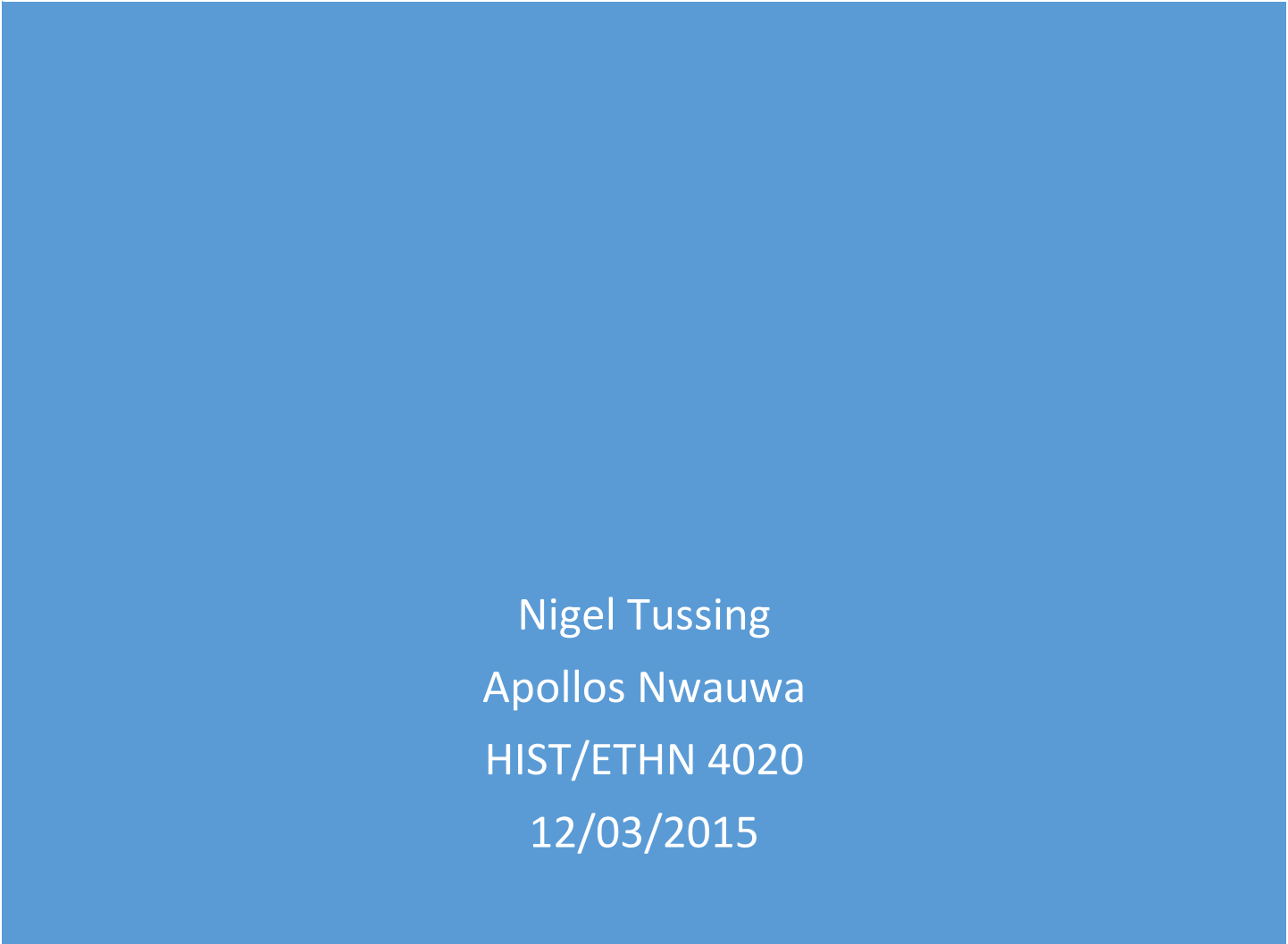




# AFRICAN RESISTANCE TO EUROPEAN COLONIAL AGGRESSION: AN ASSESSMENT



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When observing African resistance to colonialism one plainly sees that there was quite a bit of non-military resistance. However, military resistance played a large role in helping the cause of the native people of Africa. It had success such as Ethiopia's ability to remain independent and the Chilembwe insurrection; it also had its failures such as lack of technology and lack of unity. Through careful examination of these ideas we can further understand the success and failure of African military resistance to colonialism.

