

Ethiopia

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Request for background information on the Mengistu Regime during the Red Terror

Response:**Historical Background**

Ethiopia's history has been a turbulent and brutal one. Never colonized by the European powers, the country was ruled by emperors until 1974, and the ethnically diverse feudal society was often characterized by regional, territorial and religious discord. Nevertheless, despite the numerous local dialects and more than eighty ethnic groups represented throughout the nation, one man governed Ethiopia for forty-four years (Mayfield 1995).

In 1930, Haile Selassie was crowned Emperor of Ethiopia and established a more modern state by creating a structured, central bureaucracy, a judicial system with codified laws, and a constitution (IRBDC Apr. 1990, 11). Despite these accomplishments, however, revolts, rebellions, droughts, and famine marked Haile Selassie's reign. The Emperor's unresponsiveness to the economic development of the country and the political needs of his people, specifically his methods of dealing with (and concealing) the widespread famine that plagued the nation in the 50s, 60s, and 70s, is what most scholars believe ultimately led to his downfall. Although the Emperor ordered the importation of grain into Addis Ababa, other portions of the country such as Wollo and Tigray were neglected and hundreds of thousands of peasants were left to starve. By early 1974, strikes, protests, and demonstrations against the imperial government were staged throughout the country by many different groups including students and a wide-range of Marxist intellectuals, taxi drivers, Moslems, labor unions, and military units. The government's unwillingness or inability to respond to these demands eventually led to the overthrow of Emperor Haile Selassie and the accession to power of the Provisional Military Administrative Committee (PMAC) also known as the Dergue (Mayfield 1995).

When the Dergue, a committee of nearly 120 military officers, assumed leadership, it "abolished Parliament, suspended the Constitution and arrested Emperor Haile Selassie and former members of the imperial government for alleged crimes against the Ethiopian people...All land, industries and institutions were nationalized" (DIRB Apr. 1990, 13). During the initial transformation, the Dergue still honored the revolution's slogan "without blood;" overall the transition was relatively peaceful and without casualties. However, power struggles within the new ruling elite led to the rise of a new leader, Mengistu Haile Mariam, and the phrase "without blood" was soon forgotten (Mayfield 1995).

Mengistu Haile Mariam and the "Red Terror"

Following the overthrow of Emperor Haile Selassie, General Aman Andom led the Dergue government. However, in November 1974, General Aman was killed resisting arrest after another high-ranking Dergue officer, Mengistu Haile Mariam, ordered his imprisonment; that same day, Mengistu also commanded the execution of nearly 60 former government officials (HRW Dec. 1994, 5). According to one ex-Dergue member, "Most educated people and revolutionaries believed that these prisoners had committed serious crimes but were shocked at their sudden execution. The country sank into a new era of fear and terror. Some fled the country and others took up arms" (IRBDC Apr. 1990, 14).

General Teferi Banti assumed power after Aman's death, but as before, Mengistu seriously undermined Teferi's leadership and maintained unofficial control over a large portion of the Dergue. In February 1977, Mengistu Haile Mariam arranged the execution of General Teferi along with six other senior members of the government, and publicly took supreme power after their deaths. Now, as the undisputed leader of the Dergue and Head of State, Mengistu began a campaign to suppress the opposition groups that had begun to organize in response to the Dergue's more violent tactics and autocratic rule (Mayfield 1995).

"Revolts by various right and left-wing political groups demanding an elected government, and guerilla warfare by secessionist fronts spread throughout the country in the late 1970s" (IRBDC Apr. 1990, 14). The two major groups involved in the conflict, the Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Party (EPRP) and the All-Ethiopia Socialist Movement (MEISON), despite minor differences, were actually supporters of the Marxist revolution against Emperor Haile Selassie. However, by 1976, the two groups had become bitter rivals. MEISON chose to ally itself with the new government, but the EPRP accused the Dergue of having a fascist ideology, and subsequently, launched a guerilla campaign against the government, assassinating both its leaders and supporters (HRW Dec. 1994, 5).

"Mengistu labeled the EPRP's sporadic campaign of assassination the 'White Terror' and... [the Dergue] promised that for every revolutionary killed, [there would be] a thousand counterrevolutionaries executed. The promised ratio was not to be much of an exaggeration" (Africa Watch Sep. 1991, 102). The Dergue had been executing suspected EPRP members since 1976, but after Mengistu seized full control in 1977, the "Red Terror" was officially unleashed. During this two-year campaign, which has been divided into "three waves," tens of thousands of Ethiopians were arrested, tortured, and summarily executed. To assist in exterminating the Dergue's political opponents and "enemies of the revolution," Mengistu employed the secret police and issued arms to local government, or *kebele*, officials (Mayfield 1995).

