Col. Lev Dvoretsky, Alien Wars (Novato, Calif., 1996); David D. Laitin, "The War in the Ogaden," Journal of Modern African Studies 17, 1 (1979), 99; and Robert Patman, The Soviet Union in the Horn of Africa (Cambridge, 1990), Table 9, 181–82.

Ethiopian Democratic Union (EDU) was engaged in armed combat in the north-western part of the country. The hard-pressed army had lost many of its most able and experienced officers due to purges and dismissals subsequent to the outbreak of the revolution. To cap it all off, the United States government had cut off the supply of arms to its former client state whose armed forces it had helped build and equip on grounds that the new leaders had flagrantly violated human rights. It must have become all too obvious to the Somali leaders that the Ethiopian central authority and its army had been so gravely weakened by revolutionary upheaval, internal rivalries, purges, and ethnic uprisings that it could not withstand a full-scale invasion by a well-equipped army. It was a moment not to be missed and they seized it with relish.

The Somali Offensive

The Somali state executed the war in two stages, much as the Ethiopian General Staff had anticipated, but for which it was woefully ill-equipped. By early 1975 the Ministry of National Defense (MOND) was persuaded by its own intelligence that Somalia was fully prepared to wage war against Ethiopia. The assault was expected to begin soon after the Somali president, General Muhammed Siad Barre, completed his tenure as the 11th chairman of the Organization of African Unity (OAU) in June of the same year. It was believed that before it committed its regular forces, Somalia would use accessory forces—i.e., peasants from southeastern Ethiopia, whom it already had trained and armed for guerrilla fighting.⁷ That is exactly what happened.

The Guerrilla Phase. The Mogadishu regime probably was under no illusion that the guerrillas by themselves would defeat the Ethiopian army and "liberate Western Somalia." Rather, the use of guerrillas appears to have had a dual purpose: to pressure Ethiopia into negotiation while wearing down its troops, who would then be attacked by Somali regulars at a suitable time if and when the talks failed. The strategy worked well.

Evidently, the Somali state had been training and organizing dissident peasants from eastern and southern Ethiopia ever since the collapse of the 1963 revolt in Bale, which Somalia had partially inspired and sustained. In early 1975 the state reorganized the Western Somali Liberation Front (WSLF), which had led the Bale rebellion, and about six months later founded the Somali-Abo Liberation Front (SALF) under the leadership of some veterans from the 1960s. The goals of the fronts were not at all clear. Whereas the WSLF wavered between full independence and autonomy within a unified Somalia, the SALF had no overall strategy. The SALF's formation was undoubtedly intended not only to conciliate Oromo sensibilities, but also to counteract the Oromo Liberation Front (OLF), an ethnonationalist movement that had begun operations in the provinces of Bale and Hararghe and whose territorial claims overlapped with those of the Somali state.

⁷ AFH, "Tora 3—Ikid 1," Sene 14, 1967, Addis Ababa, 2; AFH, "Sile Sumalia ... Gimit," Miazia 25, 1967, 2, 15; AFH, "Tarma Ber 2," 1966, 2, MOND.

What distinguished the fronts from most other contemporary liberation movements was their lack of autonomy; both organizationally and logistically they were under the grip of a foreign authority. The administrative organs they possessed were merely designed to give them a veneer of independence. Trained, armed, organized, and otherwise supported by the Somalia state, the fronts were ancillaries of the Somali army. While the WSLF as well as the territory to which it laid claim were placed under the authority of the 26th or Northern Command, headquartered in Hargeisa, the SALF fell under the 60th or Southern Command seated in Baidoa. The guerrillas, who appeared to have been organized into nine divisions closely corresponding to clan divisions both in composition and zone of operation, were led by Somali officers and their supreme commander was no other than the Somali minister of defense, General Muhammad Ali Samatar.

How many armed men were there? The Somali side has not revealed the fronts' strength and it probably never will. The Ethiopian official sources are speculative but precise in their estimates. One source indicates that by July 1977 some 39,450 fighters had entered Ethiopia, half of them going to Hararghe and the other half to Bale, Sidamo, and Arssi. During the war 34,000 more were added, raising the total to 63,200.¹⁰ If indeed there were nine divisions and assuming that each division contained 5,000 to 7,000 fighters, then the estimate appears to be roughly accurate. Some close observers believe, however, that it is more likely the numbers did not exceed 45,000.¹¹ The men were mostly equipped with AK-47 assault rifles but also possessed heavy machine guns, grenades, and rockets.

Guerrilla warfare began almost simultaneously in the north and south in the early months of 1976 and by the end of the year had spread throughout Hararghe and into southeastern Bale and Sidamo. Partly arid scrubland and partly mountainous and wooded, it is a terrain with which the fighters were thoroughly familiar and whose inhabitants were regarded as friendly. Infiltrating from several points in the Somali republic, the guerrillas moved swiftly across vast plains and rugged hills. Wherever they went, the guerrillas dismantled the state's apparatus by destroying government offices and by systematically attacking the thinly spread police and civilian administrators, forcing most of them to flee to the near-

⁸ MOND, "Ba Hararghe Kifle Hager ya Winbidina Inkiskasie Anesas ena Edget," n.d., Table, 15. This document, which describes the evolution of the WSLF, was probably written by the Intelligence section of the Third Division. See also Markakis, *National and Class Conflict*, 227.

⁹ Markakis, National and Class Conflict, 225; Gilkes, "Revolution and Military Strategy," 722.

¹⁰ MOND, "Ba Hararghe ... Edget," 13-15, 59.

¹¹ Lt.Col. Kassahun Tirfe, April 25, 1994, Addis Ababa. The colonel was deputy intelligence officer of the Third Division at the time. Col. Ketema Gabra Mariam, April 12, 1994, Addis Ababa, a paracommando officer. Since there was a tendency to overestimate the numbers of their opponents, it is unlikely that the combined guerrilla forces exceeded 35,000.

est garrison towns. Those who could not do so in time suffered, many losing their lives. 12

Popular support was neither ubiquitous nor undisputed. The pastoral/nomadic Somali population of the lowlands universally and enthusiastically embraced the fighters. The various clans, who had historically felt alienated from the Ethiopian state, strongly identified with their eponymous state because of ethnic, religious, and economic ties.¹³ But as the guerrillas penetrated into the non-Somali inhabited uplands, popular support began to diminish and with it the guerrillas' tactics of mobilization changed. Whereas the WSLF was warmly welcomed by the Ogadenis and the Hawiya of Bale, the SALF's appeal to ethnic and religious sentiments mostly fell on deaf ears. It failed to rally Oromo peasants, who saw little reason to take up arms against a government that had just abolished the tenancy relations that had oppressed them for nearly a century. Lacking the incentives and means to mobilize the peasantry and its resources, the SALF resorted to the use of terror, including press-gangs, torture, and wanton destruction of property. Through its brutal actions, the front thus alienated the very people it sought to liberate. Violence against Christians, most of whom were Amhara settlers, was particularly appalling and both fronts were to be blamed. As tribal and religious passions overrode political or ideological beliefs, the rebels engaged in wholesale looting, pillaging, and the killing of innocent people. 14 One of the reasons for this savagery was to force the settler community into flight. As 1976 came to a close, the rebels, through propaganda and terror, had established domination over a sizeable section of Ethiopia's eastern rural population. Moreover, they had achieved this with little or no coordination of their activities—they sometimes competed for territory, men, and booty, their rivalry kept in check only by the authorities in Mogadishu.

Except for the towns sitting on vital routes and intersections, by early 1977 the rebel fronts were in control of the Ogaden and most of the Bale-Sidamo low-lands, although this meant little more than the absence of effective Ethiopian authority. They had achieved this through hit-and-run tactics, hitting the Ethiopian army at its weakest points and then melting away into a largely supportive or sympathetic populace. Such tactics undermined the will of the troops and drove them into their bunkers and camps, thereby conceding land, people, and the initiative to the guerrillas. The army was confined to the garrison towns, many of which were under siege. Although every attempt to storm a garrison town invited devastating firepower from the defenders, travel between the towns became quite hazardous and military and civilian vehicles could not move without armed escorts that often fell into ambush or were hit by land mines. One such ambush occurred on February 11, 1977, near Horakelifo (between Degehabur and Jijiga),

¹² Kassahun Tirfe, April 25, 1994.

¹³ One report noted, "The sentiments of those nomads who reside within the southeastern parts of our domain are for Somalia; in the event of war, they will collaborate with the Somali army." "Tora 3," 7-9, 14. For a similar observation, see Col. Alemayehu Kassa, ka Tor Hayloch Huletegna Memria la Tor Hayloch Sostegna Memria, enclosure, "Sile Sumalia ... Gimit."

¹⁴ Ametse, 2,11 (Tikimt 20,1970) and Hurggio Dima, 2,1, (1977).

where 25 soldiers and officers were killed, another 24 wounded, and several armored cars and trucks were destroyed. At about the same time an entire contingent of police was wiped out not far from Filtu. By disrupting communication and supply lines, the rebels caused frequent transportation delays and shortages in the camps. Civilian casualties, especially along the 105 km (66 mile) road between Harar and Jijiga, also increased dramatically. In addition to sapping the morale of the troops, guerrilla actions were aimed at sabotaging the national economy. In the summer of 1977, the fighters destroyed several important bridges and on June 1 they blew up the rail linking the Ethiopian capital with the Red Sea port of Djibouti. This vital economic artery, which normally carried over 40 percent of Ethiopia's exports and 50 percent of her imports, was put out of commission until August 1978.

A few weeks earlier, an alarmed government had taken steps to stave off the deteriorating military situation on the peripheries. Soon after the bloody factional fighting in February within the military cabal that gave rise to Mengistu Haile Mariam, the government established the Tatek ("Be Girded") camp on the outskirts of Addis Ababa to train a "people's militia" drawn mainly from the peasantry. In a crash program and with the help of Cuban instructors, the camp trained perhaps as many as 120,000 or ten infantry divisions, two of which (the Second and Fifth) were dispatched to the eastern front in July. 17 Some 57,776 of them would be sent to the region by January 1978. 18

Meanwhile, the Somali leaders had decided to escalate the fighting sharply by throwing in their regular forces. ¹⁹ On June 13, 1977, about 5,000 soldiers crossed the border for a simultaneous attack on selected targets in the province of Hararghe. ²⁰ The soldiers had removed the insignia from their uniforms in order to disguise themselves as guerrillas. But they were really distinguishable because the guerrillas were "dressed in rags for the most part." ²¹ Toward the end of the month

¹⁵ MOND, "Ka 1966 eska Tir 1971 ba Misrak Ginbar Yanebarew Huneta Atekalay Zegeba," n.d., Addis Ababa, 4. A summary account of the conflict in the east based on field reports, this is an informative but poorly prepared document, the chronology is frequently confusing.

