

A FORGOTTEN DIPLOMATIC FRONT OF WORLD WAR I: ETHIOPIA

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Whenever reference is made to the First World War, doubtless, what comes to mind immediately is, a pitiless conflict that caused the death of 8.700.000 soldiers and civilians and the maiming and rendering destitute of at least quite as many.

This war was a historical watershed that caused the collapse of four empires: the German Empire, the Austro-Hungarian Empire, the Russian Empire and the Ottoman Empire.

Similarly, those who study the First World War tend to focus their attention upon the large battles that took place during the 1914-18 period. Mainly, the French, Polish, Galician and Gallipoli fronts. They examine the causes of U.S entry in the war on the side of the Entente Powers.

Few realise the enormous struggle for influence over Ethiopia -the only independent country, other than Liberia, on the African Continent- that took place between the Entente and the Central Powers; nor is the intensity of diplomatic efforts made to draw Ethiopia into one camp or the other widely known.

The culmination of this rivalry was Ethiopia's "almost" entry into the fray on the side of the Central Powers in 1916.

The following, attempts to examine how this threshold was reached, and to analyse how the Entente Powers tried to block the Ottoman/German influence over Ethiopia.

Everything began with the establishment of permanent bilateral relations between the Ottoman Empire and Ethiopia at the beginning of 1912. The first Ottoman Consulate General was designated to the eastern

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city of Harar¹ on April 4th 1912. Earlier the Turkish Consul in Manila Necib Hac Efendi had been appointed to Harar.² However, the demise of this gentleman soon after his arrival in Harar, caused the Bâb-ı Âli (Sublime Porte) to appoint in his stead a previous director of its Translation Department, Ahmed Mazhar Bey, on April 7th 1913. The Ottoman Consulate General was transferred to the Ethiopian Capital Addis Ababa in 1914. The reason for its prior establishment in Harar was the fact that those Ottoman citizenry residing in Ethiopia were mostly situated in Harar following their migration away from the internal conflicts then taking place in the Yemen, to this, geographically *proxime accessit* location. The compilation of exhaustive lists of these persons was, in effect, the primary undertaking of the Ottoman Consulate General in Harar. In particular, many Ottoman citizens resident in Hadhramaut (Aden) refused British claims over this territory and their concomitant claims of protection over Hadhramautis, and made their relevant protests to the Ottoman Consulate General in Harar. Those who claimed Ottoman citizenship needed and duly requested certification of identity to prove this.³

The death of Menelik II on December 13th 1913, often referred to as “the Great” due to his many administrative reforms, modernisation efforts and most importantly as the victorious commander of the famous battle of Adwa (1896) against Italy, caused a considerable crisis. Successive strokes suffered in 1906 and 1908, respectively, rendered Menelik incapable of dealing with affairs of state. Thus, in accordance with a previous will, his grand-son Lidj Iyassou (born February 3rd 1898) issue of Menelik’s daughter Chawaregga and of the Prince of Wollo, Ras Mikael, was designated heir to the Imperial throne.⁴

Although Prince Lidj Iyassou was only thirteen in 1911, he began to rule the country *de facto* in accordance to Menelik II’s will and with the Emperor’s death in 1913, his grip on power was consolidated.

¹ The city of Harar and its surroundings, the centre of power of the Muslim Adal Emirate had been an independent city-state for centuries. It had however been annexed by Menelik II to Ethiopia in 1887.

² Cengiz Orhonlu, *Habeş Eyaleti*, p. 166.

³ *Ibid.*

⁴ Berhanou Abebe, *Histoire de l’Ethiopie*. pp. 143-147.

