

# **Patriots or Bandits? Britain's Strategy for Policing Eritrea 1941-1952**

NENE MBURU

*University of London, The United Kingdom*

## **ABSTRACT**

This article analyses counter-banditry policies during the British military administration of Eritrea from 1941 to 1952. The study dismisses the claim that post-Second World War Eritrea was too fragmented along ethnic and religious lines to be allowed to gain political independence. Its finding is that such claims were calculated to influence the political future of the territory through an international compromise deal that allowed Ethiopia to administer, and later to colonize Eritrea. Britain's counter-banditry measures failed because she did not deliver the liberation promises made to the people of Eritrea during the World War, there was little investment in will and resources, and her wider imperialistic designs in the Horn of Africa came on the way. The article concludes that, whatever the ethnic or religious identity of *Shifita* bandits, the causes, course, and resolution of banditry could not be isolated from the uncertainty and complexity of determining Eritrea's sovereignty. Hence the political protest that was treated as banditry during the British Military Administration of Eritrea from 1941 to 1952 crystallized into four decades of formidable liberation struggle against Ethiopia's administration.

## **INTRODUCTION**

The existing position is that we are unable to control banditry in Eritrea to an extent which makes it possible for us properly to discharge our share of implementing the UN resolution in Eritrea or to enable the UN Commission to discharge his (FO 371/90320).<sup>1</sup>

The relationship between civilians and the military in post-Second World War Eritrea was based on the general directive for occupied enemy territories issued by Britain to its military commanders at the strategic level. The instructions provided British strategic commands with the flexibility to continue active military operations, maintain active military control even after the cessation of active military operations, and to revert to civilian control in the case of an armistice or treaty agreement. This guideline for the employment of troops in the maintenance of internal security in all the African territories captured from Italy was known as "Duties in aid of the civil power, 1937" issued by the War Office (WO 230/17).

---

<sup>1</sup> Foreign Office (FO) and War Office (WO) records have been obtained from the Public Records Office Kew Gardens, London. Similarly, research evidence from The Kenya National Archives Nairobi is abbreviated KNA.

Military commanders in specific liberated territories formulated their Standing Operating Procedures to address any peculiarities obtaining in their territory but consulted the civil-military-relation handbook from the War Office as a guide. Unlike British colonies, the administrative Headquarters for the African territories liberated from the Axis powers was not based in London but in the British Middle East Command before relocating to Nairobi in 1944. Given such unambiguous regulations, the direct linkage between the military, the occupied territory, and the prevailing euphoria of emancipation from fascist repression, one could expect peace and tranquillity to mark the post-war period. Yet Eritrea is a case in point whose post-war history indicates widespread internal security problems and anything but friendship between the 'liberator' and the 'liberated'.

Any analysis of Eritrea's political history from 1941 to 1952 should grasp the wider picture by balancing the significance of *Shifita* banditry against various counter-measures by the British Military Administration (hereafter BMA). It is the view that the period has not received adequate scholarly attention despite being the genesis of Africa's longest armed struggle against 'foreign' domination that was to last four decades. This opinion is based on a review of the literature on the region that, albeit a generalization, leads to the categorization of scholars as being sympathetic to either Ethiopia or Eritrea. For example, Okbazghi defines the *Shifita* as 'terrorists' that attacked 'nationalists' a definition that precludes the existence of bandits among pro-independence Eritreans. Not surprisingly, the scholar fails to analyse why the steps taken by the BMA to establish law and order failed. Similarly, by defining the *Shifita* as "armed gangs of Christian Abyssinia", meaning pro-union sympathizers, Trevaskis' (1975: 96) has not given a fair crack of the whip to both sides. The scholar further interprets the problem of post-Second World War Eritrea in terms of ethnic and religious fragmentation. This article contests the above definition of the bandits of the period by marshalling evidence to support the view that both pro-union and pro-independence Eritreans had sympathizers among the gunmen. Pankhurst's 1952 publication is very brief on post-war security arrangements in Eritrea but establishes a firm anchor of post-war lawlessness to Britain's inequitable distribution of economic opportunities in favour of Italian nationals. In 1953 she co-authored a more contextualized account that is a deeper discussion of some of the draconian measures undertaken by Britain to suppress banditry in Eritrea. Greenfield (1965) claims that Pankhurst (1952, 1953) is sympathetic to pro-independence Eritreans yet he struggles to mask his pro-union bias by omitting a discussion of banditry despite its undeniable significance in the political history of the territory. Generally, all of the studies discussed beg the question, given Britain's military supremacy during the Second World War and unrivalled experience of colonial policing, of why counter-bandit strategies failed in Eritrea. Gebre-Medhin (1995: 181-190) summarizes the impasse in the internal security situation as emanating from Britain's lack of interest and its lack of material and personnel resources to enforce security. True, after World War Two Britain's economy was unstable, a situation that was aggravated by the mounting expenses of running her disintegrating colonial empire (KNA: Secretariat 1/11/41;

KNA: Secretariat 1/4/3; KNA: CS 2/7/36). Taking into consideration that imperial outreach limited her logistical capacity to bolster security for Eritrea, Britain had also to contend with the political interests of Italy and Ethiopia while safeguarding her future strategic interests in the entire region.

Accepting that the threat posed to the survival of Eritrea by domestic insecurity after 1947 was exacerbated by uncertainty over the territory's political future, its ramifications cannot be adequately pictured unless the pre-war social-economic and political situations are fully understood. Whereas the conspiracy of the imperial powers had led to the colonization of Eritrea in 1885, a similar collusion erected obstacles over the determination of the sovereignty of the territory after the Second World War. In the context of the competing forces of imperialism under discussion, Eritrea was a territory contested by more than one party, but the injudicious determination of its sovereignty by the United Nations ignored the wishes of the people of Eritrea. This article will try to bring out Eritrea's struggle against the vicissitudes of the post-Second World War decade, compared by Iyob with the biblical David and Goliath contest but in a case where God is openly supporting Goliath (Iyob 1995: 5). In short, the article argues that the causes, course, and resolution of post-Second World War banditry could not be isolated from the political uncertainty and complexity of determining Eritrea's sovereignty.<sup>2</sup> So, despite having the requisite mandate and muscle for the maintenance of law and order in Eritrea, counter-bandit strategies failed owing to a conflict of imperialistic interests that tied Eritrea's political future in with those of the entire Horn of Africa.

