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- 1 This book is the fruit of collaboration between two scholars of the Horn of Africa, the historian Tekeste Negash and the social anthropologist Kjetil Tronvoll. In their Preface the authors state that their intention is not to "identify and denounce an aggressor" (p. viii) but rather to render intelligible the reasons for the Eritrean-Ethiopian conflict, which the outside observer might otherwise find hard to understand. After a thirty-year war of liberation from Ethiopia, in 1993 Eritrea gained national independence in a geopolitical context, the Horn of Africa, which is notably turbulent and ill disposed to make room for the last of the nation states. Her acceptance, as a fait accompli, by the new Ethiopian government of Meles Zenawi, ally of the Eritrean People's Liberation Front (EPLF) against Mengistu Haile Mariam's regime, had nevertheless given the international community cause to hope for regional stabilisation under the sign of bilateral co-operation. These hopes foundered, however, in May 1998, when hostilities began between the two countries.
- 2 The book consists of two parts. The first consists of nine chapters (pp. 1-104), and is devoted to an examination of the main factors determining the outbreak of the Eritrean-Ethiopian conflict. It is a "full-scale" war, which the authors rightly define as the first to break out, after decades, on the African continent. And in fact one of the greatest merits of the book consists in the pluricasual approach adopted by Negash and Tronvoll.

- 3 The authors have firmly relegated the territorial dispute to the role of a mere *casus belli*: they present the official Ethiopian and Eritrean points of view regarding the frontier querelle separately, then go on to analyse the historical, politico-ideological and economic reasons for the war. It has to be said that in this first part the book proceeds in a somewhat unbalanced fashion: some chapters are very long, others rather too short; certain aspects are reconstructed meticulously while others are overlooked.
- 4 Witness the first chapter (pp. 1-3) where the authors reconstruct the event sparking the conflict, a border incident at Badme on May 6, 1998, for which they attribute responsibility and, above all, deliberate intention to Eritrea (p. 1), only to readjust the balance, in the ensuing account, of the complex political history of false steps and errors imputable to the governments of both Asmara and Addis Ababa.
- 5 The thorough exposition, rich in detail, of the diplomatic events and the various attempts to explore peace solutions pursued from the very beginning of hostilities by the two warring parties (pp. 53-56) and by the international community alike (the USA-Rwanda plan, the OAU and UN initiatives) occupies some thirty pages (pp. 56-83). On the one hand, the authors identify in the Eritrean-Ethiopian war a telling example of the repeated incapacity of regional and international organisms to prevent African conflicts. On the other hand, they are more emphatic about the responsibility of the two governments for the escalation of hostilities, looking to the profound fractures between the two leaderships of Meles Zenawi and Issaias Afworki, which were reinforced by intense war propaganda. The fundamental role of this propaganda is schematically delineated, so that the reader is given an exhaustive picture of the leaders ("seasoned guerrilla soldiers") and the "national" connotations in their representation of the "enemy". Negash and Tronvoll's purpose is to demonstrate that the poisoning of the climate of how the inhabitants of the two countries perceived each other was one of the most destabilising epigones of the war (pp. 87-90), though they avoid undue pessimism about the future: they are cautiously positive in their interpretation of the official messages and government declarations, issued during the war months, in favour of historical, cultural and economic ties between the two countries (p. 100). The book makes highly interesting reading above all here, in chapters 7 and 8 of the first part, where the authors follow at close quarters the sudden precipitation of events and the "political and diplomatic gamble" (p. 171) which brought about the war and the hard-won truce of December 2000.
- 6 Highly revealing are the findings about aspects relating to the presence in the two countries of military equipment and armaments that made full-scale hostilities possible. Although the social effects of the mobilisation of two of the largest armies in Africa are only touched upon, it appears clear—from demographic evidence—that mobilisation had a greater impact in Eritrea than in Ethiopia. The authors then reconstruct the influence of the tactical heritage of the war of liberation against the Derg regime on the military decisions taken during the new conflict.
- 7 Negash and Tronvoll, in fact, then go on to devote special attention to relations between the two liberation movements, the EPLF and the Tigrayan People's Liberation Front (TPLF), between 1975 and 1991 (pp. 12-20). They identify the ideologies of each of two movements, measuring the means pursued—both in the construction of the Eritrean nation state and in the reformulation of the post-Mengistu Ethiopian one—against the criteria that inspired them. They highlight the ideological and conceptual

