The Emperor: Downfall of an Autocrat Study Guide

The Emperor: Downfall of an Autocrat by Ryszard Kapuściński

BOOKRAGS

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Plot Summary

Emperor Haile Selassie ruled Ethiopia from 1930 to 1974. While his regime was dedicated to the improvement of Ethiopia and making economic progress to end or alleviate the suffering of the poor, corruption permeated through it, up to even the highest levels. When international attention was turned to the fact that nobles and dignitaries were living lives of luxury while hundreds of thousands were dying of disease and starvation, a revolution began in the country, ending ultimately in the Emperor's deposition.

The Emperor's reign was concerned with, above all, ensuring that he stayed in power. Every morning he was briefed with intelligence reports about any conspiracies or dissidents in the Empire. Positions were handed out based not on merit or ability, but rather on how the person filling the position would make the Emperor look. Thus, he often purposefully chose unskilled and incompetent people to fill important roles. That way, when a poor decision was made, even one that came ultimately from him, he could blame the minister. Likewise, people would never make the mistake of thinking that anything good in Ethiopia did not come from him. The only positive quality he valued in a potential appointee was loyalty.

A person, no matter how stupid, could have almost any job if the Emperor felt he could trust him. On the other hand, if the Emperor ever had reason to doubt someone's loyalty, they would be quickly removed from their positions and perhaps even punished. Loyalty usually did not come free, however, and the Emperor realized this. He kept his subjects loyal by making them totally dependent upon him. He raised up his ministers and advisers from torrid poverty to lifestyles they could never have imagined, and they remained conscious forever that he could just as easily take that away from them.

The Emperor's trust would be shaken when a man named Germame Neway led a revolt against the government. Neway had already disappointed the Emperor by disobeying the corrupt system of tribute which enriched the country's dignitaries. What was worse, however, was that Neway actually gave away land and money to the peasants. This could make the Emperor look bad and cause peasants elsewhere to demand the same thing. Therefore, Neway was shipped away to a remote province filled with nomads; there, he could not redistribute land. While there, Neway began hatching a secret conspiracy which involved some of the Emperor's most trusted dignitaries. The conspiracy went into action when the Emperor was out of town and the rebels managed to seize control of half of the military. The revolt failed, and order was restored in Ethiopia—for the time. After that point, an air of uncertainty lingered around the Imperial Palace.

Matters were made worse for the Emperor when a British journalist produced a documentary which showed both the corruption and miserable poverty of Ethiopia. Not only did this spark international outrage, it also caused a desire for reform and change in Ethiopia. Everyone had always been poor, and everyone always knew the government was corrupt, but now they wanted to change it. Mutinies began to break out

in the provinces and the military began to fall gradually into revolt. The revolution reached the Palace and the rebels began to arrest and imprison various officials they believed guilty of crimes. The Emperor, for his part, did very little to stop it. He was possibly in his nineties at this point—his age was somewhat of a mystery—and either felt like he could do nothing to stop the revolution or was simply too old to fight it. The rebels superficially maintain allegiance to the Emperor, an appearance which the Emperor tacitly corroborated with his inaction. The rebels did eventually dethrone the Emperor in 1974 and seize control. He died one year later of heart failure.

Part 1: The Throne, Pages 3-16

Part 1: The Throne, Pages 3-16 Summary and Analysis

Kapuscinski relates the conditions of Ethiopia upon his arrival. It was still then an oppressed nation governed by a harsh dictatorship. He had to take great care to make sure he was not detected by the government or he may have been arrested. His informants were hesitant to talk to him about the deceased Emperor Haile Sellasie. Many had learned to trust no one. Those who would talk to him were among the few still around of the Emperor's regime. Some had been killed or imprisoned and others had fled the country. He includes none of his informants' real names, for the obvious purpose of protecting their identities.

The Emperor was a small, thin man. He slept as little as possible, preferring instead to spend his time tending to his Empire. His first order of business every day was to listen to the briefs given to him by various informants. He was illiterate and therefore received all of his information orally. This had the added benefit of making it difficult for him to be accountable for a bad decision; he could simply blame the report this or that adviser had given him, and there would be no written record to contradict him. The informants would join him on his daily walk and tell him whatever new information had surfaced about conspiracies rising up against him. He never questioned or commented on the reports, fearing that it might influence how it was presented, nor did he store or record it. He instead had great confidence in his memory.

Afterwards, the Emperor was driven to the Old Palace to officially begin work. The Imperial convoy would always pass crowds kneeling by the road hoping to give a petition to the Emperor. Petitions were the most effective way to reach the Emperor and people often went into great debt just to have them written up. After the bodyguard rolled down the window and picked up a few at random, the convoy would go on its way to find another, different crowd outside of the palace. This crowd was composed of perhaps hundreds of men who had ambitions in working for the government. The Emperor had sympathy for those in the crowd because he had once been one of them. He had keen insight into the Ethiopian political machine and managed to carefully work his way up to becoming heir to the Emperor. His tactic was always to be invisible and inconspicuous; otherwise, he would make himself a target to his rivals.

