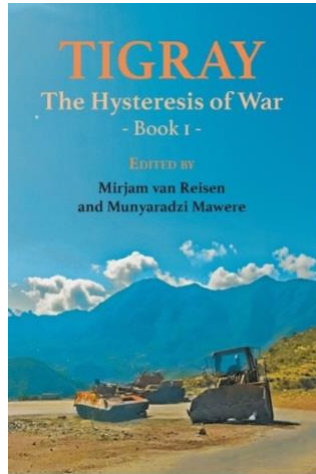


Throwing Bodies into the Tekeze River: Assessment of Massacres

*Daniel Tesfa, Matteo Bächtold, Rufael Tesfay Gebremichael & Mirjam Van
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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 Mawere</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, Rufael 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

Throwing Bodies into the Tekeze River: Assessment of Massacres

*Daniel Tesfa, Matteo Bächtold, Rufael Tesfay Gebremichael &
Mirjam Van Reisen*

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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 woredas¹ 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

¹ 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).² 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

² 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.ethiopiaticigrawar.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.

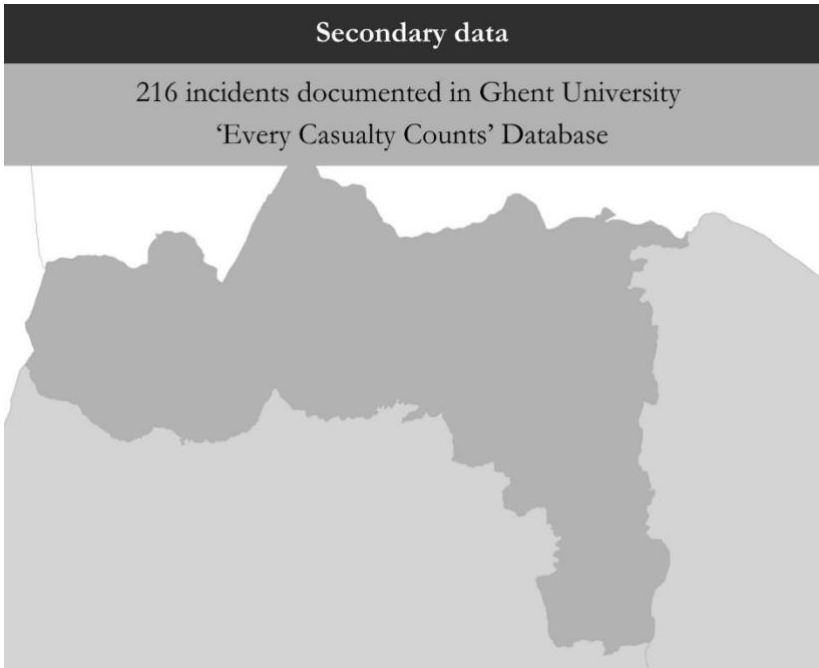


Figure 9.1. Methodology

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*.³

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)

³ 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.

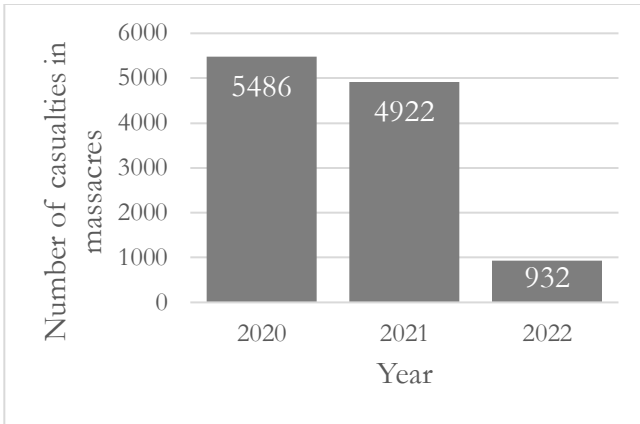


Figure 9.2. Number of casualties per year

(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.

