

New Book on The Ethiopian Revolution launched in Amsterdam

Compiled By Zerihun Engidashet zerihunengidashet@gmail.com

On Sunday 2.00PM, the 26th of March 2017, at the meeting halls of The Ethiopian Community Association in Amsterdam City, a new book on the Ethiopian Revolution was launched to guests that were invited by the Association through an email sent to hundreds of members and supporters. The book entitled Revolution Love and growing up stories from Ethiopia and the UK was written by Worku Lakew a former founding member of the USUAA Congress, and also a member of EPRP and EPRA and was available on paper back and Hard back editions. Later the author informed the meeting that an Amharic edition is in the works and should be hopefully available in the next two years.

Accompanied by a specially printed poster for the occasion, the launch was chaired and opened by the Chairman of the Association. In his introductory remarks, he described the significance of the book as an original testimony based on the memoirs of the author Worku Lakew, as an original contribution to the modern history of Ethiopia covering the period since the February Revolution up to the closing stages of the 20th Century.

Focusing on the role of the EPRP, The EPRA, The University Students Union of Addis Abeba (USUAA), and the Dergue, with all of which, the author had direct and personal involvement, it was billed as a very fresh and personal contribution to large sections of modern Ethiopian Revolutionary History, that are still in the dark and are waiting for light to be shone on the period.

The chairman welcomed the launch and publishing of the book as an encouragement for all Ethiopians to make their own contributions by recording their memoirs, so that the jigsaw puzzle which forms our history could be completed through our collective efforts.

He specially welcomed the fact the book contained material that had not been in the public domain about the relationship between the Dergue and EPRP as the author was one of the leading members of the party in relation to this work, being responsible for some of the key party members and party work between the Dergue and EPRP which came directly under the control of leading members of the political bureau of EPRP and commended that a light was being shone on this unknown facet of the Ethiopian Revolution and enable us to fill gaps in our knowledge of the history of this period.

He emphasized the originality of this contribution as the author was in the unique position of having participated to a greater or lesser degree in the founding days and epic activities of the University Students Union of Addis Abeba as well as taking part in the EPRP organisational activities in the capital where he was a member of the party Zonal committee of Zone 4 as well as the Addis Abeba party inter-zone committee on intelligence

which as is well known were key organs of the party during the urban phase of the revolution.

In addition, the Author had also been an active member of the party in the liberated areas of Bellessa Zone in Gondar Region where he served as party Secretary for the region for several years as well as in the fighting wing of the party, The EPRA, in its closing stages of the struggle where he served as apolitical Commissar of a new unit under formation.

This wide span of experience provided the author a vantage point to write and comment on this period of the revolution. Quite uniquely, the experience of running a branch of the party organisation within the Ruling Dergue establishment which included among its members key officers of the Dergue could only awaken our expectation of what great secrets are contained in this book and brought to light for the first time.

The chairman then introduced the author to the audience and took the stage and expanded on his perspective on writing the book, after thanking the chairman, the association and the event organisers for inviting him to launch the book.

He started by saying that it all started as a journey of keeping a promise that he had made to his children, three girls, to write down bedtime stories that he had been telling them orally while they were growing up, some of whom were now attending the launch as grown-ups and were among the audience.

He stated that one of his fundamental aims is to encourage other people to record their own experiences so that the mosaic of our history could be completed by the combined efforts of the all the people of the country. He also reiterated his hopes that such efforts of recording past events will become an important part of passing our accumulated and unique experience to the next generation. He felt that his generation was unique to have been called to the barricades of history to stand guard at the epic moments in which our country was going through radical and generational change, something that happens very rarely in the life of a nation. He stated that it is equivalent to the birth, wedding and death moments of a family and individuals in it, to take part in these inflection points when a nation is forced to undergo change with the entire trauma that is associated with it and the moments of heroism and sacrifice as well as the tragedy that goes with it. These impacts live with us for generations to come and the repair of our collective psychosis requires such reflection by all those witnesses from the barricades.