Although the people of Eritrea had been under intermittent foreign control spanning several centuries, it is their interaction with Ethiopian and West European imperialism in the latter half of the nineteenth century that is of immediate relevance to this study. Italian interests in Eritrea's coast can be traced back to 1869 when merchant seafarers bought port facilities at Assab. This was facilitated by the increase in the strategic significance of the area following the opening of the Suez Canal in 1869. Proper imperial designs were discernible after Italy captured Massawa in 1885 from Egyptian control, who in turn had earlier captured it from the Turks (Amrit 1980: 3). Davidson (1980: 11-14) persuasively argues that having preceded other Europeans in the region Britain not only approved Italy's conquest but welcomed her as a junior partner in the scramble for the Horn of Africa. After securing Massawa, Italian conquest of the interior of Eritrea was made easy by Abyssinia's (Amharic) territorial expansionism that in the immediate term seemed to converge with West European imperialism.

Our quest for understanding the problem starts with the treaty of friendship and alliance between Ethiopia and Italy of 2 May, 1889 known as the Treaty of Wich'ale (Ucciali). Following this treaty, Italy proclaimed Eritrea an Italian colony on 1 January 1890. Italian conquest of Eritrea not only curtailed Ethiopia's

---

<sup>2</sup> The *Shifta* under discussion was no opportunistic smash-and-grab outlaw but a militant who used brigandage to pursue a specific political agenda.

territorial ambition to Eritrea but also fomented Menelik's suspicion as to the overall territorial interest of Italy. Consequently, Menelik denounced the Treaty of Wich'ale ostensibly because the text in Italian stated that Ethiopia was Italy's protectorate, which was not contained in the Amharic version. Menelik's defiance was tantamount to challenging Italy's credibility as an imperial power. To restore this image, Italy declared war on Ethiopia with the expectation of achieving through the force of arms what she had failed to achieve in a treaty document. Her forces were defeated at the battle of Adwa in October 1896, which temporarily halted open Italian territorial ambition on Ethiopia but it retained control of Eritrea. In 1935-36, Italy invaded Ethiopia from Eritrea, which it defeated, colonized, and merged with Eritrea and Italian Somaliland to form Italian East Africa.

## 1. YEARS 1941-1947

After occupying Eritrea in 1890, *Pax Italiana* disrupted the existing military equation in the western regions where an existing warrior class of pastoral nomads had previously maintained security. Initially, Italian colonization of Eritrea seemed to diminish the existing tradition of community domination and was apparently a harbinger of economic development and racial tolerance. Italy's rapid urbanization and improvement of road and rail communication promoted social interaction among the sedentary agricultural communities of the plateaux and pastoral nomads of the lowlands (Davidson 1980: 83-110). This was the situation before 1935. However, in 1935 the legacy of *Pax Italiana* was destroyed by Italy's alliance with Nazi Germany that caused the country to adopt fascism, which religiously asserted racial superiority of the colonizer over the subjects. The fascists disrupted the harmony existing among the people and they confiscated land, thus ruining the economic base of rural life. When World War Two broke out, the Allied powers easily drummed up the propaganda of good fighting evil where Nazi Germany and Fascist Italy were easily identifiable as the enemy because of their pronounced racist ideology. British-led forces defeated Italy in 1941, following which her colonial possessions in Africa, namely Eritrea, Italian Somaliland, and most of Libya, were placed under the administration of Britain. Consequently, on 8 April 1941 a British Military Administration assumed responsibility for Eritrea pending an international decision on how to dispose of all Italian colonial possessions. For the people of Eritrea, the defeat of Italy in 1941 had symbolized victory over the ideology of racial superiority that, though linked to Fascism and Nazism, was identifiable in all forms of foreign domination. Naturally, the people of Eritrea expected the British Military Administration to respect the racial equality which pre-war propaganda had promised. What is more, they expected the Allies' victory to translate into total freedom from foreign rule. After defeating Italy, the Allies started sharing the spoils of war without considering the interests of the Eritreans and in total disregard of the promissory commitments made to the people before

and during the Second World War. In this respect, sympathy is with Gebre-Mehdin's cynical view that in the determination of Eritrea's political future the indigenous people were treated as incidental in the World War enemy territory which the Allies had just conquered (Gebre-Medhin 1995: 181-190).

It is not possible to place with certainty the beginning of banditry among the communities of Eritrea. Before the Italian occupation, *Shifta* brigands existed in the plateaux, where there existed a strong military tradition. One of the earliest recorded incidents of banditry is in Greenfield's 1965 study, where the scholar discusses how patriotic pirates denied port facilities of Eritrea to Roman fleets in the course of the first century AD.<sup>3</sup> They were part of the extant tradition where the outlaws were viewed with envy and adulation as a warrior class in society. These early brigands were nationalists inasmuch as their fame was not based on their smash-and-grab modus operandi but on their ability to prevent the exploitation of the port facilities of Eritrea by foreign seafarers. After colonizing the territory, Italy recruited heavily from amongst the youth of Eritrea's martial races, who were used to pacify the countryside. Service in the fascist army was the most lucrative means of livelihood for the peasants to the extent that during the Second World War 60,000 Eritrean *Askari* fought for Italy in Libya alone (Davidson 1980).<sup>4</sup> They were requited handsomely with salary and privileges that in reality recognized the exclusivity of the tradition of arms-bearing. After the Eritrean regiments were disbanded in 1941 following the defeat of Italy, African soldiers lost their employment and were not automatically absorbed into the mainstream society nor was their elitist status recognized (Trevaskis 1975: 103-104). Consequently, economically dislocated former *Askari* of the Italian colonial army found banditry congenial both for economic self-sustenance and for cultural machismo. The escalation of lawlessness after the war should also be seen against the backdrop of the significance of Italy's contribution to Eritrea's economy before the Second World War. Before the war, Italy had supported the occupied territory's economy through subsidies and loans to industries and projects that created a false sense of economic security. The Italian defeat meant an abrupt halt to financial assistance, which the British failed to match, although a few projects opened to support the Allies' war effort created employment, but these closed after 1945. A large number of able-bodied Eritreans suddenly found themselves unemployed. In consequence, the economic depression that followed the world war made banditry tempting and manageable using arms kept from ex-Italian stock. These arms were easily available because, having been defeated by the Allies, Italy did not co-operate in the demobilization of the former Italian *Askari*. Arms also percolated into Eritrea from Ethiopia, where the tradition of arms-bearing was kept alive by protracted

