

GETTING ETHIOPIA DEAD WRONG



By Rasmus Sonderriis

SYNTHESIS (text on back cover)

They rank among the great and the good of our media, academia, humanitarian work, politics and diplomacy. Yet they demonized a friendly people and fueled a big war with dire mispredictions and shocking lies. Who were they? How could they get away with it? What was the bigger picture that they so distorted? And why?

Getting Ethiopia Dead Wrong exposes how the distinction between legitimate and illegitimate use of force was blurred, even reversed, during what is commonly referred to as the Tigray War, raging across northern Ethiopia from November 3, 2020 to November 2, 2022. It vindicates the analysts whose warnings were disregarded. It maps out how a power struggle was deceptively reduced to tribal rage, tackling the full range of hair-raising accusations, from weaponized rape and starvation to hate speech and genocide. It concludes that the narrative about the war says a lot more about the narrators than it does about the war. And it ends with a call not to misjudge other ethnonationalist insurgencies still going on in Ethiopia.

More generally, this is a thought-provoking case study of how the Western moral-superiority complex, even in progressive clothing, continues to wreak havoc.



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PREFACE

Journalism is the first draft of history. This applies to what is commonly referred to as the Tigray War, raging across northern Ethiopia from November 3, 2020 to November 2, 2022. Alas, in this case, big media became *actors* of history as well, when their early sketches, weirdly slanted and upside-down, contributed to also misshaping the international community's response.

Getting Ethiopia Dead Wrong aspires to be a first rewrite of this history. Although the truth in such matters is always nuanced, it should be straightforward to identify the two main warring parties at the outset. One is the internationally recognized government with a short but remarkably liberalizing record. Its multiethnic armed forces have suffered a massive surprise attack by the other side, an ethnically-exclusive militia commanded by the country's old guard, kicked out of office just two and a half years ago, deeply unloved after oppressing the people for 27 years, but holding on to some of its grip on the military.

Such boring basics, however, had no place within the dominant framing of the conflict as tribal savagery on the dark continent. Playing on this 'single story about Africa' enabled a well-connected clique to pass off its violent quest to return to power as a persecuted minority facing a choice between killing and getting killed. Skillful propagandists laid it on thick. Activist university professors gave intellectual cover. Sensation-hungry correspondents lapped it up. News directors and editors made no retractions when proved wrong.

For example, important news outlets have yet to own up to spreading the fake news that, in the foremost church of Ethiopian Orthodox Christianity, 800 worshippers were cornered, dragged out, gunned down and eaten by hyenas. One section in this book looks at who invented this incendiary lie, and at the various investigations into what really took place in the holy city of Axum. This is followed up in the annex "Going undercover to interview Cara Anna from Associated Press", a jaw-dropping and not unamusing piece in the genre of swindling the swindler, which can be read as a dessert at the end or as an appetizer at the beginning.

False reports and sloppy analysis soon translated into open support for the rulers-turned-rebels, infecting Western governments. This was infuriating, but also heartbreaking, because most Ethiopians, and certainly myself as a long-time friend of Ethiopia, think of these prosperous democracies as the model of society to strive for. How could the liberal world order betray us so badly in our hour of need? Answering this became my obsession, and eventually turned into this book.

Though most of the readership will have a special interest in Ethiopian affairs, the target audience is much wider. This is why no particular foreknowledge is required.

The context will be provided. This is for anyone concerned with international relations, diplomacy, development, media dynamics, the misuse of academia, career opportunism, the misrepresentation of Africa, and much more to do with contemporary society.

This had to be a whole book. For sure, a short article has greater reach. But persuading the neutrals, let alone the skeptics, that Ethiopia was gotten dead wrong was only possible by addressing every half-truth and falsehood repeated enough times to become truisms: ethnic animosity, hate speech, mass arrests, shutdown of public services as collective punishment, weaponized rape, humanitarian siege, deliberate starvation, even genocide. Complicating matters further, I was up against sources so authoritative that, as much as a year into the war, I would believe them myself on pure instinct. Gradually, however, I found myself scrutinizing their footnotes and methodological appendices, appalled at their anonymous witnesses and righteous verbiage substituting for forensics and standards of proof.

Throughout the war, these multiple renowned voices amplified the key justification for an irregular army, namely that, if the official army were to prevail, the Tigrayan people would be exterminated. Instead, Ethiopian military victory was what enabled peace. This ought to provoke some soul-searching. There seems to have been a bit of that in the realm of diplomacy. But in the media landscape, the narrative has barely changed. Meanwhile, international organizations, for all their do-gooder mission statements, still contribute to cementing enmities and hindering reconciliation among Ethiopians. This refusal to learn follows a pattern of fatal mispredictions being instantly forgotten and accurate predictions (or timely warnings) being afforded no recognition. It is high time to dig into who said what would happen, and then compare it to what did happen, so as to revise our model of reality accordingly.

This goes for my own mispredictions too, which were not about the actual war, but about global reactions to it. It sent me on a personal journey of questioning my worldview, as will be portrayed along the way. Spoiler alert: it has *not* pushed me into the arms of the regimes of China and Russia, but it has taught me some profound lessons about the nastiness and pervasiveness of the Western moral-superiority complex.

A preliminary version of *Getting Ethiopia Dead Wrong* was uploaded to my Substack account on September 3, 2023. You may find it at rsonderriis.substack.com. It is about two thirds the length of this book, and will remain available for free. It was well received, including by some Western diplomats who wrote to me that it had changed their perspective. By then, however, something loomed larger than rewriting recent history: a new war.

The central topic here is the 2020-2022 insurgency of the Tigray People's Liberation Front (TPLF). This covers the TPLF's alliance with the Oromo Liberation Army

(OLA). It also goes into the support for the federal government coming from Eritrea and from the volunteer Amhara militia known as Fano. However, while Ethiopian-Eritrean relations soured during 2023, Fano launched a full-scale insurgency in Amhara Region in April 2023, which rages till this day, deep into 2024.

My first online publication barely mentioned this. I was dismayed that blood was being shed between sides who had just pulled together to save Ethiopia from the onslaught of the TPLF. Whatever stand I took would draw the ire of a major share of my readers, adding to the disunity. Pressed on this issue in an interview, I cravenly responded that I was “not comfortable talking about it at this point”. Well, it is time to put aside my discomfort and speak out. And it is highly relevant as follow-up to the TPLF’s war, because Fano is borrowing leaf after leaf from the TPLF’s playbook. Therefore, the hostilities between the government and Fano shall be addressed throughout the various sections, and especially in the new ending titled “Part 5: Do not get the next war wrong too”.

Each ethnonationalist rebel group in Ethiopia is unique in its history and ideology, but all of them rile up their base and appeal to outsiders with an overblown sense of victimhood, including the obligatory social-media genocide hashtag. They make it all about ethnicity, so as to distract from the real issue of legitimacy to rule a diverse country. The TPLF has played this game better than anyone, thanks to its extensive government experience and network in places like Washington DC, Brussels and the UN system. But the Fano camp has also notched up some notorious wins, not on the battlefield, but in the fight for the sympathy of those international arbiters of right and wrong.

Smooth-talking to wannabe humanitarians from rich countries has long been big business in Africa. It should come as no surprise that this art form has been perfected in Ethiopia too. Thus, in English, they speak of human rights and freedom of expression. But in their own language they monger fear, hate and war, as they recruit and fundraise for the violent pursuit of power, with media-savvy diaspora activists leading the propaganda war and drawing in Westerners on their side. As the death toll mounts, extremists are empowered and moderates are cowed, if not killed. It is high time we see through this and stand in solidarity with the majority of peace-loving Ethiopians.

Getting it wrong on Ethiopian affairs ranges from prejudice and honest mistake to reckless incompetence and elaborate deception. The pantheon of villains featured here have yet to be held to account. May this book be a step towards that. At the very least, it will help set the historical record straight.

Rasmus Sonderriis, August 2024.

Note to reader

The footnotes do not usually indicate the URL (internet address) of the source material, because URLs tend to expire. The exception is links to certain videos, as well as to online texts that have since been deleted, but can be dug up using the Wayback Machine, an internet archive. It is easy to google most of the content referred to, as well as relevant news pieces from the dates mentioned.

This is a digital copy full of links to whatever has informed or inspired my analysis, though some of the links may no longer work. The pdf file is available at: www.zaptc.com/gedw-with-links.pdf. You are welcome to share this link.

