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Raymond A. Jonas, *The Battle of Adwa: African Victory in the Age of Empire*. Cambridge: Harvard Univ. Press, 2011. Pp. x, 413. ISBN 978-0-674-05274-1.

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For historians of Africa, the 1 March 1896 victory of Emperor Menelik II of Ethiopia over General Oreste Baratieri and his Italian colonial force at Adwa stands as a major exception to a pattern of European conquest that involved either co-optation or outright conquest and the suppression of popular rebellion. Though it is the only African military victory of the era that stopped an imperial machine's advance, Adwa, its context, and its repercussions have received limited discussion. Raymond Jonas (Univ. of Washington), seeking to remedy that in his *Battle of Adwa*, has produced an engrossing account of the relevant factors and developments before, during, and after the battle.

Jonas begins with the interactions of Menelik, as King of Shoa, with various Europeans and others, as seen primarily through the records left by those Europeans. He reveals a deeply fractured Ethiopian state and the disparate qualities of the emperor who rallied his people at Adwa. His early chapters, concerning Menelik's rivals and predecessors, review the situation of Ethiopia in a broader context, from the hubris of Tewodoros II at Magdala in 1868 to the thwarted aspirations of Yohannes IV and the carefully prepared ground under Menelik and his wife, the resolute Empress Taytu. The book builds a historical backdrop by examining the relationship between Menelik's court, his European agents, and Italy; throughout, the emperor showed himself a shrewd realist. The Treaty of Wichale (Wuchale) in 1889 was the pivot for the confrontation that culminated in Adwa through its Article 17, which, in the Italian-language version only, implicitly surrendered Ethiopian sovereignty. Traditional thinking is that this was a serious misstep in Menelik's diplomacy, but Jonas generously reevaluates Menelik's reaction with an eye to alternative interpretations and an awareness of ongoing relations between the Italians, the emperor, and the various princes around the country:

for Menelik, the 'mistranslation' of article 17 was a convenient fiction. It allowed [Menelik's emissary and cousin, Ras] Makonnen to go to Rome, sign the Treaty of Wichale, negotiate the Additional Convention and the all-important loan of four million lire, and return to Ethiopia a friend of Italy. Then, more than a year later and from the safety of his secure imperial throne, Menelik could begin to disentangle himself from the partnership with Italy that had facilitated his rise.... It would be more than a year before he would formally, officially renounce the treaty. By then, he was ready to face whatever consequences this step might bring. (91-92)

With admirable clarity and suspenseful prose, Jonas explains the maneuvering during the six years between the signing of the treaty and the confrontation that led to Adwa.

The Battle of Adwa makes the intrigues of Italian and Ethiopian politics eminently readable. It draws distinct, memorable, and even sympathetic portraits of a wide cast of characters—Empress Taytu, Ras Mangasha and Ras Makonnen, generals Dabormida, Albertone, Arimondi, and Ellena, Nikolai Leontiev, and Afa-Negus Nesibu, among many others. In describing the battles that culminated in Adwa and their aftermath, Jonas shows these individuals playing their parts, influencing the “how” and “why” of various moves by both camps. There are, however, unavoidable gaps: Jonas's sources are largely European and entirely Europhone; Amharic (spoken in Ethiopia) and other Afro-Asiatic language sources are cited only in translations. This limitation is not really addressed even in Jonas's otherwise excellent discussions of the “marketing of Menelik” and the royal couple's image control. Consequently, the book must take some license with Ethiopian figures, for whom the sort of rich detail found in the memoirs of Europeans is lacking. To his credit, Jonas teases out what he can, but one is left to wonder whether Amharic sources would not have provided very much more.

The Italo-Ethiopian military encounters themselves, treated in the book's second section, from Amba Alage and the standoff at Mekele to the denouement of the Adwa clash, are seamlessly incorporated into the overall narrative. Technical discussions of military formations, dress, armaments, force composition, terrain, and the like are kept to a reasonable level and are always integral to the bigger story. *The Battle of Adwa* may not please the highly technical General Dabormida's modern counterparts, but it will certainly satisfy military, political, and cultural historians as well as general readers. Furthermore, we get a good sense of what each side thought of the other, including the misinformation the Ethiopians fed the gullible and too-willing Italians in 1895 and 1896 and what this meant for the rush to battle. In the actual battle narratives, the pertinent geographical and situational contexts come through clearly. Jonas spares few details in describing outcomes and the experiences of the victors and the defeated. The short-term fallout of Adwa for all of its participants receives similar care and attention. This part of the story has been told in bits and pieces before, but Jonas brings it all together in an engaging whole.