---

<sup>3</sup> For a comparison with contemporary banditry see Mburu 1999.

<sup>4</sup> *Askari* is the Swahili word for security troops but during and after the Second World War the term referred to Africans employed in imperial policing such as in Britain's Kings African Rifles.

rebellions by regional and cultural-linguistic 'nations' such as the Oromia and Tigray who dissented against central Amharic control. Eritrean co-operation with the British kept banditry to a minimum during the first five years of liberation. In any case, leaflets dropped by the RAF during the war had pledged a variety of freedoms that made the people patient and optimistic (Davidson 1980: 32-47).

The British Military Administration tried to tackle the problem of lawlessness with variable degrees of success owing to internal and external factors that allowed banditry to become deep-rooted and progressively more sophisticated. To begin with, Britain failed to accept that it was actually faced by incipient insurgency and not widespread thieving. Whereas pre-war brigands seemed to follow the line of traditional feuds between the social classes and specific ethnic communities, organized lawlessness after the war reflected previously unknown cleavages, which may be linked to the formation of political parties. The Party of Love of Country (PLC) started a post-war political struggle whose elitist leadership emphasized the solidarity of Christians and Muslims in anticipation of Eritrea gaining political independence. Ethiopia sensed that it was being upstaged in her territorial ambition to Eritrea, whose political future she tried to influence by establishing the Society for the Unification of Eritrea and Ethiopia (SUEE) in 1944 to compete with the PLC (FO 371/69353).<sup>5</sup> After 1944, organized lawlessness reflected divergent political views, which the BMA used to claim that banditry was the culmination of a course towards self-destruction unless the political future of the territory was determined by its benevolent liberator. In any case, even if the lawlessness that existed in the territory before 1944 had not been alarming and often confined to rural areas, there was a technical problem regarding the general application of the law. Unlike Ethiopia, where African customary law was applied, in Eritrea the BMA suspended the Italians courts, which were replaced by British magistrates administering the existing Italian law. A major test was in the passing of the death sentence. Although preferred by the British as deterrence to politically motivated banditry, capital sentences had to be commuted to life imprisonment because in the existing Italian penal code murder was not punishable by the death penalty (FO 1015/533).

A significant catalyst to banditry was the BMA's allocation of economic opportunities to Italian nationals while unfairly discriminating against the indigenous people of the territory they had just liberated. For example, between 1943 and 1946 the British authorities allocated large tracts of land to Italian entrepreneurs for agricultural purposes and gave others licenses to excavate and trade in gold without the indigenous people's consent or consultation. Obviously every inch of soil allocated to the Italians already belonged to one Eritrea family or other. This arbitrary expropriation of their land dashed the hope of an end to foreign domination promised to the people of Eritrea before and during the Second World War. Thus, after 1941 the issue of land added nationalistic appeal and

---

<sup>5</sup> As evidenced in this document, Ethiopia's territorial claim to Eritrea is inextricably linked to her quest for access to the Red Sea through Massawa.

welded together different communities in their quest for freedom from foreign domination. The young took to the forests from where they addressed what they deemed the theft of their birthright. The motive for bandit attacks was political inasmuch as they were not random acts of thieving but calculated political intimidation of Italian nationals resident in the territory.

To some extent, a power vacuum introduced by the reduction in the number of administrators and security forces policing Eritrea allowed lawlessness to intensify. In 1944 Britain reduced the number of administrators from 30 to 21 officers whose effectiveness, particularly in remote areas, was further hampered by the introduction of austerity measures such as the rationing of petrol. This miscalculation of the security needs of Eritrea was based on the aura of peace that seemed to prevail immediately after the Second World War. The most drastic security miscalculation was the relocation of the Sudanese Defense Forces (SDF) from Eritrea to the Sudan that was still administered under the terms of the Anglo-Egyptian condominium. This redeployment was probably due to increasing tension and resentment on the part of Coptic Christians after the SDF massacre in Asmara on 28 August 1946 that left 42 people dead and 74 wounded (Gebre-Medhin 1995: 85). Until then, the troops for policing the territory had consisted of 2,461 Eritrea police and 215 Italian *Carabinieri* under the command of 88 British officers (FO 1015/531). The military consisted of one battalion of British troops augmented by three battalions of the SDF. There was a proposal to form a *Gendarmerie* that would be a specially trained and highly mobile police unit to operate alongside other internal security forces but this did not materialize. In addition, a mobilization of civilians under their chiefs was considered a less costly means of policing inaccessible rural villages. Taking into consideration their advantage over the regular police against bandits, vigilantes could allow the commitment of police to other duties. In this scheme, the BMA planned to use people who were indigenous in a particular area, taking advantage of their local knowledge of terrain and language, and their ability to cope with inclement weather. However, the scheme failed as a result of not being properly co-ordinated. The SDF was trained in the conventional tactics of World War Two and in the suppression of unlawful assemblies obtaining in the colonies, applying, at least in theory, the principle of minimum force but not the nondescript warfare thrust upon them by bandits. Nevertheless, the SDF was a necessary combat multiplier that could have been used for flag shows or to police infiltration routes used by bandits along the Eritrea-Ethiopian border. In any case, it was difficult to replace the experience, ruthlessness and camaraderie that gave the SDF their reputation of being an effective force for colonial policing. Its relocation to the Sudan created a security vacuum in Eritrea in 1947 which the bandits exploited. If the BMA seriously wanted to promote peace in Eritrea the number of troops for imperial policing should not have been scaled down when it was clear that the internal security situation was getting worse. However, a worsening of the security situation augured well for Britain's prescription of Eritrea's political future, as we will discuss later.

