

The IDLER

Number One

JANUARY 1985

\$2.75 the copy

THE STARVING OF ETHIOPIA

*There was a sound of revelry by night,
And Belgium's capital had gathered then
Her beauty and her chivalry
... But hush! Hark! a deep sound strikes
like a rising knell. — BYRON*

ON the eve of Waterloo, Brussels feted while Napoleon's armies poured northward like a dark, silent flood. And so Addis Ababa recently celebrated the tenth anniversary of Marxist rule: parades and parties, gala celebrations, Communist potentates from around the world. Lieutenant-Colonel Mengistu and his military junta (the 'Dergue') spent fifty million dollars on the festivities, and another fifty million gussying up Ethiopia's seedy capital. Forty thousand cases of premium Scotch whisky came in by airfreight: for Africa's biggest party, proletarian vodka would not do.

As Marxist grandees ate caviar and drank toasts, a million or more Ethiopians were starving. Four years of drought had sereed the land, killed livestock, and stoked Ethiopia's worst crisis since the major famine of 1974 (that brought the Dergue to power). Unlike Napoleon's Hundred Days, just about everyone saw the catastrophe approaching. For more than a year, relief agencies and United Nations experts had been warning the Dergue that terrible starvation would occur. In some provinces — Tigre, Eritrea, and Wollo — famine was already a fact.

In the midst of a massive outpouring of Western aid, few have asked why the Dergue did nothing to prevent the famine. The answer will not please Western liberals. Mengistu's regime spends forty percent of its budget on Soviet arms — some 2.3 billion dollars in recent years. No funds were available to stockpile food. Hard currency was spent paying the salaries of ten thousand Cuban mercenary troops, and a small army of East Bloc advisors. (Fraternal socialist assistance must be paid for in U.S. dollars.) Trucks that could have carried food — if there had been any — were used to transport arms and troops to put down revolts in Eritrea and Tigre.

And there was another reason. Marco Carynnyk, in his article *The Dogs that did not Bark* (elsewhere in this number), gives us a shocking picture of how Stalin used starvation to crush opposition in the Ukraine

and the North Caucasus. Ethiopia's Mengistu took a leaf from Stalin's book of terror. Efforts by the Dergue to collectivize Ethiopia's farmers and herdsmen met with the usual intense opposition. It was one thing to cow city dwellers into obedience; breaking centuries of tradition in the countryside is not easily done. Mengistu's (and Stalin's) solution was to seize all private stores of grain and seed — the Ethiopian peasants' insurance against hunger. Anyone who kept a reserve of food was a 'capitalist hoarder'. When the rains failed to come for a fourth year, there was no food left in the countryside. As in the Ukraine, opponents to collectivization in Ethiopia were disciplined by denying them seed and food from government stores. Inhabitants of the rebellious northern provinces were starved into submission. (It is cheaper to starve opponents than to shoot them, when bullets must be imported.)

Unhappily for the Dergue, their programme of 'controlled famine' has gone out of control. Mengistu, aware that he came to power in 1974 by means of a famine, suddenly needs Western food aid to prevent another revolution from within his ranks. The West has responded just in time.

Ethiopia's mentor, the Soviet Union, does not have grain to spare, and is not about to buy any on the open market. Moscow has belatedly sent some aircraft, rice, and 'fraternal encouragement'. Why indeed send food when the rich capitalists are vying with one another to pour aid into Ethiopia? — ERIC MARGOLIS