Part 1: The Throne, Pages 17-26

Part 1: The Throne, Pages 17-26 Summary and Analysis

Kapuscinski never met with an informant alone. The Ethiopians were usually far too suspicious to even see a white man, let alone talk to him about sensitive matters. He was always accompanied by a guide whose name was Teferra Gebrewold. He first met Teferra when he came to Ethiopia for a convention of African political leaders. The Emperor had invited members of the press from around the world and Kapuscinski came to cover the occasion for Poland. The convention was held in the nation's capital, Addis Adaba. Since this convention was a moment when Ethiopia would, so to speak, be on a stage for the whole word, the Emperor had hastily tried to modernize it with new buildings and new public works, but the construction took longer than expected and carried on throughout the convention. Teferra was a representative from the Ministry of Information assigned to take care of the reporters. One reporter had mentioned to Teferra that he planned to complain to the Emperor about how poor their ability to communicate with their home countries had been. Teferra immediately looked downcast and started muttering that if they told the Emperor that, he would be beheaded. The group quickly changed their minds and instead raved to the Emperor about the job Teferra had done.

From then on, Kapuscinski visited Teferra every time he came to Addis Adaba. Teferra was spared by the revolution which deposed the Empire because he had, luckily, just recently stopped working in the Palace. Ethiopia was thrust into abysmal chaos afterwards. Nearly everyone owned weapons and shootings became endemic. The military government responded with the "fetasha," or search. Essentially, everyone was subject to search for weapons at almost anytime. The frequency of the searches was completely oppressive. Sometimes not even minutes would pass between them. The fetasha made traveling almost intolerable. Military men would stop the bus every few miles to tear open the luggage and search through it, often ruining the luggage or losing its contents. Despite all of this, Kapuscinski continued his work in Addis Adaba.

Part 1: The Throne, Pages 26-37

Part 1: The Throne, Pages 26-37 Summary and Analysis

The first hour the Emperor spent at the palace was known as the Hour of Assignments, because it was during this time that he handed out appointments, promotions, and demotions. The Emperor's intentions were always veiled with uncertainty. One never knew if he would receive a new promotion which would mean a dramatic increase in income or if one would be fired and penniless. The anxiety created by this helped feed the flames of faction. The Emperor tolerated, even encouraged, his subordinates to organize into factions and he carefully, though invisibly, managed them, to make sure none got too powerful. By keeping a balance of power among them, he protected his own reign.

One of the chief themes of the Emperor's rule was loyalty. He demanded loyalty from everyone. In fact, many of his most important positions—like Minister of the Pen, for example—were given to people chosen from the poorest, lowest social classes. Such a person would naturally be eternally grateful to the Emperor and he could therefore count on his loyalty. However, if he ever thought a person was not totally dedicated to him, it would always mean trouble for them, whether in the form of a demotion or a beheading.

The Emperor believed he was the Chosen One of God and he wanted people to regard him with a reverence close to worship. He filled all of the positions in the Empire himself—even positions far removed from his sphere of knowledge, like the headmaster of a school—and part of the reason for this was to ensure that the appointee was not someone who would, so to speak, outshine him. If someone else gained a reputation for reform or generosity, people might admire him instead of the Emperor. Therefore, the only time the Emperor allowed his underlings to engage in any kind of economic reform or public program was when they could make it look like his doing.

Since merit or talent was not really a consideration for receiving a position—and perhaps they could be detrimental—the key to rising up the ranks of the government was developing some kind of relationship with the Emperor. While becoming the friend of the Emperor was wholly unrealistic, one could hope to have more frequent and longer audiences with him than others. Access to the Emperor became a kind of metric for social status.

Part 1: The Throne, Pages 37 - 49

Part 1: The Throne, Pages 37 - 49 Summary and Analysis

After the Hour of Assignments came the Hour of the Cashbox when the Emperor would hand out money to needs he deemed worthy. The Emperor was often very free, even prodigal, with money. On his birthday he would shower crowds of the poor with money. Inevitably, however, these happy occasions would quickly turn sour as riots would break out over contested coins and bills. Despite his liberality, the government did not really possess as much money as people generally believed. The Emperor would sometimes be unable, or at least unwilling, to pay people he owed money and it fell to his ministers to cover it up without scandal.

One cause for the country's financial difficulties was the Emperor's frequent visits to the provinces. Most of Ethiopia was wretchedly poor but the governors were too embarrassed to let the Emperor see their region in shambles. Therefore, they would spend money which normally would be used for food and housing to make the roads immaculate, paint the government buildings, and so forth. Eventually, the Emperor realized this and came up with a compromise: He built a palace for himself in every province. This compromise turned out to be, in fact, absurdly extravagant. The palaces were always fully staffed and stocked with food in case the Emperor decided to visit and some he visited only once or twice.

The Emperor micromanaged government expenditures, just as he micromanaged almost everything else. Any expenditure over ten thousand dollars required his direct, explicit approval, but ministers often sought his approval for much smaller sums of money. The Emperor was noted and praised for his thriftiness, though this thrift would often be done in not entirely honest ways. For example, people would often come to him begging for some amount of money. To their joy, he would approve it and order his minister to give them the money. They would leave and find, horrified, that they received only a fraction of what they promised. Of course, they were never in any position to complain and so simply had to live with it.

The Emperor understood the importance of money in Ethiopia. In poor countries, having money has far more significance than it does in a rich country. People will come flocking from miles away to catch a glimpse of a millionaire; it is almost like seeing a saint or miracle-worker. Money, then, was a powerful tool for controlling the Empire. If people knew the Emperor could take away their wealth, they would do everything to stay in his favor. Once a person refused gifts from the Emperor out of principle; he was imprisoned and eventually executed. As the government started to deteriorate, and chaos started to spread through the country, greed intensified in the Palace. Everyone increasingly cared only for their own interest and hoped to pull the last scraps of meat off the nation's carcass.