While there will always be more rewrites of history, we might be stuck with the name: *the Tigray War*. This rankles with many Ethiopians. Yes, it did begin and it did end in Tigray, but in the neighboring regions of Afar and Amhara, the fighting went on for longer and was no less deadly and destructive. Then again, a name like “the TPLF’s war” is unlikely to catch on. In this book, it is mostly referred to as just “the war”.

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E T H I O P I A

INTRODUCTION

Acute genocide alert

“There is no military solution,” Western diplomacy [droned](#) on.¹ But a military solution was exactly what Ethiopia sought when, in October 2022, its army pushed back into Tigray, the northern region where an insurrection had begun and expanded out from, some two years and countless lives earlier. Half-way into the fratricidal war, the rebels had even closed in on the capital city and were hailed in the world press as the imminent victors. Now Ethiopians became cautiously optimistic that the federal government would finally prevail with a prospect of stability.

However, across the world, this sigh of relief was drowned out by alarm bells ringing.

UN Chief António Guterres [said](#) on October 17 that the war was “spiraling out of control”. A senior Africa expert with an illustrious [resume](#),² Cameron Hudson, [speculated](#) out loud that the hundreds of thousands of people in the newly taken Tigrayan city of Shire might be about to be put to death.³ A tale of kill quotas with [limbs and skulls](#) on display [graced](#) newspaper columns.⁴ Do-gooders [cried out](#) for foreign intervention.⁵

¹ This refrain was uttered in, for instance, the “Joint Statement on Resumption of Hostilities in Northern Ethiopia” signed on October 12, 2022, by the governments of Australia, Denmark, Germany, the United Kingdom and the United States.

² The Center for Strategic & International Studies, CSIS, presents him thus: “Cameron Hudson is an analyst and consultant on African peace, security, and governance issues. (...) He started his government career as an intelligence analyst in the Africa Directorate at the Central Intelligence Agency. He has also worked in democracy and governance with the United Nations, the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe, and the International Organization on Migration. His commentary on Africa issues has been featured by, among other outlets, the BBC, Al Jazeera, the New York Times, the Wall Street Journal, Foreign Policy, Voice of America, and National Public Radio.”

³ Cameron Hudson’s words in direct reference to the taking of Shire were: “We really don’t know what the fate of these hundreds of thousands of people is. Are they forcibly evicted? Will they be killed? Are they ethnically cleansed from this area?”

⁴ Chicago Tribune on October 20, 2022, later reproduced in other newspapers: “The world’s worst war that you aren’t watching is in Ethiopia”, by Elizabeth Shackelford. It says: “Sources in the region claim that Ethiopian and Eritrean forces (their allies) have each been ordered to kill three Tigrayans, including the elderly and children, and that the limbs and skulls of the victims are on display. These stories are uncorroborated given the lack of humanitarian and media access to the region. But given Ethiopia’s language and actions to date, as well as the death toll and atrocities already committed, there is little reason not to take them seriously.”

⁵ For instance, Dr. Ewelina U. Ochab, a Polish-British lawyer, who is said to have produced over 30 human-rights reports for the UN, writes in Forbes on October 25, 2022: “As the window to prevent genocide in Tigray is closing, States, individually and/or jointly with others, must act in accordance with their duty to prevent genocide (in Article II of the Convention on

By now, global audiences had been primed for the slaughter of the six million or so inhabitants of Tigray. A natural authority on this subject, The Holocaust Museum, weighed in on October 25, announcing a “heightened risk of genocide”.⁶

This echoed rebel leader Debretsion Gebremichael, who, the same day, delivered a doom-laden speech to his comrades: “Their plan is not to administer or enforce the law on us. (...) It is to wipe the people of Tigray off the face of the earth. (...) The only option we have, so that we may not be annihilated, is to fully resist.”⁷ His chief general, Tsadkan Gebretensae, at the behest of the American Heritage Foundation, had just said: “Their desire is not only to dominate and control Tigray, but to exterminate the population.”⁸



On a calmer note, The Ethiopian Government Communication Service released a statement about the latest advances of the Ethiopian National Defense Force (ENDF), and how this would restore humanitarian aid and services.

the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide). This means, as explained by the International Court of Justice, ‘to employ all means reasonably available to them, so as to prevent genocide so far as possible.’ Inaction in face of clear warnings of the serious risk of genocide cannot be justified anymore.”

⁶ The American Holocaust Museum’s press release on October 25, 2022 is headlined: “Museum Warns of Heightened Risk of Genocide, Mass Atrocities in Ethiopia”. It says, for instance that: “(...) close to half a million people are reported to have been murdered or died as a result of forced starvation”. This claim became widespread, and will be looked into later in this book.

⁷ With a voiceover translation from Tigrinya into Amharic:
www.youtube.com/watch?v=HkbTzIIA77c

⁸ www.youtube.com/watch?v=7ERb81IdjAQ&t=15m00s.



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FDRE Government Communication Service

Statement on the Resumption of Humanitarian aid and Services

In recent days, the ENDF has taken control of some urban areas in the Tigray Region. As the statement released by the GCS on October 16 indicated, the ENDF will endeavor to avoid fighting in urban areas.

The maximum care the ENDF has taken thus far has succeeded in protecting civilians from harm. The ENDF has taken control of the towns of Shire, Alamata, and Korem without fighting in urban areas.

The ENDF has averted the grim scenario some have predicted by echoing TPLF’s propaganda. The Government of Ethiopia is carrying out the necessary preparations and will coordinate with the relevant humanitarian agencies to provide humanitarian aid through these areas that have come under the control of the ENDF, including via the Shire Airport.

The Government, in coordination with humanitarian operators is making preparations to expand the routes through which humanitarian assistance could be transported. A concerted effort is underway to open the North Gondar route to Shire as well as the Kombolcha-Dessie-Woldiya-Kobo- Alamata route.

These preparations will also include technical assessments and some of the groundwork needed to restore services to the conflict-affected areas.

October 18, 2022

Addis Ababa

Government Communication Service

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FDRE Government Communication Service

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These reassurances were given not a flicker of attention in international media. Their preferred Ethiopian source was Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus,⁹ the Director-General of the World Health Organization (WHO). He had often anguished about the fate of his relatives in Tigray, and on October 19, he warned that there was a “very

⁹ He is usually referred to internationally as ‘Tedros Ghebreyesus’, whereas the Ethiopian naming convention would prefer ‘Tedros Adhanom’ or just ‘Tedros’.

narrow window now to prevent genocide”.¹⁰ On October 30, he [tweeted](#) about “Ethiopian soldiers torching an entire town in Tigray”,¹¹ illustrated with a shaky video. A frame-by-frame examination showed up nothing more than a bonfire at a safe distance from a house. Nonetheless, when Dr. Tedros speaks, the world listens.

World’s doctor or local warlord?

Notwithstanding criticism over his handling of the Covid pandemic, Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus has built an image in the West as a [donor darling](#).¹² His initial [hiccup](#) of appointing Robert Mugabe as a WHO Goodwill Ambassador is long forgotten, as is how he picked a [fight](#) with Taiwan¹³ to [ingratiate](#) himself with [Beijing](#).¹⁴ Since the war began in Ethiopia in November 2020, he has blended in among liberal democrats and accrued a shining halo, as he professes that “[peace](#) is the only solution”, [flashes](#) Greta Thunberg’s book,¹⁵ and spends MLK Day “[reflecting](#) on the interconnections between love, trust, peace and justice”.¹⁶ He has been showered with accolades, from an [honorary degree](#) at the University of Edinburgh to the \$50,000 Thomas Francis Jr. [Medal](#) in the USA. Dr. Tedros is not a medical doctor, but holds a PhD in Community Health, so The New York Times [calls](#) him “the world’s doctor”, portraying him as a stoic victim who towers above the dysfunctional politics of his country of origin.¹⁷

But there he became [seen](#) as a chief instigator of the war, whose own children go to Western universities, while he sends the young in Tigray to kill and die for him and his clique. His job description of caring for global health is considered a mere smokescreen for his real vocation as a local warlord. Even his most innocent-sounding [platitudes](#)¹⁸ are read as coded messages to egg on the bloodshed.

¹⁰ Quoted, for instance, on the Reuters website on October 19, 2022.

¹¹ Dr. Tedros’s full tweet on October 30, 2022, says: “Ethiopian soldiers torching an entire town in #Tigray. Eritrean soldiers too are massacring civilians, raping and looting in the areas they invaded. The international community should take action before it’s too late.”