¹⁶ Thid.

¹⁷ The government's claim of 300,000 seems to have been inflated. See Gilkes, "Revolution and Military Strategy," 723.

¹⁸ MOND, "Ba 1969 ba Somalia ena ba Itiopia yalew Tor ba Semen ba Idih ba Ihapa yaderesu Gudatoch," n.d., Addis Ababa. Prepared by the Operations department, the document gives figures of casualties suffered in the Eastern and Northern fronts.

¹⁹ Several factors, including confusing signs of support from the United States, may have influenced their decision. See Markakis, *National and Class Conflict*, 228–29, and Arnoud De Borchgrave, "Crossed Wires," *Newsweek*, September 26, 1977. Nonetheless, it is most likely that the overriding reason was the fear that Soviet military assistance, which had increased substantially following Ethiopia's ouster of the US military mission early in the year, would erode the advantage they then held.

²⁰ Gilkes, "Revolution and Military Strategy," 723.

²¹ David Wood, "Sticks, Stones and Rockets," Newsweek, October 24, 1977.

the towns of Degehabur, Dire Dawa, Kebridehar, Gode, and Warder were pounded with mortars and rockets. However, the offensive misfired. The attackers were beaten off, having suffered heavy casualties. At Gode alone, they may have lost as many as 300 of their men, including the brigade commander and his deputy.²² This event marked the beginning of the shift from guerrilla to conventional fighting.

The Conventional Phase: In practice, if not by design, this phase unfolded in three stages: the first stage saw the rapid Somali conquest of the lowlands; stage two was marked by assaults against the cities and towns on the Harar plateau; unflagging Ethiopian resistance led to the next stage of stalemated fighting that was broken by the intervention of exterior forces, resulting in the defeat of the Somalis.

If the aborted June offensive was intended to cause panic and flight, then it had failed dismally. If, on the other hand, it was a probing operation, it might well have encouraged the Somali leaders to embark on their most ambitious project by revealing that the Ethiopians had inferior firepower, static defenses, and that they had laid too few mines.²³ Consequently, the Somali leaders seem to have set a timetable that turned out to be delusory. As one analyst observed, "Somalia had managed to build up a substantial stock of ammunition, spares and weapons, enough for approximately six months of fighting,"²⁴ during which time they hoped to smash the Ethiopian military and to capture the territory they so much coveted. Although some of their calculations may have been accurate, they badly underestimated the Ethiopian will to resist, as well as the fickleness of international relations. Ethiopian resistance, despite initial shocks, turned out to be much stiffer than the Somalis expected, and Somalia's socialist allies abandoned her at the critical hour.

Ethiopian military strategists had anticipated that in the event of war, Somalia would wage a two-pronged offensive, although they could not tell whether her main assault would first cross from the north or the south.²⁵ The distance between Harar and Hargeisa is only 270 kms (169 miles) and Jijiga, a town located at a crossroads, is the strategic gateway to the major urban and industrial centers of eastern Ethiopia. The strategists had calculated that by capturing that important territory, Somalia could more easily cut off the Ethiopian troops in the south-central plains. To prevent this, the Ethiopians had kept their main force, which included the only mechanized brigade of the eastern front, at Jijiga. The Somalis were apparently aware of this, for they chose to attack massively first in the south and east. This strategy had several advantages. First. it was easier to replenish their forces since the Somalis maintained their main reserve and supply depots in Mogadishu. Second, it was tactically easier to capture or disable the province's second major air field at Gode because of its proximity to the border. Third,

²² Human Rights Watch, Evil Days (London/New York: Human Rights Watch, 1991), 75.

²³ Gilkes, "Revolution and Military Strategy," 724.

²⁴ Thid

²⁵ MOND, "Sile Sumalia ... Gimit," 6,19.

Ethiopian garrisons there were located so far from each other that they were vulnerable to tactical surprise and piecemeal attack by mobile forces. And finally the populace in the southeastern sector was less loyal to Ethiopia than its counterpart in the Dire Dawa–Harar–Jijiga triangle.²⁶

The Somali invasion began, according to Ethiopian official documents, on July 13, 1977 (Hamle 5, 1969) at 0300 hours, and not on July 23 as has been commonly held. The Somalis enjoyed considerable superiority in numbers and weaponry; they deployed several mechanized divisions and the bulk of their fighter planes²⁷ against four under-equipped brigades. With only light artillery and anti-tank guns for protection, Ethiopian troops were at a serious disadvantage. Not surprisingly, Somali tanks speedily rolled westward, penetrating 700 kms (437 miles) into Ethiopia and seizing 350,000 square kms (218,750 square miles) of territory. Their initial advantage derived from their superior mobilization arrangements as well as superiority in tanks and armor. They emphasized an offensive strategy based on seizing the initiative and exploiting the surprise factor. The pattern of their attacks consisted of massive infiltrations or forays across the front lines and intensive artillery barrages, combined with mechanized attacks and bombing raids.²⁸

Ethiopian resistance ranged from feeble to fierce. Whereas most of the units crumbled and retreated in disorder before the advancing enemy troops, a few fought tenaciously under conditions of extreme stress before they too were overpowered. Only at Dire Dawa did they hold their ground. It appears that between the 13th and 16th of July, about three Somali motorized battalions had slipped through the Aysha front, mostly by night to avoid detection. They attacked the city on the 17th at 0430 hours. It was defended by the 24th Nebelbal (Flame) Brigade, the Fourth Artillery Battalion, and the 752nd Battalion of the 75th Militia Brigade, which had arrived by air two days earlier. With the backing of the air force, they were able to throw back the attackers at the cost of 79 dead and eight wounded against twice as many Somali casualties. On the same day the 79th Militia Brigade and a platoon from the 219th Nebelbal Battalion were dispatched to Gode to reinforce the Fifth Infantry Brigade, which had been battered by artillery and air bombardments since the 13th of July. But they could not save the garrison, which fell into Somali hands on July 25 at 0600 hours. Without adequate tank or artillery support, the defenders were virtually wiped out; only 489 of the 2,350 militia made it to Harar and the rest were unaccounted for and most presumed dead. This was the deadliest encounter of the month. The Ninth Brigade at Kebridehar resisted as hard as it could and then retreated to Harar in a state of disarray, having refused to take up new positions. According to veterans of the war and the Ministry of National Defense itself, it was the Eleventh Infantry Brigade

²⁶ Ibid.

²⁷ According to the Ethiopians, the invading force consisted of 70,000 troops, 40 fighter planes, 250 tanks, 350 APCs, and 600 artillery, which, of course, would have meant the entire Somali fighting force. MOND, "Sile Sumalia ... Gimit," 6.

²⁸ Lt. Col. Kassahun Tirfe, April 25, 1994.

at Degehabur that fought most bravely, enduring withering fire from the air and ground until the end of the month when it was ordered to withdrew to Jijiga.²⁹ With the fall of Delo, Filtu, and Elkere with little fighting between July 30 and August 8, the Somalis appeared well positioned to achieve their goal; only Dire Dawa, Harar, and Jijiga stood in their way. For the next six months they tried to seize these precious prizes, but total victory eluded them.

To stem the tide of Somali victories, the Ethiopian Eastern Command made some organizational adjustments by dividing the unoccupied parts of Hararghe into two operational zones (qetena) under the leadership of Colonel Aberra Haile Mariam. The Third Division, or what was left of it, and the Fifth Militia Division, which arrived there on 28 July 1977, were to defend all the territory from Harar, the provincial capital and command headquarters, to Jijiga, the seat of advance headquarters, while facilitating the movement of troops and supplies between the two points. The area between Harar and the Awash was assigned to the Second Militia Division and one Nebelbal battalion. In addition to ensuring the safety of Dire Dawa, their headquarters and the army's primary depot, they were to protect the rail and motor road from the city to Aysha in the northeast and to Awash in the west. The Third Fighter Squadron of the Air Force was to assist by carrying out reconnaissance, intercepting and bombarding the enemy, and by transporting supplies and other essentials in emergency situations. The paramilitary groups, including the police and People's Revolutionary Guards (PRGs), were to serve as ancillaries.³⁰ Given the odds against them, they fought well, achieving good results.

In mid-August, the Somalis launched the second of their three-stage offensive and the first target was Dire Dawa, a vital industrial city of about 70,000 people. It is probable that as many as two motorized brigades, one tank battalion, two artillery battalions, one air defense battery, and one BM 13 battery were deployed in what turned out to be a disastrous operation. Opposing them were the Second Militia Division, the 201 Nebelbal Battalion, the 781 Battalion of the 78th Brigade, the Fourth Mechanized Company, and one platoon of the 80th Tank Battalion with only two tanks. It was on August 17 that the Somalis moved in from the Harewa side to the northeast of the city by night, as they had done in July. They probably knew that the bulk of the Ethiopian force was deployed to the southeast, toward Jeldesa. Having lost three tanks to land mines along the way, they struck by land and air the following day at 0430 hours. At first the battle

²⁹ Kassahun Tirfe, April 25, 1994; Ketema Gabra Mariam, April 12, 1994; Technician Andualem Cherru, November 4, 1994, Addis Ababa; Captain Mesfin Baye, May 10, 1994, Addis Ababa and Sergeant Haile Yitagessu, March 24, 1994, Addis Ababa. "Ka 1966 eska Tir 1971 ... Zegeba," 6–8; MOND, "Ba Misrak ena Debub tor ginbar sile neberaw zemecha yemigeltse acher Report," n.d., Addis Ababa, 2–4. A condensed report of the war.

³⁰ Col. Aberra Haile Mariam and Col. Mulatu Negash, "Ya Misrak Iz Teklay Memria—'Zemecha Tebik'," Hamle 30, 1969, Harar, and "Ya Misrak Iz Teklay Memria—'Zemecha Tireg'," Nehassie 1, 1969, Harar, MOND.

