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## The Struggling State

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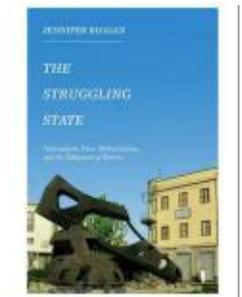
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## Struggling for the Nation

### *Contradictions of Revolutionary Nationalism*

In the middle of Sema'atat Square in Asmara is an unusual sculpture. The size of a small car, surrounded by flowering hedges, made of metal, is the *shida*—a tribute to the commonly worn plastic sandals. Bicycles, taxis, cars, buses, even the occasional donkey cart pass by this heavily trafficked circle at a major intersection in Asmara. Pedestrians walk past hurrying on their way to somewhere else, many of them wearing *shida*. The *shida*—an object common to every household and everyday life—is at once a symbol of the Eritrean everyman and everywoman and a glorification of Eritrea's *teg-adelti*, or fighters, who liberated the country during the thirty-year struggle for independence. During The Struggle, many fighters wore them instead of military boots; they enabled the fighters to move quickly, lithely, and stealthily through the rough mountainous terrain where much of the war was fought. *Shida* are tough, versatile, and inexpensive. Fighters could easily repair torn *shida* by melting down the plastic and reattaching it, meaning they often wore the same pair for long periods of time. In the 1980s, the Eritrean People's Liberation Front (EPLF) began manufacturing *shida* themselves in the liberated areas of the country along with other necessities. The party and many Eritreans are proud of these factories, which indicated the EPLF's capacity to govern, fight, and liberate itself without any significant support from the outside world. The history of plastic sandals, worn by fighters, repaired, recycled, and eventually manufactured behind the front lines during The Struggle for independence, references the national

ethos of self-sufficiency and sacrifice, while *shida* themselves are a symbol of fighters' stealth, resilience, and ability to win the war against great obstacles. The *shida* statue, thus, transforms a quotidian object into a symbol of the nation that embodies the core values of The Struggle. It is literally and metaphorically larger than life but also reflected in everyday life. The *shida* is a military symbol but also an ordinary one, and, most importantly, it is ubiquitous throughout the country.

The *shida* statue is but one example of what we might think of as the quotidian nature of Eritrean nationalism. Quotidian nationalism fuses symbols, narratives, and performances that reference the legacy of The Struggle for independence with the lives of ordinary Eritreans. This quotidian nationalism has enabled the ruling People's Front for Democracy and Justice party (PFDJ) to forge a particular sense of personhood, creating Eritrean subjects who are supposed to think of themselves as willing to sacrifice (and kill and die, if need be) to not only defend their nation but also develop it (Bernal 2014; Hepner 2009b). Processes through which Eritrean men and women are socialized into becoming this ideal national subject are also supposed to ensure that the nation is a central part of Eritreans' everyday lives. To do this, the party drew on the lived experiences of Eritreans during The Struggle, validated and valorized experiences of suffering, gave meaning to sacrifice, and nationalized that meaning. To further make the nation part of citizens' everyday lives, the party created service programs that were intended to inculcate the values of The Struggle in Eritrean youth by loosely (and sometimes directly) simulating the experiences of the fighters in the war for liberation. However, the party's revolutionary nation-making program not only drew on past experiences of The Struggle but also set out to craft a sense of the future and an ideology of how society would change in its aftermath. This included promoting egalitarian gender and class norms and also an idea of a multicultural, multireligious, unified national whole. As with many other revolutions, liberation was but the first step of social transformation.

The PFDJ, previously known as the EPLF, emerged as the liberators of the country at the end of the thirty-year struggle for liberation. One of the EPLF's key accomplishments was to construct a cohering sense of Eritrean nationalism and to bind that to state institutions even before the country was liberated (Pool 2001). A good deal of literature has detailed the nature of the Eritrean revolution, and my objective here is not to repeat the contributions that this literature has made, although I draw substantially from it (see, for example, Connell [1993] 1997; Hepner 2009b; Pool 2001; Reid 2005). Rather, I hope to highlight a few key points about the strengths and

shortcomings of Eritrean revolutionary nationalism to lay the groundwork for my exploration of the unraveling of effervescent support for the EPLF/PFDJ national project in subsequent chapters.

Eritrea is one of a handful of revolutionary movements that emerged out of a later phase of liberation and anticolonial struggle (Dorman 2006). Sarah Dorman (2006) states that while resistance was common in colonies, prolonged violent conflict was not the norm out of which nations were born in most African anticolonial struggles. The majority of the first-wave anticolonial struggles were relatively nonviolent. In contrast, a second wave of independence movements through the 1980s and 1990s was the result of far more prolonged struggle when colonies or settler states refused to give up power, such as in South Africa, Namibia, and Zimbabwe, or when countries fought to liberate themselves from a second colonizer, such as was the case in Uganda, Eritrea, Ethiopia, and Rwanda. In these later independence movements, the goal was not just wresting the state from oppressive rule but transforming society. During these protracted struggles, Dorman (2006) notes, these regimes acquired ideological legitimacy, a detailed vision of what society would look like, a developmentalist mentality, mass followings, and control of the state. Protracted revolutions thus enabled state building, the development of national identities, and the fusion of the two (Herbst 2000). These revolutionary and postliberation states were quite different from countries that were liberated in the mid-1900s (Dorman 2006). Unlike other African states, these states were relatively emancipated from society and “hard” in the sense that they were able to maintain control over borders and economies (Herbst 2000).

Eritrean official nationalism is revolutionary in the sense that the co-optation of the instruments of governance, the taking over of the state, often through the auspices of the military, was but the first step in the longer process of social transformation (Müller 2005). Both Eritrean revolutionary fronts (the EPLF and its rival and predecessor, the Eritrean Liberation Front, which are discussed below) had the goal of liberating the country, and socialist notions of progress and equality influenced both. But the EPLF was perhaps distinct in its recognition of the importance of crafting a cohering national ideology and creating an organizational infrastructure to promote it. The EPLF did a very effective job of both forging a sense of nationalism and crafting the beginnings of a preliberation state that would later be transformed into a sovereign, internationally recognized state following independence. The EPLF’s nation-state formation project was oriented around strong organization; strict discipline within the front; the value of development through self-sufficiency; progressive notions of

class, gender, and ethnic equality; and, above all, a willingness not only to sacrifice for the nation but also to do so as the party leadership saw fit.

