

# USES AND ABUSES OF THE HOLOCAUST PARADIGM IN ETHIOPIA

**Edward Kissi**

As all of us realize by now, every student and scholar who studies the Holocaust, and 20th century genocide, faces a task. For those who study African views of the Holocaust, especially the extent to which the Holocaust has been used and abused by sections of the African intellectual elite, the task becomes even more daunting. I focus my presentation on the Use and Abuses of the Holocaust Paradigm in Ethiopia.

Let me first emphasize that if there is a view of the Holocaust in Africa (Ethiopia for that matter), that view is held by a small section of the educated elite and shaped largely by how scholars who study the Holocaust present their work to their African audience. When we particularize the Holocaust by presenting it as the unique experience of the Jewish people, and by resisting comparison of it to other instances of suffering and mass murder, we risk politicizing it.

By the end of the 1970s, the Ethiopian intellectual elite - many of whom had studied in Europe and North America and had been acquainted with Holocaust scholarship - had developed three views of the Holocaust. First, the history of the Holocaust, i.e., what happened to the Jewish people in Nazi Germany. Second, the meaning of the Holocaust, i.e., what non-Jewish people can learn from the Jewish experience. Third, the politics of the Holocaust, i.e., how Jewish and non-Jewish people can use the Holocaust to advance individual and group causes.

Arguably, the leaders of anti-government armed political groups such as the Eritrean Peoples Liberation Front (EPLF), the Tigray Peoples Liberation Front (TPLF) and the Ethiopian Peoples Revolutionary Party (EPRP) showed little interest in the history of the Holocaust per se. This is striking particularly in a nation that became the first victim of fascist aggression and an African society in which a section of the community claimed Jewish identity. The leaders of the EPLF, TPLF and EPRP saw the Holocaust as politically useful at a period, in the 1980s, when key leaders of the Jewish-American community in the United States, and Congressmen of Jewish descent, showed keener interest in the plight of the Ethiopian Jews under Ethiopia's repressive revolutionary regime. It was during this time that the leaders of anti-government groups realized that the lessons of the Holocaust could be invoked and used as an ethical paradigm to interpret domestic Ethiopian politics to the American Congress. They viewed the Nazi extermination of the Jews as an example of state-organized murder of a group that highlighted their own suffering under the Mengistu regime. That interpretation of state-terror in Ethiopia enabled them to claim a particular social and political identity. All political groups opposed to the Mengistu regime were "Ethiopia's Jews" - a vulnerable group resisting an oppressive state to uphold human rights.

Why did the armed political groups in revolutionary Ethiopia view the Holocaust as meaningful for their own purposes? For more than 200 years, Ethiopian leaders had a legitimating process for conceiving political identity and power. The emperors of pre-

revolutionary Ethiopia claimed a Jewish identity through a legendary relationship between an Ethiopian princess and King Solomon of Israel. In the 1960s, the Solomonic concept or process of conceiving imperial power was contested by radical Ethiopian students. When Emperor Haile Selassie was overthrown on 12 September 1974, by a group of revolutionary soldiers and students, the first act of the revolutionaries was to abolish Haile Selassie's honorific Solomonic title: Conquering "Lion of the Tribe of Judah." The title had solidified the Ethiopian Royal House's claim of ethnic affinity with the Jews and special relationship with Israel for two centuries. By abolishing Haile Selassie's Solomonic titles, the intellectual elite reinterpreted Ethiopian history. They fostered a new idea that Jewish identity and descent from the royal house of Solomon were tools for institutionalizing obedience to the Christian political aristocracy and inducing political compliance in a syncretic and multi-ethnic Ethiopian society.

In the course of the 1980s, those who had repudiated Ethiopia's Jewish identity thought it wise to resurrect it, but in a different form. Something happened in Ethiopia to trigger that. The revolutionary military regime had become repressive. The intelligentsia who had assisted the young military officers to depose the Emperor found themselves in opposition to the regime they helped bring into power. Ethnic-based insurgencies increased as Eritrean nationalists intensified their armed struggle for an independent state. Tigrean nationalists wanted to overthrow the military regime and lead post-Imperial Ethiopia. Inability to settle the contentious issues over Eritrean statehood and civilian leadership of the Ethiopian revolution through dialogue, meant that these issues could only be resolved through war. War intensified famine. Humanitarian responses from abroad required explanation of what happened in Ethiopia to revive famine. It was under these circumstances that appropriation of Holocaust memory became a key instrument for waging war and consolidating external (American) sympathy.

