

# The Last Emperor -- The Fall of Haile Selassie

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*Emperor Haile Selassie*

Few could be more considered more central to the modern history of Africa's longest independent nation, Ethiopia, than Emperor Haile Selassie. Regent from 1916-1930, he became emperor of Ethiopia on November 2, 1930 and ruled for nearly 45 years. More than most other authoritarian rulers, Emperor Selassie embodied one-man rule, ultimately to the detriment of his own health and the growth of his nation.

In the end, his efforts to modernize the country's education system also contributed to his downfall, as foreign-educated students returned to Ethiopia seeking reform. Calls for change by students, the military and other members of the ruling family, combined with the emperor's decreasing mental awareness, led to his abdication in 1974. Haile Selassie can be considered the world's last emperor who held true political power.

Sheldon Vance served as Deputy Chief of Mission (DCM) in Addis Ababa from 1962-1966. While serving as DCM, he came to know Haile Selassie personally while working with the emperor to transform the nation into a constitutional monarchy. John Buche served as a political officer in the Ethiopian capital of Addis Ababa from 1963-1966 and describes the feudal system of rule under Emperor Selassie. Parker Wyman worked as DCM in Ethiopia during the last few years of Selassie's reign and gives insight into his final days as Emperor. Richard Jackson became familiar with the workings of the Selassie government while working in the Bureau of Intelligence and Research, Horn of Africa Desk at the State Department from 1968-1970.

## "He really was God in the eyes of his people"

Sheldon Vance, Deputy Chief of Mission, Addis Ababa, 1962-1966

VANCE: [Selassie] had decided, after he was returned to his country by the British after the war, that he would have to make strenuous efforts to modernize his country, and he ruled, among other things, that education for the future would be in English, not in Amharic, so that his educated people could communicate with the rest of the world more easily.

He said also that public education would be modernized. Before the Italian occupation, education had been entirely in the hands of the Coptic Church, and it was said that there were many Coptic Church teachers who believed still that the earth was flat and other wonderful bits of intellectualism of that nature.

As I look back on my four years in Ethiopia, that man dragged his country kicking and screaming out of the cave age. What happened? He regarded the United States as his greatest friend, and we supplied his prime minister with a legal advisor.

We helped them draft a modern constitution which envisaged a Parliament with two houses, which would have a general election, have public participation in the elections. The emperor would appoint a prime minister, there would be a Cabinet, and it all looked like Thomas Jefferson had been at work.

However, looking back on it, the emperor, I should add (although very friendly to me personally and to close foreign friends, people he regarded as close friends) he really was God in the eyes of his people. I've been

standing with him and have seen reasonably senior Ethiopians come up and prostrate themselves flat on the floor in front of him.

We did not realize how really, totally, a thousand percent feudal the old man was. He simply was not about to delegate anything to anybody. We used to joke that he decided whether to put a 25-cent stamp on any letter that left the government, or a 50-cent stamp.

What happened was, he lived too long. If he had tried to use the educated, trained youth and the structure in the government [things would have been alright.] We talked him into land control and land reform, brought in airplanes to map the country so that people would know who owned what, rather than just the dukes and their equivalents owning everything in sight from the mountaintop. It all fell apart.

### **"He was the only person who had the full view"**

BUCHE: Without sounding too naive or too prone to oversimplify, the Emperor was the source of almost all power. His ability to move ministers and governors around, which he did periodically so that they could not build up a power base or could not get any expertise, was one way he exercised power. He moved governors and judges around, moved generals out to be governors, governors in to be ministers, shuffled the military and police constantly.

He had three or four intelligence systems running concurrently, spying on each other and spying on everyone else. In his prime he was able to keep the many balls in the air. He was pretty busy keeping things in motion, but that was a source of power.

There was an inherent instability to the system, since he was the only person who had the full view. While he would occasionally tolerate and even praise independent initiatives by subordinates, such actions were usually viewed negatively and punished in some way.

Officials in Addis Ababa or in the provinces learned that it was safer to consult with the Emperor before undertaking an action that was not routine. We heard of many sudden assignments to the provinces or from one province to another, where the rumors had it that the cause was displeasure on the part of the Emperor at an action by the official.

