



PROJECT MUSE®

---

## The Struggling State

Riggan, Jennifer

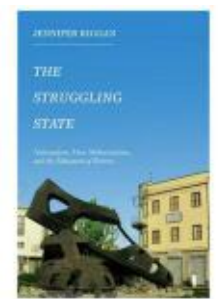
Published by Temple University Press

Riggan, Jennifer.

The Struggling State.

Temple University Press, 2016.

Project MUSE.[muse.jhu.edu/book/64136](https://muse.jhu.edu/book/64136).



➔ For additional information about this book

<https://muse.jhu.edu/book/64136>

---

Access provided at 1 Apr 2020 03:28 GMT with no institutional affiliation



This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/).

## “It Seemed like a Punishment”

*Coercive State Effects and the Maddening State*

### “In *Carcele*; Be Back in Fifteen Minutes”

In July 2002, my husband and I were staying in central Asmara. Much of my husband’s time that summer was devoted to finding a rental house for his family, who had been living in one room in a “suburb” of Asmara that lacked running water and latrines. One morning, my husband had gone off to pursue this task, and, as I sat peacefully trying to write, the phone rang. A voice that I did not recognize on the other end told me in a combination of broken English and Italian that my husband was “in *carcele*” and that he would “be back in fifteen minutes.” Confused, I tried to ask more questions, and then the line went dead. Initially, I shrugged off the odd phone call, assumed he would be back in fifteen minutes, and went on with my work. I knew *carcele* meant “jail,” but why would he be in jail?

Fifteen minutes passed, and I started to watch the clock, which hovered on top of a street map of Asmara hanging on the wall. The word *carcele* repeated itself in my head despite my attempts to mentally brush it away. But after half an hour passed, the word reverberated even more insistently. *Carcele, carcele, carcele.* I started to wonder about the meaning of *carcele* and stood up to look at the map to see whether there was a neighborhood called Carcele, perhaps located near a prison, where he might have gone to look at a house. I started to feel a tingling in my limbs, blood swimming behind my eyes, the hot-cold tightening of the scalp that accompanies the

onset of panic. I took a deep breath and berated myself for being paranoid. Why would he be in jail? Why would he be back in fifteen minutes if he was in jail?

After an hour and still no sign of him, the deep breaths that I forced myself to take could not stave off the onset of terror. My eyes teared up, and I felt that there was no space in my chest for breath. I could not concentrate on my work. The words in the sentences I tried to write refused to stay in order. I paced. I sat on the bed and sobbed. I thought about leaving the house, but where would I go? I thought about calling someone, but who would I call? Desperate thoughts collided with each other. What would I do if he did not come back? Who would help me? The U.S. Embassy that could not even gain the release of its own employees, who had been in jail for more than a year?<sup>1</sup> The Eritrean government? Whom was I connected to? Whom could I trust? Was I the reason he got arrested? Would I make more problems if I tried to fix things?

As quickly as I had worked myself up, I talked myself down. Things run late here. He is just running late. Everything runs late. He is not in jail. Why would he be in jail? He will be back. Carcele must be a neighborhood near a jail. He has found a house and is renting it. Fifteen minutes can mean two hours. I made some coffee and played a game of spider solitaire on my computer to distract myself, glancing at the phone, hoping it would ring, listening for the sound of his knock on the front gate.

I oscillated, several times, between tearful hysteria and calmly berating myself for being silly and paranoid. You have seen too many movies sensationalizing dictatorships and disappearances, I told myself. This is not a movie. This is just Eritrea. This does not happen to ordinary people here.

When he appeared almost two hours later, he was furious. “They abducted me,” he said. The story unfolded. *They*, the government, were “abducting” any young man who appeared to be of military age, a process that came to be known as *gifa*.<sup>2</sup> Military personnel were posted on street corners, demanding to see ID cards. When an ID was presented, inevitably they were unsatisfied with it and required everyone to climb on a truck waiting to take people to one of the many detention centers set up for this purpose. Once in “jail,” paperwork was more thoroughly checked, and some people were released after several hours. Those who were unable to produce satisfactory paperwork had to wait until a supervisor came to prove that they were not supposed to be on active military duty. Some remained in detention for several days. Some were returned to military units where they might be detained further, assigned to hard labor or possibly tortured.

When I heard that he had been in jail, my reaction was complex. Clearly, I was relieved that he had made it back safely, and partly I felt vindicated that my worry did not stem from mere paranoia. He had, indeed, been in jail. My hysteria was a reasonable reaction. But simultaneously I was horrified that what I had always feared—the latent capacity for the government to detain with impunity—had become real. Were there limits on its use of force?

The statement “in *carcele*; be back in fifteen minutes” is reflective of an ambivalence that Begoña Aretxaga (2003) aptly captures in the phrase “maddening states.” That maddening state<sup>3</sup> refers to the profound ambivalence citizens feel as they are trapped between their desire for the “good” paternalistic state, a desire so strong that it produces its own evidence that the state *is* benevolent, and utter fear of what the “bad” coercive state—the state that has turned against its people—can and will do. The desire for the paternalistic state is strong; it enables citizens to stubbornly cling to their illusion that the state cares about its people even amid tangible evidence to the contrary.

The first statement, “in jail,” inevitably raises alarm. Detention by authorities who have no cause, who are known to have the capacity to behave capriciously and without concern for individual well-being, as is the case in Eritrea, is distressing at best, terrifying at worst. A year earlier, in 2001, the Eritrean government arrested journalists and members of the inner circle of the ruling party who had openly spoken out against the government. As of 2002, the political purge of the previous year had not targeted ordinary citizens, but the potential for it to do so existed. Some Eritreans had experienced being detained by authorities, although a project on the mass scale of *gifu* had never taken place. Furthermore, many remembered the brutality of the Ethiopian officials prior to independence and were all too familiar with practices of arbitrary detention. People were alarmed that government personnel took it upon themselves to round up what seemed like everyone who was eligible for military service and put them in jail. There was clear evidence that the state was turning against its people.

But what do we make of the second half of the statement, “be back in fifteen minutes”? It sounds so ordinary, as if one had simply run out to the store for some eggs. It conveys that there is no cause for alarm, that all is well and normal. It conveys an assumption that detention is but a mere inconvenience. The statement is also intended to pacify. Indeed, my husband clearly intended to pacify me. It normalized the experience of arbitrary detention without cause. Citizens’ faith that the state would not harm them and would protect them enabled this process of normalization. Citizens

believed that government officials might detain without cause, they might inconvenience people, but they would not hurt them, because the state, at some level, was benevolent. Depicting mass detention as routine and normal was a means for Eritreans to retain and maintain the sense that everything was normal and that the state still cared about its people.

“Be back in fifteen minutes.” This rather ordinary statement created a sense of affective dissonance. It said, “It’s okay, but nothing is okay.” This interplay between what was an extraordinary degree of coercion and control over citizen bodies on the part of the state and what was portrayed as “ordinary” and, therefore, nothing to worry about became a key part of the normalization of life in Eritrea from that time on. That afternoon in Asmara, my encounter with the capacity of the Eritrean state to detain with impunity, set against lingering imaginaries that characterized Eritrea as the kind of place where *this did not happen*, produced my own maddening state—a state of such psychological contradiction that I still struggle to make sense of the conflicting emotions that I experienced that day.

The dissonance that I felt that day is a common characteristic of life in Eritrea. Underlying the maddeningly uncertain climate were questions: Did the state care about us or did it want to kill us? Was it fundamentally paternalistic or violent? In Eritrea, these questions had a deep emotional resonance, as what was at stake during the course of my fieldwork and what came to a critical juncture during the *gifa* of 2002 was an uncertainty as to the nature of the Eritrean state. *Gifa* befuddled the assumptions of many that the state fundamentally cared about them. Some, of course, had already had coercive, or even violent, encounters with the state in previous years. In contrast, others would continue to believe that the state cared for them long after. But the 2002 *gifa* was a turning point. It affected everyone in urban areas; thus, once the government started using widespread *gifa*, most Eritreans could no longer deny the coerciveness of the state, and yet many still wanted to believe, needed to believe at some level, in a state that would take care of its people, a state that had a plan. Yet experiences of *gifa* were evidence to many Eritreans that they were living in a punishing state, something that many still did not completely want to believe.