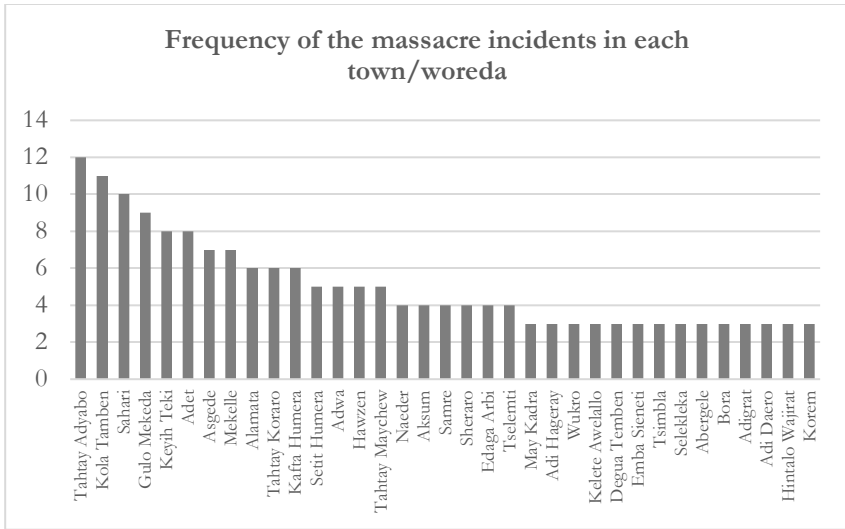


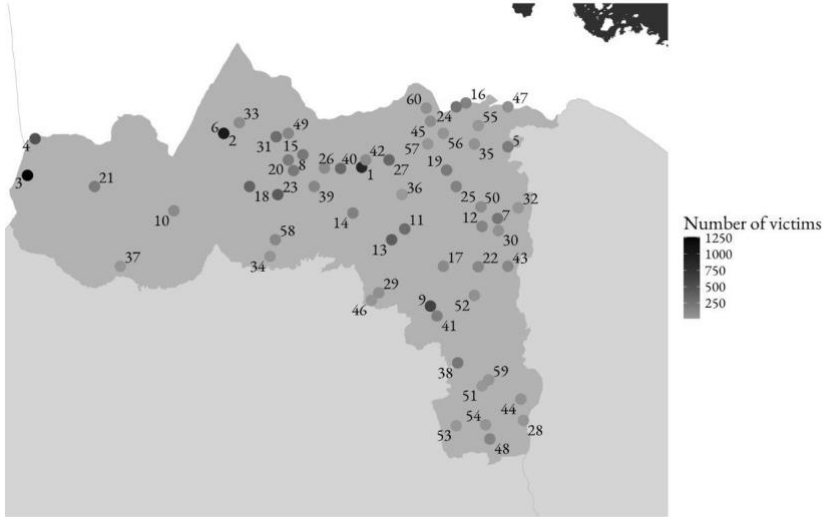
Figure 9.3. Frequency of massacre incidents in each town/woreda
(Ghent University ‘Every Casualty Counts’ database, compiled by authors)

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 Kinetal	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 Agulac	45 Mereb 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.

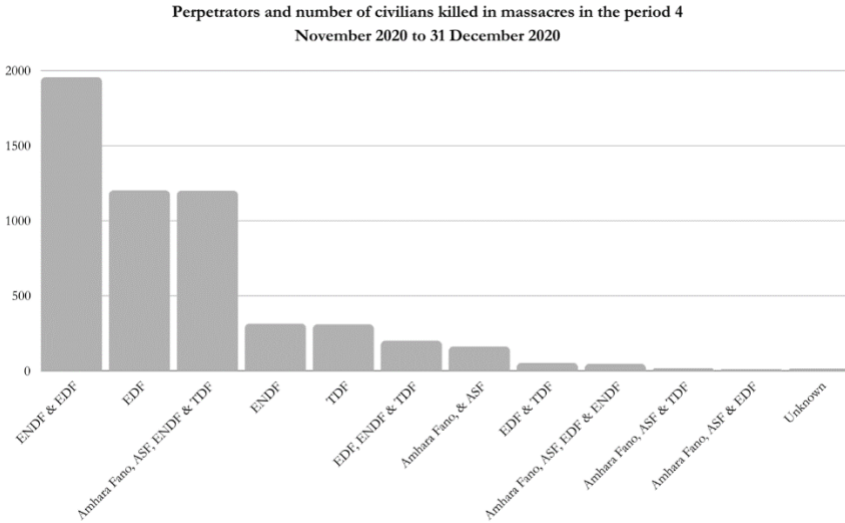


Figure 9.5. Perpetrators and number of civilians killed in massacres in the period 4 November 2020 to 31 December 2020

(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.