The third major section of the book, on the aftermath of the battle, gives much new detail about the historical reception of Adwa and Menelik at home and abroad. The breadth of material presented here is laudable, extending far beyond Italy and even Europe, and passing into the twentieth century. Menelik's travels, his reckonings, and the afterlives of all the surviving figures receive attention, some with very memorable tales (like the ailing Baratieri's rescue of a drowning woman in 1900), others presaging future greatness (as in the case of Ras Makonnen's son Tafari, later the Emperor Haile Selassie I). The treatment of prisoners, Menelik's consolidation of authority at court and in diplomacy, his image abroad, and recriminations in Italy against those responsible for the defeat round out the picture of a crucial battle with far-reaching and unforeseen consequences.¹

Jonas makes only one questionable claim. Ethiopian victory at Adwa, he states, challenged colonial ideology enough to determine the road that led to decolonization in Africa and thus was a moment that put history "back into play" (6). But the evidence for this, though suggestive, is inconclusive. How could Adwa have augured such a shift, when a significant part of the continent was not yet even under effective colonial rule? Though Ethiopia's victory and continuing independence surely colored ideas about Africa and colonial rule, the response to Adwa was very often to recast the Ethiopians as white Christians or at least semi-civilized;² Jonas himself notes such confusions in chapter 18. True, as he states, the signs of Adwa's influence were often subtle, but excessively far-reaching claims for its significance are hard to sustain in the space Jonas has, certainly in comparison with the effects of the two World Wars and the work of African and Diaspora intellectuals themselves. A definitive treatment of the multifarious role of an independent, defiant Ethiopia in the minds of colonizers and its effect on nascent ideas of African unity and identity would require book-length corroboration. On the other hand, Jonas's conclusion that Adwa was a "national epic, the founding event in the modern life of the [Ethiopian] nation" and that it deserves a place "among the great military campaigns of modern history" whether or not judged on its logistical merits alone (333) is utterly convincing. His vivid discussion of how societies in colonizing nations struggled in the near term to account for Adwa deepens our understanding of how it upturned conventional wisdom, if only briefly.

There are a few puzzling omissions and narrative choices in *The Battle of Adwa*. Jonas does not actually mention Britain's intervention and effective takeover of Egypt in 1882–83, which virtually stamped out Khedival ambitions on Ethiopian territory, laid Britain's (co-)claim to the Sudan south of it, and likely paved the way for Italian investiture on the coast of the Red Sea. He does treat at some length Khedive Ismail's ill-advised efforts to expand into Ethiopia in the 1870s as well as changes in the occupation of key locales; the Mahdists in the Sudan appear several times, but merely as props to the central story. Jonas gives surprising-

1. For further information about the battle and its principals, see Jonas's website – www.miwsr.com/rd/1209.htm – which provides a welcome extended bibliography (omitted from the printed volume), a discussion of landscape, further information about the book, recorded interviews, and other material.

2. See Harold G. Marcus, "Racist Discourse about Ethiopia and Ethiopians before and after the Battle of Adwa," in P. Milkias and G. Metaferia, eds., *The Battle of Adwa: Reflections on Ethiopia's Historic Victory against European Colonialism* (NY: Algora, 2005) 229–37.

ly little space to, for example, Léonce Lagarde, the longtime French governor at Obok, who was openly sympathetic to Menelik, but is mentioned only once in passing as an emissary in 1897 (274). Other oddities include the placement of the consolidation campaign of Menelik against Welatya in 1895 in chapter 4, *before* many important earlier developments; conversely, Nikolai Leontiev's pre-Adwa activities appear well *after* the battle itself (310–14). Such out-of-sequence narrative episodes make related sections more rewarding, but they can be disorienting chronologically.

Raymond Jonas's book is far and away the most accessible account of the roots, course, and immediate fallout of the Ethiopian campaign of 1895–96. It is political history written with a keen awareness of the contexts that shaped the choices of individual actors. Not only military historians will find here a detailed, fascinating account well grounded in the political and cultural realities of the relevant times and places and benefiting from the author's conversance with more specialized subjects. Indeed, it opens a window into the northeastern Africa of Menelik's day even for Africanists. For telling the story of Adwa in such a global and compelling way, *The Battle of Adwa* deserves a wide readership.