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"Invisible Hands" of the USA, UAR and USSR in the Aborted Military Coup in Ethiopia (13th -15th December, 1960)

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Abstract

In the 1960s and 1970s, African states experienced persistent military politics in the form of coups and countercoups. Ethiopia was no exception and experienced an aborted military coup in December 1960. This paper aims to analyze the role of Cold War politics in the Ethiopian coup, a factor commonly overlooked in existing literature on the topic. For this purpose, historical sources in the form of memoirs written by eyewitnesses and investigation records collected by investigators from the coup's primary leader were consulted. Numerous secondary sources in the form of journal articles, books, and book chapters on the modern political history of Ethiopia supplemented the analysis. Accordingly, three external powers—the USA, the UAR, and the USSR—were involved in the coup in one form or another due to their respective reasons resulting from the nature of Ethiopia's foreign relations at the time. The USA and the UAR supported and encouraged the proponents of the coup, while the USSR supported the opponents of the coup, at least indirectly.

Keywords: Military Politics, Military Coups, USA, USSR, Cold War Politics, Ethiopia, Haile Selassie

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Introduction

Etymologically, the word “coup“ is derived from the French term “coup d'état, “ which literally means “stroke of state“ (Encyclopedia Americana 1958: 650). It is now widely understood as the illegal overthrow of political leaders. It is commonly carried out by military commanders or political elites. The driving factors behind such actions can be economic, political, or social. Economic factors include low income levels, poor economic conditions, dependence on primary commodity exports, and low levels of economic development. Political instability, ineffective government, corruption, political polarization, military intervention in politics, and the inability of the ruling party to control the military are some of the political factors that have been identified. Ethnic or religious tensions, particularly those associated with political or economic inequalities are commonly mentioned social factors (Decalo 1973: 108-113).

The available literature on the history of military *coup*s and *coup* attempts in modern African history mainly attributes the reasons behind these actions to internal factors and claims that *coup*s are often domestic issues. They rarely identified external factors, such as Cold War politics, since 1945. For example, the African Union Peace and Security Council identified “deficiencies in governance“ as the main cause of *coup*s and *coup* attempts on the continent (Duzor/ Williamson 2023). These deficiencies manifest as greed, selfishness, mismanagement of diversity and opportunity, marginalization, abuse of human rights, refusal to accept electoral defeat, manipulation of the constitution, and unconstitutional review of the constitution to serve narrow interests, as well as corruption (Ibid.). Some existing theories on the causes of military *coup*s in post-colonial Africa include “political development,“ “military centrality,“ “ethnic antagonism,“ “social mobilization,“ “cultural pluralism,“ and “world system. “ (Siegle 2021).

Political development theory asserts that weak political institutions create a greater likelihood of military intervention in governmental affairs, such as *coup*s. The military centrality theory argues that the military's increased political influence led to its interest in controlling or overseeing the entire country. According to the ethnic antagonism theory, a large number of ethnic groups with cultural heterogeneity, but with one dominant, politically hegemonic group in power, will result in tense competition that may manifest itself militarily, leading to a coup that replaces one ethnic group's dominance with another's. Social mobilization and cultural pluralism theories claim that tension between increasingly mobilized citizens and weak political institutions leads to military *coup*s. Finally, world system theory posits the presence of external forces in one

form or another. This theory emphasizes the "neocolonialism" of export dependence and foreign capital penetration as a colonial legacy (Ben Barka/ Ncube 2012).

However, these theories seem to have overlooked the external factor of strategic competition between the two antagonistic global blocs during the Cold War, which made *coup*s more likely to occur in Africa. The continent experienced a number of coups associated with Cold War politics during its first four decades of independence. During those decades, the two global powers, the USSR and the USA, were involved in military *coup*s and *coup* attempts all over the continent (Abrahamsen 2018: 19-31). As an extension of global Cold War politics and related boundary or resource affairs, some neighboring states were also involved in military *coup*s. Egypt is often cited as a primary example of this type of involvement in military *coup*s and *coup* attempts in several countries in Africa and the Middle East (Kartveit 2014: 4). Most of these powers were involved through military officers who received training or education in the respective countries. The external powers involved in the African military *coup*s of the 1960s and 1970s exploited internal popular discontent and interests to gain political power for certain individuals or groups (Terrill et.al 1985).

In the 1960s and 1970s, the USA and the USSR were in strong competition in Africa, justifying their presence in several ways. Reflecting its own anti-colonial heritage, the USA sympathized with newly emerging African states (Mazrui/ Tidy 1984: 362). The US promised to recognize and support African nationalism (Penfield 1961: 221–230). In contrast, the USSR sought to spread socialist revolutions across the continent to combat imperialism. Thus, it promised to support national liberation movements throughout the continent. Such sympathies were enhanced by Cold War politics. The USA's and the USSR's ideologies toward the continent placed African nations under the direct or indirect control of these global blocs. The U.S.'s anti-communist foreign policy prevented it from supporting many liberation movements in Africa. Its policymakers could not fully embrace communist-oriented African leaders. In contrast, the USSR's anti-capitalist foreign policy embraced weak ideologies and endured shifting alliances among its African allies. In general, the USA and the USSR worked hard to prevent each other from controlling the continent. This contributed extensively to wars fought among Africans, either in the form of intra-state or inter-state conflicts (Weise and Macaulay 1985: 34-35).

Drawing on secondary literature, such as journal articles, monographs and book chapters, on modern Ethiopian political history, as well as primary sources, including eyewitness memoirs and investigative records in the Amharic

language associated with the leaders of the *coup*, this analysis argues that Washington tacitly supported attempts to weaken or remove Haile Selassie in order to prevent the implementation of Soviet-financed development plans. The U.S. government's silence in the aftermath of the massacre of the emperor's inner circle by the *coup* leaders is interpreted as acquiescence. Conversely, the *coup*'s failure was more attributable to indirect Soviet assistance than to U.S. intervention. Following the collapse of the *coup*, US-American officials welcomed Haile Selassie with conspicuous warmth, thereby masking their prior contacts with the plotters. As this research shows, the *coup* itself appears to have been hastily conceived and assembled over only a few months, which bolsters the inference of external encouragement. I therefore posit the presence of 'invisible hands' behind the abortive *coup*. Notably, much of the Anglophone historiography, largely written by U.S. scholars, omits discussion of possible US-American involvement and seldom addresses Egyptian participation. This includes reports of Egyptian military officers who were present in Addis Ababa during the events. Together, these patterns suggest an international dimension that is underrepresented in existing narratives.

