

TIGRAY

The Hysteresis of War

- Book I -

EDITED BY

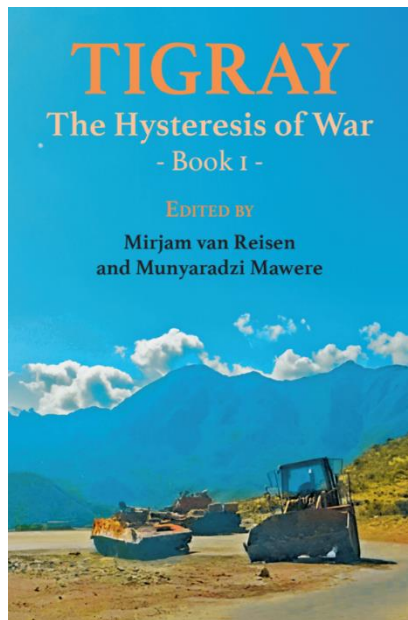
Mirjam van Reisen
and Munyaradzi Mawere



Tigray

The Hysteresis of War

Book 1



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Edited by
Mirjam Van Reisen &
Munyaradzi Mawere



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Disclaimer:

This research examines the perceptions of a specific community, namely the Tigray community, within a broader context like the Horn of Africa. The research acknowledges that social situations are dynamic and continually evolving. Therefore, the findings serve only as a snapshot and the authors refrain from making essentialist conclusions or generalizations beyond the study's scope. The ethnographer's perspective is subjective and may be open to debate. The research does not provide any certainties, from a legal or any other point of view.

The editors have verified the information presented to the best of their ability within the circumstances and make no claims as to absolute truthfulness. Publication is weighed on the basis of interest to understand the potential impacts of events (or perceptions of these events) on the situation. The editors recommend the reader to examine the most current information available through trustworthy channels and thus supplement the information provided in this work.

This study captures personal experiences from the Tigray region during the siege and communication blockade, without claiming to represent the only valid viewpoint. References to social groups should not be interpreted as statements about all individuals within those groups. The research is conducted without the intention of offending any individual, group, or community. We welcome immediate communication regarding any concerns related to respect or cultural integrity.

Great care has been taken to accurately represent the authors' research findings. The content of the chapters is the sole responsibility of the authors and editors. The authors welcome any additional information, feedback or claims of factual errors, which can be directed to: nirjamvanreisen@gmail.com.

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We dedicate this research to our beloved families – our sons and daughters, mothers and fathers, brothers and sisters, grandparents, and all our relatives. This work is also dedicated to every individual who tragically lost their life during this challenging time of war and pandemic. In the face of such profound loss, may we all find the strength to carry on.

We hold their memories in our hearts, and pray that their souls rest in eternal peace: ነብሶም ኣብ ዘለኣለማዊ ሰላም ይፅረፍ።

Contents

Acknowledgements	xi
Note on Content and Editorial Decisions	xiii
Acronyms	xxii
Timeline of Key Events	xxv
Chapter 1: Yesterday We said Tomorrow: Hysteresis and Panarchy in War	1
<i>Mirjam Van Reisen, Araya Abrha Medbanyie, A.H. Tefera, Daniel Tesfa, Seife Hailu Gebreslassie, Kristina Melicherova, Joëlle Stocker & Munyaradzji Mavere</i>	
Chapter 2: “Game Over”: Key Markers of the Tigray War in Redefining the Region	41
<i>Kristina Melicherová, Mirjam Van Reisen & Daniel Tesfa</i>	
Chapter 3: From Hidden to Open War in Tigray: Structural and Proximate Causes	97
<i>Seife Hailu Gebreslassie & Mirjam Van Reisen</i>	
Chapter 4: Regional War by Design: The Involvement of Eritrea in the Tigray War	141
<i>Daniel Tesfa & Mirjam Van Reisen</i>	
Chapter 5: Weaponising the Media: Exploring the Role of Ethiopian National Media in the Tigray War	191
<i>S. E. Geb & Daniel Tesfa</i>	
Chapter 6: Famine as a Weapon in the Tigray War and the Siege	255
<i>Znabu Hadush Kabsay</i>	
Chapter 7: Bodies for Battle Fields: Systematic Use of Rape as a Weapon of War in Tigray	285
<i>Gebru Kidanu & Mirjam Van Reisen</i>	
Chapter 8: “Vultures were Circling the Areas”: Massacres During the Tigray War	333
<i>Daniel Tesfa, Matteo Bächtold, Rnfael Tesfay Gebremichael & Mirjam Van Reisen</i>	

Chapter 9: Throwing Bodies into the Tekeze River: Assessment of Massacres 389
Daniel Tesfa, Matteo Bächtold, Rufael Tesfay Gebremichael & Mirjam Van Reisen

Chapter 10: ‘Followers of the Devil’s Code 666’: The Writing on the Wall of an Intent to Eradicate a People 425
Daniel Tesfa, Mirjam Van Reisen & Araya Abrba Medhanyie

Chapter 11: The Turning Points towards the Unequal Protection of Eritrean Refugees in Ethiopia: From Protection to Abduction 473
Kristina Melicherová

Chapter 12: “He had Orders, and His Superiors were Outside”: Strategic Rape as Genocide in Tigray..... 533
Gebru Kidanu & A.H. Tefera

Chapter 13: Genocidal Intent in the Tigray War: Establishing Reasonable Grounds Based on Evidence561
A.H. Tefera

About the Authors and Editors 603

Acknowledgements

This book is the first of three books on the war in Tigray, which are the result of a five-year collaboration with the Research Network Globalisation, Accessibility, Innovation and Care (GAIC), which started in 2020. Dr Araya Abrha Medhanyie handled the organisation and coordination of the researchers engaged in this project. He has done a stellar job in extremely difficult circumstances to bring an interdisciplinary team together throughout the five years of this research programme. Dr Araya, as we call him, is always keeping himself available, connecting people, encouraging people, finding solutions for the many difficulties encountered, being available to keep spirits high under difficult circumstances and functioning as a clearing house. Dr Araya has the rare quality of being able to connect experienced and junior researchers and ensure that a good learning environment is created. He also makes sure the team members collaborate and offer mutual support. Due to his interest in interdisciplinary knowledge, he gives space for exploration and innovation. It is thanks to Dr Araya that such an excellent collection of diverse scholars has been engaged in this research. The honour for the realisation of these three books goes first and foremost to his dedication to realise this project.

Courage was needed for this project. We are very much indebted to the coordination offered by Berhe and the ‘Sit Rep Team’ for the Europe External Programme with Africa (EEPA) Situation Reports on the Horn of Africa during the Tigray war. This was a difficult and demanding task; due to the siege, the Internet and communication block-out, and the disinformation, it required rigour. We thank Gebremedhin for interpreting some of the material. We also thank the friends, many whom are experts on the Horn, for generously sharing information and checking in on each other to make sure everyone would be alright.

Kidanu was the star coordinator of the collaboration on the training we established as a team in Mekelle during the war. She has done a wonderful job in motivating people, being sensitive to their needs, giving a listening ear, and bringing energy and hope. We are grateful for everything that she brought to make sure we stayed together, and

she has done a great service to the team, sharing with us the insights on trauma and healing gained as part of her PhD work.

Daniel Tesfa provided a lot of support to the team. He established a data base for information on the war that was verified and available for the use of all authors. He translated from Tigrinya and Amharic to English. He helped check sources across all the chapters. He also helped the editorial team to finalise the manuscripts of the three books as part of his PhD work. His work is fast, reliable and precise. We are very thankful for his availability, and tireless work, day and night.

Finally, we would like to thank the survivors of the Tigray war who told us their stories, often through pain and grief. Our heartfelt gratitude goes to all who talked to us, gave us advice and information, participated in interviews and focus group meetings, allowed us to make observations, and provided us with critical information and sources. It is easier to try and forget about this war. But in the name of humanity and in the name of justice, having encountered so much unnecessary death and suffering, we pray and hope that the research presented here will contribute to upholding the principle of valuing life. The members of our research group have suffered great losses during this time. Despite this, we continued as a community to move forward, supporting each other where we could.

On behalf of the entire editorial team,

Mirjam Van Reisen, 1 October 2024

Note on Content and Editorial Decisions

Mirjam Van Reisen & Munyaradzi Mawere

πάντα ῥεῖ

Everything flows (Heraclitus)

The research presented in the three books, ‘Tigray’. ‘The Hysteresis of War’ (Book 1), ‘The Panarchy of War’ (Book 2) and ‘War in a Digital Black Hole’ (Book 3) (2024) is the result of a five-year interdisciplinary research programme, carried out from 2020 to 2024.

The research approach entailed an emphasis on ethnography, on research carried out in real life situations and on the ground. The purpose was to build up a systematic knowledge base that can be studied, corroborated, corrected and improved.

It is very difficult to write on the topic of war. It is personal, it is sensitive, it is hurtful and painful, it is emotional, and there are many contrasting views on the situation. In addition, the siege and communication blockade and Internet shutdown during the war created a digital black hole in Tigray. Therefore, there is an urgent need to document perspectives from within Tigray that are accessible to outside audiences. This research is an attempt to contribute to this.

To develop an in-depth understanding of the situation, there is a need to build trust, to engage, and to develop an in-depth understanding on the situation in real life, there is a need to have access, be present, be in the situation, speak the language, and be part of the culture. All of these are necessary for understanding and all of these give a particular viewpoint on the situation.

Ethnography

This research used ethnography, as it allows us to be immersed in a situation, to participate in it for a moment, to reside in it for a short time, while also perceiving it as a ‘stranger’, an ‘outsider’, and to reflect on it. In-depth interviews are often used in ethnography to deduce understanding and meaning from a description of a specific situation. This may also include small sample groups, autoethnography and long

interview methodology. Interviews allow the definition of a situation through the eyes of the participants.

This research should not be read as the one truth on the war in Tigray. It seeks to promote dialogue and ensure the participation of Tigrayans as an important stakeholder in the peace-building process, which hopefully continues to move forward. There are many contrasting viewpoints in a war, and we have only been able to capture insights from different angles. We have tried to bring the voice of the communities who have suffered so much in this war and have a stake in the future, which will be established on the shattered pieces of the war. We encourage everyone who is interested in the war to debate the content and we motivate each reader to consider what it says and to feel free to disagree. We do not have a claim on a final truth.

We request the reader to make a distinction between the contribution of ethnography to the understanding of the war, which allows us greater freedom to document what was experienced in the war, what perceptions were there, what rationales were seen, and what causalities were entertained. This offers a particular scientific genre that allows us to explore new viewpoints and to document perspectives that have remained hidden and can be uncovered in this way.

We want to insist that for any legal determination, additional tools should be employed. In this book, Tefera provides a legal argument, but none of the other chapters in the three books should be read as legal arguments or as facts presented for that purpose.

While we would like to ask that the sentiments and feelings of the people sharing these harrowing accounts, which were collected first hand, be respected. We recognise there may be elements documented in a certain way, requiring further corroboration with other sources. We invite you to engage in a productive exchange to strengthen a common understanding where possible.

Translations

The translations used in this research concern:

- Spoken conversations (interviews, focus group participants, fieldwork visits)
- Written text
- Media material, TV, videos
- Other

The spoken conversations were transcribed and translated under the guidance of the main researcher. For editorial purposes, small changes were made to make the translations more comprehensible to the reader. In doing so, care was taken to capture the spirit of the original spoken word and cognisant of the fact that a translation, if done literally, word-for-word, cannot achieve this.

Other material was translated under the responsibility of the main researchers, but they were asked to use a panel of judges for translation in some cases. The editorial team had access to the outcome of the review by the panel of judges.

There may always be some discussion on interpretation and translation between languages. We encourage debate on the meaning of what is presented, we do not claim that the selected representation is necessarily the only one, or even the best one. It was the interpretation of what was understood and available to all of us, when we published the book.

Language editing

The researchers presented in the books are not born in areas in which English is a first language. We have published in English to share the results of our work. We have edited the chapters for understanding and easier reading, however, we have not polished the chapters to become something else. The editing takes into account the way of expressing in English by the authors.

In translating from Tigrinya or Amharic to English, many variants are possible. For instance, Aksum can be spelt as ‘Aksum’ or Axum’. We have tried to create coherence across all of the chapters and books. There is no linguistic reasoning supporting the decisions.

For references to names, in Ethiopia and Eritrea, generally the first name is used as the main name, so for instance President Isayas Afwerki is referred as President Isayas. There are also different spellings of the names available. The editors have chosen a coherent use of the name, but no linguistic rule was used to make the decision.

Sources and use of proverbs

The Tigrinya proverbs presented at the top of each chapter are not provided for their literal meaning. They are presented to offer a figurative association with the situation, allowing the reader some freedom to reflect on values, norms, fears and emotions from the place where these originate. Proverbs often have a long history and have moved and transformed across times and places and languages and should not be read as a direct commentary on the situation at hand. The translation from Tigrinya to English may also not be perfect.

There are two sources for the proverbs used in this research. The First is the article by Filip Busau (2020) *Comparative Analysis of Some Tigrinya Proverbs*, Proverbium 37. These are written in Tigrinya, the language spoken north and south of the Mereb in the highlands of Tigray and Eritrea. The article draws upon the work of the author on the topics of birth and death in Tigrinya proverbs. The proverbs and translations were checked and adapted by Daniel Tesfa and Gebre Kidanu.

The other source is the work of Tsigereda Teklu, Asmelash Weldemariam and Asmerom Gebreslassie, published by the Ethiopian Languages Academy under the then Ministry of Culture and Spots, published by Artistic Publishing in 1993 (GC).

Names and references

With regards to names used in this topic, the following procedure was followed. In Tigrinya, people usually have three names, the name of the grandfather, father and the given name. The references in this book use the reference name chosen by the author.

All the participants and sources have been anonymised and deidentified. This was necessary, to ensure the safety of all participants.

This research uses references to Tigrinya and Amharic sources, which are written in original script.

Use and re-use of data and verification of data

For any use or re-use of any of the data and arguments presented in this research, we want to insist that it is the task and responsibility of anyone who wishes to (re-)use the data to understand the perspective from which the data is presented here and to seek triangulation with other sources on sensitive issues that may be contested.

We have been careful to verify the sources and participants. For future understanding and research, we believe it is important to document this data. However, we are aware that it is possible that viewpoints or facts may be disputed and we invite anyone to respectfully come forward with any grievances to help improve, correct or change what is presented and the interpretation of it.

The media material was presented for verification to a panel of judges. The judges were selected for their ability to understand the material and the context of this material being produced. In this way, the originality of speeches and other expressions was traced and verified. Where in on-line productions alterations were made by the publishers of the content, this has been identified. The author and editors have a database of material that was verified and used for this publication.

The editors are responsible for the content presented in these three books. We would like to receive any comments.

Symbols, expressions and generalisation

The use of symbols and expressions in any part of this ethnography are not in any instance presented as a generalised statement to judge, accuse or demonise a person, a group of persons, or a people.

Ethical considerations

The research ethics applied to this research adhere to the principles of: (i) authenticity; (ii) veracity; (iii) diversity; (iv) inclusiveness; (v) (self-)reflection; (vi) responsibility; (vii) providing credit to all who contributed; (viii) avoid claiming the work of others or exploiting contributions of others; (ix) ensure that there is no plagiarism (x) open dialogue; (ix) allow critical reflection; (x) reliability; (xi) respect for others; and (xii) operate with cultural awareness.

The research was also guided by the principles of (i) informed consent and ongoing consent; (ii) do no harm; (iii) protect the privacy of participants by keeping personal information confidential; (iv) providing comprehensive information on the purpose of the research to participants; (v) voluntary participation of all participants; (vi) accurate reporting; (vi) transparency of disclosure of conflict of interests; (vii) treatment of all participants with respect and dignity; (viii) open communication; (ix) minimise suffering, avoid (re)traumatisation and offer referral and support; (x) personal and sensitive data-protection; (xi) adherence to the legal frameworks in the place where research is carried out; (xii) adherence to international norms and standards; (xiii) clear documentation of all procedures; and (xiv) reproducibility within the research scope and approach. The research should also be feasible and realistic in scope within the given timeframe and be realistic in its ambition.

Each part of this research was subjected to double blind peer review, the ethical committee of the Research Network GAIC, the ethical board of Tilburg University and Mekelle University, and, in specific instance, boards, as provided in each chapter.

Peer review

Many of the researchers are members of the Research Network Globalisation, Accessibility, Innovation and Care (GAIC). Many of them are in peer-groups and discussed their work in the peer-groups, and presented their work in the on-line meetings. In this way, they were able to receive valuable comments on the studies performed. These also served to provide mutual support and encouragement.

We thank everyone who took the trouble to provide proposals for inclusion in the books. We regret there were some proposals that did not make it to final publications. The research team consisted of senior and junior researchers, and this may be clear from the work presented. The point of departure was that learning to do research is by doing, and by publishing and receiving comments. We invite anyone to provide comments to improve any work presented here.

The criteria for publishing was: (i) relevance of the topic to the research project; (ii) clarity on the methodology (iii) transparency on data obtained and used and on the process of their analysis; (iv) ability to improve the drafts based on comments received within given timelines; (v) ability to present and discuss the content with peers; (vi) editorial fit with the overall content of the three books and (vii) prove of authenticity of the contributions of all of the author(s). Every chapter is accompanied by an explanation of the contributions of each author to the chapter.

The double-blind peer-review was an anonymous review process. The authors of the chapters did not know who their reviewers were. The reviewers did not know who the authors were. The reviewers were asked to provide their opinion on the article in a form that was sent to them.

The double-peer reviewers also made comments in the text of the chapter, as comments and suggestions to improve the chapters and clarify the language. Their work is gratefully acknowledged. It provided an important step to select the chapters for publication.

All drafts of all the chapters have been saved in a database and are versionalised. The final decision to publish was with the editors.

Referencing

The references are presented at the end of each chapter. The references to other chapters in the book are separately referenced, for easy findability, and to allow the chapters to be read in a stand-alone way.

Time references

Ethiopia uses the Ethiopian Calendar (EC), which is identified in the text with EC in the specific cases that this calendar is used. Most of the years follow the Gregorian Calendar (GC). If no abbreviation is provided the GC calendar is used.

Warning about traumatic content

Finally, the material presented in these three books may be hard to read. We have tried to balance honesty about what we heard on the situation, with what can be presented to a reader. Some of the elements we encountered were simply unimaginable. We have tried to be truthful, but also sensitive. The work was guided by Van Reisen *et al*, (2023), which sets out a methodology of an ethnographic research with exposure to trauma.

We encourage the reader to take care of your health and mental health and well-being and to seek support if that is needed. We thank you for picking up this book and for your interest.

Figures

The figures in the books were converted to black and white to fit with formatting requirements. In some cases, this may make them less easy to read. The original pictures, in colour, can be found at the following link: https://raee.eu/wp-content/uploads/2024/10/Figures_Tigray.-The-Hysteresis-of-War-Volume-1-1.pdf

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- Van Reisen, M., Smits, K., Wirtz, M., & Mikami, B. (2023). Skin in the Game: Methodology of an Ethnographic Research with Exposure to Trauma. In: Van Reisen, M., Mawere M., Smits, K., & Wirtz, M. (eds), *Enslaved Trapped and Trafficked in Digital Black Holes: Human Trafficking Trajectories to Libya*. Bamenda, Cameroon: Langaa RPCIG, pp. 70-120. Chapter URL: https://www.researchgate.net/publication/367240496_Skin_in_the_Game_Methodology_of_an_Ethnographic_Research_with_Exposure_to_Trauma

This chapter is available at: <https://raee.eu/1701-2/>

Acronyms

AD	Anno Domini
AEPAC	American Ethiopian Public Affairs Committee
AMC	Amhara Media Corporation
AMN	Addis Media Network
ARRA	Administration for Refugee & Returnee Affairs
ASF	Amhara Special Forces
AU	African Union
CoH	Cessation of Hostilities
CPJ	Committee to Protect Journalists
DRC	Democratic Republic of Congo
EDF	Eritrean Defence Forces
EDU	Ethiopian Democratic Union
EEPA	Europe External Programme with Africa
ELF	Eritrea Liberation Front
ENA	Ethiopia News Agency
ENDF	Ethiopian National Defence Force
EPA	Ethiopia Press Agency
EPLF	Eritrean People's Liberation Front
EPRDF	Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Democratic Front
EPRP	Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Party
ETV	Ethiopia Television
EU	European Union
FGD	focus group discussion
GAIC	Globalisation, Accessibility, Innovation and Care
ID	identity document
IDI	in-depth interviews

IDP	internally displaced person
ICC	International Criminal Court
ICT	information and communications technology
ICTR	International Criminal Tribunal for Rwanda
ICTY	International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia
IGAD	Intergovernmental Authority on Development
IHL	international humanitarian law
INSA	Intelligence and National Security Agency of Ethiopia
IOM	International Organisation for Migration
IPC	Integrated Food Security Phase Classification
KII	key informant interview
MSF	Médecins Sans Frontières
NEBE	National Electoral Board of Ethiopia
NGO	non-governmental organisation
NISS	National Security and Intelligence Service
OAU	Organization of African Unity
OBN	Oromia Broadcast Network
OLA	Oromo Liberation Army
PFDJ	People's Front for Democracy and Justice
PM	prime minister
PP	Prosperity Party
RSF	Rapid Support Forces
SNNPR	Southern Nations, Nationalities and Peoples' Region
SR	Situation Report
TDF	Tigray Defence Forces
TPLF	Tigray People's Liberation Front
TMMA	Tigray Mass Media Agency

UAE	United Arab Emirates
UN	United Nations
UNHCR	United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees
UN OCHA	United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs
US	United States
WFP	World Food Program
WHO	World Health Organization

Timeline of Key Events

- 24 December 2017 Behind-the-scenes, diplomatic efforts to broker peace between Eritrea and Ethiopia in exchange for Ethiopian access to the Assab port and European Union (EU) roads from Eritrea to Ethiopia do not receive a positive reception in Mekelle, the capital of Tigray.
- 14 January 2018 President Isayas Afwerki of Eritrea announces the policy ‘Woyane, Game Over’, signalling a hardline stance against the Tigray People’s Liberation Front (TPLF).
- 15 February 2018 Ethiopian Prime Minister Hailemariam Desalegn announces his resignation.
- 27 March 2018 Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed is elected as the chairman of the Ethiopian People’s Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF) coalition.
- 2 April 2018 PM Abiy is sworn in as Prime Minister by the Ethiopian Parliament.
- 15 June 2018 PM Abiy uses the term የቀን ጅቦች to describe TPLF or Tigrayans as ‘daylight hyenas’, a derogatory and dehumanizing label.
- 23 June 2018 A bombing at Meskel Square in Addis Ababa occurs during a rally for Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed, and chanting of “down, down Woyane”, indicating the accusation that the perpetrators are Tigrayan. The courts in Ethiopia do not find Tigrayans guilty of the bombing.
- 9 July 2018 Ethiopia and Eritrea sign the Peace Agreement in Asmara, ending two decades of hostility and restoring diplomatic relations. This agreement is seen as a significant step toward regional stability.

- 9 July 2018 PM Abiy visits the Assab Port in Eritrea.
- 14–16 July 2018 President Isayas visits military camps and installations in Ethiopia.
- 18 July 2018 PM Abiy visits the Eritrean military training camp Sawa. National service in Eritrea is indefinite and is widely regarded as a crime against humanity by the international community.
- 14 November 2018 The UN Security Council (UNSC) lifts sanctions against Eritrea (in place since 2009).
- 22 June 2019 Several high-ranking officials are assassinated in Ethiopia. General Seare Mekonen, the Chief of General Staff of the Ethiopian National Defence Force (ENDF), is killed in Addis Ababa, along with Major-General Gezae Abera. Both General Seare Mekonen and Major-General Gezae Abera are Tigrayans. In Bahir Dar, the regional capital of Amhara, the regional president Ambachew Mekonnen and his advisor Ezez Wassie are also assassinated.
- 11 October 2019 PM Abiy is awarded the Nobel Peace Prize.
- 1 December 2019 The Prosperity Party (PP) is officially formed on 1 December 2019. The party is created by merging three of the four parties that make up the EPRDF coalition, along with five other regional parties. The TPLF, one of the founding members of the EPRDF, refuses to join the PP, which contributes to the escalating tensions between the federal government and the TPLF.
- 28 February 2019 The EU signs a road-building agreement with Eritrea to connect Eritrea's ports (Assab and Massawa) with neighbouring countries.

- 15 June 2020 The European Parliament holds a hearing on the EU road-building program with Eritrea, which is carried out with national service labour, widely seen as forced labour. The European Commission indicates a shift to a “no more roads approach”. The projects are stopped in the following year.
- 9 September 2020 Elections are organised by the TPLF in defiance of the federal government’s decision to postpone all elections in Ethiopia due to the COVID-19 pandemic. The elections heighten tensions between the Tigray regional government and the Ethiopian federal government, contributing to the subsequent conflict.
- 25 September 2020 The first irregular flight is identified in connection to pre-war military preparations from Addis to Asmara (flight ET8312, Tail ETALK and 20/10/2020 Tail ETAQQ).
- 3 November 2020 The Tigray War begins with Ethiopian federal forces, including Special Forces, being airlifted to Mekelle, the capital of Tigray, marking the start of an intense military conflict.
- 4 November 2020 Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed announces the Ethiopian government’s ‘Law and Order Operation’ in Tigray, aiming to remove the TPLF leadership, which had challenged federal authority.
- November 2020 The Ethiopian government imposes a communications blackout on Tigray, cutting off telephone, Internet, and other forms of communication. This severely limits the flow of information and access to the region, making it difficult for humanitarian organisations and the international community to monitor the situation.

- 6–10 November 2020 The Mai Kadra massacre in Western Tigray occurs. The Ghent University Database ‘Every Casualty Counts’ attributes the killings to Ahhara Special Forces or Fano Militia, ENDF, and Tigray Defence Forces (TDF).
- 11 November 2020 TPLF President of the Tigray region, Debretsion Gebremichael, accuses Eritrea of being involved in the war in Tigray and of using heavy weaponry in Humera against Tigray civilians. Eritrean Foreign Affairs Minister, Osman Saleh, dismisses the claim.
- November 2020 The Adigrat and Edagu Hamus Massacres are allegedly perpetrated by Eritrean and Ethiopian military troops.
- 13 November 2020 A massacre with indiscriminate killings takes place in Zalambessa allegedly perpetrated by the Eritrean Defence Forces (EDF), following shelling of the town.
- 24 November 2020 The UN Security Council holds its first closed-door discussion on the conflict in Tigray, but no official statement is issued due to disagreements among members, particularly regarding how to address the situation.
- 11 November 2020 The ‘Law and Order Operation’ is redefined as a ‘Law Enforcement and Existential Operation’, emphasizing the existential threat the Ethiopian government perceives from the TPLF.
- November 2020 The Humera Massacre occurs with the ENDF, Amhara militias, and EDF implicated in the violence.
- November 2020 The first wave of mass arrests of Tigrayans begins.

- 28 November 2020 The TPLF forces withdraw from Mekelle, the capital of the Tigray region.
- 27–28 November 2020 An attack on Al-Nejashi Mosque, the oldest mosque in Africa, occurs.
- 28–29 November 2020 The Aksum massacre occurs. During this event, hundreds of civilians are reportedly killed by the EDF in the city of Aksum, Tigray, during the religious festival of Tsion Mariam, the feast of St. Mary of Zion. Aksum is a place of pilgrimage for the festival, as Ethiopian Orthodox Christians believe Aksum houses the Ark of the Covenant.
- 30 November 2020 The Dengelat Massacre occurs. The EDF attack civilians gathered for the religious festival of Tsion Mariam.
- 7 December 2020 The Ethiopian federal government appoints an interim administration for Tigray, led by Mulu Nega. This administration was intended to replace the TPLF leadership, which the federal government considered illegitimate.
- January 2021 Closure of the Eritrean refugee camps in Tigray, Shemelba, and Hitsats after camps are attacked by the EDF and refugees are forcibly returned to Eritrea. In July 2021 the EDF enters Adi Harush and Mai Aini camps for Eritrean refugees.
- 10 February 2021 The Abi Addi massacre occurs, including mass killings by the ENDF and EDF.
- 10 March 2021 During a congressional hearing, US Secretary of State Antony Blinken states that acts of “ethnic cleansing” are taking place in Western Tigray. He specifically referred to reports of atrocities and the displacement of ethnic Tigrayans from the region by Amhara forces and allied troops of the ENDF. He calls for

- independent investigations to hold perpetrators accountable.
- 23 March 2021 Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed publicly acknowledges and thanks Eritrea for its military support during the conflict in a speech to the Ethiopian Parliament, confirming Eritrea's involvement in the war.
- 15 April 2021 The UNSC holds a session on the humanitarian crisis in Tigray.
- 20 April 2021 A chemical white phosphorus attack by the EDF against civilians is reported in the location of Adi Yieqoro, within Ahiferom Woreda in Tigray.
- 23 April 2021 Jeffrey Feltman is appointed as the US Special Envoy for the Horn of Africa. His appointment is part of the US government's increased diplomatic engagement in the region, particularly concerning the conflicts in Ethiopia, Sudan, and the broader Horn of Africa.
- 3 May 2021 The head of the Interim Administration by the Ethiopian federal government, Mulu Nega, is replaced with Abraha Desta.
- June 2021 The blockade on humanitarian aid intensifies, with reports that Ethiopian federal forces and allied troops are preventing aid convoys from reaching Tigray. This exacerbates the already dire food and medical supply shortages in the region, contributing to a worsening humanitarian crisis.
- 15 June 2021 The European Union's special envoy to Ethiopia, Pekka Haavisto, who is also Finland's Foreign Minister, refers to the situation in Tigray as potentially amounting to "genocide"

- during a briefing to the EU Committee on Foreign Affairs.
- 22 June 2021 The UN Human Rights Council (UNHRC) adopts a resolution calling for an independent investigation into alleged human rights violations and abuses in the Tigray conflict. This resolution heightens international scrutiny of the conflict and increases calls for accountability for the atrocities committed by all parties involved.
- June 2021 Operation Alula, launched by the TDF, begins. The operation is named after the famous Tigrayan general Alula Aba Nega and is part of a broader counter-offensive by the TDF against Ethiopian and allied forces. The operation aims to reclaim territory and defend key strategic areas in Tigray.
- 28 June 2021 The TDF recaptures Mekelle and regains control over parts of Tigray, but the siege and communication blockade by Ethiopia is maintained.
- 2 July 2021 The UNSC issues a first public statement on the Tigray war, expressing concern about the humanitarian situation.
- 25 July 2021 “We will not rest unless this enemy is stamped out. These people [Tigray people] are the enemy of the whole people of Ethiopia. They are the enemy of the Oromo, the enemy of Afar, and the enemy of Somali. We have to continue heroically struggling against the enemy,”¹ declares the former President of the Amhara region.

¹ Gebremichael, T. (2021, July 25). Amhara President: Tigrayans are Enemies of Ethiopia. *TGHAT*. <https://www.tghat.com/2021/07/25/amhara-president-tigrayans-are-enemies-of-ethiopia/> (Accessed on 18 October 2024)

- 10 June 2021 The UN and other humanitarian organisations report that over 350,000 people are experiencing famine conditions, with millions more at risk due to the ongoing conflict, disruption of agriculture, and blockade of aid.
- 28 June 2021 The TDF recaptures control over the capital of Mekelle in Tigray.
- July 2021 A second wave of mass arrests of Tigrayans in Addis Ababa begins in July 2021.
- July 2021 The TDF initiates Operation Tigray Mothers reflecting a broad mobilisation effort to resist the advancing Ethiopian and Eritrean forces.
- 26 August 2021 Former Nigerian President, Olusegun Obasanjo, is appointed as the African Union (AU) High Representative for the Horn of Africa. His role is to mediate the ongoing conflict in Ethiopia and promote peace and stability in the region.
- 17 September 2021 President Joe Biden issues an Executive Order authorising broad sanctions against individuals and entities involved in the conflict, including Ethiopian and Eritrean officials, as well as those from Tigray. The order specifically targets those contributing to the conflict and obstructing humanitarian access. The sanctions include asset freezes and visa restrictions on individuals and entities seen as prolonging the conflict or obstructing peace efforts.
- October 2021 TDF Operation Tigray Sunrise starts. The TDF advances outside the Tigray region.
- October 2021 The UN suspends its humanitarian flights to Tigray after an airstrike on Mekelle, the regional capital, endangers their operations. This suspension further restricts the delivery of humanitarian aid to the region.

- 7 November 2021 Obasanjo makes his first visit to Mekelle, the capital of the Tigray region.
- 20 December 2021 Having advanced into the neighbouring regions of Amhara and Afar and coming within a few hundred kilometres of the capital, Addis Ababa, the TDF halt their offensive, leading to a temporary stalemate as both sides prepare for further operations or potential negotiations.
- 24 March 2022 The Ethiopian government declares a unilateral humanitarian ceasefire in Tigray.
- August 2022 Coalition forces, including Ethiopian and Eritrean troops, resume a major offensive against the TDF, seeking to regain control over lost territories before peace talks.
- August 2022 The resumption of hostilities leads to a tightening of the blockade. Tigray remains largely cut off from the rest of the country, with reports of increased starvation and lack of medical supplies.
- 27 September 2022 The Sheraro massacre occurs; the EDF reportedly kill dozens of civilians during an offensive in September 2022, as part of the renewed conflict before the Pretoria peace talks.
- 25 October 2022 The first round of formal peace talks starts in Pretoria, South Africa, facilitated by Obasanjo, and former President of Kenya, Uhuru Kenyatta, and former South African Deputy President Phumzile Mlambo-Ngcuka, representing the AU and the wider international community.
- 2 November 2022 The Pretoria Cessation of Hostilities Agreement is signed between the Ethiopian government and the TPLF, marking a formal

- agreement to end active hostilities and begin the process of peace-building.
- 3 November 2022 The Pretoria Cessation of Hostilities Agreement officially comes into force, leading to a significant reduction in active combat operations.
- 4–5 November 2022 The EDF perpetrates shelling of Adigrat, a town near the Eritrean border, in Tigray, leading to civilian casualties
- January 2023 The EDF begin a partial withdrawal from Tigray, as part of the implementation of the peace agreement, although reports indicate that some forces remain in strategically important areas.
- June 2023 Eritrea is reportedly still occupying Hoya Medeb, Semhal, May Hamato; parts of Ziban Guila and Erdi Jeganu in Egela Woreda; Endalgeda, Weratle, Alitena and Hagererekoma in Irob Woreda; Geter Badme, Badme Town, Gemhalo, Adi-Tsetser and some parts of Adeneyti and Lemlem in Tahtay Adyabo, as well as the whole Western Zone of Tigray.

Yesterday We said Tomorrow: Hysteresis and Panarchy in War

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The body killed by the king couldn't get someone to bury.

Abstract

The war in Tigray significantly transformed the region and Ethiopia as a whole and affected relations in the broader Horn of Africa. Despite Eritrea's denial of invading Tigray, it played a major role in the conflict. The region was placed under siege, resulting in a complete communication blackout, effectively turning Tigray into a modern digital black hole where no information could enter or leave. As a result, the grievous atrocities committed during the conflict remained hidden from the outside world.

The atrocities committed were systematic and showed intent to eradicate the Tigray people. Military attacking civilians said they followed instructions. The concepts of hysteresis and panarchy are used to understand the severe consequences of the war. The conflict has created a new political reality, causing the people of Tigray to question their place within Ethiopia. The timeline suggests that preparations for the war began in 2018, following unsuccessful diplomatic efforts in 2017 to connect Ethiopia to the port of Assab in Eritrea. The involvement of Eritrea is evident throughout the war preparations, starting with the Eritrean President's declaration of the policy "Woyane, game over" in January 2018. The evidence gathered raises the critical question of whether genocide was committed in Tigray.

Key Words: Tigray, Ethiopia, Eritrea, Tigray war, digital black hole, hysteresis, panarchy, resilience, Rome Statute, genocide

Theatre of memory

One day Pan, the Greek God of the forest, who protects the shepherds, flocks, hunters and everything in the natural wilderness, chases an impossible love. Then he hears the wind playing in the reeds at the edge of a pond. He picks some to craft a flute; and from that day onwards the melancholic music will accompany him everywhere. Using his flute, he instils a fear that creates chaos among the largest of invading giants, the Titans. The playful and creative Pan has another power. A massive voice that can surprise unexpectedly. An unseen presence, with which he can arouse panic beyond reason and logical thinking, a collective hysterical fear. So, he can protect against those who traverse his beloved land with bad intent. Creating an echo, a noise, coming from nowhere, and circling across the terrifying and dark landscape in which the invading fighters find themselves, Pan leads them to imagined voices and human shadows. This drives the invaders crazy. Pan is the God of nature and unpredictable change, who can cause hysteria and anarchy at all levels.

The story of Pan tells us that the use of force and violence is a symptom of powerlessness. This is true for warfare, says Arendt (1969), the “arbiter in international disputes” (Arendt, 1969, p. 3), which has “lost much of its effectiveness” (Arendt, 1969, p. 3), if it ever had any, defining “nearly all of it is as glamour” (Arendt, 1969, p. 3). Glamour as the apocalyptic hysteric face of terror. Devastation, death, horror and violence is what characterised the Tigray war (2020–2022), which ended in a peace that is no peace.

In the studies presented here in these three books on the Tigray war, our intention is to present the voices of the people in Tigray and to assess critical moments and aspects of the war from the perspective of what they saw and experienced. We have written this, while the echo of the war remains audible and has not died down. We have tried to document this through the hidden transcripts of the war, left behind in a landscape of destruction and death.

You, the reader, probably picked up this book to read our findings. Allow us, for a short moment, to take you on the journey of our thought process. We consider the Tigray war as a journey – a desolate one, walked in time, not isolated from what transpired before the war,

and not isolated from what Tigray is to be after the war. We have attempted to think of this process of change in a systematic way.

We have used the concepts of hysteresis and panarchy, which together explain change through entropy – the process for systems to become more disordered, if they are not in equilibrium (Abrahamson & Freedman, 2006). Hysteresis relates to change that occurs in a system, and that is difficult to reverse. A system that enters into an alternative new form keeps echoing the change that has taken place, which makes it difficult to revert to the old situation. Panarchy is the idea that change at one level affects another.

Hysteresis, a concept originating from the Greek meaning “to lag behind”, is often defined as a phenomenon in which the response of a system may be delayed after changes in the cause have occurred (Bhargava, 2022). It describes the continuous presence of the past influencing dynamics of the present and future. As such, it is naturally connected to time, to what was ‘before’ and ‘after’. It can also be interpreted as a response conditional on the memory of the system, both its current and past states (Sheldrake, 2011). In psychology this can be found in the memories of a wished-for-world wrapped in the stories about the past, holding the stubborn facts of evidence of a real life experienced (Loftus, 2013). Bourdieu (1990) used it to refer to a mismatch between the environment that a community is in and the one the community is adjusted to, explaining it as a false anticipation of the future based on what the community knows of the past. The presence of the past in this kind of false anticipation of the future performed by the habitus of a community is, paradoxically, most clearly seen when the sense of the probable future is belied in ‘the habitus’:

which embodies (literally) the tension between individual agency and social forces, and occupies a position in a field with other habitus, each defined by their difference from the others. (Joseph, 2020, p. 1)

This is a situation when dispositions are ill-adjusted to the objective changes that occur, because the environment the community encounters is too different from the one to which the community is adjusted (Bourdieu, 1990, p. 62).

In the context of war, this application of hysteresis is useful when looking at trauma on an individual and institutional level, leading to behaviour and values that were formed by the experiences during the war, but may be mismatched in a post-war environment. However, it is limiting when it focuses solely on agentic behaviour, omitting the dynamics of systems at various scales.

The importance of the interlinkages between different scales is at the core of the concept of panarchy, which focuses on systematising the dynamic relationship between change and persistence, and between what is predictable and what is unpredictable. Panarchy is a concept that explains how a system, at various scales, can respond to disturbances it faces, both predictable and unpredictable, such as during a war, and how people engage with the situation (Gunderson and Holling, 2004).

Hysteresis has, for instance, been applied in the targeting of civilians in armed conflicts through the intensification of lethal behaviour of armed groups against civilians in prolonged conflict (Lee, 2015). Therefore, it can help us understand the (violent) actions by armed troops towards civilians, where the memory of a violent past state (armed combat) leads to violent behaviour in an environment in which it is not appropriate (according to international conventions), namely, in civilian settings. This is even more clear when looking at the aggressive behaviour of Eritrean troops in Tigray, which were already trained in conditions of extreme hostility in Eritrea.

On a broader level, for instance, in the large-scale destruction of agriculture or healthcare, hysteresis is seen in the lagging behind of capacity, even after the war has ended. The exponential increase in the need for food and healthcare, thus, leads to shortages, even when capacity is back to pre-war levels.

If we zoom out to the global scale, the application of hysteresis in conflict becomes increasingly relevant. In Tigray, many ways of raging war were introduced on a systemic level, such as the complete destruction of healthcare and the two-year siege, leaving the civilians in the region with no access to food, water and electricity. These strategies have resurfaced in other conflicts that have taken centre stage since, in which hysteresis in war leads to increased atrocities

towards civilians (Lee, 2015). The plight of civilians in the wars in Tigray, Sudan and Gaza are related to hysteresis on different scales.

The dynamics leading to the perpetuation of conflict in a region can be juxtaposed against the agency of the local population in breaking the cycle through, for instance, resistance and diplomacy (Arendt, 1969). For example, Mac Ginty (2014) embodies this in the practising of “everyday peace” by individuals and collectives living within conflict-affected societies. While agency is sometimes described as a static capability of the individual in relation to the surrounding structure (Campbell, 2009), Emirbayer and Mische (1998) conceptualise it as a temporal process of understanding a situation, rooted in the past and oriented towards the present and future. The expression of agency may, thus, change based on whether one is more focused on the past, present or future at any given time.

Agency does not operate in isolation. It is the ability to understand the situation at different levels, and to act upon this understanding. Panarchy references that adaptive cycles are nested in a hierarchy across time and space, in which accumulations from the past are available for present renewal and innovation through agentic capability (Gunderson and Holling, 2004). Both the concepts of hysteresis and panarchy can provide a lens through which to look at complex interactions within (social) systems, thereby capturing the essence of resilience, adaptation and transformation in evolving environments (Stocker, 2024).

Hidden transcripts: “We wanted the womb of Tigrayan women to be infertile”

Pan’s forest may serve as a metaphor for a ‘dark place’, a ‘black hole’, a digital black hole in our modern digital age, caused by a communication blackout and siege. Causing a place to be completely isolated in the connected globalised world of today is a weapon of war. The population in Tigray was physically gated by the siege and digitally gated by the communication block-out. It allowed for those holding the keys to the gates to negotiate what comes in and what goes out, whether food, humanitarian aid or information. It allowed for invading perpetrators, such as the Eritreans, to remain ‘invisible’,

as no information came out, which allowed them to deny their presence. It allowed for atrocities to be perpetrated with impunity.

The siege and communication blackout inhibited those living in the digital back hole from reaching out and seeking empathy and solidarity with others, who did not know of the situation inside. It broke the support systems that enhanced resilience, and it stopped the social, economic and political links that sustained the community. The purpose of a siege is to break the collective resolve and resilience of the people in the area under siege.

A siege and a digital black hole isolating a people under distress may aim to create the conditions in which a people appear to have perished from the Earth, leaving only their shadow and the echo of voices of the past. It is easy to give up on such a people. The community has already gone, left without a future, left without new beginnings, left without the capacity to create and recreate, produce and reproduce. In hidden transcripts, the capacity to (re-)generate becomes the battlefield.

Traces of intent are left behind in the dark inside. Unbelievably, after the Tigray war, a doctor retrieved a message wrapped in a plastic sheet from within the womb of a young Tigrayan woman who had been raped by Eritrean soldiers. The message states the reason for the rape inside her body (see Figure 1.1):

Deki Erena [‘we Eritreans’] are always Heroes.

That is how we do! And we will still keep doing this. We want the wombs of Tigrayan women to be infertile.

We are still seeking to revenge you what you did to us in the 1990s.

Together with the piece of paper, the doctors found stones that had been put in the young woman’s womb. On the backside of the same message, it reads:

We Eritreans, people from Asmara are Heroes.

How on Earth can you forget what you have done to us in 09. Even if you do forget it, we will not forget. From now onwards any Tigrayan will not give birth, will not have a baby from a Tigrayan.

We shall make sure you know and we will show you how unforgiving we are. So, don’t leave any [Tigrayan] woman alive from now onwards: just kill them all.

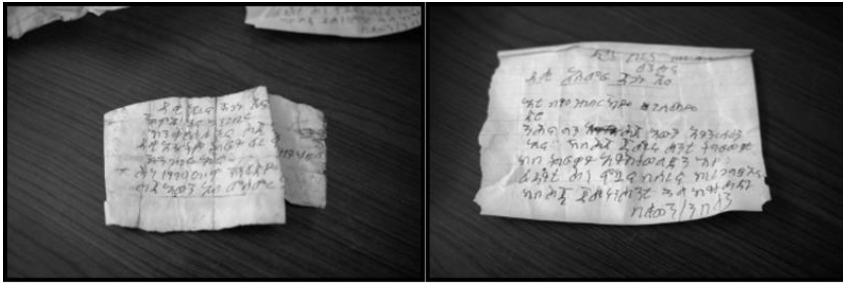


Figure 1.1. Messages found wrapped in plastic in a woman's womb

(First published by

<https://x.com/XimenaBorrazas/status/179542778393570968>) (Retrieved

from patient's file, saved under special protection)

The message carried in the womb of the woman leaves the echo of what the war against the Tigrayan people tried to tell them: that they had no right to exist. Using the derogatory terms 'Woyane', 'agame', 'junta', and 'banda', the people of Tigray were identified as illegitimate, terrorists, traitors, 'farmers' – of a lesser kind, unworthy of life.

The statement “We want the wombs of Tigrayan women to be infertile” (Figure 1.1) speaks to the hysteresis of war; the transition into a new state and the near impossibility to transition back to what was before. This statement also speaks to panarchy, the situation that a transition at one level, affects the reality at all levels. The intent to ensure that Tigray women will not give birth to new life affects the hopelessness of the situation of the Tigray community in the war as a whole, which carries the consequences of the attack into the future as a permanent new state.

Hidden transcripts refer to the underlying implicit meaning of denigrating activity, rendering people, or a people, to being of a lesser non-human kind, discourse that is often hidden away from formal public policy:

Slavery, serfdom, the caste system, colonialism, and racism routinely generate the practices and rituals of denigration, insult, and assaults on the body that seem to occupy such a large part of the hidden transcripts of their victims. (Scott, 1992)

Hidden transcripts or messages (not necessarily in writing) are also delivered by the destruction of a hospital or other indispensable facility. Destruction, unfortunately, is part of warfare, but destruction that is explicitly meant to (also) harm or exterminate civilians is not simply warfare, but can be characterised as a violation of fundamental human rights. As such it cannot simply be called ‘war’ or ‘collateral damage’, as it is often claimed to be. The hidden transcript underlying such actions, in other words, does not simply refer to ‘war’, but instead must be read and interpreted as a crime against humanity, an atrocity crime and/or genocide. The research presented in these books, contributes to decipher such hidden transcripts in the Tigray war.

Using the concept of hidden transcripts in this specific way, intentionally differs from its ‘original’ meaning, as proposed by Scott (1992). In the case of this study, the term hidden transcripts refers to the underlying, hidden intentions (e.g., genocide) in semiotic signs produced by oppressors, whereas Scott (1992) focuses on the intentions that are hidden in the semiotic signs produced by the oppressed.

We follow Scott in his observation that attempts to subordinate are met with resistance. This makes the nature of a future state of a situation unpredictable. In his book, *Humankind: A Hopeful History*, Rutger Bregman (2019) outlines the effect of the targeting of civilians in war through the bombing of London and German cities in the second World War. The idea behind these bombings was to break the morale and resistance of the British and German people. Yet what became obvious, more than anything else, is that the targeting of civilians in war leads to more resistance and more resilience (Bregman, 2019). A paper published by Kimhi *et al.* (2023) on the resilience of Ukrainians compared with Israelis concluded the following:

It appears that a war that threatens the independence and sovereignty of a country may, under certain conditions, enhance the societal resilience and hope of the population under risk, despite a lower sense of wellbeing and higher levels of distress, sense of danger, and perceived threats. (Kimihi et al., 2023, p. 7)

These narratives fit well with the resilience shown by many people in Tigray during the war. This resilience was expressed in all layers of society and included innovative strategies to cope with the extreme circumstances of siege, Internet blackout, and lack of basic supplies.

Yesterday we said tomorrow

The title of this chapter refers to the exhibition ‘Yesterday we said Tomorrow’ staged in New Orleans (2020), which referred to the album of the avant-garde jazz musician Christian Scott aTunde Adjuah (2012): *Yesterday You said Tomorrow*. The exhibition titled Prospect 5, which was held in New Orleans in March of 2020 reminds us of our own situation as researchers of the Tigray war:

In a country that has refused to reconcile with its own history, and in a city where those contested beliefs play out in the town square, these [researchers] allow us to reconsider our sense of time, our knowledge of history, our use of land, our belief in objects and rituals, our collective power, and most importantly, the space of tomorrow, always on the horizon. (Keith & Nawi, 2021, p. 33)

As was the case in the exhibition, our research resulted from a dialogue on the difficult realities we, academics, faced collectively in 2020 when war began. How should we, inside and outside of Tigray, make sense of the situation? Recognising the challenging situation, this research was undertaken by all of us together, as an expression of the expectations of hope for a better tomorrow.

This book brings together the studies of researchers inside and outside of Tigray, resulting from collaboration between Mekelle University, Aksum University, Adigrat University, Great Zimbabwe University, Tilburg University, Leiden University and universities from across the African continent. The researchers participate in the Research Network Globalisation, Accessibility, Innovation and Care (GAIC), which investigates the problem of data black holes, i.e., communities that are not connected to the global Internet. Little did we know, when we started, that we would be separated by a complete communication blackout for two years. This was research of a black hole situation in real time and experienced in real life (Gebreslassie, 2024).

During the two-year long siege, we investigated the reality separately from within and outside Tigray. The collaboration now uniquely brings together the work of the researchers who experienced the war from inside Tigray, with the work of the researchers who experienced the war from outside Tigray. All of the researchers were engaged with the situation of the war when it took place, but from different positionalities and with different types of data.

The researchers outside of Tigray came together in a team that produces the daily Situation Reports on the Horn of Africa, which are published by the European External Programme with Africa (EEPA). Starting on the 17 November 2020, the EEPA Situation Reports provided a daily bulletin of information from the ground – often lagging in time. The communication blackout, the closure of the Internet and the lack of access of journalists made it very difficult to know what was happening inside Tigray. Establishing trusted channels and verifying as much as was possible under the circumstances, the Situation Reports provided a summary of what was known – outside – about the war at the time. Being an almost daily two-page bulletin, it provides a granular reference to the developments in time. Many of the events that were first published in the Situation Reports, such as the Aksum massacre or the attack on the Debredamo convent, were later confirmed (Tesfa, Bächtold, Gebremichael, & Van Reisen, 2024). The Situation Reports opened a small but important gate from Tigray, during the siege. These reports were complemented by the important work of other groups of researchers, tirelessly keeping their gaze on Tigray, focusing on complementary information, which has supported the overall understanding of the war – from outside Tigray.

Meanwhile, inside Tigray, a group of researchers met daily in Ayder Comprehensive Specialized Hospital of Mekelle University (Medhanyie & Wuneh, 2024). Withstanding the extremely difficult circumstances of the war and withstanding the many pressures of survival the researchers and their families faced, keeping their resilience in the face of difficult circumstances of loss of loved ones while engaging with the hard realities of the war, they documented, engaged other scholars and students, collected primary data, and innovated to increase the communication channels with the outside

world in a safe way. They walked every day to the university. Without phone and Internet, communication went through chains of people. This outstanding team made sure that the events of the war were meticulously described ensuring that people in Tigray were given a voice to express what they had experienced (Medhanyie & Wuneh, 2024).

Midway through the war, the two groups working together, in separate spaces, succeeded in creating a solid communication line, through the creativity and repurposing of ICT hardware inside Tigray, creating a connection to the outside world. This was a small victory of breaking through the black hole (Gebreslassie, 2024) and allowed the researchers to have weekly meetings to share and discuss their work and provide mutual support. We established daily connections making intimacies possible across the confines of physical boundaries (Nyamnjoh, 2015). The Mekelle-based team even presented their work virtually at the European Development Days in June 2021. Work was also presented in online webinars, allowing for discussions from the inside of locked Tigray with the outside world. This forbidden representation from within Tigray to the outside world felt momentous. The EEPA webinars focused on the massacres, sexual violence, the destruction of religious places, religious artefacts and historic monuments, the destruction of the health care system, and the destruction of farms and famine. Researchers from other groups took place in the debates, which helped to validate initial findings.

This discussion over the Internet from our separated places to a public audience set a pathway in which we felt comfortable to interrogate each other, explore how things were recorded, narrated, and remembered, as well as forgotten, as well as how we could cross over from the individual experience to a collective sense and meaning. Following the war, the two groups started the work of triangulating the data available from within Tigray with those recorded outside Tigray. In some instances, this led to new collaborations in which new teams were formed that crosschecked all the available data. The collaboration led to new insights from both sides.

Most importantly and foremost, this research wants to publish the work of the researchers in Tigray, to bring forth the voice of the

people in Tigray, who were completely silenced by the siege. It brings together empirical studies, which analyse different facets of the war. Comparing the work of the two teams in their separate locations has helped to reach common understanding. Hence, this project is the result of a composition:

It integrates what in the original may have been divergent, synthesizes different classes of information, and plays different order of experience against one another. It brings the half-forgotten back to life [...]. And it creates a consecutive narrative out of fragments, imposing order on chaos, and producing images far clearer than any reality could be. (Samuel, 2012, p. xxiii)

After the war we continued to meet every week. We asked each other to explain what material was collected when, where, by whom, how it was analysed and what the basis was for conclusions presented. We also identified what was missing and what had been left out. All chapters were reviewed by at least two blind peer reviewers, who are independent academics not engaged with the research-team itself.

The study was localised in the Tigray region, the northern region of Ethiopia, which shares a thousand-kilometre-long border with Eritrea. Under the constitution of Ethiopia, Tigray is a regional state that borders Amhara Regional State in the South and Afar Regional State in the East. West of Tigray is Sudan.

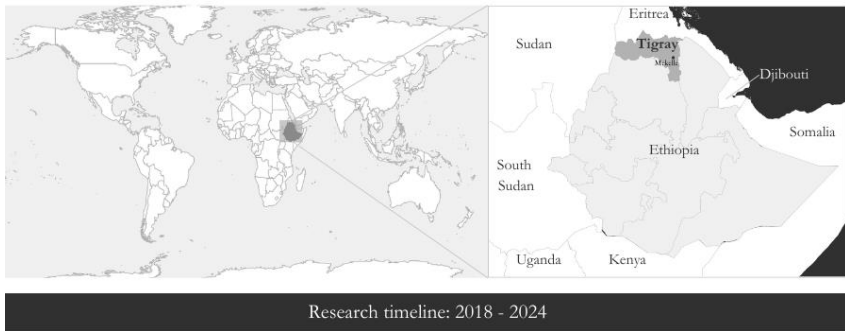


Figure 1.2. Research location and timeline

The study covers the period of the war from 4 November 2020, when the Ethiopian government declared a law-and-order operation in the region, up to 3 November 2022 when the Pretoria Agreement on Cessation of Hostilities (between the Ethiopian government and the

Tigray People’s Liberation Front, the political party leading the Tigray region) was implemented. The study traces the lead up to the war, especially the Peace Agreement between Eritrea and Ethiopia, which was signed in July 2018. It identifies the participants in the war. It engages with what is now left of the war, such as the graffiti on the walls and the damaged infrastructure and cultural heritage, left as messages to the future.

All researchers who engaged in this study – each one of them – were courageous and fearless. During and after the war, the situation was often dangerous. Researchers were threatened – some of them still are. The situation affected everyone on a personal level, while the fate of family members was unknown, loved ones died and the experiences of the war were deeply traumatising. To investigate the circumstances, meant engaging with the trauma of ourselves and of others. So as not to live in the pain caused by existential loss, every one of us had to find a way of moving forwards (Van der Kolk, 2014), renouncing much of the baggage of the past and embracing the future (Gleick, 1998).

We became a strong group with one purpose. We had to understand our own interpretation to transparently sensitise the world to the situation. To interrogate the findings meant accepting others’ intelligibility of the situation. We learnt that this was a productive performative work and that it was multidirectional. We had to give up any competitive sense towards one absolute claim on the truth (Rothberg, 2009). We synchronised around a common direction to break through the silence of the siege, we synchronised on the methodology of academic rigour and we synchronised on what was in our hearts. We admit, wholeheartedly, that we cared (Pink, 2018). We are not ashamed of it. Today, as we present the results of this collective work to you here, we, like Misghe, the Eritrean kid who flees from his country in the book “Amid the Chaos” (Mogos, 2016), we feel shaken – but also grateful, for a shared moment of clarity.

Organisation of this book

This study is divided into three books. In the first book, we focus on what we refer as the ‘hysteresis’ of war: this relates to the question of fundamental change in Tigray that was caused by the war. Most

importantly, this book deals with the question whether the war was inflicted with genocidal intent. The legal answer to this question, is presented at the Chapter 13 of this volume.

To make sense of the war, we need to understand the actors in the war, the perpetrators, the timelines and turning points, and what were expressed as the aims of involvement. The book starts from the understanding that atrocities are perpetrated with the aim to break the resilience of a group and fundamentally alter their existence, preferably to the point of non-existence. To what extent the war succeeded in doing so is an important question, which we reflect on in this volume.

In the second volume, we explore how the war impacted Tigray society at all levels, examining how changes at different levels informed each other through the concept of panarchy (Van Reisen & Mawere, 2024). The third volume (Van Reisen, Medhanyie & Mawere, 2024) adopts an agentic view of resilience: How did the people of Tigray perceive their situation, despite being unable to communicate it to the outside world? How did they respond to being trapped in a digital blackout and under siege? And how did they cope with the emerging circumstances? While these books document the heartbreaking destruction, massacres, and assaults on human dignity, they also highlight examples of creativity and speak to the human capacity to survive and innovate in the face of severe adversity.

The genesis and general overview of the war is discussed in the Chapter 2, “‘Game Over’: Key Markers of the Tigray War in Redefining the Region’ by Melicherová *et al.* (2024). They trace key moments that are decisive in the war. This chapter identifies the key periods of the war and the preparations for it. It also identifies the key actors in the war. This chapter locates the first turning point towards the war as January 2018, when Eritrean president Isayas warns in a speech: ‘Game over, Woyane’. President Isayas threatens the Tigray leadership and population, which he referred to with the derogatory term ‘Woyane’, and defines them as a target.

In Chapter 3, ‘From Hidden to Open War in Tigray: Structural and Proximate Causes’, Gebreslassie and Van Reisen (2024) look at the causes of the war, pointing to regional aspirations leading to

preparations for war from at least 2018 onwards, and with roots even earlier. The chapter demystifies the war as a law-and-order operation and shows that the dynamics of serious conflict caused the war to erupt, including claims on the situation made from neighbouring Eritrea.

Tesfa and Van Reisen (2024a) describe the involvement of Eritrea in the war in Chapter 4, 'Regional War by Design: The Involvement of Eritrea in the Tigray War'. The authors conclude that the involvement of Eritrea, which was denied in the first five months of the war, was systematic and deliberate. Not only was Eritrea involved in the war during the whole time, it was also involved in the design of it. Warning Tigray in January 2018 with the slogan "Game over Woyane", President Isayas detailed the reasons and circumstances of the upcoming demise of Tigray, masked by a Peace Agreement concluded in July 2018 with Prime Minister Abiy, after he came to power in Ethiopia in April 2018. The timeline suggests a key role of President Isayas in the formulation of a plan to confront Tigray.

In Chapter 5, 'Weaponising the Media: Exploring the Role of Ethiopian National Media in the Tigray War', Geb & Tesfa (2024) discuss the way in which the war was framed by the Ethiopian media, with the dissemination of ethnic-based hate speech. This chapter discusses the different frames that were exploited, which dehumanised the Tigray population, while contributing to drum up support for the war. These tools not only served to defend the war being waged on Tigray, but also led to increased violence towards Tigrayans anywhere in Ethiopia. They further find that the communications blackout meant that Tigray could not defend itself against the false allegations and sentiments of hatred communicated in the propaganda and hate-speech.

In Chapter 6, 'Famine as a Weapon in the Tigray War and the Siege', Kahsay (2024) describes the evidence of how food production was deliberately undermined and other pathways to food security were systematically blocked. This included the blocking of salaries, bank transfers, and support from relatives outside Tigray. It included the destruction of farming tools, culling of flock and displacement of farmers. It also included the blockade of humanitarian assistance. The

communication blockade ensured that information on the famine was not available in international media. The authors conclude that the Ethiopian authorities were well aware of the famine in Tigray, but that the siege was a deliberate attempt to use famine as a weapon in the war and asks the question whether the perpetration of genocide was aided by the deliberate undermining of the ability of the population to survive the war through the deliberate creation of a famine.

In Chapter 7, 'Bodies for Battle Fields: Systematic Use of Rape as a Weapon of War in Tigray', Kidanu and Van Reisen (2024) discuss the use of gender-based violence as a weapon. Investigating the *modus operandi*, the author finds rape was used in a systematic and deliberate manner to instil fear. The perpetration included all allied forces of the Ethiopian National Defence Force (ENDF), including the Eritrean military. Sexual violence was used to traumatise, infect people with HIV, and cause infertility in Tigrayan women. The rapes had a sadistic character and left a deep traumatic physical and mental impact on women and their families, led to collective trauma, undermining the fabric of society. The authors conclude that the *modus operandi* warrants a further investigation into the genocidal intent of the rape.

In Chapter 8, "Vultures were Circling the Areas": Massacres during the Tigray War', Tesfa, Bächtold, Gebremichael and Van Reisen (2024a) discuss the massacres that took place during the war, triangulating evidence across different sources, and finding patterns in the *modus operandi*: the execution of men, the rape of women, the restriction of burials, and violence based on ethnicity and religion. The chapter also discusses the perpetrators of the massacres – Eritrean, Ethiopian and Amhara soldiers – and their hostility towards victims based on ethnicity and religious practices. The violence of the massacres appeared to be systematic and coordinated.

In Chapter 9, 'Throwing bodies into the Tekeze River: Assessment of Massacres', Tesfa, Bächtold, Gebremichael, and Van Reisen (2024b) study the massacres using a database compiled by Ghent University, which mapped 478 civilian killing events during the Tigray war. The study finds that casualties by targeted executions were greater than those from active conflict. It also investigates the recurrence of

massacres in the same location, finding that 76% of massacres occurred in the same place between 2 and 12 times. The findings indicate the systematic targeting of civilians. The massacres occurred under a communication blackout which prevented media from publishing information on them. The Eritrean presence was denied, which allowed Eritreans, who claimed to be under instruction to kill civilians, to conduct these massacres with impunity.

Chapter 10, “Followers of the Devil’s Code 666”: The Writing on the Wall of an Intent to Eradicate a People’, by Tesfa, Van Reisen and Medhanyie (2024), investigates graffiti and signs left in public spaces by soldiers who invaded Tigray, as well as in a school and hospital. The analysis shows the strong hostile feelings by the invading military forces towards Tigrayans, with messages and slogans justifying their eradication. Most graffiti and signs tried to dissociate Tigrayans from the rest of Ethiopia, mobilise for the eradication of Tigrayans, and spread fear against the ‘power’ held by Tigrayans. An undercurrent emerging in the graffiti is of Tigray people not being human, and even associated with the Devil, showing a mindset that prepares for killing and eradication without mercy.

In Chapter 11, ‘The Turning Points towards the Unequal Protection of Eritrean Refugees in Ethiopia: From Protection to Abduction’, Melicherova (2024) investigates the perpetration of the abduction of Eritrean refugees from Tigray territory where the refugees had previously received international protection from the political persecution by the Eritrean regime. In the chapter, Melicherova finds that the destruction by Eritrea of four refugee camps, hosting an estimated 100,000 Eritrean refugees, sets an extraordinary precedent that has not happened before, and which is an egregious violation of international law concerning the protection of refugees. The refugees were taken from the camps by force and repatriated to Eritrea, where they disappeared. Melicherova concludes that some were imprisoned, and others were cynically deployed by Eritrea to fight in the Tigray war, by force, against the very region that had hosted them as refugees.

In Chapter 12, “He had Orders, and His Superiors were Outside”: Strategic Rape as Genocide in Tigray’, Kidanu and Tefera (2024)

conclude that rape during the war in Tigray was conducted with the explicit intent to make women infertile. The authors found that the sexual violence in Tigray was committed systematically and deliberately, characterised by a clear intention to commit violence and destroy the Tigrayan ethnicity, including by serious bodily and mental harm, the blocking of access to essential services, including health services, and acts intended to prevent births within the Tigrayan population. The evidence shows that the rape was carried out with systematic and deliberate intent and on the orders of the superiors of the soldiers. The perpetrators included both Ethiopian and Eritrean military.

In Chapter 13, the concluding chapter, by Tefera (2024) entitled ‘Genocidal Intent in the Tigray War: Establishing Reasonable Grounds Based on Evidence’, the legal case is presented for genocide, concluding that the evidence provides reasonable grounds to investigate the war in Tigray as a genocide. The evidence provides a clear rationale of intent. There is a consistent pattern of execution, which is ordered and supported from the highest level of the governments involved in the planning, preparation and execution of it. These acts included extra-judicial killings, large scale sexual violence, deliberate deprivation of resources indispensable for survival, and the expulsion of ethnic Tigrayans from their homes, all of which fall under the prohibited acts of the crime of genocide. The perpetrators are identified as the ENDF, Eritrean military and regional Amhara forces. The legal obligation to investigate the crime of genocide rests with the international community to ensure persecution of all carrying responsibility for the crime.

Principal findings

Comparing findings from across the chapters in the three volumes, some important elements emerge that are essential to comprehend the Tigray war. We focus on four elements. Firstly, the new political reality that provided the context of the Tigray war and which has resulted in a new political situation as a consequence of the war. This reflects hysteresis and panarchy. Secondly, the timeline of the Tigray war, which seems to begin as early as January 2018, even before the inauguration of Prime minister Abiy in Ethiopia, with the definition

of a strategy: “Game, over Woyane”, set out by Eritrean president Isayas. Thirdly, the secret involvement of Eritrea in the war and its preparations, which emerged as a critical actor related to every aspect of the war and of its consequences. And, finally, despite the imposed situation of Tigray as a black hole under siege and communication blockade, the release of information and voice, calling for justice, accountability and demonstrating creative agency to build back better.

A new political reality

On 3 April 2018, Abiy Ahmed was appointed Prime Minister of the Ethiopian People’s Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF), the ruling coalition in Ethiopia at the time. On the 23 June a grenade was thrown at the stage where the Prime Minister was sitting during a rally that took place in Addis Ababa’s Meskel Square. Shortly after the explosion the crowd began to chant “down, down Woyane”, accusing Tigrayans of having plotted the assassination attempt on Prime Minister Abiy (The East African, 2018). The attack was associated in the media with the then recent announcement of the initiative of peace with Eritrea (The Guardian, 2018).²

This was a prelude to the political shift, which on 1 December 2019 replaces the ruling Ethiopian People’s Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF) with the new Prosperity Party (PP). The TPLF, at that point representing the Tigray regional government, did not join the EPRDF. In addition, the Tigray regional government argued that the constitution should be followed, and that this stipulated that new elections at the federal and regional state level should be held in 2020. Prime Minister Abiy did not follow this argument. He justified the decision to postpone elections due to the COVID-19 situation. The Regional Government of Tigray, led by the TPLF, decided differently, and held elections on 9 September 2020. This caused further friction between Tigray and the Ethiopian federal leadership.

This increased tension led to a number of events, which culminated in the declaration of a law-and-order operation by the Ethiopian

² None of those convicted and charged were of Tigrayan origin (BBC, 2018; Kassa, 2021).

government on the Tigray region on the 4 November 2020.³ The military operation led immediately to a full-blown war, with several invading military parties (Melicherová *et al.*, 2024; Gebreslassie & Van Reisen, 2024; Kassa, 2021). In May 2021 the TPLF was designated as a terrorist organisation. Following the signing of the Pretoria Cessation of Hostilities Agreement on 2 November 2022, the designation of the TPLF as a terrorist organisation was removed on 23 March 2023. A new regional government was installed in Tigray, led by President Getachew Reda, previously the senior advisor and spokesperson of the TPLF during the war and negotiator of the Pretoria Cessation of Hostilities Agreement for the TPLF.

The war in Tigray was the result of strong tensions in Ethiopia's relations with the Tigray region. The sense of not being protected by the Ethiopian government, but, instead, being attacked by the Ethiopian allied forces, undoubtedly left strong feelings in Tigray. This included the questioning of belonging and left an expectation among the Tigray population that more independence and autonomy would resolve causes of future conflict (Gebrewahd *et al.*, 2024; Claes, 2024). The Tigray war has undoubtedly created a new political reality in Ethiopia – a new situation, with new sensitivities and new dynamics. We could refer to this outcome as the hysteresis of war.

³ Although it is claimed that the war started the night before, on 3 November, when the federal government of Ethiopia sent commandos to Mekelle (SRC-1047, EEPA, 2021, SR 44).

Hysteresis

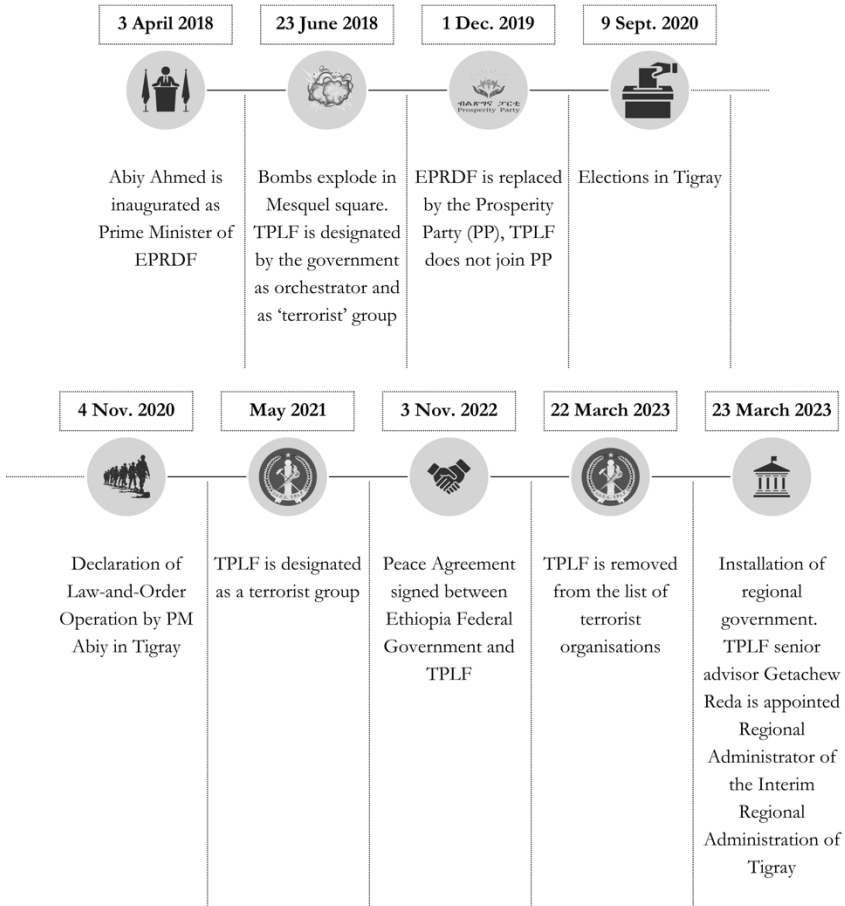


Figure 1.3. Political events in Ethiopia – Tigray relations

Timeline of the Tigray War

The slogan used in the war “Game over, Woyane” was introduced by President Isayas of Eritrea, prior to the appointment of Prime Minister Abiy in Ethiopia (Melicherová *et al.*, 2024; Tesfa & Van Reisen, 2024a). The slogan was introduced in a speech by President Isayas on 14 January 2018. Melicherová *et al.*, 2024 identify 10 critical junctures in the Tigray war (Figure 1.4.).

2018-2023: the Tigray war

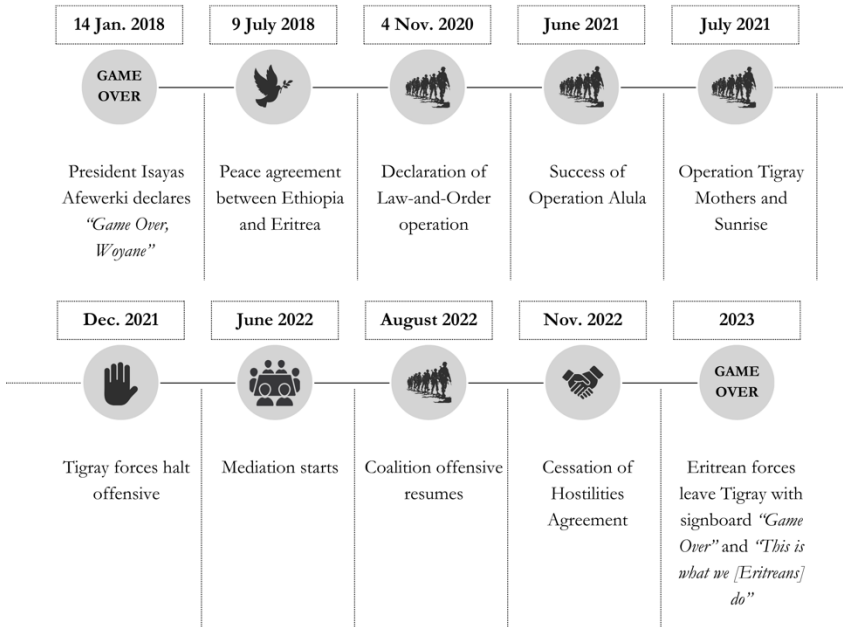


Figure 1.4. Overview of critical points in the Tigray war

Created based on Melicherra et al. 2024

Prime Minister Abiy was appointed prime minister of Ethiopia in April 2018. A Peace Agreement between Ethiopia and Eritrea was signed in July 2018. The contents of the Peace Agreement have remained secret. On the 4 November 2020, the Ethiopian government declared “አግ የማስከበር ዘመቻ”, a ‘law-and-order operation’, which was later changed to “የአግ ማስከበርና የህልውና ዘመቻ” ‘law enforcement and existential operation’ on 11 November 2020 (EBC, 2020n, 0:00:47).

However, the war had already begun on the 3 November (UN International Commission of Human Rights Experts on Ethiopia, 2022; Van Reisen, 2021; Van Reisen *et al.* 2021) with a series of preparations leading up to it (Melicherová *et al.*, 2024; Gebreslassie & Van Reisen, 2024; Kassa, 2021). Following the military operations in Tigray by the ENDF and allied forces, including Amhara regional

forces, and Eritrea Defense Forces (Tesfa & Van Reisen, 2024a), an administration directly assigned by Ethiopia was installed in Tigray.

Following the invasion, the TPLF retreated and rearranged the Tigray Defence Forces (TDF) to launch Operation Alula in June 2021. The TPLF regained control over the Tigray capital, Mekelle. The TDF then launched Operation Tigray Mothers in July 2021, in which the TDF moved towards Addis Ababa in an unexpected attempt to advance a reverse of the balance of power, break the siege and the communication blockade. Under military and diplomatic pressure, the TDF halted the offensive and retreated to the Tigray region in December 2021 (Melicherová *et al.*, 2024). In August 2022, the ENDF allied forces resumed an offensive against the TDF, followed by negotiations in South Africa, which led to the Pretoria Cessation of Hostilities Agreement signed on 2 November 2022 (Melicherová *et al.*, 2024).

Eritrean involvement in the war in Tigray

Tesfa, Van Reisen and Smits (2024) provide some further context to a plausible timeline from 2017 onwards. This involves shuttle diplomacy that takes place in 2017 on a proposition for a settlement of the Ethiopian-Eritrean border conflict, access for Ethiopia to the Assab port in Eritrea, and financial assistance from the European Union (EU) for roads to support the infrastructural connections of the port. According to the reconstruction by Tesfa, Van Reisen and Smits (2024), the negotiations involved at least a negotiator from Israel, the President of Eritrea, Isayas Afwerki, the former Prime Minister of Ethiopia, Hailemariam Desalegn, and the former regional government of Tigray.

Tesfa, Van Reisen and Smits (2024) argue that the evidence suggests that the Tigray regional government did not consent to the proposition offered in December 2017 by the diplomatic effort led by Israel to provide Addis Ababa with access to Assab port in Eritrea. Whatever may be the case, Eritrean President Isayas announced the plan to target Tigray in a public speech given on 14 January 2018. The salient element is that the outline of the plan presented by President Isayas as ‘Game over, Woyane’, is offered prior to the appointment of Prime Minister Abiy. It speaks of a shift in the international

political reality that will enable the policy (Tesfa, Van Reisen & Smits, 2024).

This quiet shuttle diplomacy has never been publicly revealed. The content of the 2018 Eritrea-Ethiopia peace agreement, which was launched in the following year, has also never been disclosed. Prime Minister Abiy visited Assab port soon after the Peace Deal was signed in 2018 and the EU proceeded to support Eritrea with a programme to build roads to connect the port to Ethiopia. The two leaders, President Isayas and Prime Minister Abiy, visited key military strategic installations announcing full access to each countries' military assets (Tesfa, Van Reisen & Smits, 2024). Making use of the strategic Eritrean border with Tigray, which is a thousand kilometres long, preparations for war involved military operations across the two countries (Tesfa & Van Reisen, 2024a). Eritrea entered Tigray prior to the announcement of the law-and-order operation on 4 November 2020 and prior to the flights that brought Ethiopian special forces to Mekelle on 3 November (Gebreslassie & Van Reisen, 2024; Tesfa & Van Reisen, 2024a; Tesfa, Van Reisen & Smits, 2024). Refugees (former soldiers) from Eritrea in Sudan gave testimony of having been deployed for the attack prior to the 3 November (Smits & Wirtz, 2024).

2018: Start of ‘Operation Game Over’

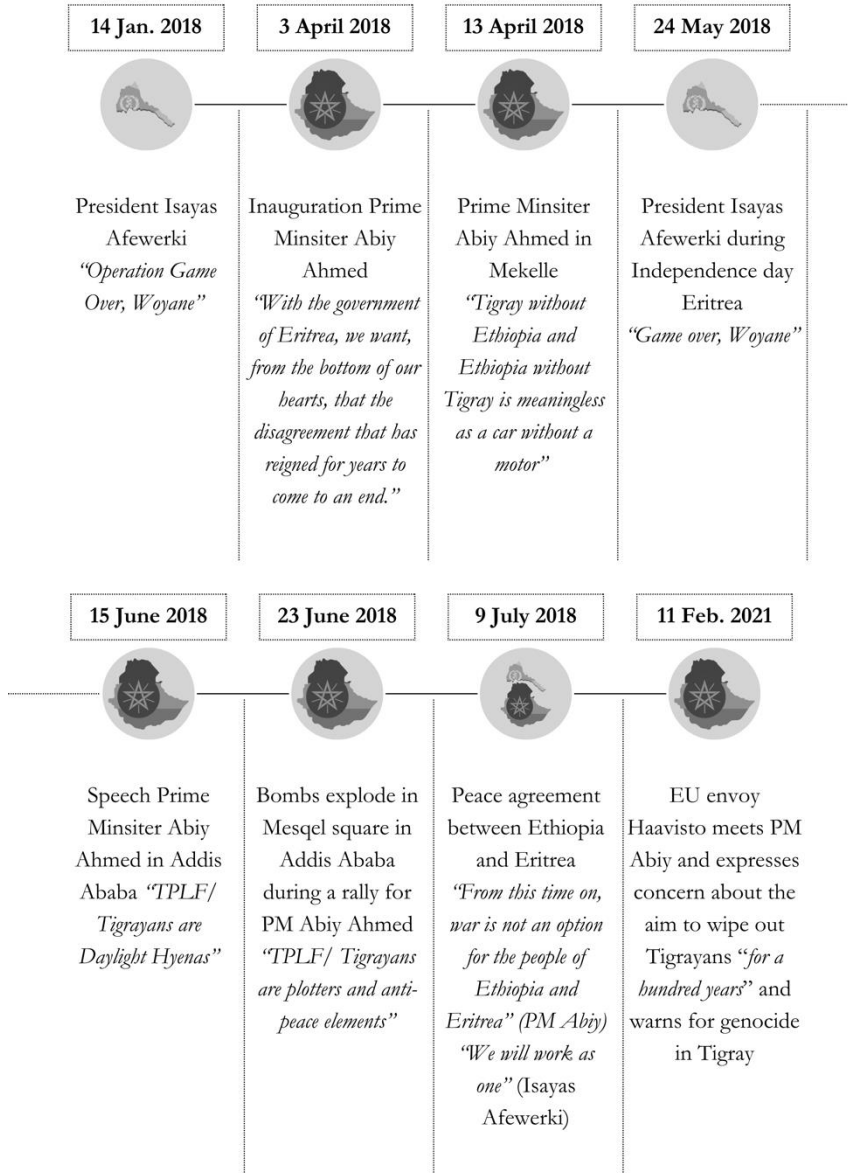


Figure 1.5. Overview of the operation ‘Game Over’ targeting Tigray

The statement “Game over, Woyane” by President Isayas of Eritrea critically signalled a policy against Tigray from 2018 onwards with a consequential outcome (Melicherová *et al.*, 2024; Equar & Tesfa, 2024). Moreover, when Eritrea left parts of Tigray in 2023 (after the Pretoria Agreement on Cessation of Hostilities was signed) the same slogan served as an explicit warning from Eritrea to Tigray that the war was not over (Tesfa, Van Reisen & Medhanyie, 2024). It is an unmistakable signature of the Eritrean position on Tigray.

The law enforcement operation of the federal government of Ethiopia immediately moved into full-fledged war. In the first three months, multiple massacres were perpetrated on civilians (Kahsay *et al.*, 2024), under cover of a siege and communication blackout, which prevented the massacres from being reported (Gebresslassie, 2024). The communication blackout also prevented the reporting of significant Eritrean involvement in the massacres (Gebremariam & Abrha, 2024). Nonetheless, Eritrea’s presence was denied during the first five months of the war (Tesfa, Van Reisen & Smits, 2024). The systematic nature of atrocities committed, the massacres, the sexual violence, and the destruction of the cultural heritage and religious sites are unparalleled (Kidanu *et al.*, 2024; Tesfa, Bächtold *et al.*, 2024; Tesfa, Bächtold, Gebremichael, Stocker, Van Reisen, 2024; Gebremariam & Abrha, 2024; Kahsay *et al.*, 2024). The human rights violations included the abduction of tens of thousands of Eritrean refugees to Eritrea, where they disappeared or were deployed on the battlefield in Tigray (Melicherová, 2024). In several studies it is identified that soldiers were operating under instructions to carry out the atrocities (Kidanu & Tefera, 2024; Melicherová, 2024; Kahsay *et al.*, 2024).

The message “This is what we Eritreans do” is delivered in a note found in the womb of a young woman who was raped (see Figure 1.1) and on banner on a truck to Eritrea, which was disseminated in social media understood as: “Game over, Woyane, this is what we Eritreans do” (see Figure 1.7) (Tesfa, Van Reisen & Medhanyie, Book 1, Chapter 10; Tesfa, Van Reisen, Book 2, Chapter 3; and Tesfa & Van Reisen, Book 2, Chapter 4). Kahsay (2024) emphasises that this should be seen as a political narrative, which is not necessarily representative of a cultural narrative or distinction, given the similarity

of values within the region, which includes Ethiopia, Tigray and Eritrea. A lack of human rights culture in civil education could explain the politically motivated cruelties perpetrated in the war.

The warning “Game over, Woyane” was accompanied by derogatory and dehumanising language, which characterised the war against Tigray in the hate-speech that was evident in media, in the graffiti left behind and in the way in which Tigray civilians were addressed as inferior or using hostile labels: ‘woyane’, ‘agame’, ‘junta’, ‘banda’, ‘day-time hyena’ (Geb & Tesfa, 2024; Tesfa, Van Reisen & Medhanyie, 2024; Tesfa & Van Reisen, 2024b.; Tesfa & Van Reisen, 2024c). Analysis of the hate speech used by soldiers invading Tigray can be traced back to words used in speeches by political leaders (Equar & Tesfa, 2024; Tesfa & Van Reisen, 2024). This campaign was taken over by the highest level of the leadership in Ethiopia, particularly with the slogan ‘Tigrayans are daylight hyenas’. In a cultural frame the ‘hyena’ has a negative connotation, a ‘daylight hyena’ refers to an abnormal aggressive animal that needs to be tamed or killed because it is dangerous (Equar & Tesfa, 2024).

The hate-speech as well as disinformation often refers to historic situations or events (Tesfa & Van Reisen, 2024). Hence, a timeline of the Eritrea-Ethiopia relations (see Figure 1.6.) is instructive to understand the references to political events that are used, among other things, in speech igniting hate and revenge.

The letter found in the womb of the young woman who was raped, referencing ‘09’ (Figure 1.1), is plausibly referring to the much-used accusation that Tigray motivated the United Nations (UN) Security Council sanctions against Eritrea in 2009. The sanctions were subsequently followed up with an investigation by a UN Special Commission on Inquiry on Eritrea in 2016 which found that the indefinite National Service constituted a crime against humanity. This left Eritrea increasingly isolated. Following the signing of the 2018 Peace Agreement between Eritrea and Ethiopia, the UN Security Council sanctions were lifted.

1998 - 2022: Tipping points of Eritrea-Ethiopia relations

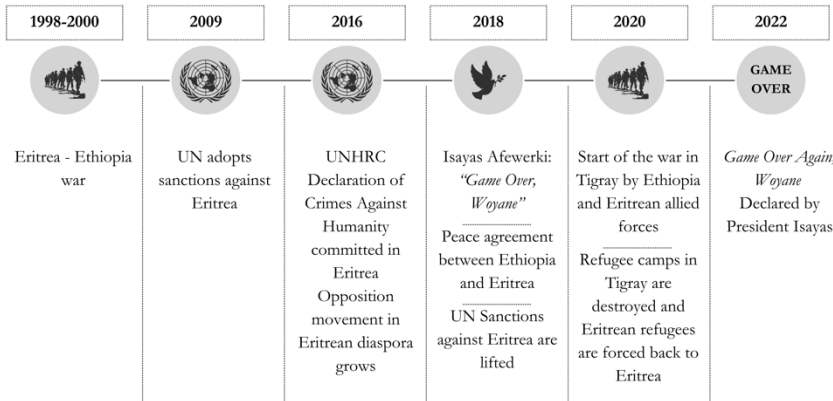


Figure 1.6. Overview of tipping points in Eritrea-Ethiopia relations between 1998 and 2022

The war in Tigray was certainly associated with overall Eritrea-Ethiopia relations. The references to important events, such as the UN Security Council sanctions, in the graffiti found in Tigray (Tesfa, Van Reisen and Medhanyie, 2024; Tesfa, Van Reisen, 2024b; Tesfa & Van Reisen, 2024c) reveal a tone of political revenge from Eritrea on Tigray, with the Tigray population blamed for certain adverse events in Eritrea.

The findings across the various chapters support the conclusion by, among others, Melicherova, Van Reisen & Tesfa (2024); Gebreslassie and Van Reisen (2024); Geb & Tesfa (2024) and Tesfa, Van Reisen and Smits (2024) that the war in Tigray was prepared from January 2018 onwards with, at the very least, the strong involvement of Eritrean President Isayas – and potentially on the initiative of President Isayas.

In addition to revenge, a certain rivalry between Eritrea and Tigray was also noticeable in the discourse on the war. In several chapters slogans such as “we will bring you back 40 years”, “...50 years”, or “...100 years” reveal the intent to purposefully set Tigray back (Kidanu, Van Reisen, Stocker, *et al.* 2024; Tesfa & Van Reisen, 2024a; Tesfa, Van Reisen & Medhanyie, 2024; Kahsay, 2024). This expresses an intent to bring about a critical transition, to create a new situation,

a new state of an impoverished population, that will not be able to return to where it was before the war. The current aim of the Tigray leadership to ‘build back better’ is a brave attempt to defy the aim of the war, to prevent Tigray from recovering.



Figure 1.7. Game Over (@alex_temelso, 20 January, 2023)

Eritrean troops only left parts of Tigray in 2023. A picture was posted and shared on social media, “This is how we Eritreans are”, with a military vehicle carrying the Eritrean flag, with the slogan “Game over, Woyane”, which can be understood as a hidden transcript to attribute the war to Eritrea as a victory over Tigray (Tesfa, Van Reisen & Medhanyie, 2024).

Conclusion: The hidden transcript of genocide

A hidden transcript in the war is the blame placed on Tigrayans, in general, for the state of the political situation in Ethiopia. This narrative was a dominant discourse; Geb and Tesfa (2024) how a documentary broadcasted in 2018 coined ‘Tigrinya-speakers’ as ደብዳቤዎች (torturers), ነፍሰ ገዳዮች (murderers), ሙሰኞች (corrupt), አሰቃይ (excruciates), መናፍስት (ghosts), ከሀዲዎች (traitors), ግብረሰዶማውያን (homosexuals) and ሰይጣኖች (devils) (Fana Television, 2018a, translation by authors). "We will not rest unless this enemy is stamped out. These people [Tigray people] are the enemy of the whole people of Ethiopia. They are the enemy of the Oromo, the enemy of Afar, and the enemy of Somali. We have to continue heroically struggling

against the enemy.”, declared the former President of the Amhara region in July 2021 (ETV, 25 July 2021). Following this statement, a second wave of mass arrests of Tigrayans in Addis Ababa began in July 2021. The declaration seems to reflect a desire for revenge for past grievances, expressed through hatred against Tigrayans.

Van Reisen, Kidanu, Stocker & Duncan-Cassell (2024) find expressions of hate contributing to the effeminisation of the people of Tigray, the process by which someone is made to take on characteristics traditionally associated with femininity. It is often used in a negative or pejorative sense, particularly when describing men or male-dominated spaces that are perceived as becoming more "feminine" in an attempt to portray them as weak, activating polarisation and dehumanisation, resulting in a perception that the lives in Tigray have no value.

The collective measures of the war – including the siege and communication blockade (Gebreslassie, 2024), the destruction of the health facilities (Medhanyie *et al.*, 2024; Niguse *et al.*, 2024; Taye *et al.*, 2024), undermining of humanitarian assistance (Kahsay, 2024), looting and destruction of farming (Nyssen *et al.*, 2024), destruction and looting of cultural, religious and economic assets (Gebremariam & Abriha, 2024) – severely undermined resilience (Stocker & Medhanyie, 2024). The result was famine (Kahsay, 2024; Kahsay & Medhanyie, 2024) and the loss of between 300,000 and 400,000 civilian lives, in addition to estimates of between 200,000 and 300,000 casualties on the battlefield (Financial Times, 2023).

The note left behind in the womb of a young Tigrayan woman: “We want the womb of Tigrayan women to be infertile”, speaks to the intent of genocide. It does not do this in isolation. Briefing EU heads of state after a visit to Ethiopia, the European Special Envoy, Haavisto, uses for the first time the term ‘genocide’ on the 11 February 2021. In the closing chapter of this book, Tefera finds that the intent of genocide can be deduced from the propaganda and hate speech perpetrated against the Tigray population, including the explicit desire that Tigrayans should cease to exist as a people. Tefera argues that the atrocity crimes committed with genocidal intent, should be investigated under the Rome Statute (1998), to ensure that

justice and accountability prevail. The conclusions of Tefera (2024) in this book, are in line with the New Lines Institute, which finds:

.. that there is a reasonable basis to believe that all sides (including the Ethiopian and allied forces, and the Tigrayan forces) committed war crimes in the course of the conflict, Ethiopian and allied forces — specifically, members of the Ethiopian National Defense Force, the Eritrean Defense Forces, and the Ambara Special Forces, among other groups — also appear to have committed crimes against humanity against Tigrayans, as well as acts of genocide.

These acts of genocide include killings, the infliction of serious bodily and mental harm, intentional measures to prevent births, and the deliberate infliction of conditions of life calculated to bring about the destruction of Tigrayans. The report finds, furthermore, that certain individuals also appear to have made statements amounting to direct and public incitement to commit genocide.

Irrespective whether this apparent conduct by the Ethiopian and allied forces was committed as part of a plan, or whether it was supported at senior levels, Ethiopia was obliged as a State party to the Genocide Convention to take effective action to prevent the commission of genocidal acts and to punish such acts if they occurred. (New Lines Institute, 2024, p. 6)

In establishing the crime of genocide, the special intent (*dolus specialis*), to destroy, in whole or in part, a national, ethnical, racial, or religious group (Article 2 of the Genocide Convention), is more important than the motive behind the act. The special intent is a key element that distinguishes genocide from other crimes; it requires a clear intention to bring about the destruction of the targeted group.

As a result, the international community is obligated to take action, which may include initiating proceedings by States before the International Court of Justice under Article IX of the Genocide Convention. Additionally, States and the international community should work towards establishing an international, impartial, and independent criminal investigation. Where feasible, they should exercise universal jurisdiction to ensure that justice is served in relation to the numerous human rights violations in Tigray (Tefera, 2024).

Designation of genocide in the Tigray war

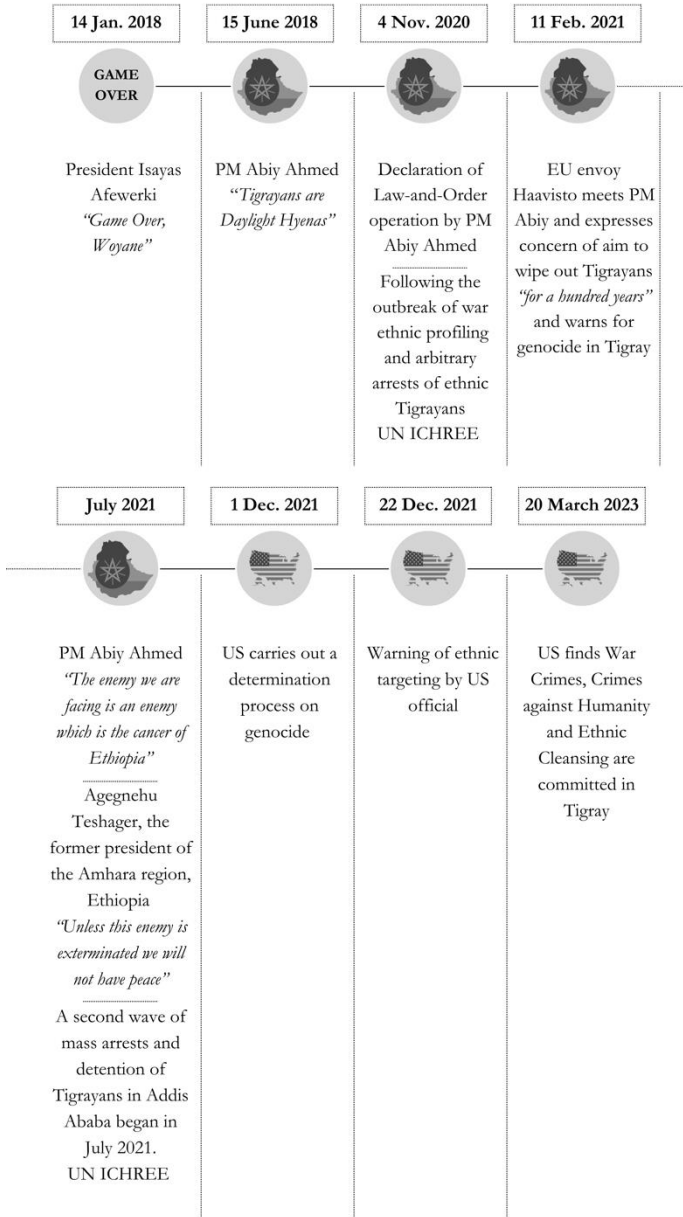


Figure 1.8. Critical points in the designation of genocide in the Tigray war

The events that have unfolded have fundamentally transformed the situation in Tigray, leading to significant changes in Ethiopia and the broader region. This reflects the concepts of hysteresis and panarchy (Stocker 2024), experienced in real life. Despite the communication blockade creating a digital black hole, individuals have shown creativity and agency to break through the imposed silence, and have demonstrate that forward-looking innovation can arise from desperate circumstances (Amare *et al.*, 2024).

Adapting to this new situation also exemplifies resilience. Just as nature continuously renews itself, we can take inspiration from Pan, with whom we started this chapter, who symbolises the potential for growth and regeneration. After the destruction of war, communities can be inspired to rebuild and restore, drawing strength from the resilience of the natural world. Pan symbolises a return to essential values and the natural state of being, encouraging healing, growth, and the celebration of life in the aftermath of tragedy.

Building back better is the courageous motto of the people of Tigray, and shows dignity and resilience in the face of the shocking genocidal actions and devastation that the people of Tigray were confronted with. This can inspire efforts to find harmony within oneself and between different aspects of society at large. To build back better may not mean to reconstruct what was before, but rather to create a new tomorrow, based on yesterday's hope, and in this encounter of the past with the future, inform a new sense of what life can bring today.

Today, understood as a mutable moment in the present, in which we can build, leaving what is behind, for a better tomorrow.

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Authors' contributions

The chapter draws on the work by Medhanyie (2024), and his reflections on the work of researchers during the Tigray war. It further draws on the conceptual framework presented by Stocker (2024) in her chapter on Resilience. The chapter further incorporates the work of all authors including Gebreslassie on the nature of the war and Tefera (2024), on the legal determination of genocide. Melicherova checked the critical junctures presented in the chapter. The first draft of this chapter was written by Stocker. Stocker also prepared the figures of the timelines. The second draft was written by Van Reisen. Tesfa reviewed the timelines and sources. Stocker and Van Reisen reviewed subsequent versions of the chapter. Munyaradzi Mawere reviewed the chapter, made editorial comments and suggestions.

Ethical clearance

Ethical clearance of the research was obtained from Tilburg University on “Cultural Dimensions of Meaning-making and Agenda-setting”, identification code: REDC 2020.139.

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“Game Over”:

Key Markers of the Tigray War in Redefining the Region

Kristína Melicherová, Mirjam Van Reisen & Daniel Tesfa

ሰብስ ይወልድ እምበር መዓንጥኡዶ ይወፅእ?

Mankind is supposed to birth, not spill out intestines.

Abstract

The study examines the critical transition during the two-year Tigray war. It starts with the declaration by Eritrean President Isayas: “Game over” on 14 January 2018, in which he sets out a plan. The chapter identifies 10 critical events during the war: (1) 14 January 2018: President Isayas declares “Game over, Woyane”; (2) 9 July 2018: Peace Agreement between Eritrea and Ethiopia; (3) 4 November 2020: declaration of a law enforcement operation in Tigray by Prime Minister Abiy of Ethiopia; (4) June 2021: Operation Alula by Tigray forces; (5) July 2021: Operation Tigray Mothers and Sunrise by Tigray forces; (6) December 2021: Tigray forces halt offensive towards Addis Ababa; (7) June 2022: Mediation begins between Tigray and federal Ethiopian leadership; (8) August 2022: Coalition offensive against Tigray resumes; (9) 2 November 2022: signing of Pretoria Cessation of Hostilities Agreement; and (10) January 2023: Eritrean forces leave Tigray with signs declaring “Game over” and “This is what we [Eritreans] do.” The threat signalled by the policy of “Game over” continues to loom over Tigray.

Key words: Tigray war, critical junctures, key markers, tipping points, hysteresis, Ethiopia, Eritrea

Introduction

The events of war making and peace making may be regarded as tipping points that mark a transformation of a situation into an alternative socio-political ecosystem. In the Tigray war both events followed each other at breakneck speed. Although President Isayas Afwerki of Eritrea and Prime Minister (PM) Abiy Ahmed of Ethiopia signed a peace agreement in 2018, for which PM Abiy received the Nobel Peace Prize in 2019, both parties were involved in a ruinous war in northern Ethiopia from 2020 onwards. These events, and their order, need explaining, as none of these emerged without the possibility of alternative scenarios.

Anthropological research has shown that many societies around the world have been capable of living in peace in a ‘non-warring’ state or refrained from wars for generations (Fry, 2012). Despite the potential ability of societies to live in “peace systems” (Fry, 2012), past centuries have been marked by distinct destructive wars causing millions of casualties, as well as material and cultural losses. After World War II, numerous international instruments were put in place to prevent atrocities of war, which many countries have adopted as a preferable framework (Geneva Convention relative to the Protection of Civilian Persons in Time of War, 1949; Universal Declaration of Human Rights, 1948; Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide, 1948; Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees, 1951). Despite preventive measures, many international and civil wars have been waged all over the world since then. Warfare has been modified by the use of modern technology and adapted to the faster and more destructive pace of the 21st century. The outbreak of war disturbs peace, stability, and the traditional functioning of society. It disrupts the social, economic, and political structures of the affected regions. Additionally, it can lead to widespread human suffering, displacement, and loss of life. The disturbance caused by war extends beyond the immediate conflict zone and can have far-reaching consequences on global relations and geopolitical dynamics.

Clausewitz, in his historical piece on war, writes that “war never breaks out wholly unexpectedly” (Clausewitz, 1976, p. 78). It is rather a result of a myriad factors underlying political tensions, territorial

disputes, historical grievances, economic interests, power struggles, ideological differences, and ethnic or religious tensions. Interconnections within society are complex and not homogenous. Countries with a greater heterogeneity within the population are more likely to enter a war (Van Der Dennen, 1980). Tsing recognised that through interaction among individuals, originating from different cultural backgrounds, differences start to emerge which cause friction (Tsing, 2005). In this regard, Bourdieu (2000) introduced the concept of '*habitus*', which shapes an individual's perception of the social world, influencing their tastes, preferences, and behaviour. Friction arising from difference, leads to an interconnection showing certain qualities of either unstable, unequal, awkward or creative character (Tsing, 2005). The occurrence of friction bounces back informing habitus of involved individuals signalling some disturbance and non-smooth movement (Tsing, 2005). If the disturbance occurs within the system with low resilience it may lead to the formation of an alternative regime (situation).

This research aims to explore the interconnections between the Ethiopian federal government and the Tigray regional government, which have been generating friction in the political arena for many years. This friction came to a climax in November 2020 when a two-year war broke out. Complex history and intensifying political events escalated to a state of war with horrific social, cultural, and humanitarian consequences affecting millions of people. The implications of the Tigray war are considered in detail in the subsequent chapters of this book. However, to understand the specific implications of war, it is crucial to depict precise situational events that underlie all ramifications of war. Despite the vastness of the war in Tigray, there is still much that is not understood when it comes to the description of the developments which shaped its course. There is a lack of comprehensive analysis that examines the key events using an academic approach. Therefore, the purpose of this chapter is to identify and analyse the key events and factors that were markers in the outbreak of the Tigray war and to determine how these signifying events shaped the war until the signing of the Cessation of Hostilities Agreement on 2 November 2022.

The main objective of this chapter is not to give answers as to why the war in Tigray was fought. Instead, a summary of the events leading up to, and occurring during, the war is provided in the form of descriptive research with a focus on the following research question: *To what extent can the theory of tipping points explain the changes of social-political systems ('regimes') during the two-year war in Tigray?*

Theoretical framework

Social and political systems – as diverse, complex, and dynamic structures – are prone to abrupt qualitative change leading to a new regime. An alternative regime is often the result of a critical transition characterised by a set of incremental processes evolving over time and triggered by an abrupt occurrence. A popular term that has been used in the literature to describe such a phenomenon is ‘tipping point’. Gladwell (2000) describes it as a critical point in which a compelling idea rapidly becomes indispensable for everyone. It is “that magic moment when an idea, trend, or social behaviour crosses a threshold, tips, and spreads like wildfire” (Gladwell, 2000).

An emerging tipping point does not occur in a vacuum. It is bound to a specific context (historical as well as contemporary), space and time. Situations in which incremental changes, occurring at a specific point of time, are met with reactions, which enhance these actions, leading to a new system change (Van Nes *et al.*, 2016). In an interdisciplinary literature review, Milkoreit *et al.* (2018) analysed the use of the term tipping point. Their analysis showed a multitude of working definitions of the tipping point across the literature, while using distinct thematic characteristics. Taking most represented themes into account, Milkoreit *et al.* (2018) defined the tipping point as:

[T]he point or threshold at which small quantitative changes in the system trigger a non-linear change process that is driven by system-internal feedback mechanisms and inevitably leads to a qualitatively different state of the system, which is often irreversible. (Milkoreit *et al.*, 2018, p. 9)

According to this definition, a tipping point is characterised by four essential attributes: (i) the existence of multiple stable states, (ii) non-linearity or abruptness, (iii) (positive) feedback, and (iv) irreversibility

or limited reversibility (hysteresis) (Milkoreit, 2022; Milkoreit *et al.*, 2018).

Alternative stable states refers to the existence of two distinct regimes that are demarcated by the tipping point itself. One regime is characteristic as a 'pre-tipping point' state and the second one as a 'post-tipping point' state. As Stocker (2024) describes in a theoretical chapter on 'Resilience Conceptualised through Transformation', the system moves to its alternative state when the original status quo is disturbed, and low resilience of the system does not prevent change occurring. Secondly, nonlinearity and abruptness refer to the fact that once the tipping point occurs, the process that follows is diametrically different to its preceding stage. Due to low resilience, there is a large disproportionality between cause and effect of the threshold that leads to a regime change. The third important component of critical transitions is the feedback loop. To overcome the status quo of a system, appropriate positive reactions need to occur to enhance the effect of the threshold leading to rapid change. Lastly, once the tipping point triggers an alternative regime it is difficult to reverse it to the state preceding the threshold occurrence. It is possible to reverse the alternative regime, even though it is usually a difficult process. Shifting the regime backwards, however, does not mean that all conditions are reinstated to the departure point. The distance between two thresholds is called hysteresis. All four components will be considered when looking at the tipping point and regime change analysed in the present study.

Concept of war

Within the body of literature, 'war' has been observed as a social phenomenon generating multiple definitions. One of the oldest and widely influential studies on war, by Clausewitz, defines war as "an act of force to compel out enemy to do our will" (1976, p. 75). He adds that it "is not a mere act of policy but a true political instrument, a continuation of political activity by other means" (Clausewitz, 1976, p. 87). Kallen (1939) criticised Clausewitz's definition claiming it is too general and ambiguous (Van Der Dennen, 1980) and it "might apply also too much that is called peace" (Kallen, 1939, p. 379). The concept of war has been studied by many scholars from various

disciplines including political science, history, law, economics, as well as peace studies.

Most and Starr (1983) observed crosscutting elements that are covered by the many definitions of war. This involves situations where two or more parties with opposing intentions, objectives, and goals are placed in a condition where they are actively seeking their objectives. In such scenarios, one party is prepared to employ military force, while the other can resist it, thereby preventing immediate defeat (Most & Starr, 1983).

Not only is the definition of war a subject of study, but so is causality. Levy (1998), in his comprehensive assessment of war and conditions for peace, states that no consensus has been reached across the fields of war studies “as to what causes of war are” (p. 140). The theoretical framework proposed by Jobbagy (2009) on studying war in terms of causal nexus shows that due to the enormous complexity and the architecture of war, it is almost impossible to point out individual cases of causality. This has been confirmed by Van der Dennen’s thorough literature review on war concepts and definitions, in which he assessed that, due to multi-dimensionality of war, it is impossible to analyse the nature of war through a single cause theory (Van Der Dennen, 1980). As Clausewitz (1976) identified in his work, there are many historical, political and contextual events preceding war, which does not break out “wholly unexpectedly” (Clausewitz, 1976, p. 78).

International humanitarian law (IHL), also known as the law of armed conflict, is a set of legal principles and rules that seek to regulate the conduct of armed conflicts and mitigate the impact on civilians and non-combatants. The primary objective of IHL is to balance the military necessities of warfare with fundamental human values, ensuring that even in times of armed conflict, certain humanitarian standards are upheld. According to the Geneva Conventions, IHL applies “to all cases of declared war or of any other armed conflict which may arise between two or more of the High Contracting Parties, even if the state of war is not recognized by one of them” (Geneva Conventions, 1949), Article 2). Through adoption of the four Geneva Conventions in 1949, the term ‘armed conflict’ replaced the

traditionally used term ‘war’. Since then, the case law applied the terminology extensively. The landmark *Tadić* case ruled that:

An armed conflict exists whenever there is a resort to armed force between States or protracted armed violence between governmental authorities and organized armed groups or between such groups within a State. International humanitarian law applies from the initiation of such armed conflicts and extends beyond the cessation of hostilities until a general conclusion of peace is reached; or, in the case of internal conflicts, a peaceful settlement is achieved. (Prosecutor v. Tadić, 1995, para. 70)

For this chapter the terms ‘war’, ‘armed conflict’, and ‘conflict’ will be used interchangeably to refer to the occurrence of events in Tigray between 3 November 2020, and 2 November 2022.

Methodology

This chapter engaged in descriptive research (Saunders *et al.*, 2007) to produce a chronology of events occurring during the war in Tigray. Looking at the key events of the war, an etic approach is applied. This approach refers to an outsider’s perspective capturing observable situations or behaviour, but does not analyse the meaning (Haapanen & Manninen, 2023). The observer, in this case the author, is not part of the culture that is being studied, nor are they attempting to look at the study through the eyes of the people of a certain culture.

One part of the data for this chapter constitutes a systematic collection of the information published by Europe External Programme with Africa (EEPA) since the early stages of the war in Tigray. The information was published in the form of daily Situation Reports as well as weekly news highlights. The information was collected through an internal network of informants who were directly in the field or who were closely mapping the situation on the ground. The primary data includes reports, briefings and media articles concerning the events occurring in Ethiopia as well as the broader Horn of Africa.

The write up of Situation Reports, its archiving, coding and labelling has been done with the support of research assistants. In total, 8,171 entries were included in the data set taken from daily Situation Reports. In addition, 522 entries relating to the Horn of Africa were identified from EEPA’s weekly news highlights and Horn highlights.

Each of the entries in the data sets were assigned a unique identifier, which were used for the purpose of the present analysis. The identifier ‘*SRC-number*’ refers to the dataset containing the Situation Report entries, while the identifier ‘*NH-number*’ refers to the dataset of weekly news highlights. The dataset was used with the explicit permission of the EEPA.

In addition, a desk search was carried out to complement the information from the main data set. The objective of the literature search was to understand how existing publications looked at events occurring during the two-year war period. Two search engines – Web of Science and Google Scholar – were used to look for the relevant literature using selected key words and phrases. Due to the vast number of search results, an exclusion criterion was applied to narrow down the literature pertinent to the problem statement as well as the research question of this chapter. After applying the exclusion criteria, 354 articles were screened based on title and abstract and further assessed for selection. At the end of the process, 17 publications were selected as relevant to this study. The objective of the desk research was to contextualise and triangulate the data from the Situation Reports. It was analysed comparatively with the main dataset, to verify information about events.

Some additional witness reports of four experts were used. These experts were closely following the Tigray war. The reports were used to understand the chronology of critical moments of the pre-war period.

Ethiopia and Eritrea in the pre-war period: Game over

The year 2018 will be considered a historic tipping point in the Horn of Africa. The year started with a speech by Eritrean President Isayas on 14 January 2018 broadcasted on the Eritrean government channel Eri-TV in which he made the announcement “Woyane [TPLF], game over” (Eri-TV, Eritrea [Official], 2018).⁴ Woyane is used as a derogatory reference to the Tigray People’s Liberation Front (TPLF)

⁴ In this speech Isayas framed Woyane as “escaping forward”, frustrated by the public unrest. He stated that change in Ethiopia is inevitable. He stated: “Woyane and its sponsors are now worried too much” (Eri-TV, Eritrea (Official), 2018).

and Tigray people. It can also refer to people that President Isayas associates with the TPLF, even if they are not, such as refugees who fled from Eritrea or people whom Isayas associates with opposition to his regime in Eritrea. The phrase “Woyane, game over” (Eri-TV, Eritrea [Official], 2018) indicated a policy of Isayas to bring down the TPLF.

The year 2018 was certainly a significant period in modern Ethiopian history, as the balance in conditions had changed in the country. Ethiopia has faced large anti-government protests since 2015, with people calling for the enhancement of land, political and socio-economic rights (Addis *et al.*, 2020). The anti-government sentiment reached its peak in February 2018, when the then ruling coalition declared a 6-month state of emergency. Soon after these events, Abiy Ahmed Ali took over the role of prime minister of Ethiopia, which was welcomed with optimism and great expectations (Burke, 2018). In March 2018, following the resignation of his predecessor Hailemariam Desalegn, Abiy was nominated by the Ethiopian People’s Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF), the ruling coalition in Ethiopia. He officially took the prime minister post on 2 April 2018, with a vision to embark on a transformative journey for the country, which would be characterised by numerous changes, reforms, and new laws. PM Abiy introduced a new political philosophy, ‘Medemer’, which translates from Amharic as ‘addition’ and can be seen as the philosophy of coming together (Eritrea Focus & Oslo Analytica, 2021; Jima, 2021; Matshanda, 2022). In the first months of his leadership, his charismatic style was praised alongside several reforms such as the reconciliation with political opposition parties, lifting of the state of emergency, the release of political prisoners, the reform of the National Electoral Board of Ethiopia (NEBE), as well as increasing female representation in state offices and forming a gender-balanced cabinet (Dahir, 2018; Mumbere, 2018; Oneko, 2018; Pichon, 2022).

When PM Abiy visited Mekelle on 13 April 2018 he famously spoke of the interconnection between Ethiopia and Tigray, with the famous expression: “Tigray without Ethiopia and Ethiopia without Tigray is meaningless as a car without a motor” (ትግራይ ብዘይ ኢትዮጵያ ድማ ብዘይ

ትግራይ ከምመኪና ብዘይሞተር ትርጉም የብሉን) (Fana Television, 2018a, min. 4:03-4:11; in iIMAGE eTHIOPIS, 2018).

Following the inauguration of PM Abiy on 2 April 2018, President Isayas repeated the threat of “Woyane, game over” on two occasions: the national liberation day of 24 May 2018 and Martyrs Day on June 20, 2018 (Ismael, 2018). PM Abiy used the term የቀን ጅቦች to describe TPLF or Tigrayans as ‘daylight hyenas’,⁵ reported for the first time as on 15 June 2018 (Yethiopia News, 2018).

On 23 June 2018, there was a bombing in Meskel Square in Addis Ababa, the capital of Ethiopia. A grenade was thrown at the podium where Prime Minister Abiy was. Shortly after the explosion the crowd attending the meeting shouted “down, down Woyane”. The suggestion was that Tigrayans plotted the assassination attempt (The East African, 2018). PM Abiy repeated the identification of “day-time hyenas” on the day of the bombing, 23 June 2018, on ETV (Fana Television, 2018b).⁶ A documentary by Yefitih Sekoka about the bombing made the accusation that the bombing was plotted by Tigrayans. The attack was associated in the media with the then recent announcement of the initiative of peace with Eritrea (The Guardian, 2018). Eventually, those who threw the grenade were captured and brought to court; none of the persons convicted were of Tigrayan origin (BBC, 2018; Kassa, 2021).

⁵ Geb & Tesfa (2024), in chapter 5 of this book, explain the term as follows: “The term hyena in the Ethiopian idiomatic expression is used to portray someone who is barbed, egotistical and stingy or someone who stands against society to manipulate the values of human behaviour and morale for their own personal gain at the cost of society. Hyenas are usually active at night calendar, and people protect themselves through fencing their house, but anything left out at night is destined to be eaten by the hyenas. The term daylight hyena then portrays someone who shamelessly demonstrates non-human and callous behaviour in daytime, without being concerned that they may be seen by others. Thus, someone who is called a daylight hyena is considered callous and greedy, against which all necessary measures are taken to eliminate.” The use of this term ‘daytime hyena’ was later taken out of the online version of the speech by the broadcaster.

⁶ Ethiopia Broadcasting Corporation later removed the reference to ‘daylight hyenas’ in the online version (verified DZ, 2024; see <https://youtu.be/kuGKmcIkgT8?si=r7bLUQ0xzAmWIT7V>).

While the tension towards Tigray from the side of both President Isayas and PM Abiy kept growing, one of the most significant changes of 2018 was the peace deal between Ethiopia and Eritrea, which had been in a ‘no war no peace’ relationship for two decades (Abai, 2021; Eritrea Focus & Oslo Analytica, 2021; Pellet, 2021). The two countries fought a deadly war over disputed border areas between 1998 and 2000 resulting in the signing of the Algiers Peace Agreement in December 2000. The Algiers Agreement, however, was not fully implemented by Ethiopia, which kept control over disputed border areas. During his inaugural speech, PM Abiy stated that he was committed to resolving the historical differences with Eritrea. The official announcement that Ethiopia accepted the terms and conditions of the Algiers Agreement came on 5 June 2018, just a few hours after the state of emergency was lifted in the country.

The signing of the Joint Declaration of Peace and Friendship between Eritrea and Ethiopia took place on 9 July 2018 in Asmara. There were several back-and-forth visits between PM Abiy and Eritrean President Isayas Afwerki. In September 2018, reinstating their mutual commitment towards peace, both leaders signed the Agreement on Peace, Friendship and Comprehensive Cooperation between the Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia and the State of Eritrea in Jeddah, Saudi Arabia. However, a degree of confidentiality shrouds both the signed agreement and its implementation. Regrettably, no detailed information has been revealed regarding the precise vision discussed between the two leaders or the specifics of implementation. Nevertheless, the new step towards peace building was highly praised across all spectrums, including political leadership, media outlets and international community.

Historic moments were seen soon after the signing of the peace agreement when the borders between the two countries opened for the first time in decades (Eritrea Focus & Oslo Analytica, 2021; Pellet, 2021; Plaut & Vaughan, 2023). Video footage and pictures showed people from both sides of the border celebrating their reunification after years of separation (Ingber, 2018). Trade and economic exchange boomed as soon as the border crossing was reopened with merchants and business owners travelling to conduct cross border exchange. Witnesses described it also as a time when intelligence

reconnaissance persons from Eritrea went across to Tigray to collect detailed information and for some to embed themselves within the community (KAG, informal communication with Van Reisen, face-to-face, 4 February 2020; HG, informal message to Van Reisen, WhatsApp communication, 18 January 2024).