The central argument of this chapter is that despite tenacious beliefs in a caretaking state, punishment has become a key modality through which the state is imagined in Eritrea. Imagining the state as punishing, thinking of oneself as being punished by the state, and responding to that perception of being punished are state effects of coercion. However, actually knowing whether, when, or why one is being punished is almost impossible, and, because of the maddening nature of the state, imaginaries of the punishing

state always coexist with other explanations that rationalize the state’s use of force.

Theories of state effects are ways to understand that while the state is not “a thing,” it has the capacity to make people think, believe, and act in particular and specific ways. Timothy Mitchell (2006) notes that the state constructs its own “structural effect” whereby people come to believe that the state is an institutional reality. Although coercion is not often considered as a state effect in its own right but instead as a means to bring about other state effects, I suggest that exploring coercion as a state effect is essential to understand everyday life in Eritrea and elsewhere. Scholars have specified a number of state effects, including an individuating effect, a totalizing effect, an identification effect, a spatialization effect, and a legibility effect, all of which are a means to understand how state power manifests itself in the lives of state subjects without suggesting that the state is an actual thing (Corrigan and Sayer 1985; Mitchell 1991, 2006; Scott 1998; Trouillot 2001). Framed by Michel Foucault’s (1990) work on governmentality, the focus on state effects explores the ways in which state power acts internally within subjects to produce ways of being, imagining, and thinking rather than externally (and emanating from particular actors) to constrain or promote particular actions (Mitchell 1991, 2006). State effects order individuals’ experiences of being state subjects through language (that is, by telling people who they are and how they are supposed to behave as a member of that polity) and by disciplining bodies. They categorize, organize, and order subjects in space and time and thereby enable people to think of themselves as attached to a nation *and* a state and as having particular positions within that nation and state. Studies of state effects seldom view coercion as a state effect in its own right. In contrast, I show that coercive power produces distinctive imaginaries of state coherence/incoherence, understandings of state subjectivity, and behaviors. Coercion is adept at creating an appearance of actual state power but not particularly effective at producing many other state effects. Indeed, the coercive state effects alter other state effects because being coerced makes it harder for subjects to identify in positive ways with the nation, national territory, and the population. A coerced subject has a harder time thinking of him- or herself as a loyal, docile national subject, yet, ironically, the experience of coercion simultaneously forges a powerful imaginary of the state—in this case, one that revolved around being punished by the state.

Through discourse about being punished, Eritreans scaled up from everyday encounters with state actors at the local level to the upper levels of government. In a similar vein, Akhil Gupta (2012) notes that in India

discourse and practices of corruption were the means through which people discursively constructed the state. Commentary about corruption in public media, people's routine experiences of corruption, and their remarks about corruption reveal citizen imaginaries of the state and tie together the local, interpersonal level with the "upper" echelons of the state. Like the discourse of corruption in India, discourses of punishment enable an imaginative scaling of the state in Eritrea. Elsewhere, I have argued that this sense of being a punished subject in large part replaced notions that the government had the legitimate right to demand service and sacrifice from its subjects (Riggan 2013b). Here, I emphasize how Eritreans linked experiences of being coerced, or forced to do something, with a sense of "being punished" and, furthermore, extended this sense of being coerced and punished to the condition of being Eritrean more broadly. At times, people knew that the government *was* actually punishing them, but Eritreans used the language of state punishment to describe their frequent experiences of being forced to do things, including instances where this was not actually a punishment or instances in which it was unclear whether punishment was involved.

Punishments were often arbitrary and unpredictable, and this unpredictability is a key component of the coercive state effect. The arbitrary sense that one could be punished at any time is better understood when we consider that Eritrea is a country aptly characterized by Giorgio Agamben's (2005: 39) notion of a "state of exception" in which "there is the force of law without the rule of law" (for discussions of state of exception in Eritrea, see International Crisis Group 2014; Riggan 2013a; Woldemikael 2013). Under a state of exception, rules become permanently suspended such that the exceptional (and extralegal) treatment of part of the population (and in the Eritrean case, a very large part) becomes the norm. Citizens under such conditions can seldom rely on having their "rights" protected. An expression I often heard during fieldwork that aptly sums up this sense of ambiguity and uncertainty is that the government "writes in pencil." This expression could refer to a range of government decisions, from whether teachers would be allowed to travel to Asmara for semester break to National Service eligibility. It reflected widespread sentiments that there was no rule of law in Eritrea or clear policy making and implementation. Eritreans were susceptible to the potential for a state actor, at any level, to use his or her power to force people to do things. In this context, force is more salient than written laws or policies, and state actors have the capability to utilize force in often unchecked ways; thus, no one knows where the state ends and the whims and opinions of individuals with the power to act on citizen bodies

begin. The phrase “written in pencil” depicted the ephemerality of state mandates as well as their susceptibility to being interpreted by anyone with power at the moment. This makes encounters with the state very personal but also ambiguous—it is never fully known whether one is being treated a particular way because of a policy or because of an individual’s decisions. Thus it was fundamentally unclear whether or when one was actually being punished, but such uncertainty enabled Eritreans to imagine themselves as punished subjects.

This chapter explores three facets of coercive state effects to argue not only that punishment has become a key modality through which the state is imagined in Eritrea but also that this imaginary has played a key role in delegitimizing the current government’s vision of the nation. First, as I noted above, the discourse of punishment enables the scaling of imaginaries of the state by linking experiences of being coerced that resulted directly from state “policy” (decisions made by top state actors) with more quotidian experiences of coercion (experiences that may not have been the result of these top-down decisions). I explore this first by examining instances of state coercion and then by looking at how discourses of punishment were used to describe them. This imaginative reworking of the state as punishing partially replaced narratives of serving and defending the country but also led to a climate of impotence and evasion, which brings me to the second facet of coercion: Eritreans responded to this sense of being punished with tactics of evasion. Evasion, avoidance, or escape from experiences of being punished is the logical response to being forced to do things one does not want to do, but, more significantly, the state subject evading state punishment is a radical departure from the national subject who willingly serves and sacrifices. Evasion thus hollows out these national ideals, leaving them empty and “impotent” (Mbembe 2001). Finally, I return to the concept of the maddening state to show that imagining the state as punishing is always nebulous—one does not know whether coercive actions are actually punishments in large part because of lingering notions of the caretaking state—the maddening condition in which the desire for a “good state” coexists with evidence of a “bad state.” One way in which desires for a good state manifested themselves was through attempting to find a rationale for the government’s coercive actions. The government’s ongoing efforts to construct a sense of heightened siege by reminding the population of various security threats contributed to the sense that the government was taking care of its people by resorting to extreme measures necessitated by a state of emergency.



## Everyday Life in the Prison State: Citizen Bodies and Coercive State Effects

Eritreans often directly or indirectly referred to their country as a “prison” throughout my fieldwork. This phrase has been picked up by journalists and human rights organizations, which often utilize the term “prison state” to evoke the level of repression present in Eritrea (see, for example, International Crisis Group 2010). However, while journalists increasingly utilized the term “prison state” to reference an alleged network of “underground prisons” throughout Eritrea, Eritreans’ depiction of Eritrea as a prison referred instead to the sensation of living in a place where they did not have control over their lives, their livelihoods, and, most importantly, their ability to leave the country. For Eritreans, the commonly voiced sentiment that the country is “like a prison” referenced the ubiquity of experiences of being forced to do things—for example, conscription, endless National Service, arbitrary transfers of civil servants, service projects, controls over people’s movements—the sense of constant surveillance, and the prohibition on leaving the country. Talking about life in the prison state thus directly reflects the experience of state coercion.

By coercion, I mean actual instances in which people are forced to engage in a particular form of labor in a particular place, something that could occur literally at the point of a gun or through a similar threat of violence or through other coercive mechanisms. *Gifa* was an example of the former, but there was also a wide array of other ways in which the state could locate and relocate its subjects. The government in Eritrea forced a large number of Eritreans to live in particular places and do particular labor, either short term or long term. The government also coerced students to engage in various forms of service, civil servants to work in locations of the government’s choosing, and civilians at large to do particular forms of “voluntary” work for the state by using a variety of other types of coercive mechanisms, such as docking pay, withholding transcripts, denying leave, and threatening people with various punishments. Eritreans were “forced” to do things and, more specifically, to be in places they did not want to be. I argue that these forms of coercion constitute a state effect that alters other state effects—individuating effects, totalizing effects, identification effects, and spatialization effects—and thereby recalibrates the relationship between state subject and identification with the nation.