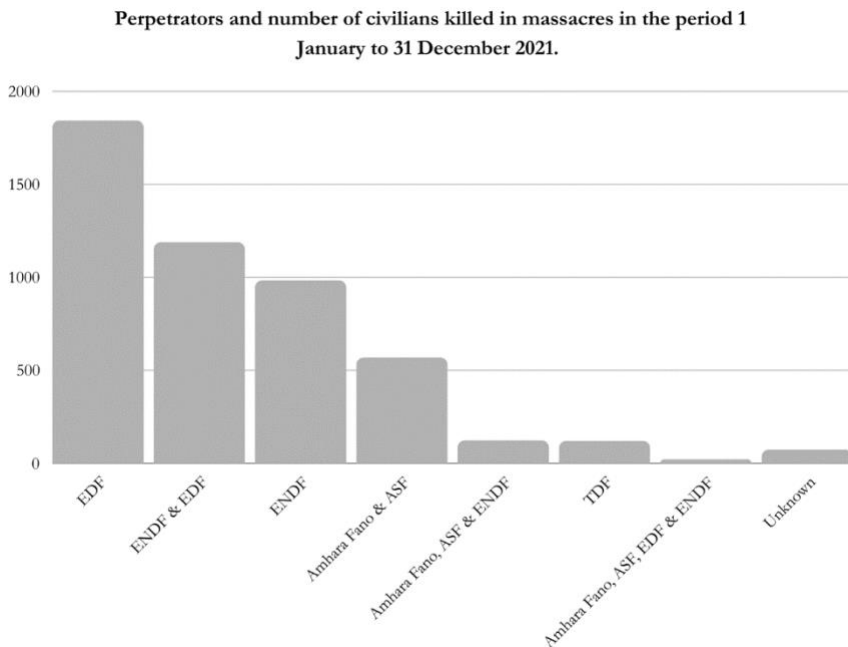


Figure 9.6. Perpetrators and number of civilians killed in massacres in the period 1 January to 31 December 2021

(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**

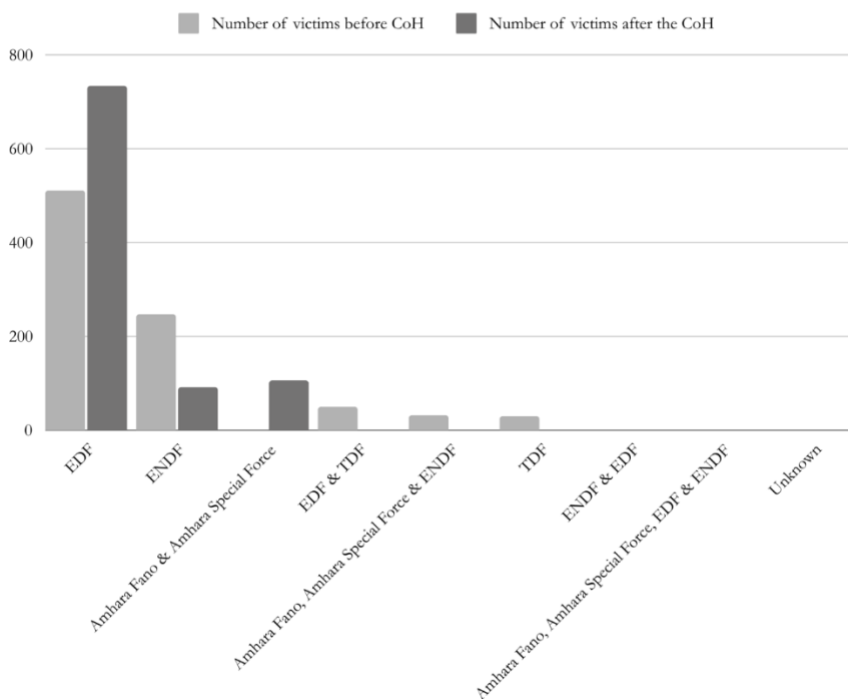


Figure 9.7. Perpetrators and number of civilians killed in massacres in the period 1 January to 20 December 2022