Ultimately, many of the strategies that were so effective for the revolutionary front that liberated the country were far less effective for a government seeking to work with a diverse and varied civilian population. But the EPLF forged ahead in using these strategies. Utilizing its coherent organizational structure, drawing staunchly on the goals and values forged in *The Struggle*, and insisting that people continue to promote those goals even in the absence of widespread support for them, the EPLF moved forward with its nation-building agenda. The leadership continued to promote and enforce the party's ideological goals and to try to transform the national subject into a new kind of person, often utilizing the same militarized, disciplinary tactics that it initially used to liberate the national territory. Unfortunately, party leaders found themselves increasingly reliant on force to do this, thus unraveling the gains of their nationalist project. Below, I provide a brief history of the genesis of Eritrean nationalism and the emergence of the EPLF's particular national program from that history. I then give some examples of the quotidian nature of Eritrean nationalism to show the ways in which nationalism tied in with personal and communal effervescence prior to and immediately after independence. I conclude by raising some questions about why revolutionary nationalism is increasingly failing in Eritrea, a theme that I take up in more detail in the following chapter about the state.

## **The Genesis of the Eritrean Nation and Nationalism**

Although much of what we think of as Eritrean nationalism derives from the EPLF/PFDJ's nationalist project, Eritrean nationalism has a robust and multifaceted history that is important to recognize in order to understand the difference between the national narrative produced and promoted by the ruling party and sentiments of nationalism felt by Eritreans. Like many African nations, the formation of the nation-state in Eritrea emerged from late-nineteenth-century colonialism. Italy began its conquest of Eritrea with the purchase of the territory around Assab from the sultan at Aussa in 1869 and then expanded its control, establishing the colony of Eritrea in 1882. Italy planned to take over Ethiopia and therefore unify Eritrea, Somalia, and Ethiopia into greater Italian East Africa, but after Italy lost the battle of Adwa to Menelik II in 1889, the Treaty of Wuchale gave Ethiopia its independence and awarded the territory that later became Eritrea to Italy. Despite Ethiopia's claims that Eritrea has always been an integral part of

the Ethiopian empire, this claim is true for only the Eritrean highlands. It was not until Italian colonization that Eritrea as a territorial entity came into existence.

Italy gave Eritrea its territorial shape and a colonial state to govern that territory, but the diverse ethnic, regional, and religious groups in Eritrea had varied histories prior to colonization. Eritrea is approximately 50 percent Muslim and 50 percent Christian. The Christian population is predominantly Abyssinian Orthodox, a form of Christianity encompassing Ethiopia and Eritrea and linked to the Coptic Church in Egypt. Eritrean Christians mainly reside in the central and southern highlands of Eritrea where the capital, Asmara, is located and are traditionally settled agriculturalists. This part of the country has been historically attached to the Abyssinian Orthodox Church as well as successive Ethiopian empires and kingdoms at various times, although these villages have always had strong local forms of governance and, in many respects, have remained quite autonomous from Ethiopian empires. Christian highlanders typically hail from the Tigrinya-speaking ethnic group, also approximately 50 percent of the population and roughly equivalent to the Orthodox Christian population, although some Tigrinya are Muslim, Catholic, and, increasingly, evangelical Christians. The predominantly Muslim Tigre ethnic group resides for the most part in the northern highlands, northeastern lowlands, and western lowlands of Eritrea and comprises approximately 30 percent of the population. The remaining 20 percent of the population is made up of seven other ethnic groups—Afar, Saho, Nara, Kunama, Rashaida, Bilen, and Hedareb. With the exception of the Kunama, who are Christian and Animists, and the Bilen and Saho, some of whom are Christian, these groups are Muslim and reside in the coastal and western lowlands as well as the northern highlands. Geographic, religious, and ethnic differences frame different experiences of nationalism and the state among different populations. When the EPLF gained power in the middle of The Struggle for independence, its supporters took it upon themselves to create a synthetic form of nationalism that would subsume these varied identities to a common Eritrean identity; however, prior to this event, a variety of other ways of imagining the nation were available to Eritreans, and in many ways, the post-Italian politics of Eritrea revolved around the interplay of varied understandings of what Eritrea was.

The period at the end of World War II was a particularly interesting moment during which an array of Eritrean nationalisms circulated. During this interim period, from 1941 to 1952, Great Britain administered Eritrea. The British Military Administration (BMA) was a complex political time; arguably, political divisions that emerged from this period were responsible

for the form that the early liberation movements in Eritrea took (Pool 2001). Ethiopia, then under the rule of Emperor Haile Selassie, thought of Eritrea as one of its own provinces, thus equating Eritrean nationalism with Ethiopian nationalism. Ethiopia began negotiating for “reunion” with Eritrea almost immediately, citing deep historical ties with Eritrea’s Christian highlands and giving rise to the Unionist Party in Eritrea. Meanwhile, Great Britain favored partitioning Eritrea, giving the Christian highlands to Ethiopia and the lowlands and northern highlands to Sudan, a plan that drew on thinking that Muslim, lowland populations had more in common culturally with ethnic groups in Sudan than they did with Christian highlanders and therefore would be more easily incorporated into the neighboring country. That plan ultimately failed but had the effect of making residents of the lowlands think about which nation they belonged to (Gebremedhin 1989; Markakis 1987; Pool 2001). As a result, an entity called the Muslim League emerged in the western lowlands to challenge the Unionist Party. Meanwhile, a burgeoning independence movement in Eritrea advocated for independent statehood and argued that a distinct Eritrean identity was mapped on to the Eritrean colonial territory (Makki 2011a, 2011b; Pool 2001; Taddia 1994; Trevaskis 1960).<sup>1</sup>

This time period is key because Eritrea’s political elites, across ethnic groups and regions, became conscious of the importance of the state and came to understand that even if there was no agreement on what Eritrea was (an independent nation, several nations, or part of Ethiopia), control over the mechanisms of governance was of critical importance (Trevaskis 1960). The question of nationhood and control of the national state brought on religious/regional cleavages that had not previously existed, and competing international interests in control over Eritrea exacerbated these cleavages (Pool 2001). While a cognizance of the nation began to emerge in the BMA period, it did so in different ways among different strata of the population, and few mechanisms existed to spread this sense of nationalism uniformly across the entire geographical territory (Makki 2011b). Eritrean nationalism was emerging through this time period, but doing so unevenly. Still, this time period is key to understanding how disparate movements that began among an urbanized middle stratum in the highlands and among disenfranchised agro-pastoralists in the lowlands eventually came together to frame a movement for independence (Makki 2011b).