However, the sentiment of excitement did not last long. By the end of 2018, it was disclosed that Eritrea had closed the border crossings requiring travellers to show permit documentation and specific details for their travel (Ethiopia Observer, 2018). By April 2019, witness accounts confirmed the closure of all of the official border crossing points. There was no official communication, neither on behalf of the Eritrean nor the Ethiopian government, on the border situation (Shaban, 2019). Even though no concrete action or specific roadmap on the implementation of the peace agreement between Ethiopia and Eritrea was presented, the leaders of both countries continued with state visits during 2020.

Despite the initial efforts on the international and regional stage, PM Abiy started to face growing polarisation of society, internal tensions among various ethnic groups and violent clashes between them. Several ethnic groups, such as the Sidama people in the Southern Nations, Nationalities and Peoples' Region (SNNPR), were calling for self-determination and self-administration, which had been suppressed for a long time (Human Rights Watch, 2019b). Clashes and violence also led to a spike in the internal displacement, as people were forced to flee their land. Against the backdrop of rising tensions across Ethiopia, PM Abiy's popularity started to be questioned and slowly wear off (Human Rights Watch, 2019a). However, the internal strains were not an objection for the Nobel Peace Prize committee to announce PM Abiy as the winner for the year 2019. The main basis for receiving this award was the reinstatement of peace with Eritrea. This decision raised questions because one year after the signing the peace agreement with Eritrea, no concrete cooperation had materialised. Some conditions were even reversed, such as the re-closure of the border.

A few weeks after accepting the Nobel Peace Prize, the internal political scene was further challenged by the decision to merge four

member parties of the EPRDF into one national party – the Prosperity Party (PP). The aim of PM Abiy was to form a centralised Ethiopian government. This, however, did not resonate with all groups, which were hoping for the strengthening of regional autonomy. The ruling party of Tigray, the Tigray People’s Liberation Front (TPLF), did not endorse the creation of PP and refused to join it due to its illegitimacy. The decision of the merger had come less than half a year before the national elections were due to take place in May 2020. These elections were postponed by the new ruling party, as the world, including Ethiopia, had been battling the COVID-19 pandemic. Firstly, the government postponed elections to August 2020. However, soon after, PM Abiy announced that the elections would be postponed indefinitely until the pandemic situation calmed down and conditions were more stable. This decision was endorsed by the parliament. The new ruling deepened the division between PM Abiy’s PP and opposition parties, namely the TPLF, as well as some nationalists from Oromia Regional State. The postponement beyond October 2020 was not accepted by the opposition parties, as the mandate of the federal government would have fallen outside the constitutional timeframe.

The TPLF viewed these decisions as a threat to constitutional integrity and autonomy. Tensions between the Tigray region and the federal government began to rise more rapidly. The Tigray regional government announced that regional elections would go forward to ensure that the governing body would have a legitimate constitutional mandate, which was due to expire in October 2020. Therefore, on 9 September 2020, the TPLF carried out its regional state council election in Tigray, securing 98% of the votes. Prior to the regional elections, the NEBE said that conducting separate elections in Tigray would be unlawful and deemed it unconstitutional. This was also confirmed by the House of Federation after the election took place.

In the weeks following the election in Tigray, the tension between TPLF and the Ethiopian government was mounting. The Ethiopian government took several deliberate actions against the Tigray region. These included stopping the supply of face masks for students in Tigray, while masks were distributed to the rest of the country. In addition, the federal budget subsidy of 10.4 billion Ethiopian birr was

cut off by the House of Federation, based on the illegality of the regional cabinet and assembly. The House of Federation ordered that the subsidies not be sent through the regional government, but rather directly to local administrations. Tigray officials also made it clear that the implementation of any policy imposed by the federal government would be rejected, as they would be deemed unconstitutional.

In October 2020, the Ethiopian National Defence Force appointed a new commander and deputy commanders of the Northern Command in Mekelle. One of the deputy commanders, Brigadier General Jamal Mohammed, was stopped at the Mekelle Airport and ordered to be sent back to Addis Ababa on 29 October 2020. TPLF also prevented the reorganisation of troops and weaponry from the Northern Command to other military bases outside of the region. On 2 November, Debretsion Gebremichael, then President of Tigray regional government, warned that the Tigray defence forces were on standby prepared to defend their region.

Outbreak of the war

The events that pre-empted the start of the war appear to be unclear, as there are opposing narratives portraying which of the warring sides fired first. However, the consensus suggests that the outbreak of the war dates to the night of 3 November 2020. On 4 November, the Ethiopian federal government declared a ‘law enforcement operation’ in response to an alleged attack by the Tigray regional government on a Northern Command army base in Tigray.

The African Commission on Human and Peoples’ Rights (ACHPR) says on 4 November 2020 the government of Ethiopia launched a military offensive against the TPLF, which was followed by attacks on the Northern Command of the ENDF by the TPLF on the same day. (SRC-4831, EEPA, 2021, SR 171)

PM Abiy claimed that it would be a swift operation and would be resolved in a matter of a few days.

Ethiopian Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed ordered a military offensive against the Tigray region on Wednesday night after reports of an attack on a Tigray army base. [...] Sounds of shelling and shooting have been reported in the Tigray region since Wednesday. A 6-month state of emergency has been declared in the region, and electricity, phone lines and Internet have been shut down. PM Abiy has accused

Tigray of manufacturing Eritrean uniforms amid concerns that neighbouring country Eritrea could get involved in the conflict. (NH-1, EEPA Weekly News Highlights, 6 November 2020)

The Tigray regional government rejected claims that the attack on Northern Command on 4 November 2020 was the first act of aggression starting the war, stating that it was provoked by the actions of the Ethiopian government. Before 3 November 2020, information trickled out that PM Abiy allegedly planned to arrest top officials and civilian leadership of the Tigray regional government. The Northern Command division of the ENDF received an order to be on standby mode. Some ENDF troops were even airlifted into Asmara, Eritrea, before the start of the conflict. On the evening of 3 November 2020, two Ethiopian cargo planes arrived in Mekelle stating that they were bringing new banknotes. However, according to witness accounts, this was a cover up plan to transport commando troops in order to capture members of the Tigray leadership:

TPLF stated it was provoked on 3 November when the Ethiopian government sent commandos in an Antonov and/or cargo plane, under pretext of delivering new banknotes, allegedly with the intention to capture the Tigray regional government, which was assembled in a meeting in Planet hotel in Mekelle. (SRC-1047, EEPA, 2021, SR 44)

The Ethiopian government denied these accusations claiming that the cargo planes were part of a standard and scheduled plan of old currency replacement. The account of a witness close to the Tigray regional government recalled the events prior to the declaration of the law enforcement operation. EEPA reported on this account in February 2021 as follows:

A spokesperson close to the Tigray regional government, which is now in hiding, gave a different reading of what had transpired. In this version, the war in Tigray effectively started on November 3, 2020. That day, Addis Ababa sent a cargo plane with Special Forces to Mekelle, under the pretext of transporting bank notes. According to the Tigray regional government, they had intelligence that the Special Forces were instructed to arrest the Tigray state government leaders, meeting in a hotel in Mekelle. The tensions reportedly occurred in the context of the federal government seeking to redeploy the Northern Command of the Ethiopian National Defence Forces (ENDF), stationed in Tigray. The Tigray regional state government

opposed the redeployment of the Northern Command because the constitutional power of PM Abiy had ended on October 5, 2020, and, as elections had been postponed, due to the Covid-19 crisis, the Prime Minister was heading a caretaker government. The attempted arrest of the members of the Tigray government was foiled and the regional government sought to gain control over the Northern Command of Ethiopian government forces. (SRC-2233-2237, EEPA, 2021, SR 89)

Since the first hours of the outbreak of the war, reports of open-armed fighting were reported on several fronts causing casualties.

Conflict intensifies despite international appeals for de-escalation. Various media have reported on the escalation of the conflict and heavy fighting in the Tigray region of Ethiopia, while the experts, civil society and the international community have been urging for the immediate cessation of hostilities and peaceful dialogue. [...] The media has reported that the first days of heavy fighting have resulted in casualties. (NH-4, EEPA Horn Highlights, 11 November 2020)

Together with proclaiming the law enforcement operation, PM Abiy declared a 6-month state of emergency and ordered a communication shutdown, which disrupted phone lines, the Internet, as well as electricity in the region. As noted in the EEPA Situation Report, “Communication from Tigray is blocked. The phone lines have been cut and the Internet is switched off. The banks are closed and there is no electricity” (SRC-147, EEPA, 2020, SR 7). A total communications blackout, which was enforced on the Tigray region throughout the whole period of the war, caused difficulty in obtaining verifiable information from the ground. Strong opposing narratives, which caused division between supporters of each of the sides, manifested themselves through misinformation campaigns disseminated on social media platforms:

Misinformation and disinformation constitute a risk to further exacerbate the conflict. Older images displaying missile defence systems and fighter jets were manipulated and spread on social media. Videos showing armed conflicts in Armenia were falsely attributed to fighting between federal and Tigray military forces. The spread of misinformation is intensified by the shutdown of Internet and phone lines which limits reliable communications to and from the Tigray region. (NH-8, EEPA Horn Highlights, 11 November 2020)

Both sides accused each other of spreading disinformation to promote their propaganda and ideological ideas of covering and dismissing the evidence of perpetrated acts.

Ethiopian diplomats warn against the widespread campaign of “misinformation and fake news” stating: “the current operation is neither a civil war nor directed against innocent Tigrayans. The Federal Government is trying to bring to justice treasonous TPLF leaders.” (SRC-482, EEPA, 2020, SR 21)

The control over information and the narrative was a key mechanism in the war.

Involvement of various forces

The ENDF invaded Tigray initially, it claimed, for a law enforcement operation, with a domestic purpose. However, in reality the coalition of the ENDF was broader. Below the involvement of Eritrean and Somali forces is discussed, as well as the involvement of Amhara special regional forces and militia (Fano).

The participation of Eritrea

The news about the presence of foreign troops in Tigray had already trickled out from the early stages of the war. That moment was crucial for understanding that the conflict in Tigray was an international, rather than internal, conflict between the Ethiopian government and the TPLF, as was narrated by media reports: “Conflict has evolved from a civil internal conflict to a regional conflict with the confirmed exchange of hostilities between Tigray/Ethiopia and Eritrea” (SRC-42, EEPA, 2020, SR 3).

The Eritrean presence on Tigray soil was announced by the Tigray regional government:

Claims made by Tigray President Debretsion that Eritrea is involved in the war [...], [it was] denied by Eritrea, but local activity [was] reported from within Eritrea. (SRC-1, EEPA, 2020, SR. 1)

The prominent role in active combat and the deliberate attacks on civilians was attributed to the Eritrean Defence Forces (EDF), which were reported to be present in Tigray from the start of the war. “A witness reported that on 4 November 2020, Eritrean soldiers already

entered the town of Gerhusernay, near the Ethiopia-Eritrea border, where it started killing civilians” (SRC-2231, EEPA, 2021, SR89)

In the first couple of months, new witness evidence emerged which suggested that the alliance between Ethiopia and Eritrea was a pre-planned strategy against Tigray:

The attack by Eritrean troops happened in the night. Therefore, it would appear to have been part of a pre-planned attack. The official reading by the Ethiopian Government is that it started a law-and-order Operation after Tigray regional troops attacked the Northern Command on 4 November 2020. (SRC-2232, EEPA, 2021, SR 89)

Several reports showed that the Eritrean President Isayas took internal steps to pave the way for the active participation of Eritrea in the war that was about to break out:

Concern [was] raised that the war in Tigray was pre-planned: “Outlines of a plan were revealed when information was leaked about a meeting held by President Isaias just prior to the outbreak of the war.” Eritrean President Isaias “brought together his closest confidantes on the eve of the Tigray war. He said that Eritrea had to accept that it had a small economy and a lengthy Red Sea coast that it cannot patrol on its own. He suggested forming some sort of ‘union’ with Ethiopia, at least in terms of economic co-operation and maritime security.” (SRC-1590, EEPA, 2021, SR 65)

The account of Mesfin Hagos, the former Minister of Defence in Eritrea, who has been living in exile, aligned with these reports claiming the early involvement of Eritrea in the combat:

Former Chief of Staff of the Eritrean Defence Forces Mesfin Hagos, now in exile, claims that Eritrean soldiers have been involved in the fighting from the start and that the Eritrean people have been involved in the war without their knowledge or permission. (SRC-289, EEPA, 2020, SR 14)

Already, before the war, the Ethiopian government transferred some ENDF military units to Eritrea from where they would have been well positioned to attack the Tigray region from the northern side which borders Eritrea: “Sources state that Ethiopia is making use of airports in Eritrea for the deployment of troops” (SRC-51, EEPA,

2020, SR 3). This strategy was recognised as a secret game plan between PM Abiy and President Isayas:

Mesfin Hagos, relates that “in the run-up to the current conflict, a large number of Ethiopian elite units had slowly been trickled into Eritrea as part of a security pact between Abiy and Eritrean president Isaias Afwerki.” He states that: “Hidden from public view at an ad hoc base in Gherghera, in the outskirts of Asmara,” in Eritrea, “these units were expected to be the hammer and the Northern Command the anvil to strike out of existence the TPLF.” According to Hagos the “TPLF pre-empted this scheme in what it called ‘anticipatory defence’, which forced both Abiy and Isaias to improvise leading to the eruption of conflict.” (SRC-401, EEPA, 2020, SR 18)

The fact that Eritrea was involved in the war was rejected and denied by both the Ethiopian and Eritrean governments.

Evidence of Eritrean involvement as AFP journalist reaches Humera (Tigray) reporting that “multiple people told that during the battle they witnessed mortar bombs whistling in “from the north”, meaning Eritrea. Ethiopia’s government denies TPLF claims that Eritrea is involved in the fighting, but acknowledges making use of Eritrean territory. (SRC-98, EEPA, 2020, SR 6)

However, active collaboration between Ethiopia and Eritrea had been proven, with many records including video footage and witness accounts. In the first days of the war, video footage showed an exchange of weaponry between ENDF and EDF:

A video has been received that shows the hand-over of artillery between Ethiopian Northern command troops and Eritrean troops on 5th November 2020 in North Eritrea near the border with Ethiopia. (SRC-5261, EEPA, 2021, SR 184)

In addition, several cargo flights were detected moving between Asmara and Addis Ababa suspected of transporting weaponry:

A number of cargo flights from Ethiopia Airlines between Addis Ababa, Asmara (Eritrea) and several destinations inside Ethiopia and Eritrea have been identified, believed to have transported weapons in November and December 2020 as part of the war effort of the two countries against Tigray. (SRC-5262, EEPA, 2021, SR 184)

Eritrean troops committed extensive crimes, including massacres, extrajudicial killings, looting and abuse of the civilian population in

Tigray. Alongside massacres, widespread sexual violence, including rape and gang rape, was committed against thousands of Tigrayan women and girls. Sexual violence became a weapon of war committed by Eritrean as well as Ethiopian soldiers. Sexual attacks were accompanied by verbal and other physical abuse. Kidanu & Van Reisen (2024) and Kidanu & Tefera (2024) describe in this book the systemic use of sexual violence in Tigray in greater detail.

Somali troops

Alongside Eritrean troops, Somali soldiers were also reported to have participated in the Tigray war. Based on the bilateral agreement between Somalia and Eritrea, some of the Somali troops were sent to Eritrea to receive their military training. Troops that were present in Eritrea were mobilised and sent to fight alongside the ENDF allied troops. Thousands of soldiers were estimated to be sent to Eritrea for training, however, the exact numbers of soldiers sent to the war and those who survived are inconclusive:

Reported from Somalia “that 1000 (young) soldiers are missing (presumed dead). Parents are now planning to organize protests.” A report circulating from a Somali MP speaks of 3,000 Somali troops participating in Ethiopia’s Tigray war. The troops were sent to Asmara in Eritrea to receive training. According to one report, only 180 of them survived. It is reported that one of them contacted his family from Mekelle, saying that he was injured in the war. (SRC-1459, EEPA, 2021, SR 60)

This was also confirmed by the report of the UN Special Rapporteur on Human Rights in Eritrea, Mohamed Abdelsalam Babiker:

The Special Rapporteur also reported that the office received reports of Somali troops being transported by Eritrea to the frontline in Tigray. (SRC-4520, EEPA, 2021, SR 161)

The Somali government dismissed the claims made by international actors that the Somali military was involved in the Tigray war. Many parents of the soldiers who had been sent to Eritrea did not hear about their whereabouts. Parents raised these concerns with Somali authorities and organised protests demanding an investigation and the return of their sons. Parents further claimed that their children were sent to Eritrea without their consent or being informed. Receiving

pressure from the parents, the Somali Prime Minister pledged to establish a committee of inquiry to investigate those claims:

The Somali Prime Minister has established a committee to investigate the complaints of parents who say they have not heard anything from their children who have been sent to Eritrea for military training and deployed in Tigray, without the knowledge of approval of the parents. (SRC-4725, EEPA, 2021, SR 168)

Even just receiving military training in Eritrea was described as harsh and cruel by soldier witnesses who underwent training:

Reported that youth who had been involuntarily taken from Somalia to training camps in Eritrea underwent cruel treatment. Speaking to the media they recalled the harsh conditions at the camps as they were subject to constant torture. “Some of us were executed”, one of the youth stated. (SRC-5339, EEPA, 2021, SR 186)

The training and involvement are one illustration of the preparations for the war and its regional dimension.

Amharan troops

The Amhara Special Forces (ASF), Amhara militia as well as Fano militia (ethno-nationalist militia of Amhara region) were actively involved in targeting the Tigray region alongside ENDF allied forces. Numerous reports confirmed their involvement since the early stages of the war. In addition, the ASF were complicit in helping the ENDF prepare for the attack on Tigray before the official proclamation of war.

The Amhara Chief Commissioner of Police, Abere Adamu, has given a speech on the involvement of Amhara forces in the conflict with Tigray. According to him, Amhara Special Forces played an important role in positioning ENDF forces prior to the conflict. The President of Amhara was allegedly also aware that a conflict was going to take place. (SRC-1106, EEPA, 2021, SR 46)

Heavy deployment was noticed along the border between the Amhara and Tigray regions before 4 November. This gave a head start to ENDF allied forces to enter the region and take strategic positions.

The Amhara Commissioner also said that “deployment of forces had taken place in our borders from east to west. The war started that night, after we have already completed our preparations” implying that the involvement of the Amhara special

forces had been prepared and was well on the way before the start of military operations on 4 November 2020. (SRC-1108, EEPA, 2021, SR 46)

Amhara forces carried out attacks on villages and cities in Western Tigray and alongside the border areas, taking over the administration of the captured areas.

Massacres

Already in the first days of conflict, ENDF – together with the allied forces, EDF and ASF – committed numerous attacks on the Tigrayan civilian population. “Cities of Shire and Aksum have been attacked by the Ethiopian National Defence Force (ENDF), Amhara Special Force, and the Eritrean army” (SRC-23, EEPA, 2020, SR 2). The attacks were directed towards people as well as their property. Military troops started to loot and destroy houses, stealing food, cattle as well as crops.

One of the first massacres reported after the outbreak of the war occurred in Mai Kadra between 9 and 10 November 2020. Mai Kadra, a town in Western Tigray near the Sudanese border, was part of disputed areas between the Tigray and Amhara regional administrations. Hundreds of civilians were killed, and many others displaced.

After the Ethiopian Human Rights Commission reported that at least 600 civilians were killed on November 9th in Mai Kadra by militias loyal to the regional government, AFP notes that different stories are being told by victims and that the full extent of the event is unknown. (SRC-164, EEPA, 2020, SR 8)

Witnesses from both ethnic groups reported that the opposing side had committed violations against them. The fighting started around mid-day on 9 November with Tigray youth and militiamen reportedly attacking ethnic Amhara. By way of retaliation, Amhara militia and civilians started to attack the ethnic Tigrayan population. Tigray fighters fled from Mai Kadra. Hence, on the next day, 10 November, ENDF and allied forces took control of the town. Tigrayans who survived the revenge killings and did not flee were detained in local detention facilities. As further revenge for the Mai Kadra attacks, ASF and Amhara militias continued to persecute Tigrayans in other places

in Western Tigray. Entire villages were destroyed, and the local population were forced to leave their homes:

By the 9th tensions were running high in Mai Kadra after the fighting had been coming closer. One Amhara said that he saw many young Tigrayans walking around with knives and machetes and checking people's identification documents. Shortly after, Tigrayan mobs started attacking Amhara living in the city, targeting mostly men. Seven Amhara residents said that members of the town militia were with the mobs and appeared to be directing some of the killings. Militiamen and local police were also blocking roads leading in and out of Amhara neighbourhoods, shooting at people trying to escape. The ENDF and other forces entered the city uncontested on the morning of the 10th. Tigrayan fighters had by then fled the town. Attacks on Tigrayans in the city started that afternoon. Amhara militiamen then systematically started driving Tigrayans out of Western Amhara. Entire villages have been destroyed, cities and highways have been renamed. Many Tigrayans have also been executed. Amhara soldiers rounded up men, put them on trucks, and brought them to Tekeze River, where they were executed. There were instances of both Amhara and Tigrayans helping each other escape while the massacres were taking place. (SRC-4629-4634, EEPA, 2021, SR 164)

On the same day, the border town of Humera was bombed and shelled with artillery shot from Eritrea. Residential areas as well as hospitals were hit leaving many people dead and injured:

This confirms reports received that "Several large artillery bombardments were allegedly carried out in Humera between November 9-11 2020. Witnesses report that shells were launched from Eritrea, devastating residential areas and destroying a hospital. The Ethiopian army and regional Amhara forces also allegedly then took control of Humera, where they killed civilians and looted buildings." (SRC-1340, EEPA, 2021, SR 55)

News about massacres committed across Tigray was constantly trickling out. The patterns were similar across all attacks, EDF, ENDF, ASF, as well as Fano militias indiscriminately shelled villages often executing whole families. Churches and mosques were not spared from attacks either as they became places of shelter for many civilians trying to hide from the military and militias. Here are some examples reported by EEPA. "Nine priests killed in the Church in Adi Aweshi, Tembien, Tigray, by Ethiopian and Eritrean troops" (SRC-678, EEPA, 2020, SR 29). Another report from 19 December

documented 150 civilians being massacred by Eritrean troops in the town of Edaga Hamus:

Killings occurred in Edaga Hamus, a small town in Tigray. Eritrean soldiers reportedly killed approximately 150 civilians, including a priest and women seeking refuge in a church, located 4 km to the west of Marieam Dengelat. The town and some rural villages (Maimegelta, Dengelat, Tsa'a and Hangoda) are under the control of Eritrean forces. The military is slaughtering the animals. People are starving to death. (SRC-724, EEPA, 2020, SR 31)

Between 28 and 29 November 2020, hundreds of civilians hiding in the Church of St Mary of Zion were massacred in Aksum city:

The church was full, and 1,000 people may have been in the building or the compound surrounding it. A confrontation happened after which people were forced to come out on the square. The troops opened fire and 750 people are reported to have been killed. (SRC-1283, EEPA, 2021, 53)

The blackout made it extremely difficult to understand the circumstances of these massacres and, while the EEPA Situation Reports were the first to publish on many of these, including the massacre in Aksum, they were only published several weeks after the events took place, as it was extremely difficult to obtain reliable information on these events.

Capturing of Mekelle and the retreat of TDF

Over the course of November 2020, the ENDF, with the significant collaboration of Eritrean and Amhara troops, was able to capture and take control of several strategic towns and cities. These included Shire, Aksum, Adwa, Adigrat, Chercher, and others. The TPLF had been contesting the statements by the federal government saying that most of the cities were under the control of Tigray forces:

PM Abiy issued a statement saying that the ENDF holds Dansha, Humera, Shire, Dbiraro, Aksum, Adwa, Adigrat, Alamata, Chercher, Meboni, Korem and other places. According to the TPLF, the Ethiopian, Eritrean and Amharic forces are moving through these cities but are not holding all of them. (SRC-81, EEPA, 2020, SR 5)

The next target for ENDF was to take hold of the regional capital, Mekelle. As the Ethiopian forces progressed from all fronts towards

the capital, PM Abiy announced that the last phase of combat was at hand. He gave a 72-hour ultimatum to the TPLF to surrender otherwise he would order an attack on the city:

Ethiopian PM Ahmed Abiy issued a statement on Twitter on the elapsing of the 72-hour ultimatum, stating that the Ethiopian National Defence Forces have been directed to commence the “third and final phase of the Rule of Law operations”. (SRC-160, EEPA, 2020, SR 8)

On 28 November 2020, Mekelle was bombed by the ENDF for several hours, resulting in them taking control of the administration of the capital:

Air missile attacks and bombardments in Mekelle (morning), and PM Abiy Ahmed claims that Mekelle is under the control of the Ethiopian National Defence Forces (ENDF) and that the military operation is complete. The Regional Government of Tigray claims that ENDF does not control Mekelle at this time (28 Nov). (SRC-214, EEPA, 2020, SR 11)

The Tigray regional government as well as the TDF withdrew from Mekelle and went into hiding in the Tigray mountains. The leadership officials hid in the mountains without the possibility of any effective communication. “According to an analyst, the entire leadership of the TPLF is intact. Over 70 of them have retreated to the mountains. Only two have been arrested” (SRC-760, EEPA, 2020, SR 32).

Together with the TPLF leadership, a wave of civilians flooded out of towns and cities. Thousands crossed the border with Sudan in the first days of the war and others were displaced internally. Displacement caused people to hide in different urban settings or rural areas, including the mountains that crosscut the Tigray region. The capture of Mekelle gave the federal government new momentum. While PM Abiy stated that the fighting was over and that no civilians had been hurt in the process, the reality on the ground did not correspond with those claims. Atrocities had been committed daily.

By the end of December 2020, the TPLF started to call upon the Tigray youth to join the TDF to retake the region from the power of

the federal government. Calls for mobilisation were further repeated in January 2021:

A leader of TPLF, who is the former deputy mayor of Addis Ababa, addressed the youth in Tigray on Facebook: “In our current struggle for self-determination, the role of the youth is very important. So, any youth who can and wants to join the struggle, shall join Tigray defence forces directly or shall go to members of the Tigray regional government leadership and fight in an organized manner to free Tigray. (SRC-915, EEPA, 2020, SR 39)

The mobilisation tactic worked for the TDF, as the military was building manpower and preparing a new strategy throughout the first months of 2021. In February, the Tigray government issued terms and conditions for resolving the conflict and silencing guns. This included the withdrawal of Eritrean troops from Tigray, respecting the territorial integrity of the region, establishing full humanitarian access to and from Tigray, and reinstating the elected regional government of Tigray:

Reported that Ethiopian, Eritrean and Amhara forces have engaged in new intensive attacks in Eastern and Southern Tigray that include aerial bombardment and artillery shelling. (SRC-3124, EEPA, 2021, SR 118)

By April 2021, it was an established and recognised fact that the coalition of ENDF, Amhara and Eritrean troops were involved in the attack on Tigray: “Isaias seems to be doing what he wants with Ethiopia,” said Dr Daniel Mulugeta, an Ethiopian research associate at SOAS in London in the Financial Times (Schipani & Pilling, 2021). The Tigray regional government was mobilising its youth to defend its regional territory.

TDF regains control

Having mobilised Tigray youth, the TDF started several military operations in mid-2021 to respond to the invasion: Operation Alula Abanega, Operation Tigray Mothers and Operation Sunrise. These are described below.

Operation Alula Abanega (recapturing of Mekelle and unilateral ceasefire)

Operation Alula Abanega marked a pivotal point in the Tigray conflict, representing the first substantial TDF offensive since the ENDF captured Mekelle. The lead-up to this operation was characterised by a significant concentration of the ENDF in central Tigray by June 2021, with rumours circulating of an imminent ENDF and EDF offensive to decisively defeat TDF forces.

On June 18, the TDF launched an attack on several fronts across the Central, South-Eastern, and Southern zones of Tigray:

Fierce fighting between Tigray Defence and ENDF allied forces was reported on various fronts in Tigray. In recent days, Tigray's Defence Forces have launched a strategic offensive against ENDF allied forces. The operation has been ongoing since 18 June. The operation has covered many parts of the Central, Southeastern, and Southern zones of Tigray. (SRC-4812-4815, EEPA, 2021, SR 171)

The TDF confirmed the first success of this offensive by destroying multiple divisions of the ENDF as well as EDF forces. The TDF claimed to capture commanders, logistic operators, as well as staff members of those divisions. The spokesperson for the TDF announced that the success was due to the new operation, Alula Abanega, launched by the TDF:

The spokesperson also told Dimtsi Weyane (DW) International that ENDF's 31st and 11th divisions were completely destroyed by the operation of Alula Abanega. (SRC-4819, EEPA, 2021, SR 171)

Subsequent days brought similar results. The TDF's unexpected successes led to the capture of key towns and the surrender of the opposing forces. "Reported that dozens of Eritrean troops have surrendered to Tigray Defence Forces near Axum, Central zone of Tigray" (SRC-4852, EEPA, 2021, SR 172). As the operation was progressing on all fronts, the TDF was strategically positioning to take over Mekelle:

It is reported that Operation Alula by Tigray Defence Forces (TDF) has resulted in the defeat of Ethiopian allied troops in many areas from Abiy Adi to the river Giba. TDF is close to the outskirts of Mekelle. (SRC-4884, EEPA, 2021, SR 173)

On 28 June 2021, the TDF successfully re-captured the city of Mekelle, prompting the ENDF, the interim regional government imposed by the federal government, as well as the EDF to withdraw from Mekelle and other major cities across Tigray:

The ENDF troops have completely pulled out from Mekelle and major towns in Tigray. ENDF and Eritrean troops, which were fleeing Mekelle, have been told to surrender by the Tigray Defence Forces near Mekelle. [It was] reported that the majority of ENDF troops who were surrounded at the outskirts of Mekelle while fleeing have been captured by Tigray defence forces. (SRC-4986-4988, EEPA, 2021, SR 176)

It was reported that the capital of Tigray, Mekelle, was controlled by the TDF. The government of Tigray issued a statement confirming the successful end of the Alula Abanega operation which led to the full reinstatement of the government and control over the capital.

The Government of Tigray states: "First and foremost, we would like to share the great news to the entire people and friends of Tigray that our beloved capital city, Mekelle, is now under the complete control of the Tigray Defence Forces and the legally elected Government of Tigray is back in its rightful place." [...] "This stunning victory was made possible as a result of the lightning operation named after the great African General Ras Alula Aba Nega." (SRC-4982 & 4983, EEPA, 2021, SR 176)

The Ethiopian government claimed that the withdrawal of ENDF forces was a planned move, as they did not want to interfere with the start of the farming period. The new developments prompted PM Abiy to declare a unilateral ceasefire. "The Ethiopian government has declared a unilateral ceasefire in the Tigray region – 8 months after Prime Minister Abiy sent troops to oust its leadership" (SRC-4980, EEPA, 2021, SR 176). The Tigray leadership responded claiming it would agree to a ceasefire if the conditions that were previously set, such as the withdrawal of Eritrean troops from Tigray, were met by the federal government.

As the war over Tigray's capital unravelled in June, Ethiopia went through general elections, which had been previously postponed. On 21 June 2021, Ethiopians cast their votes across all regions except Tigray. The PP of PM Abiy Ahmed won the election by a great majority, securing 410 seats in the House of Representatives.

Operations Tigrayan Mothers & Sunrise

On 12 July 2021, the TDF launched a new operation named ‘Tigrayan Mothers’ on the southern as well as south-western fronts. The first offensive focused on areas of Beri Teklay and Bala as well as towns Korem and Alamata:

The TDF have reportedly captured the towns of Korem and Alamata, while Amhara and ENDF forces are continuing to flee from Tigray. Other reports suggest that the TDF has retaken the entirety of Southern Tigray in Operation Tigrayan Women [meaning Tigrayan Mothers]. (SRC-5313, EEPA, 2021, SR 186)

On 13 July, Alamata was successfully captured by the TDF taking control of the city from the hands of the Amhara administration. “The offensive by the Tigray Defence Forces in Southern Tigray named ‘Operation Tigrayan Mothers’ has succeeded in liberating the Southern city of Alamata” (SRC-5343, EEPA, 2021, SR 187). Soon after, it was reported that Mai Tsebri was also controlled by the TDF. Fighting between the TDF and allied ENDF and Amhara troops was carried out in Western Tigray. Reports showed that captured weaponry, trucks, tanks, and military vehicles from the opposing side were used by the TDF. “Pictures of TDF forces travelling in captured Amhara police cars are surfacing online. This follows new reports of Tigrayans capturing many ENDF and Amhara weapons and vehicles” (SRC-5314, EEPA, 2021, SR 186). Days after the start of the Operation Tigrayan Mothers, PM Abiy revoked the unilateral ceasefire calling on Ethiopians to defend themselves from a ‘junta’.

The fighting soon expanded beyond the borders of Tigray with the TDF passing to the Afar and Amhara regions. According to the Tigray regional government, the main objective was to dismantle the ENDF and allied forces without making any territorial claims over the neighbouring regions. The Afar administration confirmed that their forces joined the allied militia and were fighting against the TDF. On the south-western front the TDF was fighting with the ASF trying to advance to the Amhara region. This was successful from about 20 July when the TDF gained control over areas between Mai Tsebri and Adi-Arkay (SRC-5416, EEPA, 2021, SR 189).

By 27 July, Operation Tigrayan Mothers was completed with the TDF confirming their success in capturing, dismantling or killing ENDF forces in other regions beyond Tigray:

The Central Command of Tigray Defence Forces (TDF) told Dimtsi Weyane (DW) International that “Operation of Tigrayan Mothers” has been successfully completed. In the Operation of Tigrayan Mothers, over 30,000 ENDF soldiers and forces from various regions including Amhara, Somali, Sidama, Afar and Oromia, have been killed, injured and captured. The operation was held from 12-27 July 2021 on three fronts (Afar, Southern and Western Tigray). Over 17,852 were killed, 11,342 were injured and 944 were captured. (SRC-5592-5594, EEPA, 2021, SR 194)

In August, the TDF made further advances deeper into Amhara region, taking control over Weldiya town and moving towards Dessie. “Reported that Tigray Defence Forces (TDF) fully controls the town of Weldiya, North Wollo in the Amhara region and is advancing north towards Mersa, a town between Weldiya and Dessie” (SRC-5717, EEPA Situation Report No.197, 9 August 2021). PM Abiy issued a statement calling upon Ethiopians to join the ENDF in the fight against Tigray (SRC-5768, EEPA, 2021, SR 199).

The success of the TDF in taking control of Mekelle as well as a majority of strategic places across Tigray was met with retaliation by the Ethiopian government against ethnic Tigrayans. A new round of ethnic profiling and surveillance was seen across all parts of Ethiopia from June 2021:

Witnesses told The Associated Press (AP) that thousands of Tigrayans are being detained and their businesses closed in cities across Ethiopia in a new wave of ethnic targeting by Ethiopian authorities. The detentions follow the dramatic turn in the war last month when resurgent Tigray forces marched into the regional capital, Mekelle and routed Ethiopian soldiers out of Tigray. (SRC-5353 & 5354, EEPA, 2021, SR 187)

The previous wave of detentions was seen soon after the outbreak of the war in November 2020. The houses of Tigrayans were searched by the police without any warrant. Many were accused of supporting the Tigrayan ‘junta’ and were detained. Others were rounded up in public spaces just because they were heard speaking Tigrinya or after

being forced to show their ID. Hundreds of businesses owned by Tigrayans in Addis Ababa were closed.

ENDF allies strike back

In late August 2021, it was announced that the ENDF and Amhara had regained some power and re-captured several towns. At the same time Eritrean troops seemed to advance in pursuit of regaining their position around Adigrat, Adi Goshu and Humera (NH-27, EEPA Weekly report, 27 August 2021):

The ENDF and Amhara militias have recaptured several towns. These include Kimir Dingay and Nefas Meewcha. There are suggestions that the TDF withdrew from the area. It is reported that some 800 Afar soldiers under the Eritrean flag have joined fighting in Barable near Samare in the Afar region and that fierce fighting is going on at the Chifra front in the Afar region. (SRC-58755 & 5876, EEPA, 2021, SR 203)

In October 2021, Abiy was sworn into the office of the Prime Minister for a second 5-year term. In the process of the cabinet reorganisation, PM Abiy appointed a new chief of the Tigray interim administration, Abraham Belay, who also took the office of defence minister.

Meanwhile, the news started to suggest that the ENDF was getting ready for a new round of offensives as the end of the rainy season was approaching. Troops, logistics and weaponry were mobilised. The reports showed that many young Ethiopians, including high school students, joined the army (NH-73, EEPA Weekly News Highlights, 8 October 2021).

Major offensives by ENDF and allied forces were launched across all major fronts in the Tigray, Amhara and Afar regions:

There has been a heavy use of jet fighters and drones during this newest offensive. Little is known about the progress of the offensive as journalists are not allowed in the area and phone lines are down. (NH-78, EEPA Weekly News Highlight, 15 October 2021)

A planned offensive seemed to be repelled by the TDF in the first days of the renewed fighting. The Tigray leadership was claiming

success on all fronts while predicting that this round of battles would not last long:

The Ethiopian government has not yet commented on the new offensive, however, the Tigrayan officials are claiming that they are holding their ground. Getachew Reda, the Tigray People's Liberation Front (TPLF) spokesperson, told Reuters that the fight is ongoing and the "number of casualties is staggering". He later said in a tweet that the Tigrayans had captured "commanding heights on all fronts". Tigrayan General Tsadkan, who has previously commanded the Ethiopian armed forces said "The enemy has been preparing for months, and so have we". He added that it would be a decisive moment for the country, with military and political ramifications. According to him, the fight is unlikely to last very long, probably a matter of weeks. (NH-78, EEPA Weekly News Highlight, 15 October 2021)

The situation was tense with Tigray as the theatre of fierce fighting in all of its territory and with all routes blocked for the TDF, including to Sudan. The TDF was not able to replenish weapons or ammunition and relied on tactics to take these over from enemy troops.

TDF and OLA operations and forming a coalition

While maintaining control in central Tigray, the TDF now launched a counter-offensive, which aimed to take control over the cities of Dessie and Kombolcha, two strategic cities in the Amhara region. Both cities lie on the vital road between Addis Ababa and Djibouti.

There have been heavy clashes between the Tigrayan Defence Force (TDF) and the Ethiopian National Defence Force (ENDF) near Dessie and Kombolcha in Amhara. The TDF has been making slow progress against the city, which is seen as an important hub in the region. It has many connecting roads, and is one of the important junctures between Addis Ababa and Djibouti. Many ENDF-allied fighters remain in the area, and have been fighting fiercely with the TDF. With fighting nearing, many civilians have started to flee. The regional airport has also been closed due to the fighting. (NH-96, EEPA Horn Highlights, 26 October 2021)

When the expansion of the TDF became more prominent, the ENDF started to bombard the Tigray region on 18 October 2021. It focused on dismantling telecommunication stations and other important infrastructure. However, residential areas were also hit by aerial strikes:

[T]he Ethiopian air force has been conducting a series of air strikes against Mekelle, the capital of Tigray. The Ethiopian government says that the strikes target industrial and telecommunications infrastructure. However, several people have told journalists that the strikes have also hit residential areas. According to the United Nations, three children were killed and 20 others wounded in the Monday [18 October 2021] strikes. (NH-87, EEPA Weekly News Highlights, 22 October 2021)

In pursuit of Dessie and Kombolcha, TDF forces created an alliance with the Oromo Liberation Army (OLA) forming a joint front. Ties between the TDF and OLA had started since mid-August 2021.

A spokesperson for the OLA has said that the group is working on an alliance with the TDF. He told the Associated Press that “The only solution now is overthrowing this government militarily, speaking the language they want to be spoken to.” He continued by saying that “We have agreed on a level of understanding to cooperate against the same enemy, especially in military cooperation”. He did however acknowledge that there were significant historical barriers, and that some doubt remained. (SRC-5570-5572, EEPA, 2021, SR 199)

At the beginning of the negotiations, the new alliance was considered as a political move rather than a military one (SRC 5801, EEPA Situation Report 200, 14 August 2021). The TDF was a much stronger army, however the Oromo region is ethnically the largest population in Ethiopia and, therefore, had the potential to bring more manpower. The grudge against the federal government and PM Abiy’s cabinet was mounting in Oromia:

Oromia is seeing a ‘brutal crackdown’, and thousands of opposition politicians were imprisoned. The two main Oromo Political parties decided to boycott the election in protest, leaving Abiy’s party uncontested. (SRC-4871, EEPA, 2021, SR 172)

By 30 October, the TDF had captured both strategic cities with a plan to capture the highway vital for the delivery of supplies. One of the main priorities for the TDF was to overcome the humanitarian blockade imposed by the federal government.

The cities of Dessie and Kombolcha, 400 km from the Ethiopian Capital Addis Ababa, have been captured by the TDF, following the Ethiopian offensive against the TDF. TDF is now moving to Mile, 160 km from Dessie, from where it would control the highway between Addis Ababa and Djibouti. The highway is critical for

the transport of humanitarian goods to Tigray, which is suffering from famine as a result of the siege of the Ethiopian federal government. The Tigray government says that its key concern is the relief of the siege around Tigray, and opens the way for humanitarian aid to reach the Tigray region. Capturing Mile would open the road to Djibouti and break the federal government's blockade on Tigray by allowing convoys through. The highway is also critical for the import and export of Ethiopian goods. Reportedly, ENDF has left Semera, the capital of the Afar regional state. Semera is located 64 km north of Mile. The collapse of government forces in Dessie and Kombolcha also opens the road for TDF forces to move on Addis Ababa. The Tigrayans have linked up with the Oromo Liberation Army (OLA) and formed a joint front. The OLA is the regional army of the Oromo regional state and has also been declared a terrorist organisation by the Federal Government. The OLA has seized several key junctures between Addis Ababa and both cities. (NH-110, EEPA Horn Highlights, 2 November 2021)

With the important highways controlled by the TDF, it became clear that the next stage was an advance on Addis Ababa. On 5 November 2021, the alliance between the TPLF and the OLA was formalised by aligning an agreement between the two parties. The political alliance was formed in the spirit of working together towards a transitional government that would replace PM Abiy (NH-121, EEPA Weekly News Highlights, 5 November 2021).

Amid rapid advances on the front made by the TDF, the Ethiopian government announced a nationwide state of emergency on 2 November 2021. It also announced that anyone suspected of having any relations with the TPLF would be subjected to a house search or potential arrest. Ethnic profiling experienced a new wave. Media surveillance was put in place to prevent any pro-TPLF news from being published.

The administration also said that it was conducting house to house searches and arresting people suspected of relations with TPLF. There have been many concerns, including from Human Rights Watch, that Ethiopian security forces have been ethnically profiling Tigrayans and detaining them without cause. The Minister of Justice has further announced that publications and broadcasts favourable to the "terrorist group" (TPLF) will be banned. [It is] reported that new fresh mass arrests of ethnic Tigrayans are taking place. (NH-111, EEPA Horn Highlights, 2 November 2021)

Addis Ababa started to make preparations for a potential invasion by the TDF-OLA alliance. Civilians were called to defend the city together with security forces. A new task force was established in the capital which was composed of “members of the National Security and Intelligence Service (NISS) Federal and Addis Ababa Police as well as Oromia Police” (NH-112, EEPA Horn Highlights, 2 November 2021). PM Abiy announced that he would personally join the fight on the frontline. Ethiopian Deputy Prime Minister, Demeke Mekonnen, took over the responsibilities of the PM office in the absence of Abiy.

By 30 November 2021, it had been announced that the ENDF had re-captured the town of Chifra in Afar. In the following days, significant progress was made on the front in Amhara. The ENDF, ASF and Fano alliance took control of several major cities including Dessie and Kombolcha on 6 December. The TDF claimed that it withdrew from its positions due to the strategic redeploying its forces:

Ethiopian forces have captured large swaths of territory over the last week. In some places, they advanced 130 km in a few days. The government has also announced the recapture of several major areas. The two strategic towns of Dessie and Kombolcha were recaptured on Monday, while Gashena was taken at the end of last week. Lalibela, an important cultural town, was also recaptured by Ethiopian forces last week. (NH-212, EEPA Horn highlights, 7 December 2021)

On 20 December 2021, Debretsion Gebremichael announced the withdrawal of the TDF from regions outside of Tigray stating the openness for peace and prioritising the protection of civilians and the delivery of vital humanitarian aid to the region (NH-237, EEPA weekly highlights, 22 December 2021). Following the announcement of the withdrawal of the TDF, a series of aerial bomb strikes were carried out in December 2021 and throughout January 2022. Residential areas were hit by bombs affecting hundreds of people:

The last weeks have seen an increase in airstrikes carried out in the Tigray region. According to reports, hundreds of people, including women and children, have been killed in these strikes. The United Nations says that at least 108 civilians have been killed in Tigray since the start of the year 2022. (NH-251, EEPA Horn Highlights, 18 January 2022)

At the beginning of 2022 there was no end in sight for the war in Tigray.

Temporary ceasefire

As the security situation outside of Tigray was basically under the control of the federal government, the Ethiopian parliament lifted the state of emergency in mid-February, which had initially been imposed until May 2022. On 24 March, the federal government announced a ceasefire to allow for humanitarian aid to be securely delivered to the Tigray region. The TPLF accepted the truce stating that the processes concerning politics and humanitarian aid needed to be separated:

The Tigray People's Liberation Front (TPLF) accepted the proposal for ceasefire, noting: "while the Government of Tigray is committed to the success of this endeavour, we would like to note that linking political and humanitarian issues are unacceptable. Nonetheless, the people and Government of Tigray will do their best to give peace a chance." (NH-411, EEPA Weekly highlights, 25 March 2022)

In the days following the ceasefire, there were reports that Eritrean troops were still present and active in Tigray. The first humanitarian aid started to flow into the region on 2 April 2022. Despite aid trucks delivering several rounds of goods and supplies, the rate with which the aid was flowing in was not adequate to address the needs of the Tigrayans (NH-502, EEPA Horn Highlights, 9 May 2022).

The ceasefire was mostly held over the months of May and June. However, tensions were visible and, in many instances, voiced by political actors accusing the opposing side of obstructing the truce. In addition, Eritrea had been adding fuel to the fire by supporting anti-Tigray social media campaigns, which echoed messages of the Eritrean Ministry of Foreign Affairs (SRC-5957-5959, EEPA, 2022, SR 206). There were reports of open clashes between the TDF and the EDF in the border areas around Badme (NH-518, EEPA Weekly Highlights, 13 May 2022). On 24 May 2022, Eritrean brigades launched attacks on north-western Tigray, which were successfully reversed by the TDF. In retaliation, the EDF shelled the town of Sheraro, not sparing civilians (SRC-6109-6112, EEPA, 2022, SR 213).

By the end of June, the Ethiopian government announced that preparations were made for peace negotiations, with the African

Union (AU) as the main facilitator. However, the mediation by the AU was refused by the Tigray regional government, stating that there was a close “‘proximity’ of its envoy Olusegun Obasanjo to the Ethiopian prime minister” (SRC-6480, EEPA, 2022, SR 229). Instead, the Tigray government proposed peace negotiations to be facilitated by Kenyan President Uhuru Kenyatta, with the presence of international actors such as the European Union, United States and AU (SRC-6480, EEPA, 2022, SR 229). Both sides expressed their commitment to peace. However, the conditions that each party had during the negotiation process seemed to be not acceptable to the opposing side.

Fighting resumes

On 24 August 2022, fighting between the TDF and ENDF restarted along the southern border of Tigray. Prior to the resumption of the battle, increased movement of the ENDF, ASF and Fano militia was observed.

Residents along the border told Reuters that they heard heavy weapons since the early morning of 24 August and there had been a movement of Ethiopian soldiers, Amhara Special Forces and volunteer Fano militia in the past two days. As of yet, it remains unclear who instigated the hostilities. Both sides are accusing each other. No independent verification has taken place. (SRC-6979, EEPA, 2022, SR 253)

The Tigray government announced that Eritrea was also involved in resumed fighting, giving support to the ENDF, and a new front opened in Eritrea (SRC-7047, EEPA, 2022, SR 256). There were multiple offensives launched by the ENDF and the EDF alliance in Northern Tigray. Soon after, Eritreans were seen to fight the TDF on multiple fronts, including Western Tigray where a fierce battle was held over Dedebit town.

According to a Tigray representative, a key battle is being fought between Eritrean forces and TDF in Dedebit in Western Tigray. Tigray Spokesperson Getachaw Reda said on Twitter that Eritrean forces are also taking up offensive positions on multiple fronts such as Rama, Tserona, Zalambessa and Dallol. (SRC-7207 & 7208, EEPA, 2022, SR 263)

All border areas around Tigray, as well as neighbouring Afar and Amhara regions, witnessed fierce fighting causing large casualties on all sides with hospitals flooded with wounded soldiers and civilians.

The ENDF has reportedly captured Adi Arkay in the Amhara region [...] Heavy fighting is taking place in many different border areas. TDF fighters are engaging Ethiopian forces from Sudan, Fighting is taking place on the Tekeze River, on the B30 Highway towards Debarke, on the Abergele front, and around Kobo in Amhara. The TDF is also engaged with Eritrean forces in the North around Shiraro. Heavy fighting is reported between TDF troops and Eritrean troops on the border with Tigray. (SRC-7209-7212, EEPA, 2022, SR 263)

Alongside land operations, this period was characterised by numerous airstrikes carried out by the ENDF in Tigray, with a particular focus on the Mekelle area. Residential areas, a kindergarten, the area close to the Mekelle General Hospital, as well as Adi Haqi University campus of Mekelle University were hit by airstrikes. “An Ethiopian airstrike killed at least seven people in Mekelle on Friday 26 August. UNICEF has said that the strike hit a kindergarten” (SRC-7050, EEPA, 2022, SR 256). Ayder Referral Hospital in Mekelle faced an overwhelming influx of wounded patients hit by drone strikes.

The chief executive of Ayder Referral Hospital, Dr Kibrom Gebreselassie, said on Twitter that an area near the Mekelle General Hospital was bombed by a drone attack around midnight. He said casualties were arriving at Ayder hospital and that the extent of the damage and casualties was not clear. (SRC-7089, EEPA, 2022, SR 258)

Renewed fighting and drone attacks significantly reduced the delivery of humanitarian aid. On 11 September 2022, the Tigray government issued a statement expressing openness to AU-led peace negotiations with the presence of international observers. “The Government of Tigray also said a comprehensive negotiated ceasefire and an all-inclusive political dialogue should follow after the cessation of hostilities” (SRC-7277, EEPA, 2022, SR 266). However, in the days following the statement the military was still engaged in fighting on all fronts. The EDF was reported to be mobilising more troops including reservists to launch a large-scale offensive in Tigray.

Tigray spokesperson Getachew Reda says Eritrean forces have launched a full-scale offensive on all fronts along the border – all the way from Tekeze through to Irob.

He said heavy fighting is going on in May Kubli, Zban Gedena, Adi Awala, Rama, Tserona and Zalambessa fronts. He added that ENDF's eastern command, members of the Northwestern command and 3 commando divisions have also been deployed along with the Eritrean forces. He said Eritrea is deploying its entire army as well as reservists. (SRC-7413-7416, EEPA Situation Report No. 272, 20 September 2022)

Another full-scale offensive was reported on 10 October 2022. Deploying tens of thousands of units, the ENDF and EDF attacked north-eastern Tigray and fighting took place in Zalambessa, Rama, Tserona and Adigrad (SRC-7734-7738, EEPA, 2022, SR 286). By 18 October the Tigray government confirmed that the ENDF had captured Shire, followed by Alamata and Korem towns in the subsequent days.

Cessation of Hostilities Agreement

On 25 October 2022, AU-led peace negotiations started in South Africa with both sides (Tigray and Ethiopia) represented by envoys. Eritrea did not participate in the peace negotiations. The Ethiopian government was represented by national security advisor Redwan Hussien and Getachew Reda represented the TDF. The talks were facilitated by former President of Nigeria, Olusegun Obasanjo, former Kenyan President, Uhuru Kenyatta, and former Deputy President of South Africa, Phumzile Mlambo-Ngcuka. The Intergovernmental Authority on Development (IGAD), United States and UN representatives sat in as observers of the peace process.

Negotiations started with a hopeful and positive demeanour: “There is hope that the outcome of an immediate ceasefire and long-lasting end of fighting should be a real possibility” (SRC-8049, EEPA, 2022, SR 299). According to the original schedule, the talks were due to finish by 30 October. This was, however, extended to 1 November due to the complex nature of the process: “According to a diplomatic source talking to The Continent, the peace talks are complicated by the absence of Eritrea” (SRC-8101, EEPA, 2022, SR 301).

On Wednesday, 2 November 2022, the Ethiopian government and the TPLF leadership signed the Agreement for Lasting Peace through

a Permanent Cessation of Hostilities (CoH Agreement) ending the two-year deadly war (SRC-8125, EEPA, 2022, SR 302). Both sides pledged to be proactive in the implementation of the agreement. Following the signing of the CoH Agreement, parties issued a statement recognising the loss of lives, physical and material damage.

The delegation leaders referred in their joint statement to the tragic loss of lives and livelihoods. They reaffirmed the sovereign integrity of Ethiopia. The statement mentions the reintegration of the Tigray combatants in the Ethiopian army. The collaboration with humanitarian agencies. The establishment of a framework for the settlement of differences, and an accountability mechanism. The parties agree to stop propaganda, voices of divisions and hate, and to restore public services. (SRC-8134-8136, EEPA, 2022, SR 302)

Based on the provisions of the CoH Agreement, the ENDF and federal institutions would be allowed to enter Mekelle to be part of the restoration of service (SRC-8153, EEPA, 2022, SR 303). Another meeting was pledged to be held specifically on the disarmament of heavy weapons, to be finalised within 10 days after the signing of the CoH Agreement (SRC-8155, EEPA, 2022, SR 303). Article 7 expected the TPLF to discontinue any collaboration with any other armed forces. The CoH Agreement further considered the establishment of a new Tigray interim regional administration, which would govern the region until the regional election would take place (SRC-8157, EEPA, 2022, SR 303). The Ethiopian government pledged to revoke the designation of the TPLF as a terrorist group and to undertake a judicial process to hold the perpetrators of crimes committed during the war accountable. Further, “The ENDF shall safeguard the sovereignty, territorial integrity, and security of the country from foreign incursion and ensure that there will be no provocation or incursion from either side of the border” (SRC-8158, EEPA, 2022, SR 303). To monitor the progress on implementation of the CoH, both parties pledged that a joint committee including IGAD and AU would be established (SRC-8160, EEPA, 2022, SR 303).

Game over – forever

Eritrean troops were pictured leaving parts of Tigray on 20 January 2023. They had signs on their vehicles reading in English “Game

over”, signalling to international audiences their objective vis à vis this war. The Tigrinya text reads: ከፍጦረ ጊዜ, which is likely to have signalled to Tigray people indexing a Tigrinya interpretive model⁷: “That’s what we [Eritreans] do, or we [Eritreans] showed you what we can do, this is our ability to do whatever” (see Figure 2.1).

The text on X (formerly Twitter) with the picture reads: “This is EDF (Aradom) leaving Tigray after the defeat of TPLF with our motto Game Over”. The context dictates the meaning. The message can be understood as being directed at the Tigrayans watching them leave. Aradom here means ‘hero’ – referring to the victory of the EDF, but also referring to the underlying meaning of being feared and creating panic and capable of terrorising.⁸

⁷ The Tigrinya and Amharic model of indexing meaning is called Qine or Qene, referred as wax and gold, which presents ambiguous layers of hidden meanings within text format. The obvious meaning is referred as the wax, which hides a deeper meaning, referred as the gold.

⁸ A number of Tigrinya-speaking persons from Tigray and Eritrea were requested to interpret the text (Informal Communication, WhatsApp with Van Reisen, 6 February 2024). One message reads: “ARADOM = “he terrorized them”. It refers to what the Shabiya think they did against the Weyane, i.e., terrorise them....” and another one “It is a name of person which means someone makes terrified other.” And “Aradom meaning make them panic and terrorized.” As well as “when I translate it they were saying, we are hero ever.” Also: “The Tigrigna version says: “We (Eritreans) are like this” ... which means they what they say... Game over”



Figure 2.1. Eritrean troops retreating from West Tigray with the motto: Game Over (Alex T, 2023)⁹

This text can be interpreted as a sign of victory of succeeding the original objective announced by President Isayas in January 2018, as well as a threat, that the Eritreans can come back, understood in the hidden transcript of the meaning, that this is what “Eritreans do”. This shows that the withdrawal does not signify a return to the situation prior to the war, but that a new situation has emerged with the threat of military intervention permanently hanging over Tigray.

Discussion: The hysteresis of the Tigray war

The analysis shows that the outbreak of the war brought a radical regime shift (situation) within Ethiopia and Tigray. A humanitarian crisis, foreign forces fighting against Tigrayans, massacres committed against civilians, hate speech, as well as sexual violence as a weapon of war were some of the realities that occurred during the two-year war (D’Costa, 2022; Fisher, 2022; Istratii, 2021; Pellet, 2021; Pichon, 2022; Pohjonen, 2022). The moment when PM Abiy declared a law enforcement operation on 4 November 2020, the system in place was

⁹ The picture was posted by an apparent supporter of the Eritrean campaign in Tigray (@alex_temelso, 20 January, 2023, on Twitter (X) with the title: “This is EDF (Aradom) leaving Tigray after the defeat of TPLF with our motto Game Over” (published on: https://x.com/alex_temelso/status/1616422065715961860). Accessed 27 May 2024)

tipped, leading to a new and unexpected alternative regime. We refer to this moment as the ‘outbreak of war’. It has become clear that the law enforcement operation was not going to be as straightforward and speedy as PM Abiy announced (Eritrea Focus & Oslo Analytica, 2021; Plaut & Vaughan, 2023). With the Eritrean forces involved in the planning and participating in the attacks, the declaration of the law enforcement operation far exceeded a ‘simple’ law enforcement process.

As the theory of tipping points suggests, four prerequisites are essential for defining an occurrence as a threshold or tipping point (Milkoreit, 2022; Milkoreit *et al.*, 2018). All four attributes will be considered in the following sub-sections and looked at from the perspective of the findings.

Existence of multiple stable situations

Ethiopia is a country with a rich history that has witnessed several challenges on the political scene, as well as among ethnic groups living in the country (Eritrea Focus & Oslo Analytica, 2021; Pellet, 2021; Plaut & Vaughan, 2023). When looking at contemporary history, it has been identified that the period from 2018 to November 2020 was important in seeing incremental steps that would lead to (what would be known in the future as) a threshold and a new regime. With Abiy Ahmed sworn into the office of Ethiopian Prime Minister, 2018 was a year of hope for many. In particular, the rapprochement between Ethiopia and Eritrea, bringing the two decades of conflict between the countries to an end, was seen as a great step towards stability in the Horn of Africa. However, the year also started with an announcement by President Isayas of Eritrea, in January 2018, of: “Game over, Woyane” to the Tigrayans, and the initial enthusiasm for the Peace Agreement deflated as the newly opened borders between Ethiopia and Eritrea closed without explanation (Eritrea Focus & Oslo Analytica, 2021; Jima, 2021; Plaut & Vaughan, 2023).

The content of the 2018 Peace Agreement was never revealed to the public in detail. The negotiations between PM Abiy and President Isayas did not involve any of the Tigray leaders, even though the conflict concerned the border regions between Eritrea and Tigray. The relationship between PM Abiy and President Isayas has been

questioned by many observers (Abai, 2021). Reading between the lines, over time the pact came to be seen as part of a conspiracy against the Tigrayans and the elimination of the TPLF (Abai, 2021). The political relationship between the TPLF and PM Abiy's cabinet saw a downward spiral in 2019 and 2020. Disagreement on key issues, such as the elections and the merger of ruling political parties into the Prosperity Party, built up tensions. Disagreements and accusations occurred on the political scene before the outbreak of war. This changed into a militarised system in which disagreements between the opposing sides were underscored by military offensives.

The findings revealed that grave violence of various characters was committed against the people of Tigray by the ENDF, EDF, ASF as well as the Fano militia. Estimates of the number of deaths in the war went as high as 700,000 people (Pilling & Schipani, 2023). Within the new war regime, disputes between political opponents had severe and concrete consequences for the civilian population and all societal structures. Looking at the theory of tipping points, two stable situations, which are delineated by the tipping point itself, are present in this study. The outbreak of war splits regimes into a 'pre-tipping point' state and a 'post-tipping point' state with 4 November 2020, being the threshold.

Non-linearity or abruptness

After the outbreak of the war, all essential services in Tigray were disrupted or destroyed (Fisher, 2022; Name *et al.*, 2021; Pellet, 2021; Pichon, 2022; Plaut & Vaughan, 2023). These included health care, school systems, banking, communication services, food and supply chain, industries, the non-government sector, as well as small business structures. From one day to the next everyone had to adjust to the new reality, which would become the new 'normal' for the years ahead. The vastness of the consequences that the tipping point caused was unpredictable. Based on the findings, the outbreak of the war resulted in a new regime with a qualitatively different state in comparison to the 'pre-tipping point' regime.

Domino effect towards a new situation

This aspect of the tipping point was very straightforward. As soon as the war broke out, all sides entered into a military confrontation.

Fierce fighting was seen on many fronts from the early moments of the war involving Tigray, Amhara, Eritrea and federal forces (Istratii, 2021; Niekerk, 2023; Plaut, 2021; Ploch Blancard, 2020; Pohjonen, 2022). The military nature of the change in the situation ('regime change') replaced the previous status quo. Responding to violence with violence caused a domino effect that reinforced the new status quo with each military offense (Lee, 2015).

Limited reversibility

It could be assumed that the tipping point was reversed with the signing of the Cessation of Hostilities Agreement on 2 November 2022. However, the months prior to the signing of the CoH agreement saw a lot of violence and heavy fighting on all fronts. Not a lot seemed to point towards the possibility of lasting peace, until the actual mediation process started on 25 October 2022.

The limited character of reversibility of the new situation that emerged over the course of two years of war can also be observed. On multiple occasions, the different sides claimed to be open to peaceful resolution, however, their actions contradicted this position. When the Ethiopian government announced a unilateral ceasefire in June 2021, it was clear that it would not last long, if at all (Eritrea Focus; Oslo Analytica, 2022). Neither did the temporary ceasefire between March and August 2022 suggest that the war would be over anytime soon. This was particularly due to the ongoing tension and back-and-forth accusations between the TPLF and the Ethiopian government. Even the vision of a peace process was contested. In addition, this period saw the large mobilisation of Eritrean forces and ongoing clashes between the EDF and TDF. Eritrean forces have not fully left all of Tigray at the time of writing. Western Tigray is still occupied and not under the control of the Tigray regional government.

Inspired by Stocker's adaptation of visualisation displaying a critical transition (2024), the following figure aims to adapt it in light of the current chapter.

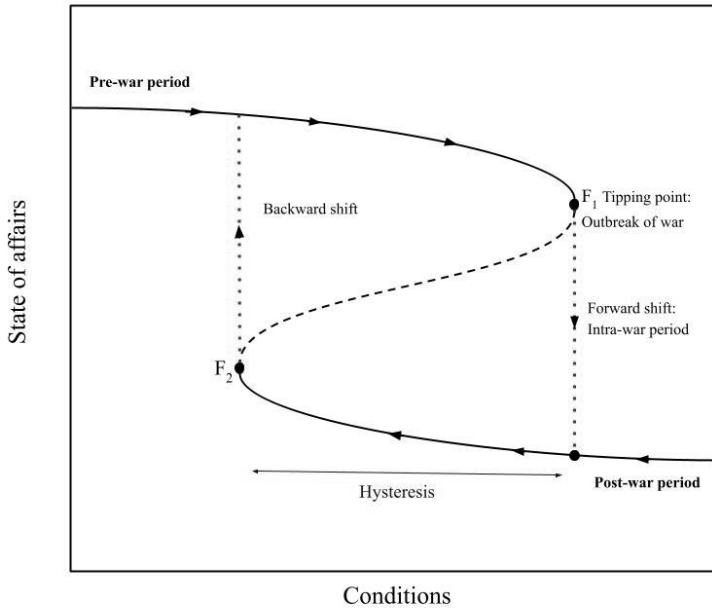


Figure 2.2. Critical transition of the alternative regime after the outbreak of Tigray war

(Adapted by Stocker (2024) from Scheffer *et al.*, 2012)

The pre-war period, which was characterised by a set of incremental processes leading up to the tipping point, was seen as a stable state that was about to change. As soon as the war broke out, the situation tipped, and this forward shift led to the new regime (situation) through a series of positive feedback mechanism, including the participation of the Eritrean military forces; the killing, destruction and looting of assets, which destroyed the economic and social fabric; the participation of other international actors in the war; and the military mobilisation of the participants in the war. The effects of the war could not be reversed completely by the mere signing of the CoH Agreement.

At the time of writing this chapter, it is difficult to predict whether conditions will be able to return to the original state by tipping over and backward shifts. The conditions discussed in this chapter include:

- Mistrust between political actors

- Militarisation throughout the region
- Large scale loss of lives and collective trauma
- Economic and social destruction of livelihoods
- Ethnic identity as source of political instability

As the damages of the war are far-reaching and devastating, the hysteresis (distance between F1 and F2 in Figure 2.2) seems to be long. It will require further research to understand what needs to be done, what steps are necessary for getting to F2 and whether this is desirable. Tsing (2005) finds that a ‘point of friction’ not only slows things down, but also speeds them up. A tipping point offers a vital force in the debate about new proposals for transformation (Tuin & Verhoeff, 2022).

Conclusion: ‘Game over’ is the new normal

The main objective of this chapter was to look at the critical transitions that occurred during the two-year Tigray war, while applying the theory of tipping points, to identify major changes in the situation that took place in Tigray and Ethiopia in the context of the Tigray war.

Departing from the premise of Clausewitz (1976), that a war does not break out without history, the study identified and examined events that led to the outbreak of the Tigray war. These events related to the period between 2018 and November 2020, during which Ethiopia witnessed some important developments.

In January 2018, President Isayas called “Game over” against the TPLF and Tigray people. In Abiy Ahmed became Prime Minister of Ethiopia and soon after signed a controversial peace agreement with the Eritrean President Isayas Afwerki. This period is recognised as one of the ‘stable states’ that was about to change. The threshold (tipping point) was reached when mounting tensions between the Tigray regional government and the Ethiopian federal government reached a climax in the outbreak of the war in November 2020.

This chapter also provided a detailed analysis of the events that shaped the course of the war in Tigray. The outbreak of war caused qualitative change to the regime which preceded it. No one was able to predict how far-reaching and devastating the consequences of the

outbreak would be. The war was characterised by widespread violence, massacres, displacement, and human rights abuses of grave nature.

Shortly after the onset of the conflict, the war assumed regional and international ramifications. Ethiopian, Eritrean, Amhara, and Somali forces were actively engaged in direct combat and assaults on civilian populations. Each of the different factions deliberately participated in military offences against the opposing side.

Reaching the point of the Cessation of Hostilities Agreement in 2022 did not conclude the war. When Eritrean forces left, their trucks had victorious signs on them reading: “Game over, Woyane”. This can be read as a clear warning to the people of Tigray that, as far as the Eritrean leadership is concerned, the war is not over yet.

This chapter finds 10 critical points that can be regarded as markers of the period of the war in Tigray:

- January 2018: President Isayas declares “Game over” to Tigray
- July 2018: Peace Agreement between Eritrea and Ethiopia
- 4 November 2020: Declaration of a law enforcement operation
- June 2021: Success of Operation Alula Abanega
- July 2021: Operation Tigray Mothers and Sunrise
- December 2021: Tigray forces halt offensive
- June 2022: Mediation starts
- August 2022: Coalition offensive resumes
- November 2022: Cessation of Hostilities Agreement
- 2023: Eritrean forces leave Tigray with a sign “Game over” and “This is what we [Eritreans] do”

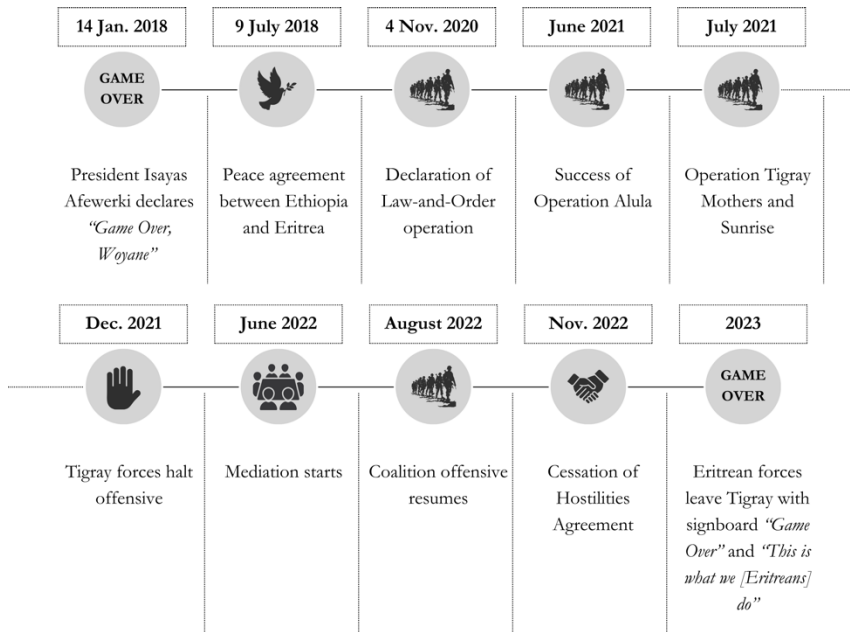


Figure 2.3. Timeline of tipping points in the Tigray War

The period after the Cessation of Hostilities Agreement has, for now, created a new state of stability, which is qualitatively different from the period prior to the war. The war itself that took hundreds of thousands of lives and caused devastating destruction in the Tigray region. The reverberations of the war are not over and it certainly has created a new situation with limited reversibility to the pre-war situation. In this new situation, the threat of “Game over” will hang over Tigray with some permanency.

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Authors' contributions

Kristína Melicherová is a PhD researcher at Tilburg University. She is the principal researcher and author of this chapter. This chapter was produced based on her independently conducted research as part of her PhD programme. She prepared the research approach and conducted data collection and analysis. She prepared the theoretical framework for this chapter. Melicherová prepared the first draft and carried out the revisions of subsequent drafts that were prepared. Prof. Dr Mirjam Van Reisen advised on the analytical framework of the chapter, authored specific sections regarding the timeline of events prior to the war, and revised the final version. Daniel Tesfa is a PhD researcher of the GAIC Research Network, an academic staff at Aksum University in the School of journalism and contributed interpretations from Tigrinya phrases used for this chapter. The interpretation included: translation, explanation of meaning, verification of source material, investigating the veracity of source material, keeping record of all source materials.

Ethical clearance

This research was carried out under ethical clearance obtained from Tilburg University Identification code: REDC 2020.139 titled “Cultural Dimensions of Meaning-making and Agenda-setting”. This chapter should be read in conjunction with the ‘Note on content and editorial decisions’ (Book 1).

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From Hidden to Open War in Tigray: Structural and Proximate Causes

Seife Hailu Gebreslassie & Mirjam Van Reisen

ሰብ ናቱ ኣይትኸልኦ፤ ዘይናቱ ኣይትሃቡ።

Don't deny people what is theirs, and don't give them what they haven't earned.

Abstract

This investigation aimed to differentiate between structural and proximate causes of the war in Tigray to understand the transition from a hidden conflict to an open war on 3 November 2020, when the Ethiopian federal government initiated a military intervention in Tigray. The role of various actors, especially Eritrea, is significant in this context. The narrative claiming that the war was triggered by an attack by the Tigray People's Liberation Front (TPLF) is questioned based on substantial evidence of pre-war preparations, including measures to marginalise both the TPLF and the Tigray population and the federal government's military readiness for an invasion. The involvement of multiple actors complicates the characterisation of the conflict as merely a domestic 'law enforcement' matter. The intent behind the war is critical, particularly as some of the atrocities committed by the different actors in the war may amount to crimes under the Rome Statute, falling within the jurisdiction of the International Criminal Court if other legal avenues fail. By using concepts such as 'hidden war', 'open war', and the distinctions between 'proximate' and 'structural' causes, this investigation contributes to clarifying responsibility for the conflict.

Key words: Tigray war, hidden war, structural and proximate causes, Ethiopia, Eritrea, TPLF, Northern Command

Introduction: Dominant and underrepresented narratives

In the study of conflict, the nature and causes of conflict can be classified as either structural or proximate. Structural causes are root or underlying, long-term and systemic causes, while proximate or immediate causes are more recent causes that trigger or lead to an escalation of the conflict (Herbert, 2017). In the analysis of the war on Tigray, most of the existing works have focused on the proximate causes of the war. Some attribute the war to the “regional election held in Tigray in September 2020, the refusal of TPLF to join the Prosperity Party or the attack on the northern command of the ENDF on 4 November 2020” (CBC news, 2021; Walsh & Dahir, 2022). Others say that it is the result of a “power struggle” (BBC, 2021) and “a political system failure of transition from repressive autocracy (of TPLF) to a democratic political system (of [Ethiopian PM] Abiye Ahmed)” (Abbink, 2022).

There is also disagreement about the start of the war. Some identify the start as 3 November 2020, when it is alleged that Ethiopian federal special forces were sent to Mekelle, where they were met at the airport by Tigray Defence Forces upon, which were simultaneously were entering Tigray from the North (UN International Commission of Human rights Experts on Ethiopia, 2022; Van Reisen, 2021). Others say that it was 4 November 2020, when the federal government of Ethiopia initiated a law and order operation in Tigray. Establishing the beginning of the war is relevant in that it implies attribution.

Some analysts have attributed the war to causes that lie in time and space, connecting it to long historical roots as well as recent political developments. For instance, Tronvoll (2022) stresses the tension between the centre and the regional state as the cause of the war (i.e., the tension about whether Ethiopia should be a singular national identity or a multi-ethnic federal system preserving autonomy for regional states). Siyum (2021) adds historical narrations, land ownership, tribal differences and weak institutions as the root causes. Fiseha (2023) determines the cause (and consequence) of the war to be the constitutional tension between the federated state of Ethiopia and the right of autonomy of the regional states, a balance that PM Abiy together with President Isayas of Eritrea sought to change.

How the war in Tigray started, why it happened and what it aimed to achieve is subject to contrasting views. The jury on this is still out, as there are many questions that remain unanswered today. Not all views on the causes of the war are equally available in the public domain. While the perspectives of the federal government of Ethiopia have been communicated prominently, access to the perspective of the Tigray regional government was complicated by the institution of a blockade of the region during the war. The communication blockade included blocking off the Internet and the media. During certain times, there was no travel to and from the region. Also, humanitarian organisations were mostly barred from the region. As a result, opposing narratives on how, and why, the war started have not been generally available in public debate. Hence, contrasting ideas about what the federal government aimed to achieved by the war have not been widely discussed. To begin to answer these questions it is important to investigate the structural and proximate causes of the war.

To discuss the root causes of the war, it is necessary to determine how and when the war began, how motives were framed, and the actors involved. This study attempts to construct a chain of events and a timeline on how the war began and who did what. The research question was: *What are the immediate and long-term structural and proximate causes of the war in Tigray during the period before 4 November 2020, when the Ethiopian government declared a military intervention in Tigray Regional State?*

This is not the first study that attempts to do this. However, its focus on the inclusion of the understanding of the genesis of the war of key persons in Mekelle, the capital of Tigray, has hitherto not been well reflected in extant literature.

Multidisciplinary theoretical framework

The study employed a multi-disciplinary approach to analyse the genesis and nature of the war on Tigray. According to Galtung (2009, 2011), conflict arises from the incompatibility of goals that different actors have, including the means to achieve them. Galtung's notion of violence and peace provide conceptual tools with which to analyse war.

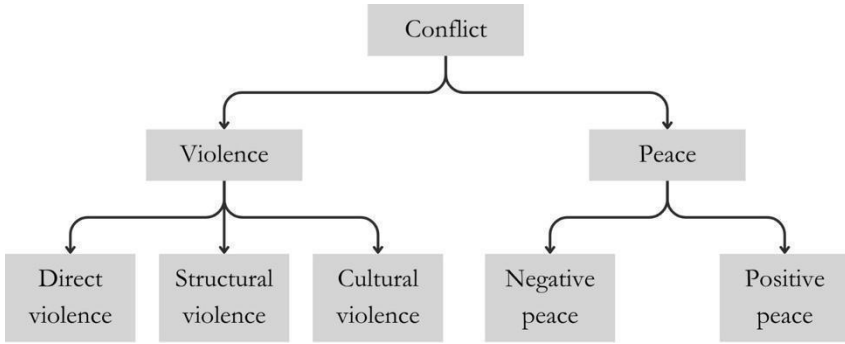


Figure 3.1. Conceptual linkages between conflict, violence and peace

Source: Galtung (1990), pp. 291–305

Direct violence involves acts like killing, imprisonment and torture. Structural violence involves economic exploitation and political oppression. Cultural violence involves the assimilation or destruction of values, identity, history and civilization. Negative peace is the absence of direct violence and positive peace is absence of direct violence, structural violence and cultural violence (Galtung, 2011; Galtung, 2009).

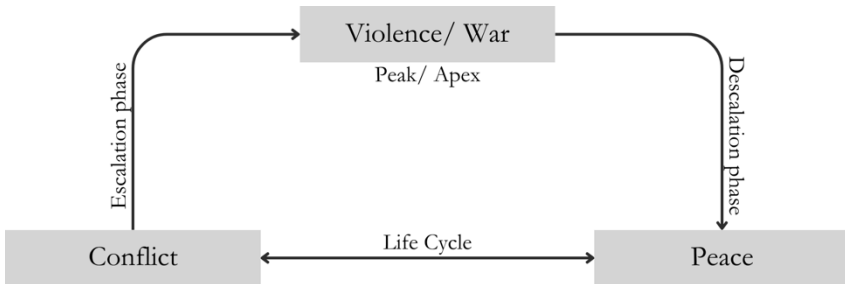


Figure 3.2. Cycle of violence

Source: Galtung (2000)

The modalities of violence (or absence of it) can be placed along a spectrum, along which they combine at different levels and in different spatial and temporal settings.

In the terminology of Clausewitz, a 19th century Prussian General, “war is the continuation of politics by other means” (Clausewitz, 2003). That means that war is conducted in pursuit of defined goals

and the primary goal is to compel an enemy to fulfil one's will. Clausewitz distinguishes between 'war' and 'total war'. A 'total war' does not have any legal and ethical constraints and creates the political, military and cultural space in which genocide occurs (Winter, 2004).

According to the symbolist political theory of ethnic violence, ethnic violence of genocidal or other nature are caused by symbols and myths that produce emotion laden mass hostility to provoke and make extreme policies popular (Kaufman, 2006). Proponents of this theory assert that emotions and non-rational calculations, are the motivators for people to act violently. Testing the theory in the case of the Rwandan genocide, Kaufman (2006) found that such an environment existed in Rwanda and is the motivation of genocide.

Methodology

This qualitative study employed both secondary and primary sources of data. A document analysis focused on analysing pertinent documents, such as statements and speeches of public officials, statements and resolutions of institutions, reports of human rights groups and monitors, and news and media reports. The purpose was to examine the claims of the prevailing narratives on the genesis and nature of the war on Tigray and to collect documents that hitherto had not been available on the viewpoints on the genesis of the war, as seen by the TPLF. Internal documents of the TPLF were also obtained and reviewed.

For primary data, the study relied on three high-ranking respondents who were in Tigray at the time of the study and personal and confidential regular communications on the situation to the second author by a senior official from Tigray and two lower-ranking well-connected persons from Tigray. This information was received throughout the period of 2020 to 2023 in various forms of personal communication. Observations and interactions with other participants in Ethiopia and in Tigray during the period 2020–2023 provided further information for the study.

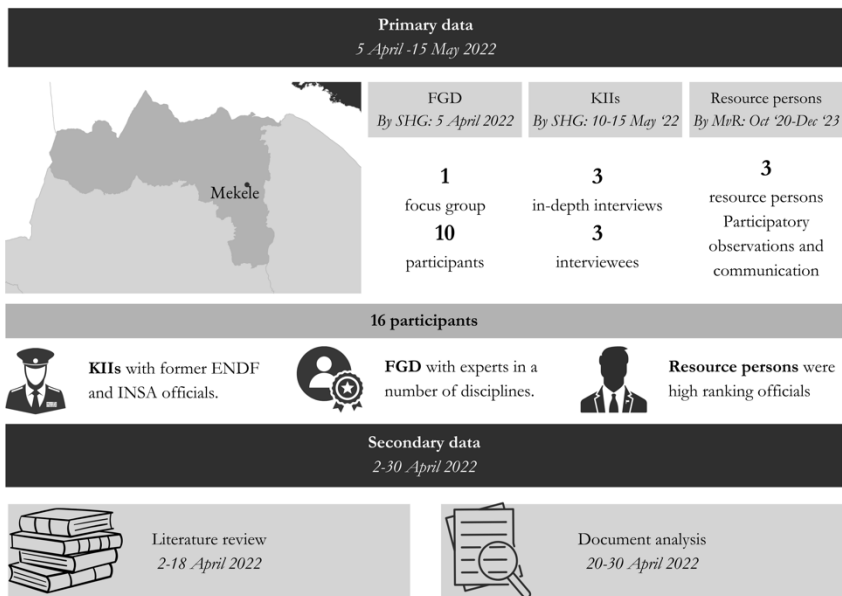


Figure 3.3. Overview of data collected and used in the study

The study used material obtained from a document analysis, focus group discussion (FGD), key informant interviews (KIIs) and resource persons. The material collected from these sources included information, knowledge, experience, opinions, observations, feelings, views and perspectives from individuals and groups that have expertise knowledge or experience related to the war in Tigray.

The FGD comprised 10 participants, who were drawn from experts in law, media, history, political science, human rights studies, federalism studies and development studies. The participants were purposively selected based on their expertise and experience in the topic under study. Three KIIs were conducted to complement the FGD. Three resource persons were included as part of a participatory setting, as these individuals had in-depth knowledge about the situation at hand. One of the resource persons was a high-ranking official from the Tigray government.

Table 3.1. Data sources and data collection period

Data sources	Description of data sources	Data collection period
Literature review	Published and unpublished articles and books were reviewed	2–18 April 2022
Document analysis	Pertinent documents such as internal statements of the TPLF, statements and speeches of public officials, statements and resolutions of institutions, reports of human rights groups and monitors and news and reports of media were analysed	20–30 April 2022
Key informants interviews (KIIs)	<p>3 in-depth interviews were conducted by first author with:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • a former senior ENDF official; • a former commander in the Northern Command of ENDF; • a former senior official of the Intelligence and National Security Agency (INSA) of Ethiopia <p>3 ranking resource persons in a participatory research setting (personal communications to second author)</p>	10–15 May 2022
Focus group discussion (FGD)	A FGD was conducted with 10 experts in law, media, history, political science, human rights studies, federalism studies and development studies	5 April 2022

The first author conducted the FGD and KIIs, which were guided by semi-structured questions. The second author conducted extensive exchanges with the three resource persons, who did not reside in Mekelle during the study period, through formal and informal discussions as part of ‘participatory observation and communication’ in real-time during the whole study period.

Participants were anonymised and deidentified. The study used qualitative analysis as a method of data analysis. Accordingly, collected data were transcribed, translated from Tigrinya to English, thematised based on the research objectives and then analysed in a descriptive narrative way. The analysis was also organised in such a way that the information and insights obtained from KIIs and FGD were triangulated and contrasted against the results of the document analysis. The texts, FGD and interviews in Amharic or Tigrinya were translated into English by the first author.

The findings of the study are presented in two parts. In the first part the analysis of the documents and literature is presented. The second part provides the analysis of the interviews and FGD.

Analysis of documents: Unravelling perspectives on the origins, nature and causes of the war in Tigray

This section presents the analysis of the documents and literature that were reviewed. In addition to widely available viewpoints, it also draws on internal documentation, particularly from the TPLF, to obtain a viewpoint that differs from the dominant perspective on the war. The following themes were identified: (i) the official reading by the Ethiopian government of the reason for the military intervention; (ii) contrasting viewpoints on the start of the hostilities as a pre-planned attack; (iii) considerations on the reading that the military intervention was intended as a law enforcement operation; (iv) considerations on interpreting the military intervention as an internal affair; and (v) deliberations on the structural causes of the war.

Federal government's narrative: A military intervention

The narrative of the federal government of Ethiopia on the cause and nature of the war was built on two fundamental claims: the attack on the Northern Command by the TPLF and the law enforcement operation as an internal conflict not a regional (international) war. The first claim is about the genesis of the war and the second about the nature of the war. The Ethiopian government narrates the war in Tigray by claiming that the TPLF started the war by attacking the Northern Command of the ENDF stationed in Tigray, which has a long external border with Eritrea. In response, a law enforcement

operation was ordered in the region. A statement from the Office of the Prime Minister of Ethiopia reads:

On November 4, 2020, the Federal Government of Ethiopia initiated a rule of law operation in the Tigray region to uphold law and protect the country from the deliberate and heinous attack of the Northern Command of the Ethiopian National Defence Force by the criminal TPLF clique. (Office of the Prime Minister of Ethiopia, 2020)

The claim that the TPLF attacked the Northern Command has been widely accepted and promoted by media and institutions.¹⁰ Following the communication by the Ethiopian government, the international media (Burke, 2020; Meseret & Anna, 2020; Tesfaye & Wroughton, 2020) advanced the idea that the war started on 4 November 2020, when the TPLF allegedly attacked the Northern Command of the ENDF. The US government accepted this claim; its S.RES.97 (2021) reads:

In the early hours of November 4, 2020, Prime Minister Abiy ordered a military offensive in response to an attack by the TPLF on Northern Command of the Ethiopian National Defence Forces (ENDF), which evolved into an armed conflict between the ENDF and allied forces on one side and the TPLF on the other side, with thousands of deaths reported. (Resolution calling on the Government of Ethiopia, 2021)

Today this narrative persists. According to the American Ethiopian Public Affairs Committee (AEPAC), war began on 4 November 2020 when a law enforcement operation was declared on Tigray by the combined forces of the government of Ethiopia (AEPAC, 2021). The military action was conducted by the Ethiopian National Defence

¹⁰ The Northern Command is an important element of the military capacity of the Ethiopian National Defense Forces (ENDF), located in the Tigray region, along the 1,000 km long border of Eritrea with Ethiopia (mostly Tigray). This is a federal Ethiopian force, but it included military from Tigray ethnic origin, many of whom are believed to have disobeyed central orders and defected to Tigray Defense Forces at the start of the war. On 5 November 2020, the regional government of Tigray declared that the Northern Command had defected to its side. The federal government spokesperson Billene described this as “false information” (Reuters, 2020).

Force (ENDF). A military alliance conducted the law enforcement operation, which AEPAC claimed lasted three weeks (AEPAC, 2021).

According to AEPAC, the law enforcement operation was carried out with support of regional forces of the Amhara state, which neighbours Tigray on the South (AEPAC, 2021). These actions were justified in the context of a claim on the Western region (AEPAC, 2021). This was viewed differently by the regional state authority of Tigray, which based itself on the constitutionally demarcated boundaries of the regional state of Tigray.

AEPAC claims that the Tigray regional government launched an attack on its neighbouring country, Eritrea, after an attack was launched on Asmara, which was condemned by US Secretary of State Pompeo:

The United States strongly condemns the attack carried out by the Tigray People's Liberation Front (TPLF) on the airport in Asmara, Eritrea, on November 14. We are deeply concerned by this blatant attempt by the TPLF to cause regional instability by expanding its conflict with Ethiopian authorities to neighbouring countries. We also continue to denounce the TPLF's November 13 missile attacks on the Bahir Dar and Gondar airports in Ethiopia. (US Department of State, 2020)

This narrative is accompanied by the idea that the war was unexpected:

Our country has entered into a war it didn't anticipate," Gen. Birhanu Jula, the deputy chief of the Ethiopian National Defense Force, said on state television Thursday afternoon. "This war is shameful, it is senseless." (Walsh & Marks, 2020)

The claim that the TPLF caused the war and that the federal Ethiopian government responded with a measured operation as an internal affair remained the predominant view in the first period of the war and towards the end of 2020, and still features as the principal interpretation today (compare, for instance, Jima, 2023).

TPLF's narrative: A pre-planned attack on Tigray

In contrast, the TPLF describes the official reading of the military intervention as a “false narrative” (TPLF, 2021b). When answering the question, who started the war in Tigray (2021a), the TPLF states that:

[The] Abiy regime and his accessories launched the war on Tigray during the time of the US Presidential election day [to divert attention from it], under the false accusation that the government of Tigray launched a surprise attack on a Tigray based Northern Command military base. (TPLF, 2021a)

The statement specifically says that the surprise attack of the Northern Command was a false accusation, to launch the Law and Order Operation on the 4th of November 2020. The statement continues with a list that is intended to show that the chronology of events leading up to the 4 November contradicts the Ethiopian government's narrative about the events (TPLF, 2021a).

All sides agree that the regional elections held in Tigray on 9 September 2020 were a trigger for the conflict. This date, the TPLF emphasises, was provided as a deadline for elections as it was the end of the legislative term, and the TPLF claims that it was merely following the provisions of the Ethiopian Constitution by holding regional elections before the term of the legislature expired. An official of the TPLF explained:

The constitution was taken as a framework to justify the autonomous decision of the regional state to hold elections. September 2020 was the end of the legislature. The previous elections took place in 2015. But [PM] Abiy extended it under the cover of the Covid outbreak. The Tigray government said that there was no case of Covid in Tigray and that it could hold elections. The TPLF took the view that there was no mandate to rule in Tigray beyond the term. (Personal communication to Author, 2022)

It is undisputed that by holding regional elections the TPLF defied the instructions of PM Abiy, who saw them as illegal (Walsh & Dahir, 2022). Following the regional elections in Tigray, the federal parliament severed ties with the TPLF, which formed the newly elected government of Tigray (Al Jazeera, 2020).

The position was also an implicit comment on what the TPLF considered to be the end of the mandate of PM Abiy, who had taken over in 2018 with an interim mandate and raised suspicion about his ambition to conduct elections (TPLF, 2021a),¹¹ fuelled by the declaration during his inauguration that his mother had told him at the age of seven that he was destined to be the seventh king of Ethiopia (Mackintosh, 2021).

Further to this, the TPLF believed that it was already facing hostility from the federal government of Ethiopia, visible in the events that led up to the war (TPLF, 2021a, 2021b). The TPLF stated that in the period before the war, the people of Tigray, referred to ‘Tigrinya-speakers’, were being blamed for the wrong-doing of the previous TPLF-led federal government¹² (TPLF, 2021a), in which PM Abiy

¹¹ The TPLF document (2021a) recognises the elections as a pivotal point with regards to the proximate cause of the war: “The State of Tigray through its regional parliament decided that it was possible to hold election at the same time as the Covid-19 pandemic, while taking adequate precautionary measures. In May 2020, following Tigray’s decision to hold its regional election, Abiy said such elections would endanger peace and security and, therefore, the regime would be forced to “take a decisive action”. He, however, failed to expound on what he meant by “taking action”. “On 9 September 2020, Tigray held its regional election. 2.7 million people voted and TPLF won in a landslide. On 7 October 2020, the federal parliament voted to sever ties with Tigray’s newly elected government. This was a clear declaration of war and a continuation of the three years of military preparation by the regime for a war of attrition against the Tigray region” (TPLF, 2021a, p.2).

¹² The TPLF White Paper identifies with the leadership it took in the previous three decades: “The Abiy govt spent three years attempting to take down the TRG, TPLF, and Tigrayans by means of demonization; and dismantlement of TPLF’s political, economic, and security apparatus that it built over 27 years; and by killing or jailing its leaders” (TPLF, 2021b). The TPLF White Paper concludes that members of the TPLF were removed from positions of leadership: “Soon after he took the office, members of the TPLF who served in the central government prior to 2018 suddenly were without jobs. So, they decided to return to Tigray as leaders of the region. But Mr Abiy did not like that they returned, and he used his government’s media apparatus and social media trolls to accuse and mock the TPLF

himself was a minister (Walsh & Dahir, 2022). Affirming that the regional elections in Tigray constituted a trigger, a TPLF White Paper recalls that on 7 May 2020 PM Abiy warned the TPLF:

“[...] youth will die, mothers will cry, and villages will be set on fire” if politicians continue to oppose the postponement of the elections. (TPLF, June 2021b, p. 9)

According to the TPLF, propaganda against Tigrayans broadened and deepened quickly when PM Abiy mentioned “27 years of darkness” – referring to the rule of Meles Zenawi, the former Tigrayan president of Ethiopia, a ‘darkness’ that was associated with the entire Tigray population (De Waal, 2020; Sew, 2019).

In addition, prior to the war, the TPLF claimed that its authority was being structurally undermined, which was reflected in various measures; for example:

The Federal government diverted the region’s budget, instructing the Ministry of Finance to disburse funds to lower-level administrative districts bypassing the executive bodies. (TPLF, 2021a)

Other examples cited by the TPLF include the exclusion of Tigray from chemical spraying to control the severe locust infection and the ban on the distribution of COVID-19 personal protective equipment (TPLF, 2021a).

The TPLF also noted active planning of a war, which involved secret collaboration between PM Abiy and President Isayas (TPLF, 2021b). Supporting this, Walsh reported that a troupe of Eritrean singers and dancers had visited the Amhara region with a delegation that included Abraha Kassa, the head of Eritrean intelligence, who met Amhara security leaders. It was agreed that Eritrea would train 60,000 troops

leaders of ‘running to and camping in Mekelle’. But this was not a simple mockery. Rather it was part of a well-designed campaign to demonize, weaken, and attack the TPLF with an ultimate goal of ‘erasing’ the TPLF from Ethiopian politics and history” (TPLF, 2021b, p. 5). In another document from the TPLF it is explained that: “TPLF declined to join the PP, expressing its concern that Abiy was deviating from his ‘assignment’ as a transitional leader. Purge against Tigrayans has been intensified, and state media increased their anti-Tigray rhetoric (including repeatedly blaming ‘Tigrigna speakers’ for past government miss-deeds)” (TPLF, 2021a).

of Amhara Special Forces (Walsh, 2021a). This group, Fano, is a paramilitary unit, which was deployed to Tigray when the war started. On 31 October 2020, three days before the outbreak of the war, Eritrea released an official statement in which it said international actors together with the “Woyane”¹³ were still hoping to “dismantle Eritrea” even after the declaration of “Game over, Woyane” (Ministry of Information Eritrea, 2020).

The TPLF points to the subsequent visit of President Isayas of Eritrea to the headquarters of the Ethiopian Air Force (Ministry of Information Eritrea, 2020; TPLF, 2021a). On 14 October 2020 and 25 October 2020, the transfer of divisions and heavy arms located in the Northern Command from Tigray at the border with Eritrea to the neighbouring Amhara region was proposed, which was seen as a hostile move and firmly objected to by the Tigray government (TPLF, 2021a).¹⁴ The situation escalated further, according to the TPLF, when the federal government of Ethiopia directed the newly appointed General Jamal Mohammed to travel to Mekelle to take charge of the Northern Command:

¹³ In Eritrea Tigrayan people are often referred to as ‘Woyane’ or ‘Agame’, which are derogatory terms when used in a certain context of speaking and intended to target and insult people from the Tigray region and of Tigray ethnicity. Agame is a region in Tigray. Used in the expression: “nothing good comes out of Agame” it is an insult that ridicules Tigrayan people. Woyane refers to the TPLF, such as in Eritrea the term ‘Shabiya’ refers to HGDEF, EPLF and the PFDJ. In the expression: “Game over, Woyane” this is understood in a demeaning insulting way. The origin of the word ‘Agame’ in Tigrinya is a place full of fruit, and ‘Woyane’ refers to people involved in an uprising, rebellion or revolution. An alternative spelling is Woyane, or Weyene.

¹⁴ TPLF (2021a) records: “In October 2020, the regime put into motion the final phases of an operation to strike Tigray. On 14 October President Isaias of Eritrea visited headquarters of the Ethiopian Air Force in Bishoftu, Oromia region. On 25 October efforts renewed to transfer divisions and heavy arms of the Northern Command from Tigray to neighbouring region, but it was firmly objected to by the Tigray government leadership. On 27 October Prime Minister Abiy made ‘a one-day secret trip’ to Asmara where he met with President Isaias in preparation for an attack on Tigray”.

On October 29, Brig. Gen. Jamal Mohammed of the ENDF flew to Mekelle to assume his post as the new deputy head of the Northern Command. Upon arrival, he was turned away by Tigray regional government. (TPLF, 2021a)

The TPLF (2021b) claims that the war was directly provoked by commandos sent from Addis Ababa to Mekelle on the 3 November 2020:

The [Ethiopian] government tried an illegal and more aggressive commando mission on Nov 3. The mission was intended to assassinate or capture the TRG and TPLF leadership according to Eritrea Hub. The Abiy govt kept this secret mission hidden from the international community, because it knows this is an act of war and would be condemned for it. What follows after such an aggression, however, should simply be considered self-defense. (TPLF, 2021b)

Van Reisen *et al.* (2021) described that on 3 November 2020, planes from the Ethiopian federal government landed in Mekelle, leading to exchanges of fire.¹⁵ The first plane arrived to distribute new currency notes and retrieve the old ones. This money transfer was accompanied by special forces (Van Reisen *et al.*, 2021).

Declan Walsh (2021) made a similar observation about the outbreak of the actual war:

In the months before fighting erupted in November 2020, Mr. Abiy moved troops toward Tigray and sent military cargo planes into Eritrea. Behind closed doors, his advisers and military generals debated the merits of a conflict. Those who disagreed were fired, interrogated at gunpoint, or forced to leave. (Walsh, 2021a)

Further confirming knowledge of the war's onset before November 4, the New York Times reported:

After government forces entered Tigray, United States Senator Chris Coons, who has a longstanding interest in Africa, phoned Mr. Abiy in late November to warn about the perils of resorting to military force.

¹⁵ Several testimonies of persons living in the vicinity of airport claimed to have heard shooting at the airport on 3 November and that this raised concern that the Special Forces were sent to capture or even assassinate (some of) the TPLF leadership (Informal communications to the second author by WhatsApp on several occasions including on 3 November 2000 and thereafter).

Mr. Coons, a Democrat from Delaware, said he reminded the Ethiopian leader that the American Civil War and World War I had started with promises of swift military victory, only to drag on for years and cost millions of lives.

Mr. Abiy was undeterred. "He was confident it would be over in six weeks," Mr. Coons said. (Walsh, 2021b)

Ethiopian government officials testified that the military intervention was planned before November 4, confirming that it was not merely a response to the attack on the Northern Command, as the federal government had claimed. Mr Gebremeskel Kassa, ex-official of PM Abiy Ahmed's interim government of Tigray, who went into exile, said that PM Abiy told them that he would intervene militarily in Tigray to oust the region's leaders and that it would take him only three to five days to do so (Walsh, 2021a).

Abere Adamu, an ex-commissioner with the Amhara state police, also recounted that the war was planned before 4 November 2020:

By the time the war started on the night of 4 November 2020, we (the Amhara state leaders) had already finished our preparation and we were waiting. My self, Temesgen Tiruneh, then head of Amhara state, and commissioner Biset, chief of Amhara special force, together with General Brhannu Jula and General Abebaw Tadesse from the ENDF were coordinating the war preparation and finally it went well according to what we discussed and planned. (Abbay Media, December 2020; Addis Standard, 2021)

Despite the differences between the federal government and the TPLF on the reasons for the outbreak of the war, there is considerable consensus that open war, which began on the 3–4 November, was preceded by a long period of hidden war, at least from 2018, when PM Abiy came to power.

Van Reisen *et al.* (2021) hypothesise what the scenario would have been if the Ethiopian federal forces had captured the leadership of the regional Tigray government in a targeted intervention. They argue that, if the plan had succeeded, notably on the 3 November or shortly

after, to capture the TPLF leadership, this could have significantly changed the turn of events:

The commandos from Addis Ababa failed in their aim to arrest the regional Tigray government. In the days that followed the Tigrayan authorities withdrew to the mountains and regrouped.

The implications of the failure to apprehend the Tigrayan leaders has been colossal for Prime Minister Abiy.

Had the Ethiopian National Defence Forces been able to seize the leadership of the regional government on the 3rd of November, the outcome of the “law and order operation” the Ethiopian authorities launched might have been very different. (Van Reisen et al., 2021)

In summary, the proximate causes of the war take place in the period between April 2018, when PM Abiy was inaugurated, and 3–4 November 2020, when open war broke out between the federal government and Tigray Regional State. The hidden war had elements of intelligence, diplomatic, security, social and economic actions, which began in 2018 with the peace-agreement signed by PM Abiy and President Isayas of Eritrea.

Law enforcement operation or all-out war?

The leading narrative in the initial period of the war was that the military action was a ‘short’ law enforcement operation. Walsh and Marks (2020) reported that government officials estimated the operation would last three to six months. The TPLF contested that a short law enforcement operation was the original aim of the military mission:

The “law enforcement” narrative was used by Mr. Abiy as a pretext to disguise a military offensive that was planned for at least two years. (TPLF, June 2021, p. 1)

Whether the terminology of a ‘law enforcement operation’ reveals an original plan for a short war to capture the TPLF leadership or served as a disguise for a total war with genocidal features aimed at the Tigray population cannot be stated with certainty. But according to Kassa (2021) the use of the ‘law enforcement’ terminology suggests that

Prime Minister Abiy was forced into a war with Tigray, based on the presumed attack of the Tigray forces on the Northern Command.

According to Assefa Fiseha, a renowned federalism scholar at Addis Ababa University, what happened in Tigray was never intended simply as a law enforcement operation, but was planned as an all-out war that targeted the entire population and the region:

[...] the Prime Minister himself appeared on tv in June 2021 and said, 'our goal was not to liberate Tigray. As a result of the war we have made Mekelle (Tigray's capital) equal with Besbasba [a little village where Abiy came from]. Tigray is not anymore center of gravity.' He made it clear that it was not law enforcement but a war to decimate Tigray and Tigrayans. (Fiseha, 2023, p. 29)

The grave escalation of the situation was observed by Pekka Haavisto, the EU envoy who visited Ethiopia in February 2021, and who told the EU Council in a closed meeting that Ethiopian leaders had told him “They are going to wipe out Tigrayans for 100 years”. Haavisto warned of the danger of ethnic cleansing (Anna, 2021).

Concerns over the conflict escalating into ethnic cleansing were fed by the language used by supporters of the federal government, such as Deacon Daniel Kibret, advisor to PM Abiy Ahmed for Social Affairs:

It should be done so that no one like them (Tigrayans) is created. As you know, after the fall of Satan, no other creature like Satan was created. Satan is the last one and they should be the last ones. There is no such thing as a land of weeds that I can repeat. This country (Ethiopia) should always be an example to our children after this. Earlier, we threatened our children that if you did something like this, a monster would eat you. Now the days of the monsters must be over. We have to use them (the Tigrayans) for intimidating our children. This country should be re-imagined that no one like them can be reborn. We need to get rid of them not only from their structural places but also from the mind and hearts of human beings and history books. (Minilik Salsawi, 2021)

Other examples include the statement by Agegneu Teshager, the then head of the Amhara Regional State, who said:

This people (the people of Tigray) is the enemy of the whole Ethiopia. This people is the enemy of Oromo, the enemy of Afar, [...]. Hence, unless this people is eliminated there will be no peace henceforth. (Yabele Media, 2021)

Genocidal intentions were also advanced by Debebe Eshetu, an Amhara artist and political activist, who said:

Dr Abiy rightly says they (the Tigrayans) are daytime hyenas. There is an old saying: 'do not be eaten by hyena instead eat it and get blessed.' Thus, my advice: Let's eat them (the Tigrayans) and get blessed.' (Sodere TV, 2018)

Human rights groups have also documented some of the rationales given for the atrocities. Human Rights Watch and Amnesty International (2022) recorded the following statements from people involved in the Tigray war:

The Fanos and Amhara Special Forces) would say "Tigrayans ate for 27 years and that's enough". (p. 117)

[...] they said they will destroy Tigray and its men. (p. 128)

[...] It's because you are Amhara that you are spared. You would have been killed with them. (p.131)

[...] the [Fano and ASF guards] kept telling us that Tigrayans deserve to be starved and starved to death [...]. (p. 134)

[...] They [the guards] would say "you don't deserve any food. Death is nothing for you; we want you to suffer before you die." (p. 135)

[...] You expect us to give you medicine when we want you to die? (p. 135)

[...] If you were male we would kill you, but girls can make Amhara babies. (p. 149)

[...] You [Tigrayans] don't deserve air, you shouldn't even be alive, you are not humans. (p. 177) (Human Rights Watch & Amnesty International, 2022, pp. 117–177)

Despite these dehumanising statements about Tigrayans, the question remains as to whether the (original) intention was a war to 'wipe out' Tigrayans, or rather just the Tigray leadership, the TPLF (Tefera, 2024).

The Ethiopian government changed the language from 'law enforcement operation' to 'war on terror' in May 2021, designating the TPLF a terrorist organisation (a designation which was lifted on 23 March 2023). In July 2021, the president of the regional state of Amhara called the war against the TPLF 'rebels' a 'survival campaign'

(Al Jazeera, 2021) as part of the ‘*kital*’ (or march against Tigrayan forces). In a statement by US Secretary of State, Antony Blinken, it was determined that the military intervention in Tigray could not be classified as a law enforcement operation, but that it qualified as atrocity crimes:

Members of the ENDF, EDF, and Amhara forces also committed crimes against humanity, including murder, rape and other forms of sexual violence, and persecution.

Members of the Amhara forces also committed the crime against humanity of deportation or forcible transfer and committed ethnic cleansing in western Tigray.

(Blinken, 2023)

Human Rights Watch and Amnesty International (2022) concluded that ethnic cleansing and crimes against humanity had been committed in Western Tigray, but did not express anything about other parts of Tigray, or about other actors in the conflict such as Eritrea. In any case, the law enforcement operation changed into a war against Tigray, in which evidence suggests that international crimes were committed.

Involvement of Eritrea: Domestic versus international conflict

At first the Ethiopia-Eritrea rapprochement was seen by many as PM Abiy’s and Eritrean president Isayas’ gift of peace to the people of Ethiopia and Eritrea. However, as later developments proved, the Abiy-Isayas axis was a secret agreement to dismantle the TPLF and decimate Tigray (Walsh & Dahir, 2022). According to Fiseha (2023), the Ethiopia-Eritrea peace deal was a secret war pact against the TPLF and Tigray. He argues:

What do Abiy and Esayas have in common? The Eritrean regime suffered in the hands of the TPLF led EPRDF in the bloody border war (1998–2000). It had old grudges to revenge. The regime in Eritrea also thinks that TPLF is an obstacle to its ambition for regional hegemony in the Horn of Africa. The regime found the new leader in Ethiopia can be his instrument for his project in the region and in Ethiopia. Abiy thinks the TPLF is the major obstacle to his vision of centralised Ethiopia. Tigray has always been on the side of political autonomy for regional states. TPLF is thus the common target hence the orchestrated early November 2020 war. (Fiseha, 2023, p. 26)

Kaplan (2021) asserts that:

Abiy, believing he could defeat the Tigrayan guerrillas in a matter of weeks, as he predicts last November, sees Tigray as a barrier to his centralizing agenda. Abiy has rejected Ethiopia's loose federal structure of different nationalities. In preparation for his struggle with Tigray, Abiy made an alliance with the Eritrean leader Isayas Afeworki. His pact with Isayas, which won Abiy a Nobel Peace Prize in 2019, was essentially a war pact. (Kaplan, 2021)

Van Reisen (2021) puts the timeline of the war as follows:

President Isayas Afeworki of Eritrea declared 'Game over Woyane' on the Eritrean national martyrs' day (20 June 2018), two weeks before the 'Ethio-Eritrea peace and friendship deal'- later turned a 'war deal against TPLF and the regional state of Tigray' was made. After this, the perception in Eritrea was clearly that a war was coming. Then came the deployment of Eritrean troops closer to Tigray border well before 4 November 2020: Division 13 was deployed to Forto, around Senafe for border control, division 29 in Tsorona and division 74 for scouting, each division with five to six thousand troops. (Van Reisen, 2021)

Tesfa *et al.* (2024) argue that the declaration of the 'Game over, Woyane' policy occurred as early as January 14, 2018, when President Isayas first introduced the slogan, along with a detailed explanation of the policy's specific features. This declaration by President Isayas predates the appointment of Prime Minister Abiy in March 2018.

The notion that the situation in Tigray was solely an internal Ethiopian issue was challenged a month after the outbreak of fighting on 3-4 November 2020. The Europe External Programme with Africa (EEPA) published a Situation Report contesting this view, reporting that both the Ethiopian and Eritrean governments were operating in Tigray, despite their continued denial of Eritrean involvement in the conflict. The EEPA Situation Report cited former Minister of Defence of Eritrea, Mesfin Hagos, who stated on 4 December 2020 that:

Through Zalambesa alone, the Eritrean President sent in the 42nd and 49th mechanized divisions and the 11th, 17th, 19th and 27th infantry divisions. On reaching Edaga-Hamus, south of Adigrat and north of Mekelle, these divisions were reinforced with an additional five Eritrean divisions, including the 2nd brigade of the 525th commando division. He also unleashed the 26th, 28th, and 53rd infantry

and 46th and 48th mechanized divisions on the Adwa front along with only one division of the Ethiopian federal army. In addition, the TPLF claims that Eritrean technical and combat units also took active part in the Alamata front, southeast of Mekelle. (Hagos, 2020)

Prior to the law enforcement operation, and subsequently, many non-regular flights took place between Addis Ababa, Asmara and airports in the region, including military planes, flying directly across the border to and from Eritrea (Reisen, Berhe & Smits, 2021). When the Tigray Regional Government countered the attack by Eritrea with rocket attacks on Asmara, the capital of Eritrea, this was interpreted as hostility from Tigray, rather than defence. Arguing that this was a wrong interpretation of events, Mesfin Hagos stated the following:

Either approving of or oblivious to President Isaias' role in the planning, initiation and execution of the ongoing Ethiopian civil war, the international community commended his uncharacteristic silence in the fact of repeated TPLF rocket attacks on Eritrean towns. Abiy Ahmed's complete media and communication blackout ensured that Eritrea's intervention remained above scrutiny and censure. (Hagos, 2020)

Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed acknowledged, inadvertently, the role of Eritrea in the war for the first time on 3 December 2020 (EEPA Situation Report, 8 December 2020). Subsequently, EEPA reported that UN Secretary General Guterres stated that there was no proof of the presence of Eritrean troops inside Ethiopia. Guterres said:

I confronted the (Ethiopian) Prime minister with that question, and he guaranteed to me that they have not entered the Tigrayan territory, that the only area where they are is the area that corresponded to the disputed territory between the two countries that in the peace agreement was decided to give back to Eritrea. (cited in EEPA Situation Report, 19 December 2020)

However, a month or so after the war, the involvement of Eritrea was proven beyond doubt. EEPA documented the dynamics in this regard as follows:

On 21 November 2020 (almost two weeks after the open war started), it is reported that up to 20 battalions of the Eritrean Defence Forces (EDF) are taking part in the fighting in Tigray on three fronts (Zalambessa, Rama and Badme). On 22 November 2020, AFP Journalist reported from Humera Tigray that multiple

people told that during the battle they witnessed mortar bombs whistling in 'from the north' meaning Eritrea. On 8 December 2020, US and other national diplomats claimed that Eritrean soldiers are fighting in Tigray, and they are engaged in 'thousands' and on 12 December 2020 (almost a month after the war started), the US State Department confirmed the presence of Eritrean troops and urged for the immediate withdrawal of such troops. (EEPA Situation Report, 19 November 2020 to 12 December 2020)

In 2021, Van Reisen *et al.* published interviews with Eritrean refugees confirmed that preparations had been made by Eritrea prior to the start of the war on 3–4 November 2020. The researchers concludes that:

Interviews we carried out with Eritrean former fighters who fled to Sudanese refugee camps in June 2021 revealed that these fighters were mobilised for the war in Tigray even before November 3rd.

One former Eritrean fighter stated with great precision in an interview we did with him that he was released from detention on October 30th, and that he was subsequently mobilised to fight on the border with Tigray by the Eritrean army. He entered Tigray as a fighter on November 2nd, in Sheraro.

The fighter explained how the war began:

'All these things happen just in the first week, the first days. In the beginning, we fight. But after four, five days, everything is finished. The Tigray army is successful to protect the area from the Amhara army, the Ethiopian army, until the Ethiopian army escaped to Eritrea. But the Eritrean army was successful in fighting against Tigray. The Ethiopian army has not got the ability to fight against Tigray. But when the Eritreans came, they succeeded in fighting against them.'

*Further evidence we obtained show that on the morning of 4th November Eritrean troops were already seen in Gerhusermay, a town near the border between Ethiopia and Eritrea, where they started killing civilians. (Van Reisen *et al.*, 2021)*

Other who focused on the role of Eritrea in the war in Tigray have also pointed to the Ethiopia-Eritrea-Somalia tripartite alliance against Tigray. Eritrean Focus documented the following in this regard:

A summit meeting was held in Asmara on 27 January 2020 at which the Eritrean and Ethiopian leaders were joined by the Somali President, Mohamed Abdullahi Farmajo. A statement was issued after the meeting in which the three leaders pledged

to face common security threats together. When the war on Tigray erupted, troops from all three countries would be involved strongly suggesting the leaders were making preparations to confront and-if necessary-eliminate the threat they perceived to emanate from Tigray. (Eritrean Focus, 2021, p. 18)

Hence, it is clear that the leading narrative viewing the war in Tigray as an internal conflict is contradicted by evidence of the involvement of Eritrea, in terms of planning the war, prior to the start of the war, and during the war itself.

Structural causes of the war

Politically, the dismantling of the EPRDF, the formation of the Prosperity Party (PP) and the refusal of TPLF to join the PP are structural elements that underpin the lead up to the war (Fiseha, 2023). This situation became toxic, as a narrative was advanced that the Oromo-Amhara population is in the majority in Ethiopia, whereas the Tigray population makes up only six percent, leading to the further expulsion and marginalisation of Tigrayans in Ethiopia. Observing that the leadership of the PP were challenging the legitimacy of the TPLF, the TPLF saw a conspiracy to undermine its existence:

The purpose of the planned military offensive was the removal of the TRG [The Tigray Regional Government], the destruction of the TPLF, and the weakening and annihilation of the people of Tigray. The plan to destroy or dismantle TPLF and bring Tigray to its knees started to become apparent shortly after Mr. Abiy was handed the power of prime minister in April 2018. The Abiy-Afwerki duo devised two schemes to accomplish their objective. The first scheme was to weaken the TRG, the TPLF, and the people of Tigray by means of demonization, trickery, killing or jailing its leaders, and by dismantling TPLF's political, economic, and security apparatus. If Scheme 1 worked, then Scheme 2 which is an all-out war would be unnecessary. They spent more than two years implementing Scheme 1 because it carries much less risk to them than waging an all-out war. But Scheme 1 did not bring the demise of the TPLF, TRG, or the people of Tigray. So they invoked Scheme 2 on Nov 4, 2020. (TPLF, 2021b, p. 2)

The TPLF accused the federal government of Ethiopia of secretly conspiring to remove it from power:

They tried to make TPLF self-destruct by dissolving the EPRDF and forming a new party. When the TPLF was not willing to dissolve itself, the Abiy govt tried to remove it from power illegally using commandos on a secret mission. They recruited disgruntled Tigrayans and created a youth group they named Fenkil to stir trouble and remove the TRG. (TPLF, 2021b, p. 2)

In response to this threat, public sentiment in Tigray towards embracing an aspiration of self-determination grew rapidly (Walsh & Marks, 2020), and the Tigray leadership pointed out that the Constitution, in Article 39, Section 3, allows regional states to conduct a referendum on independence (Omna Tigray, 2021; personal communication to author, 2021, 2023). Walsh and Marks reported this sentiment in 2021:

Sisay Hagos, a 36-year-old who was celebrating in Mekelle on Monday, said: "They invaded us. Abiy is a liar and a dictator, but he is defeated already. Tigray will be an independent country!" (Walsh & Marks, 2021)

The manifestations of the socio-economic war waged on Tigray since PM Abiy Ahmed came to power include Tigray's blockade from trade and investment routes, the federal government's diversion of funding from Tigray (Walsh & Marks, 2020), budget cuts as well as the exclusion of safety net subsidies for people living in poverty (TPLF, 2021a), and denial of support to Tigray, particularly during the 2019/20 desert locust invasion season and in relation to the provision of personal protective equipment in the COVID-19 pandemic (TPLF, 2021a). Trading missions, including a Chinese investment mission, were denied access to Tigray:

The Abiy govt also made other economic sabotage on Tigray on several occasions during the three years it has been in power. On December 19, 2019, Customs and Immigration officials at the airport, under the direct order of the Prime Minister's office, stopped Chinese investors from traveling to Tigray. The officials dragged the investors off their Tigray-bound flight in a humiliating fashion. In protest, the Chinese investors returned to China. (TPLF, 2021a)

Various institutions and service providers were requested to sever ties with Tigray:

Even the federal sports commission circulated a memo instructing national leagues to sever ties with the Tigray region. The Ethiopian Postal service ordered its employees not to accept couriers destined to Tigray. Federal public notary on its part rejected to legalize documents originated from Tigray on the ground that the government in Tigray was illegal. (TPLF, 2021a)

In 2022, PM Abiy Ahmed himself narrated the genesis of the war through a chain of structural developments, departing from the previous narrative that it was because the TPLF attacked the Northern Command:

TPLF made grand mistakes in row, which eventually forced it and the people of Tigray to face a costly war and bear a miserable destiny. First, it misused the 'forgiveness' given to it by the Ethiopian people in 2018 for the problems created during the 27 years of EPRDF rule. Second, it failed to join Prosperity Party (PP) in whole or in part even by splitting from within. Third, it conducted 'illegal' regional election in defiance of the Federal government's warning not to do it, and fourth, it attacked the northern command of ENDF based in Tigray. (Nahoo Media, 2022)

If the war had structural causes, it also resulted in structural consequences. This was largely due to the way that the war was perpetrated. A siege was perpetrated in Tigray from November 2020 until November 2022, in which commercial and trade linkages were stopped and Tigrayans were denied budget funds for the region, including for salaries, as well as development funds, banking services, telephone, the Internet, media, and humanitarian support (Fisseha, 2023). During the later stages of the war the lack of humanitarian support resulted in the starvation of civilians (The Economist, 2021). Infrastructure was demolished and looted, 2 million people displaced, many were killed, while atrocities, including sexual violence, were perpetrated on civilians (Walsh & Dihar, 2022; Human Rights Council, 2023). The consequences are lasting: 1,400 deaths caused by famine were recorded in Tigray between April and August 2023 alone (Human Rights Council, 2023). The situation includes the continued presence of Eritrean troops occupying parts of the Tigray Regional State territory (Human Rights Council, 2023).