The friendship that was to be born between Lidj Iyassou, just sixteen, and the Ottoman Consul General Mazhar Bey, in 1914, would lead to very interesting developments in Ethiopia during the early years of World War I. In fact, the young Prince, seemed to regard Turkey with particular amicability and it was he who invited Mazhar Bey to relocate the Consulate General to the capital Addis Ababa when First World War broke-out. At the time, Lidj Iyassou's tendency was toward open support for the Central Empires' Alliance (the Triple Alliance). There were many reasons for this. Primarily, the Ottoman Empire held the shores of the Arabian Peninsula on the opposite side of the Red Sea; the Ottoman Emperor Sultan Reşad was coincidentally the Caliph of all Muslims and approximately half the population of Ethiopia was Muslim; Lidj Iyassou did not consider himself as only the ruler of Ethiopian Christians but as the Prince of Ethiopian Muslims also. Moreover, the young Prince had a sympathetic regard for Islam as a religion.

Fate took Mazhar Bey, by formation a translator, to the post of Ottoman Consul General in Harar. Soon, Mazhar Bey would demonstrate what could only be deemed strategic genius in this position. In fact, shortly after taking office in Harar, Mazhar Bey compiled a detailed report concerning how Ottoman policy should be shaped toward counteracting the actions and aspirations of colonialist states in that region of Africa. This report was duly sent to the Sublime Porte on November 1st 1913.⁵

Briefly, in his report Mazhar Bey suggests that the Ottoman Empire support the development and modernisation of Ethiopia both politically and economically, that reassurance be given to the Ethiopian government, in that the Ottoman Empire would be helpful in ascertaining the path best suited to Ethiopian interests, and finally that the Ottoman Empire would not allow its influence over Ethiopian Muslims to be perceived as a threat by the Christian Orthodox government of Ethiopia.

Whilst working within the broad framework of this policy, Mazhar Bey was quick to realise the strategic advantages that would accrue from the alignment of Ethiopia to the ranks of the Central Empires.

⁵ Cengiz Orhonlu, *Habeş Eyaleti*, p. 167.

Following the failure of the Suez Canal campaign in February 1915, Mazhar Bey made a plan that would bring together Ethiopia, the Muslim mullahs in Somalia and the Moslem elements in Southern Sudan and with this military force march up the Nile delta. Yet before this or any other campaign could possibly be mooted, Prince Lidj Iyassou needed to be persuaded.

With this end in view, Mazhar Bey issued the following proposals to the Bâb-ı Âli (The Sublime Porte):

-That Mullah Seyid Mohammed, one of the leaders of the Moslems and of the resistance against the colonialistic states in Somalia be supplied with the arms and munitions he required;

-That the Ottoman Empire cede the coastal region (Gulf of Aden) , the "Somaliland" of today, between the ports of Zeyla and Belhar to Ethiopia. As well as this, that a region extending 120 km. with a width of 40-50 km., from the eastern border of Harar to the coast, be similarly ceded to Ethiopia.

These suggestions were duly considered in Istanbul, the views of the German Ambassador Wangenheim were taken into account and the whole was approved by Enver Pasha, Deputy Commander in Chief⁶ of the Ottoman Armies and Minister for War; thus, Mazhar Bey was given wide responsibility to do whatever necessary to ally Ethiopia to the Ottoman Empire.⁷

It should be noted at this point that the Ottoman Empire considered the above mentioned areas to be ceded to Ethiopia -"Somaliland" then being under British occupation- to be under its *de jure* sovereignty in 1915.

It seems that the proposals thus approved by the Porte and duly related by Mazhar Bey were found attractive by the young Prince Lidj Iyassou. Indeed, land-locked Ethiopia would thus be enabled to gain egress to the Indian Ocean.

After this, the relationship between Mazhar Bey and Lidj Iyassou became even closer and warmer. Not only would the young Prince visit the Ottoman Consulate General in Addis Ababa but, he would, on the occasion of the birthday of Sultan Reşad, on April 27th 1916 present an Ethiopian flag

⁶ The Commander in Chief being the Sultan himself.