Although the 2002 *gifa* was the first time round-ups had been carried out on such a large scale, *gifa*-like round-ups were not unfamiliar to Eritreans prior to that. During the war, there were quite a few accounts of

arbitrary round-ups by the military and military commanders commandeering civilian bodies. One group of teachers told me a particularly alarming story. On their way home late one evening in 1998, they were pulled aside by soldiers who forced them to climb on a truck. Several waiting trucks drove them a long way into the desert. Terrified, they realized that they were heading toward the front line of the war that was then actively being fought. At the front, they were told to collect the bodies of wounded soldiers, work that would typically be assigned to military personnel. Other friends and acquaintances also recounted being rounded up to have their identity documents checked during this time. The experience of being arbitrarily detained or having one’s labor commandeered was a ubiquitous one in Eritrea. While not all of these experiences were terrifying, all gave citizens the sense that their time and their bodies were not entirely under their own control. Furthermore, the government officials’ willingness to arbitrarily round up civilians, load them onto the backs of trucks, and require them to perform dangerous tasks, such as collecting the bodies of wounded soldiers, reflects an assumption that any Eritrean was available to serve the government in whatever capacity a local official deemed necessary. As a result, civilians believed they were not safe in war time, not only because an enemy bomb might drop but also because their own government—or, more specifically, an individual with unchecked power—might place them in danger.

The constraints on citizen bodies were nowhere more apparent than in the *de facto* prohibition on leaving the country. Emigration was effectively illegal in Eritrea at the time of my fieldwork. Exit visas were required to leave the country, and completion of national/military service was a prerequisite to receive an exit visa or a passport (GoE 1995). Receiving an exit visa was premised on completion of National Service; however, since the border war with Ethiopia (1998–2000), very few had been released from National Service, and most recruited into National Service came to believe they would be serving indefinitely (Bozzini 2011; Kibreab 2009b; O’Kane and Hepner 2009; Reid 2009). Furthermore, during my fieldwork, exit visas were almost impossible to acquire even for those who had been released from or were exempt from National Service. Additionally, the border was heavily policed, and those who attempted to leave ran the risk of imprisonment, torture, being shot at the border, or being kidnapped by traffickers (Human Rights Watch 2009).

Preventing people from leaving the country transforms Eritreans’ attitudes toward the national space, thereby altering the state spatialization effect. What Michel-Rolph Trouillot (2001) calls the spatialization effect is a means of producing an attachment between state subjects and their dis-

tinct national territory. Symbols such as the map, awareness of borders, and anything that produces an understanding of belonging to national space constitute this effect in Eritrea and elsewhere. Eritreans were profoundly aware of the nation as a bounded, territorial entity; however, the coerciveness with which prohibitions on leaving kept Eritreans *in* produced negative attachments between citizens and national space. The country felt like a prison, and its citizens seemed to have the desire, above all else, to escape. This phenomenon continues to be evident in the large numbers of Eritreans who flee the country despite the significant risks they face in doing so. Thus, state spatialization in Eritrea has bound Eritreans to the national territory by making them feel imprisoned by it, but the fact that such large numbers of Eritreans are fleeing the country suggests that this feeling of being made captive is at least in part responsible for producing the desire to escape (Poole 2013; Riggan 2013a).

National Service also produces spatialization effects, because it locates Eritreans across the country, but it simultaneously produces two other state effects—identification and totalization. Identification effects link individual identities with the nation, while totalization effects make them feel part of a larger collective—in this case, the military. One of the key ways in which identification and totalization effects are produced is through the disciplining of time, space, and the body such that subjects come to order their individual lives in ways that align with the expectations of the totality. The experience of being in the military simultaneously produces a particular type of individuated subject and a larger collective (Mitchell 1991, 2006). National Service is, first and foremost, an experience of becoming an individual military subject, an extreme form of subjugation in which one's entire being is subsumed to total discipline, as space, time, and the body are significantly regimented (Foucault 1995).<sup>4</sup> Military discipline (in the Foucauldian sense), in Eritrea and elsewhere, also produces totalizing effects whereby the effect of a collective military body to defend the nation is produced (Mitchell 1991, 2006).<sup>5</sup> National Service is supposed to inculcate the values of *The Struggle*, make Eritreans feel national, and incorporate individuals into a military whole. However, the coercive state effects prevalent in National Service mean that while it did produce identification and totalization effects, these came to have negative connotations, just as attachments to space did. Eritreans saw themselves not as docile, loyal individuals and not as proud members of a militarized core but as coerced subjects, forced to serve. Service denoted a collective experience of hardship at the hands of the state.<sup>6</sup> Furthermore, coerciveness in the military was experienced through the arbitrary and unpredictable nature of military discipline. The

arbitrariness and unpredictability made it easy for conscripts to believe that they were at the mercy of their superiors and imagine themselves as being punished subjects. One of the ways this occurred was through the lack of a predictable schedule while in training. Time for military trainees was both intensively managed and unpredictable, making it totally oriented toward the will of commanding officers. Recruits were expected to live moment to moment and submit their entire beings obediently to their officers. Additionally, recruits were literally punished if they did not follow orders. I discuss punishments in more detail in the next section.

The coercive effects of National Service were well illustrated by a commonly heard phrase, “in Sawa,” which appeared frequently in both public, official media and everyday conversations among Eritreans. The town of Sawa is the site of the nation’s military training facility (and also the site of the newly created boarding school for all grade 12 students), but the commonly used phrase “in Sawa” had broad and complex meanings. In its most descriptive sense, “in Sawa” meant that someone was in service, and the phrase could refer to either going through military training, serving in the military, or serving in a civil capacity. The military training facility at Sawa is celebrated and glorified in public, government-controlled media and patriotic songs. The government hosts an annual youth festival at Sawa. Additionally, it sponsored trips to Sawa for diaspora youth, where they have experiences that are distinct from military conscripts and include musical entertainment. Sawa thus produces a spatial effect as it constructs an imaginary of a particular place and an identification effect with particular national narratives. However, for most Eritreans, mention of going to Sawa evokes fear and anxiety and is emblematic of the hardships, and coerciveness, of military training. The phrase “in Sawa” merges references to an actual place that has negative connotations associated with the hardships of military training with negative sentiments about service more generally. When most Eritreans commented that someone was “in Sawa” (a phrase heard almost daily), it referenced a sense of being subservient, and vulnerable to, the government. For example, teachers who were completing their National Service as teachers often referred to themselves or were referred to as being “in Sawa” a condition that was typically pitied. Senior teachers expressed worry about being sent “to Sawa,” which evoked their concerns about having their salary and freedom taken away. Through the phrase “in Sawa,” Eritreans drew together experiences of military and civil service and linked both to an experience of hardship, referencing an imaginary that equated service, military training, and state-induced suffering. Eritreans tended to think of military training, National Service, and military ser-

vice as part of the same process. For Eritrea's leaders, this was supposed to produce an equalizing, nationalizing experience of service; however, for most Eritreans, the phrase "in Sawa" reflected an imaginary of a state that demanded service in a place that epitomized hardship.

One of the reasons service came to have negative connotations is that it became indefinite. Being a military subject is typically a temporary and limited experience. The vast majority of soldiers submit to that kind of intense, total subjugation for a specific amount of time. While militarization produces fairly common state effects, I suggest that coercive effects were created by policies that forced people to stay in National Service indefinitely, transforming what should have been willing subjects into coerced ones. The Warsai Yikaalo Development Campaign (WYDC) is the main vehicle through which military service was extended indefinitely (Hepner 2009b; Müller 2008; O'Kane and Hepner 2009). Under the auspices of galvanizing National Service conscripts to work on development projects, the WYDC, introduced in 2002, enabled the government to avoid mass demobilization after the border war concluded and effectively extend National Service. But given that there has been no significant fighting with Ethiopia since 2000, the ongoing mobilization of such a large proportion of the population is generally seen as illegitimate and outside the scope of Eritrean law; thus the common assertion among Eritreans, scholars of Eritrea, and human rights organizations is that National Service is indefinite or permanent.

*Gifa* during summer 2002 occurred at the same time that the WYDC was announced, further reinforcing the notion that service was now something Eritreans had to be forced to do. That summer many people, typically men who appeared to be under the age of forty-five, were detained multiple times. In most cases, they were released within a few hours, although in some cases, they were detained overnight or even for a few days. As others have noted, there was a sense among the population of being under siege not by external enemies but by the Eritrean government itself (Bozzini 2011). *Gifa* illuminated the effects of a coercive state to move and detain citizen bodies. The Eritrean state has always had this capacity, as, indeed, all states do; however, when widespread, mass *gifa* was enacted in 2002, it indicated that the government was willing to use this capacity on a scale that had previously been used only during the war to mobilize reserve troops and new military recruits for the defense of the country.