While the structural causes of the war are rooted in the past, the war will have a long-lasting impact on Tigray. The implementation of a full two-year siege during the war not only hurt the TPLF leadership, but also harmed the entire Tigray civilian population with long-term damage to people, infrastructure and the economy. It severely undermined the political weight of the Tigray leadership in Ethiopia and beyond and expanded the influence of Eritrea in Ethiopia, including the illegal occupation of territory in Tigray.

Findings of interviews and FDGs: Causes of the war

The interviews and focus group discussions provide further detail on the genesis and nature of the war, as well as its structural causes. Four themes emerge from the analysis of the material: (i) the increasing hostility towards ethnic Tigrayan people in the period leading up to the war from the leaders Ethiopia and Eritrea; (ii) the military preparations for the war which preceded the outbreak of the war and involved Ethiopian federal forces, Amhara regional forces and Eritrean forces; (iii) the participants from the region in the war, which was not a domestic internal affair and (iv) perceptions of the structural causes of the war and its consequences for the future.

Increasing hostility towards Tigray in the lead up to the war

In considering the more immediate historic events leading up to the war, one historian who participated in the FGD summarised the proximate causes of the war as follows:

On 2 April 2018, the Ethiopian parliament elected PM Abiy Ahmed as prime minister. On December 2019, PM Abiy Ahmed created Prosperity Party (PP) by merging all EPRDF coalition members except TPLF and the latter refused to join the new party. On March 2020, the National Election Board of Ethiopia (NEBE) delayed the general elections scheduled for August 2020 arguably due to the COVID-19 pandemic and by so doing extended the terms of the federal parliament beyond its October 2020 constitutional mandate. The Government of Tigray rejected this as unconstitutional and on 9 September 2020 held its own regional election. Abiy's government rejected the Tigray election as illegal and responded by slashing federal funding to the region, a decision Tigray described as 'tantamount to declaration of war'. In late September 2020, the government of Tigray stated that it would consider the federal government constitutionally

illegitimate after 5 October 2020. On the eve of November 4, 2020, the federal parliament of Ethiopia suggested for the designation of TPLF as a 'terrorist organization'. Ever since, tensions escalated and reached a breaking point. (Focus group discussion, Mekelle with Gebreslassie, face-to-face, Mekelle, 5 April 2022)

The immediate turning point leading up to the war is often identified as the 2018 Ethiopia-Eritrea peace deal. An ex-official of the ENDF interviewed for this study shared the following:

A secret and dubious 'peace deal' was made between Ethiopia and Eritrea that not only excluded Tigray and Afar (the two states that share the entire border with Eritrea) but also one that completely blacked out and excluded all institutions and actors in Ethiopia including the parliament. After a while, Isayas Afeworki came up with the idea of 'Game over Woyane' revealing the conspiracy behind the 'peace deal'. Ambassador Donald Yamamoto, the then US assistant secretary of state for Africa, was also shuttling between Addis Ababa and Asmara to convince PM Abiy Ahmed and Isayas Afeworki that the Trump administration prioritizes three agendas in the Horn of Africa: settling the Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam (GERD) issue, settling the Ethiopia-Eritrea issue and the 'reforming' of Ethiopia. The Ambassador said the administration is committed to support PM Abiy Ahmed's effort to 'reform' Ethiopia towards a unitarist state with liberalized and opened up economy and to give the 'Ethiopia - Eritrea peace deal' a good shape by dealing with the Tigray problem first militarily and then through generous reconstruction package. (Former senior ENDF official, interview with Gebreslassie, face-to-face, Mekelle, 10 May 2022)

The hostility towards Tigray began long before the outbreak of open war in 2020. One expert on development studies outlined the dimensions of the socio-economic wars waged on Tigray before 4 November 2020 as follows:

The siege of Tigray began long before 4 November 2020. Trade and economic routes connecting Tigray to the rest of Ethiopia via the Amhara state were blocked in full knowledge and cooperation of the federal government for almost two years before 4 November 2020. The federal government denied and delayed infrastructural developments in Tigray. The delay of Mekelle city clean water project and exclusion of Tigray from federal government planned and funded mega projects for 2019/20 are cases in point here. The federal government prevented Chinese investors from entering into Tigray. The federal government prohibited Covid-19 protection masks

for children in Tigray while children in all other parts of Ethiopia received. The federal government denied desert locust prevention support to Tigray while Ambara farmers in the neighbourhood were supported. The federal government also stopped safety net programs and other humanitarian supports to Tigray. To me, all these measures were taken to socio-economically weaken Tigray and I count them as weapons of war. (Focus group discussion with Gebreslassie, Mekelle, face-to-face, 5 April 2022)

An expert on media communication shared the following observation on the framing of anti-Tigrayans propaganda since 2018, with a focus on the narrative of 27-years of TPLF rule of Ethiopia and hate-speech against Tigrayan people:

Series of documentaries were produced by state Medias (e.g., the 'Yeftu seqoqa' documentary) that attributed all evils in Ethiopia in the past 27 years to Tigrayans. The documentaries were used to profile, name and shame and demonize Tigrayans and finally to make them victims of mass deportation and ethnic cleansing. By the documentaries and speeches of public officials (including PM Abiy Ahmed's), Tigrayans were called 'Daytime hyenas', 'Strangers', 'Blood suckers' 'Cancers', 'Satan', 'Weeds, and Junta'. (Focus group discussion with Gebreslassie, face-to-face, Mekelle, 5 April 2022)

According to the same FGD discussants, reminders of the Tigrayan legacy were being erased; he shared the following observation:

Institutions and symbols (especially in Ambara state) were re-named so as not be reminders of any Tigrayan legacy. For instance, 'Meles Zenawi Campus' was re-named 'prince Mintewab campus', 'Ginbot 20 (May 28) airport' was re-named 'Belay Zeleke Airport' and the photos of ex-PM Meles Zenawi that were posted everywhere were burned and erased including the one in his grave in Addis Ababa. (Focus group discussion with Gebreslassie, face-to-face, Mekelle, 5 April 2022)

According to the participants of this study, a propaganda war against Tigray was also unleashed from Eritrea. FGD discussants said that Isayas used terms, such as 'Game over Woyane' and 'Political washing for Ethiopia' to generate hostility and dehumanise Tigrayans, justify their profiling, deportation, and even ethnic cleansing (Focus group discussion, Mekelle, 5 April 2022).

In summary, according to the interviewees and FGD discussants, the proximate causes of the war take place in the period from 2018, after PM Abiy comes to power, up to the outbreak of the war on 3–4 November 2023. A particular chain of events with escalating hostilities preceded the war. An important aspect is the pact between PM Abiy and Eritrean president Isayas, which started with the secret peace deal in 2018, and the subsequent targeting of the Tigray people by both. In the rhetoric of President Isayas this was identified as ‘Game over Woyane’ and by PM Abiy as ‘27 years of darkness’.

Military preparation for the war: From hidden to open war

The study also looked at what the participants thought about the military preparations for the war, prior to its outbreak? Speaking on the dynamics of the security and intelligence dimension of the war in Tigray, a senior ex-official of INSA interviewed for this study stated:

Months before 4 November 2020, the Ethiopian government began taking four particular measures relevant for preparation to the war in Tigray. First, Tigrayans were cleansed from the ENDF through demotion, firing, transfer and killing. Secondly, new signal and intelligence system was established in Woldiya (Amhara state) tasked with undertaking surveillance and cyber monitoring on Tigray including the Northern Command of the ENDF. Thirdly, attempts to move the missiles and other armaments based in Tigray to other parts of Ethiopia. And, fourthly, frequent replacements of top leadership of the northern command of ENDF (e.g., general Getachew Gudina was replaced by general Derbew Mokenen and in turn he was replaced by general Belay Siyum). Amidst all these developments, Tigray remained unprepared, vulnerable, and attractive to be attacked. (Former senior INSA official, interview with Gebreslassie, face-to-face, Mekelle, 15 May 2022)

A former senior commander of the Northern Command of ENDF added the following story:

PM Abiy Ahmed’s government has cleansed Tigrayans from key positions in the ENDF to weaken the role and influence of Tigrayans in the security and military sectors of Ethiopia. For instance, general Abraba Weldemariam (Quarter), head of training and indoctrination department of ENDF, general Masbo, commander of Eastern army division of ENDF and general Yobans G/meskel, commander of Western division of ENDF, general Guesh Gebere, commander of 7th mechanized unit of the northern command division, general Fisseha Kidanu and general Seare

Mokenen, chief of staff of ENDF were removed from their positions through firing, demotion, transfer and killing. The government also decided to move the 4 mechanized units (out of the total 6 in the country) of the Northern Command of the ENDF to other parts of Ethiopia (to Oromia, Amhara, and Somali regions in particular) with the purpose of leaving Tigray without defence capability. (Former senior commander of Northern Command of ENDF, interview with Gebreslassie, face-to-face, Mekelle, 12 May 2022)

On the movements of troops and armaments from other parts of Ethiopia to areas bordering Tigray prior to the start of the war, the commander stated:

From the Ethiopian side, army units 13, 21, 25, 32 and 6th mechanized unit were moved respectively from Diredawa, Negeleborena, Harar (Jijiga), Shashmene (Nazret) and Semera (Afar) to Woldiya-Kobo front to attack Tigray from the Southern (Raya) direction and Agazi commando brigade and army units 12, 22, 24 and 33 from Jima (outskirt of Renaissance Dam), Dangla, Wellega and outskirts of Gonder respectively were moved to Gonder front to attack Tigray from the Western direction. And, from Eritrea, 8 ground force units, 4 reserve force units, 2 mechanized units and 1 motorized unit were moved to Shambako front to attack Tigray from the Northwestern direction (Adyabo area) and 14 ground force units and 2 mechanized units were moved to Zalambesa front to attack Tigray from the North and East directions. In addition to all these, the Northern Command of the ENDF inside Tigray was also instructed (especially the Amhara and Oromo members were secretly informed) to attack Tigray from within. The security and military preparations for the war in Tigray were thus thought and planned long overdue, comprehensive, clear, and imminent. (Former senior commander of Northern Command of ENDF, interview with Gebreslassie, face-to-face, Mekelle, 12 May 2022)

The former senior commander noted that the dynamics of the war on the 3 and 4 November 2020 were as follows:

Days before 4 November 2020, PM Abiy Ahmed planned to conduct an operation with a mission to capture top civilian and political leadership of Tigray and, to this end, the Northern command of ENDF was instructed to be on a standby mood. Then, on the night of 3 November 2020, PM Abiy Ahmed sent a commando force named 'republican guard' to Mekelle to conduct military operation (as was earlier done in Somali and Afar regions) and capture the Tigray leadership. The calculation was such that the republican guard would do the operation and if the special force

and militia of Tigray reacted, the Northern command would crash them from nearby and in all corners of Tigray. If the people of Tigray also reacted, the forces from the ENDF and Amhara region prepared in the Southern and Western directions of Tigray and the Eritrean forces prepared in the Northern and Eastern directions of Tigray would crash it. The operation was attempted, and the government of Tigray aborted the mission by taking self-defence measure on the Northern Command. Following this, the Ethiopian government and its allies declared an open and total genocidal war in Tigray on 4 November 2020. I would then say if the self-defence operation was not made on 4 November 2020, the survival of the people and government of Tigray would have been history. (Former senior commander of Northern Command of ENDF, interview with Gebreslassie, face-to-face, Mekelle, 12 May 2022)

In summary, the interviews are consistent with other reports and give further detail on what has been documented previously concerning the military preparations prior to the outbreak of open war. The interviews also provide evidence in support of the statement that on the 3 November 2020 Addis Ababa sent commando troops to Mekelle, as well as details on the involvement of Eritrea in the preparations for the war.

A regional war emerging from regional interests

Another narrative that is challenged by the interviewees is the that the Tigray war was an internal civil war. An ex-official of Intelligence and National Security Agency of Ethiopia characterised it as follows:

The war in Tigray is not a civil war. It is rather a regional war because it has mobilised almost all the relevant forces in the Horn of Africa and Middle East regions and some global powers. Sudan participated by agreeing to block Tigray from access to the international system in exchange for getting land from Ethiopia. Somalia directly participated in the war by sending troops. Eritrea participated in the war by directly invading Tigray. UAE, Turkey, and Iran participated in the war by supporting the Ethiopian government financially and technologically and Russia and China participated in the war by supporting the Ethiopian government politically, diplomatically, and militarily. Interestingly, states that are usually enemies on other agendas joined hand and stood together in the war in Tigray. Both the Saudi-UAE axis and the Turkey-Iran axis sided with and supported the Ethiopian government in the war. (Former senior INSA official, interview with Gebreslassie, face-to-face, Mekelle, 15 May 2022)

Asked about how he characterises the war in Tigray, a senior ex-official of the ENDF observed that:

It is a full-scale war with regional character since it mobilised all Ethiopian forces and institutions, Eritrea as a country, regional geopolitical powers from the Horn of Africa (Somalia and Sudan) and the Middle East (UAE, Turkey, and Iran) and some global powers (China and Russia). The purpose is subduing Tigray to servitude or exterminating it altogether and then making a political re-arrangement in Ethiopia and the Horn of Africa. (Former senior ENDF official, interview with Gebreslassie, face-to-face, Mekelle, 10 May 2022)

Hence, according to the participants, the involvement of multiple actors has made the war in Tigray a regional war in nature, with international involvement.

Structural causes of the war

What are the perceptions on structural causes of the war? From the interviews and FDGs, several perspectives can be discerned. A historian who is an expert on federalism summarised his perspective on the key manifestations of the historical-structural-strategic contradictions of the modern Ethiopian state as follows:

Historically, there has been no fundamental agreement on the history of ideas, events, leaders, regimes, and symbols in Ethiopia. No agreement on characterising the Ethiopian state since some characterise it as a historic normal nation-state, some as an empire (prison house) state and others as a multi-national federal state. No agreement on nation-state building options as well since some promote assimilationist unitarism, some secessionism and others federalism (geographic or multi-national). Structurally, there is no agreement on country fundamentals in the existing Ethiopian state. No agreement on constitution, flag, emblem and anthem, content and form of state structure, system of government, electoral system, state institutions, regime type and leadership style and also policy preferences (especially language, religious and other identity related policies and also on policies of power and resource sharing). And, strategically, there is a re-vitalization of the competing visions for the Ethiopian state. The Amhara envision an Amharanized Ethiopia (i.e., assimilationist unitarist nation-state), the Oromos envision an Oromonized Ethiopia or Oromo republic, the Tigrayans envision an Ethiopia that guarantees them maximum autonomy (though increasingly less appealing today) or Tigray republic, and the other ethnic groups, by and large, envision to side with the inevitable. The clashes of visions in turn created clash of cultures. The Amhara promote

assimilationism and domination, the Tigrayans resist domination and promote autonomy and the Oromos promote a mixed culture-an assertive nationalism for autonomy and a majoritarian politics for domination. (Focus group discussion with Gebreslassie, face-to-face, Mekelle, 5 April 2022)

Hence, in the context of the Tigray-Ethiopia relationship, the historical-structural contradiction has been reflected over generations, mainly in the form of regionalism-centralism tension.

The proximate causes of the 2020–2022 war are seen as rooted in the ethnic tensions in Ethiopia that remained unresolved in the previous decades. An ex-official of INSA interviewed for this study described the roots of the war as follows:

The war in Tigray has been cooked since at least the 1990's. By that time, Tigrayans were striving to build a new federal democratic republic of Ethiopia. They did not envision their own separate political path. The Amharas, on the other hand, were promoting the propaganda of 'Tigray supremacy/dominance' and 'Tigrayans are anti-Ethiopia forces. The Oromos were also promoting the propaganda that 'Tigrayans are agents of the old Abyssinian Imperial rule of the north'. Both the Amhara and the Oromo were then massively engaged in demonizing and isolating the Tigrayans and consequently cultivating hatred and enmity on them. Then, in PM Abiy Ahmed's time, 'Tigrayano-phobia' and 'Anti-Tigrayanism' intensified to the extent that institutionalized attack on glory and pride of Tigrayans became a norm. For instance, Abiy Ahmed himself was personally engaged in attacking the Orthodox Church for he considered it as the source of the resistance culture of Tigrayans. He was also engaged in imposing 'siege and isolation' on Tigrayans to subdue them to servitude. State institutions and other actors in Ethiopia also followed his footsteps. As a result, Tigrayans of all walks of life became victims of mass killing, cleansing and mass deportations from all parts of Ethiopia but mainly from Amhara and Oromia. (Former senior INSA official, interview with Gebreslassie, face-to-face, Mekelle, 15 May 2022)

In addition the influence of Eritrea over politics in Ethiopia was mentioned as a particular problem. One discussant angrily expressed the following:

Isayas' propaganda goal is realizing his project of 'Eritreanization of Ethiopian politics and economy' – i.e., de-institutionalization or personalization of politics and establishing 'mafia system' based economy – in PM Abiy Ahmed's 'reforming

Ethiopia. (Focus group discussion with Gebreslassie, face-to-face, Mekelle, 5 April 2022)

The war in Tigray has left very deep marks. Not only was it caused by structural issues, it has also created new tensions, that may be the cause of conflict in the future.

Discussion

This study on the events that led to the Tigray war is based on two sets of analyses: (i) a document analysis, including available literature on the situation and media reports and (ii) interviews, a focus group discussion and discussions with resource persons. The contribution of this chapter to the extant literature is by way of new sources of documentation of the war in Tigray, including, in particular: (i) internal and unpublished documents of the TPLF and (ii) insights of high-ranking officials from Tigray, including senior officials of Northern Command of ENDF and INSA who went to Tigray after the outbreak of the war. This allows the comparison of existing understanding with views and observations that have been poorly represented in the documentation of the Tigray war.

Comparing the different sets of material, no serious discrepancies were found. On the contrary, the data from the interviews, focus group discussions and personal communications appear to corroborate the reading of critical events that emerged from the document analysis.

There are a number of elements that stand out from the analysis:

- Structural causes pre-2018: tensions between the central government and regional states
- 2018–2020: secret pact between PM Abiy of Ethiopia and President Isayas of Eritrea, targeting Tigray, and military preparations involving other actors in a period of hidden war with marginalisation of TPLF and mutual hostilities
- 3–4 November 2020: The war changes from a hidden war into an open war. The narrative that this was provoked by the TPLF, is denied by the TPLF and there is overwhelming evidence of military preparation for the war.

- 4 November 2020–3 November 2022: The Tigray war develops from what is originally coined as a short domestic military intervention into a long-term war which involves regional actors.
- 3 November 2022: The Cessation of Hostilities Agreement is signed; the long-term consequences of the war involve Eritrea, which is not a party to the agreement.

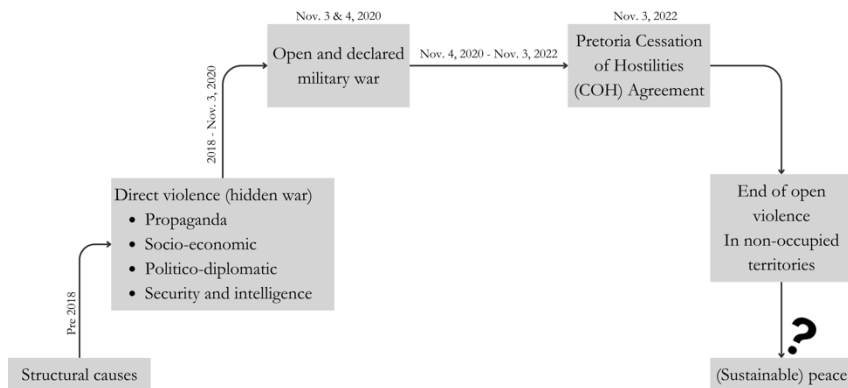


Figure 3.4. Trajectory of the war in Tigray

Source: Developed by the authors for this chapter

The post 3 November 2022 period can be seen as a de-escalation period, following the apex of violence in the period prior to the signing of the agreement. At this point, the period following the Cessation of Hostilities Agreement can probably best be characterised as negative peace (in the absence of direct military violence), while the continued occupation of regions in Tigray could best be characterised as structural violence.

The Tigray war can be described as a ‘total war’ in Clausewitz’s (2003) terms, in which anything was ‘permitted’ to advance positions and in which no limitations were respected. The structural and proximate causes of the war include the promotion of propaganda by federal Ethiopian and Eritrean high-ranking leadership in which ethnic Tigrayans were targeted. The incitement evolving from such propaganda and hate-speech is likely to have advanced the

perpetration of crimes against humanity (Rome Statute crimes; see Chapters 12 and 13).

Conclusions

Distinguishing between structural and proximate causes, this investigation sought to identify the elements that led to the transition from hidden to open war on the nights of 3 and 4 November 2020 when the federal government of Ethiopia declared a military intervention in Tigray. The involvement of other actors, and particularly of Eritrea, plays a prominent role. The idea that the war was provoked by an attack by the TPLF on the Northern Command is challenged by consistent evidence of pre-war preparations. These include measures to marginalise the TPLF and the Tigray people as well as military preparations, which readied the federal government of Ethiopia to invade Tigray. The actors involved were many; in any case it is difficult to conclude that the war was a simply a law enforcement operation or a domestic affair. The intent of the war matters, particularly if there is concern that the atrocities committed might amount to Rome Statute crimes.

This chapter started with the Tigray saying: “Don’t deny people what is theirs, and don’t give them what they haven’t earned”. This expression refers to ownership over the events that happened as opposed to narratives constructed to hide intentions and criminal actions. The responsibilities for the war become clear when using the concepts of ‘hidden war’ and ‘open war’ as well as ‘proximate causes and ‘structural causes’. These concepts, and the findings of the research, challenge the well-established narratives of the federal government of Ethiopia. Further investigation will be needed to determine if crimes have been committed, who should be held responsible and what reparations are required by whom and for whom.

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Authors' contributions

The research was conceptualised by Seife Hailu Gebreslassie, who prepared the research plan, collected the data and carried out the data analysis. Gebreslassie was responsible for the first draft of the chapter. Gebreslassie offered the theoretical chapter for this article. Mirjam Van Reisen provided additional data and assisted in the data analysis. Van Reisen commented extensively on all of the drafts and contributed text on the findings and discussion.

Ethical clearance

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Regional War by Design: The Involvement of Eritrea in the Tigray War

Daniel Tesfa & Mirjam Van Reisen

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Those who establish friendships with their enemy will be ashamed over time.

Abstract

This research examines Eritrea's involvement in the Tigray conflict, which was initially denied by both Eritrean and Ethiopian leaders, with Ethiopian Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed eventually acknowledging Eritrea's role in a speech to the Ethiopian Parliament on 23 March 2021. The study draws on interviews with 50 individuals, including residents of border areas, to explore the historical and phenomenological tensions between Eritrea and Ethiopia, with a focus on Tigray. The conflict is rooted in statehood disputes, contrasting Eritrean nationalism, shaped by Italian colonial influence, with Tigray's ethnic and Aksumite heritage. The findings suggest Eritrea's ambition to dominate the Horn of Africa by intervening in Ethiopian and regional matters. Following Eritrea's independence in 1993, an initial peace was disrupted by the 1998–2000 war between Eritrea and Ethiopia. According to interviewees, the Tigray conflict reflects unresolved issues, with Eritrea reacting to its political and economic isolation. Military coordination between Eritrea and Ethiopia, including transports by Ethiopian Airlines, facilitated attacks on Tigray. Despite international oversight regarding the Cessation of Hostilities Agreement between Ethiopia and Tigray (2022), Eritrea continues to occupy Tigrayan regions. This research underscores the potential for grassroots peace initiatives among border communities, which have shared socio-economic and cultural ties.

Key words: Tigray war, Eritrea, Ethiopia, Eritrea-Ethiopia Peace Agreement

Introduction

For the first five months of the war in Tigray, Eritrea's participation was hidden (EEPA, 2020a, 2020b; Wrong, 2023). After the presence of the Eritrean Defence Forces (EDF) was confirmed by international actors, the federal authorities in Ethiopia said that the Eritrean army had been 'invited' to fight against Tigray and, as such, was not violating Ethiopia's sovereignty (Wight, 2022). The narrative of the Tigray war as being a domestic issue persisted. This narrative is reflected in the fact that the African Union (working with the United Nations and the United States) invited only the federal government of Ethiopia and the leadership of the Tigray People's Liberation Front (TPLF) to the talks that resulted in the Cessation of Hostilities Agreement signed in 2022. There has been little analysis of how Eritrea participated in the Tigray war. Thus, this chapter explores the following question: *What was Eritrea's involvement in the war in Tigray and was it in fact a regional war, or a domestic war?*

Theoretical framework

The drive for communities to come together, revolve around specific thoughts, and identify themselves as unique from others remains subject to scholarly debate. Historically, religion has served as a core value for communities to shape community norms and practices. As religious beliefs were increasingly diversified and citizenry demands for secular systems grew over time, the empires that considered themselves as 'messengers of God' were challenged. This led to the birth of the concept of nationalism – a belonging where people with a similar culture, history, blood, language, and territory come together as citizens of a given nation (Anderson, 2006). A nation has boundaries, although the rationale for these may not always be very clear:

The nation is imagined as limited because even the largest of them, encompassing perhaps a billion living human beings, has finite, if elastic, boundaries, beyond which lie other nations. No nation imagines itself coterminous with mankind. The most messianic nationalists do not dream of a day when all the members of the human race will join their nation in the way that it was possible, in certain epochs, for, say, Christians to dream of a wholly Christian planet. (Anderson, 2006, p. 7)

Anderson (2006) argued that nations are not ancient communities connected by blood, language, history, culture, and/or territory, as nationalists often claim, but the distinctly modern imagination of a given state's population as constituting a static community produced by nationalism. He added:

It is imagined as sovereign because the concept was born in an age in which the Enlightenment and Revolution were destroying the legitimacy of the divinely ordained, hierarchical dynastic realm. Coming to maturity at a stage of human history when even the most devout adherents of any universal religion were inescapably confronted with the living pluralism of such religions and the allomorphism between each faith's ontological claims and territorial stretch, nations dream of being free, and, if under God, directly so. The gage and emblem of this freedom is the sovereign state. (Anderson, 2006, p. 7)

According to Anderson, the sovereign nation is imagined as a community in which people are equal participants:

It is imagined as a community, because, regardless of the actual inequality and exploitation that may prevail in each, the nation is always conceived as a deep, horizontal comradeship. (Anderson, 2006, p. 7)

Anderson discussed that it is only possible for members of a given nation to *imagine* that they have a relationship with all other members across time and space, as it is impossible for all the members to know one another; the nation must be understood as an imagined community in which nationalism is a progressive force (Anderson, 2006). The imagined narrative of the nation binds the citizens together.

Globalisation is challenging the concept of national belonging. Salazar stated:

The relationship between place, collective identity, and socio-cultural processes of identification is a contested aspect of the (dis)connections between (post) nationalism and its underlying concept of belonging. (Salazar, 2021, p. 1)

Tsing scrutinised the action-reaction between the growing forces of globalisation as increasingly colliding with local struggles (Tsing, 2005). She defined globalisation as the introduction of a way of thinking about the history of social projects, including business and local empowerment and, hence, not thinking of everything in the

world at once (Tsing, 2005). This is because, according to Tsing (2005), globalisation grows spatially, while cultural diversity continues to appear as an important factor in these interconnections.

Tsing described this interaction of globalisation as ‘friction’, as a metaphor for the diverse and conflicting social interactions that make up the contemporary world (Tsing, 2005): “this is a particular kind of universality: It can only be charged and enacted in the sticky materiality of practical encounters” (Tsing, 2005, p. 1). Cultures are co-produced in interactions causing friction, which is “the awkward, unequal, unstable and creative qualities of interconnection across difference” (Tsing, 2005, p. 1).

Thus, the concept of friction helps to understand that nationalism and national belonging are dynamic and subject to contestation and change over time. This emanates from the perspective that the way people relate to the concept of a state is subject to their interpretation of life, which limits the power of the state as not absolute, but rather a dynamic phenomenon (Tsing, 2005).

Methodology

Using a qualitative research design, this research explored how the involvement of Eritrea in Tigray is explained from the local perspective of the victims and witnesses. A literature review of studies and policy documents was conducted to sketch the background situation. Primary data was collected through in-depth interviews (IDIs), focus group discussions (FGDs), key informant interviews (KIIs), and observations. The interviews were carried out by Daniel Tesfa (Tesfa), Mirjam Van Reisen (Van Reisen), and Seife Hailu Gebreslassie (Gebreslassie).

The IDIs and KIIs are focused on selected geographic areas where the Eritrean army was alleged to be present: Aksum, Sheraro, Tahtay Adyabo, Egela and Irob woredas¹⁶ as well as Samre town.

¹⁶ An administrative unit in Ethiopia equivalent to a district.

IDs were conducted in Sheraro, Egela, and Samre and with an internally displaced person (IDP) from Guliso.¹⁷ The KIIs were conducted with victims of atrocities, eyewitnesses as well as members of the interim government administration in Tahtay Adyabo, Egela, and Irob woredas. Observation of the Aksum massacre by one of the members of the research team who kept diary notes of his observation are also used in the research. A minimum of five and a maximum of six IDs were conducted with survivors of atrocities and family members of victims in the selected places. In addition, KIIs were conducted with victims of atrocities, eyewitnesses, and interim local administration members, who provided a general overview of the situations as well as individual stories, which were already addressed by the IDs. The list of respondents was registered in an Excel sheet and codes were assigned for each respondent, as indicated in Table 4.1.

Table 4.1. Coding and dates of data collection

Assigned code	Type of data collection tool	Date of data collection
GSIDI01-05	IDI	9 July 2023
SHIDI06-10	IDI	4-6 June 2023
SMIDI11-16	IDI	11 June 2023
GUIDI17	IDI	23 July 2023
AXFGD01	FGD	23 March 2023
GSFGD02	FGD	8 July 2023
GSKII01	KII	9 July 2023
TAKII02	KII	7 June 2023
IRKII03	KII	18 July 2023
TDFKII04	KII	12 May 2022

¹⁷ In Sheraro and Samre minors participated as respondents. Two in Sheraro, 15 and 17 years old, as well as one 16-year-old in Samre, participated as respondents with the consent of one or both of their parents.

Assigned code	Type of data collection tool	Date of data collection
CHKII05-07	KII	19 July 2021
MDKII08	KII	16 January 2024
EAKII09-10	KII	5 March 2021
BTKII11	KII	21 April 2021

The interviews looked at perceptions on the relationship between Eritrea and Ethiopia with a special focus on Tigray, the perception of the drivers of the Eritrean aggression in the Tigray war, as well as perceptions regarding international actors in the war. They were held in the places visited by the first author of this study over the period 2021–2024. The qualitative data was transcribed, translated, coded according to four themes, and categorised using sub-themes on four frames. A coding-labelling strategy was employed to analyse the data obtained from in-depth interviews (IDI), focus group discussions (FGD), key informant interviews (KII), and observation.

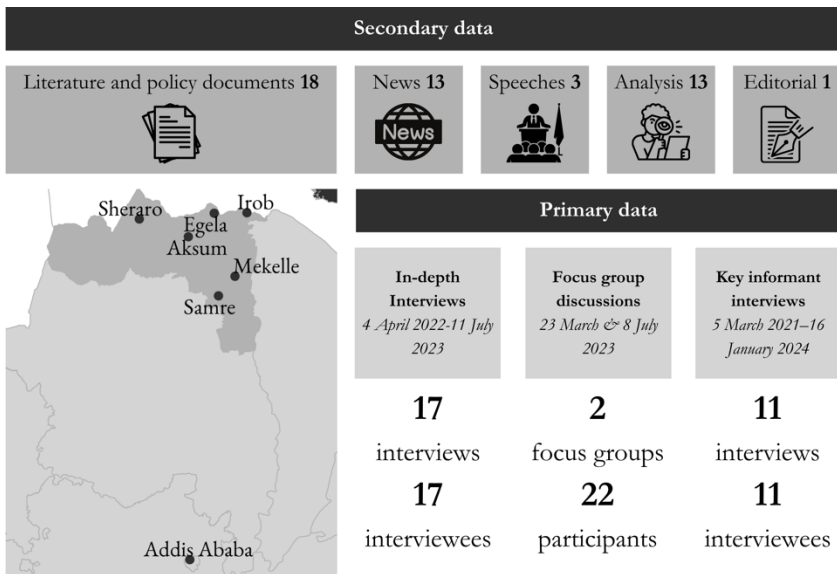


Figure 4.1. Overview of data collected and used in the study

The selection of the themes was reviewed several times after brainstorming on the transcribed data. The drafts of the themes were crosschecked again to capture the essence of the data. Sub-themes that contribute to the bigger themes were then identified. Finally, the data was analysed based on the coded themes and sub-themes, which is explained in the result section.

Background: Historical shifts over sense of belonging

The Eritrean highlanders living north of the Mereb River and Tigrayans living south of Mereb have a common historical and political-economic background that goes back to the establishment of the Aksumite civilisation using the Adulis sea trade route (Alemseged, 1998). Following the decline of the Aksumite civilisation in the 10th century A.D., the empire was fragmented into parts with semi-autonomous governance, where Bahre Negasi (King of the Sea) was among the rulers until the 19th century (Getahun, 1974; Alemseged, 1998). The trans-Mereb Tigray extended from the Red Sea in the northeast to Alewaha in the south, as one of the two major provinces of Abyssinia (Alemseged, 1998).

Following the opening of the Suez Canal, the Egyptian advances were halted by the Tigrayan Emperor of Ethiopia, Yohannes IV (Getahun, 1974), and his renowned lieutenant, Alula, at Gundet in 1875 and Gura in 1876 (Alemseged, 1998). As the Mahdist rebellion prevented Egypt from taking control of the Red Sea coast, in 1885, the colonial master in Sudan-Britain invited Italy to control Massawa against its competitor France (Killion, 1998). Menelik-II signed the Wuchale Treaty in 1889 that handed over Bahre Negash to the Italians, for which they coined a new name: Eritrea (Getahun, 1974). This is the historical turning point when Eritrea appeared as a creation of Italy, an Italian colony for almost 60 years, until Italy's defeat by the Allied Forces in World War II (Tesfagiorgis, 2015). The UN decided to return Eritrea to Ethiopia in 1952, under a federal relationship. Ethiopia, ruled by Haile Selassie, dismantled the federation after 10 years.

The annexation of Eritrea by Ethiopia prompted the rebel group, the Eritrea Liberation Front (ELF), to launch an armed struggle against Ethiopian repression in 1961 (Reid, 2007). The Eritrean resistance

movement met with massive Ethiopian military mobilisation (Moonis, 1984). The ELF was criticised over its resistance tactics and military and political mobilisation strategies. This resulted in the establishment of the Eritrea People's Liberation Front (EPLF), which would subsequently dominate among the rebel groups struggling for independence. The Ethiopian imperial regime of Haile Selassie (with US support) and then the Derg regime's (Mengistu Hailemariam's) Marxist rule (with support from Russia), continued large-scale counterinsurgency campaigns, burning villages and massacring civilians in Tigray and Eritrea (Killion, 1998).

Contact between the Tigrayan and Eritrean liberation movements developed before the Tigray People's Liberation Front (TPLF) launched its armed struggle in February 1975. Tigrayans living in Eritrea, particularly students at the University of Asmara, endeavoured to obtain promises of assistance from the ELF and especially from the EPLF (Young, 1996). For the relationship to advance to military training, the TPLF recognised the EPLF's right to fight for the independence of Eritrea. The TPLF itself resolved to be in the vanguard of the liberation of the whole of Ethiopia from the authoritarianism of the Derg regime (Reid, 2021). The TPLF benefited from the ELF's cross-border raids on Derg bases in Tigray, which resulted in close military relations between both sides. The EPLF joined this in 1976. This enabled the movements to resist the Derg regime's military offense, called the Raza Project (Young, 1996). The alliance between TPLF and ELF was hampered and led to a strong TPLF-EPLF alliance:

[...] the ELF's wide field of operations in Tigray became a principal cause of the complete break in relations with the TPLF. The ELF's territorial interpretation of Eritrea went beyond the Italian-defined colonial boundaries to include parts of north-western Tigray, a concept that TPLF could not accept. In addition, the ELF's alliances with the nobility-led Ethiopian Democratic Union (EDU) and the pro-Marxist Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Party (EPRP), which the TPLF was challenging for supremacy of the anti-Derg opposition in Tigray, became the source of growing tensions. Moreover, the TPLF found that it was unable to maintain ties with two organizations engaged in an acrimonious struggle for an Eritrea-wide hegemony. Given the language and cultural links that bound the membership of the TPLF and the EPLF and the latter's stronger Marxist credentials than those of

the Islamic-oriented ELF, the TPLF not surprisingly gravitated to the EPLF, and in the late 1970s joined in what proved to be a successful campaign to remove the ELF from the central highlands of Eritrea and Tigray. (Young, 1996, pp. 3–4)

The quest for military domination among the resistance groups in Eritrea also served as an impediment towards organisational unity, which resulted in the defeat of ELF by the EPLF, causing the former to retreat to Sudanese border in 1980–1981 (Moonis, 1984). For both to realise their ambitions as sole Eritrean and Tigrayan movements, the EPLF and TPLF cooperated to oust ELF from its strongholds in Eritrea (Moonis, 1984), while the TPLF defeated the Ethiopian Democratic Union (EDU) and the Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Party (EPRP) in Tigray in 1978, which allowed it to devote resources to challenge the Derg, notably by attacking Ethiopia's supply lines to Eritrea (Young, 1996). By 1980 an even more powerful TPLF had forced the Derg to rely increasingly on air and sea transport to supply its troops garrisoned in Eritrea, and, for this, valued assistance was supplied by the EPLF to the TPLF, including technical skills, advanced weaponry, and military training (Young, 1996). However, the EPLF-TPLF alliance soon moved from a strategic to a tactical arrangement:

[...]The course of alliance in the 1970s was mainly dominated by EPLF which in many ways had common cause with the TPLF in their respective struggles against the Derg, but which had important differences in ideology, military tactics, and the very definition of nationality; the two movements severed all contact in the mid-1980s. ...the movements renewed a tactical alliance in the late 1980s, and together overthrew the Derg, with Eritrea becoming independent. (Reid 2021, p. 2)

Human Rights Watch (1991) estimates that 1.4 million people were killed during the Ethiopian civil war between the Derg regime and the rebel groups. At the hour of victory, relations between the two movements appeared genuinely warm and friendly (Plaut & Gilkes, 1999). Although reluctantly accepting that both the EPLF and TPLF had come to power through Marxist credentials, Western countries forecast that the administration of both would bring peace to the Horn of Africa (Henze, 1991). This marked the underestimation of the difficult relationship between EPLF and TPLF:

[...] profound tensions remained beneath the civility of post-liberation diplomacy where the TPLF perceived in their Eritrean counterparts a dangerous hubris bordering on contempt for all others, while the EPLF saw in the TPLF a movement they had helped create – the former had initially helped to train TPLF fighters – and one which therefore should allow them some political and military influence in a much weakened Ethiopia. (Reid, 2021, p. 2)

Short of the anticipated new peaceful chapter for the Horn of Africa, as heralded by the mainstream media (Tekle, 1994), with President Clinton anointing the leaders of Ethiopia and Eritrea as princes of an African Renaissance (Perlez, 2000), Ethiopia and Eritrea, under TPLF and EPLF leadership, went to war in 1998. This war lasted until 2000 and claimed the lives of between 50,000 and 100,000 people (Congressional Research Service, 2000).

Although many researchers said that the drives of the Ethio-Eritrea war were beyond borders (Young, 1996; Hamilton, 2000; Reid 2003), the Organization of African Unity (OAU), UN and the United States of America proposed a border-based mediation, called a Framework Agreement, which coined the term the return of “Badme and its environs” (Congressional Research Service, 2000). Accordingly, the decision made by the commission assigned by OAU explained the subject of dispute as the geographical description of the boundary, which ended up the delimiting western, central, and eastern borders (Eritrea-Ethiopia Boundary Commission, 2002). After the border demarcation, Eritrea and Ethiopia stayed in a ‘no war no peace’ stalemate for almost two decades.

Table 4.2. Shifts in Ethiopia-Eritrea relations

Shift in relations	International actors’ contribution or response to the shift	Consequences of the shift
From early Aksumite civilisation until 1889	Adulis was the sea trade route of the Aksum civilisation.	Culturally and socio-economically intertwined people
Eritrea under Italian colonial rule (1889-1952)	Wuchale Agreement	The people divided into two: south and north of the Mereb River

Shift in relations	International actors' contribution or response to the shift	Consequences of the shift
Eritrea federated with Ethiopia, but Emperor Hailelassie violated the right of Eritrea to autonomy	This was ruled by the United Nations in 1952.	Pervasive grievances among the public in Eritrea against Ethiopia created an opportunity for the Eritrean elites, who opposed the United Nations decision to federate Eritrea with Ethiopia, to translate their intentions into armed struggle.
ELF and, then EPLF, resistance movement for Eritrean independence started an armed struggle	Rebel groups in Eritrea started the independence movement in the early 1960s. They were supported by Egypt, Sudan, Saudi Arabia, North Yemen, Iraq, and Syria as well as China.	The Eritrean and Tigray populace became victims of the war; their farmlands serving as war fronts. Regardless of their allegiance, they were forced to provide basic services to the soldiers on both sides.
Overthrow of the imperial regime in Ethiopia by the military Derg regime in 1974	Soviet Russia, Cuba, and other Socialist-Marxist Eastern European states	Shift from imperial rule by a 'god' to socialist a dictatorship
TPLF established in 1975	TPLF received training and military support from EPLF, conditional upon the TPLF accepting the right of Eritrean independence.	The Derg regime targeted Tigrayan and Eritrean populations as a means of draining insurgencies.

Shift in relations	International actors' contribution or response to the shift	Consequences of the shift
Both supported each other to oust their opponent in their respective territory of influence.	TPLF defeated EDU and EPRP, while EPLF defeated ELF becoming the sole representatives of their respective resistance movements.	The population in Tigray and Eritrea suffered from the war among the rebel fighters.
The strategic rifts among the leadership of EPLF and TPLF, which have existed underneath for years, started to come to the surface in the 1980s.	The Western policy actors overlooked the effect of these strategic rifts on the Horn of Africa.	While the Tigrayan population was in staggering famine, EPLF cut the route to Sudan where aid agencies prepared rations in June 1985. The famine claimed the lives of 1 million people.
The downfall of the Derg regime in 1991	UN organised a referendum after which Eritrea became an independent country.	An estimate of 1.4 million people were killed by the civil war.
Ethiopia under TPLF/EPRDF and Eritrea under EPLF signed the Asmara Pact in September 1993. This is also known as the honeymoon period.	US President Clinton described Meles Zenawi and Isayas Afwerki as “princes of an African Renaissance” in 1998.	Common market as well as people-to-people relations facilitated in 1993–1998.
Ethiopia-Eritrea war (1998–2000)	OAU, UN, and US defined the war as a border confrontation, which resulted in the establishment of the Ethiopia-Eritrea Border Commission .	Loss of lives 50,000–100,000

Shift in relations	International actors' contribution or response to the shift	Consequences of the shift
Stalemate (2000–2018)	Neither was the arbitration of border delimitation implemented nor normalisations achieved.	The close socio-cultural, people-to-people relationships and economic exchange were cut as a result of the policy.
UN-sanctioned Eritrea over its destabilisation role in the Horn of Africa in 2009.	UN imposed an arms embargo as well as travel restrictions and a freeze of the assets of the political and military leaders in Eritrea.	Eritrea used forced conscription of the youth into indefinite military training as a policy. This and other violations of human rights resulted in the illegal migration of the Eritrean youth.
A Joint Declaration of Peace and Friendship was signed between Ethiopian Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed and Eritrean President Isayas Afwerki on 9 July 2018.	UN lifted the sanction on Eritrea on 14 November 2018.	People-to-people relations and economic exchange were among the top global headlines of September 2018.
Eritrea participated in the Tigray war (2020–2022)	The AU, UN, US, and EU supported the Pretoria Agreement on Cessation of Hostilities, which defined the Tigray war as an internal conflict. Only the Ethiopian government and TPLF signed the agreement	Eritrea was implicated in massacres, sexual violence, extrajudicial killing, and bombardments (including chemical gas), which the UN Human Rights Experts in Ethiopia allege are crimes of aggression, war crimes, and crimes against humanity. The continuous illegal presence of the Eritrean army in Tigray hampered the

Shift in relations	International actors' contribution or response to the shift	Consequences of the shift
		implementation of the agreement.

In 2018 unexpectedly a Peace Agreement was signed by Eritrea and Ethiopia with the involvement of the United Arab Emirates and Saudi Arabia. In November 2020, war broke out after Ethiopia declared a law enforcement operation in Tigray on 4 November.¹⁸ Eritrea invaded Tigray at the same time, even though this was denied for five months and only admitted by PM Abiy on 23 March 2021 in the Ethiopian Parliament. On 2 November 2022, the Pretoria Cessation of Hostilities Agreement was signed between the federal Government of Ethiopia and the regional government of Tigray, the TPLF.

Results

This study investigates the period after the signing of the Eritrea-Ethiopia Peace Agreement in 2018, seen from the perspective of people interviewed in Tigray. The interviews and focus group discussions aimed to understand the Tigray war in view of Eritrea-Ethiopia relations. In particular, it attempts to establish if the war was in fact a regional war (the involvement of Eritrea, including in the planning) or a domestic conflict (as claimed by the federal government of Ethiopia). From the analysis of the interviews, the following themes were identified:

- Cause of the war
- Scope of participation of Eritrea
- Ethnic hostility from Eritrea towards Tigray
- Magnanimity towards the adversary

¹⁸ Although it is argued that it actually started on 3 November, when it is alleged that Ethiopian federal special forces were sent to Mekelle (UN International Commission of Human rights Experts on Ethiopia, 2022).

- Scope of the Pretoria Cessation of Hostilities Agreement

Cause of the war

It was the surprise attack by the regional Tigray Defence Forces (TDF) on the Northern Command of the ENDF that was echoed by Ethiopia and Eritrea as the cause of the declaration of the Tigray war. However, this was not the perspective of people interviewed in Tigray. The participants in the research explained that the cause of the Tigray war should be examined from the perspective of the underlying factors, beyond explaining the trigger (AXFGD01, focus group interview with Tesfa, face-to-face, 23 March 2023; GSFGD02, focus group interview with Tesfa, face-to-face, 8 July 2023; SMIDI13, interview with Tesfa, face-to-face, 11 June 2023). According to the focus group discussants, the dynamics in the relationships between Tigray and Amhara, Ethiopia, and Eritrea, long before 4 November 2020, should be examined to understand the causes of the war.

According to participants, there was a strategy of besieging Tigray from the inside, which was manifested by cutting off Tigray from Ethiopia. Amhara Regional State cut off the transportation lines connecting Gondar-Humera, Debark-Shire and Kobo-Alamata, and targeted Tigrayans living in Amhara at-least two years before the war was declared (AXFGD01, focus group interview with Tesfa, face-to-face, 23 March 2023). The federal government of Ethiopia contributed to the sense of isolation by framing ethnic Tigrayans as a threat to the national interest, employing generalised ethnic slurs in official media campaigns and blaming Tigrayans for all the perceived and actual wrongdoings of the previous EPRDF rule (SMIDI12, interview with Tesfa, face-to-face, 11 June 2023).

The discussants explained that the ethnic slurs were complemented by political tit-for-tat between the Prosperity Party (PP) and the TPLF, including TPLF's rejection of join the PP labelling it an illegal merger, and the legitimacy crisis following the postponing of elections in Ethiopia, while Tigray went ahead with elections at regional level (AXFGD01, focus group interview with Tesfa, face-to-face, 23 March 2023). According to the interviewees, the tactics used by the federal government of Ethiopia's tactics to oust regional governments in Somalia and Afar regions were not effective in Tigray

(SMIDI13, interview with Tesfa, face-to-face, 11 June 2023; SMIDI16, interview with Tesfa, face-to-face, 11 June 2023). Then the federal government aimed to remove the military armaments (armoured vehicles etc) from Tigray, as most of the military resources were under the Northern Command of the ENDF, as Eritrea was the threat to the country (SMIDI16, interview with Tesfa, face-to-face, 11 June 2023; TDFKII04, interview with Gebreslassie, face-to-face, 12 May 2022). But the people of Tigray resisted this plan, which prevented the relocation of the military resources (SHIDI08, interview with Tesfa, face-to-face, 4 June 2023; TDFKII04, interview with Gebreslassie, face-to-face, 12 May 2022).

At ground level, in Mahy 2020, the ENDF and EDF, which had been enemies and watchful of each other's moves for the past 20 years, started visiting each other's military camps and sharing food rations and mattresses (GSIDI01, interview with Tesfa, face-to-face, 9 July 2023). In a televised address PM Abiy Ahmed stated that the federal government was going to take measures against the election in Tigray (SHIDI07, interview with Tesfa, face-to-face, 4 June 2023). This threat was advanced in the first week of September 2020 by the EDF's move to construct a new road across the border at Belesa, between Tserona in Eritrea and Egela in Ethiopia (GSIDI02, focus group interview with Tesfa, face-to-face, 8 July 2023). Accordingly, relations between the ENDF and EDF improved and they shared artillery; discussions were also held between military leadership level in Belesa (GSFGD02, focus group interview with Tesfa, face-to-face, 8 July 2023).

A key informant who had been a member of the military leadership in one of the divisions of the Northern Command of the ENDF stated that the mobilisation towards military convergence in the units of EDF and ENDF in border areas was questioned by many soldiers as being a threat to national security (TDFKII04, interview with Gebreslassie, face-to-face, 12 May 2022). Similarly, focus group discussants who had been displaced from border areas of Egela to Gerhu Sirnay stated that some ENDF soldiers were doubtful of the collaboration with the EDF. They expressed their concern that the ENDF's move to show its forts/bastions, military positions, and artilleries to the EDF in the last week of July 2020 violated

sovereignty and territorial integrity (GSFGD02, focus group interview with Tesfa, face-to-face, 8 July 2023).

In the second week of August 2020, the ENDF responded to the criticism that both Ethiopia and Eritrea, through Abiy Ahmed and Isayas Afwerki, agreed to share their military capacities so that they could defend themselves from enemies within their territories and within the Horn of Africa in general (GSFGD02, focus group interview with Tesfa, face-to-face, 8 July 2023; TDFKII04, interview with Gebreslassie, face-to-face, 12 May 2022). According to a former military leader of one of the ENDF's divisions in Northern Command:

Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed once invited the military leadership of all ENDF divisions who were in a meeting in Addis Ababa for lunch in his palace. Then he said "Our soldier is there to guard the border not the constitution" disclaiming the concerns about constitutional sovereignty raised by some of the military leadership related to the developments in military relations with EDF. (TDFKII04, interview with Gebreslassie, face-to-face, 12 May 2022)

The participants in the focus group discussion in Gerhu Sirnay also stated that mechanised brigades of the EDF¹⁹ were seen in long

¹⁹ A mechanized brigade is a type of military formation that consists of several battalions equipped with armoured vehicles, such as infantry fighting vehicles (IFVs), armoured personnel carriers (APCs), and often includes tanks. The primary characteristic of a mechanized brigade is its ability to rapidly move and fight alongside armoured vehicles, providing both mobility and protection for infantry forces. Key Components of a Mechanized Brigade:

- Infantry Battalions: These are the main fighting force within the brigade, typically transported and supported by armoured vehicles.
- Armoured Vehicles: The brigade is equipped with IFVs and APCs, which allow infantry to move quickly across the battlefield while being protected from small arms fire and shrapnel.
- Tanks: Many mechanized brigades also include a tank battalion, providing heavy firepower and the ability to engage enemy armoured forces.
- Artillery: The brigade often has its own artillery units, which can include self-propelled howitzers, providing indirect fire support.
- Reconnaissance Units: These units conduct scouting missions to gather intelligence and provide early warning of enemy movements.
- Engineers: Engineering units within the brigade can construct fortifications, clear obstacles, and conduct demolition work.

queues on the newly constructed road at the Ethiopia-Eritrea border at Belesa a month before the declared war (GSFGD02, focus group interview with Tesfa, face-to-face, 8 July 2023).

An interviewee who was displaced in the first week of November 2020 following the Guliso massacre in Oromia stated:

The units of the 24th Division of ENDF were in-charge in securing peace and security in Guliso following the frequent conflict in the locality. But they were ordered to leave the area immediately in the third week of October 2020 which resulted in the regeneration of attacks on civilians in the last week of October and 1 November 2020. [...] Let's leave the attribution of responsibility to an independent investigation. But the question here is why at this time the massacre that I escaped was perpetrated in Guliso. It was because the military was moved out of the area. This violence forced me and my family to be displaced to Addis Ababa leaving all the means of our livelihoods behind. (GUIDI17, interview with Tesfa, face-to-face, 23 July 2023)

The military leadership of the Tigray Defence Forces (TDF) stated that the armies outside Tigray were mobilised at least a week before the war was declared, indicating that the breakout of war was not a surprise, but rather the result of the prior preparations and military mobilisation (TDFKII04, interview with SHG, face-to-face, 12 May 2022). A former member of ENDF military leadership who later joined the TDF stated:

The 24th Division of ENDF was called to position itself in the corridor from Gonder to Debarik along with one Agazi Commando Brigade, 12th Division from Jimma and the Renaissance Dam, 22nd from Gambela, 33rd from around Gonder with Fano and Amhara Special Forces while the 25th Division from Somalia and Harar, 2nd Mechanized Division from Ogaden, 21st from Negele Borona, 32nd from Adama, 13th from Dire Dawa and 6th Mechanized Division from Semera lined

A mechanized brigade is designed for fast-paced, mobile warfare, capable of advancing quickly across varied terrain while maintaining a high level of firepower and protection. This makes it suitable for offensive operations, as well as defensive roles where mobility and the ability to counterattack are important. The brigade's mechanization enables it to operate effectively in environments where traditional foot infantry would be at a disadvantage due to the need for speed and protection against enemy fire.

from Woldia to Kobo. (TDFKII04, interview with Gebreslassie, face-to-face, 12 May 2022)

The key informant stated that significant armies were also positioned in the corridor from Shambuko of Eritrea to the border of Badme, as well as Senafe (Eritrea) to the border of Zalambessa (TDFKII04, interview with Gebreslassie, face-to-face, 12 May 2022).

From within Eritrea, 8 divisions, 2 mechanised and 1 motorised, of the Western Command of the ENDF, along with the 46th and 48th ENDF mechanised divisions, and 12 divisions of Eritrean army were positioned from Shambuko to Badme. In addition, 2 mechanised divisions and 14 divisions were also prepared to attack from Senafe to Zalambessa (TDFKII04, interview with Gebreslassie, face-to-face, 12 May 2022).

In addition, Ethiopian Airlines conducted successive flights from Addis Ababa to Asmara; the research team confirmed the flights of 25 September and 20 October 2020, which had the same flight number (ETH8312), which were also reported on social media. These flights were departing from Addis Ababa carrying soldiers and military logistics to Asmara and Massawa at the same time (BTKII11, interview with Van Reisen, WhatsApp, 21 April 2021).²⁰

The flight on 25 September 2020 was an irregular chartered flight with flight number ETH8312, which departed from Addis Ababa and arrived in Asmara at 12:29 hours and departed back to Addis Ababa at 13:23 hours local time. On 20 October 2023, the same irregular chartered flight number (ETH8312) departed from Addis Ababa and arrived in Asmara at 02:17 local time, and departed back to Addis Ababa at 13:53 local time (EAKII09, interview with Van Reisen, WhatsApp, 5 March 2021).²¹ Hence, it appears that the ENDF, Amhara Special Force, and EDF had mobilised military from within Eritrea to Tigray long before the declared war.

²⁰ Flight numbers obtained from the key informant were checked by a specialised organisation which confirmed the flights took place and was able to show the routes of the identified planes. The authors obtained a report of the flight schedules and routes, and details about the specific flights.

²¹ Same verification as under previous footnote.

A key informant said that the Northern Command of the ENDF was on a mission to dismantle the political leadership of Tigray using a commando military group that landed in Alula Aba Nega Airport in Mekelle late on the evening of 3 November 2020, under the pretext of delivering new currency notes (TDFKII04, interview with Gebreslassie, face-to-face, 12 May 2022). The research team confirmed the numbers of two flights on 3 November 2020: ET3102, which departed from Addis Ababa Airport at 17:31 local time, arrived in Alula Aba Nega Airport in Mekelle at 18:34 local time and departed back to Addis Ababa at 04:21 local time (EAKII10, interview with Van Reisen, WhatsApp, 5 March 2021). The second flight was ET3100, which departed from Addis Ababa Bole Airport at 21:05 local time, arrived in Alula Aba Nega Airport in Mekelle at 22:25 local time and departed back to Addis Ababa at 04:07 local time (EAKII10, interview with Van Reisen, WhatsApp, 5 March 2021). Social media reported that the commandos were sent to arrest and kill the Tigray government leadership, in coordination with the Northern Command of the ENDF. A second key informant also indicated that the clash was triggered by the commandos in the airport (TDFKII04, interview with Gebreslassie, face-to-face, 12 May 2022).

Eritrea: Part of the war design

The respondents explained that Eritrea's push to interfere in the internal affairs of Ethiopia was not a new phenomenon, but rather informed by historical aspirations. The interviewees stated they were aware that Eritrea used to arm rebels, aiming at regime change in Ethiopia, including the opposition group Arbegnoch Ginbot 7, of which (Prof.) Birhanu Nega and Andargachew Tsige were among the leadership (AXFGD01, focus group interview with Tesfa, face-to-face, 23 March 2023).²²

²² Birhanu Nega and Andargachew Tsige were among the founders and board members of Ethiopia Satellite Television (ESAT), which is known for the dissemination of a rebel call against ethnic Tigrayans (SMIDI11, focus group interview with DT, face-to-face, 11 June 2023). Eritrea also sponsored and hosted Ginbot 7 Radio Broadcasting, disseminating its programmes through the only media in Eritrea, the state-owned Eritrea Television and its radio counterpart Dmsti Hafash (Eri-TV, 2017).

After PM Abiy Ahmed came to power, the leadership of Ginbot 7 were brought home to Ethiopia and Birhanu Nega was (and still is) among the government appointees, while Andargachew Tsige served as advisor to the Prime Minister (GSFGD02, a focus group interview with Tesfa, face-to-face, 8 July 2023; AXFGD01, a focus group interview with Tesfa, face-to-face, 23 March 2023). The discussants explained that Eritrea had sent its agents to the Ethiopian incumbent (AXFGD01, focus group interview with Tesfa, face-to-face, 23 March 2023). This was followed by what participants called a ‘surprise’ declaration of peace in 2018, a few months after PM Abiy assumed power, which was reaffirmed by the signing of the Eritrea-Ethiopia Joint Declaration of Peace and Friendship, although the terms of the agreement remained secret (GSFGD02, focus group interview with Tesfa, face-to-face, 8 July 2023).

The participants stated that the People’s Front for Democracy and Justice (PFDJ) (the new name for the EPLF after Eritrean independence and the only party in Eritrea) had disclosed that the policy of the peace process was a strategy to start war with Tigray (SMIDI11, interview with Tesfa, face-to-face, 11 June 2023; GSFGD02, focus group interview with Tesfa, face-to-face, 8 July 2023). Simultaneously, with the peace process between Eritrea and Ethiopia, the only state-owned media, Eritrea Television (Eri TV), broadcast President Isayas Afwerki saying “Woyane²³... game over”, as a threat to the people of Tigray. The participants opined that, Tigray was targeted for war to protect the peace between Ethiopia and Eritrea (see also ERi-TV, Eritrea [Official], 2018a; ERi-TV, Eritrea [Official], 2018b). This was followed by official visits to each other’s military positions, which had been built and used for decades to defend themselves from each other. The respondents stated that the speeches by President Isayas could not be considered utterances of an individual, but were the officially declared state policy of Eritrea against Tigray (AXFGD01, focus group interview with Tesfa, face-to-face, 23 March 2023). The speeches were perceived as a threat.

²³ A derogatory term used in Eritrea to refer to the people of Tigray.

The secret nature of the peace deal also caused mistrust. One of the interviewees stated:

The people of Tigray repeatedly called on both sides to make the reconciliation terms official rather than personalized to the leaders of both sides. This is because it is the Tigray people that will be affected by the terms the most, positively or negatively, which shares more than a thousand kilometres border with Eritrea. But this request for the right to be informed was framed as negation from the wave of the so-called peace and friendship. (GSIDI01, interview with Tesfa, face-to-face, 9 July 2023)

According to one of the key informants, Eritrea had been hosting the Western Command of ENDF, which was positioned to attack Tigray from Shambuko (village in Eritrea bordering Badme of Tigray) to Badme, as well as from Serha (village in Eritrea bordering Zalambessa) to Zalambess. The soldiers and artilleries were being transported on Ethiopia Airlines to Asmara and Massawa (TDFKII04, interview with Gebreslassie, face-to-face, 12 May 2022). The informant added:

Eritrea also positioned most of its armies along the ENDF to attack Tigray from the Eritrean side. Both countries had made coordinated military preparations and mobilised and positioned vast armies aimed at attacking Tigray from all sides at least weeks before the declared war. The war, from its first date, was begun between the allies of Ethiopia and Eritrea against Tigray. Therefore, Eritrea is part of the war design – if not the pioneer. (TDFKII04, interview with Gebreslassie, face-to-face, 12 May 2022)

The research team learnt from a verified video that showed ENDF and EDF conducting a large-scale artillery handover, which was geo-located to be in Mukuti village inside Eritrea on 5 November 2020. The military handover by ENDF further indicates a pre-war arrangement, agreement, and a division of labour between the commands of the Ethiopian and Eritrean armies (original video in possession of the authors²⁴).

²⁴ The video was checked by Bellingcat for the purpose of geolocation and confirmation of veracity. The authors also obtained background information disclosing the way in which the video was obtained.

The research team found that Ethiopian Airlines continued its irregular chartered and cargo flights to Asmara and Massawa during the first and second weeks of the war. On 6 November 2020, ET8312 departed from Addis Ababa and arrived in Asmara at 13:13 hours. It then departed from Asmara to Addis Ababa on the same day at 14:29 hours. From 7 to 9 November 2020, flight number ET8124 was recorded from Addis Ababa to Gondar then to Asmara, and then back to Gondar, arriving in Addis Ababa on 9 November 2020. Between 8 and 9 November 2020, Ethiopian Airlines flight number ET3312 departed from Addis Ababa to Massawa-Eritrea then back to Bahir Dar and to Gondar, finally arriving in Addis Ababa on 9 November (EAKII10, interview with Van Reisen, WhatsApp, 5 March 2021).

That same day, the Eritrean army shelled Humera town in the Western Tigray from the Eritrean bordering town of Omohajar (Human Rights Watch, 2021). Ethiopia Airlines flight number ET3312 departed from Addis Ababa on 12 November 2020, arrived at 15:01 and departed back to Addis Ababa at 19:18 local time (EAKII09, interview with Van Reisen, WhatsApp, 5 March 2021).

The next day Ethiopian Airlines conducted three flights: ET2206 from Addis Ababa to Dire Dawa to Asmara then back to Addis Ababa; ET2142 from Addis Ababa to Bahir Dar to Asmara then back to Addis Ababa; and ET3314 from Addis Ababa to Asmara then to Addis Ababa (EAKII10, interview with Van Reisen, WhatsApp, 5 March 2021). As the flights between Ethiopian and Eritrean airports continued extensively, social media users shared photos of soldiers in the planes. The pictures indicated that the flights were transporting Ethiopian soldiers and artilleries that were used in the invasion of Tigray from within Eritrea (BTKII09, interview with Van Reisen, WhatsApp, 21 April 2021).

Two of the focus group participants in Gerhu Sirnay stated that they were displaced from their locality in Hoya Medeb Vicinity (bordering with Tserona of Eritrea) of Egela Woreda in the early morning of 3 November 2020, a day before the declaration of the law enforcement

operation (GSFGD02, focus group interview with Tesfa, face-to-face, 8 July 2023). An interviewee said:

I had been collecting harvest in my farmland around the ENDF Ford in Belesa in the early morning of 3 November 2020. I witnessed the unpleasant behaviour of soldiers repeatedly firing bullets toward the houses in Belesa. The soldiers, wearing Eritrean and Ethiopia armies' uniforms, were lined in buses directed toward Gerhu Sirnay. I counted 6 pickups and 14 buses lined. I sneaked from the harvest to my house as I saw one passer-by man being killed by the bullet shot from those who were in the double pickup cars lined up first. Then I decided to escape before they reached out to us in their house-to-house search. Together with my children, those of whom were at home, we waited to hide in the hills, and travelled to Gerhu Sirnay. One of my children was not at home at the moment; I couldn't get his whereabouts yet. (GSFGD02, focus group interview with Tesfa, face-to-face, 8 July 2023)

An elder man also stated:

I witnessed people being killed by the soldiers wearing Ethiopian and Eritrean armies' uniforms in Belesa; then the dwellers of the bordering areas who escaped the indiscriminate killing were displaced to Gerhu Sirnay. I have been living begging for food from the Gerhu Sirnay community ever since as our village is still under the occupation of Eritrea. (GSFGD02, focus group interview with Tesfa, face-to-face, 8 July 2023)

Participants emphasised that Eritrea was part of the invasion of Tigray, prior to the official declaration of the law enforcement operation by the Ethiopian government. According to participants, Eritrea facilitated the invasion, but also acted independently. The Eritrean involvement expanded after the official declaration of the invasion on 4 November.

The discussants in Aksum and Gerhu Sirnay stated that the EDF was engaged in shelling, bombarding, mass killing of civilians and sexual violence (AXFGD01, focus group interview with Tesfa, face-to-face, 23 March 2023; GSFGD02, focus group interview with Tesfa, face-to-face, 8 July 2023). An interviewee from Sheraro stated that Eritrean soldiers were transporting the resources they looted from the areas they captured on 18 November through Sheraro (SHIDI06, interview with Tesfa, face-to-face, 4 June 2023). One of the members of the research team was in Aksum and personally witnessed when EDF

together with ENDF was shelling and bombarding Aksum on 18 November 2020.

A sister of several victims who died as a result of the shelling by the EDF in Adi Yieqoro explained what happened on 20 April 2021 (CHKII05, interview with Van Reisen, WhatsApp, 19 July 2021). A resident of Daero locality in Adi Yieqoro village of Ahiferom woreda in the Central Zone of Tigray said, she:

Two of the girls burned and hit by the weapon are my sisters [name deleted for safety] and [name deleted for safety]. One of them was hit by fire and burned immediately while my other sister was hit by remnants of the heavy weapon. (CHKII05, interview with Van Reisen, WhatsApp, 19 July 2021)

She stated that the weapon hit a civilian house:

The owner of the house [name deleted for safety] was burned by the fire and also hit by the remnants of the weapon. All of them were heavily affected by the April 20 attack. (CHKII05, interview with Van Reisen, WhatsApp, 19 July 2021)

She added:

The heavy weapon was fired from the direction of the village of Adi-Mokuri by the Eritrean soldiers. After it was fired, the girls were hit and a cow has also died. Then the roof of the house was burned, and everything inside the house was completely burned including grains, flour, and all house materials. (CHKII05, interview with Van Reisen, WhatsApp, 19 July 2021)

The authors received and studied first-hand interviews, videos, and photographs of the incident, and the location was visited by collaborators of the research team to verify the incident, the location, and the basis for alleging that a phosphorous attack was launched by Eritrean forces (CHKII05-07, interview with Van Reisen, WhatsApp, 19 July 2021). Several members of the team who took the videos and interviewed the civilians were interviewed by the research team.²⁵

²⁵ The incident was published in a Telegraph exclusive report of the attack, which said “Ethiopian and Eritrean armies may have used powerful incendiary weapons in civilian areas” (Brown & Kassa, 2021). The report furthered “leading chemical weapons experts said the footage is consistent with white phosphorus, which is not considered a chemical weapon but is banned from use against human targets under international law” (Brown & Kassa, 2021).

The participants in the study also explained that Eritrea was and still is among the main actors in the Tigray war. They question why Western policy actors didn't want to frame Eritrea as a foreign aggressor in the context of Tigray, while at the same time they frame Russia's aggression on Ukraine as foreign as far as sovereignty is concerned (GSFGD02, focus group interview with Tesfa, face-to-face, 8 July 2023; AXFGD01, focus group interview with Tesfa, face-to-face, 23 March 2023; SHIDI07, 4 June 2023; SMIDI11, interview with Tesfa, face-to-face, 11 June 2023). Such incorrect problem definition has created an incorrect sense of responsibility for the atrocities and provided the EDF with impunity. This has negatively impacted on regional peace and stability (AXFGD01, focus group interview with Tesfa, face-to-face, 23 March 2023).

Interviewees were upset that about a month after Eritrea massacred civilians in Aksum, the African Union and international actors continued to state that the war was an internal conflict (AXFGD01, focus group interview with Tesfa, face-to-face, 23 March 2023). To the interviewees this indicated that the regional and international actors were reluctant to accept the reality that the war was regional in nature and not an internal conflict (GSFGD02, focus group interview with Tesfa, face-to-face, 8 July 2023). The participants emphasised that the war was not a domestic one Eritrean and Somalian soldiers physically participated and the United Arab Emirates (UAE), Saudi Arabia, Russia, and China provided military technology support, including unmanned drones, to the ENDF (AXFGD01, focus group interview with Tesfa, face-to-face, 23 March 2023; SMIDI11, interview with Tesfa, face-to-face, 11 June 2023).

Attribution-'Agame': Ethnic slurs and moral disengagement

The interviewees and focus group discussants described indiscriminate killing, massacres, kidnapping, looting and sexual violence as perpetrated by soldiers in the Eritrean army. While committing atrocities, the EDF expressed hate, with expressions such as: "Agame you locked us behind for 30 years, now it's our turn to drag you back 100 years, if we can't deracinate you all" (AXFGD01, focus group interview with Tesfa, face-to-face, 23 March 2023). Another respondent heard Eritrean soldiers saying that they would

move Tigray “50 years back in time” (MDKII08, Correspondence with Van Reisen, WhatsApp, Audio recording, 16 January 2024).

Eritrean soldiers captured one of the research interviewees in Samre town, when they were just back from the war in Adi-Awso (which is 15-kilometers from Samre town on the road to Mekelle) on 22 March 2021 (SMIDI16, interview with Tesfa, face-to-face, 11 June 2023). He said:

Eritrean soldiers captured me on the edge of my house. They laid me down and hit me by the muzzle of the gun and three times by the oyster. I begged them to kill me firing a gun not beating by the muzzle but one of them responded ‘We want to see Tigrayans suffer’. I vomited blood following their repeated hits by the muzzle and oyster. (SMIDI16, interview with Tesfa, face-to-face, 11 June 2023)

He added that he would have died if his friend hadn’t been able to provide him with medicine from a non-governmental organisation that came to Samre town for the first time (SMIDI16, interview with Tesfa, face-to-face, 11 June 2023). But the soldiers went back to his house after 10 days. He remembered:

The Eritrean soldiers some of who muzzled me while others were watching me suffering came again home. They found me in bed without proper medical treatment. The soldiers then ordered the people around to carry me to Meda Samre. It was not a hospital; it rather was a place where they searched house to house and captured all the men they got in Samre on 2 April 2021. Together with the more than a thousand people in the field, I was ordered to take off my clothes with the help of three people for I was unable to stand. (SMIDI16, interview with Tesfa, face-to-face, 11 June 2023)

Another interviewee who was part of the scene in Meda Samre stated that:

Five Eritrean soldiers came to my house. And they immediately tied my hands together handing me over to their comrades while they began looting my house in my presence. They took my clothes, mobile and 3,000 ETB. I was made to be seen naked in Samre Town for hours by the EDF on 2 April 2021. I witnessed atrocities by Eritrean soldiers including beating, ethnic slurs, slur on reproductive bodies, and incarceration. (SMIDI11, interview with Tesfa, face-to-face, 11 June 2023)

A religious leader who was serving in St. Mary Church in Samre town was similarly captured by the soldiers and taken to the scene (SMIDI15, interview with Tesfa, face-to-face, 11 June 2023). The 78 years old priest remembered:

The Eritrean soldiers ordered me to take them to my house for a search because they said ‘Tigrayan priests are armed’. I responded them it is forbidden for priests to carry guns. They sent me to the mass in Meda Samre while they not only continued their search, but also looted my house properties and building instruments including hammers and jerrycans. I was then ordered to take off my clothes and slurred by the female soldiers who were gathered to mock in-front in front of me. (SMIDI15, interview with Tesfa, face-to-face, 11 June 2023)

A 16-year-old child who was sent by his parents with a donkey to fetch water from Bakbako River was also captured by the soldiers early in the morning on 2 April 2021 (SMIDI14, interview with Tesfa, face-to-face, 11 June 2023). He was then taken to Enda Gabir Church (an Orthodox church in Samre town) where he estimated more than 400 men were being held by Eritrea Defence Force (SMIDI14, interview with Tesfa, face-to-face, 11 June 2023). He stated:

I found from 12-year-old children to elders in the 80s – all of them men. The soldiers then prevented priests from entering the church to provide religious services. All of us were calm, waiting for what they would do next. One elder requested the soldier in front of him to allow him to go out to urinate. The soldier responded ‘you Agame consider yourself as human, no you are not; you can urinate on your trousers’. It was a rough time for us not only because of the atrocities, but also their mistreatment of us as animals. They ordered us to go out to the field after the midday. We were ordered to take off our clothes and stay all naked. The female soldiers then were joking comparing the size of the reproductive organs one from another. (SMIDI14, interview with Tesfa, face-to-face, 11 June 2023)

A brother of one of the captured men in Samre town who lived in Mekelle, being informed by his sister, complained to the interim government of South-Eastern Zone, which connected him with the military leadership in the Northern Command (SMIDI11, interview with Tesfa, face-to-face, 11 June 2023). He testified:

The military leadership detained my brother saying “If the people whom you said captured by Eritrean soldiers are below one hundred we will kill you”. But the Eritrean soldiers refused to provide information to the military leadership based in

the Northern Command of ENDF responding: “We are working based on the directives from our line of command, not yours”. The leadership then called to their command and they informed them a large number of men were captured, which enabled my brother to be released after detention for hours. Then the Eritrean soldiers lined the people up and ordered us all to take off our clothes after the midday of April 2021. (SMIDI11, interview with Tesfa, face-to-face, 11 June 2023)

Around 1:30–2:00 pm local time, more than a thousand men, under arrest and naked, were released. One of those who had been captured said:

When they let us go, they didn’t even allow us to wear our clothes properly. I was trying to wear my trousers, but one of the soldiers stopped me saying ‘You are not allowed to wear them here; we want you to be seen naked in the street’. Then he ordered me to collect my clothes and go in nudity. (SMIDI13, interview with Tesfa, face-to-face, 11 June 2023)

After the dehumanising scene was over in Meda Samre around 2:30 pm local time, one of the captured men approached the military leadership of EDF requesting access to water, electricity, and banking services (SMIDI11, interview with Tesfa, face-to-face, 11 June 2023). He said:

He responded to my request ‘We were ordered to kill all men in Tigray let alone provide you services. Our leaders believe that leaving men in Tigray will enable the regeneration of the TPLF junta. They always dictate to us that we don’t need to have mercy for Agame because all of them are traitors. (SMIDI11, interview with Tesfa, face-to-face, 11 June 2023)

Parents of the victims of the Aksum Massacre also indicated that most of the soldiers did not consider that they were killing human beings (AXFGD01, focus group interview with Tesfa, face-to-face, 23 March 2023). A mother whose son was massacred said:

I begged the soldier, who killed my 14-year-old son, to let me take the body so that I could bury him before the hyenas got it. The soldier responded ‘Don’t worry you all Agame are hyenas so the hyenas don’t eat their ancestors’. (AXFGD01, focus group interview with Tesfa, face-to-face, 23 March 2023)

The participants in the research explained that most of the Eritrean soldiers they encountered committing atrocities did not show feelings of guilt or remorse (GSFGD02, focus group interview with Tesfa,

face-to-face, 8 July 2023; AXFGD01, focus group interview with Tesfa, face-to-face, 23 March 2023). The men who were captured and made to be seen naked in Meda Samre also stated that the soldiers were quick to carry out cruel acts that are considered inappropriate in Tigrayan tradition (SMIDI12, interview with Tesfa, face-to-face, 11 June 2023; SMIDI15, interview with Tesfa, face-to-face, 11 June 2023). The respondents explained these acts as moral disengagement or dissociation, developed as a result of the indoctrination that the soldiers had been through, framing Tigrayans as enemies and traitors, which enabled the soldiers to perceive Tigrayans as animals and not humans (SMIDI16, interview with Tesfa, face-to-face, 11 June 2023; AXFGD01, focus group interview with Tesfa, face-to-face, 23 March 2023).

The intention of the war by Eritrean forces can be deduced from the signs by which they communicated. The first author photographed graffiti on a wall of Gerhu Sirnay Hospital, in the Central Zone of Tigray, Egela Woreda (district) on 9 July 2023. This district shares a border with the rural villages and the town of Tserona Eritrea.



Figure 4.2. Slogan written on wall of Gerhu Sirnay Hospital, which was destroyed by the Eritrean Defence Forces
(Photograph by DT captured on 9 July 2023)

The Tigrinya words that the first author captured on 9 July 2023 in Gerhu Sirnay Hospital say “ኤርትራ ትስዕር” and “አዩ ወይን”. The first can be translated as “Eritrea is winning” and as “Poor Woyane” or “Hopeless Woyane”. In this context, ‘Woyane’ is a derogatory term for the people of Tigray people.²⁶

Magnanimity by Eritrean soldiers towards the adversary

A survivor of the Aksum massacre who was shot in his leg stated that it was an Eritrean soldier who enabled him to survive (AXFGD01, focus group interview with Tesfa, face-to-face, 23 March 2023). He explained the circumstance as follows:

The oldest soldier of the three ordered the youngest soldier to shoot us all. I was shot in my leg, while the other survivor on his hand; but the three others died immediately as they were shot repeatedly. (AXFGD01, focus group interview with Tesfa, face-to-face, 23 March 2023)

The survivor said that he always remembered the confrontation between the soldiers which determined the fate of two who survived, one of them shot once in leg while the other in the hand (AXFGD01, focus group interview with Tesfa, face-to-face, 23 March 2023). He continued:

The oldest soldier said: ‘Check them all or shoot them again’. The one who shot us responded ‘All of them are dead’. But he ordered him again ‘I told you to check them all or shoot them again’. He responded: ‘It’s my responsibility to check; all are dead’. The one who was shot in his hand had shown some movement, but the soldier went as if he didn’t notice it. That movement was the point of departure for me and the one who was shot in his hand kind of life after death. Then we kept silent as if we all died until the soldiers left the compound. (AXFGD01, focus group interview with Tesfa, face-to-face, 23 March 2023)

He stated that there were a few people who tried their best to show humanity when the context allowed them (AXFGD01, focus group

²⁶ In the philosophy of gene there are two kinds of meaning, the most visible and direct meaning, and the underlying deeper meaning contained in it. This is also referred as wax (the varnish, what you see) and gold (what lies underneath). ‘Woyane’ is both a term of pride, if used by Tigrayan people themselves, and a slur, used in hate-speech by adversaries. The meaning depends heavily on the context.

interview with Tesfa, face-to-face, 23 March 2023). He remembered a particularly sadistic event:

Immediately after the soldiers left the compound I preferred to stay there while the one who was shot in his hand ran through the backyard of the house to another compound. He again faced another challenge. As blood was flowing from his arm covering his clothes, the kennel of dogs in the village which were gathered in the compound was brought on him. He had to fight them with his one-hand holding stick that he kicked around for 15 minutes. Then people in the compound saw him fighting with the kennel and took him to their home. (AXFGD01, focus group interview with Tesfa, face-to-face, 23 March 2023)

He stated that he wanted to get time where he and the soldier who intentionally left them alive could meet and discuss the context in a peaceful situation; but it was nearly impossible to find him, as he had no name nor address for the soldier (AXFGD01, focus group interview with Tesfa, face-to-face, 23 March 2023).

A religious leader in Samre town met one of the soldiers who were from Senafe after the scene of nudity on 2 April 2021 (SMIDI15, interview with Tesfa, face-to-face, 11 June 2023). He said:

There was one Eritrean soldier who used to walk around our house. I wanted to discuss with him what was going on. As I told him I wanted to meet him, he asked me 'How can I trust you' then I responded I don't lie for myself. Then we went to my house. My first question for him was, why this was all on Tigray. He responded 'While the Eritrean dictator was planting hate against Tigrayans in Sawa, you were focusing on building Bolaso, which you couldn't be able to protect it now'. (SMIDI15, interview with Tesfa, face-to-face, 11 June 2023)

The soldier discussed that he understood the war was targeting the Tigrayan community in both countries (SMIDI15, interview with Tesfa, face-to-face, 11 June 2023). Their discussion continued:

I wondered how he managed to hide his true feelings and pretend as if he is a supporter of the PFDJ for three years. He told me 'Until I get a chance to escape with less risk, I had to act silly as they do'. I asked why Eritrea was part of this war. His response was straightforward 'because the PFDJ perceives that it couldn't realise its dominance in the region while Tigrayans and their history are there to interrupt the creation of Eritrean nationalism'. (SMIDI15, interview with Tesfa, face-to-face, 11 June 2023)

He explained that the Tigrayan population on both sides of the Mereb River suffered for decades, for their leadership could not coexist (SMIDI15, interview with Tesfa, face-to-face, 11 June 2023). As indicated by one of the interviewees, the people on both sides of the river were (and still are) targeted for hate speech and contrasting narratives by the political leadership aimed at mobilising support against each other (GSIDI01, interview with Tesfa, face-to-face, 9 July 2023). According to the informants, the local voices of the grassroots communities, religious leaders, elders, and youth-led bottom-up peace-building initiatives needed to be promoted to bring about sustainable resolution of the cycles of war in the region.

Pretoria Cessation of Hostilities Agreement: More questions than answers

According to the key informant interviewees, more than seven months into the Pretoria Cessation of Hostilities Agreement, Eritrea is still occupying Tigrayan villages in Egela, Tahtay Adyabo, Irob, and the whole Western Zone of Tigray (GSKII01, interview with Tesfa, face-to-face, 9 July 2023; TAKII02, interview with Tesfa, face-to-face, 7 June 2023; IRKII03, interview with Tesfa, face-to-face, 18 July 2023). Most of the localities in the vicinity of Hoya Medeb, Semhal, and May Hamato, as well as some parts of Ziban Guila and Erdi Jeganu, are under Eritrean occupation (GSKII01, interview with Tesfa, face-to-face, 9 July 2023). Similarly, Endalgeda, Weratle, Alitena and Hegerelekoma of Irob Woreda, as well as Geter Badme, Badme Town, Gemhalo, Adi-Tsetser and some parts of Adeneyti, Lemlem and Adi-Aser in Tahtay Adyabo Woreda, are occupied by Eritrea (IRKII03, interview with D'TesfaZT, face-to-face, 18 July 2023; TAKII02, interview with Tesfa, face-to-face, 7 June 2023).

The focus group discussants in Gerhu Sirnay stated that the Pretoria Agreement did not enable them to return to their homes (GSIDI02, interview with Tesfa, face-to-face, 8 July 2023). This was because according to an interviewee:

The procedures that lately developed into an agreement didn't include all warring parties to come to the table. At least one major actor in the war, Eritrea, is not part of the procedure. As a result, we are paying the cost of the shallow definition of the

warring parties being IDP since 3 November 2020. (GSIDI01, interview with Tesfa, face-to-face, 9 July 2023)

In addition to this, the IDPs in Gerhu Sirnay showed the list of 17 civilians kidnapped by the Eritrean Defence Forces since the signing of the agreement (GSFGD02, focus group interview with Tesfa, face-to-face, 8 July 2023). The key informant also indicated that three civilians were killed by Eritrean soldiers after the signing of the agreement (GSKII01, interview with Tesfa, face-to-face, 9 July 2023).

The discussants in Aksum also questioned how the Pretoria Peace Agreement can bring justice, when all the signatories are Ethiopians only, while the perpetrators of the atrocities in Tigray are Ethiopians, Eritreans, Somalis, and other regional actors (AXFGD01, focus group interview with Tesfa, face-to-face, 23 March 2023). One of the participants said:

We don't know what this agreement is meant by transitional justice. For transitional justice to work, there must be agreement on what happened, who did what to whom which the agreement didn't address at all. How transitional justice within one country could work in a regional war where UN-registered states invaded other registered states. If the claim in the Pretoria Agreement is to encourage impunity in the name of peace, then we will see how durable that peace will be. (AXFGD01, focus group interview with Tesfa, face-to-face, 23 March 2023)

The participants in the discussions acknowledged that the agreement had temporarily de-escalated the state of war, it only contributed to strengthening Ethiopia's narrative on the internal conflict, ignoring that Eritrea and Somalia were directly involved in the war. An interviewee in Samre said:

The wrong problem definition of the 1998–2000 war was a border conflict where the international policy actors rushed to demarcate borders resulting in a stalemate for 20 years. This wrong problem definition of the Tigray war by the international policy actors which developed to the terms of the Pretoria Agreement may not have a different fate. This is because people who are being denied justice will not keep silent at all; they rather will wait for the right time to come for them. Unless there is a paradigm shift in the definition of the Tigray war, I feel there may be another cycle of war because, not I am pessimistic rather, the trends so far showed me the same. (SMIDI16, focus group interview with Tesfa, face-to-face, 11 June 2023)

The interviewees also mentioned that the African Union (AU), an organisation that claimed that the Tigray war was a legitimate act to preserve Ethiopia's unity and stability, should have been subject to investigation on its responsibility for enabling the atrocities in Tigray, and that it was wrong that the AU was asked to play a mediation role in establishing the agreement (SHIDI07, focus group interview with Tesfa, face-to-face, 4 June 2023; SMIDI13, focus group interview with Tesfa, face-to-face, 11 June 2023).

The discussants in Aksum indicated that they saw the Pretoria Cessation of Hostilities Agreement as inadequate when it is then observed that the United Nations Investigation Team on Ethiopia was denied access to Tigray by the Ethiopian government (AXFGD01, focus group interview with Tesfa, face-to-face, 23 March 2023).

Discussion

The findings not only confirm the involvement of Eritrea in the Tigray war, but also suggest that its presence in Tigray was preplanned and purposefully designed, on the orders of the Eritrean line of command from the top. In this discussion the findings of the interviews and FGDs are discussed, comparing them with the available literature and considering the conceptual framework of this study.

Background: A history of recurrent war

Having established Eritrea's involvement in the war, the next question is: What was its motive for participation? The relationship between Ethiopia and Eritrea had been historically contested over time, especially during changes of regimes. The Haile Selassie and Derg regimes took diplomatic and military measures to impede the Eritreans' struggle for independence, while the EPLF and TPLF complemented each other enabling them to be the sole representatives of the armed struggles in their respective areas (Reid, 2021). However, important differences were observed in ideology, military tactics, and the definition of nationality, which reinforced the rift between the parties (Reid, 2021; Young, 1996). Following the downfall of the Derg regime, both parties seemed to settle in as

‘normal’ political actors, and the international policy actors acclaimed their leaders as ‘princes’ of an African Renaissance (Perlez, 2000). But the hope of peace for the Horn of Africa (Henze, 1991) was short-lived, followed by the 1998–2000 war. The international community, including the US, UN, and Organization of African Unity, oversaw the border demarcation-based Framework Agreement, which resulted in a two-decade stalemate between Eritrea and Ethiopia. According to the informants of this research, although the international policy actors aimed to bring peace and stability to the region, they based their efforts on the incorrect definition of the problem as border conflict. Hence, the main reasons for the conflict were not addressed in the Framework Agreement, sowing the seeds for future conflict. The issue of fluid nationality and the frictions emerging over ‘belonging’ of the populations north and south of the Mereb River gave rise to the hostile involvement of Eritrea in the Tigray war. The Eritrean leadership has an interest in preserving an Eritrean national identity as different from its shared Tigrayan roots.

The Eritrea-Ethiopia Joint Declaration of Peace

According to the findings of this research, the Joint Declaration of Peace and Friendship between Ethiopia and Eritrea enabled Eritrea to regain its destabilisation role in the Horn of Africa by lifting the sanctions. The informants compared this agreement with the short-lived honeymoon period (1993–1998) following the signing of the Asmara Pact, when relations were not institutionalised.

Selassie and Van Reisen (2019) explained the Eritrean people were not able to reap the dividends of the 2018 Peace Agreement, while Stigant and Phelan (2019) stated that the 2018 Peace Agreement depended solely on the individual relationships of PM Abiy Ahmed and President Isayas Afwerki, which was inadequate and even risky. Melicherová *et al.* (2024) found that the hostilities expressed by Eritrea against Tigray began openly in January 2018, when President Isayas declared “Game over, Woyane” to Tigray – which was prior to the Declaration of Peace. At the time, this message was not interpreted by the international community as a declaration of war against Tigray. However, any peace efforts at the grassroots level were halted on a practical level by the closing of the borders by Eritrea, a

few months after signing the Declaration of Peace. According to the informants, the intention of the 2018 Declaration of Peace, for Ethiopia and Eritrea to join forces to mobilise against Tigray, became apparent when Eritrea and Ethiopia started coordinating the mobilisation of their armies.

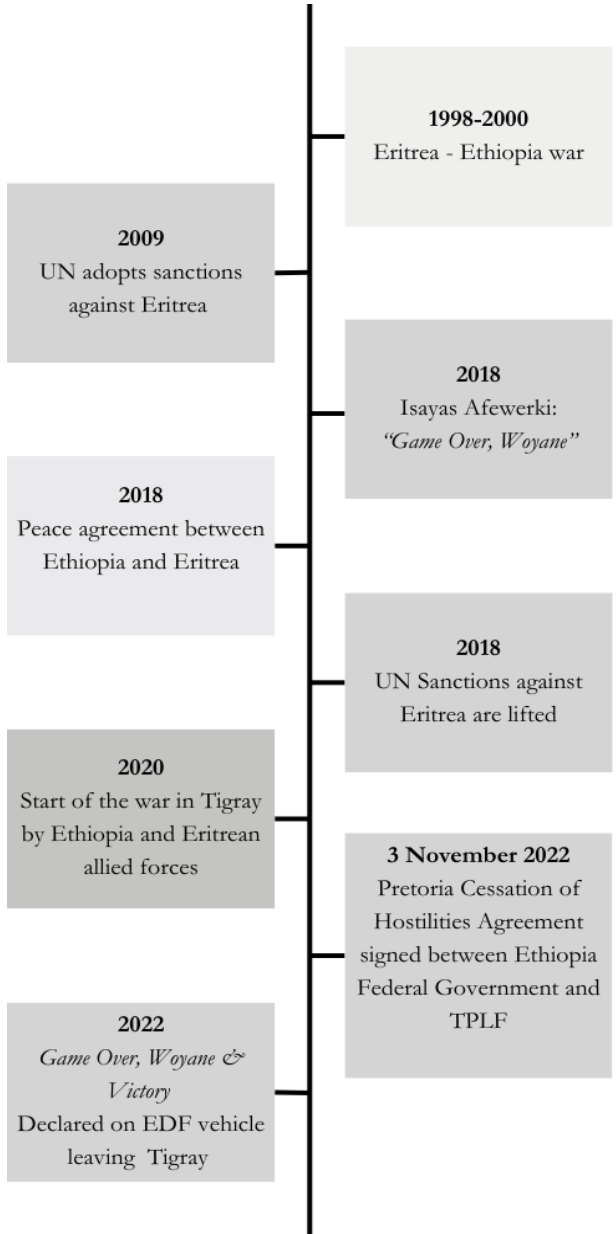


Figure 4.3. Timeline of Tigray war

When Eritrean troops left the theatre of war in Tigray in 2023, the EDF again announced ‘Game over, Woyane’, as a message of victory and intimidation, intended to instil fear among the people of Tigray (Tesfa *et al.*, 2024).

Involvement of Eritrea in the war

The findings of this research indicate that Eritrea had already declared war on Tigray in 2018, following the disclosure of its aim to perpetrate a campaign to implement the policy referred to as ‘Game over’. Alongside with the military build-up, Eritrea issued a statement on 31 October 2020 accusing the TPLF of impeding regional peace and stability (Shabait, 2020). The President Debretsion of the Tigray regional government stated: “We have prepared our military of Special Force not in need of a war, but if the worst comes” (Medihane, 2020).

Former Eritrean Defence Minister Mesfin Hagos said that the Eritrean and federal Ethiopian military had an ad hoc base in Gherghera, on the outskirts of Asmara, where the units were expected to be the hammer and the Northern Command the anvil to defeat the TPLF (Mesfin, 2020). He also indicated that in the 48 hours before the TPLF fired a missile at Asmara on 14 November 2020, local sources counted close to 30 military airplanes flying in thousands of soldiers from Ethiopia (Mesfin, 2020).

Some international actors, including the US, explained the participation of Eritrea as being triggered by the rocket attack on Asmara on 14 November 2020, but by that time Eritrean soldiers had already captured Badme, Gemhalo, Adi-Tsetser and Sheraro in alliance with ENDF and Amhara forces. Residents of Hoya Medeb who were displaced on 3 November 2020 also indicated that Eritrean soldiers killed civilians on their way to Gerhu Sirnay. Van Reisen, Berhe and Smits (2021) reported that Eritrean soldiers were seen in Gerhu Sirnay in the early morning of 4 November 2020, killing civilians in the town. This indicates that Eritrea was a major actor in designing, as well as perpetrating, the Tigray war, which gave the war a regional nature from the beginning.

Van Reisen, Berhe and Smits (2021) also found that Eritrean soldiers entered Tigray on 2 November 2020, two days before the war was

declared to have begun. Another military mobilisation witnessed by the informants was that the Northern Command of ENDF was in position to dismantle the political leadership of Tigray in coordination with the commandos who landed at Alula Aba Nega Airport in Mekelle late on the evening of 3 November 2020. Participants in this research confirmed the events that night, earlier described by Van Reisen, Berhe and Smits (2021).

Social media sources indicate that on 1 November 2020 16 buses of ENDF soldiers were mobilised from a camp in Shilaabo city in the Somalia region (Faysal, 2020). Media reports confirmed the participation of Eritrea early in the war. According to news media Reuters (Reuters, 2021) the Eritrean army was complementing the military campaigns of the ENDF on all possible fronts including Zalambesa. Eritrean soldiers indiscriminately massacred civilians in Zalambesa town on 13 November 2020 (Tigrai Online, 2021).

The US called Eritrea's reaction to the rocket attacks from Tigray 'restraint', indicating the war was started internally between Ethiopia and Tigray. The excerpt from the BBC news report on 18 November 2020 stated:

The US says it is concerned by what it calls a "blatant attempt to cause regional instability" by local forces in Ethiopia's Tigray region after they launched rocket attacks last weekend against neighbouring Eritrea... The rocket attacks on the Eritrean capital, Asmara, were a sign of how the internal conflict in Ethiopia could spread to the rest of the Horn of Africa... The US said it admired "Eritrea's restraint", which the State Department said had helped "prevent the further spreading of the conflict". (US Embassy in Ethiopia, 2020)

The assessment by the US that Eritrea was showing restraint was posted on the Ethiopia Foreign Ministry's website (MFA, 2021). While the US State Department officially stated it that it 'admired' Eritrea for not engaging in the internal war, the EDF had reached the edge of Aksum and was fighting along with ENDF, Amhara Fano, and Amhara Special Forces.

Collaboration with Amhara Special Forces

Abere Adamu, the late Police Commissioner of the Amhara Region confirmed that the Amhara Special Forces under his command had

made preparations for the war in Tigray long before 4 November 2020. He was quoted as saying:

It is history and let me tell you what happened during this time. Amhara region police and Temesgen Tiruneh who was the President of the Amhara region [at the time], already knew that this thing was going to happen, especially TPLF's preparation, as they were next door to us. Therefore we have already done our homework. And accordingly, deployment of forces had taken place in our borders from east to west. The war started that night after we had already completed our preparations. (Addis Standard, 2021)

Abere Adamu disclosed the communication he had with his subordinate who mobilised and positioned the Amhara Regional Special Forces in the war field close to Humera. He said:

After that, we were all at work. A little later Assistant Commissioner Biset – Assistant Commissioner in the police sector is equivalent to that of Brigadier General – and I wish I could call him as such because that is a familiar title. He called me again and told me that it was going as per our discussion. What we have talked about was, because it is now in the past let me make it clear for you today: with those within [ENDF Northern Command members], with whom we had close relations, especially with those members of the mechanised forces stationed near Humera we had relations with them and we have already studied how to retrieve the force to come to us if something happened. (Addis Standard, 2021)

The Commissioner further revealed that not only was he aware, but he also had consultations about the war before it started. He stated:

So when I and Commissioner Biset say “according to what we discussed” we understand [each other] what we were saying. What it meant was to make members [ENDF Northern Command] of the steel-clad mechanised forces come to us under the protection of our Special Forces, and after they reached us, to commander them to turn back to face the enemy. So he asked me “They are coming, what do I do with them” so I told him to divert them back to face the enemy. He did it. The armored mechanised members that we provided protection and retrieved from there protected our forces. And the infantry marched in. You all know what happened next. This is how the war started; this was the day. [...Audience clap...]. (Addis Standard, 2021)

Amhara Regional State Police Commissioner then informed the ENDF Chief of Party that their plan, made long before the war was declared, enabled them to celebrate joy. Abere said:

In the process, after the war started and after we had allied the armoured mechanised members with our forces, I called General Birhanu Jula [ENDF Chief of Staff]. General we have retrieved your forces [ENDF] and allied them with our [Amhara] forces. I asked him to bring down a directive of alignment between ENDF and Amhara Forces. At times of war, there is this language of directive of alignment otherwise there could emerge incidents in which allies end up hitting each other. So we need to do that and when I told it to General Birhanu, his speech [response] was a mix of joy and doubt. Joy because we retrieved the armoured mechanised forces and directed them to face the enemy. I doubt it because I think he wondered how that could be possible. That is what I understood from his tone. In any case, I told him what was done was done and asked him to give us the alignment directive. And he agreed; the war continued that way. (Abbay Media, 2020; Addis Standard, 2021)

Border localities in Egela stated that both armies, the ENDF and EDF, crossed the Belesa border with Tigray, killing any civilians they encountered, in the early morning of 4 November 2020 hours before the war was declared (GSFGD02, focus group interview with DT, face-to-face, 8 July 2023). The federal government framed the war as caused by a surprise attack by TDF on the ENDF Northern Command, but the former TPLF official Sekoutoure Getachew described it as a “pre-emptive strike” (EBC, 2020; Dimtsi Weyane Television, 2020).

Evidence today shows that ENDF, EDF, and the Amhara Special Forces prepared a military offensive long before 4 November 2020. The attack on the Northern Command in Tigray was the result of prior military developments. Evidence shows that the parties to the war had mobilised their military capacities beforehand.

Cessation of Hostilities Agreement – without Eritrea

The African Union saw the Tigray war as Ethiopia’s internal legitimate act to preserve national unity and stability, as expressed in the Inter-governmental Authority on Development (IGAD) meeting hosted by Djibouti in the third week of December 2020. The Chairperson of the African Union Commission (AUC) said that

Ethiopia took ‘legitimate’ military action in its Tigray region to preserve the country’s unity and stability. Speaking after the conclusion of a meeting of regional leaders on Sunday evening, AUC Chairperson Moussa Faki Mahamat said Ethiopia’s military campaign in its Tigray Region was “legitimate for all states” (Ethiopia News Agency, 2020).

The 2022 Pretoria Cessation of Hostilities Agreement followed the same logic and defined the war as a local conflict, bringing only the Ethiopian government and TPLF to the negotiating table. Although the agreement discussed transitional justice, it did not say anything about how the accountability of Eritrea would be addressed.

According to this research, more than eight months into the Pretoria Cessation of Hostilities Agreement, Eritrea still occupies: Hoya Medeb, Semhal, May Hamato; parts of Ziban Guila and Erdi Jeganu in Egela Woreda; Endalgeda, Weratle, Alitena and Hagerelekoma in Irob Woreda; Geter Badme, Badme Town, Gemhalo, Adi-Tsetser and some parts of Adeneyti and Lemlem in Tahtay Adyabo, as well as the whole Western Zone of Tigray. The continuation of indiscriminate killing, kidnapping, and looting are among the atrocities that Eritrea is perpetrating in the villages of Tigray that it still occupied, despite the signing of the Cessation of Hostilities Agreement.

The participants in this research claimed that the international community failed to address the root causes of the cycles of war, atrocities, and migration in the Horn of Africa. Deleersnyder (2021) also found that the European Union and the African Union’s early warning mechanisms had not been able to prevent the escalation of the Tigray crisis. According to Verhoeven and Woldemariam (2022), the US neither succeeded in achieving peace and security in Ethiopia nor in the Horn of Africa. The scholars argued:

Instead of pursuing a careful approach that sought to place guardrails on the transition, particularly through the promotion of national consensus and a transitional roadmap, Washington effectively underwrote Abiy’s regime consolidation project through unconditional political support. The effect was to create massive problems of “moral hazard” – excessively risky policies by Abiy on the

understanding that the United States backed him to the hilt. (Verhoeven & Woldemariam, 2022)

Eritrea utilised the opportunity presented by the lifting of UN sanctions to mobilise resources to stage the Tigray war. The 2018 Peace Agreement did not address the need for peace by the communities on the two sides of the Mereb River, resulting in the bloodiest war since the world wars, with hundreds of thousands killed and more than 2 million others displaced.

Conclusion: A regional war by design

The research explored the historical, linguistic, and ethnic roots, and geographic proximity between Eritrea and Ethiopia, particularly focusing on Tigray, to understand the friction and cycles of war between them. Key points from the research include:

Historical contestations of statehood: The friction between Ethiopia and Eritrea is rooted in their historical and phenomenological contestations of statehood. Eritrean nationalism, influenced by its colonial master Italy, contrasts with the partially common Eritrean and Ethiopian ethnic roots in Tigray and the Aksumite civilisation. The common roots foster a sense of connectedness between the north and south of the Mereb River. This common ancestry in the highlands creates a complex sense of connectedness across the Mereb River, intertwining the identities of both nations.

Eritrean influence: The Eritrean leadership aspires to interfere in Ethiopia's affairs and establish a hegemonic influence in the Horn of Africa.

Post-independence conflict: After a brief honeymoon period post-1993 independence, Eritrea and Ethiopia engaged in a bloody war from 1998 to 2000. The Tigray war is seen as a continuation of the unresolved issues between the two countries, with Eritrea preparing for two decades to take revenge.

International perception: The international community initially defined the conflict as a border dispute, celebrating the 2018 Eritrean-Ethiopian Peace Treaty and lifting the UN sanctions. Therefore, the warning by Eritrean President Isayas that he would bring down Tigray

(‘Game over, Woyane’) declared in January 2018, was downplayed, and the war was wrongly framed as an domestic issue for Ethiopia.

Coordinated military action: Leading up to the Tigray war, Eritrea and Ethiopia coordinated military deployments. Ethiopian Airlines conducted flights to Asmara carrying soldiers and equipment, and multiple military divisions were positioned to attack Tigray from various fronts.

International community’s role: The international community’s response, particularly the Cessation of Hostilities Agreement, failed to address the root causes of the war in Tigray and Eritrea’s role. To this day, villages in Tigray remain occupied by Eritrean forces.

Grassroots peacebuilding: Despite the political and military conflicts, communities on both sides of the Mereb River share socio-economic, cultural, and religious ties and have an interest in peace. The research indicates that these border communities have a clear understanding of the drivers of the war and are capable of driving peacebuilding efforts if given the opportunity.

In summary, the research highlights the deep-rooted historical, political, and socio-economic factors contributing to the cycles of war between Eritrea and Ethiopia, emphasising the potential for grassroots peacebuilding amidst ongoing conflict and international missteps.

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Authors' contributions

Daniel Tesfa is a PhD student and he put together the first version of this chapter. He prepared the study-plan, the research approach and methodology, and conducted the research independently, collected the primary data, and he carried out the data analysis. Tesfa provided the first draft for this chapter. Mirjam Van Reisen provided input for the theoretical considerations for this chapter. Mirjam Van Reisen advised on the approach of the chapter, reviewed all the versions, and restructured the text. This work has been carried out as part of a PhD study.

Ethical clearance

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Weaponising the Media:

Exploring the Role of Ethiopian National Media in the Tigray War

S. E. Geb & Daniel Tesfa

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Today's listeners, the witnesses of tomorrow's jury

Abstract

This research examines the role of the Ethiopian media in the Tigray war, focusing on its use by the government to disseminate disinformation and further its agenda. It employs Hallin and Mancini's polarised pluralist model, Herman and Chomsky's propaganda model, and Entman's framing theory to analyse media content, organisational connections, journalists' political activities, audience partisanship, and journalistic practices. These factors reveal political parallelism, while the propaganda model highlights information sources and anti-'others' sentiment. Iyengar's diagnostic and prognostic frames are also used. The study explores how the political narrative of the Tigray war was established and reinforced. Key indicators include the media's alignment with political entities, the influence of information sources, and the frames shaping public perception. The research found that state-owned and party-affiliated media promoted government narratives, blaming Tigrayans collectively. Media frames dehumanised Tigrayans, portraying them as threats to Ethiopian unity and justifying the war. Government-controlled narratives led to ethnic profiling, killings, and atrocities. Critical media faced closures, intimidation, and arrests, allowing state-affiliated media to dominate. The study concludes that the Ethiopian media played an inflammatory role in the Tigray war.

Key words: Tigray war, Ethiopia, media, hate-speech, disinformation, media control, framing

Introduction

Historically, the media has been used to instigate atrocities and war crimes, for example, in the first and second world wars (Lazarsfeld & Merton, 1971), in Nazi Germany (Cole, 1998), and during the Vietnam war (Hallin, 1984; Taylor, 1992), Bosnian war (Kent, 2006), and Rohingya crisis (Brooten, 2015). A pertinent example of the media being weaponised to manipulate and mobilise the population is Rwanda. In Rwanda, it was found that an estimated 51,000 perpetrators, who committed 10% of the overall genocide in Rwanda, were incited to violence by Radio Télévision Libre des Mille Collines (RTLM) (Yanagizawa, 2014). More generally, in situations of war, the media is used to spread hate speech and propaganda, for the massive mobilisation of people against others, and consequent killings, as witnessed in Rwanda, Sierra Leone and Bosnia (Bratic, 2008).

The position that the media take on the causes and consequences of the war can either help resolve the conflict or aggravate the situation. The media can either play “an active part in the conflict and has responsibility for increased violence, or stays independent and out of the conflict, thereby contributing to the resolution of conflict and alleviation of violence” (Puddephatt, 2006, P. 4). This role is determined by various factors, including the degree of freedom given to the media power structures, particularly from those in power (Page, 1996).

The Tigray war, which started on 3 November 2020 and finished on 3 November 2022 with the Pretoria Cessation of Hostilities Agreement coming into force, resulted in the displacement of more than two million people, widespread sexual violence and massacres, and a siege and blockage of Tigray that caused many civilians to die of starvation (Melicherová *et al.*, 2024; Kidanu & Van Reisen, 2024; Tesfa *et al.*, 2024a; Tesfa *et al.*, 2024b; Kahsay, 2024). During this period, and leading up to it, the situation was reported heavily in the media. The media in Ethiopia has played an important role in promoting specific narratives on the reasons and causes of the war in Tigray. This chapter asks: *What role did the Ethiopian media play in the war in Tigray, what were the narratives it disseminated, and how are the political realities in Ethiopia constructed upon the narratives?*

To answer this question, this study analysed media content and strategic factors that impacted on the way that the media contributed to the war. Before presenting the findings of the study, the following sections provide a brief background to set the context, followed by the theoretical framework and methodology used for this study.

Background

Media in Ethiopia

The development of media in Ethiopia is about a century old and has traditionally served the wishes and whims of those in power (Nigusie, 2014). The media has supported different political agendas at different times, with different underlying political ideologies. The Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF), which came to power in 1991 after deposing the Derg²⁷ during the Ethiopian Civil War, used the media to further its interests by repressing critical views (Gudeta, 2008). Contrary to this view Stremlau (2014) stated that the EPRDF adopted media policy that enabled the private media to flourish, which served as forum for elite negotiation on the constitution. Skjerdal further indicated:

The media situation in Ethiopia [during the EPRDF regime] is best seen as an interchange between coercion and liberalisation. The period begins with liberalisation (1991–92) and proliferation of new media outlets (1992–96); turning into a phase of government clampdowns (1996–2000); followed by consolidation and renewed diversity (2000–05); then abruptly changing direction due to post-election setbacks (2005–07); succeeded by an interlude of revitalization (2007–10); before once again being affected by a wave of coercion (2010–12). (Skjerdal, 2012, p. 17)

The broadcast media in Ethiopia has been dominated by a state and ruling party monopoly, except a few private radio stations based in Addis Ababa (Nutman, 2013). For most of its modern history, the news media in Ethiopia has been a tool for government control because most of the broadcast media were state owned, while the few

²⁷ The Military Committee, or Derg, was a Marxist-Leninist party that ruled Ethiopia from 1974 to 1991. Atrocities including red terror, murder, forced disappearance, abuse of power, crimes against humanity, war crimes etc. were attributed to the regime (Girmachew, 2006).

private press lacked legal and operational conduciveness to perform their roles (Skjerdal, 2012). However, in recent years, media ownership has been diversified between the state and different parties, with diversification of community and private ownership of the broadcast media since 2017. Skjerdal and Mulatu (2020) described this as a pluralistic media society, after the long history of state monopolised media system.

The state television includes Ethiopia Television (ETV), Amhara Media Corporation (AMC), Addis Media Network (AMN), Oromia Broadcast Network (OBN), Debub TV, Tigray Mass Media Agency (TMMA), Afar TV, Somali TV, Gambela TV, Benshgul Gmuuz TV and Harar TV. In addition, there are state-owned print and online media outlets including Ethiopia Press Agency (EPA) and Ethiopia News Agency (ENA). The ruling party affiliated television includes Fana Broadcasting Corporate (FBC), Walta TV and Dimtsi Weyane Television (DWTV). There are private television stations including EBS TV, ARTS TV, Ahadu TV, Nahoo TV, JTV Ethiopia and Kana TV. Diaspora based media – Ethiopia Satellite Television (ESAT) and Oromia Media Network (OMN) – both established branch in Addis Ababa, following the election of Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed. Online and television media run by Ethiopian diaspora communities abroad, including Ethio 360 and Tigray Media House, also have a stake in the political communication of the country. The Reporter, Addis Standard, Ethio Forum, Reyot Media, Alpha Media, Ethiopia Insider and Ethiopia Business Review are among the privately run online and print media firms that report about Ethiopia.

Although freedom of expression is a fundamental human rights in international declarations, it is categorised as a democratic right in the Ethiopian Constitution (Zemchal, 2019). The media system in Ethiopia, including the private sector, is influenced by restrictive policy and regulatory approaches, under which the private media faces various challenges, including lack of access to government information, financial instability, heavy taxation on media materials as well as low institutional investment (Zemchal, 2019).

As soon as Prime Minister (PM) Abiy Ahmed came to power on 27 March 2018, the federal government took measures to remove

Tigrayans from the security, military and executive positions. Some of them were arrested, others fired. The then Chief of Staff of the Ethiopian National Defence Force (ENDF) General Seare Mekonen and visiting retired Major-General Gezae Abera were killed on 22 June 2019 (Ethiopian Embassy, 2019). Both of them were Tigrayan (BBC, 2019). This event was followed by the merger of the Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF) on 1 December 2019, which the Tigray People's Liberation Front (TPLF) claimed was unlawful (Assefa, 2018).

Initially, when Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed Ali came to power in 2018, there was hope of a new era of free media. The government freed journalists from prison; deregulated the sector, enabling the establishment of dozens of new media houses; and put into motion a media reform process that brought government and civil society together in a shared vision for change (Henok, 2022). However, Skjerdal and Mulatu (2020) state that the media system at the beginning of the Abiy era was observed as serving annihilation and othering frames, along ethnic-lines, by ethnically segmenting media institutions. Henok (2022) also indicated that the quick deregulation of a previously state-monopolised media system, without strong enabling institutions and laws, created a surge of media outlets and journalism associations, which fuelled polarisation and resulted in conflict along ethnic fault lines.

Political context

In 2018, after 27 years of power in Ethiopia, the coalition that made up the EPRDF²⁸ became unstable (Gardner, 2018). One of the main parties in the coalition, the Tigray People's Liberation Front (TPLF), was seen as a threat by other members of the coalition – the Oromo Democratic Party (ODP), Amhara Democratic Party (ADP) and Southern Ethiopian People's Democratic Movement (SEPDM). These political parties merged on 1 December 2019 to form the new

²⁸ The EPRDF was made up of a coalition of four parties: the Oromo Democratic Party (ODP), the Amhara Democratic Party (ADP), the Southern Ethiopian People's Democratic Movement (SEPDM) and the Tigray People's Liberation Front (TPLF) (Assefa, 2018).

Prosperity Party (PP), which the TPLF declined to join (Abdurahman, 2019). This led to the removal of Tigrayans from federal and administrative jobs, as well as their parliamentary positions in Addis Ababa, and the vilification of the TPLF as responsible for various crimes and human rights violations (Tronvoll, 2020). Unfortunately, the people of Tigray have been conflated with Tigray’s ruling party, the TPLF, which dominated the EPRDF during its nearly three decades in power (Tronvoll, 2020). As a result, Tigrayans have been collectively blamed and persecuted for the wrongdoings of the EPRDF, although the people of Tigray suffered equally under the repressive policies of the coalition (Yohannes, 2018).

In 2019, PM Abiy Ahmed was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize, among other reasons, for the Peace Agreement with Eritrea and his role in bringing about regional stability. However, the first of these achievements, the Peace Agreement with Eritrea, appears to have had an ulterior motive. This motive became apparent when forces from Eritrea, led by Isayas Afewerki, allied with the federal government of Ethiopia to invade Tigray. Afewerki’s statement: “አሽካሳል ወያነ ኣብቲ ዓለም ኣሸር ተባሂሉ” [“the theatre of Weyane²⁹ is no more. Game over”] (ERi-TV, 2018a) revealed Eritrea’s plan to depose the TPLF and destroy the people of Tigray (ERi-TV, 2018b).

In 2018–2019 political actors³⁰ in the Amhara region blocked the roads connecting Tigray from other parts of the country, as part of an economic siege (Samuel, 2019). The federal government seemed reluctant to resolve this situation or the growing disputes between Tigray and Amhara state (International Crisis Group, 2020). Instead, the federal government further marginalised Tigray by not disbursing the yearly budget allocated to Tigray (Al Jazeera, 2020a). In addition, the House of Representatives of the Tigray National Regional State

²⁹ Weyane or Woyane is a derogatory term used to refer to the TPLF, and more broadly the people of Tigray.

³⁰ The political actors in Amhara region that directly or indirectly contributed to the economic siege on Tigray include the Amhara Regional Government, Amhara Special Force, Amhara Militia, committees established in the name of regaining Welkayt and Raya from Tigray as well as Amhara Fano.

opposed the postponement of Ethiopia's sixth national election as unconstitutional and decided to have its own election. Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed denounced Tigray's election as illegal. In defiance, the government of Tigray denounced the postponement of the national election as unconstitutional and conducted its own regional election in the first week of September 2020. This was followed by the federal government's mobilisation of troops against Tigray.

Both sides have their own narrative about who began the war. The federal government claims that the war was triggered because the Tigray forces attacked the Northern Command of the Ethiopian National Defence Force (ENDF) on 4 November 2020, and that the federal government needed to intervene to restore control over the ENDF Northern Command Forces. According to other sources, the federal government had sent two planes with military commanders to Tigray on 3 November with the apparent aim to dismantle the Tigray administration (Van Reisen, 2021). According to Van Reisen, Smits and Kibrom (2021), the Tigray government had intelligence of the planned military action and stationed regional Special Forces when the planes with federal forces landed in Mekelle, the capital of Tigray. This resulted in armed fighting that started at the airport and which compelled the Tigray government to attack the Northern Command forces stationed in the region, to protect the regional government from being attacked (Van Reisen, 2021).

The events that precipitated the outbreak of war in November 2020 need further investigation, which is beyond the scope of this chapter. This study looks at the particular narratives that were promoted through the Ethiopian media. It was initially claimed by the federal government of Ethiopia that its invasion of Tigray was a brief 'law enforcement operation' to restore control over the regional state, which had broken away by organising elections which the Ethiopian government did not accept. But the Tigray War continued for two years after this and some say that the war has not yet ended, at the date of writing, as Western Tigray, parts of Southern Tigray, and North-Western, Eastern, and Central zones of Tigray are still under the control of a foreign invader, Eritrea, and Amhara Regional State militias. This investigation examines the role of the Ethiopian media

in the promotion of certain discourses on the reasons for, and causes of, the war in Tigray.

Theoretical framework

There are different theories that attempt to explain the role that the media plays in politics. The theoretical framework for this research is drawn from three theories – Hallin and Mancini’s (2004) political parallelism, under the polarised pluralist model, Herman and Chomsky’s (1988) propaganda model of manufacturing consent, as well as framing theories (Entman, 1993) – to understand the relationship between the media and political system in Ethiopia in reporting the Tigray war. The following subsections outline these theories.

Political parallelism

Hallin and Mancini (2004) define political parallelism as “the degree and nature of the links between the media and political parties or, more broadly, the extent to which the media system reflects the major political divisions in society” (Hallin & Mancini, 2004, p. 21). These scholars claim that even though a direct one-to-one connection between the media and the political system is not common today, political tendencies to control the media still exist (Hallin & Mancini, 2004). This is especially true when a news organisation (or most of its members) are aligned with a particular party.

Political parallelism has different components and indicators that can be used to identify the level of political presence in the media system of a certain country. The major indicators described by Hallin and Mancini (2004) are: media content, organisational connections, the tendency for media personnel to be active in political life, the partisanship of media audiences, and journalistic role orientations and practices. The indicator ‘media content’ refers to the extent to which political issues and events are covered in the news. The indicator ‘organisational connection’ describes the formal or informal connections the media has with political parties and other political actors, such as churches and trade unions (Hallin & Mancini, 2004). The ‘tendency for media personnel to be active in political life’ refers to an individual journalist’s political persuasion or loyalty to a

particular political party they support or the service they provide under cover of the journalism practice, while ‘journalistic role orientations and practices’ explains how journalistic practices impact on the selection, collection, and dissemination of politically oriented news reports. Political parallelism can also be manifested in ‘the partisanship of media audiences’, as the media are often approached by different party supporters (Hallin & Mancini, 2004).