Part 1: The Throne, Pages 49 - 56

Part 1: The Throne, Pages 49 - 56 Summary and Analysis

After the Hour of the Cashbox was the Hour of Ministers. During this time the Emperor met with his various ministers, who were invariably close at hand, to discuss matters related to their posts. The Emperor showed a special favor to incompetent ministers because it made his own magnanimous works stand out. The Emperor actually had made a number of truly humane reforms for the country. For example, he abolished many of the laws that existed in rural areas which called for cruel and severe punishments of crimes. One of his reforms turned out to be somewhat imprudent as far as protecting his power. He decided to begin sending some youths abroad for college. When the students came back and had a point of a reference to compare Ethiopia with, they immediately started to cause trouble. Fortunately for the Emperor, this problem was not long-lasting. It turned out that little attention would wind up really being turned upon him because the dissident students would often get swept up in criticizing and trying to fix some foolish, unimportant decision made by this or that minister.

After the Hour of Ministers was the Hour of the Supreme Court. The Emperor heard cases and would mete out justice as he saw fit. If he sentenced someone to death, his decision was final and they would be executed immediately. The court was modeled after the court of King Solomon, for the Emperor believed him to be his direct ancestor. After the Hour of the Supreme Court, the Emperor returned to his home for dinner and the Old Palace would clear almost immediately.

Part 2: It's Coming, It's Coming, Pages 59 - 75

Part 2: It's Coming, It's Coming, Pages 59 - 75 Summary and Analysis

The Emperor's court was, unsurprisingly, filled with highly ambitious men. They sought advantage in any way possible and even bickered over their order in the Imperial procession. Makonen Habte-Wald was an exception to this rule, however. He truly served out of devotion to the Emperor. He lived modestly—drove an old car and lived in a small house. He was technically charged with monitoring and managing the nation's industry, but in truth his real responsibilities involved creating and maintaining a network of informants for the Emperor. This network kept tabs on anyone who might pose a threat to the Emperor's rule.

One such person was a man named Germame Neway. He first rose to power in Ethiopia as a governor of a region in the south. His rise to power had people gossiping that he was one of the Emperor's favorites and it was generally believed that he had a bright future ahead of him. Germame's prospects quickly changed, however. Germame took tributes—bribes, that is—like all other governors. Unlike the other governors, however, he used the money to build schools. This outraged others in the government because it threatened the system of bribery which made them rich. The Emperor, however, did nothing until Germame's reforms grew and he began to give away land to peasants. Germame was summarily moved to govern a region which was inhabited only by nomads and, therefore, had no land to give away.

This demotion evidently soured Germame to the Emperor since he was a very idealistic man. Germame, along with his brother, the head of the Imperial police force, and twenty-two others, established a group dedicated to overthrowing the government. The Emperor dismissed warnings of this group, refusing to believe that Germame's brother, Mengistu, would betray him. Workneh was one of the Emperor's "personal people"—the group of people the Emperor had picked by hand from the poorest echelons of Ethiopian society and made into wealthy, prestigious nobility.

When the Emperor left the country to visit Brazil, the group went into action and began arresting government officials. The revolutionary group had control of the Emperor's Guard but were opposed by the army. Peasants, too, joined the fight against the rebellion, recalling how the Emperor would shower them with gifts and money. The revolution, then, was short-lived. Germame and Mengistu managed to escape alive but a five thousand dollar bounty was immediately put on their head. They were found by peasants in a village soon after. They tried to commit suicide but Mengistu survived and was executed by the government for treason.

Part 2: It's Coming, It's Coming, Pages 75 - 88

Part 2: It's Coming, It's Coming, Pages 75 - 88 Summary and Analysis

Part 2: It's Coming, It's Coming: Pages 75 - 88

There was a noticeable change both in the Emperor and in the way the Palace was run after the failed coup. First of all, any talk of the coup—along with many other dark pages in the country's history—was strictly forbidden. The Emperor had also silently and gradually begun a purge. He never liked to make any dramatic change, because it could cause excessive fear or excitement. Nonetheless, palace denizens could not help but become anxious as they noticed their peers losing their jobs and new, fresh faces being brought in to replace them.

Despite these efforts, unrest began to gradually brew in the country. A vaguely rebellious mood began to engulf the towns and usually the sources of this mood were the universities. The Emperor had always been sympathetic to ideas of progress and economic reform—and after the failed revolt, he even dedicated a new hour of his day to the subject—but intellectuals in the country had become increasingly hostile to the manner of his reforms. They criticized him for focusing on reforms which neglected the poverty oppressing most of the country. Calls for radical reforms inspired by socialism and communism began to surface.

Part 2: It's Coming, It's Coming, Pages 88 - 103

Part 2: It's Coming, It's Coming, Pages 88 - 103 Summary and Analysis

The Emperor began going on more trips abroad to visit foreign nations. There he would secure promises for loans or discuss issues affecting humanity or Africa as a whole. Though the Emperor always stayed aware of what was happening at home, these trips were a kind of vacation from the mounting stress at home. Dissenters had risen up to speak out against the Emperor and, more troublesome than that, people listened to them.

In response to this, the Emperor set up a police state, or at least strengthened the existing one. He dedicated a new hour of the day to affairs related to the military and police. This hour, however, largely consisted of showering officials with money. After the Neway revolution, the leaders of the "forces of order" felt entitled to better compensation. It eventually got to a point where forty percent of the government's budget was dedicated to the military and the police. By comparison, only one percent was dedicated to farmers. In the Empire's new police state, spies were everywhere trying to root out any hint of dissent or revolution. People quickly adapted, however, more or less nullifying the Emperor's efforts. They ingeniously developed a new language, which the spies could not understand, and thus could control what was heard by the government and what was not.

