



# African Resistance to Colonialism

*By Trevor Getz*

Early resistance to colonialism in Africa often took the form of military battles. This article discusses three of these resistance attempts. The attempts had different results.

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## Resistance

Historians debate the nature of colonialism in Africa, but two things are clear. Colonialism caused much change, and colonialism was not good for Africans. As a result, Africans found ways to resist.

When we think about African resistance to colonialism, it's easy to imagine people constantly fighting guerrilla wars. In reality, this kind of resistance is difficult. Instead, the evidence points us toward a few conclusions:

1. Most resistance wasn't aimed at "colonialism." Resistance was usually prompted by a new colonial policy, like taking away land.
2. Most people under colonialism lived their lives normally until a new policy came about. They resisted the policy as much as possible, and then returned to their lives as best as they could afterward.
3. Most resistance is invisible to us today. It didn't take the form of big battles. It happened when workers slowed down their work, or people gave fake directions to visiting colonial officials. These sorts of acts do not often appear in records, but they probably happened a lot.

However, that does not mean societies didn't use military force to resist colonialism. They often did, especially when Europeans first arrived. Military resistance also often emerged when conditions became particularly difficult, or people organized around a skilled leader. Here are three examples of military resistance.

## The Battle of Adwa

By 1895, Europeans rushed to claim African colonies. The Italians wanted to conquer Ethiopia. They hoped both to build their national reputation and to use Ethiopia as a place to resettle poor, landless Italians. Ethiopia was already populated by a large multicultural state led by Emperor Menelik II. The Italians tried to trick Menelik by having him sign a treaty that said different things in Italian than in Amharic. Amharic is the main language of Ethiopia. They also tried to divide Ethiopians with promises to ethnic minorities such as the Oromo. When this failed, they sent an army.

Emperor Menelik II responded. He was helped by Empress Taytu, who was suspicious of the Italians and had relatives among the Oromo. Taytu stated that "we will slaughter those who come to invade us. There is no Ethiopian who will not plant his feet in the sand and face death to save his country."

Menelik and Taytu brought together an ethnically and religiously diverse army of 100,000 men. Meanwhile, Ethiopian peasants harassed the approaching Italian army. On March 1, 1896, the two armies met at Adwa. The Italians were divided into three groups, each of which was surrounded and attacked by Ethiopian forces. By 9:30 in the morning, the Italian force had been defeated.



*An 1899 map of Northeast Africa shows Italian and British territory along the coast, as well as independent Ethiopia, which is labelled "Abyssinia". Public domain.*



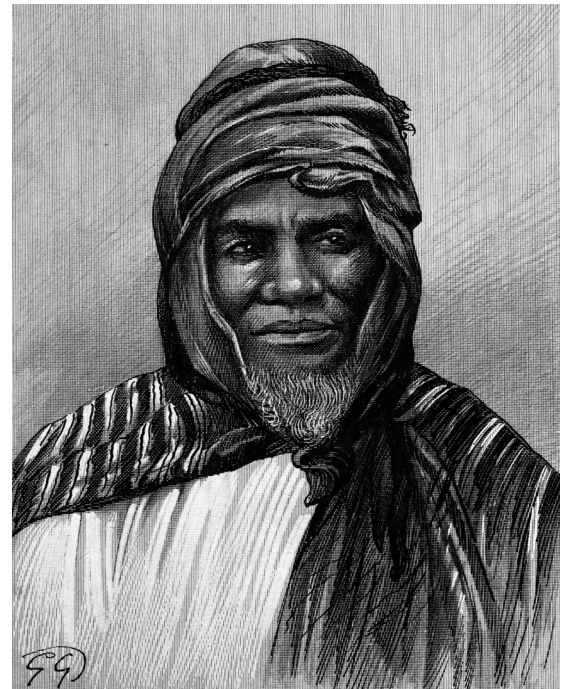
*An Ethiopian tapestry depicting the Battle of Adwa. National Museum of Natural History, public domain.*

## Samori Ture

In West Africa, many states and independent societies resisted colonialism. One example of military resistance came from the Mandinka state led by Muslim leader Samori Ture, known as Samori. Samori did not inherit a kingdom but created one for himself: the Wassoulou Empire.

