

Moscow's First Hybrid War

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Сергій Сингаївський. 2016. *Дорога на Асмару* [The Road to Asmara]. Київ: Кліо.
Serhii Synhaiivs'kyi. 2016. *Doroĥa na Asmaru*. Kyiv: Klio.
ISBN 9786177023424, 512 pp.

[Image of book cover]

An astounding novel. A rare find. The unhurried but spell-bounding and precise prose, which becomes this roman-fleuve, takes the reader on a trip into a forgotten corner of the communist world, to the Horn of Africa, to the People's Democratic Republic of Ethiopia. In English, novels devoted to this country are typically authored by émigré Ethiopians or their children, who tend to focus on their family stories. As a backdrop they choose World War II, when the country was occupied by the Italians (for instance, in Maaza Mengiste's *The Shadow King*, 2019), or the postwar Empire of Ethiopia (in Abraham Verghese's *Cutting for Stone*, 2009). I should also mention Ryszard Kapuściński's *The Emperor* (1978), ostensibly about the last years and fall of Haile Selassie, but in reality a parable on the author's own home country of communist Poland. The 1974 Revolution, which led to the rise of Soviet (Derg, communist) Ethiopia, marks the end of the narrative in the last two of the aforementioned titles. In contrast, Synhaiivs'kyi – drawing on his own experiences as a Soviet interpreter in Africa¹ – probes into the beginning of the end of communist Ethiopia, treated as an integral part of the Soviet bloc. Communism survived in this African country for two years longer than in Europe, and fell only in 1991 when the system's ultimate protector, the Soviet Union, broke up. Three decades down the line, these events continue impacting Ethiopian and Eritrean politics and society, including Ethiopia's 2020 civil war against its northern region of Tigray.²

The plot consists of two stories, that of the Soviet interpreter and translator Andrii (Andrew) in the mid-1980s Ethiopia, and the other one, which is devoted to Mykyta (Nicholas) in Ukraine in 2012. The latter protagonist, in the wake of his mother's death, is on quest of his true origin, guided by the diary of his biological father that he found among his mother's things. Meanwhile, Andrii as a civilian contractor is on the voyage of his life to Africa, smuggled together with Soviet soldiers, all disguised as Soviet tourists on a cruise liner that sails majestically through the Bosphorus and the Suez Canal to the Red Sea. To many of Andrii's colleagues it is indeed like a pleasure voyage after the gruesome tour of duty in the midst of the murderous Soviet-Afghan War (1979-1989). In Ethiopia, Andrii interprets between Soviet, Ethiopian, Cuban and Polish comrades, hoping to earn enough for an apartment in Kyiv. Soviet planes and helicopters transport aid grain donated by the West to the mountainous north of the country, from where they also take starving people to Ethiopia's tropical south. The intended alleviation of the famine does not work, despite the involvement of Mother Theresa and international

¹ Літфест 2019: Розмова про книгу "Дорога на Асмару" Сергія Сингаївського. 2019. Джерела Трускавця TV. 23 Oct. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WFQd3SdvHCc>. Accessed: Nov 11, 2020.

² Tigray Crisis: Ethiopian Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed Rejects Peace Talks. 2020. BBC News. 11 Nov. <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-africa-54900769>. Accessed: Nov 11, 2020.

organizations, alongside western volunteers and governments. To Andrii what is happening in Ethiopia looks like a repeat of the Holodomor, about which he learned from his relatives in whispered conversations, out of the earshot of eavesdroppers. He is shocked when his detachment eat their full, while outside the perimeter fence starving Ethiopians die and in desperation eat the Soviet soldiers' feces.