The author also shared his view that Ethiopian History has been truncated and chopped into small segments due to the experiences of different generations, different regions, nations and peoples, and this has made a consensus difficult among the people . In this epoch of contested history and experiences, the author believes that an honest and personal testimony is one of the best ways forward in order to reconstruct our fragmented history.

Personal experiences have the status of a start witness for the prosecution in a murder case. If it involves eyewitness statements from the scene of the crime including the murder weapon, it can act as an invaluable source of evidence for our history for future generations.

The author stressed that he is not writing a justification for or a defence of EPRP, EPRA or the USUAA Congress but providing a direct and first-hand account of what happened, where, by who and why things turned up the way they did as well as occasionally offering his own opinion of what the explanation is, even if it is critical of EPRP and its role in the revolution.

As the chairman stated in his introductory remarks, and interventions, honesty and frankness must start at home and in this regard the author doesn't spare us the intimate details of his early childhood, his family life and the complexities of growing up in Gondar and later in Addis including what happens in one of the most privileged boarding schools in the country, The General Wingate, which is the playground of the sons of the privileged, the rich and the powerful or the poor but talented who arrive on the back of special competitive scholarships, as the author did. The book then frogmarches us through the pre-revolutionary situation in Ethiopia, the birth and development of the revolutionary student union of Addis Abeba University (USUAA congress), the February Revolution of 1974, the coming to power of the Dergue, followed by the red terror, the revolutionary armed struggle of the Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Army (EPRA), and life in the liberated areas. It surveys the final days of this epic armed struggle where the author together with hundreds of others ends up in exile in the Sudan as a refugee and later in London in the UK.

In between there are arresting insights into the history of Ethiopia, the great philosophical and political theories of humanity, further insights into economics, banking theory and practise and revolutionary struggles of the 20th century. There are also adventures of a rebel under fascist occupied parts of northern Ethiopia. All in all, it is an epic journey that the author is inviting us to explore in his company.

The format of short stories that the author adopted (there are about 30+ short stories in the book) made the business of getting into the book man easier task so that one could get in and out at one's leisure and convenience without losing the thread of the whole story.

The author then went on to describe, as part of his introduction to the writing of the book and its contents, the following facts and observations. The first of these was focussed on the character and impact of the Ethiopian revolution.

The Ethiopian Revolution, about which little of great significance is known either in the West or East, is one of the epic revolutions of humanity on a par with the French Revolution of 1789, the October Revolution of 1917 in Russia and the Chinese Revolution of 1949 in terms of its consequences for humanity. However, very little of these consequences are known and even stranger, hardly any of these consequences are associated with Ethiopia or its

revolution. The huge impact of the revolution was both positive in the main internally and negative, especially in terms of its impact externally on the rest of humanity.

An established state and polity which had existed continuously for over two thousand years and had become frozen in relation to the needs of the people and the nation had suddenly exploded overthrowing the established order. It took the culmination of a raging famine, unlimited corruption and exploitation by the old and new elites of society, huge inflationary pressures on the urban poor and lower middle classes both from oil crisis of the 1970's and the hoarding of staple grains from unscrupulous merchants betting on getting rich from the devastating famine of 1972/74. Bankrupt economic policies that led to huge unemployment among the poor, peasants expropriated of their ancestral lands from an expanding feudal centre, to the periphery of other nations in the empire, as well as no prospects for the hundreds of thousands of educated young people were combined with an insurrectionary movement fomented by radical students now turned into organised revolutionaries and a four day general strike that culminated in the overthrow of the monarchy and the feudal order.

Sections of the military composed of NCO's and lower officers seized the opportunity of an insurrectionary population to intervene and stop the crumbling of the ancient state and the pressures from a still un-pacified and restive population forced the young Turks of the military to decapitate the leading lights and mainstay of power of the ruling class in a rerun of events in the French Revolution of 1789.

The author identified the impact of the revolution internally as follows.