³¹"Ka 1966 eska 1971 ... Zegeba," 15–16; Kassahun Tirfe, April 25, 1994; an anonymous sergeant who took part in the battle, March 15, 1994, Addis Ababa.

went badly for the Ethiopians because they were caught by surprise. They had expected the assault to be directed against Jijiga.³² The 871 Battalion fought doggedly for several hours on the Shinile hilltop overlooking the city but was eventually forced to withdraw to the airport. The attackers followed and by 1500 hours they had closed on the city which they began hitting with rockets and artillery, causing panic and confusion among the population. A Somali tank unit was able to press through and temporarily put the country's second major air base out of service; the air traffic control was destroyed and as many as nine planes might have been disabled while on the ground. A gas station near the airport and other fuel tanks went up in flames, and the cement, cotton, and meat factories nearby suffered partial damage. For the next 24 hours the defenders would be fighting under dreadful conditions, and in a desperate effort to stop the fall of the city, the command brought in militia reinforcements, tanks, and BRDM guns from Harar. The paralysis that had set in gave way to patriotic rage and fervor.³³

The Ethiopians rallied and launched a bold counter-attack. The fighting was intense and both the militia and Nebelbal proved their mettle. Individual acts of bravado were demonstrated as well, as in the case of Second Lieutenant Mitiku who climbed onto the top of a tank and hurled a grenade at his opponent before he was cut down by a sniper.³⁴ But it was really the Ethiopian air force that broke Somali resolve by destroying 16 of their T-55 tanks. Flying from the Debre Zeit air base to the south of Addis Ababa, some 400 kms (250 miles) away, Ethiopian pilots in American F5s outmatched their Somali counterparts piloting Soviet MIGs in the dog-fights. Soon they took total control of the air, relentlessly pounding the enemy while boosting the morale of the ground units and the civilian population, which participated in the drama by providing food and water for the fighters and by caring for the wounded.³⁵ At the end of the day the attackers ran out of steam and fled, leaving a trail of equipment that included tanks, armored cars, rocket launchers, artillery pieces and hundreds of rifles and machine guns that were proudly put on display by the victors.³⁶ Thenceforth, the city was never seriously at risk.

The Somalis had suffered a major setback, for the fall of Dire Dawa could have jeopardized the safety of the Ethiopian troops to the east. They might not have succeeded in starving those troops into submission by cutting off their supplies, but the Somalis certainly could have made the situation very difficult.

³² "Sile Telat Yemereja Gimit," enclosure, Col. Tsegaye W.Agegnehu la Hibretesebawit Itiopia Giziawi Wotaderawi Astedader Derg Abiotawi Mereja Memria, Nehassie 9, 1969, Addis Ababa, MOND.

³³ Ibid., 13, and "Ba Misrak ena Debub ... Report," 2-3.

³⁴ Anonymous Sergeant, March 15, 1994.

³⁵ MOND, "Ba Misrak ena Debub ... Report," 2–3. Lt. Solomon Jembere, March 15, 1994, Addis Ababa; Captaian Asfaw Zewde, March 20, 1994, Addis Ababa; Ketema Gabre Mariam, April 12, 1994, and anonymous Sergeant, March, 15, 1994.

³⁶ Ibid.; Addis Zemen, Nehassie 12, 1969 and James Pringle, "State of Siege," Time, September 26, 1977.

Moreover, victory there would have given them control over the Dire Dawa–Djibouti transport lines, which would probably have been sufficient to strangle the Ethiopian economy. From Dire Dawa it was easier to impede traffic along the Awash-Assab road. In other words, it could have imposed severe strains on the military as well as the economy. So it was a sweet victory for the Ethiopians. The Somalis were defeated because they failed to capitalize on the defenders' tactical errors, and did not strike with a massive armor thrust before the Ethiopians could concentrate sufficient forces for the counterattack. Moreover, coordination of the Somali infantry, tanks, and aviation was poor. Not only were there too few infantrymen, but also reinforcements were not brought in speedily when the tide turned against them. That inept leadership contributed to their loss is clear, but was ineptitude the result of interference from Mogadishu? That does not seem likely.

Undeterred by their defeat at Dire Dawa, the Somalis turned against Jijiga, the third-largest provincial town, in the third and final phase of their stymied offensive. Even though an Ethiopian police commando unit had been driven out of Tugwajale, a small border town only 65 kms (41 miles) east of Jijiga, on July 27, a full-scale attack against the town did not take place until the third week of August. This delay no doubt had given the Ethiopians time to strengthen their defenses by bringing in another mechanized brigade and by deploying some of their best troops in this section. The Tenth Mechanized Brigade had positioned itself at Aroresa, Sebulberol, a high ground about 5 kms north of Aroresa and at a mid-point between Jijiga and Kebribeyah in anticipation of the attack. The town itself was guarded by the 92nd Mechanized Brigade. When the Somali forces attacked the Aroresa fortification on August 21, they found it impregnable. Solidly entrenched and using heavy artillery, the Ethiopian troops halted the enemy's advance, but not before a forward unit protecting the Jijiga-Kebribeyah road had taken a severe beating. Skirmishes continued for another week at which time the garrison town of Neghele in Sidamo was successfully defended against repeated attempts to capture it.39

The first half of September saw a series of attacks and counter-attacks during which time Jijiga exchanged hands twice. Jijiga became the site of one of the bitterest struggles of the war, with both sides grimly determined to defend or capture it. The Somali assault on the town was preceded by several days of bombardment, and on September 2 the Somalis attacked with great force, using MIGs, tanks, artillery, and rockets. The Ethiopians were heavily outnumbered and outgunned;

³⁷ In fact, panicky officials at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs had feared the worst, according to one of them: "If Somalia captures the city of Dire Dawa where we have the second largest air force base, then it can easily use this base and threaten Addis to a point where the government would be obliged to capitulate." Dawit, 39.

³⁸ Gilkes ("Revolution and Military Strategy," 724) has claimed that Dire Dawa was saved not only by the Ethiopian air force, but also "by the decision of the Somali commander to withdraw when the city lay open to his forces," due to political intervention from Mogadishu. This is contradicted by the Ethiopian evidence and it does not seem credible.

³⁹ "Ka 1966 eska Tir 1971 ... Zegeba," 10.

discipline and cohesion subsided and mutinous soldiers, along with their families, abandoned the town and retreated to Adew and Karamara. Outsiders were blamed for the disaster. In disbelief the army would claim that "it has been confirmed that many of their tank specialists were Arabs." ⁴⁰ The victors entered Jijiga, looted shops and bars, and ransacked government offices. The Somali residents received them with jubilation and elation, a double injury to their non-Somali compatriots, most of whom deserted the town in terror. ⁴¹

Fearing the deleterious effect that Jijiga's surrender would have on the army's morale, Mengistu flew to Harar and led the counterattack himself.⁴² It was a daring personal act but of little consequence militarily. First, those suspected of leading the mutiny were bayoneted as cowardly and antirevolutionary elements. and then the troops were regrouped and led back to recapture the town. They carried out a two-frontal attack against the occupying Somali army from the west and north of the town. It was a successful though fleeting operation. The Somalis "suffered heavy casualties" and many of their tanks were killed. They evacuated the town, which the Ethiopians recaptured on September 5. But it remained sufficiently within the enemy's artillery range to be bombarded all night long. At dawn the next day, the Somalis returned, considerably strengthened and ever more determined; the town was nearly encircled and the Chairman found his way to Adew, from where he was flown back to Addis Ababa on the 7th. The troops he left behind resisted fiercely, but short of heavy artillery and without air cover, they faltered again. The Fourth Geset Artillery Battalion which had been recalled from Humera in early August arrived too late to make a difference, its long march having been delayed by the rainy season. The destruction by enemy fire of the newly installed radar at Karamara on September 12 also hindered the air force's effectiveness.⁴³ The Somalis were thus able to break through Ethiopian lines, completely overrunning the defenders, inflicting heavy casualties, and capturing vast quantities of light equipment. Many of the 75 tanks and 71 APCs lost since the conflict began were destroyed in this battle.⁴⁴ With mounting confusion came the inevitable headlong retreat to the next line of defense at Karamara. Jijiga fell on September 12 (Meskerem 2), coinciding with the third anniversary of the revolution, and would remain in enemy hands for the next five and a half months. In hot pursuit, the Somali forces drove the retreating Ethiopian troops beyond the Marda Pass, which they then occupied without a fight.

The epic defeat at Jijiga has often been attributed to dissension and discord within the armed forces. However, that is only partly true. There were indeed two types of friction that adversely affected the operational competence of the Ethio-

⁴⁰ Ibid. This and all subsequent translations from the Amharic texts are mine.

^{41 &}quot;Ba misrak ena debub ... Report," 4; Kassahun Tirfe, April 25, 1994.

⁴² Mengistu was in Harar at the time and both MOND's documents and my informants speak of his "heroic" act. But it is worth mentioning that many Ethiopians doubt that he personally led the assault.

⁴³ Thid.

^{44 &}quot;Ka 1966 eska Tir 1971 ... Zegeba," Part 3, Appendix 3.

pian armed forces in the initial stages of the conflict. The first was within the regular army. There were many soldiers who did not approve of the Derg or its policies, and some of them were affiliated with the various opposition political organizations that eschewed military rule. They encouraged infighting and sedition, which, as in Jijiga, at times resulted in a mutiny. The second conflict was between the regulars and the militia. Even though they fought and fell in the same ditches for the same obligations and objectives, the combatants were treated differently and unequally. The regulars received larger and better rations and their monthly paycheck was four times fatter than that of the militia. The preferential treatments were a constant source of bitterness and acrimony, which ineluctably had a detrimental effect on discipline, morale, and esprit de corps. Discipline was often very low, as an exasperated commander of the Second Militia Division once reported:

Rather than prepare for the next action, men are driven toward looting. They move around without permission and awkwardly stick the enemy's insignia onto their outfit or wear his uniform even. They are not mindful of the proper use of water and fire. For self-interest they forget their primary mission. An army without discipline and a farmer without tools are one and the same. Those who display the behavior of fifth columnists are not useful to the revolution. Those who fail to comply with revolutionary discipline ... must be eliminated. In order to uphold discipline, revolutionary slogans must be replaced with revolutionary action. I say let us restore order either through fruitful consultation or appropriate punishment, or else it will be an endless war.⁴⁶

It is clear that disharmony contributed to the army's initial setbacks, but it is wrong to ascribe the loss of Jijiga to a seditious group; the defeat was primarily due to the imbalance in firepower. As Lt. Colonel Tesfaye Gabre Kidan, leader of the detachment and later minister of national defense, admitted in his communique to the commander in chief, it was simply beyond the unit's power to prevent the capitulation of Jijiga. Yet mutinous soldiers were condemned to death in the wake of the defeat. The executions were probably intended to serve as a warning and deterrent to other prospective mutineers.

