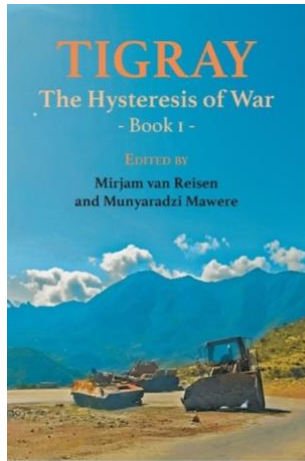


From Hidden to Open War in Tigray: Structural and Proximate Causes

Seife Hailu Gebreslassie & Mirjam Van Reisen

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Seife Hailu Gebreslassie & Mirjam Van Reisen

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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.

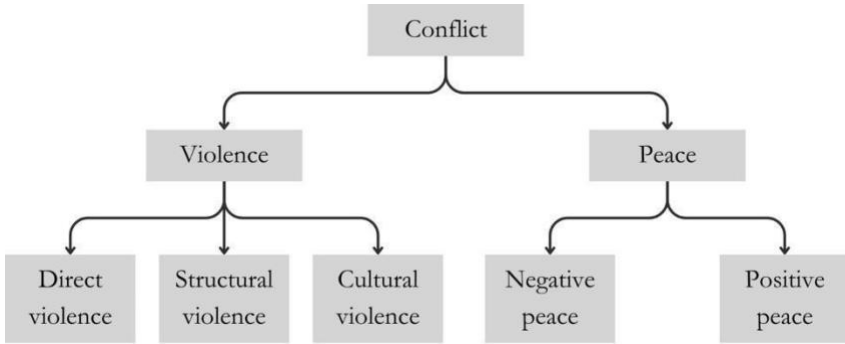


Figure 3.1. Conceptual linkages between conflict, violence and peace

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).

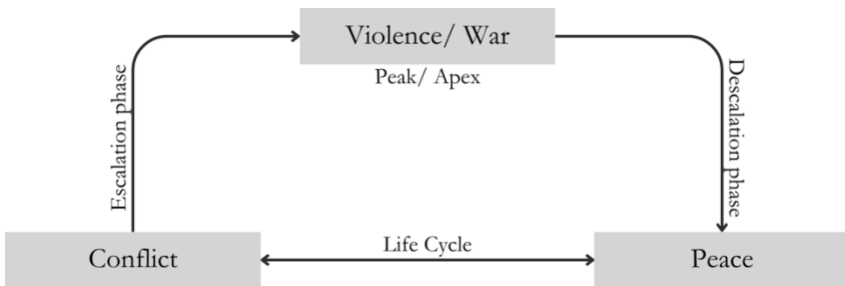


Figure 3.2. Cycle of violence

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.

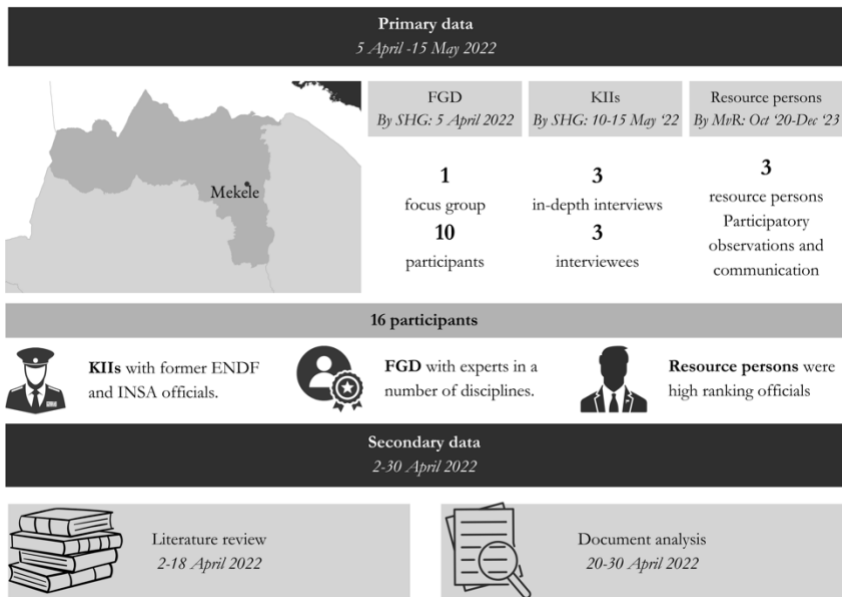


Figure 3.3. Overview of data collected and used in the study

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.¹ 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

¹ 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),² 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 government³ (TPLF, 2021a), in which PM Abiy

² 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).

³ 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”⁴ 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).⁵ 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:

⁴ 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.

⁵ 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.⁶ 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.

⁶ 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 Brhanu Jula and General Abeban 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 Beshasha [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 '*kitat*' (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 Ambara forces also committed crimes against humanity, including murder, rape and other forms of sexual violence, and persecution.

Members of the Ambara 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 Gerbusermay, 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 Amhara 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 'Yefth 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 Amhara 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 Woldiyya (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 Guesb 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 Amharamized 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.

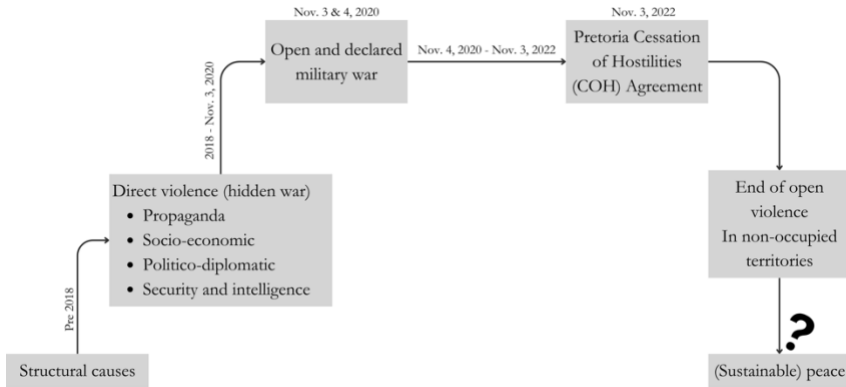


Figure 3.4. Trajectory of the war in Tigray
Source: Developed by the authors for this chapter

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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