differences, and even the differences in military doctrine, which emerged back in the years of the struggle against the Derg, and document the rupture that occurred in the second half of the nineteen-eighties. Their conclusion is that in the long run it would have been hard for this “marriage of necessity” (p. 21) to keep hidden the change in political and civic loyalties that came about with the achievement of Eritrean independence.

- 8 The authors indeed record how after 1993 resentment of the Eritrean nation-state became rife in Ethiopia. This they attribute to the deeply rooted conviction south of the Eritrean-Ethiopian border that Eritrea represented and still represents considerably more than a mere frontier region of marginal importance, but is regarded rather as an integral part of the tradition of the “Greater Ethiopia”, linked to the myths of the foundation and legitimisation of the nation which appeal to Solomonic lineage. What many Tigreans and Amharas thus perceive as amounting to a veritable split testifies in their eyes to the diminution of Ethiopia’s prestige, which they have witnessed with ill-concealed discomfort. Serious objections to Addis Ababa government policy—pursued by the Tigreans of the TPLF—have been raised mainly by the Amharas, who have been kept out of office since 1991. According to the authors, these attacks have influenced the decisional process which has gradually led Ethiopia to take up an intransigent defensive position toward her Eritrean neighbours. It might have been interesting to take a closer look at the triangular nexus between the élites in power, the Eritreans, the Tigreans and the Amharas, regarding not least hegemonic relations within single governing classes, though the authors have, in fact, drawn attention to this in an invaluable survey. At the same time, they emphasise how Eritrean independence has been opposed by virtue of its negative economic repercussions on Ethiopian citizens (pp. 93-94).
- 9 On this score, while highlighting the reasons for the poor record, since 1993, of bilateral economic co-operation, Negash and Tronvoll do not believe that this can be identified as the sole profound cause of the Eritrean-Ethiopian war (pp. 31-45), as Ethiopia has claimed. They therefore retrace the various stages of the problematical economic partnership between Eritrea and Tigray, insisting particularly on the complementarity, which became competition, between them, and on the role of the Eritrean community that had stayed behind in Ethiopia, with the attendant fears aroused in Addis Ababa. They consider the context in which the conspiracy theories stoked by the two warring parties flourished to be inadequate, above all after the adoption of the new Ethiopian protectionist economic policy; and help set the record straight in answer to the numerous pretextual arguments that have found a voice in the mass media. In any case they point out how decisions taken in the years following 1996—the Ethiopian tariff regulations and the new division of Eritrea—influenced subsequent events and how the costs relating to power politics weighed heavily on the populations, removing resources which would otherwise have gone to promoting essential civilian services.
- 10 There remains then the need to inquire into a possible correspondence between the turn toward armed struggle that the Eritrean-Ethiopian crisis took and factors relating to the internal political order. This the authors do, denouncing both the authoritarian direction taken by Eritrea and the difficulties met with by Meles Zenawi’s government in maintaining hegemony in the composite Ethiopian political universe undermined by Oromo and Somali centrifugal drifts. The authors devote a chapter (pp. 5-11) to the