Certainly it can be said that Ethiopia was an oddity when it came to colonial Africa. It was the only African nation that managed to successfully repel European invaders with military force. This is because the emperor of Ethiopia at this time was emperor Menelik II, the emperor who had already begun his own colonialism to gain control and great portions of land and to control large groups of people. The book *Ethiopia* offers the statement "Shortly after he came to power in 1889, Menelik signed a treaty allowing the Italians to occupy Asmara, but renounced it in 1893 when Italy sought to extend its authority to Ethiopia as a whole."<sup>1</sup> At this point we see that Menelik was ready to resist the Italians as they tried to gain a foothold in his territory. He had already consolidated great power, and could strike once he acquired weaponry. This book further states that "When the Italians began moving southward into Ethiopian territory, Menelik distributed weapons obtained from France and Russia, assembled a national army from Ethiopia's diverse ethnic groups and readied his troops for battle. On March 1, 1896, the Ethiopian army confronted the Italians at the Battle of Adwa and scored a decisive victory. The peace treaty signed later that year preserved Ethiopia's independence during the height of the scramble for Africa."<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Gish, Steven, Winnie Thay, and Zawiah Abdul Latif. 2007. *Ethiopia*. New York: Marshall Cavendish Benchmark. 21

<sup>2</sup> Gish, Steven, Thay, and Latif. 21-22

So we see that Africans are capable of resisting Colonial rule. Surely this would serve as an example to other African nations that they can too be free and resist the European occupation. However this was not the case, as Ethiopia had special circumstances, namely that they had already begun to expand their own power under Menelik II and that they were able to unite themselves. Other African nations were unable to do this properly and therefore were not able to resist European rule through military force. After all there were only 2 nations that managed to remain free of European control for an extended period of time, one being Ethiopia and the other being the free African founded country of Liberia. The difference being that Ethiopia remained free by force and that Liberia remained free as it was founded as a free nation.

It would not be until the 1900s that Ethiopia would be taken over by force by Benito Mussolini backed by the Nazi Regime. The book *Collision of Empires: Italy's Invasion of Ethiopia and Its International Impact* offers an interesting point on this topic. "Italian infantry and light tanks rolled across the Eritrea-Ethiopia frontier on 3 October 1935. Fascist Italy's invasion of Ethiopia, a sovereign empire in its own right and a member of the League of Nations, proved cruel even by the dismal standards of the era. Italian soldiers and pilots conducted a vicious campaign and subsequent occupation, freely using poison gas against soldiers and civilians and carrying out summary executions of captured Ethiopian soldiers and insurgents. Mussolini dispatched five hundred thousand troops south of the Suez Canal; the invasion was no limited colonial campaign, but rather a national war mobilizing the people and resources of the Fascist state."<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Strang, Bruce. 2013. *Collision of Empires: Italy's Invasion of Ethiopia and Its International Impact*. Farnham, GBR: Ashgate Publishing Ltd. 11

By this we can see that Italy was quite embarrassed by its defeat at the hands of what they thought were an inferior people. Italy's determination to destroy Ethiopia once it had gained the means proved as a testimony to this. It proved that Ethiopia's strength during the colonial era had come to an end, however it would not be long before it was again free of European control. Proving again that Africans were more than capable of managing themselves and fighting for their freedom despite the odds against them.

