

Following the Berlin conference of 1884-1885, European powers divided up Africa among themselves and throughout the continent, the process of nation formation began within the colonial boundaries. In the Horn of Africa, France occupied French Somaliland now known as Djibouti; Britain took over British Somaliland, now part of the Republic of Somalia, and Italy took possession of Eritrea as well as Italian Somaliland which is now part of the Republic of Somalia; Ethiopia, however, did not fall under the colonial yoke, partly because of the resistance of the north and partly due to the agreement of competing colonial powers on future goals.

### **Italian colonialism in Eritrea**

The Italian colonialists had special aims in Eritrea. Their objectives were not confined to exploiting Eritrea's natural and human resources but extended to occupying a large territory in the Horn of Africa-including Ethiopia. Towards this end, they gave primacy to turning Somalia and especially strategically-located Eritrea into spring boards for their invasion of Ethiopia. They invested large amounts of capital in Eritrea and speeded up the dismantling of the traditional economic, social and cultural structures as well as the process of nation-building.

The Italians built ports, roads, railways, and rope ways. They opened airports and introduced sea, land and air transportation. They installed telephone and telegraph networks, established power stations, consumer goods factories and large scale industries. They set up repair and maintenance facilities. They began prospecting for minerals, opened up mines and expanded salt-mining and fishing. They set up large plantations as well as service industries. In short, they introduced a new, advanced, but exploitative, economic system and created new social forces.

The Italians inducted thousands of Eritrean peasants and herdsmen into their colonial army. To meet their administrative needs, they launched a limited educational program confined to teaching the Italian language, the four arithmetic operations and hygiene and began spreading their cultural influence. They made the traditional clan and tribal administration comply with colonial laws. Furthermore, they divided Eritrea into districts and sub-districts, appointed loyal Eritreans to administer them and brought these under the colonial office. They also specified the areas Eritreans could inhabit and freely move in and enacted racially discriminatory laws.

In this manner, Italian colonialism unified Eritrea geographically and set in motion economic; social and cultural changes which in turn fostered common national feeling among Eritreans.

## Colonialism in the Horn

Written by Yishak Yared

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Although Italian colonialism proscribed political and trade union rights, this did not prevent the Eritrean people from mounting strong opposition to Italian policies of exploitation, oppression, racial discrimination and forcible conscription. Many Eritreans fled to Ethiopia. It was then that Nacura became a notorious prison.