(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

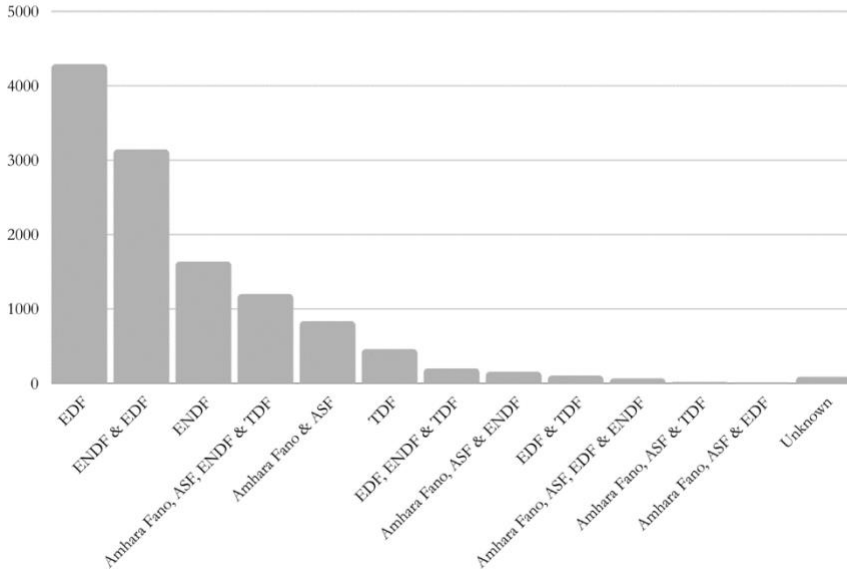


Figure 9.8. Perpetrators and number of civilians killed in massacres in the period 4 November 2020 to 20 December 2022

(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.

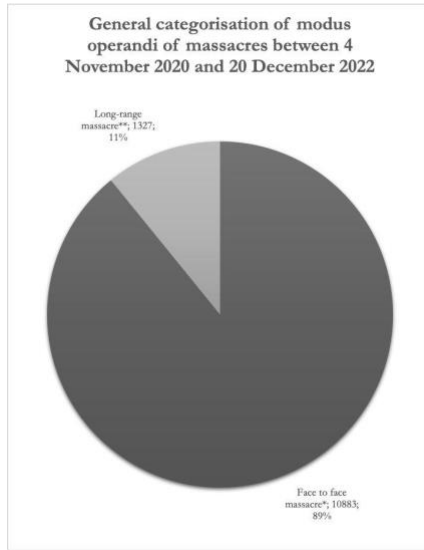


Figure 9.9. General categorisation of modus operandi period 4 November 2020 to 20 December 2022

(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.