The Chilembwe revolt, on the contrary, is a different kind of success for the military resistance of Africa. This resistance did not lead to prolonged freedom or an independent state. It instead was, as the *Oxford Encyclopedia of the Modern World* put it "A symbol of the difficult transition from the traditional to the modern world."<sup>4</sup> This was a series of attacks on British officials by John Chilembwe and his followers to attempt to gain a semblance of freedom. "In January 1915 his followers attacked the homes of several especially despised European estate operators, killing three; Chilembwe even displayed the severed head of one in his church. Attacks planned for elsewhere in Nyasaland did not proceed to fruition, nor did an effort seeking the assistance of authorities in adjacent German East Africa (Tanzania)"<sup>5</sup> However it wasn't long at all before British officials rallied and began their hunt for John Chilembwe. His so called army was after all not very large and was non-professional. As the *Oxford Encyclopedia of the Modern World* further explains "British officials at once rallied a few newly recruited African troops and called all available European men into immediate service. The conspirators were scattered within a fortnight. Chilembwe himself was shot attempting to flee into Mozambique, and most of his followers were captured; later tried, several were executed for treason."

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<sup>4</sup> Page, Melvin E. "Chilembwe Revolt." In *Oxford Encyclopedia of the Modern World*. : Oxford University Press, 2008. 120-121

<sup>5</sup> Page 120 -121

Thus John Chilembwe's insurrection was over fairly quickly and not having accomplished that much in the way of gains for the African people. However, it was not the gains of the insurrection that made this a memorable encounter. It was the inspiration that this movement gave the people of Africa that made it memorable. It showed people that even a priest can rise up to attempt to do something about European rule. It may have even been the sad truth that a priest had to rise up before the common man. Nonetheless, "Chilembwe's memory inspired his countrymen as they struggled against colonialism, and he remains a national hero in Malawi today."<sup>6</sup> This is why this is considered a success in military resistance, not because the resistance itself was successful, as it clearly was not very successful. Instead, it is because the man and his mission lived on and inspired the people to make further gains for their cause of freedom.

For every success in African military resistance to European rule there are many more failures. One of the biggest failures of African resistance was the lack of modern technology. Much of Africa still used spears or machetes to fight and if they did have guns, they were old, outdated, and poorly maintained. As a result Africans did not stand much of a chance against modern European military technology. This biggest advantage that Europeans had was the maxim machinegun. One who knows of the British use of the maxim knows of the poem that goes alongside it "Whatever happens, we have got the Maxim gun, and they have not."<sup>7</sup> This quite accurately sums up the power the Maxim gun held for destruction. It was capable of, simply put, mowing down men. It was capable of stopping a charge of men with spears and machetes quite quickly by tearing through them before they can reach the machinegun crew. It had incredible accuracy at range and a rapid rate of fire to keep slinging lead towards the African

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<sup>6</sup> Page 120-121

<sup>7</sup> Belloc, Hilaire, and B. T. B. *The Modern Traveller*. London: Edward Arnold, 1898. 42

foe. Thus it became quite notorious for its capabilities. One such instance is as follows “At Omdurman in 1898 the British Army, equipped with Maxim's guns, mowed down 10,000 Dervish soldiers for the loss of just 48 Tommies. Maxim was knighted shortly afterwards. And from Omdurman to the killing fields of the Somme was but a short hop up the premier league of massacre.”<sup>8</sup>

Furthermore, Europeans had access to ships to move large quantities of men across the oceans and seas to gain stronger footholds in Africa. Africans had no such access to great warships or transport ships. As a result European armies were much more mobile than their African counterparts. This made long distance movements and resupply much easier for Europeans. These ships also could be used in combat as they often times were meant for war and, as such, were fully equip with cannons and mortars. Africans had no such weaponry. Africans were confined to movement along the land. Additionally, some African tribes were promised assistance by Europeans in the form of military aide to help destroy tribes they were at war with. This was trickery on behalf of the Europeans as they had no intention of providing prolonged aide to the Africans. Then afterwards the Europeans would attack or use the tribe they had helped. This was common as a way of controlling the African people as they were at first keen to use Europeans superior firepower to try to defeat other tribes.