Historical Background: The Post WWII Ethiopian-USA Diplomatic Relations

After the victory of Adwa at the end of the 19th century, the USA made great efforts to establish strong diplomatic relations with Menilek[1] II of Ethiopia. The USA also did not recognize Ethiopia as an Italian colony during the second Italian invasion and occupation (1936–1941). However, post-liberation, Ethiopian external relations were dominated by the British for at least a decade. Although the U.S. could not or did not involve itself in Ethiopian affairs due to the dominant British presence, it fully supported Ethiopia's demand for access to the sea after the Italian colonial occupation of Eritrea ended during WWII (Tefera 2007: 251–256). The U.S.'s position and policy regarding Ethiopia's demand for access to the sea passed through three phases. Initially, in 1945, the U.S. proposed that Ethiopia have access to the sea through the port of Assab and that the rest of Eritrea be granted full independence under a ten-year U.N. trusteeship. However, the US eventually recognized that Eritrea was not eligible for statehood and should be partitioned into two. Accordingly, the lowland part of Eritrea, which is close to Sudan geographically, linguistically, and culturally, should be united with that state. The highland Tigrigna speakers and Christians

[1] The official way of spelling the name of the emperor in official Ethiopian historical documents including his chronicle in Amharic is ምኒልክ, which has been rendered here into English as Menilek.

could unite with Ethiopia. This proposal was still not feasible due to the situation in Sudan, i.e., the need for southern Sudan to secede. Ultimately, the US proposed uniting Eritrea with its historical motherland, Ethiopia. The USA had a special interest in the area, and Ethiopia was in a position to fulfill that interest by providing an American military station in the Red Sea area and by contributing soldiers to the UN security mission in Korea—the only African state in that position. This interest prompted the U.S. to support uniting Eritrea with Ethiopia. Ultimately, the U.N. decided to federate Eritrea with Ethiopia in 1952 (Alem Seged 1993: 61, 136-137; Aklilu 2011: 70-71; Zewudie 1999: 375, 422-423). The United States was pleased with Ethiopia's presence in Korea as part of the UN peacekeeping mission because it countered the Soviet claim that the UN force in Korea was an invasion of people of color by white imperialists (Lyons 1986: 56; Mengistu/ Mezgebu 1986: 353).

In addition to establishing a military station in Eritrea, the United States was interested in building communication facilities in the area. Accordingly, in 1942, the US began operating the Italian radio transmit base in Eritrea, renaming it *Kagnew* Station. The US believed that the station would be more secure if the region were under Ethiopian control. Moreover, the US feared that an independent Eritrea could become a satellite state of the Soviet Union or be infiltrated by communists. Thus, the US moved to protect the station in Eritrea (Lemmu 1989: 52–53). Consequently, the US supported Ethiopian Emperor Haile Selassie in his struggle for access to the sea. On December 11, 1952, the U.S. representative to the U.N., Charles A. Sprague, introduced a resolution calling for the federation of Eritrea with Ethiopia. The General Assembly adopted the resolution on December 17, 1952, securing Ethiopia's access to the sea (Zewudie 1999: 317).

It is said that both the United States and Ethiopia were to benefit equally from their cooperation. Ethiopia was to receive military aid from the United States in exchange for allowing the United States to use *Kagnew* Station. They signed an agreement on May 22, 1953. One clause stated that Ethiopia provided the United States with a 25-year lease for *Kagnew* Station, and another stated that the United States offered Ethiopia $5 million a year in military aid and training provided by a Military Assistance Advisory Group. However, during this time, Ethiopia and the US could not agree on two issues: The US demanded extra territoriality, and Ethiopia requested a defensive agreement. Thus, the agreement did not fully satisfy Ethiopia's need for military aid and a defensive agreement. Nevertheless, the Pentagon opposed providing Ethiopia with additional military aid (Lyons 1986: 59).

In fact, the US provided economic assistance to Ethiopia, thinking it could accomplish three important purposes. First, it would contribute to Ethiopia's western orientation. Second, it would limit the effectiveness of Soviet bloc economic initiatives. Third, it would foster an increase in consumption levels and the standard of living in Ethiopia. However, the major US interest in Ethiopia was geopolitical (Lyons 1986: 60). US officials believed that Ethiopia was one of the top ten countries in Africa receiving US aid, not because of its economic interests in the country, but because of its geopolitical interests. According to them, Ethiopia did not demonstrate "a firm commitment to development," and its economic growth was hindered by its weak government institutions. They concluded that the US's economic assistance was not used for economic development but rather to build infrastructure that strengthened the emperor's political power center (Lemmu 1989: 55–56).

Moreover, the US expected Ethiopia to support anti-communist policies. However, Ethiopia pursued an independent foreign policy, leaning towards Pan-Africanism. Ethiopia participated in the 1955 Bandung Conference and supported the Non-Aligned Movement instead of pro-East or pro-West policies. The US was irritated by this move, believing it to be contrary to US interests in Africa. The US wanted Ethiopia to be its sole agent in Africa but did not fully address the interests of the Ethiopian government. Often, the US worked against the interests of Ethiopia in Africa. For example, in 1957, the US announced its intention to fund the Aswan Dam Project without warning Ethiopia. This incident convinced Ethiopia that the US supported countries that were hostile to its interests (Lyons 1986: 61; Lemmu 1989: 56). Therefore, the Ethiopian emperor began pursuing an independent foreign policy, strengthening his ties with states unfriendly to the West to threaten US interests and push the US for more assistance to Ethiopia. Thus, the US would be forced to compete with the Soviets for aid (Lyons 1986: 61-62).