The Emperor grabbed power as a young man and held on against many rival contenders for decades. He was shrewd, cunning, farsighted, and decisive in his prime. In 1963 when I arrived in Ethiopia, I believe the Emperor was about at the zenith of his mental abilities. What he accomplished on the international scene over the next several years was most impressive. The fact that he held the country together in the 1960s as well as he did, given the many internal and external challenges, demonstrates his extraordinary talents.

### **"Haile Selassie made a strategic miscalculation"**

BUCHE: The Emperor had survived the 1960 coup, and there was a slightly faster pace of reform. The coup was still on peoples' minds, although it took place in December 1960, and the last executions were completed by mid-1961. It was a bloody coup, and there were deaths on both sides, not only from the fighting, but also the killing of hostages by the Revolutionaries and then the executions by the Government.

The coup punctured the mystique surrounding the Emperor, damaged the relations between Haile Selassie and his son, the Crown Prince, revealed the bitter rivalries in the military and security forces, demonstrated the extent of hatred toward the reactionary nobles around the Emperor, and inspired other opponents of the regime to continue their fight.

A pesky insurgency was festering in Eritrea. The rebellion did not have to happen. Haile Selassie made a

strategic miscalculation.

Haile Selassie wanted complete amalgamation, but he saw that proposal was not going to fly. He was absolutely opposed to independence, so he accepted federation. By 1961, Haile Selassie had the Eritrean Parliament under his control. He gave the signal and the Eritrean Parliament voted to abolish the Federation and join "Motherland Ethiopia". The rebellion began a few months later.

**"The forces he unleashed were ones ultimately...he couldn't control"**

BUCHE: Both his physical and mental powers began to weaken and the system became unglued. You could see in the late '60s, early '70s, that things were coming undone. He could no longer juggle hundreds of important issues, keep up a heavy schedule of foreign and domestic travel, decide on the numerous personnel appointments, and continue to dispense instructions, rewards, and punishments through face-to-face meetings with his officials.

The embassy tried hard, frankly, to get Haile Selassie to abdicate, to step down in favor of his son, the crown prince, who had been educated in England, who was a centrist moderate, let's say, who admired the British monarchy, who took as his model the British monarchy, so that he would have been not exactly a figurehead, but he would have been a constitutional monarch, with a prime minister and elections, real elections, to choose a government under his general suzerainty.

**"We began to see the collapse of the entire previously-existing power structure"**

Parker Wyman, Deputy Chief of Mission, Addis Ababa, 1972-1974

WYMAN: All military units sent representatives to Addis to present their combined grievances to the central government. The ones sent were either junior officers or non-commissioned officers, and tended to be the most radical and vociferous in their units.

Those representatives then formed a committee in Addis which was called the "Derg," a word which simply means "committee." One of those men was Major Mengistu, who would gradually come to dominate the entire group by methods which included murdering his rivals.

Meanwhile the incidents, strikes, and mutinies continued to grow in scope. The Prime Minister was replaced, the government's authority looked increasingly weak.

Gradually we began to see the collapse of the entire previously-existing power structure. It became obvious that the new civilian government was being manipulated by the Derg, and we heard more and more of Mengistu's influence in the Derg. Its members had gone way beyond the role of presenting grievances and were calling the shots themselves even though Haile Selassie was still emperor and there was still a civilian government. By this time many of the most influential people in the country had been arrested and thrown into the same prison in Addis.

Their influence was growing and expanding into this power vacuum, where nobody else was really able to control matters. That situation went on, basically-I don't think there's too much point in going into the details-went on, basically, until the Emperor was-in August of that year, roughly six months after the revolution started-was really thrown out of his palace and taken off to house arrest.

I have always remembered the last meeting I had with the emperor, not long before he was arrested. I remember him shaking his head and saying sadly, just before I left, "Times are changing very rapidly these days." Ostensibly, he said this in relation to Kagnew base, but I felt sure from the tone of his voice and the look on his face that he was also thinking of the traditional Ethiopian political and economic structure which was

collapsing around him.