1. The complete incapacitation and neutralising of the old ruling class through arrests, decapitations, expropriations and the spread of a reign of terror on the upper classes through the media
2. The launch of a red terror campaign that killed, imprisoned and exiled a whole generation of youth, intellectuals, workers and oppressed nations that set back the country by several generations as well as weakening and decimating left wing parties like the EPRP and its army the EPRA, by the fascist military.
3. The worsening of conflict within the empire among the oppressed nations by the brutal attacks of the fascist military
4. The wipe out of a landed gentry and nobility through land expropriations and the expropriation of all urban housing, industry, banking and financial services and industrial and financial capital
5. The establishment of a large class of state bureaucrats and apparatchiks as well as state capitalism, who like in the days of the USSR thrive and feast on the coffers of the nationalised state, industry, agriculture and trade
6. The eclipse of the national democratic revolution as the main task and agenda of the Ethiopian peoples and The Ethiopian Revolution and its replacement by the national question and empire as the main preoccupation of all the struggling forces

7. The emergence of a very heightened and real risk to the over two-thousand-year-old sovereign and independent existence of Ethiopia and its peoples and for the first time in the nation's history the national subjugation of the country first by the USSR briefly and now by the USA.

The author then went on to expand on the international impact of the Ethiopian Revolution above and beyond most revolutions that had occurred before or after the rise of political struggles of humanity.

In order to understand this incredible, international impact, the author drew the attention of this invited audience to the prevailing conditions of the time just before the 1974 revolution.

He started by pointing out that the entire post Second World War order was under the grip of a cold war raging between the two camps of east and west, the latter now under the leadership of the United States as the pre-eminent super power of the late 20th Century.

The mid 1970's was arguably the most intense and critical phase of the cold war, that transformed every single incident of local conflict into a critical event of showdown between the super powers.

Secondly, Africa had been thrust as the greatest space of contention between the superpowers and as Ethiopia was the most significant diplomatic space of Africa at the time it was unavoidable that it emerged as the eye of the cold war storm that was raging globally. The new wave of decolonisation had led to many independent African countries which had come together in Addis Ababa to found the Organisation of African Unity (OAU), now based in the capital. All the UN regional offices including the Regional Office for Africa, The UNDP and others were now based in Addis Ababa. In short Addis was the diplomatic capital for Africa; it was the meeting point between Arab Africa to the North and Black Africa to the South, West and Centre. Its two thousand years of uninterrupted existence and independence had given it the status of a peer group's leader among the 52 African countries and nations of the OAU. And its Red Sea port of Assab and Massawa had the strategic function of being the meeting point between the Red Sea and The Indian Ocean acting as a southern counterpart to the Suez Canal through which the overwhelming part of global maritime trade passed through. So, whatever happened in Ethiopia was bound to have a huge impact on the two super powers and their global alliance partners.

Because of these unique set of factors and circumstances, the US was bound to and did get deeply involved with the Ethiopian Revolution to an extent that it had never done before in any other revolution in its history. That included the Chilean, The Argentinian and The Cuban Revolutions where US involvement was well known and well documented. In Ethiopia, US involvement was not well known at all and wasn't documented in any accessible way.

It is a little-known fact that US involvement in the Ethiopian Revolution changed Ethiopia dramatically, and for many years to come. It also changed the US itself, especially its foreign policy drastically, like no other event in world history has done since the formation of the young republic. Its impact is arguably even greater than the rise of communism and the February Revolution of 1917 and the experience of US involvement in the Second World War that shaped US foreign policy for a long time to come.

More important than anything else changes that took place in US foreign policy as a direct result of the US experience in the Ethiopian Revolution led to a dramatic impact on world politics for the closing quarter of the 20th century and are still continuing their dramatic impact on world politics to the present day.

For the first time in its history, the US was confronted by an old style revolution against an ancient Regime that it had supported led by an ageing Emperor who had grown to be out of touch with his people, in the manner of the French Revolution of 1789, but this time led by a new left movement that was in turn led by a new left organisation, a development that complicated the process of getting a handle on the situation for desperate US foreign policy executives that needed to formulate credible and deliverable policy options.