The Post- WWII Ethio-USSR Diplomatic Relations

Diplomatic relations between Ethiopia and the Soviet Union began to be renewed due to strong interest from both states after World War II. From Ethiopia's perspective, the postwar decades with Britain and the United States could not compare to its heavy need for material, financial, and technical support from the West. Consequently, the Ethiopian monarch tended to favor a return to the traditional pattern of Russo-Ethiopian relations (Yakobson 1963: 332). The Soviet Union, a socialist superpower, wanted a dependable foothold in East

Africa and intended to regain its traditional influence in Ethiopia, lost during the socialist revolution. This was followed by the provision of a large number of staff to its legation in Ethiopia to secure its interests in East Africa in general and Ethiopia in particular. Similar to the US, Ethiopia's post-WWII diplomatic relations with the USSR revolved around negotiations regarding the future of Italian colonies in Africa. At this international forum, the USSR sought trusteeship over Somaliland and Eritrea. However, the UN gave that position to Italy and Britain: Somaliland to Italy and Eritrea to Britain. Thus, the Soviet Union's efforts to establish a presence in the Horn of Africa were unsuccessful, at least for the time being (Yakobson 1963: 332; Yodfat 1979/80: 2–3).

Due to her previous negative experiences with the West, Ethiopia sought to establish diplomatic relations with both the Western and Eastern worlds. Furthermore, the growing military might and influence of the USSR in global politics prompted Ethiopia to renew its historical diplomatic ties with the Soviet Union. One indication of the development of the USSR's military power was the launch of its space satellite, Sputnik, in September 1957. Ethiopia and other "third world" countries viewed this launch as proof of the USSR's advanced technology and military power. They also considered the "Suez Crisis" at the time as further proof of "Western weakness" (Yodfat 1979/80: 2). Ethiopia also carefully observed the presence of the USSR in Egypt and other Middle Eastern countries. These global political dynamics led Ethiopia to renew diplomatic relations with the USSR. Simultaneously, the USSR planned to exploit this new opportunity in Ethiopia to exert pressure on President Nasser and bring him under the USSR's control. By portraying Emperor Haile Selassie of Ethiopia as the champion of the African liberation movement, the USSR cast a shadow on President Nasser's claim to such a position in Africa (Yodfat 1979/80: 2). Ethiopia was undoubtedly aware of the potential negative reactions from the West regarding its diplomatic shift towards the USSR but could not ignore the material and technical aid that the Soviet Union would provide. In short, Ethiopia was forced to make this potentially risky decision for the following decisive economic reasons (Yodfat 1979/80: 3):

i) The unpleasant presence of the British in Ethiopia during the postwar decade led to the continuous deterioration of their relationship.

ii) The economic stagnation in Ethiopia and the need for aid that the West, particularly the United States, was unable to provide.

iii) The huge funds and technical resources required to finance Ethiopia's consecutive five-year development plans.

Additionally, there were political considerations that forced Ethiopia to make this decision.

a) The Soviet Union's relations with Gamal Abdel Nasser of Egypt, whose Pan-Arab ambitions threatened Ethiopia.
b) The creation of a "United Somalia," proposed by Great Britain and encouraged by Egypt, resulted in a sense of "Muslim encirclement."
c) The collapse of the colonial system in Africa challenged Ethiopia to seek a position as a major liberator of the African continent.
d) An ambition to become a long-lasting spokesperson for the newly independent Africa.

On top of the above motives, Ethiopia's move by this time was to establish a roadblock against the Somalis to prevent them from seeking support from the Communist camp[2].

The Post-WWII Ethiopian-UAR Diplomatic Relations

Post-WWII, Ethiopia's relationships with the UAR (United Arab Republic) mainly revolved around sharing Nile waters and religious issues (Christianity and Islam). Although Ethiopia was located in the Nile Basin, it was not included in the agreements signed by the British and other colonial states in the basin. Some of these agreements granted Egypt the right to veto any upstream projects. In addition to the Nile issue, patriarchal relations existed between Egypt and Christian Ethiopia since the fourth century. Furthermore, the Al-Azhar Mosque in Egypt played a prominent religious role among Muslim Ethiopians. On June 25, 1959, the Ethiopian emperor, Haile Selassie, signed an agreement with Egypt regarding the relationship between the Ethiopian Orthodox Church and the Egyptian Coptic Church. This agreement liberated the Ethiopian Orthodox Church from its subordination to the Egyptian Coptic Church. Similarly, the Al-Azhar Mosque sent representatives, who were based in Addis Ababa, to teach Muslims in Ethiopia (Hanna 2019: 2904).

[2] File scanned from the National Security Adviser's Memoranda of Conversation Collection at the Gerald R. Ford Presidential Library, MEMORANDUM OF CONVERSATION, between President Nixon and Emperor Haile Selassie of Ethiopia, Haile Minassie, Ethiopian Foreign Minister, Major General Brent Scowcroft, Deputy Assistant to the President for National Security Affairs DATE AND TIME: Tuesday, May 15, 1973. 11:03 am. - 12:13 pm. https://2001-2009.state.gov/documents/organization/67407. (Accessed on February 5, 2025)

The nature of diplomatic relations between Ethiopia and Egypt changed fundamentally following the Egyptian Revolution of July 1952. Since then, Egypt has linked its policies and interests in Africa to the regional and global environments. Decolonization, the establishment of new countries, and African aspirations for progress and development, as well as Egypt's relationship with the Nile Basin, forced Egypt to adopt this new policy. The signing of the 1959 agreement between Egypt and Sudan to utilize the Nile's water resources marked a turning point in relations between Egypt and Ethiopia. The agreement allocated 55.5 billion and 18.5 billion cubic meters of water to Egypt and Sudan, respectively. Ethiopia was highly disappointed by this decision. Egypt claimed that Ethiopia's use of the Nile waters would threaten Egypt. Since the November 1959 agreement, it had been preparing to construct the Aswan Dam. Ethiopia claimed that none of the agreements included its legitimate interests in water sharing, despite contributing about 86% of the water. In 1957, however, Ethiopia announced the unilateral development of projects on the Nile, which were opposed by Egypt and Sudan. In 1958, Ethiopia requested to participate in the water negotiations between Egypt and Sudan but was rejected. In response to this experience, Ethiopia started the Blue Nile Master Plan Study Project in 1958. The project proposed constructing four high dams along the Blue Nile after a six-year study was finalized (Kazickas 2016: 52–55).