essential features of the contemporary history of Eritrea, in which they attempt to bring into focus the impact of Italian colonialism which, as is well known, created Eritrea in 1890 as a distinct territorial entity. They emphasise how this theme—central for the legitimisation of the Eritrean nation-state—is still of burning political and historiographical relevance. In their view, Eritrea as a colony essentially represented for Italy a reservoir of resources for the military pacification of other Italian possessions (Somalia and Libya), an operational platform for economic penetration into Ethiopia and, later, in 1935, an excellent springboard for the actual invasion of this country (p. 7). The recapitulatory character of this page may possibly be explained by the relative shortness of the book and the historiographical debate that has been unfolding for years around this theme appears slightly neglected¹. The main consequences of Italian colonialism, Negash and Tronvoll go on to say, were the introduction of a monetary economy, the birth of a working class and the imposition of a *pax colonialis*, aspects which left “profound traces on a considerable section of the Eritrean population” (p. 8). The demographic growth of the Tigrinya meant that they came to constitute the most numerous ethno-cultural group in the possession and, from that time on, there developed a “marked distinction in material well-being between the Tigrinya in Eritrea and the Tigreans in Ethiopia”. Tekeste Negash partly moves away from the historiographical interpretations put forward in his previous works², where he confuted the overall importance of colonialism in the transformation of traditional society and the embryonic formation of a national conscience. Thus the authors attribute to Italian colonialism the constitution of a distinct identity among inhabitants of the Eritrean highlands and of northern Ethiopia—who share the same language, religion and multiple elements of material culture—attributing this to greater economic well-being more so than to any ties with the territory that might have developed (p. 9).

- 11 However, objections can be raised to this approach to the problem. Terms such as nation, state, society and people suggest cultural, historical, linguistic and religious affinities, but also rest inevitably on geographical aggregations and territorial delimitations. In these pages of the book, the authors fail to make historical reference to the emergence, in pre-colonial times, of the separate socio-political identities on the two sides of the borderland, albeit within a political dialectic which, from the 14th century, had frequently renegotiated power relations within the Ethiopian empire. Furthermore, in the centuries-old agrarian civilisation that developed in Ethiopia, relations with the land have markedly permeated both individual and collective identity, which has developed inhabited settlements and the administrative organisation of space according to the geographical features of the territory. In fact, we know that since the mid-18th century the watercourses Mereb and Belesa have represented a spatial area conscious of constituting a socio-political subjectivity and are traditionally indicated as limits toward the Tigray.
- 12 With Italian colonisation, the Mereb-Belesa-Muna was officially consecrated as the frontier between Eritrea and Ethiopia and for the whole of the 20th century became, malgré soi, the most troubled historical site, bearer of events and perspectives that have profoundly affected the history of Eritrea and Ethiopia. It is the place where the history of the frontier has brought the gravest loss of life, the most dramatic acts of violence and the forced movement of thousands of people. This frontier phenomenology has changed in the course of time and been transformed, in key with the mutable relationship, and thus power relations, between the two sides. It has thus

acquired a symbolic role of pre-eminence in the formation of Eritrean nationalism and, above all, in the process of constructing a national identity essentially ideologically antithetical to the Ethiopian ethos.