The Palace was shocked one day to discover that an uprising had broken out among the peasants in the Gojam Province. The cause for the uprising was a burdensome tax levied on them, a tax which the Emperor levied in order to fill the dwindling treasury. In those times, his officials had become bolder in their financial demands and, in order to keep his ministers loyal, he had to shower them with even more money. Though the tax was the Emperor's idea—as was any major policy decision, and most minor ones—it was naturally effected through one of his ministers. The minister—by design—took the blame for the tax and it was, in time, repealed. The peasants went back to work, appeased for the moment. The Emperor then re-imposed the tax but in a more careful way. Instead of burdening the peasants with a large tax all at once, it was levied gradually. As intended, the peasants did not care when it was done this way.

Dissent still festered throughout the Empire, however, and the focus was always upon the university. Thinking was considered a dangerous thing at the time; it was better, people believed, to not think and just follow the wise. Nonetheless, ideas of reform and, implicitly, revolution began to develop at the university. The Emperor tried to drown out the effects of the universities by distracting the people with feasts and parties. People who are too busy eating and drinking have no time to think. The attempts ultimately failed. A turning point in the Empire's history was when a Prince decided to organize a

demonstration among students loyal to the Emperor. The Emperor was far-sighted, however, and realized it was a bad idea, but he was too late to stop it. The demonstration happened as planned—the loyal "students" were mainly policeman dressed up like students—and it was quickly flooded with dissident students who demonstrated against the Emperor. The police force was called in to stop the protest and it resulted in the death of a student, Tilahum Gizaw. He became a kind of martyr and catalyst for the student movement. Demonstrations multiplied and, with them, the corpses of students.

Part 3: The Collapse, Pages 107 - 120

Part 3: The Collapse, Pages 107 - 120 Summary and Analysis

Uncertainty permeated the air of the Empire in 1973, the year the real troubles began. In that year, reporter Jonathan Dimbleby produced a documentary juxtaposing the lavish decadence of the Emperor with the miserable poverty of those living in the provinces. Thousands, perhaps even hundreds of thousands, had starved to death, and many more would in the coming years if something was not done about it. The Emperor, of course, was displeased by this. The general feeling among loyal palace officials was that this report and others like it were distortions. While people certainly were starving, there was also great progress being made in the Empire, but reporters were never interested in showing that.

Initially, the official policy of the Palace was to deny that there was hunger and starvation. This policy came to a quick end when dissident University students provided proof otherwise. The Ethiopian government then pleaded for international aid, which came swiftly. The effect of the aid, at least immediately, was negligible, however. Corrupt governors hoarded the food sent by charities and foreign governments and sold it at high prices; very little actually reached the people and starvation continued more or less unabated. Aid was suspended altogether when a minister decided to levy a customs tax on it; if people wanted to donate food, they had to pay a fee to the government. The Emperor tacitly approved of this policy because he hated the publicity that his country had received.

Some even attempted to justify the existence of hunger in the kingdom by means of their religion (which was an ancient form of Christianity). Indeed, one of Kapuscinski's own interviewees expressed the view that hunger and privation was good for the soul. A hungry soul had no time to think about sin; the only thing it could think about was food. Hungry people tended to make good subjects, as did people who were well off and stood to lose everything if the Empire collapsed. The troublemakers, then, were those who had something, but not much.

Part 3: The Collapse, Pages 120 - 138

Part 3: The Collapse, Pages 120 - 138 Summary and Analysis

In 1974, the military takeover of Ethiopia began. It was not immediately an organized movement which aimed at political revolution. Rather, it started with uprisings of soldiers here and there, complaining about having to eat rotten food or not having access to water. Eventually, such an uprising began in Addis Adaba, near the capitol. Curiously, the Emperor made no attempt to stop or slow the progress of this rising as, one by one, the divisions of the military joined with the dissidents. Superficially, the military still maintained loyalty to the Emperor, and in a strange way, this pleased the aging ruler.

The Palace officials divided into three different factions in reaction to the crisis. One group known as the Jailers advocated direct action be taken against the rebels. They wanted their leaders to be jailed and control of the country retaken by force. This movement was led by Tenene Work, the Emperor's daughter. Next were the Talkers, who wanted to communicate and compromise with the rebels. Finally, there were the Floats, who represented not so much a definite solution to the crisis, but rather an attitude of simply waiting to see what happens, hoping it turns out well (for them).

Throughout the crisis, the Emperor remained almost completely passive, whether by intention or simply because of his old age—he was probably in his nineties at this time. He met with leaders of all the factions and heard their arguments, but never seemed to approve of any of them. He even met with the rebels who were now arresting palace officials one by one, though doing so in his name. He had made some minor attempts to appease the rebels at the outset of the rebellion. He promised higher wages and fired officials which had angered the movement, but these mere administrative actions could not stop the chain of events that had been set into motion.

A finance minister had come up with the idea of building dams. By building dams, he argued, large tracts of land could be made arable and the hunger crisis would disappear. Of course, how money could be raised for this project was unclear. Large dams were very expensive and would take many years to build. Meanwhile, the provinces would only grow poorer and more wretched; more bodies would wither away and die. The Emperor, however, favored this project, though it would never see the light of day. Dams would be monuments that would endure long beyond his death. People hundreds of years later could look at the dams and remember that he had built them. Saving people from starvation, however, left no such legacy; starving people died anyway, after all.