In short, diplomatic relations between the two countries deteriorated for the following possible reasons (Hanna 2019: 2904):

i) The Egyptian Pan-Arabic outlook,

ii) Egypt's decision to construct the Aswan High Dam,

iii) Egypt's support for the Eritrean independence movement,

iv) the Ethiopian decision to make African diplomacy a major sphere of political interest,

v) Ethiopia's 1957 agreement with the US government to launch a study of the water resources of the Blue Nile for irrigation and hydroelectric power which was started in 1958, and

vi) the break from the institutionalized affiliation of Ethiopian Christianity with the Egyptian Coptic Church in 1959.

In general, relations between Ethiopia and the UAR became tense during the late 1950s, and Radio Cairo's propaganda about Greater Somalia added fuel to the problem. Ethiopia also proposed including Jordan in a front with Turkey, Iran, Ethiopia, and Israel. Egypt's interest in Jordan prevented it from obtaining the

keys to the Deir al-Sultan monastery in Jerusalem, the subject of centuries of rivalry between Egypt and Ethiopia. Thus, on December 2, 1960, a Jordanian committee recommended that the keys be handed over to the Ethiopian monks (Erlich 1994: 138).

The USA, UAR and USSR in the Aborted *Coup* in Ethiopia (December 12-15, 1960)

The position of USA and UAR

The following four incidents are the immediate causes of the USA's involvement in the aborted military coup in Addis Ababa: the nature of the USA's relations with Egypt, Somalia, and Ethiopia in the late 1950s and 1960s; Ethiopia's urgent need for financial aid to fund its development plans and the USA's reluctance to provide it; the USA's desire to establish Ethiopia as an anti-communist state in Africa and Ethiopia's reluctance to fulfill that role; and the USA's desire to establish a military base in Eritrea and Ethiopia's desire to secure access to the sea and obtain meaningful military aid from America in the form of firearms, ammunition, and techniques (Lemmu 1989: 57–58).

Due to new regional and global dynamics, discrepancies are clearly observed between the interests of the two countries. One such dynamic was the end of colonialism and the global powers' positions on the future of the former Italian colonies, Eritrea and Somalia (Zewudie 1999: 93–101). The international community's decisions regarding these two colonies affected Ethiopia in some way. This was, of course, highly influenced by their relations with Egypt and probably other Eastern African states that shared borders with Ethiopia. The United States viewed problems in the Horn of Africa as part of a global conflict between the Soviet Union and the West, whereas Ethiopia saw them as threats to its territorial integrity (Lyons 1986: 60). The discrepancy in interests reached its climax on February 9, 1959, when the British proposed uniting British Somaliland with Italian Somaliland to form an independent state of Somalia. Making matters worse, the United States endorsed the proposal (Shinn 2018: 63). Ethiopia then began arguing that the West did not appreciate its legitimate concerns. Their main concern was that an independent United Somalia would try to gain sovereignty over the Somali populations in the Ogaden region of eastern Ethiopia. Therefore, Ethiopia was convinced that the West could not be depended on, resulting in a fear of abandonment. This fear prompted the emperor to expand his international relations strategy (Yodfat 1979/80: 2).

Accordingly, he announced his plan to visit the Soviet Union and other communist states in 1959. Ethiopia's dramatic shift in foreign policy occurred at a time when the Soviet Union needed to increase its influence in Africa. Consequently, the tension between Ethiopia and Somalia provided the Soviets with an opportunity to become involved in the internal affairs of the Horn of Africa. In July 1959, Haile Selassie visited Czechoslovakia and the Soviet Union (Yodfat 1979/80: 2). This development shocked the US Embassy in Addis Ababa, which promptly informed Washington of every move made by the Eastern bloc in Ethiopia. The United States feared the effect this move would have on the newly emerging African states (Lyons 1986: 63).

External forces' involvement in military *coup*s or *coup* attempts in Africa is commonly reflected in the plotters' declaration of their potential foreign policy, i.e., how they mention their former colonial master or one of the global ideological blocs at the time (Terrill et al. 1985: 80–85). The aborted military *coup* in Ethiopia in December 1960 was declared in a manner that expressed the *coup* leaders' intention to establish strong diplomatic relations with the West and newly independent African countries, particularly the USA, the United Kingdom, West Germany, and Latin America, as well as Egypt, with the aim of resolving the dispute over the Nile in accordance with international laws and proclamations concerning cross-border rivers and seas.

> "[...] በሁሉም አህጉር በከፍተኛ ምሁራን የሚመራ ልኡክ ለመላክና እውቅና ለማግኘት በተለይም ከአሜሪካ፣ ከእንግሊዝ፣ ከምዕራብ ጀርመን፣ ከላቲን አሜሪካና ከአፍሪካ ነጻ መንግሥታት ጋር የጠነከረና የጠበቀ ወዳጃዊ ግንኙነት ለማድረግ በተለይም ከግብጽ መንግሥት ጋር ስላለው የአባይ ወንዝ ጥያቄና ፍጥጫ በማስወገድ በዓለም አቀፍ ህግ ስለ ታላላቅ ወንዞችና ሐይቆች የወጣውን ደንብ ለማክበር [...]።" (Tadesse 2012: 35)

Approximately to mean

> "[...] to send a recognized delegation led by the most prominent Ethiopian scholars to all continents, especially to foster strong and close friendly relationships with the United States, Great Britain, West Germany, Latin America, and the independent states of Africa particularly to Egypt to avoid the Nile River dispute with the Egyptian state and comply with international law regarding major rivers and lakes [...]."[3]

[3] All of the equivalent translations from Amharic to English throughout this text were made by the present author himself.

Similarly, in the list of the "eleven points" of the aborted *coup*, they mentioned plans to send young Ethiopians to the Western world for further university education, including short-term training and long-term studies, so that they would understand Western modernization and be able to implement it in Ethiopia upon their return. They expected the World Bank to help them realize the plan. In another point of the "eleven points," the West, specifically America, was taken as their model. They emphasized that educated Ethiopians should work for their country as educated Americans do, rather than pursuing personal interests (Clapham 1968: 501-502; Tadesse 2012: 35).

