

CHAPTER
11

HISTORYMAKERS

Menelik II

Preserver of Independence

Section 2

"In administration, as in 'high politics' and diplomacy where he scarcely made a false move after 1878, Menelik understood the limits of the possible, kept his objectives clearly in sight, and had an almost unerring eye for the means best suited to attain those objectives."—Historians Ronald Oliver and G. N. Sanderson

As foreign powers carved up Africa in the late 1800s, the nation of Ethiopia remained independent. This occurred because of the skill of Emperor Menelik II, who defended his country against voracious imperial appetites in Europe.

Menelik II was born as Sahle Miriam, the son of the king of Shoa, a part of Ethiopia. The king of Shoa was ruled by the emperor of Ethiopia. However, Shoa, on the southern border, was more independent of the emperor than most kingdoms. That ended in 1855, when the emperor invaded Shoa. The king died, the land was seized, and Sahle—only 11 years old—was taken prisoner. He was held captive for ten years.

In 1865, Sahle escaped back to Shoa and declared himself king. He ruled the region for more than 20 years, slowly gathering strength. For most of those years, the emperor of Ethiopia was Yohannes IV. Sahle outwardly showed loyalty to him by paying the tribute and sending soldiers to help him put down rebellions. Meanwhile, Sahle fortified his own power so he could challenge the emperor.

In preparing, Sahle took three steps. First, he made his kingdom larger with new conquests to the south and east. Second, he made his army stronger by buying guns from Europeans. Third, he gained support from Italy through a secret agreement. In the late 1880s, Yohannes's power weakened. He proved unable to check the growing influence of the Italians, who wanted to gain a foothold in Ethiopia. He also could not stop the Muslims in the Sudan, which bordered Ethiopia. As Sahle moved to challenge Yohannes, the emperor died in a fight against the Sudanese. Sahle became emperor. In taking Menelik II as his ruling name, he reached back in Ethiopian history. Menelik I had been the name of the son of Solomon and the Queen of Sheba who, by legend, had ruled many centuries before.

Only one king refused to recognize Menelik II as emperor. Yohannes's son claimed the throne for himself. Menelik, however, signed a treaty with Italy that gave the Italians the kingdom that his

rival ruled. He hoped to prevent the son and Italy from ever joining forces.

Soon, problems arose. There were two versions of the treaty that granted the Italians this land. In Amharic, the Ethiopian language, the treaty said one thing, but in Italian it gave Italy much greater control over Ethiopia. Menelik renounced the treaty and skillfully avoided Italian attempts to recognize its claim. He won the support of France and Russia for his position and traded for more weapons. He made friends with the rulers of the Sudan so he would not have to worry about an attack from them.

Finally, in 1895 Menelik moved against the Italians. Gathering a large army, he marched on the smaller Italian force. In March 1896, they met in the Battle of Adowa. The Italians were without supplies, disorganized, fighting on land they did not know, and outnumbered. Menelik's army crushed them. Almost three-quarters of the Italian force was killed, wounded, or captured. Other European nations saw Ethiopia's power.

Menelik ruled his empire for almost 20 more years, never again having to worry about invasion. He put in place telephone and telegraph systems so he could communicate with outlying areas. He built a railroad that connected a seaport with his new capital, Addis Ababa. He also started a western-style school system aimed at training people for work in the government. When he died in 1913, he left behind a nation that had fought off European imperialism and was ready to enter the modern age.

Questions

- Determining Main Ideas** What is the main idea of this biography?
- Analyzing Causes and Recognizing Effects** What actions helped Menelik maintain the independence of Ethiopia?
- Supporting Opinions** Reread the evaluation of Menelik at the top of the page. Do you agree or disagree the statement? Explain.