The capacity for the government to control the lives and labor of its citizens through indefinite National Service, prohibitions on leaving the country, mass round-ups, and arbitrarily commandeered citizen labor forms the fabric of ordinary life in Eritrea. Encounters with government officials,

who were willing, empowered, or ordered to coerce citizen bodies in these ways, were ubiquitous; it would be hard to find an Eritrean, particularly an Eritrean adult man, living in Eritrea at this time who has not had one or more coercive encounters with someone representing the state.

Additionally, coercive state effects were felt in other, less anxiety-provoking but equally routine ways. Various types of service projects that could take anywhere from a few hours to a few months provide good examples of less extreme forms of state control. As early as 1995, the government set up summer service projects that took high school-aged youth to various parts of the country to terrace hillsides or plant trees. Similar forms of summer service exist for university students as well (and, indeed, conditions of these university service projects proved to be a political flashpoint in 2001). At the community level, mandatory cleanup days were required of entire towns several times a year. All of these projects were efforts to require citizens en masse to provide service to the government. Both National Service and other mass service projects create an individuating effect by producing subjects who think of themselves as service-providing subjects, but they also have a totalizing effect, as those in service became a highly visible corps.

The extreme and ubiquitous levels of control over bodies, space, and time in Eritrea resemble what Katherine Verdery (1996) refers to in her research on Romania as the *etatization* of time. Time is *etatized* when the state usurps people’s time, compelling them to expend their time on state projects.<sup>7</sup> Eritreans’ time was certainly *etatized*. In military service, Eritreans report that the microscopic detail of when (and where) to eat, sleep, study, run, walk, dance, and play was dictated by superiors, but because National Service was indefinite, Eritreans’ time over the long haul was also controlled by the government. Entire lives were *etatized* because Eritreans were giving a life of servitude to the government. Eritreans complain that they could not go on to higher levels of education, get married, choose where to live, or have control over their lives because of the mandate that they serve, and in many cases serve indefinitely, either in the military or in civil service. Large numbers of Eritreans were located far from their own families and communities, giving the government direct control over when they could return home. This was true of not only military conscripts but also civil servants and even students. In all of these cases, few or no policies and procedures were in place to allocate leave in the case of a wedding, illness, death of a family member or vacation to visit family. Similarly, there was seldom a policy to determine when a civil servant or military conscript merited transfer.

Any attempt to move physically around the country necessitated an intense, interpersonal negotiation with low- and mid-level state function-

aries, who thus had a great deal of power over individual lives. Eritreans describe these negotiations over leave and transfers as being based on their supervisors' highly personal feelings, which could be positive and sympathetic to personal circumstances or negative. Supervisors were often described as making certain decisions to punish those under their command. In these instances, the discourse of punishment brought the intimate and interpersonal state into alignment with the larger "government." Below, I explore the ways in which these experiences were depicted as punishments even when they were not necessarily actual punishments.

### **"It Seemed like a Punishment": Imagining Everyday Encounters with the State**

In the wake of everyday experiences with coercion, many Eritreans started talking about themselves not only as living in a prison state but also as *being punished*. Discourse of the state as punishing is one mode of imagining the coercive state. Through talk about punishments, Eritreans link encounters with everyday coercion, such as those I describe above, to a sense of constantly being susceptible to punishment. Punishment here becomes a means of commenting on and interpreting state coercion and enables linkages to be made between a variety of types of experiences of the state, both those that individuals experience directly and narratives that circulate broadly in conversations and rumors. Eritreans interpreted the actions of supervisors and superiors as punishing but then, based on that experience of "being punished," imagined the state itself as punishing. This perception came from evidence that the government, in fact, had begun to punish people. While the motive to punish was clear in some cases, in other cases it was anything but, yet the widely circulating discourse around punishments constructed an imaginary of the state as punishing.

While they were in National Service itself, conscripts described being constantly at risk of being punished. Indeed, according to human rights reports, a culture of violence and punishment has taken hold in the military (see, for example, Human Rights Watch 2011). Teachers and others recounted to me from their experiences in military training that if they were not in the right place at the right time, if they could not perform tasks as requested, or even if they were caught purchasing food other than what was issued to them, they could be punished. Punishments that teachers described to me from their experience in National Service varied from minor forms of corporal punishment, such as being asked to hop like a frog or roll in the dirt, to more extreme forms of punishment, such as being beaten and tied

in stress positions. Accounts from those who are still serving in the military are far more severe, with depictions of torture. Interestingly, in many of these accounts of military punishment, the land itself is used as a means to punish people. Both civil servants and National Service conscripts are sent to parts of the country with the harshest heat as punishment. A common form of corporal punishment in the military is to tie someone up and leave him or her in the hot sun in a desert area. (This too produces a particular spatialization effect—the Eritrean earth and climate are punishing.) Perhaps most importantly, these accounts all reflect the fact that conscripts are susceptible to the whims of their commanders and superiors. The lack of rule of law means that punishments are arbitrary and highly interpersonal. Furthermore, family members have been detained or fined in what has been referred to as “collective punishment” if a conscript escapes (Human Rights Watch 2011). In the military, by all accounts, there is a culture of violence, coercion, and punishment. As I have described above, punishments within National Service were common at the time of my fieldwork (and, by all accounts, still are). However, talk about punishment was also common, even when it was unclear whether one was truly being punished.

Being sent to National Service itself has been used as a punishment for civil servants and others. One incident in particular signaled to Eritreans that service itself could be used as a punishment (Müller 2008; Treiber 2009). In summer 2001, Semere Kesete, the head of the University of Asmara student union and valedictorian of the senior class, was arrested for publicly protesting the conditions of service. University students subsequently protested his arrest and were themselves arrested, detained in the city’s soccer stadium, and sent to work on a summer service project in the town of Wi’a, one of the most remote and hot parts of the North Red Sea zone. It was common knowledge that students were sent to Wi’a as a punishment, a sentiment that circulated broadly in conversations among Eritreans and that the government did not seem to deny. Two students died of heatstroke there.

Another instance of using service as punishment affected a group of teachers whom I knew personally. After the evacuation of Assab, upon arrival in Massawa, every able-bodied man of military age was conscripted. When the teachers arrived in Massawa, the precise date on which they would begin their military training was unclear. Officials in Massawa gave the teachers and other evacuees from Assab permission to make a brief trip to the capital, Asmara, where most had relatives, to drop off their belongings. Officials told them to return to Massawa on a particular date, but because the teachers were not sure when exactly military training would begin and knew that the government was notorious for starting things late,



several of them decided to spend some extra time with relatives in Asmara. They planned to return to Massawa when they heard that training would start rather than on the appointed date. Another small number of teachers who were long-time residents of Assab actually stayed in Assab instead of evacuating. They received word that they had been called up for military service quite late and then had to figure out how to make the two-day journey to Massawa. The entire group of teachers from Assab who came late to military service—both those who had decided to spend more time with their families in Asmara and those who decided not to evacuate from Assab—were subsequently punished with the addition of a period of several months to their time in military training. While other teachers were released after their military training ended, these latecomers were required to stay in service to perform an additional two months of hard labor in the western lowlands even though the war had ended by that point. Making conscripts perform additional labor and denying them release time to visit family were common punishments in National Service and often had the effect of making sure that people reported for military duty and complied with government mandates.

In addition to what appears to be a culture of punishment within the military and the utilization of service itself as a punishment, civil servants believed they were constantly susceptible to being punished by their superiors and described actions that their supervisors took against them as punishing even when it was unclear whether they actually were being punished. There was a general sense that when it came to conscripting older, educated, professional people, such as civil servants and teachers, being called up for National Service itself was often used as a punishment. In perpetuating this belief, older civil servants discursively linked their experience/perception of being punished to narratives of national punishments, such as the incident at Wi'a and the generalized sense that soldiers were punished people. Like those in the military describing being punished by superiors, many teachers described their transfers as reflective of highly personal grudges, jealousies, and emotions. In fact, any time a teacher was transferred to a remote location, he or she assumed that someone did not like him or her. There were several cases among teachers I interviewed in which a teacher was offered a much coveted and rare opportunity to attend Eritrea's sole university or to leave the country to get a master's degree, only to hear a few weeks later that he or she had also been called up to report to Sawa for military training and National Service. These teachers inevitably assumed that some particular individual was jealous of their receiving an opportunity to further their education and was instead routing them to service.