These early nationalist sentiments were not simply reflections of religious, ethnic, or regional cleavages, however, but were merged with ongoing class sentiments (Gebremedhin 1989; Markakis 1987). This is important to note because both the EPLF and the Eritrean Liberation Front (ELF;

the liberation front that preceded the EPLF) were deeply concerned with elements of class and inequality in Eritrea and would eventually galvanize class-based grievances into armed insurgencies. The Muslim League actually evolved out of an ongoing serf-emancipation movement in the western lowlands (Gebremedhin 1989). Serfs, who had recently made great strides in achieving greater social equality, believed that union with feudal, imperial Ethiopia would diminish gains that they had made and exacerbate inequalities (Pool 2001). All of this is key because The Struggle for independence initially started in Eritrea's predominantly Muslim western lowlands and, for this reason, is often depicted as stemming from Muslim fear of being federated with Christian Ethiopia. However, as the scholars cited above have compellingly argued, the beginnings of The Struggle not only constituted a religious/regional revolt but also built on ongoing class concerns that related to Eritrea as a whole.

Following the BMA period, despite growing sentiments that Eritrea should be independent, the United Nations agreed to federate Ethiopia and Eritrea, allowing Eritrea to retain its autonomy while incorporated into Ethiopia. It quickly became clear that Ethiopia did not intend to honor the spirit of the loose federation with Eritrea. Ethiopia almost immediately began to undermine the federal agreement and ultimately disbanded the federation and formally annexed Eritrea. While there were initially competing ideas about what *Eritrea* should be in the BMA period, Eritreans' concerns about being dominated by the Ethiopian empire would ultimately galvanize popular support for Eritrean independence; however, what it meant to be *Eritrean* would take much longer to work out.

Sentiments that Eritrea should be independent emerged from different sectors in Eritrea and gained strength as Ethiopia began undermining Eritrea's autonomy. Early opposition efforts began in 1958, when the Eritrean Liberation Movement (ELM), which consisted of mainly urban intellectuals, was formed (Pool 2001). As David Pool (2001) details, by the time the Ethiopian government officially annexed Eritrea in 1962, it had put down the ELM's efforts, but meanwhile another opposition group, the ELF, was forming out of the remnants of the Muslim League in the western lowlands. Thus, liberation movements in Eritrea have roots in both the urban intelligentsia and the disenfranchised in the western lowlands, among the elite and among the periphery.

The ELF began The Struggle in Eritrea's western lowlands, and for many years the western lowlands and northern highlands, which were the regions most disenfranchised by Ethiopian annexation, were the parts of the country that most staunchly supported the ELF. Thus, in the early

years of The Struggle, Eritrean nationalism was often seen as a religiously based nationalism. However, as Ethiopian repression in Eritrea increased, larger and larger numbers of urbanized Christians, mainly students, from the central highlands started joining the ELF in the late 1960s and early 1970s. In 1966, new recruits were sent to China, Cuba, and Syria for further training. The group that went to China, which included the current Eritrean president Isaias Afewerki, proved to be particularly influenced by Maoist thought (Pool 2001). Ideas gleaned from the training in China were largely responsible for proposed changes to the ELF that would eventually result in the development of the EPLF and its split from its parent movement. The trip to China was particularly influential in terms of helping the leadership formulate a vision for a more unified national ideology as well as an organizational structure that would allow them to promote this revolutionary form of Eritrean nationalism (Pool 2001). Infighting led to the dissolution of the ELF in the 1980s, leaving the EPLF/PFDJ to eventually win Eritrea's thirty-year struggle for liberation (Hepner 2009b; Pool 2001). Although there were numerous reasons for the EPLF/ELF split, diverging understandings of Eritrean nationalism were significant.

Differences between EPLF and ELF variants of Eritrean nationalism reveal different understandings of the relationship between collective identity, individual subjectivity, the nation, and the state. The ELF is often mistakenly associated with narrow Muslim, lowland concerns, but this association ignores the fact that many Christian, Tigrinya highlanders joined the ELF and that many who joined The Struggle chose which front to join for pragmatic reasons rather than ideological ones (Hepner 2009b; Pool 2001). Both the ELF and the EPLF initially built class-based concerns into their national ethos, the same concerns that had previously sparked the rise of the Muslim League, but the EPLF took up the challenge of forging an explicit national ideology that emphasized unity, equality, and revolutionary thought (Pool 2001). In contrast, the ELF focused more exclusively on liberation and not on the broader task of nation building. Literature on distinctions between the ELF and the EPLF emphasize the exclusionary nature of the ELF, suggesting that this front, with its origins in the western lowlands and support from Arab countries, failed to craft a coherent national identity that would include all of Eritrea's diverse peoples and religions and instead focused narrowly around the goal of independence (Hepner 2009b). However, scholars have noted that another way to understand the ELF's ideological and organizational approach is that it tried to build Eritrean identity around existing social groupings and networks rather than produce statelike structures to promote, disseminate, and subsume state subjects to

hegemonic national ideology, as the EPLF did; the organizational structure of the ELF itself reflected the notion of a nationalism oriented around a common goal of liberation rather than a common national identity (Hepner 2009b; Pool 2001). As the ELF developed, it came to be structured along the lines of the Algerian liberation movement, with discrete and homogeneous geographic zones. These zones largely utilized kin, ethnic, regional, and other patronage ties to recruit new fighters, and their organizational structure was rather informal (Hepner 2009b; Markakis 1987; Pool 2001). At times there was even rivalry and conflict between and within the different zones. In contrast, the EPLF prioritized the creation of a nationalist orthodoxy and statelike structures to organize the population and inculcate this ideology in them.

Tricia Redeker Hepner (2009b) makes a compelling argument that the ELF's nationalism was pluralist in the sense that it was able to accommodate a variety of understandings of what it meant to be Eritrean and was, therefore, more flexible and "open-minded" than the form of nationalism ultimately propagated by the EPLF. The ELF's nationalism was less inclined to promote a specific definition of what it meant to be Eritrean, leaving it open for people to be Eritrean in multiple ways. In contrast, what Hepner (2009b: 44) terms the EPLF's "synthetic nationalism" required strict allegiance to a very specific notion of what it meant to be Eritrean that was developed by the party leadership itself. She notes that the ELF's focus on loose unification around the goal of independence left open the possibility of dialogue about what it meant to be Eritrean, an openness not found in the EPLF's expectation of adherence to ideological orthodoxy. The benefit of this more fluid and open-minded form of nationalism was that it accommodated difference. The down side was that it remained open to the influence of sub- or pre-national allegiances, loyalties, and commitments and thus remained unemancipated from society in key ways that ultimately proved problematic for the ELF.