Propaganda model

McNair (2011) argues that the relationship between the media and the political process is a dialectical one, involving action and reaction. The media report on and analyse political activity and are available as a resource for political actors and their advisers. In response, political actors have a major interest in understanding how the media works, and how best to achieve their communication objectives through the medium (McNair, 2011). Political actors and the state try to influence the media and stop it from performing its watchdog role. They try to control and manage the content of the news. States use different mechanisms for this, such as censorship, secrecy, regulation, and propaganda (Street, 2001).

According to McNair (2011), political content is considered and realised through the relationship between political organisations, the media, and the audience. Although, in theory, the media is meant to be independent, objective, impartial and unbiased, the literature reveals that, in practice, various factors influence this. As a result, the process of media production can be manipulated by those who have access to the media on favourable conditions. Herman and Chomsky (1988) highlight that the structure and performance of the media is affected by those who have the most resources or political power (Herman & Chomsky, 1988).

The propaganda model deals with the political economy of the mass media. The model is described as “the media system in which money and power are able to filter out the news to print, marginalise dissent, and allow the government and private interests to get their messages across to the public” (Herman & Chomsky, 1988, p. 2). In their propaganda model, Herman and Chomsky (1988) identified five

filters of mass media news which consistently served the interests of the elite, determining which news or information to disseminate to the public, which to make salient and which to omit (silence). These filters are (1) the size, concentrated ownership, owner wealth and profit orientation of the dominant mass media, (2) advertising as the primary income source of the mass media, (3) 'flak' and the enforcers, (4) sources of information, and (5) anti-ideological others as a controlling mechanism (Herman & Chomsky, 1988). This research uses the fourth and fifth filters – sources of information and anti-others, adopted by Alford (2017) from anti-communism (Herman & Chomsky, 1988) to anti-ideological others or anti-others filters (Alford, 2017), news filters – for this analysis.

Framing theory

Framing is defined as the “selection of information and rhetorical devices, the sender of a communication may explain the relevant policy problem and designate solutions” (Entman, 1993, p. 52). Framing is an essential body of political communication research that examine how media affects public opinion (Chong & Druckman, 2007). Frames are “the selection, organisation and emphasis of certain aspects of reality, to the exclusion of others” (de Vreese *et al.*, 2001, p. 108).

Frames “shape individual understanding and opinion concerning an issue by stressing specific elements or features of the broader controversy, reducing a usually complex issue down to one or two central aspects” (Nelson *et al.*, 1997, p. 568). Iyengar (1991) classified framing of political news reporting into episodic and thematic frames that influence citizen’s attributions of responsibility, emotional reaction and policy views. Episodic framing targets creating news incidents that trigger emotional reactions of the public in favour of the framed policy while thematic frame focuses on strategic positioning of broader policy issues in a general context (Aarøe, 2011). According to Iyengar (1991) thematic frames focus on political issues and events in a broader context and present collective, abstract, and general evidence while episodic frames describe concrete events and particular cases that illuminate the issue. Accordingly, this

research examined the episodic and thematic framing of the selected media organisations about the Tigray war.

Integration of a conceptual framework

The research is guided by Hallin and Mancini's polarised pluralist model of media, political parallelism, as well as Herman and Chomsky's propaganda model and Entman's framing theory. Accordingly, factors like media content, organisational connections, the tendency of journalists to be active in political activities, the partisanship of the media audience, journalistic role orientations and practices (indicators of political parallelism), as well as source of information and anti-others filters of propaganda model were used as criteria for analysis. This section presents the results of this research using the four indicators from the political parallelism model identified by Hallin and Mancini (2004), the two filters from the propaganda model (Herman and Chomsky, 1988) as well as diagnostic and prognostic frames identified by Iyengar (1991). The researchers preferred to integrate the criteria from the mentioned theories so as to explore how the political narrative of the Tigray war was established and reinforced through examining the media content, the media system as well as the government organisational connections employed to establish and maintain the narrative.

Methodology

Approach

A qualitative methodology was used in this study to explore how the media in Ethiopia, other than in Tigray – including Ethiopia Broadcasting Corporation (ETV), Fana Broadcasting Corporate (FBC), Walta Television, Ethiopia Satellite Television (ESAT), Amhara Media Corporation (AMC), Addis Media Network (AMN) and Oromo Broadcasting Network (OBN), Ethiopia Press Agency (EPA) and Ethiopia News Agency (ENA) – reported the Tigray war. The research team utilised media content, organisational connections, the tendency of journalists to be active in political activities, the partisanship of the media audience, journalistic role orientations and practices criteria of political parallelism, source of information and anti-others filters of propaganda model as well as episodic and

thematic frames of framing theory. Table 5.1 explains the list of research criteria and the type of data utilised in this research.

The data collected for this research included: media data (news, documentaries and speeches), focus group discussion (FGD) and in-depth interviews (IDIs).

Table 5.1. Research criteria and types of data used

No.	Criteria	Type of data used
1	Media content	Media data (news, documentaries and speeches)
2	Organisational connection	FGD, IDI and (to lesser extent) media data
3	Tendency for media personnel to be active in political life	IDI, FGD and media data
4	Journalistic role orientations and practices	IDI, FGD and media data
5	Partisanship of media audiences	Media data, IDI and FGD
6	Source of information	IDI, FGD and media data
7	Anti-others	IDI, FGD and media data
8	Diagnostic frame	Media data
9	Prognostic frame	Media data

Source of criteria: Adapted by the authors from Hallin & Mancini, 2004; Herman & Chomsky, 1988 and Entman, 1993

The operational definition of media the researchers used in the above table explicitly defines the mainstream broadcast, online and print publications. Media content was used in all research criteria. The research team used qualitative content analysis to explore the distinct patterns in the diagnostic and prognostic frames of reporting. The research encompassed print media, online articles, documentaries, television broadcasts, and YouTube. The research mainly used news, speeches and documentaries disseminated/published by the mainstream print and broadcast media in Ethiopia.

The research process included a verification of the provenance of media items. In some cases, the research team found that the speeches which were disseminated by the selected mainstream media were removed from their online documentation-YouTube page. Hence, the team used alternative documentation links of the mainstreamed content from other YouTube and social media pages. To verify the originality of the videos that were used from alternative documentations, the research team disseminated a survey through Google forms to 30 experts in digital media, communication, videography, information science and computer science. Almost all (28) of them responded to the survey. Accordingly, all of them verified (100%) that five of the videos we surveyed were originally disseminated by at-least one of the national broadcasters. For the remaining four videos we used from alternative documentation, 25 (89.3%), 27 (96.4%), 24 (88.9%) and 26 (96.3%) responded that they were originally disseminated by at-least one of the national media organisations.

In addition, interviews and a focus group discussion were conducted with media professionals, members of editorial teams at state media houses and strategic actors, who provided data on how the media ownership and institutional structural, as well as factors related to media practices, influenced media content during the reporting of war narratives. Table 5.2 summarises the coded list of participants in in-depth interview and focus group discussion.

Table 5.2. Participants of IDIs and FGD

No.	Description of source	of Work	Tool	Assigned code
1	Editor	Work for national mainstream media based in Mekelle	IDI	EDIDI01
2	Reporter	Work for national mainstream media based in Mekelle	IDI	REIDI02

No.	Description of Work source	Work	Tool	Assigned code
3	Government Communication official	Worked for government communication bureau based in Mekelle	IDI	COIDI03
4	Reporter	Work for national mainstream media based in Mekelle	IDI	REIDI04
5	Member of editorial team	Worked for national mainstream media based in Addis Ababa	IDI	ETIDI05
6	Member of editorial team	Work for national mainstream media based in Addis Ababa	FGD	ETFGD01
7	Member of editorial team	Worked for national mainstream media based in Addis Ababa	FGD	ET1FGD01
8	Editor	Work for national mainstream media based in Mekelle	FGD	EDFGD01
9	Reporter	Work for national mainstream media based in Mekelle	FGD	REFGD01
10	Coordinator	Work for national mainstream media based in Mekelle	FGD	COFGD01

The research process was started after obtaining ethical clearance obtained from College of Social Sciences and Languages (reference number CSSL/RCS/0005) in Mekelle University. All the participants in the in-depth interviews and focus group discussion consented to

provide information as well as to use their opinions in the research. The in-depth interviews were conducted on 18 May to 15 June 2022, while the focus group discussion was conducted on 22 June 2022.

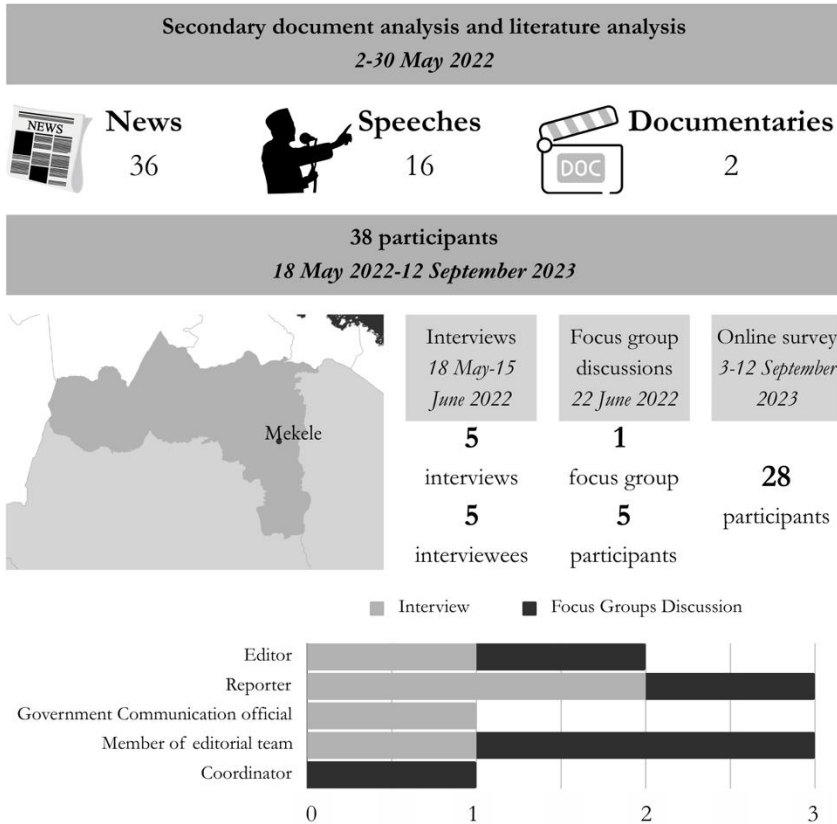


Figure 5.1. Overview of data collected and used in this study

Sampling procedure

Multiple-stage purposive sampling was used for the qualitative content analysis. In determining the media content, documentaries and news reporting were selected for analysis. Firstly, documentaries on Tigray and/or Tigrayans instigated by the media and broadcast by ETV, FBC, Walta Television, ESAT, AMC, AMN and OBN after Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed came to power in April 2018 were purposively selected. These documentaries included *Yefitib Sekoka* (contextually translated as “The Agony of Injustice”) (OBN, 2018) and *Shiwoch Yetesewulet Yeginbot Haya Dil Yekelebesew Yegifegnoch Bedel*

(contextually translated as ‘The Heartless Who Manipulated the May 20 Conquest’) (Walta TV, 2020) were selected for analysis. *Yefitih Sekoka* was broadcast by more than 10 local and federal media institutions, including ETV, AMC, ESAT, FBC, Walta TV, OBN AMN and Debut TV on 11 December 2018 at the same time, while *Shiwoch Yetesewulet Yeginbot Haya Dil Yekelebesew Yegifegnoch Bedel* was broadcast by ETV, Walta TV, FBC and many other media outlets in the last week of May 2020. Table 5.3 presents the list of the media data used and the sampling technique applied.

Table 5.3. Media data used and sampling technique used

No.	Type of content	Sampling technique
1	Documentary (Yefitih Sekoka disseminated in December 2018 and Shiwoch Yetesewulet Yeginbot Haya Dil Yekelebesew Yegifegnoch Bedel broadcast in May 2020)	Purposively selected to explore how Tigrayans were portrayed before the declared war. Both documentaries were disseminated by many media including ETV, Walta TV, ESAT, OBN, AMN, AMC and FBC at the same broadcast time.
2	News (October 2020 to December 2020)	News from ETV (8 pm), ENA and EPA were purposively selected to understand how the Tigray war was portrayed-a month before the start of the Tigray war, during the month of declared war and a month after the declared war.
3	Speeches about Tigray, Tigrayans and Tigray war	Speech by public officials and influential persons before and during the declared war were purposely selected for analysis. Convenience sampling was utilised to purposively select speeches which explicitly discuss Tigray, Tigrayans and Tigray

No.	Type of content	Sampling technique
		war which were disseminated by any of the Ethiopian media. ³¹

Secondly, news content disseminated by three state media stations, ETV, EPA and ENA, were purposely selected to examine how state media framed the war. Accordingly, the 8 pm prime news broadcast by ETV was selected to understand how the state media framed Tigray, Tigrayans and the causes of the Tigray war. These prime news broadcasts were canvassed from October 2020 to December 2020 (a month before the start of the Tigray war, which began in November 2020, to a month after). The timeframe was selected to understand how the media reported the antecedence (October 2020) and immediate (in November 2020) causes of the Tigray war, as well as the effects of the war (examined after the war in December 2020). News stories published by EPA and ENA during the periods were also analysed in order to explore how various state-owned media genres (broadcast, print and online) portrayed the war.

Thirdly, speeches about Tigray, Tigrayans and Tigray war by public officials and influential persons were also utilised as part of the content analysis. The research used convenience sampling to purposively select speeches which exclusively discussed Tigray, Tigrayans and the Tigray war. The sampling time frame started from August 2016, the time when ethnic slurs against Tigray began to be spread through official media, to October 2022, the signing of the Pretoria Cessation of Hostilities Agreement between TPLF and the Ethiopian government. Speeches by public officials, military leaders, artists and local militia leaders were selected for their contribution to public opinion making of the Ethiopian audience.

³¹ In a few cases the research team used the links of the speeches from social media and online media because some of the mainstream media organisations deleted the speeches from their pages. Thus, the team didn't sample social media content for itself, but used it to locate the speeches that were deleted from the mainstream media. The originality of the videos used from alternative documentations were verified using experts' survey.

The main purpose of analysing the documentaries and speeches was to generate an in-depth understanding of how the media portrayed Tigray and Tigrayans during the media propaganda war (from December 2018 to October 2020). The focus of the prime news and speeches analysis was to explore how the media framed the causes and effects of the Tigray war. In addition, the viewpoints of journalists, members of editorial teams, and strategic leadership from some of the media houses who were involved in shaping the way the Tigray war was framed participated in interviews and a focus group discussion. This is because the research aimed to explore the practice of the media houses and the interaction among media professionals, managers, the political groups and other opinion makers parallel with the media content.

Data collection tools

The research employed three techniques for data collection. Firstly, the research team gathered the media content used during the timeframes specified above. The media content (news, speeches and documentaries) was retrieved from the YouTube pages of the different media stations from 15–30 May 2022: ETV,³² ESAT,³³ FBC,³⁴ OBN³⁵ and Walta TV³⁶. The news stories from EPA³⁷ and ENA³⁸ were accessed on 2–14 May 2022.

Secondly, journalists (reporters and editors) and editorial team members who work or worked in three of the national media outlets were purposively selected for interview and focus group discussion. Five journalists who worked for three national media outlets in Ethiopia as well as a member of the communication leadership, who was responsible for shaping how the Tigray war should be framed,

³² <https://www.youtube.com/c/EBCworld>

³³ <https://www.youtube.com/@ESATtvEthiopia>

³⁴ <https://www.youtube.com/@fanabroadcastingcorporate>

³⁵ <https://www.youtube.com/@OBNoromiyaa>

³⁶ <https://www.youtube.com/@WaltaTV>

³⁷ <https://press.et/herald/>

³⁸ <https://www.ena.et>

were interviewed in the period from 18 May to 15 June 2022. A focus group discussion was also conducted to explore the way the Tigray war was framed. Two former editorial staff from two national media outlets, one editor, one coordinator and one reporter of the national media outlets participated in the focus group discussion which was conducted on 22 June 2022.

Data analysis

The analysis of the data gathered explored the commonly applied frames, media sources and their link(s) (deviation from) with political interests, as well as how the media attributed responsibility in reporting the Tigray war.

The media content was first collected, and then reviewed by the researchers and selected according to criteria that were driven from the theoretical framework. Material that was originally published in Tigrinya or Amharic language was translated by authors into English. After three brainstorming sessions between the researchers, initial codes were developed from the pool of the data. Then the coded categories were registered in Excel sheets. Themes were then developed based on the codes. Then the research team cross checked that the themes developed captured the essence of the whole data. Finally, the analysis was conducted based on the themes developed.

Results

In this section, the findings are presented on media content, organisational aspects related to the media, the political engagement of members of the media, the media audience, the orientation on journalistic roles and practices and the role of source and anti-others elements of discourse. The research used news, speeches and documentaries for the analysis of media content; IDIs, FGD and news for organisational connection, and data from IDIs, FGD and news for media personnel, journalistic roles and partisanship of media audience, source of information and anti-others.

Media content

The findings with regards to the media content are presented according to the classification of several narratives that were found to

dominate the interpretation of events. These narratives are discussed below.

The ‘Fish’ and the ‘Sea’: Media as a whetstone for ethnic incitement

The diaspora-based medium, ESAT, used an ethnically motivated framing to instigate Ethiopians to stand together against the TPLF/EPRDF rule. ESAT called for action against Tigrayans in a broadcast by journalist Mesay Mekonen on 6 August 2016, referring to Tigray people as “(deformed) fish” that should be removed:

This delinquency plan is 5 million people to 95 million people. So, the one and the only way of exterminating the deformed fish from the sea is through dispelling the sea. Thus, without doubt, we call for all to begin taking our measures wherever we are. (Tghat, 2021)³⁹

In this call, the Tigrayan mass is portrayed as the sea while the TPLF is represented by deformed fish. Accordingly, the call explicitly called Ethiopians to exterminate the people of Tigray in order to exterminate the TPLF once and forever.

The youth protests in Oromia and some parts of Amhara challenged the political, economic and social structures of the country which forced the EPRDF to appoint a new leader from Oromo, Abiy Ahmed, as a political solution to the crisis. Abiy Ahmed became chairman of the EPRDF on 27 March 2018 and was elected Prime Minister of Ethiopia in April of the same year. While the Ethiopia-Eritrea rapprochement within the context of the conclusion of the Peace Agreement, was a headline in 2018, President of Eritrea, Isayas Afwerki, uttered “*Weyane*⁴⁰... Game over” (ERi-TV, 2018a), and revealed in his discussion with the youth in Sawa that his regime aimed at the political cleansing of Tigray (ERi-TV, 2018b). This was complemented by Prime Minister Abiy’s portrayal of Tigrayans as “daylight hyenas” who perpetrated the bombing of a public gathering

³⁹ The original Amharic version of ESAT’s call to Ethiopians is as follows: “ይህ የጥፋት አቅድ የታቀደው ከ5 ሚሊዮን ህዝብ ለ95 ሚሊዮን ህዝብ ነው። ስለዚህ የተበላሸን አሳ ከባህር ማስወገጃ መንገዱ አንዱ ነው የባህሩ ወሃ ማስወገድ። ስለዚህ ሳናመነታ ሁላችንም በያለንበት እርምጃችንን እንድንጀምር ጥሪ እናስተላልፋለን።”

⁴⁰ Weyane or Woyane is a derogatory term used to refer to the TPLF, and more broadly the people of Tigray.

in his support in Meskel Square on 23 June 2018 (EBC, 2018), saying that they were anti-reformists and had escaped to Mekelle, the capital of Tigray (Yethiopia News, 2018).

‘Tigrinya speakers’: Yefitih Sekoka

Shortly after these events, in December 2018, the State and State-affiliated media in Ethiopia released the documentary *Yefitih Sekoka* (contextually translated as ‘The Agony of Injustice’). This documentary positioned Tigrayans as the sole perpetrators of human rights violations in Ethiopia (Fana Television, 2018a). The documentary, which ran for around an hour and half, was broadcast by seven television agencies: ETV, FBC, Walta TV, AMN, AMC, OBN and Debub TV. It used the term ‘Tigrinya speakers’ and described Tigrayans as torturers, murderers, corrupt, excruciates, ghosts, traitors, homosexual and devils who stood against Ethiopian national interests.⁴¹ In the documentary, the narrator explained that the source of the information was the Investigation Team assigned by the Office of Attorney General to investigate human rights violations (OBN Oromiyaa, 2018, 0:01:56–0:02:41).

The documentary set the agenda for the audience in the first five minutes, alleging that ‘Tigrinya speakers’ (Fana Television, 2018a, 0:05:25) were responsible for human rights violations, later mentioning torching, electric shock, beating, and murder (Fana Television, 2018a, 0:50:01), and attributing these acts to the people of Tigray (Fana Television, 2018a, 1:03:26). The narrator introduced one of the alleged victims, Andualem Ayalew, an Ethiopian who joined the Ginbot-7⁴² trained by Eritrea to rebel against Ethiopia, who was captured while on a mission in Sudan. Andualem says “Four Tigrinya

⁴¹ The actual words used in the documentary to describe Tigrinya speakers were *ደብዳቤዎች* (torturers), *ነፍስ ገዳዮች* (murderers), *ሙስኞች* (corrupt), *አስቃይ* (excruciates), *መኖፍስት* (ghosts), *ከሀዲዎች* (traitors) *ግብረሰዶማውያን* (homosexuals) and *ሰይጣኖች* (devils) (Fana Television, 2018a).

⁴² Ginbot-7 was a political opposition movement established by Berhanu Nega in the United States on 15 May 2008 (Global Security, 2016). It was then turned into an armed group, which was supported by Eritrea until Abiy Ahmed became Prime Minister. Currently, some of the members of the movement are serving as members of the Prime Minister’s executives, including Berhanu Nega.

speaking people and two Sudanese security members subdued me” (Fana Television, 2018a, 0:05:23–0:05:34).

Andualem’s speech indicated that Eritrea was working to bring about regime change in Ethiopia.⁴³ Eritrean President Isayas Afwerki’s political cleansing plan in Tigray, which he disclosed in the 8th Eritrean Youth Festival Seminar in Sawa, complemented why Eritrea had been supporting the Ginbot-7 rebel based in Eritrea.

The news disseminated by ERi-TV on 13 July 2018 about the 8th Eritrean Youth Festival Seminar in Sawa showing President Isayas Afwerki stated:

In the seminar President Isayas said Weyane’s political scuff and sarcasm is over. But he underlined that we need to have serious and intelligent determination to cleanse its ruminants and conduct political cleansing. (ERi-TV, 2018b, 0:08:43-0:08:56)⁴⁴

These indicated that both Ethiopia and Eritrea conducted collaborative propaganda campaign against Tigray. Ethiopia used Andualem Ayalew, a member of Ginbot-7 who was trained in Eritrea to bring about regime change in Ethiopia, while Eritrea disclosed its political cleansing plan on Tigray through President Isayas Afwerki. Both stories were published in 2018 before the two countries signed the Joint Declaration of Peace and Friendship.

An anonymous investigator who was interviewed in Yefith Sekoka claimed that the attempted assassination of the Prime Minister on 23 June 2018 was carried about by Tigrinya speakers, as the weapons were captured from Tigrayans in the office of Ethiopia’s National Intelligence and Security Service (NISS) (Fana Television, 2018a, 0:24:27–0:25:58). In the documentary Tigrayans were portrayed as

⁴³ Andualem was a member of the Ginbot-7 party that was based in Eritrea aimed at bringing regime change in Ethiopia that was receiving military, propaganda and financial from Eritrea (Sudan Tribune, 2013).

⁴⁴ “ወያኔ ዝፈጠሮ ፖለቲካዊ ፀወታን ኣሸካዕላልን ኣኸቲሙ እዩ ዝበለ ፕረዚደንት ኢሳያስ ንሱ ዝፈጠሮ ሓድጊ ንምፅራይን ፖለቲካዊ ሕፅቦ ንምክያድን ግን ዕቱብን ንቑሕን ፃዕሪ ከምዘድሊ ኣስግራሉ” (ERi-TV, 2018, 0:08:43-0:08:56)።

‘ogres’ (Fana Television, 2018a), ‘ghosts’, and ‘devils’, who committed atrocious crimes against civilians as a way of life (OBN, 2018).

‘Tigrinya speakers’ (referring to the people of Tigray) were compared by the narrator with historic traitors who worked for foreign invaders during Ethiopia’s struggle for sovereignty (Fana Television, 2018a, 0:0:50–0:01:40). Their identity as Ethiopians was questioned: “frankly speaking, are these people Ethiopians?” (Fana Television, 2018a, 0:30:03–0:30:24). They were also compared with Adolf Hitler in World War II, as indicated in the quote below (Fana Television, 2018a, 0:54:35–0:54:54). One of the speakers who explained himself as a victim, Yohanes Tefera, said:

My eyes don't function well. Especially my right eye is no more functioning. This is because they put me out of sunlight for four months and twenty days. Though their attempt to harm my reproductive organ was failed my right testicle is damaged. This kind of preventing man from reproduction, I don't know, may be Hitler had perpetrated it. (Fana Television, 2018a, 0:54:20–0:54:54)

The documentary frequently used the term Tigrinya speakers to identify the perpetrators. This is an implicit term which is commonly used to describe the whole ethnic groups of Tigrayans. Thus, the documentary portrayed Tigrinya speakers as ogres, ghosts, devils and traitors who perpetrated crimes against Ethiopians not Ethiopians themselves.

‘Eat hyena and get blessed’: Dehumanisation by Mainstream Media
Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed’s term ‘daylight hyena’ was one of the portrayals of Tigrayans that reverberated among the general population. Among Ethiopia’s influential personalities, artist Debebe Eshetu supported the use of this term as appropriate and, in June 2018, he said that measures must be taken.

He [Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed] said hyenas, he is right. What I want to advise Dr Abiy is that there is a tale; eat the hyena and get blessed before you are eaten by them. Let's eat them and get blessed. We will become sacred. (Sodere TV, 2018, 0:00:46–0:01:01)

The term hyena in the Ethiopian idiomatic expression is used to portray someone who is barbed, egotistical and stingy or someone who stands against society to manipulate the values of human

behaviour and morale for their own personal gain at the cost of society. Hyenas are usually active at night calendar, and people protect themselves through fencing their house, but anything left out at night is destined to be eaten by the hyenas. The term daylight hyena then portrays someone who shamelessly demonstrates non-human and callous behaviour in daytime, without being concerned that they may be seen by others. Thus, someone who is called a daylight hyena is considered callous and greedy, against which all necessary measures are taken to eliminate.

In addition, the Social Affairs Advisor to the Prime Minister, Daniel Kibret, described Tigrayans as monsters, devils and sneaks (Tebta Mar, 2019; Zamader collection, 2021).⁴⁵ In addition, live footage of Tigrayan General Kifle Dagnew's arrest for alleged embezzlement portrayed Tigrayans as a threat to national security (Fana Television, 2018b).

On top of this, the judiciary reinforced the politically motivated allegations by labelling Tigrayans as perpetrators of various atrocious crimes committed throughout the country. Adanech Abebe, while she was serving as Attorney General, in a media brief about assassination of the musician and activist from Oromo, Hachalu Hundessa, attributed 'Tigrinya speakers' as responsible for planning the assassination (Fana Television, 2020b). The public officials attributed the assassination of Hachalu Hundessa to "Weyane who escaped to Mekele and Oromia Liberation Army (OLA) (Fana Television, 2020c). Conversely, Al-Jazeera's the Listening Post producer (Phillips, 2020) stated that Hachalu's interview with Oromia Media Network was critical of the government as well as the Emperor Menelik's oppression against the Oromo people. She added "Just one day after Hachalu's interview went out calls for his death spread on social media. A week later he was gunned down in Addis Ababa" (Al Jazeera English, 2020). But the government used the justice system

⁴⁵ The original words in Amharic by the Social Affairs Advisor to the Prime Minister, Daniel Kibret, are ጭራቅ (monsters), አጋንንት (devils) and እባብ (sneak) (Tebta Mar, 2019; Zamader collection, 2021).

and national media to allege that Tigrinya speakers were the orchestrators behind the assassination of Hachalu Hundessa.

‘30 million to 6 million’: Call for annihilation

The hatred against Tigrayans was not restricted to magazines, books, and diaspora media channels like ESAT. When Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed came to power, the state media, including EPA, ENA and ETV, also joined in by denigrating the EPRDF’s victory that overthrew the dictatorial Derg regime (Ethiopian Press Agency, 2020). However, at the same time, some of the main actors in the military wing of the Derg regime acted as military advisors to the federal government on how to wage war against Tigray. Among them, Kassaye Chemed, a retired military member of the Derg regime, said to a government-affiliated Walta TV on 9 July 2020: “The government should plan well, and they should be attacked” (Michael Laine, 2021).

He added:

The Ethiopia Defense Force and security personnel should warn those who challenge us with a stick and weapon. If they resist, they must shoot them. This is a timely pronouncement. Nothing should be compromised about Ethiopia. The one who escaped to the stony Mekelle, when their affiliates are being targeted, the government must, I don’t go deep into the details for now, but it is possible, they must be shot with a well-established plan. (Michael Laine, 2021)⁴⁶

In addition, a member of the leadership of Amhara Fano (a group of paramilitary youth, some retired members of the military during the Derg regime and local militia in Amhara region), Mesafint Tesfu, said that Tigrayans do not deserve the factories they own, calling the youth to war in Tigray. He said:

If we are allowed, we urge that as they are defiant, Tigray is too small for us. We will clutch it, [applause continues for 7 seconds]. We will bring the factories you own

⁴⁶ Speech by Kassaya Chemed, on Walt TV, 9 July 2020: “ዱላ ይዞ ትጥቅ ይዞ በመንደሩ እንትን የሚለን የኢትዮጵያ መከላከያ ሰራዊትና የፀጥታ አስከባሪዎች አስቀምጥ እምቢ ካለ በጥይት ማለት ነው። ቢቃ ጊዜው ጊዜያዊ አዋጅ ነው። ከኢትዮጵያ ወዲህ ምንም ነገር የለም። ባለፈው ወገኑ ሁሉ ተመትቶ ሸሽቶ እዛ ድንጋይ ስር መቀሌ ሂዶ የገባው እሱ ላይ መንግስት እኔ አሁን ዝርዝሩን አልናገርም ይቻላል ደምበኛ እቅድ ተደርጎ መመታት አለባቸው።”

there. Unless anyone is able to bring it for us, we will by ourselves [acclaim continues for 8 seconds]. (Ab sha Tube, 2020)

In news broadcasts on 24 May 2020 state media institutions, ETV, EPA, and ENA, went one step further by calling the federal government of Ethiopia to intervene in Tigray (EBC, 2020a).

At the same time, the armed groups in Amhara region were preparing for war, using the media to mobilise the youth, as evidenced in the following statement by a member of Amhara Fano:

Instead of dying for nothing, it is worthy to die killing one Tigre. Maybe the population of Tigray is 6 million while the population of Amhara is around 30 million. Perhaps if we garrison 6 million people to fight only Tigray, the remaining people will be liberated. (Gebrekirstos, 2020)

With the national election of Ethiopia indefinitely postponed mentioning the COVID-19 pandemic as a pretext Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed warned that Tigray's regional election would result in the "extermination of youth, snivelling of mothers and destruction of homes" (Haq Ena Saq ሃቅ እና ሳቅ, 2020).

Law enforcement to survival campaign: The evolving frames of the Tigray War

While declaring military action against Tigray on 4 November 2020, Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed framed that Tigrayans attacked the ENDF from behind while it was on a mission to protect them from the enemy (EBC, 2020h). He stated:

Honoured people of Ethiopia, today traitor Ethiopians poked Ethiopia. Ethiopia, its generous hands and its motherly breasts that fed them are bitten. The Ethiopian National Defence Force that protected its territory and people, with martyrdom in thousands, wounded, bled and suffered in desert fords for the past twenty years, was attacked by traitors and their forces in Mekelle and other areas as of the night. This attack is infamous because the army didn't face such a situation while being in peacekeeping mission in its history let along in its country where now is attacked from behind where many sacrificed martyrdom and wounded as well as resources destroyed. (EBC, 2020h, 0:00:32-0:01:49)

In his speech, the Prime Minister used terms traitors, greedy Junta, ingrate and criminals to portray the political administration in Tigray

(EBC, 2020h). Subsequently, the parliament declared state of emergency in Tigray on 5 November 2020 (EBC, 2020i). The Prime Minister described the Ethiopian government’s action on Tigray as law enforcement operation on 6 November 2020 (EBC, 2020j). On the next day, the House of Federation fully passed a resolution that the federal government must fully intervene in Tigray (EBC, 2020k). The National Intelligence and Security Service publicised that it had captured ‘terrorists’ in Addis Ababa City, as well as Gambela and Benshangul Gmuz regions, who were preparing to perpetrate attacks on the public at the behest of the TPLF (EBC, 2020k).

The federal government explained that its action in Tigray aimed at enforcing order as part of its constitutional mandate. The Prime Minister said:

The people of Tigray, the militia and special force must be aware that this action will stop when these criminals who pulled nails, killed civilians and looted resources are all captured. This confrontation, which is not with anyone else but with the greedy Junta, these forces, will be stopped when they are handed over to order and ensure that the law works for all of us. This action is being implemented based on the constitution. (EBC, 2020l, 0:06:58-0:07:34)

The alleged victims of human rights violations who portrayed Tigrinya speakers as perpetrators of the crimes were again part of the ETV news on 9 November 2020 (EBC, 2020m, 0:16:43-0:21:52). Citing a legal expert, ETV disseminated that the “junta” in Tigray committed acts of “terrorism”, according to the FDRE Proclamation 1176/2012 (Legal Expert Noh Takele, 9 November 2020; EBC, 2020m, 0:24:28-0:26:11). The Prime Minister said that “the aim of the operation we are conducting in the northern part of the country is to protect the country and its people, thus, its main focus is enforcing law” (EBC, 2020d, 0:00:10-0:00:31).

ETV used terms such as ‘extremist TPLF group’, ‘traitors’, ‘criminals’, ‘junta’ and ‘terrorists’ to represent the Tigray regional government (EBC, 2020i; EBC, 2020n). The term “ሕግ የማስከበር ዘመቻ” [law and order operation] was changed to “የሕግ ማስከበርና የህልውና ዘመቻ” [law enforcement and existential operation] frame on 11 November 2020 (EBC, 2020n, 0:00:47). The national media initially said that the law

and order operation would be finalised quickly, with the media framing the Prime Minister's discussions with the then Tigray Interim Government and the rehabilitation of Tigray as a priority agenda on 19 November 2020 (EBC, 2020o, 0:00:56-0:05:50).

Following the fall of Mekelle on 28 November 2020, the Chief of Staff of the ENDF Birhanu Julia said:

Congratulations to the people of Ethiopia. Our Defense force has accomplished its constitutional mandate of law and order mission while defending itself. The war from now onwards will be between police and concealed groups so that they will be captured to face the law. The war is over. For our Defense force already captured their last ford, the war is ended. Now it is time for us to capture concealed criminals and we will shortly disclose news about their capture. (EBC, 2020p, 0:06:38-0:08:17)

In a press release, the Tigray Prosperity Party, which was assigned by PM Abiy to administer Tigray, as the Tigray regional government had withdrawn to the highlands following the law enforcement operation, also reaffirmed that the fall of Mekelle was considered confirmation that the war was over (ETV, 2020p, 0:25:49-0:28:40). The head of the Tigray Prosperity Party, Nebiyu Sihul Mikael, stated:

Government's focused and careful action enabled the capture of Mekelle without civilian causality. This law and order operation is also the victory for the suppressed people of Tigray. As the people of Tigray was in deep-rooted oppression, this victory will pave the way to reinstating its development and prosperity agendas forward. (EBC, 2020p, 0:28:41-0:32:02)

In a parliamentary address, Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed congratulated the people of Ethiopia on the accomplishment of the law enforcement and existential operation (EBC, 2020q). He said that "the heroism and contribution of the Ethiopian National Defence Force to the successful accomplishment of the law enforcement and existential operation was extraordinary" (ETV, 2020q, 0:20:35-0:20:47). He added "Mekelle had fallen and that not a single civilian was killed during the operation" (BBC, 2021a). However, it is common knowledge that there were many civilian fatalities, and even possibly war crimes (BBC, 2021b).

In addition, ETV, ENA and EPA similarly reported that no external force was involved in the Tigray war. Spokesperson for the Foreign Affairs Minister Dina Mufti in his media brief said:

The diplomatic front was also successful. Specially, the conversations made with Rwanda, Uganda, Kenya and the Democratic Republic of Congo during the president's visit enabled them to understand the situation as an internal issue of Ethiopia. What they were concerned, including the Europeans, is humanitarian issues and civilian protection. But almost all are sympathetic to the sovereignty of Ethiopia and the law enforcement operation. (ETV, 2020g, 0:32:55-0:33:50)

The Ethiopian government claimed that the situation in Tigray was an internal affair (Abyssinia Media, 2020). After the declaration of war, the EPA headline referred to the completion of the law enforcement operation in a congratulatory tone: “As the curtain falls on TPLF”. The article reported as follows:

The noticeable symbolic change in the landscape is the irrevocable termination of TPLF, a prominent political and military power that had been destabilising and creating havoc in the nation's politics and the politics of the horn as well. (Solomon, 2020)

This framing of the TPLF and Tigray in-general was an extension of the Eritrean President Isayas Afwerki's “Weyane...Game over” utterance (ERi-TV, 2018a). Another EPA headline read that the “Swift law enforcement operation helps avoid the vicious circle of war and poverty”, again justifying the war (Getachew, 2020).

On 4 December 2020, the federal government of Ethiopia framed its operation in Tigray as “ወንጀለኞችን የማደንና የመልሶ ግንባታ ምዕራፍ” (assessing criminals and reconstruction chapter), following the claimed accomplishment of the operation (EBC, 2020g). This framing of the federal government was manifested through its national broadcaster, ETV, until 31 December 2020, which is the last date for the news data assessment for this research (EBC, 2020t). However, the Tigray war continued for two years after the federal government claimed victory, until de-escalation following the signing of the Pretoria Peace Agreement on 2 November 2022.

‘Devils back to Hell’: The war within a war

A retired Ethiopian military member who re-joined the ENDF following Prime Minister Abiy’s call (Fana Television, 2020a) during the Tigray war, Lieutenant General Bacha Debele, said on 12 November 2020:

These people are the devils who escaped from hell; they shall not live impersonated on the Earth. We shall not allow them to live like human being. We must turn them back to hell. (EBC, 2020b, 00:42:23-00:42:40)

On 28 November 2020, Ethiopian artist Debebe Eshetu stated:

November is about to end. They are getting warmth from the fire they are setting. As it is tempered, it is about to blow a fuse. I don’t feel any sympathy for their burning up. I say they deserve it. (Amhara Media Corporation, 2020)

Referring to the people of Tigray, on 5 September 2021, the President of Amhara Regional State, Agegnehu Teshagar, said:

These people [Tigrayans] are enemies to the people of Ethiopia. These people are enemies to Afar, enemies to Gambella, enemies to Somali. (Yabele Media, 2021a)

On 18 September 2021, Daniel Kibret, Social Affairs Advisor to the Prime Minister, who has a background as deacon in Orthodox Church, said:

As you know, after the fall of Satan, there was nothing like Satan that was created... Satan was the last of his kind. And they (the TPLF) must also remain the last of their kind. There should be no land in this country which can sustain this kind of weed. (AFP, 2021)

Speaking to a televised gathering, he added:

We must exterminate them not only from their conformation, but they must be erased from public memory, from public knowledge, from historical archive in a way that a person like these people cannot be created again in this country. (Galama Dhugaa, 2021)⁴⁷

Hence, it is clear that public officials used implicit terms that dehumanise Tigrinya speaking people. The national media, which

⁴⁷ Original text, Daniel Kibret: “እንደነሱ አይነት ሰው ዳግም እንዳይፈጠር እዚች አገር ላይ እንዳይታሰብ ከመዋቅራዊ ቦታቸው ብቻ አይደለም ማሰወገድ ያለብን ከሰው ህሊና ከሰው ልቦና ውስጥ ከታሪክ መዝገብ ውስጥ ነው ተፍቆ መጥፋት ያለባቸው።” (Galama Dhugaa, 2021).

serve as mouthpieces of the federal government, served as vital channels of dissemination for ethnic slurs against Tigrayans.

Diagnostic and prognostic frames

Although, the media campaigns against Tigrayans were carried out over time, the state media (ETV, ENA and EPA) framed the law and order action on Tigray as the result of a surprise attack on the Northern Command of the ENDF:

The very reason that caused the law enforcement operation was the red line dashed by the TPLF clique via attacking the Northern Defense base behind. (Mengesha, 2020)

On 3 November 2020, in an ETV news report, the Amhara Prosperity Party accused the TPLF of being ‘devilish’ and causing civilian casualties, adding that military measures were the only solution:

The TPLF ruling group fortified in Mekelle is compromising the life of civilians for its political game. In addition, it has become a threat to national security, as it is the centre of crisis and terrorism. For the sustainability of peace in Ethiopia and the region [in-general], sidelining political sympathy, we assure you the right time to take active measures for a durable solution is today. (ETV, 2020c)

On the evening 8 pm prime time news broadcast on 10 November 2020, ETV reported on the ethnic conflict in Guliso district of Western Oromia and its casualties, attributing responsibility to the TPLF and Oromo Liberation Front (EBC, 2020c). But it did not mention why the ethnic conflict in Guliso happened at that moment. Exploring various sources, the Guliso ethnic conflict happened on 1 November 2020 (Al Jazeera, 2020b), three days before Prime Minister Abiy’s law enforcement operation declaration on Tigray. This raises the question as to why the divisions of the ENDF that used to be stationed in those areas were not in position to prevent or stop the Guliso conflict. As reported by Al Jazeera (2020b) the “Sunday’s attack on Gawa Qanqa village in Guliso District of West Welega Zone took place a day after government forces unexpectedly left the area”. In addition, a former member of the Ethiopia People’s Revolutionary Party, Yared Tibebu, stated “the Guliso massacre on Sunday, 1st November 2020 was as a result of the mobilisation of the

17th, 21st, 22nd, 24th and 25th divisions of the ENDF from different areas of the country including Welega to border areas of Tigray, on standby for the war” (Yabele Media, 2021b). He added “the [Ethiopian] government and even the opposition parties were misleading the public with a false narrative that the [Tigray] war broke out as a result of the attack on the [Northern Command] military base” (Yabele Media, 2021).

On 3 November 2020, the Ethiopian parliament requested the executive body of the government to take measures against the TPLF and Oromo Liberation Front, demanding that: “If possible, the government must take strong military action against them, if not they must be enlisted as terrorists, so that they must be legally liable” (EBC, 2020c, 0:11:08-0:11:22).

Although mobilisation of the ENDF military was the immediate cause of the Guliso massacre, the national media outlets attributed surprise attack on the Northern Command as the cause of the declared law enforcement action.

Lieutenant General Bacha Debele said:

They started the operation before a week at night 10pm LT. They cut the communication channel of the command. And they took the rations of the soldiers. They encircled each brigade and requested them to hand over their munitions so that they can allow the soldier to go wherever they want. Those who were thirsty requested water and food so that they will hand over. Immediately as they got water and food they regrouped themselves and went out fighting to where so ever they wanted. (ETV, 2020d, 0:03:06–0:04:08)

Talking about the situation he added that they danced over the bodies of the soldiers. He added:

For those who were in the same ford, for those who fought side by side against Shaebiya [a term used to describe Eritrea], except the soldiers from Oromo Liberation Front and the [Tigray] Special Forces, they know each other with militias who used to attend fords together. The people in the localities also know the soldiers. For those who martyred soldiers of the ENDF, they took off their clothes and exposed them to sun. Their bodies are not buried till this day. The bodies were deformed and it was left to vultures and hyenas. For the soldiers who spent 21 years in the same fords together, they killed the soldiers and danced over the bodies after

they took off the clothes. When they bury the bodies of their comrades, they danced over the ENDF soldiers' bodies. (ETV, 2020d, 0:06:15–0:07:46)

ETV used emotionally charged language to describe the graphic details of the attack on the Northern Command, instead of providing substantive figures, like how many soldiers were killed and wounded during the attack (EBC, 2020d; 2020e).

In relation to media content, the results show that different actors, especially state actors, extensively used the media to mobilise the Ethiopian people against Tigrayans in Ethiopia. Similar to how RTLM was instrumental in disseminating hate speech, including by using terms like ‘cockroach’, to dehumanise the Tutsi in Rwanda (Forges, 2007), Tigrinya speakers were depicted by Ethiopian media as less than human with the use of terms such as ‘weeds’, ‘cancer’, ‘monsters’, ‘ghosts’, ‘traitors’, ‘homosexuals’, and ‘devils’ who has betrayed their country (Fana Television, 2018a). Ethiopians were called to stand together to exterminate the ‘sea’ (metaphoric reference to ethnic Tigrayans), as the only means to avoid the ‘deformed fish’ (metaphoric reference to the TPLF/EPRDF) (Tghat, 2021).

In addition, Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed used the term ‘daylight hyena’ attributing the Meskel Square bombing to Tigrayans in the aftermath of the attempt on Prime Minister Abiy’s life on 23 June 2018 (EBC, 2018). This term was picked up and mainstreamed by the state media (EBC, 2018). In addition, Prime Minister Abiy pointed to Tigrayans as instigators of violence in Ethiopia (Yethiopia News, 2018). Such utterances by the country’s Prime Minister were interpreted as a signal to continue the character assassination, dehumanisation, and ethnic profiling of Tigrayans. The Diaspora media, ESAT, went so far as to call on Ethiopians to mobilise to annihilate Tigrayans as an umbrella frame of their campaign against the EPRDF, triggering youth movements in Oromia and Amhara (Tghat, 2021).

ETV, ENA and EPA used thematic framing to define the attack on the Northern Command of the ENDF as treason, claiming that the TPLF had used every means to destroy the country over the last 47 years (Solomon, n.d.). The ENA portrayed the impact of the war in

Tigray and its people as either minimal collateral damage (episodic framing) or claimed that the TPLF intentionally destroyed infrastructure in Tigray (Ethiopian News Agency, 2020c). Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed also used episodic framing, such as: “these [Tigrayan] women are raped by men while our soldiers are slaughtered with bayonets” (EBC, 2021, 00:08:45-00:08:51) to dismiss reports by the international media alleging that sexual and gender-based violence were used against the people of Tigray as a weapon of war (Kassa, 2021b). The EPA presented the extermination of the people of Tigray as a solution in its headline, “Swift law enforcement operation helps avoid the vicious circle of war and poverty” (Getachew, 2020).

Organisational connections

The research found that although media reform was one of the promises that Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed was recognised for, the media in Ethiopia is tightly controlled by the government and the ruling party. In addition, the federal government controls and manipulates the media to homogenise information and silence alternative perspectives, to enforce its narrative.

Controlling the media

At the federal level, the state owned and party affiliated media are patronised by the government through salary boosts, which went up to double in 2020, and their content is politically motivated, controlled and filtered through loyal politically-nominated personalities at each media house put there to monitor media practices (Interviewees ETFGD01, focus group discussion with Equar and Tesfa, face-to-face, 22 June 2022).

At the same time, the then Ethiopia Broadcast Authority (EBA) (now Ethiopia Media Authority) was in charge of implementing the Hate Speech and Disinformation Prevention and Suppression Proclamation 1185/2020 (Republic of Ethiopia, 2020), which prohibits the dissemination of ethnic hatred. However, it appears that through its application the purpose of this proclamation was in fact to intimidate the media and suppress critical voices. In this regard, a former member of editorial team in one of the national media said:

While allowing the state media engage in dehumanisation campaigns against ethnic Tigrayans, the Ethiopia Broadcast Authority wrote a warning to the local media in Tigray. It was instrumented as a means to suppress critical voices of the Tigray war. (Interviewee ETFGD01, focus group discussion with Equar and Tesfa, face-to-face, 22 June 202)

The focus group discussants who worked as reporters up to editorial team members, for national media outlets based in Addis Ababa and Tigray added that the media houses at the federal level are ardent supporters of Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed's reform initiatives and see Tigrayans as a stumbling block to Ethiopia's unity. A former editorial team member of a national media outlet who wants to remain anonymous shared the following observations:

Although there were influences that were critical of the government before, we were trying to evaluate issues based on news value. A few months after [Prime Minister] Abiy Ahmed came to power, the measurement criteria of news value dramatically changed. Issues that dehumanise ethnic Tigrayans and downgrade TPLF leadership as responsible for all abuses became the salient news items and a main theme of the media. (Interviewees ETFGD01, focus group discussion with Equar and Tesfa, face-to-face, 22 June 2022)

A reporter from another national media outlet said:

The field reports I was assigned by the news department, of the media I work for, were congruent with the political motives of the government. The government used the Raya and Welkayit issues⁴⁸ as an agenda to mobilise other Ethiopians against

⁴⁸ Raya is the cultural nameplate for the communities living in the Southern Zone of Tigray while Welkayit is one of the woredas (districts) administered under the Western Zone of Tigray (Negarit Gazzeta, 1995). Explaining the historical perspectives, Leule Ras Mengesha Seyoum Mengesh, who ruled Tigray from 1953–1965 Ethiopian Calendar (E.C.), stated that Raya, Welkayit and Tsegede were administered under Tigray province until 1948 E.C. during the rule of Hailelesslassie, where the border for Raya was Alweha Milash, while Welkayit and Tsegede were fully administered under the Tigray province (Dimtsi Weyane Television, 2019; Nyssen, 2022). Then Raya (the border changed from Alweha Milash to Kobo) was changed to be administered under Wollo province in 1948 E.C., while Welkayit and Tsegede were changed to Begemidir province (border changed to Tekeze Milash) in 1949 E.C. by the then National Border Minister (Dimtsi Weyane Television, 2019). Following the census in 1984, given the fact that the majority of communities living in the areas were Tigrayans, Raya and Welkayit were readjusted to their

Tigray. Once I sent a report that shows the friendly neighbourhood among the people of Alamata of Tigray and Kobo of Amhara, it was rejected for dissemination. What I understood from such continuous trends is that they want my news to flame the political tit for tats into outright conflict. The media were instruments for igniting conflict but not for peace. (Interview REIDI02, Interview with Tesfa, face-to-face, 18 June 2022)

A coordinator of one of the national media outlets shared the following:

[The usual] editorial policy, that we all have adhered to in the news selection and production process, was sidelined to let the government officials intervene in our daily routines in the name of endorsing the reform. We used to report the reality on the ground but they urge us to send them news that explains Tigray is instable as opposed to the reality on the ground. (Interviewees COFGD01, focus group discussion with Equar and Tesfa, face-to-face, 22 June 2022)

A former member of an editorial team in one of the national media said that the media management routinely received agenda and directions from the Press Secretariat of the Prime Minister, which went down to the editorial members (Interviewees ET1FGD01, focus group discussion with Equar and Tesfa, face-to face, 22 June 2022). In addition, religious institutions, opposition parties and private institutions were all sources of information in support of the government's position on media content.

According to the focus group discussants, the measures taken by the government to silence critical voices on the Tigray war included the blocking of local media – including Tigray TV, Dimtsi Woyane TV, Tigray Media House (TMH), Assena TV and Oromia Media Network (OMN) – from using satellites to broadcast their programmes (Interviewees FGD, focus group discussion with S. E. Geb & Daniel T., face-to-face, 22 June 2022). The federal government also arrested journalists Bekalu Almirew from Awlo Media (on 4 November 2020), Haftom G/Egizabeher, Tsegaye Hagos and Abreha Hagos from

historical status of being administered in Southern and Western zones of Tigray (Office of the Population and Housing Census Commission, 1991). Since then, some part of Raya and the entire Western Tigray including Welkayit woreda, have been annexed by the Amhara militia and Eritrean army.

Ethiopia Press Agency as well as Medhanie Ekubamichael from Addis Standard (on 7 November 2020) and Dawit Kebede from Awramba Times (on 30 November 2020), accusing them of disseminating false information and defaming the Ethiopian government (Mahlet, 2020a). Journalists Medhanie Ekubamichael, Haftom G/Egizabeher, Tsegay Hagos, Abreha Hagos, and Dawit Kebede are ethnic Tigrayans.

Following the fall of Mekelle on 30 November 2020, journalists in Tigray TV were ordered to describe the ousted government and Tigray Defence Forces as a ‘junta’, discrediting the TPLF (Interviewees FGD01, focus group discussion with Equar and Tesfa, face-to-face, 22 June 2022). Tigray TV journalist Dawit Kebede Araya was shot dead in Mekelle in January 2021 while the city was in the hands of federal authorities and Oromia Broadcasting Network journalist Sisay Fida was killed in May 2021 (Mumo, 2022). One of the focus group discussants said that “the extrajudicial killing of Dawit made us fearful for our lives let alone reveal the atrocities committed by the warring parties” (Interviewees FGD01, focus group discussion with Equar and Tesfa, face-to-face, 22 June 2022).

The Committee to Protect Journalists (CPJ) ranked Ethiopia the second worst jailer of journalists in sub-Saharan Africa after Eritrea (Committee to Protect Journalists, 2021b). The CPJ documented the arrest of at least 63 journalists and media professionals following the law and order action on 4 November 2020, at least 8 of whom remain detained as of 1 August 2022 (Mumo, 2022). The CPJ census disclosed the list of journalists in jail in 2021, including Associated Press (AP) contributor Amir Aman Kiyaro with his Cameraman Thomas Engida (freelance on 28 November), Bikila Amenu and Dessu Dulla (Oromia News Network on 18 November), Ermias Tesfaye (Ethiopia Insight 3 November), Hirsi Mohamed Mahad, Ibrahim Hussein and Salman Mukhtar (Nabad TV, 10 November), Kibrom Worku (Ahadu Radio and Television, 26 October), Mekonnen Yibrah and Teklehaimanot Girmai (EBC, 16 November), Melese Diribsa (Oromia Media Network, as of 2 July 2020) and Tesfa-Alem Tekle (Nation Media Group, 31 October) (Committee to Protect Journalists, 2021a; Mumo, 2021).

Awlo Media and Ethio Forum online media journalists Bekalu Alamrew, Yayesew Shimeles, Abebe Bayu, Fana Negash, Fanuel Kinfu and Meheret Gebrekirstos were captured by security between 30 June and 2 July 2021 and detained in Awash Arba for 49 days (Mahlet, 2021b). In addition, Addisu Muluneh (from FBC, on 28 November 20), Eyasped Tesfaye (Ubuntu TV on 7 December), Meaza Mohammed (Roha TV, 11 December) and Tamrat Negera (Terara Network, 10 December) were arrested by security personnel (Committee to Protect Journalists, 2021b; Mumo, 2021).

The killing, arrest and intimidation of journalists, as well as political pressure from the government, resulted in the closure of online media alternatives working from Ethiopia, including Ethio Forum, and Awlo Media, causing many journalists to continue their work abroad (Mumo, 2021; Mahlet, 2020a; Mahlet, 2020b). Addis Standard was also suspended by Ethiopia Media Authority for a week for using the term ‘Tigray Defence Forces’ in its news about the war (Mumo, 2022).

According to Reporters Without Borders, many journalists, including Meaza Mohammed of Roha TV, Sabontu Ahmed of Finfinnee Integrated Broadcasting, Solomun Shumye of Gebeyanu Media and Yayesew Shimelis of Ethio Forum Media were arrested between 19 and 28 May 2022, while Dessu Dulla and Bikila Amenu of Oromia News Network were arrested on 3 June 2022 (Reporters Without Borders, 2022b).

Consistent with local media control, the international media were also denied access to Tigray until 24 February 2021 (Henok, 2021). Even after some of the media were allowed access, the federal government used various techniques including posing threats to the journalists and expelling journalists who disclosed atrocities on the ground. Ethiopia warned the media in its official statement “the government will continue to take irreversible measure on individuals involved in illegal activities who are planning and working to create havoc and chaos, also on those wearing a cloak of media outlets and journalists” (Obulutsa, 2022).

Three days after a few of the international media entered Tigray, “on February 27, soldiers arrested two translators-Fitsum Berhane,

working with an Agence France-Press (AFP) news crew and Alula Akalu, working with the Financial Times (FT)-and a local reporter and fixer Tamrat Yemane” (Committee to Protect Journalists, 2021c). BBC Tigrinya reporter Girmay Gebru was also detained on 1 March 2021 (Committee to Protect Journalists, 2021c).

Reporters Without Borders indicated:

These arbitrary arrests and proceedings are worrying and pose an additional threat to journalism in a country where it was already constrained by the effects of the fighting between government forces and the Tigray People’s Liberation Front (TPLF). Some Ethiopian journalists such as Lucy Kasa, a freelancer working for several foreign media including Al Jazeera, have been forced to leave the country to escape the threats they were receiving in connection with their work. She was physically attacked in her Addis Ababa home in February 2021 by three men who accused her of “spreading lies” and supporting “the Tigray junta.” Foreign journalists have not been spared either. Tom Gardner, The Economist magazine’s correspondent in Addis Ababa, was expelled on 16 May, three days after the authorities withdrew his accreditation. Simon Marks, an Addis Ababa-based reporter for the New York Times, was forced to leave in May 2021 without any prior warning or official explanation by the government. (Reporters Without Borders, 2022a)

Tigray TV employees Teshome Temalew, Misgena Seyoum, Haben Halefom, Hailemichael Gesesse, and Dawit Meknonnen were also arrested in Mekelle by Tigray regional authorities in July 2022, on the charge of working with the enemy (Committee to Protect Journalists, 2022).

Referring to the state’s stringent control over the media, a journalist based in Addis Ababa, who is an anonymous source for Deutsche Welle (DW), described the level of control and intimidation by the federal government as follows: “I’ve had meetings with media authority officials. They were saying, ‘It’s your country. You have to defend the national interest’” (Laurent, 2022). The government of Ethiopia used various means to repress the disclosure of atrocities in Tigray, including arrest, abduction and intimidation on the members of local and international media, revoking licenses and permits as well as expelling media professionals (Salem, 2020).

Media manipulation: Disinformation as a strategy

As stated in the focus group discussion, the government used various ways of conveying one-sided information about the war, including disinformation, strategically and in the name of fact-checking (Interviewees ETFGD01, focus group discussion with Equar and Tesfa, face-to-face, 22 June 2022). Among the documentaries that depicted ethnic Tigrayans as perpetrators of human rights violations, *Yeginbot Haya Dil Yekelebesew Yegifegnoch Bedel*, which was disseminated by ETV, Walta TV, Fana Television and various other media, showed an interview with Lidya Mohammed, who was presented as a victim of abuse and physical attacks by Tigrayan security personnel perpetrators while in prison during the rule of the EPRDF (Walta TV, 2020). Although EPRDF was criticised for human rights violations, she disclosed on Tigray Television that the abuse that happened to her took place after Abiy Ahmed became Prime Minister, not during the time of the EPRDF and not by Tigrayan perpetrators (TMMA, 2020).

A former editorial member of ETV said:

The management of ETV were in a position to direct the editorial team at ETV to provide full support to [Prime Minister] Abiy's reform. They were politically nominated by Prosperity Party to run the media. As they already have endorsed the values of the Prosperity Party as pillars of the nation, the disinformation employed was at the cost of credibility, and professionalism was compromised. (Interviewees ET1FGD01, focus group discussion with Equar and Tesfa, face-to-face, 22 June 2022)

As explained in the focus group discussion, disinformation was used to manipulate information in the Tigray war.

An editor in one of the national media outlets shared the following:

The government systematically closed all means of communication in Tigray, so as to prevent reports of atrocities in Tigray. In addition, disinformation was instrumented as a means of stemming and disregarding the reports by international institutions. In my 30-years of experience, for the first time, I witnessed how disinformation floods can be made strategically and tactically, resulting in the manipulation of the narrative about the Tigray war. (Interviewees EDFGD01, focus group discussion with Equar and Tesfa, face-to-face, 22 June 2022)

The state's organisational connections with the media were used to control the media and the information it disseminated, including through communication blackouts and the manipulation of media content. The state's organisational connection was manifested through state ownership of media, assigning politically loyal media management and political-economic influences. Some media professionals were loyal to the ruling party and defied editorial good practice to speak to partisan audiences who supported the Ethiopian government's position of war against Tigray. Although direct (one-to-one) organisational connections among media and party (a medium serving a party at a particular time) have "mostly died out", as explained by Hallin and Mancini (2004), the findings of this research show that many media organisations in Ethiopia were serving one alliance, i.e., many to one. Most of the mainstream media based in Addis Ababa, Bahir Dar, Adama and Hawassa were serving the alliance (federal government of Ethiopia etc.) and portrayed Tigrayans as anti-Ethiopian unity. Thus, the research found that the component of political parallelism, which Hallin and Mancini (2004) explain as manifestations of the media during the 20th century, but which are not common in modern day media system, are still the defining characteristics of the state media in Ethiopia.

Tendency for media personnel to be active in political life

During the war on Tigray, journalists working in the state media used terms such as 'anti-reform' and 'threat to national security' in their reports about the TPLF (Ethiopian News Agency, 2020a). A senior editor working for a national media house said:

During my 30-years working [in the media], I have observed journalists in Ethiopia as instruments of party politics. I think today's journalism is a manifestation of that. But what made it worse [in the Tigray war] is that its intentions were not only based on the political divide, but on the inflammation of ethnic hatred against Tigrayan identity. (Interviewee EDIDI01, interview with Tesfa., face-to-face, 22 June 2022)

Journalists working for national media organisations based in Addis Ababa and Tigray described being harassed as 'traitors', 'anti Ethiopian', and 'anti-reform' by their colleagues, who saw themselves

as proponents of the Prosperity Party, during the general meetings held in their respective head offices in Addis Ababa (Interviewees FGD, focus group discussion with Equar and Tesfa, face-to-face, 22 June 2022). A former editorial team member at one of the national media outlets said:

Regardless of the position they have, even if lower than mine, many of the colleagues with whom I had close friendships began to plot against me, on the assumption that I may not be the best fit to support [Prime Minister] Abiy's reforms. Editorial discussions were dominated by [Prime Minister] Abiy Ahmed's pro-reformist proponents and handful professionals who do not require the media to be run professionally, but who label Tigrayan journalists as 'anti-reform'. (Interviewees ED1FGD01, focus group discussion with Equar and Tesfa, face-to-face, 22 June 2022)

In addition, a former editorial member of a national media outlet explained that Tigrayan members of the editorial team were banned from participating in the editorial meetings:

Tigrayan members of the editorial team were prohibited from participating, because it was believed that Tigrayans may not support [Prime Minister] Abiy's 'Medemer' [philosophy for Ethiopia's unity] heartily. The proponents of the Prosperity Party even suspected that we may blow the secrets of the reform. As a result I was barred from the editorial meetings. (Interviewees ED1FGD01, focus group discussion with Equar and Tesfa, face-to-face, 22 June 2022)

Following the declaration of the law enforcement, journalists informed the Ethiopian public that the law enforcement operation was a successful and a sustainable solution to the unity of Ethiopians (EBC, 2020g). ETV reporter, Solomon Abegaz, concluded in his report “the law enforcement operation by the ENDF actualised civilians to live in a peaceful environment” (EBC, 2020h), despite the fact that the ENDF has been accused of perpetrating massive atrocities in Tigray (Feleke *et al.*, 2021). In an ETV newscast on 3 December 2020, journalists who were reporting from the war fronts discussed details of how the northern division was betrayed, without mentioning the civilian casualties all the way from Dansha to Aksum, Zalambessa to Mariam Dengelat to Mekele, Maytsebri through

Temben to Samre, in line with the domination of public opinion by the Prosperity Party (EBC, 2020h).

Before, during and after the Tigray war, there was also a tendency for media personnel to be active politically. Following the nomination of Abiy Ahmed as Prime Minister, the state media swiftly joined the campaign, attributing responsibility for the abuses perpetrated all over the country to Tigrayans. Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed's portrayal of the 27-years of EPRDF rule as "years of darkness" (Sew, 2019), coupled with Isayas Afewerki's of Eritrea's utterance of "Weyane ... game over" (ERI-TV, 2018a), were a signal for the Ethiopian media to keep going, culminating in a series of documentaries depicting 'Tigrinya speakers' as solely responsible for human rights violations in the country.

The media in Ethiopia thematically blamed the TPLF, Tigray Defence Forces and Tigrayans in-general as responsible for all of the losses that were incurred as the result of the Tigray war (Mulatu, 2020). Media professionals in ETV, ENA and EPA reported the trends of the Tigray war in line with the position of the Prosperity Party, in search of political favour for their future ambitions. As opposed to their editorial policy, the media disseminated ethnic hatred against Tigrayans to mobilise public in support of Tigray war. The journalists working for the state media considered themselves to be loyal servants of the government and proponents of the Prosperity Party-led reforms, rather than providers of objective information.

Partisanship of the media audience

There are indicators that the general public supported the claims of the government, which were widely and dominantly disseminated through the media in rallies, that Tigrayans were a threat to national unity and security (EBC, 2020c, 0:39:35). A reporter in one of the national media outlets shared the following:

It is hard to think about this war without thinking about the inflammatory role of the media. It is the media that mobilised the 'we' Ethiopians to stand against the 'other' enemy, Tigrayans, so as to preserve Ethiopia's unity. The ethnic hatred, the dehumanisation, the deception – all of these efforts were instrumentalised by the

media for effect. (Interviewee REIDI02, interview with Tesfa, face-to-face, 18 May 2022)

While committing atrocities, soldiers were also reported to have repeated words disseminated by the media like “junta you deserve not to live in this earth” (Feleke, Mackintosh, Mezzofiore, Polglase & Elbagir, 2021). The word “two bullet is enough for junta” used by ENDF soldiers while massacring civilians in Mahbere Dego is one such instance (Feleke, Mackintosh, Mezzofiore, Polglase & Elbagir, 2021), showing how the media affected the audience.

A senior editor in one of the national media organisations stated:

Although the profession demands that the media minimise harm during conflict, the media were an instrument for the inflammation of the bloody war [in Tigray], a weapon used to mobilise Ethiopians against Tigrayans through false narratives. They even framed annihilating Tigrayans as a sustainable solution to the crisis. (Interviewee EDIDI01, interview with Tesfa, face-to-face, 25 May 2022)

A CNN report described how soldiers, while gang raping Tigrayan women, said that they were cleansing their Tigrayan bloodline (Feleke, Mackintosh, Mezzofiore, Polglase, Elbagir, Arvanitidis & Platt, 2021). Similarly, Al Jazeera reported a story of a woman who was gang raped by Amhara militia and was told that they do not want a “Tigrayan womb to give birth” (Kassa, 2021b).

A former editorial member of one of the national media organisations shared the following:

The war was first inflamed in the media. Strategically, the media classified ‘us’ and ‘them’, created a conducive environment for action against Tigrayans through dehumanisation and ethnic based hate speech, then called Ethiopians to wage war against Tigray. I understand the political factors, but I believe that the Ethiopian media made the war that happen wear its worst face. (Interviewees ET1FGD, focus group discussion with Equar and Tesfa, face-to-face, 22 June 2022)

In line with this, a news piece published by EPA that promoted war and conflict as a “major agent of change though neglected by

politicians” is another example of the level of media partisanship (Getachew, 2020).

The media audiences were, politically, partisan. In an effort to influence public perception about Tigrayans, state and ruling-party affiliated media – ETV, FBC, Walta TV, AMN, OBN, AMC, Debub TV and even private media including ESAT – disseminated the documentaries *Yefitih Sekoka* and *Shimoch Yetesenvulet Yeginbot Haya Dil Yekelebesew Yegjefgnoch Bedel* describing ‘Tigrinya speakers’ as murderers comparable to Adolf Hitler in World War II. The documentary attributed responsibility for all human rights violations in Tigray to the ethnically-inclusive group ‘Tigrinya speakers’, blaming all ethnic Tigrayans as a whole. This finding supports Tronvoll’s analysis, that although Tigrayans themselves were among the victims of maladministration, corruption and abuses, they increasingly became the target of hate speech and ethnic slurs in Ethiopia, as they were collectively blamed for the authoritarian rule and maladministration by the EPRDF (Tronvoll, 2020).

The narrative established by the Ethiopian media that the Tigray war was declared following the attack on the Northern Command of ENDF was accepted by the masses. The general public supported the claims of the government that Tigrayans were a threat to national unity and security, which were widely and dominantly disseminated by the media and in rallies (EBC, 2020c, 0:39:35). The members of the ENDF also repeated terms such as ‘junta’, ‘snake’ and ‘terrorist’ while massacring civilians in Tigray (Feleke *et al.*, 2021). The utterance “two bullet is enough for junta” used by ENDF soldiers while massacring civilians in Mahbere Dego (Feleke *et al.*, 2021), the expressed aim of soldiers to cleansing the Tigrayan bloodline by gang raping women in Tigray (Feleke *et al.*, 2021), and the Amhara militia saying that they don’t want a “Tigrayan womb to give birth” (Kassa, 2021b) are all examples of how the media affected actors in the war. The media mobilised people, explaining the importance of the Tigray war as “major agent of change though neglected by politicians” (Getachew, 2020).

Journalistic role orientations and practices

The state media – ETV, ENA and EPA – used terms such as ‘junta’ ‘power mongers’, ‘betrayers’, and ‘traitors’, all coined by the Prosperity Party to refer to Tigrayans (Ethiopian News Agency, 2020c). The focus group discussants also explained that the documentary *Yefitib Sekoka* was produced by a composite crew from various media stations loyal to Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed (Interviewees FGD, focus group discussion with S. E. Geb & Daniel T., face-to-face, 22 Jun 2022). The senior editor of one of the major Ethiopian news outlets stated as follows:

As an editorial approach, we were sending our news issues, action plans to the head office and carrying out our reporting. But months after PM Abiy Ahmed came to power, the head office began sending top-down plans for news issues, rejecting our action plans. And they swiftly censored us from reporting on the political issues in Tigray a year before the declaration of war in Tigray. I have witnessed the ENA dumping one quarter of the news we sent them for dissemination. Lately, we have stood empty, as we were not allowed to report even social and economic affairs in Tigray. We have faced unprofessional pressure from head office. (Interviewee EDIDI01, interview with Tesfa, face-to-face, 25 May 2022)

A reporter in one of the national media outlets described an event that took place during his field report assignment:

Our crew in Mekelle was ordered by the Head of Assignment Desk to interview a youth group during the unrest in Alamata. When we reach there the youth, whom we were ordered to interview, were positioning the unrest as an ethnic conflict. Although there is constitutionally demarked territorial definition which our editorial policy was guided by for decades, the youth were claiming Alamata as Amhara. I called the Head that our report shouldn't be framed by ethnic portrayal, especially considering the principle of minimising harm in journalism. But he insisted that I report it through an ethnic frame. I decided to quit this job, as my journalism shouldn't serve to maximise the conflict. But I paid a price for it; I was suspended from my organisation for a week. (Interviewee REIDI02, interview with Tesfa, face-to-face, 18 May 2022)

A senior reporter from another national media outlet described the following:

We were an imperfect match; what my news room was demanding in the last four years [before the war] was to frame every death in Tigray as a manifestation of the TPLF's suppression. But what I found on the ground was that these death were [usually] the result of quarrels between individuals. When I tried to make them understand the situation, they continued insisting that it be reported thematically, as a deliberate action by the incumbent government in Tigray, and even to add the number of casualties. This happened in my field report assignment to Adet [a district in Central Zone of Tigray] in March 2020. A man died while fighting because of personal disagreement with the perpetrator. The head office called me to report it as if it was done by the TPLF and add to the number of deaths to bring it to a total of 15. I handed the contact number of the person who was investigating the case to the head office and quit reporting it. (Interviewees REFGD01, focus group discussion with Equar and Tesfa, face-to-face, 22 June 2022)

Journalists from ETV and ENA explained that the state media were in a position to disseminate sensational and even disinformation to mobilise Tigrayan youth to stand against the government in Tigray in 2018–2020 (Interviewees FGD, focus group discussion with Equar and Tesfa, face-to-face, 22 June 2022).

Reinforcing state propaganda: Source and anti-others narratives

The media in Ethiopia were under direct inspection by the Prime Minister's Press Secretariat, following the dismantling of the former Government Communication Affairs Minister (Interviewees FGD, focus group discussion with S. E. Geb & Daniel T., face-to-face, 22 June 2022). Journalists witnessed the introduction of a centralised information provision system, controlled by government-affiliated officials, which became the main source of information. The Prime Minister's Spokeswoman, Billene Seyoum, told Reuters that "the state of emergency prohibits unauthorised entities from disseminating activities from the front via various channels including media" (Reuters, 2021). In addition, the federal government Communication Service declared new restrictions on information about the Tigray war:

Battlefront updates can only come from the government. Disseminating information on military manoeuvres, war front updates and results via any medium is forbidden

except for information provided by a Joint Civilian-Military Command set up to oversee a state of emergency. (Reuters, 2021)

Information related to the Tigray war was solely provided by government and ruling party officials, with other means of seeking information being restricted, including by intimidation and on the pretext of national sovereignty. The restrictions included, but were not limited to, Internet shutdown in Tigray, denial of information access requests and travel requests of the international media to Tigray until 24 February 2021, intimidation, harassment and removal of permissions of journalists who published narratives contrary to the dominant narrative. State actors, allied religious and opinion leaders were the main sources of information and used the media to suppress information about the atrocities committed during the war. The then member of communication leadership in the Interim Government explained:

We had pressure from the federal government, which insisted on meddling with the media professionals heading to Tigray. I remember some international media crews coming to Mekelle with military security personnel from the ENDF. When the crew began interviewing survivors in an IDP camp in Mekelle, their translators were mistranslating what was said by the survivors of the bloody war. As the public blared in disagreement with the translators, the security personnel swiftly ordered the journalists to evacuate justifying security reasons. But the journalists refused and rerun their interview afresh. (Interviewee COIDI03, interview with Tesfa, face-to-face, 15 June 2022)

The source further stated that when some of the international media selected translators from Mekelle, the government immediately arrested the translators (Interviewee COIDI03, interview with Tesfa, face-to-face, 15 June 2022).

The ENDF and state media were closely connected, even establishing a collaborative media-military information dissemination task force at every front in the Tigray war. Profiled military staff were appointed as media coordinators to monitor what was reported by the media; the North West Front Media Coordinator is one of the military structures installed by ENDF (Ethiopian News Agency, 2020b). A

then member of communication leadership said the following about control of the media by the military:

... the national media and the military coordinated engagements by establishing a media-military task force in charge of editions, so as to control and monopolise the provision of information. (Interviewee COIDI03, interview with Tesfa, face-to-face, 15 June 2022)

Some of the state media awarded their journalists for favouring the federal government when reporting military operations. Hence, more than 70 loyal media professionals, from EPA, ETV, ENA, FBC, Walta TV, AMN, AMC, OBN, ESAT and others, led by the military commanders, were reporting from war fronts, while critical media voices were sidelined (Tewodros, 2020).

Religious leaders, scholars, artists, athletes, business elites and other influential people were among the sources of information spreading hate speech against ethnic Tigrayans, which falls into the ‘anti-others’ filter. Among them, Daniel Kibret, a public official and deacon in Orthodox Church, described Tigrayans as sneaks who must not be allowed to live on this Earth as humans (Tebta Mar, 2019); Lieutenant General Bacha Debele compared Tigrayans with the Devil (EBC, 2020b); artist Debebe Eshetu compared Tigrayans with hyenas (Amhara Media Corporation, 2020); and the former President of Amhara Regional State Agegnehu Teshagar said that the people of Tigray were the enemy of all Ethiopians (Yabele Media, 2021a). An Ethiopian Orthodox Church priest was quoted as saying:

All of them [Tigrayans], both intellectuals and the ordinary people are mad. So if a person is mad, before a hyena eats you, you better eat it and be blessed. The government called for a ceasefire for the sake of reconciliation assuming the criminals will surrender; however, since they [the Tigrayans] are mad to accept the reality, we priests have to baptise them with fire. If they refuse water they have to be baptised with fire. (Theodros, 2022)

On top of this, Ethiopian Orthodox Church Bahir Dar Synod Chief Executive, Melakeselam Efram Mulualem, and Amhara Regional Muslim Higher Council President, Shek Seid Mohammed, described Tigrayans as ‘anti-religion’, calling Ethiopians to join the law and

order enforcement measures by the government (Amhara Media Corporation, 2021).

These high-profile sources used their position as opinion leaders to reinforce the Ethiopian government's position, repeating the narrative about the need to enforce law and order and to fight against the threat to national security posed by the people of Tigray to justify the Tigray war. As one of the main 'news filters' in examining how sources can be instrumental in manufacturing consent, the media in Ethiopia used public officials and their allies to contribute to the creation of biased public knowledge among Ethiopians, and beyond, counter to the realities of the Tigray war on the ground (Herman & Chomsky, 1988).

The sources – public officials, alleged victims and opinion leaders – classified 'Tigrinya speakers' as the main national threat throughout Ethiopian history (EBC, 2020b). Thus, these trusted sources used their credibility to manufacture consent for the Tigray war, on the pretext that it was necessary to protect Ethiopian unity and sovereignty by annihilating the 'anti-Ethiopian unity', 'anti-religion', 'anti-reform' and non-human 'others', namely, 'Tigrinya speakers'.

In relation to propaganda theory, the research showed that the source of information and 'anti-others' filters were widely used in creating and maintaining the narratives spread by the federal government to justify the Tigray war. One of the main propaganda narratives was that the war was a necessary internal law and order enforcement operation that targeted 'terrorists' in Tigray. Tigrayans were classified as 'anti-Ethiopian unity' and 'anti-religion' by public officials, religious leaders, artists, business elites and other influential personalities. These narratives and the vilification of 'Tigrinya speakers' as the enemy of Ethiopian unity are indicative of the fact that the decision to declare war on Tigray was already established in the minds of the government before the TPLF attack on the Northern Command of the ENDF. However, despite this, the Ethiopian media framed the declaration of war as if it happened suddenly, after the Northern Command was attacked (Ethiopian News Agency, 2020d). Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed's media brief denounced the Tigray election as an automatic declaration of war

three months before (Haq Ena Saq ሃቅ ነና ሳቅ, 2020). Although ETV did report the massacre in Guliso district in Western Oromia, which occurred days before the attack on the Northern Command, it did not question why the military personnel had left the area, or where they had gone (EBC, 2020c).

Discussion

This research explored the role of the media in Ethiopia in creating and disseminating narratives on the Tigray war. The research used Hallin and Mancini's (2004) political parallelism and McNair's (2011) propaganda model as a theoretical framework. The research found that the Ethiopian media portrayed the Tigray war from the position of the Ethiopian government. Turning first to political parallelism, this research looked at each component: media content, organisational connections, the tendency for media personnel to be active in political life, partisanship of media audiences, and journalistic role orientations and practices. From the perspective of propaganda theory, it assessed the use of source and anti-others frames.

The use of trusted sources, including public officials, military strategists, religious leaders, business elites, artists and other influential people, in the hate speech campaign lent credibility to the narrative, which proposed annihilating Tigrayans as the only means of maintaining national unity in Ethiopia. Similarly, Skjerdal and Mulatu (2020) found that annihilation and othering were the major frames used by the media when reporting on Tigray. The role of Ethiopia's national media in mobilising Ethiopians against Tigrayans can be explained by Herman and Chomsky's (1988) 'anti others' filter.

This research focused on exploring how the Tigray war was framed from the perspective of the national media outlets, it did not explore the Tigrayan media (which continued from the Diaspora) and international media's portrayal of the war. Documentations and updates from the EEPA Situation Report and online outlet Tghat were used to distinguish major timelines of the war, which are important inputs for further exploration. The social media campaigns, including on Facebook and Twitter, by Diaspora supporters of all the

warring parties is also worth exploring. The communication blackout of Tigray, which lasted for a year and five months, as well as its effects in the social interaction in this digitalised world is also an interesting topic of investigation. And, most importantly, the effect of the hate speech, dehumanisation and ethnic slurs from the perspective of the victims and perpetrators is an area of research that needs critical scrutiny.

Conclusion

This research examined the role of Ethiopian media in the Tigray war, highlighting its use by the government to spread disinformation and further its agenda. The research uses Hallin and Mancini's polarised pluralist model, Herman and Chomsky's propaganda model, and Entman's framing theory to analyse factors such as media content, organisational connections, journalists' political activities, media audience partisanship, and journalistic practices. These factors are indicators of political parallelism, while the filters of the propaganda model include the source of information and 'anti-others' sentiment. The study also uses Iyengar's diagnostic and prognostic frames to present the results.

The research integrates criteria from these theories to explore how the political narrative of the Tigray war was established and reinforced through media content, the media system, and government organisational connections. This integration helped examine the establishment and maintenance of the narrative surrounding the Tigray war.

Key indicators include:

- Political parallelism: Media's alignment with political entities, journalists' political activities, and audience partisanship
- Propaganda model: Media content influenced by information sources and anti-others sentiment
- Framing theories: Diagnostic and prognostic frames used to shape public perception of the Tigray war

By combining these theoretical perspectives, the research provides a comprehensive analysis of how the Ethiopian media was used to construct and sustain the political narrative of the Tigray war.

The study found that state-owned and party-affiliated media promoted government narratives blaming Tigrayans for human rights abuses and denying foreign involvement. Media frames dehumanised Tigrayans, labelling them with derogatory terms, akin to the RTLM's use of 'cockroach' during the Rwandan genocide, such as: 'daytime hyena', 'devil', 'monsters', 'weeds', 'cancer', 'ghosts', 'traitors', 'homosexuals', and the 'enemy'.

It is clear from the findings of this research, that the media portrayed Tigrayans as a threat to Ethiopian unity, justifying the war as a law enforcement operation. The government controlled the narrative through a total communication blackout in Tigray, limiting alternative perspectives. Media incitement contributed to ethnic profiling, killing, arrests, and mob justice against Tigrayans, leading to atrocities and possible war crimes. Contrary to expectations, many media organisations served the government's alliance, using public figures to shape public opinion. Critical local and international media faced closures, jamming, intimidation, and arrests enabled state-affiliated media to dominate the narrative. The study concludes that the Ethiopian media played an inflammatory role in the Tigray war.

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Authors' contributions

S. E. Geb designed the research and provided overall guidance to the study. Daniel Tesfa established the research framework and conducted the interviews. Both authors collected the data, organised the coding and labelling, analysed the data and reviewed all the article versions and contributed suggestions on the conceptual framework. Both authors worked on the subsequent drafts. This work has been carried out as part of the PhD study of Daniel Tesfa.

Ethical considerations

This research was carried out under ethical clearance obtained from Mekelle University, reference number CSSL/RCS/0005/2023.

This chapter should be read in conjunction with the 'Note on content and editorial decisions' (Book 1).

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Famine as a Weapon in the Tigray War and the Siege

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ሓይሊ መላኽ ደረት የብሉን።

There is no limit for dictatorship.

Abstract

This study examines whether or not the famine in Tigray was a deliberate act of war, based on a conceptual framework drawing on Messer (1991), Kaldor (2013) and Mundy (2017). In 2021, allegations surfaced that famine was weaponised against civilians in Tigray. The research identifies pathways leading to deliberate famine, including decreased agricultural production, market disruption, displacement, and food aid blockage, resulting from: loss of access to land; destruction of agricultural capital; loss of labour supply; disruption of transportation networks; loss of income; and blockage of humanitarian aid.

The Europe External Programme with Africa (EEPA) Situation Reports on the Horn of Africa, which reported on the Tigray war, indicated early warnings of famine, including deaths from starvation, lack of clean water, malnutrition, and inadequate food in camps for internally displaced people (IDP). Despite warnings, the Ethiopian government and Eritrean troops exacerbated the crisis, deliberately destroying food sources, looting, and hindering farming. This research highlights the deliberate use of hunger and famine as tools of warfare, causing severe starvation. The blockade of humanitarian aid, refusal of permits, and prevention of needs assessments exacerbated the situation. The study concludes that all pathways to deliberate famine were employed, underscoring the intentional use of famine as a weapon in the Tigray conflict.

Key words: Tigray war, Ethiopia, Eritrea, famine, hunger, weapon of war, humanitarian aid, siege

Introduction

To allege that famine is used as a weapon of war is a grave allegation. Deliberate use of famine, sometimes also termed as hunger crimes, refers to starving targeted civilians as a means to achieve a political or military goal (Conley & De Waal, 2019). Deliberate starvation reduces a population's access to food, water, and the means to provide essential care, aggravating morbidity and mortality (Conley & De Waal, 2019). After successful reduction of the use of starvation as a weapon over the last 30 years, the tactic of starving besieged civilians as a tool of warfare appears to be on the increase (United Nations Security Council, 2018). The United Nations (UN) declared starving civilians as a war crime in 2018 in Resolution 2417, which establishes the need for the protection of civilians in countries subject to armed conflict from deliberate famine and food insecurity (United Nations Security Council, 2018). However, the literature shows that deliberate starvation continued to be considered a war tactic, as documented in Mali, Southern Sudan, Yemen, and Syria (Lucas, 2020).

The Integrated Food Security Phase Classification (IPC) describes the level of food insecurity in five phases; minimal (none), stressed, crisis, emergency, and famine (catastrophic). Famine is defined as an extreme deprivation of food and a situation in which starvation, death, destitution and extremely critical levels of acute malnutrition are or will likely be evident. According to the IPC, famine is the fifth and the last classification in the level of food insecurity. A situation is often declared as a famine when 20% of households face an extreme lack of food, 30% of under-five children suffer from acute malnutrition and two adults in every 10,000 people die outright from starvation or due to the interaction of malnutrition and disease (IPC, 2019, 2022). Globally, it is estimated that one third of individuals are hungry and the number of people in famine situations has dramatically increased from 27 million in 2019 to 41 million in 2021 (Solidarités International, 2021).

Before the war in Tigray, most of the population in Tigray was considered food secure. In October 2020, 57% of the population in Tigray had adequate food and another 30% had minimally adequate food (IPC, 2020, 2021; FAO, 2019). However, just six months after

the war broke out (from November 2020 through May 2021), the proportion of individuals in the crisis phase has increased from 10% to 34%, the proportion in the emergency phase from 2% to 31%, as well as the proportion in famine phase from zero to 6% (IPC, 2020, 2021). A recent study also shows that 85% of households in Tigray (excluding the Western Zone) are food insecure while the experience of moderate or severe household-level hunger increased from 3.3% during pre-war to 36% after the war broke out (Weldegiargis *et al.*, 2023).

Accordingly, this research asks the following question: *Does the empirical data support the claim that famine was used as an instrument of war in Tigray?*

Problem statement

Famine-induced starvation is human-made and preventable through governmental decisions. The deliberate use of starvation in the context of warfare has been raised over the last three decades (Global Rights Compliance & World Peace Foundation, 2020; Independent International Commission of Inquiry on the Syrian Arab Republic, 2018). Deliberate encircling and indiscriminately starving civilians in Southern Sudan contributed to the death of about 383,000 people between 2013 and 2018 (Lucas, 2020). Deliberate starvation of civilians in besieged areas was also documented in Syria (Independent International Commission of Inquiry on the Syrian Arab Republic, 2018).

Conley and De Waal (2019) state that the deliberate use of famine as a weapon in war may relate to instances of mass killing, controlling a population by reducing their capacity to resist, gaining territorial control, flushing out a population, or punishment of a population. The deliberate use of famine as a weapon of war exacerbates the potentially devastating consequences in terms of health, social and livelihood aspects. The health consequences are especially imminent in settings with limited access to health care and to life-saving interventions (Seal *et al.*, 2017).

Famine phenomena in the Horn of Africa have been identified as the primary driver for a range of negative health consequences such as

nutritional deficiency disorders, infection and economic consequences, such as a reduced productivity (Dugassa, 2019).

Literature shows that a declaration of famine enables timely response and better decisions at global, regional and local level for the famine. In May 2021, the IPC reported that Ethiopia scored high in the number of people in famine situations with 350,000 people in a catastrophic phase in Tigray and neighbouring regions, which is the highest after the 2011 famine in Somalia (IPC, 2021). Hence, the IPC called for a declaration of famine in Ethiopia for subsequent action. However, The Ethiopian federal government refused the report and a committee named “IPC Famine Review Committee” was activated in July 2021 by IPC Global Steering Committee to verify the plausibility of the IPC classification. The committee confirmed the determination of famine by the IPC classification based on the high number of individuals in a phase of famine (increased to 400,000 in July 2021) and the risk factors related to the ongoing siege and conflict in Tigray. However, the committee suspended a declaration of “famine” explaining the situation as follows:

...due to the highly dynamic nature of this conflict-driven crisis into account, it is impossible to determine a ‘most-likely scenario’ for the near or medium-term future.

(IPC Famine Review Committee [IPC FRC], 2021, p. 5)

The situation has caused concern regarding the need to address the ongoing man-made suffering in Tigray by mobilising global resources in a concerted effort.

Reports (Inza, 2022, Global Rights Compliance, 2022) have claimed that the famine in Tigray is deliberate to use starvation as warfare. As part of this, the UN’s International Commission of Human Rights Experts on Ethiopia has revealed that there are reasonable grounds to believe that the federal government of Ethiopia has used starvation as a method of warfare (Human Rights Council, 2022). However, evidence in supplementing and detailing the nature of the intentional use of famine as a warfare is not adequately documented.

Theoretical framework

Considering deliberate famine as a weapon as a means of gaining advantage in a conflict or contest could be implemented across variety of approaches. It often involves an active targeting of livelihoods and sources of food. The current study adopted concepts of considering famine as a weapon from Messer (1991), Kaldor (2013) and Mundy (2017) and established a theoretical framework from these concepts.

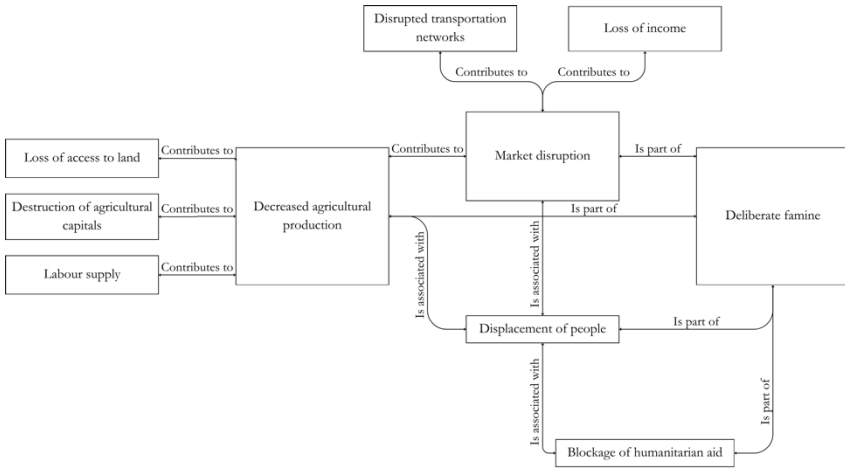


Figure 6.1. Theoretical framework

(Adapted from Messer, 1991; Kaldor, 2013; and Mundy, 2017)

Combining the concepts from the above documents indicates that famine as a weapon of war can be used in four pathways:

- Decreasing agricultural production,
- Disruption of markets
- Displacement
- Lockage of food aid

These pathways result from:

- Loss of access to land
- Destruction of agricultural capital
- Loss of labour supply
- Disruption of transportation networks
- Loss of income

- Blockage of humanitarian aid

A deliberate famine is the result of these factors producing a pathway to deliberately block access to food. Furthermore, Kaldor highlights the consideration that in making the ecological environment unfavourable to living, people will be displaced from the place where their economic sources are based (Figure 6.1).

Methodology

The data source of the current study is the Situation Reports on the Horn of Africa which were published by Europe External Programme with Africa (EEPA). The almost daily EEPA Situation Reports on the Horn of Africa record the key political developments in the Horn of Africa and recorded the key events of the Tigray war since it began. The EEPA Situation Reports were sent to diplomatic missions, and distributed on social media and it was published by various outlets, and therefore there was an ability to access the information sent out in the reports.

The EEPA Situation Reports are based on local sources, media and international media, and was often a basis for media to do further investigation on issues raised in the reports. The EEPA Situation Report could be regarded as an early warning system; not claiming that all information published could be absolutely verified is published what the editors deemed reliable as a basis for further investigation and research.

Given that the EEPA Situation Report was published in Belgium, while Tigray was under siege, it provides a clear barometer of the type of information that was communicated outside Tigray, despite the blockade. It also provides a good record of what information was available for the international community to respond to. Apart from the fact that the media and communication blockade in itself can and perhaps should be seen as a factor that played a role in the development of famine as a weapon of war, a blockade that the EEPA Situation Report attempted to circumvent, the reports do also give clear evidence of the information that was available at the time – in real time, on the development of the famine in Tigray – and its potential causes.

As the Situation Reports encompassed a wide range of issues related to the war in Tigray, the reports were disaggregated by sub-topics. The researcher only extracted the entries directly related to the war and famine in the region. The EEPA Situation Reports investigated covered five subsequent months since the war broke out (November 2020 to March 2021). The overall set of Situation Reports on which the current study is based is freely available for reuse at the website of EEPA.

The extracted Situation Reports were imported to Atlas' qualitative software (Scientific Software Development GmbH) for coding and labelling analysis. After repeated reading and re-reading, similar codes were categorised and thematically re-grouped to let them inductively emerge to themes and sub-themes. Subsequently, findings were organised in logically connected and non-repetitive themes.

Results

The current study aimed to analyse the five months of Situation Reports from 18 November 2020, to 19 March 2021. The following themes emerged out of the review of said reports. The findings were categories in five main themes and sixteen sub-themes. The main themes were revolving around:

- Concerns and calls for action on the looming famine
- The famine was evident
- Deliberate blockage of humanitarian assistance
- Deliberate blockage of basic Services and infrastructure, and
- Deliberate destruction of food sources

Table 6.1 sets out main themes and sub-themes identified in the data.

Table 6.1. Summary of the themes and sub-themes regarding the deliberate use of famine as warfare in Tigray war, 202

Theme	Main themes	Sub-theme
Theme I	Concerns regarding the famine	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Estimated number of people in need of humanitarian assistance
Theme II	Information about the famine	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Deaths attributed to starvation • Visitors' witness on people not eating for days • Fleeing to IDP camps for daily food • No Food at the IDP centres • Eating leaves to survive • Severe acute malnutrition/wasting
Theme III	Humanitarian assistance	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Refusal of permits • Preventing a critical need Assessment for Food • Preventing food and supplies from reaching people • Denial and hiding of the looming famine by authorities
Theme IV	Deliberate siege	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Blockage of medical supplies • Destruction and looting of Health facility • Blockage of bank, Telecommunication, and electricity service • Denial to access safe drinking water
Theme V	Deliberate destruction of food sources	

Theme I. Concerns regarding a famine

Concern about famine in Tigray was identified almost immediately after the onset of the war. Following the break-out of the war, there was a sudden closure of all services including banks, telecommunication and transportation. In the first four weeks, the restrictions imposed on movement, the difficulties to access savings, the absence of fuel and the run out of consumables (foods and goods) were part of the challenge in responding to the basic consumption needs of the people in Tigray. Both the loss of income and the shortage of food due to transport being blocked provoked concerns.

As soon as the federal Ethiopian troops controlled Mekelle City in November 2020, the federal government imposed a curfew for everyone to be at home from 6pm every day. The insecurity that followed, a situation in which extrajudicial killings were perpetrated, the absence of security, and the looting of food supplies from shops, immediately endangered access to food for the civilian population in Tigray. Due to the siege, which included a blockade on media and closure of the Internet, concerns about how the population would have access to food was not transmitted. It took more than a month and a half before the urgent need for humanitarian assistance came to the attention of the global community. The human suffering associated with food shortage appeared in the UN Security Council for the first time on 15 December 2021, raised by German delegate. The German delegate called for full and immediate humanitarian assistance for Tigray. However, the Council did not give adequate attention to the issue at that time (EEPA, 2020, SR 26, Ref. number 602).

At the same time, the Belgian journalist Stijn Vercruyssen (VRT) found a way of entering Tigray and making a (secretly shot) report; he addressed the concern of extreme food shortages in Tigray (EEPA, 2020, SR 34, Ref. number 813). Concerns were also raised at the Flemish Parliament in Belgium, which asked for urgent diplomatic action with regards to the conflict in Tigray to avoid famine (EEPA, 2020, SR 22, Ref. number 497).

In January 2021, more warning reports about the looming famine were raised within the international community. At the end of

January, a Government of France statement also addressed the continued risk of famine in Tigray (EEPA, 2021, SR 72, Ref. number 1761). In late January and early February 2021, the Washington Post stressed the report from the Early Warning Systems Network regarding the looming famine in Tigray and a substantial proportion of the people requiring emergency food (EEPA, 2021, SR 59, Ref. number 1453).

Parts of central and eastern Tigray are likely in Emergency Phase 4, a step below famine. (EEPA, 2022, SR 59, Ref. number 1455)

In line with the above, the Catholic Bishop of Adigrat Zone of Tigray, sent out an appeal for solidarity with the population of Tigray (dated 5 January 2021) stating food items and basic life-saving medicines had run out in Tigray (EEPA, 2021, SR 56, Ref. number 1359).

A grave concern was raised that a substantial proportion of the Tigray people were suffering from hunger and starvation, and this became especially clear after the visit of the EU Special Envoy to the Horn, Haavisto, to Tigray, when the EEPA Situation Report documented:

Tigray is being confronted with a potential famine, where 2.3 million people need urgent access to supplies. Ethiopian troops are making access difficult and restricting access to water and aid, including that of the UN. (EEPA, 2021, SR 86, Ref. number 2157)

In February, the looming famine in Tigray had started to deepen and it was reported that more geographic areas in Tigray were entering phase 4 level of food insecurity, the most severe stage of a looming famine (EEPA, 2022, SR 77, Ref. number 1871).

Estimated number of people in need of humanitarian assistance

The UN OCHA published the prediction on the estimated number of people in urgent need of humanitarian assistance which jumped to two million over the two-week period from the start of the war (EEPA, 2020, SR 5, Ref. number 94) and the predicted number hit a 4.5 million point after just two months (at January 8, 2021) (EEPA, 2021, SR 58, Ref. number 1404). This figure (4.5 million persons) was frequently reported in reports, calls for action and early warnings to call for actions to avoid a deadly famine.

In January 2021, the Washington Post covered in its news that hundreds of thousands might starve to death and 4.5 million people need emergency food assistance – out of a population of 6 million people in Tigray (EEPA, 2021, SR 59, Ref. number 1453). Furthermore, in early February, the then Chief for the World Food Program (WFP) stated that 4.5 million people in Tigray were in need of humanitarian assistance, of which 2.6 to 3 million persons needed immediate assistance of food aid. The WFP chief underlined that children, pregnant and lactation women continued to be starving in Tigray (EEPA, 2021, SR 79, Ref. number 1934).

Theme II: Information about the famine

In January 2021, three months after the war broke out, accounts from the region started to report indicators of famine. Deaths attributed to starvation, visitors' witness reports communicating that people were seen not to be eating for days, and that people were fleeing to IDP camps to be able to access daily food consumption, the lack of food at the IDP centres for people arriving at the centre, that people were eating leaves of trees and shrubs to survive, and Severe Acute Malnutrition/wasting in the margin were reported (EEPA, 2021, SR 82, Ref. number 2016; EEPA, 2021, SR 91, Ref. number 2293; EEPA, 2021, SR 102, Ref. number 2656).

The following themes were identified from the analysis:

- Death attributed to starvation
- Visitors witness reports
- Reports of people in search of food fleeing to IDP camps
- The lack of food in IDP camps
- Reports on people eating leaves for survival
- Reports on severe acute malnourishing and bodily wasting.

Deaths attributed to starvation

Figures on deaths due to starvation were reported from January 2021 onwards. As a tip of the iceberg, in January, five families had been found dead due to starvation in Irob, the Eastern part of Tigray (EEPA, 2021, SR 61, Ref. number 1483), while the then interim administration Bureau of Social Affairs in Tigray reported his office's witness regarding the death of 10 individuals in Gulomekeda Woreda

in Eastern Zone and the death of three children in the Adwa Woreda in Central Zone primarily due to starvation (EEPA, 2021, SR 65, Ref. number 1582). In addition, reports in February 2021 disclosed that many more individuals were dying from hunger in the Northwest, Central, and Eastern Zones of Tigray (EEPA, 2021, SR 77, Ref. number 1873). A report from Red Cross explained the evidence of starvation as:

“Many, many severe cases of malnutrition” state Red Cross, “emaciated” people who managed to escape rural areas still inaccessible in the fourth month of fighting. Displaced civilians reaching camps near major towns have skin on their bones and appear very malnourished. (EEPA, 2021, SR 82, Ref. number 2016)

In February 2021, the evidence of starvation of civilians in Tigray was clear, and it was also apparent that this crisis was a serious one.

Lack of access to safe drinking water

Lack of access to safe drinking water was a problem reported immediately since the onset of the war in Tigray. It was documented in relation to the destruction of water sources including the damage to reservoirs around major cities, looting water trucks, and security concerns to fetch water. In January 2021, MSF stated the critical shortage of clean water in Tigray related to the war as “The people (in Tigray) have very limited access to food, clean water, shelter, and healthcare.” (EEPA, 2021, SR 54, Ref. number 1314). It was reported that the Ethiopian troops deliberately acted to block access to water:

Tigray is being confronted with a potential famine where 2.3 million people need urgent access to supplies. Ethiopian troops are making access difficult and restricting access to water and aid, including that of the UN. (EEPA, 2021, SR 86, Ref. number 2157)

Some reports mentioned that the people in some towns of the Tigray were left to use rivers as a source of drinking water. A report stated the critical shortage of water and the security concern it created to fetch water from rivers in Adigrat, the head quarter of the Eastern Zone of Tigray as:

In Adigrat, water shortage is forcing people to drink from rivers. Fearing attacks, some are hiding in caves. (EEPA, 2021, SR 77, Ref. number 1873)

The security situation made it dangerous to access rivers to fetch water.

Visitor's witness reports

In February 2021, members of the global community who visited Tigray created an opportunity to speak out about the lack of communication on the famine in Tigray. Just four months after the war broke out, the desperate need for food in Tigray overwhelmed visitors from the global community. This is evidenced by the level of emotion and the impact visits had on foreigners as they saw an enormous need for food. The president of the Red Cross is one of the visitors who expressed emotion after he observed that no food, no water, no medicine, or drugs were available for the people in Tigray (EEPA, 2021, SR 90, Ref. number 2263). The same month, the Chief of Save the Children US witnessed that he had found people in Tigray who had not eaten food for days:

Since arriving in Axum, Central Tigray in early February, Save the Children has met families who have not eaten for days. (EEPA, 2021, SR 91, Ref. number 2293)

The situation on the availability of food and necessities was so dire that it created emotional appeals by those in a position to visit the region and see the situation in real life.

Fleeing to IDP camps for food

In the fifth month of the war, from late February through late March 2021, the people not displaced from their homes remained locally contained/quarantined with no food, medicine, water, or fuel. Associated Press reported it:

Skinny, hungry, fleeing threats of violence, thousands of people who have been hiding in rural areas of Ethiopia's Tigray region have begun to arrive in the community of Shire. 5000 arrived between last Wednesday and Sunday. (EEPA, 2021, SR 102, Ref. number 2653)

A Dutch director of Médecins sans Frontières (MSF) explained:

The people arriving (at camps) are in very bad conditions... very exhausted, dehydrated, and skinny and it is becoming a desperate situation very quickly. (EEPA, 2021, SR 102, Ref. number 2654)

This situation prompted people to flee to the internal displacement centres to look for daily food. Hungry, skinny, and dehydrated persons had started to arrive at the camps for food assistance.

IDP centres running out of food

It was unfortunate that the people fleeing to IDP centres were not getting the food they had hoped to receive there. The Situation Report captured that refugees in Tigray were deliberately forced to live in overcrowded camps and conditions, which posed further vulnerability to infections. UN OCHA has repeatedly sent out alarms as early as December 2020 to warn that food rations for displaced people in Tigray had run out and they called for an urgent call for unconditional and safe humanitarian access to Tigray (EEPA, 2020, SR 23, Ref. number 528). Due to the siege, this access to support the population with food was denied.

Eating leaves for survival

In March 2021, reports captured evidence of the deliberate deprivation of food after hearing from newly arriving people in IDP camps. The newly arriving people survived by eating leaves available in the forest since they left their homes and hidden in the forests for security concerns. Aid workers exposed that they found people spending their time in forests and they had been eating leaves after they finished the seeds they had put aside for planting (EEPA, 2021, SR 102, Ref. number 2655). The aid workers also uncovered that they had heard many accounts of refugees hiding in remote villages. The people, afraid to be found, were at risk of being cut off from any assistance (EEPA, 2021, SR 107, Ref. number 2794). After visiting the Shire with the International Rescue Committee, Madiha Raza witnessed:

People are starving! There is a severe issue of access to food. One interviewee told me that she survived on just leaves for a month while she hid in a forest. (EEPA, 2021, SR 102, Ref. number 2656)

The situation in the rural areas was dire.

Severe acute malnutrition and bodily wasting

The increasing incidence of the proportion of under-five children with severe acute malnutrition is also a reliable indicator of famine.

The proportion had sharply risen from 7% before the war (4 November 2020, to 10% on 29 January 2021 (EEPA, 2021, SR 70, Ref. number 1713). Reports at this time repeatedly mentioned that the international classification for food security in Tigray showed to approach the margin of level 4, just one step before it was classified as a catastrophic situation.

Theme III: Humanitarian assistance

The following three sub-categories were identified to look at (i) the deliberate blockage of humanitarian assistance mainly food and medicine, (ii) extra-mile efforts to destroy food sources (iii) intentional blockage of other basic services including fuel, electricity, bank, and telecommunication.

Refusal of permits

For at least four months, federal government authorities withheld permissions to provide humanitarian assistance in Tigray. The UN agencies reported that the permission granted by the federal authorities was frequently put down to simple “paperchase” permission.

An official from the Red Cross stated the situation with emotion that lack of clearance prevented his institution from reaching people in Tigray with food for months:

There is no clearance for the humanitarian flights of the Red Cross!! We are ready! We have loaded our cargo! However, we cannot send medicine, drugs, and food!! The elderly and children are in desperate need of food. (EEPA, 2021, SR, 90, Ref. number 2266)

No aid entered the region from November to mid-January and humanitarian organisations expressed their concern to the federal authorities that they could not ask regional offices to go without food, and, as people were starving, they were in great trouble especially as they could not even feed their staff (EEPA, 2021, SR 58, Ref. number 1410).

Preventing critical need assessment for food

As part of the humanitarian response, agents needed to conduct a rapid need assessment for foodstuff. However, the issue suffered

from frequent and deliberate obstruction by security authorities. In one reported instance, a UN agency was blocked from carrying out the critical needs assessment for food in Tigray by refusing to give security clearance. The US House Foreign Affairs Committee responded to reports that a UN convoy came under fire as:

[...] the situation on the ground is getting worse. Lack of security protections and opaque approval processes are blocking critical humanitarian assessment teams. (EEPA, 2020, SR 23, Ref. number 519)

The lack of clearance for the implementation of needs assessments further impeded the possibility to address the famine.

Preventing food and supplies from reaching people

Blockage of conveyances and trucks to prevent food from reaching displaced people was commonly reported by aid agents (EEPA, 2020, SR 23, Ref. number 519). The US House Foreign Affairs Committee called not to politicize humanitarian aid:

We call on the Government of Ethiopia to ensure safe and unfettered humanitarian access without delay. Humanitarian aid cannot be politicized. (EEPA, 2020, SR 23, Ref. number 518)

The physical blocking of food aid transports and transport of humanitarian assistance resulted in further obstacles to the delivery of much-needed aid.

Denial and hiding of the looming famine by Ethiopian authorities

In contrast to the reports generated on the hunger and starvation in Tigray, the starvation was denied by the then Ethiopia's Disaster Commission spokesman [Debebe Zewdie] in January 2021, when he stated that there was no starvation in Ethiopia (EEPA, 2021, SR 62, Ref. number 1525). The reports that government officials were denying the looming famine provoked a first allegation that famine was used as a weapon of war in Tigray.

The Economist reacted to the government's statement about the horrific reports on the evident starvation in Tigray:

Ethiopia's government appears to be wielding hunger as a weapon as the Tigray region is being starved into submission along with the horrifying accounts of ethnic killings, mass rapes, and starvation. (EEPA, 2021, SR 63, Ref. number 1530)

While the concern for a looming famine was continuously reported, the analysis emerged that support mechanisms to prevent the famine were intentionally blocked by the Ethiopian government.

Theme IV: Deliberate siege

The Situation Report also captured blockage of other basic services including medical supplies, bank service, telecommunication and fuel, health service, and access to safe drinking water, which all are directly related to food.

Blockage of medical supplies

The deliberate obstruction of medical supplies to Tigray was frequently reported. Just to mention a few, the US House Foreign Affairs Committee stated in early December 2020 that medical supplies and other desperately needed humanitarian aid were blocked by the Government of Ethiopia from reaching displaced populations (EEPA, 2020, SR 23, Ref. number 519). In addition, journalist Stijn Vercruyse (VRT) – who entered Tigray despite the block of media into the region, warned about the lack of medicines including for Eritrean refugees residing in Tigray on December 2020 (EEPA, 2020, SR 34, Ref. number 813). A representative of the Red Cross discussed the critical shortage of medicines and drugs in Tigray in February (EEPA, 2021, SR 90, Ref. number 2263). The Catholic Bishop of Adigrat (Tigray), sent an appeal on 5 January 2021, that basic life-saving medicines had run out in Tigray including for refugees residing in the region (EEPA, 2021, SR 56, Ref. number 1359).

Destruction and looting of health facilities

Reports suggested that the destruction of health facilities and looting of the facilities were deliberately executed. In December 2020, the then-head of the Bureau of Health of the interim government installed by the Ethiopian government confirmed that the Wukro and Adigrat hospitals (both in the Eastern Zone of Tigray) were destroyed and all materials were looted (EEPA, 2020, SR 37, Ref. number 874). In December 2020 the arrival of looted cars, diagnostics, and pharmaceuticals in Asmara (Eritrea) was confirmed (EEPA, 2020, SR 19, Ref. number 424). On 5 January 2021, 78% of the health facilities in Tigray were reported to be destroyed, and 265 of the 291

ambulances in Tigray were either stolen or destroyed (EEPA, 2021, SR 46, Ref. number 1111). At the same time, the UN also revealed that the health facilities outside the cities were not operational and those in cities were in a critical shortage of supplies (EEPA, 2021, SR 47, Ref. number 1141). Furthermore, three months after the war broke out, MSF teams reported that between 3 and 4 million people in Tigray had been left to live without health services. (EEPA, 2021, SR 54, Ref. number 1319)

Blockage of banks, telecommunication, and electricity service

The deliberate blockage of basic services including banking services, telecommunications, and electricity services considerably contributed to the famine in Tigray. It inflated the price of the food supplies in Tigray. The absence of telecommunications and a bank system considerably interfered with the efforts of aid workers to organise humanitarian response while the absence of bank services blocked many from access to their savings or benefiting from support from relatives abroad. (EEPA, 2020, SR 27, Ref. number 642)

Theme V: Deliberate destruction of food sources

An impressive number of entries related to a scorched earth tactic with possible food sources being destroyed and destruction of farming resources with the effect of limiting the productivity of the farmers. The Ethiopian National Defence Force, Eritrean Defence Forces and Amhara special forces, and non-formal Amhara militants were reportedly engaged in burning crops in the farm and house, mixing seeds to make them unusable, cutting fruit trees, stealing and slaughtering domestic animals. In addition, mixing food items with sand was deliberately executed in Tigray to punish the people. Alex De Waal revealed that he had received reports that Eritrean and Ethiopian troops cut down the Mango orchards at Adebay and Tseada on the Zamra River in south-central Tigray (EEPA, 2021, SR 97, Ref. number 2489). He also added that this amounts to the crime of using starvation as a weapon:

It's not a massacre, a mass rape or torture. But chopping down those fruit trees is evidence of the war aims of the leaders in Asmara and Addis Ababa. (EEPA, 2021, SR 97, Ref. number 2490)

While the Washington Post also exposed that the troops deployed in Tigray were burning crops and stealing cattle (EEPA, 2021, SR 70, Ref. number 1715), reports in December also confirmed that looted food items arrived in Asmara in Eritrea, along with other looted cars, equipment from universities, diagnostics, pharmaceuticals and factory equipment including a textile factory (EEPA, 2020, SR 19, Ref. number 424).

Discussion

The indicators of the use of hunger and starvation as a weapon of war in Ethiopia's Tigray are well documented (Clarfield *et al.*, 2022; Paravicini & Houreld, 2021; Inza, 2022). According to the report by the IPC (2021) 352,000 individuals in Tigray were experiencing catastrophic starvation conditions in June 2021 with 70% of the population in Tigray in crisis or worse with people in one-third of the households eating only one meal per day (Phase 3 or above).

The delivery of humanitarian assistance was deliberately blocked. Other reports from Tigray and elsewhere have also shown the blockade of aid trucks with humanitarian aid (Devi, 2021; Gesesew *et al.*, 2023). The national government's attempts to deliberately hide the looming famine, to refuse to act on the early warnings, and to play paper-chasing deals to stop humanitarian access weigh heavily given the clear indications of a looming famine. The lack of support is compounded by a deliberate attack on aid workers, blocking and looting aid trucks, and suspension of non-governmental emergency workers (Gesesew *et al.*, 2023). Persons flocking to camps as they were in critical need of food did not find adequate support available at the IDP camp sites. A study by the International Organisation for Migration (IOM) showed that 575 IDP sites were identified in Tigray and that half of the households in the majority (93%) of the IDP sites had never received food assistance since they arrived in the camps (Mesfin & Gebremariam, 2023).

Unlike conventional famine, which can be prevented or addressed by the mobilisation of global resources in response to the early warning indicators, famine which is deliberately hidden by government authorities is difficult to address. In Somalia, the aid and humanitarian

assistance made available dramatically increased after a catastrophic famine had been declared (Maxwell, 2019). Intentional blockage by warring parties in delivery of humanitarian assistance has persisted as a main challenge (Schwendimann, 2011).

Concerted efforts are hardly possible when governments are not willing to address the disaster. As information on the Tigray war was blocked, warnings for the looming famine were hardly available. In contrast to the international laws which prohibit starving of civilians, reservation to interfere with the nation's "sovereignty" delay the efforts to define and address the looming famine. Moreover, the prohibition of deliberate starvation is less monitored and amounts to war crime only when perpetrated by state parties (D'Alessandra & Gillett, 2019).

In famine situations access to health care services is critical to provide lifesaving treatment increases (Dean *et al.*, 2020; Garber *et al.*, 2020; Seal *et al.*, 2017). The health system in Tigray was as it seems purposefully destroyed with medical equipment being looted, and health facilities were used as military camps while health care workers were attacked (Gesese *et al.*, 2023; Tigray Health Bureau, 2022). Basic services including vaccination services were denied for children under-five, malnourished children left untreated, and women who gave births unattended by skilled care providers (Tigray Health Bureau, 2022, Gebregziabher *et al.*, 2022; Gesese *et al.*, 2021; 2023). In addition, the war led people with chronic conditions to discontinue regular check-ups (Weledegebriel *et al.*, 2023). While access to basic services in protracted areas is generally difficult (Garber *et al.*, 2020), the consequences of deliberate denial of access to basic services were enormous in the context of a looming famine.

In addition, there was a massive allegedly purposeful destruction of water sources. With an estimated 19,159 rural and 715 urban water sources in Tigray, the coverage for safe drinking water was 61% in 2020. However, 50% of the water sources of the coverage were destroyed, according to a report by the Tigray Bureau of Water and Natural Resources. It was found that 36 ongoing projects aimed at improving the water coverage in Tigray were deliberately targeted, looted, and destroyed (Mesfin & Gebremedhin, 2023). Another study

in early 2022 showed that the war reduced the water coverage in Tigray by 50%, putting a considerable population at risk due to inadequate and unclear safe drinking water (Shishaye *et al.*, 2023).

In May 2021, the Addis Standard addressed the then deputy head of the Tigray interim administration's statement regarding a campaign to stop farmers in Shire, Tembien, and Hawzen from their routine farming activities as well as the deliberate obstruction of seeds from entering Tigray (Addis Standard, 2021). In addition, a study on the farm situation indicated that the shortage of farming tools, oxen, fertiliser, seeds, and manpower in Tigray severely affected their farming ability and that farms cultivated late and left land uncultivated. The study indicated the lower yield of major cereal crops (wheat and barley) because farmers had consumed the seeds when hiding from warfare (Ghebreyohannes *et al.*, 2022).

Similarly, deliberate destruction of crops in the fields or food stocks, killing of livestock, and blocking of food and aid supplies for the civilian population were observed in Somalia, North Nigeria, and the Lake Chad region, conflicting parties (Lucas, 2020). This might imply the need to intensify the monitoring and accountability mechanisms on governments or parties regarding the deliberate use of starvation as warfare (United Nations Security Council, 2018).

At present, the long-term effects of the deliberate destruction of food sources along with the deteriorated economic activities, shortage of rainfall, temporary termination of food aid in Tigray, people are suffering from hunger. (World Food Programme, 2023) A study conducted in August 2023 also verified that more than 1300 individuals in Tigray died of starvation since the ceasefire agreement was reached in November 2022, while many more were left at grave concern of starvation (The Associated Press, 2023)

Conclusion

This study looked at whether or not the famine in Tigray was the result of a deliberate set of actions amounting warfare. In 2021, it was alleged that famine was used as a weapon of war against the civilian population in Tigray. This research investigates this claim.

The literature describes how a series of actions constitute together a pathway to deliberate famine. The key factors are the following:

- decreasing agricultural production,
- disruption of markets and
- displacement, and
- blockage of food aid

These pathways result from:

- Loss of access to land
- Destruction of agricultural capital
- Loss of labour supply
- Disruption of transportation networks
- Loss of income
- Blockage of humanitarian aid

To establish the use of famine as weapon of war it must result from a deliberate policy on the combined pathways. This study investigated the pathways and the causes of problems based on policy decisions by the parties partaking in the war in Tigray.

The review of the EEPA Situation Reports showed that calls and concerns about a looming famine were reported since the onset of the war. The threat of famine was high and indications were reported related to:

- Incidences of death due to starvation
- Lack of access to clean drinking water
- Reports by visitors to the region
- People in need of food fled to IDP camps – where food provisions were inadequate
- Reports that people were surviving on leaves
- Reports of acute malnutrition

It can, therefore, be concluded that the famine was reported and that the situation was known to the Ethiopian government, who led the war actions. The international media warned in 2021 that 4.5 million people out of the 6 million people in Tigray were suffering from the lack of access to food.