¹² For instance, at the height of the war in Ethiopia, in 2022, he was lauded in person by former US President Bill Clinton. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IA3q4I8vXgk>

¹³ He accused Taiwanese leaders of being behind racist personal attacks against him, but showed no evidence.

¹⁴ During the outbreak of the Covid-19 Pandemic, Dr. Tedros was widely criticized for his nearness to the Chinese Communist Party, though, as we shall see later, this would end abruptly when China defended Ethiopia’s central government against the TPLF in the UN Security Council.

¹⁵ <https://twitter.com/DrTedros/status/1632067221009858562>

¹⁶ Dr. Tedros’s full tweet on January 16, 2023, says: “On #MLKDay day I’m reflecting on the interconnections between love, trust, peace and justice — and how health equity and #HealthForAll is fundamental to all four ideals.”

¹⁷ The New York Times on April 24, 2021: “The Anguish of the World’s Doctor”, by Nicholas Kristof.

¹⁸ For instance, a tweet by Dr. Tedros on June 18, 2022, reads: “Tolerance. Kindness. Compassion. Peace. Love. Say #NoToHate speech.”



Tedros Adhanom Ghe...  · 12 Jul 21 
No comment.



 779  1,274  2,886 

*Around the globe, many interpreted this cryptic Tedros tweet as an appeal for compassion. But in Ethiopia, it was heard as a cry for war. It came out on the exact same day that the WHO Director-General's ethnically-exclusive party launched what was to become a march on the capital with the [declared aim](#) of overthrowing the multiethnic government.¹⁹ The offensive was codenamed: **Operation Mothers of Tigray**.*

These [contrasting](#) views of the same man illustrate the theme of this book, which is the even wider gap in the understanding of the war. The fact that Ethiopians have known Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus much longer and better than Westerners also foreshadows a broader point.

Dr. Tedros hails from the inner circle of Ethiopia's dictatorial old guard, the Tigray People's Liberation Front, TPLF. From 1991 to 2018, this highly disciplined party, with

¹⁹ For instance, a tweet 15 days later, on July 27, 2021, by rebel leader Getachew Reda reads: "In the meantime, our forces are advancing in every direction and no one is going to stop them, not even rain. #Ethiopia needs a new political dispensation that has the courage to tell the #AbiyAhmed & #AgegnehuTeshagers of the world that they are cancers to be removed @ all costs;".

Marxist-Leninist-Stalinist roots,²⁰ ran the country's military, dominated its governance and held sway in its economy, despite Tigrayans making up only about 6% of the population. Many an Africa reporter has jumped to the conclusion that those 27 years of authoritarian rule by Tigrayan elites drove Ethiopians into genocidal rage against the entire Tigrayan people.

Identity politics is a big deal in Ethiopia, as it is in many countries. A picture-perfect of interethnic and interreligious harmony presents itself in the day-to-day of neighborliness, business, friendship, even in marriage and kinship. But chauvinism is a powerful political tool. Anti-Tigrayan revanchism is one of many extremist minority currents. However, as will be explained, it was far from the driving force, let alone the root cause, of this war.

Diverging from the single story about Africa

The foreign correspondent struggles to convey a context unfamiliar to the audience in brief dispatches. It saves words to build upon the widely-known elements of “the single story about Africa” that the Nigerian author Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie has warned against. There is also a huge cultural meme on Ethiopia and man-made famine that is easy to tap into. And parallels to the Rwandan genocide are much catchier than explaining the complexities of Ethiopian affairs.

However lightly sourced, a quick fix of horror is intensely emotional. This book also aims to be moving, but on the basis of patient insight. Part 1 goes through the predictions and mispredictions that revealed so much about correct and incorrect models of Ethiopian reality. Part 2 examines the widely-overlooked history that led to the conflict. Then Part 3 reveals some eye-popping contrasts between the claims and the evidence, between the high repute of the communication channels and the lowliness of the defamation. Part 4 analyzes the incentives behind getting Ethiopia dead wrong. Finally, Part 5 warns against getting the next ethnonationalist insurgency war wrong too. Without denying, trivializing, let alone justifying, any of the crimes that were indeed committed on both sides in the course of this brutal war, the conclusion is as scandalous as this: The media-borne narrative that Ethiopia's motivation was to commit genocide was concocted to confer legitimacy on the violent pursuit of power.

This was always obvious to the majority of Ethiopians, and to foreigners like me, with longstanding immersion into Ethiopian society. What we said all along was to be confirmed, namely that the federal forces' victory was not a recipe for genocide, but the only realistic path to peace. By standing in its way, Western powers caused

²⁰ See, for instance “Ideology and Power in TPLF's Ethiopia” by Tefera Negash Gebregziabher, *African Affairs*, Volume 118, Issue 472, July 2019, pages 463–484.

immense damage to Ethiopia and to democracy worldwide, as [pointed](#) out by the largely ignored scholars who did get Ethiopia [right](#).²¹

Failure to Stand for Democracy in Ethiopia Has Weakened Democracy Worldwide



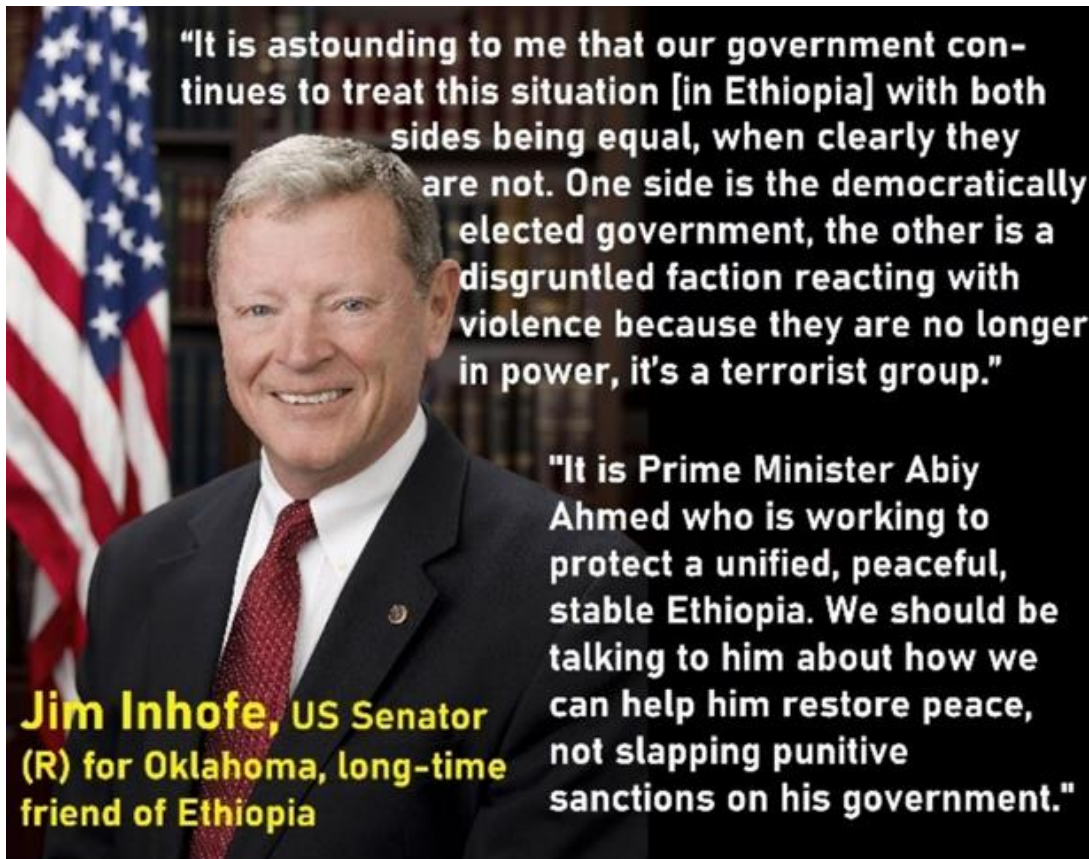
I [tried](#) to get the [message](#) through as well,²² although newspapers that had previously published me and recognized my Ethiopia expertise could not let me write for them on this war. They would have come under accusations of propagandizing for the most heinous acts, without the background and confidence to argue back. Thus, however right I was on Ethiopia, I totally misjudged the West. I assumed that my own cultural realm, the world’s strongest democracies and our free press, would, by and large, have the back of an elected government against an authoritarian aggressor. This overestimated the power of context analysis and underestimated the single story about Africa.