Teacher Elias recounts one such experience. He was selected to work on a master’s degree partially at the University of Asmara and partially abroad. While working on his degree, he was assigned as an administrator in the central Ministry of Education office:

My boss at that time was not good. From the day I came here [to the Ministry of Education Office], I was treated not well. They thought I was new and could be treated how they wanted. He was not a real boss. He deliberately sent me to Sawa. He sent my name to them. So, anyway, I had to go, and I told them that I have to complete my education, but the Ministry of Defense didn’t care.

Stories like Elias’s were quite common. Two points are key here. First, Sawa is depicted as a form of punishment or mistreatment. Second, Elias blames his boss’s personality, claiming that his boss was “not good” and “was not a real boss” because he behaved jealously rather than fairly. Indeed, I heard that teachers had been simultaneously selected for higher education and National Service frequently enough to believe that these were not coincidences. Teachers often cited these types of stories as evidence that the power of immediate supervisors was often utilized intimately, maliciously, and based on personal emotions, such as jealousy.

Casting individuals with power as malicious and jealous set against the backdrop of the state known to be punishing reveals a scaling up from an individual encounter with a jealous superior to an imaginary of the punishing state as a whole. Elias blames his boss for “sending his name to them” but then becomes a victim of the uncaring Ministry of Defense and ultimately is susceptible to being sent “to Sawa.” The jealous punishing boss sets him on a path of state punishment and thus has two faces, and an encounter with the state through this boss has two meanings—on the one hand, the supervisor is an individual using his power punitively and capriciously, but at the same time, he represents the punishing nature of a state that operates on the basis of these personal jealousies. This is similar to what Walter Benjamin (1978) and Aretxaga (2003) think of as the “double body” of the state.

Elsewhere, I have detailed the nature and variation of these types of imaginaries of the punishing, jealous state (Riggan 2013b). For example, younger service teachers might more quickly imagine all Ministry of Education officials as punishing, while more experienced professional teachers might distinguish between those who are bad and not bad. In all of these instances, however, power is experienced as “close to the skin” and then

interpreted, imagined, and scaled up, on the basis of its closeness, to reflect a broader imaginary of the “bad” state, or the government turned against its people (Aretxaga 2003).

Similarly, teachers in the South Red Sea zone experienced being transferred to teach in remote locations in the Danakil desert not as part of a broader nation-building project but as a form of punishment. In doing so, teachers often cast blame on the punishing nature of their supervisors who, like Elias’s bad boss, often made decisions based on jealousy. Especially after the Wi’a incident, teachers increasingly commented that anyone who made trouble, complained, or spoke out might be *sent to the desert* as a punishment. There was some evidence for this belief that being transferred to the desert was a punishment. Teacher Ezekiel, who was transferred to Tio in 2000 at a time when many of his peers were being transferred to Asmara, was chair of his department and a highly regarded teacher. Ministry of Education officials argued that they needed strong, well-trained teachers in villages such as Tio, where a new Junior Secondary School had recently been opened, but Ezekiel insisted that his transfer was a punishment for being too outspoken. He often complained openly about problems with the school and policies of the local Ministry of Education office. He believed that he was a direct threat to the then regional director of the Ministry of Education and that he was transferred accordingly. Another teacher also transferred to Tio claimed that his transfer was a punishment as well and cast blame on the punishing nature of his supervisors rather than on his own actions when discussing the situation with me:

Jennifer: Tell me about your transfer to Tio.

Gebreselasie: [My transfer to Tio] seemed like a punishment. If you look at the soldiers, there are so many ways to punish them, but there is no way to punish teachers. Because we are National Service [and not earning salaries], they cannot take our salary. The only thing they can do is send us to Tio.

J: So what did you do to make them punish you?

G: I don’t think I did anything. As I told you, I was given some months’ rest, and I was in Asmara for about six months.

J: Did they send you [to Tio] for coming late to school?

G: They gave so many reasons for this.

I would like to highlight several points revealed by Gebreselasie’s comments. First, while Gebreselasie may have deserved to be disciplined for arriving

late—and, indeed, he was something of a bane to his supervisors—it is key to note that they had no means to discipline him because he was in National Service. National Service, which was the very mechanism set up to manage the population and transform the entire populace into a particular type of national subject, made it impossible to discipline and hold individual teachers accountable. Prior to summer 2001, at which time the vast majority of teachers were recruited into National Service, supervisors and school directors punished teachers by docking their salary. However, when teachers no longer received a salary because of National Service, there was suddenly no way to hold them accountable. Several supervisors and school directors expressed great frustration to me that there was no way to discipline teachers and often noted that if they were soldiers, there would be ways to “punish them.” (This is an example of the inefficiency of coercion and the ensuing impotence of the state, which I elaborate on in the next section.)

Second, and even more importantly, it is significant that Gebreselasie, like other teachers, believed that his being sent to a remote area was a punishment, and, furthermore, asserted that he had done nothing to deserve this punishment. When I asked Gebreselasie if the government transferred him because he showed up several weeks late for the school year, he waived his hand dismissively and said with disgust, “They gave so many reasons for this”—or, in other words, it had no good reason for this. Gebreselasie did not believe that this punishment/transfer was merited by any particular action on his part. Instead, he believed that it was characteristic of the state’s desire to punish.

Perhaps most importantly, Gebreselasie’s comment that “there are so many ways to punish soldiers” recasts the soldier from national symbol to punished figure. It is telling that in discussions that evoked teacher transfers as punishments, comparisons between teachers and soldiers often came up. These comments typically built on the idea that soldiers *could* be punished. In making this comparison, Gebreselasie and others who made similar comments undermined the symbolic value of a pivotal and much celebrated national figure—the *tegalalai/tegalalit*, or fighter. As noted in the previous chapter, the quintessential Eritrean is the fighter in the struggle for liberation. The fighter embodies nationalist values of personal sacrifice and willingness to defend or develop the nation. In contrast to the heroic revolutionary fighter, the punished soldier is cast as a victim of demands for endless service. The word “soldier” in Tigrinya tends to refer to professional soldiers, a category that many Eritreans argue does not exist in Eritrea. The occupational group described by the English word “soldier” was referred to

by participants in my study using two different terms in Tigrinya: When describing former fighters, Eritreans used the word *tegadelti*, but in contrast, those in military service tended to refer to themselves simply as *agelglot* (service), emphasizing their servitude (Bozzini 2013). When using the English word for soldiers, Eritreans described a group of people to be pitied because they were highly disciplined, were often punished, and had little control over their lives. Their bodies were totally at the mercy of the state. But even as teachers differentiated themselves from soldiers in their talks with me, they also believed that they were like soldiers. Like soldiers, teachers felt controlled by their supervisors and the state itself, but unlike soldiers, teachers' supervisors and directors did not control them as intensely as military authorities controlled soldiers. Teachers had much more freedom in their everyday lives.

Michael Herzfeld's (1997) notion of social poetics is useful here as a means to explore the interplay of official symbols and narratives with everyday discourses that reinterpret and rewrite official symbols and narratives. As Herzfeld (1997: 25) notes, social poetics "links the little poetics of everyday interaction with the grand dramas of official pomp and historiography in order to break down illusions of scale." If we understand Gebreselasie's commentary on soldiers as one such instance of these "little poetics of everyday interaction," we can see how this commentary reworks the "grand drama" of Eritrean nationalism, a drama that casts the figure of the soldier as the quintessential sacrificing, serving Eritrean. Rather, the soldier is symbolically evoked as a victim of a punishing state. Thus the state not only is characterized as inherently punishing but also, in characterizing soldiers as victims of punishment, engages and alters the symbolism of the nation itself.

Eritreans playfully engaged the idiom of the fighter/soldier. Ironically, as the Eritrean government has developed increasingly coercive mechanisms to shuttle all Eritreans into service, Eritreans have come to identify with being fighters/soldiers, but in the process the fighter, an icon of willing service, has been transformed into the soldier, a specter of punishment. Just as "in Sawa" has come to have negative connotations, the soldier has come to be used as an index of how the state "controls" its citizens in various forms of service. Casting "service," in its various forms, as a punishment delegitimizes the government's ability to require service from its citizens. In the absence of a widespread sentiment that people should serve the country, the government has had to resort to increasing levels of force to pull people into service. In turn, the people themselves have begun to find more ways to evade and avoid being caught by the government.