Perhaps it is no surprise that the EPLF has been preoccupied with developing a sense of national unity, given both the challenges and importance of doing so elsewhere in Africa, one of the last regions of the world to be parceled out into discrete nation-states. African states were built on top of strong colonial states, but not states that were designed to unify or represent a national polity (Mamdani 1996). Meanwhile most African nations comprised diverse, varied, fluid cultural groups that often spanned national boundaries and resisted identification with the nations or, conversely, sought to co-opt the states by defining the nations based on their own particular ethnic, religious, or geographic affiliations (Dorman, Hammett, and

Nugent 2007).<sup>2</sup> Although the same could be said about many nations, particularly postcolonial nations, processes of nation-state formation in Africa have been particularly befuddled by the combination of strong, coherent non-national identities (for example, ethnic and religious identities) combined with the weakness of state institutions (Bayart 2009). Following a fleeting moment of patriotic, independence-era nationalism in the 1950s and 1960s, the process of creating a coherent sense of nationalism and viable states in most African countries floundered (Herbst 2000). New governments inherited state institutions from colonialism that were designed to consolidate political, economic, and military control in the hands of an elite ruling group (Rodney 1974). They also inherited little coherence, legitimacy, or loyalty around the idea of a nation among would-be national citizens (Davidson 1993). Elites in African nations often attempted to build legitimacy for these nations by creating national mythologies, origin stories, and sets of national heroes and symbols to fill this void and shore up the idea of these nations, but given the diversity of their populations, these symbols and myths often excluded and disenfranchised groups of citizens, galvanizing resistance to the governing elites and their ideas about the nations more than legitimizing them (Davidson 1993).

The EPLF thought of itself as trying to rectify the errors of both the ELF and other African nations by forging a unified nation and a strong state. The EPLF's nationalism, emerging as it did through war and defense of its sovereignty, has arguably required that Eritreans become a particular kind of national subject, one oriented toward sacrifice and service for the nation, one who will subsume other identities (religion, region, ethnicity) to nationalism. Despite the fact that the EPLF's notion of what an Eritrean should be is rather extreme—and, arguably, unsustainable now that The Struggle for independence is over—it has clung to this strict notion of Eritrean-ness. Because this is the form of official nationalism that has predominated in Eritrea until today, I now turn to a fuller discussion of the EPLF's version of nationalism and later evaluate the pitfalls inherent in promoting this type of national orthodoxy.

### **“Our Struggle and Its Goals”**

The ongoing strategy of governance of the ruling PFDJ as well as the attributes of official formulations of Eritrean nationalism can find their roots in processes by which the EPLF consolidated control over the development of an Eritrean state and their particular nationalist ideology. Interestingly, the EPLF's efforts sought to quite intentionally fuse nation to state, simul-

taneously creating institutions to govern the country, instilling a sense of common national identity in its population, ensuring sovereignty over an independent national territory, and co-constructing both nation and state. In partial response to their contention that the ELF lacked an organizing ideology, in 1971, the EPLF authored the highly influential pamphlet “Our Struggle and Its Goals.” In fact, it is speculated that Eritrea’s president himself authored the pamphlet (Weldehaimanot and Taylor 2011). In the document, the EPLF outlines its version of the origins and history of The Struggle. This version of the history emphasizes the overwhelming support among Eritreans of all religions, regions, and ethnicities for Eritrean independence at the time of the BMA; the alliance of Ethiopia with foreign powers to ensure that Eritrea was federated with Ethiopia; political repression and manipulation on the part of Ethiopia, which dissolved the federation and led to the annexation of Eritrean by Ethiopia and the beginning of The Struggle in 1961; and, finally, the failings of the ELF to adequately organize or unify the country (Weldehaimanot and Taylor 2011). The 1971 document distinguishes the EPLF and its ideology from that of the ELF as well as from that of Ethiopia, historically details the origins of The Struggle for independence, and outlines a sketch of the nationalist goals, which are further developed in documents produced by the EPLF in 1977 and 1994 (EPLF 1977, 1994). One of the EPLF’s projects was to define Eritrea as an independent nation, differentiated from Ethiopia but also from the Arab world, with which the ELF had aligned. The pamphlet clearly notes that Eritrea shares with the Arabs a stance against colonialism, imperialism, and Zionism, but it differentiates Eritreans from Arabs, a distinction that the EPLF believed the ELF had not made (Weldehaimanot and Taylor 2011).

The EPLF’s nationalist language was heavily inflected by anti-imperial and anticolonial sentiments, all of which were propagated through an aggressive series of political education campaigns. These focused on class, instilling in Eritreans a sense that their history was a history of struggle against imperial forces including, but not limited to, Ethiopia (Pool 2001; Weldehaimanot and Taylor 2011). Political education was also combined with development efforts, which included access to education, veterinary services, and health care in the liberated areas (Hepner 2009b; Pool 2001). Literacy campaigns and education were also a vital part of the EPLF’s struggle, both for fighters and for civilians (Gottesman 1998).

In addition to its orientation toward development and progress and its anti-imperial stance, creating a sense of national unity among Eritrea’s diverse people was an essential part of the EPLF’s nationalist program. “Our Struggle and Its Goals” details the multicultural origins of Eritrea

and celebrates the diversity of its people (Weldehaimanot and Taylor 2011). The EPLF set out to create a common culture by studying livelihoods and lifestyles of its various regions and ethnic groups (Pool 2001). The party, at least initially, had a very strong sense of needing to not only learn from the people it was liberating but also educate them. The EPLF also attempted to pull together elements of different cultures to create a sense of fused Eritrean culture, something that has been continued by the PFDJ (Hepner 2009b). Organizationally, unlike the ELF, it merged fighters from different parts of the country into heterogeneous groupings. It also refused to declare a national language and set about establishing a program to promote indigenous language education in addition to using Arabic as a working language among the lowland populations (Bereketeab 2010; Hailemariam, Sjaak, and Walters 1999; Woldemikael 1993).

Another key element of the EPLF's revolutionary nationalism related to gender roles. Partly out of a pragmatic need to expand its fighting force, the EPLF actively encouraged women to serve as fighters (Bernal 2000; Müller 2005; Wilson 1991). It later incorporated gender-based reforms into its land policies and political education program where possible, although following the war for independence, many of these reforms were hard to continue (Hepner 2009b; Pool 2001). While equality for women was core to the party's revolutionary ideology, encouraging the participation of women in leadership roles was a key component of the way it formed governance structures in the liberated areas. Thus the PFDJ's approach to gender was central to both its nation- and state-building agendas (Müller 2005).

One of the ways that ideology was disseminated was through various forms of mass organization, which gathered particular segments of the population—women, youth, workers, and peasants—into associations (Hepner 2009b; Pool 2001). These efforts were remarkably successful in transforming the EPLF into a popular front, reflective of its name and its nickname, *Shaebia*, which translates as “popular.” These organizations allowed members, initially in Eritrea and later in the diaspora as well, to participate in broader political processes. Additionally, through these organizations development was fused with political education, and fighters were able to engage with civilians around issues related to membership within these groups. Thus, Eritreans engaged with the front, and the nation, by joining an organization that represented their identities as youth, women, peasants, or workers, categories that cut across broader swathes of Eritrea.