- 13 What better than the frontier could have enabled the Eritreans to represent with immediacy and both real and metaphorical value their discontinuity from the Ethiopian oppressor, almost a metonym for the cause of liberation? This has enabled them to devise and legitimise territorial action, to the point at which even among scholars there have been those who have not hesitated to attribute to Mereb-Belesa-Muna Eritrean national individuality ³.
- 14 In this regard, Negash and Tronvoll also recognise the importance of the role played by the reinforcement of Eritrean identity in bringing about the Eritrean-Ethiopian war (p. 31, p. 91 sq.). This theme raises the question of the development of nationalism and how deeply rooted it actually is among the population. And this is the crux of the debate revolving around Donald Levine's theses regarding Greater Ethiopia, according to which the history of pre-colonial Eritrea is viewed as being part of a continuum—an albeit confused one—of historical events shared with Ethiopia, a thesis which has been vigorously challenged since the eighties. What is involved here is the problematic issue of historical memory, understood as a continuous elaboration of the past. It cannot be satisfied only by historical and historiographical reconstructions, for it regards the actual lives of those involved and the contrasting values of everyday life: reciprocal memories of men and of peoples which have structured themselves on images of pain and fear, sedimented resentments and patriotic projections. The war situation in Eritrea, between 1962 and 1991, did not favour field research and likewise impeded the formation of a mature national historiography. What has developed, rather, and with relative fervour, is a literature of militancy, which nevertheless has had the merit of kindling and fuelling the debate about Eritrea's national identity. A debate duly engaged in, cautiously and with methodological rigour, also by scholars who have stressed the characteristics of Eritrea's territorial nationalism, a theme which Negash and Tronvoll do not however seem to accept.
- 15 Whatever the case, it is a difficult question—even from the purely historiographical point of view—requiring further study. Historiographically, some have advanced this hypothesis, while others tread more carefully. Since the nineties, studies involving prolonged fieldwork have been conducted, with a view to tracing the identity-related trajectories that have traversed the country in the past and that are projected into present-day Eritrea ⁴. Whilst awaiting developments in this sector which, through long-term studies and recourse to oral sources, might throw light on how and for what identity-related mechanisms the combination of political events leading to the crystallisation of Eritrea has been lived by the communities of the borderlands, in this review all we can do is underline the need for further inquiry. Regarding Eritrea, doubts and perplexities do in fact remain, which an excellent recent book by Kjetil Tronvoll has not dispelled ⁵. Tronvoll has made this problem one of the guiding threads of his researches and the object of deep meditation, referring on the one hand to the motley and scattered character of Eritrean society and, on the other hand, to its complex identity-related roots, representing these themes in lucid attempts at synthesis ⁶. These studies seem to me to bring to light pretty clearly some elements that increase one's doubts about the national consciousness of the Eritrean population, doubts which are problematically re-expressed in *Brothers at War*.

- 16 It seems, indeed, that the two authors feel the need to indicate which of the various factors of the Eritrean-Ethiopian crisis that they analyse has played the preponderant role. Rather than surrendering to the definition of this war as “criminally foolish”, they find in the persistence of the historical ties between the populations of the borderland and in the complexity of trans-boundary identity a determining element in the escalation of the conflict. Attention shifts then to the “multiple links binding the Tigrinya to their Tigrean brothers across the border and to their cousins the Amhara further south” (p. 6, p. 91 *sq.*). For all their interpretive caution, Negash and Tronvoll do not hesitate to conclude that we are in the presence of “a tragic war in which common history and the deleterious impact of colonialism are having a significant say” (p. 94). It seems to me difficult, for the time being, to say the last word about these problems, which all the same require an answer. Possibly one might add that it is worth taking ones cue from these two scholars and retracing the contemporary history of Eritrea and Ethiopia from the historical and anthropological point of view. We need, that is, to resume the historical quest for the traces that have led to the birth of nations, states and ethnic solidarities, questioning ourselves about the imaginary representation of these processes in today’s political rituals and modern cultural techniques.
- 17 A word, finally, about the main problems caused by the war as suggested by the book. Foremost, in the authors’ view, is the question of ethnic deportation (pp. 46-48), though they are fully aware that the reliability of the official figures can only be relative. Following this, in an ideal scale of the authors’ priorities, is the decline in the economic development of Eritrea and central-northern Ethiopia, linked to the cessation of bilateral exchanges. Besides the sacrifice of human lives, last but, in my view, not least, is the destabilising impact on the internal politics of the two countries, with the stepping up of the campaign of hatred directed at the enemy. In short, from the two scholars’ analysis there emerges the responsibility of “a small group of political leaders in the two governments” for driving the people’s into the conflict. In the second part of the book—Appendices—the authors provide the reader with a selection of documents, both published and unpublished. No less than sixteen texts occupy pages 105-165 of the book. The volume ends with a Postscript by the authors, an update of the situation in July 2000—the month which saw the first glimmers of peace, when the volume went to press—a bibliography and index. The book contains three geographical maps—which illustrate respectively the geo-political position of the two warring countries, the ethnic map of Eritrea and, lastly, the areas of contention along their shared political border—as well as two tables, one devoted to the presence of industrial and commercial concerns in Italian East Africa in 1940 and the other relating to Eritrean exports between 1993 and 1996.
- 18 The bibliography provided by the authors is not particularly extensive and, as regards the most recent historiography, there are a number of serious omissions. More interesting are the unpublished sources that the authors were able to consult. They conducted missions to the two countries—Tekeste Negash to Ethiopia and Kjetil Tronvoll to Eritrea—and have rightly acknowledged the joint financial help received from the DPSIR-NIHR Cooperation Programme of the University of Addis Ababa by the Horn of Africa Research Programme of the Norwegian Institute of Human Rights, directed by Tronvoll. They have availed themselves of formal interviews with the leaders of the EPLF and TPLF liberation fronts. They succeeded in obtaining from the Ethiopian Foreign Minister access to documentary material, such as the proofs of