US intervention in the Ethiopian Revolution couldn't stop the storming of the Bastille by a highly incensed insurgent population railing against the old order and the emperor. The insurgents had undertaken a four-day general strike in Addis Abeba in 1974; the US couldn't protect the Emperor or the ruling nobility or stop the insurrectionists from guillotining the entire leading lights of the ruling class using a firing squad. The traditional levers that State Mandarins are used to operate, the institutions through which US foreign policy executives intervene and influence such as the army, the police, the security forces, the Navy, the air force, the intelligence branches and apparatuses were not accessible in a rapidly escalating revolutionary situation. By the same token the local media, the bureaucracy, the public opinion formers of the intelligentsia were also off limits. Such was the frenetic pace of the revolution and public disgust and mobilisation about the corruption of the ruling class while Rome was burning and the hunger and famine of the population while the nobility had wedding cakes flown in by chartered jet transport from Paris that even the option of slowing down the process while options were being developed was not possible. All known policy options were still born as they had to be discarded no sooner than they were formulated to keep up with the fast pace of unfolding events.

Even worse was to come. The US could only look on as the young Turk's of the military (yesterday's WestPoint graduates, now metamorphosed overnight to Nasserite revolutionaries), now in a clumsy alliance with left leaning civilian supporters who demanded as the price of getting into bed, an unholy tripartite alliance with the USSR, something unheard of since the Cuban Revolution.

The US tried to stop the haemorrhage to its old cold warrior adversary, the USSR, by desperately backing a Trojan horse attack of foreign Somali invaders from the East of the Horn of Africa fortified with US intelligence, weapons supplies and strategic advice in a blitzkrieg attack on these unholy intruders in the diplomatic capital of Africa. The attack nearly succeeded coming within 100 Kms of Addis Abeba before the USSR mobilised the Cubans in solidarity and organised the largest and longest airlift in military history of equipment, supplies and manpower to try and repulse this external invasion. As soon as the US saw that its name was being tarnished in the eyes of the general public as public enemy number one (which by now has been galvanised into fervent nationalism and patriotism thanks to the age-old trick of an attack by a foreign enemy) it stopped supporting this zero sum game that was born out of desperation for any policy options.

The US came to a sudden awakening that for the first time since the Second World War it had no policy options left, when faced by an adversary that combined old and new in the way it was not supposed to be. All the traditional levers of foreign policy had been closed by the ferocity of a grass roots based movement from below that washed like a tsunami over all the actors in the political space narrowing the options for them as well. The tsunami ensured that the theology of the time for all participants had in the minimum to appear in the form of left ideology and left policy options. Both the Young Turk's of the military and the opportunist civilians that had taken shelter under its tent to get a breathing space from the onslaught of the tsunami were victims of this tectonic shift of the political discourse of the nation.

Once again, for the first time in its history, the US realised it had to start working with forces that it had never worked with before to any significant degree; forces that are working to undermine its local interests and allies that it is protecting which had now become a liability to its global interests. These included insurgent forces, mass organisations, now suitably christened as NGO's, nationalist forces fighting for secession in Eritrea, Somalia Tigray and in Oromia. It even got to bed for the first time in its history with explicitly self-declared communist forces (these one's saw themselves as the followers of the Albanian Communist Party and its totalitarian leader Enver Hoxa) fighting for the independence of Tigray- in short really anyone that was opposed to these new left forces the likes of which the US has never come across before.

Thanks to the Ethiopian Revolution, the US foreign policy executives learnt that in the interest of US foreign policy objectives of containing the Soviet Union, the US has to work with the government in power as well as the forces that are fighting to destroy it, all at the same time. Machiavelli, The Prince, has risen from his grave gratis of the little known left wing party, the Ethiopian People's Revolutionary party. The US's newly cast policy of working with mass movements that are directed at fighting governments in power, gradually metamorphosed into the policy of staging colour revolutions from below.

All of this happenstance was a direct result of the only choice available for the US in the heyday of global confrontation and containment of the USSR in the cold war: US defeat in the eye of the storm, Ethiopia, was not simply an option.

