

Eritrea and Namibia: Collateral Victims of the Korean War in Africa

*By Asgede Hagos**

Note: *This short article is adapted from a long, 7,000-word academic paper scheduled to be published soon.*

In a few weeks, on June 25, 2020, the world will mark the seventieth anniversary of the Korean War; efforts to officially end this conflict and denuclearize the region have been on and off the news pages since the June 2018 Washington-Pyongyang summit in Singapore. But, as this continues, it is important that the world pause to remember and assess the collateral damage this Asian conflict has caused and the seeds of other wars it left deeply planted in such distant lands as Eritrea and Namibia in Africa. Caught in the vortex of the Cold War, the decolonization of these two former colonies were derailed and delayed by more than 40 years, forcing their peoples into protracted and costly armed resistance to reclaim their national rights.

This is an issue that is never raised in the ongoing discourse on the Korean crisis. The purpose here is to shed some light into some of the dark corners of the history of that period and draw some attention to the harsh reality it created some of which is still with us today. For example, the extent of the damage the war has caused and the crises it spawned in the Horn of Africa are still here today, though the end now seems to be in sight with the recent thawing in relations between Eritrea and Ethiopia.

The Korean War broke out at a time when the fates of both Eritrea, a former Italian and British colony, and Namibia, a former German colony known at the time as South West Africa, were in the hands of the United Nations, which was and still is dominated by the United States, then in the process of building an anti-communist coalition to support its new global order. At the center of this geopolitical drama were also South Africa and Ethiopia and their cynical ploys to use the war at the other end of the world to achieve their annexationist goals at home. The leaders of both nations quickly attached their respective agendas to the Cold War, the same way other Third World expansionists were to leverage terrorism in the wake of the 9/11 terrorist attacks half a century later to advance their goals.

The cases of these two former colonies had been going through the UN system for some time before the outbreak of the Korean War on June 25, 1950. However, the conflict gave both Ethiopia and South Africa a new impetus to strengthen their respective claims over their neighboring territories. The conflict, Lefebvre says, “jolted the [Ethiopian] emperor into recognizing” how much he needed the U.S. to secure Eritrea. He “abandoned all pretenses of

playing up to the East bloc” and “declared Ethiopia to be a loyal ally of the West and offered” to send troops to join the anti-communist crusade.¹ The Ethiopians, who arrived in South Korea six months after the UN voted for a “federation” between Eritrea and Ethiopia, the only African ground troops in the war, went through three rotations (1952, 1953, and 1954) with a small group remaining there until 1965, and were attached to the 32nd Infantry Regiment of the U.S. 7th Infantry Division. They were also considered the ‘show troops’ for visiting dignitaries coming to Korea during the war” and “were called upon to serve as protection for Secretary of State John Foster Dulles’s visit and formed the honor squad for President D. Eisenhower” when he visited the troops at the end of 1953.²

The emperor was also willing to provide the U.S. full and unconditional access to a communication base in Eritrea that Washington wanted to turn into a major spy center to eavesdrop on communist activities in nearly half of the world--part of a worldwide effort to establish a network of global listening sites and military bases to counter communism. He went out of his way to polish the anti-communist image he was cultivating when an American news outlet called him, in a report from Addis Ababa, a “communist incubator” in Africa. The emperor deployed his American point man on the Eritrean case, John Spencer, to mobilize the U.S. Department of State and the American delegation to the UN to force the media organization to retract and threatened to sue for \$500,000 in damages, which would be worth more than \$5,355,00 in 2020 dollars.³

South Africa also saw a new opportunity to utilize the crisis to achieve its goals of annexing Namibia and receiving acceptance or at least tolerance of its repugnant apartheid system at home. Though its foreign policy leading up to the start of the Korean conflict was decidedly against involvement in new foreign conflicts, the distant Asian war created a new situation that forced the regime to undergo what Borstelmann describes as “some sort of epiphany with a belated realization as to the potential benefits of [foreign] military involvement for South Africa,” the main benefit being a long-sought association with the then emerging superpower, the United States, which Pretoria saw as “the natural opponent to communism.” It was the only other African country whose offer of military assistance was accepted. In addition to its commitment to send a fighter squadron to Korea, its willingness to “produce and sell large quantities of uranium ore to the-U.S. and Britain entrenched the Union firmly in Washington’s good graces,” he argues.⁴