The facts are appalling enough without exaggeration. Genocide became an activist mantra and a media buzzword, but failed to become an official designation. And, in fairness, the most knowledgeable diplomats privately shared our perspective and worked behind the scenes to soften the betrayal of Ethiopia. After all, TPLF supporters also became [angry](#) with the international community. Sending arms to the rebels was

²¹ For instance: The Institute for Peace and Diplomacy on November 3, 2021: “Failure to Stand for Democracy in Ethiopia Has Weakened Democracy Worldwide”, by Ann Fitz-Gerald and Hugh Segal; and Foreign Policy on December 28, 2021: “To End Ethiopia’s War, Biden Needs to Correct Course”, by Bronwyn Bruton and Ann Fitz-Gerald.

²² On November 11, 2021, my first reportage on the war from Addis Ababa was published in Danish in POV International, headlined “Godhedsimperialisme mod Etiopien”, and self-published in English as “Do-Gooders Doing Bad”. The latter version was then re-published by several Ethiopian online magazines. And on March 22, 2022, I held a ten-minute speech, later titled “We have stabbed a fellow democracy in the back”, as part of a panel with the Danish ambassador to Ethiopia, an EU representative and another journalist, at an event organized by the Danish Society of Engineers, IDA. My subsequent translation of this talk from Danish into English was also re-published on several websites.

something proposed only by the [craziest](#) of crazy journalists.²³ And yet, the politician braving the cries of “genocide denial” was a rarity.



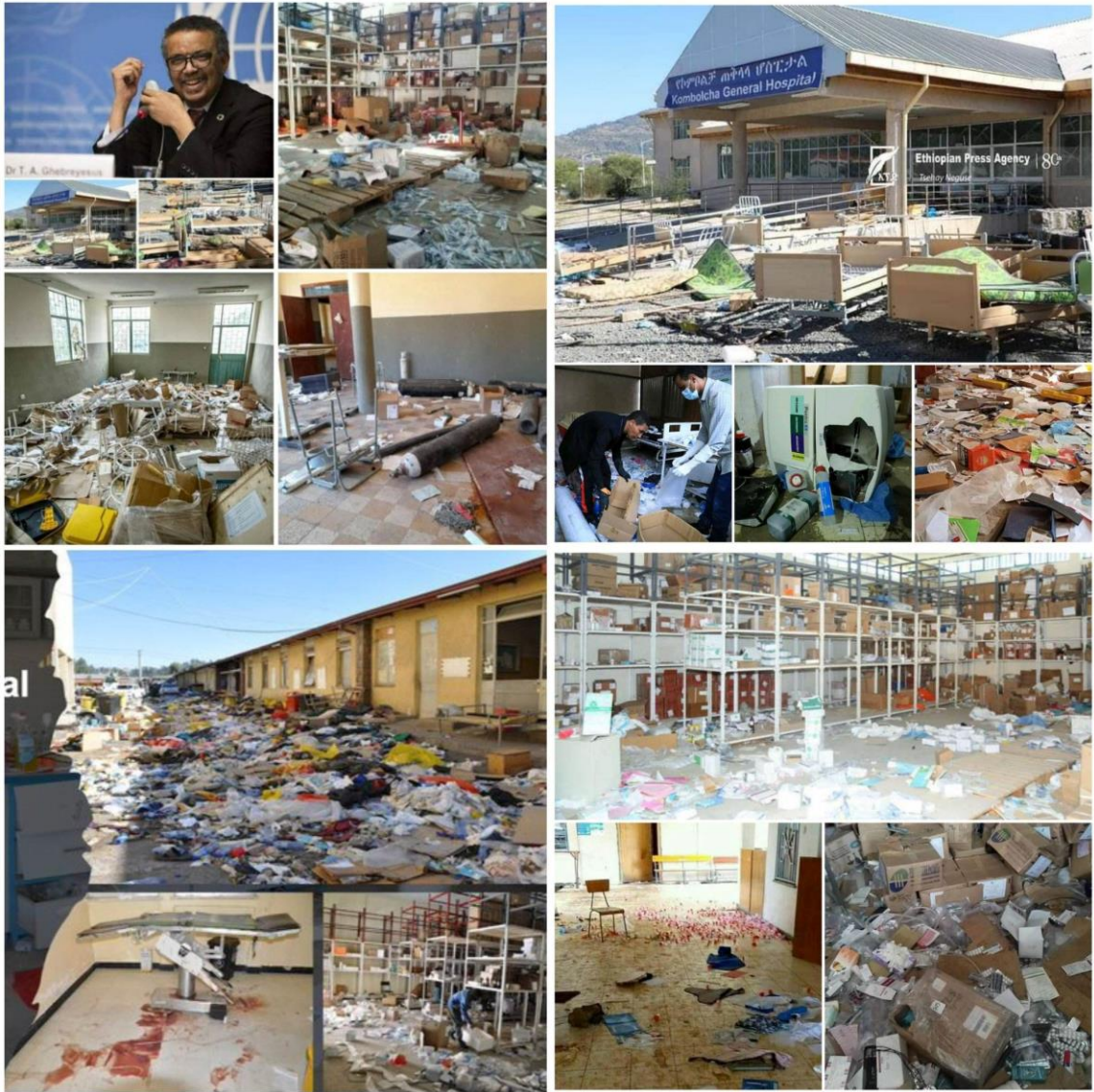
Spoken on the US Senate floor on May 27, 2021 by one of the most conservative members of Congress. Though there has been no clearcut left-right divide on Ethiopia policy, the accusations of genocide have mostly come from center-left people, who often staff media corporations and international organizations.

A paralyzing fear of standing with Ethiopia was instilled by big media trumpeting the stereotype of savagery on the dark continent. Supposedly serious organizations favored anonymous witnesses over forensics. Body-snatching hyenas were repeatedly [conjured](#) up. Into this sensationalist slipstream jumped a string of noble-cause-hunting public figures with vivid ideas but little knowledge about Ethiopia. Many of them may have been well-meaning and deceived by disinformation that played skillfully to their prejudices. I have a naïve dream that just one of them will be moved by this book to apologize.

²³ His name is Michael Rubin. On the American Enterprise Institute’s website on September 9, 2022, he published the article: “The US should support the Tigray Defense Forces”. It argues that the US should send small arms, ammunition and counter-drone technology to the TPLF. His analytical mishits, and the lack of accountability for these, will be discussed in Part 3.

When Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie spoke about *the danger* of the single story about Africa, I assumed it was the danger to non-Africans of not understanding Africa. Today I realize that, to the Africans who are not understood, this danger is deadly. Luminaries in rich and powerful countries poured obscene amounts of fuel on the fire. Their demonization of Ethiopians was less about Ethiopians than about self-projection. They pontificated about peace, while passing off the alternative to war as extermination. They waxed indignant about hate speech, while saying the enemy is a genocidal rapist. They preached international humanitarian law, while conniving with the recruitment of child soldiers. They fancied themselves as championing minority grievances, while siding with extremist ethnonationalism. They radiated charitable zeal, while pushing for the misery of some of the poorest people in the world. There are an inordinate number of such opinion formers who abused their establishment position and moral authority for a rotten cause, even more than the many who *will* be named and shamed here. Above all, lazy journalists took their cues from a handful of openly pro-TPLF academics and UN high-ups, who were elevated to neutral experts, even to moral arbiters, and whose disgrace, nothing less, this book aspires to bring about.

Despite the heartbreaking sacrifices borne by her children, strong and single-minded Mother Ethiopia survived this attempt at her life. She has become warier, but remains friendly. It is high time to respect her and make amends. One way is to give aid. Even better are trade and investment. But most important is understanding. So as not to do it again.



An Ethiopian photo collage associates Tedros Adhanom with the TPLF troops' destruction of health facilities in Amhara and Afar Region. The WHO Director-General would only ever talk about violations of international humanitarian law in the Tigray Region.

Timeline for beginners

May 28, 1991: A guerrilla army from the small northern region of Tigray, the Tigray People's Liberation Front (TPLF), enters the capital Addis Ababa, together with various allies, toppling the communist *Derg* regime and being celebrated as liberators.

The TPLF, led by Meles Zenawi, thus becomes the most powerful political party in Ethiopia for the next 27 years. It dominates the interethnic ruling coalition set up under the name of Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Democratic Front, EPRDF, and it completely controls the military.

April 27, 1993: Eritrea declares independence from Ethiopia. Since Eritrean secessionists have been allies of the TPLF in the war against the Derg, this is recognized by TPLF-led Ethiopia and hence by the whole world.