While maintaining that violence in the territory was politically motivated, it is important to recap the impact of political developments at the global level that touched on the sovereignty of Eritrea. In June 1946 the Treaty of Paris was signed where Italy resigned its rights to its former colonies of Libya, Eritrea, and Italian Somaliland. Disposal of her colonies would be implemented after a year following an agreement of Great Britain, the USA, the USSR, and France. However, the Allies were unable to decide the future of Eritrea owing to conflicting strategic interests in the Horn of Africa. A Four-Power Commission (FPC) of investigation was appointed composed of Great Britain, the USA, the USSR and France to discover from the people of Eritrea what their preferred political destiny should be. Such a plebiscite presupposed that the people of Eritrea were one and assumed the impartiality of the FPC in the outcome of the referendum. Given the aforementioned conflict of interests, the FPC visit to Eritrea from 8 November 1947 to 3 January 1948 failed to find a solution. The United Nations General Assembly sent a second commission of inquiry to Eritrea composed of representatives from Pakistan, Burma, Guatemala, Norway and South Africa. Erling Quale, the Norwegian representative and Chairman of the United Nations Commission for Eritrea resigned before the completion of the task owing to what was seen as a conflict of interest within the commission, particularly with regard to its mandate (**The Times**, 31<sup>st</sup> March 1951). A plebiscite would invite the views of Egypt, Ethiopia, France, Italy and the United Kingdom before submitting its findings and recommendations. Some members of the commission suggested that during its visit to Ethiopia to receive the views of the Emperor on the future of Eritrea, the commission should tour areas outside the official itinerary. Ethiopia's reputation did not include good governance and such a tour, particularly in Tigray, could expose the Emperor's authoritarianism that could weaken the case for Ethiopia's plans to annex Eritrea.

The Eritrea plebiscite had been a cloak behind which each European power pursued its imperialistic interests in the Horn of Africa. For a start, it is important to recognize that Britain could not maintain its Second World War image of a benevolent liberator in Eritrea without making political concessions that were harmful to Britain's national interests. Britain was consistent in highlighting the fragmentation of Eritrea as being a matter between Coptic Christians and the Muslims. However, bandits in the territory were not fundamentalists inasmuch as religion was just a façade behind which patriots pursued deep-seated political convictions and divisions that became more conspicuous by 1946. By portraying the territory as hopelessly fractionalized along ethnic and religious lines, Britain hoped the international community could accept her recommendation on Eritrea's sovereignty. A favourable decision could enable her to secure her imperial design in the entire Horn of Africa generally, and in particular, allow her to control the geo-strategically important choke points on the Red Sea. Britain's was also interested in the economic exploitation of its colonial possessions in Egypt, the Anglo-Egyptian Sudan, and British Somaliland. To realize the plan, Britain recommended the partitioning of Eritrea so that its eastern province could be ceded



to Ethiopia and the rest merged with Anglo-Egyptian Sudan, with the Ogaden restored to British Somaliland. The latter proposal ties in closely with what came to be known as the Bevin Plan. This plan followed the Italian peace treaty signed after the Second World War, where Sir Ernest Bevin, Britain's Foreign Minister, proposed to the House of Commons the creation of a 'Greater Somalia' under a British administration, stating:

In all innocence therefore we must propose that British Somaliland, Italian Somaliland and the adjacent part of Ethiopia, if Ethiopia agree, should be lumped together as a Trust territory, so that the nomads should lead their frugal existence with the least possible hindrance and there might be a real chance of a decent economic life as understood in that territory (Hansard, House of Commons Debate 4<sup>th</sup> June 1946; Jaenen 1957: 151).

From a different angle, Britain was attempting to create and benefit from both the enlargement of Ethiopia and the expansion of Somalia. Nevertheless, it was not possible to attain both 'Greater Ethiopia' and 'Greater Somalia' because they were not only mutually antagonistic concepts but also interlocked with the conflicting European realpolitik in the Horn of Africa. Whatever the outcome in Eritrea, France was only interested in safeguarding her colonial possessions in the region and averting any steps being taken to determine Eritrea's political future that could incite her own colonies towards independence. Italy also harboured imperial interests in connection with Eritrea and hoped that the territory could be declared her Trusteeship. European imperialism was competing with regional territorial expansionism, too. Granted that their attraction was primarily the exploitation of a strategic coastline, Egypt and Ethiopia anticipated splitting Eritrea and each justified its irredentist ambitions by citing cultural and historical ties with the people of the territory. In the post-World War Two period, the USA and the USSR intended to fill any power vacuum left by Italy and possibly champion the quest for African independence by limiting Britain's post-war colonial influence in the Horn of Africa. Ethiopia seemed to solve the political jigsaw of Eritrea's future for the Europeans by seemingly denying the territory to all big competitors. With the benefit of hindsight, the USA was probably the ultimate western benefactor in that she acquired the Kagnew military facilities in Ethiopia as a result of the newly established rapport with the Emperor. It is against the backdrop of the above political tussle and uncertainty that one should analyse lawlessness and the attendant difficulties of counter-banditry strategies after 1947.