In an interview with a Swedish television station in January 1961, the emperor implied the presence of external forces in the attempt, though he refrained from naming any specific foreign powers.

> "የውጭ አገር እጅ በአመፁ ስራ ለመግባቱ የተጣራ ማስረጃ አልተገኘም። ነገር ግን የአመፁ አወጣጠን፣ ዓመፀኞቹ ያሰናዱትን ፕላን፣ የሥራቸው ዘዴ በኢትዮጵያ ውስጥ የተለመደ ባለመሆኑ ጉዳዩ የሚያጠራጥር ሆኖ አግኝተነዋል።" (Addis Zemen News Paper 1960)
>
> "There is no clear evidence of foreign involvement in the rebellion. However, we found the case suspicious because the structure of the rebellion, the plan prepared by the rebels, and their method of work are not common in Ethiopia."

I suspect that the external force referred to by the emperor was the US government or its agents for the following reasons.

After he was caught and interrogated by investigators, one of the coup leaders, Brigadier General Mengistu Neway, explained that they had contacted the American ambassador, Arthur Richard, more than three times within a day during the coup from December 12 to 15, 1960 (Ayele 2020: 301; Tadesse 2012: 39).

Mengistu's last words to investigators after he was injured and captured provided detailed information about the process, particularly his group's relationship with the governments of the USA and UAR. Mengistu said that his brother, Garmamme, and Lieutenant Colonel Workineh had contacted the ambassadors of the USA and UAR. They secured promises from both that they would support the *coup* or a change in government. Then, on December 9, the US ambassador contacted Mengistu himself; Garmamme served as an English interpreter. Mengistu said that when he requested support from the

governments of the USA and UAR for the project, the ambassador replied that he would convince both governments, particularly the UAR, to provide economic and military support for the implementation of the change, as well as for the newly established government. On December 11, the US ambassador came and contacted Garmamme. He promised Garmamme that the UAR government had agreed to provide all the necessary political and economic support for the government change, as well as all the necessary military aid in Addis Ababa and Asmara. The ambassadors also assured the coup leaders that they would support the new government in all aspects necessary for its survival (Tadesse 2012: 36; Ayele 2020: 300–301).

On December 12, 1960, Garmamme went directly to the American embassy to discuss the matter with the ambassador. He returned to the other *coup* leaders and promised them that, should members of the army regiments and their commanders oppose or attempt to abort the plan, the ambassador would convince them to support the plan or the *coup*. Furthermore, the ambassador promised that the Egyptian army would provide all necessary support (Fentahun, 2014/15: 131).

Ras Imru Haile Selassie, the Ethiopian Ambassador to the United States for several years, had deep-rooted contacts with both the Americans and the Garmamme group. He was probably involved in or brought to the *coup* because of his background. According to *Ras* Imru:

> “የአሜሪካ አምባሳደር እየመጣ እንነጋገር ነበር። [...] እኛ ከአምባሳደሩ ጋር ስንነጋገር ወርቅነህ አንዳንድ ነገር ቢናገርም ከልቡ እንዳልሆነ ይታወቅበት ነበር።.....ከአምባሳደሩ ጋር ስንነጋገር ቆይተን አምባሳደሩ የተነጋገርንበትን ጉዳይ ለአገሩ (ለዩናይትድ ስቴትስ አሜሪካ) ሊያስተላልፍ ሲሄድ [...] አምባሳደሩ እየተመላለሰ ከእኛ ጋር እየተወያየ የተወያየንበትን ለመንግሥቱ ሲያስተላልፍ ቆይቶ መጨረሻ ለአራተኛ ጊዜ መጥቶ በመነጋገር ላይ እንዳለን [...]።“ (quoted in Wolde Sema’et 2020: 174).
>
> “We were talking when the American Ambassador arrived. [...] Even if Workineh said something when we talked with the Ambassador, it was clear that it wasn't from the heart. [...] While we were talking, the Ambassador was going to convey what we discussed to the United States Government. The Ambassador discussed the matter with us, walked out, and conveyed it to the government of his country. Finally, he came for the fourth time, and we were discussing [...].“

The American Ambassador seems to have been the mastermind behind all the promises. He said he would convince the chief of staff of the Ethiopian army to

join them and that the Egyptian government would provide economic, military, and other support.

However, the chief of staff, General Merid, refused to discuss the matter with the ambassador. He had already communicated with the USSR embassy in Addis Ababa, which provided him with information about the intentions and processes of the *coup*. General Merid was probably also supported or guided by the Soviets to abort the *coup*. Meanwhile, the American ambassador informed Garmamme that the Egyptian government had sent an aircraft carrying about fifteen Egyptian officers, soldiers, and civilian personnel to Lideta Airport to provide military support to the conspirators. Finally, on December 15, another contact was made between the conspirators and the American ambassador to convince General Merid to come for a discussion through *Ras* Imru, in order to save the conspirators from air bombardment (Tadesse 2012: 39; Wolde Sema'et 2020: 174).

But, General Merid refused the call, although the American Ambassador still promised to mediate between the two groups:

> "[...] ምናልባት ከተቻለ በአሜሪካን ኤምባሲ ግቢ ውስጥ ተገናኝታችሁ ችግሩን የሚፈቱበት መንገድ እቀይሳለሁ ብለው አምባሳደሩ ለልዑል ራስ እምሩ ቃል ገቡ።
> " (Mengistu quoted in Tadesse 2012: 57-58). "[...] If possible, I will arrange for you to meet at the American Embassy and plan a way to solve the problem,' the Ambassador promised *Ras* Imru."

As is clear, Mengistu frequently mentioned the extent to which the American Ambassador supported them during the movement, including his physical presence until the very end.

The foreign supporters of the *coup* had two parallel plans in the initial stage of the movement. Primarily, as mentioned above, they planned to support the new government established by the conspirators in every way possible. The second alternative was to rescue Mengistu, Garmamme, and Workineh by giving them political asylum in the USA or UAR (Cairo) if they were unsuccessful for various reasons (Tadesse 2012: 38).

