



ZONES OF  
VIOLENCE

# Frontiers of Violence in North-East Africa

*Genealogies of Conflict since 1800*

RICHARD J. REID

# FRONTIERS OF VIOLENCE IN NORTH-EAST AFRICA

GENEALOGIES OF CONFLICT  
SINCE C.1800

RICHARD A. LEVINE



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any responsibility for the interpretation which follows; some, indeed, will heartily disagree with it.

Finally, I would like to dedicate this book to the memory of an old friend who died before its completion, Amanuel Yohannes. Amanuel taught me more about the region than anyone else, and especially how to think differently about its past and its present; I owe him a great deal, though I never got to tell him just how much.

RJR, LONDON

## *Glossary and Abbreviations*

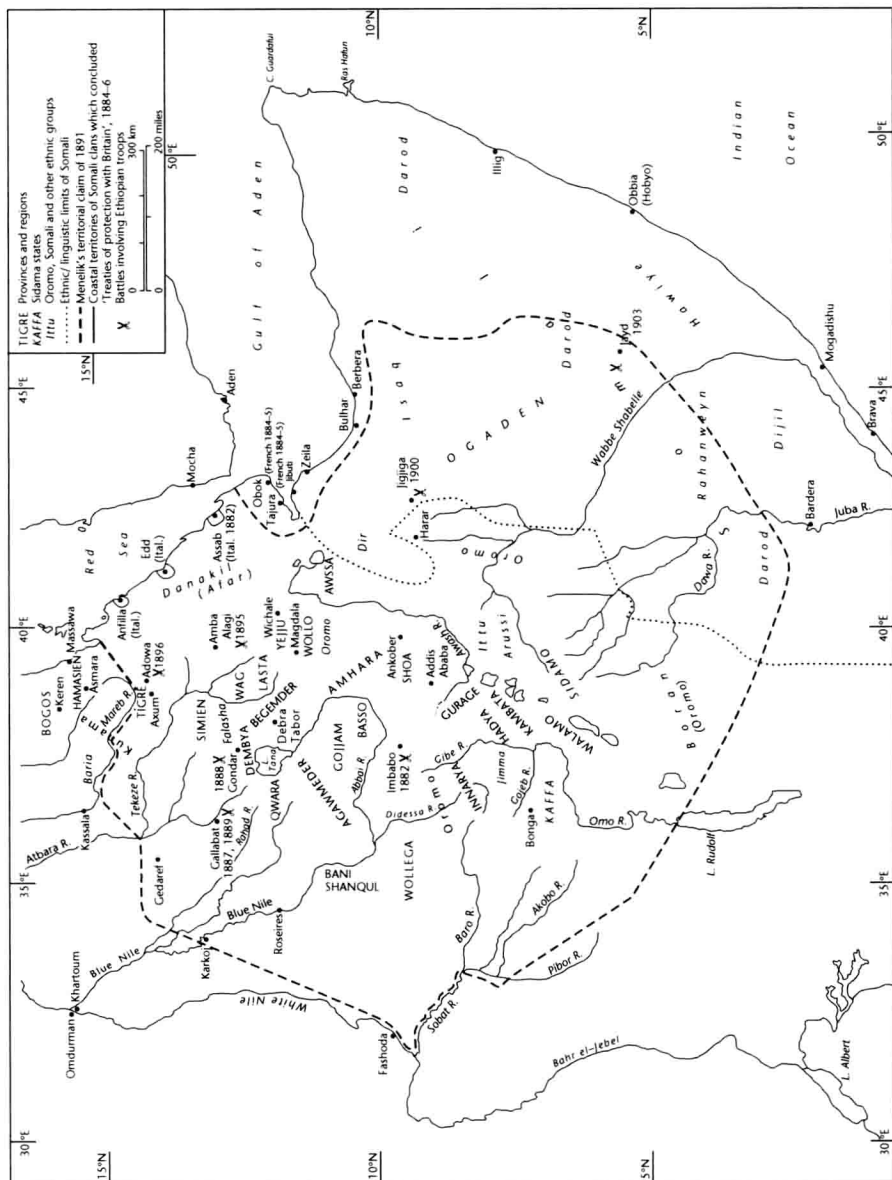
AAPO	All Amhara People's Organisation
<i>Andinet</i>	'Unity', youth wing of the UP in the 1940s
ANDM	Amhara National Democratic Movement
<i>Anyanya</i>	Southern Sudanese guerrillas from the late 1950s onward
<i>ascari</i>	African troops in the Italian colonial army
<i>banda</i>	irregular militia
<i>baria</i>	derogatory Tigrinya term for the Nara, implying 'black slaves'
<i>blatta</i>	title given to learned men, counsellors
BMA	British Military Administration
BPLM	Benishangul People's Liberation Movement
<i>dejazmach</i>	noble title, lit. 'commander of the gate'
<i>Derg</i>	informal name for Ethiopian government 1974–91, lit. 'Committee'
EDU	Ethiopian Democratic Union
ELF	Eritrean Liberation Front
ELM	Eritrean Liberation Movement
ELPP	Eritrean Liberal Progressive Party
EPDM	Ethiopian People's Democratic Movement
EPLF	Eritrean People's Liberation Front
EPRDF	Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Democratic Front
EPRP	Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Party
<i>fitaurari</i>	noble title, lit. 'commander of the vanguard'
<i>gada</i>	Oromo age grade system
GPLM	Gambella People's Liberation Movement
<i>gult</i>	fief
<i>habesha</i>	common, informal term for highland Ethiopians and Eritreans
IGAD	Intergovernmental Authority on Development
<i>Jiberti</i>	Amhara and Tigrinya populations who are Muslim