Not only were the indications of famine neglected, but there appears to have been a concerted effort to terminate food production in the Tigray region. The EEPA Situation Reports repeatedly warns of the destruction of food sources, looting and slaughtering of domestic animals, and preventing access to agricultural inputs as well as not allowing farmers from ploughing their farms. These acts were deliberately executed to reduce access to food by the people in Tigray. Eritrean troops hindered farmers from ploughing their farms in Atsbi (Eastern Tigray). The findings highlight that a significant portion of those impacted were highly vulnerable, facing severe starvation.

Consequently, the study underscores the deliberate use of hunger and famine as tools of warfare in the Tigray conflict, aimed at decimating the community. The war directly resulted in loss of access to land; destruction of agricultural capital; loss of labour supply and disruption of transportation networks. Moreover, the siege relating to media, communications, banking services, and many other services, compounded the isolation, driving up prices and causing a loss of income. Due to the large number of internally displaced people, farmers lost access to their land and food production declined further. The continuous threat of attacks and the ongoing insecurity further contributed to the displacement of the population.

While the situation mounted to a humanitarian crisis, the aid to support the civilian population was blocked in various ways:

- Lack of access to support including from relatives
- Refusal or delay in granting permission to humanitarian actors to provide much-needed support and blocking their work
- Refusal of permits for humanitarian transports to the region to bring in food and essential items such as medicines
- Apparent prevention of needs assessments

The Situation Reports by EEPA captured strong evidence of deliberate blockage of humanitarian assistance including: (i) refusal of permit entry of humanitarian support, (ii) preventing critical needs assessment for food, (iii) obstructing food and supplies from reaching people, and (iv) denial of the evident famine.

The denial of the problem of hunger the looming famine and the blocking of pathways to address these issues was further compounded by the destruction of medical health facilities and looting, attacking of health workers, and occupation of facilities by military.

In summary, this study finds that all of the pathways towards deliberate famine were used in the Tigray war. This underscores the egregious concern of the deliberate nature in the use of famine as a weapon of war.

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Author's contributions

The author conceived the study, designed the theoretical framework, analysed the data, drafted first draft, and approved the final manuscript.

Ethical considerations

This research was carried out under ethical clearance obtained from Tilburg University Identification code: REDC 2020.139 titled “Cultural Dimensions of Meaning-making and Agenda-setting”.

This chapter should be read in conjunction with the ‘Note on content and editorial decisions’ (Book 1).

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Bodies for Battle Fields: Systematic Use of Rape as a Weapon of War in Tigray

Gebru Kidanu & Mirjam Van Reisen

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Even as she was being slaughtered, the mother protected her children.

Abstract

This study investigates the systematic use of sexual violence in the Tigray war using Europe External Programme with Africa (EEPA) Situation Reports, EEPA testimonies, and in-depth interviews with victims. It analyses 327 reports and 38 testimonies, along with 20 interviews, finding that sexual violence was strategically employed by the Ethiopian National Defence Force (ENDF), Eritrean Defence Forces (EDF), and Amhara militia and Special Forces, with Eritrean troops as primary perpetrators. Eritrean forces attempted to conceal their presence, which was later confirmed by Ethiopian Prime Minister Abiy in March 2021. A communication blockade and disinformation initially obscured the widespread sexual violence, with the first reports surfacing in January 2021. These reports eventually revealed extensive and systematic atrocities affecting thousands, including those in rural areas, and were discussed at the UN Security Council in April 2021. The blockade and siege of Tigray prevented victims from seeking help or accessing health facilities, leaving them destitute. The study concludes that strategic rape aimed to reduce women's reproductive capabilities, causing infertility, HIV infections, pregnancy losses, and trauma, deeply impacting individuals and communities. Future research is essential for accountability and addressing these war crimes and their impact.

Key words: Tigray war, Ethiopia, Eritrea, sexual violence, strategic rape, war crimes

Sexual violence in war

When rape is used as a weapon of war, it is used to advance military and political aims, by humiliating the victims in a calculated and vicious manner (Caryl, 2017). The age of the survivors of war-time rape ranges from infants up to elderly women, indicating that its purpose is to destroy the ‘enemy’ by targeting women and girls in the society it seeks to overpower (Clifford, 2008). Perpetrators of this form of rape, which can be called ‘strategic’ rape (Seifert, 1993; Wirtz, 2023), use their words, and acts to communicate the purpose of this violence. Through rape, they convey the message that the culture has been penetrated by the enemy, humiliating the whole community, and sending a symbolic message (Reid-Cunningham, 2008).

Additional forms of violence committed together with rape include the mutilating of genitals and other body parts, blinding women so that they cannot identify the perpetrator(s), amputating body parts, inserting foreign objects inside the vagina (Mukengere Mukwege & Nangini, 2009; Hagen & Yohani, 2010). Survivors are often exposed to multiple incidents of rape and gang rape, leading to greater psychological and physical consequences, including, in some cases, death (Clifford, 2008). HIV/AIDS is also transmitted through rape, both intentionally, to reduce the number of the targeted population, and unintentionally (Reid-Cunningham, 2008).

For centuries, rape has been considered an inevitable by-product of war and has only recently been deemed a ‘weapon of war’ by the international community (Lundgren, 2015). In recent history, the use of rape as a weapon of war is well documented, including in World War II, during which this act was committed by the Nazis, Soviets, and the Japanese, as well as in the Vietnam War (Clifford, 2008). The wars in Bosnia and Herzegovina and the genocide in Rwanda were also characterised by the systematic mass rape of women (Shanks & Schull, 2000; Fairbanks, 2018).

Eastern Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC) has been recognised as disconcerting by UN Special Representative Wallstrom (Lloyd-Davies, 2011; see also Clark, 2009). Much of the violence is rooted in the aftermath of the Rwanda genocide because after the

genocide, Hutu militias known as the Interahamwe sought refuge in the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC). They established bases in Hutu refugee camps in eastern DRC and continued to launch attacks against Rwanda. In response, the Rwandan Patriotic Army (RPA) intervened in the DRC two years later with the aim of dismantling the Hutu militias. (Brown, 2011). A study undertaken in south Kivu indicated four types of rape in DRC: individual rape, gang rape, members of the community forced to rape each other, and rape involving objects inserted into the genitals (Ohambe, Galloy & Sow, 2004).

In 2004, a militia group in Darfur called Janjaweed were accused of committing systematic attacks against civilians in Sudan, rape being one of the common forms of violence committed against women, during that time (Amnesty International, 2004). Amnesty International reported that rape has been used in Sudan as a weapon of war, where women were raped in public in front of the community and family members to humiliate the woman, her family and the community (Amnesty International, 2004). Other women were tortured, beaten, and killed during the act of rape. The report also shows that the violence did not spare pregnant women. In Sudan, women and girls were also taken into military camps to serve as sex slaves (Amnesty International, 2004). These acts create long-lasting trauma among families and the community, and children born out of this rape are labelled 'Janjaweed babies' or 'Arab babies' and are stigmatised in the community (Abdullahi, 2016).

Rape was used extensively during the war in Tigray. Tigrayan women were the primary targets, including young girls, elderly women, and pregnant and lactating women (Dyan, 2021; Amnesty International, 2021; Human Rights Watch, 2021; McVeigh, 2021; UN Human Rights Council, 2022).

Based on the clinical data analysis by Physicians for Human Rights, it was found that most documented rape incidents (76%; n=233) involved multiple perpetrators. These incidents primarily occurred in groups, with an average of three perpetrators per incident (Physicians for Human Rights, 2023). Women were kept as sex slaves and exposed to multiple incidents by different groups (Physicians for

Human Rights, 2023; Gebremichael *et al.*, 2023) United Nations Human Rights Council (UNHRC) (2022) concludes that there:

[...] are reasonable grounds to believe that violations such as extrajudicial killings, rape, sexual violence and starvation of the civilian population as a method of warfare have been committed in Ethiopia since 3 November 2020. (United Nations Human Rights Council, 2022)

The perpetrators often utilised other forms of violence alongside the acts of sexual violence. Additionally, several accounts revealed the tragic murder of family members, including children, either before, during, or after the occurrences of rape (Physicians for Human Rights, 2023).

Fisseha's study reveals that among the 500 sexual violence survivors examined, the primary form of sexual violence was rape, accounting for 82.2% (411 cases). Among these cases, 68.4% (247 cases) involved instances of gang rape. (Fisseha *et al.*, 2023).

Consequences of sexual violence in war

Results of a research conducted by Croatian researchers (Loncar, Medved, Jovanović & Hotujac, 2006) studying the psychological consequences of rape on women during the 1991–1995 war in Croatia, Bosnia, and Herzegovina, describe a strong correlation between wartime rape and different psychiatric disorders, mainly depression, social phobias, and chronic post-traumatic stress. Most of the research participants reported having suicidal thoughts and attempting suicide, mostly associated with being pregnant and feeling humiliated (Lončar, Medved, Jovanović & Hotujac, 2006).

Physicians for Human Rights indicated that conflict-related sexual violence has led to significant physical and psychological consequences for survivors, both in the short and long term in Tigray. (Physicians for Human Rights, 2023). They based this on a study of medical records. These consequences include mental health issues like post-traumatic stress, affecting 13% of survivors and depression affecting 17% (Physicians for Human Rights, 2023). The records also indicate that unintended pregnancies were reported by 8% of survivors, reproductive organ injuries and disorders affecting 11% of

survivors, and a notable percentage of the survivors (among those that were tested) tested positive for HIV (11%) (Physicians for Human Rights, 2023).

This chapter aims to explore the lived experiences of women who survived sexual violence during the war in Tigray, Ethiopia and the impact on the women, their families, and communities without focusing on the intent behind the violence.

The research question investigated was: *What were the experiences of survivors of sexual violence during the war in Tigray and what are the psycho-social consequences?*

To answer this, the sub-research questions are formulated as follows:

- Sub-Q1: *What was the modus operandi of sexual violence in the Tigray war, as narrated by women survivors?*
- Sub-Q2: *Who were the perpetrators of the violences?*
- Sub-Q3: *What are the other factors that compounded the trauma of the survivors and hampered their recovery that are particular to the Tigray war?*
- Sub-Q4: *What are the physical and psycho-social consequences of these acts for women and their communities, and what are their needs for support that can be identified from the study?*

Theoretical framework

This study uses two theories as a framework to explain the rape that took place against Tigrayan women in the war and its consequences. These theories are strategic rape theory and collective trauma framework.

Strategic rape theory

The strategic rape theory focuses on the effects of wartime rape on the community and collective, not only on the individual. Siefert (1993) describes how culture plays a role in this: where women are the homemakers and are the backbone of society and men are expected to be the protectors. Strategic rape is directly associated with gender-categories (Van Reisen *et al.*, 2024). The armed forces deliberately hit the people whom they knew it would hurt the most

and used that to communicate to men how they had failed to protect their women (Seifert, 1993). Strategic rape theory is rape inflicted to destroy people and their culture (Jelínková, 2018). The strategic rape theory states that rape in times of war can be used strategically to achieve military and political goals, and is not incidental (Gottschall, 2004).

MacKinnon (2006) finds that strategic rape not only attacks the individual but the whole community. According to the strategic rape theory, wartime rape is used to diminish the community; to perpetrate to dehumanise, demoralise, displace, and/or ethnically cleanse and to instil fear by asserting dominance and control (Farwell, 2004; Benard, 1994; Gottschall, 2004). When people are forced to flee their homes because of (fear of) strategic rape, military forces can occupy the land and easily take the resources they desire (Meger, 2011).

The literature identifies some distinct characteristics of wartime rape, including how it targets injuring sex organs and bodily functions leading to severe damage (Benshoof, 2014). Most of the time this form of rape is committed as gang rape (Hagen & Yohani, 2010), and foreign bodies (knives, glasses, wood etc.) are inserted into women's reproductive organs (Mukengere Mukwege & Nangini, 2009; Hagen & Yohani, 2010). This form of rape also often takes place in public, in front of neighbours or family members, with loved ones forced to witness the incident or even participate in the act. This affects the social structure and cohesion of families and communities (Gingerich & Leaning, 2004; Gottschall, 2004; Diken, & Lausten, 2005; Mechanic, 2004). Meger writes that:

Rape as a weapon of war uses violence to erode the social fabric of communities by exploiting traditional cultural values, and core social themes of honour, shame, family, and identity. (Meger, 2011)

Strategic rape has many physical and psychological consequences. In many of these cases, women who have fallen pregnant from rape have forced abortions and are left infertile. Strategic rape can also involve the deliberate transmission of HIV/AIDS and forced impregnation (World Health Organization, 2000; Bartels, 2010). These additional impacts make reintegration into society difficult and leave a

permanent reminder of what happened. The physical, psychological, and social consequences for individuals are significant and long-lasting.

However, strategic rape theory states that it is important to distinguish between the consequences of wartime rape and the actual motives behind it. While the damage caused by mass wartime rape is acknowledged, it is possible that these consequences could be unintended rather than intentional goals of the perpetrators. (Gottschall, 2004).

Conceptualising the trauma of rape perpetrated during the war: Collective trauma

Looking at the consequences of trauma in the context of a broader act of violence against a community, Kidane (2019) studied the information exchange in communities to understand the interaction of trauma of survivors with the collective trauma of communities. Kidane identifies multiple factors which inform the trauma, including interrelated events causing loss, threat, separation, war, poverty, violence, abuse, lack of prospects, torture, ethnic cleansing, religious persecution, slavery and forced militarisation. The type of trauma involved sadistic forms of exposures including involving family members (Van Reisen, Kidane and Reim, 2017). Referring to Shamai (2015) and following the empirical analysis of the relationship between individual trauma and collective trauma, Kidane (2019) and Kidane (2021) set out how trauma has an impact on the self-efficacy, affecting the socioeconomic resilience of an individual and affects simultaneously the individual, the family, the community and the cultural group or society.

Following Landau, Mittal, & Wieling (2008), Kidane (2021) defines collective trauma as the result of an event involving multiple persons who simultaneously experience, witness or are confronted with actual death, or threat of it, often due to war, political violence, terrorist attacks or natural disaster, causing emotional and psychological wounds over an individual's lifespan and across generations, as well as impacting community-wide structures and processes.

Collective trauma, in the context of this study, refers to the psychological and emotional wounds that are inflicted on a community as a result of experiencing or learning about such violences. It is a shared experience of pain and suffering that can have long-lasting effects on individuals and the social fabric of a community. This type of trauma can manifest in various ways, including feelings of fear, shame, guilt, and helplessness, as well as disruptions in social relationships and cultural practices.

Methodology

This study was conducted as explorative phenomenological ethnographic research, focusing on how women who experienced rape during the Tigray talked about their experience. The overall research was carried out by Kidanu. The overall data collected consist of:

- Secondary data published by EEPA Situation Report (2020-2022) (n=327) and testimonies (2021)
- Primary data of 20 interviews (2022)

EEPA Situation Reports and testimonies

In the first part of the research secondary data was obtained from the EEPA Situation Report. During the entire period of the war as reported by the EEPA Situation Report the EEPA Situation Report provided daily information on the events as they evolved in Tigray. During the publication period by EEPA Situation Reports (from 27 November 2020 to 31 December 2022), 329 entries on sexual violence were published. The reports are published in English. The Situation Reports provide a comprehensive overview of what was reported to the outside world from within Tigray, and by news agencies, international organisations and other credible sources.

The timeline of the EEPA reports publications on sexual violence shows a serious delay on reporting of incidents, due to the limited communication as a result of a siege imposed on the Tigray region after the beginning of the war. Together with the siege, the Internet was entirely blocked in parallel with a communication block out. Journalists were generally barred from the region.

The first reference to sexual violence is published in the EEPA Situation Report 43, on 2 January 2021. A total of 329 entries on sexual violence were identified in the systematic review of the data published in the Situation Reports from 17 November 2020 until 31 December 2022. The 329 entries were identified by Joëlle Stocker and classified according to themes a coding-labelling strategy to help understand timelines and locations, perpetrators and modus operandi.

Further to the Situation Reports, EEPA published detailed testimonies on sexual violence in Tigray. These were obtained in video recording and translated. Eight testimonies were presented in a public webinar to bring attention to it (EEPA, 2021). The discussion of the testimonies reported among experts on the region, allowed for their validation. Three testimonies (including one published media report) published by EEPA detailed 38 cases of rape, and these were also analysed according to emerging themes.

Interviews

With regards to the primary data collected during 21 interviews with survivors of rape (20) and a male caregiver (1). The interviews were conducted from May 2022 to December 2022, while the war in Tigray was taking place. Only female survivors of rape were interviewed for this study. All the interviewees were adults, except for one child, assent from her brother was in addition to her consent.

The study was conducted in three sites: two sites in Mekelle and one in Shire in Tigray. The interviews in Shire were conducted first and consisted of 9 interviews with women in camps for internally displaced people and one male caregiver (IDP) in 2022. These initial interviews used an interview guide, which was later modified, after analysing the first eight interviews. A further 12 survivors were interviewed in Mekelle. These interviews were conducted in two places:

- Ayder Comprehensive Specialized Hospital one-stop centre: A centre where medical, psychological, and legal services are provided in one place for survivors).

- Safe house in Mekelle: This is one of the two safe houses in Tigray and provides survivors of rape with an average three months of services, focusing on physical and mental health support and skill training for future livelihood opportunities.

Table 7.1. Showing where, when and by whom data was collected

Sites in Tigray	Time	Interview	Interviewer
Shire, IDP sites	May-June 2022	n=9	KGK
Mekelle, Ayder one-stop centre	July-December 2022	n=7	KGK
Mekelle, Safehouse	July -August 2022	n=5	ZM
Total n = 21			

The interviewees were selected for this study using a purposive sampling technique. The researcher worked in the one-stop centre for over a year, providing psychosocial support and noting down observations. Data in the IDP sites in Shire and one-stop centre in Mekelle was collected by the researcher and data from the safe house was collected by a research assistant who worked within the centre as access was not granted to enter the safe house. The research assistant was a female psychiatric nurse who had experience working with survivors. She previously had training on case management and basic concepts of gender-based violence. She was given a one-day training on qualitative in-depth interview techniques and the interview guide.

Data was collected using in-depth interviews. To ensure the quality of the data, a field guide was prepared for the interviews with participants (using the literature and drawing on the previous interview experience of the researcher). This guide was prepared in English and translated to Tigrinya, then back to the English language to check its consistency. The interview guide had two parts: the first on the sociodemographic data of the survivor and the second on the sexual violence incident and the consequences. Data was collected

using audio recording devices, which were then transcribed simultaneously during data collection.

Table 7.2 shows the disaggregated data of the research participants in this research.

Table 7.2. Research participant data

Number of participants	21
Age range	9–62
Area	Western Zone Eastern Zone South Zone South-Eastern and Central Zones
Perpetrators	EDF, ENDF, Amhara special forces, Fano Group
Number of perpetrators	3–10

The information collected in the interviews was kept confidential by not using any personal identifiers of survivors and only focusing on general sociodemographic information (such as age) and details of the incident. The data was checked for completeness daily. A qualified professional was used as an assistant and trained on interview techniques. The collected data was transcribed, coded, and categorised using Atlas Ti software. It was thematically analysed and presented using narrative descriptions.

Ethical clearance with the reference number MU-IRB 1978/2022 was obtained from Mekelle University, College of Health Sciences, support letters were given by Mekelle University College of Health Sciences and the Regional Health Bureau making it possible to conduct the interviews.

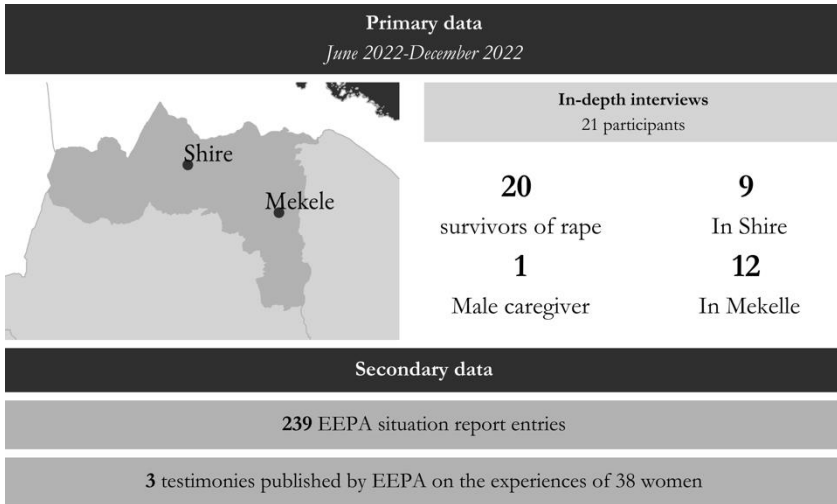


Figure 7.1. Overview of data collected and used in this study

Detailed information about the study was explained to all participants before starting data collection. The study process was based on the careful consideration of basic ethical principles of, respect for a person’s autonomy, beneficence, non-maleficence, confidentiality, and justice. Verbal and written consent was obtained from each participant before starting data collection after carefully explaining and making sure participants understood the objectives, risks, and benefits of the study. Participants were told that they could withdraw consent and stop the interview at any time.

Findings of the EEPA Situation Reports and testimonies

The EEPA Situation Reports and testimonies were analysed and categorised according to the following themes:

- Timelines and geographic locations
- Perpetrators
- Modus operandi

Timelines and geographic locations

The first incidences of rape are reported in the EEPA Situation Reports in early January 2021. The first Situation Report is published on 17 November 2020, when the Internet has completely closed and

only sporadic information is coming out of Tigray. The Situation Report identifies on 2 January:

Reports of rape of Tigray women as part of the violence carried out on civilians in Tigray. (EEPA, 2021, SR 43)

The following day the report reads:

Reported cruelties against civilians include forcing relatives to commit incest on women and girls under the threat of arbitrary execution. (EEPA, 2021, SR 44)

And in the next day's report an entry states:

Report of severe violence against women: "countless number of women" are victims of physical and sexual abuse and rape, including gang rape. Some of these acts are aggravated by other forms of brutality like shooting victims or mutilating them with knives. (EEPA, 2021, SR 45)

In this Situation Report, further specifics are published:

Report that women are kidnapped and taken by armed forces from different parts of the region without any information of their whereabouts. Call made for urgent investigation. (EEPA, 2021, SR 45)

In the subsequent entries the Situation Reports publish that the incidence has been high in Mekelle, which is under the control of the Federal Ethiopian government:

There have been many reports of rape in Mekelle and elsewhere. A video has also emerged of and ENDF commander admitting that the rape is taking place in Mekelle. The commander says that while it would have been expected during times of conflict, it should not be happening now that the city is well under control of the federal government. (EEPA, 2021, SR 51)

This entry and the following report, indicate that the incidences of sexual violence and rape have taken place in 2020:

It was revealed by ETV that women were raped in Mekelle in the week following the takeover by the ENDF at the beginning of December; this was reported by an unidentified man in an Ethiopian military uniform who spoke of repeated abuses against women. (EEPA, 2021, SR 54)

The EEPA Situation Reports publish that the victims of the violence are reportedly of all ages:

The witness states that she heard of old women and young girls being raped. (EEPA, 2021, SR 62)

On 21 January the United Nations (UN) Special Representative on Sexual Violence in Conflict and Under-Secretary-General of the United Nations, Pramila Patten makes a first statement on the situation in Tigray:

I am greatly concerned by serious allegations of sexual violence in the Tigray region of Ethiopia, including a high number of alleged rapes in the capital, Mekelle. (EEPA, 2021, SR 63)

The UN Special Representative specifies that the concern is specifically on the safety of women in camps for internally displaced people (IDPs) and refugees, mostly coming from Eritrea, and the information is especially coming from the capital Mekelle and the city, Shire, where international organisations are responsible for the refugees under international protection (EEPA, 2021, SR 64). Reports of rape against Eritrean refugees in the camps under international protection in Shire are confirmed in the EEPA Situation Report citing PBS:

PBS aired an audio interview with a refugee, who says that Eritrean soldiers swept through Hitsats camp, and killed, beat, raped and kidnapped refugees. Many people were taken, and those that tried to escape were shot. (EEPA, 2021, SR 142)

Following the signing of the Cessation of Hostilities Agreement on 3 November 2022, the reports on sexual violence continued, particularly in relation to areas that remained under occupation by Amhara and Eritrean forces (EEPA, 2021, SR 356).

Reported number of cases

The timelines suggest that the sexual violence in the context of the war began immediate after the announcement of the law enforcement operation by the Ethiopian federal government.

Early February 2021 it is stated that 108 cases were reported in Mekelle over the last two months, but that this figure may be under-

representing the situation and that the incidences may be many more and more widespread (EEPA, 2021, SR 83). Information from outside the cities enters the Situation Reports at the end of January when a shelter for victims of rape with 50 beds is made available in Adigrat (EEPA, 2021, SR 63). Early March 2021 more than 170 cases were reported from Adigrat and in one day 40 self-reported victims of sexual violence visited Adigrat hospital in a single day and needed referral services (EEPA, 2021, SR 97). Doctors at the Ayder Referral Hospital reported that the number

Early March UN Human rights chief, Bachelet, states that 139 rapes had been reported in Mekelle (EEPA, 2021, SR 98). On 22nd of March it was reported from Mekelle that a coordinator at a gender-based violence crisis centre in Tigray said that before the start of the war, they used to hear cases every few days or once a week. However, since the outbreak of the war, up to 22 women and girls seek treatment for rape every day (EEPA Situation Report 108, 22 March 2021). It is reported that CNN finds that more than 200 women were admitted to the hospital for sexual violence in recent months, but that many cases occur in rural areas with limited to no access to medical care (EEPA, 2021, SR 108). IOM, Interaction, the World Health Organization (WHO), UNHCR, and other organisations says that reports of “Indiscriminate and targeted attacks against civilians, including rape and other horrific forms of sexual violence, continue to surface. This must stop.” (EEPA, 2021, SR 110). On 26 March it is reported that the UN aid coordinator in Ethiopia has stated that 516 rape cases have been reported to five clinics (Mekelle, Adigrat, Wukro, Shire and Aksum) in Tigray region (EEPA, 2021, SR 112). It was reported that the number cases reported by hospitals were increasingly rapidly (EEPA, 2021, SR 132).

Overall, 829 women have reported sexual assault to major hospitals of Tigray. The figure was 518 on April 1,” said Hayelom Kebede, chief executive director of Ayder Referral Hospital. (EEPA, 2021, SR 132)

It is reported that the numbers indicate that the situation was very much underreported due to lack of access to those areas, compounded with lack of access to transport and to health facilities (EEPA, 2021, SR 137 & 140). Many cases were not reported. A UK

Member of Parliament tabled a motion in the house of commons, which identified that the number of rape cases in Tigray could be in the tens of thousands (EEPA, 2021, SR 157). A conservative estimation is that the sexual violence must have affected over a thousand and possibly thousands of Tigrayan women.

Response by authorities and the international community

Reports suggest that the extent of the situation was significantly underreported due to limited access to affected areas, compounded by a lack of transport and health facilities (EEPA, 2021, SR 137 & 140). Many incidents went unreported. A UK Member of Parliament introduced a motion in the House of Commons, indicating that the number of rape cases in Tigray could be in the tens of thousands (EEPA, 2021, SR 157). Even conservative estimates suggest that sexual violence affected at least over a thousand and possibly thousands of Tigrayan women.

On the 8 April EU Special Envoy Pekka Haavisto expresses his deep concern regarding the violence against women in Tigray (EEPA, 2021, SR 122), followed by expressions of concern by the international community during the UN Security Council Open debate on “Women, peace and security: sexual violence in conflict” (EEPA, 2021, SR 127). On 6 May 2021, the G7 condemned “the killing of civilians, rape and sexual exploitation and other forms of gender-based violence, destruction and looting of religious and cultural heritage sites and the forced displacement of hundreds of thousands of Tigrayans and Eritrean refugees” (EEPA, 2021, SR 142). In this period many leaders express themselves on the situation, such as US Ambassador Linda Thomas-Greenfield (EEPA, 2021, SR 127 & 166), UK Ambassador Barbara Woodward (EEPA, 2021, SR 127), EU Commissioner for Crisis Management, Janez Lenarčič (EEPA, 2021, SR 147), Irish Foreign Affairs Minister Simon Coveney (EEPA, 2021, SR 147) and Former President Sirleaf from Liberia and AU Special Envoy to the conflict (EEPA, 2021, SR 155). The Patriarch of the Ethiopian Orthodox Church also condemned the sexual violence (EEPA, 2021, SR 144).

Modus operandi of strategic rape

The age of the female victims ranges from 8 years old, reported by UN representative Lowcock in the UN Security Council (EEPA, 2021, SR 128) to 75 years old (EEPA, 2021, p. 6). The victims include reports of rape of nuns and women affiliated with religious locations (EEPA, 2021, SR 99, 162, & 181). These observations are in line with an interview reported by The Guardian in which a witness states that:

The Guardian has released an interview with catholic sister working in Mekelle. In the interview the sister says that “Rape is happening to girls as young as eight and to women of 72. It is so widespread, I go on seeing it everywhere, thousands. This rape is in public, in front of family, husbands, in front of everyone.” She continued by saying “Every single woman, not only once. It is intentional, deliberate. I am confident in that from what I am witnessing. (EEPA, 2021, SR 148)

The initial reports indicate that the soldiers demand sexual violence in exchange for basic supplies. In subsequent reports, sinister, sadistic modus operandi emerge, including politically motivated strategic rape:

... six young girls were raped by ENDF soldiers in Mekelle city and threatened to not report it to anyone or even seek any medical care. But one of them came to get medical help and fled after hearing they were looking for her at her coffee shop (a small cafe like place for drinking traditional coffee) without the termination of her treatment. She said: “when we asked them why they are raping us, while we are all Ethiopians and brothers and sisters, they said your father is Dr Debretsion and ours is Dr Abiy. We are not all the same.”. (EEPA, 2021, SR 73)

This statement is referring to the political leaders of the Tigray regional government and federal government of Ethiopia respectively. A report on sadism, ordering a father to rape his own daughter emerges for the first time on

Sadistic perpetration of sexual violence reported. Report received that a girl from Abiy Adi was shot 4 times on her hands by a soldier who first went into their home asking where ‘woyane’ (a term for people in Tigray) is. Her father, a blind man, responded they didn’t know, and he was ordered to rape his own child. He was taken into another room and beaten by another soldier after he strongly refused. The girl was then ordered ‘lantash’. (This is an offensive term widely used referring to sexual intercourse in the context of violence or rape). When she refused, he fired a shot

wounding her left-hand small finger and then followed it with three shots on her right arm leaving her now amputated. (EEPA, 2021, SR 74)

A similar report is of a woman who was raped in Mekelle, then killed in front of her three sons, who were not allowed to remove the body for three days (EEPA, 2021, SR 99).

In this report the perpetrators are referring to the victims as ‘Woyane’ which is a derogatory term used in Eritrea and parts of Ethiopia, as a demeaning ethnic identifier. In early February 2021 an incident is reported that the rape is perpetrated in combination with killings of the victims and their families (EEPA, 2021, SR 75) and the following day the EEPA Situation Report for the first time identifies an expert stating that the sexual violence may amount to strategic rape: A researcher comments that “looking at all the rape cases so far, the assaults are not random; they are a weapon of war.” (EEPA, 2021, SR 75). The term ‘genocide’ is reported in relation to the modus operandi of rape in the EEPA Situation Report on 22 March 2021:

“The women that have been raped say that the things that they say to them when they were raping them is that they need to change their identity – to either Amharize them or at least leave their Tigrayan status - and that they’ve come there to cleanse them – to cleanse the blood line,” said Dr T.T. [name known to authors]. “Practically this has been a genocide,” he added. (EEPA, 2021, SR 108)

EEPA Situation Report publishes rape incidences in Humera allegedly perpetrated by Amhara forces, specifically focusing on attacking the ethnic identity of Tigrayans:

She added the Amhara militia proposed to her that: “Claim to be Amhara and we will give back your house and find you a husband. But if you claim to be Tigrayan, we will come and rape you again.” (EEPA, 2021, SR 122)

A midwife, who came from Humera, concluded that:

“This is to harm the community psychologically,” said the midwife. They say: “Most of the people in Tigray support the (fugitive Tigray leaders). To destroy them, you must destroy Tigrayans.” (EEPA, 2021, SR 122)

Details of rape in combination with other atrocities are increasingly reported in the EEPA Situation Report in 2021:

The doctor said women are being gang-raped, drugged and gravely injured in the assaults. One woman was held captive for over ten days, raped by 23 Eritrean soldiers, then left on the side of the road. Surgeons had to remove stones and nails that had been inserted inside her genitals. (EEPA, 2021, SR 99)

A victim told Al Jazeera that she was raped and severely injured, with a hot metal rod inserted in her genitals, and that the perpetrators told her:

“You did nothing bad to us,” she said they told her. “Our problem is with your womb. Your womb gives birth to Woyane” This is a term used to refer to the TPLF: “A Tigrayan womb should never give birth.” (EEPA, 2021, SR 132)

The doctor who treated her confirmed that she was now infertile (EEPA, 2021, SR 132).

A priest of the Catholic Church in Adigrat stated that the sexual violence against women of Tigray was carried out with the intention of eradication of the people of Tigray and that the rape was used as a weapon of war:

They want to annihilate Tigray. By killing the men and boys, they are trying to destroy any future resistance. They want to make sure that nobody can question their actions in the future,” said the priest. “They are raping and destroying women to ensure that they cannot raise a community in the future. They are using rape and food as weapons of war. (EEPA, 2021, SR 150)

Similar concerns were expressed by Chairman Ranking Member of the US House Foreign Affairs Committee, McCaul:

As the fighting continues, there is starvation and systematic rape being used as a weapon of war. And comments from [USAID head Samantha Power] that Ethiopia is ‘destroying the reproductive health of Tigrayans’ really calls into question whether conditions amount to genocide under the 1948 Genocide Convention,” said Mr. McCaul said. (EEPA, 2021, SR 171)

The EEPA Situation Reports show the systematic and widespread perpetration of rape in the Tigray war, causing concern that the rape was perpetrated as a weapon of war, targeting the Tigrayan population and that this could be determined as the use of rape as a weapon of war, and which may have even been perpetrated with genocidal intent (Kidanu & Tefera, 2024; Tefera, 2024).

Perpetrators

In the EEPA Situation Reports the perpetrators identified are members of the military forces which are present in the arena, from November 2020 onwards, including Eritrean forces, despite the denials of their presence.

A first entry providing an overview of the perpetrators emerges in April 2021:

USAID also says that there were at least 144 perpetrators. 44% of those are Ethiopian soldiers, 33% Eritrean, and 6% both. The remaining perpetrators are unknown or Amhara militia. In 76% of the cases were perpetrated by multiple men. (EEPA, 2021, SR 121)

The UN representative Lowcock identified that the sexual violence was committed by soldiers:

Lowcock reported that one agency estimated that “30% of all incidents against civilians involved some sort of sexual violence.” The majority of these rapes are committed by men in uniform. He followed by saying that “Cases reported have involved Ethiopian National Defense Forces, Eritrean Defense forces, Amhara Special Forces, and other irregular armed groups or aligned militia.” (EEPA, 2021, SR 128)

Classifying the perpetrators identified in the incidents reported in the EEPA Situation Report, the conclusion that perpetrators were from armed forces is confirmed. The analysis also shows that all armies present in Tigray at the time were committing sexual violence against women. The highest number reported in the EEPA Situation Reports were perpetrated by the Eritrean soldiers, followed by soldiers of the Ethiopian National Defence Force, Amhara Fano forces, a small number reported as by the Tigray Defence Forces, and a small number reportedly committed by civilians.

CNN reported that Eritrean troops continued to operate “with total impunity in the Tigray region, killing, raping, and blocking humanitarian aid to starving populations more than a month after Prime Minister Abiy pledged to the international community that they would leave” (EEPA, 2021, SR 147).

The same conclusion is drawn by Nyssen from the University of Ghent, who stated that:

[...] numerous women have been raped. The victims hide themselves and do not speak, but nurses cannot hold their tears, and the whole town knows the top-three of rapists: 1. (and by far) Eritrean soldiers, 2. Ethiopian soldiers, 3. Civilian perpetrators. (EEPA, 2021, SR 152)

The origin of perpetrators identified in the publications in the EEPA Situation Reports on the Horn from November 2020 to the end of 2022 is shown in Figure 7.2.

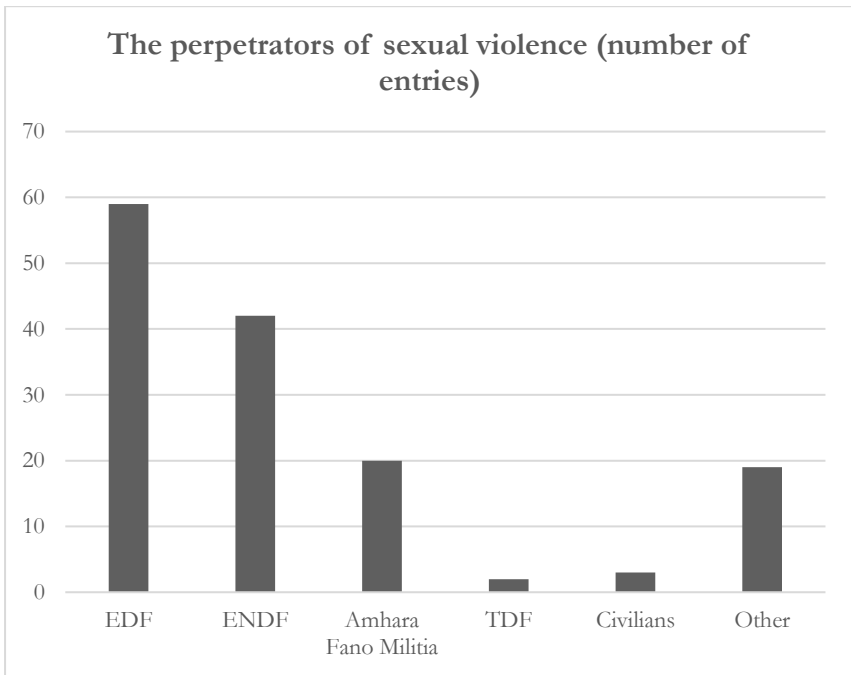


Figure 7.2. The perpetrators of the sexual violence based on counts of reports in the EEPA Situation Reports

The data classified by perpetrators shows that the Eritrean Defence Forces (EDF) count as the highest number identified in the reported incidents.

Modus operandi emerging from the testimonies

The testimonies, comprising of 38 cases of rape, show the following themes emerging. In 12 out of the total of 38 cases mentioned that

Eritrean military were the perpetrators of the rape. In 1 case, Ethiopian soldiers were mentioned and in the remaining 15 cases the nationality of the perpetrator was not identified.

In one of the testimonies the perpetrators identified as Eritrean by the victim pressurise the victim to not declare their identity. The victim declared:

The soldiers strictly warn her to say she is raped by the Ethiopian soldiers, if in case she is asked. If they know she said she is raped by Eritrean soldiers ('Shabiya'), they will find and kill her. (EEPA, 2021, p. 2)

'Shabiya' refers to the soldiers operating in the context of the Eritrean regime, which is referred to by Eritreans as 'Shabiya'.

In another incident the perpetrators, identified as Eritrean soldiers, were hiding their identity by wearing an Ethiopian military uniform, according to the victim:

In the town of Abiy Addi, a teenager lost her right hand after being raped by an alleged Eritrean soldier wearing an Ethiopian military uniform. The soldier initially tried to force the schoolgirl's grandfather to have sex with the teenager but when he was not successful, he shot the grandfather. (EEPA, 2021, p. 4)

The Eritrean soldiers perpetrated the rape declaring the aim to ensure the women would not give birth to Tigrayan children, with statements such as:

The soldiers say they kill the newborn because he will become 'Woyane' when he grows up. It is horrific when the woman explains how the soldiers kill the newborn. The mother of the dead newborn was killed as well. The victim continues to tell her painful story... (EEPA, 2021, p. 2)

'Woyane' is a derogatory term particularly used in Eritrea to pinpoint Tigrayans, with a demeaning connotation. The ultimate purpose of the rape being strategic, also emerged in the statement about what a victim, referred to as Selam:

By the time she was taken into the forest, she had already been raped several times by men she recognised as Eritrean soldiers. After the first attack, her abusers were waiting for her as she returned to her house from the hospital with contraceptives and post-exposure HIV drugs. "Why the hell did you want this? We want you to be

sick. That is what we are here for. We are here to make you HIV-positive,” Selam recalled one of the men as saying.’ (EEPA, 2021, p. 4, citing: The Telegraph, 27 March 2021)

Another example of the strategic military objective in relation to the execution of the rape is the following testimony:

Noticing that her husband wasn’t present they asked her if her husband is fighting against them along with ‘Weyane’/TPLF. Lemlem’s husband and father of her children had to run to the mountains to avoid military raids as they often turn into murder scene for men. They could not have quite imagined what might unfold. She said he was not. One of the soldiers then asked that she take off her clothes. Lemlem lied and said she was pregnant, assuming they’d have mercy on her. Without a second thought, the soldiers said “that’s good, let’s remove the ‘junta’ inside you, and replace it with our own race.” Two of them opened her legs forcefully and the other brought a rough stick and inserted it into her vaginal canal and stirred it with the intention of aborting her pregnancy. (EEPA, 2021, p. 5)

The purpose of affecting the reproductive capacity of women and forcing an abortion is clear from this testimony. The strategic objective of the rape is also clear from the following testimony in which the victims were fighters in the Tigray Defence Forces (TDF):

But the Eritrean soldiers took turns raping the three women for hours, after that one of the soldiers pulled out a metal from his Kalashnikov and put it on fire and then inserted it into her uterus, he then said now you will never give birth to a baby of the ‘junta’. (EEPA, 2021, p. 5)

CNN also reported that sexual violence was perpetrated in combination with other atrocities:

CNN report says an alarming number of women are being gang-raped, drugged and held hostage in the conflict, in which sexual violence is being used as a weapon of war and its use linked to genocide in Tigray. (EEPA, 2021, SR 147)

Testimonies speak to the violence of the attacks:

Health professionals and eye-witnesses report different rape cases in Mekelle and other cities of Tigray. It is reported that many of the girls that come to the clinics are not only sexually assaulted and raped but they are also brutally beaten and bruised all over their bodies. (EEPA, 2021, SR 75)

From testimonies obtained, EEPA concluded that:

It has become common to hear about hospitals being occupied with women that have foreign bodies like stones, sand, metals, inside their uterus in hopes of making women of Tigray infertile. (EEPA, 2021, p. 7)

In the testimonies also other aspects appear:

- Women being gang raped
- Women raped and held in groups
- Combination of rape with abduction
- The rape of elderly women (reported up to the age of 75)
- Women raped in front of family members and the rape reportedly being recorded on video
- Women raped while they were living in church compounds or were church servants

The reports also mention the problem that women had to find any support or assistance as health facilities were destroyed (EEPA, 2021).

Findings of the interviews in 2020

After analysing the interviews transcripts data deductively and inductively, four thematic areas were identified by which to discuss the finding. These thematic areas are as follows:

- Modus operandi (details of the incident)
- Perpetrators of the violence.
- Compounding factors hampering recovery.
- Consequences of sexual violence

Modus operandi (details of incident)

This section presents the evidence from the interviews on the modus operandi of sexual violence in the Tigray war, as narrated by women survivors, identified perpetrators and the locations of the incidents.

Most women experienced gang rape, sexual slavery accompanied by physical and verbal violence. The number of perpetrators ranged from three to ten armed combatants:

I was home with my mother and daughter when seven soldiers came to the house. They would ask questions like: "Where is the Junta" [this is a word that was used by the prime minister of Ethiopia referring to TPLF members but later throughout the war it was used to refer to Tigrayans by armed groups with derogatory intent]? "Where are you hiding them?" As soon as I heard their voices, I told my mother and daughter to find a hiding place, so they went inside a room and kept silent while I spoke to the soldiers. I told them that I didn't know anything, I explained that I had an illness and didn't leave my house much. But they started to slap and beat me even before I could finish speaking. They slapped me, pulled my hair, and started hitting me with their Kalashnikovs until I couldn't take it anymore and fell to the ground. That's when they started taking turns to rape me. I kept begging them, but that only seemed to anger them more. They would say how I deserved even worse, how I should be grateful that Amhara men would [rape] me that I should beg for more. I became unconscious after the fourth man started to rape me. The next thing I remember is my mother helping me dress and putting me on my bed. (Interviewee II10, In-depth interview with Kidanu, face to face, 19 August 2022).

Others were taken hostage by forces that were occupying the area and held hostage for many days and were raped multiple times by different groups. Survivors reported having been held captive anywhere between two to thirty-five days. One woman shared the following:

I have friends who were displaced with me, some did not have this experience, some of us were taken from the group and kept for a few days and returned but others never came back. To this day, we don't know where they are or what happened to them that is another pain I carry with me. (Interviewee II03, In-depth interview with Kidanu, face to face, 11 June 2022)

This interviewee showed how the survivor not only went through that experience but also lost friends who had fled home together with them hoping to find safety elsewhere.

Another survivor explained that they heard a knock at their house and knew that the soldiers were coming for them, and she told her husband to go through the back door:

I said to my husband "I am a woman; they wouldn't hurt me, but they would defiantly kill you". They came in and said junta accomplice in Amhara and said come with us. I told them I couldn't leave my children behind, but they wouldn't listen. They hit me and started pulling me out. They dragged me inside a vehicle

where there were four other women and a few men. Then they took us to their military camp. They separated us and put me in a small room where they kept me for 35 days. They repeatedly raped me; sometimes it would be anal sex, and other times oral sex. Finally, I couldn't move anymore, at which point they moved me to a prison where they kept me for three months. (Interviewee II06, In-depth interview with Kidanu, face to face, 17 August 2022)

Participants described how they faced multiple incidents of rape at different times. The previous interviewee continued to explain how when she got home and was just starting to recover, she was attacked again by a group she identified as being members of the Fano, an Amhara militia:

They gathered us in our neighbourhood and told us that we would have to gather our things and leave, they said we didn't belong there. So, everyone went home to collect what we could carry, it was clear that we didn't have a choice in the matter. My friend, who knew about what had happened to me, came along to help me pack my things. She was in the back, packing when four soldiers came to the house. Right away, they started to mock me they said, "You are a brave junta, you are not scared". I started to beg them, to please leave me alone, but they started beating me. They didn't stop, they even pulled out their knife and gun. I felt so helpless. And then three of them started to take turns rapping me, and later left me there to die. (Interviewee II06, In-depth interview with Kidanu, face to face, August 17, 2022)

Reports of sexual violence would also include incidents of physical torture like beating, cutting and caustic burns:

I was raped by three Eritrean soldiers. But that was not all, they put hot metal on my skin and repeatedly hit me on the head. I have burn scars all over my back, my head and between my thighs and vagina. And then they poured some type of chemical on my head, I can't explain to you what it was, but I've been bald ever since. My hair hasn't been able to grow back, that's why I cover it this way. (Interviewee II08, In-depth interview with ZM, face to face, 15 June 2022)

Minors were also victims of atrocities by these soldiers, the brother of a nine-year child shared the following experience:

My little sister was outside when they came to the house. They asked her if there was a man inside the house and she told them "Yes my brother is here". They came in and told me that they would be searching our house. I agreed and went to the back

of the house. That's when I saw him carrying my 9-year-old sister on his shoulder. He told my mom and older sister to go into the other room. That is when we heard a scream, when I got back, she was lying there unconscious. I immediately took her to a medical centre for medical care; she doesn't speak anymore and is always startled when she sees men. I see that she is disturbed even when she sees me. So, I try to stay away. I blame myself every day. I always wonder what would have happened if I hadn't left the house. (Interviewee II19, In-depth interview with Kidanu, face to face, 19 August 2022)

The findings from the analysis report reveal that the majority of survivors experienced gang rape, indicating a coordinated and planned effort to perpetrate these heinous acts. The rape was often accompanied by intense physical abuse, further exacerbating the trauma endured by the survivors.

Additionally, women were taken into sexual slavery, forced to endure multiple incidents of rape, and subjected to derogatory language aimed at humiliating and dehumanising them. The use of such language serves to further degrade and traumatise the survivors, leaving lasting psychological scars.

Perpetrators of the violence

This section presents the evidence from the interviews on sub-research question two to who the perpetrators of this violence were.

Women described the perpetrators as being from different groups; some women reported that they were raped by Eritrean Defence Forces (EDF), some by the Ethiopian National Defence Force (ENDF) while others reported being raped by Amhara Special Forces or by the irregular armed group from the same region, the Fano. In other instances, survivors reported that multiple soldiers wearing different uniforms and speaking different languages performed acts of violence jointly:

I sent my family away to find safety. I thought they wouldn't hurt me as I was a new mother, with a three-week-old child. Three of them came in, one speaking Tigrinya and wearing the uniform of Eritrean soldiers and two speaking Amharic in ENDF uniforms. The Eritrean soldier stayed outside, and the two Amharic-speaking soldiers did things to me you wouldn't think any human being is capable of. They left me there almost unconscious. Then the other one entered the room, I was so

exhausted, but he didn't seem to care and asked me to kiss him. I was crying and in so much pain. I spit on him because at that point I didn't care even if he killed me. Then he kicked me on my chest and punched me on my teeth. I thought I lost my teeth at that point, and I passed out. I woke up when my family came back. (Interviewee II17, In-depth interview with Kidanu, face to face, 21 June 2022)

In this incident the victim tells she saw all the different soldiers of the groups that had invaded Tigray, working together.

Violence compounding to the rape

This section presents the evidence from the interviews on sub-research question three: What are the other factors that compounded the trauma of the survivors and hampered their recovery that are particular to the Tigray war?

While all the participants in this study experienced sexual, physical, and emotional violence, that was not the end of their suffering, they also witnessed traumatic events and experienced loss. They saw family members killed and found bodies of loved ones:

They killed my older brother, my brother-in-law and my husband's brother-in-law all in one night. We saw them bathing in their blood but were told we couldn't bury them. We couldn't bury our family [crying]; they kept them that way for two weeks. We kept watching over their bodies so that they were not eaten by animals, until we finally had their permission to bury them, and the community supported us in doing so. (Interviewee II09, In-depth interview with Kidanu, face to face, 23 June 2022)

Another survivor described one of the most painful moments as when she watched her mother lose consciousness after the soldiers beat her:

They kicked my mom as she was coming to my aid, and she dropped to the floor. I kept looking at her even when they were raping me wondering and hoping she was okay. (Interviewee II03, In-depth interview with Kidanu, face to face, 11 June 2022)

The women said that their homes were burnt to ashes, their food systematically destroyed, and their property looted. They were forced

to leave their homes with only the clothes on their backs, without even a meal to last them through the day:

Four ENDF soldiers came into my home. I was with my grandmother and some friends who were with me in a hiding place in the area. They came in and started to break everything inside. They broke the TV, threw down the fridge, and one pointed at the system unit and said that it was an ammunition box and asked me to open it, I had put some cash there. When I opened it, he took everything. Then they took the other women into another room, locked them and raped me. (Interviewee II05, In-depth interview with Kidanu, face-to-face, 13 June 2022)

They were exposed to other adversities as well, such as losing their possessions, and were forced to be displaced. Survivors separated from their families suffer from further anxiety and stress due to the communications blackout, which made it impossible to trace missing family members. Many lost family members, sometimes in single events:

I lost my husband and my unborn child in one day. (Interviewee II17, In-depth interview with Kidanu, face to face, 25 August 2022)

Many could not find transport to get support, and they could not reach health centres. Those who managed the long and difficult journey would be unable to obtain sufficient care, due to the destruction of health facilities, lack of supplies and displacement of professionals.

Consequences of sexual violence

This section presents the evidence from the interviews on sub-research question four: What are some of the physical and psychosocial consequences of these acts for women and their communities, and what are their needs for support that can be identified from the study?

As a result of the rape, all the participants described having multiple consequences continuing up to the time of the interview. These consequences were described in many ways but are sub-categorised in this study as physical, psychological/emotional, and social consequences.

Physical impact

Many of the women interviewed described having broken bones, abnormal vaginal discharge, fistula, organ failure, swelling on their vagina or anus and some reported having contracted HIV/AIDS or other STDs. Some reported suffering from permanent disabilities, while many had become pregnant due to the incident. One interviewee reported the following:

After the incident, I came to the IDP sites because my home was not safe anymore. And here I never shared it [the rape] with anyone until I started to lose weight and was constantly getting sick. I talked to one of the camp coordinators about my situation and she took me to the hospital. I got tested and the nurse told me that I had contracted HIV/AIDS. I could not believe it. I screamed at the nurse at the centre. I said, "No, you are wrong, this can't be right". She was trying to counsel me and told me that I could have a long life with medication. I asked her if she was crazy, and why I would take medication for something I don't have. I pushed her and ran out of the room. I have not gone back since. (Interviewee II13, In-depth interview with Kidanu, face to face, 20 August 2022). Her words break up and tears form, as she relives the moment.

Another survivor who was pregnant at the time of her assault said that:

The attack led to my miscarriage, and I was left to bleed profusely in the forest. Fortunately, my son was there and rushed me to a health facility for treatment' (Interviewee II17, In-depth interview with Kidanu, face to face, 25 August 2022)

One of the biggest concerns is pregnancy from rape, because unwanted pregnancy, coupled with the unavailability of health services often results in an unsafe abortion:

I was not on any contraceptive when the soldiers raped me. After some time, I found out I was pregnant from the incident. I was heartbroken. I immediately wanted to have an abortion and found out that the ICRC was nearby. But conflict had broken out in our area so I couldn't leave. But I could not stand the thought of having a child from the rapists. I went through a different route; I walked 10 hours through the valley and finally reached my sister's home. I then went to the hospital and aborted the pregnancy. (Interviewee II05, In-depth interview with Kidanu, face to face, 13 June 2022)

One of the participants in this study was at the one-stop centre at Ayder Comprehensive Specialized Hospital because she could not control her urine; she was diagnosed with fistula. She was stigmatised by people around her because of the odour from the condition:

What did I do to deserve this? Not only was I violated, but now I can't control my urine and am stigmatised by the people around me because of the odour it brings. No matter how hard I try to clean up, the smell is still there. (Interviewee II11, In-depth interview with Kidanu, face to face, 20 August 2022)

None of the survivors interviewed for this study had been able to access sufficient medical care, even months after being raped, and some had not received any medical care whatsoever.

Mental impact

The mental health consequences (impairment) described by survivors can be categorised as physical, emotional, thought process, and cognitive.

Somatic manifestations – The women interviewed expressed having clinically unexplainable physical symptoms. They reported feeling fatigued all the time and experiencing persistent headaches, and muscle and joint aches months and years after the incident. They also reported disturbed sleep patterns including not being able to get adequate sleep and finding that their sleep is often interrupted by nightmares. Changes in appetite were common, with most women reporting that they did not want to eat during the day and that they could even go days without eating.

Emotional manifestations – The women who participated in the study reported feeling hopeless most of the time, wondering what the future holds for them. They described feeling constantly sad, not feeling like themselves, and finding it difficult to enjoy previously pleasurable activities. They reported being fearful of their environment and often withdrawn, finding it difficult to interact with others. They also reported that they often feel anxious about most things in their lives.

Intrusive thoughts – The interviewees expressed feelings of constant guilt regarding the incident, they often blame themselves for

what happened. They have recurrent thoughts of suicide. One survivor shared the following:

I am not human anymore; I am not human anymore. Please take care of my children. I just want to die right here; I cannot look at my husband again. I cannot look at my family again. Please take care of my children and leave me here. I told my friend. Laying there, I asked myself what kind of luck this is. (Interviewee II10, In-depth interview with Kidanu, face to face, 19 August 2022)

Almost all the survivors interviewed described having suicidal ideations, and some had had organised plans while others had attempted but failed multiple times.

I have thought about killing myself multiple times. I have even attempted it many times. I tried drinking bleach; I have taken many medications hoping to overdose and even tried to electrocute myself. But you know I wish I didn't do that. I understand I must live for my daughter. (Interviewee II20, In-depth interview with Kidanu, face to face, 3 December 2022)

The interviewees said that their view of the world has changed, that they feel threatened by men around them, thinking the world is a dangerous place and feel a depreciated sense of self-worth because of their traumatic experience. They say they feel dirty or like they have been contaminated.

Cognitive manifestations – The women interviewed for this study often found themselves confused and disoriented about time, place, and person. One interviewee shared the following:

I am no longer myself after the incident, I am easily irritable, and I take it out on my children. I am always on my own, I constantly blame myself for what happened, and I do not think of anything else, but the incident during the day and it follows me in my dreams. I often wake up screaming, I am always watching my environment carefully and do not trust people and everything is a reminder of what has happened. The uniform, the place, and the wind everything – that's why I avoid going there and last time I was walking on the street, and I saw them with guns walking towards me and I lost it. I froze, my body shaking. I didn't know where to hide. It brought me back to that day. (Interviewee II15, In-depth interview with ZM, face to face, 21 August 2022)

Some described having experienced being unconscious. They also reported worrying, having trouble remembering simple things, and having impaired judgment in different situations in their lives. They explained that they cannot focus on anything and have difficulty communicating with others.

Re-experiencing – The women interviewed described reliving their experience through recurrent thoughts of the incident. They had memories that came back and could often return the women to that state of emotion. These flashbacks could happen during the day or nightmares if they sleep.

Avoidance – The interviewees also described being triggered through internal and external stimuli and said that they tended to avoid both the thoughts, emotions and external reminders such as places where the incident took place, the clothes they were wearing, and the shoes they had on. Any detail, no matter how insignificant, could be a trigger. Triggers could also sometimes be family members or friends who were present during the incident.

Hyper arousal – The women interviewed often said that they are not themselves anymore, and that they are angry and aggressive. They said that most of the time they are impatient with their children, family members and other people around them. After the incident they constantly find themselves looking over their shoulders and find it hard to stay still. They are easily startled by small stimuli and can be taken back to the time of the incident. And sometimes women experience dissociative symptoms leading them to out-of-body experience:

I was numb I couldn't believe that this was happening to me again and I couldn't feel their beating. (Interviewee II06, In-depth interview with Kidanu, face to face, 17 August 2022)

Family members who witnessed the violence experienced multiple mental health distresses and disorders as a result. Another mother explained how her son developed a psychotic disorder after

witnessing her being raped and is now being taken to religious holy water for treatment:

He does not communicate, all he says is "Leave my mother alone, leave her alone". I am ashamed to go to him and look at him. He is this way because of me. (Interviewee II01, In-depth interview with Kidanu, face to face, 7 June 2022)

This highlights the profound impact that exposure to violence can have on individuals' mental well-being, extending beyond the direct victims of the violence itself. And this attacked community and families and not just individuals the collective trauma lingers on and is seen affecting the families of participants in this study.

Socioeconomic impact

The women interviewed also reported having lost material possessions and their means of livelihood. Because of the rape, a lot of women said that they are no longer physically able to continue their work. Many have been forced to leave their jobs, while others have lost family members who support them and are now, therefore, financially unstable.

Stigma has become one of the main issues women face in the community. Almost all the women in these stories explain how they did not disclose to family members or other people as they feared they would not be accepted. Some women said that even if they did not disclose the rape, other people know about what had happened to them and behaved differently towards them:

I was having trouble feeding myself so I started selling GIBA (jujube), but no one would come and buy from me. It was amazing, people who grew up with me couldn't even look me in the eye, and I was heartbroken. (Interviewee II02, In-depth interview with ZM, face to face, 10 August 2022)

Another participant said that as a joke her brother says, "You belong to Amhara" and that is hurtful. Another survivor who disclosed to her husband shared that they are no longer together:

When I told him what they had done to me he said, "It would have been better if they killed you". I was shocked. I couldn't believe what I was hearing, we were no

longer together. (Interviewee II07, In-depth interview with Kidanu, face to face, 17 August 2022)

Others, who did not disclose the rape to their partners, said that they were having trouble engaging in sexual relations with their partners. One survivor, whose husband was injured and lost his limb said:

I have not told him about what has happened to me. But he feels hurt, he thinks, I am not sleeping with him because he is now disabled due to the war. (Interviewee II06, In-depth interview with Kidanu, face to face, 17 August 2022)

Some participants said that they will not be accepted anymore if people know that they were raped, and that no one would choose to be with them. They fear that they will never find a partner. But some women also described finding support from family members, partners, or friends who comfort them.

Now many of the survivors live in IDP sites, where more than 40 people sleep in one room, they report that it is harder to bond when they are starving and fighting over food. They are left longing for family members, friends, and the neighbours they left behind and are disconnected from. They were unable to call family members during the communication blackout or during months when connectivity was restored, as most of them had their phones taken away.

Discussion

The evidence recorded in the EEPA Situation Reports, the testimonies and the interviews were compared. In the triangulation of the data we found convergence. In all three sources, the Eritrean soldiers appear as an important group of perpetrators. This is all the more surprising as the presence of the Eritrean soldiers in Tigray was denied by the Ethiopian and Eritrean governments until 23 March 2021. In the research, the perpetrators were mostly found to be Eritrean troops followed by the Ethiopian troops of the ENDF. These findings align with reports conducted in Tigray by multiple organisations (Fisseha *et al.*, 2023; Gebregziabher *et al.*, 2022; Physicians for Human Rights, 2023; Human Rights Experts on Ethiopia, 2023).

In this research, we found across the different data, that the age of survivors ranged from 9 to 75 years, showing that women and girls in any age group were victims of the violence. This aligns with the findings by Physicians for Human Rights (2023) which identified that the age of sexual violence in the Tigray war ranged between 8 and 69 years. Other research on the sexual violence perpetrated in the war in Tigray found the age of participants ranged from children to elderly women (Fisseha *et al.*, 2023; Gebregziabher *et al.*, 2022; Physicians for Human Rights, 2023). The results triangulate with the modus operandi described by Kahsay, Kahsay and Keeble (2024) of rape of women in the Tigray war. The number of victims of sexual violence in the war in Tigray from this study can be estimated in the thousands, possibly as high as 10,000, which corresponds with the findings of the UN Human Rights Commission:

With no comprehensive statistics on conflict-related sexual violence in Tigray available, the Commission compiled credible information about incidents of rape and other forms of sexual violence from seven one-stop-centres in Tigray. These indicate that at least 10,003 survivors had sought support between 3 November 2020 and June 2023. (United Nations Human Rights Commission, 2023)

The findings across the data compared in this study show that women experienced multiple forms of violence such as gang rape, which was the commonest form of rape, and physical abuse. They were also often raped multiple times by different groups. These findings align with studies conducted in Darfur, Congo, where women were taken as sex slaves and kept for longer durations in camps (Ohambe, Galloy & Sow, 2004; Amnesty international, 2004; Fisseha *et al.*, 2023; Gebregziabher *et al.*, 2022; Physicians for Human Rights, 2023).

The sadistic nature of the sexual violence reported from the different data analysed is disturbing. Family members – including children, were forced to watch the perpetration of sexual violence against relatives. These acts often took place in front of the family. This has grave additional traumatic consequences, as members of the family were forced to watch the act and feel helpless, not being able to stop it, sustaining mental trauma. Community members and sometimes family members were forced to participate in the acts, leading to psychological trauma and breaking the social fabric. This had an

impact on family members, with the development of mental disorders, contributed to the breaking of the social fabric and led to collective trauma. These findings align with studies in other countries, such as in Sudan where women were raped in daylight when family and community members witnessed the incidents (Amnesty International, 2004). The sadistic sexual violence, forcing family members to participate or watch (as well as killing them during the incident in some cases) was also reported by victims of human trafficking for ransom from Eritrea and was a source of secondary trauma as well as collective trauma (Van Reisen *et al.*, 2017)

Physical injuries are not the only consequences of the rape; the reports and interviews align in reporting that women contracted sexually transmitted diseases, fell pregnant or lost unborn children, and suffered numerous other health consequences, some of which were life-threatening. These findings are in line with other studies (Reid-Cunningham, 2008) on wartime rape and with recently published papers in Tigray where STIs like HIV were significantly high (Physicians for Human Rights, 2023).

Post traumatic stress was found to be the most common reaction across all survivors. Survivors experienced intrusion of thought, memory and feelings, avoidance of internal and external stimuli, and had changes in their mood and the way they reacted to their environment. This is similar to findings in a study conducted in Croatia, Bosnia, and Herzegovina where participants experienced chronic post-traumatic stress. Another study by Physicians for Human Rights conducted in Tigray showed that 13% of the charts reviewed showed a diagnosis of post-traumatic stress in survivors (Physicians for Human Rights, 2023).

The compounding impact of the war aggravated their situation. Some women said that their money was looted and that they could not afford to feed their children or themselves. After surviving the horrific acts of violence, they faced other challenges, such as the blockade and siege of the region, which made it difficult for them to recover. This resulted in the complete closure of banks and survivors could not access their savings or find other means to support themselves. They were under a complete communication blackout,

could not find transport, and were generally unable to reach out to support systems.

Access to health services after rape

Those who were able to reach health facilities, found that most facilities had been destroyed, making it impossible to get the services they were seeking. The data from November 2020 shows that before the war, Tigray had a total of 40 hospitals, including 2 referral hospitals, 14 general hospitals, and 24 primary hospitals. In addition, there were 226 health centres and 741 health posts in the region, and according to data from June 2021, it was found that over 96% of the 1007 health facilities in the Tigray region did not meet the criteria of Fully Functional (FF) status. None of the health facilities have returned to their prewar operational status due to various reasons such as a shortage of health workers, lack of medical equipment, power, water, and supplies. (Gebregziabher *et al.*, 2022). Similarly, Médecins Sans Frontières (MSF) teams who visited 106 health facilities between mid-December 2020 and early March 2021, found that nearly 70% of them had been looted and over 30% had been damaged. Only 13% of the health facilities were found to be functioning normally during this period (Médecins Sans Frontiers, 2021).

On an average, there was a five-month gap between the reported incident of sexual violence and survivors seeking assistance at healthcare facilities (Physicians for Human Rights, 2023). Based on the analysis of the medical records, it was found that there were numerous instances of conflict-related sexual violence both before and after the signing of the November 2022 CoHA (Cessation of Hostilities Agreement), (Physicians for Human Rights, 2023). Another study conducted in Tigray reported that 90% of sexually abused women did not have access to medical and psychological support following their experience of sexual violence (Fisseha *et al.*, 2023).

This study indicates that the physical and mental condition of survivors deteriorated significantly following their attack and that their condition was aggravated due to other compounding factors.

These factors included displacement, witnessing other violent incidents, and lack of access to post-rape care services, mainly because of the systematic attack on the region's health system, as well as the siege on the region, discontinuation of basic services, such as banking and telecommunications, and the blockade on aid and other basic items such as fuel (Fisseha *et al.*, 2023; Gebregziabher *et al.*, 2022; Physicians for Human Rights, 2023). The UN Commission on Human Rights also concluded that the lack of transport, the unavailability of health centres and the Internet and communication blockade compounded to the inability of victims to seek necessary support:

Presence of armed actors at medical or health centres, the lack of safe or available transport from rural to urban areas, Internet and telecommunication breakdown as well as lack of money were given as reasons why survivors could not seek medical or psychological support within the critical first 72 hours after the incident, only several months after the incidents or not at all. (United Nations Human Rights Commission, 2023)

Governmental structures were not functioning properly, making it difficult to seek any form of health, economic, psychosocial, and legal support and non-governmental organisations had limited access to cash or access to certain areas that were highly affected, as they were not given clearance to travel. Violated and closed off from the world and restricted from basic services, women in Tigray suffered in silence.

Perpetrators

The research indicates that perpetrators from various military groups within Ethiopia and Eritreans were involved. However, the predominant finding of the study suggests that participants had primarily experienced rape at the hands of Eritrean forces followed by troops of Ethiopian defence forces. These findings align with the results of other research studies conducted on survivors of conflict-related sexual violence in Tigray (Human Rights Watch, 2021; Fisseha, 2023; Physicians for Human Rights, 2023).

Addressing victims' needs

The findings of this study show that there is collective trauma imprinted in the Tigray community. Women have been left with wounds, and trauma that have left them thinking they are unworthy, without a future of marriage, school, or children to look forward to. The women are left feeling worthless and the connection with their family is broken.

Moving forward, it is crucial to establish and implement health, mental health and psychosocial support services specifically tailored to survivors of sexual violence and restore health services. Raising awareness is vital in combating the stigma surrounding survivors and ensuring they receive the support they need. Trauma-focused interventions should be implemented to address the long-term effects of trauma and facilitate the healing process for survivors, their relatives, and communities. Additionally, it is essential to prioritize investigations and documentation of the violence that occurred in Tigray. This will help establish accountability and promote justice for the survivors. These steps are crucial in promoting healing, resilience and recovery for the affected individuals, the community, and the Tigray society.

Need for further investigations

The research does have certain limitations that should be acknowledged. Firstly, the small sample size and data collection of the interviews from only three sites limits the generalisability of the findings. To provide a more comprehensive understanding of the extent of conflict-related sexual violence, future assessments with a larger sample size should be conducted. Moreover, it is important to incorporate key informant information from family members, healthcare professionals, and perpetrators to gather additional evidence that supports the findings of this research. Further investigation through desk reviews and other research methods can also provide valuable insights.

Despite these limitations, the study still highlights the urgent need for comprehensive support services for survivors of conflict-related sexual violence. Further studies are needed to understand the

responses offered so far, and to investigate whether this addresses the current needs of victims and their communities.

Further study into the determination of the legal classification of the atrocities reported in this chapter is also desirable, particularly concerning the findings that sexual violence was perpetrated strategically and by uniformed soldiers, including from neighbouring country Eritrea and that these were perpetrated with an aim to demean and eradicate the Tigray ethnic identity. The role of the other forces, including the ENDF perpetrating atrocities against its own population, its failure to protect the citizens of Tigray and the refugees from Eritrea sheltered in Ethiopia under international protection, needs further work.

Conclusion

This study investigates the systematic use of sexual violence in the Tigray war through three data sources: EEPA Situation Reports, EEPA testimonies, and in-depth interviews with victims. The research analyses 327 reports and 38 testimonies, alongside 20 interviews with rape victims. It finds that sexual violence was strategically used by the Ethiopian National Defence Force, Eritrean Defence Forces, Amhara Militia, and Special Forces, with Eritrean troops being the primary perpetrators.

There are reports that Eritrean forces attempted to hide their presence. Despite initial denials by the Ethiopian and Eritrean governments, the involvement of Eritrean troops was later confirmed by Ethiopian PM Abiy in March 2021. The communication blockade and disinformation allowed widespread sexual violence to go unreported in the early months, with the first reports appearing in January 2021. Over time, reports revealed the extensive and systematic nature of these atrocities, affecting thousands, including in rural areas. The situation was discussed in the UN Security Council in April 2021.

The widespread and systematic perpetration of sexual violence was clearly compounded by the siege and the communication blockade, the inability of the victims to ask for help, their inability to reach health facilities and the destruction of health facilities and other

services. The victims were left destitute, and this has greatly affected their ability to cope.

The strategic rape was perpetrated by uniformed soldiers. The study concludes that strategic rape aimed to reduce women's reproductive capabilities, causing infertility, HIV infections, pregnancy losses, and pregnancies by perpetrators. Victims faced severe trauma, abductions, captivity, and violence, including rape in front of family members. This has left deep physical and psychological scars on individuals and their communities. Future research is crucial for accountability and addressing the impact of these war crimes.

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Authors' contributions

Gebru Kidanu designed the research and implemented the interviews, analysed the interviews, and supervised the overall research. This work has been carried out as part of a PhD study. Mirjam Van Reisen reviewed all the chapter versions, restructured the content and contributed to the literature review and theoretical framework.

Ethical considerations

This research was carried out under ethical clearance obtained from Mekelle University, reference number MU_IRB 1978/2022. Tilburg University has also provided ethical clearance. This research was carried out under ethical clearance obtained from Tilburg University Identification code: REDC 2020.139 titled “Cultural Dimensions of Meaning-making and Agenda-setting”.

This chapter should be read in conjunction with the ‘Note on content and editorial decisions’ (Book 1).

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“Vultures were Circling the Areas”: Massacres During the Tigray War

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From an assembled people can a solution be revealed.

Abstract

This research employed ethnographic analysis to explore massacre patterns during the Tigray war, comparing secondary documentation with firsthand witness interviews. The study found strong corroboration between the sources and eyewitness accounts, revealing distressing details such as family killings, the restricting of burials, and the presence of vultures at massacre sites. According to the available secondary documentation and those interviewed for this research, the massacres during religious events in Aksum and Mariam Dengelat were primarily carried out by Eritrean soldiers, while Ethiopian soldiers were responsible for violence in Bora, and the Amhara Fano and Special Forces perpetrated atrocities in Setit Humera and Dansha. Eritrean soldiers used derogatory terms for Tigrayans and claimed they were ordered to execute extensive killings, while Ethiopian soldiers displayed hostility towards Tigrayans. Victims, including priests, faced violence based on their ethnicity and religious practices. The violence targeted men for execution, while women and girls suffered severe sexual violence, including gang rape and mutilation. Elderly individuals and children were forcibly deported, exemplifying ethnic cleansing. The coordinated violence against Tigrayans is viewed as an attempt to destroy the Tigray population, necessitating investigations for potential atrocity crimes and genocide under international law.

Key words: Tigray war, massacres, genocide, Ethiopia, Eritrea

Investigating massacres in ethnography

Massacres have occurred throughout history, but it is yet to be developed as a self-standing research discipline (Dwyer & Ryan, 2012), due to the complexity of the topic and how to treat it. Jacques Sémelin (2001b) discussed that massacres of civilian populations have received little attention for causes that are psychological, moral, and intellectual in nature:

The first is psychological in nature: avoiding a research topic that triggers horror and repulsion is understandable. The second is moral: faced with acts of pure savagery, how is it possible to prove “scientific neutrality”? The compassion felt for the victims leads spontaneously to the condemnation of their torturers. The third obstacle is more specifically of an intellectual nature: the phenomenon of massacre defies understanding. It appears to make no sense or to serve any purpose. We tend to write it off as man’s ‘folly’. Beyond such a psychological retraction, beyond our moral judgment, it is important, nonetheless, to understand the political, economic, and cultural circumstances that come together in the production of such collective behaviour (Sémelin, 2001b, p. 3).

Massacres – as an intentional attempt at the destruction of humankind – need to be examined from the perspective of the aim of the perpetrators, the action itself, as well as its effect on victims and survivors, and not only reporting the figures of those deceased.

Stathis Kalyvas described massacre as the killing of at least 10 people and its character including its sheer brutality and the inclusion of women, elders, and children, its enigmatic nature as well as its apparent irrationality (1999). The Guatemala Human Rights Commission, on the other hand, put the death of at least 3 individuals as amounting to a massacre (1989). Other researchers like Alain Corbin argued the killing of a single person may amount to a massacre (Corbin as cited in Sémelin, 2001b, p. 5).

Sémelin discussed that researching massacres is relevant to understanding conflict’s dynamic in addition to accountability inquiries.

Furthermore, far from being a ‘marginal’ or ‘collateral’ phenomenon, massacres may have considerable psychological and political effects upon the dynamic of a conflict. It is, therefore, legitimate to make it the object of separate study (Sémelin, 2001b, p. 4).

Sémelin (2001a) encourages approaching the study of massacres from an interpretative framework, with methodologies that allow an empirical and context-aware approach. These sources are one of the keys to imagining what might seem unimaginable, to bringing facts into the realm of understanding and out of the register of the ineffable, and thus helping to reduce the correlated barriers which, according to Sémelin (2001a), hinder the interest and progress of work on massacres.

This research investigates the massacres reported in the Tigray War. The war, which took place from 3 November 2020 (ICHREE, 2023) to 3 November 2022, has been characterised by the brutal descriptions of massacres. The information on these massacres has been difficult to obtain and verify, due to a two-year siege and communication blockade imposed on the region (Gebreslassie *et al.*, 2024). Keeping Sémelin’s conclusion in mind, that ethnography on massacres should not be confused with the legal determination of these, this research employed a strictly phenomenological and interpretive ethnography of selected massacre incidents perpetrated during the Tigray war.

The research compares and corroborates available sources with ethnographic fieldwork on the ground. It investigates how the various sources triangulate in terms of the description of the *modus operandi* of the events, identified as massacres. The main research question is: *To what extent do the modus operandi of the events identified as massacres during the Tigray war triangulate between secondary sources and primary data collected in the field?*

Theoretical framework: Understanding massacres

The potential indexing of genocide and atrocity crimes through massacres makes research on this topic particularly sensitive, including delicate from a political point of view. This is also the case

in the Tigray war. The circumstance of a siege and total communication blackout allowed for the invisibility of the events and a contestation on whether these happened and how. Lyons (2019) has shown the political articulations and the power balance between accusations of genocide – as well as terrorism – in Ethiopia. Lyons (2019) finds that accusations of genocide are “a key arena of the larger contention”.

A relevant debate has, therefore, been ongoing on the scholarly engagement with research into massacres. Wierzbicka (1990) identifies the difficulty of defining what a massacre is in the lived reality, in the sense that a phenomenological description should precede the task of classifying it. Taylor (2008) on the other hand warns that a lack of definition opens the door to denial, minimisation and creates loopholes for the exactions committed, which is one of the core dynamics of groups who commit atrocities. A rational definition must therefore be pursued (Gewirtz, 1996), “as far as it will go” (Bollinger, 1992), in that the term ‘massacre’ has no consensual theoretical definition.

The vagueness of the definition contributes to a lack of interest in researching events usually described as ‘massacres’, creating a vicious cycle. There is little possibility of a widely held consensus on what constitutes a massacre, so varied are the circumstances in which they have occurred throughout history (Dwyer & Ryan, 2012, p. 5). The importance of this observation is in the sensitivity of the objective of the task in describing the event(s) identified as a ‘massacre’. On this point, it is worth consulting Jacques Sémelin’s decade-long work on the definitions of massacre in relation to genocide and their articulation. Although highly critical of the legal definition of genocide, Sémelin acknowledges its current normative power in this field of study (Sémelin, 2002a; 2002b; 2003; 2009; Guilaïne & Sémelin, 2016). As the term ‘massacre’ is not well established and lacks a strong and studied notion compared to the term ‘genocide’, which has a much larger legal and theoretical surface, a connection between massacres and genocide should not be *a priori* assumed (Sémelin, 2002a). This could be extended to an *a priori* assumption

of the connection between ‘massacres’ and atrocity crimes more broadly.

Several researchers ask for recognition of the importance of an ethnographic approach to the study of ‘massacres’, which is free from the strictly legal approach, required when determining atrocity crimes. Dwyer and Ryan (2012) emphasise that massacre studies aim to study massacres in their social and historical complexity, beyond the idea of the ‘technique of genocide’. This is important, as it separates the task of identifying the determination of genocide and atrocity crimes from the task of describing and classifying massacres in their lived experience.

While the need for clear demarcation from a legal perspective is understood, different things are at stake for ethnographers, whose task it is to describe events that are experienced or perceived as massacres. Ethnographers should start with the investigations of events that are referred to as ‘massacre’ by those who live in a conflict situation. Ethnographers should also seek to pursue the definitional contours of ‘as far as it will go’, but the contours here are established by the discourse they know to be contextual, relative and changing. It is then up to the jurists to see whether the discourse, once identified, corresponds with any legal classifications. Ethnographers must investigate the so-called massacre(s) as such, and understand the category as thought by the actors, while the jurists must then consider whether to categorise these in absolute terms. In short, the jurists seek to name events they have understood, ethnographers seek to understand events that others have named.

Contested discussions on the massacres in the Tigray war

In Ethiopia, accusations of genocide are widespread and have deep historical roots. Scholars such as Hassen (2022a, 2022b), Bulcha (2005), Dugassa (2008), and Jalata (2016) have accused the Amhara (or broadly Abasha) populations of committing genocide against the Oromo people. Similarly, Abbay (2022), Weldemichel (2022), and Desta (2022) argue that the Amhara committed genocide against the Tigrayans. On the other hand, scholars like Bitew Geremew (2023),

Atnafu (2018), and Wachiso Gichamo (2023) describe genocide against the Amhara by Tigrayans and other ethnic minorities.

Endalew, Molla, Hussen, and Bayeh (2022) specifically attribute the Maikadra massacre to the Tigray People's Liberation Front (TPLF), framing it as a crucial event at the war's outset on November 3, 2020. Supporting this view, Bihonegn and Aleminew (2023) label the Maikadra massacre as a 'technique of genocide,' echoing the claims of Tesfaw Muluken (2016) in his book *Ye Tifat Zemen* ('The Era of Delinquency'), which portrays the Amhara as victims of a 'holocaust' orchestrated by the TPLF and Oromo Liberation Front (OLF).

Bihonegn and Aleminew (2023) based their conclusions on interviews with 15 survivors from Maikadra, but only one referred to the events as 'genocide', which cannot be the basis for a conclusion that this was experienced as a genocide. This discrepancy highlights the need to distinguish between subjective experiences, the ethnographic and the legal definition of genocide.

Qualitative studies of the massacres perpetrated during the 2020–2022 war in Ethiopia all focus on the Maikadra massacre (9–10 November 2020) (Woldemariam and Woldgabreal, 2023). The studies of Eshetu (2022), Ali *et al.* (2022), as well as Antehunegn's thesis (2022) come from different disciplinary fields, offering a great diversity of approaches. Nevertheless, they share several points in common, the main one being that they always attribute – with or without analysis of the sources – the atrocities committed in Maikadra unilaterally to TPLF or TPLF-sympathising Tigrayans.

This conclusion runs against the findings of Ghent University (2024a) and the most recent joint reports by Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch (2022). The latter presents a more complex reality, where the atrocities in Mai Kaidra in 2020 were committed by the Ethiopian National Defence Force (ENDF), Tigray Defence Forces sympathisers (IDF) and Amhara Special Forces (ASF).

On this point, the article by Ali *et al.* (2022) is the least informed, insofar as it relies mainly on official sources, notably to put forward the figure of 1,600 Amhara victims, which has not been confirmed by any independent observers. Antehunegn (2022), for his part, wrote

his thesis before the publication of the joint Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch report of April 2022. Antehunegn (2022), therefore, did not have access to the decisive elements needed to establish with certainty the multi-actor nature of the actions committed. Although published in June 2022, after the report's publication, Messele (2022) does not take the Human Rights Watch and Amnesty International report (2022) into account either, nor do those by Bihonegn and Aleminew (2023) or Woldemariam and Woldgabreal (2023).

Researchers have a particular responsibility to be prudent, consistent, and clear in their approach toward the description of events, including massacres and the legal determination of genocide. This requires academic maturity, as the material speaks to emotive topics. Among the civilians killed in the war in Tigray, some were killed by aerial bombardment, drones, shelling, various crossfire situations and potentially chemical weapons (Brown & Kassa, 2021); others were shot at point blank, and eliminated by other gruesome methods (Tesfa *et al.*, 2024).

How to speak on these events needs consideration and a sense of humility. Ibreck and De Waal find that in a competing and ethnicised political environment, such as in Ethiopia and the Horn of Africa, academia should support domestic scholars to help “bolster” “fragile and divided scholarly communities” (Ibreck & De Waal, 2022). The phenomenological study of massacres requires humility and a notion that the imagination of it is inevitably incomplete. It also requires a separation of judgments forwarded from different fields. The ethnographer should not sit on the chair of the jurist. Njamnjoh tells us that the awareness of incompleteness tells us we need each other, and a sense of incompleteness provides the necessary medicine against villainising and scapegoating others and is good medicine against the spiralling effect of the creation of the idea of undesirable outsiders (Njamnjoh, 2021).

Methodology: A heuristic approach

This research takes a heuristic approach, examining some selected massacre incidents that were perpetrated between 2020 and 2022,

described as major massacres by victims, non-governmental organisations (NGOs) documenting the conflict, and international institutions. Triangulating the reports as compared to the insights from survivors and families of the victims, we will seek to examine the similarities and unique patterns of perpetration and modus operandi across different massacre sites as in Tigray as well as if this typology echoes genocidal-type behaviour.

There is a need to complement the phenomenological quantitative studies already carried out by the Geography Department of Ghent University (Vanden Bempt *et al.*, 2021), notably via their www.ethiopiaticgraywar.com database, with a qualitative ethnographic study on the ground. Every Casualty Counts (of Ghent University) is an online database of massacres and civilian victims of the Tigray war (Vanden Bempt *et al.*, 2021). The sources of information are verified social media posts, media reports, advocacy groups listings and direct reports (Vanden Bempt *et al.*, 2021).

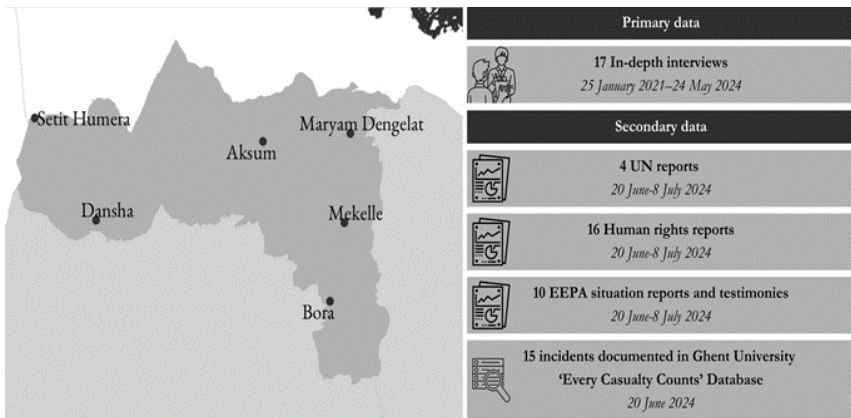


Figure 8.1. Method of data collection and interview locations

The research used qualitative data to explore the insights from the perspective of massacre survivors. The massacres selected for the qualitative analysis are those of Aksum, Dansha, Mariam Dengelat, Bora, and Setit Humera. They were chosen because of their importance in terms of the number of victims, as well as the critical mass of diverse and reliable sources concerning them, allowing a socio-historical study based on cross-referencing information and

avoiding cases of *unus testis*.⁴⁹ It should be remembered that the war in Tigray took place for the most part behind closed doors, in what Van Reisen, Mawere, Smits and Wirtz (2023) call a ‘digital black hole’, making the circulation of information and reliable sources particularly complicated,⁵⁰ even after the conflict’s end. This article makes no claim to exhaustiveness, which can only be achieved with further extensive fieldwork.

Secondary data sources

On the various incidents which are the subject of this study, several writings are already publicly available. In addition to the scientific articles already mentioned, we find the research results of the UN International Commission of Human Rights Experts on Ethiopia and the Special Rapporteur on the Situation of Human Rights in Eritrea, NGO specialised reports (by the international media, Amnesty International, Human Rights Watch, Eritrea Focus, Europe External Programme with Africa [EEPA] and Ethiopian Human Rights Council), as well as articles and reports from the press.

⁴⁹ These cases must be treated in the same way as the others, but the epistemological challenges they pose require their own methodological questioning before they can be discussed in the context of a study such as the one we’re here conducting. Ginzburg, Carlo. 1992. ‘Unus Testis. Lo Sterminio Degli Ebrei e Il Pricipio Di Realtà’. *Quaderni Storici* 27 (80 (2)): 529–48.

⁵⁰ Reisen, Mirjam van, Mawere Munyaradzi, Klara Smits, and Morgane Wirtz (eds). 2023. *Enslaved: Trapped and Trafficked in Digital Black Holes*. Bamenda: Langaa.

Table 8.1. Types of data

Secondary data	Explanation
1. Every Casualty Counts	<p>The Geography Department of Ghent University regularly documented (www.ethiopiaticgraywar.com) the major massacre incidents perpetrated during the Tigray war from November 2020 to 20 December 2022. The researchers extracted 15 incidents for quantitative analysis (2024). The selection criteria were:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"><li>1. Civilian casualties, and<li>2. Incidents with more than 10 casualties.
2. UN reports	<p>The four reports by the UN International Human Rights Commission on Ethiopia are among the valuable documents that were used to understand the context of the massacre in Tigray. The reports include:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"><li>1. Comprehensive investigative findings and legal determinations (2023b)<li>2. The acute risk of further atrocity crimes in Ethiopia (2023b)<li>3. Human Rights Council Fifty-fourth session 11 September–6 October 2023 Agenda item 4: Human Rights situations that require the Council’s attention (United Nations, 2023a)<li>4. Human Rights Council Fifty-first session 12 September–7 October 2022 Agenda item 4: Human rights situations that require the Council’s attention (United Nations, 2022)

Secondary data	Explanation
3. International reports by independent non-governmental organisations	<p>16 international reports of massacre incidents in Tigray reported by human rights advocates including Amnesty International, Human Rights Watch, and Crisis Group:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Ethiopia: “We will erase you from this land”: Crimes against humanity and ethnic cleansing in Ethiopia’s Western Tigray Zone (Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch, 2022). 2. Ethiopia: The Massacre in Aksum (Amnesty International, 2021). 3. Evil days: 30 years of war and famine in Ethiopia. An Africa Watch Report (Human Rights Watch, 1991). 4. Ethiopia’s Tigray War: A Deadly, Dangerous Stalemate (International Crisis Group, 2021). 5. Other summary updates and articles of Amnesty International, Human Rights Watch and International Crisis Group.
4. EEPA Situation Reports on the Horn of Africa	<p>Europe External Programme with Africa (EEPA) is one of the institutions that was providing daily updates of the Tigray war context. The EEPA Team also published images of videos on massacres which were translated and transcribed. The images included witness statements. We used 10 Situation Reports on the Horn of Africa as part of this research.</p>

Primary data sources

Our research examined the massacre sites, perpetrators, intensity of the event, as well as the modus operandi of the massacres during the Tigray war. Interviews were conducted between 25 January 2021 and 2 December 2023 with 17 adult Tigrayan survivors of the massacres of Aksum, Dansha, Mariam Dengelat, Bora, Setit Humera, and Mekelle and 20 additional reports as well as 25 incidence updates were obtained from individuals who witnessed massacres.

Table 8.2. Data collection tools and participants

Data collection tool	Place and number of participants						
	<i>Aksam</i>	<i>Bora</i>	<i>Mariam Dengelat</i>	<i>Seiti Humera</i>	<i>Dansha</i>	<i>Mekelle</i>	<i>Zagreb</i>
In-depth interview	5	2	4	1	2	2	1

The interviewees were selected through chain-referral sampling (or snowball sampling). Starting with the interviewers' contacts, which was the most appropriate selection method given the scarcity, difficulty of access, and vulnerability of the group targeted by this study, the research team identified the interviewees.

Most of the interviews were conducted face-to-face while some other were by phone calls of WhatsApp. All the interviewees were coded and labelled in an Excel spreadsheet. Participants in the interview were anonymised in the research.

The massacres were traumatic events for the interviewees, which left them vulnerable to varying extents. In order to respect their dignity and to create a climate of trust favouring discussion and the expression of emotions (Zarowsky, 2004), the interviews were conducted in Tigrinya language by interviewers who are native from Tigray.

Table 8.3. Coding and labelling of interview participants

Data collection tool	Date collected	Place	Mode	Code	Interviewer
In-depth interview	4-Jul-23	Bora	Face-to-face	EGIDI BS01	Tesfa
In-depth interview	4-Jul-23	Bora	Face-to-face	MDID IBS02	Tesfa
In-depth interview	25-Jan-21	Aksum	Face-to-face	SAIDI AK03	Tesfa
In-depth interview	25-Jan-21	Aksum	Face-to-face	MAIDI AK04	Tesfa
In-depth interview	25-Jan-21	Aksum	Face-to-face	AHIDI AK05	Tesfa
In-depth interview	25-Jan-21	Aksum	Face-to-face	HKIDI AK06	Tesfa
In-depth interview	7 Oct 201	Mekelle	Face-to-face	SMIDI 07	Tesfa
In-depth interview	2-Dec-23	Zagreb	Phone	SAMEI DI08	Gebremichael
In-depth interview	25 Jan 2021	Aksum	Face-to-face	TMIDI 09	Tesfa
In-depth interview	25-May-24	Mariam Dengelat	Whats App	HAGI DI10	Van Reisen
In-depth interview	28-Jul-22	Setit Humera	Face-to-face	BITID I11	Tesfa

Data collection tool	Date collected	Place	Mode	Code	Interviewer
In-depth interview	28-Jul-22	Dansha, Tsegede	Face-to-face	HIGID I12	Tesfa
In-depth interview	28-Jul-22	Dansha, Tsegede	Face-to-face	TSKID I13	Tesfa
In-depth interview	4 Jan 2024	Mariam Dengelat	Face-to-face	HREI DI14	Desta
In-depth interview	31 Dec 2023	Mariam Dengelat	Face-to-face	MFUI DI15	Desta
In-depth interview	7 Oct 2021	Mekelle	Face-to-face	SHGI DI16	Tesfa
In-depth interview	30 Nov 2023	Negash	Phone	TADSI DI17	Gebremichael

Interview HAGIDI10 resulted from conversations between researchers, which resulted in a voluntary recording of the experiences of fellow researchers who were present in the event. The semi-structured questionnaire focused on the survivors' personal account of the massacres, with an interest for the events and discourses that preceded and followed them.⁵¹

In addition to the recorded interviews, all the researchers collected material, narrative reports, videos and interactions with persons who had been present in the event. The material was obtained from the occurrence of the event, the immediate aftermath until the in-depth interviews carried out for this research. Interviewees were also invited

⁵¹ The method used is intended to be consistent with what has already been done for the Aksum article in the same book, so that the datasets are optimally compatible with each other.

to share photo, video or audio archives they may have taken during the events or their aftermath. These audio-visual sources, requiring of course ‘the effort of archaeology’ (Didi-Huberman, 2004), are particularly important, as they help to dispel, beyond the vagueness of concepts and the vagueness of factual events – already mentioned above – the vagueness of the imaginary.

Findings

The findings are described in three sections. The first section discusses the findings of the secondary material in the form of documentation available (at the time of the research). The second section discusses the interviews carried out (primary data). In the discussion, the analysis from the secondary data and the primary data is compared for the purpose of triangulation.

Secondary data

Based on data in available documentation in Ghent University, United Nations, international human rights organisations as well as EEPA, this section describes selected massacres.

Dansha massacre

Although it was the May Kadra massacre that received palpable media attention in the Western Zone of Tigray, the first massacre was perpetrated a week earlier in Dansha. The Danasha massacre took place at the beginning of the war. The Ghent University incident documentation indicated that the Dansha massacre, dated 4–6 November 2020, was perpetrated by Amhara Fano and militia claiming the lives of 24 civilians (Ghent University, 2024g). The massacre was not reported in the EEPA Situation Report, which only started its reporting on the 17 November. The Dansha massacre is among the incidents which were not reported in the media.

Aksum massacre

The Eritrean army killed civilians in a massacre searching house to house in Aksum from 28–30 November 2020 (Ghent University, 2024e; UN International Commission of Human Rights Experts in Ethiopia, 2023d; Amnesty International, 2021, EEPA, 2021a, b, c). All the documents explained the perpetrators were the EDF. A

witness of the Aksum massacre who recorded the events in a video which was transcribed, relates the events of the Aksum massacre as follows:

On the 27th November, 2020, Eritrean soldiers came on a Scania type big truck with Eritrean plate number (with red slash). And in the evening, they opened gunfire and there was gunshot the whole night; in response, Tigray militias and some youth of Aksum tried to defend but they could not hold out. On the 28 November, 2020, Eritrean soldiers entered the town and they were shooting and killing every youth they found in the street day and night including two brothers who were passing on the road to open their shops in the early morning of 29th of November. (EEPA, 2021b)

The witness reported shock that the holy place of Aksum was attacked in such a brutal massacre:

On the Eve of Hidar of Zion [Aksum Annual Festival celebrated on 30 November 2020], the compound of the St Mary of Zion Church was supposed to be full of people with no space to move. But today an era has changed and we were in gunfire for the whole week; during this festive day, St Mary of Zion church compound was empty, with no people, and what a ghost day. It is surprising that since the establishment of this church, even in the Derge regime, it has never been like this. (EEPA, 2021b)

The perpetrators of the massacre were identified as Eritrean soldiers, while ENDF soldiers present failed to protect the civilian population:

ENDF soldiers were in the town for more than a week but didn't do anything like that; however, Eritrean soldiers were killing Aksum youth the whole day on 29 November and the people of Aksum have never experienced this kind of sorrow on the eve of the St Mary of Zion festive occasion. (EEPA, 2021b)

Another testimony identified the images of a video in which several people are inspecting the body of a person killed in Aksum (during the massacre of 28–29 November). The following is a reading of what the video shows:

In this video, few people including a priest have been seen carrying a body (most likely found nearby the church of St Mary of Zion but no mention of a date) and they are trying to take the body away. The person recording the video was saying Aksum has experienced this terrible thing (expressing the degree of sorrow and sadness). Then

they lay the body down and one of them asked for ID of the victim; the priest found the ID in the pocket and he was found to be an employee of the Commercial Bank of Ethiopia named G/biwot G/kidan G/tinsae. After that the people were surprised; someone from them asked “why did he come and why did he go to this place (he did not mention exactly where the area was) and questioned his true identity.” Then someone from the group asks to see his face to cross-check his true identity and the person recording the video said “I know him” shortly after they saw his face, all agreed his ID matched. (EEPA, 2021c)

Ghent University estimated that between 100–800 people were killed at this one event (Ghent University, 2024e), EEPA described 750 had been killed at this massacre (EEPA, 2021a), while the report by Amnesty International (2021) indicated that it was unable to calculate the massacre’s precise death toll, but estimates that hundreds of people were killed.

The documentations of Ghent University (2024e), Amnesty International (2021c) and EEPA (2021a) similarly indicate that Eritrean soldiers were searching house to house massacring teenage and adult men on 28–29 November 2020. Amnesty International’s report on the Aksum massacre indicated that six civilians who were from the same family were among the victims of the massacre (Amnesty International, 2021b).

Prior to this massacre, Aksum was indiscriminately targeted through airstrike killing 19 civilians (Ghent University, 2024d), indiscriminate shelling that claimed the lives of 40 civilians (Ghent University, 2024c; EEPA, 2020).

After the massacres in 2020, there were frequent reports of extrajudicial killing of civilians in Aksum, one incident claimed the lives of 19 civilians on 28 November 2022 after the signing of the Pretoria Agreement (Ghent University, 2024f). The number of civilians killed in these four massacre incidents in Aksum is 878 people, according to the Every Casualty Counts database of Ghent University.

Dengelat massacre

The Ghent University’s documentation of massacres indicated that two massacres were committed in the St Mary of Zion Dengelat

Church and its surrounding localities of the Saesie Woreda⁵² in the Eastern Zone of Tigray in 2020 (Ghent University, 2024h; Ghent University, 2024i).

This massacre was committed by the EDF between 30 November and 2 December 2020 targeting the people who were gathered for St. Mary of Zion annual feast in the St Mary of Zion Dengelat Church (Ghent University, 2024h; UN International Commission of Human Rights Experts in Ethiopia, 2023d), after the villages had been surrounded by Eritrean troops. The incident report of Ghent University reads:

Soldiers opened fire on people celebrating in St Mary Dengelat Church. They later went door to door taking people away and executing them. Some of the victims were found with their hands tied behind their backs, shot in the head. (Ghent University, 2024h)

The UN International Commission of Human Rights Experts on Ethiopia also reported:

EDF forces killed large numbers of Tigrayan civilians around the Mariam Dengelat church, Saesie woreda [district] in the Eastern Zone. The area was busier than usual as many civilians had fled the fighting in the nearby Edaga Hamus, while others had travelled to the area to mark the feast of St Mary of Zion, which falls on 30 November. On the morning of 30 November, EDF soldiers approached the town and opened fire. They then went house to house, pulling out civilians, mainly men and boys, and shooting them. (UN International Commission of Human Rights Experts, 2023d, p. 22)

One of those whose son was killed interviewed by the commission stated:

We told them, 'All of us are civilians. Some are even university students.' They told us they didn't care. They said they had come from Eritrea and would kill every male over five years old. Then they separated the men and women, and ordered the women to tie the hands of the men behind their backs... They began beating us using sticks and guns. We were crying. Finally, we had to tie all the men. (UN International Commission of Human Rights Experts, 2023d, p. 22)

⁵² An administrative unit in Ethiopia equivalent to a district.

The documentation from Ghent University (Ghent University, 2024h) and the United Nations (UN International Commission of Human Rights Experts, 2023d) establish that the Eritrean military perpetrated the massacre.

Bora massacre

The massacre in Bora took place from 8-10 January 2021. All reports subscribe the massacre to troops of the Ethiopian National Defence Force. The massacre occurred in the aftermath of the Ethiopian Christmas celebration. The report of the UN International Commission of Human Rights Experts in Ethiopia described:

[On] 8 January, ...fighting broke out between Tigrayan militia and ENDF soldiers on the outskirts of the town. ENDF soldiers then entered the town on foot shooting indiscriminately before going house to house and pulling Tigrayan men and boys outside and shooting them. (UN International Commission of Human Rights Experts in Ethiopia, 2023d, p. 22)

The ENDF killed teenage and adult men searching house-to-house in Bora of the Southern Zone of Tigray (Ghent University, 2024j). The UN International Commission of Human Rights Experts on Ethiopia also indicated that the ENDF soldiers killed civilians searching house to house.

The report by Ghent University (2024j) indicated that between 70 and 170 men were killed by the ENDF while the UN International Commission of Human Rights Experts in Ethiopia indicated the number of those that were killed was 101 persons of which 100 were teenagers and men and one was a woman (UN International Commission of Human Rights Experts in Ethiopia 2023d).

The report by the UN International Commission of Human Rights Experts in Ethiopia found that:

ENDF soldiers did not allow families to bury their loved ones, and dead bodies were left on the streets of Bora for up to three days. One interviewee heard ENDF soldiers saying: "Junta deserves to be eaten by hyenas and foxes." It was only when the bodies started producing an intense smell, that ENDF soldiers allowed burials to take place. Interviewees explained that due to the sheer number of dead, there were not enough burial sites and residents had to bury the bodies in mass graves. (UN

International Commission of Human Rights Experts in Ethiopia, 2023d, p. 23)

Long-range indiscriminate shelling hit Bora on 29 March and 20 May 2021 killing 30 and 22 civilians in the respective massacres (Ghent University, 2024k; Ghent University, 2024l).

Setit Humera massacre

According to the report by the UN International Commission of Human Rights Experts on Ethiopia, many Tigrayans who were living in Western Tigray were detained (mainly teenage boys and men) and deported (elders and women) through Tekeze River by Amhara Fano (United Nations, 2023d).

The UN International Commission of Human Rights Experts on Ethiopia's report reads:

Tigrayan civilians – women, men, and children were detained on a massive scale in Western Tigray. The Commission identified at least 13 different detention sites. Detentions began from November 2020 through September 2022. Many took place between July and November 2021 and were subsequently followed by forced expulsion from Western Tigray. Tigrayan civilians were detained by Amhara Special Forces and Fano militia, at times accompanied by ENDF and EDF soldiers, during mass roundups of Tigrayan civilians. Amhara Special Forces and Fano militia members would summon Tigrayans to meetings or order them from their houses. Others described being detained while displaced or fleeing their homes, or after being stopped on the street and forced to show their IDs which indicated Tigrayan ethnicity. (UN International Commission of Human Rights Experts in Ethiopia, 2023d, p. 33)

Investigations by Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch (2022) showed that the kebele/vicinity administrations in Humera made various announcements and meetings to cleanse Tigrayans from the zone. The report reads:

The ethnic cleansing campaign was announced in meetings in Humera. According to five residents, new kebele administrators held a string of public meetings in December 2020. Aklile, a 30-year-old Tigrayan farmer who lived there, described one such meeting: "I was trying to attend one of two times but it's uncomfortable, because they don't like us to participate with them in the meeting – especially the Amhara residents." He said that on December 14, he went to a general meeting held in the

kebele 1 administrative building: “They invited the residents – not specifically Amharas or Tigrayan. But the agenda was very dangerous because it was about Tigray and how we can move Tigray people out of the Zone beyond the Tekeze Bridge.” (Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch, 2022, p. 73)

The report further indicates:

The new kebele 1 administrator, he said, made a speech announcing the administration’s decision to deport Tigrayans: They said: “We won against the EPRDF and the TPLF so Tigrayan people must not live with us, and they shouldn’t live here. If they want, they can go by themselves, if not we can also deport them. Also, nobody can go to Sudan, so we will close them in. “The agenda [of the meeting] was very dangerous because it was about Tigray and how we can move Tigray people out of the zone beyond the Tekeze bridge.” (Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch, 2022, p. 73)

Tigrayan civilians living in Setit Humera town were rounded up and detained by the Amhara Special Force and Fano Militia. Between 1 and 3 March 2021, the Amhara Special Force or Fano Militia transported the civilians who had been rounded up to the Tekeze Bridge, executed them, and threw their bodies into the Tekeze River (Ghent University, 2024m). The incident report described the bodies thrown into the Tekeze River on 1-3 March 2021 were between 30 and 250 people.

Another massacre incident in Setit Humera reports the killing of between 5 and 50 Tigrayans between 16 and 24 July 2021 whose bodies were similarly found in the downstream villages of Sudan (Ghent University, 2024). The incident report reads:

Some of the bodies showed stab wounds or bullet wounds and some had their hands tied behind their back. According to the Ethiopian government, the claim of a massacre in Humera is false as the bodies might have been fighters killed on the battlefield in the Afar region. (Ghent University, 2024n)

Another massacre incident dated 4-8 August 2021 also documented:

Amhara militia were rounding up civilians and putting them in detention centers. People were killed after being taken out of the prisons. Bodies started washing up on the shores of a Sudanese village downstream of Humera. Some of the bodies showed

stab wounds or bullet wounds and some had their hands tied behind their back.
(Ghent University, 2024o)

In this incident, Amhara militia took 13–80 Tigrayans detained in Humera to the Tekeze Bridge, executed them, and threw their bodies into the river. Their bodies were found in Sudanese villages where they washed up on the riverbanks (Ghent University, 2024o).

The investigation by a CNN team uncovered that the bodies of those who were killed and thrown into the Tekeze River were found on the riverbanks. An excerpt from the news reads:

The ghostly outlines of limbs emerge through the mist along the Setit River in eastern Sudan. As the river's path narrows, the drifting bodies become wedged on the silty clay bank and their forms appear more clearly; men, women, teenagers, and even children. The marks of torture are easily visible on some, their arms held tightly behind their backs. On a trip to Wad El Hilou, a Sudanese town near the border with Ethiopia, a CNN team counted three bodies in one day. Witnesses and local authorities in Sudan confirmed that in the days after the team's departure, 11 more bodies arrived downstream. Evidence indicates the dead are Tigrayans. Witnesses on the ground say the bodies tell a dark story of mass detentions and mass executions across the border in Humera, a town in Ethiopia's Tigray region. CNN has spoken with dozens of witnesses collecting the bodies in Sudan, as well as international and local forensic experts and people trapped and hiding in Humera, to reveal what appears to be a new phase of ethnic cleansing in Ethiopia's war. (Elbagir et al., 2021)

The Amhara Fano, Amhara Special Force, and militia systematically targeted Tigrayans in the Western Zone of Tigray.

Video footage

A testimony by a priest of a group of people saved from being killed in a massacre was recorded on video. The names of the church and the district are withheld for security reasons. The authors managed the privacy aspects of the information and coded the church as E and the district as W for this analysis purpose.

Our church was shelled. The walls and the roofs were all shot. Now there are holes and cracks in the windows, walls and roof of the church. The shooting and shelling were done by Ethiopian National Defence [Force] soldiers from a distance before

they reached and entered the church. This was done on January 10, 2021, at around 3 PM.

The most horrifying time was on the next day. On January 11, 2021, the Ethiopian soldiers dragged us out of our home at 8 AM and took us to the church. We were around six and they forced us to open the church. We couldn't identify the key that opened the door. They get angry. They beat us. They asked us: where the Tigray policy forces, militias, and leaders are? They think the Tigray forces kept weapons in the church. They asked us: were the Juntas are? We told them we knew nothing. We told them we were servants of the church.

I am so sad I don't want to talk about it. They killed our brothers. I don't want to talk about it. What they have done to us is not something you could explain it in words. What they have done to us is nothing when I think of our brothers who got killed. They beat us. They start beating us from the church until we reach their bureau. They dug a pit and asked to stand in it. In the pit, they were about to shoot and kill us. One of the soldiers whose name was Captain Abdi, is the one he saved our life. He shielded us by standing between us and the shooters. He asked the shooters to leave us. Later he told us he is from Hawassa, Southern Ethiopia. The cruellest and who destroyed our life are the ethnic Amhara soldiers. There was the difference between the Amhara and Oromo soldiers. We identified them by their language. The ethnic Amhara's and Oromo's were speaking in their respective languages. We heard the Amhara's saying kill them all. Had it not been for Captain Abdi who saved our life, they would have killed and buried us all in the pit.

They released us at 5:30 PM and they took the church keys. The soldiers came back again the next morning on January 12, 2021, and interviewed us. On this day, they succeed in opening the church's door. They looted more than 10 [religious] umbrellas, and 5 carpets and took a heritage church book. The book was registered as a heritage at the Bureau of Tourism of Tigray. The umbrellas are heritage objects as well. They were not ordinary umbrellas. They were made nicely and didn't get dirt. They glare and their colour is unique like silver. The church is believed to be built in 424 BC. Our parents told us the book and umbrellas have been in the church for ages and generations. They are as old as the church. Our parents and grandparents said so. They were in the church from generation to generation. On the front page of the book, there is a statement about the person who built the church. His name is Gebre-Aregawi.

Our pain didn't end with the Ethiopian soldiers. The worst came when the Eritrean soldiers (Shabiya) arrived on January 26, 2021. They fought using the church as their main fortress and camp. We couldn't come to the church and pray for days. We pray for God to save us and give us peace. We pray for God to give his judgment to all who are doing all the crimes and bring them back to peace. (EEPA, 2021e)

Video footage was also investigated in an interview with a woman who lives and serves in a church. She explains how the Ethiopian and Eritrean soldiers abused her and the priests in the church. In the interview, she mentions a priest who was killed by Ethiopian and Eritrean troops. She says the troops asked her to show them or give them information about 'juntas', a reference to the TPLF. She said she doesn't know and don't have information, they then tied her and kept her as prisoner in one of the church's room for three days. The troops beat her bitterly and they accused her that she buried dead bodies. In the video, she does not explain who these dead bodies are. She just shows the direction of where the dead bodies are buried. She said the troops beat and abused the priests and that they desecrated the church by smoking cigarettes in the church. (EEPA, 2021f)

Another massacre incident in Gueguna locality in Saesie Woreda of the Eastern Zone of Tigray stated that Eritrean troops of the EDF gathered a group of men to help loot the Goda Glass Factory where they were executed upon completion of the task (Ghent University, 2024i).

Primary data: Interview results

In the following section, the results of the interviews are provided.

Dansha massacre

A resident of Dansha town in Tsegede woreda who was a clothes merchant, farming sesame cash crops, and raising cattle was interviewed when living as an internally displaced person (IDP) in Mekelle. She said that the Dansha massacre was perpetrated by Amhara Fano and militia against 25 Tigrayan men between 4 and 6 November 2020 (HIGIDI12, face-to-face interview with Tesfa in Mekelle on 28 July 2022). The interviewee said:

The massacre in Dansha started that very first day on 4 November 2020. Amhara Fano and militia rounded the town searching Tigrayan men to kill. 25 Tigrayans

in our neighbourhoods were killed mainly using machetes, knives and some of them using guns. (HIGIDI12, interview with Tesfa, face-to-face, Mekelle, 28 July 2022)

The interviewee further indicated that the Amhara Fano were committing sexual violence against Tigrayan women ‘frequently’. This was taking place in her neighbourhood. The sexual violence was committed instead of killing them. She added:

We were frustrated when the Amhara Fano were searching Tigrayan men yelling ‘we are here to slaughter Tigre men so that we have the women for us to give birth to Amhara babies’. Together with my younger brother, 24, they killed 25 Tigrayan civilians. We were not even allowed to bury the bodies for many days. (HIGIDI12, interview with Tesfa, face-to-face, Mekelle, 28 July 2022)

The interviewee explained that the Amhara Fano collected all Tigrayan elders, women, and children to deport them through the bridge to the east of the Tekeze River while screening male teenagers and adult men for detention and execution. She said:

On 27 November 2020, Amhara Fano announced that all Tigrayan elders, women, and children must leave the town within a day otherwise they would be detained and massacred the same as the Tigrayan men. As many of the Tigrayans were gathered from where they were hiding, the Amhara Fano screened 98 teenagers and adult men from us and took them. Many of them who were taken were farmers, merchants, and even elementary and high school students. Then the rest of us were transported to the Tekeze Bridge with 15 buses the next day [on 28th November 2020]. (HIGIDI12, interview with Tesfa, face-to-face, Mekelle, 28 July 2022)

She described the order they received from the Amhara Fano upon their arrival to Tekeze Bridge.

After we reached the bridge, one of the Amhara Fano who coordinated the deportation of Tigrayans said ‘it is south of the Tekeze Bridge where you belong. If you speak anything about what happened in Dansha, it means you decided for these men that we captured them to be killed very soon.’ (HIGIDI12, interview with Tesfa, face-to-face, Mekelle, 28 July 2022)

She travelled on foot from the Tekeze Bridge for weeks.

With my 10, 7, and 5-year-old children, we caught malaria for we had no resistance for we used to lack food while travelling on foot. On our way to Adi Mehammeday some farmers provided us with some flour that enabled me to save my family. We reached Mekelle on 12 June 2021. Now we sleep in a school turned into an IDP camp in the city. (HIGIDI12, interview with Tesfa, face-to-face, Mekelle, 28 July 2022)

It is not only the whereabouts of those of her relatives who were detained when they were deported that concerned her. It is also looking at a bleak future:

On the one hand we have many family members that we have never heard from after they were detained by Amhara Fano. On the other hand, there is no clue for what the future will bring. You can think of my children who had enough milk and food, but now they are begging to continue their days, they were schooling, and now they are out of school for three consecutive years. This war took our past, present, and future. (HIGIDI12, interview with Tesfa, face-to-face, Mekelle, 28 July 2022)

The interviewee indicated that the Amhara Fano and militia cleared Tigrayans from Dansha town detaining and executing the young and able-bodied men while deporting elders and women.

Aksum massacre

The interviewees indicated Eritrean soldiers entered Aksum following the fighting that continued until around 3:00 pm in the afternoon of the 28 November 2020, the Eritrean soldiers used tanks and shelling from the eastern direction. When they came into Aksum, they carried out house-to-house raids:

The soldiers then went down the city killing any men they saw which was followed by house-to-house raids and massive killings in captured groups between the afternoon of 28 and 29 November 2020. (MAIDI AK04, interview with Tesfa, face-to-face, Aksum, 25 January 2021)

Many people were killed but how many were killed was not clear. Another respondent indicated:

It is when you are allowed to collect the bodies that we could have been able to know how many were killed. I am one of the survivors. At the time I was at home around Abinet. At around 3:45 pm, they blew open the door to our house. They collected

seven youths in our compound. They separated us from the women and elders in the compound ordering all men to kneel with our hands waving up. They immediately started shooting as they ensured we kneeled in line. I was shot in my right arm. Among those killed at that moment, two were siblings. They left me with the assumption that they killed me because they were firing non-stop guns after ordering us to kneel in a group. (AHIDIAK05, interview with Tesfa, face-to-face, Aksum, 25 January 2021)

The Eritrean soldiers were especially targeting the men:

After the Eritrea[n] soldiers killed every youth and man they found searching house to house, they didn't allow us to take bodies into burial places. It was on the third day that we collected bodies. Even hyenas started eating the bodies of those who were shot in gorges and outskirts of the city. Vultures were circumnavigating the spaces around the outskirts hills for more than two weeks. (HKIDIAK06, interview with Tesfa, face-to-face, Aksum, 25 January 2021)

The survivors of the Aksum massacre who were interviewed by one of the authors estimated the number of victims of the massacre between 1000 and 1200 (MAIDIAK04; SAIDIAK03, interview with Tesfa, face-to-face, Aksum, 25 January 2021).