For the US, as well as for their new found nationalist allies, the defeat of these new left insurgent forces through encirclement, blockade and proxy wars was not enough in itself. Even the disorganised, confused and option less survivors nor congregating in the Sudan had to be physically removed from the vicinity of the Horn of Africa by being airlifted in chartered jets from Khartoum and other places directly to the US in order to ensure that they couldn't reorganise and emerge as a local or regional movement in the future. US immigration policy and rules which specifically barred communists from entering the US had to be clandestinely broken by the high-powered CIA operatives who had set up base in Khartoum to sift through and organise the airlift that lasted for over a year until the overwhelming majority of the Ethiopian new left had been relocated to the US. Nationalist Eritreans who were told that they couldn't qualify for resettlement because they were not communists couldn't make any sense of US policy much like the Ethiopian left itself.

After his comments on the impact of the Ethiopian Revolution on the US foreign policy the author then turned his attention to the question of the relationship between the Dergue and EPRA, a subject that is also described in some detail in the book.

He stated that the party treated the Dergue just as one section of the army and the state apparatus and undertook party work of mobilising support, recruitment and democratisation activities within the Dergue, just as it did in other parts of the state apparatus. Dergue members were recruited as individual members into the party structures or other mass organisations such as the movement of soldiers; NCO's and lower officers or their equivalent in the air force and the police forces. They had to accept the party programme, abide by the constitution and rules of the party and had to be free from having committed any crimes against the people and the revolution and be willing to oppose the fascist rule imposed by the Dergue.

Gradually, due to the persistence of the struggle of the Ethiopian people's against the fascist rule of the Dergue led by colonel Mengistu, and the hard work of party supporters and sympathisers and other democrats within its midst, a movement emerged within the Dergue, to form a united front with the party on a handful of issues: to establish a political front that included the EPRP and the democratic forces in the Dergue that will take the Ethiopian Revolution forward to achieve the New Democratic Revolution, to resolve the Eritrean question and other national questions of self-determination on the basis of a peaceful discussion and negotiation and declare a ceasefire and an end to military conflict and lastly to set up an 18 member committee elected directly by Dergue members that will help implement this decision and get in touch with all relevant parties.

The author stated that his brother in law was elected as the head of this 18-member committee and 16 of the 18 members of the committee were definite supporters of this new programme and approach of the Dergue special General Assembly. A huge majority of Dergue members voted to support this policy. There were also several party members who were elected to this new committee as well as several key people in the Dergue who openly supported the new direction including general Teferi Banti , the Head of State, and Colonel Atnafu Abate , the vice chair of the Dergue, Captain Moges Woldemichael , who was the chair of the economic policy committee now reorganised by the special assembly as the economic and political committee of the Dergue with special responsibility for the resolution of the Eritrean question. It also included Captain Alemayehu another progressive officer now moved to work with Captain Moges in the political and economic committee.

This new approach was interrupted and decimated by the brutal coup d'état launched by Mengistu and his civilian counter parts now organised under Woz League and Meisson. It massacred 16 of the 18 members of the executive while they were in a special meeting called by Mengistu ostensibly to apologise to his colleagues for his past behaviour. This was communicated to the author by Captain Moges a few hours before the meeting.

The author went on to explain that the party had a pragmatic as well a revolutionary attitude both to the situation and to the Dergue or in this case the state. For example party members in all institutions, took advantage of opportunities that arose in the course of their own jobs, to advance the democratic agenda of the new democratic revolution, in such areas as drawing up the land reform bill, the urban land and housing nationalisation bill, the industry and finance sector nationalisation bill, etc. which accounts for the fact that some of the bills turned out to have enormous revolutionary scope like the equal and independent property rights for women in rural and urban land ownership, and the formation of mass organisations and unionisation in all social economic and political spaces (peasants , workers, urban communities etc.) to safeguard and deepen the revolution.

The author concluded his remarks by stating that if it hadn't been for the overwhelming imperative of US foreign policy to achieve a win over the Soviet Union in Ethiopia, the new democratic revolution would still have been successful even after the launch of the Red Terror and he considered that this line of argument and thinking to be the biggest contribution of the book to a discussion on the history of the Ethiopia Revolution.