Pretoria also had another epiphany moment—this time on the Eritrean question. When discussions on the decolonization of Eritrea began at the UN before the breakout of the war, South Africa expressed strong opposition to—and lobbied actively against—the idea of linking Eritrea to Ethiopia to avoid creating a precedent, particularly in Africa, of white people—i.e. Italians in Eritrea—being governed by a black leader—i.e. the Ethiopian emperor. The then Union of South Africa ambassador to the U.S. told American officials that “the Government of South Africa would not be happy to see Italians of Eritrea subjected to Ethiopian rule.” The ambassador, making the case against the emperor’s designs for Eritrea, also expressed “doubt that Ethiopia could properly administer additional territory.”⁵ As a result, South Africa expressed strong support of Italian trusteeship over Eritrea and most of the rest of former Italian colonies.

However, as a member of a five-nation UN Commission of Inquiry for Eritrea, Pretoria made a complete turn-around and accepted the U.S. and Ethiopian plan—with no questions asked--to have Eritrea incorporated into the Ethiopian empire, under the cover of a sham federation. Its inclusion as a member of the UN commission has raised many troubling questions, given the fact that it had repeatedly violated UN decisions with regards to its mandate over Namibia as well as its internationally condemned system of governance. For example, why was a country that was condemned by the UN over its policy and practice that prevented its own neighbor, Namibia, from authoring its own future, was allowed to sit in judgment of another former colony seeking to achieve the same thing?

The UN failed repeatedly to uphold the Eritrean people’s right to determine their own destiny, largely due to the outsize role the U.S. played in shaping and shepherding the case at the UN to make sure the final outcome met the Ethiopian emperor’s expectations. By contrast, though it was not successful in its attempt to free the territory from Pretoria’s defiant grip, the world body continued its commitment to the Namibian people’s struggle by establishing UN-affiliated organizations, to support their resistance against the apartheid regime.

The actions in New York and in Washington naturally prompted nationalistic pushback in both territories—ushering in a new era of organized resistance to fight against two of Africa’s largest and well-equipped armies, though with a marked difference in the alignment of forces for and against the leading nationalists in both nations. The Namibians were able to leverage the global anti-apartheid movement as well as the direct intervention in Africa of the USSR and its

own clientele states, especially Cuba, to their benefit. However, Eritreans had to singlehandedly face both sides in the Cold War. At the end of the Cold War, however, both Eritrea and Namibia, which trace their origins as multi-cultural nations to 1890, were able to liberate themselves and achieve independence one hundred years later, one year apart, Namibia in 1990, and Eritrea in 1991.

There is a Korean proverb that says when two whales fight the shrimp in the middle gets crushed! Well, the 45-year fight of the two Cold War superpower whales did a lot of collateral damage in both Eritrea and Namibia; however, these two small African nations didn't give up, despite all the military and diplomatic power that was deployed against them. But, as efforts continue to officially end the Korean war, Washington and the rest of the West should pause to reflect on the destructive wars the conflict spawned thousands of miles away from the epicenter of the crisis, and to draw some lessons from it. One of the lessons that should be drawn from this is that the powerful nations should never underestimate the resolve of small nations fiercely determined to be free.

¹Asgede Hagos, Ph. D. is the author of *Hardened Images: The Western Media and the Marginalization of Africa*.

NOTES

¹ Jeffrey Lefebvre, *Arms for the Horn: U.S. Security Policy in Ethiopia and Somalia, 1953-1991*, (Pittsburg: University of Pittsburg, 1991), 63.

² Paul Edwards, *United Nations Participants in the Korean War: The Contribution of 45 Member Countries* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland & Company, 2013), 84.

³ U.S. Department of State (USDOS), *Memorandum of Conversation*, with the following participants: James E. Webb, acting secretary of state, James S. Moose Jr, Ras Imru, Ethiopian minister, and Haddish Alemayehou, first secretary, Ethiopian Legation in U.S., June 17, 1949.

⁴ Thomas Borstelmann, *Apartheid's Reluctant Uncle* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993), 160-161.

⁵ USDOS, *Memorandum of Conversation*, **Folder:** March, 1949, **Collection:** Dean G. Acheson Papers. Date: March 29, 1949, with Secretary of State Dean Acheson, H.T. Andrews, ambassador of the Union of South Africa, and James S. Moose, Jr., of the African Division.