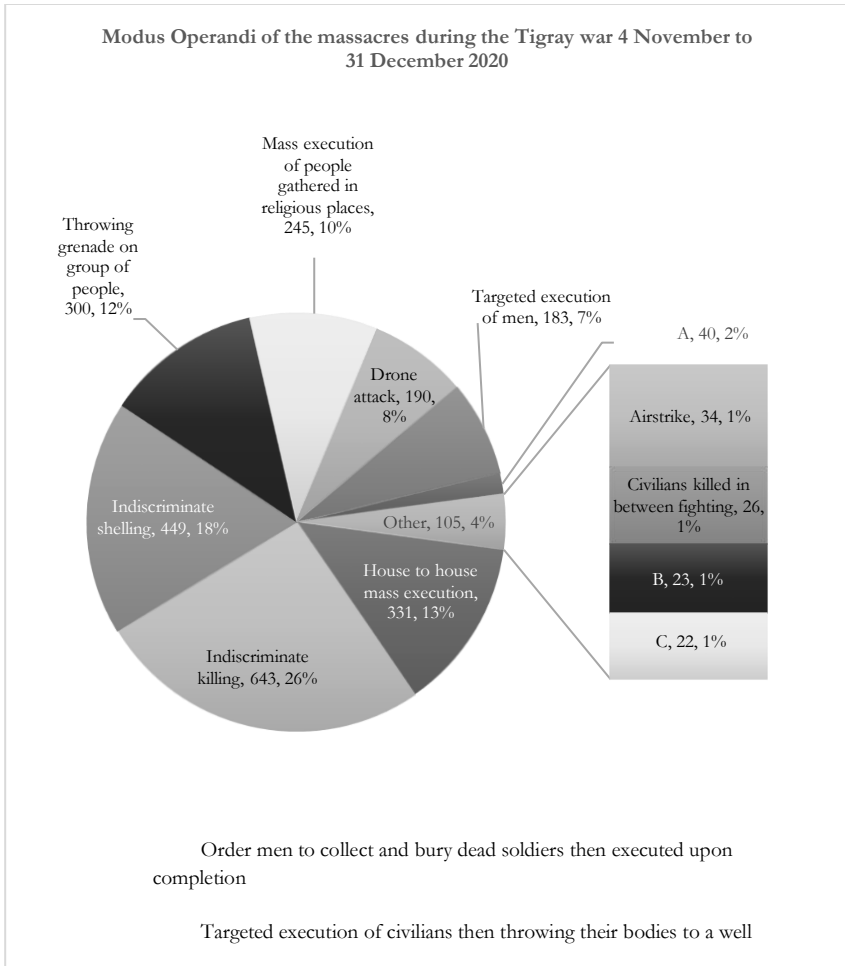


Figure 9.10. Massacre modus operandi period 4 November to 31 December 2020

(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.

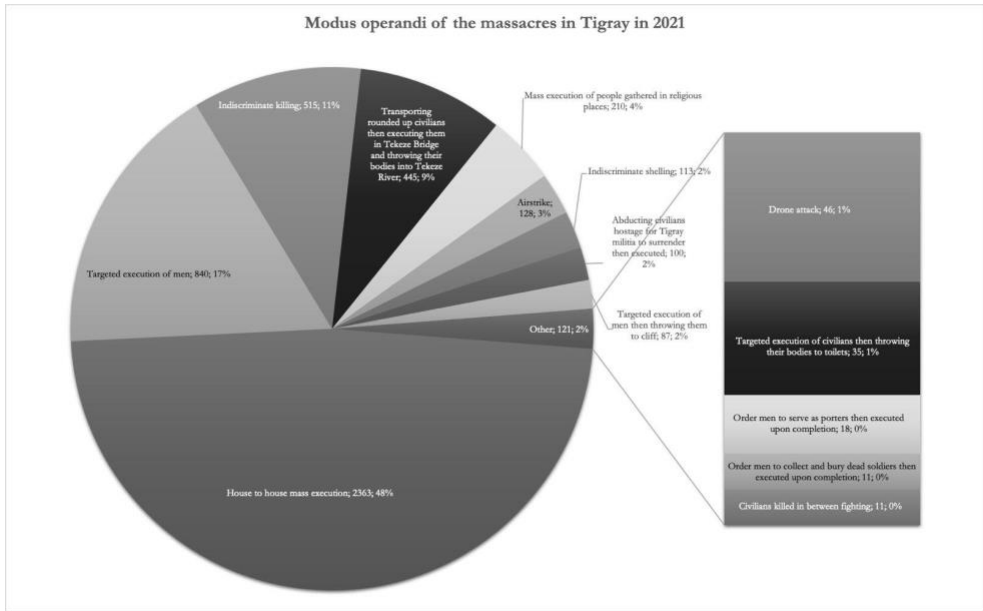


Figure 9.11. Massacre modus operandi period 1 January to 31 December 2021

(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.