During the first wave of the Red Terror, anyone suspected of being an EPRP member or supporter was a target; if an individual were young and even slightly educated, that was often enough evidence to prove that they were involved in counterrevolutionary activities. The result was that at least 2500 youths alone were killed during the first wave (Africa Watch Sep. 1991, 104). In addition, thousands of men, women, and children were detained. According to a Human Rights Watch report,

Equally appalling is that the families of those killed or missing were often required to pay the government for the bullet used to kill the family member before the body would be released for burial. By the middle of 1977, Mengistu had successfully destroyed the EPRP in Addis Ababa, and launched the second phase of his massacre (Mayfield 1995).

During the second wave of the Red Terror, Mengistu now turned on his former allies, MEISON and the *kebele* members who were suspected to have greater loyalty toward MEISON than the Dergue. In October 1977, an estimated 3,000 to 4,000 people were killed, and by the end of the year, MEISON members had been removed from all high-level government positions. The murder of EPRP members in more rural areas continued as well (Africa Watch Sep. 1991, 104). During the third phase, lasting until spring 1978, the executions were less public and few bodies were left on the streets; nevertheless, the

killings were at least as frequent as in the previous years. "During one week of the Red Terror of 1978, [Mengistu's] secret police and army security squads murdered 5,000 high school and university students and imprisoned 30,000 others" (Rapoport 23 May 1991).

While the killing and imprisonment were predominately aimed at inhabitants of Addis Ababa, it is important to note that executions occurred in provincial areas as well. "During 1978, the government instituted a purge of the leadership of Peasant Associations...Though not as bloody as the urban terror, this purge was accompanied by many detentions and some executions" (Africa Watch Sep. 1991, 108). In addition, although not part of the Red Terror campaign per se, landlords, traders, and shopkeepers, especially those involved in grain trading, were also targeted. While the number of merchants killed, detained or forced out of business is smaller than the number of young, educated victims, the absence of these individuals contributed greatly to the famines of the 1980s (Africa Watch Sep. 1991, 111).

It is impossible to calculate the exact number of those killed, imprisoned, or forced to flee the country on account of the Red Terror campaign. "A minimum of 10,000 were killed in Addis Ababa alone in 1977, and probably a comparable number in the provinces in 1977 and 1978. A larger number were detained and subject to appalling prison conditions and torture, and an even greater number became refugees" (Africa Watch Sep. 1991, 110).

The Downfall of Mengistu

Despite Mengistu's successful obliteration of his political opposition, popular support for the Dergue government decreased as a result of economic and political disasters, conflict, and famine. Warfare was prevalent throughout the Dergue period, and with the help of Soviet funding and training, the regime fought Eritrean independence forces, Somali invaders of the Ogaden region, and ethnic-based insurgencies by Tigrayans in the north and Oromos in the south. "In the Ogaden, an estimated 25,000 civilians were killed in 1980 following the defeat of the Somali army, and, in Eritrea, between 70,000 and 80,000 combatants and civilians were killed between 1978 and 1981" (Mayfield 1995).

However, by the end of the 1980s, Mengistu's regime faced international criticism and dwindling financial and military support from the Soviet Union. In 1989, several long-standing liberation movements took the opportunity to consolidate forces, and the Tigrayan People's Liberation Front (TPLF), the Ethiopian People's Democratic Movement (EPDM), and several smaller allied groups formed a united front called the Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF). In February 1991, the EPRDF and the Eritrean People's Liberation Front (EPLF) launched new offenses against Dergue forces and were able to overpower the army, which had become divided and frustrated with the brutality of Mengistu's rule. On May 21, the EPRDF entered Addis Ababa and took control of the country (Mayfield 1995).

Current Conditions

Today, the Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia is led by the EPRDF, and a number of political and economic reforms have been implemented. However, many human rights advocates report that the new government has tried to suppress its political opponents. "Opposition activists, editors of the private press, and leaders of labor organizations who continued to challenge the EPRDF's monopolization of political space were systematically targeted through harassment and repeated detentions" (HRW 1999). Clearly, Ethiopia still faces huge obstacles on its path toward democracy and freedom; however, the overthrow of the brutal Mengistu regime was a necessary step toward these goals.

This response was prepared after researching publicly accessible information currently available to the RIC, including the World Wide Web. This response is not, and does not purport to be, conclusive as to the merit of any particular claim to refugee status or asylum.

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