Dengelat massacre

The massacre at the St Mary of Zion church also happened during the Orthodox celebration of Zion on 29 and 30 November. All witnesses state that the massacre was carried out by Eritrean troops. An interviewee who survived the Dengelat massacre stated:

I was in the compound of the church of St Mary of Zion Dengelat while my wife and my relatives were inside the church attending a mass. My two children (6 and 4) were with their aunt and grandmother around the church outside of my site. Once I and my brother-in-law noticed soldiers were blocking the narrow gate of the village and supported by heavy gun tracks, I went to the inside church and informed the people that there was gunshot, and troops were coming to the village and screamed ... Go out go out. However, except few people most of them refused to go out including my wife. Normally, in the orthodox mass, even moving from place to place within the church is not allowed and it is an extreme violation of the ceremony if you try to stop the religious service. But many times, the mass was interrupted and stopped as the priests were nervous, suffering from fear while conducting the service. (HAGIDI10, interview with Van Reisen, WhatsApp, 25 May 2024)

Explaining the context of the massacres, he added:

I and my brother-in-law already started running up to the top of the mountains to escape from the random bullets coming around the church and even we heard three bullets hitting the iron cover of the church. When we noticed we were somehow safe because we started going out, we hid ourselves under a rock looking down at the village of Dengelat. I witnessed troops from a distance going house to house bringing people outside and killing them in the backyard of their houses. I witnessed a group of 8 people killed where I knew their identity including a businessman from Adigrat who was hidden there with his family. He was killed along with his sister and his son, while his wife was with my wife inside the church and survived. (HAGIDI10, interview with Van Reisen, WhatsApp, 25 May 2024)

The interviewee added:

I also witnessed that they were taking young men collectively to a big gorge locally known as "Endaba Gura" and couldn't see what they did to them while I later knew they had killed them all in one place (they were 39). After I watched most of the tragedy and the movement of the soldiers from house to house and the military trucks from a distance, I was getting panicked and nervous. I also saw two cars burning from those who were hidden and later I knew that one car belonged to the Ethiopian Road Authority (the driver who brought the car to Dengelat to hide survived) and a car owned by a relative (a priest who was later killed) and bajaj [a three-wheeled motor vehicle] owned by my cousin. At that moment we moved out a bit further, and the rock we had been hiding under, was crushed by a heavy long-distance gun. Then we hastily fled to higher ground, where I sustained an injury to my left leg by the relentless barrages of heavy weaponry. (HAGIDI10, interview with Van Reisen, WhatsApp, 25 May 2024)

He survived the leg injury caused by the gun fire from the EDF's long-distance gun. His uncle and many other civilians who were in a religious feast were killed between 30 November and 2 December 2020. He said:

This, I think, is a systematic humiliation and a barbaric massacre of a kind that I have never imagined would appear somewhere in the 21st century. Many dead bodies were eaten by hyenas and other animals as the people were ordered not to go towards this direction. 24 young teenagers who were Sunday school members and sang for the church, were all killed. My uncle who was the iconic symbol of my mother's generation was brutally killed and he was not buried until after 5 days. There is a lot of pain

and memories behind every killing. (HAGIDI10, interview with Van Reisen, WhatsApp, 25 May 2024)

The Eritrean soldiers said they were instructed to carry out the killing and that the instruction had been to be more severe than what they carried out. They were indicating that they were less brutal than what they were ordered to do. They also said they had been ordered to carry out a scorch-earth military strategy:

The Eritrean troops said, ‘We are not killing as we were told to do so, and it is only a quarter of what we have been ordered, and we were told we were ordered to even to cut the trees’. (HAGIDI10, interview with Van Reisen, WhatsApp, 25 May 2024)

The interviewee further stated that the soldiers disallowed the community from collecting the bodies for burial. He stated:

Once they had killed 164 innocent lives including a newly married man with his sister and six priests, they ordered the village not to bury the dead bodies. After three and four days, they needed to take the cars and started allowing people to bury the dead bodies next to their houses and those around the car. Then they looted all the cars from the village, looted most houses, and carried out rape cases which were invisible. People were not allowed to cry and express condolence or move from house to house. (HAGIDI10, interview with Van Reisen, WhatsApp, 25 May 2024)

Another interviewee witnessed:

The church’s walls were completely destroyed by the artillery shelling and bullets that struck its roof. The soldiers who had arrived at the church approached the individuals they had discovered there and addressed them as follows: ‘You are Weyane TPLF’; began shouting at the priests who were praying in the compound, the children who were seeking refuge at the church; and the elderly individuals who had besieged them ruthlessly before escorting them away. My brother-in-law and an elderly priest of the church were found dead in the wreckage caused by the shelling. (SAME003, interview with Gebremichael, phone, 3 December 2023)

A survivor of the St Mary of Zion Dengelat massacre, who lost eight family members including her uncle with his two sons, said:

We went to Edaga Hamus on 28 November 2020 but since the city was getting hit by heavy weapons, we went back to St Mary of Zion Dengelat. At the Zion Mariam

day, the village was already under Eritrean troops. They came to a house in the church where there were about 20 people. They separated the girls and boys into two groups. They took the boys with them and they put us into one corner. We were asked to hand in all the gold that we wore including our ring. They tied the hands of all the men by their shoe laces and belts and they were on their knee. Then they start shooting them from the front. Then they moved us to a room and there were already dead bodies in the room and the Eritrean soldiers were called and informed by their fellow soldiers that there were even more to kill there. Before they left, they ordered us to leave quietly. I have lost 8 close relatives including my uncle with his 2 sons. (HREIDI14, interview with Desta, face-to-face, St Mary of Zion Dengelat, 4 January 2024)

Another survivor who collected and buried the bodies of 86 people after the massacre said:

I was in St Mary of Zion Dengelat church where more than 154 people lost their lives and I buried 86. I never thought I would experience such a terrifying moment in the 21st century. On November 20, 2020, we went to St Mary of Zion Dengelat to hide inside the church as the Eritrean troops were getting control of the small towns. We stayed inside the church for more than 12 days. On November 30, unexpectedly they started to kill everyone they saw and took people's property and cars. The church was a hidden place so I never thought the Eritrean troops would come there. We were ordered by the Eritrean troops to come down from the church and ordered to bury the bodies of the victims. I was fortunate enough to survive but that wasn't the case for everyone. (MFUIDI15, interview with Desta, face-to-face, St Mary of Zion Dengelat, 31 December 2023)

A medical doctor and researcher who lost his father on the 21st of November 2020 and his cousin in the St Mary of Zion Dengelat massacre shared his painful story and the heinous crimes committed on civilians as follows:

A war burst in the town. Shaabia [Eritrean government troops] used our house as a shield. Father was one to two kilometres away when this happened. Shaabia burnt the animal feed he had gathered. So, he can't stay wherever he was, and run to the house to see and protect his family. A civilian and a 70-year-old dad were killed 20 meters away from his house. A formal funeral service didn't occur. They [mom and siblings] were not allowed to cry. I heard about this 25 days later; a relative travelled mostly on foot and some by car from Edagabamus-East Tigray to Mekelle (100km).

My cousin was killed on the day of the 'Dengelat massacre' in Edagabamus. On 30th November 2020, the Shaabia were killing everyone on their way in the villages surrounding Edagabamus by its south, west, and northern sides. The troops took a crew of young and middle-aged men to a new establishment of a 'ceramic' factory named 'Goda' by the northern exit from Edagabamus. The army ordered these young men to load cars with all equipment; then, these young men couldn't come back home. Elder citizens went to the commander to ask for the release of the innocent men. It was their everyday routine. The commander used to mock them like I will release them tonight and the like. That squad moved out; then people started to perceive the foul smell of a decaying body. (IDI 19, interview with a 38-year-old male, e-mail, 13 April 2023)⁵³

The interviewees stated that the Eritrean soldiers said that they were sent for a mission of revenge and that they aimed to kill everyone that was above the age of seven.

Bora massacre

The Bora massacre was carried from 8–10 January 2021 after the Orthodox Christmas celebration. One interview was conducted in relation to the Bora massacre. The interviewee is a mother of six whose husband was killed in the massacre. She stated:

The ENDF used to camp in schools in Bora. The day after [Orthodox] Christmas [on 6 January], we heard gunfire in the outskirts of the town. Few moments later, the ENDF soldiers entered the town killing anyone they encountered. They immediately started searching house to house where they found my husband and me in our home. I begged them that there is no need to kill him as he is a civilian. They ordered him to kneel and shot him at his head in front of me. (EGIDIBS01, interview with Tesfa, face-to-face, Mekelle, 28 July 2022)

She added:

Because the soldiers prohibited collecting bodies, my family had to cry inside for three nights to prevent the body from being eaten by the hyena. (EGIDIBS01, interview with Tesfa, face-to-face, Mekelle, 28 July 2022)

⁵³ This interview originates from the research of Medhanyie & Wuneh (2024, and reused with their permission.

The interviewee indicated that around 200 civilian men in Bora were killed in Bora during the days after Christmas.

The interviewee stated that the massacre was perpetrated by the ENDF troops after the Christmas celebration and that house-to-house searches were carried out.

Setit Humera massacre

A detailed interview was carried out with a priest who used to serve one of the Orthodox churches in Humera was taking care of his family of five through selling garment products. He discussed:

As they entered Humera, Amhara Fano immediately started searching for Tigrayans house to house. Any Tigrayan boy or man found in his house or the street was taken to detention centres they prepared. The main way Amhara Fano used to identify Tigrayans was through checking IDs as well as using list of the community dwellers from kebele administrations. (BITIDI11, interview with Tesfa, face-to-face, Mekelle, 28 July 2022)

According to the priest the Amhara Fano, accompanied by Amhara Special Force as well as sometimes with ENDF used to round house to house at daily basis. He added:

Every day there were round-ups, detention, gunshots, and executions of Tigrayans. Terrified by the incidents, my children used to hide under bed and water tankers. At that time, if anyone reported your identity being Tigrayans, the default decision the Fano provides is either being shot on the spot or being detained. (BITIDI11, interview with Tesfa, face-to-face, Mekelle, 28 July 2022)

As these detentions were intensified, some concerned elders and religious leaders went to discuss their complaints with ENDF commanders around.

We went wearing religious dress and cross, from three churches in Humera, to beg them to enable civilians to live in the town where they were born. As we were trying to start the point of complaint that we came for, the commander stopped us immediately. He said 'You are shameless people. You support TPLF. Now we will see if TPLF will save you. This place is not yours. You Tigrayans are not ours either. You are not Ethiopian citizens. So I urge you to leave this compound before I order action to be taken on you.' We left the place immediately helpless to save our

lives. (BITIDI11, interview with Tesfa, face-to-face, Mekelle, 28 July 2022)

Heading the administration of the kebeles in the town, Amhara Fano continued:

Amhara Fano threw brochures signed by kebele administrators that gave three days and three hours ultimatum for Tigrayans to leave Humera. The brochure reads 'without thinking about your properties and your gold which is now ours, you must leave Humera within three days and three hours. Unless otherwise, we will kill every Tigrayans we find then after.' (BITIDI11, interview with Tesfa, face-to-face, Mekelle, 28 July 2022)

The Priest indicated that the schools turned detention centres were full within a few weeks of these round-ups:

I remember Amhara Fano captured 170 Tigrayans within a day in the third week of February 2021. They used to round across kebeles with Isuzu cars to transport the detained Tigrayans to the detention centres. (BITIDI11, interview with Tesfa, face-to-face, Mekelle, 28 July 2022)

Amhara Fano ordered the Tigrayan religious leaders to hand over keys to the religious institutions in Humera.

Priests who came from Northern Gondar were already heading the religious rituals. In the church I served for 20 years in the town, the priest assigned from Northern Gondar prevented me from entering the compound uttering 'Tigrayans are all Satans, there is no Tigrayan priest.' As I tried to explain that I have been serving this church since its establishment, the priest called some Amhara Fano members who took me to a high school turned detention centre where I found about 400-450 Tigrayan boys and men being arrested. (BITIDI11, interview with Tesfa, face-to-face, Mekelle, 28 July 2022)

He added:

The Amhara Fano used to select from among the detainees, beat them on the floor, and throw them to Isuzu. But this was intensified in the last week of February and 1 March 2021. I remember more than 200-300 Tigrayan boys and men were taken out of the detainee centre. They were not returned then after. They were not that much interested in detaining the elders like me as I was 63. They were eager when it comes to Tigrayans in the age range of 14-50. On 2 March, they prepared two Isuzu, the one that transported us, elders, to be deported south of the Tekeze River while the

other the Tigrayan boys and men whom I witnessed being executed in mass around the Tekeze Bridge. As we reached the bridge, I saw bodies of people on the left and right sides of the road alongside of the Tekeze River. (BITIDI11, interview with Tesfa, face-to-face, Mekelle, 28 July 2022)

Travelling on foot up to the Shire, he got the car to Mekelle where he used to shelter in a school turned IDP in the city. He lately learnt that those who were taken from the detention centre were executed and thrown to the Tekeze River.

Sexual-violence induced massacre

A mother of two who used to look after her father, in addition to raising her children, while selling traditionally prepared coffee in Edaga Hamus town of the Eastern Zone of Tigray, was interviewed for this study. She told how she met the same fate that put her father into a permanent disability. Her father was a merchant in Asmara before the broke out of the 1998-2000 Ethiopia-Eritrea war. Labelled as ‘agame’ her father was hit by Eritrean soldiers which caused him permanent disability and deported to Humera in 2000. After the 1998-2000 war it was her duty to feed and look after her father. She took him to Edaga Hamus.

After two decades, with the breakout of the Tigray war in 2020, she too fell in the hands of the Eritrean soldiers. In the last interview she had with one of the authors before she deceased, she said:

I used to live preparing and selling coffee in Edaga Hamus. Immediately as Eritrean soldiers occupied Edaga Hamus, five soldiers gang-raped me that made my life upside down. Because there was no access to medical services in Edaga Hamus, I made all the efforts to go and get medical support in Adigrat. When I came back from Adigrat three of the same soldiers captured me and gang-raped me again. As I got a rare option of escape from their daily gang-rape while being arrested, I decided to go out of Edaga Hamus with my ten-year-old son.

As a result, we started travelling from Edaga Hamus to Mekelle with our son and many other people through public transportation. Then Eritrean and Ethiopian soldiers stopped the mini-bus. They also stopped the other three mini-buses after ours. We thought that they were going to have security check so that we prepared our ID when they stopped the mini-bus. But they ordered everyone to step out of the car and

to line up by men and women category. Then they gave us all injections by force and took us all to the forest where the soldiers used to camp.

I found myself in the middle of dead bodies of men and women, children, youth, and elders scattered underneath the forest of the big trees being tied and gang-raped via my va** and an**, when I was back to my consciousness. Most of those who raped me in the group were from the Bin Amir in Eritrea. They used to wear the Eritrean soldiers' uniforms as well as had scarps in their forehead. Some Ethiopian soldiers used to come three up to five to rape me when these Bin Amir were done raping me for the day. They raped me in this way for 10 days.

Not only that they killed my son before my eyes, seeing him while dying. It was better they should have killed me with him. I even begged them to kill me with him. They responded 'we want to see you agame suffer to death while we enjoy killing your son and we want to enjoy you as well'.

Among them, there was a woman who gave birth through caesarean section ten days later with her infant son. Although she told them that she was C/S they continued gang-raping her which led for her C/S to come loose and she died immediately. Two soldiers picked the infant child of her and collaborated to slaughter him. The Ethiopian soldier who slaughtered his right hand with knife said 'ጁንታ ኣይድግም': junta shouldn't ever be allowed to grow-up'. The Eritrean soldier who slaughtered his left leg uttered 'ኣዚ ዓጋመ ኣይዓብን እዩ' [Agame shouldn't be allowed to grow]. I couldn't ever forget that infant's suffering to death.

They used to chill drinking liquor before I was gang-raped and the odour of the dead bodies was very disturbing. The men who were abducted with us were killed and there were even bodies as we arrived there. The women, including me, were tied from behind for sexual purposes and our reproductive organ was intentionally made out of use. Many women died because they couldn't cope with the gang rapes and putting odd things in their reproductive organs. They burned my vagina using alcohol that made my womb out of use. I couldn't withstand the bleeding and pain that made me unconscious then after.

In the 11th day, I found myself in Adi Shundibin Health Center in Mekelle. I don't have any clue about who brought me there and what happened after the 9th day because I was on the brink of death for I was not able to withstand the gang rapes that were perpetrated by up to 20 soldiers some days. Then I was referred to Ayder Hospital where you found me today. But I couldn't get stability even in Ayder by then for the soldiers made various killing attempts for me intimidating my nurses to

direct them to me. I used to hide in the delivery rooms of the hospital as they frequented searching for me in the sexual violence-related treatment rooms.

Now I know these soldiers are not in Mekelle. But their intentions are being continued to be achieved for I couldn't get medicine to heal the bleeding in my womb and anus. They have succeeded that I couldn't give birth anymore. They have succeeded that I couldn't sleep memorizing the slaughter scenes they did in front of my eyes. I couldn't forget the last moments of my son while being killed.

The Ethiopian and Eritrean governments who sent these soldiers have now declared the total elimination of Tigrayans through siege and blockage. Mind you, I am gang-raped, my son was killed in my eyes, observed various atrocities while being raped, and now I am suffering for lack of medicine; these all made me tired of life. I always question what I am worth to be eager to live. I couldn't sleep at all and I don't see any mirage of the future too. (SHGIDI16, interview with Tesfa, face-to-face, 7 October 2021)

The woman who narrated her story on 7 October 2021 died in November 2021, after the interview.

Discussion

This chapter provided an ethnographic study of the massacres that took place during the Tigray war of 2020–2022. A heuristic approach was employed to understand what is meant by 'massacre' by the stakeholders in the conflict and to understand the events referred in this way. In-depth interviews were carried out on the ground, as an additional verification of reports on the massacres. Triangulation of the incident reports, the testimonies, and the interviews indicates consistency in terms of timelines, perpetrators and modus operandi. The events were all referred as massacres. The Tigrinya term ትምላቂ ጤናጫና (massacre), which was used in the interviews, has a similar meaning as it has in English.

According to Ghent University and the results of the interview, 24–25 people were killed by Amhara Fano and Amhara Special Force in Dansha between 4 and 6 November 2020. The findings show Eritrean soldiers executed civilian boys and men in Aksum searching house to house between 28 and 30 November 2020. The number of people killed in the Aksum massacre varies across different sources

ranging from a general term of hundreds to 1,200 people. As crosschecked from different sources, the St Mary of Zion Dengelat massacre was perpetrated by Eritrean soldiers against civilians who were gathered for religious purposes and continued to house to house killing of boys and men in Dengelat between 30 November and 2 December 2020. The number of deceased indicated across different sources range from 58 to 165 people. The Bora massacre was perpetrated by Ethiopian soldiers and claimed the lives of 101–200 people between 8 and 10 January 2021. According to sources, a range of 70–200 men and boys were killed being searched house to house. The Setit Humera massacre was perpetrated by Amhara Special Force and Amhara Fano claiming the lives of 30–300 people. The perpetrators used a unique modus operandi transporting Tigrayan boys and men from the town to Tekeze Bridge then executing them and throwing their body to Tekeze River.

Although events of massacres that are less documented and less prominent in the collective memory of a conflict, are nonetheless essential to understanding the general mechanics of the massacres (Foa, 2021), the massacres in small localities like the case of Dansha were not reported. This shows the effect of the communication blackout. There is a need for further on-spot ethnographic investigation of the massacres committed in small villages which are not yet disclosed for they can show the patterns of the massacre campaigns.

House-to-house searches for civilians was a modus operandi reported in three of the massacres. In the massacres young men were targeted, while women were targeted for sexual violence which was cruel and sadistic. The reason why people were massacred was reported because they were of Tigrayan identity. Relatives were not allowed to collect the bodies of their loved ones for three to five days after massacre incidents and bodies were thrown into rivers so that they could not be collected. Interviewees indicated that among those executed in massacres as many as 2–8 people of the same family were killed. The survivors are suffering from mental disorders and post-traumatic stress due to the cruelty of the violence.

While perpetrating the massacres, soldiers said things like: ‘you are Weyane TPLF’, ‘we are here to kill Tigrayan boys and men aged 7 and above’, ‘we are not killing as we were told to do so, and it is only a quarter of what we have ordered’ and ‘we have been ordered to cut the trees’, ‘junta shouldn’t ever be allowed to grow-up’, as well as ‘Agame shouldn’t be allowed to grow’. These justifications for the massacres indicate that these campaigns were the result of policies and the soldiers were instructed to execute the massacres in a coordinated and systematic manner aiming at the extermination of Tigrayans.

Table 8.4. Overview of massacres

List of massacres	Source	Incident timeline	Perpetrators	Number of people killed	Modus operandi
<i>Dansha massacre</i>	Ghent University ‘Every Casualty Counts’	4–6 Nov 2020	Amhara Fano and Militia	24	Mass killing
	UN reports	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A
	Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch reports	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A
	EEPA Situation Report on the Horn	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A
	Interview Insights	4–6 Nov 2020	Amhara Fano and Amhara	25	Mass killing of Tigrayan

List of massacres	Source				
		Incident timeline	Perpetrators	Number of people killed	Modus operandi
			Special Force		boys and men
<i>Aksum massacre</i>	Ghent University 'Every Casualty Counts'	28–30 Nov 2020	EDF	100–800	House-to-house mass execution
	UN reports	27–28 Nov 2020	EDF	Hundreds of civilians	Mass killing
	Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch reports	28–29 Nov 2020	EDF	Hundreds of people	Systematic house-to-house searches, extrajudicially executing men and boys
	EEPA Situation Report on the Horn	28–30 Nov 2020	EDF	750–1,000	House-to-house mass execution of men and boys
	Interview Insights	28–30 Nov 2020	EDF	1,000–1,200	House-to-house mass execution of boys and men

List of massacres	Source				
		Incident timeline	Perpetrators	Number of people killed	Modus operandi
<i>St Mary of Zion Dengelat massacre</i>	Ghent University 'Every Casualty Counts'	30 Nov –2 Dec 2020	EDF	70-164	Mass execution of civilians celebrating religious holiday
	UN reports	30 Nov –1 Dec 2020	EDF	165	House to house execution of men and boys
	Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch reports	30 Nov –2 Dec 2020	EDF	List of names of 70 victims confirmed	Mass execution of civilians celebrating religious holiday
	EEPA Situation Report on the Horn	30 Nov 2020	EDF	EEPA confirmed the list of names of 58 victims	Mass execution of civilians celebrating religious holiday
	Interview Insights	30 Nov –2 Dec 2020	EDF	164	Mass execution of civilians celebrating

List of massacres	Source	Incident timeline	Perpetrators	Number of people killed	Modus operandi
					religious holiday
<i>Bora massacre</i>	Ghent University 'Every Casualty Counts'	8–10 Jan 2021	ENDF	70–170	Execution of teenage and adult men searching house to house
	UN reports	8–10 January 2021	ENDF	101	House to house search of Tigrayan men and boys outside and shooting them
	Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch reports	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A
	EEPA Situation Report on the Horn	8–10 Jan 2021	ENDF	160	House to house execution of men and boys
	Interview Insights	8–10 Jan 2021	ENDF	Around 200 boys	House to house execution of

List of massacres	Source	Incident timeline	Perpetrators	Number of people killed	Modus operandi
				and men	men and boys
<i>Setit Humera massacre</i>	Ghent University 'Every Casualty Counts'	1–3 Mar 2021	Amhara Special Force, Amhara Fano	30–250	Mass execution of men and boys then throwing their body to Tekeze River
	UN reports	N/A	N/A	N/A	
	Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch reports	N/A	Amhara Special Force and Amhara Fano	136 bodies had been found in the river between Hamda yet and Wad al-Hiliyu	Mass execution of men and boys then throwing their body to Tekeze River
	EEPA Situation Report on the Horn	1–3 March 2021	Amhara Fano and Amhara Special Force	More than 80 young men	Mass execution of men and boys then throwing their body to Tekeze River

List of massacres	Source	Incident timeline	Perpetrators	Number of people killed	Modus operandi
	Interview Insights	1–3 March 2021	Amhara Fano and Amhara Special Force	200- 300	Mass execution of men and boys then throwing their body to Tekeze River

The interviewees stated that artefacts symbolising Tigrayan culture, including religious and historical artefacts, were among the targets of destruction and looting, along with the killing of religious leaders and worshippers in the compounds of churches and mosques. Survivors experienced this as a deliberate attempt to undermine the Tigrayan identity.

Many survivors of the atrocities were prevented from receiving medical treatment, as they were abducted for weeks. Some survivors were abducted, gang raped and their family members killed in different settings as they tried to travel from town to town seeking medical support. Ethiopia’s policy of prolonged siege and blockage resulted in a lack of medicine and starvation, which aggravated the sufferings of the victims.

The following elements are important features of the Tigray massacres:

- The triangulation of different findings shows that the massacres in Aksum and St Mary of Zion Dengelat were perpetrated by EDF, the massacres in Setit Humera and Dansha were committed by Amhara Fano and militia, while the Bora massacre was perpetrated by ENDF.

- Most of the massacres were committed through house-to-house searches for Tigrayan boys and men as well as mass the execution of civilians gathered in religious institutions.
- Many of the survivors indicated that as many as eight people of the same family were killed in a day, leaving them without family or a support system.
- While massacres mainly focused on young men and boys, women and girls were subjected to grave sexual violence that included gang rape, abduction, inserting materials in their reproductive organs, and burning their reproductive organs so that they would not be able to give birth.
- The perpetrators used derogatory terms and hate speech, which explained how they aimed to exterminate the Tigrayan population while perpetrating these massacres
- The massacres were perpetrated under a siege, blockage, and limited humanitarian access, aggravating the effects of the massacres.
- The massacres were accompanied by a communication block-out and Internet shut down, and it was extremely difficult for survivors to ask for help and to communicate about the atrocities that were taking place.
- The survivors were not allowed to bury the dead for two to five days, which meant that they had to protect the bodies of their loved ones from being eaten by hyenas, further aggravating their suffering and leaving traumatic memories with the families of the deceased; in other cases, the bodies were thrown in the river and disappeared.
- The massacres appeared to target the Tigrayan civil population and were perceived as being aimed at exterminating the Tigray ethnic community.

The patterns identified by survivors and the families of the victims suggest government-sponsored massacres, as noted by Uekert (1995). The acts of violence carried out by Ethiopian forces constitute state-sponsored massacres. Both historical and contemporary examples demonstrate that such massacres are often perpetrated as acts of state

terror designed to instil fear in the population or to eliminate a specific group (Dwyer and Ryan, 2012).

The government of Ethiopia not only perpetrated massacres that targeted ethnic Tigrayans, but also invited or allowed Eritrea to perpetrate cruel mass killings. Eritrea's presence in Tigray was denied during the time that the massacres took place by both PM Abiy of Ethiopia and President Isayas of Eritrea. It seems that the siege and communication blockade was implemented to ensure the massacres could be perpetrated in secret. It allowed the perpetration of the massacres to remain unreported.

The pattern shows that the classification by Sémelin of massacres as bilateral massacres (such as in civil war) and unilateral massacres (such as that of a state against its people) (Sémelin, 2002a, p. 3) is inadequate to define the massacres perpetrated in Tigray. Eritrean soldiers expressed in clear terms the instructions they were operating under.

Further understanding of the drivers and consequences of the massacres in the Tigray war is necessary. The research suggest that many massacres committed during the Tigray war, have remained underreported. Further research on the specifics of the massacres perpetrated during the Tigray war is necessary to explain their intention. This may allow the possibility for accountability for the atrocities committed.

Conclusion

This research used ethnographic analysis to investigate massacre patterns during the Tigray conflict, comparing secondary documentation from sources like Ghent University and UN reports with primary data gathered from witness interviews. The study aimed to assess if the sources corroborated each other and to identify patterns in the methods of violence.

The result shows that the patterns of perpetration and modus operandi of the massacres in Aksum, Dansha, Mariam Dengelat, Bora, and Setit Humera triangulated positively across different document sources and the interviews. The results indicate a positive triangulation of perpetration patterns across the documented sources

and firsthand accounts. Interviews revealed harrowing details, including family killings, restricted burial practices, and the presence of vultures around victim sites. The interviews from the ground add vivid testimonies on the gravity of the crimes committed. Some massacres include the killing of 2–8 people of the same family. Families were not allowed to collect and bury the bodies of their relatives. Some interviewees indicated that vultures were circling the massacre sites, as the perpetrators were not allowed to collect bodies for 2–5 days.

The massacres committed during the religious celebrations in Aksum and Mariam Dengelat were characterised by the mass execution of Tigrayan civilians and the destruction of their religious and indigenous culture and identity. The massacres in Aksum and Mariam Dengelat were mainly perpetrated by Eritrean soldiers. The massacre in Bora was perpetrated by Ethiopian soldiers. Massacres in Setit Humera and Dansha were perpetrated by the Amhara Fano and Amhara Special Force.

The Eritrean soldiers used derogatory terms like, ‘Agame’. They stated that “Agame shouldn’t be allowed to grow”, explaining the mission they received from their leaders, and “we are not killing as we were told to do”, which is understood as meaning that they were instructed to commit massacres on a larger scale. Eritrean soldiers said: “and it is only a quarter of what we have been ordered”, which can be interpreted as a statement that they were holding back on instructions. Eritrean soldiers were also heard saying “we have been ordered to even to cut the trees”, meaning they were instructed to carry out a scorched earth military strategy.

The Ethiopian soldiers used terms like ‘junta’ and said “junta shouldn’t never be allowed to grow-up”. The Amhara Fano used administrative documents, including the list of residents in kebeles and identity documents in Western Zone of Tigray to profile and target ethnic Tigrayans stating: “we are here to slaughter Tigray men so that we have the women for us to give birth to Amhara babies”. An ENDF leader responded to priests in Setit Humera by saying: “you are shameless people. You support TPLF. Now we will see if TPLF will save you. This place is not yours. You Tigrayans are not

ours either. You are not Ethiopian citizens. So I urge you to leave this compound before I order action to be taken on you”. Tigrayan priests in Setit Humera were prohibited from carrying out religious services in a church. A priest who came from the neighbouring Amhara region in Northern Gondar to serve the church said “Tigrayans are all Satans, there is no Tigrayan priest”.

The massacres were marked by face-to-face killings, with a focus on male targets and severe sexual violence against women, including gang rape and mutilation. Children and the elderly were forcibly deported, indicating ethnic cleansing. With regards to the massacres in Setit Humera and Dansha, elders and children were deported from these sites.

The coordinated killing of ethnic Tigrayans through the mass execution of men, while damaging the reproductive organs of women and girls, as well as deportation of elderly people and children, appear to be a concerted attack aimed at destroying the Tigray people. This warrants further investigation into potential atrocity crimes and to ascertain if genocide was committed under international law.

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Authors' contributions

Daniel Tesfa and Matteo Bächtold set up the first version of this chapter. This work has been carried out as part of his PhD study. Matteo Bächtold provided the theoretical considerations for this chapter, particularly the introduction, the theoretical section and the section on research approach. Daniel Tesfa and Rufael Tesfay Gebremichael collected primary data for this chapter and analysed them. Daniel Tesfa carried out the second review of the coding labelling of the EEPA Situation Report and all other secondary sources, as well as primary material. Daniel Tesfa was responsible for the coordination of all subsequent versions of the chapter. Mirjam Van Reisen advised on the approach of the chapter, reviewed all of the versions in detail, and restructured the text.

Ethical considerations

This research was carried out under ethical clearance obtained from Tilburg University Identification code: REDC 2020.139 titled “Cultural Dimensions of Meaning-making and Agenda-setting”.

This chapter should be read in conjunction with the ‘Note on content and editorial decisions’ (Book 1).

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Throwing Bodies into the Tekeze River: Assessment of Massacres

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When the owl is away, leaps the mouse for joy.

Abstract

This chapter evaluates the massacres during the Tigray war, as recorded by the Ghent University Every Casualty Counts database. The research examines massacre sites, occurrences, and methods, focusing on incidents with 10 or more civilian casualties. Most of the massacres were committed by Eritrean soldiers, the alliance of Ethiopian and Eritrean soldiers, and the coalition of Ethiopian soldiers, Amhara Special Force, and Amhara Fano. Civilian casualties from active conflict between these forces and the Tigray Defence Forces (TDF) were lower compared to targeted executions. The frequency of massacres in the same towns or woredas⁵⁴ ranged from 1 to 12 times, with 76% occurring between 2 and 12 times, indicating systematic targeting of civilians. These atrocities occurred under a communication blackout imposed by the Ethiopian government, which hindered media coverage and independent investigations. The government also denied the presence of Eritrean forces in Tigray for the first five months of the conflict, despite their involvement. Further research and independent investigations are necessary to understand the full scope of the massacres, ensure accountability, and prevent such events from taking place in the future.

Key words: Tigray war, massacres, war crime, atrocity crimes, genocide, Ethiopia, Eritrea

⁵⁴ An administrative unit in Ethiopia equivalent to a district.

Introduction: Investigating mass killings of civilians

To grasp the events of massacres, we must engage our imagination, we must envision the unimaginable. “Who has perfect knowledge, mastery over their imagination?” (p. 128) asks Binyavanga Wainaina (2022) rhetorically. This is the most challenging task, said Didi-Huberman (2004); to conceive of what happened. If our goal is to document massacres, we must examine the descriptions, see the pictures, and understand what those who witnessed try to tell us, which often verge on the incredible:

We must in return contemplate them [these images], take them on, try to realize. Images despite everything: despite our own incapacity to know how to look at them as they deserve [...] (Didi-Huberman, 2004, p. 11)

Investigating a ‘massacre’ is describing or interpreting an intentional mass killing of civilians who are not directly participating in hostilities or out-of-combat fighters. The killing is perpetrated by organised armed forces or groups in a single incident. The incidents violate international human rights or humanitarian law (United Nations, 2013):

Thus included are multiple instances of the war crime of murder, and killings that result from the conduct of hostilities in which civilians or the civilian population as such is the object of the attack, amounting to the war crime of attacking civilians. When murder is committed as part of a widespread or systematic attack directed against a civilian population, perpetrated according to or in furtherance of a State or organisational policy, the commission of massacres can amount to the crime against humanity of murder. (United Nations, 2013)

A massacre occurs when a group of people lacking in self-defence, at least at a given moment, are killed – usually by another group who have the physical means, the power, with which to undertake the killing without physical danger to themselves (Dwyer & Ryan, 2012).

In legal terms the investigation of a massacre usually falls under what the 2005 United Nations World Summit, heads of state and governments accepted as the responsibility of every state to protect its population from: the crimes of genocide, war crimes, crimes against humanity and ethnic cleansing (Global Centre for the

Responsibility to Protect, 2018).⁵⁵ Their classification as international crimes stems from the recognition that the actions linked to them are a violation of the fundamental dignity of human beings, regardless of whether these are perpetrated during peacetime or wartime (Global Centre for the Responsibility to Protect, 2018). The elements of what constitute these atrocity crimes are clearly defined (Global Centre for the Responsibility to Protect, 2018).

Massacres can be perpetrated by state and non-state actors against protected groups. Uekert distinguishes government-sponsored massacre into two: the ‘political massacre’, designed to maintain the balance of power, and which occurred when the state, often authoritarian, felt threatened; and the ‘genocidal massacre’, designed to manipulate the balance of power, and which is used to promote or exacerbate ethnic tensions (1995). There are historical as well as recent instances where a massacre is perpetrated as an act of state terror with the purpose of instil fear into the population or eradicating a particular group (Dwyer & Ryan, 2012).

Sémelin (2002a) identifies that massacres may be perpetrated as face-to-face encounters and/or long-range massacres like areal bombings. Based on the determination of the general notion of the perpetration

⁵⁵ The crimes of Genocide, War Crimes and Crimes against Humanity are defined in international legal documents: the 1948 Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide, the 1949 Geneva Conventions and their 1977 Additional Protocols, and the 1998 Rome Statute of the International Criminal Court. With regards to ethnic cleansing the Global Centre for the Responsibility to Protect finds: “A UN Commission of Experts mandated to look into violations of international humanitarian law committed in the territory of the former Yugoslavia defined ethnic cleansing in its interim report as “rendering an area ethnically homogeneous by using force or intimidation to remove persons of given groups from the area” and as “a purposeful policy designed by one ethnic or religious group to remove by violent and terror-inspiring means the civilian population of another ethnic or religious group from certain geographic areas.” The Commission also stated that coercive practices used to remove the civilian population can include: murder, torture, arbitrary arrest and detention, extrajudicial executions, rape and sexual assaults, severe physical injury to civilians, forcible removal, displacement and deportation of civilian population, deliberate military attacks or threats of attacks on civilians and civilian areas, use of civilians as human shields, destruction of property, and robbery of personal property, as well as attacks on hospitals, medical personnel, and locations with the Red Cross/Red Crescent emblem.” (Global Centre for the Responsibility to Protect, 2018)

process, there are bilateral and unilateral massacres (Sémelin, 2002a). Bilateral massacres commonly happen during civil wars. Unilateral massacres include situations of a state committing a massacre against its people (Sémelin, 2002a).

Sémelin (2001) encourages to approach the study of massacres from an interpretative framework, with methodologies that allow an empirical and context-aware approach. These sources are one of the keys to imagining what might seem unimaginable, to bringing facts into the realm of understanding and out of the register of the ineffable, and thus helping to reduce the pre-set correlations with legal determinations, which, according to Sémelin (2001), hinder the interest and progress of work on massacres.

The nature of the massacres in Tigray needs further investigation, to understand whether these can be explained in the typology proposed by (Sémelin, 2002a). It is unclear whether the massacres can be categorised within the existing typology – which is relevant and necessary to advance understanding of these events. This study aims to study the events that are described as ‘massacres’ in the context of the Tigray war, by investigating the facts reported of these events and seeking patterns in these events reported as massacres. The aim is to understand what typology of the events reported may emerge, general or specific, from the massacres experienced in this war.

The research question asked: *What are the typologies in events described as ‘massacres’ in the Tigray war, including massacre sites, occurrences, and methods, described in the Every Casualty Counts Database, established by Ghent University?*

Steps towards defining the term ‘massacre’

To measure the extent or magnitude of the massacre, Sémelin (2002a) used the term ‘mass massacre’ to explain massacres where many people were killed in a few weeks, like as in Indonesia in 1965 or Rwanda in 1994 where 500,000–800,000 people were killed in a short period as well as much smaller scale massacres, like in Algeria and Colombia. Sémelin (2002a) further defined a massacre as an organised process of civilian destruction, targeting both people and their property. Oftentimes, complemented by conflict situations, massacre

causes serious human suffering. Accordingly, Sémelin (2002a) identified four features that entail massacre. A massacre is characterised by its:

- Organisation – planned, not accidental, face-to-face and/or areal perpetration
- Process – the outcome of implicit and/or explicit intentions developed over the course of time
- Modus operandi - targeting of civilians – targets identified particular groups of a civilian population
- Aim – to result in human destruction , to wipe out the presence of the inimical ‘other’ by all means necessary.

The perpetuation of massacres involves a systematic attack on identified particular groups of people. Sémelin (2002a) defined a massacre as one of the outcomes of a long-term development of the contributing factors.

Because the collective action of a massacre can be regarded as the outcome of a complex situation created primarily by the combination of a particular long-term political history, cultural environment, and international context. (Sémelin, 2002a, P. 436)

A massacre is an event that develops through time because of implicitly or explicitly defined intentions of destruction caused by the political-economic history, cultural, international and other factors:

Because the term is broader than “murder” and encompasses the possible demolishing or burning of houses or religious or cultural buildings to wipe out the presence of the inimical “other”. This may also include the dehumanising of the victims before their elimination. Forced marches and other deportation techniques, which often carry a high mortality rate, also form part of these processes of population destruction. The word ‘destruction’ does not predetermine the method of killing, be it by fire, water, gas, starvation, cold or any other slow or quick means of causing death. (Sémelin, 2002a, p. 436)

Destruction is among the intentions of massacres. The ‘in-group’ aims to wipe out the ‘out-group’, which in many cases is preceded by

hate speech and dehumanisation campaigns. Sémelin finds that massacres are directed against an identified particular group:

Because this is not “natural” destruction (such as an earthquake) or accidental destruction (such as the Chernobyl nuclear disaster). Far from being anarchic, this process of violence is channelled, directed and even structured against a particular group. It takes the concrete form of collective action, most often fostered by the state (and its agents), who have the will to organise such violence. That does not rule out possible improvisation or even spontaneity on the part of the perpetrators in ways of inflicting suffering or killing. (Sémelin, 2002a, p. 436)

A massacre is further defined in that it is explicitly directed at the civilian population of a certain out-group that was targeted for systematic and coordinated destruction:

Because it has to be acknowledged that, while such violence might initially be directed towards military (or paramilitary) targets, it tends to move away from such targets and be aimed primarily or even exclusively at non-combatants and hence civilians. The phrase ‘destruction of civilian populations’ is a familiar term found in strategic vocabulary. (Sémelin, 2002a, p. 436)

The intention of the massacre directed at a particular civilian group may extend to the level of wiping-out of an entire community:

It is necessary to envisage a more differentiated destruction process targeting civilians who are ‘dispersed’ within the same society. The expression ‘civilian destruction’ is therefore preferable since it encompasses both these dimensions, which range from the elimination of dispersed individuals to that of established groups and even entire populations. (Sémelin, 2002a, p. 436)

The four characteristic elements of massacre distinguished by Sémelin (2020) are derived from empirical observation, not from any apriorist thought.

Methodology: Investigating events occurring in a digital black hole

Approach and method

This research takes a heuristic approach, starting with a series of factual events between 2020 and 2022, described as major massacres by higher education databases, non-governmental organisations

(NGOs) documenting the conflict and international institutions. From there, we will seek to analyse these events, to see if similar logics and mechanics can be observed, if they are sufficient to extract a typology of massacres from the Tigray war, and if this typology echoes genocidal-type behaviour.

The war in Tigray took place for the most part behind closed doors, in what Van Reisen *et al.* (2023) call a ‘digital black hole’, making the circulation of information and reliable sources particularly complicated, even after the conflict’s end. This research makes no claim to exhaustiveness, which can only be achieved with further extensive fieldwork.

The secondary data used for the study is the www.ethiopiaticgraywar.com database in which Ghent University (2024a) mapped 478 civilian killing events with a total of 8,946 to 16,291 victims of massacre across Ethiopia during the 2020–2022 Tigray war (Ghent University, 2024a). The ‘Every Casualty Counts’ database of Ghent University (2024a) is an online database of massacres and civilian victims of the Tigray war (Vanden Bempt *et al.*, 2021). The sources of information are verified social media posts, media reports, advocacy group listings and direct reports (Vanden Bempt *et al.*, 2021).

The aim of the database is:

[...] to document and map as much information as possible about civilian casualties, more particularly those killed by military forces and warfare. With communication lines blocked, we document pieces of a bigger puzzle, yet to be fully reconstructed. By providing spatially explicit information, we hope to transfer useful information to human rights organisations and other humanitarian and development actors. This document also serves as an explanatory note to the online database of massacres and civilian victims of the Tigray war. (Vanden Bempt *et al.*, 2021, p. 1)

The team of researchers administering the database further indicated:

The communication blackout and lockdown of the region make it very hard to get verified information, so the actual number of deaths is likely much higher than the sample that we have collected so far. Through Tim Vanden Bempt (@tvbempt on Twitter), we have collected a list of verified identities of civilian victims in the Tigray war. This list is populated from a mix of sources, ranging from social media posts,

media reports, advocacy groups listings (for instance Irob Advocacy) and direct reports (as posted for instance on www.tghat.com). (Vanden Bempt *et al.*, 2021, p. 2)

The research team at Ghent University stated that they used a variety of sources to verify the incidents. They stated:

The social media posts are mostly from family members and friends who mourn the death of their loved ones, which they learnt about by telephone. For each victim, through our network, we have tried to contact one relative or friend to learn more about the circumstances in which the victim died. For this verification, some families also have provided a photo of the deceased person. It is noted, however, that there are many families who, for various reasons, do not report the loss of relatives, which limits our sample of fully documented casualties. Additionally, there may be casualties in very remote areas and/or victims may not be locals of the area, which makes it difficult to fully document these deaths. Several reported casualties and massacres hence may not be well represented in our fully documented casualties list. (Vanden Bempt *et al.*, 2021, p. 2)

The Ghent University team also noted:

Though impressive in video footage, only 1% of the known victims were killed during shelling and airstrikes, such as the one targeting the Togoga market (Central Zone) on 22 June 2021. People who died of hunger or due to the total collapse of the healthcare system are generally not reported and make up less than 1% of the fully documented victims. (Vanden Bempt *et al.*, 2021, 2021, p. 3)

In line with the expectation that casualties were underreported, the researchers of the study reported in this chapter used ‘the maximum amount of casualties’ indicated in the database for its quantitative analysis. In line with the definition of Sémelin, the researchers of this chapter only used the incidents which caused 10 or more civilian casualties from the Every Casualty Counts database.

On closer inspection of the secondary data, it emerged that some of the casualties listed by the Ghent University database (2024a) are considered as ‘massacres’ in the context of events known as ‘massacres’. A certain number of violent events are named in this way, according to a series of criteria which, on closer examination, turn out to be fluid, not very rigorous, and subject to personal appreciation. These include the number of victims and perpetrators, the intent of the perpetrators, the degree of familiarity between victims and

perpetrators, the time frame, the technology and techniques employed, and the victims' ability to defend themselves. Nevertheless, none of these criteria –which are in fact variables – or their combination, make it clear where the definition of a massacre begins, in a morbid form of the sorites paradox. In fact, a massacre is most often defined as such on an 'I know it when I see it' basis.

Inclusion criteria for data

For the study published in this chapter, the secondary quantitative data of Ghent University (2024a) were used. Guided by Sémelin's four criteria (2002a) of what constitutes a massacre, the researchers selected a total of 216 massacre incidents from the Ghent University Database (2024). The inclusion criteria were the civilian victims as well as mass killing of 10 and above people. Accordingly, 67 massacre incidents from 2020, 113 incidents in 2021 and 36 massacre incidents in 2022 were included in the quantitative analysis.

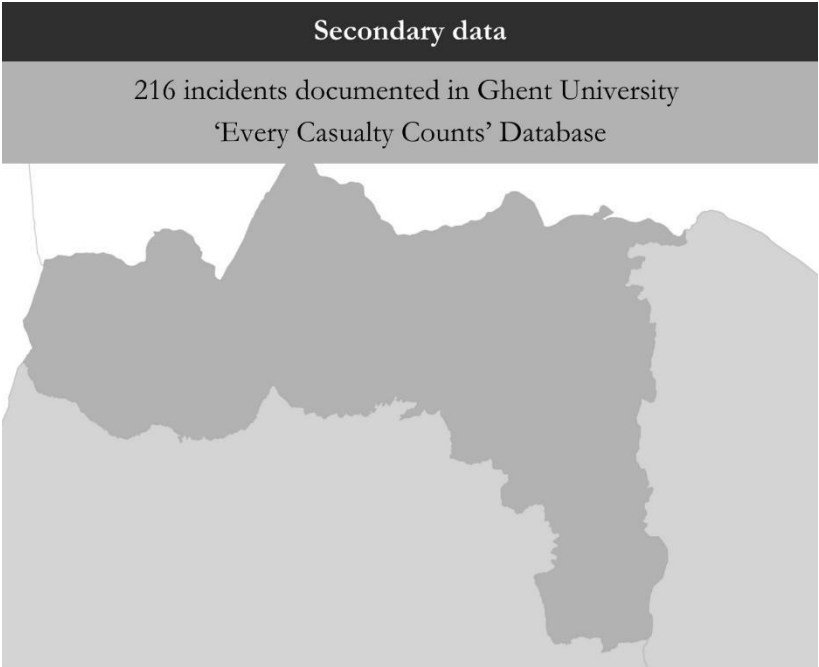


Figure 9.1. Methodology

The incidents that encompass (1) civilian victims and (2) 10 or more casualties were identified for quantitative analysis in this study. The

incidents of a massacre were further selected on the critical mass of diverse and reliable sources describing them, allowing a socio-historical study based on cross-referenced information and avoiding cases of *unus testis*.⁵⁶

The data obtained is presented in the Table 9.1.

Table 9.1. Number of incidents and count range of civilians killed

Year	Number of Incidents*	Minimum Civilians Killed	Maximum Civilians Killed
2020	67	2190	5486
2021	113	3202	4922
2022	36	1306	1802
Total	216	6698	12210

Source: Ghent University ‘Every Casualty Counts’ database

The research examined the available information in the database on (i) when and where the massacre took place (ii) perpetrators, (iii) modus operandi and (iv) frequency of incidents of the massacres during the Tigray war.

Findings

In this section, the findings are presented regarding the timeline and place of the massacres, the alleged perpetrators identified in the documentation and the modus operandi as described in the documentation.

The findings are described in a chronological order, based on the three years under consideration in the period 2020–2022. The periods are not equally divided. They represent the following months:

- 2020: November – December (two months)
- 2021: January – December (12 months)
- 2022: January – 20 December (almost 12 months)

⁵⁶ These cases must be treated in the same way as the others, but the epistemological challenges they pose require their own methodological questioning before they can be discussed in the context of a study such as the one we're here conducting (Ginzburg, 1992).

We discuss the number of incidents (based on the definition of Sémelin, 2020a), the number of civilian people killed, the alleged perpetrators, and the modus operandi as described in the database.

Number of incidents per year

The analysis shows that at the start of the war in 2020, between 4 November and 31 December 2020 5,486 people were killed in massacres. In the 12 months of 2021, 4,922 people were killed in massacres and 2022, from 1 January to 20 December 2022, 1,802 people were killed in incidents marked as massacres.

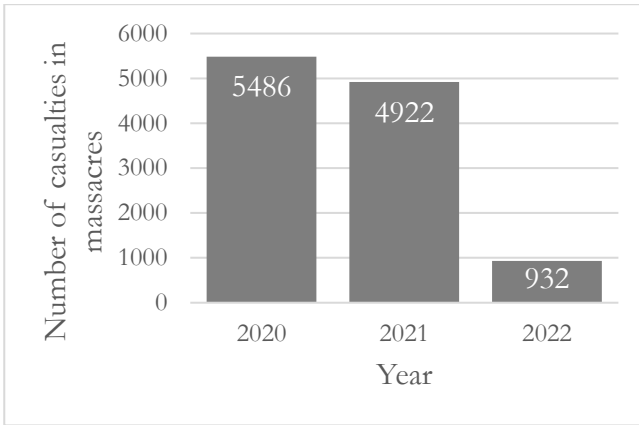


Figure 9.2. Number of casualties per year

(Ghent University ‘Every Casualty Counts’ database, compiled by authors)

The analysis of the data shows that the number of incidents in the first year is much less. The high number of casualties reported in 2020 is explained by the large number of victims in the massacres in November 2020 in Maikadra (1,257 people killed), Adi Hageray (1,000 people killed), and Aksum (878 people killed).

Table 9.2. Number of people killed and number of incidents of massacres per year

No.	Year	Number of massacre incidents	Estimation of minimum no. of people killed in massacres	Estimation of a maximum of no. of people killed in massacres
1	2020	67	2,190	5,486
2	2021	113	3,202	4,922
4	2022	36	1,306	1,802
Total		216	6,698	12,210

In 2021 the number of massacres increased, but the number of people killed in each incident of a massacre decreased significantly.

Frequency of massacre incidents in each town and woreda

The massacres were repeated in towns and woredas. The repetitions ranged from one time to 12 times in one specific district. The highest frequency of massacres during the Tigray war was 12 times in Tahtay Adyabo. Followed by Kola Temben (11 times), Seharti (10 times), Gulo Mekeda (9 times), Keyhi Tekli (8 times), Adet (8 times), Asgede (7 times), Mekelle (7 times), Alamata (6 times), Tahtay Koraro (6 times), Kafta Humera (6 times), Setit Humera (5 times), Adwa (5 times), Hawzen (5 times) and Tahtay Maychew (5 times). Towns and woredas where massacres were perpetrated 4 times include Aksum, Naeder, Samre, Sheraro, Edaga Arbi and Tselemti. Bora, May Kadra, Adi Hageray, Wukro, Kelete Awelaello, Degua Temben, Emba Sieneti, Tsimbla, Selekleka, Abergele, Adigrat, Adi Daero, Hintalo Wajirat and Korem are the towns and woredas where massacres were perpetrated 3 times during the Tigray war.

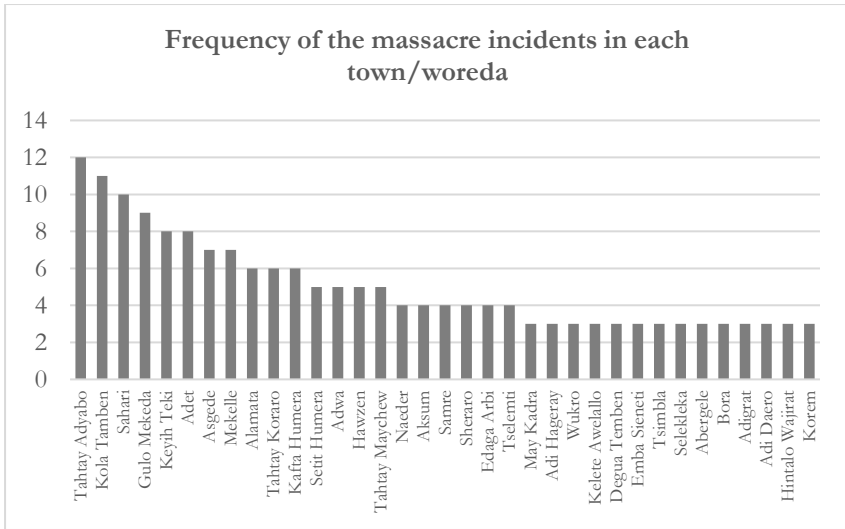


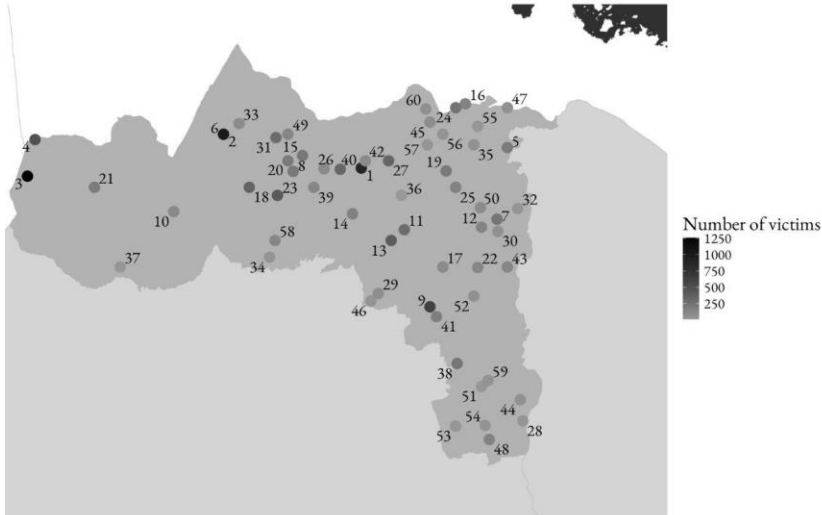
Figure 9.3. Frequency of massacre incidents in each town/woreda
(Ghent University ‘Every Casualty Counts’ database, compiled by authors)

Other towns and woredas Saesie, Shire, Gerealta, Ganta Afeshum, May Tsebri, Tsegede, Laelay Maychew, Enderta, Irob and Mereb Leke are places where massacres were perpetrated twice, according to the database. Korarit, Zalambesa, Chercher, Agulae, May Kinetal, Raya Azebo, Tanqua Milash, Laelay Adyabo, Zana, Enda Mehoni, Ofla, Ahferom, Maychew and Egela experienced massacres once, according to Ghent University’s database. This shows that massacres were perpetrated between 2 and 12 times in 46 of the towns and woredas, while massacres were committed once in 14 others. This indicates that 76% of the massacres were the result of frequent atrocities. Thus, the massacres committed by the actors of the Tigray war were systematically organised.

Number of people killed in massacres

Significant numbers of people were killed in massacres in Maikadra (1,257 people killed), Adi Hageray (1,000 people killed), Aksum (878 people killed), Tahtay Adyabo (776 people killed), Saharti (613 people killed), Setit Humera (489 people killed), Tsimbla (418 people killed), Kola Temben (409 people killed), Asgede (355 people killed), and Adwa (343 people killed).

The massacres in rural villages and towns of Tahtay Maychew (329 people killed), Keyih Tekli (294 people killed), Adi Daero (292 people killed), Gulo Mekeda (244 people killed), Wukro (230 people killed), Bora (222 people killed), Adet (219 people killed), Shire (210 people killed), Emba Sieneti (205 people killed) and Tahtay Koraro (193 people killed) claimed the lives of many civilians.



1 Aksum	16 Zalambesa	31 Adi Daero	46 Tanqua Melash
2 Tahtay Adyabo	17 Degua Temben	32 Atsbi	47 Irob
3 May Kadra	18 Asgede	33 Sheraro	48 Alamata
4 Setit Humera	19 Emba Sieneti	34 May Tsebri	49 Laelay Adyabo
5 Saesie	20 Tahtay Koraro	35 Adigrat	50 Edaga Arbi
6 Adi Hageray	21 Kafta Humera	36 May Kintal	51 Enda Mehoni
7 Wukro	22 Mekelle	37 Tsegede	52 Hintalo Wajirat
8 Shire	23 Tsimbla	38 Bora	53 Ofla
9 Saharti	24 Gulo Mekeda	39 Zana	54 Korem
10 Korarit	25 Hawzen	40 Tahtay Maychew	55 Gerealta
11 Keyih Tekli/Werkamba	26 Selekleka	41 Samre	56 Ganta Afeshum
12 Kelete Awelallo	27 Adwa	42 Laelay Maychew	57 Ahferom
13 Kola Temben	28 Chercher	43 Enderta	58 Tselemti
14 Naeder	29 Abergele	44 Raya Azebo	59 Maychew
15 Adet	30 Agulae	45 Merib Leke	60 Egela

Figure 9.4. Map of massacre sites in the period 4 November to 20 December 2022

(Ghent University ‘Every Casualty Counts’ database, compiled by authors)

Massacres were widespread in other woredas and villages across Tigray, including Saesie (186 people killed), Kafta Humera (178 people killed), Samre (174 people killed), Naeder (163 people killed), Hawzen (152 people killed), Zalambesa (150 people killed), Alamata (138 people killed), Laelay Adyabo (117 people killed), Mekelle (118 people killed), and Zana (116 people killed).

Similarly, in the following woredas significant number of victims were counted: Tselemti (118 people were killed), Enderta (111 people were killed), Korarit (98 people were killed), Selekleka (95 people were killed), Degua Temben (94 people were killed), Laelay Maychew (92 people were killed), Edaga Arbi (87 people were killed), Sheraro (85 people were killed), Mereb Leke (79 people were killed), and Abergele (72 people were killed).

Other civilian victims of the massacres during the Tigray war include massacres that took place in the location of Egela (65 people were killed), Hintalo Wajirat (56 people were killed), Irob (55 people were killed), Agulae (55 people were killed), Raya Azebo (53 people were killed), Adigrat (52 people were killed), Maychew (40 people were killed), May Tsebri (37 people were killed), Korem (37 people were killed), Ganta Afeshum (35 people were killed), Chercher (31 people were killed), Tanqua Milash (30 people were killed), Atsbi (22 people were killed), Ahferom (22 people were killed), Gerealta (20 people were killed), Tsegede (17 people were killed), Enda Mehoni (17 people were killed), Ofla (15 people were killed) and May Kinetal (11 people were killed).

Perpetrators of the massacres

In 2020

The research examined the perpetrators of the massacres perpetrated during the Tigray war as documented by Ghent University (2024b). In less than two months into the Tigray war, within 57 days between the 4th of November and 31 December 2020, the allies of ENDF and Eritrean Defence Forces (EDF) killed 1,956 civilian Tigrayans in massacres. What must be noted is that during the time these massacres were perpetrated, Ethiopia and Eritrea denied the involvement of Eritrea in the Tigray war.

According to the Ghent University database, EDF alone killed 1,202 civilians from 4 November till the 31 December, while Amhara Fano, Amhara Special Force, ENDF and Tigray Defence Forces (TDF) were indicated as the perpetrators of massacres killing 1,200 civilians in the same period.

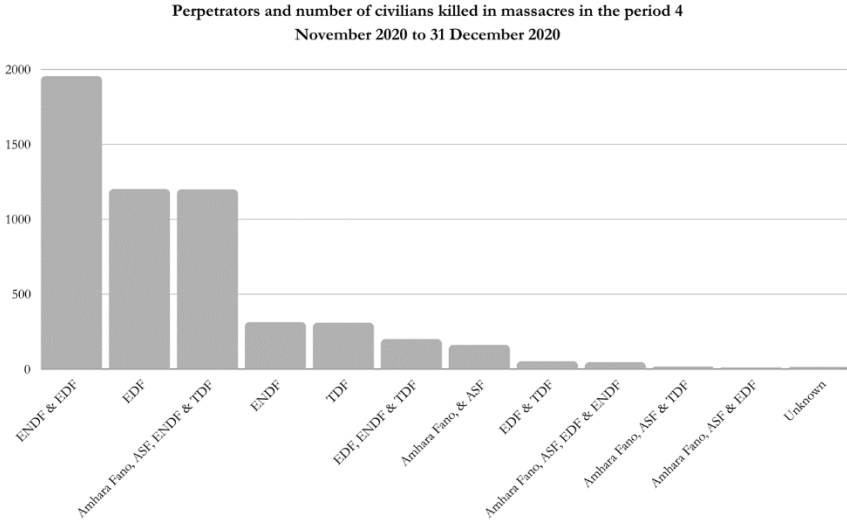


Figure 9.5. Perpetrators and number of civilians killed in massacres in the period 4 November 2020 to 31 December 2020

(Ghent University ‘Every Casualty Counts’ database, compiled by authors)

ENDF alone killed 314 people in massacres; TDF 309; Amhara Fano and Amhara Special Force 162; EDF and TDF 53; Amhara Fano, Amhara Special Force, EDF and ENDF 46; Amhara Fano, Amhara Special Force and TDF 17 and as Amhara Fano, Amhara Special Force & EDF killed 12 Tigrayan civilians. The perpetrators of the massacre that claimed the lives of 15 people remained unknown.

In 2021

According to Ghent University (2024a), the EDF perpetrated the massacre of 1844 civilians that making the army the highest perpetrator of the year 2021 as compared to the allies of ENDF and EDF being the highest perpetrator in 2020.

Perpetrators and number of civilians killed in massacres in the period 1 January to 31 December 2021.

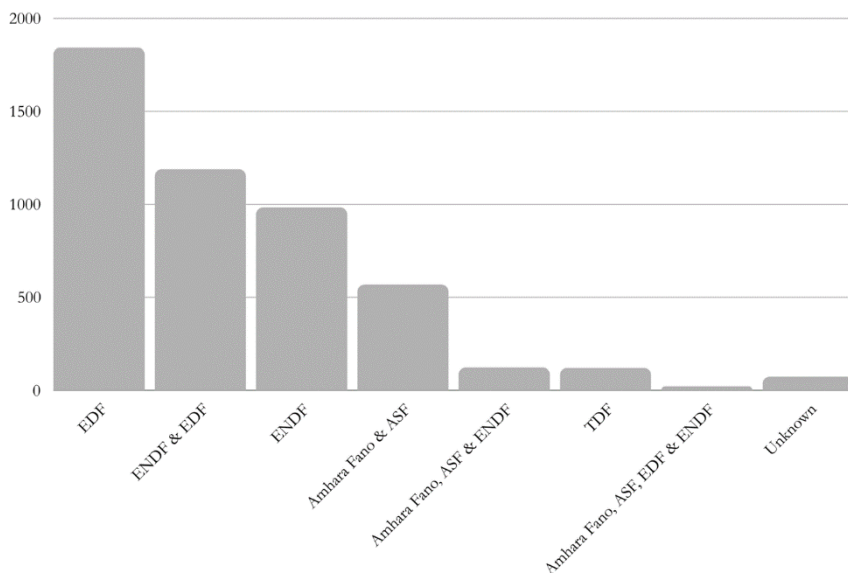


Figure 9.6. Perpetrators and number of civilians killed in massacres in the period 1 January to 31 December 2021

(Ghent University ‘Every Casualty Counts’ database, compiled by authors)

The alliance of ENDF and EDF perpetrated the killing of 1.189 people, ENDF alone killed 984 people as well as Amhara Fano and Amhara Special Force killed 568 people. The alliance of Amhara Fano, Amhara Special Force and ENDF perpetrated 123, TDF 120 as well as allies of Amhara Fano, Amhara Special Force, EDF and ENDF killed 21 people. The perpetrators of 73 civilian massacres in 2021 remained unknown.

In 2022

Between 1 January and 1 November 2022 (which is 355 days), EDF perpetrated massacres that claimed the lives of 511 civilians. This was followed by ENDF perpetrating 247, EDF and TDF 50, Amhara Fano, Amhara Special Force & ENDF 32 as well as TDF 30.

**Perpetrators and number of civilians killed in massacres in the period 1
January to 20 December 2022**

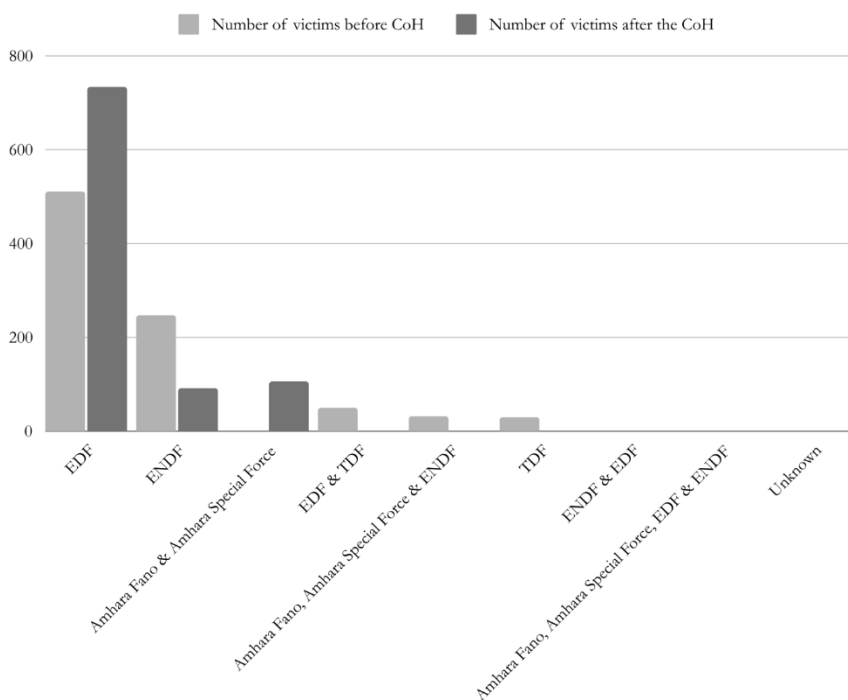


Figure 9.7. Perpetrators and number of civilians killed in massacres in the period 1 January to 20 December 2022

(Ghent University ‘Every Casualty Counts’ database, compiled by authors)

Unlike 2020 and 2021, the alliance between ENDF and EDF was almost non-existent that was different from the previous trends discussed earlier. Besides, the alliance among Amhara Fano, Amhara Special Force and ENDF also weakened. It was recalled that the peace talks between the Ethiopian federal government and TPLF were started in July 2022 in Seychelles then in Djibouti. Finally, Pretoria Agreement was reached on 2 November 2022 in South Africa that was named after the city.

Following the signing of the Pretoria Agreement, the alliance between ENDF and EDF as well as ENDF, Amhara Fano and Amhara Special Force was hampered. EDF aggressively continued massacring 734 Tigrayan civilians which was even higher than the number of

victims that EDF killed between 1 January and 1 November 2022. The Amhara Fano and Amhara Special Force also killed 106 civilians while the ENDF killed 92 civilians. A total of 932 civilians were killed after the signing of the Pretoria Agreement as compared to the number, 870, earlier in 2022.

From 2020–2022

During the 778 days between 4 November 2020 and 20 December 2022, the actors of the Tigray war perpetrated massacres that claimed the lives of 12,210 Tigrayan civilians. EDF alone killed 4,291 civilians, followed by EDF in alliance with ENDF that killed 3,145 Tigrayan civilians.

The largest number of civilians killed in massacres were victims of the EDF. The ENDF alone killed 1,637 in massacres. In combination Amhara Fano, Amhara Special Force, ENDF, and TDF together killed 1,200 people in massacres; Amhara Fano and Amhara Special Force together killed 836 people in massacres; TDF killed 459 people in massacres; EDF, ENDF, and TDF together killed 200 people in massacres; Amhara Fano, Amhara Special Force and ENDF killed 155 people in massacres, EDF and TDF killed 103 people in massacres; Amhara Fano, Amhara Special Force, EDF & ENDF together killed 67 people in massacres; Amhara Fano, Amhara Special Force and TDF together killed 17 people in massacres and Amhara Fano, Amhara Special Force and EDF killed 12 civilians in massacres. Other 88 civilians were killed during the Tigray war whose perpetrators are not documented/unknown.

Perpetrators and number of civilians killed in massacres in the period 4 November 2020 to 20 December 2022

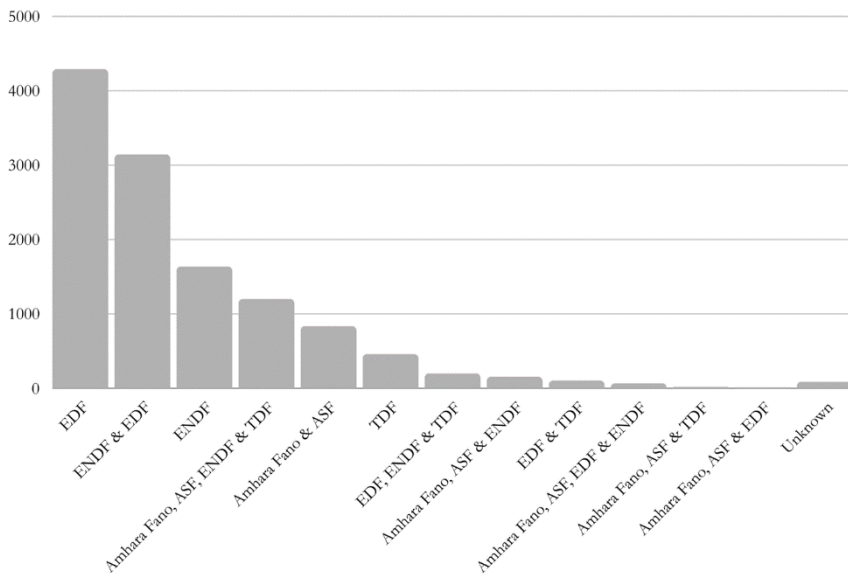


Figure 9.8. Perpetrators and number of civilians killed in massacres in the period 4 November 2020 to 20 December 2022

(Ghent University ‘Every Casualty Counts’ database, compiled by authors)

Modus operandi of massacres

During the Tigray war

Sémelin categorised perpetration of massacre as face-to-face and long-range massacres (2002a). The massacres committed in the Tigray war used both face-to-face and long-range massacres. In the context of the Tigray war, a ‘face-to-face massacre’ means the perpetration of massacre as a result of direct engagement of soldiers against identified group of civilians. The term ‘long-range massacre’ is reserved for shelling, aerial bombing, airstrike and drone attack.

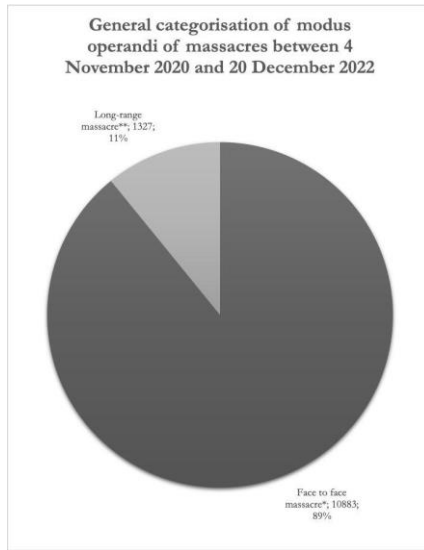


Figure 9.9. General categorisation of modus operandi period 4 November 2020 to 20 December 2022

(Ghent University 'Every Casualty Counts' database, compiled by authors)

Most of the victims (10,883) were killed face-to-face while 1,327 others were killed through long-range attacks that included drone attacks, airstrikes, and indiscriminate shelling.

In 2020

The examination of the modus operandi of the massacres perpetrated during the Tigray war gives the following result.

In the first 57 days between 4 November and 31 December 2020, a total of 5,486 Tigrayan civilians were killed within less than two months. Many of the massacres, involving 3,331 killings, were perpetrated through house-to-house mass execution.

This was followed by massacres with casualties of 643 Tigrayan civilians through indiscriminate killing, 449 indiscriminate shelling, 300 throwing grenade on group of people, 245 through mass execution of people gathered in religious places as well as 190 through drone attacks.

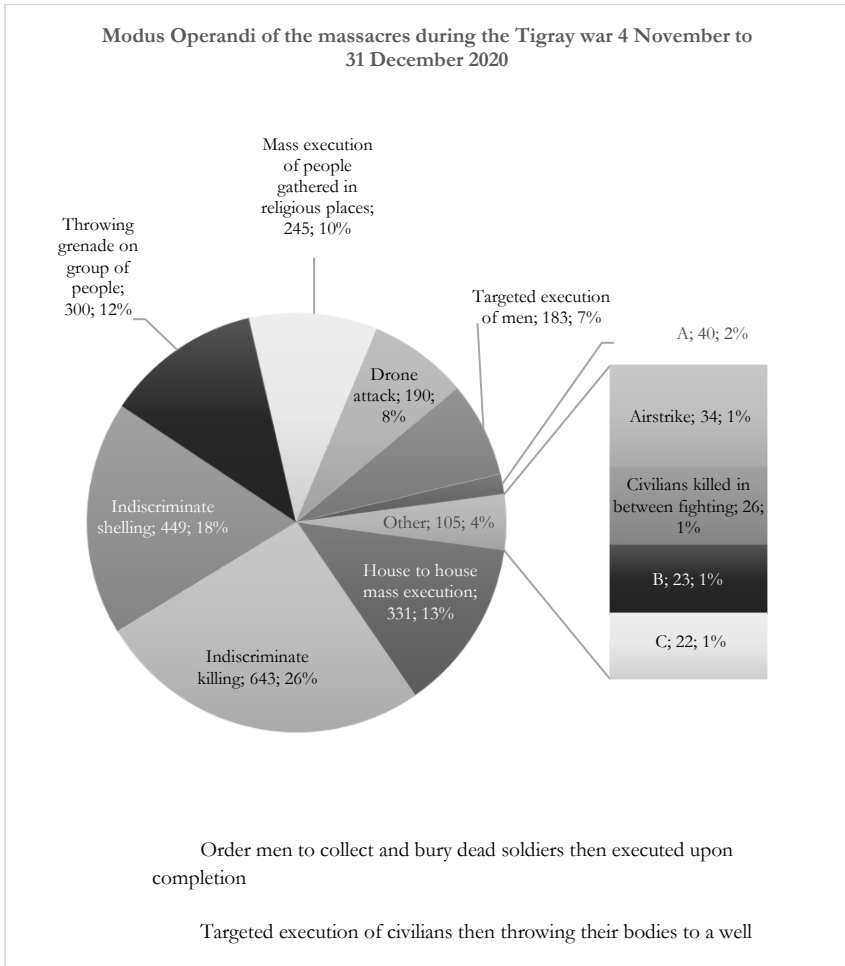


Figure 9.10. Massacre modus operandi period 4 November to 31 December 2020

(Ghent University ‘Every Casualty Counts’ database, compiled by authors)

Others were killed through targeted execution of men (183), ordering men to collect and bury dead soldiers who were executed upon completion (40), airstrike (34), civilians killed in between fighting (26), targeted execution of civilians followed by throwing their bodies to a well (23) as well as ordering men to help loot infrastructure which was executed upon completion (22).

In 2021

In 2021 a total of 4,922 victims were killed by the actors of the Tigray war. The modus operandi of these massacres included house-to-house mass executions that claimed the lives of 2,363 Tigrayan civilians.

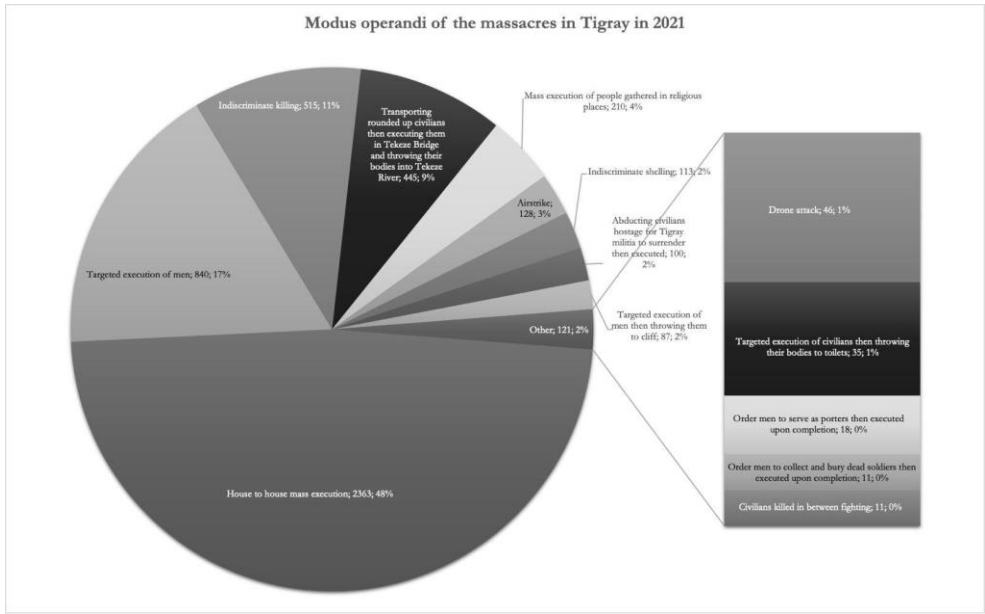


Figure 9.11. Massacre modus operandi period 1 January to 31 December 2021

(Ghent University ‘Every Casualty Counts’ database, compiled by authors)

Targeted execution of men (840), indiscriminate killing (515), transportation of rounded-up civilians who were then executed on the Tekeze Bridge and throwing of their bodies to Tekeze River (445), mass execution of people gathered in religious places (210), airstrike (128) and indiscriminate shelling (113) were also among the common modus operandi in 2021. The massacres included the abduction of civilians as hostage for Tigray militia to surrender and who were then executed (100), targeted execution of men then who were thrown from a cliff (87), drone attacks (56), targeted execution of civilians after which their bodies were thrown in pit latrines (35), ordering of men to serve as porters who were executed upon completion (18),

ordering of men to collect and bury dead soldiers who were executed upon completion (11) and civilians killed in between fighting (11). The researchers explored the specifics of the 2021 massacres through examining the incidents in Bora and Setit Humera in detail.

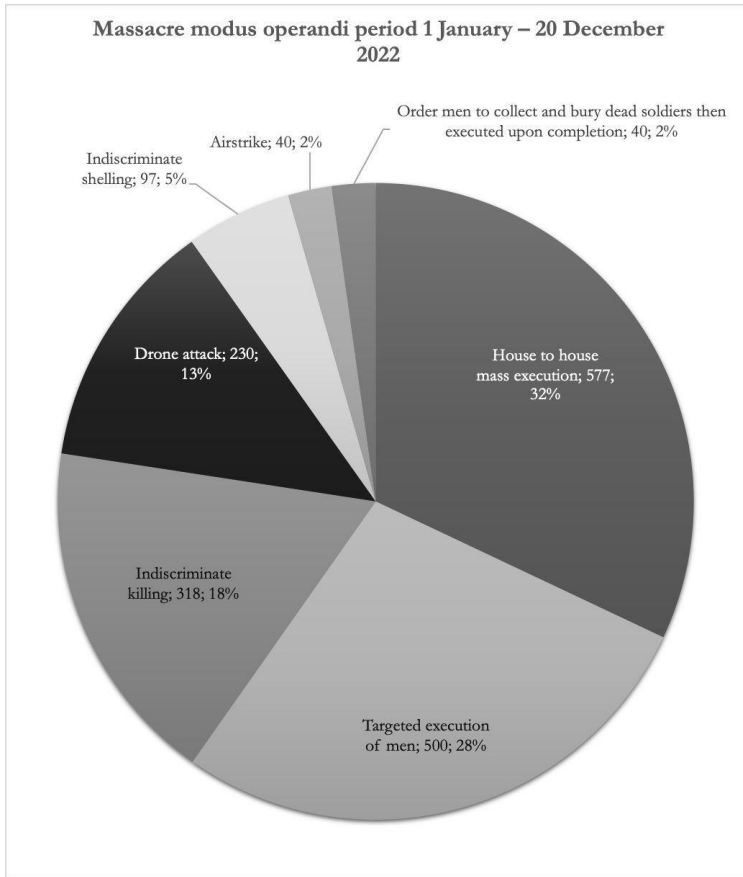


Figure 9.12. Massacre modus operandi period 1 January to 20 December 2022

(Ghent University ‘Every Casualty Counts’ database, compiled by authors)

In 2022

House-to-house mass execution (577) was the highest means of massacre in 2022 too. Besides, 500 men were killed through targeted executions while 318 were killed through indiscriminate killing. Killing due to long-range massacres including drone attacks involved

the killing of 230 persons, indiscriminate shelling involved the killing of 97 persons, and airstrikes involved the killing of 40 persons. Men ordered by soldiers to collect and bury dead soldiers and then executed upon completion involved the killing of 40 persons.

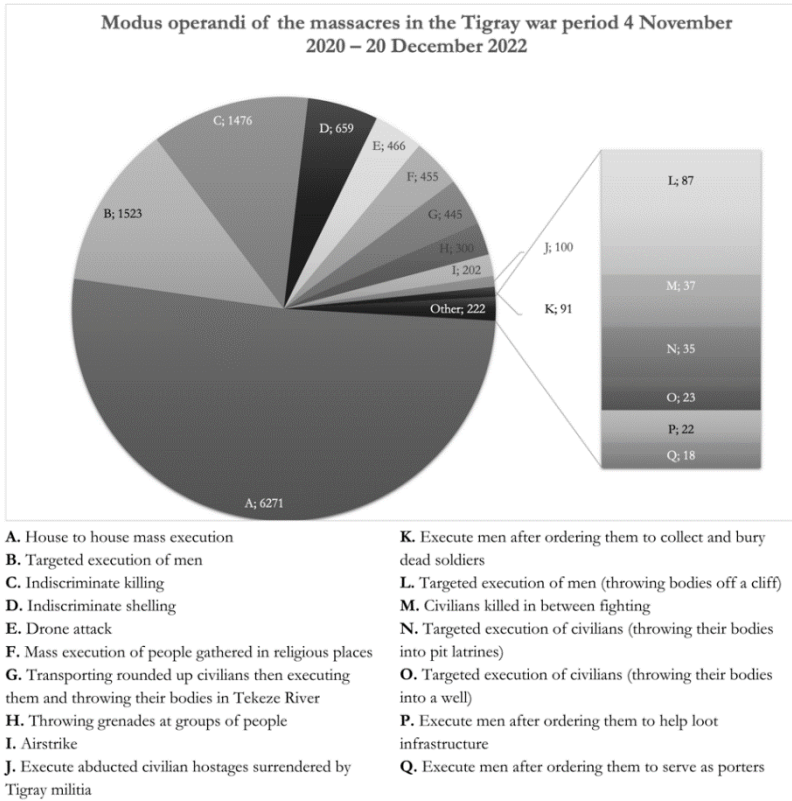


Figure 9.13. Massacre modus operandi during the Tigray war period 4 November 2020 to 20 December 2022

(Ghent University ‘Every Casualty Counts’ database, compiled by authors)

From 2020–2022

Most of the victims (10,883) were massacred face-to-face while 1,327 others were massacred through long-range that include drone attack, airstrike, and indiscriminate shelling. House-to-house mass execution claimed the lives of 6,271 Tigrayan civilians during the Tigray war between 4 November 2020 and 20 December 2022. Targeted execution of men (1,523), indiscriminate killing (1,476),

indiscriminate shelling (659) and drone attack (466) were among the common modus operandi during the Tigray war. People who were gathered in religious places, churches and mosques, were also executed en mass (455), which happened alongside the destruction of the religious sites.

Civilians (445) from the Western Zone of Tigray were rounded up from their homes and then transported to the Tekeze Bridge where they were executed. Their bodies were thrown into the Tekeze River. Other modus operandi include: throwing grenades at the group of people (300), airstrike (202) as well as abducting civilian hostages for Tigray militia to surrender then execute (100). Civilian men (91) were ordered to collect and bury dead soldiers of combatants and were then executed upon completion of the tasks. Other Tigrayan civilians were executed, and their bodies were thrown from a cliff (87), their bodies thrown into pit latrines (35) and their bodies thrown into a well (23).

Some other civilians were ordered to help loot the infrastructure in Tigray and then executed when they finished the assigned tasks (22) while others served as porters and then executed upon delivering what they were assigned to carry (18).

Discussion

This chapter examined the events identified as massacres and selected based on Sémelin (2002a). The authors used the Every Casualty Counts database of the Department of Geography at Ghent University. The authored used criteria (1) civilian casualties and (2) incidents that resulted in 10 or more casualties in extracting data from the database. The events took place during the Tigray war between 4 November 2020 and 20 December 2022. A quantitative analysis was conducted to study the timeline, incidents, number of people killed in the massacres, the massacre sites and locations, the alleged perpetrators, and modus operandi.

The highest number of civilians killed in massacres were those allegedly perpetrated by the Eritrean military. From 4 November 2020 to 20 December 2022, the lives of 12,210 Tigrayan civilians were claimed in incidents labelled as massacres. EDF alone killed 4,291

civilians, followed by EDF in alliance with ENDF which killed 3,145 Tigrayan civilians. Notably, most of the massacres were committed by Eritrean forces whose presence was denied by Eritrea and Ethiopia.

Christian Solidarity Worldwide (CSW) representative Khataza Gondwe identified the important role of Eritrea in the massacres in June 2021:

The war on Tigray is essentially the revenge of President Afewerki. It is the outworking of a grudge against the Tigrayan leadership dating back to the 1998-2000 border war and differences in orientation during the liberation struggle. It displays openly the true character of his regime, exposing the severe violations Eritreans have suffered for 30 years under a shroud of enforced secrecy. (EEPA, 2021).

Gondwe describes the massacres perpetrated by the Eritrean forces as systematic and intentional:

Tigrayan civilians are being subjected to collective punishment, having been deemed guilty by association due to their shared ethnicity with TPLF leaders. Civilians and civilian structures are being attacked in a manner indicating an intentional effort to dismantle a people group, its history, and its land (EEPA, 2021).

Massacres were also perpetrated by the ENDF together with a range of other forces in different compositions. Moreover, Ethiopia imposed a siege and blockage, obstructing essential services including telecommunication, electricity and medicine from entering to Tigray. In addition, the government hindered humanitarian access to major parts of Tigray, which exacerbated the crisis. This caused many civilians who survived the massacres to face death due to a lack of food, medicine, and other basic services.

The research found rare massacre incidents during the Tigray war. As part of the systematic ethnic cleansing of Tigrayans from the Western Zone of Tigray, 445 civilians were rounded up from their homes in Setit Humera and then transported to Tekeze Bridge where they were executed, and their bodies were thrown to Tekeze River. Some of the bodies were observed on the shores of the downstream Sudanese villages, which shocked the mainstream media.

Other incidents include throwing grenades on groups of people (300), airstrikes (202) as well as abducting civilian hostage for Tigray militia to surrender then executed (100). Tigrayan civilian men (91) were ordered to collect and bury dead soldiers of combatants and then executed upon completion of the tasks. Other Tigrayan civilians were executed their bodies were thrown onto a cliff (87), into toilets (35) and into a well (23). Some other civilians were ordered to help loot the infrastructure in Tigray and then executed when they finished the assigned tasks (22), while others served as porters and then executed upon completion (18).

The following elements are important features of the Tigray massacres:

- The largest number of massacres was perpetrated by Eritrean forces, whose presence in the war was initially denied both by Eritrea and by Ethiopia.
- Ethiopian forces and a range of other forces perpetrated massacres in mixed groupings, including Eritrean forces and Amhara Fano.
- The massacres were perpetrated under a siege, aggravating the effects of the massacres.
- The massacres were accompanied by a communication block-out and Internet shutdown, and it was extremely difficult for survivors to ask for help and to communicate on the atrocities that were taking place.
- House-to-house mass executions, the targeted execution of men, indiscriminate killing, indiscriminate shelling, drone attacks as well as mass execution of people in religious places were the common modus operandi of the massacres.
- Some new, cruel, and sadistic modus operandi emerged including throwing bodies of killed civilians from cliffs, pit latrines, rivers, and wells while other massacres involved ordering civilian men to collect and bury the dead bodies of soldiers followed by execution upon completion, order civilian men to help loot infrastructure followed by execution upon completion.

- Most of the massacres were perpetrated in a frequency range of 2 to 12 times in a town/woreda (district), which shows how systematically organised the commission of massacres was.
- The massacres appeared to target the Tigrayan civil population.

This list of features shows that the classification by Sémelin of massacres as bilateral massacres (as in civil war) and unilateral massacres (of a state against its people) (Sémelin, 2002a, p. 3) is inadequate to define the massacres perpetrated in Tigray. Further understanding of the drivers of the massacres in the Tigray war is necessary. According to Uekert (1995), patterns observed by survivors and victims' families indicate that the massacres were government-sponsored. Historical and contemporary instances show that such massacres are frequently acts of state terror aimed at instilling fear in the population or eliminating specific groups (Dwyer and Ryan, 2012). These involved a secret alliance between multiple state parties (in any case Ethiopia and Eritrea), which was denied, and the massacres were perpetrated under a siege and communication blockade. Further investigation on the involvement of Somalia and Sudan in arrangements related to the events could be useful to understand these massacres as a hidden regional alliance against a regional people, led by a central government.

This research is not exhaustive by any means. This effort must be complemented by studies on the ground into the massacres listed in the Ghent University database, as well as a thorough study of the smallest massacres, which have not been noted or recognised. Jérémie Foa (2021) has shown, that events of massacres that are less documented and less prominent in the collective memory of a conflict, are nonetheless essential to understanding the general mechanics of the massacres. The movement of the major cogs cannot be fully understood without considering the motion of the smaller ones.

Such a study could perhaps benefit from the proposals of the emerging field called war criminology (Jamieson, 2014; DiPietro, 2016; Karstedt *et al.*, 2021), as an “empirical area of study” in that war

“offers a dramatic example of massive violence and victimization *in extremis*” (Jamieson, 2014), usually played out through many smaller events that connect an area of investigation. Further interdisciplinary engagement with the atrocities committed in the Tigray war is necessary, including a focus on the victims, their families and communities and their needs; the need for reparation; a perspective on justice; and a better understanding of the perpetrators to avoid repetition, increase deterrence and ensure an environment in which communities feel safe. This will need to include a legal determination of the atrocity crimes committed and ensure accountability.

Conclusion

Phenomenological research is among the vital instruments for understanding the events, the perpetrators’ intentions, and modus operandi in massacre studies. A massacre is defined as a report of a massacre in the Ghent University database Every Casualty Counts (2024a), and the events selected for this study involved 10 or more civilian casualties.

The results of this study show that massacres were perpetrated throughout the war in Tigray and in all regions of Tigray. Most massacres were perpetrated by Eritrean soldiers alone, followed by the alliance of Ethiopian and Eritrean soldiers as well as the alliance of Ethiopian soldiers, Amhara Special Force and Amhara Fano. The number of civilian casualties attributed to the TDF is small, compared to the targeted civilian executions by the allies (ENDF, EDF, Amhara Special Force, and Amhara Fano).

A siege and communication blockade created a ‘black hole’ in Tigray, allowing the massacres to be perpetrated with little if any outlet of information from Tigray. This allowed massacres to be perpetrated with impunity. The perpetuation of the massacres during the first five months of the war was conducted while the presence of the Eritrean armed forces in Tigray was formally denied. The Pretoria Agreement on Cessation of Hostilities, which was signed on 2 November 2022, did not involve all military actors active in the Tigray war. Subsequently, to the agreement, the EDF and Amhara Fano continued their perpetration of massacres until 20 December 2022, in

what seemed to be a silent agreement with the ENDF. On 20 December 2022, the ENDF stopped collaboration with these allied forces in Tigray in a formal sense.

Particularly Tigrayan civilian men were targeted for execution. The most common modus operandi included house-to-house execution and targeted execution of men. In addition, the civilian population in Tigray was subjected to indiscriminate killing, indiscriminate shelling, drone attacks as well as the mass executions of people gathered in religious places.

The modus operandi involved cruel and sadistic elements, such as the execution of men and throwing them into pit latrines, cliffs, wells, and rivers, throwing grenades on groups of people, abducting civilians as hostages to force Tigray militia to surrender, ordering Tigrayan civilian men to collect and bury dead soldiers of combatants followed by their execution upon completion of the tasks, ordering men to serve as porters followed by their execution upon completion, and ordering men to help loot infrastructure followed by their execution upon completion of the tasks. Some of these killings seem to have been conducted to create fear and despair and to ensure that information on the war would not be revealed.

The soldiers executed the killings together with the destruction, desecration, and looting of religious and ethnic artefacts in Tigray. The massacres were conducted alongside the deportation of elders, women, and children, aimed at clearing Tigrayans from specific settings like the Western Zone of Tigray.

Since the massacres in Tigray were perpetrated in a 'black hole' as the region was under siege and in a complete communication blackout, the massacres in villages and woredas (districts) of Tigray were often not disclosed. The database of massacres in Tigray is likely to reflect an underreporting of the events that transpired. More research, particularly on the ground, is needed for a more exhaustive and complete picture of the situation.

It is a difficult task to imagine the events reported by the Ghent University database, but the study of these is necessary for further comprehension of what transpired during the Tigray war. The events

cannot easily be categorised into bilateral or unilateral incidents. The incidents reflect the hidden participation of actors operating under government instruction in the perpetration of massacres, the denial of their presence, and a coalition of forces from within the country against its population with assistance from outside. The massacres demonstrate a fluid interaction of a coalition of mixed military parties operating together, under the authority of the Ethiopian government, which failed to protect the citizens of Tigray and which perpetrated attacks on civilians with forces from neighbouring country Eritrea. The Eritrea secretly attacked the Tigray region and acted with impunity under a siege and communication lockdown imposed by the Ethiopian authorities.

The International Commission of Human Rights in Ethiopia and the US have determined that crimes against humanity, war crimes, and ethnic cleansing have been committed in Tigray. The nature of the massacres – both face-to-face and long-range – indicates that these acts were directed at civilians and were coordinated, intentional, organised, and systematic. A legal investigation is required to determine potential atrocity crimes, including genocide, under international law.

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Authors' contributions

Daniel Tesfa put together the first version of this chapter. This work has been carried out as part of his PhD study. Matteo Bächtold wrote the first version of the theoretical and methodological considerations. Daniel Tesfa provided the first version of this chapter, particularly the introduction, the theoretical section and the section on research approach. Daniel Tesfa, Matteo Bächtold and Rufael Tesfay Gebremichael collected primary data for this chapter and analysed them. Joëlle Stocker and Daniel Tesfa carried out the second review of the coding-labelling of the Ghent University Every Casualty Counts data and Joëlle Stocker conducted visualization of the data obtained. Mirjam Van Reisen advised on the approach of the chapter, reviewed all of the versions, and restructured the text.

Ethical considerations

This research was carried out under ethical clearance obtained from Tilburg University Identification code: REDC # 2020n13 on “Social Dynamics of Digital Innovation in remote non-Western Communities”.

This chapter should be read in conjunction with the ‘Note on content and editorial decisions’ (Book 1).

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‘Followers of the Devil’s Code 666’:

The Writing on the Wall of an Intent to Eradicate a People

Daniel Tesfa, Mirjam Van Reisen & Araya Abrha Medhanyie

ፍቅር ካብ ሞት ይሕይል ፤ ቅንኣት ካብ ሲኦል ይብርትዕ።

Love is stronger than death, jealousy is more unrelenting than Sheol.

Abstract

This study looks at the semiotic landscape to interpret the 2020–2022 Tigray war. The body of semiotic observations consists of 78 texts including (i) graffiti left in public places by the military who invaded Tigray; and (ii) signs visible on public roads and public places. The graffiti analysed in this study was found in the Emperor Yohannes Public School in Mekelle and at the Gerhu Sirnay Primary Hospital. The signs on public roads include a banner ‘Game over, Woyane’ carried by retreating forces from Eritrea after the Pretoria Cessation of Hostilities Agreement was signed as well as signboards in public places in Mekelle. Following the building blocks for discourse analysis proposed by Gee (1999), the authors conclude that the semiotic landscape offers important insights into strong sentiments of hostility that the soldiers who invaded Tigray had towards the people of Tigray, messages such as, for instance, ‘Followers of 666’ (the Devil), which stigmatise Tigrayans and justify the call for their eradication. The graffiti messages analysed aim to (i) distinguish Tigrayans from other Ethiopians (‘othering’); (ii) mobilise Ethiopians for the eradication of Tigrayans; and (iii) create an undercurrent of fear of the (dark) ‘power’ of Tigrayans. These messages include expressions of intent to ‘eradicate’ the Tigray population. Signs such as ‘Pretoria Night Club’, referring to the Pretoria Cessation of Hostilities Agreement, reflect the lack of faith that the people of Tigray have in the Agreement, which has left them in an uncertain situation.

Key words: Tigray war, woyane, eradication, genocide, Pretoria Cessation of Hostilities Agreement, Ethiopia, Eritrea

Introduction

The process of establishing power over others is accompanied by discourse on the situation in which those seeking or holding power, and those subordinated to the power, participate and express themselves somehow. Scott (1990) has elaborated on this process in what he calls ‘transcripts’:

The argument that offstage or veiled forms of aggression offer a harmless catharsis that helps preserve the status quo assumes that we are examining a rather abstract debate in which one side is handicapped rather than a concrete, material struggle. But relations between masters and slaves, between Brahmins and untouchables are not simply a clash of ideas about dignity and the right to rule; they are a process of subordination firmly anchored in material practices. (Scott, 1990, p. 187)

These material practices are observable and often leave material traces. Scott (1990) indicates that the use symbols, verbal formulas, and expressions or acts of humility are used to mobilise the in-group against the out-group. Power, in this social situation, means “the chance of a man or number of men to realise their own will in a communal action even against the resistance of others who are participating in the act” (Weber, 1946, p. 180).

According to Scott, there are public transcripts and hidden transcripts. The public transcript operates when power actors aim to install hegemony through officially communicated messages, hiding disagreement and anti-hegemonic thoughts, while the hidden transcript represents the underlying factors that are secretly kept by the group (Scott, 1990). These underlying factors may be revealed through various means in the semiotic landscape. This is the visual linguistic environment, including various semiotic resources, such as texts, symbols, drawings, or pictures (Pesch, 2021). Understanding the role of language in discourse can help us examine public and hidden transcripts.

Discourse is a means by which humans integrate language with various non-linguistic elements, including different ways of thinking, acting, interacting, valuing, feeling, believing, and using symbols, tools, and objects appropriately in specific contexts. This integration serves to enact and recognise various identities and activities, assign

meanings to the material world, distribute social goods in particular ways, create certain types of meaningful connections in our experiences, and prioritize certain symbol systems and ways of knowing over others (Gee, 1999). The Discourse with a capital 'D' refers to the collective sense that emerges from a daily common discourse. The discovery of Discourse requires the examination of ordinary discourse. Discourse is thus intrinsically linked to the context in which socio-political and economic power is played out. Discourse cannot be understood without understanding the context in which it is placed. Investigating discourse means linking the text back to the context. This is an exegetic exercise, a careful consideration of the meaning of the text in its context.

Graffiti is one relevant resource for studying text in public places (Bloch, 2012). Graffiti and other texts in the semiotic landscape are widely available as signifiers of discourses in the Tigray war. The war started on 3 November 2020 and ended when a Cessation of Hostilities Agreement was signed in Pretoria on 2 November 2022. During the war, the soldiers that entered Tigray as part of the coalition of the Ethiopian National Defence Force (ENDF) left graffiti in schools, health facilities, roadsides, and other public places where they camped and some of these have been described (Awet, 2021; Human Rights Watch, 2023; Claes, 2024; Tesfa & Van Reisen, 2024a).

Tesfa & Van Reisen (2024a) found that the term 'Woyane' refers not only to the political party of the Tigray People's Liberation Front (TPLF), but it is likely also to all ethnic Tigrayans. Tesfa & Van Reisen (2024b) conclude that graffiti expresses an intent of genocide by using explicit expressions suggesting that the 'eradication' of Tigrayans is needed and creating a strong sense of the 'otherness' of Tigrayans as non-humans. These disconcerting conclusions warrant further investigation.

The use of graffiti to spread hate speech was not only employed by the Ethiopian National Defence Force (ENDF), but also by the Eritrean Defence Forces (EDF). Following the outbreak of the war on 3 November 2020, it was reported on 22 November 2020 that fighting took place in the Tigray region on three fronts, Adwa, Gerhu

Sirnay, and in the South (Raya), with heavy losses (EEPA, 2020). The same report states that possibly up to 20 battalions of the EDF were taking part in the fighting on all three fronts. The presence of Eritrean forces was denied by both the Eritrean and Ethiopian leadership (EEPA, 2020). Due to the siege, no pictures were available in international media until a few media representatives were allowed to enter Tigray in the last week of February 2021. The presence of the Eritrean forces was only acknowledged by Prime Minister Abiy in a speech to the Ethiopian Parliament in March 2021. It is, therefore, relevant to investigate the presence of the Eritrean military in the semiotic landscape and interpret the meaning of what was left behind. The semiotic landscape also involves text by civilians, with implicit messages on the situation.

The objective of this study is to analyse additional graffiti within the context and discourse during the Tigray war, to reveal underlying reasoning. To investigate this, the research question was: *What are the implicit and explicit meanings of the texts available in public places during and after the Tigray war?*

Theoretical framework: The hidden transcripts in discourse

Discourse analysis considers how language, both spoken and written, enacts social and cultural perspectives and identities (Gee, 1999). The role of language is not only encoding and decoding messages, but also making the message understood in each context. Gee explains the relevance of studying language in a social situation where power is contested:

Language has a magical property: when we speak or write we craft what we have to say to fit the situation or context in which we are communicating. But, at the same time, how we speak or write creates that very situation or context. It seems, then, that we fit our language to a situation or context that our language, in turn, helped to create in the first place. (Gee, 1999, p. 11)

The language disseminated in the exchange of a message is subject to, and a reflection of, the established context.

We continually and actively build and rebuild our worlds not just through language, but through language used in tandem with actions, interactions, non-linguistic symbol

systems, objects, tools, technologies, and distinctive ways of thinking, valuing, feeling, and believing. Sometimes what we build is quite similar to what we have built before; sometimes it is not. But language-in-action is always and everywhere an active building process. (Gee, 1999, p. 11)

According to Gee (1999), discourse analysis reveals discourse to be significant in each given context, in which a sign system and ways of knowing are established to define a certain group as being different from another (p. 121-122). Gee further introduces seven building blocks for discourse analysis, which were earlier introduced in this study by Tesfa & Van Reisen (2024a). Tesfa & Van Reisen (2024a) examine the graffiti left from the 2020–2022 Tigray war in the Martyrs Commemoration Museum. The following building blocks were identified:

- **Significance:** How are situated meanings, social languages, figured worlds, intertextuality, discourses, and conversations used to build relevance or significance for things and people in context?
- **Practices (activities):** How are situated meanings, social languages, figured worlds, intertextuality, discourses, and conversations used to enact a practice (activity) or practices (activities) in context?
- **Identities:** How are situated meanings, social languages, figured worlds, intertextuality, discourses, and conversations used to enact and depict identities (socially significant kinds of people)?
- **Relationships:** How are situated meanings, social languages, figured worlds, intertextuality, discourses, and conversations used to build and sustain (or change or destroy) social relationships?
- **Politics:** How are situated meanings, social languages, figured worlds, intertextuality, discourses, and conversations used to create, distribute, or withhold social goods or to construe particular distributions of social goods as ‘good’ or ‘acceptable’ or not?
- **Connections:** How are situated meanings, social languages, figured worlds, intertextuality, discourses, and conversation

used to connect things and people or show these as relevant to each other or not – instead, being irrelevant to or disconnected from each other?

- **Sign systems and ways of knowing:** How are situated meanings, social languages, figured worlds, intertextuality, discourses, and conversations being used to privilege or disadvantage different sign systems (language, social languages, and other sorts of symbol systems) and ways of knowing? (Tesfa & Van Reisen, 2024a; Gee, 1999).

Graffiti is a communication tool that explains the political, socio-economic, and cultural context of communities from the perspective of graffiti writers. According to Bloch graffiti is “systematically produced, stylized markings of monikers, images, and symbols written on infrastructure by self-acknowledged members of the graffiti community” (Bloch, 2012, p. 51). The material expressions, visible in public spaces, can provide an insight into the mind-set of the authors who left them behind. Some, but not all, may be signs of deliberate communication. Mocking is a clear strategy that hides other meanings of the text (Claes, 2024).

Wartime graffiti are a real-time documentation of the development of the momentum, as well as indicators of the underlying and immediate causes of the war. Walker (2019) discusses that graffiti serves several purposes ranging from enthusiasm for the war to subversion and the registering of survival. It serves as a medium signifying the survival of the individual and offering a place to comment on authority (Walker, 2019).

The trend of analysing the explicit and implicit interpretations of wartime graffiti writings was among the common discourses based on the graffiti from world wars. Both the First (1914–1918) and Second (1939–1945) World Wars were characterised by the extensive use of graffiti written by soldiers (Shaikh, 2022; Usic, 2019).

Methodology

Approach

Following the study of Tesfa & Van Reisen (2024a) on graffiti left in the Martyr's Commemoration Museum in Mekelle during the 2020–2022 war, the researchers expanded their view on the semiotic landscape to widen the scope for further interpretation and triangulation of the findings of the first study. While the first study was carried out on many texts found in the museum, it was considered that these were left in one particular space, and concerning one specific 'author', the ENDF military, which used the museum as a military camp.

Therefore, the study lacked a broader scope of material that would allow interpretation of expressions left by actors other than the ENDF and the Tigray population. This research, thus, attempts to study an additional broader set of artefacts, which complement the earlier study. Considering the available artefacts, the following were selected for further study:

- Graffiti left in public places by the military who invaded Tigray: The graffiti analysed in this study was found in the Emperor Yohannes Secondary and Preparatory School in Mekelle and on the wall of the Gerhu Sirnay Primary Hospital. The graffiti in these places does not contain overtly public messages, but speaks to the mind-set of those who left the texts behind.
- Signs visible on public roads and in public places with an intention for them to be seen: A sign selected on public roads concerns a picture of a banner 'Game over, Woyane', which was circulated on social media (Twitter). The banner was photographed on a truck that was transporting retreating forces from Eritrea after the Pretoria Cessation of Hostilities Agreement, and it was intended to be seen. Other selected signboards were in public places in Mekelle equally referring to the Agreement and intended to be seen, but in these cases were placed by civilians of Mekelle.

The selection of the texts is based on the following criteria:

- The artefacts were intact, could be observed, and had a clear origin;
- The context of their expression could be investigated and interpreted.
- The artefacts provided additionality over earlier investigated material.

The criteria used for the selection of the texts are related to: volume, place, languages, nature of artefact, authors, and period during which the text was left. The intention was to ensure diverse sources. The relevance of the texts was also weighed.

Table 10.1. Selection criteria artefacts for discourse analysis

Criteria	Martyrs Commemoration Museum	Emperor Yohannes Secondary and Preparatory School	Gerhu Sirnay Primary Hospital	Banner on vehicle	Signboards in public places
Volume	Large volume (n = 142)	Large volume (n= 78)	One text	One text	Several texts (fewer than 5)
Place	Mekelle	Mekelle	Gerhu Sirnay	Shire	Mekelle
Authors	Ethiopian National Defence Force	Ethiopian National Defence Force	Eritrean soldiers	Eritrean soldiers	Tigray civilians
Languages	Multiple: Amharic, Arabic, Oromiffa, Tigrinya, English	Amharic and English	Tigrinya	Tigrinya and English	Tigrinya and English

Criteria	Martyrs Commemoration Museum	Emperor Yohannes Secondary and Preparatory School	Gerhu Sirnay Primary Hospital	Banner on vehicle	Signboards in public places
Nature of artefact	Graffiti, drawings, and text left on walls and other objects	Graffiti, drawings, and text left on whiteboard, blackboard, walls and other objects	Graffiti text left on the wall	Banners and photos on social media	Signboards with names in public places
Period	End of 2020 till mid-April 2021	End of 2020 till mid-April 2021	During the war	After the signing of the Pretoria Cessation of Hostilities Agreement	After the signing of the Pretoria Cessation of Hostilities Agreement

The graffiti found in the Martyr’s Commemoration Museum is analysed separately in a chapter by Tesfa & Van Reisen (2024a). Combining the analysis in this chapter and the analysis of the corpus found in the museum, a comparison was made which is published in Tesfa & Van Reisen (2024b).

Guided by Gee’s ‘building blocks’ for discourse analysis, the study examined graffiti found in public spaces during the 2020–2022 Tigray war. The research employed a combination of quantitative and qualitative discourse analysis. The quantitative analysis aimed to provide evidenced generalisations of the nature of the graffiti while the qualitative approach will bring interpretation of the meaning to the context. Two phone interviews were carried out after the initial analysis to clarify elements of the context. Both were with persons related to the Emperor Yohannes School. The aim was to obtain additional information about which part of the ENDF army had camped in the school, information concerning the graffiti, and their general impressions. These interviews were carried out in May 2024.

Table 10.2. Method of data collection and analysis

No.	Criteria	Approach
1	Method	Quantitative and qualitative discourse analysis
2	Study subject	Graffiti and text associated with the war
3	Data collection tool	Capturing photos and observation
4	Sites of data collection	Public spaces: (i) School (ii) Health facility (iii) Roads
5	Specific sites	Emperor Yohannes Secondary and Preparatory School (27-28 December 2020, 15-17 April 2021) Gerhu Sirnay Primary Hospital (9 July 2023) Public roads in Shire (Jan 20, 2023) and Mekelle (9 September 2024)
6	Number of collected data	Emperor Yohannes School: 83 Gerhu Sirnay Primary Hospital: 2

No.	Criteria	Approach
		Banner on truck: 1
		Public space signboard: 1
		Total graffiti content collected: 87
7	Exclusion criteria	Duplication and blurredness of image
8	Number of excluded data	9 (5 blurred graffiti that the researcher is unable to read and 4 duplications)
9	Number of graffiti content used	78
9	Coding and procedures following	The images of the graffiti expressions were first converted to picture format, listed in a spreadsheet, and then transcribed into the original language and translated into English. The translations were conducted by the first author and checked with a panel of judges (total translators to agree: n=3).
10	In-depth interview	IDI01, 13 May 2024 IDI02, 15 May 2024
10	Analysis procedures	Discourse analysis was employed by considering the content based on the 'building blocks' adapted from Gee, 1999)

The pictures captured in the Emperor Yohannes Secondary and Preparatory School were taken by a member of the school community. These were collected and crosschecked on location, as well as the class setting, with what is in the photo and videos. After the verification processes, the messages were transcribed, translated, and analysed according to the research criteria indicated in the theoretical framework. The pictures taken in the school were compared with photographs collected by the Tigray Education Bureau at the Emperor Yohannes School. The Tigray Education

Bureau provided consent for the use of the photos taken in the school.

The pictures in Gerhu Sirnay Primary Hospital were photographed by one of the authors during a research field trip in 2023. The footage of the road transport in Tigray was obtained from X (formerly Twitter) and was verified with other available sources using the picture published on various social media in 2023. The pictures in Mekelle after the signing of the Pretoria Cessation of Hostilities Agreement were taken by one of the authors in 2024.

After the outbreak of the war, the Emperor Yohannes Secondary and Preparatory School (named after Emperor Yohannes IV) located in Mekelle was used as barracks by soldiers. It was occupied from the end of 2020 till mid-April 2021. A lot of graffiti and text were left in the school. Out of the 40 texts photographed and analysed for this study, 39 were written in Amharic. The graffiti was found on walls, boards, doors, chairs and on a lesson plan. All of the graffiti includes derogatory content toward the people of Tigray.

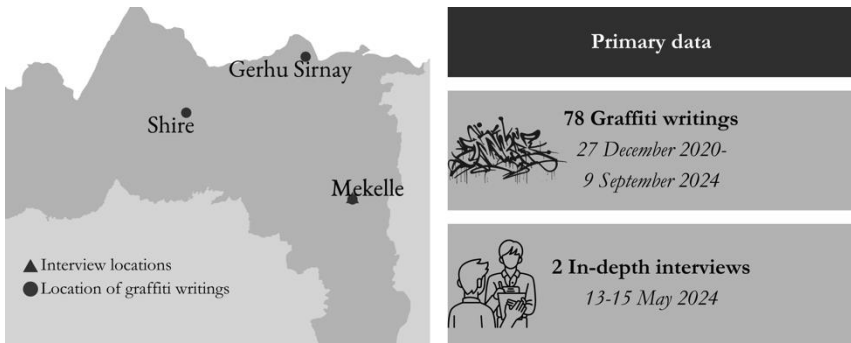


Figure 10.1. Overview of data collected and used in the study

Study sites

Four study sites were included in this study: the Emperor Yohannes School, the Gerhu Sirnay Primary Hospital, a banner on track, and signboards in public places.

The Emperor Yohannes School, located in Mekelle, the capital of Tigray, was occupied by Ethiopian soldiers for eight months from the

end of 2020 until mid-April 2021. A lot of graffiti and text were left on the school walls, boards, doors, chairs, and on a lesson plan.

Gerhu Sirnay is the centre for the Egela District in the Central Zone of Tigray bordering Eritrea. The Gerhu Sirnay Primary Hospital is the only hospital in Egela and serves a population of over 50,000 people living in the district. Its services were stopped after it was looted and destroyed by EDF following the breakout of the Tigray war. EDF soldiers also camped in the hospital during the war. The graffiti written in that hospital by the EDF soldiers is also included in this research.

The banner on a truck transporting Eritrean soldiers back to Eritrea after the war, while they were pulling out from the central part of Tigray as a result of the Pretoria Cessation of Hostilities, is also included. The vehicle was photographed on a road near the town of Shire in Western Tigray. The photograph was circulated on social media. The banner was written in Tigrinya and English.

Signboards in public places in Mekelle were photographed after the war and refer to the Pretoria Cessation of Hostilities Agreement. The text on these signboards is written in a combination of Tigrinya and English.

Results and findings

Figure 10.2 presents the analysis of the graffiti in Emperor Yohannes School, based on the discourse analysis building blocks following Gee (1999). The numbers show a positive score on each item. The total on each item is 83 (the total number of graffiti analysed in the school).

The analysis concludes that the graffiti attributed significance 66 times, while practice is designated 55 times out of the total of 83 graffiti. The soldiers identified themselves as protectors of national sovereignty, as well as of peace and security, in comparison to portraying Tigrayans as stateless traitors. Identity accounted for 69 times, while relationship was referred to 46 times out of the total of 83 graffiti texts.

Through the graffiti, the soldiers reflected their perception of there being strong relationship bonds among Ethiopians, except for

Tigrayans. Tigrayans were portrayed as being different and not seen as being Ethiopian. This contributed to an understanding of other texts mobilising opposition against Tigrayans. An example is the graffiti stating that ‘Woyane’ learnt betrayal against their own country, from their forefather Emperor Yohannes. The graffiti is a direct reference to the name of the school.

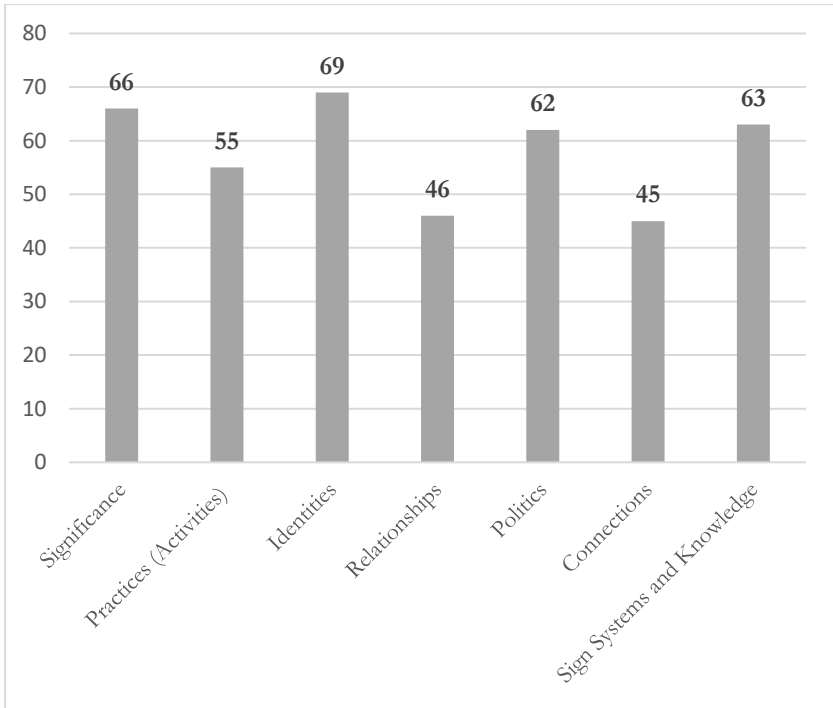


Figure 10.2. Frequency per item positively scored off the graffiti writings in Emperor Yohannes School (n=83)

The graffiti also suggests that Tigrayans are sub-human. They are portrayed as being a threat to Ethiopians. They are described as ‘cannibals’, ‘daytime hyenas’, ‘junta’, ‘traitors’, and ‘looters’. Graffiti with such references was found everywhere in the Emperor Yohannes School: on the walls, school boards, and even on a chair.

Significance

One of the elements of Gee’s discourse analysis building blocks uses significance to explain how a speaker or writer makes certain things important (put in the foreground) and less important (placed in the

background) (1999). To emphasise the importance of the historical grounding of the messages, some of the graffiti historical references are used as a technique to mobilise objectivity in seeking support for the claims that Tigrayans had historically betrayed Ethiopia. The graffiti below reads:

አጼ ዮሃንስ ጁንታ ነበር ወያኔ የሱ ታናሽ ነው።

Emperor Yohannes was junta. Woyane is its junior.

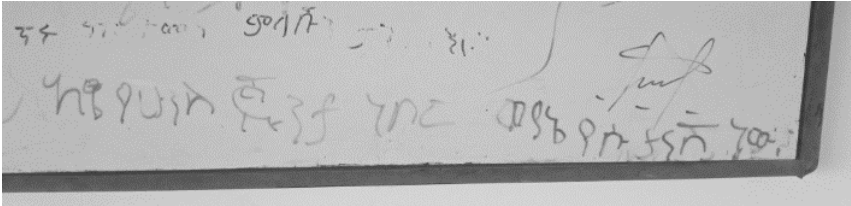


Figure 10.3. Graffiti from Emperor Yohannes School: Emperor Yohannes was a junta. Woyane is its junior
(Captured on 27 December 2020)

The graffiti in Figure 10.3 represents the Tigrayans as a junta.

Another instance of graffiti reads:

ኢትዮጵያን ከጥንት እስካሁን ለኪዳን እየሸጣት ያለ ትግሬ ብሔር ብቻ ነው ለምን?

ትግራይ ማለት

ት=ትሒን ማለት ነው

ግ=ግንድ አንሳ

ራ=ራይጥ አይጠመገጥ

ይ=ይቅዘን ቅዘናም ፈሳም ማለት ነው

ወያኔ ህወሀት ብቻ ሳይሆን ትግሬ የሚባል ብሔር ከኢትዮጵያና ከምድረገጽ መጥፋት አለበት ከሃዲ ሀገር የለውም

The only ethnic group that is selling Ethiopia for betrayal is Tigrayan. Why?

Tigray means

T=Bedbug

G=Stem stealer

R=Rats and rodents

Y=Full of grief and cowardly

Not only Woyane TPLF, but the ethnic group named Tigrayan must be eradicated from Ethiopia and the Earth. Traitors don't have a country.

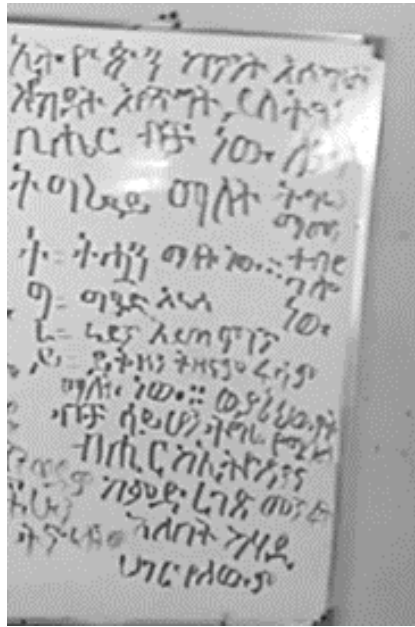


Figure 10.4. Graffiti from Emperor Yohannes School
(Captured on 27 December 2020)

The graffiti in Figure 10.4 clarifies that the references made to ‘Woyane’ are inclusive of all ethnic Tigrayans and that this inclusivity is deliberate. The soldiers started with a premise that Tigrayans are not Ethiopians, but rather a threat to Ethiopia. Then the graffiti advanced to a genocidal call, stating: “Tigrayans must be eradicated from Ethiopia and the Earth.”