## 2. YEARS 1947-1952

How did internal political developments in Eritrea influence the nature and magnitude of lawlessness? A significant political development in Eritrea was the formation in November 1946 of the pro-Ethiopia Unionist party, which was

supported by Eritrea's Coptic Church. Its formation led to the death of the PLC and the creation of the Independence Bloc. The latter amalgamated a plethora of parties that wished to attain independence under the aegis of the United Nations at the end of the British Military Administration in 1952. The numbers of outlaws soared owing to disaffected civil servants sacked by the BMA. There was widespread xenophobia manifested in the targeting of Italian nationals particularly known bigots at the time or during the fascists' administration of the territory. Others were attacked in the businesses, mines, and individuals in specific concessionaires targeted for kidnap until a specified ransom was paid out. Robberies were frequent on remote dirt roads and on trains to the countryside. After a train-robbery, bandit leaders usually warned the BMA that lawlessness would continue until the political future of the country was determined in accordance with the wishes of the people of Eritrea. This was the bandits' means of exerting political pressure on a caretaker administration whose recommendation on the future of the territory was unpopular.

While the policing of Sudan increased Britain's imperial outreach, the demobilization of Italian *Carabinieri* rapidly degraded the effectiveness of the troops available for the internal security of Eritrea. Other punitive counter-banditry measures had to be explored to compensate for the deficiency in manpower. Hence, the BMA decided to impose collective punishments of £ 3,015 sterling on villages known to have sheltered a bandit and to have purposely withheld the information from the government troops (FO 1015/146). The BMA also offered a reward to any civilian whose action or information led to the capture or killing of a gunman. The problem with this legislation was the likelihood of demoralizing security troops who were expected to risk their lives performing similar tasks all in the line of duty. For this reason a meritorious award of £ 20 sterling was introduced for exemplary cases of gallantry by security troops who led to the arrest or elimination of any gunman, but renowned ones had a price tag of up to £ 900 (FO 1015/146). Strangely, the BMA did not explore the possibility of deploying pseudo-gangs that could infiltrate known bandit groups and expose, apprehend, or eliminate important leaders. Such a policy was less costly in personnel, logistics or prestige and it had produced good results elsewhere in the British colonies. This failure to explore every possibility of containing banditry reinforces the suspicion that Britain was not committed to the restoration of law and order in Eritrea.

In view of an increase in cases where the bandits specifically targeted Italian nationals, Italy complained that the BMA had abrogated its responsibility of securing the life and property of all people in Eritrea. Partly as a result of Italian pressure, Britain appointed Lieutenant-Colonel H.V. Rose in 1949, who was designated Staff Officer anti-*Shifta* operations in Eritrea (FO 1015/208). It is difficult to de-link his appointment from the UN General Assembly decision of 21 November 1949, which proposed the formation of a United Nations Commission for Eritrea to ascertain the wish of the territory's populace. It can be construed that the haste and timing of the appointment of such a high-ranking officer was intended to create the impression that Britain still had the capability and commitment to restore the rule of law in Eritrea. His duties entailed collecting and collating

intelligence to facilitate the co-ordination of counter-banditry operations in aid of the civil power. Admitting that their roles tended to overlap, the civilian authorities were supposed to provide personnel and material resources that could be used by the military to eradicate lawlessness inside Eritrea and along the territory's border with Ethiopia. The latter is significant in view of Ethiopia's support for gangsters sympathetic to the Coptic religion, which increased after the formation of the Unionist Party. Ethiopia evidently supported gangsters who targeted Muslims and any group that was against the union of Eritrea with Ethiopia. During this period, bandits were operating in gangs of eighty to one hundred strong. Military attempts to flush them out were frustrated by the populace, who fed, sheltered, and recognized theirs as a patriotic struggle and not as selfish smash-and-grab brigandage. Furthermore, civilians failed to betray bandits for fear of reprisals because the under-staffed British troops could not guarantee the people any respectable form of protection. Security troops became demoralized as the breakdown of law and order eroded public confidence in them, making Europeans in particular feel very vulnerable.

Though both pro-union and pro-independence bandit groups targeted Italian nationals, the latter's participation in the territory's domestic politics aggravated an already volatile situation (FO 1015/208). The BMA was of the opinion that Italian political activities were aimed at improving the image of Italy as a colonial power. This may be viewed as part of Italy's strategy in the Horn of Africa, which expected to retain Trusteeship of Eritrea along with Italian Somaliland (FO 1015/522). Indeed, speculation was rife that the United Nations General Assembly's rejection of the recommendation by Britain that Eritrea's eastern province should be united with Ethiopia was due to Italy's growing influence. This created greater antipathy towards Italian nationals from bandits who sympathized with the pro-unionists. Having postponed a decision on the future of Eritrea on 21 November 1949, the United Nations General Assembly appointed a commission of inquiry to visit the territory and determine the political desire of the people.

The UN decisions of 2 December 1949 seemed to fuel the incidence of bandit attacks and shape their organization to fulfil a specific political agenda. Most of the gunmen were of the Coptic Christian religion but their outlaw activities had a political bearing and not the makings of a religious crusade. Understandably, the Coptic Church in Ethiopia had cause to desire change after the Italians appropriated its land. Its chance of regaining this land rested with an Ethiopian administration. The interests of the Church in the future sovereignty of Eritrea, were therefore, closely interwoven with those of the Unionist Party. The Unionist Party in turn represented Ethiopia's political interests. It is no wonder that neither Ethiopia nor the Unionists Party in Eritrea respected the BMA's appeals for help in apprehending named bandit leaders. Yet without castigating or condoning them, the Coptic ecclesiastical authority in Eritrea justified their non-cooperation by claiming that by definition the *Shifta* were 'lawless men whom nobody was in a position to control or influence' (FO 371/90319). Such a definition may ring true of random brigandage, which continued on the line of traditional feuding in the plateaux, but

organized pro-union bandits in Eritrea were unmistakable frontrunners in Ethiopia's political claim to Eritrea. It is not surprising that there were instances when bandits defied the BMA forces but on their own volition surrendered to Ethiopia, where officials treated them as heroes.