The Somali conquest of the Pass, which the Ethiopians had placed at the center of their defensive strategy, was not at all expected and naturally was received with consternation. This can be seen by the sensational exchange of telegrams between Mengistu and Tesfaye Gabre Kidan, commander of the unit. On September 12 at 2045 hours Tesfaye wired this message to Comrade Chairman Lt. Colonel Mengistu Haile Mariam:

⁴⁵ Dawit, 38 and Kassahun Tirfe, April 25, 1994.

⁴⁶ Undecipherable signature of a lt.colonel who was commander of the Division and deputy commander of Zone One of the Eastern Command. His letter was la Misrak Iz ena Ketena Und Memria, Hidar 20, 1970, Dire Dawa, enclosure, Lt. Col. Afeworki Wolde Michael la Biherawi Zemecha Memria, Tahisas 1, 1970, Addis Ababa, MOND.

(1) We have abandoned the saddle [code name for Karamara] and are now at Adew; (2) we are to destroy the bridge in the middle of the saddle; (3) we will assemble and talk to the troops; (4) we have planned to make a tactical withdrawal; (5) send large quantities of 16-30 tomorrow. Urgent response requested.

The message was received at 2130 hours and Mengistu sent his reply at 2245:

(1) Today, sufficient manpower strengthened with tanks is on its way from Harar; (2) one brigade is being flown from Addis Ababa to Harar; (3) many tanks are on the move by land from Addis Ababa to the province; (4) the force will travel by day and night; (5) the requested 16-30 will be made available immediately and continually; (6) the saddle should not be relinquished at all; if there is any other problem, let me know right away so the necessary measures could be taken.

At 2355 Comrade Tesfaye responded:

(1) The saddle has been abandoned; (2) at this hour the saddle is under their control; (3) the army is out of control; (4) it is impossible to wait until the said force arrives; (5) to respect order I will stay until the end of my life; (6) everything is beyond [our] capability.

On September 13 at 0130 hours Mengistu demands confirmation of the fall of the Pass:

In order to take the necessary decision, urgently confirm the occupation of the saddle by the enemy.

The distressful confirmation arrived at 0225 hours:

Karamara is in the hands of the enemy; our troops have refused to obey me and we are on the march.⁴⁷

Under the circumstances, neither outcome could have been avoided. Yet the loss of Jijiga and then Karamara were crushing blows to the Ethiopians psychologically, and from a strictly military standpoint, it was the darkest hour of the army, for what remained between the town and the provincial capital were defeated battalions and a few weakly defended fortifications. In the everlasting search for scapegoats, these setbacks were immediately blamed on "fifth columnists"; a dozen officers and NCOs were subsequently executed by firing squad on September 13 for conspiring with "anarchists" opposed to the war—i.e., political organizations of the Left but mainly the Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Party (EPRP). Interestingly, that did not save the commander of the Third Division from rebuke by his superiors; in a terse communique of the same date, Mengistu told him that the surrender of Karamara would leave a dark spot in the army's history and instructed him to remove it by setting up a permanent defensive line at Kore, 51 kms (31 miles) to the east of Harar and by restoring the Pass. Any per-

^{47 &}quot;Ba misrak ena debub ... Report," 5-7.

^{48 &}quot;Ka 1966 eska Tir 1971 ... Zegeba," 5-7; Kassahun Tirfe, April 25, 1994.

son who left his position without order was to be executed on the spot.⁴⁹ The Division duly established its advance headquarters at Kore and held the front line until the start of the counter-offensive nearly five months later, but recovering the Pass was simply beyond its capability.

At this juncture, the government was compelled to call for a general mobilization while it made some organizational changes in the Eastern Command. Between September 14 and 21, the National Revolutionary Operations Command (NROC), chaired by Mengistu, issued eight "directives" (memria) for a national mobilization with the slogans "revolutionary motherland or death" and "everything to the war front." Directive 1 was a passionate appeal to the patriotic sentiments of the population, particularly those of the war-affected areas of Dire Dawa, Jijiga, and Harar, to stand behind the armed forces in defense of the country and the revolution. Directive 2 called for the return of retired soldiers under 60. In conjunction, the NROC devised a new operational plan called "Awrora" for the Eastern Command, which was now redivided into the Awash, Dire Dawa, and Harar sub-sectors. Operation Awrora was to foil Somalia's strategic intentions by firmly defending the two cities, the crucial bridge of Awash, the Awash-Assab and Awash-Harar motor roads, and by reopening the Addis Ababa-Djibouti railway. It also was hoped that the Command would mount a counterattack to regain all the territory up to and including Jijiga.50 It was a forlorn hope, for the force was not equipped for such action. However, it did resist. In the second half of September, Somali advance weakened rapidly due to over-extended fronts, bad weather, difficult conditions, and perhaps exhaustion. The defenders fell back to their camouflaged dug-outs and reinforcements began to arrive at the points. The Somali blitzkrieg had ended and the phase of attrition had begun.

The next five months were spent on intense but inconclusive fighting, with neither side able to break the stalemate. Fighting was intense, dogged and slow, frontal assaults ending in bloody failures. Only towards the end of the war did the Somalis prosecute two major offensive operations simultaneously. In retrospect, this seems to have enabled the Ethiopians to concentrate on one front line at a time and to move their reserves wherever and whenever they were needed. The longer the war went on, the more the balance of forces changed in favor of the Ethiopians.

There was a lull in fighting for a week following the fall of Jijiga. The Somalis apparently used the interval to fortify new defensive positions along the Daketa valley by digging extensive trenches, laying mines at critical junctions, and demolishing at least three key bridges. By wasting time, though, they lost the initiative. The Ethiopians used the reprieve to regroup their defeated troops, to bring in fresh units and more weapons, and to construct hillside bunkers.

Then the Somalis opened a pincer movement, one from the north toward Dire Dawa and another from the east toward Harar. It appears that their main aim was

^{49 &}quot;Ba misrak ena Debub ... Report," 7.

⁵⁰ Lt.Col. Mengistu Haile Mariam, "Ya Misrak Iz ya zemecha ikid—'Zemecha Awrora," Meskerem 18, 1970, Addis Ababa, 1-7, MOND.

to capture Harar first and then to link with the northern force at Dire Dawa. Therefore, they concentrated on smashing the eastern front line by advancing from Karamara and Fik. Although the Ethiopian defense line position was still highly unfavorable, it took the Somali army over seven weeks to unhinge it. There were several reasons for this: both the size and combat effectiveness of the Ethiopian troops increased with time, and between the end of September and beginning of October, the Soviets provided Ethiopia with substantial arms including aircraft and tanks. Moreover, as the militia gained more combat experience and became more familiar with their Soviet weapons and with the environment, new specialized units like paracommandos were trained at Tatek and sent to the war front to reinforce them. Most of the troops fought with extraordinary spirit. With its dominance of the skies the Ethiopian air force proved most effective in its support of the ground forces. The arrival, in late September, of two (South) Yemeni armored battalions (code name Comrades 03) considerably boosted Ethiopia's firepower. With their help, the first tank division equipped with T-34s became operational in October. Whereas Somalia had the feverish support of the population of the lowlands, its forces were now in hostile territory. The highland population, and especially the settlers, were mostly opposed to the Somalis and supported the Ethiopian men in uniform in every conceivable way, from scouting and guarding crossroads and strategic heights to portering and fighting. As the Somalis moved deeper into unfriendly areas, their overstretched lines became more vulnerable to interdiction and disruption. Last but not least, it was far easier to defend the mountainous and broken terrain than the flat lowlands against a mechanized enemy.

For four months, from the third week of September to the end of January, the Somalis did all they could to capture Harar. They nearly surrounded it from the north, south, and east. Twice, the fall of this city of 48,000 and seat of Ethiopia's prestigious military academy seemed imminent. This did not happen, however, partly because Somali operational maneuvers lacked speed and decisiveness and partly because of the tenacity and resolve with which the Ethiopians fought. The Somali army tried to entrap and annihilate a large Ethiopian detachment occupying a bulge that expanded from Harar southeast toward the town of Kore. They had mustered a large force for that purpose; at one time or another during the operation, it may have comprised of as many as five motorized infantry brigades, a tank brigade, an artillery brigade, a commando brigade and two or more guerrilla brigades. They were resisted by the Third Division which had been reinforced by the 74th Mechanized Brigade, the Second Tank Battalion, the 219th Nebelbal Battalion, the Fourth Air Defense battery, two battalions of veterans (021 and 023) and several battalions of the PRGs. 52 For two months, the Somalis

⁵¹ Ethiopian Intelligence identified the following: the 5th, 7th, 8th, 11th, 23rd and 90th Motorized Brigades, the Second Tank Brigade, the First Artillery Brigade, and the 116th Commando Brigade. "Ka 1966 eska 1971 ... Zegeba," 13–18.