American literature on the issue seems to have remained silent about the American position in the coup attempt. In fact, it appears that the US or its ambassador supported the massacre of the government ministers taken hostage by the *coup* leaders. This was probably because the Americans were trying to weaken the imperial government so that it could not implement its second five-year plan with the financial and technical support of the USSR.

> “ንጉሠ ነገሥቱ ወደ ሶቪየት ኅብረት ስላዘነበሉ የእነ መንግሥቱ ንዋይን የመፈንቅለ መንግሥት ሙከራ አጋጣሚ ተጠቅመው ከሥልጣን እንዲወርዱ ለማድረግ ምኞት እንደነበራቸው ነው። ይኸውም ጃንሆይ መስኮብ ሄደው ባገኙት አራት ሚሊዮን ሩብልስ ገንዘብ.... በጣም ተናደው ... አስኪ በዚህ ገንዘብ ስትጠቀሙ እናያለን እስከማለት ፎክረው[...].“ (Wolde Sema’et 2020: 175).
>
> “Since the emperor was leaning toward the Soviet Union, the Americans wanted to take advantage of the coup attempt to overthrow the government. In other words, the emperor went to Moscow and received four million rubles. They were very angry and boasted, “We will see you using this money!“

Additionally, none of the local sources, including Mengistu's testimony, claimed that the Americans worked to rescue the emperor’s ministers and other dignitaries. Tadesse and Wolde Sema’et even claimed that the Americans facilitated the process. Wolde Sema’et boldly wrote that Western countries supported the entire massacre by taking advantage of the situation; they killed those who were working hard to develop Ethiopia. This idea became public knowledge after Wolde Sema’et’s memoir was published and he was interviewed by several Amharic media outlets, more so than Tadesse’s book about American involvement in the coup attempt (Mezemir 1990). Disappointed by the Soviet support of the Imperial Ethiopian Government, the US plotted behind the scenes. Some even believe that the US Ambassador was with the conspirators and therefore left the palace during the massacre of Ethiopia’s “strong countrymen“ (Wolde Sema'et, 2020: 175; Tadesse 2012: 58).

In general, documents on this topic rarely address the United States' involvement in African military *coup*s, particularly the aborted *coup* in Ethiopia. American scholars who have written about the aborted Ethiopian *coup*—including Richard Greenfield, Christopher Clapham, Harold Marcus, John Spencer, David Shin, and Theodore Vestal—have discussed the coup's details without mentioning any American involvement or the names of American diplomats. This does not seem to be due to a lack of sources or information about the American position. American scholars living in Addis Ababa at the time were closely connected to Garmamme.[4] For example, one of the former members

[4] It is said that Donald Levin, an American professor of anthropology, was a good friend of Garmamme's while he was in Ethiopia, as mentioned by the late Professor Mesfin Woldemariam of Addis Ababa University (Mesfin 2012: 60). Professor Merid Wolde Aregay, from the history department at the same university, also told a similar story to his graduate students, including the present author, in a class on Ethiopian historiography about two decades ago.

of the Ethiopian Imperial Body Guard described his experience with it as follows:

> “ገርማሜ [...] አሜሪካ ሄዶ እንዲማር ሁኔታዎችን ያመቻቸለት ግሪንፊልድ ነበር። ከተመለሰም በኋላ አዘውትረው ይገናኙ ነበር። ስለዚህ ገርማሜ በግሪንፊልድ ድጋፍ በነገሩ ላይ ለረጂም ጊዜ ሲያስብበት ሲዘጋጅበት ቆይቶ ነበር.... አንድ ተራ የዩኒቨርሲቲ ኮሌጅ መምህር [...] ከመምህርነቱ ያለፈ ምስጢራዊ ተልዕኮ ይዞ የሚንቀሳቀስ ሰው ባይሆን ኖሮ መፈንቅለመንግሥቱ ከከሸፈ በኋላ .... በኤምባሲው አማካኝነት በምስጢር ልዩ አውሮፕላን ተዘጋጅቶለት ወደ ሱዳን በመሸሽ ከኢትዮጵያ የመውጣት ዕድል ባላገኘ ነበር።“ (Ayele 2020: 301).
>
> “Greenfield facilitated the conditions that allowed Germamme to study in America. After he returned, they met regularly. With Greenfield's help, Germame had been thinking about it for a long time. [...] an ordinary university teacher... but if he wasn't a person with a secret mission beyond his teaching, then how was a special plane prepared for him through the embassy, and why did he flee to Sudan after the failed coup d'état?“

The Position of the USSR

As mentioned above, Ethiopia planned to diversify her diplomatic relations and sources of foreign financial and technical aid after finding that her sole diplomatic relationship with the West was unreliable. To this end, the Ethiopian emperor made an official state visit to the USSR from June 29 to July 13, 1959. During the visit, he secured a long-term, low-interest loan of 400 million rubles (equivalent to 100 million USD at the time) from the USSR to develop industry and agriculture (Wolde Sema’et 2020: 174–175). He also signed agreements regarding trade, economic relations, and the further expansion of cultural contacts. This was the second largest credit ever granted by the Soviet Union to an African state. The Soviet Union's goal in granting Ethiopia such a generous loan was “among other things, to open the gates of Africa to a large number of Soviet technicians.“ It also implicitly aimed to strengthen Ethiopia's state ownership in industrial enterprises at the expense of private enterprise and investment (Yodfat 1979/80: 3). The Emperor mentioned this explicitly in his official speech to the public after returning from the visit.

