

CLASSROOM

Why Was Ethiopia Independent During the 1900s?

By Aatif Rashid

Ethiopia retained its independence thanks to strong leaders such as Haile Selassie, depicted here.



During the early 1900s, Ethiopia remained an independent country despite large-scale European colonization of Africa in the late 19th century. Ethiopia affirmed its independence from Italy after its victory in the Battle of Adowa in 1896, and retained its independence through strong leaders and key alliances with other European powers. Nevertheless, Ethiopia was colonized prior to World War II by Italian forces in 1936, and not liberated until the 1940s.

Scramble for Africa

European colonization of Africa had been ongoing for several centuries but was formalized in 1884 at the Berlin Conference. Before this time, European empires, such as the Portuguese, the Dutch and the British, had each informally established colonies along the African coast. At Berlin in 1884, however, the European powers agreed to formally divide Africa among themselves. Italy, a newly unified European country, was allotted East Africa, including the territory of Ethiopia.

Battle of Adowa

In 1889, Ethiopia signed a treaty with Italy, known as the Treaty of Wuchale, which ceded some Ethiopian territories to Italy in return for financial aid. However, linguistic discrepancies among the two translations of the treaties led to the outbreak of the First Italo-Ethiopian War between Italy and Ethiopia in 1895. In March 1896, the Ethiopians defeated the Italians at the Battle of Adowa. This affirmed their country's independence from the Italians, who had sought to conquer them.

Leadership

Ethiopia's victory against the Italians was credited to the strong leadership of its king, Menelik II. Ethiopia was able to maintain its independence throughout the early 20th century because of the strength of Menelik's successor, Haile Selassie. Menelik became king in 1889, and after uniting the various wayward regions of Ethiopia under his rule, he modernized the country by establishing institutions such as a bank, a postal system, railroads and a communication infrastructure. Selassie continued this national development by introducing Ethiopia's first written constitution and establishing a system of allies to challenge continued Italian attempts at colonization.

Alliances

Alliances were essential in maintaining Ethiopian independence. Ethiopia under Menelik was victorious at Adowa partly because of an alliance with Russia, which ensured a steady supply of money and weapons. Selassie continued the system of alliances by maintaining good relations with Britain and appealing to the League of Nations. On October 3, 1935, Italian forces under Mussolini invaded and conquered Ethiopia. They colonized the country for five years, but Ethiopia was finally liberated from Italy in 1941.

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