August 21, 1995: A new Constitution of the Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia enters into effect. It redraws the political map into what becomes known as 'ethnic federalism'. It is said to grant more self-determination to the various ethnicities. In practice, however, Meles Zenawi tolerates little dissent. His politics is authoritarian, and his economics is a mix of statism and crony capitalism. This is euphemistically called "the developmental state".

May 6, 1998 to June 18, 2000: A major war over a minor border dispute is fought between Eritrea and Ethiopia. Ethiopian citizens of Eritrean origin have all their belongings seized and are deported to Eritrea. The Algiers Agreement, signed on December 12, 2000, provides for international arbitration to demarcate the border. However, when its ruling on April 13, 2002, favors Eritrea, Ethiopia under Meles Zenawi refuses to implement it.

May 15, 2005: This is a fateful election day, in which a relatively free and fair campaign descends into sham vote counting and a fierce crackdown on the opposition. It sets the stage for elections in 2010 and 2015 becoming farcical.

August 20, 2012: Prime Minister Meles Zenawi dies at age 57 from unknown causes. The EPRDF replaces him with Hailemariam Desalegn, but he is largely considered a weak puppet of the powers-that-be in the TPLF-controlled military.

In the absence of change, popular protests expand across the country. The oppression worsens, but splits begin to appear within the EPRDF.

February 15, 2018: Prime Minister Haile Mariam Desalegn resigns over widespread civil unrest. The process within the EPRDF to choose a successor sees TPLF hardliners isolated against forces more open to democratization.

April 2, 2018: Abiy Ahmed Ali becomes Prime Minister of Ethiopia. He is a long-time EPRDF top official, but starts by apologizing to the people for the abuses of the past.

A period of liberalization known as *Abiymania* follows. Peace with Eritrea becomes official, when the new Ethiopian leader agrees to implement the Algiers Agreement.

The TPLF retreats to its stronghold in Tigray, where it controls the regional government. A power struggle ensues, especially over the military. The TPLF prevents Ethiopian troops from vacating Eritrean land, though this is not public knowledge until early 2020. Saber-rattling from Tigray is compounded by ethnic pogroms and other violence across the country. This dampens the new-found optimism, despite Abiy Ahmed winning the Nobel Peace Prize in 2019.

December 1, 2019: The still-ruling EPRDF is dissolved and replaced by the Prosperity Party. Although this is essentially the old EPRDF minus the TPLF, it projects an image of moving away from statist economics and authoritarianism towards free markets and democracy.

September 9, 2020: Despite the general election scheduled for 2020 being postponed due to the Covid pandemic, the TPLF goes ahead to elect new members of parliament for the Tigrayan constituencies, winning all contested seats. The election authority declares the poll to be null and void. The TPLF, in turn, says the federal government is now unconstitutional and illegitimate.

Night between November 3 and 4, 2020: The so-called Tigray War begins, when five bases of the federal Ethiopian National Defense Force (ENDF) in Tigray come under fire. Thousands are killed and captured. The attackers are soldiers loyal to the TPLF acting from inside and outside the bases. They raid most of Ethiopia's heavy weapons. In the following weeks, the TPLF also fires missiles north into Eritrea and south into Amhara Region.

Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed announces a "law-enforcement operation" for the ENDF to take control of Tigray and punish the leaders of the rebellion. Moreover, Eritrean Defence Forces invade Tigray from the north. Soldiers from the Amhara Regional Special Forces and the Amhara Fano militia also join in on the side of the ENDF, entering Tigray from the south.

November 28, 2020: The ENDF takes Mekelle, capital of Tigray. The new provisional regional government is composed of Tigrayans, who are not loyal to the TPLF. Over the following seven months, well-prepared guerilla warfare continues across Tigray. Many war crimes are reported.

June 28, 2021: In the face of massive losses, the ENDF and its allies withdraw, leaving Tigray back in the hands of the TPLF (except territory disputed with Amhara Region). The federal government declares a ceasefire. This is rejected by the TPLF, alleging that Tigray is still under siege.

July 12, 2021: Launching 'Operation Mothers of Tigray', the TPLF invades the regions of Afar and Amhara. More war crimes are reported. The TPLF begins its march on Addis Ababa.

Unlike in 1991, this time the TPLF can expect resistance from the non-Tigrayan population. To strengthen its position, in August 2021, the TPLF formalizes an alliance with the Oromo Liberation Army, which is already operating in Addis Ababa's rural hinterland. By early November 2021, much of the world press is confidently announcing the imminent fall of Addis Ababa and the Abiy Ahmed-led government. By late November, TPLF troops get within 200 km of the seat of national power. However, this is the closest they will ever get.

December 2021: After a broad mobilization of volunteers and a counteroffensive that involves

combat drones and sees Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed in military fatigues at the front, the TPLF is evicted from Amhara Region. Its forays into Afar Region carry on.

August 24, 2022: The TPLF invades Amhara Region for a second time, but soon finds itself on the backfoot inside Tigray against both Ethiopian and Eritrean soldiers.

November 2, 2022: After several cities in Tigray have fallen to the ENDF, the war seems to be over. However, TPLF leaders and prestigious international voices warn that next up is a genocide, in some versions nothing less than the extermination of the six million or so inhabitants of Tigray. Instead, a peace agreement between the federal government and the TPLF is signed in Pretoria, South Africa.

PART 1: PREDICTIONS AND MISPREDICTIONS ABOUT THE WAR

A death wish foretold

“Why Ethiopia is spiraling out of control” was [explained](#) by the English academic Alex de Waal for the BBC and [other media](#) in [gloomy](#) terms, when war broke out in the northern region of Tigray in November 2020.²⁴ In the magazine Foreign Policy, he [scolded](#) the Trump Administration for “indulging” the Ethiopian leadership, and [pleaded](#) for Biden, the incoming president-elect, to take a tougher line. During the two terrible years that followed, Alex de Waal became perhaps the most prominent Ethiopia pundit worldwide. He was a fixture in media big and small by November 2021, when the advances of the insurgent Tigray People’s Liberation Front (TPLF) caused him to wax lyrical, *literally*, as we shall soon see. However, by October 14, 2022, with all the fighting back where it began, he was again [warning](#) of “another genocidal onslaught on Tigray”.²⁵ His [conclusion](#) was that, whatever the outcome of soldiery and diplomacy, Ethiopia was now doomed to become a failed state.²⁶ He elaborated in a live interview two days later²⁷, [saying](#) that it had “essentially collapsed already”, while [dismissing](#) the African-Union-led peace negotiations as “a fraud” and “a sham”. This is when he finally [admitted](#) that the rebel army was being overrun.²⁸ Yet he insisted that morale remained high, presaging a bloody showdown: “The Tigrayans have every motive to fight to the death”, he [wrote](#).

And then, it turned out, they had more motive to live! Doomsday in Tigray was called off with the polar opposite of fighting to the death against a failed state, namely yielding to state monopoly on violence. Because this was the gist of the “[Agreement](#) for Lasting Peace through a Permanent Cessation of Hostilities between the Government of the Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia and the Tigray People’s

²⁴ Some articles penned by Alex de Waal at the beginning of the war are, on the BBC website on November 15, 2020: “Tigray crisis viewpoint: Why Ethiopia is spiraling out of control”; Foreign Policy on November 18: “Violence in Ethiopia doesn’t stay there”, in which he characterizes the conflict as “intractable”; and The Guardian on November 27: “As Ethiopia’s army declares daily victories, its people are being plunged into violence”.

²⁵ Responsible Statecraft on October 14, 2022: “Tigray faces a new onslaught by Eritrean-Ethiopian forces – the EU and US must act urgently in support of Kenyatta to avert a possible genocide”, by Alex de Waal.

²⁶ The exact phrasing was: “Whatever happens, the pillars of the Ethiopian state — security institutions, finance, and an elite bargain — have crumbled. State collapse is a matter of time.”

²⁷ Tghat interview titled: “Alex de Waal on the war on Tigray - AU-led process is a sham; Ethiopia collapsed; Eritrea in charge”. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=yy262KmVSFO>

²⁸ In the aforementioned article in Responsible Statecraft on October 14, 2022, Alex de Waal writes: “After 50 days of day-and-night fighting, the joint Eritrean-Ethiopian federal offensive has ground down Tigrayan defenses to a point of collapse.”