With their ranks dwindling, palace officials became desperate. They were trying to find some idea or formulate some plan which could give them some hope, however remote, of restoring the status quo which had made their lives so comfortable. Finally, someone proposed that there be a public celebration of the Emperor's birthday. A great party was

thrown on this occasion and the Emperor gave a tearful speech blessing and thanking everyone in the government, including the army. At this point, it was clear that the Empire was coming to an end.

Part 3: The Collapse, Pages 139 - 164

Part 3: The Collapse, Pages 139 - 164 Summary and Analysis

The Emperor's last days in his palace were spent among dignitaries whose numbers diminished as more were hauled to prison each day. In spite of this calamity, the Emperor ordered a strict regimen of calisthenics be followed by all of the dignitaries in the Palace. The idea was met with a natural resistance, but the Emperor insisted and his subjects obeyed. The calisthenics groups had to be small. The army would start arresting people if there was ever a large gathering.

Eventually, the Emperor lived alone in his Palace with only his valet. The two would spend these days quietly. They would go to Mass in the morning and pray and spend the rest of the day reading. The Emperor was told to watch television that night and did. Dimbleby's documentary about Ethiopia was on television and he stayed up to watch the whole presentation. Not long after, soldiers led him out of the palace into the back of a Volkswagen and took him away from the Palace. All the while, both sides continued to exchange compliments and encouragements. The Emperor even said that if his deposition was good for the country, then he supported it.

The army had already liquidated all of the Emperor's wealth in Ethiopia but could not lay hands on the significant sums of money he held in foreign accounts. Estimates about the value of these holdings vary—some say he had several billion, but it was probably a few hundred million. Army officials prodded him for the money, saying how it could be spent to feed the poor and starving, but the Emperor refused. The money was never recovered.

The next year, 1975, the Emperor died of heart failure.

Characters

Emperor Haile Selassie I

Emperor Haile Selassie I was the Emperor of Ethiopia from 1930 to his deposition in 1974. He was believed to be a kind of Divine figure, the descendant of Solomon and head of the Church, whose authority was totally unimpeachable and absolute. Most of his efforts were directed towards, first, ensuring he stayed in power and, second, keeping up an appearance befitting his position. Thus, most of his days were spent listening to reports about conspiracies threatening to take him out of power, appointing ministers who would make him look good (which often meant that they were not entirely competent), and maintaining the loyalty of his workers. He was a clever and insightful man who was, for the most part, successful in managing a political situation which was often trying. He defied the expectations one might have of an absolute monarch. Though political opponents were executed and disloyalty was severely punished, most of the Emperor's actions were done subtly and gently. He believed in making people his allies rather than creating and eliminating enemies. This often resulted in tolerating, even promoting, corruption in the government's ranks and he seemed to be fine with that.

As he advanced in age, his solicitude towards staying in power waned. He seemed passive and even helpless as the revolution gradually dismantled his government and imprisoned his dignitaries and ministers. His attention turned, instead, on promoting his legacy. He planned a massive project to dam the Nile river, thus turning much of Ethiopia's wasteland into fertile land. Though it would take many years to complete and would cost large sums of money—and no one knew exactly where the money would come from—it would eventually solve Ethiopia's hunger crisis. At least, that was superficially the motivation for the project. In reality, the Emperor wanted to leave a monument to himself so people would never forget his reign.

The Dergue

The Dergue was the revolutionary movement which ultimately took political control of Ethiopia and dethroned the Emperor. The Dergue developed out of the disorganized unrest which began to afflict Ethiopia in the early 1970s. People had become upset with the corruption of the government. Officials were hoarding food and selling it at outrageous prices, prices which were too high for the massive numbers of poor people living in Ethiopia. To make matters worse, the food they were hoarding was largely produced by the same Ethiopians who could not afford to pay for it. It was perhaps a natural response, then, when people decided to reform the government through violence and pockets of rebellion emerged throughout Ethiopia.

In the capitol city, Addis Adaba, a movement of university students and professors had formed in ideological opposition to the Emperor's government. More informed than the

hunger-driven revolt of the provinces, the students demanded the government be reassembled from top to bottom and became some of the Emperor's harshest critics. Naturally, the university movement found a suitable ally in the provincial movement. This alliance, in time, developed into what was known as the Dergue, an identifiable, tangible revolutionary organization. The Dergue controlled almost all of Ethiopia's military and met little resistance from the aged Emperor anyway. After clearing out the Palace by arresting and imprisoning officials, they eventually dethroned the Emperor himself.

Ryszard Kapuscinski

Ryszard Kapuscinski is the Polish journalist who visited Ethiopia and collected the interviews which compose this book.

Teferra Gebrewold

Teferra Gebrewold was Kapuscinski's guide and aid in interviewing people close to the Emperor. Ethiopians were suspicious in general and would never have opened up to a foreign white man.

Germame Neway

Germame Neway was an Ethiopian governor who led the first, failed revolution against the Emperor's government. He had been punished by the Emperor for his progressive, reform-minded style of governing and, presumably, these same principles guided his attempts to overthrow the government.

Mengistu Neway

Mengistu Neway was a general in the Ethiopian government who joined Germame Neway's revolution. Prior to the revolution, he was a trusted friend of the Emperor and the Emperor was deeply hurt by the betrayal. He was one of the only leaders of the revolution to be caught alive and was publicly hanged.