⁵² Ibid. It must be pointed out that, following the general mobilization, two workers' brigades and seven brigades of PRGs were given a brief training at Tatek camp and, along with four battalions of veterans, were sent to the eastern front in early October. "Ba Misrak ena Debub ... Report," 8.

repeatedly attacked frontally with tanks and artillery; but they bumped into embedded anti-tank guns and artillery, failing to rupture an opening with one concentrated force. From their entrenchments the Ethiopians beat off one assault after another, foiling every outflanking movement as well. Their first severe test occurred on September 18-19 when they fought from 1700 to 0730 hours without yielding any territory. A strong Somali attempt to outflank the Ethiopians from the rear by cutting off the 92nd Mechanized Brigade at Gursum also failed. A series of pitched battles followed in which the combatants slugged it out for control of Mount Dalcha, a few kms to the south of Kore. That strategic point changed hands several times before the Ethiopians secured it on October 17. Somali casualties may have exceeded 2,000, whereas Ethiopian losses were characteristically and imprecisely described as "considerable." 53 The Somalis made one more strong attempt to retake Dalcha by storming it on the 19th, only to lose 219 more of their men, some of whom were later described by the Ethiopians as Sudanese, and two MIG-17 fighters.⁵⁴ Hostilities continued intermittently thereafter but without upsetting the situation. The Somalis had fought fiercely to win by sheer weight of numbers and firepower, but utterly failed to puncture the Kore front. Two units in particular played a critical role in checking them: the Fourth Artillery Battalion, which the Somalis had tried and failed to put out of action, and the 74th Militia Brigade, which was described as the most motivated unit. "Since its arrival in Harar," reads the Ministry's citation, "the 74th Brigade fought with such high spirit that it set an example for the other brigades. Although it crushed with its revolutionary arm enemy forces in all the battles it fought, it also suffered severe casualties. A new brigade that bears its name has been reconstituted and is now in service, for history does not forget its sacrifices."55

With their efforts at Kore thwarted, the Somalis switched their attention to Kombolcha, Babile, and Fedis and began hitting at the weakest point. The area running from Kombolcha to Jarso had been left virtually undefended as the police had managed to ward off the guerrillas who constantly attacked the towns. When a Somali regular force was detected heading towards Jarso, 35 kms to the northwest of Harar, the Command rushed off the Kagnew Brigade which was hurriedly constituted through the amalgamation of the 76th and the 96th Brigades (from Werwer and Fedis, respectively) plus one 105 mm battery from the Third Artillery Brigade on October 23rd. While fighting intensified there, the Somalis attacked the Babile front, which was being defended by the First Task Force. ⁵⁶ Its initial setback was blamed on "anarchists" associated with the EPRP who were

⁵³ These figures may not have been inflated because they seem to be corroborated by Somali evidence. Quoting its leader, Gilkes has reported that one Somali "brigade suffered 60 percent casualties," and four others were "so badly mangled that all five were subsequently amalgamated into a single brigade." Their overall loss at the Kore front was 3,000. Gilkes, "Revolution and Military Strategy," 725 and 735 n. 20.

⁵⁴ "Ka 1966 eska Tir 1971 ... Zegeba," 12.

⁵⁵ Thid

⁵⁶ See "Ba Misrak ena Debub ... Report," 11.

accused of killing "many progressive and able officers and NCOs," thus disabling the force. By eliminating or weeding out those "defeatists," the Task Force was able to regain its cohesion and consolidate its position at Abusharif following some bitter fighting on November 11–12. Somali losses were estimated at 250–300 killed and 400–500 wounded. Once again Somali advance was stalled, an event that may have pushed the Mogadishu regime to take a precipitous action; it severed diplomatic relations with Cuba and expelled the Soviet military mission of 1800 men on the 13th, thereby burning its bridge with much of the "Socialist Block" without getting the hoped-for aid from the west. It was a fateful decision, and one that it would cost it dearly. Within two weeks a massive Soviet airlift of arms into Ethiopia began, and some of the expelled Soviet personnel were transferred to Ethiopia.

Meanwhile, the situation on the Kombolcha front had dangerously deteriorated for the defenders. On the 16th, the Somalis bombarded Jarso with massive artillery and a panic-stricken contingent fled to Kombolcha and Harar; only a fraction of it remained behind to destroy valuable hardware and then repositioned itself at Mount Hablo, only a kilometer away from the town. ⁵⁹ A reinforcement was intercepted on the way and the unit itself was decimated on the 18th. Two truckloads of supplies and two 105 mm guns were lost to the enemy, who hurried toward Kombolcha, 16 kms (10 miles) to the northwest of Harar. The town was defended by the units that had retreated from Jarso, plus some fresh supporting elements. The battle of November 24 had raged for only a short time when the defenders fled in panic toward Harar, Alemaya, and Hameresa, leaving Kombolcha open to the attackers. One stubborn unit persisted and saved the town, with the support of the First Paracommando Brigade dispatched from Shashamene. The entry to Kombolcha had been effectively blocked. ⁶⁰

The Somalis did attain some success in piercing the Fedis front, which had been weakened by the relocation of the 96th Brigade. The two paracommando battalions (61 and 62) and the 501 Brigade of the PRG, supported by an artillery battery with 105 mm guns and a platoon of M-41 tanks had resisted for a week before bending to the opponent. On the 4th of November, for instance, they fought a fierce battle that lasted from 0900 to 1800 hours; their losses were 45 killed and 30 wounded. In subsequent engagements, however, they lost substantial ground and Harar was in serious danger of being overtaken. By the 21st they had retreated to within 3 kms of the city. Alarmed, Colonel Haile Giorgis Habte Mariam spoke with Mengistu and requested that BM 21 rocket launchers

^{57 &}quot;Ka 1966 eska Tir 1971 ... Zegeba," 27. It seems that any one who questioned or conspired against the military rulers was condemned as a sympathizer or member of the EPRP.

⁵⁸ Ibid.; "Ye Simintegna Igrenga Kifle Tor ye 1970 Ametawi Report—Huletegna Kifil," enclosure, Lt.Col. Tefaye Ayalew la Biherawi Abiotawi Zemecha Memeria, Nehassie 15, 1970, Harar, MOND.

⁵⁹ "Ka 1966 eska 1971 ... Zegeba," 22–24.

^{60 &}quot;Ba Misrak ena Debub ... Report," 10.

^{61 &}quot;Ka 1966 eska Tir 1971 ... Zegeba," 25.

be immediately sent from Kore. The chairman and his advisers suspected that the attack was merely a deceptive plan to divert attention from Kore and denied the request. Instead, the Second Paracommando Brigade was flown from Addis Ababa on the 22nd and its arrival in the nick of time averted a potential disaster.⁶² It prevented not only the fall of the city, but also the possible envelopment of the bulk of the Ethiopian force in the bulge. The attackers were thrown back to Fedis, 24 kms (15 miles) to the southwest of Harar, where they would stay until January. By failing to attack with greater force, the Somalis missed another opportunity as they had in Dire Dawa.

Dire Dawa was never as threatened as Harar during the third phase of Somali offensive. Fighting there was sporadic and indeterminate, and the standoff gave the Ethiopians some breathing room to strengthen their units in that sector. They organized the Second Task Force, which comprised the Second Division and several supporting units that were deployed along the Shinile, Jeldesa, Hawale, and Harewa lines. With the delivery of Soviet arms in late October, the balance had begun to shift in Ethiopia's favor, and the Task Force was confident enough to take the offensive. On November 18, for example, the Somalis received a sharp attack on the Harewa-Jeldesa fronts, losing a large quantity of heavy and light weapons. In their counterattack five days later, they did regain some ground but the Ethiopians held them off. They tried again at the end of the month, only to lose 150 men, 19 PRGs, and 120 Kalashnikov assault rifles.⁶³ That silenced their guns for a while, during which time the Ethiopians were able to make air strikes against border towns in Northern Somalia. Clearly, the tide had already began to turn in their advantage before the Soviets and Cubans entered the fray.

The level of fighting dropped in December, perhaps because the Somalis were busy replenishing their combat forces; meanwhile, they were being overtaken by political events. The Soviet Union, whose military personnel the Somalis had expelled in mid-November, began massive arms deliveries to Ethiopia, decisively tilting the balance. In the course of six weeks, from December to mid-January, they shipped large numbers of Mig-17 and Mig-21 fighter-bomber aircraft, T-54 and T-55 tanks, Mi-6 and Mi-8 giant helicopters, BTR 152 APCs, BM 21 rocket launchers, Sagger anti-tank missiles, heavy mortars, 155 and 185 mm artillery guns, air defense weapons systems, a variety of infantry vehicles, automatic rifles, tons of munitions and the BMP-1, a devastating "highly mobile armored vehicle with a 73 mm gun, anti-tank missiles, and heat-seeking anti-aircraft missiles," which the Somalis named the "moving castle." Worth about a billion dollars, ⁶⁴ the arms shipments were roughly comparable in volume to the arms the Soviets delivered to the Arabs in 1973 and to the People's Liberation Movement of Angola (MPLA) in 1975. ⁶⁵ The Ethiopian defense forces, swollen by the

^{62 &}quot;Ba Misrak ena Debub ... Report," 10.

^{63 &}quot;Ka 1966 eska Tir 1971 ... Zegeba," 19-20.

⁶⁴ Sarin and Dvoretsky, Alien Wars, 134.

⁶⁵ Porter, The USSR, 182-83, 203; David Wood, "Ethiopia Goes on the Attack," Time, February 20, 1978.

deployment of 100,000 newly trained troops, were wholly outfitted in new gear; about 30,000 of them, dubbed the "First Revolutionary Liberation Army," were sent to the eastern front. By contrast, the Somali military, which the Soviets had trained and equipped with full knowledge that it might be used against Ethiopia, as indeed it was, was running short of manpower, supplies, and spare parts. There were indications that the Somalis had begun forcible conscription as early as October. By November, Somalia was shopping for a variety of items ranging from lubricating oil and bazookas to jeeps and trucks in Europe and Asia. Most of its needs were supplied by conservative Muslim regimes, notably those of Saudi Arabia, Egypt, Iran, and Pakistan. By

Soviet aid was not limited to hardware; they also sent more than a thousand military advisers and technicians (Comrades 01). Some of the senior officers like General Grigory Barisov and Lt. Colonels Andrei Filatov and Semyon Nezhinsky had been principal advisers to the Somali General Staff only a few weeks earlier. They, of course, brought with them intimate and thus invaluable knowledge of the strengths and weaknesses of the Somali military that the Ethiopians put to good use.⁶⁸ Along with the Soviets came regular Cuban troops (Comrades 02); starting with a few hundred in December, they grew to 3,000 in January and 18,000 by February, 69 more than half of them ferried in from Angola. Headed by General Arnaldo Ocha, a soldier of great distinction, they came with their own full gear including armored cars and T-62 tanks, mainly of Soviet production. The Somali regime had gambled by expelling the Soviet and Cuban professionals; now there was no one else to compensate them for the loss. If there was any truth to Ethiopian claims that the Somalis were being assisted by troops from Pakistan and Arab countries, it was no doubt blown out of all proportion. 70 Now the Somalis stood almost alone against an international colossus.

The Ethiopian Counter-offensive

Internationalism Against Irredentism: The Ethiopians were now ready for a spirited counter-offensive. In January the Derg set up the Supreme Military Strategic Committee (or SMSC), composed of Ethiopian, Russian, and Cuban officers, to map and direct the campaign. It was led by General Vasilii Ivanovich Petrov, a combat-hardened veteran and first deputy commander of the ground forces of the

⁶⁶ Major Tadesse Tekle Haimanot, "Zemecha Dequs" ("Crush"), Eastern Command Headquarters, Tikimt 15, 1970, Harar, 5, MOND.