Andrii is tasked with translating the Western press coverage of the Soviet 'aid.' Not satisfied with conversations in English, he learns Amharic and picks up Italian to learn more about Ethiopia, its inhabitants and history. He is surprised at how similar the country is to the Soviet Union. The multiethnic population of over 80 nations, complete with their own languages, is ruled over by the three kindred (Semitic) nations of the historical north, namely, the Amharas, Tigrayans and Tigres. In their elevated imperial role these three are similar to the Soviet Union's Slavic nations of Russians, Ukrainians and Belarusians. With time, Andrii notices that the Soviet military busy distributing aid is more like a foreign power surreptitiously engaged in yet another imperial war. After pulling wool over the international public opinion's eyes with transporting grain and refugees, Soviet planes, helicopters and trucks are sold to the regime's vast military for a hefty profit. The Tigre-led Eritrean War of Independence (1961-1991) is in full swing, whereas the Tigrayan-led anticommunist guerillas holed up in their underground towns in the mountains stage increasingly successful attacks against the Amhara-led communist regime. The road to peace, to Asmara in the east (or today's capital of Eritrea) leads westward, to Addis Ababa, where first the communist regime must be defeated.

An Amhara friend of Andrii, who passed to western journalists some revelatory material on the manufactured nature of the famine, disappears with his family, as though they never existed. A local priest educated in an orthodox seminary in Leningrad, whom Andrii took to visit, is assassinated as a traitor for his regular contacts with a foreigner. Finally, a Canadian-Ukrainian volunteer, with whom he speaks in his native Ukrainian, confirms Andrii's suspicion. It is an Ethiopian Holodomor mounted for the sake of starving the Tigrayan and Eritrean partisans and forcing the collectivization (or 'villagization,' as the official term is) of the countryside. As many re-settlers to the south die of diseases and due to crop failures in kolkhozes as their starving relatives in the north. Aid barley ends up in a factory producing alcohol, not as food for the starving. But at least the Ethiopian hosts treat to the same dinner and entertainment all the detachment, exposing a festering cleavage between the privileged caste of Soviet officers and the pushed around privates, especially if they come from Central Asia.

Hunger is the most potent and cheapest weapon of war and of forced social change. Andrii's detachment is again on the road transporting grain. They notice rogue Ethiopian troops killing a group of villagers and raping women. Driven by human decency and the principles of honor as learned in the military academy, the detachment comes to rescue. This cathartic event opens the novel's Part Two. The GRU, or the Soviet military intelligence, assess that they were taught wrongly. It was not the detachment's role to intervene in the allied army's operation. Some eggs need to be broken to produce the impatiently expected omelette of communism. The matter is deftly swept under the carpet of the Ethiopian-Soviet brotherhood, the involved soldiers are sent home early,

while Andrii is made into a personal interpreter of the high-ranking intelligence functionary Nef'odov. This functionary is busy making money by selling weaponry on the side, but also keeps spreading revolution worldwide. In early January 1986 Nef'odov disappears for good, it later transpires, to communist South Yemen, which East German comrades helped establish. Nothing doing, the Soviets were unable to stop internecine warfare among the Yemeni communists in which half a percent of the country's population died in less than a fortnight.

Billeted in the compound of Nef'odov's villa, during the functionary's frequent absences, Andrii is tasked with accompanying his much younger wife, Irina, to shops and on pleasure trips. Inevitably, they fall in love. Despite their 15-year-old marriage, the Nef'odovs have been childless. It must have been Nef'odov's plan from the beginning. A quarter of a century later, Mykyta learns that Andrii was his father and that he died in an airliner bombing attack. Perhaps, it was carried out by Eritrean guerillas, enabled by a security breach that Nef'odov allowed on purpose. On this realization, coming back to life in a hospital bed after a vicious attack by the ex-husband of his lover, Nila, Mykyta renounces the comfortable life and fortune, which Nef'odov made on shadowy arms deals during the Soviet times and in independent Ukraine. Mykyta wants honest love and life for his family. He will earn it as a hard-working architect, like the Ukrainians who chose dignity over Russia's cheap oil in 2004 and again in 2013. Like Ukrainian pilots who were helping the Eritreans in their unequal struggle against Ethiopia (supported by Russian pilots), before Eritrea gained independence in 1993.