⁷ Cengiz Orhonlu, *Habeş Eyaleti*, p. 171.

to be conveyed to him. On this particular Ethiopian flag, of green, yellow and red diagonal stripes, on the green area of the flag the holy expression of Islam, the Kelime-i Şahadet (Confession of Faith) was embroidered, together with this was a figure bearing a sword in one hand and a bunch of bull-rushes in the other. In this manner Prince Lidj Iyassou was giving his oath and solemnly promising to deliver justice and religious equality to the Muslims of the Empire, and invoking the wrath of God upon himself should he fail so to do.⁸

During this period of time, Lidj Iyassou, who no longer felt the need to hide the fact that his sympathies resided with the Ottoman Empire, got in touch with Mullah Seyid Mohammed in "Somaliland" and conveyed arms and munitions to the other Somali leaders in the region. In July 1916, he went to Djibouti and from thence to Harar, where he married the daughters of Emir Abdullahi of Harar. These actions taken by the young Prince denote a policy aimed at establishing blood relations with the Muslim elements of the Empire and with those of neighbouring countries.⁹

However, these activities on the part of Prince Lidj Iyassou were found to be more than could be born by the flesh and blood of the Entente Powers. Meanwhile, the conduct of First World War had reached a critical phase in 1916. The extremely violent German assaults at Verdun were continuing apace. The possible entry of Ethiopia to the war on the side of the Central Powers caused the ambassadors of the Entente Powers in Addis Ababa to take action. On September 10th 1916, the French Minister Charles Brice, the Italian Minister Colli di Felizzano and the British Minister Wilfred Thesiger, jointly requested audience from the Ethiopian cabinet. In this joint *démarche* it was warned that the actions of the Prince were placing the country under external and internal danger; it was also threatened that should this course be pursued the Entente powers would, in order to safeguard their interests, have recourse to taking the necessary measures.

Another aim of this *démarche* was to provide encouragement to Iyassou's opponents in the Shoa region where Addis Ababa was located.

⁸ The fate of this Ethiopian flag, probably sent to Istanbul by Mazhar Bey, is being researched at present at the Topkapı Museum and at the Directorate of National Palaces of the Turkish Grand National Assembly.

⁹ Berhanou Abebe, *Histoire de l'Éthiopie*, p.149.

Chief among these opponents was the son of Menelik II's nephew Ras Makonnen, Ras Tafari (the future Emperor Haile Selassie I).

The fruits of the Entente Powers' undertaking were soon to be harvested. The Archbishop of the Ethiopian Orthodox Church Abouna Matheos would, on the 27th September 1916, declare Prince Lidj Iyassou both deposed and excommunicated.¹⁰ Archbishop Abouna Matheos further declared the daughter of Emperor Menelik II., Princess Zaouditou Empress and Ras Tafari (the future emperor Haile Selassie) regent and heir to the throne of Ethiopia.

The Head of the Ethiopian Orthodox Church Abouna Matheos' pretexts and ratiocination for these decisions and the ensuing declaration were:

- Ever since Ethiopia became Christian, it has maintained its faith in this religion. Prince Lidj Iyassou having totally disregarded the Ethiopian peoples' adherence to the Christian faith has himself adopted Islam. Under these circumstances, the oath of fealty made by the Ethiopian people to Prince Lidj Iyassou, in accordance to Emperor Menelik II's will, has become null and void.

- Not only has Prince Lidj Iyassou adopted Islam, but has given an Ethiopian flag, where the Muslim Confession of faith was imprinted on the green part of the flag, to the Turkish Consul General, to be conveyed to the Turkish Government. This action has provoked the reaction of countries such as Britain, France and Italy and these states have begun to amass forces on Ethiopia's borders. In short, Ethiopia's security is at risk.

- Whilst these events were taking place, Prince Lidj Iyassou went to the town of Jijiga in the Somali region and presented twelve similar flags, with the Muslim Confession of Faith imprinted to the Somali notables. Moreover, Prince Lidj Iyassou has donned a turban denoting proof of descent from the Prophet Mohammed and has, thus garbed, given the Harari and Somali princes medals.¹¹

¹⁰ Berhanou Abebe, *Histoire de l'Ethiopie*, p.150. Berhanou Abebe, *Annales d'Ethiopie*, Vol. XVII (2001), p. 326.