> “[...] As we commented at the beginning of the year, [...] capital and labour are necessary ingredients for wealth and prosperity and these two factors are absolute essentials for the economic development of our country [...]. Although Ethiopia possesses abundant natural resources, vast amounts of capital, far in excess of our present means, are needed to develop and exploit these resources for the good of our people. It was

> with this in mind that we acquired credits from friendly countries such as the United States of America, Yugoslavia, the Federal Republic of Germany, the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics, and the Republic of Czechoslovakia. For the purpose of implementing these credits and commercial agreements, numerous missions have been sent and received during the past year. It was with particular gratification, therefore, that, on our return from Our state visits to Europe, We were able to announce the granting to Ethiopia by the great and friendly Union of Soviet Socialist Republics of a four hundred million rouble loan." (IEMI 1967: 497)

Moreover, the trade agreement stipulated that the Soviet Union would export the following to Ethiopia: "machinery and equipment, tractors, agricultural machinery, light and heavy motor vehicles, bicycles, motorcycles, road-building machinery, rolled metal products, oil and oil products, cameras and film, medical supplies, household goods, chemicals, textiles, and window glass." In return, Ethiopia was to export coffee, raw hides, oil seeds, sheep and goat skins, and other traditional produce, with payment to be made in freely convertible currency (Yakobson 1963: 336). To strengthen diplomatic relations and materialize the agreements and plans, the Soviet government appointed A. V. Budako, former head of the African Department of the Soviet Foreign Ministry, as ambassador to Ethiopia on October 12, 1959. According to the Soviet plans, the appointment was "to showcase the Soviet coexistence policy in Africa" (Yakobson 1963: 336). One could argue that this type of Ethio-Soviet relationship resulted in ideological suspicion by the USA.

In addition to the aforementioned diplomatic relations, the USSR government tried to support the Imperial Government of Ethiopia in the event of any violent movement against the government. One indication of this was when the Soviet ambassador in Ethiopia informed Emperor Haile Selassie I of a *coup* plotted against his government on November 16, 1960. However, they could not identify the conspirators (Tadesse 2012: 13). Second, the Embassy of the USSR in Addis Ababa helped Major General Merid Megesha, the Commander in Chief of the Ethiopian Armed Forces, send news about the coup to the emperor via telegram while he was on an official state visit to Brazil (Tadesse 2012: 20).[5]

[5] Most authors, like Vestal (2011:110), maintain that "Haile Selassie had been made aware of the coup by his son, Prince Sahle Selassie's use of his ham radio. [...] he was persuaded to send the message by his mother, Empress Menen. His broadcast was picked up in several places around the world and made public in the press". He even claims that the US Ambassador "actually authorized the transmission of a message to Haile Selassie from forces loyal to the emperor" (ibid). However, Tadesse (2012) made a convincing case that the emperor was first informed through the Soviet Embassy.

I believe the reason the Commander in Chief used the USSR embassy, despite the Ethiopian government being pro-USA, was because the USSR and the general knew the US ambassador was with the *coup* leaders from the beginning. Furthermore, the aid and loan obtained from the USSR may have bolstered the General's confidence in the Emperor's relationship with the USSR. The General's confidence in the USSR embassy tells us something about the USSR government's position on the *coup* (Tadesse 2012: 36).

Despite such relations between the two countries, it seems that the Soviets generally ignored Ethiopia's internal policy issues. During the failed coup in December 1960, the Soviet press avoided taking sides, merely quoting Western press reports. Only after the emperor's victory was assured did the Soviet press begin to condemn the *coup*, claiming it was USA-inspired (Yodfat, 1979/80: 3).

Another area where we can observe the USSR's position on the issue at hand is its approach to the Somalian case in Eastern Africa. Somalia gained independence on July 1, 1960. British Somaliland, which had gained independence on June 21 of that year, united with Somalia to form a unified state (Yodfat, 1979/80: 3). Somalia claimed the Ethiopian Ogaden region, Kenya's northern frontier district, and French Somaliland (now Djibouti). Mogadishu needed foreign assistance to gain this territory since the African states were interested in maintaining colonial boundaries to prevent endless claims and destructive strife. Of course, Ethiopia could not accept the Somali government's claim to about a fifth of its territory since that might have prompted similar demands from other ethnic groups and endangered its very existence. The newly independent African countries and the Western powers were not in favor of Somalia's expansion. Thus, it was expected that Somalia could obtain assistance only from Arab countries and the USSR. However, the Soviets were careful not to take sides on Somalia's claims to Ethiopian territory because they wanted to maintain good relations with both Ethiopia and Somalia. In fact, the USSR sided with Somalia at the expense of Ethiopia's interests in the area because of the British presence in Kenya as a colonial power (Yodfat 1979/80: 3-4).

In short, the developments surrounding the aborted *coup* were brought about by both Ethiopian and external forces. The major developments were brought about by the involvement of officials from the USA, UAR, and USSR, and probably their governments as well. From the Ethiopian side, these developments were brought about by two military generals: Mengistu Neway, who led the *coup* and sided with the USA-UAR, and Merid Mengesha, who was loyal to the Imperial Ethiopian Government supported by the USSR.

The Form of Government Planned by the *Coup* Leaders

Another area in which external powers' involvement in the aborted December 1960 *coup* in Ethiopia can be seen is in the form of government that the *coup* leaders planned to establish. The *coup* leaders were said to have had a reformist tradition rather than a revolutionary one in mind (Clapham 1968: 498). The *coup* was seen as a movement resulting from dissatisfaction within the ruling class. This dissatisfaction led to a reformist *coup* that could be explained by internal or palace politics. In this case, the group strongly associated with the palace was divided into two factions: opponents and proponents of the *coup*. These categories are important because not all educated Ethiopians supported the coup makers unless they had personal or familial reasons to do so (Clapham 1968: 498–500). The principal leaders of the *coup* almost all belonged to the privileged class of society (the most notable exception being Workineh), resulting in an absence of support from most educated members of society. As *Ras* Imru's testimony shows, the main actors in the *coup* attempt were those with deep-rooted ties to the Americans, namely Garmamme and his supporters, including his elder brother. This does not necessarily mean that these privileged members were conservative; however, it does mean that they had inherited a certain authority and confidence in their ability to lead, which is generally lacking among other educated Ethiopians from humble backgrounds. In fact, their eleven-point plan did not explicitly clarify the changes they thought were necessary in the existing system of government (Clapham 1968: 502).