government meetings concerning bilateral questions, held between 1993 and 1996, while from Asmara they received copies of the letters exchanged between the two premiers in summer 1997, regarding incidents that were occurring along the shared border. These documents are reproduced in the Appendix and the authors have managed to obtain a striking amount of information from them.

- 19 What final reflections does Negash and Tronvoll's book prompt? I would not say that the authors fall into the trap of economic determinism by insisting on an inevitable link between economic development and nationalism. They recognise, in fact, the possibility of alternative paths of development, of better ways of handling relations with one's neighbours. From their analysis there emerges the complex interweaving of hegemonic tendencies, social imbalances and the difficulty of post-war reconstruction. In short, the book seems to me to raise the question of whether it was possible above all for Eritrea to pay a less high political price for her independence and for both countries to pursue a different path which would have allowed her to avoid the direct line linking nationalism with power politics. Which raises the question of the coming to the fore of government élites who, in both Asmara and Addis Ababa, demonstrated, according to the authors, political immaturity in choosing the path of violence as a political strategy and in the management of the national economy (p. 82).
- 20 In conclusion, Negash and Tronvoll's book keeps faith with its subtitle in "making sense of the Ethiopian-Eritrean War". It does so above all because its argumentative clarity and modest length make it accessible to newcomers to the history of the region. It is a timely bridge to a wider public and, besides the new contributions that it offers, gives useful food for reflection to specialists in the field as well—even if the doubts of those who claim that historical evaluation requires greater temporal distance from the events analysed may still be justified.

NOTES

1. Leaving aside the stages of this well-known debate, I should like to record the notable contribution given by some scholars, who have engaged themselves assiduously and dealt with the subject systematically. See, in particular, the works—different though they are in terms of organisation and interpretive results—of Irma Taddia, Ruth Iyob, Tesfatsion Medhanie and John Markakis.
2. Cf. above all these two works: *Italian Colonialism in Eritrea, 1882-1941: Policies, Praxis and Impact*, Uppsala, University of Uppsala, 1987, and *Eritrea and Ethiopia: the Federal Experience*, Uppsala, Nordiska Afrikainstitutet; New Brunswick (NJ), Transaction Publishers, 1997.
3. Alain FENET, "Il conflitto eritreo", in Sergio VENTRIGLIA (a cura di), *Frontiere del Terzo Mondo*, Milano, Angeli, Connaissance du Tiers-Monde and Pluriel-débat, 1986 : 111-126.
4. The reference is to the researches conducted by Kjetil Tronvoll and Alemseged Abbay.

5. Kjetil TRONVOLL, *Ma Weini, a Highland Village in Eritrea*, Lawrenceville (NJ), The Red Sea Press, 1998.
6. Besides the already cited *Mai Weini*, see the works of Kjetil TRONVOLL, “Borders of Violence–Boundaries of Identity: Demarcating the Eritrean Nation-state”, *Ethnic and Racial Studies*, 1999, XXII (6) : 1037-1060; “The Process of Nation-Building in Post-war Eritrea: Created from Below or Directed from Above?”, *The Journal of Modern African Studies*, 1998, XXXVI (3) : 461-482.