Liberation Front”, announced in Pretoria, South Africa, on November 2, 2022, mediated by the African Union. The most salient provision was the disarmament and demobilization of the TPLF’s irregular army. This had long been Ethiopia’s declared war aim, but it had never been taken up by the international community, which saw it as a non-starter for negotiations. It was clearly enabled solely by the Ethiopian state prevailing militarily.

All the nations of the world rushed to praise this “African solution to an African problem”. The WHO Director-General, Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus, uncharacteristically, kept quiet. The day after, he put a brave face on it by retweeting a congratulatory message from the EU foreign-affairs supremo, Josep Borrell.

How could he not? Mr. Borrell had consistently backed Dr. Tedros’s views on the war. Only three weeks before, Mr. Borrell had even been acclaimed by the TPLF’s top negotiator and spokesperson, Getachew Reda.²⁹ Appearances may deceive, as Dr. Tedros had been tweeting out mind-numbing pacifism and Getachew Reda a lot of military bravado.³⁰ But these two have long been on the same team, and kept professing brotherhood and mutual admiration during the war too.³¹ It goes back to 2012-2016, when they served together in the cabinet of Ethiopia’s central government. Both were renowned as hardliners against the pro-democracy protests.

²⁹ Getachew Reda’s tweet on October 12, 2022, says: “Thank God we have people like @JosepBorrellF in international diplomacy”.

³⁰ The New York Times on June 29, 2021, writes: “Getachew Reda, a senior Tigrayan leader, said that Tigray’s forces would not hesitate to enter Eritrea, and even try to advance toward its capital, if that is what it would take to keep Eritrean troops from attacking again. And he claimed that in recent days, Tigrayan forces had killed many Ethiopian troops and militia fighters, and took more prisoners. ‘We want to degrade as many enemy capabilities as possible,’ he said in a telephone interview with The New York Times on Tuesday. ‘We are still in hot pursuit so that enemy forces will not pose a threat to our Tigray in any way.’”

Getachew Reda’s tweet on July 27, 2021, says: “In the meantime, our forces are advancing in every direction and no one is going to stop them, not even rain. #Ethiopia needs a new political dispensation that has the courage to tell the #AbiyAhmed & #AgegnehuTeshagers of the world that they are cancers to be removed @ all costs;”

Getachew Reda’s tweet on October 29, 2021, says: “#Tigray Army military command of has a stern warning to the commanders & pilots of the #EthiopianAirForce actively involved in the killing of innocent children in Tigray: we will hunt you down & bring you to justice & no corner of the world will remain safe to you! #TigrayShallPrevail!”

And Getachew Reda’s tweet on October 2, 2022, says: “AbiyAhmed’s treasonous army has been repeatedly making desperate attempts to take back positions in #NorthWollo that it had lost roughly 37 days ago CV only for it to lose tens of thousands of troops and materiel. Its repeated efforts to make so much as small dent in our defense”.

³¹ Dr. Tedros’s tweet on May 26, 2022, says: “Thank you, my brother, @reda_getachew, for your support”. And Getachew Reda replies four minutes later: “It’s been a singular honor to have known and have worked with you up close, brother.”

Now Alex de Waal entered the fray again from his important BBC platform.³² He rained criticisms on the permanent settlement, calling it a mere truce. He stated candidly: “Tigrayans at home and in the diaspora have greeted the [peace] deal with dismay.” As per his custom, he equated Tigrayans with TPLF supporters.

While Tigrayans in the street expressed relief,³³ they did indeed have cause for dismay too. The TPLF had accepted to lay down arms as a last resort to survive. This showed its leadership never really believed that the enemy, both Eritrea and Ethiopia, had “genocidal intent”, as claimed by Getachew Reda just two days before signing.³⁴ It raised the question: Why were so many sent to die for terms that could have been easily obtained without violence? Some two months earlier, on August 24, 2022, the TPLF had launched a second offensive outside of Tigray, right after rejecting negotiations. Getachew Reda had even penned an opinion piece released on August 22, headlined: “The African Union cannot deliver peace in Tigray”.³⁵

As a face-saving device, humanitarian access was touted as a concession to the TPLF. However, as military strategists know, making life bearable for the locals is key to countering a popular insurgency, which was the TPLF’s remaining card. We shall return to the crucial issue of what caused so much hardship in Tigray, as well as in the neighboring regions. The point here is: humanitarian access was never thought of as a concession by anybody in the Ethiopian camp, where celebrations of the peace agreement were tempered only by distrust of the TPLF’s readiness to comply.

By contrast, angry and bewildered TPLF activists in the diaspora, many of them children of *ancien régime* officials, protested by taking their cars to block a highway in Seattle³⁶ and a bridge in Washington DC.³⁷ Mr. de Waal speculated that “some Tigrayan commanders would rather continue guerrilla war than submit to what they regard as humiliating terms”.³⁸ A month and a half later, Mr. de Waal was still

³² The BBC website on November 3, 2022: “Ethiopia civil war: Tigray truce a triumph for PM Abiy Ahmed”, by Alex de Waal.

³³ E.g. in street interviews on November 3, 2022.
<https://twitter.com/SmartEthiopians/status/1588197362991767552>

³⁴ Getachew Reda’s tweet on Oct 31, 2022, says: “(...) The killings in southern, central, eastern and northwestern Tigray clearly show that the genocidal intent of both regimes is on full display (...)”.

³⁵ The Africa Report on August 22, 2022: “Ethiopia: The African Union cannot deliver peace in Tigray”, by Getachew Reda.

³⁶ Reported, for instance, in The Seattle Medium on November 11, 2022: “Protests Blocked Lanes On I-5 In Seattle”.

³⁷ Reported, for instance, in WUSA9 on November 6, 2022: “Demonstrators shut down I-395 South, 14th Street Bridge in protest of ‘genocide’ in Ethiopian Tigray region”.

³⁸ BBC on November 3, 2022: “Ethiopia civil war: Tigray truce a triumph for PM Abiy Ahmed”, by Alex de Waal.

presented as a neutral expert on the popular [show](#) Majority Report,³⁹ where he essentially portrayed the situation as if the war were still going on.

Getting Ethiopia right

Senior officers on both sides of the war used to study under Professor Ann Fitz-Gerald, currently the Director of the Balsillie School of International Affairs. In 2004, she came to Ethiopia from a [background](#) in NATO to teach security governance and strategic planning. She stayed in this job for 15 years. This made her exceedingly well-versed in Ethiopian politics and military matters, talking to key actors on a daily basis. During the escalation process, she [published](#) specialist articles on the looming [threat](#).⁴⁰ When war broke out in November 2020, she too was [pessimistic](#) about a prompt resolution,⁴¹ but, by late August 2022, on the verge of the federal forces' decisive ascendancy, she [expressed](#) faith that the AU-led peace negotiations could soon succeed.⁴²

A few months earlier, in April 2022, she [presented](#) a [survey](#) titled “The frontline voices: Tigrayans speak on the realities of life under an insurgency regime”. It was based on visits to communities and camps of internally-displaced people (IDPs), interviewing 162 persons both individually and in focus groups. These were mainly civilians who had fled from Tigray into Amhara Region, in addition to a smaller number of forced TPLF recruits who had been taken into safety at a camp in Afar Region.

This treasure trove of heart-breaking as well as heart-warming personal stories led her to the opposite conclusion of Alex de Waal, namely that morale was sinking among the rebels, who were resorting to ever-harsher coercion to conscript their foot soldiers, including denial of food aid and imprisonment of family members. Many interviewees had run away because their name was on an arrest list, or for [finding out](#) about the [fabrication](#) of evidence for war crimes. Shortly after, a Tigrayan doctor, Aregawi Hagos, also escaped, [telling](#) the Ethiopian press about the TPLF's misuse of humanitarian supplies and medicine, while [lamenting](#) that his family back in Tigray would be punished for his saying so.⁴³ The TPLF's increasingly draconian recruitment

³⁹ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=q-WHBriKj9U>

⁴⁰ Examples of Ann Fitz-Gerald's foresighted analysis include Section 4.1 “Ethiopia's Defense Reform Agenda: Progress and Challenges”, as part of the book “Ethiopia in the Wake of Political Reforms”, Tsehai Publishers, December 2020; and the article “Ethiopia's Security Dilemmas” on the website of the Royal United Services Institute (RUSI), July 18, 2019.

⁴¹ On November 19, 2020, Ann Fitz-Gerald writes: “The prospects for peace are dim” in the article “Ethiopia in turmoil” on the RUSI website. She also explains how the new prime minister has been struggling to gain control of the military, providing political context to what the media had jumped to portray as just another tribal war.