⁶⁷ Wood, "Sticks, Stones, and Rockets"; Raymond Caroll et al, "War in the Horn," Newsweek, February 13, 1978; Gilkes, "Revolution and Military Strategy," 725-26.

⁶⁸ Sarin and Dvoretsky, Alien Wars, 134; Dawit, 41; Kasshun Tirfe, April 25, 1994.

⁶⁹ This information was obtained from the then Ethiopian ambassador to Havana on March 12, 1994 in Addis Ababa.

⁷⁰ There could have been some foreign experts, but allegations that there were at least a Pakistani battalion and as many as 15-29,000 Egyptian and Iraqi troops appear to be without foundation. "Ka 1966 eska Tir 1971 ... Zegeba," 23. See also Elizabeth Peer, *Newsweek*, August 29, 1977.

USSR. The SMSC established its command post at Dire Dawa. The operation was painstakingly planned and well directed. Its key elements were surprise and massive artillery barrages followed by infantry and/or mechanized attacks, standard Soviet assault tactics.

The counter-offensive was preceded by a Somali gambit to seize Harar on January 22nd. The outcome was predictable. The Somalis began by blasting the town of Babile with mortars and rockets from Hill 1692,71 apparently being to deflect Ethiopian attention from the bigger maneuver. At 1530 hours, several infantry brigades backed by a large number of tanks and artillery advanced toward the city of Harar in a pincer movement from Fedis and Kombolcha.⁷² This was really the only operation that was executed with great force, but it came too late. In an integrated ground and air resistance that for the first time involved Cuban soldiers, the Ethiopians pinned the attackers a few kilometers from the city. While a battle of tanks raged on the ground, jet fighter-bombers strafed the enemy's rear and lines of communications. The Somalis were routed with casualties perhaps as high as 3,000, the highest Somali loss in a single action since the conflict began six months earlier. Their plan to capture the provincial heart by encircling it was completely frustrated. This was a turning point in the war, for the Ethiopians immediately moved from defense to offense. In their counter-attacks from January 23 to 27, the Eleventh Division and Cuban armored brigades regained all the territory as far as Fedis, the first town of significance to be liberated. In the process, they captured 15 tanks, many APCs, 48 artillery pieces, seven anti- aircraft guns, a cache of infantry weapons, and several munitions depots.⁷³ From there on, the Somalis would be forced to abandon all the land they had occupied.

Without allowing the Somalis any respite, the Ethiopian-Cuban juggernaut launched a series of short, sharp thrusts against the main Somali lines from Dire Dawa and Harar, enveloping enemy units one after the other. This campaign began on February 1st with an attack on Hawale, south of Dire Dawa, by an artillery battalion; this was evidently a feint designed to draw away the enemy's attention from the main line of action to the north, and it worked out pretty well. On the following day at 0700 hours, the Ninth Division spearheaded by Cuban tank and artillery shock troops outflanked and, with air support, attacked the Somalis at Harewa from the rear. The defenders were completely taken off guard and hastily abandoned the town "without even eating their freshly cooked food." The other strongly fortified town of Jeldesa was likewise outflanked and recaptured on the 4th. The defeated troops fled towards Anonomite, leaving behind 42 tanks, some of them intact, many APCs, BTRs and over 50 artillery pieces of varying sizes. They were pursued by the 75th Militia Brigade, the 201

⁷¹ "Ka 1966 eska Tir 1971 ... Zegeba," 30–31.

⁷² According to the Cubans, the attack commenced from points to the north and south of Kombolcha. *Granma*, March 14, 1978.

⁷³ Ibid.; "Ba Misrak ena Debub ... Report," 13.

^{74 &}quot;Ka 1966 eska Tir 1971 ... Zegeba," 32-33.

⁷⁵ Ibid.; Granma, March 14, 1978.

Nebelbal Battalion, and the 69th Mechanized (Militia) Brigade, which had joined them from Erer. They converged at Jarso on the 9th with the First Paracommando and 102nd Mechanized Brigades of the Tenth Infantry Division that had surged from Kombolcha. Thus between February 5 and 9 the Somalis had been evicted from the small towns of Milo, Anonomite, Belewa, Chinahasan (Chinaksan), Ejarso Goro, and Gursum and by the 15th were driven as far as Felana. In the face of the string of defeats, the Somali regime publicly acknowledged for the first time that its armed forces were engaged inside Ethiopia and called a general mobilization; actually, the forcible induction of men had been going on for some time. The call would have little effect on the eventual outcome of the conflict.

The clearing of the strategic heights to the west of the Amhar mountain range made it possible for the concentration of forces that would destroy the main Somali detachment in one decisive engagement. There were two major obstacles for the advancing Ethiopian and Cuban troops to overcome. The first was to capture the Marda Pass, the only access to Jijiga from the west, and the second was to overrun the elaborate system of embankments and ditches the Somalis had erected as well as the extensive land mines they had buried to fortify their defense lines. It took the genius of the SMSC under Petrov to surmount the obstacles and annihilate the Somali army with as little sacrifice as possible. Instead of mounting the costly frontal assault the entrenched Somalis had fully expected, the strategists chose to outflank the defenders. The task was entrusted to the Tenth Division whose backbone was a Cuban armored brigade with more than 60 T-62 tanks. At daybreak on February 15 the unit bypassed the heavily defended Marda Pass and took a long detour by way of Arabi, proceeding to the Shebele pass, some 50-60 kms to the north. It took Arabi on the 17th of February, lost it on the 20th, but regained it on the 24th. The Somalis again put up strong resistance at Grikocher but lost it on the 28th.⁷⁸ These victories cleared the path for the 69th Militia Brigade to join the Task Force at the town of Lewenaji, another site of fierce fighting that resulted in one more Somali defeat. From there on, the march to Jijiga was spearheaded by the 69th Brigade to which the Cubans paid glowing tribute: "marching on foot [the Brigade] had virtually filtered into the mountain range by way of the towns of Lewenaji and Golocha, ... and in a bold move turned south, then east and advancing over muddy terrain under torrential downpours, along difficult, narrow and dangerous mountain trails armed with tanks, artillery and armored infantry [vehicles], came with its forward units to the other side of the mountain range on February 28."79 The Ethiopian commendation was no less laudatory: "This Brigade has demonstrated extraordinary enthusiasm and gallantry.... What is so astounding is that its numbers had dwindled, due to high casualties, to about 500 when it reached Jijiga. Undeterred by this, it, along with Comrades 02 moved around Jijiga and put the Kebribeyah-Aroresa road under

⁷⁶ "Ka 1966 eska Tir 1971 ... Zegeba," 35-37.

⁷⁷ Wood, "A Desert Duel Keeps Heating Up," *Time*, February, 27, 1978.

⁷⁸ "Ka 1966 eska Tir 1971 ... Zegeba," 35-37.

⁷⁹ Granma, March 14, 1978.

control. It was one of the units that seized Degehabur. The 69th Brigade has come to occupy a special place in history because of the unique role it played in the Red drama."80

The Task Force followed suit using humans, mules, and donkeys, to transport essentials over the marshy and broken terrain, smashing and rendering useless all Somali defensive arrangements. Somali infantry, tank, and artillery units defending Jijiga counter-attacked furiously but were beaten off with the loss of 14 tanks. Subsequently, while enemy attention was fixed on the western front, the attackers airlifted in giant Soviet Mi-8 helicopters men, tanks, stockpiles of munitions and fuel behind the lines of the defenders who were pinned down by unremitting air strikes. The Task Force linked up with the airlifted units on a plateau northeast of Jijiga, setting the stage for the final assault on the strategic town. The allied forces brought down a crushing air and artillery bombardment upon the garrison prior to overwhelming it with massed tank and artillery attack. Then, while the Tenth Division and its supporting units struck toward Jijiga, the 75th Infantry and First Paracommando Brigades "moved in a southerly direction through the mountains to capture the Marda pass" on March 4.81 Hargeisa and the port of Berbera, where the Soviets had had a naval and missile base before their ouster the previous year, were subjected to bombing raids, possibly to prevent Somali reinforcements. The six Somali brigades trapped in the garrison fought for three days with great bravery against overwhelming odds. Without air cover, supplies desperately short and tank strength perhaps little better than 50 percent, they had no option but to withdraw; had they not retreated in time, they could have been surrounded and wiped out.82 Already, they probably had lost as many men as a brigade. Ethiopian casualties were light, apparently the result of sound employment of superior technology. 83 The main reason for such a swift victory and at such small cost in life and equipment was that the attackers surpassed the defenders both strategically and tactically.

With the liberation of Jijiga on March 5 (Yekatit 26) at 0900 hours, the war was practically over. Mengistu was naturally buoyed by the recapture of Karamara and Jijiga. He had been mortified by their capture six months earlier and saw the event as part of the international proletarian struggle. In a communique commending the Eastern Command for their contributions, he wrote that "This is not a victory of the Ethiopian people only, but also of the struggles of the workers of the world."84

^{80 &}quot;Ka 1966 eska Tir 1971 ... Zegeba," 34.

⁸¹ Granma, March 14, 1978; "Ka 1966 eska Tir 1971 ... Zegeba," 37-38; Anonymous Sergeant, March 15,1994.

⁸² Ibid. For a good account of the second battle for Jijiga, see Kim Willenson et al., "The Ogaden Debacle," Newsweek, March 20, 1978.

⁸³ Kassahun Tirfe, April 25, 1994; Sarin and Dvoretsky, Alien Wars, 134.

⁸⁴ Lt.Col. Mengistu Haile Mariam, Aschequay ya melikt woreket, 26.6.70, Addis Ababa, MOND.