The discipline of Europeans soldiers was unrivaled by Africans. These were men who were trained for years to fight, were given modern weaponry and command by a superior officer who had gone to a military academy. Africans were often lucky to have any training besides occasional conflicts with their neighboring tribes. They were also likely farmers who had been

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<sup>8</sup> Morrison, Richard. 2002. "Hiram Maxim Invented the Light Bulb, but it was Edison Who made a Fortune.so Maxim Started Afresh, and Invented the Machinegun." The Times, Feb 21, Times2 7

brought up to fight only during times of war, and were likely only given a spear or machete to fight with. This led to a gap in skill and discipline between Europeans and Africans that favored the Europeans heavily. As a result, we see many battles that involve Africans taking incredible losses and Europeans walking away with almost no losses such as that of the Battle of Gingindlovu which is described as a time that “The Zulus lost heavily. Over 470 bodies were buried initially and more than 200 were subsequently found. The Gatling gun and artillery in particular took a heavy toll; in addition, scores were wounded, many to die in solitude later. Hundreds of Martini Henry rifles were recovered, most of which bore the stamp of the 24th Regiment on their butts; grim reminders of the disaster at Isandlwana some nine weeks earlier. The British lost two officers and 11 other ranks killed and about 50 wounded”<sup>9</sup>

This was not always the case, as some battles tended to go in African favor due to superior tactics or inferior numbers on European behalf such as several of the battles from the Anglo Zulu wars. Specifically the Battle of Isandlwana. In which of about 1200 British faced about 12000 Zulus “52 British officers and 806 non-commissioned ranks were killed. Around 60 Europeans survived the battle. 471 Africans died fighting for the British. Zulu casualties have to be estimated and are set at around 2,000 dead either on the field or from wounds. The Zulus captured 1,000 rifles with the whole of the column’s reserve ammunition supply.”<sup>10</sup> However, it was more common for Africans to be on the losing side of the battles as the technology advantage was often times what was encountered. Manpower could be calculated in terms of weaponry, that is to say that one man with a machinegun is worth much more than several men with spears.

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<sup>9</sup> Grillings, Ken. January 1979. “INYEZANE, GINGINDLOVU AND THE RELIEF OF ESHOWE The forgotten battlefields of the Zulu War, 1879.” *Military History Journal* Vol 4 No 4 - Zulu War Centenary Issue

<sup>10</sup> Knight, Ian. <http://www.britishbattles.com/zulu-war/isandlwana.htm>. N.p., n.d. Web.

As stated, tribes often refused to work with each other and often times even sided with the Europeans to help eliminate other tribes in the area. Even within friendly territories it was difficult for African leaders to organize their men as many of them were not trained professionals but were farmers and peasants. Thus African strategy was rarely organized properly and effectively. Often, Africans fought with each other despite European invasion and were therefore much easier to engage and eliminate later. Africans often lost battles they could have won if they had only organized their soldiers and made alliances with other tribes instead of continuing feuds and siding with Europeans.

African resistance to colonial rule varied greatly over time and ranged from all-out war to fighting with words and logic. However some of the most interesting resistance came from the success and from the failure of African military resistance. Without military resistance we could have never seen the success of Ethiopia or we could have never known the deadly efficiency of the Maxim machinegun. It had success such as Ethiopia's ability to remain independent and the Chilembwe insurrection inspiring the people; it also had its failures such as lack of technology and lack of unity. Whatever the case, there is much to be learned from this form of resistance, as in the end it was not the most effective way of resisting colonial rule. It was a people that had no chance of military success, but were inspired by the people who managed small scale successes. These people would go on to fight in a different way. To quote Apollon Nwauwa, with the pen and with a brain.



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