<i>kebessa</i>	Eritrean highland plateau
<i>Kebre Negast</i>	Glory of the Kings
<i>lij</i>	title for children of nobility, lit. 'child'
<i>metahit</i>	Eritrean lowlands
ML	Muslim League
<i>na'ib</i>	title of Ottoman governor of Massawa, lit. 'deputy'
<i>negus</i>	king
<i>negus negast</i>	king of kings (emperor)
NFD	Northern Frontier District (Kenya)
NIF	National Islamic Front
OAU	Organisation of African Unity
OLF	Oromo Liberation Front
ONLF	Ogaden National Liberation Front
OPDO	Oromo People's Democratic Organisation
PFDJ	People's Front for Democracy and Justice
<i>ras</i>	noble title, lit. 'head'
<i>sha'abiya</i>	'popular', nickname for EPLF
<i>shangalla</i>	derogatory Amharic term for peoples to the west of Ethiopian highlands, in Sudan
<i>shifta</i>	bandit, rebel
<i>shiftanet</i>	banditry, rebellion
SPDO	Sidama People's Democratic Organisation
SPLM/A	Sudan People's Liberation Movement/Army
SYL	Somali Youth League
TFG	Transitional Federal Government
TNG	Transitional National Government
TPLF	Tigray People's Liberation Front
UIC	Union of Islamic Courts
UP	Unionist Party
<i>Woyane</i>	lit. 'revolt', referring to 1943 uprising as well as a nickname for TPLF
<i>zemene mesafint</i>	'era of the princes'









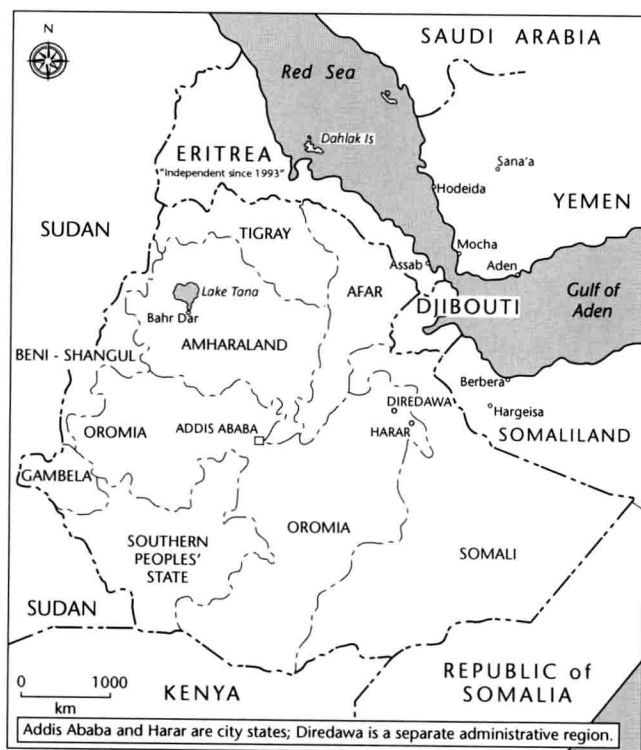
### 3. The region in the late nineteenth century

Source: R. Oliver and G. N. Sanderson (eds), *Cambridge History of Africa Vol. 6, c.1870–c.1905*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1985