The EPLF had a very strong state-building agenda. One of the factors that made the EPLF successful was that it began to act like a state even before liberation, organizing the civilian population, blending them with

the fighters, and very effectively disseminating its national ideology in a way that built on sentiments that saw independence as an answer to experiences of repression under Ethiopian rule. The party's approach to nation building was not to work through existing organizational and institutional structures but to create its own and then to ensure that these new organizational structures, their ideology, and their symbolism were part of people's daily lives. With this in mind, where possible the party replaced traditional governance structures, which it thought of as co-opted by Ethiopian rule, with its own administrators (Pool 2001: 118). Arguably, at independence, Eritrea's leadership had already done a great deal of quite effective nation-building and state-making work, enabled by several factors. The EPLF's centralized governance structure, extensive organizational capacity, and vision of unified national identity meant that a coherent nation-building project was already well underway by independence. But while this was remarkably successful in many ways, it also required intensive discipline and strict ideological orthodoxy among the fighters.

Like other socialist or communist revolutions, the EPLF was inspired by both Marxism/Leninism and Maoism and sought to create an egalitarian socialist society, to reeducate the masses through the auspices of political education campaigns, and to instill a strong organizational structure throughout society that would maintain discipline (Pool 2001). The EPLF was particularly effective at instilling discipline and political consciousness within the front itself, and in some areas it was quite successful at organizing the masses and inculcating political identities, although doing so among civilian populations was notably more difficult than it was in the army. Nonetheless, uplifting the masses from various forms of oppression, be they economic or colonial, was at the core of the EPLF's doctrines. The expression *awet n'hafash* (victory to the masses) is a "signature slogan" (Pool 2001: 105) of the EPLF and continues to be used prevalently in the regime. In fact, all official communiqués are signed *awet n'hafash*. As the front tried to extend its influence to civilian populations, it reached out especially to peasants, the urban working class, women, and youth. Land reform throughout the liberated areas of Eritrea was particularly concerned with dismantling long-standing class hierarchies and building class solidarities (Pool 2001). Other policies were also aimed at building solidarity among the poor and working class and ensuring the business classes did not have access to disproportionate wealth.

The EPLF drew on anti-imperial, anticolonial ideologies to argue for Eritrean independence, but its nation-building project also sought to transform Eritrean society and enacted an intensive ideological as well as

organizational campaign to do so. Much of the literature on Eritrea has detailed the ideological content of EPLF nationalism and its strong social organization of both the party and the masses. The EPLF has narrated the nation and its national origins in a very particular way. Following independence, the EPLF attempted to fuse nationalism with quotidian experiences of Eritreans by making experiences of the nation a core part of individual memories and everyday lives.

### **Massification, Militarization, and Quotidian Nationalism**

It is important to note that while the PFDJ/EPLF was quite adept at producing a cohering, revolutionary national ideology; building state institutions to disseminate it; and constructing the symbolic and ritual means to socialize Eritreans into this sense of national personhood, Eritrean nationalism is not merely a party construct. In large part, what has lent it emotional heft is the way in which it draws on the experiences of Eritreans, particularly during *The Struggle*, and in so doing transforms experiences of suffering into valorous sacrifices and quintessential attributes of being Eritrean. The party narrates the nation in a way that connects with Eritreans' everyday lives and their recent, personal historical memories. In this sense, it has made its version of nationalism quotidian—a routine part of life. The following story about wanting to join the fighters told to me by one of my research subjects presents a narrative that is reproduced in various forms of popular media and aptly illustrates the ways in which lived experiences are appropriated by the party's national narrative.

Growing up close to the front line during the war for independence, the war deeply and personally influenced Isaac, particularly when the Ethiopian government imprisoned Isaac's father for revolutionary activities. Although the war ended before Isaac was old enough to join the fighters, he imagined that he would become a fighter and prioritized Eritrea's independence over his own education or future, thus epitomizing the ethos of sacrifice for the nation:

The war was in the area surrounding [our village]. We could listen to the sound of the war. Our thinking was totally towards the war. Our brothers and sisters were at the front. We thought, "Why are we going to school here in the village? We should go to fight." I didn't have any goal or objective. But I did have a very long-term plan—when we got liberation, I would have good education—

better than under Ethiopia. This was my thinking. But we didn't have any plan. My plan was just to be an Eritrean soldier. All the surrounding area was covered by Ethiopian soldiers. It was very difficult. Some of us found ways to go to join the Eritrean forces, but I couldn't get to them. In 1989, Eritrean forces attacked my village, and then we tried to go with them, but when we went to this forest area to meet the fighters, they told us they were going a very long distance. They said, "We will come back again, so it is better to stay in your house. Stay here and go to school, and next time you will come with us."

Although Isaac speaks of this in terms of "not having a plan," the sentiment here is that his entire orientation was focused on the liberation of his country and becoming a fighter to bring this about. He could not have a plan because of the conditions his country was in. His story is an expression of willingness to sacrifice but also of the lack of options that war brings. Like many Eritrean young people growing up in Eritrea during the war for independence, early in Isaac's life he was willing to sacrifice everything to become a fighter to liberate Eritrea. Many Eritreans in Isaac's generation did join the fighters, and many others expressed the desire to do so. Even Eritreans who grew up in Ethiopia told me that their parents confessed that they did not tell them about The Struggle for fear that it would fill them with such a strong desire to join the front that they would run away from home and travel to Eritrea to join the fighters.

A young person "running away" to join the fighters is a common motif in Eritrean public nationalist discourse. Short plays that are either televised or performed live on public holidays often portray parents trying to convince their child not to leave home and then ultimately accepting the decision and sacrificing the personal need to keep their child alive for the good of the nation. These dramas link highly personal and emotional memories of the war for independence, desires to liberate the country, and fear of personal loss with public performances of what it means to be Eritrean. In these dramas, a parent, often crying, typically tries to prevent the child (often a girl) from running away, but the dramas always end up with the child succeeding in running away and joining the fighters and the parent recognizing that love for country must take precedence over love for one's child. This sends the message that everyone must be willing to make the ultimate sacrifice.