Italy never fully accepted that having lost Eritrea to the British, their views on events were not important. It tried to project national interests under the guise of safeguarding the concerns of the local Italian population. In this connection, Italy criticized the workability of Britain's counter-bandit measures in view of continued attacks on her nationals and their property. There was an upsurge of raids on foreigners, particularly Italian and British nationals, to the extent that if the matter of sovereignty was left pending any longer the security of all foreign nationals could be seriously jeopardized. Italy argued that since banditry was politically motivated, political solutions were likely to succeed over the use of brutal policing operations. Whereas this concern was justified, Italy may be accused of exploiting the security issue for ulterior political motives. For example, Italy suggested to the BMA that Catholics in Eritrean prisons in 1949-50 should be released to commemorate an historic religious event. The BMA was justified in turning down the request because Catholics in Eritrea were not only a minority but also clemency for them had to be extended to convicts of all religious denominations. In any event, the BMA did not wish to create a precedent where political activities in Italy were automatically imitated in Eritrea, which, despite having a large Italian population, was legally under the administration of Britain. Another example was the proposal that since Britain had failed to protect Italian nationals from the renowned Hagosand Tecchie *Shifta* the BMA should allow the Europeans to be placed under the care of the United States of America (FO 1015/146). Italy's attempt to draw the USA into the internal security of the territory was impermissible and outside the agreed framework for the administration of territories captured from Italy in the Second World War. Consequently, Britain downplayed Italy's concern on the situation in Eritrea inasmuch as the country was making political capital out of organized violence to portray the BMA as incompetent partly to embellish her own credibility in the determination of Eritrea's sovereignty. Continued fog over the determination of Eritrea's future led to speculation which patriots exploited. A lot of politicking continued between Britain and Italy, in which each country tried to win the sympathy of the people of Eritrea by exposing the other's shortcomings. In this low-key propaganda war, Britain used radio broadcasts and newspapers while Italy used the *Eritrea Nuova* paper.

As lawlessness and rapine increased, the BMA lost the popularity it had acquired after liberating the territory through its draconian measures calculated to reclaim legitimacy in Eritrea. In addition to the aforementioned collective fines on whole villages, Britain introduced a legislation of guilt by association where ten innocent men could be arbitrarily detained from every village if any resident was a suspected bandit (FO 1015/146). This was a gross miscalculation of its policing capability and hardly a recipe for winning the hearts and minds of the innocent civilian population. The timing was most inopportune given that bandits were reportedly

displaying good organization and tactics. Some proudly wore uniforms with Ethiopian epaulette and rank insignia, reinforcing the suspicion that they had been secretly trained, armed, and infiltrated by Ethiopia (FO 371/80907).

Britain persistently argued that in Eritrea there were three strong groups: Unionists, Italians, and pro-independence Eritreans. If the territory were allowed to proceed to independence, there could occur a power vacuum that could not be filled by any of the contending groups. The lives of the Italian minority could be in danger as neither the pro-independence group nor the Unionists favoured the continued presence of foreigners in the territory. Britain also expressed the fear that political turmoil in the territory could have a serious domino effect in Italian Somaliland, thus sparking a clamour for independence. Already, bandit activities were being experienced along the Ogaden border with British Somaliland, which caused great concern, particularly because Ethiopia was doing nothing to control it (FO 371/80907). In Tigray, secessionism from Amharic control had been expressed through lawlessness for many decades to the extent that Hodson (1927: 71, 120) described bandits as the absolute masters of the border.<sup>6</sup> While some of the attacks were executed in the fashion of seasonal livestock rustling, the impact of banditry on trans-frontier security could not be ignored. Nevertheless, Ethiopia's ineffectiveness in eradicating banditry within its borders did not prevent Britain and the USA from handing Eritrea to the Emperor as opposed to the territory gaining independence immediately or being administered as a Trusteeship of the United Nations (FO 1015/524).

On 2 December 1950, the UN General Assembly resolved that Eritrea should remain an autonomous unit federated with Ethiopia under the Emperor's administration. The news could not have been better for Britain and USA. Ethiopia saw this as a gift for her co-operation with the Allies during the Second World War and the final step in the realization of a Greater Ethiopia. Henceforth, Britain would treat brigandage in Eritrea, which previously had the makings of political protests, as criminal. During the visit by the UN Commission, both pro-union and pro-independence bandits exerted pressure on the Commission through a rapid escalation of violence. It was impossible to continue with the state of lawlessness, yet coercion through policing action had proved deficient as a solution. For several reasons, bandits failed to take advantage of the amnesty offered by the BMA. First, the existing amnesty was Eurocentric in its letter and lacked the spirit of genuine forgiveness insofar as it did not necessarily translate into an absolute free pardon. It was a *nolle prosequi* issued on the condition that a suspect bandit had not murdered a British subject personally or through his actions (FO 371/90319). Secondly, Eritrea patriots shunned it as being specifically tailored for pardoning criminals and not as a measure for settling their political problem.

Italian nationals resident in Eritrea took advantage of the vague legislation to advocate a total forgiveness for all the bandits and not just the dangerous elements

---

<sup>6</sup> Actually, Hodson uses the term *Shifita* and banditry interchangeably.

amongst them. The Italian recommendation appeared more pragmatic in view of the prevailing need for reconciliation that could pave the way for the settlement of the future of Eritrea. For this reason, a general amnesty was deemed the most feasible solution in that it could allow the different factions to bury the hatchet and start co-existing as before the world war. Several reasons were advanced in favour of a general amnesty. As observed by the UN Commission, a general amnesty was the only means of promoting peace. Unlike Britain, Ethiopia also favoured a general amnesty and supported Italy's call for the BMA to reconsider commuting the death penalty to life imprisonment and reviewing sentences imposed on serving bandits. Repentant bandits were to be given employment where they could earn a living without recourse to violence. In addition internal measures could be undertaken to minimize banditry but their success remained in doubt until Ethiopia stopped training and sheltering gunmen sympathetic to the Coptic faith. Ultimately, a solution to banditry could not be imposed by the BMA through the threat to use brutal force. Family chieftains needed to be recognized and enabled to revive their authority in settling traditional livestock rustlings and family feuds without necessarily consulting the British authorities.