The excerpt in Figure 10.5 is consistent with that in Figure 10.4, in that the soldiers reiterated that Tigrayans are non-Ethiopian. It reads:

What is the SI unit of Junta [?] Its SI unit is Woyane. They are countryless, they are placeless.

The content of these graffiti refers to Tigrayans as a non-Ethiopian out-group of enemies that must be eradicated to maintain peace and stability among the in-group Ethiopians.

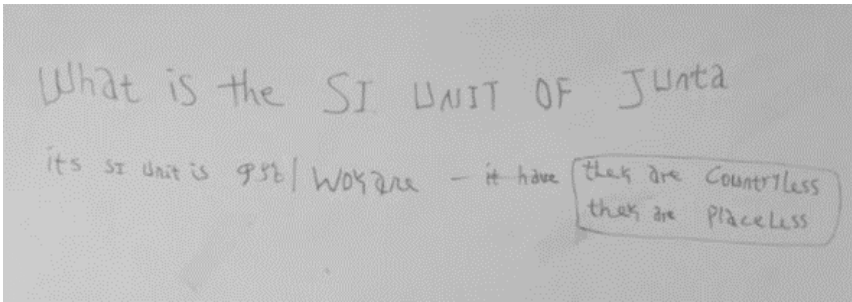


Figure 10.5. Graffiti from Emperor Yohannes School: they are countryless

(Captured on 15 April 2021)

Another dimension of demonising ethnic Tigrayans is by associating culturally sensitive words with Tigrayans. The graffiti excerpt in Figure 10.6 states that Tigrayans are followers of the Devil’s code 666, which is culturally determined as immoral among Ethiopians. It reads:

ለማንኛውም እኔ ትምህርት ቤት ነው። የፊት ትምህርት ማስተማር የሽፍትና የአዳር ቤት ነው። ምድር 666 ወያኔ ትምህርት ቤት ከፈትኩ ብሎ ፊት ከፈተ ይገርማል። የወያኔ መጨረሻ እኔ ነው ምድር ፊት ቆሻሻ ሁሉ ዜጋ ከማስተማር ይልቅ ኮንዶም ትሰበስባለህ አንተን ብሎ መምህር ፊት ኮንዶም ፊት አያትህ አንተም ትጠቀማለህ ወያኔ።

Anyways is this a school? This is rather a sex education school where people spend the night. This is the land of 666, [this is a symbol that stands for the condemned Satanism in the Ethiopian context], amazing Woyane opened a sexual education institution; assuming it’s a school. This is Woyane’s dead end. These pieces of garbage you collect condoms instead of schooling citizens. How on earth you can be considered as a teacher? You and your grandfather are used to condoms, Woyane.

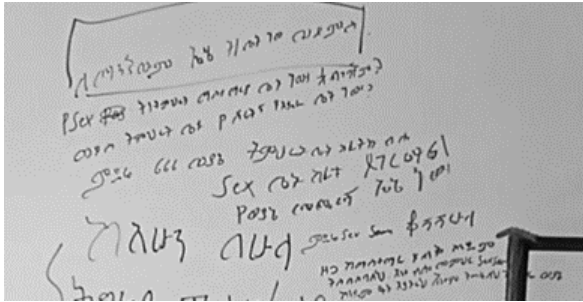


Figure 10.6. Graffiti from Emperor Yohannes School: Land of 666
 (Captured on 28 December 2020)

The number 666, often referred to as ‘the number of the beast’, has its origins in the Bible. Specifically, the New Testament 13:18 says “this calls for wisdom: let the one who has understanding calculate the number of the beast, for it is the number of a man, and his number is 666”. This verse is part of a broader passage that describes two beasts. The first beast emerges from the sea, and the second beast comes from the Earth, enforcing the worship of the first beast and its image. In eschatology (the study of end times), 666 is often seen as a sign of the coming Antichrist, who will appear in the last days before Christ’s return. The number serves as a mark of those who align themselves with this figure of ultimate evil.

The graffiti writings follow three mechanisms: (i) to dissociate Tigrayans from other Ethiopians (ii) to mobilise Ethiopians for the eradication of Tigrayans and (iii) to mobilise an undercurrent of fear against the power of Tigrayans. The first mechanism uses the historical context to claim that Tigrayans were and still are betrayers of Ethiopian nationalism. The second mechanism associates culturally sensitive topics with the habits of Tigrayans. In a religious country, culture and religion are among the most influential methods is to frame Tigrayans as followers of 666. This is an automatic call for these communities to join the war against Tigray to protect their religious and cultural values. The third mechanism is heightening the significance of the problem not as a political or social problem, but rooted in deep religious and spiritual values. The soldiers indicate in the graffiti that eradicating Tigrayans is the only solution to protect Ethiopia from ‘stateless traitors’ who have evil spiritual powers.

Practices

Activities are conventional ways that people with certain identities have developed to function, what they are interested in, or to explain how they portray the actions of their enemies (Gee, 1999). The graffiti frequently linked the school education to the name-giver of the school, Emperor Yohannes. This graffiti in Figure 10.7) states:

ደደብ ጌታቸው አረዳ፣ ደደብ አቦይ ጸሃዖ የባንዳው የአጼ የሐንሰ ዘር የሆኑት የልጅ ልጆች ሚናቸውን ተጫውተዋል በነበሩበት ወይም በቆዩበት ስራ ውጤታማ ጁንታ መሆን አገራቸውን በመከድና ሰለዘህ እነዚህ ያልተማሩ የሚመስሉ ነገር ግን ሽልማት በአለም አቀፍ አሸባሪነት ተሸልመዋል።

The ignorant Getachew Reda, and ignorant Abay Tsehaye, the grand sons of the bandit Emperor Yohannes did their role. They performed very well being a Junta, betraying one's own country. These ignorant are provided with international awards in terrorism.

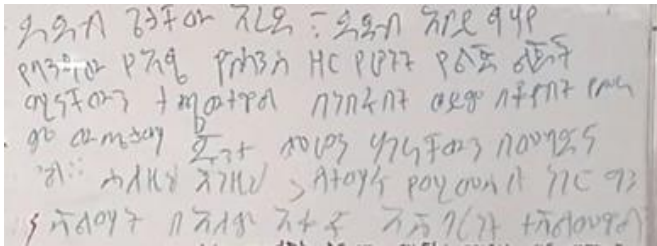


Figure 10.7. Graffiti from Emperor Yohannes School: The Ignorant Leadership

(Captured on 28 December 2020)

These claims attempt to links the Tigray leadership directly with Emperor Yohannes (a descendant), after whom the school is named. The graffiti emphasises the school environment of the graffiti by juxtaposing it against the qualification of ‘ignorance’ attached to the TPLF leaders.

The graffiti in Figure 10.8 reads:

ወያኔ ማለት ሀገር መከዳት የተማረው ከጥንት አያቶቹ ከነ አጼ የሐንሰ ነገሠ አጼ የሐንሰ ለጦር መሳርያና ለሰልጣን ብሎ አጼ ቴዎድሮስን አሉንግሊዝ ሀገር የሸጠ ሰላይ ተላላኪ ሌባ ነበር ወያኔ ጁንታው ቡድን ደግሞ በተጨባጭ በሽታ በዘር ስለሆነ ከአጼ የሐንሰ የተማረውን መከዳት የባንዳነት ትምህርት በተግባር።

Woyane learnt betrayal of one's own country for its ancient ancestors like Emperor Yohannes. Emperor Yohannes was a spy messenger who handed over Emperor Tewodros to England in exchange for weapons. Given that disease transmits hereditarily, Woyane Junta practised what was learnt from Emperor Yohannes.

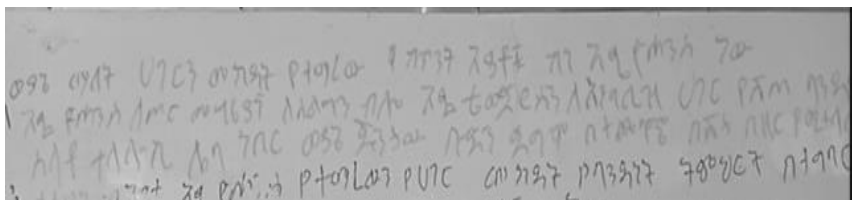


Figure 10.8. Graffiti from Emperor Yohannes School: Learnt from Emperor Yohannes

(Captured on 28 December 2020)

Some of the graffiti images also accuse the Emperor Yohannes School environment of ‘teaching’ the students about the TPLF. These contain political messages. The general sentiments expressed are frustration and blaming the TPLF for a bad situation in Ethiopia and accusing the TPLF of benefitting Tigray over the rest of Ethiopia.

The sharp mockery in the graffiti in Figure 10.9 also relates directly to the place where the graffiti was found, a school:

እሺ ተማሪዎች ስርቆት ምን እንደሆነ አወቃችሁ በጣም ጥሩ ወያኔ ኢትዮጵያን እንዴት እንደዘረፉት ያስተምህራችኋል። መልካም ትምህርት ህወሀት ለስርቆት መነሻ ወያኔ ለዘረፉ መነሻ መልካም የዘረፉ ግዜ ይሁንልክ ደደቡ ህወሀት ወያኔ ጁንታዉ ፈሳም ነዉ።

Ok students, great that you know what theft is. It teaches you how Woyane looted Ethiopia. Have a nice class. TPLF took irreversible commitment to rob; TPLF took irreversible commitment to loot. Have a nice looting season. The ignorant TPLF junta farts.

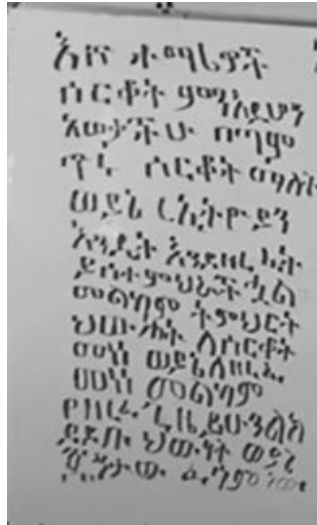


Figure 10.9. Graffiti from Emperor Yohannes School: Have a nice class

(Captured on 27 December 2020)

The graffiti writings portrayed the TPLF as a ‘thief’ who ‘looted’ Ethiopia and suggested with sharp irony that students should take lessons from this.

The graffiti in Figure 10.10 reads:

ኢትዮጵያን ከጥንት አሰካሁን ለከደት እየሸጣት ያለ ትግሬ ብሔር ብቻ ነዉ ለምን

The only ethnic group that is selling Ethiopia for betrayal is Tigrayan. Why?

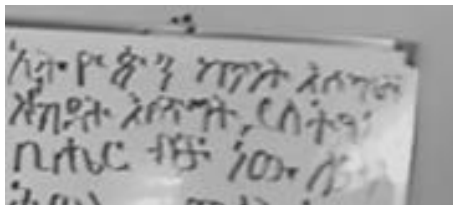


Figure 10.10. Graffiti from Emperor Yohannes School: Betrayal

(Captured on 27 December 2020)

This graffiti says that the soldiers framed Tigrayans as an ethnic group that exposed Ethiopia to danger.

The graffiti in Figure 10.11 is also explicit:

ቁጩ ከአሁን በኋላ ትግራይ ፖሊስ (ልዩ ሀይል) ብሎ ነገር የለም አባታች ህዳር 21 03 2013::

Finished, from now onwards there is no more Tigray police (Tigray Special Forces). It is dead. November 21 03 2013 [Ethiopian Calendar].

The date converts to Monday, 30 November 2020 in the Gregorian calendar.

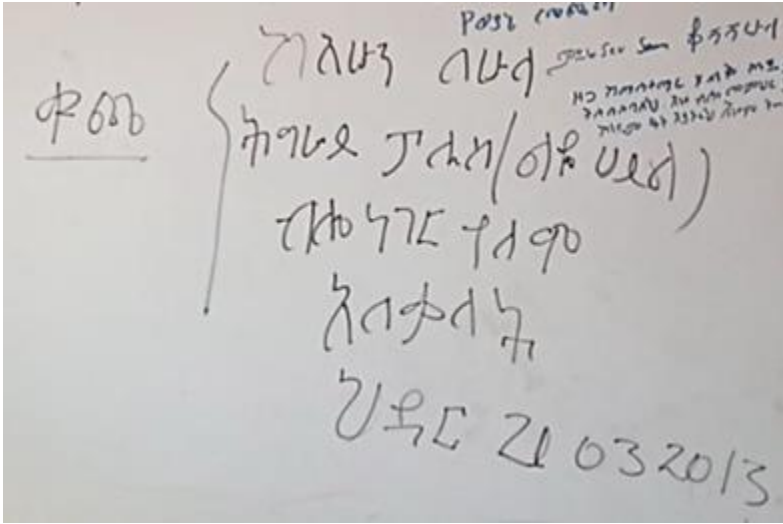


Figure 10.11. Graffiti from Emperor Yohannes School: Tigray Special Forces is dead

(Captured on 28 December 2020)

The soldiers stated, in the graffiti, that they had destroyed the Tigray Defence Forces, which is consistent with the claim of Ethiopian Government on the same day:

Tigray’s leaders ‘on the run’ says Ethiopian Prime Minister Abiy. Ethiopia’s Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed said on Monday [30 November 2020] that leaders from the Tigray People’s Liberation Front (TPLF) had fled from Tigray’s regional capital Mekelle, after federal government troops claimed to have captured the city. (RFI, 2020)

Hence, the content of the graffiti “Special Forces is Dead” timed on 30 November 2020, is remarkably consistent with the announcement

by the Prime Minister of Ethiopia in the Parliament that the Tigray leadership had fled. This shows that the graffiti was not random, but that these were well contextualised in the situation and that they were aware of this situation.

Making the conversation one about ethnic dominance, the graffiti in Figure 10.12 reads:

ካሁን በኋላ ትግሬ መሪ አይሆንም ለትግሬ አማራ መዳህኒቱ ነፊ አንድ አማራ 150 ትግሬ መዳህኒቱ ነፊ ካለውቃችሁ ወያኔን ጠይቋት

Forever from now onwards Tigrayan would never be a leader again. It is Ambara who knows how to handle Tigrayans. One Ambaran will suffice to deal with 50 Tigrayans. You can ask Woyane's testimony if you are not aware of it.

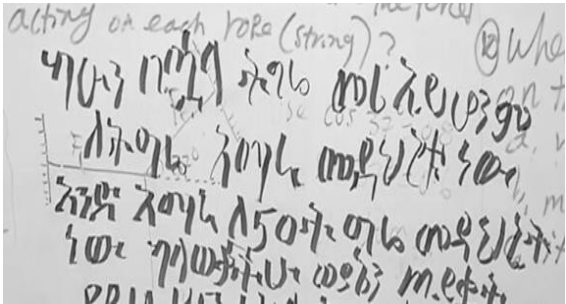


Figure 10.12. Graffiti from Emperor Yohannes School: Tigrayans will never be a leader again
(Captured on 27 December 2020)

This graffiti claimed that ethnic Tigrayans must not be nominated as leaders, taking lessons from their past. The ratio of 1:50 fighting capability serves to belittle the self-defence capability of ethnic Tigrayans as compared to other ethnic groups in Ethiopia.

The graffiti in Figure 10.13 found in the Emperor Yohannes School reads:

ወያኔ ሞተ

Woyane is dead



Figure 10.13. Graffiti on the wall of the looted Emperor Yohannes School: Woyane is dead
(Captured on 15 April 2021)

The graffiti from Emperor Yohannes School in Figure 10.13 reads: “Woyane is dead” – starkly placed among the destruction of the facility.

Making an explicit reference to the slogan introduced by President Isayas of Eritrea in January 2018, ‘Game over, Woyane’, this slogan reads:

ገ/ጸኔ ገ/ሀጻን አከትጥልሁል

The game is over G/Tsion G/Kid

The content directly referenced, mocked and belittled the President of Tigray, Debretsion Gebremichael. Both Debretsion and Gebretsion are common names in Tigray. Debretsion means the crown of Tsion (Zion) while Gebretsion is the servant of Tsion (Zion). The authors may have confused his name. Sometimes a distinction is made and only the TPLF leadership is addressed. In

other messages it seems that the entire ethnic group of Tigrayans is addressed. This can be seen in the graffiti in Figure 10.14:

የወያኔ ህልም ታሪክ ማበላሸት እና ሀገር ማፍረስ የባንዳነት ሚና መጫወት ወያኔ ጁንታ ቡድን በጣም ባለፈው 2011 ዓመተ ምህረት በወጣው ሃገር ከዳተኝነት ትግራይን ወክለው 0 በሚባል የማህይዎዎች ደረጃ ከሞትኩ ሰርዶ አይብቀል የሚል የዘመናችን ድንጋይ አህያ ነው ተ*ዳ ወያኔ:

*The dreams of Woyane is destroying history, destruction of country and acting the role of bandits. In the last 2011 (Ethiopian Calendar), Woyane Junta group representing Tigray won 0 award of the ignorants for being traitors. They practiced there is no need for the grass to grow after my passing away [Amharic proverb]. They are stones, donkeys, fu** Woyane.*

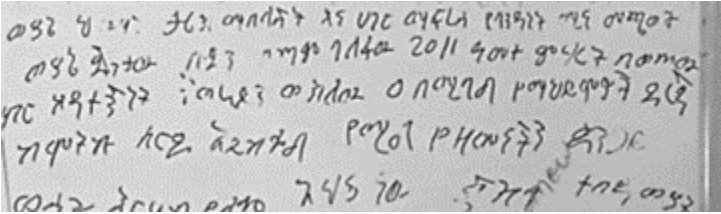


Figure 10.14. Graffiti from Emperor Yohannes School: The dreams of Woyane is destroying history
(Captured on 27 December 2020)

Another graffiti (Figure 10.15) reads “Woyane. Game Over”. In this overt political messages the TPLF leaders are mentioned and the ‘Woyane’ are referred as a “junta group”.

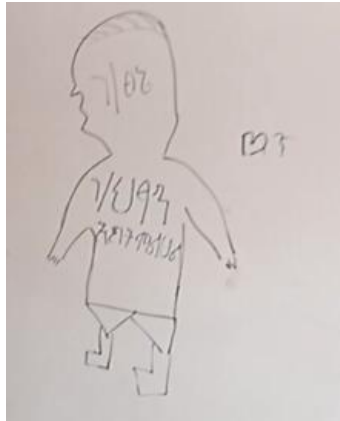


Figure 10.15. Graffiti from Emperor Yohannes School: Game Over Woyane

(Captured on 28 December 2020)

The same text “Game over, Woyane” was posted on a banner placed on a truck, carrying Eritrean soldiers from Western Tigray back to Eritrea almost three months after the signing of the Pretoria Cessation of Hostilities Agreement (Figure 10.16).



Figure 10.16. Banner on a truck, carrying Eritrean soldiers

(@alex_temelso, on Twitter [X], Jan 20, 2023)

The photograph of the truck with the banner in shown Figure 10.16 was posted on social media, by what would seem to be a supporter of

the Eritrean campaign in Tigray (@alex_temelso, Jan 20, 2023, on Twitter (X) with the title: “This is EDF (Aradom) leaving Tigray after the defeat of TPLF with our motto Game Over”. EDF refers to the Eritrean Defence Forces, which participated in the 2020–2022 Tigray war as allies of the Ethiopian National Defence Force. It is of interest to note that the banner on the truck is written both in English and in Tigrinya. The use of the English language indicates that the audience of the content written on the banner is, among others, an international audience. Under the English message, the same message is painted in Tigrinya.

The term ‘Aradom’ seems to be a stark reminder of Tigray fighters being trapped by their opponents. Aradom is a Tigrinya word that refers to glorifying someone whose heroism puts the enemy in terror. The story of Aradom refers to a mountain in Tigray that is famous for the Battle of Enderta. The invading Italian army tried to capture this place. In April 1939 fighters opposing the Italian invasion hid in a cave in the mountain and were attacked by poison gas and bombs and the story is that no one escaped. The reference on the banner is a stark reminder of the underlying narrative, that Tigrayans are trapped and there is no exit for them to escape. The Tigrinya ከፍብኪ ኢና translates to “That’s how we are”, but it may have a meaning underneath: “We are proud of what we have done and we have shown our capacity”.



Figure 10.17. Eritreans in the diaspora singing about the war in Tigray (@HeranTigray. Twitter [X], Jan 20, 2023)

The Tweet “Game Over Woyane” is a response to a propaganda message and photo captioned: “Eritreans living in the diaspora cheering to a song that says ‘Terrorize them, until they say, Master, you make them kneel on their knees’. Known for their cruelty and doing despicable things in Tigray, they boast through such fascist songs” (Figure 10.17, @HeranTigray. Jan 20, 2023). The picture of the truck with the Eritrean military leaving Tigray after the signing of the Pretoria Agreement (Figure 1016) was spread widely on social media. The picture shows Eritrean supporters wrapped in Eritrean flags, celebrating and dancing at the thought that Tigrayan people have been brought down on “their knees” (Figure 10.17).

Identities

Identities in the discourse are assigned to people as a result of similarities or differences with the speaker or writer in language, socialisation, political views, religion, and other classifications (Gee, 1999). Given that various actors with different languages participated in the Tigray war, language can serve as one of the indicators of the identity of the graffiti writers.

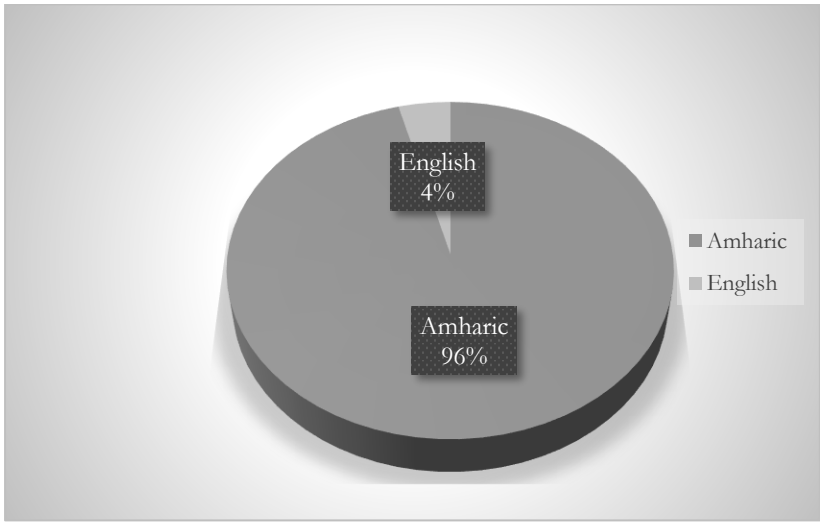


Figure 10.18. Frequency of language employed in the graffiti in Emperor Yohannes School (n=83)

In the Emperor Yohannes School, 96% of the graffiti was written in Amharic, while the remaining 4% was a combination of Amharic and English or only English. An example of a graffiti English is shown in Figure 10.19.

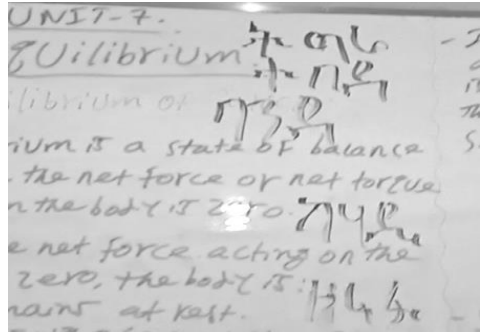


Figure 10.19. Graffiti from Emperor Yohannes School: English language

(Captured on 27 December 2020)

The graffiti also provides indicators of identity. One of the graffiti in the school (Figure 10.20) reads:

አገልዚ ኮሚንደንትና ልዩ ኃይሎች ጠቅላይ መምሪያ

General Military Department of Agazi Commando and Special Forces

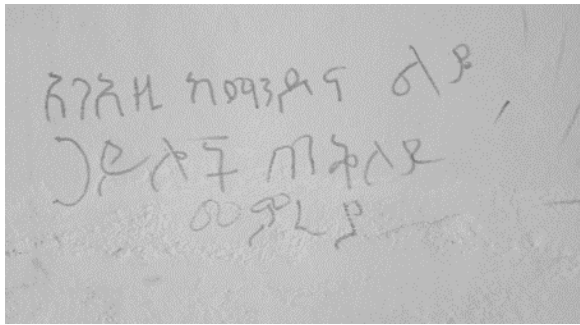


Figure 10.20. Graffiti from Emperor Yohannes School: General Military Department of Agazi Commando and Special Forces

(Captured on 28 December 2020)

Another indicator is the list of soldiers found in a classroom of Emperor Yohannes School. The handwritten list of two pages

contains the names of 44 soldiers. The names written in these papers are common names used in Ethiopia.

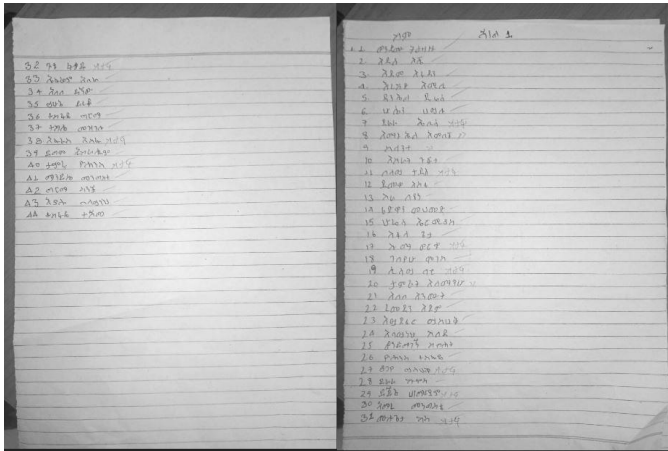


Figure 10.21. List of soldiers found in Emperor Yohannes School
(Captured on 17 April 2021)

In an interview, a member of the Emperor Yohannes School community said that “the soldiers who captured the Emperor Yohannes School were battalions from the 24th Regiment of the ENDF. Rosters of soldiers’ list and other indicators also confirm the same” (IDI01, 13 May 2024, phone interview with Tesfa). The interviewee said:

as soon as the soldiers left the school we found computers that had a tag of the Martyrs Memorial Museum while people in the museum also sent us some of our computers thrown in the compound of the museum. (IDI01, 13 May 2024, phone interview with Tesfa)

This showed that the ENDF soldiers camped in the Martyr’s Commemoration Museum and those in the Emperor Yohannes School were likely to have been in contact with each other and exchanged items.

Signs of the Eritrea military participation in the invasion were left on the walls of the Geru Sirnay Primary Hospital. The picture in Figure 10.22 was taken on 9 July 2023. The graffiti written on the wall was left after the soldiers demolished the hospital. The graffiti reads:

ኤርትራ ትሰዕር ኣያ ወይን?

Eritrea is winning. Hopeless Woyane.

The more general sense of the text can be interpreted as Eritrea winning the battles in Tigray. The accompanying graffiti “ኣያ ወይን?” can be translated as “Poor Woyane” or “Hopeless Woyane”, mocking the Tigrayan people as an ethnic group.



Figure 10.22. Graffiti on the wall of Gerhu Sirnay Hospital. Tigrinya: Eritrea is winning. Hopeless Woyane
(Captured on 9 July 2023)

Pictures of the health facility in Gerhy Sirnay show that it was heavily damaged and ransacked (Figure 10.23).



Figure 10.23. Overview of pictures of the destruction of Gerhu Sirnay Hospital

(Captured on 9 July 2023)

The destruction enhances the meaning of the graffiti, which points to the narrative, namely, that Tigrayans have been attacked by Eritrea and that they have not been able to defend themselves.

Relationships

As one of the building blocks of discourse analysis, relationships explain how the meaning, context, language, and intertextuality are used to either build and sustain or change/destroy social relationships (Gee, 1999).

Portraying Tigrayans as a non-human out-group, which is compared to human Ethiopians, the graffiti represents Tigrayans as ‘bedbugs’, ‘liars’, ‘farts’, ‘thieves’, ‘cowards’, ‘punishers’, ‘dirty’, ‘daylight hyena’, ‘numb’, ‘patient’ as well as part of ‘the tribe of poverty’.

An offensive graffiti (Figure 10.24) found in Emperor Yohannes School reads:

ትሆናም ጸላ

Bedbug tsila

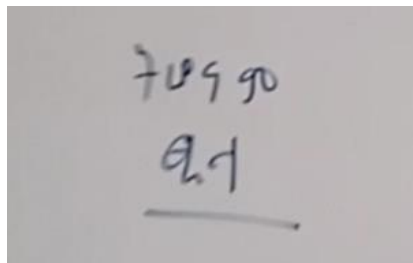


Figure 10.24. Graffiti from Emperor Yohannes School: Bedbug tsila

(Captured on 28 December 2020)

Tsila is a derogatory word that is used to identify or characterise Tigrayans as being different from other Ethiopians. Tsila is slang used in the major cities in Ethiopia and by other Ethiopians (not Tigrayans), who are involved (for instance, as part of law enforcement

or intelligence) to identify Tigrayans. Initially ‘Tsila’ may be a reference – a hidden transcript – to identify potential snitches. The term ‘Tsila’ is not a new term used in the war, it has been used to refer to Tigrayans for at least a decade. The term began as a coded communication so that another person would not understand what was being referred to. In the context of the graffiti in the Emperor Yohannes School, the term ‘Tsila’ demeans Tigrayans. ‘Tsila’ singles out Tigrayans in Ethiopia.

Associating Tigrayans with poverty (contradicting the other message that Tigrayans enriched themselves and have stolen from others), the following graffiti (Figure 10.25) reads:

የደህ ዘር ሁላ ትግራይ ኑር ከሚሉኝ ወጭ ሃገር ብሰደድ ይሻለኛል

The tribe of poverty; I prefer to migrate overseas than living in Tigray.

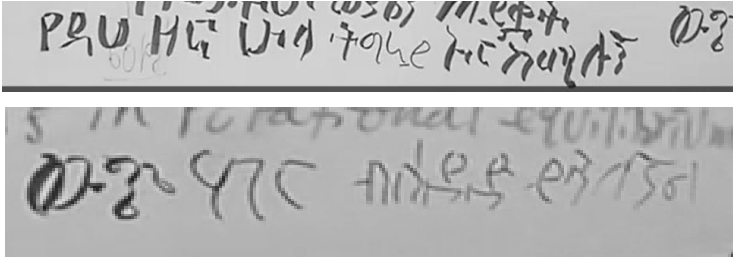


Figure 10.25. Graffiti from Emperor Yohannes School: The tribe of poverty

(Captured on 28 December 2020)

In contrast with the above ‘tribe of poverty’ message, the graffiti below identifies Tigrayans as ‘liars’:

ትግራይ እርሃብ የለም

There is no hunger in Tigray. It is fake.

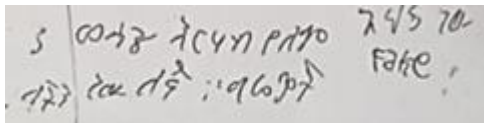


Figure 10.26. Graffiti from Emperor Yohannes School: There is no hunger in Tigray

(Captured on 28 December 2020)

Sexually explicit demeaning messages were also found. The sexually explicit words were associate with ‘Woyane’, ‘Tigrayans’, ‘Junta’, and ‘TPLF’.



Figure 10.27. Graffiti from Emperor Yohannes School: Sexually explicit graffiti

(Captured on 15 April 2021)

A sexist graffiti, effeminising Tigrayans as a way of reducing their worth, reads “Woyane Tigrayan fu**.” Another expression “ወያኔ ግጣታም ቅን**ም” means “Woyane Garbage, Big Clit**”. The sexually explicit language, equating Tigrayans with physical women, uses sexist categories of subjugation to degrade.

Politics

According to Gee (1999), in discourse politics, meanings, writings and conversations can be used to create, distribute, or withhold social goods. The graffiti expressions used key references, such as ‘Woyane’, ‘Junta’, ‘TPLF’, and ‘ethnic Tigrayans’ to attribute responsibility, particularly for the actions of the Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF) regime. These references are associated with ‘sneak’, ‘snitch’, ‘thief’, ‘cannibals’, ‘power losers’, ‘coward’, ‘racist’, and ‘hunchback dog’.

A graffiti found in Emperor Yohannes School reads:

ሰው በሎች ናቸው ወያኔ ማለት የአገሪቱን ንብረት ሲበዙበዝ የኖረ ሌባ አጃጂው ቡድን አገሩን የሚከዳ ሌባ ቡድን ነው ወያኔ ማለት የመከላከያን ገንዘብና ንብረት ሲሰርቅ የኖረ በመዋሪኤ ሆነ በሌላ አመቸኝቶ ሲዘርፍ የኖረ ጁንታ ቡድን ነው አሁን ግን አቢቃለት ዘረፋም ሆነ ሌላ ነገር የለም ግፍ ሰርቶ ሞተ ቂጡን ተ ዳ በመላጣ!!!!*

*They are cannibals. Woyane means a group that was looting the country's resources that already betrayed one's own nation. Woyane is a junta group that used to rob the military's finances and resources by requesting contributions and other forms. Now it is over. There is no looting and other crimes. It is already dead while committing crime. Get fu***d in naked an*s!!!*

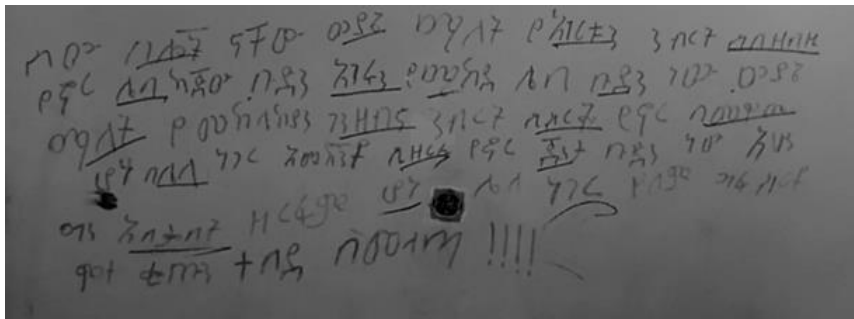


Figure 10.28. Graffiti from Emperor Yohannes School: Looting the country's resources

(Captured on 15 April 2021)

It carries the message that the political game of the Tigray people is over, ‘finished’ – a theme that is also expressed in other texts. These graffiti represent Tigrayans as ‘cannibals’, thus framing Tigrayans as non-humans, even anti-humans, who eat other peoples. These expressions contribute to the mobilisation of people against Tigrayans to protect themselves.

Some of the graffiti writings mocked the death of TPLF leaders, showing the dehumanisation of the TPLF leadership in the mind of the authors of the graffiti. In the graffiti image below, a Tigrayan former Chief of Army, Samora, who fought on the side of Ethiopian PM Abiy during the Tigray war, was mentioned in derogatory claims alongside the TPLF leadership. The graffiti (Figure 10.29) reads:

አበይ ጸሐይ ደብረ ጺወን ጌታቸዉ እረዳ ሳምራ ሌባ ታደሰ ወረደ ሰባት ነጋ የሌቦች መንጋ በተረፈ ሰማይ ቤት ለመሄድ እንኳን አቢቃችሁ ከጥንት አንስቶ ለምንድ ነዉ ሁል ጊዜ ሀገራችሁን ትከታላችሁ ባንዳ ናችሁ ለምን ትኖራላችሁ ቢቃ ኢትዮጵያን ተዋት ልቀቋት

The Abay Tsebaye, Debretsion, Getachew Reda, and Samora thefts; Sibhat Nega the gang of thieves. Anything else to say congratulations on your passing away. Since

ancient times, why do you always betray your country? You are bandits whom there is no need of your existence. No more leave Ethiopia alone.

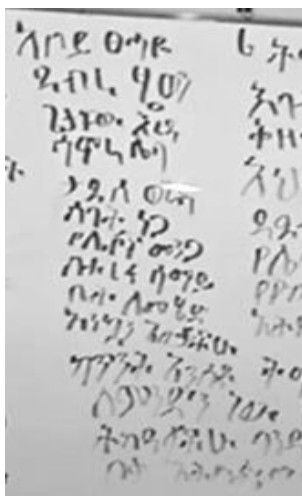


Figure 10.29. Graffiti from Emperor Yohannes School

(Captured on 28 December 2020)

This indicates that these hate speech utterances are not only directed at those who refused to work with Abiy Ahmed; it rather directed to all Tigrayans as an ethnic group.

Another excerpt (figure 10.30) reads:

አህያው ትሬን ብ*ት ከአ100ሺህ ትግሬ አንድ ውሻ ይሻላል

*Tigrayan the donkey; Fu** him. One dog is better than 1,000 Tigrayans.*

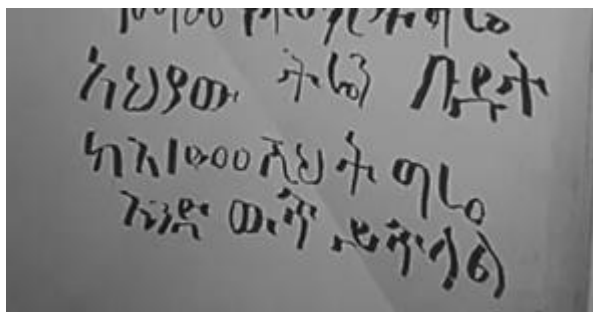


Figure 10.30. Graffiti from Emperor Yohannes School: Tigrayan the donkey

(Captured on 27 December 2020)

Another graffiti (Figure 10.31) gives a more distinct qualification

ትግሬ ማለት እባብ ነጩ ቅዝናም ሌባ ፈሳም አህያ ሌባ ሹጣም ደደብ ልክስክስ የሌባው የባንዳው የሮሃንስ ዘር ናቸው ኢትዮጵያን የማትወዱ ትግሬ ኢትዮጵያን አትወዱም።

Tigrayan means snake, coward, thief, fart, donkey, thief, stupid. It is because you are the tribes of the bandit Yohannes that you don't like Ethiopia. Tigrayans don't like Ethiopia.

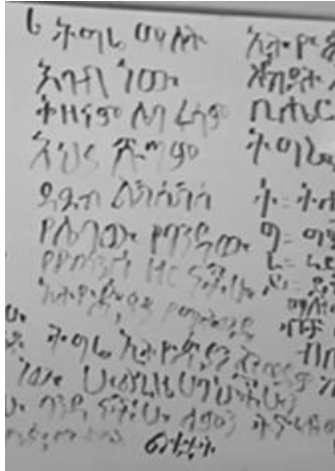


Figure 10.31. Graffiti from Emperor Yohannes School

(Captured on 28 December 2020)

This qualification also speaks to the interpretation that Tigrayans are not Ethiopians. They are different and less worthy to be Ethiopians, not worthy to live on the Earth.

The graffiti left in the Emperor Yohannes Secondary and Preparatory School gives some clear reading of the term ‘Woyane’ as an ethnic group that does not belong to Ethiopia, which has undesirable treacherous traits, and the dehumanising messages portrays the meaning that the Tigray people are not worthy of existence. Some messages would seem to identify genocidal intent, such as in for instance: “there is no need for your existence” (Figure 10.29).

Connections

Connections refer to how meaning, language, and discourses are used to make things and people connected or disconnected from each

other (Gee, 1999). Through graffiti, the soldiers connected Tigrayans with animals, immoral practices, and non-human behaviours. The corpus of messages reveals strong hate speech, singling out Tigrayans as a lesser group, and blaming Tigrayans as a whole for all of the bad things in Ethiopia. There are also overt genocidal messages. The graffiti portrayed Tigrayans as ‘bedbugs’, ‘rats’, ‘daytime hyenas’, and ‘cannibals’ which must be ‘eradicated’. The graffiti in Figure 32 reads:

ትግሬን ማመን ቀብሮ ገሎ ነው

To trust Tigrayan is after you killed and buried them.



Figure 10.32. Graffiti from Emperor Yohannes School: To trust Tigrayan is after you killed and buried them

(Captured on 27 December 2020)

The above aggressive graffiti speaks to the same intent of eradication of all the Tigrayans. A similar message is conveyed in this graffiti (Figure 10.33):

ትግሬ ደውደም ያለም ኮሮና

Destroy Tigrayan the Corona [virus] of the world.

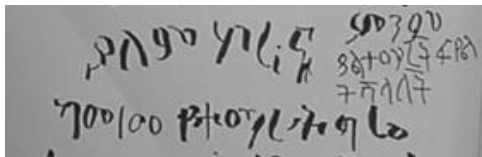


Figure 10.33. Graffiti from Emperor Yohannes School: The Coronavirus of the world

(Captured on 27 December 2020)

This graffiti makes a reference to the COVID-19 pandemic, which was a killer-virus that took the world by surprise in 2020–2021, the same time as when this graffiti was written.

Another graffiti (Figure 10.34) reads:

ሹቆናም ትግሬ የሚባል ብሄር ኢትዮጵያዊ አይለም

The Tigray (Tigrayan) ethnicity is not Ethiopian.

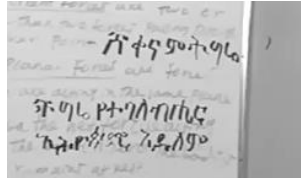


Figure 10.34. Graffiti from Emperor Yohannes School

(Captured on 17 April 2021)

A mocking sign is left on a school form of a teacher’s lesson plan, which is filled out as:

Teacher: TPLF

Department: Patient

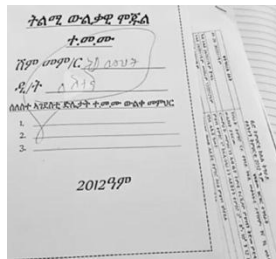


Figure 10.35. Graffiti from Emperor Yohannes School: TPLF – patient

(Captured on 17 April 2021)

That education should not be associated with Tigrayans, who are portrayed as stupid, speaks from this one:

ትግሬ ቢማርም 0+0=0 ነጩ

Whatever Tigrayan learns, it is all the same. You cannot get different number in the sum of $0+0=0$.

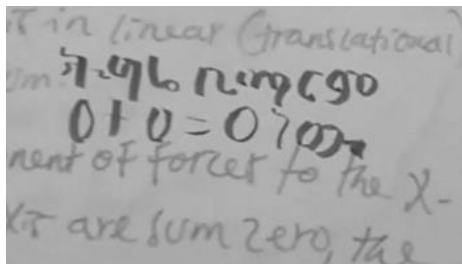


Figure 10.36. Graffiti from Emperor Yohannes School: $0+0=0$
(Captured on 17 April 2021)

One graffiti written in English reads (Figure 10.37):

*Learning is burning for Tigray Nation So Woyane Double Fu***

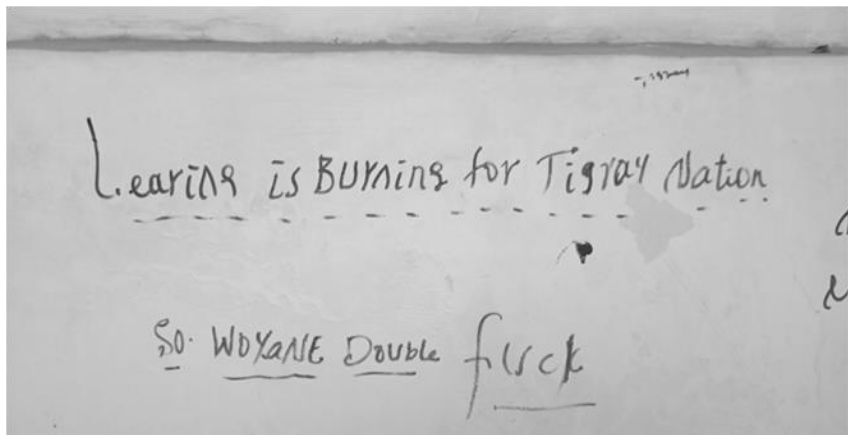
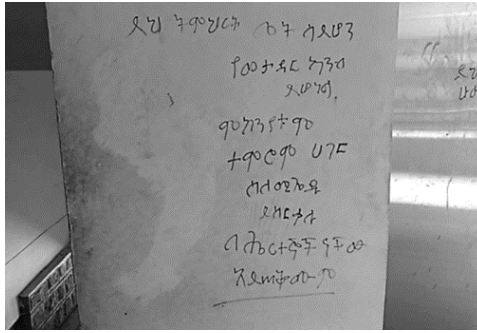


Figure 10.37. Graffiti from Emperor Yohannes School: Learning is burning
(Captured on 17 April 2021)

Another graffiti adds to this theme, by identifying a reason why the school should no longer be used (Figure 10.38):

ይህ ትምህርት ቤት ሳይሆን የወታደር ካምፕ ይሆናል። ምክንያቱም ተምሮም ሃገር ስለሚጎዱ ይሰርቃሉ ብሄርተኞች ናቸው አይጠቅሙም።

This will no longer continue as a school. This is because their learning was utilised to exploit the country. They are useless ethnocentrists.



**Figure 10.38. Graffiti from Emperor Yohannes School: useless
ethnocentrists**
(Captured on 15 April 2021)

The reference to ‘ethnocentrists’ reflects the ethnic hatred that is surfacing in the graffiti texts in reference to the Tigray ethnic group.

Sign systems and ways of knowledge

The last element of studying text is to identify what sign systems and ways of knowledge are referenced (Gee, 1999). In the graffiti in the Emperor Yohannes School, Tigrayans are presented as a danger to Ethiopia. The conclusion that is drawn from this is clear. It reads:

አሁን የቀረን ትግሬን ማጥፋት ነው።

Now the remaining task we have is to eradicate Tigrayans.

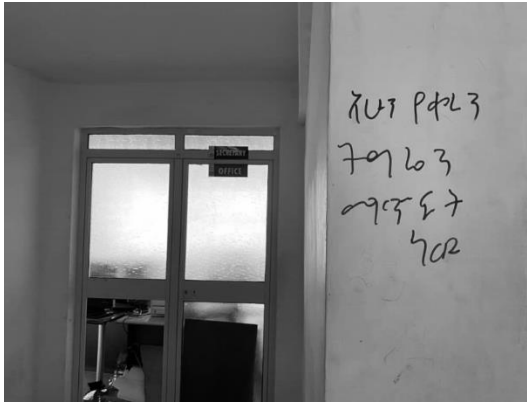


Figure 10.39. Graffiti from Emperor Yohannes School: Now, the remaining task we have is to eradicate Tigrayans
(Captured on 17 April 2021)

After the war, the term 'Pretoria' has a new significance in Tigray, following the signing of the Agreement on Cessation of Hostilities on 2 November 2022. This is clear in the semiotic landscape. A few clubs and restaurants put up signboards with a name referencing 'Pretoria'. The picture below was taken on 9 September 2023. The text is in Tigrinya and in English. The Pretoria Nightclub is a reference to the Pretoria Agreement on the Cessation of Hostilities. It reveals the resumption of normal life and pleasure, but it is also possibly, with a sense of irony, pointing to the unresolved outstanding issues.



Figure 10.40. Pretoria Nightclub: Pretoria Night Club
(Captured on 9 September 2023)

The sense of irony comes immediately to mind when someone in Tigray is shown the picture, and he responds:

Ha

Is the drink needed to not even visualize how the Pretoria Agreement squashed justice for victims, wherever they are?

So, as not to come into one's real sense that all these crimes happened but nothing is done about them.

Thanks for sharing. (WhatsApp message to MvR, 9 February 2024)

These are perceived as amusing, but also serious pointers to the new period following the signing of the Pretoria Agreement. Whether permanent or temporary, the Pretoria Cessation of Hostilities Agreement stopped the war, but was unable to bring about accountability and justice. It has not developed into a peace agreement. In many places in Tigray, other than Mekelle, the guns have not stopped, and the occupation continued up to the time of publishing. Hence, the 'Pretoria Night Club' may be a sign that Tigrayans are alive and kicking, that a new status quo has seen the light of day, but that the knowledge of a project to eradicate Tigrayans, is still written on the wall.

Discussion: The central image of the hyena

The portrayal of Tigrayans as adherents of the Devil (666), as observed in the Emperor Yohannes School, parallels the characterization of Tigrayans as "Buda," a term documented in the Martyr's Commemoration Museum (see Tesfa & Van Reisen, 2024a). In the cultural contexts of Ethiopia and Eritrea, particularly among the Amhara and Tigrinya ethnic groups, "Buda" carries a specific and culturally significant connotation. It denotes a belief in a malevolent force akin to the evil eye, often linked to individuals perceived to possess the ability to transform into animals, especially hyenas, and inflict harm through their gaze or presence (Baynes-Rock, 2015). These individuals are believed to inherit supernatural powers capable of causing illness, misfortune, or even death, typically through possession or witchcraft (Teklemariam, u.d.). Froyen (2013) provides

a comprehensive interpretation of the Ethiopian belief in Buda⁵⁷, suggesting that it embodies a complex interplay of culture, ecology, medicine, psychological concepts, religion, and social relations. Froyen further posits that the uneasy coexistence between humans and spotted hyenas mirrors the tensions between majority and minority groups within the Ethiopian context, although she also notes that Buda can manifest in other close interpersonal relationships.

Both references, “666” and “Buda” speak to undercurrents of cultural religious beliefs and practices, which relate to spiritual powers, such as the evil eye and the power of possession. These also closely relate to the curse of ‘hyena’, which is the transformative power of ‘Buda’. The graffiti, therefore, evoke beliefs and fears, as an undercurrent and background to the overtly political content of the messages.

The graffiti investigated in this study reveals a strong pattern of ‘othering’ of Tigrayans, who are referred to with dehumanising terminology. The graffiti explicitly evokes hate and openly calls for the eradication of Tigrayans. The text authored by members of the Eritrean military confirms their presence in Tigray during the war, as well as their intent, and reiterates the political slogan introduced by President Isayas: ‘Game over, Woyane’. The analysis shows how the military repeats the slogans and texts used by the political leadership.

While the graffiti points to egregious consequences, including the eradication of ethnic Tigrayans, humour or irony is also employed. This is also the case in the graffiti by Mekelle civilians referencing the Pretoria Cessation of Hostilities Agreement in a tone that can be interpreted in various ways, but often as a parody of the importance of the Pretoria Agreement.

Conclusion

This research examined the graffiti written by Ethiopian and Eritrean soldiers. The soldiers used derogatory and dehumanising terms for Tigrayans: ‘cannibal’, ‘snitch’, ‘daytime hyena’, ‘rat’, ‘bedbug’, ‘traitor’,

⁵⁷ Froyen (2013) defines Buda as: “the ‘evil eye’ belief or the person who can attack or “eat” people by means of a certain kind of communication of the eyes that transfers evil spirits that are believed to cause illness.”

‘thief’, and ‘devil’. The graffiti directly calls for the eradication of Tigrayans. The code 666, referring to possession by the Devil, is used, justifying the eradication of the Tigray people.

Some of the hate speech in the graffiti was already used in public transcripts and official communications of the leaders of Ethiopia (‘Tigrayans are daytime hyena’) and Eritrea (‘Game over, Woyane’). These were instrumental in mobilising people against Tigrayans. The slogan ‘Game over, Woyane’, which President Isayas introduced on 14 January 2018 – almost two years before the war began – is repeated in the graffiti left by Ethiopians. It indicates the influence of this slogan on the preparation of the military for the war. Eritrean soldiers wrote on the wall of a hospital that they destroyed in Tigray that Eritrea was winning, indicating purposeful involvement and intent to be in this alliance.

That the war is not over is signalled by the banner on a truck filled with Eritrean military leaving Tigray after the Pretoria Cessation of Hostilities Agreement, containing the warning ‘Game over, Woyane’. Displaying this slogan contains a threat, that the job of eradicating Tigrayans is not over implying that they plan to continue. The uncertain future for the people of Tigray under the Pretoria Agreement is highlighted in a signboard in Mekelle announcing the ‘Pretoria Night Club’. This irreverent name shows the lack of faith that the people of Tigray have in the Agreement. With a sense of irony, the name ‘Pretoria Night Club’ also highlights the dark side of the current situation in Tigray, in which the people of Tigray are left dealing with trauma, heavy losses, and the continued occupation of important territories, while those committing war times atrocities enjoy impunity.

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Authors' contributions

The research originates from Daniel Tesfa, who prepared the original concept for it, prepared the research plan, carried out the collection of the data and the analysis. Daniel Tesfa also established the theoretical framework. Daniel Tesfa wrote the first draft of the chapter. This research is part of his PhD research. Mirjam Van Reisen provided guidance on the research at all stages, and reviewed the raw data, the data analysis and contributed to the writing of all versions of the article. Araya Abrha Medhanyie contributed the picture of the sign board of the Pretoria Night Club. Daniel Tesfa did the interview with a staff of Pretoria Night Club and cross-verified the picture and its meaning.

Ethical clearance

This research is carried out under the research titled “Cultural Dimensions of Meaning-making and Agenda-setting”, with ethical clearance REDC 2020.139.

This chapter should be read in conjunction with the ‘Note on content and editorial decisions’ (Book 1).

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The Turning Points towards the Unequal Protection of Eritrean Refugees in Ethiopia:

From Protection to Abduction

Kristina Melicherová

ሰብ ከይሞተ እኽሊ ከይሸውተ ኣይትእመን።

Do not trust man before he is dead, the crop before it is ripe.

Abstract

Ethiopia, once known for its open-door policy towards refugees, abruptly changed its stance in early 2020, revoking *prima facie* refugee status for Eritreans. Previously, asylum seekers, including Eritreans, received favourable treatment and automatic refugee status. This policy shift lacked justification and procedural clarity, raising concerns about the protection of Eritrean refugees. There has been no prior evidence that would demonstrate the existence of a plausible circumstance justifying the termination of the *prima facie* recognition of refugee status for Eritreans. The situation worsened with the outbreak of war in Tigray in November 2020, leading to the destruction of four refugee camps. A hundred thousand Eritrean refugees went missing, suffering unprecedented attacks and abductions by Eritrean military forces. This chapter explores the ambiguity and procedural omissions in the government's decisions and the resulting protection failures. The study highlights the need to understand the reasons behind these changes and their impact on refugee protection, focusing on the plight of Eritrean refugees during and after the Tigray conflict. This is a unique occurrence of a situation that may constitute a grave violation of international law.

Key words: Tigray war, refugees, Eritrea, Eritrean refugees, Ethiopia, International Refugee Convention, refoulement, forced return

Introduction

For a long time, Ethiopia held the status of an ‘open-door policy country’, which welcomed refugees from neighbouring states in the Horn of Africa (Abebe, 2017). Asylum seekers from many countries, including Eritrea, used to receive government as well as local support (UNHCR, 2020c). Refugees were granted rights and protection through the national refugee proclamation, as well as international legislation (Convention Governing the Specific Aspects of Refugee Problems in Africa, 1969; Federal Republic of Ethiopia, 2019; Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees, 1951; Protocol Relating to the Status of Refugees, 1967). In 2019, Ethiopia adopted a new refugee proclamation, which extended the rights of refugees residing on the territory and, thus, complied with its 2017 pledges under the Comprehensive Refugee Response Framework (Ministry of Foreign Affairs Ethiopia, 2017; Federal Republic of Ethiopia, 2019; UNHCR, 2018).

Escaping oppressive regimes, forced conscription, and indefinite national service, Eritreans have been seeking refuge in neighbouring countries as well as other places all over the world for decades. Eritreans crossing borders with Ethiopia used to benefit from its open-door-policy. Refugee status was granted on a *prima facie* basis (UNHCR, 2020c), after the initial screening process, and recognised refugees were placed in one of 4 refugee camps in the Tigray region, unless they applied to live in an urban setting under the out-of-camp policy.

Early 2020 brought a shift in the established practice in relation to the treatment of Eritrean refugees in Ethiopia. The abrupt policy change resulted in revoking of the *prima facie* refugee status for Eritreans arriving in Ethiopia (Human Rights Watch, 2020). There is no evidence that would demonstrate the existence of a plausible circumstance justifying the termination of the *prima facie* recognition of refugee status (Melicherová & Saba, 2020). This sudden change in the government’s decision, without the usual procedural steps, raised concerns on behalf of the Eritrean refugees. Particularly because there has been no change in the *prima facie* recognition of refugees of other nationalities in Ethiopia.

The change in the *prima facie* refugee status was exacerbated by the decision of the Ethiopian government to close the Hitsats refugee camp in Tigray (EEPA, 2020). Since then, the unequal treatment of refugees based on nationality has escalated, with an array of additional policy decisions further jeopardising the position of Eritrean refugees in Ethiopia (UNHCR, 2020a).

A critical failure of refugee protection occurred after the outbreak of war in Tigray in November 2020. After the destruction of four refugee camps in Tigray, the whereabouts of thousands of Eritrean refugees was unknown (Eritrea Focus & Oslo Analytica, 2021). They suffered from totally unprecedented attacks and abduction by the military forces of Eritrea, the very country from which they fled (R-39, EEPA Situation Report No. 11, 29 November 2020; R-43, EEPA Situation Report No. 12, 30 November 2020). Historically, such a plight as that of Eritreans in Tigray has not been faced by other internationally recognised refugees. This study investigates the failure in refugee protection resulting from the revoking of *prima facie* refugee status for Eritreans. It looks at the context of the policy change, which has resulted in the unequal treatment of Eritrean refugees in Ethiopia *vis à vis* refugees of other nationalities.

Academic research on the revoking of *prima facie* refugee status of Eritreans in Ethiopia is lacking. Therefore, this study focused on the circumstances in which the *prima facie* status was revoked. The objective was to study the context in which the changes took place. The study is guided by the following research question: *What are the critical events that led to a shift in protection policy and treatment of Eritrean refugees in Ethiopia during the pre- and intra-war period in Tigray?*

Critical events analysis

Critical events can lead to a policy change at a given time and place. Explaining the present events while looking at the past can be approached through the theory of critical junctures (Donnelly & Hogan, 2012; Hogan & Doyle, 2007; Pierson, 1993). Critical junctures are events that set processes of institutional or policy change in motion (Capoccia & Kelemen, 2007; Collier & Collier, 2002; Donnelly & Hogan, 2012; Hogan & Doyle, 2007; Pierson, 1993).

Change often arises through friction, which can be characterised as “the awkward, unequal, unstable, and creative qualities of interconnection across difference” (Tsing, 2005, p. 4). New patterns emanate from the heterogeneous and unequal encounters, offering a space for different meanings (Tsing, 2005). Points of friction serve as an alert that calls for action, reinvention, reconceptualization and, ultimately, change (Tuin & Verhoeff, 2022).

Collier and Collier (2002, p. 29) define a critical juncture as “a period of significant change, which typically occurs in distinct ways in different countries (or other units of analysis) and which is hypothesized to produce distinct legacies”. The interpretation by Collier and Collier (2002) suggests that critical junctures occur in an extended period through incremental change. One of the critiques of this interpretation is that it lacks a specific framework that would delineate a point sufficient for declaring a critical juncture (Donnelly & Hogan, 2012). Capoccia and Kelemen (2007, p. 348) see critical junctures as the “relatively short periods of time during which there is a substantially heightened probability that agents’ choices will affect the outcome of interest”. The authors argue that change is not a necessary element of the critical juncture as the contingency implies that it is possible that the situation re-equilibrates to the pre-critical juncture period (Capoccia & Kelemen, 2007). The authors further highlight the importance of power dynamics and power asymmetries between actors that play a crucial role in the political analysis of the critical junctures. Different interpretations within the literature state that critical junctures can occur on both a brief and a long-time horizon.

The framework of critical events by García-Montoya and Mahoney (García-Montoya & Mahoney, 2023) is used to complement the theoretical lens in this chapter. This theory is particularly relevant to explain the ‘outcomes of interest’. In the theory of tipping points, an ‘alternative state’ or ‘alternative regime’ unfolds after the status quo of the original state is disturbed by a tipping point event leading to a system change (Gladwell, 2000; Milkoreit *et al.*, 2018; Stocker, 2024; Van Nes *et al.*, 2016). In the present research, the outcome of interest that being studied is the shift in the protection and treatment of

Eritrean refugees in Tigray. By tracing back, the ‘critical event’ that led to the shift is identified.

Under the critical events framework, events are defined as “well-bounded episodes marked by the unfolding of specific occurrences and coherent modes of activity” (García-Montoya & Mahoney, 2023, p. 485). To classify an event as a critical one, we must establish whether there is a clear link between a contingency and the event. Furthermore, the occurrence of that event must have causal importance for an outcome of interest.

Therefore, two main elements are crucial for the determination of a critical event: (i) contingency, and (ii) causality (García-Montoya & Mahoney, 2023). The first element, contingency, is an unexpected characteristic of an event. It is the occurrence of something not foreseen. Not all literature on critical junctures deems contingency as an inherent condition for occurrence of a critical juncture (Collier & Collier, 2002; Slater & Simmons, 2010). However, in this chapter, contingency is considered.

As García-Montoya and Mahoney (2023, pp. 493–494) point out, contingency plays an important role when trying to explain unclear outcomes of a particular case study, allowing one to differentiate “between causally important events and critical events” (García-Montoya & Mahoney, 2023, p. 494). Analysing critical events through a contingency factor helps to overcome the typical problem of “infinite regress”, which is often identified in social science research (Slater & Simmons, 2010) and historical research (Pierson, 2004). Contingency serves as a valid endpoint for “causal backtracking” (García-Montoya & Mahoney, 2023, p. 495). To be able to empirically measure the contingency, one must study the possible cases that are counterfactual to the studied event and which are in close proximity to the actual world and context. Each of such negation cases is given approximate weight. The greater the proportion of possible cases the greater the contingency. Furthermore, contingency can be measured through exogenous shocks, which are occurrences that disrupt the system; however, these shocks are of external origin and do not emanate from the system itself. Exogenous shocks tend to disrupt the

status quo of the system at hand and establish a new alternative regime.

The second precondition for an event to be classified as a critical one is causality, which is characterised by the permissive and enabling role of a certain event to lead to an outcome of interest. To establish the causal properties of the critical event, the theoretical framework of critical events analysis suggests using the concepts of *sufficiency* and *necessity* (García-Montoya & Mahoney, 2023). By measuring these elements through the use of the counterfactual analysis, it is possible to establish to what extent a studied event is necessary and sufficient for the outcome of interest (García-Montoya & Mahoney, 2023). To study the necessity of event x, the researcher must consider the different counterfactual occurrences with respect to the event, while keeping all the contextual considerations unchanged. Sufficiency is measured by creating alternative aspects of context while event x is kept constant and unchanged (García-Montoya & Mahoney, 2023, p. 497). In both steps of analysis, counterfactual cases should be given a relative weight with the intention to stay as close as possible to the actual world and context.

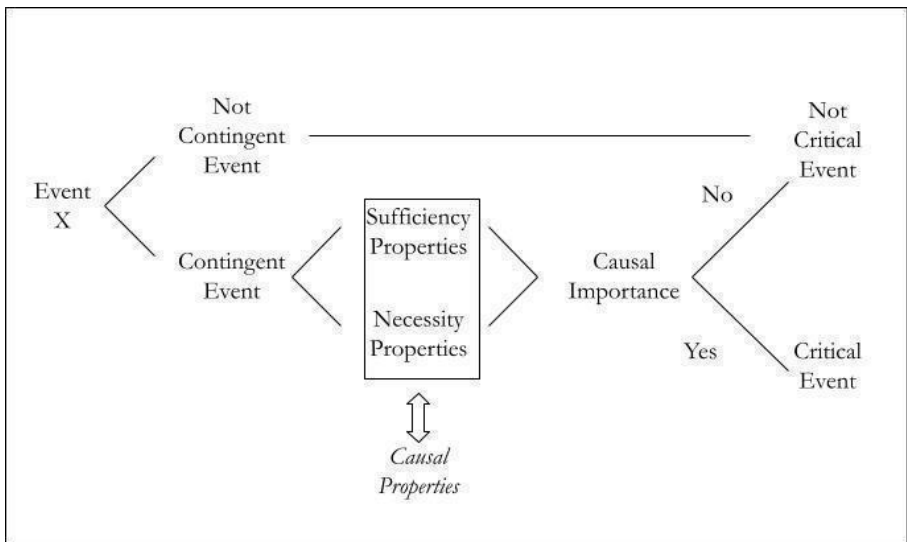


Figure 11.1. Steps in critical event analysis

(Adapted from Milkoreit, 2022)

Figure 11.1 shows the steps that are undertaken to identify whether a studied event is critical or not. The process can only be implemented by the researcher under the condition that the potential critical event has been identified as well as the outcome of interest and specific case to which the study pertains (García-Montoya & Mahoney, 2023, p. 503).

Timeframe of the study

Changes to the protection of Eritrean refugees have been observed since early 2020 (Melicherová & Saba, 2020). That year was marked by several geo-political events that influenced not only Ethiopia, but also the Horn of Africa region, as well as the world in general. The COVID-19 pandemic caused the closure of international borders and the introduction of strict measures with inter- and intra-state implications. In Ethiopia, the planned federal election, due to be held in August 2020, was postponed indefinitely. because of the pandemic (Jima, 2021; Schwikowski, 2020). This created additional tension in the already strained relations between Ethiopian Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed and the Prosperity Party that he leads, and the opposition, mainly voiced by the Tigray People's Liberation Front (TPLF), a political party governing the administration of Tigray Regional State. According to the Article 54 of the Ethiopian Constitution,

Members of the House of Peoples' Representatives shall be elected by the People for a term of five years on the basis of universal suffrage and by direct, free, and fair elections held by secret ballot. (Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia, 1995, Art. 54)

The election was due to be carried out one month prior to the expiration of the running term of the PM, as stipulated by Article 58 of the Ethiopian Constitution (Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia, 1995). The Ethiopian Constitution does not contain any provision on the postponement of the elections. The decision to postpone the federal election indefinitely sparked debate on the constitutionality of this move and provoked a constitutional crisis in Ethiopia (Salemot & Getu, 2020).

The TPLF declared that the federal government was illegitimate when it lost its official mandate after August 2020 (Abai, 2021; Jima, 2021).

Relations escalated even further when the TPLF announced that the Tigray region would hold a regional election (Lyons & Verjee, 2022; Pichon, 2022; Ploch Blancard, 2020). Contrary to the TPLF's claim, the federal government of Ethiopia proclaimed the regional elections as invalid and unconstitutional, as the National Election Board of Ethiopia had never approved the election's legitimacy (Abai, 2021; Lyons & Verjee, 2022). According to Article 102 of the Ethiopian Constitution, the National Election Board is an independent organ responsible for conducting "free and fair election in Federal and State constituencies" (Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia, 1995). However, as the original postponement of the federal election, against constitutional mandate, created a legal vacuum (Salemot & Getu, 2020), the escalation of the relations between the federal government and the TPLF reached a tipping point in November 2020, when the war in Tigray broke out. The detailed accounts and genesis of the war are discussed in previous chapters of this book (Melicherová *et al.*, 2024; Gebreslassie & van Reisen, 2024).

Setting up clear temporal boundaries is one of the first steps to be undertaken in critical events analysis (García-Montoya & Mahoney, 2023). To be able to identify the events significant to changes in the protection of Eritrean refugees in Ethiopia, this research defined the period of analysis in two parts. Clear demarcation between the two periods is given by the outbreak of the war in Tigray which occurred in the night of 3 November 2020. As the advent of war brings radical changes to a state's political, social, economic, and humanitarian domains, it is deemed necessary to analyse the periods before and after the war separately. The starting point of the first period which, for this research, will be referred to as the *pre-war period*, starts with the election of a new Prime Minister, Abiy Ahmed, in April 2018. The second period, hereinafter referred to as the *intra-war period*, starts with the outbreak of war in November 2020 and ends with the signing of the Pretoria Cessation of Hostilities Agreement in November 2022. Both periods are marked by changes in the protection of Eritrean refugees in Tigray. A critical event will be identified under each of these periods separately.

Methodology

In this case study, a descriptive research design is used while applying an interpretivist philosophical outlook. As Saunders *et al.* (2007) put it, descriptive research is “[r]esearch for which the purpose is to produce an accurate representation of persons, events or situations” (Saunders *et al.*, 2007, p. 596). This study engages in the socio-legal domain in which the analysis of the law is linked to the analysis of the social situation in which the law is applied. The investigation considers the situation and the role that the law plays in the creation, maintenance, and/or changing of the situation. An etic research approach refers to a research design with an outsider’s perspective, through which observable situations or behaviours are captured and analysed.

The main data for this chapter was acquired through two distinct processes. Desk research was used to gather data for the analysis of the pre-war period. This part of the research concerns material looking at events about Eritrean refugees in Ethiopia occurring before November 2020. In total, 81 sources were selected through online search. These include reports, publications, and media articles. Two search engines – Google and Web of Science – were used to look for the relevant literature using selected keywords and phrases such as ‘Peace agreement between Ethiopia and Eritrea’, ‘Closure of Hitsats refugee camp’, ‘Eritrean refugees in Ethiopia’, ‘protection of Eritrean refugees’, and ‘revoking of prima facie recognition’. During the screening processes, exclusion criteria, namely, the year of publication, science categories, and selection by relevance, were applied to narrow down the literature pertinent to the problem statement as well as the research question of this chapter.

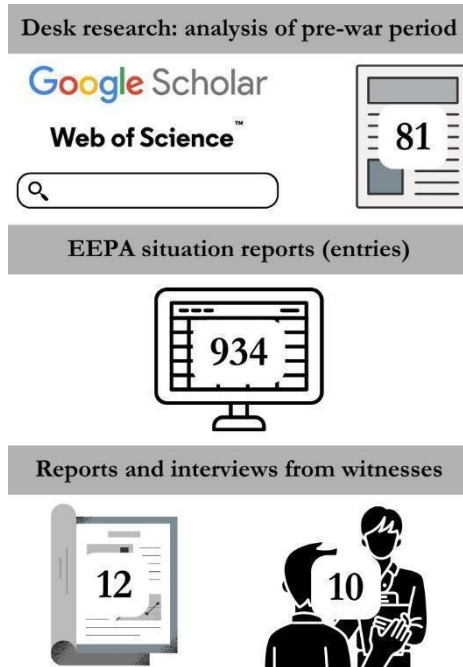


Figure 11.2. Overview of data collected and used

The main source of data for the second part of the study on the intra-war period are the daily Situation Reports published by EEPA, which contain systematically collected information. The first report was published on the 17th of November 2020 and the EEPA Situation Reports on the Horn were published on an almost daily basis throughout the period of the war. The EEPA Situation Reports had a large focus on the situation in Tigray. The reports are published as two-pagers and sent to a mailing list, as well as published on X (formerly Twitter). The reports are publicly available at: https://www.eepa.be/?page_id=4237.

The information published in the EEPA Situation Reports was collected through internal networks of informants as well as by gathering information available in news outlets and verifiable social media accounts. The primary data also includes reports, briefings, and media articles that concern all of the events that occurred during the intra-war period. The original data published in these reports are available on request from the publisher.

As there are thousands of entries in the data set for analysis, these were transferred to a spreadsheet, from where the entries were narrowed down to entries that focused on Eritrean refugees. After narrowing the data down to relevant lines for the refugee issues, the total number of entries subjected to analysis was 934. This dataset was then coded and labelled by research assistants distinguishing the main categories and themes within each line. In the third step, more detailed coding was done in which the topics pertinent to this chapter were considered. These include, for example, information on the attacks on refugees (physical, verbal, armed), involvement of the Eritrean troops in attacks, kidnapping of refugees, arrests or detention, details on refugee camps (namely, Hitsats, Shimelba, Adi Harush and Mai Ayni, Alemwach), details on refugees in urban settings, and how the situation evolved at the start of the war in different localities.

In addition, secondary data was collected by way of interviews and field reports collected from witnesses that were refugees in Ethiopia at the time of outbreak of war. The collection of data on refugees during the war was made extremely difficult by the total communications blackout and siege that took place in Tigray at that time. In total, 12 written reports and 10 interviews with refugees were collected by Mirjam Van Reisen, as the principal researcher, who granted permission for the use of this data. Field reports were written with support of a field assistant who is a refugee in Ethiopia and who was able to gather information from the field between February and June 2021. Interviews were collected with the support of Tigrinya speaking assistants. Assistants carried out phone interviews with refugees who were at the time of outbreak of the war in Tigray either in refugee camps or in urban settings.

The interviews were then transcribed and translated into English by a field assistant. Transcribed data was registered in an Excel sheet and open coding was applied to the data set. The coding process involved line-by-line examination and categorisation of the data, allowing for the emergence of new thematic concepts. During open coding, the researcher maintained flexibility and openness to unexpected insights,

ensuring that the analysis is not constrained by predetermined structures. Table 11.1 provides a short overview of the empirical data.

Table 11.1. Information on the collected empirical data

Document type & reference	Short description	Date of collection	Original Language
Interview: IN-001	Experiences of Eritrean refugees in Hitsats camp and Adi Harush at the start of war between November 2020 and January 2021	19/2/2021	Tigrinya
Interview: IN-002	Experiences of Eritrean refugees in Shimelba and Hitsats camps at the start of war in November 2020	20/2/2021	Tigrinya
Interview: IN-003	Experiences of Eritrean refugees in Shimelba and Hitsats camps at the start of war between November and December 2020; and experience of refugees <i>en route</i> to Addis Ababa	26/2/2021	Tigrinya
Interview: IN-004	Experiences of Eritrean refugees in Adigrat at the start of war between November 2020 and January 2021	7/3/2021	Tigrinya
Interview: IN-005	Experiences of a female Eritrean refugee in Adigrat at the start of war in November 2020	8/3/2021	Tigrinya
Interview: IN-006	Situation of Eritrean refugees in Tigray	8/3/2021	Tigrinya

Document type & reference	Short description	Date of collection	Original Language
Interview: IN-007	Experiences of an Eritrean refugee on the events in Shimelba camp at the start of the war	18/2/2021	English
Interview: IN-008	Experiences of Eritrean refugee on the situation in May Ayni and Adi Harush refugee camps	15/7/2021	Tigrinya
Interview: IN-009	Experiences of a female Eritrean refugee on the way from Adigrat (through Mekelle) to Addis Ababa	Feb 2022	Tigrinya
Interview: IN-010	Experiences of male Eritrean refugee (Eritrean opposition)	Feb 2022	Tigrinya
Report: REP-001	Events occurring in May Ayni Camp on 27–28 February 2021	Apr 2021	English
Report: REP-002	Attack on Hattaye and Kamisee villages near Dese city on 20 March 2021	Apr 2021	English
Report: REP-003	Eritrean refugees interviewed by the UNHCR on 22 March 2021	Apr 2021	English
Report: REP-004	Historical perspective on why certain Eritrean ethnic groups were assigned to the fronts in Tigray war	Apr 2021	English
Report: REP-005	Gun shooting training in Shimelba Camp on 28 November 2020, 2 December 2020 and 15 December 2020	Apr 2021	English

Document type & reference	Short description	Date of collection	Original Language
Report: REP-006	Soldiers from the 33rd Round of Sawa military centre involved in the war in Tigray	Apr 2021	English
Report: REP-007	Cross checking validity of Twitter reports on practices of Eritrean troops	Apr 2021	English
Report: REP-008	Events that happened between 7– 8 March 2021 in Adi Harush refugee camp and involvement of Eritrean troops	Apr 2021	English
Report: REP-009	Report on plans for relocation of Eritrean refugees residing in May Ayni	Apr 2021	English
Report: REP-010	Report on the 33rd Round of the Eritrean National Service	Apr 2021	English
Report: REP-011	Report on the trip of an Eritrean refugee to Shire between 10 to 15 June 2021	Apr 2021	English
Report: REP-012	Report on smuggling of refugees from Ethiopia to Uganda through Kenya	Apr 2021	English

Concepts, terminology, and boundaries

Concepts are not fixed ideas or labels, nor are they just ordinary words (Bal, 2002; 2009). In her research, Bal describes concepts as having a travelling nature and typically moving between disciplines, sciences, cultures, languages, geographies, and historical periods, as are the scholars who are studying them (Bal, 2002). The philosophical view applied in this chapter accepts that a certain concept is not a

prerogative of one paradigm operating within specific disciplinary boundaries, but it travels beyond and across them. Knowledge is co-produced through such a ‘nomadic’, travelling nature of concepts. For that, the key conceptual terminology is described in this sub-chapter. Rather than providing an exhaustive explanation of each concept and delineating strict boundaries, the author aims to provide their understanding and working definition of these concepts.

Policy

Policy appears to be an interdisciplinary concept outlined by various definitions in the literature. On the one hand, policy can be seen as a set of rules, decisions, and directives encoded in a (static) text. From a positivist view, policy can be seen as a text, which is a product of governmental action. As Ball puts it, policies are:

[...] representations which are encoded in complex ways (via struggles, compromises, authoritative public interpretations and reinterpretations) and decoded in complex ways (via actors, interpretations and meanings in relation to their history, experiences, skills, resources and context). (Ball, 1993)

On the other hand, policy can be seen as a discourse that refers to an understanding of a public agenda as a bigger picture and as a higher-level process (Ozga, 2000). Ozga’s ‘bigger picture’, comprises not only what policymakers think and incorporate into policy agendas, but also what they do not think or what they deliberately exclude from their agendas. Definitions of ‘policy’ seem to have a commonality in understanding public policy as a process through which governments choose what to do or not to do in certain actions (Dye, 2017) as well as understanding the government’s intentions that determine such actions (Cochran *et al.*, 2009). These processes, which aim to achieve societal goals (Cochran & Malone, 2005) and influence the life of citizens, can be carried out by governments directly or through government ‘agents’ (Peters, 2010). Birkland (2015) defines public policy as “a statement by government – at whatever level, in whatever form – of what it intends to do about a public problem” (Birkland, 2015, p. 9). Birkland sees the statements in the broad sense of the word, which includes legislation, case law, decisions on various levels

of leadership, “even in changes in the behaviour of government officials at all levels” (Birkland, 2015).

It is important to note that definitions in literature are applied to or are derived from the context of the global North, which constitutes one of the limitations of the present research.

For this study, the working definition of policy is understood as being (non-) actions by various actors and their intentions to address (or ignore) certain problems and (public) concerns within the context (social, political, historical) in which they find themselves by exercising their authority.

Refugees

For this study, the following definition is used as adopted under the Article 1A (2) of the Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees (hereinafter 1951 Refugee Convention):

[T]he term “refugee” shall apply to any person who [...] owing to well-founded fear of being persecuted for reasons of race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group or political opinion, is outside the country of his nationality and is unable or, owing to such fear, is unwilling to avail himself of the protection of that country; or who, not having a nationality and being outside the country of his former habitual residence as a result of such events, is unable or, owing to such fear, is unwilling to return to it. (Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees, 1951)

The Organization of African Unity (OAU) Convention Governing the Specific Aspects of Refugee Problems in Africa, built upon the internationally recognised definition of a refugee by adding the following:

[...] apply to every person who, owing to external aggression, occupation, foreign domination or events seriously disturbing public order in either part or the whole of his country of origin or nationality, is compelled to leave his place of habitual residence in order to seek refuge in another place outside his country of origin or nationality. (Convention Governing The Specific Aspects of Refugee Problems in Africa, 1969)

The present research will use the term refugee/refugees for citizens of a country different than Ethiopia, who are residing in Ethiopia or

were residing in Ethiopia at the time of the studied period, and whose refugee status qualifies under the definition in international law or regional law. The research will particularly refer to Eritrean refugees as the subject of this empirical study.

Protection

The term ‘protection’ as a constitutional term is not clearly defined (Goodwin-Gill, 2001) within refugee law or by international legal standards. It is variously referred to as either ‘legal’ protection or ‘international’ protection. The latter term is typically used by the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), which understands international protection as:

[A]ll actions aimed at ensuring the equal access to and enjoyment of the rights of women, men, girls and boys of concern to UNHCR, in accordance with the relevant bodies of law (including international humanitarian, human rights and refugee law). (UNHCR, 2005)

The Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA) assembled a glossary of terminology used in the humanitarian context and situations relating to armed conflict in which protection is defined as:

A concept that encompasses all activities aimed at obtaining full respect for the rights of the individual in accordance with the letter and spirit of human rights, refugee and international humanitarian law. Protection involves creating an environment conducive to respect for human beings, preventing and/or alleviating the immediate effects of a specific pattern of abuse, and restoring dignified conditions of life through reparation, restitution and rehabilitation. (Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs, 2003)

Implicitly, a common understanding of protection in refugee related situation is characterised by the principles of *non-refoulement* and non-discrimination, and in relation to the social and humanitarian well-being of refugees.

Contextual considerations

The context of this study relates to the origin, culture, and context of the refugees from Eritrea. The study takes place within Ethiopia,

which provides the context for the location in which the refugees resided.

Eritrean refugees in Ethiopia

The history of Eritrean refugees fleeing the regime goes back to the independence of Eritrea from Ethiopia in 1993 (Kidane, 2021). Since independence, Eritrea has been ruled and controlled by the authoritarian regime led by President Isayas Afwerki. Indefinite national service, surveillance, arbitrary detention, abolishment of fundamental freedoms, and fear have been the driving forces for thousands of Eritreans to seek refuge outside their homeland (Human Rights Watch, 2023; Smits & Wirtz, 2024). In its 2016 report, the United Nations Commission of Inquiry on human rights in Eritrea found reasonable grounds for the actions of the regime to amount to crimes against humanity (UN Human Rights Council, 2016). The country has witnessed a mass exodus of Eritreans for many years and has become one of the fastest shrinking populations in the world, taking ninth place, with the largest refugee population globally by 2017 (Mengiste & Lucht, 2020). To date, Eritrea continues to produce one of the largest refugee populations across African countries.

According to UNHCR, by 2022, 508,291 Eritrean refugees were registered by UNHCR worldwide (UNHCR, 2023b). It is estimated that about one-third of the Eritrean population lives outside the country (Mengiste & Lucht, 2020). As a population census has not been carried out since independence, it is difficult to estimate the exact size of the current population. The most recent estimation by the World Bank puts it at 3.68 million inhabitants (World Bank, 2022).

Ethiopia – A host country

Neighbouring countries including Ethiopia have been hosting Eritreans for many years. Ethiopia had an ‘open door’ policy, with good practices for refugees seeking protection on its soil. Before the war in Tigray, Eritrean refugees mostly resided in four refugee camps in the Tigray region as well as two camps in the Afar region. In Tigray, the oldest camp, Shimelba, was opened in 2004, followed by Mai

Ayni, Adi Harush, and the youngest camp Hitsats, established in 2013. When Eritrean refugees crossed the border to Ethiopia, they would usually be gathered in small reception centres established along the border areas. From there the refugees would be brought to the Endabaguna central reception centre for screening procedures, as well as determination and registration of their refugee status by the Administration of Refugee and Returnee Affairs (ARRA) and the UNHCR.

Findings

The findings of this study are divided into two periods: the pre-war period (April 2018–November 2020) and the intra-war period (November 2020–November 2022). In each of these periods, sub-themes relevant to Ethiopia’s policy concerning Eritrean refugees are addressed. These periods have time-bound characteristics.

Pre-war period (April 2018–November 2020)

In this section, the pre-war period is analysed. Certain steps are followed to outline findings which will lead to an assessment of whether a given phenomenon can be characterised as a critical one.

Abiy Ahmed elected as Prime Minister

An event identified as a starting point of the pre-war period is the election of Abiy Ahmed Ali to the office of the Prime Minister of Ethiopia. In March 2018, the ruling coalition in Ethiopia nominated Abiy, after his successor Hailemariam Desalegn resigned from the post of Prime Minister after months of protests. Abiy was sworn into office on 2 April 2018. With his election, the country entered a period of several changes and reforms, including the adoption of new laws. The leading narrative in the media over the election of Abiy as Prime Minister was positive and one of expectations for a new era of hope.

Since coming to power as Prime Minister in April, Abiy has electrified Ethiopia with his informal style, charisma and energy, earning comparisons to Nelson Mandela, Justin Trudeau, Barack Obama and Mikhail Gorbachev. (Burke, 2018)

Some changes that marked the beginning of PM Abiy’s term were the release of political prisoners, the strengthening of state institutions,

the lifting of the state of emergency in the country, the holding of dialogues with political oppositions, and the start of political reforms of a national and a regional character (Burke, 2018; Dahir, 2018; Mumbere, 2018; Oneko, 2018). For these initiatives, Abiy was praised across communities in Ethiopia, among the Ethiopian diaspora, by the international diplomatic leadership, as well as by the media:

In just 66 days, the Prime Minister has turned a new page in Ethiopian history, restoring hope and optimism in the direction the country is taking. (Allo, 2018)

However, this positive sentiment soon met with challenges across Ethiopia's varied regional, ethnic, and political realities. This will be considered in greater detail later in the findings.

Signing of the peace agreement between Ethiopia and Eritrea

The signing of the Joint Declaration of Peace and Friendship between Eritrea and Ethiopia (hereinafter called the 2018 Peace Agreement) by PM Abiy and President Isayas ended almost 20 years of a 'no peace no war' situation between the two countries. The signing of the declaration took place on 9 July 2018 in Asmara. The preparations preceding the summit between Ethiopia and Eritrea, started with the announcement by the federal government of Ethiopia accepting the conditions contained in the resolution of border disputed areas in June 2018:

The executive committee of the EPRDF, Ethiopia's ruling coalition, said that it would adhere to the terms of the Algiers Agreement, which resulted in a definitive ruling on the border between Ethiopia and Eritrea. (Solomon, 2018)

The two leaders of Ethiopia and Eritrea, PM Abiy and President Isayas, subsequently met in Jeddah, Saudi Arabia, to sign the Agreement on Peace, Friendship, and Comprehensive Cooperation between the Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia and the State of Eritrea in September 2018. The United Arab Emirates (UAE) and Saudi Arabia were deeply involved in the process leading up to the signing of the agreement. To date, the content of the signed agreement and its implementation remain unknown. The only documents available to the public are one and two-page documents, signed in Asmara and Jeddah respectively. No further details were disclosed on the implementation of the Peace Agreement nor was the

vision that was discussed between the two leaders shared with the public.

Even though the Ethiopian PM Abiy had been, at that time, overseeing a wave of new reforms, the announcement of the Peace Agreement with Eritrea gave rise to a great deal of surprise in the region as well as internationally: “[I]t is the prospect of peace with reclusive Eritrea that has come as the latest, and largest, surprise” (AlJazeera, 2018).

Soon after the signing of the 2018 Peace Agreement, the act of reconciliation between the two countries gained the label of being ‘historic’:

Ending the “no war, no peace” period between Ethiopia and Eritrea remains a historic milestone. The stories of families reunited after decades highlight the deep personal costs of conflict and the immediate possibilities of peace. (Stigant & Phelan, 2019)

The Peace Agreement was also highly recognised by international actors praising and welcoming the new developments, which sparked hope for the whole of the Horn of Africa. The Chairperson of the Commission of the African Union, Moussa Faki Mahamat, welcomed the Peace Agreement on behalf of the AU:

The Chairperson of the Commission stresses that the ongoing normalization process between Eritrea and Ethiopia is a milestone in Africa’s efforts to silence the guns by 2020. (African Union, 2018)

The Peace Agreement between Ethiopia and Eritrea marks an important event in the pre-war period.

Post-peace agreement: Developments affecting refugees

In the aftermath of the signing of the 2018 Peace Agreement, the two countries, Eritrea and Ethiopia, agreed to reopen the border crossings in September 2018. This was highly welcomed, above all by the people on the ground living in the highly militarised border area. Communities on both sides celebrated the historical reunification of families and friends who had been separated by the border for years: “Video and photos emerged of people embracing, dancing and

weeping as flags of both nations flapped in the breeze” (Ingber, 2018).

The opening of the border also brought a booming exchange of goods and business, as merchants as well as trucks were permitted to travel between Eritrea and Ethiopia without any permit:

Horse-drawn carts, buses full of visitors and trucks piled high with bricks and plywood make their way across the frontier, watched by relaxed soldiers from the two nations’ armies [...]. (Arab News, 2018)

With no controls on the border, a surge in refugee arrivals spiked immediately following the opening of the border. Reception centres near the border area saw a sevenfold increase in registrations with as many as 10,000 Eritreans coming in the first month after the opening:

The arrival rate from Eritrea has risen sharply, from 53 to 390 people per day. Most arriving families wish to remain in Ethiopia with relatives that preceded them, or plan to reunite with family in Europe, or other countries. Others will return to their homes in Eritrea. (Norwegian Refugee Council, 2018)

However, by the end of the year, news trickled out that from one day to another Eritrea had effectively closed the border crossings. People were requested to show permit documentation specifying the purpose and duration of the visit to the country:

The main road between Zalambessa and the Eritrean town of Serba is no longer accessible since this morning after Eritrean soldiers were deployed in the area, sources say. Eritrea has also imposed restrictions on another border point – the Rama-Kisad Adi-Quala border crossing [...]. (Ethiopia Observer, 2018)

The reasons for this sudden and unannounced move were not disclosed by either of the two governments. The closure of other crossings further continued in early 2019, when both the Hager-Humera and the Bure-Assab crossings were closed by the Eritrean government on 22 April 2019.

A spokesman for Ethiopia’s Foreign Ministry at the time told reporters that he had no information about any border restrictions. The Eritrea government has routinely not responded to reports. (Shaban, 2019)

Alongside the border developments, the post-Peace Agreement period was marked by the adoption of a new Refugee Proclamation No. 1110/2019 in Ethiopia (hereinafter called 2019 Refugee Proclamation), which entered into effect in February 2019 (Federal Republic of Ethiopia, 2019). The new law strengthened the rights of refugees in several instances and became one of the most progressive frameworks across African countries:

UNHCR, the UN Refugee Agency, welcomes Ethiopia's historic new refugee law which will now allow refugees to obtain work permits, access primary education, obtain drivers' licenses, legally register life events such as births and marriages and open up access to national financial services, such as banking. (UNHCR, 2019)

The adoption of the new 2019 Refugee Proclamation was seen as a positive step forward by the Ethiopian government to move from a strictly camp-based approach, thus, comply with its 2017 pledges under the Comprehensive Refugee Response Framework.

Refugee policy shift

Despite the 2018 Peace Agreement, the internal situation in Eritrea remained unchanged. The indefinite national service, which had been the main push factor for Eritreans to flee their country for years, remained in place. No internal reforms were hinted at by the Eritrean president or the Eritrean government.

The influx of Eritrean refugees was still reported as very high by mid-2019, even though the border between Ethiopia and Eritrea was closed again by that time:

A senior official from the Ethiopian refugee agency has reported that Eritrean refugees continue to arrive in Ethiopia in large numbers, 250 to 300 persons a day. The increasing number of people residing in refugee camps is posing an enormous challenge for the Ethiopian Agency for Refugees and Returnees Affairs (ARRA) as well as development and relief organizations working with refugees. (Melicherová, 2019)

Early 2020 brought a turning point, when the federal government of Ethiopia made adjustments to its refugee policy concerning Eritrean refugees. The first crucial change was revoking *prima facie* recognition of refugee status for Eritreans arriving in Ethiopia, which occurred in January 2020:

On 26 January, the Government of Ethiopia made the decision to cease prima facie recognition of refugee status for Eritreans, with plans to initiate individual Refugee Status Determination (RSD), bringing an end to the over 10-year recognition of Eritreans on a prima facie basis. (UNHCR, 2020a, p. 5)

Considering that the circumstances prompting Eritreans to escape from Eritrea had not changed, the sudden decision of the Ethiopian government came as a surprise to organisations working on the ground. There had been no prior indication of a plausible circumstance justifying the revoking of the *prima facie* recognition of the refugee status for Eritrean refugees. In addition, there was no prior consultation with UNHCR (UNHCR, 2020b) nor basis for the reported situation in the country of origin (UN Special Rapporteur on the Situation of Human Rights in Eritrea, 2021), which is required as per the Ethiopian 2019 Refugee Proclamation:

[T]here is no evidence that shows the existence of change of circumstance for terminating the prima facie recognition of Eritrean refugees. Circumstances that led to group recognition which are persecution that includes involuntary open-ended military conscription, arbitrary arrest and detention and other systematic human rights violations remain unchanged in Eritrea. Therefore, the decision to end prima facie recognition of Eritrean asylum seekers is not in line with the refugee proclamation. (Kassu, 2021, p. 48)

In early March 2020, the Ethiopian government made another unexpected move – the closure of the Hitsats refugee camp. Hitsats had been hosting more than 10,000 Eritrean refugees for many years. This decision was contested by refugees themselves, as well as by NGOs and experts calling for dialogue with the government. Initial plans included the aim to relocate refugees from the Hitsats camp to the Mai Ayni and Adi Harush refugee camps in the Tigray region. However, no infrastructure nor any new capacities were put in place in those camps before this decision:

Anonymous sources confirmed that the federal government of Ethiopia ordered the closure of [the] Hitsats refugee camp in [the] Tigray province of Ethiopia. All camp refugees have been asked to relocate to another camp which is already overpopulated and does not have a functioning infrastructure. (EEPA, 2020)

The decision to close Hitsats was announced amid the start of the COVID-19 pandemic, without any consultation with UNHCR officials and partner organisations working in the camp. Even though Ethiopia proclaimed a state of emergency due to the rapid spreading of the COVID-19 virus, ARRA was adamant about continuing with preparations for the relocation of refugees from Hitsats. The motive for such an abrupt and unprecedented impulse was unclear. Some observers suspected a hidden political agenda on the part of Eritrea and Ethiopia, as well as pointing to the culminating tension between the federal government of Ethiopia and the Tigray regional government:

According to a source, the move is linked to the political games that are being played on the regional level since the peace deal between Ethiopia and Eritrea has been signed. On the national level, the regional government of Tigray has promised to support refugees in Hitsats and is ready to oppose the federal government. (EEPA, 2020)

Eritrean refugees on the ground also believed that there were hidden government interests prompting the decision, which undermined their status as refugees in Ethiopia:

The refugees told local media that the decision on the closure of the refugee camp comes after an agreement was reached between Addis Ababa and Asmara. (Ezega News, 2020)

Later in March, the federal government of Ethiopia announced its intention to adopt an ‘exclusion criteria’, preventing a large number of Eritrean asylum seekers from obtaining recognition as refugees.

The “Exclusion Criteria” include the following. They are not exhaustive and apparently not officially documented either, although they are being applied:

- 1. Unaccompanied and separated minors;*
- 2. Persons within the age of conscription in Eritrea [This criterion seems to be all encompassing as almost all Eritreans from their teens are indefinitely conscripted to the National Service];*
- 3. Persons who access Ethiopia to seek medical care;*

4. *Persons who have crossed the border on repeated occasions, regardless of whether or not they have sought asylum in Ethiopia before; and*
 5. *Persons wishing to reunite with family members in a third country.*
- (Hagos, 2020)

Further evidence showed that the exclusion criteria had been slowly and secretly applied for a few months already, in particular with regard to unaccompanied minors:

[I]n January 2020, for reasons not made public, the government began to exclude certain categories of new arrivals from Eritrea from registering, including unaccompanied children. (Human Rights Watch, 2020)

There is some resemblance between each of these new policies announced by the federal government of Ethiopia. These new policies were announced abruptly from one-day-to-another, without consultation with the UNHCR or any other agency working with refugees in the country and the region. These changes only targeted Eritrean refugees. There is no other evidence that similar policies were applied to refugee groups of other nationalities in Ethiopia. Eritrean refugees experienced the fear of failed protection and uncertainty over their future in the country which had been welcoming them for many years before 2020.

Intra-war period

The intra-war period can be described as four different periods: the outbreak of the war; the Eritrean forces entering Tigray where the Eritrean refugees are held; the refugee camps coming under attack from military operations and the abduction and forced repatriation of the Eritrean refugees. The resulting humanitarian situation and the refugees located in urban settings are described in the last two sections.

Outbreak of war

The start of the intra-war period was marked by an outbreak of the war between the federal government of Ethiopia and the Tigray regional government, led by the Tigray People Liberation Front (TPLF), which erupted on the night of 3 November 2020. The narratives regarding which side started the war vary and are not

conclusive. Nevertheless, both sides were immediately actively participating in open conflict. It was the beginning of a new reality filled with gunshots, the use of heavy artillery, and the sound of bombs across Tigray. People living in Tigray at that time were caught in shock by the escalating situation, keen to obtain any information. This was, however, impossible, as the federal government shut down all communication lines upon the outbreak of the war. Alongside the connectivity blackout in Tigray, which lasted throughout the whole period of the war, people were stranded in the region due to the closure of regional and national borders, roads, and air traffic.

Eritrean refugees living in the four refugee camps in Tigray were caught in the middle of the fighting and left without any mechanism of protection or support. Their protection was further jeopardised when all the international organisations ended their operations due to security reasons and started withdrawing from the camps and evacuating their staff members:

70,000 refugees [of] Eritrean origin in four camps [live] near the border (near Shiretown). Potential humanitarian disaster [is] looming as international organisations are leaving and no food and supplies are coming into Tigray due to closures of airports and closure of transport to Tigray. (EEPA, 2020, SR 1, Ref. number R-1)

There were no mechanisms in place to protect the Eritrean refugees living under international protection in the four camps.

Eritrean forces enter Tigray

The fear of Eritrean refugees, as well as those of the Tigrayan population, escalated further with the news of the presence of Eritrean military forces in Tigray:

Claims made by Tigray President Debretsion that Eritrea is involved in the war (specifications below), [this was] denied by Eritrea, but local activity [is] reported from within Eritrea. (EEPA, 2020, SR 1, Ref. number SRC-1)

Siding with the Ethiopian federal forces, Eritrean troops actively participated in the war, from the very early stage, regularly using harsh practices on people as well as looting and destroying property:

Sources on the ground report massive looting and destruction of property, houses, food, and cereal, taking place; especially by Eritrean forces. (EEPA, 2020, SR 2, Ref. Number SRC-23)

Soon after entering Tigray, Eritrean forces headed towards the refugee camps. The area of the camps was on the frontlines of the battlefield from the early days of the war:

Cities of Shire and Aksum have been attacked by the Ethiopian National Defense Force (ENDF), Amhara Special Force, and the Eritrean army. Fighting takes place in close proximity to Eritrean refugee camps, which are under attack. This includes Hitsats camp with a population of 25,248, [including] many unaccompanied minors. (EEPA, 2020, SR 2, Ref. number R-3)

Refugee camps under attack

Worries over the security of Eritrean refugees have been voiced since early November 2020 by different actors within Ethiopia as well as by the international community:

The Ethiopian Agency for Refugee and Returnee Affairs (ARRA) expressed concern over [the] mistreatment of Eritrean refugees in Tigray amid the fighting around the refugee camps. (EEPA, 2020, SR 3, Ref. number R-8)

Among those calling for protection were refugees themselves, who were left exposed to the military fighting:

UNHCR is no longer in Shire (Tigray) to protect Eritrean refugees in camps. Refugees in Tigray are pleading for the international community to come to their rescue. (EEPA, 2020, SR 6, Ref. numbers R-19 & R-20)

Fighting between the warring sides was often carried out in an indiscriminate manner, catching civilians in the crossfire. There were also reports of instances of deliberate attacks on refugees.

Eritrean refugees under international protection in four camps in Tigray report they were shot at by Eritrean and Ethiopian troops. (EEPA, 2020, SR 26, Ref. number R-128)

Refugees in all four camps in Tigray were affected by the war and were shocked at the presence of the Eritrean military on Ethiopian

soil. In Shimelba, witness reports showed that the Eritrean military entered the oldest camp in Tigray on the 17 November 2020:

According to a witness who was an Eritrean refugee in the Shimelba camp in Tigray Eritrean troops entered the camp on 17 November at 14:00 hours. In the previous days, from 15/11 to 17/11 people from the Hitsats refugee camp came to the Shimelba refugee camp. (EEPA, 2021, SR 91, Ref. number R-370)

From the beginning, Eritrean troops used a technique of lack of information and instilling fear to establish full control and power over refugees in Shimelba:

The witness says that the Eritrean fighters collected all the young refugees. They took us for a meeting and told us “[W]e control 80% of Tigray. We fight to control Mekelle. Now we control this area.” (EEPA, 2021, SR 91, Ref. number R-371)

Days after entering the camp on the 21 November 2020, Eritrean troops closed off the camp and warned refugees not to leave the camp otherwise they would risk being punished:

The Eritrean troops that entered Shimelba stated on the 21st of November that “The Government of Eritrea forgives all of you and you can go back to your country.” They also told us not to leave the camp, because we would be shot, [and] killed, says the witness: “[A]nyone who goes outside will be our enemy and you must inform us if someone leaves the camp. Otherwise hard punishment will follow.” (EEPA, 2021, SR 91, Ref. number R-372)

Total control over refugees was further exercised through a curfew, set by Eritrean soldiers who were accompanying refugees when they moved within the camps. Soldiers then also started to arrest people without any reason. Among those arrested were women and children:

The witness says that the chairman of the youth club was arrested; the chairman of the youth club disappeared or escaped. They arrested four women and their children: “We do not know why. In the evening seven children were arrested, and again we did not know why. They disappeared.” (EEPA, 2021, SR 91, Ref. number R-375)

Similar stories of refugees in the other three refugee camps in Tigray were reported. Practices and crimes of the Eritrean forces committed against the refugees were almost identical across all camps. Eritrean troops invaded Hitsats camp and started to steal the property of

refugees, host communities living in the area, as well as the property of the international organisations that had been active in the camp before the war:

Mechanized military forces from Eritrea entered [the] Hitsats refugee camp, via Shimelba camp, on 19 November, and in subsequent days looted the camp and local communities around the camps. (EEPA, 2020, Sr 16, Ref. number R-64)

Attackers did not spare anyone and were ready to use fatal force against people who stood up to them:

Reported that Hitsats camp was under Eritrean military control from [the] end [of] November/December. Eritrean soldiers killed people, including 2 priests who protested when soldiers tried to enter into the church. Tigray troops started shooting on 17 November in a fight with the Eritrean troops, and 9 Eritrean refugees were killed in the crossfire. Shimelba and Hitsats have not been accessible since. (EEPA, 2021, SR 57, Ref. number R-270)

Refugees in Adi Harush camp were also not spared from attacks by the invading Eritrean forces:

It was reported that Adi Harush, a refugee camp for Eritrean refugees in Tigray, was attacked. Camp residents stated that the guards fled after a short exchange of fire. (EEPA, 2020, SR 7, Ref. number R-23)

Left unsheltered and unprotected, Eritrean refugees fell victim to fierce fighting and bombing from all warring sides. There were injuries and fatalities since the early stages of war:

Bombshells landed in refugee camp Adi Harush (sheltering Eritrean refugees) in Tigray killing two or three Eritrean refugees (reported: a child and a 20-year old girl) and [leaving] 6 wounded, reported from inside the camp. (EEPA, 2020, SR 10, Ref. number R-35)

Women, children, and elderly people were among those victims hit by shelling. Due to the lack of medical staff and supplies, injured people were left without proper medical attention:

Fire exchanges between Tigray forces and federal government soldiers around Mai Ayni (3 Dec.) and military activity converging close to Mai Ayni refugee camp. Many Eritrean refugees from Mai Ayni have fled the camp and some have been pictured walking on the roads with suitcases as they fear being killed or arrested.

Mai Ayni was reportedly hit by shells on 3 December, leaving a woman, child and an elderly man injured, without medical supplies to treat the wounds. (EEPA, 2020, SR 17, Ref. number R-72)

Amhara forces were also actively involved in the fighting near the camp sites as well as directly in the camps. Data show that they often entered the camps in search of TPLF fighters who were hiding inside or around the refugee camps:

A message reported from an Eritrean refugee from Adi Harush refugee camp states that the refugees have no supply, that between 70-90 are leaving each day and that Amhara forces are searching for the TPLF troops who hid in the area of the camp. They also state Amhara forces broke into the UNHCR office and the ration storage building to search for weapons and soldiers. (EEPA, 2020, SR 14, Ref. number R-54)

Another common practice of the military invading the camps was to confiscate mobile phones from refugees, with the effect that any access to information or dissemination of information was restricted:

Refugees in Adi Harush refugee camp state that attackers came to confiscate around 180 cellphones. The refugees feel unsafe, continue to bear heavy weaponry, and are not allowed to leave the camp. (EEPA, 2020, SR 34, Ref. number R-155)

In some instances, Eritrean forces found an opportunity to earn money by providing a mobile phone communication service to refugees who were held captive:

The refugees held by Eritrean troops are using mobile phones from the Eritrean soldiers to contact relatives. These are Eritrean mobile phones. The soldiers are making a business out of this so that they get paid for this 'service'. Soldiers take a part of this money and in some cases all of it. (EEPA, 2021, SR 56, Ref. number R-265)

The refugees in the camps were subject to brutalities. The invasion led to the destruction of two refugee camps, Shimelba and Hitsats, in January 2021. Systematic targeting of these camps by Eritrean forces continued over two months starting in November 2020 at the beginning of the war. Based on the reports, nothing was left behind and many buildings and houses were burned down. The level of

destruction was reported by witnesses and these reports are supported by satellite imagery of the camp areas:

The damage in the two refugee camps is extensive. The latest pictures, taken on January 27, show up to 721 structures damaged and 531 destroyed. 99 of those are catastrophically or extensively damaged. The intent seemed to have been to make sure the camps could no longer be used. (EEPA, 2021, SR 77, Ref. number R-329)

Some of the refugees who survived and who had witnessed the destruction of the two camps were relocated to Adi Harush or May Ayni, and reported on the situation:

Refugees from Shemelba and Hitsats refugee camps report that there is nothing left of the two refugee camps after they have been looted and destroyed. Refugees have relocated to the two camps Adi Harush and May Ayni, or have traveled to Addis Ababa or other places where they feel [safer]. (EEPA, 2021, SR 62, Ref. number R-292)

In the later course of the war, authorities realised the need for an alternative setting for Eritrean refugees from the remaining locations of Mai Ayni and Adi Harush. Both camps were under constant attack and fighting related to the battlefield and the refugees in the camps were without any proper access to protection. In addition, basic humanitarian supplies were running out, and the situation became acute. A piece of land was allocated for the construction of a new refugee camp, Alemwach, which was located near Dabat town in the Amhara region of Ethiopia:

UNHCR is calling for a safe passage which will allow refugees from Mai Aini and Adi Harush to be moved to the new site of Alemwach, near Dabat town, some 135 kilometers away. (EEPA, 2021, SR 199, Ref. number R-670)

The initial estimation was to create a capacity in the Alemwach camp to accommodate about 25,000 refugees.

Those who were moved to the Alemwach camp received basic support in the form of relief items such as jerry cans, mattresses, soap, blankets, and basic food. The relocations from refugee camps in Tigray continued up to December 2022:

The UNHCR participated in the relocation of 7,000 Eritrean refugees from the Mai Aini and Adi Harush camps to the recently established Alemwach site in [the]

Amhara region, where 22,000 Eritrean refugees are already located. (EEPA, 2022, SR 328, Ref. number R-908)

Abduction of Eritrean refugees & forced fighting in the war

Early in the war, Eritrean troops started to abduct Eritrean refugees and return them to the country from which they had fled:

Thousands of Eritrean refugees, recognised by UNHCR, have been abducted by Eritrean soldiers from refugee camps under the Ethiopian Federal Administration of Refugees and Returnees Affairs (ARRA) in Tigray, presumably to be forcefully returned to Eritrea. (EEPA, 2020, SR 11, Ref. number R-39)

Refugees were rounded up and obliged to board the trucks or buses, which then transported them back to Eritrea.

Reports that Eritrean refugees in camps under international protection in Tigray [are] being forced onto trucks by Eritrean soldiers and sent to Eritrea. (EEPA, 2020, SR 12, Ref. number R-43)

They were often forced to walk long distances to the point where they were forcibly taken by vehicle to Eritrea.

Eritrean refugees in Hitsats camp in Tigray were ordered to return to Eritrea and were forced to walk to Sheraro. From Sheraro buses and trucks take them to Eritrea. (EEPA, 2021, SR 55, Ref. number R-251)

By the end of December 2020, there were some estimations that thousands of refugees had been abducted and returned to Eritrea in just a few weeks following the start of the conflict.

A highly credible source from Eritrea informed the Situation Report that an estimated 7,000 Eritrean refugees have been forcefully returned to Eritrea and are held in “a special camp” in Eritrea. The report comes from a reliable source from the ground in Asmara (Eritrea). (EEPA, 2020, SR 40, Ref. number R-177)

Due to the complicated nature of war, it was difficult to carry out any assessments and exact estimations of how many refugees were affected by these crimes. Throughout the full war period, witnesses reported forced returns and disappearances.

Eritrean soldiers have forced 6,000 refugees from Shimelba camp to return to Eritrea. Of those politically active, 120 have disappeared. Eritrean soldiers also killed 64 people in the camp. (EEPA, 2021, SR 53, Ref. number R-241)

It is known that those who were captured and returned to Eritrea often faced cruel conditions, physical or mental punishments, and even torture.

The Eritrean refugees which are deported to Eritrea face punishment, torture, and indefinite compulsory national services, a form of forced labour, which the UN has classified as a Crime against Humanity. (EEPA, 2021, SR 78, Ref. number R-333)

In several instances, it was also witnessed that the refugees who were captured by the Eritrean army were forced to enter the battlefield and fight against the TPLF and the communities that had hosted them as refugees:

Eritrea is alleged to be forcefully arming Eritrean refugees in Tigray to fight host communities. (EEPA, 2020, SR 16, Ref. number R-65)

The traumatic experience to which Eritrean refugees were exposed caused a lack of trust in any official structures. For example, before the destruction of the Hitsats camp, the Tigray Defence Forces aimed to evacuate refugees from the camp to Shire. However, this scared refugees who thought that they might be lured into cars and sent back to Eritrea:

Eritrean refugees report that Eritrean forces continued to loot the camp and destroyed shelters. Tigray regional forces organised transport to Shire town. However, Eritrean refugees were petrified. Some fled to places around the area. The Eritrean government forces took refugees who were hiding and took them to the border town of Badme. Refugees are now sent back to Eritrea, from where they fled. (EEPA, 2021, SR 79, Ref. number R-341)

ARRA and UNHCR tried to organise some relocation from Mai Ayni to Adi Harush camp. However, relocations organised by ARRA were not welcomed by Eritrean refugees, due to lack of trust:

Most of the refugees are also afraid that the relocation by the Ethiopian government might be a prearranged plan to get them closer to the border so that kidnapping will be easy for Eritrean troops. (EEPA, 2021, SR 124, Ref. number R-512)

Resistance against the relocation was also due to the ongoing security risks reported in Adi Harush, where refugees were being kidnapped by Eritrean troops regularly:

UNHCR states that of the more than 100,000 Eritrean refugees that were in Tigray prior to the war only 10,000 are left in two Tigray refugee camps, Mai Aini and Adi Harush. There has been no food distribution since late September. (EEPA, 2022, SR 308, Ref. number R-865)

This practice of systematic abduction and forced return of refugees under international protection to the country from which they had fled and their forced recruitment to fight in a war against the host population that had given them protection has not been previously reported in other contexts. This is a major violation of international, regional, and national law. The practice was condemned by the Special Rapporteur on Eritrea as a violation of the human rights of Eritreans residing outside the country (UN Special Rapporteur on the Situation of Human Rights in Eritrea, 2021, 2022, 2023).

Humanitarian situation

Because of the complete closure of the region, all basic supplies were dramatically decreasing across the whole Tigray region. The refugee camps were not an exception. Shortages of food were announced as early as November 2020 and they continued to be alarming throughout the whole intra-war period:

UN reports critical shortages in Tigray. Food supply for 100,000 Eritrean refugees in Tigray will be gone in a week. 600,000 people requiring food aid remain without food. (EEPA, 2020, SR 9, Ref. number R-33)

The supplies in Tigray were not only running out, but many reserves were also looted or destroyed. Basic life supplies, such as access to water, were destroyed completely:

A message reported from the Mai Aini refugee camp states that the water depot has been destroyed, leading to a water shortage. (EEPA, 2020, SR 14, Ref. number R-55)

Apart from scarce natural resources, food, and medical supplies, humanitarian workers were also targeted:

A humanitarian and diplomatic source told Reuters that four Ethiopian aid workers (possibly a fifth) were killed in one of the Eritrean refugee camps in Tigray. (EEPA, 2020, SR 15, Ref. number R-59)

Those few humanitarian workers who stayed in their respective capacities, positioned in the refugee sites, were assaulted and harmed:

A Dutch humanitarian organization ZOA staff member is killed in Tigray, Ethiopia. The 52 year old staff member was murdered during the recent conflict while on duty in the Hitsats refugee camp. (EEPA, 2020, SR 6, Ref. number R-191)

Even humanitarian envoys trying to access refugee camps and carry out assessments of the situation were attacked:

A UN security team trying to visit the Shimelba refugee camp in Tigray, where refugees are located under international protection, was denied access and shot at, and briefly detained. The situation around the camps is unsafe. (EEPA, 2020, SR 19, Ref. number R-81)

Due to agreements to establish a humanitarian corridor, some humanitarian aid was delivered to Adi Harush and Mai Ayni. However, even prior to their destruction, Shimelba and Hitsats never received any humanitarian support:

World Food Programme delivered food for 35,000 refugees in Adi Harush and Mai Ayni refugee camps, but the convoy to Hitsats and Shimelba camps was unable to deliver aid due to insecurity in the area. (EEPA, 2020, SR 36, Ref. number R-165)

The situation in Adi Harush and Mai Ayni was also dire. After UNHCR carried out its visit to those sites in January 2022, the status of the availability of water, food, and medical supplies was characterised as alarming.

Refugees in urban settings

Not only camp refugees were threatened and attacked, many refugees in urban settings came under attacks, were assault, or were arrested because of their ethnicity:

Over 20 Eritrean refugees fleeing from Tigray, were arrested by federal police in Addis Ababa. (EEPA, 2020, SR 42, Ref. number R-195)

Arrests of refugees took place in a broader context of ethnic profiling carried out by the federal government during the war. Tigrayans and Tigrinya-speaking people were harassed, assaulted, and arrested based on their ethnicity:

It is reported that many Eritrean refugees in Addis Ababa have been arrested as part of the mass arrests of people who speak Tigrinya (the language in Tigray and Eritrea) in Addis Ababa. Additionally, according to reports, the Agency for Refugees and Returnees Affairs (ARRA) is now asking money for its services as part of increased corruption practices. It is reported that refugees who traveled to the new refugee camp, Debarq, find food and housing inadequate. However, they are prevented from returning to Addis Ababa. (Horn Highlights, 9 November 2021)

Thousands of refugees who left the Tigray refugee camps due to rising insecurity were coming to towns and cities with a need for assistance. Leaving everything behind and with nowhere to go, they tried to reach bigger cities such as Mekelle or Addis Ababa to find some safety:

ICRC reports that 1,000 Eritrean refugees from Shire have come to Mekelle and are looking for assistance; ICRC has difficulties in meeting their needs, due to disruption of supply. (EEPA, 2020, SR 12, Ref. number R-46)

Furthermore, thousands of Eritrean refugees, despite having internationally recognised refugee status, ended up in Adigrat living as internally displaced people (IDPs) (EEPA, 2021, SR 125, Ref. number R-516).

Direct attacks on refugees on the move were reported in many instances:

Radio Erena reported that over 4,000 Eritrean refugees have left their camps in Tigray and are moving towards other Ethiopian regions after repeated attacks by militias. (EEPA, 2020, SR 19, Ref. number R-82)

Those who managed to reach urban settings were not safe either. They could not be supported in their basic humanitarian needs, but refugees also faced a threat of forced returns to Tigray war zones:

Ethiopia's government states it is returning Eritrean refugees to camps they have fled in the northern region of Tigray, a move that alarms the United Nations refugee agency UNHCR. (EEPA, 2020, SR 23, Ref. number R-105)

The federal government took control over one of the IOM offices in Addis Ababa and started to send refugees back to the refugee camps in Tigray:

According to online sources, some refugees tried to run from the IOM center, and were caught and badly beaten and forced to return to the center by the security personnel. (EEPA, 2020, SR 23, Ref. number R-109)

Some of the refugees who were sent back to Tigray went missing during their trip and have not been accounted for:

Eritrean refugees that were forced to return to camps in Tigray have not arrived yet, despite having left Addis Ababa 3 days ago. They seem to have disappeared without communication. (R-129, EEPA Situation Report No. 26, 15 December 2020) (EEPA, 2020, SR 26 Ref. number R-129)

Eritrean refugees were deported from Addis Ababa to Tigray, even though the refugee camps in the Tigray no longer offered adequate protection.

Discussion

To identify the critical events that were pivotal to changes in the protection and treatment of Eritrean refugees in Ethiopia, the theory of critical events has been used. Several steps need to be undertaken in critical event analysis. In the first instance, it is important to establish the distinguishing features of an event. Further, any contingencies of the event, as well as causal properties (necessity and sufficiency), are identified. After identifying causal properties, one can understand whether or not the identified event is causally important for the outcome of interest. Table 11.2 explains the definition of the main concepts used in the critical event analysis, as introduced by García-Montoya and Mahoney (2023).

Table 11.2. Definition of terminology under the theory of critical events

#	Term	Definition
1	Event	Clearly defined incidents characterised by temporal boundaries and distinguishing features

#	Term	Definition
2	Critical event	An event that is both contingent as well as causally important for an outcome of interest
3	Outcome of interest	A series of consecutive events that occur after a critical event takes place
4	Contingency	An unexpected characteristic of an event; some occurrence that was not foreseen to happen and yet does happen
5	Causal properties – sufficiency & necessity	<p>Causal properties of an event are divided between sufficiency properties and necessity properties. To establish sufficiency and necessity one needs to consider plausible counterfactual cases to the identified event.</p> <p>Sufficiency is a feature that generates the outcome.</p> <p>Necessity is an enabling feature of the outcome.</p>
6	Causal importance	If the analysis shows that sufficiency and necessity properties are identified, it can be concluded that the critical event is causally important for an outcome of interest.

Source: Adapted from García-Montoya & Mahoney, 2023

Pre-war period – Temporality, contingency and causality

To see which of the events in the studied pre-war period can be characterised as the critical one, the temporal boundaries of an event need to be established. The studied phenomenon must be clearly delineated by temporal boundedness. This is a prerequisite in a causal analysis. The pre-war period starts upon Abiy Ahmed’s election to the office of the Prime Minister in April 2018 and ends at the outbreak

of the war in Tigray on the night of 3 November 2020. One of the significant events in this period was the signing of the 2018 Peace Agreement between Ethiopia and Eritrea.

The outcomes of interest that directly affected the course of protection of Eritrean refugees in Ethiopia, are three events that happened in the first months of 2020. These are (i) the withdrawal of *prima facie* refugee status determination, (ii) the announcement of the closure of the Hitsats refugee camp, and (iii) the application of the exclusion criteria in the refugee status determination.