I would like to highlight two points that emerge from this narrative of running away to join The Struggle. First, any Eritrean could be, or imagine

him- or herself as, a fighter. The “fighter” (*tegadalai/tegadalit*) is simultaneously an Eritrean icon and everyman/everywoman. Fighters (*tegadelti*) are pictured on postage stamps, murals, and posters and in documentaries and music videos on Eritrean state-run television. The image of the fighter is everywhere. However, the fighter is not a distant figure but every Eritrean, literally and metaphorically. Many people joined The Struggle when they were young, tried to join The Struggle as Isaac did, or supported the fighters in some other way. When Eritreans who grew up during The Struggle described their understanding of being Eritrean, it was often equated with a sense of wanting to personally help the country, particularly by helping the fighters, emulating the fighters, or becoming a fighter. Peggy Hoyle’s (1999) survey of university students provides evidence of the kind of national symbol fighters are—a heroic everyman. When asked who is “the greatest hero of Eritrea,” most students answered, “all fighters,” “all martyrs,” or “all Eritreans” (1999: 407). Although there are specific Eritrean heroes and heroines from the long war for liberation, what was striking in Eritrea was that in the post-independence years, Eritreans regarded all who fought, suffered, and died to liberate the country as heroic (Hoyle 1999). This is indicative of the fact that, in the post-independence years, many Eritreans bought into the idea that *all* Eritreans were heroic and had worked together to liberate themselves by virtue of the national characteristics of fortitude, self-sufficiency, and willingness to sacrifice.

In an interesting inversion, just as the fighter is everyone, those who might be put on (or put themselves on) a pedestal as heroes from The Struggle for liberation instead behave as ordinary people. Eritrea’s leaders, including the president, take pride in being common people, something that Eritreans often comment on. They are not thought of as being above others, and, to this day, there is little cult of personality around the president himself. Ministers typically wear fairly casual clothes and drive ordinary cars. The party’s political culture does not require those with power to acquire visible adornments of affluence. In the years immediately following independence, President Isaias could often be seen driving himself around Asmara in a small, modest car. It was also a common experience for Eritreans in Asmara to look up in a bar and find he was standing next to them watching a football game or enjoying a beer. These were not heroes put on a pedestal to hover over people and be revered by them; rather, they were thought of as ordinary Eritreans, just like everyone else.

Another idea emerging from narratives of young people running away to join The Struggle is the theme of sacrificing oneself and one’s family members for the nation. A unit on patriotism in the national civics curriculum

illustrates this theme. The unit begins with a story of a grandfather and his grandson being apprehended by Ethiopian soldiers. A group of Derg (Ethiopian) soldiers was lost without food and water in the Eritrean countryside. They came across a man named Omar Mohamed near the town of Afabet, pulled out their guns, and demanded that he take them to water and food and show them the way to Keren. Omar refused, and the soldiers threatened to kill both him and his grandson who was accompanying him. Omar then said that he would show the soldiers where they could find food and water if they let his grandson go. The soldiers suspected that after they let his grandson go, he would then refuse to take them to food and water. They said they would kill both of them. The man then said that they should kill his grandson in front of him before they kill him. The Derg soldiers were confused and wondered why this man wanted to have his grandson killed first. Then, fortunately, the EPLF showed up, freed the man and his grandson, did not harm the soldiers, fed them, and took them to prison. The conclusion of the story then reiterates that the man had no intention of showing the soldiers where food and water were. He was thinking, the curriculum notes, that he would tell them to kill him after they freed his grandson. The curriculum also notes that he did not want to leave his grandson with “these cruel enemy soldiers,” but when it became clear that he could not save his grandson, he began to fear that if he died first, his grandson would show the soldiers to food and water, his focus shifting to protecting the nation by *not* showing the soldiers where the food and water were. The commentary on the story concludes: “Even this innocent child has to be sacrificed for the safety of his people and his country. There is a lot of this type of incidents in the Eritrean’s struggle for liberation. It is the highest stage of patriotism” (Ministry of Education, Moral and Civil Education Grade 6, unpublished document). Clearly this definition equates patriotism with willingness to sacrifice not only oneself but also one’s loved ones.

The celebration of martyrs and martyrdom extends the theme of valorizing, validating, and nationalizing suffering and sacrifice. Martyrs Day is a public state celebration, but one that penetrates the intimate realm of the home and the family. The events of Martyrs Day are choreographed not only to produce a particular affective climate oriented around loss but also to vindicate these losses, to give them purpose and claim them for the good of the nation. Indeed, sacrifice for the nation is at the core of government-produced definitions of what it means to be Eritrean (Bernal 2014). Through the commemoration of martyrdom, the government also subsumes personal memories of loss into the public commemoration of martyrs. Very personal experiences of grief and mourning are claimed by the

state and given meaning. Martyrs are both an intimate part of Eritreans' everyday lives and key national figures who embody the national value of sacrifice. Few Eritrean families did not lose someone to The Struggle, and each family who lost someone is given a certificate, which is often displayed prominently in people's homes. That person's name is seldom mentioned without noting that he or she was "martyred" (e.g., "my uncle, the one who was martyred"). The martyr is a key national symbol and emblematic of the core national tenet of sacrifice (Hepner 2009b). As an ideal type of citizen, the martyr illuminates the ideal of willingness to sacrifice everything for the nation above all else. Being martyred, or being related to a martyr, thus demarcates the experience of being Eritrean, both identifying martyrs and their families as the ideal sacrificial citizens and locating the experience of mourning and loss within the national space.

In Eritrea, Martyrs Day has always been a somber occasion on which Eritreans grieve those they have lost in The Struggle. Unlike the more raucous Independence Day celebrations, there is no drinking or dancing on Martyrs Day. Bars are closed, their lights dimmed. Throughout the country, Eritreans walk or stand quietly, holding candles in vigil. Martyrs Day in 2001 was particularly poignant. On June 13, 2001, approximately one year after fighting in a three-year border war with Ethiopia had ended, the government announced the names of nineteen thousand people who had died in the border war. It was, literally, a day of public, mass mourning. Red-eyed and tearful, people cried as they walked down streets and traveled on public buses moving from home to home where thousands of mourning ceremonies were simultaneously being held.<sup>3</sup>

Official versions of Eritrean nationalism are oriented around sacrifice, and patriotism is inherently linked with sacrifice. The necessity of sacrifice in the face of the brutality of enemies is a theme that shows up in various places in the national curriculum, typically when recounting the atrocities of Ethiopian rule. English texts, history texts, civics texts, as well as movies and television programs depict the horrors experienced under Ethiopian rule. A reading in a grade 10 English book goes into detail about the conditions in a jail for Eritrean dissidents in Asmara by describing the processes of being interrogated and tortured. It also describes the sympathy that other prisoners had for those who had been tortured and notes the patriotism of those being executed: "As prisoners heard their names, they started walking out, shouting slogans: 'Long live the EPLF! Victory to the masses!'" (Ministry of Education, CRDI 1993: 21). This statement reflects a common theme that is also present in a passage on fortitude and other passages on atrocities under Ethiopian rule—that suffering can be transcended through patriotism.