Jonathan Dimbleby

Jonathan Dimbleby was a British journalist who visited Ethiopia to study its people and government. He was horrified to see corrupt politicians living luxuriously while the common people starved and died. He produced a documentary which drew international attention to Ethiopia. Many people believe that his documentary helped lay the foundation for the unrest which eventually toppled the Emperor's regime.

Tilahum Gizaw

Tilahum Gizaw was a university student who was killed during an anti-government demonstration. His death was a catalyst for further political turmoil.

Aklilu Habtawald

Aklilu Habtawald was Ethiopia premier during the turbulent 1960s and '70s. Though almost all Ethiopian dignitaries were corrupt, he was especially mercenary for his tolerance of abuse and exploitation. The Emperor tried to appease the rebels by dismissing Aklilu, but the revolution rolled on anyway.

The Emperor's Valet

The last person left in the Palace's staff was the Emperor's valet. He spent the last days with the Emperor before the revolution dethroned him and provided valuable testimony to Kapuscinski.

Objects/Places

Ethiopia

Ethiopia is a nation on the Eastern coast of Africa. Emperor Haile Selassie ruled Ethiopia for nearly a half decade.

Addis Adaba

Addis Adaba is Ethiopia's capitol and the location of the Emperor's two main palaces.

The New Palace

The New Palace was the Emperor's residence.

The Old Palace

The Old Palace was the government's official headquarters.

The Hour of Assignments

The Hour of Assignments was the Emperor's first official point of business each day. During this time he hired, promoted, demoted, and fired government officials.

The Hour of the Cashbox

The Hour of the Cashbox followed the Hour of Assignments. During this time the Emperor received people asking for money to fund this or that government project and decided whether or not to fund it. Since the government was almost always short on money, he would often give people less than they asked for.

The Hour of the Supreme Court

The Emperor was the Supreme Judge of Ethiopia and he held court each day during the Hour of the Supreme Court. He exercised total judicial power and could decide unilaterally to acquit someone or have them executed.

The Hour of Development

The Hour of Development was instituted after the failed revolution of Germame Neway. It was devoted to coming up with ways to modernize and update Ethiopia.

Fetasha

"Fetasha" is Amharic for "search" and refers to the frequent searches everyone in Ethiopia had to submit to after the fall of the Emperor's government. Kapuscinski found them burdensome, even terrifying, but decided to pursue his research regardless.

Personal People

The Emperor kept a group of people around the Palace known as a "personal people." These people were drawn from the poorest villages and provinces of Ethiopia, given a comfortable income, and assigned some post or duty for the government. The Emperor believed such people would be almost unflinchingly loyal, since they knew that he had the power to take everything away from them.

Ethiopia: The Unknown Famine

"Ethiopia: The Unknown Famine" was a documentary produced by Jonathan Dimbleby which showed the world the depth of Ethiopia's hunger crisis.

The Fashion Show

Large assemblies were strictly forbidden in the Empire to discourage revolutionary conspiracies. An exception was made for a university fashion show. This exception turned out to be imprudent—from the point of view of the government—because revolutionist students used it as a staging ground from which to launch their rebellion.

Themes

Lingering Loyalty to Emperor Among Interviewees

Since most of the book is composed of interviews of people who had worked in the Emperor's Palace, the presentation of the facts is colored by their beliefs and biases. Prevalent throughout the testimonies are references to the Emperor as "His Ineffable Majesty" or "His Indefatigable Majesty" or "His Most Virtuous Majesty." As the news clippings at the end of the book (164) show, Haile Selassie stilled believed he was the Emperor even after he had been officially dethroned. It should not be surprising, then, that his former dignitaries—who became wealthy and comfortable solely by his hand—should still refer to him with his Imperial titles.

The affection shown towards the Emperor runs deeper than mere titles, however. Even in situations which seem totally indefensible, the interviews almost invariably take the Emperor's side. For example, they never criticize the amount of corruption that the Emperor both participated in and engaged in. They acknowledge that governors were hoarding grain while their peasants suffered and starved to death, but they only bring it up incidentally. The first time the reader ever hears of starvation is when one of the interviews mentions that foreign journalists had exposed it to the rest of the world. Further, far from agreeing with the outrage, or even the human sympathy, which motivated the journalists, the interviewees condemn them. They denounce them for showing only the suffering and excluding the progress being made in the country (progress which was rather minimal, of course). While such actions might be reasonable—or at least unsurprising—from someone who was still in power, it is rather curious that these interviewees still maintain their loyalty years after the Emperor's deposition and death.

Ethiopian Cultural Attitudes Are Difficult for Westerners to

A Western reader will immediately notice that the Ethiopians—both those interviewed and those described by the interviewees—see the world in a way very different and very foreign to the Western mind. Frequently, this world view is manifested implicitly throughout their testimony. For example, it is difficult to comprehend the utter loyalty Ethiopians generally had towards their Emperor. All of those interviewed by Kapuscinski continue to refer to the Emperor by his royal titles and show only the greatest respect towards him. Likewise, as much as the government came under criticism during the revolutionary years, only the most radical and outspoken dared criticize the Emperor himself. For the most part, blame was placed upon this or that minister or official, even when responsibility ultimately laid with the Emperor himself. The revolution vowed obedience to the Emperor until the very end. They even claimed that as they were arresting his officials that they did so in his name.