Regardless of its international significance, the battle of Jijiga was the culminating event of the war. From there on, the Somalis were on the run and it took just three weeks to restore Ethiopian sovereignty over nearly all of the occupied areas. The Ethiopians began attacking from three directions. The going was rough, with the simmering heat and exhaustion taking a toll on the men, who almost invariably walked for hours along with the armored units without sufficient water or medicine. Members of the 68th Brigade at one point got out of control and consumed the water reserved for vehicle batteries and even broke radiators for more.85 Twenty-nine of them succumbed to dehydration.86 The Eighth Infantry Division lost 32 of its men under similar conditions.⁸⁷ The army was also desperately short of clothing, leading one to complain, "the uniform and boots provided for a year are not even adequate for four months. So men are forced to walk barefoot and without clothing even; their feet are often swollen and oozing."88 Nevertheless, with victory in sight, morale remained high and the march eastward proceeded. On March 6, an armored column of the Third Division and the Third Cuban Tank Brigade easily captured Degehabur, about 200 kms south of Jijiga on March 8. To the west Somali troops unexpectedly put up stiff resistance against the Eighth (formerly Fifth) Division, which made a parallel advance from Babile towards Fik, a town that commanded the southern edge of the plateau. One of the Ethiopian units, the 94th Brigade, was so badly mangled at Abusharif that its wounded commander, Major Bekele Kassa, killed himself rather than risk capture. However, that did not halt the Division, which, supported by a Cuban artillery battalion, drove 150 kms to Fik on March 8. By then it had become clear that the Somalis could not hold for long and few were surprised when President Siad Barre announced the unilateral withdrawal of all his troops, who were trekking home across the Ogaden in small and disorganized bands, much like the Ethiopians seven months earlier. The tables had turned. The Fourth Division, which had set out from Agoba, near Neghele, and had seized Filtu on the 8th, entered Delo, 245 kms to the southeast, on the 12th at 1125 hours. On the same day, the Third Paracommando Brigade broke into Kebridehar and the 69th Brigade triumphantly entered Kelafo at 1800 hours on the 13th. With the 12th Division's seizure of Imi and El Kere on the 16th and 17th, respectively, Bale and most of the Ogaden were liberated.⁸⁹ On March 23, Addis Ababa declared that the last frontier post had been regained, marking the official end of the war. The announcement was not entirely accurate, however, for Somalia still controlled Geladin, Shibalo, Mustahil, Ferfer and several other towns, an area that amounted to nearly a third of what it had seized in July-August 1977.

⁸⁵ Lt.Col. Solomon Beyene, "68th Militia Brigade," Megabit 9, 1970, MOND.

⁸⁶ Major Yirdaw Alemu, "Ya Simintegna ... Report," enclosure, Lt.Col. Tesfaye Ayalew la Biherwi Abiotawi Zemecha Memria, Nehassie 15, 1970, Harar.

⁸⁷ Lt.Col. Negash Woldeyes, in Tesfaye Ayalew.

⁸⁸ Yirdaw Alemu in Tesfaye Ayalew:

^{89 &}quot;Ba Misrak ena Debub ... Report," 15; "Ka 1966 eska Tir 1971 ... Zegeba," 39-41; Captain Assefa Zewde, February 18, 1994, Addis Ababa and Kassahun Tirfe, April 25, 1994.

Assessing the Outcome

Was Ethiopian victory or Somali defeat primarily due to Soviet and Cuban intervention, or did other intrinsic factors influence the eventual outcome of the war? Without doubt external interference decisively shifted the balance of forces on the battlefield during the last two months of the conflict. While incompetent leadership contributed to their failure, eventually the Somalis were crushed by the sheer weight of numbers and technology. With the arrival of 18,000 Cuban artillerymen, tank crews, and pilots who undertook and suffered much of the dangerous combat tasks during the counter-offensive and about 1,500 Soviet military experts who brought with them a vast amount of armaments, the Somalis stood absolutely no chance of success. That Cuban-Soviet assistance was decisive in both their defeat and expulsion is therefore incontrovertible. 90 Yet the Somalis were ultimately checked from achieving their aim by the Ethiopians who fought them to a deadlock for six gruelling months. By stabilizing the front on their own, the Ethiopians turned the situation in their favor. In essence, they won by not losing. Resoluteness was their main asset but they did benefit from the vacillation of or even bungling by the Somali high command.

The Somalis were poorly equipped to win a protracted war. The fact that the war had dragged on for six months before the intervention speaks to some fundamental strengths and weaknesses of the adversaries. There is no tangible evidence that the Somali soldiers were less competent or courageous than their Ethiopian counterparts. As a matter of fact, both Cubans and Ethiopians who met them on the battleground admit that they were "tough and fought bravely." Ethiopians speak admiringly of Somali agility and skillfulness and especially of the dexterity of the tank specialist. One of them even remarked that, "if one were to combine the Ethiopian air force and the Somali tank units, one would have created Africa's dream army."92 In the end, they were defeated in part because of Ethiopian tenacity and in part because their country had neither the resources nor an effective plan for a long war. Given the enormous demographic disparity between the two countries and the vastness and variegation of the contested terrain, Somalia could have won the war only through a blitzkrieg. In any major military operation, speed is as important as firepower. The Somali army was well equipped and highly mechanized, but the blitzkrieg the Ethiopians had feared did not occur. It is true, of course, that the Somalis easily swept through the friendly lowlands but

⁹⁰ It is possible to speculate that, had there not been foreign meddling, the Somalis could have held on for a few more weeks or even months, although it is doubtful they would have won. However, one wonders whether a prolongation of the war might not have worked to the advantage of the Eritrean rebels. A major setback there would have had profound political and military consequences both at the center and the eastern periphery.

⁹¹ Granma, March 14, 1978.

⁹² Anonymous sergeant, March 15, 1994. Their major criticism was that the Somali soldiers ran at the first sign of defeat, leaving almost everything intact. Major Aklilu Tessema, December 4, 1993, Addis Ababa; Captain Tesfamariam Tesfahunegn, January 1, 1993, Addis Ababa; Captain Jafaar Gidi, March 12, 1994, Addis Ababa, and an anonymous major (a graduate of the Harar Academy), May 20, 1994, Addis Ababa.

got stalled when they reached the hostile highlands. There, the struggle turned into a war of attrition that the Somalis could not have possibly won; after all, the Ethiopian population was ten times larger than that of Somalia and just as fiercely patriotic. As Rene Lefort has observed, "Somalia had easily won the initial sprint, but lacked the staying power with which to win the long distance race." As the war dragged on, the Ethiopians were able to increase the Eastern Command from its peacetime strength of one poorly equipped infantry division to seven well-armed divisions, while Somalia's manpower became overstretched and undersupplied. The Somalis might have been ready for a short mobile campaign of up to six months, but they failed to win the war in that time as they had hoped. Instead, the conflict turned into a contest of attrition in which the manpower and spirit of each nation was tested to the limit. The longer the war dragged on, the more weary the Somalis became. They had other problems pertaining to logistics and leadership.

Fighting some 700 kms away from home, it soon became apparent the Somalis had overstretched themselves logistically. As the combat zone was deep in enemy's territory, their supply and communications systems became more vulnerable to disruptions by Ethiopian airmen and paratroopers, and the provisions for supply and reinforcement were woefully inadequate.⁹⁴ If only they had limited themselves to seizing the Ogaden, they could have won at least a temporary military victory.

Moreover, the Somalis were overconfident but lamentably led. As the preceding narrative shows, the coordination of war plans was never near adequate, and whereas the generals had a range of options, none was fully exploited. They had difficulty pinpointing their enemy's vulnerability; rarely did they attempt to present their opponent with more situations than he could handle by creating chaos and confusion at his rear or by making swift deceptive maneuvers on his flanks. They never attacked concurrently at several points along the war front in order to make it difficult for the Ethiopians to guess where defensive reserves would be needed most. The Somali army was trained by the Soviets and it has been a common Russian tactic to fight simultaneously close and deep at the enemy's rear; they failed the test. The Somalis did repeatedly attack the enemy's weak points, but invariably with insufficient force; they were terribly weak in concentrating physical and firepower on the decisive point and in maintaining the initiative. It is plausible, for instance, that with more force and speed they could have captured Dire Dawa in August; that would have surely changed the whole complexion of the war. At the very least, it could have reduced the capacity of the Ethiopian air force that they had come to dread.

All modern wars have been fought on the ground by infantry and mechanized troops, and the Ogaden war was no exception. But aircraft also has become a fixture in contemporary warfare, often determining the outcome, as in the Arab-

⁹³ Rene Lefort, Ethiopia: An Heretical Revolution? (London, 1984), 227.

⁹⁴ Ibid.; Kassahun Tirfe, April 25, 1994; and Paul Watson, "Arms and Aggression in the Horn of Africa," Journal of International Affairs 40 (1986), 166-67.

Israeli war of 1967. Aircraft was also a decisive component in the Ogaden war. Even though the Somalis had more fighter/bomber aircraft (53 to 36) during the first five months of the war, their Aeronautical Corps was outclassed by the Ethiopian air force. Not only did the Ethiopians achieve near-absolute control of their own skies, but they also were able to penetrate Somali air space and strike as far away as the port of Berbera. According to the Ministry of National Defense, between July 1977 and June 1978 the air force flew 2,865 sorties punishing Somalia's armored crews, destroying 9 Mig 17s and 18 Mig 21s in the dog-fights and another six inside Somalia itself. This feat has been credited to the superiority of the American F5s over the Soviet Mig 17s and 21s. This may be so, but machines are operated by human beings. The Ethiopian air force had a history of thirty years behind it to Somalia's fifteen. Ethiopian domination of the air had perhaps more to do with technical skill and experience than the mere possession of a superior machine.

Finally, to their surprise, the invaders woefully underrated two critical factors: the depth of Ethiopian patriotism and the popularity of the revolution. A military victory for Mogadishu was possible only if the central authority in Addis Ababa or the Ethiopian army had collapsed. Neither happened. On the contrary, Somali aggression inspired civic patriotism, which the government skillfully manipulated for popular mobilization under the guidance of the NROC.96 The patriotic zeal was such that the factionalism that had undermined the military in the early stage of the revolution quickly disappeared once the invasion threatened both territorial integrity and sovereignty. Hundreds of battle-tested veterans eagerly returned to the battlefield despite their distaste for the young and haughty military rulers. The militia, though unskilled and inexperienced, turned out to be surprisingly tenacious; the resolve and bravery with which they fought must have astonished not only the Somalis but also their own leaders. The militia were inspired by dreams or hopes of social justice and a transformed world. Many of them were from the southern regions, primary beneficiaries of the land reform legislated in early 1975. There was much at stake for them to defend the gains of the revolution as well as the territorial unity of the country. With their patriotic and revolutionary enthusiasm, they helped halt a highly motivated and skilled, though not well led, enemy from undermining both.