Building on narratives depicting common experiences of oppression and atrocity during the war and the period of Ethiopian rule, the civics text describes “fortitude” as the ultimate Eritrean national character trait. The text notes that “fortitude is one of the moral values which our forefathers cherished” and that “a person with this characteristic can endure any pain or difficulty.” It goes on to state that “he or she is dedicated to what he or she believes or stands for to the extent of death.” The text defines fortitude as the willingness to sacrifice oneself for a cause, as the Eritrean fighters did when fighting for freedom for thirty years. Furthermore, it notes that this characteristic “has a deep root in the blood of every Eritrean” and describes those who lack fortitude as a burden on society. The segment on fortitude concludes by noting that “every Eritrean has inherited this behavior as a culture and this was witnessed in the very long and bitter war for independence. . . . There is no doubt that this moral value will also be inherited by all our young generation as a good culture of our forefathers” (Ministry of Education, Moral and Civic Education Grade 6, Unit 1, Fortitude, pp. 23–24, unpublished document). This sense of national character is rooted in the notion that all Eritreans possess inherent fortitude in the face of difficulty. The text depicts the fighters who liberated the country as embodying this characteristic; however, all Eritreans, the text suggests, have “inherited” this characteristic from their “forefathers.” Fortitude, the passage above suggests, leads not only to personal success but also to the success of the nation, as the person with fortitude works hard, is patient, and is willing to sacrifice him- or herself for higher ideals.

In addition to the nationalization of personal experiences of loss and suffering, and the valorization of sacrifice and suffering for the nation, the party has also engaged in an ongoing, overt project of making the nation a core part of everyday life. As I noted above, the EPLF intentionally sought to produce a coherent, singular notion of what it meant to be Eritrean and a personal attachment between Eritreans, the party, and its revolutionary ideology. The EPLF, and later the PFDJ, utilized a variety of quotidian strategies to insert these values in Eritreans’ everyday lives.

One quotidian strategy was the government’s use of rhetoric and symbols to nationalize ordinary, everyday experiences and objects. The valorization of the *shida*, which I discussed in the beginning of the chapter, is one example of the nationalization of the everyday. The *shida* is one of several quotidian nationalist symbols that enable Eritrea’s ruling party to imbue Eritreans’ daily lives with nationalism. Values that are core to The Struggle, such as fortitude and making due with local resources, can be read in the *shida* and in other symbols. Similarly, the camel, another some-

what unusual national symbol, which appears on the national seal, references endurance and self-reliance. The use of camels to transport weapons and supplies through the dry terrain has been celebrated as an example of utilizing local resources to win the war. Camels have been particularly important in Eritrea's predominantly Muslim lowland areas, where people have commonly used them to transport goods. The camel's elevation to a very public national symbol thus referenced the fusion of lowland and highland peoples and ways of life in the Eritrean nation (see Hoyle 1999 for a discussion of camels as well as other national symbols). Additionally, the very use of the word "struggle" to describe the war for liberation may be seen as a quotidian rhetorical strategy. While "war" depicts events that are both geographically and emotionally distant and temporal (wars start and end), "struggle" is more intimate and continuous. Indeed *The Struggle* is depicted as the responsibility of all Eritreans. Like "revolution," the term "The Struggle" seamlessly extends from armed combat to other struggles against oppression, poverty, underdevelopment, ignorance, or whatever the regime pinpoints as in need of being struggled against. Struggle is a word that galvanizes on an ongoing, personal level.

Another quotidian strategy of nation making was to create routine, ritualized experiences for Eritreans that socialized them into what it meant to be Eritrean. National Service has been, of course, the quintessential process of socializing Eritreans into the values and experiences of being a fighter—the ideal Eritrean everyman/everywoman—but National Service was certainly not the only way to make Eritrean nationalism understood and felt to be part of everyone's everyday lives. Additionally, throughout my fieldwork, there were a variety of everyday national routines. In major towns and cities, at the beginning and end of the workday, flags were raised and lowered. All pedestrians and traffic were expected to stop when a whistle sounded. Pedestrians then stood in silence to salute the flag while it was lowered and continued moving only after the whistle sounded again. It was a striking experience to be walking down the street and suddenly find everyone standing still while gazing up at a nearby flag.

Similar to National Service, after independence, the government initiated a series of programs designed to ensure that this identification with the experiences of the fighter would transfer to subsequent generations. These programs initially built on desires to serve the country but over time turned mandatory. In the immediate postwar years, Eritreans willingly talked about the need to make sacrifices for the nation. This ethos of sacrifice, as recounted to me in interviews, often translated into a willingness to do whatever and go wherever the government said to. Aspiring students were

told to be patient and volunteer while they waited for schools to get started. Civil servants and high-level officials all found themselves being told to make sacrifices as their salaries were furloughed, raises that were long overdue were delayed even longer, or they were transferred to postings they did not want (Hoyle 1999). Eritreans were told that their labor was badly needed, enabling the new government to allocate workers where they needed them and to use a degree of coercion to tell people where to go and what to do. The legacy of loyalty and obedience gleaned from the disciplined military culture created during The Struggle and the strong sentiments of pride in the new nation made sacrifices for the nation in the immediate post-independence years seem like an inevitable part of being Eritrean.

The government yoked the rhetoric of sacrifice to several homegrown development-oriented projects, which enabled successive generations of Eritreans to experience the legacy of The Struggle and have experiences that approximated those of the fighters. Most notable in this regard was Eritrea's National Service program. Initially, trainees spent several months on foot trekking through Eritrea's rugged terrain much as the fighters had, something that many civilians complained was overly harsh. In addition, they received political education and were ultimately put to work on development projects. Effectively, National Service was thought to transform all Eritreans into *tegadelti* (fighters). Citizens' participation in the various forms of service intentionally simulated the service and sacrifice of those who fought in The Struggle (Hepner 2009b; Müller 2008). National service thus was both a disciplinary practice that organized a labor force for development and defense and an ideological one intended to fuse the values of The Struggle into the population.

In the same vein, short-term service projects recruited high school students, university students, women, or, sometimes, members of the population at large into a variety of civic and service activities that might last anywhere from an afternoon to several months. Other mass service projects took on different forms, many of which simulated the developmentalist projects that brought civilians and fighters together during The Struggle. Community-wide cleanup days required all members of a community to clean their town or village. Summer service programs (*ma'atot*) sent high school and university students to different parts of the country to plant trees, terrace hillsides, or engage in other development projects. The goals of National Service and shorter-term service projects were to inculcate in citizens the value of service to the nation and to forge an attachment to the nation among all of its regionally diverse peoples through the common experience of service (Kibreab 2009b; Müller 2008). High school sum-

mer work projects also required moving teachers and students to different regions where they would mix with others.