⁴² Interviewed live on TRT World Now on August 25, 2022, Ann Fitz-Gerald says: “The time has now come for the international community to insist that both parties really come to the peace table. And really get behind the African Union in its efforts to help facilitate a peaceful resolution.”

⁴³ FANA Broadcasting Corporate on May 3, 2022: “TPLF holds people of Tigray a hostage, uses aid as a political tool: escaped physician”, by Wondesen Aregahegn.

drive, described by Professor Fitz-Gerald's informants, was later [borne out by](#) journalistic [reports](#).⁴⁴

As Getachew Reda [put it](#) in a tweet on November 7, 2022, justifying his acceptance of disarmament to disgruntled hardliners, many of them living in the West: "Our people (...) have suffered beyond what ordinary mortals can endure".

Nobody could dispute the suffering. But throughout the war, Alex de Waal and like-minded analysts pointed to this suffering as the reason why Tigrayans had no choice but to keep fighting. Then, it turned out, they stopped fighting precisely to end the suffering. Clearly, a lot of suffering could have been avoided simply by not fighting in the first place.

Mr. de Waal can say, [as he did](#),⁴⁵ that an impending famine was what subdued the insurgency (a central allegation that will come under the microscope in Part 3). But he had insisted that Tigrayans would fight to the death, because the concession demanded of them was also death. The moment this was proved wrong, it pushed Mr. de Waal's justification for running an irregular army onto much rougher terrain, on which he had consistently avoided treading, namely some [unspecified](#) "political claims",⁴⁶ in other words, the violent pursuit of power, which, as will be demonstrated in Part 2, is what this war was really about. Evidently, resisting extermination of a people comes without any legitimacy requirement whatsoever. But making "political claims" is all about legitimacy, and even more so when backed by the force of arms.

Struggling to accept peace

Martin Plaut is a well-connected former BBC Africa Chief Editor, still featured as a pundit on the [BBC](#) and [elsewhere](#), just as he will reappear throughout this book as a major shaper of the news agenda. He was a pioneer in [predicting](#), as early as July 2021,

⁴⁴ The Guardian on June 20, 2022: "It's death either way: desperate Tigrayans flee starvation and forced conscription", by Lucy Kassa. Reuters on May 16, 2022: "Insight: Some Ethiopians claim forced recruitment by Tigrayan forces", by Giulia Paravicini and Katharine Houreld. It says that: "Reuters conducted a dozen interviews from February to May with residents of Tigray, captured fighters and aid workers that provide a picture of forced recruitment by local officials in several parts of the region. The testimony suggests some Tigrayans, who volunteered in droves earlier in the war, are becoming increasingly reluctant to fight in a conflict that has ground to a stalemate following a ceasefire in March [2022]."

⁴⁵ The Frontier Post on November 17, 2022: "Starvation works", by Alex de Waal, November 2022.

⁴⁶ Alex de Waal's article in The Frontier Post starts: "Starvation works. At the end of the day, famine decided the outcome of the Ethiopian civil war. Two years after the outbreak of hostilities, Ethiopian Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed and Eritrean President Isaias Afewerki forced the Tigrayan leadership *to forsake their political claims* and instead negotiate to save their people from famine." (My italics).

that the rebel army’s march on the capital would be a walk in the park.⁴⁷ On November 3, 2022, the day after the Pretoria Agreement, he was [interviewed](#) by Tigray Media House. He portrayed this latest development as the TPLF leadership reckoning without the people of Tigray, who are “all those that could conceivably fight, [and] went to fight, because they knew the alternative was death, or worse”. Like Alex de Waal, Martin Plaut could not adjust so quickly to Tigrayans rather fancying their chances of living *without* walking into the killing fields. On November 8, 2022, he [tweeted](#) “worth a listen – strong claims”, linking to an anonymous [voice](#) with a southern drawl.⁴⁸ It called the peace deal “the extermination agreement”, suggesting that the TPLF’s negotiators in South Africa had signed under duress. It also claimed that clashes were still going on and could not be stopped. Martin Plaut would continue into 2023 to [toy](#) with the idea that the war was about to rekindle.



Martin Plaut 
@martinplaut



The [#Tigray](#) war may be about to resume.
Eritrean sources say Eritrean senior officers have been told to get ready.
Similar reports from Tigrayan sources. Very worrying

12:50 AM Mar 13, 2023 98.4K Views



Martin Plaut is still a prominent voice in the Western media discourse on Ethiopia. This book will expose him as utterly unscrupulous, which is important, because, as of mid-2024, he is still mongering fear, hate and war.

However, at the time of signing the Pretoria Agreement, the TPLF had exhausted its military means, having to practice politics in more modest ways. On December 26, 2022, a federal-government delegation [travelled](#) to Tigray’s capital, Mekelle, where the TPLF’s number one, Debretsion Gebremichael, [thanked](#) his partner in peace, no longer a genocidal dictator, but “Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed with high regard”.⁴⁹ Not long before, Abiy Ahmed’s [narrowly-missed](#) top target for assassination was Getachew Reda. He, in turn, would [call](#) the prime minister a “child killer” who will “get it in the

⁴⁷ Martin Plaut’s tweet on July 24, 2021 said: “The TDF completed a three-day battle and destroyed divisions of the ENDF in the Kobbo-Weldiya area and also destroyed Presidential Guard forces

‘The balance of forces is now completely in our favor. We are in a position to march into Addis Ababa with no real opposition.’”

⁴⁸ The episode was titled “Battlefield Ethiopia Nov 5th”, from an obscure Youtube channel called “Military and Foreign Affairs Network”.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zio7KEu3bIU>

⁴⁹ Reported, for instance, in Addis Standard on December 27, 2022.

neck”.⁵⁰ An appalling amount of killing and dying later, the two [met](#) for a talk on February 3, 2023, albeit with stern faces, which relaxed into big smiles on April 24, when they shared the stage at a self-congratulatory [peace ceremony](#) in the capital, Addis Ababa. Foreign dignitaries present beamed over this new spirit of reconciliation.

Meanwhile, Ethiopians on both sides rolled their eyes. The TPLF’s [supporters](#) found it hard to stomach the embrace of Abiy, their archvillain. And the TPLF’s detractors had expected the senior rebel leaders to be imprisoned, at least exiled. The old guard’s [continuing](#) dominance of Tigrayan governance, with Getachew Reda [named](#) the interim regional president and Debretsion Gebremichael still heading the TPLF, also means the Tigrayan population stays under the party’s iron rule. Then again, this may be preferable to victor’s justice, which could unite Tigrayans and provoke a smoldering insurgency in Tigray. In terms of political strategy, it is probably wiser to let the TPLF share in responsibility for ruling post-war Tigray. In the course of 2023 and 2024, the heavy burden of practical problems has taken a toll on the TPLF’s unity, with Getachew Reda and Debretsion Gebremichael being at loggerheads.

Tension between the federal government and the TPLF has since waxed and waned. The Pretoria Agreement has not been fully implemented. Among several unresolved issues, one side complains that the TPLF continues to command thousands of well-armed fighters. And the other side points out that there are still camps of hundreds of thousands of Tigrayan IDPs.

And yet, the international consensus today is that the Pretoria Agreement was a vital achievement and needs to be adhered to. Across Ethiopia, this is largely accepted, but tinged with resentment over the perceived indulgence towards the defeated TPLF. Many believe that this was something imposed by the Western powers as a condition for aid and trade, throwing a lifeline to the TPLF. In particular, the TPLF being allowed to survive angered Amhara ethnonationalists. They protested that the TPLF can never be trusted. In the course of 2023, this became one of several factors in a new insurgency, this time in the Amhara Region, waged by Fano, the volunteer militia which fought on the side of the federal government on the frontline against the TPLF. Various section throughout this book, and particularly the final Part 5, shall discuss the ongoing war in Amhara Region.