The Ethiopians won the war but not the peace. Skirmishes with the defeated but stubborn Somalis who still contested a large piece of Ethiopian territory continued for another three years. Moreover, the WSLF and SALF reasserted themselves, reverting to guerrilla warfare, under the auspices of Mogadishu, of course. It took a major counter-insurgency campaign that deserves separate treatment for Addis Ababa to defeat the guerrillas in 1980–81, although small-scale resistance continued until the mid-1980s.

⁹⁵ MOND, "La Isapako Maekelawi Committe Gubae Abalat ya Miset ya Mekelakeya Minister Meglecha," Hidar 30, 1973, Addis Ababa, 11, MOMD. Note the discrepancy with Table 1. A draft report prepared by the Ministry for the Central Committee of the party in formation. It contains obvious factual errors.

⁹⁶ Clapham, Transformation and Continuity, 61-62; Lefort, Ethiopia, 228.

What was the cost of the war? It is impossible to answer this question with any degree of certitude because Somali official information is unavailable, and what is available on the Ethiopian side is discrepant.⁹⁷ One document from the Ministry of National Defense gives 5,532 casualties, another 5,137, and a third has 6,65098 as the number of Ethiopians killed during the eighth months of fighting. A total of 20,000 casualties does not seem too high given the duration and intensity of hostilities. Of the dead, 160 were executed for a variety of reasons ranging from cowardice and attempts to desert or harm oneself to sedition, and of the 3,799 soldiers missing in action, 1,362 were categorized as deserters. It is not known how many were taken prisoner, but the Ethiopians claimed to have captured 106 Somali fighters. 99 It is believed that about 100 Yemenis and 400 Cubans were killed in action. 100 The civilian population was caught between two fires, which must have consumed a good number of them along with some of their property, although we have no clue as to how many and how much. What we know is that nearly half a million people were uprooted, most of them temporarily migrating to Somalia.

The hardware that Ethiopia purchased from the Soviet Union was worth over a billion dollars, much of it on credit. The estimated cost of equipment and logistics the country lost is given as birr 283,219,970.00 (US\$138,156,083). Du the inventory contains many items, including 64 tanks, for which no estimates were provided; it is thus plausible that the total cost was in excess of 400 million birr or 200 million dollars. When the computation takes into account the closure of the railway, which must have robbed the country an enormous amount of its foreign earnings, and the extensive disruptions in agricultural and commercial activities, it is not hard to imagine that Ethiopia's losses were far greater than these numbers would suggest.

⁹⁷ For Somali estimates see Gilkes, "Revolution and Military Strategy," 736 n.51.

^{98 (1) &}quot;Ka 1966 eska Tir 1971 ... Zegeba," Part 3, Appendix 1. (2) MOND, "Ba Misrak ena Debub Iz Sir ba Wigia Lai ya Deresebachew Makonnenoch ena ba/ Maaregoch Matekaleya Senterej, Hamle 11, 1969—Tir 1970." The operations department of the Ministry has given the total number of Ethiopian casualties in two tables on a two-page document. (3) "Ba 1969 ba Somalia ... Gudatoch." According to this report, 6,301 more died on the southern front, for a total of 12,951 casualties. This is certainly incorrect because most of the fighting took place on the eastern front and should it not follow that most of the dying also occurred there? In fact, the second report affirms that fewer than a thousand perished in the southern sector. "Ba Misrak ... Tir 1970."

⁹⁹ Ibid. The records also reveal that 1564 were decorated.

¹⁰⁰ Kassahun Tirfe, April 25, 1994, and former ambassador to Havana, March 12, 1994.

 $^{^{101}}$ "Ka 1969 eska Tir 1971 ... Zegeba," Appendices 2–10. The exchange rate at the time was US\$ 1 = Ethiopian birr 2.05.

Table 1. Et	hiopian and	Somali L	osses, July	1977–March 1978
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Personnel	Ethiopia ^a	<u>Somalia</u>	
Killed	6,133	6,453 ^b	
Wounded	10,563	2,409	
Captured/missing	3,867	275	
Total casualties	20,563	9,137	
Equipment losses			
Aircraft	23	28	
Tanks	139	72	
APCs	108	30	
Vehicles	1399	90	

Notes: ^a Most of the field reports I have seen were professionally prepared. These conflicting and confusing figures are most probably the result of careless compilations by low-level bureaucrats at Ministry headquarters.

Sources: "Ka 1966 eska Tir 1971 ... Zegeba," Part 3, Appendices 1-5, 16-18, 21; "Ba 1969 ba Somalia ... Gudatoch"; "Ba Misrak ena Debub Iz sir ba wigia lai gudat ya deresebachew makonnenoch ena ba/maaregoch matekalaya senterej, Hamle 11, 1969—Tir 1970," n.d., MOND.

Table 2. Ethiopian Losses by Unit and Rank, 1977-1978

	Officers	NCOs	Militia	Police	PRGs	Total
Killed	125	2,327	2,537	951	49	5,989
Wounded	171	3,632	4,318	319	36	8,476
Captured/m	12	419	1,362	126	3	1,922
Total	303	6,378	8,217	1,396	88	16,387

Notes: The Militia figures included 513 workers.

The following additional casualties were unclassified: 777 killed, 1,357 wounded, 2,042 captured (sub-total 4,176), bringing the total losses to 20,563

Sources: "Ka 1966 eska Tir 1971 ... Zegeba," Part 3, Appendix 1 and 2; "Ba 1969 ba Somalia ... Gudatoch"; "Ba Misrak ... Tir 1970."

b The number of Somalis killed is quite close to a figure of 7,000 that Gilkes obtained from the former head of the military hospital at Hargeisa. Gilkes, "Revolution and Military Strategy," 736, n.51.

Somalia took advantage of the political tumult in Ethiopia in order to settle a long-standing dispute with its neighbor by force, provoking a protracted war that the irredentist state was ill-equipped to win on its own timetable. Its generals proved unequal to the task, its meager resources soon became overstretched, and its Aeronautical Corps were overwhelmed by the Ethiopian air force. Moreover, the Somalis had seriously underestimated the potential of (Ethiopian) nationalism for popular mobilization and the capriciousness of international relations. They were surprised by the Ethiopian will to resist, as they must have been by their own diplomatic blunders, which cost them the friendship of much of the socialist world.

It is quite interesting that an armed conflict that started in one of the desolate corners of Africa should have developed into the continent's largest war, involving directly the USSR, then a super-power. It was one of those riddles of the Cold War era. Whatever their interests and calculations, 102 the intervention of the Soviets in the Horn's crisis was as dramatic as it was extensive. It of course outraged the Somalis, who had been tied to the USSR for fifteen years. It also alarmed the West and its allies in the region, especially Egypt, Saudi Arabia, and Iran because it seemed to herald a new era of confrontation in northeastern Africa and the Indian Ocean littoral. What left the Somalis and Western strategists dumbfounded were the speed, efficiency, and scale with which the USSR armed the Ethiopians to vanquish an army that they themselves had trained and equipped. The war destroyed existing alignments and forged new ones, but without seriously upsetting detente as has been feared. The long-term impact was on the warring countries themselves.

The war had enormous repercussions for both Ethiopia and Somalia. On the Ethiopian side, military victory restored national pride, improved the tarnished image of the army, and saved the country from possible fragmentation. It also consolidated authoritarian military rule. The principal beneficiary of this was Mengistu, who emerged as the undisputed leader with a new myth that portrayed him as an intense nationalist and decisive person. Moreover, success against Somalia emboldened the military leaders to seek a similar victory in the north. But in the north they had to fight a civil war that required different strategies and tactics, and eventually they lost. As the Ogaden had catapulted Mengistu to the apogee of power, Eritrea and Tigray pulled him down, forcing him into a solitary life in exile. With his fall came the disintegration of the national army and the break-up of the country into two parts.

On the opposite side, the Ogaden debacle fatally wounded the regime in Mogadishu and may even have been the catalyst in the decomposition and demise of the Somali state. Defeat provoked widespread disillusionment and discontent which, in turn, led disgruntled elements in the army to mount an abortive coup just a month after the retreat from the Ogaden. Subsequently, a dozen men were

¹⁰² For an extended consideration of Soviet calculations, see Patman, *The Soviet Union*, 235-54.

executed and many more fled the country to join or found clan-based opposition organizations to which the Ethiopian government was only too happy to lend support, to counterbalance Mogadishu's backing of the WSLF and SALF. Neither the state of emergency declared in 1980 nor the reprisals would intimidate the otherwise-fractured opposition, which by the end of 1990 had gained the upper hand. In January 1991 Barre was driven out of Mogadishu. Upon his flight, the military and civilian bureaucracy collapsed and the Somali state ceased to exist.

Somalia's ambition for territorial aggrandizement was blunted, but the Ogaden problem remains. The invasion was almost universally welcomed by the Somalis of eastern Ethiopia, who cherished the eight months of occupation as liberation. Following their victory, the Ethiopians regained the Ogaden but not the permanent allegiance of the territory's inhabitants, tens of thousands of whom fled to Somalia for fear of reprisals by the Ethiopian army. Today, despite the unprecedented autonomy granted them by the new federal structure, there are political organizations like the Ogaden National Liberation Front (ONLF) that clamor for self-determination, a euphemism for independence and eventual unity with other Somalis. They believe, and perhaps rightly, that the extinction of the Somali state is a transitory, not a permanent, phase in the rugged process of statemaking. Thus the prospects for conflict have only diminished, not disappeared. Densely multi-ethnic, with varied historical experiences under colonial and postcolonial regimes, and prone to recurring drought and famine, the Horn of Africa is like a tinderbox. As the more recent and tragic war between Ethiopia and Eritrea has once again demonstrated, it is a volatile region where nationalist or ethnonationalist aspirations clash with each other, with the interests and fancies of existing states, with the caprice of geography and history, and with the logic of economics. To imagine a stable Horn that is relatively free of ethnic conflicts and wars is to think of a different political order, perhaps in the form of a loose confederation, that transcends the colonial boundaries that divide ethnic and cultural groups. The continuing anarchy in Somalia, the current enmity between Ethiopia and Eritrea, and the neocolonial presence of the French in tiny Djibouti would seem to make such a proposition foolish; but it is precisely these conditions that ought to reinforce the urgency of regional integration. Meanwhile, efforts will have to be focused on strengthening economic cooperation, which hopefully will lead toward eventual political amalgamation. The formation of the Inter-African Governmental Agency for Development (IGAD) is a good first step in that direction.