## “Sleeping Late and Making a Wide Turn”: Evasive Maneuvers and Impotence

During the course of summer 2002, the house where we were staying was often turned into a safe haven of sorts. We would hear a knock on the door and a friend or relative—a man of military age—would duck in, usually smiling and joking, making a quick escape from the authorities. Located in central Asmara, we were well positioned for that summer’s events. At times, it felt like a rolling party in our house. At other times, parties we had planned fell flat because everyone stayed home to avoid *gifa*. It was not uncommon to see young men duck into shops when walking the main streets. More common was for young men to avoid the main streets altogether. *Gifa* had the capacity to change ordinary, daily life events and reorder time in highly unpredictable ways. Coercive state effects not only “etatized” time but also politicized the ordinary actions of everyday life, commanding citizens’ bodies, time, and public spaces (Bayat 2010; Verdery 1996).

Coercion produces a vicious cycle. The regime was increasingly not imagined as the benevolent, caretaking state. It could no longer legitimately command Eritreans to do their national duty; it could only coerce them to do so. As Eritrea’s leadership became more and more reliant on using force to command Eritreans to do their “duty” as citizens, civil servants, and students and, specifically, to conscript them, the state became more illegitimate and impotent. When a regime must rely on force to govern, it strips itself of legitimacy, thereby further necessitating a reliance on force.

The concept of impotence, which I borrow from Achille Mbembe (2001), illuminates the effects of state coercion. Mbembe notes that authoritarian regimes produce a condition of impotence as they attempt to command subjects who are subtly but persistently resistant to their commands but never capable of overturning them. What I call coercion is in many respects similar to Mbembe’s notion of the *commandement*. As I have noted, according to Mbembe, when state subjects perceive that the state has the capacity to absolutely command (coerce) them—to tell them when, how, and where to walk, stand, dance, talk, work, fight, and so on, they will comply, but only to the extent that they are forced. Mbembe notes that as the *commandement* is enacted, symbolic and disciplinary realms join to produce docility and obedience, but they never quite produce complete compliance among citizens, and thus the seeds of transgression may emerge in subtle ways as symbols are transformed, rituals subverted, and narratives quietly rewritten.<sup>8</sup> Subjects simultaneously evade or resist the state *commandement* and ridicule those in power with all sorts of humorous and vulgar displays

that delegitimize their power. This process of evasion and ridicule leads to what he calls impotence. Impotence is not resistance to power but a condition of mutual disempowerment—an effect of coercion. Mbembe (2001: 111) argues that the subtle inversion of the signs and symbols of officialdom, rather than undoing official power, “produces a situation of disempowerment . . . for both ruled and rulers”; it erodes official power but fails to produce effective resistance, resulting in what he calls “mutual zombification.” Ruler and ruled are caught in a sort of bizarre, grotesque dance that leaves them both sapped as impotence profanes the sacred symbols of nation and state and also lays the groundwork for the evasion of state *commandements*.

*Gifa* created unofficial categories of people—those who were safe from prolonged detention and punishment and those who remained vulnerable to imprisonment, conscription, and further punishment. These categories did not necessarily reflect who was actually avoiding service and who was not. People with high positions in the ministries, who tended to be released quickly as soon as they were identified, were inconvenienced by *gifa* but not endangered by it. Civil servants who were doing essential jobs, such as doctors and nurses, tended to be released within a few hours. Teachers, who were on leave for the summer, might languish in detention for several hours or even days before a supervisor got around to getting them released. And those who were self-employed or business owners, and therefore not under the control of the government, might have a very difficult time being released unless they happened to have a close contact among the country’s leadership. Thus, those more essential to the state were relatively safer in times of *gifa*, while those who were not essential were in relatively more danger of being ignored, forgotten, and released only after a great deal of effort, or perhaps not at all.

The unpredictability produced by this time of intense *gifa* led not only to anxieties about being detained but also to tremendous inefficiencies. When people were detained for hours or days, they could not work. Because the net of *gifa* was cast so widely, even officials, administrators, and supervisors were detained. Initially when the 2002 *gifa* began, the only people qualified to secure the release of the detained were those who were very highly placed—in some cases, the minister or the minister’s deputy. This meant that during times of *gifa*, high officials were spending a great deal of time negotiating the release of their employees rather than attending to other tasks. Furthermore, *gifa* encouraged people to hide at home, leaving government offices and businesses understaffed. During *gifa*, young men’s friends, family members, and even supervisors advised them not to go out on the street, even if it meant not coming to work. During one particularly

challenging week in summer 2002, I had conversations with several teachers who had business to complete in the central Ministry of Education office and complained that they were unable to do their business because they were arrested every time they left their house. They were advised by Ministry of Education officials to stay home. Magnus Treiber (2009) also notes that one of his informants was told to leave work and go home, where he would be safe, because he did not have the correct paperwork. Employers and supervisors apparently thought it was easier to send people home to hide than to get people out of detention. Productivity slowed.

Through *gifa*, everyday life was politicized because everyone became potentially suspect of avoiding service. Ironically, this coercive politicization of everyday life rendered the functioning of the government itself completely inefficient, as Eritreans responded to this politicization of everyday life with evasion, something Asef Bayat (2010) notes is common under conditions of authoritarian rule. If the round-ups themselves were described as evidence of the mean-spirited nature of the government as a whole, the individuals carrying out the round-ups were described as ineffective tools in the hands of that mean-spirited government. Many Eritreans commented that the military police doing the round-ups were illiterate, did not recognize all forms of identification, and were from remote (read: less developed) parts of the country.

The Eritrean state had a strong need for a means to catch those evading National Service, but a limited technical capability to monitor the population (Bozzini 2011). Until about 2004, civil servants typically did not have papers that denoted that they had completed National Service, which made it difficult to ascertain who was and was not evading it (Bozzini 2011). Because so many people were in National Service, the government lacked clear mechanisms to show who should be in a military unit and who should not. Furthermore, a wide array of documentation could be used to show that someone was not required to be in National Service. Student IDs and ID cards awarded by an individual’s employing ministry typically served this purpose. But rather than actually proving completion of military service, these cards showed only that the individual was temporarily ineligible for service or had been ineligible at some point in the recent past. This plethora of forms of identification and documentation required that police or military personnel make determinations about their validity (Bozzini 2011). *Gifa* created a massive net intended to catch all who were evading military service, but in the absence of a clear means of identifying evaders, the mechanism proved clumsy and coercive. *Gifa* was a blunt object in the hands of a government that wanted to exert tight control over its entire



population but lacked the technology to do so. As more and more people started trying to evade service, this lack of technological capability became clear, leading the government to turn to force and creating a manifestation of the vicious cycle of impotence.

What evolved during summer 2002 was a series of techniques of evasion and a general sense of good-humored solidarity around how to best avoid *gifa*. By evasion, I refer to tactics to avoid being punished by the state (or avoiding coercion perceived to be punishment). When passing each other on the street, strangers would warn each other about which way to walk to avoid the soldiers. Rumors would circulate as to which days *gifa* would happen, and people would avoid going to work that day. One friend of mine articulated a strategy to evade *gifa* that I think is emblematic of the condition of impotence that marked this time period. Because *gifa* typically occurred during the hours when people were commuting to work and soldiers tended to be located on the busiest street corners, his strategy was to “sleep late” (meaning leave for work late) and to “make a wide turn” (meaning walk to work down side streets). His comment that he could avoid *gifa* by sleeping late and making a wide turn highlighted the absurdity of the situation and articulated the ethos of evasion that took hold that summer and came to demarcate Eritreans’ relationship with the state.

Jokes about *gifa*, such as my friend’s comment about sleeping late and making a wide turn, revealed that the overall climate in summer 2002 was not one of fear, although fear was present, but of solidarity in evading the authorities. A culture of evasion was produced that resulted in many people “sleeping late” or avoiding work altogether to evade being rounded up. If practices of *gifa* made things inefficient, then solidarities formed around evasiveness, and jokes made about evasion rendered the state completely illegitimate, ridiculous, and impotent.

Solidarities created around evasion extended to other areas during the years of my fieldwork as well. Teachers avoided returning to schools at the start of the school year, making schools start weeks and at times months late (something I take up in more detail in Chapter 4). In some regions where teachers traveled back and forth to Asmara regularly, I heard from supervisors in the Ministry of Education that schools ran only three days a week because teachers were constantly traveling to Asmara, thereby evading work. Civil servants also dragged their feet and refused to go to posts at times.