The spectacle of those serving the nation also generated mass euphoria in the population at large. As in many other nations, in Eritrea, national loyalty is inscribed through bodily practices; ideally, as citizens viscerally feel the nation in their bodies, they imagine the state as the benevolent keeper of the national vision. Tekle Woldemikael (2009: 4) notes the importance of Independence Day celebrations to “produc[ing] docile bodies, subjects who fit into the ruling party’s image of nationhood.” Similarly, students traveling to National Service or summer work programs were often paraded through large towns, waving from buses with horns honking.

By the end of The Struggle, being Eritrean had become a lived experience due to the prevalence of the war and the sense that the fighters were one with the Eritrean people. In the immediate postwar era, the euphoria of independence led to a continuation of the desire to serve and sacrifice for the country. In the decades that followed, the PFDJ has continued to merge nationalism with people’s lived experiences by creating a series of experiences whereby Eritreans viscerally and bodily experience the nation in their everyday lives. This happens through programs of mass socialization (National Service), everyday rituals (flag ceremonies), and the celebration of everyday, ordinary symbols that are both national and a part of everyone’s lives (the *shida*). However, quotidian nationalism has faced challenges to its legitimacy in the years following the border war.

## **Contradictions of Revolutionary Nationalism in Post-Independence Eritrea**

Revolutionary movements face particular challenges in sustaining their revolutionary ideals when the fighting is over. In part due to their military legacy and in part due to their ideological purity, regimes that come to power through armed insurgency tend to require adherence to an ideological orthodoxy and demand loyalty (or the performance of loyalty). They are also intolerant of internal cleavages, rifts, and dissent (Dorman 2006). But this adherence to ideological orthodoxy and absolute loyalty can prove to be unsustainable in the absence of a clear enemy. Postliberation or revolutionary regimes merge a progressive and developmental vision for societal transformation with a kind of coercive and intolerant politics that, as I show in the next chapter, winds up eroding the legitimacy that enabled the revolution in the first place. Thus, revolutionary movements can lead to political hierarchies and a particularly closed political climate; in their efforts to

produce a society that is revolutionary, they also emphasize controlling the population over producing positive emotional attachments to the nation, all of which has been the case in Eritrea (Connell 2011; Dorman 2005).

Post-independence, the government showed itself to be intent on shoring up centralized state control. Shortly after independence, Eritrea reorganized the country administratively, creating five new administrative zones that bifurcated historic ones to ensure that no single ethnic group dominated any one geographical area. Also following independence, the government asserted administrative control at the local levels. While officially leaving traditional forms of governance intact, it also appointed to each village or municipality a centrally appointed administrator who, in practice, was more powerful than traditional leaders. Following the border war, these administrators were more often than not military personnel who had a great deal of power but little legitimacy (Dorman 2005, 2006).

The government also showed itself to be increasingly intolerant of all forms of dissent. From early on, the EPLF/PFDJ leadership cracked down harshly on any who opposed it, most notably in 1973, with the Menka'a incident in which a group of mainly former students protested the EPLF's lack of democratic decision making (Connell 2001, 2005, 2011; Pool 2001). The movement was swiftly put down and its five leaders executed. After that, the EPLF devised severe punishments for anyone who criticized its leadership. A similar incident in 1976 also met with swift brutality (Hepner 2009b). The EPLF was known for expecting loyalty to its vision for the nation, demanding strict discipline from its fighters, and enacting harsh punishments on anyone who disobeyed. This strict orthodoxy has been difficult to maintain in the postliberation years.

Since independence and particularly since 2001, any attempts to voice dissent have been cracked down on equally harshly. The summer and fall of 2001, only months after the cessation of hostilities agreement was signed with Ethiopia to end fighting between the two countries, was a time of unprecedented political debate. Letters drafted to the president from party elites raised questions about the management of the border war as well as the implementation of the constitution and the overall trajectory of the country. A group of diaspora intellectuals now known as the G-13 first attempted to engage Eritrea's leadership in critical discussions about how the country was being managed. Their efforts did not lead to the widespread debate they had hoped for but resulted in the country's leadership questioning the group's integrity (Hepner 2009b: 191–194). The G-13 was followed by a group that came to be known as the G-15, which authored "An Open Letter to Members of the PFDJ." The open letter made many

similar points previously made by the G-13, but this letter was written by long-time members of the party's inner circle and leaders within the government itself, including ministers and ambassadors (Hepner 2009b: 194–196). In July 2001, student union president Semere Kesete was arrested following a controversial speech he gave at the University of Asmara. His speech voiced long-time concerns that university students held about voluntary service during their school breaks. Students who protested his arrest were subsequently detained and sent to work camps in the desert later that summer. In mid-September 2001, eleven of the fifteen members of the G-15 were arrested and have not been heard from since. Three were exiled, and one rejoined the government. Private presses were shut down at the same time and remain shut down to this day. Journalists were arrested or went into exile. Scores of others suspected of political involvement and activism were also arrested (Tronvoll and Mekonnen 2014). Since 2001, any attempts to organize and mobilize politically have been dealt with harshly; indeed, there has been little political resistance in Eritrea since 2001. In January 2013, this pattern was broken when a group of soldiers briefly occupied the Ministry of Information and aired part of a statement demanding the release of political prisoners. Opposition websites report that participants in these events have been arrested along with military commanders suspected of inciting this mutiny.

Service and sacrifice have long been the core tenets of Eritrean nationalism (Bernal 2014; Hepner 2009b; Kibreab 2009b). While initially there was support for service projects, increasingly, people's comments about government demands for service and control over citizens began to reflect increasing disillusionment with the government. This occurred against the backdrop of a broader critique of the government's failure to hold elections, implement the constitution, and institute democratic reforms. Whereas during The Struggle for liberation and in the early independence years people had faith in the ideal of service as well as, and perhaps even more significantly, faith in the government's capacity to manage manpower and care for citizens in service, later on service projects began to "lose their luster as more and more young people found their lives dictated by the government's demands for labor and defense as part of its self-reliant development strategy" (Hepner 2009b: 65–66). Throughout my fieldwork, I often heard the assertion, "We still love our country. We still love our country and we would defend it." But in the postwar years, these assertions of willingness to defend were usually a preamble to a bitter critique of all that was going wrong, particularly with National Service. Service to the country, it seemed, had become a punishment, not a national duty.