Samori brought together merchants and traditional rulers in the region. By the 1880s, he had created a military state that allowed for religious freedom and supported trade. It had an army of 30,000 to 40,000 men.

When the French first began to push into his territory in 1881, Samori attempted to negotiate. He also pursued a strategy to balance the British and the French against each other. He constantly tried to update his weapons. Unfortunately, he had no artillery. His forces were defeated in several battles. As a result, he agreed to a treaty with the French that gave them some territory in return for peace. However, the French military consistently broke this treaty and encouraged Samori's people to rebel. In 1892, the French army and Samori's army waged a closely fought battle, but Samori was defeated.



*Samori Ture (c. 1830–1900), founder of the Wassoulou Empire. © Getty Images.*

Then, Samori decided to uproot everyone in his empire. Burning everything man-made behind him, he moved his entire population eastward. This brought him into conflict with the British. The French captured him in 1898, after fighting him for almost 18 years.

## Tanganyika

In East Africa, resistance to colonial invasion in the 1890s was initially fragmented. The Germans fought multiple states and communities in Tanganyika. This divided resistance could not stop the German invasion.

By 1905, Tanganyika was largely under German rule. Many people were now poorly paid laborers who had to pay taxes. Many were required to work for free on cotton plantations for 28 days a year. The prophet Kinjikitile Ngwale used religion to unify people of different communities. He claimed that God had told him that if everyone unified and fought for their freedom, their ancestors would return to help them. He soon attracted followers from many different communities. Many leaders of the movement told their people that they would be immune from German bullets. One, Selemani Mamba, told his followers: “We shall not die. We shall only kill.”

German bullets, however, proved to be deadly and the Tanganyikans were badly defeated in a few mass battles. The mass uprising was relatively short-lived. But because conditions were so bad, resistance continued. New groups joined in, and the rebels improved their strategies. They used ambushes and guerrilla warfare to make German weapons less effective. In the end, German forces managed to put down the rebellion, but it took two years. Perhaps as many as 100,000 people were killed.

## Conclusions

When colonialism began in Africa, military resistance could sometimes be effective, but this was rare. Europeans usually could defeat African armies.

Battles like this subsided for much of the next half-century. Subtler types of resistance endured. But military resistance reemerged after the Second World War. Then, changing global politics and new weapons and tactics made it possible for Africans to eject Europeans from the continent.



*A German depiction of events in the Tanzanian uprising sometimes known as the Maji Maji Revolt. © Getty Images.*

## Sources

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## Image credits

**Cover image:** Battle of Adwa, 2 March 1896. Emperor Menelik II of Ethiopia is depicted in the top left corner in royal crown, velvet cape (lemd) and with a royal umbrella. Empress Taitu of Ethiopia is shown in the bottom left corner on a richly caparisoned horse with a royal umbrella, she carries a revolver. The Ethiopian troops are shown full face and all wear striped tunics. The Ethiopian generals are shown in striped tunics and lemd with lion's mane collars and lion's mane headdress. The Italian troops are shown side on and are often reduced to heads and guns. Above the battle is the image of Saint George, the patron saint of Ethiopia, in a halo of green, yellow. © The Trustees of the British Museum, CC BY-NC-SA 4.0.  
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**An 1899 map of Northeast Africa** shows Italian and British territory along the coast, as well as independent Ethiopia, which is labelled "Abyssinia". Cleveland Moffett, "Menelik-and-His-People," *The Windsor Magazine* 10 (1899): 603. Public domain.  
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**An Ethiopian tapestry depicting the Battle of Adwa.** Smithsonian, National Museum of Natural History. CC0 1.0 Universal. Public domain. [https://www.si.edu/object/nmnhanthropology\\_8378154](https://www.si.edu/object/nmnhanthropology_8378154).

**Samori Ture** (c. 1830–1900), founder of the Wassoulou Empire. © Roger Viollet via Getty Images.

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