There is no binding international framework that rules on *prima facie* refugee status determination. States are recommended to develop their own national frameworks and policies to create a basis for the recognition of refugee status. Under Article 21, the Refugee Proclamation adopted by Ethiopia in 2019 incorporated some of the procedural implications that need to be followed when it comes to terminating the group's refugee status determination. Such action needs to be accompanied by a consultation with UNHCR on the plausible change of circumstances in the country of origin of refugees at stake. In the case of Eritrean refugees, no such procedure was followed by the government.

Based on the analysis, the signing of the 2018 Peace Agreement can be seen as an unexpected event in the complex historical course of Ethiopia–Eritrea relations. The relationship between the two countries has been characterised by a complex and often tumultuous history. Their relationship has been marred by periods of conflict and tension, as well as intermittent attempts at cooperation and reconciliation. The unexpected character of the 2018 Peace Agreement is particularly prominent in the context of the implementation of the 2000 Algiers Agreement and the resolution of the disputed border area of Badme. Despite the formal end of the war in 2000, tensions between Eritrea and Ethiopia persisted over the years. The border issue remained unresolved, and both countries nourished the tense relationship, further exacerbating the conflict. The status quo around the ‘no war, no peace’ relations between the two countries lasted for nearly two decades. Therefore, the announcement of the Ethiopian government, which came only a few

months after the new PM Abiy entered office, was received with surprise by Ethiopians, Eritreans, and the international community.

The ‘normalisation’ of relations between Eritrea and Ethiopia was an enabling characteristic for the causal relationship with the changes in refugee policies described in this study. The Peace Agreement itself sparked a belief that reforms could potentially occur inside Eritrea. However, that was not a result that materialised. Many countries, including in Europe, changed their narrative around Eritrean refugees, using the signing of the 2018 Peace Agreement as a departure point, saying that the conflict between countries was the main driver for Eritreans to flee the country. However, the main push factor for the refugees was, and remains, primarily the indefinite national service and the lack of basic human rights protection in the country (Human Rights Watch, 2023). The outcomes, as identified in the analysis, of the pre-war period do not occur in other counterfactual cases. When looking at the refugees of other nationalities residing in Ethiopia, no similar practices are observed in relation to protection policies. Based on the findings, the causal properties of the studied event show a high level of necessity and sufficiency.

Table 11.3. Summary of the critical event identified in the pre-war period and its properties

Critical event	2018 Signing of the Declaration of Peace and Friendship between Eritrea and Ethiopia
Contingency	This event is classified as unexpected due to the many years of ongoing ‘no war, no peace’ conflict between Eritrea and Ethiopia. Especially over the implementation of the 2000 Algiers Agreement and resolution of the disputed border area of Badme. The announcement of the Ethiopian government comes only a few months after the new Prime Minister entered office.

Causal properties	'Normalisation' of relations between Eritrea and Ethiopia has an enabling characteristic as a causal relation to the changes of policies. A similar outcome does not occur in other counterfactual cases when looking at the refugees of other nationalities residing in Ethiopia. Both necessity as well as sufficiency properties are present and establish causal path to the outcome of interest.
Outcome of interest	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> (1) Abolition of the <i>prima facie</i> recognition of Eritrean Refugees (2) Implementation of exclusion criteria for refugee status determination of Eritrean asylum seekers (3) Abrupt closure of established refugee camps
Causal importance	Signing of the Declaration of Peace and Friendship between Eritrea and Ethiopia had been causally important for shifts in protection policies towards Eritrean refugees.

Intra-war period – Temporality & contingency and causality

The internal political tension between the Tigray People's Liberation Front and the federal government of Ethiopia escalated to an open armed conflict on the night of 3 November 2020. This event characterises the starting point of the second part of the analysis, which focused on the intra-war period. From the beginning, the war had an international character due to the involvement of the Eritrean military. The presence of Eritrean forces in Ethiopia and their active participation in the Tigray war has been observed as a significant event in the intra-war period. In order to establish whether this event can be characterised as the critical one, this section will talk about the contingency as well as causal properties, as required by the theoretical framework. The landmark of the end of the present analysis is the signing of a Cessation of Hostilities Agreement between the warring parties on 2 November 2022.

The unexpectedness of Eritrea's involvement in the war is highly visible in this occurrence. The gravity of the consequent events that

were caused by the presence of Eritrean troops in Tigray could not have been foreseen. One can, however, argue that the reports of mobilisation of the Eritrean military before the outbreak of the war diminished the contingency aspect of the event. Reports from the 33rd Round of the Eritrean National Service indicated that it was a mass campaign targeting people from the rural areas of Eritrea, underage children and youth, as well as persons branded as criminals, to join the Eritrean military and fight for their country against Tigray.

They motivated people from rural areas by saying you're going to revenge your people who have been killed by Tigray people in the past years and also you can return your cattle which was taken by Tigray people. The motivation for the criminals was to let them free after they came back from the war in Tigray. (REP-010.05, internal report to Van Reisen, written report, April 2021)

An estimated 30,000 recruits received military training in Sawa and Kour Meena Military Training Centres in Eritrea from May to August 2020. This, however, did not prepare the recruits sufficiently for the battlefield and fierce fights that were ahead of them:

After one month of the campaign which covered all Eritrean Cities and Rural Areas, the number became more than what they expected and it was about 30,000 and the 12,000 were just between 16 and 20 years old. (REP-010.06, internal report to Mirjam Van Reisen, written report, April 2021)

The reported involvement of Ethiopian federal military commanders in the training of Eritrean representatives with higher military rankings suggests that the war in Tigray had been a long anticipated and pre-thought agenda, in which Eritrea was expected to take an active role. The graduates of the 33rd Round of the Eritrean National Service were part of the military group that invaded Shimelba refugee camp on 17 November 2020. Most of them were scared and confused youth:

The troops between 16 and 20 were confused, so afraid of what was going on in Tigray, they were children, they wanted protection from someone but they couldn't find it. (REP-010.12, internal report to Van Reisen, written report, April 2021)

The second fact that could diminish the unexpected character of the event to be considered a critical one, is the escalation of the internal

relations between the Ethiopian federal government and the Tigray regional government prior to the outbreak of war. This was very apparent for many months when tensions on the political scene were gradually rising.

Despite these assertions, it is undeniable that the extent, severity, and active involvement of the Eritrean military in the Tigray conflict was an unexpected development at the onset of the war. What is also important to note, when it comes to contingency, is that the exogenous shock of the outbreak of the war, in a way, complements the contingency of the event itself, because, without that, the likelihood of the event occurring is rather small. Exogenous properties of the outbreak of the war disrupted the functioning status quo of the existing regime and set the tone of the alternative regime.

Non-protection of Eritrean refugees

The situation of Eritrean refugees in Tigray during the war was challenging, giving rise to grave humanitarian concerns. As shown in Table 11.4, in 2020, Tigray hosted 181,091 Eritreans who were officially recognised as refugees by the UNHCR. However, as the conflict escalated in Tigray, the refugees became caught in the crossfire with dire consequences.

Table 11.4. Eritrean refugees registered with UNHCR in Ethiopia

Year	Country of origin	Host country	Number of refugees registered with UNHCR
2018	Eritrea	Ethiopia	173,965
2019	Eritrea	Ethiopia	158,596
2020	Eritrea	Ethiopia	181,091
2021	Eritrea	Ethiopia	158,294
2022	Eritrea	Ethiopia	162,812

Source: UNHCR, 2023a

Table 11.4 shows the number of Eritrean refugees registered under UNHCR’s mandate in Ethiopia from 2018 to 2022. The figures do not include unregistered refugees and migrants who informally

moved to Ethiopian cities and urban settings. Further, it is important to note that the numbers of refugees in the years 2021 and 2022, as displayed in Table 11.4, are questionable. As the analysis shows, the high number of unprecedented abductions of refugees returned to Eritrea, as well as the secondary migration, seem to be unaccounted for in the statistical records of the UNHCR Refugee Data Finder.

Ethiopia is a party to several international legal frameworks governing the rights of refugees. Table 11.5 contains some of the key international and regional instruments and dates of accession by Ethiopia. Based on the basic principles of international law, every adopted treaty is binding upon the parties that ratify it and must be implemented in good faith.

Table 11.5. Overview of the international and regional legal instruments

Instrument	Year of adoption	Year of accession by Ethiopia
Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees	1951	January 7, 1969
Protocol Relating to the Status of Refugees	1967	January 7, 1969
Convention Governing the Specific Aspects of Refugee Problems in Africa	1969	November 19, 1974
African Charter on Human and Peoples' Rights	1981	January 15, 1998
Universal Declaration of Human Rights	1948	
Convention Against Torture and Other Cruel, Inhumane or Degrading Treatment or Punishment	1984	March 14, 1994
Convention on the Rights of the Child.	1989	May 14, 1991
African Charter on the Rights and Welfare of the Child	1990	April 15, 1992
Protocol to the African Charter on Human and People's Rights on the Rights of Women in Africa	2003	February 11, 2004

The principle of *non-refoulement*, which lies at the very core of international refugee protection, had been an integral part of the 1951 Convention and its 1967 Protocol, as well as the 1969 OAU Refugee Convention. The principle of protection is implicitly embedded in the

provisions of all the above-mentioned international and regional legal frameworks. Therefore, it is expected that the country implements the framework in its full extension and applies these provisions to all citizens, including the refugee population residing on its soil, without discrimination. The analysis shows that in many instances the adopted legal frameworks were not complied with by Ethiopia.

The findings indicate that Eritrean refugees in Tigray were subject to indiscriminate attacks, violence, and human rights abuses perpetrated by various armed groups involved in the conflict. There were accounts of killings, sexual violence, looting, and destruction of refugee camps, leaving many refugees in a state of extreme vulnerability. The fighting and disruption of essential services further exacerbated the already precarious conditions for Eritrean refugees in the region. The main analysis of this study is supported by the witness accounts given by refugees who were present in the Tigray region at the time of the war. Accounts of the invasion of Hitsats and fighting in the camp are confirmed by a refugee who used to work in the camp hospital:

On 19 November 2020 the problem came to us. On this day, I was on my duty in the hospital. It was Wednesday. The conflict started between the Eritrean fighters and the Tigray militants who were around the Hitsats camp. When I came out of the hospital, I found the Eritrean fighters already inside the camp. After that they went directly to the near village and continued the war with the Tigray militants there. (IN-001.04, interview with Van Reisen, phone interview, February 2021)

Refugees appeared to be attacked by all the military forces operating on the ground: the Eritrean troops, the Ethiopian federal military as well as Amhara military groups, and forces associated with Tigray fighters. A refugee in Hitsats camp talked about an attack by “Tigray militants” who went to the camp’s hospital originally aiming to kill a man of Amhara ethnicity, but the attack caused more casualties including refugees:

Tigray militants came to the camp and killed 10 people and one of them is my friend. He was working as a social worker in the same hospital. [...] we found that the militants went to the hospital to kill Mr Shibeshi because he is from Amhara tribe.

(IN-001.06, interview with Mirjam Van Reisen, phone interview, February 2021)

Witness accounts from the Shimelba camp also support the findings from the main analysis. A refugee recounted how Eritrean forces entered the camp and forced the refugees to walk to Sheraro, from where they were forcibly taken back to Eritrea:

On 17 November 2020, the Eritrean fighters came to the camp. After that, they used a system to let us run from the camp by killing some people. They start to force us to leave the camp, then the people reach Shiraro, and after that, they start to force the people to go to Eritrea. Some of the people went to Eritrea because they did not have any food or anything to survive. (IN-003.15, interview with Van Reisen, phone interview, February 2021)

Other refugees witnessed the situation in the urban setting in Adigrat, where Eritrean troops entered on 18 November.

On 19 November 2020, in the morning, the Eritrean fighters came with about 10 tanks and they were killing anyone on the streets. We were about 5000 people. About 300 people were under a fire shooting, some of them were killed and some injured. I and the other 5 people ran from them. (IN-004.02, interview with Van Reisen, phone interview, February 2021)

The conflict also led to the severe disruption of humanitarian aid and assistance to the refugee population. Access to food, water, healthcare, and shelter became limited, posing a significant risks to the health and well-being of the refugees:

There was a lack of food, and all [other] needs for the refugees. People suffered a lot and also some people died because of hunger. (IN-003.20, interview with Van Reisen, phone interview, February 2021)

Many were forced to flee the camps and seek refuge in neighbouring areas or attempt dangerous journeys to other regions in search of safety. The situation created a humanitarian crisis, with a large number of refugees in urgent need of assistance and protection. The routes for displaced refugees were dangerous:

There were a lot of Eritrean fighters on the way to Shire. That's why a lot of people were going on foot through indirect ways for 4 days. Then you needed to pay a lot of money for traveling to Addis Ababa, from Shire to Mekelle 1200ETB and from

Mekelle to Addis Ababa also 1200ETB. All the people who were moving to Addis Ababa had some help from outside. The other people suffered a lot there without any kind of help. (IN-003.24, interview with Van Reisen, phone interview, February 2021)

International humanitarian organisations and human rights groups expressed deep concern over the situation of Eritrean refugees in Tigray and called for immediate action to ensure their protection and access to lifesaving assistance.

Intra-war period – Causality

The causality of the critical event is even more straightforward than during the pre-war period. It has been clearly supported by the data that the very presence of Eritrean forces in Tigray was detrimental to Eritrean refugees. The advancement of the Eritrean military on Ethiopian soil had both a permissive and enabling role in the identified outcomes. When looking at other identified counterfactual cases, it is observed that attacks on refugees were done by other military forces present in Tigray. Local civilians as well as refugees were caught in the crossfire between the warring sides.

It has been considered that Eritrean refugees could have been attacked even if the Eritrean military had never entered Tigray. However, data shows the direct involvement of Eritrean forces in massacres and attacks. Taking into consideration the facts on this point, one can claim that a moderate level of necessity is reached. The other aspect that is supported by the data is that abduction of refugees back to Eritrea, which was carried out solely by Eritrean forces. So, looking at the necessity of the presence of Eritrean forces for this outcome of interest one can constitute a high level of necessity. It is important to note that the relationship between outcomes of interest and identified critical events is more layered than what is visibility. Power dynamics and the complexity of political agendas set within the context of war are unpredictable.

Table 11.6. Summary of the critical event identified under the intra-war period and its properties

Critical event	Eritrean military enters Tigray and actively participates in war.
Contingency	Although the escalation of the internal relations between the federal government of Ethiopia and the regional government of Tigray was seen in the months prior to the war, the active participation of Eritrean forces and the scope of their interference in Tigray is considered unexpected.
Causal properties	<p>The presence of Eritrean forces in Tigray and their advancing on areas farther from the border had both a permissive and enabling role in the identified outcome.</p> <p>There are some counterfactual cases that, to a certain extent, result in similar outcomes: e.g., attacks on refugees by Ethiopian government forces, Amhara forces, and Tigray militia. However, multiple attacks as well as the abduction of Eritrean refugees back to Eritrea were done by Eritrean forces. This indicates a moderate level of necessity and sufficiency of the event.</p>
Outcome of interest	<p>(1) Attacks on refugees by military</p> <p>(2) Abduction of refugees by Eritrean forces to Eritrea</p> <p>(3) Destruction of Eritrean refugee camps</p> <p>(4) Displacement of 100,000 Eritrean refugees</p>
Causal importance	The presence of Eritrean troops and their active participation in the war were causally important in relation to the protection of Eritrean refugees in Tigray.

Studying the policy shifts and the critical events in history that lead to alternative regimes is a complex matter, characterised by power

relations and power asymmetries between different actors. The complexity of the present study discusses the relations that happen at the level of visibility.

Many events occur behind curtains in the complex world of politics and power struggles, which are not accounted for in the present analysis. However, this limitation does not diminish the accounts and recollections of the people who were caught in the middle of such political plays – the refugees.

Conclusion

This chapter aimed to analyse the critical events that led to shifts in protection policies and treatment of Eritrean refugees in Ethiopia and identify the reasons for such changes occurring. Eritrean refugees, who were once welcomed and protected in Ethiopia and Tigray, were no longer protected. In fact, they were even abducted and taken back to the country from which they had fled. This is a severe violation of international law that will need further investigation.

This study set out to define and describe the periods in which the failure to protect the Eritrean refugees occurred. The investigation identified the critical events that led to the occurrence of this tragic failure of the protection of refugees in two distinct periods: (i) the pre-war period and, (ii) the intra-war period. These periods were characterised by temporal boundaries. The starting point of the first period was the election of Abiy Ahmed Ali into the office of the Prime Minister of Ethiopia in 2018. The intra-war period starts with the outbreak of the war in Tigray on the night of 3 November 2020 and ends with the Pretoria Cessation of Hostilities Agreement in November 2022.

The analysis shows that the main critical event of the pre-war period was the signing of the 2018 Peace Agreement between Ethiopia and Eritrea. This event melted the ‘cold’ relations between the two countries and played an enabling role in the changes to refugee policies. The main shifts that affected the protection of Eritrean refugees during this period were the withdrawal of *prima facie* recognition of Eritrean refugees in Ethiopia, applying the exclusion criteria for the refugee status determination of Eritrean asylum

seekers, and the abrupt announcement of the closure of the established Hitsats refugee camp.

The second part of the analysis focused on the intra-war period. The critical event identified in this period is the entering of the Eritrean military into Tigray and their active participation in the war. The study found that this event highly influenced subsequent events affecting the Eritrean refugees in Tigray. The entering of the Eritrean military into the war in Tigray was directly associated with the (non-) protection of this refugee group reaching new and unprecedented levels, including attacks on refugees by the military, the abduction of refugees back to Eritrea by Eritrean forces, as well as the destruction of Eritrean refugee camps in Tigray. Eritrean refugees were also sent back from Addis Ababa to camps in Tigray that were no longer functioning or offering protection.

Due to such *modus operandi*, an unknown number, but at least a hundred thousand Eritrean refugees that were present in Tigray prior to the war, went missing during the war. This is a unique occurrence that will need further scholarly study. From this research it can be concluded that the *modus operandi* of the Eritrean and Ethiopian governments, which undermined the basic safety of Eritrean refugees, can be classified as an egregious failure of refugee protection and a grave violation of international law.

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Author's contributions

This is research carried out under the PhD. Programme of the author, Kristina Melicherová, who independently prepared and conducted this research.

Ethical considerations

This research was carried out under ethical clearance obtained from Tilburg University Identification code: REDC 2020.139 titled “Cultural Dimensions of Meaning-making and Agenda-setting”.

This chapter should be read in conjunction with the ‘Note on content and editorial decisions’ (Book 1).

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“He had Orders, and His Superiors were Outside”:

Strategic Rape as Genocide in Tigray

Gebru Kidanu & A. H. Tefera

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Any attempt to hide the truth eventually leads to its revelation.

Abstract

This study explores the systematic sexual violence and atrocities against the Tigrayan ethnic group, highlighting deliberate actions such as rape, killings, forced abortions, and the transmission of HIV, perpetrated with strong indications of genocidal intent. These crimes were reportedly executed by the Eritrean Defence Forces (EDF) and Ethiopian National Defence Force (ENDF) under direct orders. The organised nature of the violence aimed at the long-term destruction of the Tigrayan community’s physical and psychological well-being. In addition to sexual violence, survivors faced other forms of oppression, including restricted access to essential services and destroyed infrastructure, exacerbating their suffering and hindering recovery. The study underscores the severe psychological trauma inflicted, as many witnessed killings and violence, leading to community-wide devastation. It calls for urgent humanitarian intervention, accountability, and justice through international collaboration, emphasising the need for reparations and comprehensive support for survivors. The report criticises the lack of justice in ongoing peace negotiations and stresses the importance of addressing these atrocity crimes under the Rome Statute.

Key words: Tigray war, Ethiopia, Eritrea, strategic rape, sexual violence, genocide, atrocity crimes

Introduction

In war, there are many deadly weapons, but there is one that all men carry with them – their bodies. This weapon is used by forces involved in conflict around the world to attack women and girls and, through them, their communities (Clifford, 2008). When rape is used as a weapon it is random and every woman and other members of the specific group are a target. This is referred to as ‘victim interchangeability’, indicating that the crime is committed against the identity of a person, while no other characteristics matter. Rape is used strategically to install fear, dehumanise a population, undermine communities, break social fabric, and in some cases pollute the bloodline of the victimised population (MacKinnon, 2016).

During genocide and ethnic conflict, women become prime targets because of their cultural position and their importance in the family structure (Seifert, 1993). The experience makes it difficult for survivors to integrate back into society and assume their previous familial and social roles, potentially resulting in societal collapse (Gingerich & Leaning, 2004). Another intention of this violence is to leave women infertile by damaging their reproductive organs and/or ‘purify’ the bloodlines by impregnating the women with babies of the perpetrators, thereby considering them ‘ethnically cleansed’ (French *et al.*, 1998; Baaz & Stern, 2013).

Rape inflicts long-lasting and potentially irreparable psychological trauma on survivors. In the context of ethnic conflict, mass rape not only affects individuals, but also contributes to collective trauma, effectively serving to dismantle and destroy an entire ethnic group (Sharlach, 2000). This rape also takes place in public, in front of family members and the community, with loved ones forced to witness the incident or participate in the act, affecting the social structure and cohesion of family and community (Gingerich & Leaning, 2004; Gottschall, 2004, Van Reisen *et al.*, 2017; Kidanu & Van Reisen, 2024). These incidents have happened in Bosnia, where family members were compelled to commit acts of rape against each other or forced to witness the rape of a family member (Diken & Laustsen, 2005).

The transmission of HIV/AIDS through rape is used to reduce the number of the targeted population. It can also be unintentional, when violent attacks lead to the exchange of bodily fluids (Reid-Cunningham, 2008; World Health Organization (WHO), 2000; Harvard Humanitarian Initiative & Oxfam International, 2010).

Sexual violence in the Tigray war

Since the war in Tigray started on 3 November 2020 (ICHREE, 2023), there have been several reports published stating that rape was used as a weapon of war. The evidence lists the perpetrators as members of the Eritrean Defence Forces (EDF), Ethiopian National Defence Force (ENDF), Amhara Militia, and Special Forces (Kidanu & Van Reisen, 2024; Varia, 2021; Fisseha *et al.*, 2023; Physicians for Human Rights, 2023). During this time, Tigrayan women were the primary targets, including young girls, elderly women, and pregnant and lactating women (Dyan, 2021; Amnesty International, 2021; Varia, 2021; Mcveigh, 2021; United Nations Human Rights Council, 2022).

No place was safe for the women of Tigray, they were attacked in their homes, on the road, and on the way to school. They were exposed to multiple forms of violence (Dyan, 2021). Women and girls were gang raped, used for sexual slavery, and forced to perform anal and oral sex, which are taboo in the culture bringing them shame and feelings of guilt. Women had foreign objects including hot metal, nails, and socks logged into their vaginas. These acts were performed in front of family members, neighbours, and even in public. This led to trauma among both survivors and their families and communities, leading to the destruction of the social fabric (Dyan, 2021; Amnesty International, 2021; Varia, 2021; Kassa, 2021; Mcveigh, 2021). Family members, including young children, have tragically been victims of sexual violence as well. They have been forced to witness the rapes and assaults of their mothers or other female relatives. The consequences of these incidents are far-reaching, causing long-term harm and trauma not only within generations but also between different communities (International Commission of Human Rights Experts in Ethiopia, 2023).

Survivors also endured emotional abuse. Ethnic slurs were used; perpetrators told them that they were traitors and unworthy. Other descriptions from survivors indicate that rape was used to humiliate and dehumanise with a special intent to destroy the ethnic group, indicting genocidal intent (Sela, 2021; Dyan, 2021). They reported being told by the perpetrators “[we will] clean you all” we will “cleanse your identity”, and that no one would hold them accountable as they were ordered by their superiors to do so (Dyan, 2021). Aljazeera interviewed a woman who had hot metal inserted into her vagina and was told “A Tigrayan womb should never give birth” (Kassa, 2021; see also Amnesty International, 2021; Varia, 2021).

Traces of intent were also hidden in the dark of the inside body. A Tigrayan doctor treating a rape survivor found a piece of paper held in a plastic sheet from within her womb. The rape was allegedly perpetrated by Eritrean soldiers. The message written on the piece of paper is translated as follows:

Deki Erena [‘we Eritreans’] are always Heroes.

That is how we do! And we will still keep doing this. We want the wombs of Tigrayan women to be infertile.

We are still seeking to revenge you for what you did to us in the 1990s.

On the backside of the piece of paper, the message reads:

We Eritreans, people from Asmara are Heroes

How on Earth can you forget what you have done to us in 09. Even if you do forget it, we will not forget. From now onwards any Tigrayan will not give birth, will not have a baby from a Tigrayan.

We shall make sure you know and we will show you how unforgiving we are. So, don’t leave any [Tigrayan] woman alive from now onwards: just kill them all.

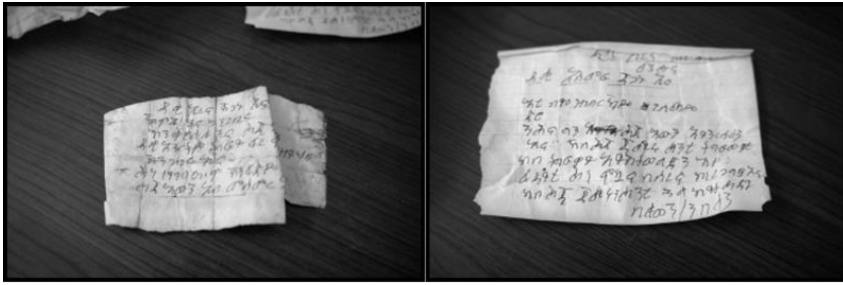


Figure 12.1. Messages found wrapped in plastic in a woman’s womb

(First published by

<https://x.com/XimenaBorrazas/status/179542778393570968>) (Retrieved from patient’s file, saved under special protection) (Van Reisen *et al.*, 2024)

The message carried in the womb of the woman is a clear message of intent. The statement “We want the womb of Tigrayan women to be infertile” speaks to an intent of genocidal proportion.

The womb of this survivor, who carried this message, had also been stuffed with stones, which the doctor removed. In addition to the pain of the rape, survivors were subjugated to further hurdles, as they were not able to access services and did not receive adequate support to deal with their trauma and pain, as health facilities were damaged, and the blockade and siege stopped support from coming into Tigray. They were effectively closed off from the world due to the communication blackout (Human Rights Watch, 2021; Mcveigh, 2021; International Commission of Human Rights Experts in Ethiopia, 2023).

Women who were able to visit hospitals came with bruises, stab wounds, burns, and cuts on their bodies because of the physical violence that accompanied the rape. Others came with psychological and reproductive health issues. After the rape, women suffered from fistula, HIV/AIDS, pregnancy, and miscarriages (Human Rights Watch, 2021; Dyan, 2021).

Survivors were subjected to threats of additional sexual and gender-based violence, coerced impregnation, intentional HIV transmission, and warnings of reproductive harm by the perpetrators (International Commission of Human Rights Experts in Ethiopia, 2023;

Gebremichael *et al.*, 2023). Gang rape was reportedly used to hinder women from giving birth in Tigray. Due to the extent of rape that took place in Tigray and considering the fertility rate of four in five generations, it was estimated that there would be a loss of 3.2 million offspring (Gebremichael *et al.*, 2023).

A concerning aspect is that only a small percentage of survivors received the necessary medical and psychological care. This lack of access to healthcare services is attributed to the destruction and looting of most health facilities in the region. This indicates the dire situation faced by survivors of sexual violence, leaving many without the essential support and care needed to address their physical and mental health challenges. The victims of sexual and physical violence were not limited to a specific age group or gender, as underage girls, elderly women, and men were also targeted. (Fisseha *et al.*, 2023).

EDF, ENDF, Amhara Special Forces, Afar Special Forces, and Fano militias employed dehumanising and derogatory language before, during, and after engaging in acts of sexual violence. Survivors were singled out based on both their ethnicity and gender, reflecting a systematic strategy to instil fear, displace, and inflict punishment upon the Tigrayan community. Certain statements from the perpetrators hinted at a potential intention to harm the Tigrayan population (International Commission of Human Rights Experts in Ethiopia, 2023).

Although the weaponised rape that took place in the region has been the most talked about aspect of the war, there is not much evidence coming from academic researchers on the ground. There have been news articles, books, and reports written on the subject, but only a few scientific research papers from academic researchers on the ground have been published. This is understandable, given the most sensitive nature of it, the importance of not harming survivors again, and the issue of having the trust of the survivors. The siege that was imposed over the two-year period of the war presented an almost insurmountable challenge to (safe) travel for academic researchers and anyone belonging to the Tigray community.

This research builds on the documentation of the modus operandi of sexual violence perpetrated in the Tigray war (Kidanu & Van Reisen, 2024) to further investigate the intent behind the sexual violence in the region and the consequences it had for survivors. This study presents important documentation on the subject; the data of this study was collected during the active period of war, and the additional elongated siege and blockade.

The main research question investigated was: *What patterns can be identified in sexual violence and rape perpetrated on Tigrayan women during the war in Tigray and could these constitute genocide?* The general questions was split into two sub-questions:

Sub-Q 1: *Were there systematic or widespread instances of rape targeting Tigrayan women during the war in Tigray?*

Sub-Q 2: *To what extent do these patterns of rape align with the legal definitions and criteria for genocide, as outlined in international conventions and jurisprudence?*

Rape committed with genocidal intent

During the Rwandan genocide of 1994, a significant number of women experienced sexual violence, with estimates ranging from 250,000 to 500,000 cases. Systematic rape was a strategic component of the Hutu extremist plan to exterminate the Tutsi minority population. This involved collective and repeated sexual assaults with brutal violence, public humiliation, and torture (Mukamana *et al.*, 2018). The rape in Rwanda was designed to kill Tutsi women through transmission of sexually transmitted infections like HIV/AIDS, using sharp objects as a weapon for rape, public humiliation, collective and repeated sexual violence (Reid-Cunningham, 2008).

Similarly, the first Yugoslavian genocide in the early 1990s resulted in the rape of approximately 10,000 to 60,000 Muslim and Croatian women. In the 1971 civil war in Bangladesh, it is believed that Pakistani soldiers raped between 200,000 to 400,000 Bangladeshi women (Sharlach, 2000). In Darfur, a militia group called Janjaweed has been accused of committing systematic attacks against civilians in Sudan, with rape being one of the violence committed against women

survivors. Witnesses said that rape was used against them in hopes to destroy their bloodline, impregnate them with babies and extinguish their bloodline from Sudan, humiliate the men making them feel weak as they could not defend their women and leave long term trauma because they believed in having been raped for multiple reasons and sustain long-lasting trauma among families and the community. Children born out of this rape are labelled as Janjaweed babies or Arab babies and stigmatised in the community (Abdullahi, 2016). Women are exposed to multiple consequences post-rape. They are stigmatised, because culturally rape is seen as taboo, and because of the notion of virginity and purity, these women are seen as damaged and are disowned by their husbands or family, especially those with children born out of rape (Abdullahi, 2016).

Correspondingly, in recent incidents, Sudanese women and girls in Darfur were highly vulnerable to violence. Additionally, migrant and refugee women and girls from Eritrea and South Sudan, are also severely impacted. The experts from the United Nations report identified the perpetrators as men associated with the Rapid Support Forces (RSF), the former Janjaweed, who are allegedly employing rape and sexual violence to punish and terrorize communities. Additionally, some of the documented incidents of rape appear to have ethnic and racial motivations (UN experts alarmed by reported widespread use of rape and sexual violence against women and girls by RSF in Sudan.).

Physical and psychological consequences follow this violence. In a study conducted by International Alert, 91% of participants were found to have been suffering ongoing impacts of rape (Ohambe *et al.*, 2004). Women and girls who survive these horrific acts are left with physical effects, like gynaecological problems, haemorrhages, rectal injury, and sexually transmitted infections like HIV (Clifford, 2008). The violent nature of the attacks, and the use of foreign objects to perform them, lead to multiple physical disabilities like fistula, internal bleeding, incontinence, and other life-threatening conditions (Reid-Cunningham, 2008).

Recognising rape with genocidal intent

One of the most visible long-term effects of war rape is the number of children that are born due to the rape. Tens of thousands of children around the world are born because of rape (Gettleman, 2007). The mother carries lifelong pain in the decision to keep the child or not. Some mothers have a continuous love-hate relationship with her child, which can leave her with feelings of guilt. The children also view themselves as the source of suffering to their mother and hate what their father did to them (Rimmer, 2006). Women can also be seen as traitors in their communities and left out of the social, political, and economic spheres. These consequences leave a lasting scar on the community (Clifford, 2008).

It is only recently that rape has been recognised as a tool for genocide, during the prosecution of Jean-Paul Akayesu in the International Criminal Tribunal of Rwanda. (Human Rights Watch, 1998). The wars in Bosnia and Herzegovina and Rwanda were characterised by systematic mass rape of women (Shanks & Schull, 2000). Sharlach finds that the Genocide Convention does not explicitly address sexual violence as a distinct crime of genocide, that the intent to destroy a population based on gender should hold the same legal status under international law as the intent to destroy a population based on ethnicity, nation, or religion (Sharlach, 2000).

The acknowledgment of rape as a form of genocide holds significance in the pursuit of justice, reparations, and reconciliation among the communities involved – comprising victims, survivors, and perpetrators. This recognition not only serves as a preventive measure, but also establishes the gravity of rape as both a war crime and a tool for genocidal intent. Categorising such acts as atrocity crimes falling under the jurisdiction of the International Criminal Court reinforces the commitment to accountability and the deterrence of such heinous acts in conflicts.

Sexual violence and rape as genocide

The Convention for the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide, established by the UN General Assembly on December 9, 1948, defines genocide as the intentional commission of any of the

following acts to destroy, either wholly or partially, a national, ethnic, racial, or religious group:

- (a) Killing members of the group
- (b) Causing serious bodily or mental harm to members of the group
- (c) Deliberately inflicting on the group conditions of life calculated to bring about its physical destruction in whole or in part
- (d) Imposing measures intended to prevent births within the group
- (e) Forcibly transferring children of the group to another group

Rape, in the absence of fatal consequences, can potentially be categorised as a crime of genocide. It is not the crime as such, but the intention of the crime, that critically defines it as genocide. As stated in the Genocide Convention of 1948, the intentional infliction of severe physical or mental harm upon members of a group and/or deliberately subjecting the group to conditions of life that aim to physically destroy it, either partially or entirely, falls under the definition of genocide (United Nations General Assembly, 1948; Rome Statute of the International Criminal Court, 1998).

‘Genocidal rape’ is rape inflicted to destroy people and their culture (Jelínková, 2018). Catharine Mackinnon said:

...this is not rape out of control. It is rape under control. It is also rape unto death, rape as massacre, rape to kill, and to make the victims wish they were dead. It is rape as an instrument of forced exile, rape to make you leave your home and never want to go back. It is rape to be seen and heard and watched and told to others, rape as spectacle. It is rape to drive a wedge through a community, to shatter a society, to destroy a people. (MacKinnon, 2007)

This study adopts the criteria of genocide as its framework. It aims to analyse whether the acts of rape that occurred during the Tigray war were carried out with the specific intent of genocide. By using this framework, the study aims to explore the evidence and circumstances surrounding the instances of rape to determine if they were part of a systematic pattern to destroy the Tigrayan population.

Methodology

This study was conducted in Mekelle and Shire, Tigray: a region located in the northern part of Ethiopia, known for its historical significance, and is characterised by its high-plateau terrain, with elevations typically ranging from 5,000 to 11,000 feet (1,500 to 3,300 meters). The region is drained by the Tekeze and Gash (Mareb) rivers. To the east, you find the Denakil Plain, which includes the Kobar Sink, reaching a depth of approximately 380 feet (116 meters) below sea level.

This study was conducted as explorative ethnographic research with a phenomenological design, aiming to understand how women who experienced rape during the Tigray conflict perceived the phenomenon. The primary data was collected through 20 interviews, including 19 survivors of rape and one male caregiver. The interviews took place from June 2022 to December 2022, during the war in Tigray. Only female survivors of rape were interviewed (this is not an indication that there were no male survivors, but it was not feasible under this study, although it is still an area that needed), and all participants were adults except for one child who had consent from her guardian to participate. This study targeted exclusively survivors of rape.

The study was conducted in multiple sites, including two sites in Mekelle and one in Shire, Tigray. The initial interviews were conducted in Shire with eight women living in camps for internally displaced people (IDP) in 2022. An interview guide was used for these initial interviews, but was later modified after analysing the first eight interviews. An additional 12 survivors were interviewed in Mekelle at two locations: Ayder Comprehensive Specialized Hospital's one-stop centre and a safe house that provides services to survivors of rape.

The participants for this study were selected using a purposive sampling technique. The Regional Health Bureau and Women's Association Tigray were contacted for support and coordinators. The researcher (KGGK) had worked at the one-stop centre for over a year, providing psychosocial support and making observations. The safe house is a highly secure area, and only authorised personnel are

allowed to enter. Therefore, a female psychiatric nurse working at the safe house, supported with conducting interviews within the safehouse.

In-depth interviews were conducted to collect data, ensuring its quality by preparing a field guide based on the literature and previous interview experience of the researcher. The guide was translated from English to Tigrinya and back to English for consistency checking. The questionnaire consisted of two parts: sociodemographic data of the survivor and information about the sexual violence incident and its consequences. Audio recording devices were used for data collection, which was transcribed simultaneously during collection.

The confidentiality of information was maintained by not using personal data, survivors' data was deidentified by not using the survivor's name, and not mentioning the specific 'woreda' or 'kebele'⁵⁸ where the incident took place. Data completeness was checked daily, with assistance from a trained professional on interview techniques. The collected data was transcribed, coded, and categorised using Atlas Ti software, thematically analysed, and presented through narrative descriptions.

Ethical clearance was obtained from Mekelle University College of Health Sciences before conducting the study MU-IRB 1978/2022. Despite challenges due to regulations put in place after Tigray Defence Forces (TDF) regained control of Mekelle in June 2022 to protect survivor data, ethical clearance and support letters allowed for the continuation of interviews.

Detailed information about the study was explained to all participants before starting data collection. The study process was based on the careful consideration of basic ethical principles of, respect for a person's autonomy, beneficence, non-maleficence, confidentiality, and justice. Verbal and written consent was obtained from each participant before starting the data collection after carefully explaining and making sure participants understood the objectives,

⁵⁸ Administrative units of Ethiopia (woreda = district; kebele = ward).

risks, and benefits of the study. Participants were told that they could withdraw consent and stop the interview at any time.

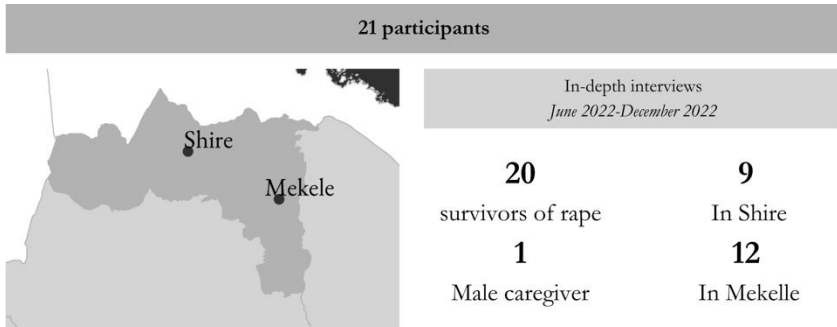


Figure 12.2. Data collected and used in this study

The study acknowledges limitations in terms of data availability and the challenges of conducting research in conflict-affected regions. These factors may have influenced the completeness and accuracy of the findings. Future research should focus on expanding the scope of the study to include a larger sample size and exploring the long-term consequences of sexual violence and rape on survivors.

Results

Based on the in-depth data analysis from the study, the following results were identified in the following thematic areas:

- Acts committed with intent to destroy
- Killing of members of the Tigrayan ethnic group
- Serious bodily or mental harm to survivors of sexual violence
- Deliberately blocking access to essential services
- Measures intended to prevent births within the Tigrayan community

The results are described below.

Acts committed with the intent to destroy.

From the experiences narrated by the participants in this study, all of them describe that this happened to them because of their identity.

They described being told this during the act. One survivor shared the following:

One of them came to me and said that he doesn't want to do this, but he had orders, and his superiors were outside, he said if I pretended that I was raped then he doesn't have to do it too. But then two other soldiers came in and it happened. (Interviewee II10, interview with KGK, in-depth interview face to face, June 2022)

Another survivor said soldiers apologised for her attack after she told them she was not Tigrayan:

The next day I was so furious, I just wasn't thinking straight. I went to their superior who was residing nearby and told him what happened. He didn't seem to care so then I lied and told him I wasn't Tigrayan. My husband had an Ambara Identity and we lived in the Ambara region, so I have the ID my name also doesn't give me away. After I showed him that he got mad and got them all in a line and asked: 'Who did this to our own? He asked them to identify the perpetrators. He even gave me some cash after I told him they had destroyed my belongings. But I did not want that money. I knew it would be the end of me. The Eritreans who were jointly occupying the area saw this and came to my house and raped me again (crying). (Interviewee II05, in-depth interview with Kidanu, face to face, 15 June 2022)

A similar experience is recorded by another interviewee, showing that the identity of some of the women was checked before the act:

They inquired about my ethnicity, questioning if I was Tigrayan. Feeling compelled to tell the truth, I admitted to being Tigrayan. Their reaction was anger, leading to the horrific act of rape. (Interviewee II20, in-depth interview with Kidanu, face to face, 3 December 2022)

In a distressing account, a survivor who questioned the soldiers regarding the reasons for her rape was callously instructed to attribute it to the unfortunate circumstances of her Tigrayan ethnicity. Another survivor, displaying remarkable courage, pleaded with her assailant to use a condom. Shockingly, the soldier responded by revealing their purposeful intent in the act of rape – to impregnate her and contribute to the proliferation of their racial group.

Another survivor was forced to abort her child during the rape despite begging them to stop when she started bleeding excessively.

They refused to stop and told her that was what they had wanted from the start. Many women said: we are unaware of the actions that caused them to harbour such intense hatred towards us. One survivor describes her experience this way:

They gathered us in our neighbourhood and told us that we would have to gather our things and leave, they said: we don't belong here. So, everyone went home to collect what we could carry, it was clear that we didn't have a choice in the matter. My friend, who knew about what had happened to me came along to help me pack my things. She was in the back, packing when four soldiers came to the house. Right away, they started to mock me they said, 'You are a brave junta, you are not scared.' I started to beg them, to please leave me alone but they started beating me. They didn't stop, they even pulled out their knife and gun. I felt so helpless. And then three of them started to take turns raping me, and later left me there to die.
(Interviewee II09, interview with Kidanu, face to face, 23 June 2022)

Many of them said that the EDF told them that they were there to seek revenge, to destroy them. They said that they were told Tigray would be taken back over 20 years and would suffer as they had:

Why did you Tigrians wait for us in your homes and not on the battlefields? We are here to take everything you own and take you back 22 years. (Interviewee II03, interview with Kidanu, face to face, June 2022)

Another participant described a similar experience:

We are here to bring you back 20 years, just as you did to us. (Interviewee II06, interview with Kidanu, face to face, 17 June 2022)

From the experience narrated by the participants in their story, 19 survivors described in the interview that the violence happened to them because of their Tigrayan identity – because they were told so during the act.

Killing members of the Tigrayan ethnic group

While all 20 participants in this study experienced sexual, physical, and emotional violence, that was not the end of their suffering, they also witnessed traumatic events and experienced loss. They saw family members killed and found bodies of loved ones:

My older brother, brother-in-law, and husband's brother-in-law were all mercilessly killed in a single night. The sight of their lifeless bodies drenched in their blood is

etched in my memory forever. However, despite our grief and the instinct to give our loved ones a dignified burial, we were cruelly denied this basic human right. For two agonizing weeks, we were forced to endure the heart-wrenching experience of keeping watch over their remains, ensuring that they were not desecrated by wild animals. The pain and sorrow we felt were unbearable. It was a constant battle between our desire to honour our family members and the oppressive forces that sought to strip us of our dignity. Eventually, with the support of our resilient community, we were granted permission to finally lay our loved ones to rest. It was a bittersweet moment to provide them the final farewell they deserved. (Interviewee II09, interview with Kidanu, face to face, 23 June 2022)

The study found evidence of killings targeting members of the Tigrayan ethnic group. These killings may be part of a broader strategy to diminish or eliminate the group's presence. A burial is of the most important (religious) order in Tigray and the denial of a burial left deep marks on the relatives who felt they had failed in their duty, even if this was beyond their control. The resulting consecration is a serious undermining of the social and religious fabric of Tigrayan society.

Serious bodily or mental harm to survivors of sexual violence

Some women described being raped while family members were present to witness the incident or in proximity so they could hear:

I told everyone that we had to leave somewhere safe and secure, but my husband wouldn't listen. He insisted on staying behind and looking after the house. My children didn't want to leave either, so I left with other family members. Hours later I returned to the house – it just didn't feel right to be without them. The first thing I saw was my husband's dead body lying on the floor. I was so afraid; I was sure they would come back so I got my children and started running when we ran into Eritrean soldiers. They raped me in front of my 18-year-old son, he tried to break himself free so he could try to help, but they were just too strong. He watched them rape me one by one. He kept screaming, asking them to leave me alone, but I think this just added to their pleasure. (Interviewee 17, interview with Kidanu, face to face, 25 August 2022)

Reports of sexual violence would also include incidents of physical torture like beating, cutting, and caustic burns:

I was raped by three Eritrean soldiers. But that was not all, they put hot metal on my skin and repeatedly hit me on the head. I have burn scars all over my back, my head, and between my thighs and vagina. And then they poured some type of chemical on my head, I can't explain to you what it was, but I've been bald ever since. My hair hasn't been able to grow back, that's why I cover it this way. (Interviewee II08, interview with Kidanu, face to face, 15 June 2022)

The study uncovered evidence of serious bodily or mental harm inflicted upon survivors of sexual violence. This suggests that sexual violence was used to cause significant physical and psychological suffering within the Tigrayan community.

Deliberately blocking access to essential services

Interviews conducted with survivors indicate that their physical and mental condition continued to deteriorate significantly following their attack due to other compounding factors. These factors included displacement, witnessing other violent incidents, and the lack of access to post-rape care services mainly because of the systematic attack on the region's health system; resulting in survivors not being able to access basics like medical care, psychosocial support, and legal services. This was exacerbated by the siege on the region that discontinued basic services such as banking, and telecommunication and a blockade on aid and other basic items such as fuel.

The IDP site is not safe for us. The sleeping corridors are not separate for women and men. We are at risk for further violence, we are not able to access our accounts because the banks are closed. I am still wearing the cloth I was wearing the night they raped me (crying). It reminds me of what happened to me every day, but I can't even get a change of clothes. I can't feed my children. And as a woman you know I need things to clean up with. Pads, soap, water but they are all inaccessible. (Interviewee II03, interview with Kidanu, face to face, 11 June 2022)

Survivors were very stressed due to the circumstances of the siege, and the lack of basic items as safe places for them to look after themselves, their children, and relatives and care for their health and recovery. Survivors whose families were separated suffered from further anxiety and stress due to the communications blackout that

had made it impossible to trace missing family members. Many could not find means of transport to reach health centres and those that managed the long and difficult journeys would not be able to get sufficient care due to the destruction of the facilities, lack of supplies, and displacement of professionals.

The study documented deliberate actions to block access to essential services for the Tigrayan population/women. This included limiting or denying access to healthcare, humanitarian aid, and other necessary resources.

Measures intended to prevent birth within the Tigrayan group.

A survivor who was pregnant at the time of her assault said that the attack resulted in a miscarriage and described how she was left to bleed to death in the forest before her son finally found her and took her to a health facility:

I told them I was pregnant; they did not care. I was four months pregnant, and I miscarried. I was drenched in blood while they continued to take turns raping me, I lost my husband and my unborn child that day. (Interviewee II17, interview with Kidanu, face to face, 25 August 2022)

While others were told that they wanted the survivors to contract HIV:

They were raping me in a group. I think I heard one of them say “Get the one with the disease”. I begged them to use protection at least, but they refused and said I didn’t know what they had planned for me and laughed. (Interviewee II13, interview with Kidanu, face to face, 20 August 2022)

These narratives demonstrate a systematic and targeted approach to inflict harm on Tigrayan women, including intentional transmission of HIV and causing miscarriages. The level of violence and disregard for the survivors’ well-being suggests a calculated effort to undermine and dehumanise them physically and psychologically. Such actions not only cause immediate harm but also have long-lasting physical, emotional, and societal consequences for the survivors and the community.

Discussion

In this study, the objective was to investigate patterns of sexual violence and rape perpetrated on women during the war in Tigray and to determine if these incidents could constitute genocide. The findings of the study strongly relate to the framework of genocide as defined by the United Nations. The acts of violence perpetrated against the Tigrayan ethnic group align with several elements of the definition, demonstrating a deliberate intent to destroy the group, either partially or entirely. Sexual violence was one tool used to perpetrate the intent and this was communicated to the victims. The only element which the study did not find was the forcible transfer of children from the Tigrayan group to another group.

The results demonstrate a systematic targeting of women during the Tigray war, with deliberate actions aimed at causing severe harm and trauma. These findings are in line with reports from Amnesty International and the International Commission of Human Rights Experts on Ethiopia. The reports describe the systematic nature of the violence that took place in Tigray (International Commission of Human Rights Experts on Ethiopia 2023; Amnesty International, 2021). These results confirm the findings published by Kahsay *et al.* (2024), who collected individual experiences of victims of rape in the Tigray war. These narrations also pointed to the mental state of genocidal intent.

The destruction of property, denial of resources, and displacement further exacerbated the physical and mental well-being of survivors. Survivors' testimonies highlight the presence of a systematic and strategic approach to rape, with genocidal intent. They have reported being subjected to dehumanising language, such as being labelled as threats and unworthy, and told that their wombs should never give birth again. These accounts shed light on the deliberate intention to not only inflict physical harm, but also to target the reproductive capacity, affecting future generations of Tigrayan women (Sela, 2021; Dyan, 2021, Kassa, 2021). The generational loss is estimated at 3.2 million people (Gebremichael *et al.*, 2023).

The testimonies reveal instances of killings and violent deaths among the Tigrayan population. This aligns with the first element of the definition of genocide, indicating the intentional targeting and killing of individuals based on their ethnic identity. The interviewees reported that the perpetrators were Eritrean troops of the EDF and Ethiopian troops of the ENDF. Both the EDF and ENDF were operating under military command structures and the consideration of the intent expressed in the acts of sexual violence committed cannot be divorced from the instructions under which the military was sent into the arena of the war in Tigray (Kidanu & Van Reisen, 2024, Fisseha *et al.*, 2023; Gebregziabher *et al.*, 2022; Physicians for Human Rights, 2023; International Commission of Human Rights Experts on Ethiopia, 2023).

The study reveals severe physical and mental harm, including rape, physical abuse, intentional starvation, verbal assault, and emotional abuse inflicted upon Tigrayan individuals. These acts of violence contribute to the serious bodily and mental harm experienced by the group, fitting the second element of the genocide definition. This aligns with findings of studies done in South Sudan, where survivors of sexually experienced similar acts leading UN experts to be alarmed by the reported widespread use of rape and sexual violence against women and girls by RSF in Sudan (OHCHR, 2023).

Multiple researcher and reports on Tigray contain findings supporting those of the current study, that alongside the physical and psychological pain of rape, survivors in Tigray faced additional suffering due to limited access to services and inadequate support caused by the siege, blockade and destruction of essential infrastructure. The deliberate siege, blockade, and destruction of essential infrastructure in the Tigray region contributed to conditions of life aimed at physically destroying the group. The closure of banks, communication blackout, lack of transportation, and destruction of health facilities hindered access to essential services and contributed to the deterioration of the population's well-being. This aligns closely with the third element of the genocide definition: deliberately inflicting on the group conditions of life calculated to bring about their destruction, in whole or in part. The damage of health facilities

and the blockade imposed on the region prevented necessary assistance. Communication blackouts further isolated survivors from outside aid. Disturbingly, only a small percentage of survivors received essential medical and psychological care, as most health facilities were destroyed or looted. This lack of access highlights the critical challenges faced by survivors in addressing their physical and mental health needs. The victims of sexual and physical violence spanned various age groups and genders, with underage girls, elderly women, and men also being targeted (Varia, 2021; Mcveigh, 2021).

This study also found that there were measures intended to prevent births within the Tigrayan group, including the deliberate use of rape and the intentional transmission of HIV, forced abortions during the act of rape, which aligns with the fourth element of genocide and with various research across the globe and in Tigray. There is documented evidence worldwide showing that the transmission of HIV/AIDS through rape is used to reduce the number of the targeted community (Reid-Cunningham, 2008; WHO, 2000; Harvard Humanitarian Initiative & Oxfam International, 2010). In the Rwandan genocide, there were experiences designed to kill Tutsi women through the transmission of sexually transmitted infections like HIV/AIDS (Reid-Cunningham, 2008).

The findings of this study align with existing literature on the use of sexual violence as a weapon of war and genocide. Studies have documented similar instances in other conflict-affected regions, highlighting the devastating impact on women and their communities. The research questions were answered by uncovering the deliberate targeting of women through sexual violence and rape. However, limitations exist due to the challenges of accessing comprehensive data in conflict zones, limited study areas, and participants. The findings highlight that there is an urgent need for comprehensive support systems, including healthcare, psychosocial services, and legal assistance, for survivors. The study also contributes to the broader field of research on sexual violence in conflict zones.

Conclusion

This study provides an in-depth analysis of the widespread sexual violence and other atrocities committed against the Tigrayan ethnic group during the conflict in the Tigray region. The acts described include systematic rape, killings, and serious bodily or mental harm, all of which are framed as part of a deliberate and coordinated campaign with genocidal intent. This campaign aimed to destroy the Tigrayan community, as evidenced by forced abortions, the intentional transmission of HIV, and other acts of brutality targeting Tigrayans specifically for their ethnic identity.

Survivors reported that perpetrators, including members of the Eritrean military (EDF) and the Ethiopian military (ENDF), carried out these acts under orders from their superiors. The violence was not random, but highly organised, with the explicit goal of inflicting long-term damage on the Tigrayan community's physical and psychological integrity. In addition to sexual violence, the report details other forms of oppression, such as blocking access to essential services, enforcing a communication blackout, destroying healthcare facilities, and closing banks. These actions exacerbated the suffering of the victims, making recovery and accessing help exceedingly difficult.

The findings highlight the psychological and social consequences of these atrocities. Many survivors witnessed the killing of family members and were often forced to participate in or observe acts of (sexual) violence, leading to profound trauma. This has severely damaged the social fabric of the community, causing immense psychological trauma and feelings of guilt and helplessness among the survivors.

This chapter concludes with a call for immediate humanitarian intervention in Tigray. It urges international organisations, governments, and NGOs to collaborate in providing emergency aid, establishing support systems for survivors, and ensuring that perpetrators are held accountable through thorough investigations and fair trials. The document also emphasises the need for preventive measures against future gender-based violence, promoting gender

equality, and ensuring the active participation of women in peacebuilding processes to achieve sustainable peace and justice. It stresses the importance of bringing perpetrators to justice, offering reparations to victims, and ensuring a comprehensive approach to supporting survivors, including medical, psychological, and legal aid.

In conclusion, the lack of accountability and justice after the Tigray war is remarkable, particularly noting that ongoing peace negotiations have failed to address the role of the Eritrean military and have not included provisions for addressing these atrocity crimes. Rape, as committed with both the intent and actions to commit genocide, constitutes a severe violation under the Rome Statute and calls for international intervention.

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Authors' contributions

The first author designed the research and implemented the study. This work has been carried out as part of a PhD study. The second author contributed on the legal argumentation of the chapter.

Ethical considerations

This research was carried out under ethical clearance obtained from Mekelle University, reference number MU_IRB 1978/2022. Tilburg University has also provided ethical clearance. This research was carried out under ethical clearance obtained from Tilburg University Identification code: REDC 2020.139 titled “Cultural Dimensions of Meaning-making and Agenda-setting”.

This chapter should be read in conjunction with the ‘Note on content and editorial decisions’ (Book 1).

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Genocidal Intent in the Tigray War: Establishing Reasonable Grounds Based on Evidence

A. H. Tefera

ብዓመጽ ዝጠፈአ ብሕጊ ይትካእ።

The loss caused by the riot is compensated by law.

Abstract

The mental element of the crime of genocide, known as a ‘special intent’ to destroy a group in whole or in part, differentiates genocide from other crimes. This chapter investigates whether the atrocities committed against civilian Tigrayans during the Tigray war involved such intent. In the absence of direct evidence, this chapter uses circumstantial evidence, such as statements by state officials, media propaganda, and the contextual patterns of actions, to indicate genocidal intent in the acts committed against the Tigrayan population. It argues that Tigrayans qualify as an ethnic group protected under the Genocide Convention, using both objective and subjective criteria for group identification. The documented crimes, including extrajudicial killings, widespread sexual violence, rape and gang rape, torture, deprivation of essential resources, forced displacement, and the insertion of metallic objects into the victims’ wombs, allegedly perpetrated by the Ethiopian National Defence Force (ENDF), Eritrean Defence Forces (EDF), and Amhara forces, are classified as genocidal acts. This study concludes that there are reasonable grounds to believe that genocide was committed against ethnic Tigrayans. Consequently, it calls on the international community to fulfil its legal and moral duties by investigating these crimes and prosecuting those responsible.

Key words: Tigray war, genocide, Ethiopia, Eritrea, sexual violence, strategic rape

Introduction

Genocide is committed when the prohibited acts mentioned under Article 2 of the Genocide Convention are perpetrated with the intent to destroy, in whole or in part, a national, ethnical, racial, or religious group as such (Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide (Genocide Convention, 1951). Accordingly, it is vital to prove the special intent, at least with the minimum standard of proof: ‘reasonable grounds to believe’. If the special intent element cannot be established with the minimum standard of proof, the crime committed cannot be designated as a crime of genocide, as proving the mental element/intent is at the core of the crime of genocide.

Legal authorities, including the International Criminal Court *Elements of Crimes* (International Criminal Court 2013), explain that genocide is not about mass killing, unlike the ordinary understanding of many people, it is about the ‘intent’, which is why it is argued that even a single killing can amount to the crime of genocide, provided there is evidence that sufficiently establishes the special intent behind the single killing (Schabas, 2000; International Criminal Court, 2013, Article 6).

Due to the above reason and the hidden nature of the ‘special intent’ element of the crime of genocide, several international and UN based fact-finding bodies, such as the UN Commission of Experts and Amnesty International, have been reluctant to call the atrocities committed in Tigray genocide. One of the core reasons behind the reluctance to use the term genocide, is the difficulty of proving genocidal intent, as the crime is often committed in a secretive and hidden manner. Hence, finding direct evidence is very difficult, according to the reasoning of the judgment in the Trial Chamber of the International Criminal Tribunal for Rwanda, the ICTR (*Prosecutor v. Akayesu*, 1998).

In addition, proving intent is more challenging than proving the facts or incidents that happened on the ground (Tefera, 2014). Even if genocidal intent is established by any means, the crime by its nature is subject to political and diplomatic manipulation and compromise (Van Sliedregt, 2007). For example, fact-finding bodies such as the

UN Commission of Human Rights Experts in Ethiopia has indicated evidence revealing genocidal intent in its findings, yet has failed to conclude that genocide was committed (Human Rights Council, 2022). Consequently, the international community has remained reluctant to conclude that genocide was committed without sufficient evidence.

This chapter aims to explore whether the acts committed by the alleged perpetrators during the Tigray war were committed with the intent of genocide. These acts consisted mainly of killing, rape, siege-induced starvation, deliberately infliction conditions of life calculated to bring about physical destruction, and birth prevention measures.

The main research question that this chapter addresses is: *Were the acts committed against civilians during the Tigray war perpetrated with the special intent to destroy the protected group, in whole or in part, i.e., with genocidal intent?*

In answering this question, the following sub-questions are addressed:

Sub-Q1. *Do the acts committed by perpetrators fall under the category of the prohibited acts mentioned in the Genocide Convention?*

Sub-Q2. *Do Tigrayans constitute a group protected by Article 2 of the Genocide Convention?*

Sub-RQ3. *Can genocidal intent be established?*

Theoretical framework

The international normative framework governing the crime of genocide is provided under Genocide Convention, which requires the fulfilment of three elements in order for an act to constitute the crime of genocide. International criminal tribunals and the International Criminal Court (ICC) have adopted this normative framework, and subsequently built their own jurisprudence based on the Genocide Convention. The primary requirement is that an act should fall under the prohibited acts listed in Article 2(a–e) of the Genocide Convention, which are:

(a) Killing members of the group; (b) Causing serious bodily or mental harm to members of the group; (c) Deliberately inflicting on the group conditions of life

calculated to bring about its physical destruction in whole or in part; (d) Imposing measures intended to prevent births within the group; (e) Forcibly transferring children of the group to another group. (Genocide Convention, 1951)

The second element of the crime of genocide is the ‘prohibited act’ or acts that target one of the protected (national, ethnical, racial or religious) groups. The third and most important element of the crime of genocide is the requirement of special intent or genocidal intent, which is a critical and distinctive element.

Taking the above elements into account, proving the existence of genocidal intent requires meeting the minimum threshold standard, which is ‘reasonable grounds to believe’ that the perpetrator intended to destroy, in whole or in part, a national, ethnical, racial, or religious group. In line with this, the prosecution’s appeal brief in the case of Akayesu under paragraph 21 indicated that courts and tribunals need to establish the existence of genocidal intent ‘beyond reasonable doubt’ in order to convict a suspect of committing the crime of genocide (*Prosecutor v. Jelusic*, 2000). The above normative framework is globally applicable, including to the atrocities committed against civilians in Tigray.

Another important source of jurisprudence governing the arguments entertained in this chapter are the objective and subjective approaches of establishing genocidal intent. Under the crime of genocide, strong emphasis is given to the subjectivity aspect of the commission of the crime (Kim, 2016). On the other hand, the Genocide Convention provides objective elements, such as the commission of prohibited acts, the manner and pattern of the commission of the acts, and the resources and policy employed in the commission of the crime. Thus, it is widely argued that the subjective state of mind (*mens rea*) of a person or a group of persons (perpetrators) plays a crucial role in determining whether the crime of genocide has been committed or not. Based on this dominant normative framework, this chapter discusses and evaluates the objective and subjective approaches in establishing genocidal intent and tries to reconcile the approaches in a way that fits the overall objective of this chapter in addressing the alleged atrocities committed in Tigray.

In addition to the above normative framework, international criminal tribunals, the ICC, and legal scholars have established jurisprudence governing the crime of genocide in which the crime often requires plotters and those who further the overall policy. “Thus, the crime by its nature requires a wider level of organization which renders it difficult to imagine genocide without the involvement of plotters and organizers particularly state or state-like entities, or a group associated with it” (May 2010). In this context, “[...] at least it is expected that the organizers and planners must necessarily have a genocidal intent” (May 2010), which leads to the conclusion that individual perpetrators acting under the overall genocidal plan are *prima facie* expected to have known the overall genocidal intent and are assumed to have shared and pursued the genocidal intent while committing the prohibited acts, unless proved otherwise (Schebas, 2006). This normative framework is also applicable to the analysis in this chapter determining whether the acts committed against civilians in Tigray were genocidal or not.

Methodology

This research aims to analyse mainly qualitative data that describes the pattern, nature and manifestation of the violations committed against the people of Tigray, in order to establish whether the violations were committed with genocidal intent or not. Accordingly, this chapter employs a qualitative, doctrinal research method,⁵⁹ by which evidence gathered from investigative reports from credible entities, a document review, and case studies obtained from investigative bodies are analysed and evaluated against the normative framework governing the crime of genocide.

Data sources

The resources used in this chapter included reports on investigations conducted by organs of the United Nations (UN) and international non-governmental organisations (NGOs) such as Human Rights

⁵⁹ The doctrinal research method is the most accepted method of legal research that analyses and synthesises legal principles, facts, and thoughts (Vranken, 2010, pp. 111–121).

Watch and Amnesty International. Investigations conducted by the Team of Experts in South-Eastern Zone of Tigray, 2022, in which the author was involved as co-investigator, were also used. In addition, this chapter relies on media reports, reviews of administrative records and documentary evidence, and the decisions of international criminal tribunals and the ICC.

Analysis

As the determination of the crime of genocide is a legal process, proving genocidal intent according to the ‘reasonable grounds to believe’ standard is a mandatory element, in addition to proof of the material elements (the prohibited acts) that targeted protected groups (ethnic, religious, racial and national groups). In order to establish genocidal intent, this chapter analyses credibly established facts against the normative framework governing the crime of genocide – fact-law analysis. This includes the identification and evaluation of prohibited acts committed against civilians during the Tigray war, such as killing, rape, torture, inflicting conditions of life aimed to destroy, and measures to prevent births, and analysing them against the elements of the crime of genocide mentioned in Article 2 of the Genocide Convention. Evidence of the perpetration of the prohibited acts was acquired from the reports of international investigative bodies, gathered from independent bodies based in Tigray, and collected during the investigation conducted by the Team of Experts in South-Eastern Zone of Tigray, as well as from media reports, a document review and court decisions. In order to infer genocidal intent in relation to the alleged prohibited acts committed during the Tigray war, utterances of/statements made by government officials, military leaders and foot soldiers were analysed to evaluate the context in which the crimes were committed and to assess if there was an anti-Tigrayan government policy that led to these acts. Moreover, the manner and pattern in which the crimes were committed, and the systematic targeting of the protected group, were among the elements evaluated.

Scope of the study

Thematically, the study focused on the elements of the crime of genocide and establishing genocidal intent in relation to the atrocities committed during the Tigray war. Geographically, the study was limited to atrocities committed in the Tigray region. The temporal scope of the study covered the events leading up to the conflict and the events that followed.

Meaning of genocide and genocidal intent

The word genocide was coined by Polish law professor Raphael Lemkin, who combined the Greek term ‘*genos*’ meaning nation, race, or tribe, and the Latin term ‘*cide*’, meaning killing (Lemkin, 2008). The legal concept of genocide is principally restricted to the Genocide Convention of 1951 (Genocide Convention, 1951). This Convention, in addition to customary international law, obligates all states to prevent and punish the crime of genocide.

Article 2 of the Genocide Convention defines genocide as:

[...]any of the following acts committed with intent to destroy, in whole or in part, a national, ethnical, racial or religious group, as such: (a) Killing members of the group; (b) Causing serious bodily or mental harm to members of the group; (c) Deliberately inflicting on the group conditions of life calculated to bring about its physical destruction in whole or in part; (d) Imposing measures intended to prevent births within the group; (e) Forcibly transferring children of the group to another group.
(Genocide Convention, 1951)

Thus, the crime of genocide is committed when the prohibited acts mentioned above (a–e) are perpetrated with the intent to destroy, in whole or in part, a national, ethnical, racial or religious group as such.

In establishing the crime of genocide, the special intent of the crime is more important than the motive. However, courts and tribunals find it difficult to distinguish intent from motive in cases of genocide. The distinction between intent and motive can be clearly seen in the distinctive meanings of ethnic cleansing and genocide. The report of the UN Commission of Experts on Yugoslavia under paragraph 130 defined ethnic cleansing as “a purposeful policy designed by one ethnic or religious group to remove by violent and terror-inspiring

means the civilian population of another ethnic or religious group from certain geographic areas.” (UN Commission of Experts on Yugoslavia, 1994). Even though both ethnic cleansing and genocide may entail similar acts, the former is based on motives such as political, demographic, and economic, while genocide is based on a special intent to destroy the targeted group (ethnic, racial, religious and national) in whole or in part. Moreover, there is no legal definition given to ethnic cleansing in the international legal instruments (Singleterry, 2010). This means that there is no way by which individuals can be held accountable for committing ethnic cleansing as such. This deprives the act of ethnic cleansing due recognition, as there is no legal definition or punishment provided under the international legal instruments. The only available options for holding perpetrators accountable are as a war crime or crime against humanity, depending on the context and manner of perpetration.

The above point is relevant because there is the possibility that acts of genocide can be masked by the designation of acts as ethnic cleansing. For example, the UN Team of Experts in former Yugoslavia, under paragraph 130, reported that the acts committed were ethnic cleansing, although many were convinced that the crimes were perpetrated with genocidal intent (UN Commission of Experts on Yugoslavia, 1994). In the current situation, the report by Amnesty International on Western Tigray that established ‘ethnic cleansing’ fails to consider the clear plan of, and incitement by, the Amhara authorities to eliminate ethnic Tigrayans from Western Tigray, which is similar to the incitement propagated by Radio Rwanda in relation to the genocide against the Tutsi ethnic group (Metzl, 1997).

Moreover, in 2021, the Office of the Prosecutor of the ICC elaborated that “a policy of displacement could be understood as an *actus reus* of genocide under Art 6 (c) of the Rome Statute” (ICC, 2002), including forced eviction and encouragement of others to resettle in the displaced areas (*Prosecutor v. Al Bashir*, 2009). Consequently, the report does not establish criminal responsibility based on ethnic cleansing as such because there is no crime of ‘ethnic cleansing’ under the international legal framework. Similar reports

have been widely observed several times in different parts of the world (Singleterry, 2010), with the international community failing to criminalise the act of ethnic cleansing. The above-mentioned elements and features of genocide, reveal the amorphous nature of the crime of genocide.

What acts constitute the crime of genocide?

The first element that is required to constitute the crime of genocide is for one or more of the acts mentioned under Article 2(a–e) of the Genocide Convention to be committed.

Killing members of the group

Killing members of a protected group, with the required mental element, is a prohibited act of the crime of genocide under Article 2(a) of the Genocide Convention. Killing is also specified as a prohibited act in Article 6(a) of the Rome Statute of the International Criminal Court (hereinafter called the Rome Statute). According to the explanation contained in *Elements of Crimes*, a publication designed to assist the Court in the interpretation and application of articles 6, 7 and 8, the terms ‘killing’ and ‘caused death’ are interchangeable (International Criminal Court, 2013, p. 2). The term ‘killing’, as provided in Article 2 of the Genocide Convention and Article 6(a) of the Rome Statute, seems neutral in terms of expressing whether it is intentional or negligent killing. However, in genocide there is no negligent killing (as intent is a required element of genocide), therefore, the term killing is interpreted as intentionally killing (*Prosecutor v. Stakić*, 2003). Therefore, if killing constitutes an act of genocide, the element of genocidal intent must be proven.

Causing serious bodily or mental harm to members of the group

Under Article 2(b) of the Genocide Convention, causing serious bodily or mental harm to members of a protected group is an act of genocide, when committed with the required intent. Among the questions that need to be addressed here is what constitutes ‘serious bodily or mental harm’, and what degree of severity should the harm

be. In addressing the first question, the District Court of Jerusalem in the case of Eichmann, elaborated that:

Serious bodily and mental harm can be caused by 'the enslavement, starvation, deportation and persecution of people [. . .] and by their detention in ghettos, transit camps and concentration camps in conditions which were designed to cause their degradation, deprivation of their rights as human beings and to suppress them and cause them inhumane suffering and torture. (Attorney General v. Eichmann, 1968)

Taking the reasoning of the Israeli high court in the Eichman case, siege induced starvation, deprivation of medical facilities, large scale sexual violence, unlawful imprisonment and torture fall within the category of prohibited acts mentioned in Article 2(b) of the Genocide Convention.

Deliberately inflicting on the group conditions of life calculated to bring about physical destruction in whole or in part

Unlike the other prohibited acts, deliberately inflicting conditions of life on the group calculated to bring about its physical destruction, in whole or in part, is not results based. The intention – calculated to bring about – is sufficient; the actual destruction of the group is not required (*Prosecutor v. Akayesu*, 1998). According to the Trial Chamber in the Stakić case, para 571: “Deliberately inflicting on the group conditions of life calculated to bring about its physical destruction in whole or in part’ under sub-paragraph (c) does not require proof of a result” (*Prosecutor v. Stakić*, 2003).

Conditions of life, as provided under Article 6(c) of Rome Statute, include, but are not limited to: “deliberate deprivation of resources indispensable for survival, such as food or medical services, or systematic expulsion from homes” (International Criminal Court, 2013). Looking at the characteristics of this condition, the Trial Chamber of the International Criminal Tribunal for Rwanda (ICTR) in the case of Akayesu noted that:

[t]he expression deliberately inflicting on the group conditions of life calculated to bring about its physical destruction in whole or in part, should be construed as the methods of destruction by which the perpetrator does not immediately kill the members

of the group, but which, ultimately, seek their physical destruction. (Prosecutor v. Akayesu, 1998; Prosecutor v. Stakić, 2003)

In the context of the Tigray war, the fact that the Ethiopian government imposed a strict siege under which humanitarian aid, including food and medicine, were prevented from entering Tigray, can be considered an act of genocide, if the special intent is sufficiently established. In the same manner, the act of expulsion of ethnic Tigrayans from Western Tigray (Human Rights Council, 2022), as an act of ‘systematic expulsion’, could also be an act of genocide, as shelter is considered an essential condition of life. This is similar to the decision of the International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia (ICTY) in the prosecution of Karadžić and Mladic cases, where the indictment was based on the expulsion of Muslims by the Serbs to eliminate the latter from large areas of Bosnia Herzegovina (*Prosecutor v Karadžić & Mladic*, 1995; Cryer *et al.*, 2020).

Rape and the deliberate transmission of HIV/AIDS to members of the protected group can also constitute an act deliberately inflicting conditions of life calculated to bring about physical destruction of the group. In Tigray it was reported that “militiamen carrying the [HIV] virus used it as a ‘weapon,’ thus intending to cause delayed death” (Human Rights Council, 1996). Evidence of objective probability that the conditions of life were deprived in a way calculated to bring about the physical destruction of the group can be inferred from “the nature of the conditions of life, the length of time for which the conditions of life were imposed, and the characteristics of the members of the targeted group” (*Prosecutor v. Brđanin*, 2004).

Imposing measures intended to prevent births within the group

This prohibited act came into the consciousness of the international community after the Nazi’s practice of forced sterilization measures against the Jewish people during the Second World War (Cryer *et al.*, 2020). In defining this prohibited act, the ICTR stated in the case of Akayesu that it included: “sexual mutilation, sterilization, forced birth control, separation of the sexes and prohibition of marriages to

constitute measures that intend to prevent births” (*Prosecutor v. Akayesu*, 1998). The Trial Chamber added, under paragraph 507:

[...] during rape, a woman of the said group is deliberately impregnated by a man of another group, with the intent to have her give birth to a child who will consequently not belong to its mother’s group. Furthermore, the Chamber notes that measures intended to prevent births within the group may be physical, but can also be mental. For instance, rape can be a measure intended to prevent births when the person raped subsequently refuses to procreate, [...] through threats or trauma. (Prosecutor v. Akayesu, 1998)

In the context of the Tigray war, acts such as inserting stones, sand, metal, and sticks into the womb of the Tigrayan women, gang rape that resulted in damage to the womb, and rape in front of family members (Amnesty International, 2021) amount to the prohibited acts referred to as “measures intended to prevent births” within the group (*Prosecutor v. Akayesu*, 1998), provided that they were committed with the required genocidal intent.

The status of Tigrayans under the Genocide Convention

The second component of the crime of genocide requires that the prohibited acts (*actus reus*) target a protected group or members of that group. A protected group, as per Article 2 of the Genocide Convention, is defined as a “national, ethnic, racial or religious group”.

Those groups were selected by the UN General Assembly to be protected groups, considering that these groups have been the target of hostility. These groups are each identified by their cohesion, homogeneity, membership unavoidability, and stability (Szpak, 2012). To clarify the term ‘unavoidable membership’, we can consider membership to a political group. A political group cannot be regarded as a stable group, because membership is not something that you obtain through birth or in a permanent manner, but, rather, it is based on an individual’s will. This is why political groups are not given protection under the Genocide Convention (Kabatsi, 2005; Lippman, 2000). Yet, it should be noted that despite the above establishment, a few nations, such as Ethiopia, have given protection to political

groups under their domestic criminal jurisprudence (Revised Criminal Code of Ethiopia, 2004).

In several prosecutions related to cases of genocide, it was observed that the absence of a conventional legal meaning for the words ‘national, ethnical, racial, and religious’ group makes it difficult to identify protected groups (*Prosecutor v. Rutaganda*, 2003). For example, one of the challenges in determining the atrocities against the Rohingya population in Myanmar was the debate as to whether the Rohingyas constitute a distinct ethnic group. Similarly, the Trial Chamber of the ICTR in the case of Akayesu found it difficult to determine whether the ‘Tutsi’ fall under the category of ‘protected groups’, because both the Tutsi and Hutu groups share a common language and culture (*Prosecutor v. Akayesu*, 1998). However, decisions of different international criminal tribunals, such as the ICTR, have tried to overcome this challenge by giving meanings to the above terms. As ‘ethnic group’ is given due emphasis in this chapter, it is important to provide the appropriate meaning provided by international criminal tribunals. Accordingly, the ICTR trial chamber has defined an ethnic group as

[...] one whose members share a common language and culture; or, a group which distinguishes itself, as such or, a group identified as such by others, including perpetrators of the crimes. (*Prosecutor v. Kayishema & Ruzindana*, 1999)

The above discussion also leads to the conclusion that the existence of the ‘protected group’ may be objectively or subjectively established. As mentioned by the Trial Chamber of the ICTR. In the case of Semanza, objective existence simply means when the protected group physically exists on the ground, having all their distinct features (Cryer *et al.*, 2020). Whereas the subjective existence of the protected group is determined by the perception of the perpetrator that the target population belongs to either of the protected groups (Cryer *et al.*, 2020). For instance, the ICTY Trial Chamber in the case of Brdanin decided that the relevant protected group may be identified using the subjective criterion of the stigmatisation of the group, notably by the perpetrators of the crime, based on its perceived national, ethnical, racial or religious characteristics (*Prosecutor v. Brdanin*, 2004).

Taking the above-mentioned approaches and normative frameworks into account, what is at issue is whether the Tigrayans fall under either of the groups protected under the Genocide Convention. Considering the above normative framework, Tigrayans share a common language, history, and geographic territory and they consider themselves “as being alike by their common ancestry [it could be real or fictious] and are so regarded by others including the perpetrators as ‘ethnic Tigrayans’”. Therefore, it is clear that Tigrayans can fall within the category of an ‘ethnic’ group protected by the Genocide Convention.

Number of victims needed to constitute the crime of genocide

The number of victims needed to constitute genocide has been controversial among genocide scholars and criminal tribunals handling cases of genocide. The question directly relates to the interpretation of the phrase ‘in whole or in part’ under Article 2 of the Genocide Convention. Practically speaking, the international community is shocked when people are targeted on mass. Of course, mass atrocities quickly attract the attention of the international community. Scholars, such as Chile Eboe, interpret the term ‘in part’ to constitute a substantial part having a meaningful impact on the group (Eboe-Osuji, 2007). However, the above argument could be challenged on the ground that the crime of genocide is mainly characterised by the special intent element, not by the number of victims. Moreover, the punitive purpose of the crime would be diminished if one has to wait until a substantial part of the population was targeted (Eboe-Osuji, 2007).

To fortify the above argument, in *Elements of Crimes* the International Criminal Court explains that even one victim is sufficient to constitute an act of genocide, provided that the act was committed with the required special intent (International Criminal Court, 2013, Article 6(c)(1)). The Trial Chamber of the ICTY in the case of *Jelisić*, which stated that “killings committed by a single perpetrator are enough ‘to establish the material element of the crime of genocide’” (*Prosecutor v. Jelisić*, 1999), supports the above assertion.

Taking the above arguments into account, the number of Tigrayans that were subject to the acts is sufficient to constitute the ‘in part’ element under the definition of genocide.

Genocidal intent (*dolus specialis*)

The third and vital element of the crime of genocide is ‘genocidal intent’ (*Prosecutor v. Akayesu*, 1998). As the terms ‘genocidal intent’ and ‘motive’ are often confusing, courts and tribunals entertaining cases of genocide find it difficult to differentiate intent from motive. In real terms, the crime of genocide may be motivated by various motives, such as winning the war, economic or political gain, and so forth. For example, in times of armed conflict, one may find it difficult to identify whether the mass killing committed against civilians is committed to win the war or to destroy the target civilians in whole or in part. Arguments put forward by the defence in the case of *Krštic* before the Appeals Chamber of the ICTY claimed that “the purpose of the killings in Srebrenica was not to destroy the group as such; it was to remove a military threat and this was evidenced by the fact that men of military age had been targeted” (*Prosecutor v. Krštic*, 2004). However, the Appeals Chamber did not accept this argument and found, based on evidence, that the act was intended to destroy the community of Bosnian Muslims in Srebrenica. The Commission mandated to investigate the situation in Darfur stated, in relation to the policy of killing and forcibly displacing members of the Fur, Masalit, and Zaghawa tribes in Darfur, that genocidal intent was not established, but that these acts were “motivated by counter-insurgency warfare’ (Human Rights Council, 2005). Similar confusion is likely to exist in relation to the alleged perpetrators of the atrocities during the Tigray war.

To establish genocidal intent, it is important to see how knowledge of the nature and consequence of one’s act differs from the ‘special intent’ requirement. The jurisprudence of the ICTY reveals that special intent should be established for each perpetrator (*Prosecutor v. Krštic*, 2004). One important point that needs to be addressed is what will happen to a foot soldier who knows that his acts are contributing to the overall genocidal plan. In this case, the person may be assumed

to have ‘mere knowledge’ of the genocidal plan, but not necessarily genocidal intent. Concerning this, the Appeals Chamber of the ICTY acquitted General Krštic´ of genocide, as the Chamber could not establish genocidal intent. However, General Krštic´ was convicted of aiding and abetting acts of genocide (*Prosecutor v. Krštic*, 2004). Therefore, in the absence of the special intent in the minds of individuals who knew that their acts were contributing to furthering the genocidal plan, aiding and abetting the commission of genocide can be used to hold these individuals responsible for their acts. This is related to the knowledge-based approach, as distinguished from the purpose-based approach, in which the defendant becomes aware of the overall genocidal plan and decides to participate in the furtherance of the plan (May 2010). This argument is in line with what Larry May refers to as ‘collective genocidal intent’, according to which, genocide cannot be planned and executed by an individual, but rather needs a collective plan and demands the involvement of several individuals or groups and resources for the implementation of the plan.

Therefore, if an individual simply participates in the prohibited acts of genocide, but does not know the overall genocidal plan, there is room for them to defend themselves based on lack of knowledge. However, the ‘knowledge requirement’ could be satisfied by a failure to know what any reasonable person would have known. Consequently, one may still be held responsible, although not as a principal perpetrator, for failing to know what they should have known, as a reasonable person, about their acts and consequences of their acts (May, 2010).

In the situation of the Tigray war, this means that a foot soldier cannot raise the defence that he participated in the killing or rape of civilians without knowing the overall alleged ‘genocidal plan’ against ethnic Tigrayans. The standard with which the foot soldier may be held responsible is that the existence of the overall genocidal plan is obvious and, thus, the defendant should have known that their acts contributed to furthering the overall genocidal plan. Accordingly, even though they may not be liable as a principal perpetrator, proof of lack of knowledge and willingness to further the genocidal plan may not relieve the defendant of responsibility for the crime of

genocide. In line with this argument, the ICTY Appeals Chamber judgment in Krštic case argued:

[...] Krstic was aware of the intent to commit genocide on the part of some members of the VRS Main Staff, and with that knowledge, he did nothing to prevent the use of Drina Corps personnel and resources to facilitate those killings. There was a demonstrable failure by the Trial Chamber to supply adequate proof that Radislov Krstic possessed the genocidal intent. Krstic is therefore not guilty of genocide as a principal perpetrator. (Prosecutor v. Krštic, 2004)

The purpose-based approach is the conventional approach by which the ‘intent to destroy’ is interpreted. This approach suggests that genocide is a collective crime that needs the participation of a wider group of people and resources (Cryer *et al.*, 2020). According to this approach, the perpetrators have a common genocidal intent from the beginning. In line with this argument, the ICTR Trial Chamber in the case of Kayishema found that “The killers had the common intent to exterminate the ethnic group and Kayishema was instrumental in the realization of that intent” (*Prosecutor v. Kayishema & Ruzindana*, 1999). The masterminds of the crime of genocide could be heads of states, ministers, military commanders, or religious leaders, etc., who may have the opportunity and the resources to conspire in the genocidal plan.

Whether the acts of killing, rape, and siege-induced starvation targeting Tigrayan population were committed with genocidal intent or with the motive of winning the war against TPLF is addressed in the following sections.

Proving the existence of genocidal intent

The mere fact that an offender has committed a prohibited act under the crime of genocide under Article 2(a–e) of the Genocide Convention does not suffice to establish the perpetration of the crime of genocide. It is, however, vital to proving the most amorphous part of genocide, the special intent, namely that the perpetrator has committed the act to destroy the target group in whole or in part (*Prosecutor v. Kambanda*, 1998; *Prosecutor v. Kayishema & Ruzindana*, 1999).

The mental (*mens rea*) element of genocide is often believed to be the most challenging aspect in establishing the crime. Usually, general intent refers to the objective elements of an offense (*actus reus*). Under the definition in Article 30 of the Rome Statute, it refers to the knowledge or intellectual element. When it comes to the crime of genocide, the general intent refers to the meaning and acts listed under the crime directed against one or more of the groups protected in Article 2 of the Convention (Genocide Convention, 1951; or the Rome Statute of the International Criminal Court, 1998, Article 6(a)–(e)). This means that the perpetrator must know that his/her actions target one or more groups protected under the Convention (Rome Statute of the International Criminal Court, 1998, Article 30(3)). When it comes to the crime of genocide, the special intent – ‘intent to destroy’ – is an additional subjective requirement, beyond the general intent or objective elements of the crime (Triffterer, 2001).

Accordingly, investigative bodies should establish the minimum standard of proof, or degree of persuasiveness, which is ‘reasonable grounds to believe’, to allege genocide. This standard is met when a sufficient and reliable body of primary information gathered by way of investigation, consistent with other information, allows an ordinarily prudent person to reasonably conclude that an incident or pattern of conduct occurred that amounts to the crime at hand (Human Rights Council, 2018). In the case of Darfur, for example, the ICC prosecutor submitted an indictment against Albashir of the Sudan for the alleged crime of genocide against the Fur, Masalit, and Zaghawa ethnic groups in Darfur. The Pre-Trial Chamber reasoned that “[...] the only reasonable conclusion to be drawn therefrom is the existence of reasonable grounds to believe in the existence of a specific intent to destroy in whole or in part the groups” (*Prosecutor v. Al Bashir*, 2009) (in this case the ethnic groups of Fur, Masalit and Zaghawa). The Pre-Trial Chamber also accepted the charges of the prosecution of genocide, believing the minimum threshold of standard of proof (reasonable grounds to believe standard) was met (*Prosecutor v. Al Bashir*, 2010). The jurisprudence of the ICC mentioned above reveals that to establish genocidal intent, investigative or fact-finding bodies are required to establish the minimum threshold which is the reasonable grounds of the standard of proof.

Nevertheless, since the crime of genocide is planned secretly, fact-finding bodies and lawyers find it difficult to find direct evidence that establishes genocidal intent based on the reasonable grounds to believe standard of proof (Kinseth, 2019). Consequently, intent to destroy or genocidal policy is inferred from the facts; the actions and utterances of perpetrators; concrete circumstances; or pattern of acts (*Prosecutor v. Brđanin*, 2004; *Prosecutor v. Gacumbitsi*, 2006; *Prosecutor v. Kamuhanda*, 2004). In this regard, the ICTY Appeals Chamber in *Prosecutor v. Stakić* ruled that “[...] evidence of intent to destroy may be inferred from an accused’s actions or utterances vis-a-vis the targeted group” (*Prosecutor v. Stakić*, 2003). Similarly, the ICTR Trial Chamber, in the case of Rutaganda, stated “[I]ntent can be, on a case-by-case basis, inferred from the material evidence submitted to the Chamber, including the evidence which demonstrates a consistent pattern of conduct by the Accused” (*Prosecutor v. Rutaganda*, 1999).

The difficulty of establishing genocidal intent is not limited to the difficulty of proving the genocidal intent, but the crime in itself is also subject to compromise and manipulation by political leaders alleged to have committed the crime. As Ashley S. Kinseth provided in her contribution, despite establishing genocidal intent, the crime of genocide is by its nature highly compromised on a political and diplomatic basis (Kinseth, 2019). In what she called a ‘political pawn’, the case of Rohingya in Myanmar, for which adequate genocidal evidence was produced, can be mentioned as an example where the decision to designate the acts as crimes of genocide was compromised (Kinseth, 2019).

Moreover, despite credible reports that established genocidal intent and later the ICC’s preliminary findings and indictment for genocide (*Prosecutor v. Al Bashir*, 2009) against Albashir of Sudan, the report of the International Commission of Inquiry on Darfur concluded, on the contrary, that “no genocidal policy has been pursued and implemented in Darfur by the Government authorities, directly or through the militias under their control” (Human Rights Council, 2005). The international community was, in this case, seen to be convinced that killing, serious bodily or mental harm, and the deliberate infliction of conditions of life against the ethnic groups in

Darfur (the Fur, Masalit, and Zhagawa) were committed with genocidal intent, however, the Commission of Inquiry refrained from stating that genocide had been committed in Darfur. This is one manifestation of such compromise, leading to failure to enforce the Genocide Convention. The international community has so far followed the same pattern in determining the crime in other areas where the genocidal intent was established. For example, the UN Commission of Experts in Ethiopia, in paragraph 62 of its investigative report on the alleged atrocities committed in Tigray, said:

[...] the attackers expressed an intent to render the victims infertile by permanently destroying their sexual and reproductive health, The rapes were often accompanied by dehumanizing language that suggested an intent to destroy Tigrayan ethnicity.
(Human Rights Council, 2022)

Yet, even though the report said that there was “intent to destroy Tigrayan ethnicity”, it regrettably failed to conclude that genocide was committed by the perpetrators, referring to war crimes and crimes against humanity instead.

Notwithstanding the above political and diplomatic hurdles, genocidal intent can be established, according to the jurisprudence of international criminal tribunals, if there is an existing genocide policy or those following the orders. The existence of a genocidal policy may be inferred from a wider genocidal plan. At the same time, under Article 6(c) of the *Elements of Crimes* (International Criminal Court, 2013), the specific intent to “destroy a protected group in whole or in part” may be inferred on a case-by-case basis from public statements of authorities; from the scale, pattern, and nature of the crimes committed; and from the utterances and manner of committing the crime, which manifestly shows the intent to destroy the target group in whole or in part (International Criminal Court, 2010). It must be further noted that the degree of proof that courts adopt to convict a suspect for the alleged crime of genocide must be ‘beyond reasonable doubt’ (*Prosecutor v. Krstić*, 2004; Human Rights Council, 2005).

In times of difficulty in establishing genocidal intent, especially when intent is difficult to infer from what the perpetrator says or does, evidence of the context of the alleged genocidal acts may help to

establish the intention of the perpetrator. In this regard, the ICTR Trial Chamber emphasised that the use of context in establishing the genocidal intent should be verified with the actual conduct of the accused (*Prosecutor v. Bagilishema*, 2001).

Genocidal intent in the acts committed against the Tigrayan population

As mentioned earlier, genocide is planned and committed in a hidden manner; accordingly, it is rare to find direct evidence. Consequently, most fact-finding missions on genocide depend on indirect evidence, including utterances of political and military leaders, official and private media propaganda, and the words of the individuals who commit the prohibited acts. In relation to the war in Tigray, for example, Ibreck and de Waal (2022), in an article titled ‘Situating Ethiopia in Genocide Debates’, said that before the eruption of the war, when a bomb exploded at a public rally for the Prime Minister in Meskel Square, Addis Ababa on 23 June 2018, PM Abiy Ahmed accused ethnic Tigrayans of being plotters and anti-peace elements (EBC, 2018). The accusation by PM Abiy that Tigrayans are ‘daylight hyenas’ are also direct encouragements of eradication given the cultural connotation of ‘hyenas’ and their association with the evil eye (Tesfa, Van Reisen & Medhanyie, 2024; Geb & Tesfa, 2024). The policy of “Woyane, game over” by Isayas indicates a policy to terminate the ethnic group of Tigrayans (Tesfa & van Reisen, 2024c). The relation of the effect of the political slogans on the expression by soldiers and their motivation to perpetrate the act of eradication is well established (Geb & Tesfa, 2024; Tesfa, Van Reisen, & Smits, 2024; Kidanu & Tefera, 2024; Tesfa & van Reisen, 2024a; Tesfa & Van Reisen, 2024b; Gebremariam & Abrha, 2024).

Anti Tigrayan discourse also dominated the social media. Tigrayans were labelled as “daylight hyenas, anti-reform et cetera” (Ibreck & de Waal, 2022). In addition, an incendiary documentary film, titled in Amharic as *Yefith Sekoka* (‘The Torment of Justice’) aired on government TV. The documentary narrates that the most cruel crimes perpetrated against the Amhara and Oromo during the Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF) era

were perpetrated by Tigrinya-speakers (EBC, 2018; Fana Television, 2018). Consequently, most political crimes were associated with ethnic Tigrayans.

Following PM Abiy's speech, the term 'daytime hyena' was widely used to profile and dehumanise ethnic Tigrayans (Geb & Tesfa, 2024; Tesfa & Van Reisen, 2024a; Tesfa & Van Reisen, 2024b). Other derogatory and profiling words such as '*tsegure limutob*', which crudely means 'strange', were also widely used by many officials, including the Prime Minister, and the media to label ethnic Tigrayans (Tghat, 2021). Other dehumanising language, such as 'cancer', 'devil', 'weed to be uprooted' were employed against ethnic Tigrayans by Ethiopian officials, including the Prime Minister (Tghat, 2021; Geb & Tesfa, 2024; Tesfa, Van Reisen & Medhanyie, 2024; Tesfa & Van Reisen, 2024a; Tesfa & Van Reisen, 2024b). It is possible to challenge whether these utterances were meant to label Tigrayans in general or whether they were referring only to TPLF officials. In this regard, subsequent government statements provide insight, as they accused the Tigrayan people as a whole of 'treasonous' acts in support of the TPLF and against the ENDF (Ibreck & de Waal, 2022).

Subsequently, the dehumanisation, detention, and killing of ethnic Tigrayans took place all over the country (Anna, 2021a; Kidanu & Van Reisen, 2024; Tesfa, Bächtold, Gebremichael, & Van Reisen, 2024a; Tesfa, Bächtold, Gebremichael, & Van Reisen, 2024b; Tesfa, Van Reisen & Medhanyie, 2024; Tesfa & Van Reisen, 2024a; Tesfa & Van Reisen, 2024b). Tigrayan public servants and business owners all over the country were harassed and subjected to unlawful detention, before and during the war (Amnesty International, 2021). This indicates that the government knew the context and consequences of their utterances.

The report of the European Union Special Envoy, Pekka Haavisto, indicated that senior Ethiopian leaders had frankly stated that they "are going to wipe out the Tigrayans for 100 years" (Anna, 2021b). This is additional evidence of the genocidal blueprint. Moreover, the

United Nations Special Advisor on the Prevention of Genocide mentioned that:

the use of pejorative and dehumanizing language like “cancer”, “devil”, “weed”, “bud” “those who bite the breast of their mother” to refer to the Tigray conflict is of utmost concern. (Nderitu, 2021)

As judicial opinions in case law, including on the Rwanda genocide, reveal, public statements made by officials and politicians that label and dehumanise certain target groups constitute a “direct and public incitement to commit genocide” (*Prosecutor v. Ruggiu*, 2000). In Rwanda, Radio Rwanda and Hutu political leaders spread discourse dehumanising, labelling and spotting ethnic Tutsi (*Prosecutor v. Kayishema & Ruzindana*, 1999).

Another important issue to consider is that the public statements made by political leaders and authorities have influenced the public. Terms such as ‘junta’, ‘woyane⁶⁰/TPLF’, ‘*tsere lewit*’ (non-reformist), and so forth were widely used to refer to the people of Tigray (Geb & Tesfa, 2024; Tesfa, Van Reisen & Medhanyie, 2024; Tesfa & Van Reisen, 2024a; Tesfa & van Reisen, 2024b). In this regard, Ibreck and De Waal (2022) showed how the term TPLF was extended to include the Tigray people as a whole:

Each of the warring parties has cast the conflict in existential terms, with the federal government, Amhara region, and Eritrean state arguing that their security requires the definitive subjugation of the TPLF – often extending this to the Tigrayan people as a whole. (Ibreck & de Waal, 2022)

The terms ‘TPLF’ and ‘*Woyane*’ were also used by foot soldiers and military commanders to refer to the people of Tigray during the armed conflict in Tigray (Geb & Tesfa, 2024; Tesfa, Van Reisen & Medhanyie, 2024; Tesfa & van Reisen, 2024a; Tesfa & Van Reisen 2024b). Daniel Kibret, Social Affairs advisor to the Prime Minister and board member of the Ethiopian Broadcasting Corporation, made anti-Tigrayan speeches on several TV stations. For example, on a live

⁶⁰ A derogatory term used as an ethnic identifier for people from Tigray.

event transmitted through local TVs in 2022, Daniel Kibret, social advisor to the prime minister, stated:

[...] Weyane [Tigray] is not something we can understand. We can only erase it. For instance, Australia... there is an island called Tasmania which is found in southern Australia. They have destroyed Tasmanian tribes until only one person remained. There was only one person left for [continuity of] the race. Only one person! (Plaut, 2022a)

Evaluating the content and context under which the speech was delivered, the term ‘Woyane’⁶¹ is not used to refer to the TPLF as a party, rather it is widely understood to refer to the people of Tigray (Geb & Tesfa, 2024; Tesfa, Van Reisen & Medhanyie, 2024; Tesfa & van Reisen, 2024a; Tesfa & Van Reisen 2024b).

In addition, survivors of atrocities in several places in Tigray reported that soldiers of the ENDF, EDF and Amhara forces stated that “they intend to cleanse the bloodline”, while committing acts of sexual violence against women of ethnic Tigrayans and during the extrajudicial killing of civilians (Feleke *et al.*, 2021; Kidanu & Van Reisen, 2024; Kidanu & Tefera, 2024). This leads us to argue that the special intent crafted by the masterminds to target Tigrayans was manifestly shared and furthered by foot soldiers and military commanders on the ground.

In conclusion, it appears clear that derogatory terms were used to refer to the people of Tigray by association, even when they referred to the TPLF. As a consequence of this labelling, ethnic Tigrayans all over the country were subjected to mob justice and extrajudicial actions. Under the following sections, we will specifically address how, and to what extent, the prohibited acts under Article 2(a–e) of the Genocide Convention were accompanied by the genocidal intent in Tigray.

Killing ethnic Tigrayan civilians

The above sections provided an overview of prohibited acts of genocide, including by killing (Article 2(a–e) of the Genocide

⁶¹ Weyane (or Woyane) is a derogatory term used to refer to the TPLF, but also more broadly to all Tigrayans.

Convention). This section evaluates whether the acts of killing were accompanied by special intent. In the context of the war in Tigray, state officials established anti-Tigrayan policies and expressed ethnically charged utterances, giving rise to a coordinated campaign against ethnic Tigrayans. The dehumanising and labelling words used by top government officials of Ethiopia were also consistently used by government media. For instance, when a bomb exploded at a public rally in Meskel Square held in support of PM Abiy Ahmed on 23 June 2018, Tigrayans were implicated by the Prime Minister as plotters and characterised as *'yeken jiboch'*, which means 'daytime hyenas' (AFP News Agency, 2018). This was subsequently associated with ethnic Tigrayans by the public. The dehumanising and labelling words were taken as a green light to take all measures against ethnic Tigrayans. Moreover, these words were used by the ENDF and Amhara forces while committing the mass killings of civilians against ethnic Tigrayans (Team of Experts, 2022; UN ICHEE, 2022).

Derogatory words such as 'junta' used by the Ethiopian Prime Minister, initially to refer to the TPLF, were later extended to refer to all Tigrayans. High-ranking officials, media, and even foot soldiers used the term to refer to Tigrayans on numerous occasions. For instance, in one case of investigation conducted in South Eastern Zone of Tigray in 2022, the wife of a priest from village Michael Abiy, in Degua Temben woreda (district) testified:

[...]my husband was repeatedly asking a member of the Ethiopia defense force for mercy saying that he was a priest, and the soldier replied "there is no priest in Tigray, all of you are 'juntas' [...] he then fired and killed him. (Team of Experts, 2022)

The overall governmental policy of targeting ethnic Tigrayans also received the blessing of regional governors, such as the then president of the Amhara Regional State, Mr Agegneu Teshager. In his public statement aired by the Amhara Media Corporate he stated the following:

[...] we will not rest until this enemy is eradicated [...] this people [people of Tigray] are the enemy of Oromia, this people are the enemy of Afar, this people are the enemy of Gambela, this people are the enemy of Somalia, this people are the

enemy of the whole of Ethiopia [...] therefore we need to accomplish what we have started courageously. (Tsehager, 2021)

Such terms were also used by members of the EDF. Victims testified that members of the EDF were heard referring to Tigrayans as ‘Woyane’ while targeting civilians. Investigations conducted by the Team of Experts in 2022 in South-Eastern Zone of Tigray reported that a religious leader named Priest Meresa Abadi (name changed) from the village May-Tekli, Samre district, remembers statements of the commanding officers of EDF in that area, when addressing villagers detained by them on 3 March 2021

[...] you ‘weyanes’ are now like a lizard cornered in a fence [...] you have nowhere to go [...] no one likes you. (Team of Experts, 2022)

Similarly, the investigative report a study conducted in 2022 at Village May Haydi contains the testimony of a 61-year-old man called Bayray Kelali (name changed) who survived the killing:

Armed soldiers started to torture and call them ‘Junta’. Mr Bayray testified that the military commander in the area was heard saying ‘Unless these Tigrayans vanish from this earth, they could not let us [non-Tigrayan Ethiopians] live peacefully,’ consequently, ten family members were stoned to death. (Team of Experts, 2022)

The above testimonies and evidence of the reports of independent investigations undertaken in Tigray indicate that the killing of civilians in some areas was undertaken with genocidal intent and that the EDF was heavily implicated in it (UN ICHEE, 2022).

Causing serious bodily or mental harm to ethnic Tigrayans

According to International Criminal Court in *Elements of Crimes*, causing serious bodily or mental harm to members of a protected group includes, but is not restricted to, “acts of torture, rape, sexual violence, or inhuman and degrading treatment” (International Criminal Court, 2013, p. 2, Article 6(b)). Similarly, the ICTR in the case of *Prosecutor v. Seromba* (2008) interpreted serious bodily harm to encapsulate “nonfatal physical violence that causes serious injury to the external or internal organs” and explained that serious mental harm “includes more than minor or temporary impairment of mental faculties such as the infliction of strong fear or terror, intimidation or

threat” (*Prosecutor v. Kayishema & Ruzindana*, 1999; *Prosecutor v. Semanza*, 2003). For the act to constitute a prohibited act of the crime of genocide, “the bodily harm or the mental harm inflicted on members of a group must be of such a serious nature as to threaten its destruction in whole or in part” (*Prosecutor v. Seromba*, 2008).

Torture, inhumane and degrading treatment, rape and other forms of sexual violence were among the acts, widely reported to have been inflicted against ethnic Tigrayans. The investigation report of conducted by the Team of Experts in 2022 and findings of other independent fact-finding bodies show that torture and ill-treatment was carried out on civilians by members of the ENDF, EDF, and Amhara forces either acting independently or jointly (Human Rights Council, 2022). What is important here is whether or not the acts were committed with the special intent to destroy Tigrayans in whole or in part.

An investigative report of the study conducted in 2022 indicates that acts of torture and ill-treatment were committed against Tigrayan civilians in Dejen village, Enderta district by members of the ENDF and EDF. On 29 April 2021, Tsegay Gebrehiwot (name changed), a 46-year-old victim who was severely beaten by a member of the EDF, testified that the perpetrator was saying “[...] you are fighting and killing us, you are ‘junta’; you are ‘weyane’” (Team of Experts, 2022). The report, undertaken in South Eastern Zone of Tigray, narrates as follows:

On 16 January 2021, at Wejerat, village Gonka, ENDF detained a group of men named Weldu Gidey, Kalayu Birhane, Fitsum Hagos, and Negasi Belay [names changed] and put them behind doors, locked them from outside and set the house on fire resulting in bodily burn, pain, and serious physical and mental harm. When the soldiers commit the act, the ENDF vowed “to eliminate Tigrayans”. (Team of Experts, 2022)

The findings of the investigation also reveal acts of torture and ill-treatment. On 29 January 2021, at the village of Micheal Abiy in Degua-Tembien district, the combined soldiers of the ENDF, EDF, and Amhara Forces arrested and detained a man called Gebray Tsegay (name changed). The witness testified that soldiers put him in

detention for two days and beat him with an iron bar while denying him food and water. He recalls that the soldiers said: “You Tigrayans, we will get rid of you” (Team of Experts, 2022).

In most cases, families of deceased individuals were prohibited from burying the bodies of their relatives. This act inflicts severe mental harm on members of the families. The report of the Team of Experts contains the testimony of a 40-year-old man named Assefa Weldu (name changed) who said that he heard a member of the EDF stating “Killing [civilians] is not enough [...] killing should be accompanied by severe moral infliction on the people of Tigray [...]”, after killing civilians as a result of artillery shelling at in Mawel village in Samre woreda (district) (Team of Experts, 2022). The above-mentioned utterances, such as “we will get rid of you, Tigrayans, we will eliminate you”, are strong indicators of genocidal intent on the part of the soldiers who were committing the acts.

As part of the acts that cause serious bodily or mental harm, rape and other forms of sexual violence were also reported to have been inflicted resulting in serious physical or mental harm to victims (Kidanu *et al.*, 2024; Kidanu & Tefera, 2024). A 27-year-old Tigrayan woman from Western Tigray testified that a militia member of the Amhara forces told her: “You Tigrayans should disappear from the land west of [the Tekeze River]. You are evil and we are purifying your blood” (Amnesty International, 2022). Similarly, on 8 March 2021 four Amhara militiamen stopped Amleset (name changed) and other women. The Amhara men separated Amleset from her children and brother and took her into an abandoned farmer’s house, just a few meters away. After she was gang raped, the militiamen inserted into her genitals a hot metal rod that burned her uterus. She begged them to stop, asking why they were doing that to her and what wrong has she done to them. They replied:

You did nothing bad to us, our problem is with your womb. Your womb gives birth to Woyane [a derogatory term used to refer to the TPLF]. A Tigrayan womb should never give birth. (Kassa, 2021)

Similarly, a 19-year-old woman named Kisanet (name change) who fell pregnant after being raped by Ethiopian soldiers, recalls one of

the soldiers say: “They did this to eliminate Tigrayans, and for the generations of babies delivered to be Ethiopian, because they don’t want the next generation to be Tigrayans [...]”. Bisrat (name changed), a 22-year-old girl from Irob, an indigenous community in Tigray, testified that when the war erupted, she escaped from Adigrat to a place called Haraze, where she was caught by Eritrean troops and raped for 14 days along with other women who fled with her. Bisrat says that despite her pleas to be spared to breastfeed her daughter, they did not stop and said “we are cleansing your wombs, now you will have clean babies that are not Woyane”. From this it is clear that the term Woyane, which on the face of it seems to directly refer to the TPLF fighters, not to the people of Tigray, has been extended to refer to the broader group of Tigrayans. This is in line with (Tesfa, Van Reisen & Medhanyic, 2024; Tesfa & Van Reisen, 2024a; Tesfa & Van Reisen, 2024b).

As reflected in different parts of this chapter, the word ‘Woyane’ has been consistently used by politicians, army leaders, and foot soldiers to refer to the people of Tigray. For example, we have seen that several rape victims testified that perpetrators called them ‘Woyane’ while raping them (Human Rights Council, 2022). Hence, it can be concluded that the above-mentioned prohibited acts of the crime of genocide were accompanied by genocidal intent, which can be inferred from the pattern of the commission of the crime and utterances of the perpetrators.

Infliction of conditions of life calculated to bring about the physical destruction of ethnic Tigrayans

As mentioned, in the previous sections, this element of the crime of genocide is explicitly mentioned under Article 2(c) of the Genocide Convention as a prohibited act. As noted by the Trial Chamber of the ICTR in the Akayesu case, conditions of life are intentionally inflicted to bring the gradual destruction of the intended group in whole or in part (*Prosecutor v. Akayesu*, 1998). Investigation undertaken by the Team of Experts in 2022 found that:

Villages and homes were systematically destroyed and the properties looted, livestock slaughtered and crops burned down, cereals deliberately mixed with foreign objects.

The life-sustaining conditions of the civilian Tigrayans including health centres, hospitals, agricultural instruments of farmers, and water supply systems strategically ransacked and the remaining destroyed. (Team of Experts, 2022)

This finding is evidence of acts amounting to the inflicting conditions of life calculated to bring about the physical destruction of the ethnic Tigrayans. A report by Amnesty International confirmed this finding in Western Tigray; according to the report, the Amhara and regional officials committed widespread pillage of crops and livestock, they looted and occupied Tigrayan homes by force and destroyed sources of livelihood (Amnesty International, 2022). Similarly, Human Rights Watch, in its report on the situation in Western Tigray, stated:

In several towns in Western Tigray, signs were displayed demanding that Tigrayans leave, and pamphlets distributed issuing Tigrayans [...] to leave or be killed. (Human Rights Watch, 2022)

These conditions are not restricted to Western Tigray as is evident from Kahsay (2024); Nyssen *et al.* (2024); Kahsay & Medhanyie, (2024); Medhanyie *et al.* (2024). In addition to these acts, the Ethiopian government imposed a strict siege on the Tigray Regional State, under which basic humanitarian aid supplies, such as food and medicine, and essential services, such as banking and power supply, were prevented from entering Tigray. One may reasonably question whether the siege was imposed with the motive of weakening/subduing the TPLF forces, or whether it can be consider the deliberate infliction of conditions of life calculated to bring about the physical destruction of the people of Tigray.

The siege imposed on Tigray cannot be compared to sieges imposed elsewhere during times of war. For example, according to the UN Commission of Inquiry in the Syrian Arab Republic, the siege imposed in eastern Ghouta of Syria does not fulfil the elements of genocide and was instead characterised as a war crime (Human Rights Council, 2018). The Commission found that genocidal intent could not be establish in the case of Syria. However, the intention and context in which the siege was committed varies from that of the siege on Tigray. To determine whether or not the siege imposed on Tigray

was genocidal it is important to ascertain the context, the patterns of the acts, and other circumstantial evidence.

On the 30 July 2021, the state-owned Amhara Media Corporation broadcasted that Tigray will face a situation “Like Biafra” (Amhara Media Corporation/ አማራ ሚዲያ ኮርፖሬሽን, 2021). The Biafran famine was a devastating humanitarian crisis that occurred during the Nigerian Civil War, which lasted from 1967 to 1970. The famine was one of the most tragic consequences of the war, resulting from the conflict between the Nigerian government and the secessionist state of Biafra. The comparison in the language shows the intentional punishment of famine inflicted upon Tigray with its aspirations of autonomy.

In a similar expression of how he may use his power, Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed stated that it is up to the will of the Ethiopian government whether aid gets into Tigray (Gebre & Marks, 2021). The Ethiopian government repeatedly rejected requests by the international community to allow humanitarian aid to Tigray, citing security assurance, among other reasons, for nearly two years. Ethiopia set aside the security assurance granted by the EU and US envoys on 2 August 2022, according to the EU-US joint statement, 2022. The Ethiopian government continued the repeated promotion and systematic implementation of the siege against the people of Tigray, including by blocking life supply corridors in collaboration with the Afar and Amhara regional governments (Gebreslassie *et al.*, 2024; Kabsay, 2024; Stocker & Medhanyie, 2024).

This pattern indicates that the siege was deliberately imposed with the intent to cause the destruction of the people of Tigray, in whole or in part, which amounts to the crime of genocide. Even though what matters in establishing genocide is the intention, not the result, many have reported that the conditions of life imposed on the people of Tigray by the siege resulted in a large number of deaths due to starvation and lack of medical treatment (Medhanyie *et al.*, 2024;

(Kahsay, Z 2024: Kahsay, B, 2024). Plaut, quoting Nyssen and his team at Ghent University concluded in March 2022:

[...] we made the assessment that so far there are between 150,000 and 200,000 starvation deaths, [...], and more than 100,000 additional deaths due to lack of health care. (Plaut, 2022b)

The International Criminal Court, in *Elements of Crimes*, when defining the term ‘conditions of life’, provides that the term may “may include, but is not necessarily restricted to, deliberate deprivation of resources indispensable for survival, such as food or medical services, or systematic expulsion from homes” (International Criminal Court, 2013, p. 2, Article 6(c), element 4).

It is argued that rape and sexual violence could also be considered as inflicted conditions of life calculated to bring about the destruction of the people of Tigray, as the victims and survivors of the sexual violence testified that perpetrators deliberately raped the victims to disseminate HIV/AIDS. Meseret (name changed), a 26-year-old girl who works in a coffee shop in Edaga Hamus, around 100 kms from Mekelle, testified “after gang raped by Eritrean troops, I went to a nearby drug shop to get post-exposure HIV drugs and contraceptive, and one of the perpetrators who saw me having the drugs stated, ‘why are you having those drugs, we are here to make you HIV positive’” (Amnesty International, 2021).

Many of the women who were gang raped sustained severe injuries and suffered health complications resulting in infertility (Amnesty International, 2021). The report of the UN Committee of Human Rights Experts on Ethiopia:

A woman survivor from north-western Tigray was abducted by ENDF and EDF soldiers at a checkpoint while traveling, she was held and gang-raped over four days before being released: [...] They burned her nipple with a naked flame. Before they let her go, they inserted rocks, plastic and tissue in her vagina. (Human Rights Council, 2022, paragraph 60)

Several survivors interviewed by Amnesty International said that the perpetrators of rape said things like, “This is what you deserve” and “You are disgusting” (Amnesty International, 2021).

Hence, in conclusion, the genocidal intent of the perpetrators can be inferred from their utterances and the pattern and systematic nature of their acts. Taking the context into account, one can deduce that perpetrators knew that the consequence of their acts could be fatal to the victims, as the perpetrators knew that the victims would be left without basic medical support.

Measures intended to prevent births among the protected group

As mentioned earlier, the International Criminal Court in *Elements of Crimes* (International Criminal Court, 2013) does not contain an explicit list of acts that constitute measures intended to prevent births. However, case law, such as Akayesu, mention some acts intended to prevent births: “sexual mutilation, sterilization, forced birth control, separation of the sexes and prohibition of marriages” (*Prosecutor v. Akayesu*, 1998). The ICTR Trial Chamber, in its judgment, also reiterated that when rape is committed to impregnate and lead to birth, and while at the same time preventing birth by the targeted ethnic group, it amounts to a measure to prevent births by forcibly controlling birth (*Prosecutor v. Akayesu*, 1998, paragraph 507).

The following instances reveal the intention of the perpetrators to use rape as a birth prevention method. For example, many victims reported that they were gang raped in front of family members (Amnesty International, 2021). According to the report of the Amnesty International, a 35-year-old mother-of-two from Humera said “On 21 November 2021, three members of the Eritrean troops raped me in front of my child” (Amnesty International, 2021).

In some instances, men were forced to rape their family members (Kassa, 2021). In a related report, Wafaa Said, deputy UN Aid coordinator in Ethiopia, in her briefing to the Sunday Morning Herald on 26 March 2021, stated that there were reports of: “[...] gang rape, rape in front of family members and men being forced to rape their family members under the threat of violence” (Nichols, 2021). In a patriarchal, and highly religious society such as Tigray, raping a woman in front of her family members would lead to extreme trauma and isolation, to the extent of preventing her of

coupling with her husband and preventing her from procreating (Gebremichael *et al.*, 2023).

The other act that may fall under birth prevention measures is the act of inserting materials, such as nails, sharp materials, gravel etc, inside the reproductive organs of the victims to prevent them from conceiving and giving birth to ethnic Tigrayans (Amnesty International, 2021). Houreld interviewed a young woman aged 27 in Adigrat hospital where she testified that “in February, she was repeatedly raped by 23 soldiers who inserted nails, a rock, and another item into her vagina, and she was threatened to death with a knife” (Houreld, 2021).

The pattern of these acts and the knowledge of the perpetrators about the consequences of their acts indicates that the intention is beyond a desire for sexual gratification or to cause physical or psychological harm to the victim, but extends to preventing the women of Tigray from giving birth and continuing the bloodline – in other words, the destruction of the Tigrayan people. This corresponds with genocidal intent.

Conclusion

It is clear from the evidence examined in this chapter (and this book), that the acts perpetrated against the people of Tigray, including killing, rape and sexual violence (including to prevent birth), deprivation of resources indispensable for survival (food and medical services and expulsion from homes), and the siege of Tigray can be considered prohibited acts under Article 2 of the Genocide Convention. Moreover, few would doubt that Tigrayans can be regarded as an ethnic group protected by the Convention. The challenge in proving the crime of genocide is the mental element – intent to destroy in whole or in part (special intent). This special intent is a key requirement that characterises the crime of genocide and distinguishes it from other crimes.

Accordingly, this chapter attempted to determine whether or not the acts committed against civilian Tigrayans during the Tigray war were carried out with the special intent required of the crime of genocide. Like many other cases, it is difficult to find direct genocidal evidence

for the acts committed against civilian Tigrayans, because the architects of the crime sketch the genocidal blueprint and implement it in a hidden manner. This, coupled with the difficulty of proving the mental state of the perpetrators at the time of the commission of the crime, makes it difficult to establish the crime of genocide. The difficulty of proving the mental element of the crime makes it subject to political manipulation. In Darfur and Myanmar, and recently in Tigray, the international community has been reluctant to use the term ‘genocide’, although independent reports have clearly indicated genocidal intent.

Consistent with established jurisprudence, this chapter uses circumstantial evidence, including the utterances of state officials, perpetrators, and media propaganda, together with the analysis of the patterns and context in which the acts were committed, to establish the existence of genocidal intent in the commission of the prohibited acts against the Tigrayan population. The study finds that there is evidence that there are reasonable grounds to believe that genocide was in fact committed against ethnic Tigrayans. Thus, the international community has a legal and moral obligation to investigate the crime of genocide in Tigray and prosecute those responsible.

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Author's contributions

The author conducted the research.

Ethical considerations

This research was carried out under ethical clearance obtained from Mekelle University, reference number MU_IRB 1978/2022. Tilburg University has also provided ethical clearance. This research was carried out under ethical clearance obtained from Tilburg University Identification code: REDC 2020.139 titled “Cultural Dimensions of Meaning-making and Agenda-setting”.

This chapter should be read in conjunction with the ‘Note on content and editorial decisions’ (Book 1).

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