

Idi Amin

| INTRODUCTION

Idi Amin (1925?-2003), president of Uganda (1971-1979), also known as Idi Amin Dada, whose brutality and disregard for the rule of law led to hundreds of thousands of deaths and plunged the country into chaos and poverty.

| EARLY LIFE AND MILITARY CAREER

Idi Amin was born in Buganda to parents who came from northwestern Uganda. He received little formal education and pursued a career in the army from a young age. The details of Amin's early military service are uncertain—when president, he claimed to have fought in Burma (Myanmar) in World War II (1939-1945), although he may have only served in the British army as a cook or orderly, and possibly was not involved in the war at all. Ugandan army records indicate that he entered the King's African Rifles (the British army's East African corps) in 1946. A physically imposing athlete, Amin gained the attention and admiration of his superiors by becoming the heavyweight boxing champion of Uganda, a title he held from 1951 to 1960. In the early 1950s Amin campaigned with his battalion against the Mau Mau Rebellion, an uprising against British rule in Kenya. Just before Uganda became independent from Britain in 1962, Amin was promoted to lieutenant and ordered to disarm a number of cattle raiders in northeastern Uganda. While carrying out this order, Amin reportedly tortured several suspected cattle raiders. The British governor told the new prime minister, Milton Obote, about Amin's misconduct, but Obote decided to overlook it, much to his later regret. Amin was promoted to captain by 1963 and was rapidly promoted to the rank of colonel and deputy commander of the army in 1964.

In 1965 Amin was implicated in a financial scandal with Obote and other top government officials. Ugandan military units were assisting rebels in the Democratic Republic of the Congo who allegedly paid the Ugandans in gold. Amin had made large deposits in his personal bank account that he later admitted were the results of these transactions, although he denied any intention of keeping the funds. In the aftermath of the scandal, leaders of the kingdom of Buganda (a region of Uganda that enjoyed special governmental powers within the country) demanded Obote's removal from office and threatened to secede. On Obote's orders, Amin commanded a successful military attack on the palace of the *kabaka* (king) of Buganda, forcing the kabaka to flee the country. Obote subsequently named Amin the commander of Uganda's armed forces. Amin's relationship with Obote deteriorated after the mysterious murder of high-ranking army officer Pierino Okoya in 1970. Okoya had earlier denounced Amin for cowardice because he fled to a military base instead of taking charge of the army following an attempted assassination of Obote in December 1969. In a move to take away Amin's command over troops, Obote moved him to an administrative military position in late 1970. In January 1971, when Amin discovered that Obote intended to arrest him on charges of misappropriating millions of dollars of military funds, Amin organized a coup and overthrew Obote while Obote was out of the country.

|| AMIN'S RULE

Once in power, Amin appointed well-qualified administrators to most of the positions in his first cabinet, but he paid no attention to their advice. To control the army, Amin relied on the support of soldiers he had recruited from the northwest corner of Uganda. In his first year as president Amin ordered massacres of large numbers of Langi and Acholi troops who were suspected of being loyal to Obote. After Amin's demands for large increases in military assistance were rebuffed by Israel and Britain, he expelled all Israeli advisers in 1972 and turned to the Arab Republic of Libya, which gave him immediate support. In doing so, Amin became the first black African leader to renounce ties with the Jewish state of Israel and side instead with Islamic nations in the Middle East conflict over possession of the historic region of Palestine (see Arab-Israeli Conflict). Subsequently, Amin made a number of anti-Semitic declarations, including praising German dictator Adolf Hitler for killing Jewish people during World War II.

Later in 1972 Amin announced that God had told him in a dream to expel Uganda's Indian and Pakistani populations, who owned almost all of Uganda's businesses. At first, only non-Ugandan citizens were forced to leave, but eventually those with citizenship were also expelled. Officially, about 40,000 Indians and Pakistanis left, although many others fled across the borders. Their

homes and businesses were allocated to Ugandans who had connections to Amin. Because many of the new business owners lacked experience running profitable enterprises, corruption and mismanagement quickly caused many of these businesses to fail. Shortages developed in Uganda, leading to high prices, more corruption, and greater involvement by state enterprises in the economy.

After a September 1972 coup attempt orchestrated by Obote from Tanzania, Amin grew more brutally repressive. Ugandans who criticized Amin or whom the government considered potentially dangerous to the regime were seized by roving squads of soldiers and summarily killed; their bodies were often found dismembered and horribly mutilated. Members of the Acholi and Langi ethnic groups, who had formed Obote's support base, were particularly targeted. The number of civilians unlawfully killed by the Amin regime is disputed—it is often estimated at 300,000 and may have been as high as 500,000. Among those killed were Uganda's chief justice, murdered just after he had ruled against the government by ordering a British businessman who had been arrested without a warrant to be released; the vice-chancellor of Makerere University; several ministers who served in Amin's government; and the Anglican Archbishop. However, most victims were ordinary citizens from targeted ethnic groups or districts, or were simply killed at the whim of Amin's murderous henchmen.

Amin was condemned by much of the international community for his brutality, but when Britain and the United States cut aid to Uganda in 1972, he successfully turned to Libya and the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR). However, Amin was able to purchase luxury goods and military and communications equipment from private U.S. and British companies during most of his rule. The United States government did not pass a trade embargo until 1978. In an unsuccessful effort to encourage Amin to moderate his policies, the rulers of other African states elected him chair of the Organization of African Unity for a one-year term in 1975.

In 1976 Palestinian and West German terrorists hijacked an Air France plane with a large number of Israeli passengers, and Amin allowed them to land at Entebbe Airport and use it as a base. An Israeli commando raid successfully rescued more than 100 hostages; three hostages, all of the terrorists, an Israeli commander, and 20 to 40 Ugandan soldiers were killed in the raid. In revenge, Amin had a remaining passenger, an elderly woman who had been taken to a Ugandan hospital, murdered.

I DOWNFALL AND EXILE

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To cover up an army mutiny in southwestern Uganda, Amin invaded Tanzania, seizing a strip of Tanzanian territory north of the Kagera River in late 1978. The Tanzanian government swiftly mobilized its army and forced out the Ugandan soldiers. Then, accompanied by a small contingent of anti-Amin Ugandan rebels, the Tanzanian army invaded Uganda in early 1979. By April they had fought their way to Kampala, the Ugandan capital, and overthrown Amin's government.

Amin fled to Libya where he was offered asylum, but after an altercation between his security guards and the Libyan police, he was forced to leave at the end of 1979. He then accepted asylum in Saudi Arabia, settling in Jiddah. He made one known attempt to return to Uganda, in early 1989, getting as far as Kinshasa, Zaire (now the Democratic Republic of the Congo), where he was identified and forced to return to Saudi Arabia. Amin's rule had many lasting negative consequences for Uganda: It led to low regard for human life and personal security, widespread corruption, and the disruption of economic production and distribution.