A number of U.S. Congressmen visiting Ethiopia in the 1980s to estimate the magnitude of famine and U.S. responses to it showed considerable interest in the plight of the Ethiopian Jews. That fuelled a debate, in underground revolutionary literature in Ethiopia, about American intentions. It also spurred a vigorous discussion about who the Ethiopian Jews were and what constituted Jewishness in revolutionary Ethiopia. The government newsletter, *Mekere*, argued that all starving Ethiopians merited the attention of the United States. It defined "Jewishness" not as ethnic or religious affiliation with Israel or the House of Solomon, but as a struggle for dignity. But it was anti-government movements which succeeded in making the Holocaust into a discourse. Anti-government newsletters such *Abyot* defined Jewishness as vulnerability and resistance to state repression.

The location of Jewish identity in struggle rather than in ethnicity and geographical space formed part of a calculated process of broadening American sympathy in Ethiopia beyond the Ethiopian Jews to include the groups fighting the Mengistu regime. But there was also another reason for using the Holocaust as a framework of political debate. The EPRP and TPLF opposed Israeli military aid to the Mengistu government. They invoked the Holocaust to chastise and also extract empathy from the State of Israel. They also used it to frame their request for food from the United States. For a country mired in war and famine, international food relief was a very important source of survival and means for recruiting peasants as soldiers. Both the Mengistu government and its opponents saw the United States

as the chief source of relief aid and Jewish Congressmen as the most influential players in the making of American famine-relief policy towards Ethiopia.

By describing Ethiopia under Mengistu as a "concentration camp" and a "fascist", "Hitlerite State", the leaders of the EPRP, TPLF and EPLF invoked Holocaust imagery to arouse negative feelings about the Ethiopian revolutionary government in Jewish-American Congressmen. They expected such feelings to lead to U.S. diplomatic support and sympathy for the political groups fighting the Mengistu regime. The EPLF's quest for a "State of Eritrea" as in the "State of Israel" and not a "Republic of Eritrea" is particularly instructive.

But did this exercise in political manipulation work? Yes, it did. Congressional hearings on the human rights abuses of the Mengistu regime initiated by Senator Dick Clark and Congressman Henry Reuss led to the characterization of the conduct of the Mengistu regime as genocide. The Congress got its information about the Mengistu regime from the liberation movements. Like the U.S. Congress, the American media also became victims of the sophisticated political discourse around the Holocaust in Ethiopia.

On 27 January 1986, the Wall Street Journal wrote a sensational editorial entitled "Today's Holocaust." In it, the paper compared the Mengistu Government's resettlement of people from northern Ethiopia to the Southwestern parts of the country to the Jewish experience during the Second World War. It compared the Mengistu regime to the Nazi regime and accused it of orchestrating group murder comparable to the Holocaust and the genocide against Cambodians by the Pol Pot regime. That was quite a stretch. But these editorial comments were just what the EPLF and TPLF needed to fuel their assault on the Mengistu regime. They exemplified the degree to which the American media and the Congress succumbed to the frameworks in which the combatants in Ethiopia waged their struggles for power.

My presentation has addressed three questions. First, is there a Holocaust consciousness in Ethiopia? Put in another way: Is there a view of the Holocaust in Ethiopia? The answer is Yes. Ethiopian intellectuals consider the Holocaust as the historical experience of the Jews. But they regard it as an experience that has meaning for all vulnerable people struggling against state-terror anywhere in the world. An experience that can be employed as a paradigm for raising moral and ethical issues about state-society relations. Second, Among whom does that view exist? It exists among the politically conscious, i.e., the educated elite. How was that view shaped? It was shaped largely by famine and a realization that U.S. concern for Ethiopians of Jewish heritage could be molded into a discussion on the broader meaning of the Jewish experience to people locked in war, famine and revolution. Ethiopia's liberation movements of the 1970s and 1980s saw and used the Holocaust for political and diplomatic purposes. It provided a conceptual tool for fighting the Mengistu regime at home and framing their requests for food aid from the United States and representing their government to the American media.

## Discussion

### Panelists

**Roberto Cabrera:** I am grateful for your definitional use of the Holocaust. That really clarifies what we have been talking about for the past two days, and the debate on whether we should use the term a Holocaust, in other contexts than just the Jewish experience. In Guatemala, it was commonly used by writers and popular artists for quite a long time, but it was abandoned when the Commission for Historical Education addressed the Guatemala case as genocide. People have not had this debate on the Holocaust; they have some ideas and some meaning of the Holocaust and that is why they use it. And it has been used in a political way in Guatemala, also, saying it was a Holocaust. The Holocaust is part of the American mind so you don't have to explain what happen. If you can just make the link between the Jewish Holocaust to the Guatemalan genocide, you don't have to explain the whole thing again. Those are the meanings for people who are struggling to survive — the tools for attracting the attention of the people of the United States. Keeping the term exclusively to one event prevents others from doing the same.