Hold-ups by highwaymen increased after the UN resolution of December 1950 that went against the political wishes of the majority of the people of Eritrea. Dr. Meglia President of the *Comitara Rappresentivo Italiana* was genuinely concerned by the resurgence of attacks on Italian nationals that escalated uncontrollably to the extent that 1,500 Italians planned to return to Italy in the month of April 1951 alone (**The Times**, 31<sup>st</sup> March 1951). As movement by road became extremely dangerous for foreigners, half of the resident British military force was assigned to armed escort duties. But given that the UN resolution had favoured their political standpoint, why did pro-union bandits continue to unleash terror on their political opponents? Coming after the UN resolution that allowed Ethiopia to administer Eritrea, their motive may appear to have been terror for the sake of it. However, an escalation of lawlessness was aimed at nullifying the UN resolution because it was not fully compliant with Ethiopia's interest in the outright annexation of Eritrea. Such violence specifically targeted pro-independence Eritreans in the hope of making them so vulnerable that they could not mobilize opinion or articulate opposing political views in the recommended Eritrean Representative Assembly. On 16 November 1951, the UN Commission for Eritrea was appointed to prepare a constitution for the proposed federation with Ethiopia. If political intimidation was sufficiently delivered, Ethiopia hoped to revise the UN decision from that of federal administration to that of annexation of the territory to augment its dream of a 'Greater Ethiopia' with access to the Red Sea. The political impact of banditry during the transition period is best summarized by the admission by the British Military Administration that: 'The very existence of the *Shifita* gangs constitutes a state of political intimidation in which the real opinions of the Eritrean population as a whole can neither be reliably canvassed nor reliably expressed in debate' (FO 371/90319).

During the transition of power from Britain to Ethiopia, counter-bandit measures included sending out peace envoys composed of community elders, clerics, and government officials to persuade bandits to surrender. Since peace was not in their interest, the Ethiopian authorities frustrated Britain's counter-bandit efforts by not only harbouring wanted pro-union brigands but when the situation was too insecure in Eritrea the bandits worked as normal labourers in Ethiopia (FO 371/90319). Later, such bandits were able to infiltrate from Ethiopia into Eritrea to continue brigandage mainly by robbing convoys along remote roads and isolated shopping centres. Britain agreed to Ethiopia's suggestion that a propaganda team should be sent to Eritrea to persuade known pro-union outlaws to surrender. These emissaries of goodwill could state in their visa the nature of their visit. However, having entered Eritrea, nothing stopped them from using the opportunity to spread pro-union propaganda that the British had no means of monitoring or halting. There was also the added risk of Ethiopian delegates making pro-union promises that could not be fulfilled. Furthermore, the known presence of hundreds of organized gunmen in Ethiopian sanctuaries made the country's position on the issue of lawlessness partisan.

The biggest problem remained cross-border infiltration by bandits whom the local Eritrea populace treated as patriots and therefore failed to betray them to the British policing authorities. Furthermore, corruption in the indigenous Eritrean police force reduced the effectiveness of informers. A known bandit leader usually planted a mole within the police force as much to alert him of impending counter-bandit operations as to warn him of government informers who might betray him. Owing to clan feuds, it was impossible to guarantee security to a police informer. Hence, there was a major problem with the collection of intelligence information that could lead to pro-active military operations. In addition, the BMA lacked adequate wireless communications to co-ordinate concurrent policing operations in remote parts of Eritrea. Passive measures that included amnesties had equally been ineffective in persuading large numbers of bandits to cease their lawlessness. As cases of organized violence increased, American troops were attacked while travelling without convoy on a remote dirt road. They were not in military uniform and they were spared from death simply by telling the bandits that they were Americans. Even if the bandits did not understand American English, the implication is that the Americans knew, as did the brigands, that organized violence was not random but directed at specific foreign nationals. During the transition period, they targeted Italians and the British because the attitude of these countries to the political future of Eritrea was openly unpopular (FO 371/90320).

The Counter-bandit strategy also included mopping-up operations conducted by a combination of British Army and Eritrea's Field Force. Whereas Britain could draw on its colonial experience to promote peace, its junior colonial partner, Ethiopia, could not. Therefore, Britain extended training support to the Emperor's army in view of its ineffectiveness against organized lawlessness within Abyssinia. Joint border operations between the BMA and Ethiopia could have limited the freedom of action enjoyed by bandits. However, Ethiopian armed presence close to

the common border in 1951 was likely to send the wrong signals in Eritrea. Bearing in mind that a Greater Ethiopia entailed the territorial annexation of Eritrea, Ethiopian troops for counter-bandit operations could easily be mistaken for the impending entry into Eritrea and their deployment was likely to escalate violence and encourage boldness from pro-union gunmen. Conversely, pro-independence bandits could arm in self-defence and the overall aim of curbing banditry in the territory could be defeated.

Other counter-bandit measures undertaken by the BMA included the banishment of known leaders to remote parts of Eritrea where they were to be under the close observation of civilian administrators. This ambitious policy was similar to a suspended sentence where, without the stewardship of known leaders, bandits were expected to comply with the rule of law and effectively set aside their political ambitions. They could then be forgiven their previous crimes and embraced within the fold of mainstream society where the local administrator could henceforth monitor their good behaviour. It was hoped that this method could eradicate organized political lawlessness, leaving the less frightening apolitical rural bandits to the plateaux. If these peaceful steps failed, the BMA intended to proclaim a state of emergency to facilitate the use of repressive powers to restore the rule of law until the complete handover of the territory to Ethiopian administration.