#### 4. Imperial Ethiopia, mid-twentieth century

Source: P. Henze, *Layers of Time: A History of Ethiopia*, Hurst, London, 2000



##### 5. The region in the early twenty-first century

Source: P. Henze, *Layers of Time: A History of Ethiopia*, Hurst, London, 2000

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3. The region in the late nineteenth century  
 Source: R. Oliver and G. N. Sanderson (eds), *Cambridge History of Africa Vol. 6, c.1870–c.1905*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1985 xv
4. Imperial Ethiopia, mid-twentieth century  
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5. The region in the early twenty-first century  
 Source: P. Henze, *Layers of Time: A History of Ethiopia*, Hurst, London, 2000 xvii

# Prologue

## The Past in the Present

In the first few years of the third millennium, the region of north-east Africa is as enmeshed in conflict as it has been for several decades. Somalia is engulfed once more by violence, the result of both factional fighting and the Ethiopian invasion; Ethiopia itself is politically tense, its government confronted with armed insurgency among the Oromo in the south and the Ethiopian Somali of the east; the Sudanese peace agreement looks impossibly fragile, and violence has flared in contested areas between north and south; Eritrean and Djiboutian forces are engaged in a standoff across their common frontier; and—the epicentre of so much regional conflict—the Eritrean–Ethiopian border remains highly militarized, with armies representing two competing national missions glaring at one another with malicious intent. It is this last conflict which best illustrates the analytical parameters of this book. Eritrea and Ethiopia, the two key state-level actors in the account which follows, appeared to be on the brink of renewed war in the early twenty-first century: scores of thousands of troops were dug in on either side of a border which was as torturous as it was disputed, and the governments in Asmara and Addis Ababa seemed as far away from any kind of *rapprochement* as they had been at any time since the Algiers Agreement in December 2000 supposedly ended the original conflict. In fact, while the Algiers Agreement had ended a battle, or series of battles, it had not addressed the causes of the war itself. That war had begun, ostensibly at least, in May 1998—but as this book will argue, it had been going on for some considerable time before that, interrupted by brief periods of armistice, quiescence, and even, apparently, sporadic goodwill. Its genealogy, in fact, can be traced back through the twentieth century and into the nineteenth. It is clear that what happened in May 1998 was only the latest manifestation of a war which had been going on for a very long time. The conflict represented the crystallization of a number of intertwined historical grievances, the opening up of



so many fault lines, and constituted another episode of extreme violence in a regional cycle of conflict stretching back more than two centuries.

In the early years of the twenty-first century, beyond the northern highlands themselves, the Eritrean–Ethiopian war had had a profound effect on the wider region, either sparking new, proxy, conflicts or joining up with extant ones. It was in Somalia in particular that the implications of the war between the two countries were clearest, and where the violence inherent within their respective political cultures was most dramatically manifest. Somalia had imploded in the early 1990s, but in the first years of the twenty-first century violent instability there had taken on new forms. In a world increasingly defined by post-9/11 allegiance, Eritrea sought to shore up the Union of Islamic Courts in Mogadishu, a government which appeared to have at least some semblance of local support but which the United States believed sponsored, and provided a base for, Islamic terrorism. When at the end of 2006 Ethiopia invaded what remained of ‘Somalia’, the US—after initially, so it is claimed, advising against such an act—came to support it,<sup>1</sup> and the stated objective was to overthrow the pernicious al-Qaeda-succouring Islamic government. Within a few months, entirely predictably, an insurgency had erupted against the Ethiopians, while the Eritreans were widely believed to have been arming the insurgents themselves. A proxy war had begun, compounding the stand-off on the Ethiopian–Eritrea border itself and—temporarily at least—replacing actual fighting along that frontier. At the same time, Eritrea found itself threatened with the ‘terrorist-sponsor’ label by the US. This was a ludicrous accusation by a misguided administration. Yet what was certainly true was that there appeared to be no regional crisis which the Eritrean government would not exploit for foreign policy gains against Ethiopia: it reached out to the Southern Sudanese government, raising the issue of Eritrean support for South Sudan’s secession from Khartoum, even as the Comprehensive Peace Agreement itself appeared increasingly fragile; it at first provided military support to, and then sought to build alliances among, a range of Darfur rebel factions which for a time at least—like their Somali counterparts—saw Asmara as a safe haven. Eritrean President Isaias Afewerki saw himself as a peace-broker; his critics detected the whiff of megalomania, and at best saw him as a troublesome meddler. Meanwhile Ethiopia provided succour to armed groups opposed to the Eritrean state; Eritrea, in addition to their Somali connections, trained and armed insurgents among the Oromo and anyone else in a position to direct their fire at the government in Addis Ababa.