**Chivy Sok:** It seems to me that the Holocaust is used so much to try to give visibility, and a certain level of connection to horror, that takes place in another part of the world. When the Holocaust is invoked in the Cambodian sense, it used as a measuring stick to some degree. I'm wondering if what we're doing here is to do as much work as possible so when you talk about the Cambodian Killing Fields or the Rwandan genocide, then it has its own identity, and its own strength, so we don't have to use the Holocaust for comparison. I would welcome comments not just from Edward Kissi but from others as well. This is what has been resonating in my mind as we're sitting here and talking about all the different issues. One solution is to make all the other issues and problems of genocide as visible. How do we do that?

**Nadim Rouhana:** One of the complications [goes beyond] people appropriating the image and the framework of the Holocaust to gain visibility and support. I feel also that there is a dimension of anti-Semitism because in their using the imagery, and sometimes the framework, to instrumentally reach Israel through Jewish-American groups. I think we should add that to our analysis of the extent to which the Holocaust is used in other instances. I think this mixture makes it very complex.

**Shawkat Toorawa:** The issue is not, or should not be, if can we use the word "Holocaust." The issue is discourse around the word and around the use. What has happened in Ethiopia is the appropriation of a term in a way that is transparently available in order to gain something. There are also uses that are no doubt completely innocent, in the sense that someone wants to draw attention in a good way to a situation. If I say "ethnic cleansing" to you, you'll think of the Balkans. If I say genocide, you'll think of Rwanda. And if I say "the Holocaust," you'll think of Nazi Germany. There is a way in which terms acquire a life of their own because they function within a kind of particular discourse. [To Chivy Sok] You've succeeded in implanting in our minds that the "Killing Fields" is a term that can be used legitimately to draw attention to the Cambodian genocide or the Cambodian holocaust. Right. The Rwandan genocide is one way of describing; we could say the "Rwandan

Holocaust", or we could [say] the "Rwandan Killing Fields." These terms acquire a political life. So as I look at the title of the Symposium — "An International Symposium Exploring the Impact of the Shoah on Intellectuals and Activists" — and it seems to me one could say "exploring the impact of the discourse on the Shoah on intellectuals and activists." This might be even more meaningful, precisely because I think we all agree the word Shoah applies only to one event. The ability of these terms to [go] beyond what they mean is what endows the other words that we come up with. We come up with them, because we are trying to particularize. Everyone one says "ethnic cleansing" when referring to the Balkans, right? We occasionally hear the word genocide — maybe I will become a prophet — but in thirty years we're probably going to use the term genocide (unless we exterminate one another all together). It seems to be the term the carries that kind of negative and clinical sense that we are so unhappy about. [To Edward Kissi:] What you're pointing out is so fascinating. It's not just the Third World that does this. It's not as if we in the academy don't do it as well.

**Locksley Edmondson:** A three-part question. Edward, your presentation about appropriation of the term comes through as a purely calculating and manipulative exercise. Is this all you're saying? Is this the bottom line? Might there be other factors that influenced this "appropriation?"

It seems to me that out of all African countries, the one that should be the most sensitive to the Jewish Holocaust would be Ethiopia, given the fact it was invaded by Italy in 1936, almost at the onset of World War Two. This was a dramatic event in Ethiopian history and [Ethiopia] was very much caught up in these struggles. I am sure that this is not just an Ethiopian problem but a worldwide problem. I think for a long time there was a disconnection between the dynamics of World War Two and the Holocaust. I certainly remember growing up in colonial Jamaica — I go back that far — where I remember everything about World War Two: all the generals who fought. The Royal Family in Buckingham Palace, I read the newspaper, I listened to the radio. It was part of reinforcing British nationalism, part of the war effort. I remember the day that Nazi Germany was overthrown — I was wearing my school outfit and jumping for joy. But it took [me] time to really understand the reality of the Holocaust. Even in the Western World — in this country too — that particular event in Germany was ignored. So I'm wondering if this is another example of disconnection. Especially in Ethiopia, where I'm suggesting there ought to be a special sensitivity, given Mussolini's relationship with Germany and so on.

Third question is this: Initially, the government of Israel had some difficulty in responding to Ethiopian Jewish interests in migrating to Israel. It took a long struggle for Israel to come around, and eventually [linked it] with the issue of famine. So some eventually migrated. To what extent were these actions of the US Congress related to that particular phenomenon? Can you say anything about the current treatment of Ethiopian Jews who moved to Israel?

As someone who grew up in Africa, one of my greatest concerns has been [that] discourse about the Holocaust [has been] restricted to Western, European, circles. Because it is not part of our countries' mind. Those of us who are living in developing countries of the Third World will always have to enter into the debate in a subservient role. There is no one in Ethiopia who counterattacks those arguments. That's where I see there is major fault line. This appropriation of the word will lead to dangers in terms of human rights.