Incidentally, the eleven-point plan was reportedly prepared by Garmamme and supplemented by Workineh. Therefore, it appears that Lieutenant Workineh contributed his own ideas. General Mengistu also contributed, as he reported to the investigators. They ultimately decided to implement the plan from December 1960 to February 1961. Mengistu reported that only the three of them knew about the secret: Mengistu, Garmamme, and Workineh (Tadesse 2012: 57–58). Thus, unlike the global thinking of Ethiopian youth at the time, the conspirators did not strive for a republic. Unlike most *coups* in Africa at that time, they were working for a constitutional monarchy and reformation. The Crown Prince's speech regarding their policy or plan shows that their intention was to establish a constitutional monarchy.

> “[...] እነዚህ ሁለቱ [ሀብትና ሥልጣን]የኢትዮጵያ ሕዝብ የኑሮ ነቀርሳ መሆናቸውን በመገንዘብ፣ ከዛሬ ጀምሮ በሀብት በኩል እንዱ አንድ ኢትዮጵያዊ ሆኜ በሚቆረጥልኝ ደሞዝ ብቻ የምተዳደር፣ በስልጣን በኩል እውነተኛውን ሕገ

መንግሥት መመሪያ በማድረግ አገሬንና የኢትዮጵያን ሕዝብ ለማገልገል ፍጹም ቅን በሆነ ልቦና መስኛለሁ።“ (Berhanu 2013: 188-189).

“[...] recognizing that wealth and power are the cancers of the Ethiopian people, as of today, I will live as an Ethiopian on a salary. I will serve my country and the people of Ethiopia by following the true constitution regarding political power.“

Initially, the coup leaders did not mention land issues in their declaration. In contrast, the Second Five Year Development Plan of the Imperial Ethiopian Government included content on revising the country’s land tenure system. The plan aimed to make peasants or tenants freeholders (landowners), which was contrary to American ideology (Clapham 1968: 503). Perhaps that is why the coup leaders remained silent on the issue of land, although they were forced to address it in their second declaration, which was an appeal to garner support from the general public. The Second Five Year Development Plan also included the construction of a hydroelectric power dam, which the emperor mentioned in his official speech. However, as explained above, the coup leaders' plan was to be on good terms with the Nasser government of Egypt. The coup leaders tried to justify their actions by raising points that would lead to the internal correction of some systems — reformation rather than revolution. The *coup* leaders listed a number of limitations of the regime but could not clearly explain how they would solve the problems they listed;

“[...] ከዚህ በላይ ዘርዝረን የጠቀስናቸውን ጉድለቶችና ሳይዘረዘሩ የቀሩትን ጉድለቶች የሚያስወግድ፣ ኢትዮጵያ የምትሻሻልበትንና ሕዝቧም የሚበለጽግበትን ጎዳና የሚከፍት ሰላማዊ ለውጥ ነው።“ (Berhanu 2013: 210).
“[...] It is a peaceful change that will remove the defects we have listed above and the defects left unlisted and open the way for Ethiopia to improve and its people to prosper.“

To that end, they declared that they established a constitutional monarchy and appointed *Ras* Imru, who had connections to America and the American ambassador, as prime minister. By appointing *Ras* Imru, the *coup* leaders capitalized on his reputation for honesty and reform, as well as on his status as the Emperor's cousin and a prominent member of the royal family. The *coup* leaders intended to retain the throne and the royal family, including Crown Prince Asfa-Wossen. They also tried to incorporate the strong royal element in Ethiopian society (Clapham 1968: 502). Garmamme is said to have proposed the plan’s emphasis on economic development and its comparison with other

African states, and these themes were repeated in later broadcasts. However, their actual policies and proposals did not differ much from those of the existing regime. Their policy statement was moderate rather than a revolutionary call to the army. The only new proposal disseminated to the public was the promise that everyone would be given land and those whose land had been purchased could buy it back (Clapham 1968: 503).

Of course, it is difficult to determine how much this land policy actually aligned with the interests of the *coup* leaders. It seems that it was brought up late due to pressure from the frightening situation at that moment, to gain more popular appeal. Had that not been the case, land reform would have been mentioned in the Crown Prince's speech. There does not seem to have been a "revolutionary" element to the *coup* that can be traced to its specific proposals. As mentioned earlier, the *coup* leaders thought they were operating in an environment where radical policies would not be considered. The difference between the *coup* leaders' proposals and the existing government's policies was largely in the emphasis given to economic development. The *coup* leaders' strong criticism of the imperial regime concerned the stagnation of the economy rather than the rampant oppression and corruption of the imperial regime. They made few proposals regarding political changes or reforms, such as forms of government, human rights, and elections, which one might expect in the case of overthrowing a dictatorial regime in most African military coups. They also ignored the issue of ethnic diversity in the appeal that raised a number of issues to mobilize the wider public. They could not propose any plans for the future regarding ethnic issues or regional groupings in heterogeneous Ethiopia. They assumed these issues would undermine the country's national unity.

Conclusion

Ethiopia's post-WWII relations with the USA, UAR, and Europe did not inspire confidence in the West. This situation prompted the government to establish similar relations with the USSR and its allies. Although Ethiopia claimed that its relations were guided by the principle of neutrality, the US was seriously disappointed by this measure. I have argued that the USA supported developments to either weaken or replace Haile Selassie's government, preventing it from implementing Soviet-financed development plans. For example, the American position of silence regarding the massacre of Haile Selassie's government's core group by the *coup* leaders implies support for this action. The *coup* was aborted with the indirect support of the USSR, but not the

USA. In fact, the US pretended that they supported the emperor and received him warmly upon his return, as if they had had no contact with the coup leaders once the attempt was aborted. Furthermore, the *coup* was not a well-thought-out plan, but rather a plan of a few months. If that were not the case, then how could the Neway brothers, leaders of the *coup*, have gotten married on the same date several months prior and established families amidst such high risks that could cost their lives? Therefore, it can be posited that external factors instigated the idea to overthrow the emperor. Thus, I conclude that there were invisible hands pushing behind the aborted *coup*. It is therefore no coincidence that most writers about the aborted *coup* were Americans and failed to mention American involvement in the movement. They also never mentioned Egypt's involvement or that of Egyptian military officers who were present in Addis Ababa during the *coup*.

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