The chairman then opened the meeting for questions from the invited guests attending the launch. One of the questions was inviting the author to reflect on whether the Ethiopian Revolution had gone off course and missed its historical goals. The author referred to a similar question posed about the French Revolution of 1789 to Prime Minister Chou en lai of China by a French journalist in the 1960's (it was too early to tell!) based on the fact that it had only been 165 years since the revolution. He added that a new democratic revolution takes place through a long period of time and takes many directions before it reaches its goals. For example, the Chinese new democratic revolution started in 1905, picked up steam

around 1912 and got huge momentum in 1949 and is still not concluded yet, although it has entered its final stage since 2016.

Another questioner wanted to know if EPRP destroyed most of its own leaders and if so what use would it have been to the Ethiopia people if it succeeded? The author replied that in the realm of leadership, the party was unique in that 65 % of the leadership that were in the central committee (24 members) died in the process of struggle against the enemies of the Ethiopian Revolution, and only two of these are known to have died in the process of internal conflict in the party. No other political party known to us in history has paid so much sacrifice from its leadership wing rather than its middle and base cohorts which showed that the leaders were more focussed on the success of the revolution and to serve the country rather than personal considerations such as power and privilege.

Another contributor wanted to know how much research had gone into the question of the characterisation of the Dergue as a fascist state and movement? The author replied that he personally had spent two years after the revolution studying the question as it was one of the requests that he had received from his good friend Zeru Kihshen while they were both still in the underground struggle before end of 1975. He had no time to look into great detail at the question but had written several papers on the subject since then and had no hesitation on labelling the Dergue as a fascist state. He added that Fascism is misunderstood by some people and those who take Marxism as an orthodox framework, as a political phenomenon that only takes place under conditions of advanced capitalism thus excluding countries like Ethiopia. In reality, it can arise and occur anywhere, where the balance of power between the people and the ruling class that controls the state is highly contested and has broken down and neither side could impose its will on society. It requires a crisis of the society and economy, where the ruling classes cannot run things in the form of business as usual, and on the other hand the people are not strong enough in their organisational and mobilisational journey to overwhelm the ruling class and its organ of power. In this kind of crisis situation, sections of the army at different levels and at different times would intervene to preserve the status quo of the state and impose order, even if they had to appear as change agents in the process of imposing their will. One must remember that the Dergue was the last of four waves of the old ruling class that still tried to maintain state rule in the old form after the fall of the Emperor (a reformed Aklilou Habte Wold cabinet under Ras Asrate Kassa as the behind the scene strong man, Lidge Endalkatchew Mekonnen cabinet that lasted two weeks, and Dejasmach Amha Desta cabinet that was short lived).

Some questioners felt that EPRP was a party that was unpatriotic and led to the division of the Ethiopian people along ethnic lines and differed from the author's viewpoint about its significance and relevance but this line of argument didn't attract a lot of support from the assembled guests.

Other contributors wanted to know what the book had done to encourage dialogue among discordant viewpoints rather than dredge old wounds and saw discord. The author replied

that he had chosen to be personal and truthful even if he had to be critical of the party at times and he hoped that this would encourage others to listen to the arguments that he is making rather than dig into their old positions.

One of the guests wanted to know if the author had achieved catharsis and healing as a result of the process of writing the book. The author agreed that writing can be a form of therapy and that writing the book had been helpful to him in his personal journey.

Another contributor wanted to know if revolution required too much price to be paid by the people and the country leading to death, suffering, exile, trauma and genocide and whether the price which lasted for generations outweighed the damage that they do and should be avoided. The author replied that nations chose revolution as a last resort and most often revolutions are imposed on countries by a set of circumstances beyond their control. The Ethiopia Revolution started as a peaceful protest and a demand of the age-old cry for land to the tiller but no one can control the direction of events when necessary change has been postponed for so long that the pressure cooker has to explode to relieve the pressure in society.

The meeting was concluded by the author signing books that guests had purchased earlier followed by a photo shoot and the organisers of the meeting also made announcements that similar launches were planned to take place in other world cities and that books could be purchased from five restaurants in Amsterdam and Utrecht had agreed to stock the books including

1. Sunshine Ethiopian Restaurant
2. Amsterdam Ethiopian Restaurant
3. Taytu Ethiopian Restaurant
4. Addis Ababa Restaurant
5. Rotterdam Sirah Asfaw Restaurant.