### Audience

**Cummings:** You talk about using in Ethiopia the term and concept of the Holocaust with respect to Europe... How do Ethiopians deal with their own mistreatment of their own native Jewish population? In the 1800s and 1850s, there was a large Jewish population in Ethiopia, about 250,000. But by 1958, when the West discovered that this group existed, the numbers dropped by something like 40,000. The reason why Israel started to accept other Jews was because of US pressure. US American-Jewish groups organized the emigration. I know you're nodding your head at this, but I was involved in this in 1979, when I was at Brandeis. It was an ongoing thing and the Israeli government did not want these Jews because they were dark, they were different. I'm curious how Ethiopia currently deals with its native Jewish population. How do they look at their mistreatment of their own Jews for over a hundred years?

### **Edward Kissi Responds**

Excellent and compelling questions and comments. I was at Yale some time ago. There was a tradition there that I had to abide. When we have five minutes to respond to questions, we don't have to answer all questions raised. I will try to retain my Yale identity even though I do not have a degree from there.

How people use the Holocaust depends on how they hear it. Ethiopia is a clear case of the work that we have to do. We can hardly predict where the particularization of the Holocaust or universalization of it will lead. The important issue in my presentation was that there is indeed a discourse about the Holocaust. What appears to me from my reading of the underground political pamphlets, is that Ethiopian intellectuals are most interested in the meaning and not necessarily the history of the Holocaust. That is surprising (and Edmondson is right) because one thought that the Ethiopian elite will be more interested in the history and not what can be extracted from it for political purposes. The fact that there is a Holocaust consciousness among the elite is reassuring. That indicates that knowledge of the Holocaust has spread beyond Europe and America and people in Africa know something about it. What is disturbing is that the ethnic-based insurgent movements in Ethiopia turned the Jewish experience in Nazi Germany around as they sought answers to two questions: Who is a Jew? and Who are the true Jews of Ethiopia?

These questions arose from their reactions to American interest in the condition of the Ethiopian Jews. They used the Holocaust as a paradigm for raising moral and ethical issues about human society. By doing so they claimed that Jewishness in a "Hitlerite Ethiopian State" transcended the claims of a small group of Ethiopians to descent from a relationship between Solomon and Queen Sheba; a story whose authenticity they doubted in the 1960s and early 1970s.

"Who is a Jew?" in Ethiopia raised another question of whether a Jew is one who has an Israeli citizenship, can claim Solomonic heritage or anyone anywhere who is vulnerable to state repression. The intellectual elites who fought the Mengistu regime, but were despised by the U.S. Congress for their Marxist ideological inclinations, came to think of themselves

as no more or less Jewish than the Ethiopian Jews whose condition in Ethiopia attracted the interest of Jewish-American Congressmen.

The political uses of the Holocaust in Ethiopia reminds me of something. When I was growing up, I thought I was a Jew because my grandmother told me that we were Jewish; that we had come from the Promised Land. I have read similar descriptions of the Akan people of Ghana at the height of Ghana's struggle for independence after World War II. You know, in 1948, the state of Israel was founded and because the Gold Coast (now Ghana) was still under British colonial rule, our nationalist leaders pointed to the State of Israel in order to highlight our legitimate claims to an independent homeland. Perhaps my grandmother's claim to Jewish identity must have been a residue of this discourse on independence with reference to the foundation of a Jewish State in 1948. The question which the Ethiopian elite raised: "Who is a Jew?" was their way of using the Holocaust to identify themselves with the oppressed victims of ethnic-chauvinism and state terror.

Was the Holocaust used for manipulative purposes in Ethiopia? Yes, but in a particular period in Ethiopian history: 1976 to 1991. There was also a domestic reason for using the Holocaust as a paradigm for political debate. The leaders of the anti-government groups invoked Holocaust memory and characterized the Mengistu regime as a "Hitlerite regime" to pave the way for a future trial of the Mengistu regime. By invoking the memory of the Holocaust, they were drawing attention to Nuremberg. In May 1991 when the EPLF and TPLF cooperated to overthrow the Mengistu regime, they established a court to try Mengistu and his cohorts for genocide and crimes against humanity. That trial is still going on.

I have very little information about whether one can indeed legitimately claim that there are Ethiopian Jews. Ethiopians such as Professor Tadesse Tamrat, who study medieval Ethiopia, have pondered the circumstances under which a religious group, like many in Ethiopia, claimed a foreign ethnic identity on the basis of theft [of an Ark] and the seduction of a wise monarch [King Solomon]. If there is a basis to that claim, then we have a subject in our hands that causes us to rethink the social history of Africa.