¹¹ *Annales d'Ethiopie*, Vol. XVII (2001), pp. 335-337.

Whilst analysing the September 27 1916, “Addis Ababa *Coup d’Etat*”, the Ethiopian historian Berhanou Abebe puts forth a highly interesting thesis that has so far been disregarded by modern historians. According to this historian, Britain, highly perturbed by events in Ethiopia, sent, during 1915-1916 T.E. Lawrence, a.k.a , the renowned “Lawrence of Arabia” to Harar in Eastern Ethiopia. As is known, Lawrence at that point was busy organising the Great Arab Uprising against the Ottoman Empire.

The thesis put forth by Berhanou Abebe is based on two main sources. The first of these is a document sent by the then French Minister to Ethiopia Charles Brice to Paris.¹² In this document, Charles Brice states that during the leave of absence of Major H. Dodds, the British Consul at Harar, in January 1916, a Major Lawrence (sic), who was posted to “Somaliland”, took charge *ad interim* of the Consulate.

The second source is a book written by the Italian Antonio Zisca who took part as a volunteer in the Italian campaign against Ethiopia in 1935, as part of the “East Africa Corps”.¹³

In his book *Abissinia Ultima Problema Insoluto dell Africa*, Zisca writes that Lawrence came to Ethiopia in 1915 and 1916. Moreover, he contends that the turban mentioned above, which Prince Lidj Iyassou wore at the Somali region, and which was supposed to indicate his descent from the Prophet Mohammed, was in fact given him by Lawrence.¹⁴

In order to further strengthen his thesis, Berhanou Abebe indicates Lawrence’s recorded visit to Somalia in 1928.¹⁵

In that year, a “Friendship and Trade Agreement” had been signed between Ethiopia and Italy and the Italians were planning a road link between the Eritrean port of Assab and the Ethiopian town of Dessie. However, the French also had similar plans for that region where Ethiopia, Somalia and Djibouti crossed borders. In fact, during 1927-1929 they built the roads between Dikhil and Ali Sabiet and between Dikhil and Mourato.

¹² *Annales d’Ethiopie*, Vol. XVII (2001), pp. 335-337.

¹³ Antonio Zisca, *Abissinia Ultimo Problema Insoluto Dell’Africa*, Firenze, 1936, pp. 88, 89 and 179.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*

¹⁵ *Annales d’Ethiopie*, Vol. XVII (2001), p. 325.

Naturally, all this activity indulged in by the French and Italians could not leave the British indifferent. They sent Lawrence "once again" to observe developments *in situ*.

Berhanou Abebe contends that the only reason for sending Lawrence to the Horn of Africa "for the second time" would be his prior knowledge of the region.¹⁶ In light of the available documentation, it seems difficult to state conclusively that T.E. Lawrence did in fact go to Ethiopia in 1915 and 1916. However, if true, such a state of affairs would indicate the extent to which Britain was perturbed by the inclination shown by Ethiopia towards an alliance with the Central Powers.

It is to be hoped that this particular "historic enigma" will see the light of day when and if the relevant British Archives are made available.

Whilst the Coup d'Etat of September 27th was taking place in Addis Ababa, Prince Lidj Iyassou was in Harar. Although the Prince did his utmost to change the outcome, the risk of capture and imprisonment forced him to go to the Wollo Province which was ruled by his father Negus Mikael. In order to safeguard his son's rights, Negus Mikael assembled a force of fifty thousand and marched on Addis Ababa. Although he gained some initial victories such as seizing the city of Ankober, he was finally defeated on October 27th 1916 at the pitched battle of Sagalé by the Shoa (area around Addis Ababa loyal to Ras Tafari) forces under the command of *fitaourari*¹⁷ Habte-Guiorgis and Ras Tafari.