Perhaps the clearest example of evasion is reflected in the extraordinarily large numbers of people who have fled the country. While the number of people fleeing Eritrea has always been high, a variety of reports suggest that there has been a surge in these numbers (Al Jazeera 2014; Gedab News

2014c; UN News Centre 2014).<sup>9</sup> Eritreans continue to flee the country despite known, and increasing, dangers and risks of capture, kidnapping, or shipwreck in doing so. Recent accounts on opposition websites suggest that what we might think of as evasive tactics are becoming more widespread in other ways. These websites suggest that the army is operating at a fraction of its strength because so many have fled (Gedab News 2014b, 2014d). Awate notes that the army recently told returning recruits to stay home instead of returning to their units, and, taking advantage of a lapse in government control, many either fled or went into hiding to avoid being recalled to their units in the future (Gedab News 2014a).

I think it is also significant that evasion and avoidance are far more common than outright resistance in Eritrea. With a couple of notable exceptions, there have been no instances of outright, open, coordinated protest.<sup>10</sup> Evasion, however, is highly political. It is a form of what James Scott (1985) would call a form of “foot dragging” and a “weapon of the weak.” Typically, this type of resistance has an impact, as Scott argues, but it is not as effective at bringing about political change as more coordinated resistance. As I showed above, evasive maneuvers, such as sleeping late and making wide turns, make the functioning of the state inefficient but lack a coherent message or intention.

There are some interesting signs that more recently the tendency toward evasion has been galvanized and transformed into a more coordinated political message. In 2011, opposition groups inside Eritrea organized “Freedom Fridays.” Freedom Fridays are a form of protest in which Eritreans are encouraged to stay home on Fridays rather than going out, to act by not acting—in short, to be evasive. As this book goes to press, accounts gleaned from opposition websites suggest that government tactics in the latter part of 2014 have oscillated between increased coercion and evidence of loss of government control. In light of this, there is even more evidence that what have been individual evasive tactics are being organized into coordinated resistance movements. Reports on Asmarino in October 2014 note that Freedom Friday urged Eritreans to refuse to report for National Service, calling on them to do, or rather not do, something that it appears many were already inclined not to do in the first place (Arbi Harnet 2014a, 2014b, 2014c; Plaut 2014; Vincent 2014). Freedom Friday has “organized” people around refusal, or, in other words, organized people around a strategy they may have already been using to evade and avoid becoming a punished subject. If evasion has functioned as a spontaneous and logical response to state coercion, Freedom Fridays might be seen as an effort to coordinate and politicize this natural, everyday form of resistance. In short, Freedom

Fridays ascribe a political message to evasion and encourage Eritreans to oppose the regime by being evasive.

The government's loss of control in part comes from the sheer difficulty of managing the large numbers of people evading government control. If accounts of the military (and the civil service) operating at a fraction of its strength are true, it is no wonder that the government can no longer engage the population coercively. I can think of nothing that makes Mbembe's (2001) notion of impotence clearer—a government that cannot control its people because it has chased so many of them away by being too coercive, a government that has been so coercive and punishing that it no longer has the capacity to coerce and punish. The vicious cycle of coercion and evasion, which for so long has resulted in impotence—mutual disempowerment—may finally have run its course, ending the impotent stalemate between coercive state and subjects seeking to avoid punishment. Or, as many speculate, the government could return to even greater use of force to limit the capacity for escape from being a punished subject.

It is, perhaps, curious that, in a regime renowned for its long-term armed struggle for independence, evasion is the predominant form that resistance to the regime seems to be taking. I think there are a few reasons for this. First, it is very likely that many, if not most, Eritreans are afraid of outright resistance, something that is not surprising given what has happened to those who have attempted to resist the regime over the years. A number of writers have discussed the state's construction of fear (Feldman 1991; Green 1995; Skidmore 2004; Sluka 2000). However, an affective tone of fear is complex. The climate produced in Eritrea by the state's coercive effect at the time of my fieldwork reflected fear mixed with a number of other powerful emotions, such as anger at being coerced and solidarities formed around evasion. Fear was tempered by frustration and disappointment in the way things had turned out. The affective tone with which *gifa* was described reflected a sense of righteous anger at being denied rights and a sense of being entitled to certain freedoms. Additionally, fear was often accompanied by humor and shared strategies of evasion. People made jokes about the government's strategies of rounding people up not working very well. People were fearful enough that they tended not to resist in any coordinated fashion, but they often refused to comply with government mandates, citing all kinds of excuses or simply sleeping late and making wide turns. Second, beliefs in the caretaking state still coexisted with coerciveness. It is hard to mount outright resistance to a state that has delivered so much historically—independence and its promises. There were lingering beliefs that the government was using force only because extreme measures were needed to

protect its citizens from an ongoing threat—the return to war. The palpable sense of siege cultivated by the government and the ways in which a sense of siege continued to render the state maddeningly ambiguous are addressed in the next section.

## State of Emergency or State of Exception? Rumors, Rationale, and “the Last *Gifa*”

I arrived in Asmara from Assab to lecture at the university on November 15, 2004. A tension that encompassed the country as a whole was palpable in the capital city. The government had announced that everyone who had served in the military and was not currently working as a civil servant, including students over eighteen, was to report to his or her former military units. This order evoked memories from just prior to the war in 1998, when all reserve units were called up in a similar manner. It elicited a sense of fear of renewed war and of being on alert. In Asmara, fighter jets buzzed over the city every night for several weeks.

Around the same time (about ten days before I arrived in Asmara), an incident occurred that has come to be known as the Adi Abeto incident. Earlier that November, the government began rounding people up in the capital in what some of my interlocutors referred to as “a massive *gifa*.” Rumors about Adi Abeto not only had spread through Asmara but had already reached Assab. In fact, we heard that one of our colleagues, a teacher in the Senior Secondary School, had been arrested in this round of wide-sweeping *gifa*. When I arrived in Asmara, I was able to piece together what happened and recorded the following account from one of my interlocutors in my field notes:

My friend was there, and so I can tell you what happened. They [the people who were detained] were being held and got frustrated. They realized they could push down a wall, and they did. Two soldiers on the other side were crushed to death. Other soldiers started to fire. Prisoners, especially those without an ID, started stampeding to get out. Many died or were wounded either from the soldiers’ fire or from being stampeded.

The Adi Abeto incident, like *gifa* and the government’s coercion of civilian populations more broadly, poignantly reveals the maddening state of Eritrea during these years. Clearly Adi Abeto was an extreme manifestation of state violence, but it occurred amid an attempt by the government to

galvanize its defense capabilities. Conversations about Adi Abeto reflected struggles with questions about whether the state was good or bad. Was the violence of Adi Abeto an unfortunate side effect of necessary processes of calling up reserves, reconstituting anyone who could fight, and placing the country on war footing? Was it a necessary measure to protect the country from the threat of renewed war? Was the threat of war legitimate? Or were efforts to place the country on war footing a charade to create an illusion of danger and thereby justify these extreme uses of force? Was the government mandating brutality because it was brutal? What is maddening about the coercive state is that citizens can never quite know whether the state is using force for protective, and therefore benevolent, ends or malevolent ends.

Another way to think through this maddening condition in which the benevolence/malevolence of the state is ambiguous is to understand the blurry distinction between the state of emergency and the state of exception (Agamben 2005). By evoking states of emergency, something states often do in wartime or other crises, states claim exceptional powers, particularly the use of force. Agamben's (2005: 39) notion of the state of exception allows us to see how the state of emergency becomes normalized and operates as an ordinary technology of the state. Like the state of emergency, the state of exception derives from the perception or reality of being constantly under siege, or, in other words, from concerns about security. Indeed, Eritrea has been described as "a siege state," a place where exceptional measures are taken to reorganize society around the need to defend against perceived external threats to the nation (International Crisis Group 2010; Müller 2012a; Tronvoll and Mekonnen 2014). Siege gave a rationale to state coercion during the war, but after the war the sense of siege was more nebulous and no longer fully legitimated the use of force. In the years following the border war, this wartime state of emergency has been indefinitely extended. As the state of siege extends there are ever-expanding gray areas where written law becomes secondary to governing practice, including practices that are experienced as coercive. Because *gifa* and other forms of state coercion emerged from a wartime state of emergency, there was always a maddening ambiguity regarding whether the state was trying to punish its people for disloyalty or trying, albeit sloppily, to bring order to and improve the country.