Britain's colonial experience should have revealed that its counter-bandit strategy could not succeed when the people of the conquered territory did not contribute their support. An example to elucidate this point is the belated suggestion that the BMA should create special courts for handling cases of banditry (FO 371/90320). These special courts would be composed of three British officials. Working on the premise that bandits were criminals and not freedom fighters, the structure and constitution of the special courts robbed the suspects of the right to a fair trial. In addition, the rules of procedure assumed that incriminating evidence was already available at the time of arresting a bandit. Therefore, at their discretion, courts could deny the suspect's request for calling defence witnesses. This prescription for the swifter dispensation of cases involving the bandits was in reality a travesty of justice and hardly a recipe for reconciling factions whose recourse to violence was politically motivated. Furthermore, the Eritrean police could not support this initiative because they favoured a general amnesty for all outlaws. Even if British troops were duty-bound to support any government legislation, it remains in doubt how the BMA could have enforced a hard-line internal security strategy that was not supported by the African police force of Eritrea. Hence, from the commencement of the British administration in 1941 banditry continued unabated until 16 September 1952 when Britain handed over the administration of Eritrea to Ethiopia.



### 3. CONCLUSION

The preceding argument has been that the bandits operating in Eritrea from 1941 to 1952 were not ordinary gangsters but part of an inchoate armed struggle that used brigandage to pursue a political agenda. Whereas Britain had the experience, mandate, and means of policing Eritrea to safeguard lives and property, its wider imperialistic designs in the Horn of Africa came in the way. Italy and Ethiopia further frustrated Britain's half-hearted strategies for imperial policing in the hope that each could secure international support to administer post-war Eritrea. In any event, banditry could not be eradicated without addressing its political base, which hinged on solving the issue of Eritrea's sovereignty. The argument that there existed Coptic and Muslim outlaws is irrelevant in the political history of the period inasmuch as no group articulated fundamental religious intolerance. Rather, this was Britain's attempt to show that the people of Eritrea were too hopelessly divided along ethnic and religious identities to be allowed to gain political independence. In short, the article has explored the way in which imperialists' conspiracy influenced the political future of the territory through a compromise deal that allowed Ethiopia to administer and later to colonize Eritrea. Hence, in the decade following the end of the Second World War, counter-banditry by Britain failed as the people of Eritrea fought for self-determination using vestigial brigand groups which, under Ethiopia, developed into formidable liberation movements.

## REFERENCES

- Amrit, W. 1980.  
*The challenge road, women and the Eritrean revolution*. London: Guernsey Press.
- Davidson, B. (ed.) 1980.  
*Behind the war*. Nottingham: Spokesman.
- Gebre-Medhin, J. 1995.  
*Peasants and nationalism in Eritrea, A critique of Ethiopian studies*. New Jersey: The Red Sea Press.
- Greenfield, R. 1965.  
*Ethiopia a new political history*. London: Pall Mall Press.
- Hodson, A. W. 1927.  
*Seven years in southern Abyssinia*. London.
- Iyob, R. 1995.  
*The Eritrean struggle for independence domination, resistance, nationalism, 1941-1993*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Jaenen, C.J. 1957.  
*The Somali problem*. **African Affairs: Journal of the Royal African society** 56(22): London, January 1957.
- Mburu, N. 1999.  
*Contemporary banditry in the Horn of Africa: Causes, history, and political implications*. **Nordic Journal of African Studies** 8(2): 89-107. Helsinki.
- Pankhurst E. S. 1952.  
*Eritrea on the eve*. London: New Times Books.
- Pankhurst, E .S & Pankhurst, R. K. P. 1953.  
*Ethiopia & Eritrea*. London: Lalibela House.
- The Times** (London), 31 March 1951.  
*Uncertainty in Eritrea: Commission Chairman resigns*.
- Trevaskis, G. K. N. 1975.  
*Eritrea: A colony in transition 1941-1952*. Connecticut: Greenwood Publishers.

## ARCHIVES / PUBLIC REPOSITORIES

Foreign Office Kew Gardens, London (FO) 371/69353.

*Ethiopia attitude towards the disposal of the former Italian colonies in Africa dated Massawa 30/4/1948.*

FO 371/90319.

*From British Embassy to Ato Zeude Gabre-Heywot of 01/01/1950; CFB Pearce to Chief Secretary on condition of amnesty; For Chief Administrator of January 1951.*

FO 371/90320.

*Note for the Secretary of State; From Asmara to Foreign Office of 4 May 1951; From Foreign Asmara to Foreign Office of 17 April 1951.*

FO 371/80907.

*From Mogadishu to Foreign Office of 11 January 1950; From Lascelles British Embassy Addis Ababa to Brigadier F.G. Drew dated 25 February, 1950.*

FO 1015/146.

*Notes on Shifta activities in Eritrea; From C-in-C MELF to War Office cipher telegram dated 18 March 1948; Confidential correspondence from Foreign Office of 4 May, 1948; Internal security situation Eritrea from Chief Administrator to Director Civil Affairs War Office London, dated 17 December 1948; Notes on Shifta activities in Eritrea; Cipher telegram from War Office to BMA Eritrea dated 15 September 1948.*

FO 1015/208.

*From GHQ to MOD UK; From GHQ to MOD UK; From Foreign Office to Asmara of 8 December 1949.*

FO 1015/522.

*From Foreign Office to Asmara of 8 December 1949; From Foreign Office to Rome of 30 December 1949.*

FO 1015/524.

*From Foreign Office to Rome of 25 March 1950.*

FO 1015/531.

*From Foreign Office to Chief Administrator Asmara outward telegram of 13 April 1950; Anti-Shifta organization note by the administrator signed by Chief Administrator on 2 April 1950; Note by General Whistler, Major-General Commanding troops Sudan dated Asmara, 6 April 1950.*

FO 1015/533.

*British Administration of Eritrea from Chief Administrator to Headquarters Asmara dated 4 July 1950.*

War Office, Kew Gardens, London (WO) 230/17.

*Relationship between the military & political officers of 28 May 1941; Notes on the use of Armed Military Forces acting in aid of the civil power' published by Headquarters East Africa in March 1944.*

Hansard House of Commons Debate of 4 June 1946.

Kenya National Archives, Nairobi (KNA) Secretariat 1/11/41.

*Balance of trade with USA, 1947-1949.*

KNA: Secretariat 1/4/3.

*Trade and Commerce: The colonial empire and the economic crisis, 1948.*

KNA: CS 2/7/36.

*Colonial Office: reorganization of administration of the colonial empire.*