Lidj Iyassou managed to hide in the Afar desert for some time. He was captured and subsequently imprisoned only in 1921. Although no definite date of death is available for Lidj Iyassou, it is generally believed that he died in 1935, whilst still in captivity.

As for the Ottoman Consul General Mazhar Bey, his position in Ethiopia became increasingly tenuous after the 1916 Coup d'Etat. Indeed after the Coup, his diplomatic communications with the Porte were disrupted and he could not carry out his duties as Consul General. Study of some of the documents pertaining to the Consulate, reveal that he,

¹⁶ *Annales d'Ethiopie*, Vol. XVII (2001), p 325.

¹⁷ Commander of the vanguard.

eventually, left Addis Ababa for Harar and continued his work there until the middle of 1919.

According to the well-known work by Maurice de Coppet, who served as French Minister in Ethiopia during the 1920's, *Chronique du Règne de Ménélik II*, Mazhar bey died in Djibouti, then under French rule, on January 13th 1920.

In pursuance of this information, a copy of the certificate of death of Mazhar bey was obtained through the good offices of the Honorary Turkish Consul General in Djibouti. This, together with its unofficial translation into Turkish and English is appended to this text.

Thus the great diplomat Mazhar bey died during the aftermath of First World War, on January 13th 1920, with no chance of returning home . He achieved posthumously the rank of *Şehit*¹⁸ .

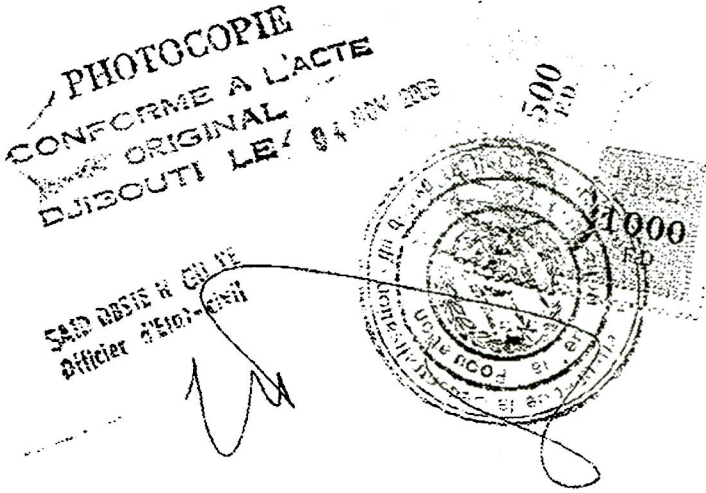
During the official visit paid to Turkey in March 2004 by the then Minister of Foreign Affairs of Djibouti, Ali Abdi Farah, the Turkish Government made an official request to the Government of Djibouti concerning the discovery of the site where Mazhar bey was buried. The relevant Djiboutian authorities are at present pursuing their inquiries.

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¹⁸ A Muslim who dies in battle for his country or for his faith according to the Muslim religion.

Appendix 2



Appendix 3

The death of Mazhar bey,
January 13th 1920

Unofficial Translation

On January 13th 1920 at 19.00 hours the Turkish Consul General to Addis Ababa (Place of birth, date of birth and parentage unknown) has deceased at Djibouti.

This Record ((of death)) was composed at 10.00 hours, on January 14th 1920, on the basis of joint declarations made by René Cazamet, aged forty, Major, Medical Corps, head of Health Services of the Colonial troops and by Jean Michel, aged thirty two, nursing sergeant. Both of the above-mentioned being domiciled in Djibouti, having read this document in our presence, Georges Guilbert, Colonial Administrator adjunct and delegated to the functions of officer in charge of the Civil Administration of the town of Djibouti, have duly signed it.

(Signature)
Georges Guilbert

(Signature)
René Cazamet

(Signature)
Jean Michel