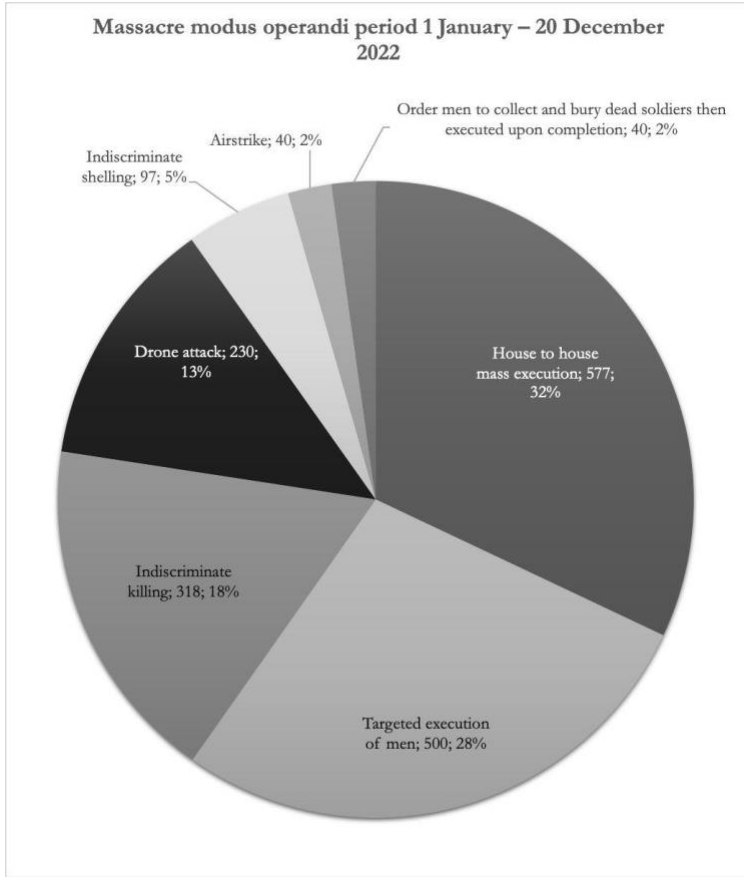


Figure 9.12. Massacre modus operandi period 1 January to 20 December 2022

(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.

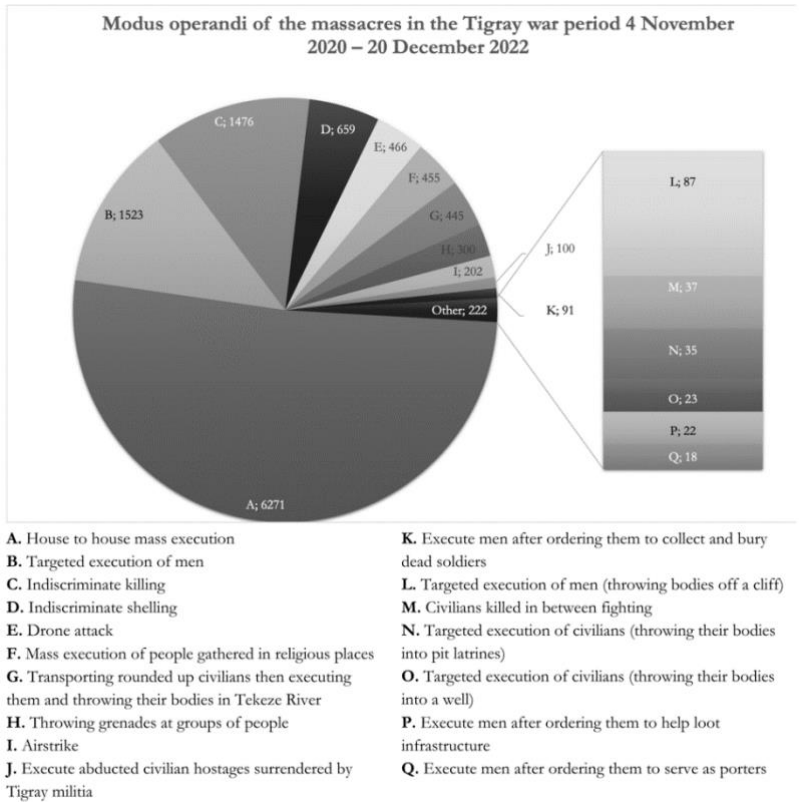


Figure 9.13. Massacre modus operandi during the Tigray war period 4 November 2020 to 20 December 2022

(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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