



From Oblivion to Memory

ADWA

An African Victory

Editor's note

In the late nineteenth century, amid the aggressive expansion of European empires during the Scramble for Africa, Ethiopia emerged as a powerful exception—an African nation determined to defend its sovereignty against colonial ambition. Its confrontation with Italy would culminate in the historic Battle of Adwa, on March 1, 1896, and would be the victory that reshaped global perceptions of power, resistance, and African independence. Brave anticolonial wars had taken place throughout Africa at the time, but what makes the Battle of Adwa exceptional was not just its victory against colonial ambitions, but that it was an **irreversible victory**.

This was not a defeat only for Italy – but for Europe. European reaction was of shock, embarrassment and racial anxiety. Newspapers of the time described the defeat as astonishing and humiliating for any European power. Britain and France tried to frame it as Italy's weakness instead of Ethiopia's success. However, the Battle of Adwa became the African Victory that inspired colonized and subjugated people throughout the world. And the names of Emperor Menelik II and Empress Taytu became immortalized.

Background

As a sovereign African nation in the late 19th century, Ethiopia was a rarity in Africa. Its location, which is now known as the Horn of Africa, made it strategically attractive in the Scramble for Africa. The Kingdom of Italy, unified only in 1870 was eager to attain the stature it lacked among European powers. Italy therefore viewed the Eritrean coastline as a gateway to regional dominance. A series of commercial and political events allowed it to establish a base in Massawa.

Rising Tensions: Battles in Dog'ali & Adwa

From its vantage point in Massawa, Italy progressed inland and entered into military confrontation with Ras Alula¹ at the Battle of Dog'ali in 1887. More than 500 Italian soldiers were killed during this engagement, resulting in Italy's humiliation. Ethiopia was now cast not merely as an obstacle to Italy's imperial ambition, but even as a direct affront to its right to empire.

In 1889 following the coronation of Menelik II, Italy manipulated its diplomatic overture in the translation of the Wuchale Treaty, by creating significant discrepancy between the Amharic and the Italian versions. Menelik's wife, Empress Taytu was adamant in her rejection of the Italian interpretation and decisively challenged it, setting the stage for the next military confrontation.

Italy's political climate was primed for imperial adventure. Expansion abroad was promoted not only as a means of elevating national prestige but also as a strategy to distract from mounting domestic challenges. Confident in its military superiority, Italy anticipated a swift and effortless victory.



Emperor Menelik II

VICTORY



Instead, Menelik II mobilized tens of thousands of warriors in defense of sovereignty. Advancing from the north, the Italians were not prepared for the formidable and coordinated resistance that they met at the Battle of Adwa in 1896. Empress Taytu valiantly commanded 5000 infantry and a cavalry regiment of 600 in this battle.

Historical Significance and Legacy

Ethiopia achieved what many believed impossible. No European colonial army was thought to be vulnerable against an African one. Ethiopia effectively challenged Italy's ambition and its perceived invincibility. This battle and Ethiopia's victory sent a powerful message worldwide. Adwa became a symbol of resistance and stoked the imagination of the African diaspora. It showed African American and African anti-colonial leaders and organizers that victory and liberation were possible. It was evident now that white supremacy could be challenged and defeated. Adwa became the rallying cry.

The battle of Adwa left Italy badly bruised. Where it was seeking stature and prestige, it was left with a humiliating scar. This was the basis for subsequent foreign policy fueled by desire. By 1935, Italy's ambition and need for revenge were brimming. Mussolini decided to invade Ethiopia, and this led to a brutal occupation. It was obvious that this was not just about imperial ambition. The massacre that took place on Yekatit 12, in Addis Abeba is demonstrative of the barbaric politics of the occupation beyond the obvious imperial and colonial interest.

(1) Ras Alula was previously governor of Mereb Millash, present day Eritrea. He was a highly regarded leader who fought in 1875 & 1876 against Egypt, and the Mahdists in 1885 and 1889, and in Dog'ali in 1887 against Italy leading Ethiopia to victory each time.
 (2) Fitawrari Alula Lulseged, not to be confused with Ras Alula Abba Nega died at the Battle of Adwa.

Today, the Ethiopian tricolor endures as a worldwide symbol of Black resistance and liberation, rooted in the legacy of Adwa and Ethiopia's defense of its sovereignty.



Ras Makonnen and other warriors before the battle



Fitawrari Alula(2) and warriors preparing for battle