



# Understanding Ethiopia's Tigray War

Martin Plaut & Sarah Vaughan

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Review by Phillip van Niekerk

**U**nderstanding Ethiopia's Tigray War, an account of the conflict and its long and complex historical roots by Sarah Vaughan and Martin Plaut, former Africa Editor of the BBC, was recently published by Hurst Publishers.

What they have to say is explosive: that the entire justification for the war was based on a lie – the claim that the Tigrayans started it by attacking the Northern Command Headquarters in Mekelle, the capital of Tigray, on 3 November 2020 and that the federal government's response was a "law and order operation to counter a traitorous terrorist attack" by the Tigrayans.

The authors reveal in great detail that the motivation for war was long "in gestation and preparation" as Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed pushed to centralise power after 25 years of Tigrayan-dominated ethnic federalism under the [Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Democratic Front](#).

From July 2020, the authors recount, there were explicit social media calls for Ethiopia and Eritrea to act against the Tigray People's Liberation Front (TPLF), which was identified as "the source of all our problems". Abiy and his associates began a programme of hate speech against Tigrayans, calling them monsters and saying they should be the last of their kind. Tigrayans were expelled from the military and the civil service, and thousands withdrew into

Tigray. The anti-Tigrayan sentiment was channelled into millions of Ethiopian homes on satellite television.

An important context is that this was not a civil war but a regional war in which the Ethiopian National Defence Force (ENDF) allied with Eritrea, [whose leader, Isaias Afwerki](#), had a long-standing beef with the Tigrayans dating back to the 1970s. The two countries, along with Somalia, formed a tripartite alliance on 27 January 2020, nine months before the outbreak of war, and the weapons and troops were moved into place well ahead of 3 November.

"Everyone knew this was coming," Plaut told the Commonwealth Institute at the launch of the book earlier in 2023. "This was no surprise."

## **AN INVASION LONG IN THE PLANNING**

Plaut cites Professor Mirjam van Reisen, from Tilburg University in the Netherlands, who was working on a research project with academics from Mekelle University when she received a call on the night of 3 November 2020 from a colleague, saying that there was gunfire in the city.

Van Reisen later learnt that two Ethiopian Air Force planes had landed at Mekelle airport, pretending they were bringing in new banknotes, but actually ferrying in special forces.

"The ENDF were sent by plane to capture and kill the leadership of the

regional government," said Plaut. "That was the spark that led to the outbreak of the fighting."

The Tigrayans then went to the regional command in Mekelle and told them to hand over their weapons or they would be arrested. Many did, but some fought back and there was fighting at other bases in Tigray.

The very next day – 4 November – Ethiopian, Eritrean and Somali troops, along with Amhara ethnic militia, began their invasion of Tigray. The Eritreans took Western Tigray so they could cut off the supply lines to Sudan. Mekelle fell on November 29 and the TDF was driven into the mountains from where it launched a guerrilla war.

The rest is history. The war fell into several phases: the occupation of Tigray (November 2020); the recapture of Mekelle by the Tigray Defence Forces (June 2021); the TPLF march on Addis Ababa (August to November 2021); the retreat back to Mekelle (November 2021) and the final assault by the Eritreans, ENDF and Amhara militias (April 2022), ending with the November 2022 cessation of hostilities.

Atrocity comparisons tend to be odious, but the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights has verified 7,199 civilian deaths in Ukraine, a sickening level of mass murder for which Russian President Vladimir Putin bears full responsibility. The number of combat deaths is in the

tens of thousands.

By contrast, the number of casualties in Ethiopia might never be known. The best estimates have been put together by Jan Nyssen, a geographer at Ghent University in Belgium, who has calculated that up to 600,000 non-combatants died during the Tigrayan war between November 2020 and November 2022. Many of them starved to death. If one adds fighters who died in combat, the total number of deaths could approach one million.

At the recent Munich Security Conference, US Vice-President Kamala Harris accused Russia of committing crimes against humanity. But given the simultaneous near-planetary silence on Tigray, it is safe to conclude that not all crimes against humanity are equal.

President Joe Biden's administration did start a review last year to determine whether genocide had been committed in Tigray, but then backed off so as not to impede the peace process that culminated in the Pretoria and the Nairobi peace agreements in November.

The peace that has accompanied the signing of the accord has provided a shield against asking too many difficult questions or delving too deeply into the Tigrayan conflict – and provided an opportunity for Abiy, who recently hosted the African heads of state summit in Addis Ababa, to take a victory lap.

The authors can expect angry pushback to their book, especially on the fake narrative claim, as this has become an article of faith for the defenders of the military operation.

But the question can be asked in a different way: which side was ready and prepared to fight a war on 4 November 2020? Tsadkan Gebretensae, the Tigray Defence Forces' (TDF's) legendary commander, was scathing in his criticism of the TPLF for their lack of proper preparation when all the signs were there.

Within the first weeks of the war, a number of war crimes had been committed, such as the extrajudicial

killings of hundreds of civilians in Axum in November 2020 and the brutalisation and rape of Tigrayan women. "They were raped at random," said Plaut. "Sometimes many, many times over many days."

Still to come were the mass arbitrary arrests of tens of thousands of ethnic Tigrayans, the aerial bombardment of schools and hospitals and the use of starvation as a weapon of war through the blockade of Tigray, which included the deaths of thousands of children.

There is no denying that the TDF responded by inflicting atrocities too, but the case that this was an ethnically motivated war aimed at subjugating and eliminating an entire nation can only be made against one side.

### **DREDGING UP OLD HISTORY**

There are those who will ask, with the peace accord now signed and in place, what is the purpose of dredging up this now-old history?

The best answer is the same reason that South Africa's Truth and Reconciliation Commission was established – that the victims should have a voice too. And they are Africans too.

This is especially true when one considers that, for much of the war, Tigray was cut off from the rest of the world, without internet or telephone access. To this day, reporters remain highly restricted. The Ethiopian government, its control of state media and its army of social media trolls have a unique ability to tell their story or digitally assault anyone who strays from the official line.

Plaut and Vaughan welcome debate – and they hope that more books will be written. The conflict in Ethiopia is not over by a long shot. The search for the truth does not end with one book.

The peace accord, they say, has not resolved the fundamental underlying conflict in Ethiopia over a communal national identity and issues around it such as ethnonationalism, land hunger and score-settling.

The Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF) could be blamed for authoritarianism and lapses in the 27 years it ruled the country, but in the years since Abiy took power in 2018, the levels of conflict, division and violence have been unprecedented.

This is not to deny that the peace accord was a significant achievement. The role of South Africa and former presidents Olusegun Obasanjo of Nigeria and Uhuru Kenyatta of Kenya – and the US behind the scenes – probably saved many thousands of people from starvation and death.

The Pretoria Accord was at its root an admission that the TDF was exhausted and on its last legs, the Tigrayan people starving and facing an overwhelming regional force armed and financed by powerful international players.

Vaughan fears that aspect of the accord that reinforces the message that "might is right and you can win by force of arms".

She points out, Tigray is only one of the dynamics that have marked Ethiopia in this period. "Even after the cessation of hostilities on November 22 last year, the conflict has been metastasising into other spheres."

Now with the Tigrayans out of the game, the struggle for domination in Ethiopia is being played out between the Oromo and the Amhara.

Ethiopia has veered away from the careful ethnic balancing act of the EPRDF era, which may have been an imperfect response to the problem of multiple ethnicities, into what Vaughan now calls a "zero-sum game" where the choice of identity is much starker.

"Until Ethiopia's elites come to terms with a more positive, constructive approach to this issue, this peace deal may just stick but the underlying problems won't be resolved," she says.

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