The difference in cultures is occasionally made explicit, however. For example, one Ethiopian official (44-45) mentions how difficult it is for the Westerner to understand how money is viewed in a poor country like Ethiopia. While Westerners certainly have a healthy love of money—like any place—in poor countries, having money makes one into a kind of demigod. People will come from far and wide just to see a millionaire. Understanding this helps one understand the kind of complete control the Emperor had over his officials. He raised most of his dignitaries from destitute poverty and they labored under the knowledge that he could easily put them back.

Blame for Emperor's Downfall Attributed to External Factors

The Empire and the Emperor had an almost theological significance in the minds of Ethiopians, at least those who worked closely with the Emperor. Indeed, the Emperor himself was a kind of religious figure, the "King of Kings," the ancestor of Solomon, the Chosen One of God to rule Ethiopia. Since, therefore, it was by Divine Right that Haile Selassie was Emperor, it was impossible for loyal Ethiopians to believe that the Emperor could ever be dethroned; and, if he were to be dethroned, it certainly would not be because of anything he did. This attitude is verbalized explicitly by one official: "I don't have to explain to you, my friend, that we were beset by a devilish conspiracy. If it hadn't been for that, the Palace would have stood for a thousand more years, because no Palace falls of its own accord" (124).

The interviewees, then, find the cause for political unrest elsewhere. Though they acknowledge the country's problems—no one could deny that Ethiopians were starving by the thousands, though the Palace did try for some time to do so—they try to diminish or justify them. One official, for example, argues that hunger is good for people, because it lets them more easily live a life of virtue: "The usefulness of going hungry is that a hungry man thinks only of bread" (113). When Ethiopia's poverty crisis was made known to the world at large, the interviewees—mainly men who had some kind of political power—deny that the government had any kind of responsibility for it. Hunger and corruption were simply facts of life in Ethiopia. No one had complained about them before, so it made no sense to begin now. They believed the whole controversy and outrage was a result of the machinations of scheming journalists who had some inexplicable agenda against "His Majesty." Likewise, one interviewee points out the decision to send youths to universities abroad as one of the Emperor's few mistakes. By doing so, he made the imprudent error of letting Ethiopians see other countries and have their heads filled with Western ideas about economics and justice. This habit of "thinking" becomes widely condemned by the Empire's servants.

Style

Perspective

Kapuscinski was a Polish journalist who came to Ethiopia several times in order to understand the reign and fall of Emperor Haile Selassie I. His interest in Ethiopia's political history is complex. On the one hand, it is hard to imagine that the political situation of Poland did not factor in to this work. Poland at that time was being oppressed by a Communist dictatorship and surely his largely Polish audience (the book was originally published in Polish and only translated to English much later) would find parallels both between the Emperor's regime and the military regime which followed it.

On the other hand, Kapuscinski is legitimately interested in understanding Ethiopia. His interest is not narrowly confined to exposing political, social, or economic justice. In short, he does not style himself another Jonathan Dimbleby. In the sections of the book he wrote himself, Kapuscinski does point out many dark spots of Ethiopian history his interviewees neglect or forget, and for the most part his judgments of the Emperor are less forgiving. However, he does see positive aspects of the Emperor's rule and stops short of either condemning him totally or supporting the military dictatorship which followed him. In fact, he significantly points out the oppressive and even frightening searches he had to endure as part of the "fetasha:" It is difficult to understand why he would include these reflections on the revolutionary regime if he did not want it to cause some sympathy for the regime it revolted against. In other words, Kapuscinski might believe that the Emperor was in many ways corrupt and dictatorial, but he also acknowledges that, in many ways, his rule was preferable to what upended it.

Tone

The author of the book himself—whose sections make up only a minority of the book—for the most part writes with a scholarly, objective attitude. Compared to his interviewees—who make no attempt to conceal their biases and judgments about the Emperor—Kapuscinski might seem to be critical of the Emperor. However, it is probably more correct to label Kapuscinski's tone as "balanced." While he does sometimes criticize the Emperor for his lavish lifestyle and for his arrogant attitude towards others, he also occasionally points out some of the Emperor's virtues. This balanced attitude is illustrated nowhere more explicitly than page 101, where he writes: "In those years existed two images of Haile Selassie. One, known to international opinion, presented the Emperor as a rather exotic, gallant monarch, distinguished by indefatigable energy . . . The other image, formed gradually by a critical and initially small segment of Ethiopian opinion, showed the monarch as a ruler committed to defending his power at any cost, a man who was above all a great demagogue and a theatrical paternalist . . . And as often happens, both these images were correct."

Since the better part of the book is made up of directly presented interviews, it is worth considering the general tone Kapuscinski's interviewees speak with. Most of them seem as if they were still officials working for the Emperor. His royal titles—which seem to be without number—are used constantly and he is almost never referred to by his real name, Haile Selassie. They speak of the last days of the Empire with sorrow and it is evident that they wish those times could, somehow, return.

Structure

The book is divided into three large sections. These large sections are broken down occasionally into smaller, unlabeled subsections, which mark changes in subject or theme. The book as a whole is composed almost entirely of interviews with people who used to work with the Emperor. Few people really knew the Emperor; he purposefully stayed aloof and really had no close friends or confidants. Rather, the people Kapuscinski interviews are those who held doors or placed pillows beneath his feet. The closest thing to a friend is the Emperor's valet, whose testimony is the last recorded in the book.