Wartime entangles experiences of being coerced by the state with beliefs in a caretaking state. In wartime, the state is supposed to take care of its people, and many citizens are willing to do their part to defend the nation. For this reason, under conditions of war, many citizens are willing to accept a state of emergency, which extends greater powers to state actors to address security concerns (Agamben 2005). In Eritrea, commentary on

other instances of state violence also shows Eritreans’ attempts to reconcile state violence with the perceptions of an ongoing state of emergency. The following story told to a group of us in the school cafeteria and recorded in my field notes captures the tension between experiences of coercion at that time and rationalization of why the government needed to use force:

Iyasu told us a troubling story. He was at the front fighting during the third offensive during the border war. When he returned to Assab after the fighting stopped, he was rounded up. He remembered watching people who were resisting the soldiers. The soldiers were using a lot of force. He recounted that he saw people being handcuffed and tied around the neck. He saw people being beaten and yelled at. They tried to arrest him because the person he was with did not have an ID, but he convinced them to let him go because he had an ID. Iyasu in the end said, “This is a state of emergency, so the government has to do these things.”

Despite these extremes of violence, Iyasu attempted to explain the government reactions by saying, “This is a state of emergency.” The question of whether Eritrea is in a state of emergency is key to making sense of the maddening state in Eritrea—if the country faces a legitimate threat, then the government, according to some, may use exceptional powers, even against its own people, to keep the country safe. But if the threat is no longer legitimate, then the government’s use of coercion against its own people is malevolent and punishing, not benevolent and protective.

When the border war began in 1998, citizens were forced into the military and thus began to feel even more coerced and punished, but, until fighting ended in 2000, they also believed that what the government did was in the interest of defending the nation. Although a state of emergency was never formally declared in Eritrea, various government actions indicated that something approaching a state of emergency was in place. In 1998, just prior to the outbreak of war, everyone who had been trained in the military was recalled to his or her unit. Thus the wartime state of emergency allowed the government to extend the time-limited contract of National Service (a contract that allocates eighteen months of citizens’ lives to the government) indefinitely. Under conditions of “war and mobilization,” the National Service Proclamation states, “Anyone in active National Service is under the obligation of remaining beyond the prescribed period” (GoE 1995, Article 21). This is not particularly unusual in times of war, but during the war in Eritrea, the government also conscripted a much larger proportion of the

population. Therefore, wartime not only extended military discipline across a longer span of time for those recalled to National Service; it also expanded the number of people who came under military discipline. Eritreans were all directly affected by the war. Although there was still a sense that the government itself was dangerous, unpredictable, and could harm its citizens, there was also a sense that it was appropriate to mobilize citizens to defend the nation and that if the government needed to use force to do so, that force was justified. Not surprisingly, the desire for a state that could be thought of as benevolent, protective, and paternalistic coexisted with these fears. People understood that wartime produced a state of emergency, which might lead to extreme measures. Most who were headed off to the front lines during the war went willingly. The state was charged with defending the nation, and during the war there was an understanding that people needed to participate in this defense, but even at that point, using civilians, not military personnel to do so, created a sense of fear in the state, leading to the “maddening state” of tension between imaginaries of a paternalistic state and a coercive state (Aretxaga 2003).

After the war, the ongoing use of force was increasingly delegitimized through the discourse of punishment and solidarities formed around evasion of state coercion. In closing this chapter, I return to the maddening state to argue that, despite increased state illegitimacy, uncertainties about whether the state continued to be a caretaking, protective entity lingered in the imaginations of Eritreans. If imagining the punishing state is a way of interpreting state coercion as evidence that the state is malevolent, seeking out a rationale for the state’s use of coercion is a lingering attempt to imagine the benevolence in the caretaking, protective state.

Rumors that circulated in 2002 in an attempt to explain why the government was using *gifa* provide particular insight into attempts to make sense of being a coerced subject at this maddening time, during which the line between emergency and exception blurred. Many of these rumors attempted to ascribe a motivation to the government’s efforts to round people up. Some tried to ascribe a protective role to the government. Most were highly ambivalent. One rumor that was particularly common during summer 2002 (one of the most intensive periods of *gifa*) was that the government was not really trying to catch draft dodgers but was using *gifa* as a pretense to round up hidden political dissidents. These rumors suggested that *gifa* was effectively a cover for catching a small, limited number of individuals and that mass round-ups were a pretense for making isolated arrests. This rumor tried to distinguish between “bad” people who might actually be undermining the security of the country and other

“good” Eritreans. By evoking this rumor, Eritreans cast themselves as “good” and the government as attempting, albeit clumsily, to protect the country. Other rumors suggested that those detained during round-ups were suspected of producing counterfeit ID cards. Indeed, mass round-ups placed new importance on having a valid ID card and created a great deal of confusion about which ID cards were acceptable because they were not standardized. The fact that there were no standardized ID cards created a healthy market for counterfeit identification. Understandably, at this time, the government had great anxieties about the counterfeiting of ID cards, which would only make the population harder to manage and control, but like rumors that suggested that the government lacked the means to catch those who were opposing it, rumors about counterfeiting also revealed the weakness of the state.

In 2004, following the Adi Abeto incident, rumors took a different tone. Amid speculation about whether the nation was actually at risk of returning to war or the government was simply rattling the war drums to legitimize its use of force, many people suggested that, following the deaths at Adi Abeto, the government would cease using *gifa* as a technique because it would recognize the limits on its use of force. Adi Abeto was talked about as a sort of “last *gifa*,” and comments on it suggested that the government realized that things had gone too far. (Although, as David Bozzini [2011] notes in his work, *gifa* certainly did not end after the Adi Abeto incident, there was a sense that that was the last *gifa* for a while). Like rumors that sought to ascribe rationale to round-ups, rumors about “the last *gifa*” were also an attempt to find benevolence in the state. Commentary on “the last *gifa*” reflected the hope that state actors know when they have gone too far. These rumors suggested that the state knew its limits, alluding to the fact that while the government may have deemed some force necessary, it could be held accountable for the use of extreme force. All of this suggested an imaginary of state power in which the state was characterized as ultimately concerned for its people, if flawed and at times violent.

Rumors that suggest there is a reason for and a limit to state violence run counter to imaginaries of the punishing state. Ascribing a rationale to state violence reflects lingering desires for the paternalistic state—the state that would take care of its people—and recasts *gifa*, which was an experience of being a target of state coercion, as an experience of being accidentally caught up in the state’s attempt at protecting the population from various threats, such as counterfeiters, dissidents, and others. Imaginaries of being punished do the opposite—they delegitimize state violence and instead focus on experiences of being a coerced subject.



It is also important to note that the particular rumors about *gifa*, both in 2002 and 2004, demonstrated a popular awareness of state impotence. While these rumors ascribed a rationale and a limit to state violence, they also depicted the state as somewhat incompetent in these efforts. Rumors of counterfeiting reflected an imaginary of a state that could not keep the lid on illegal activity. Rumors of government attempts to catch someone elusive through *gifa* provided evidence of a government that had to resort to the sweeping, blunt instrument of mass round-ups to catch a small number of people. These rumors that tried to make sense of *gifa* thus revealed both a desire for a paternalistic state and a frustration with its ineptness. Rumors about counterfeiting, government dissidents, and “the last *gifa*” were simultaneously commentaries on the state’s preoccupation with control and an evaluation of its lack of capacity.

States can never control their populations solely through force. The demands that the Eritrean state placed on citizen bodies, particularly National Service, lost their legitimacy after the war, meaning that the government had to rely increasingly on coercion to conscript its citizens. But coercion produces a vicious cycle of force and evasion—increasing reliance on force renders that force less and less legitimate, leading increasing numbers of citizens to evade coercion, which in turn leads to increasing reliance on force. Additionally, as more and more citizens have to be forced into service, the state capacity to do so becomes weakened, making the state impotent both symbolically and in terms of its actual capacity to control its population.

State coercion is seldom legitimate, but it is always maddening. It results in subjects who commonly comment on being punished, forge imaginaries of the punishing state, evade, form solidarities around evasion tactics, and ridicule the state’s efforts at controlling them even as they fear the consequences of coercion and violence. And yet citizens’ desires for a benevolent state produce an attempt to rationalize its use of force, to make state actors out to be rational. However, even these rationales reveal the state’s weaknesses and impotent condition. The state cannot control without force, yet force can never be legitimate and only leads to further evasion. The ultimate state effect of coercion, thus, is impotence. This interplay of impotence and coercion played out in multiple spheres of Eritrean life, most notably in schools.