In addition to the interviews, Kapuscinski occasionally intersperses his own writing. These sections serve several functions. In the first section of the book, he uses the section to describe how Ethiopia is at the time of his writing (around 1978) perhaps as a point of reference for and contrast to how Ethiopia was, as presented through the testimonies in that section. These written sections also occasionally contain summaries of Ethiopia's history or Kapuscinski's judgment about the Emperor and the events that took place around him.

The first of the book's three sections, "The Throne," is concerned with providing the reader background on how the Emperor lived and what kind of government he ran. This information is all presented with an emphasis on Palace life; government policies affecting the outlying provinces are generally not discussed, for example. The second section, "It's Coming, It's Coming," talks about the events which set the stage for the eventual revolution in the 1970s. The most significant event in this section is the failed revolution led by Germame Neway; that revolt set a tone of pessimism throughout the palace and country. The third section, "The Collapse," recounts the final years of the Empire as it gradually was eroded by the revolutionary forces of the Dergue. The book ends with two news clippings. The first is about how the Emperor still believed he was the ruler of Ethiopia even after he had been dethroned. The second briefly mentions that he died of "circulatory failure."

Quotes

"First of all, one can't unmask oneself too early, showing the rapacity for power, because that galvanizes competitors, making them rise to combat. They will strike and destroy the one who had moved to the fore. No one should walk in step for years, making sure not to spring ahead, waiting attentively for the right moment. In 1930 this game brought His Majesty the crown, which he kept for forty-four years." (16)

"I had fetasha dreams. A multitude of dark, dirty, eager, creeping, dancing, searching hands covered me, squeezing, plucking, tickling, threatening to throttle me, until I awoke in sweat. I couldn't get back to sleep until morning." (26)

"As it happened, however, not only did His Benevolent Majesty advance people; unfortunately, upon perceiving disloyalty, he demoted people as well. If you will excuse my vulgar words, he kicked them into the street. Then one could observe an interesting phenomenon: upon contact with the street, the effects of promotion disappear. The physical changes reverse themselves, and the one who has hit the street returns to normal. He even manifests a certain exaggerated proclivity to fraternize, as if he wanted to sweep the whole affair under the rug an, to wave it away and say 'Let's forget all that,' as if it had been some illness not worth mentioning." (36)

"It is true that some excesses were committed. For instance, a great Palace was constructed in the heart of the Ogaden Desert and maintained for years, fully staffed with servants and its pantry kept full, and His Indefatigable Majesty spent only one day there." (42)

"Next he writes that he [the Emperor] forbade the custom that a man who had been accused of murder—and this was only an accusation by the common people, because there were no courts—would have to be publicly executed by disembowelment, with the execution performed by the closest member of his family, so that, for example, a son would execute his father and a mother her son." (51)

"And those who had insulted His Unrivaled Majesty went straight to hell, my friend." (73)

"Although sometimes I think it's better after all if they start to sniff around. Because if they start to sniff around, at least you can come back to existence, if only in a damned and negative way." (82)

"A year after the Gojam uprising . . . a singular misfortune happened to me: my son Hailu, a university student in those depressing years, began to think. That's right, he

began to think, and I must explain to you, my friend, that in those days thinking was a painful inconvenience and a troubling deformity." (98)

"His Sovereign Majesty had accepted the aid unwillingly because of all the publicity that accompanied it; all the sighing and head shaking over those who were wasting away spoiled the flourishing and imposing image of the Empire, which, after all, was marching along the road of undisturbed development, catching up and even surpassing. From that moment no aid or contributions were needed. For the starvelings it had to suffice that His Munificent Highness personally attached the greatest importance to their fate, which was a very special kind of attachment, of an order higher than highest." (119)

"The high school students came out into the streets, attacking and burning buses, and let me mention that His Impeccable Highness owned the bus company. Trying to suppress these pranks, the police catch five high school students, and in a lighthearted mood send them tumbling down a steep hillside and take potshots at the rolling boys. Three of the boys are killed and two seriously wounded." (121)

"I don't have to explain to you, my friend, that we were beset by a devilish conspiracy. If it hadn't been for that, the Palace would have stood for a thousand more years, because no Palace falls of its own accord." (124)

"And so came the month of August, the last weeks of power for our supreme ruler. But do I really express myself well, using the word 'power' about those last days of decline? It's so very difficult to establish where the borderline runs between true power that subdues everything, power that creates the world or destroys it—where the borderline is between living power, great, even terrifying, and the appearance of power, the empty pantomime of ruling, being one's own dummy, only playing the role, not seeing the world, not hearing it, merely looking into oneself." (145)

"Demonstrators were marching through the town, all sorts of rabble loitering about, cursing His Majesty, calling him a thief, wanting to string him up from a tree. 'Crook! Give back our money!' they cried, 'Hang the Emperor! Hang the Emperor!' Then I would close all the windows in the Palace, to prevent these indecent and slanderous cries from reaching His Venerable Majesty's ears, from stirring his blood." (158)

Topics for Discussion

Why do the interviewees continue to refer to Haile Selassie by his Imperial titles?

Why did the Emperor take basically no action against the revolution in the 1970s?

Explain why the interviewees generally place the blame for the Empire's collapse on foreigners.

Why does Kapuscinski include descriptions about life in post-Imperial Ethiopia in this book? Is he trying to make a point?

Aside from historical scholarship, does Kapuscinski have any other purpose in writing this book? Is there some issue he wants to draw attention to, even if just by analogy?

Explain the religious nature of the Emperor's reign.

Was the Emperor a benevolent monarch or abusive dictator? Explain your position.