And yet, Fano’s switch from lukewarm ally to all-out enemy of the constitutional order reflected an assessment that the TPLF had ceased to be a threat. Fano would not have risked going it alone in the middle of the war with the mighty TPLF. Today, as a result of over one year of this new war, which is often framed as being between Fano

⁵⁰ The full text of Getachew Reda’s tweet on July 27, 2021 was: “Not potential players in the future of a country they have put in the brink. Let there be no mistake about two facts: nothing is going to stop our advance against all child-killers; #AbiyAhmed , #Agegnehu & their arch sponsor #Isaias will get it in the neck. #TigrayisPrevailing!”

and the federal government, but is in practice just as much between Fano and the Amhara regional government, the Amhara people have been profoundly weakened. This has contributed to emboldening the TPLF, which has, since April 2024, reappeared as a military force capable of taking on Amhara Region. The TPLF has staged various incursions aimed at gradually retaking land, which became part of Tigray Region after the TPLF took power on the national stage back in 1991, but still has large Amhara populations and fell under Amhara administration during the so-called Tigray War. This territorial dispute poses a threat to the Pretoria Agreement and shall be addressed in Part 3. Meanwhile, the TPLF's ally during the war, the Oromo Liberation Army (OLA), continues to make vast parts of Oromia Region unsafe, [including](#) near the capital Addis Ababa.

“Come in peace, compete in the elections, win with ideas and join our efforts to build this country”, [said](#) Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed at a public meeting in March 2024, referring to mounting ethnonationalist rebellions.⁵¹ Is he sincere?

Well, regardless of the answer to that, the conclusion of this book, to be elaborated upon at the end of the final Part 5, is that, although the persistent militarization of Ethiopian politics has shrunk the democratic space, making the most of what is left of it still holds out the best chance of positive change.

However, in an authoritarian political culture, what people most expect from their ruler is security. Accordingly, it has dented the prime minister's popularity that guerrilla armies are making road travel unsafe. Even if the militias are the real culprits, many ordinary Ethiopians target their dissatisfaction at the government, not necessarily for being in the wrong, perhaps not even for violating human rights in its counterinsurgency methods, but simply for being unable to keep the peace. There is also frustration over the strain of war on the economy, on top of a [series of other controversies](#).⁵² In short, although the hope of building a democracy lives on, the term 'Abiymania' today describes a closed chapter in history, to be revisited in Part 2. Finding one's way around a complex society takes a good rearview mirror.

A remarkable Prediction Prize win

It is fair to judge analysts on the accuracy of their predictions (or their warnings of what will happen absent corrective action). The ability to see what comes next is the hallmark of a good model of reality. Conversely, mispredictions can provide valuable

⁵¹ The Reporter on March 2, 2024: “Mounting casualties in Oromia, Amhara contrast with unconvincing public discussions”, by Ashenafi Endale.

⁵² E.g. over the prime minister being seen to get involved in a schism within the Ethiopian Orthodox Church in Oromia Region in early 2023, police violence on Adwa Victory Day 2023, mosque and house demolitions near Addis Abba, and many bread-and-butter issues, such as inflation and lack of public transport.

lessons, but they do call for revising the model. Just ignoring them is a recipe for even more wrongheaded analysis.

Digging into the past to check for the most detailed foresight, [one analysis](#) stands out: “Ethiopia and Eritrea have a common enemy” in the magazine *Foreign Policy*, authored by the American Horn of Africa specialist, Bronwyn Bruton, as early as July 12, 2018, when the world had just warmed to the fresh face of 41-year-old Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed, installed three months earlier in the wake of years of popular protests. He had wasted no time in breaking with an oppressive past and embarking on liberalizing reforms. The freshly coined word ‘[Abiymania](#)’ was all the rage. There was exuberant [optimism](#). Ms. Bruton begged to differ. I remember reading her piece at the time, finding her insightful, but overly alarmist. Tigray was uncooperative yet stable, unlike some other regions, [where](#) violent ethnic [chauvinism](#) was [displacing](#) millions. The grumpy old warhorses in Tigray looked like a dying breed and the least of Ethiopia’s many [problems](#).

However, as we can and should observe today, Ms. Bruton’s premonition of slowly-escalating tensions between the federal government and the Tigrayan regional government, with potential for full-blown civil war, was eerily prophetic. In making her case, she described the future causes of the war, which were later to be terribly misrepresented by lesser pundits. Her list was topped neither by ethnic animosity nor disputes over regional autonomy. The most immediate concern was that the new civilian authorities in Addis Ababa would be unable to control the army, a risk to peace that is as big as they come to a poorly consolidated regime. After all, the vast majority of [senior officers](#) were not only Tigrayan, but also staunch TPLF loyalists. She then correctly foresaw that the TPLF leadership would seek to retaliate for its loss of monopolistic economic power by activating its well-established and still well-funded patronage networks to whip up ethnic pogroms across the country.

She even foreshadowed Western cluelessness: “the White House and European leaders appear unaware of the life-or-death power struggle that is unfolding”. In the looming turn to violence, she cautioned against American bothsidesism, yet lamented that: “If history is any guide, however, Washington will prefer to hedge its bets.” She anticipated that the US would be “maintaining ties with the TPLF”, whose “shocking human rights abuses” had long been “blithely overlooked” due to reliance on its extensive security apparatus in the fight against radical Islamism in Somalia. On a final note, she warned that TPLF hardliners “may be desperate enough to act irrationally”, but would do well to notice “how many enemies they have”. Indeed, there was prescient advice in there for everyone.

In laying out the timeline for the next couple of years, only the Covid-induced election postponement caught Ms. Bruton unawares. After all, she was not a psychic,

just a rock-solid connoisseur of Ethiopian politics and a razor-sharp analyst. Alas, there were to be more missed chances to listen to her and save lives.



With foreknowledge of what lasting peace was going to look like, this last warning was issued nine days into the war (when disarmament was not yet achievable through [negotiation](#)).⁵³

Bronwyn Bruton, Ann Fitz-Gerald and [others](#) kept [contributing](#) their [expertise](#) throughout the war.⁵⁴ However, their view that the TPLF's leaders were the main spoilers remained on the fringe. What was amplified the most was the judgment of those who got it consistently wrong. And not only about the peace. They were even further off the mark about the war.

Rebels at the gate, reportedly

The Norwegian Kjetil Tronvoll is a [New York Times-quoted](#),⁵⁵ The Guardian [op-ed](#)-writing,⁵⁶ internationally sought-after Ethiopologist, also presented as a neutral academic, even though, [like](#) Alex de Waal, he is not coy about his [closeness](#) to the TPLF

⁵³ Another tweet by Bronwyn Bruton on Nov. 14, 2020, reads: "If violent factions attacked US soldiers in their barracks or militants launched a terror campaign against French citizens, no one would demand that the respective governments enter into negotiations with zealots."

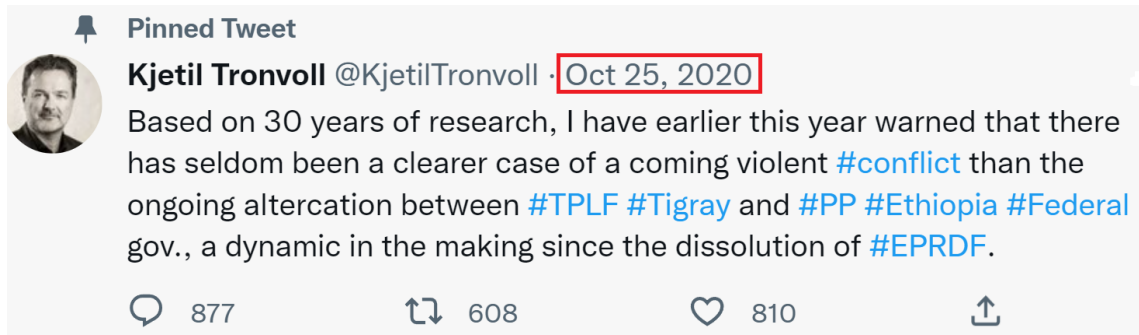
⁵⁴ For instance, together Ann Fitz-Gerald and Bronwyn Bruton published "To End Ethiopia's War, Biden Needs to Correct Course" in Foreign Policy on December 28, 2021. Two other Western commentators with firsthand knowledge of Ethiopian affairs were the Finnish diplomat Simo-Pekka Parviainen and the Dutch professor Jon Abbink.

⁵⁵ Kjetil Tronvoll was introduced as "a scholar of Ethiopian politics" in the New York Times early on in the war in the article "They Once Ruled Ethiopia. Now they are fighting its government," November 15, 2020.

⁵⁶ The Guardian on June 7, 2021: "The Nobel committee should resign over the atrocities in Tigray", by Kjetil Tronvoll.

hierarchy. For instance, in a tweet on April 25, 2021, he called Dr Tedros “my friend”. And in a tweet from November 24, 2022, he called Getachew Reda “my brother”.

Kjetil Tronvoll is also a bit of a clairvoyant. Throughout the war, he proudly pinned this on top of his Twitter [profile](#):

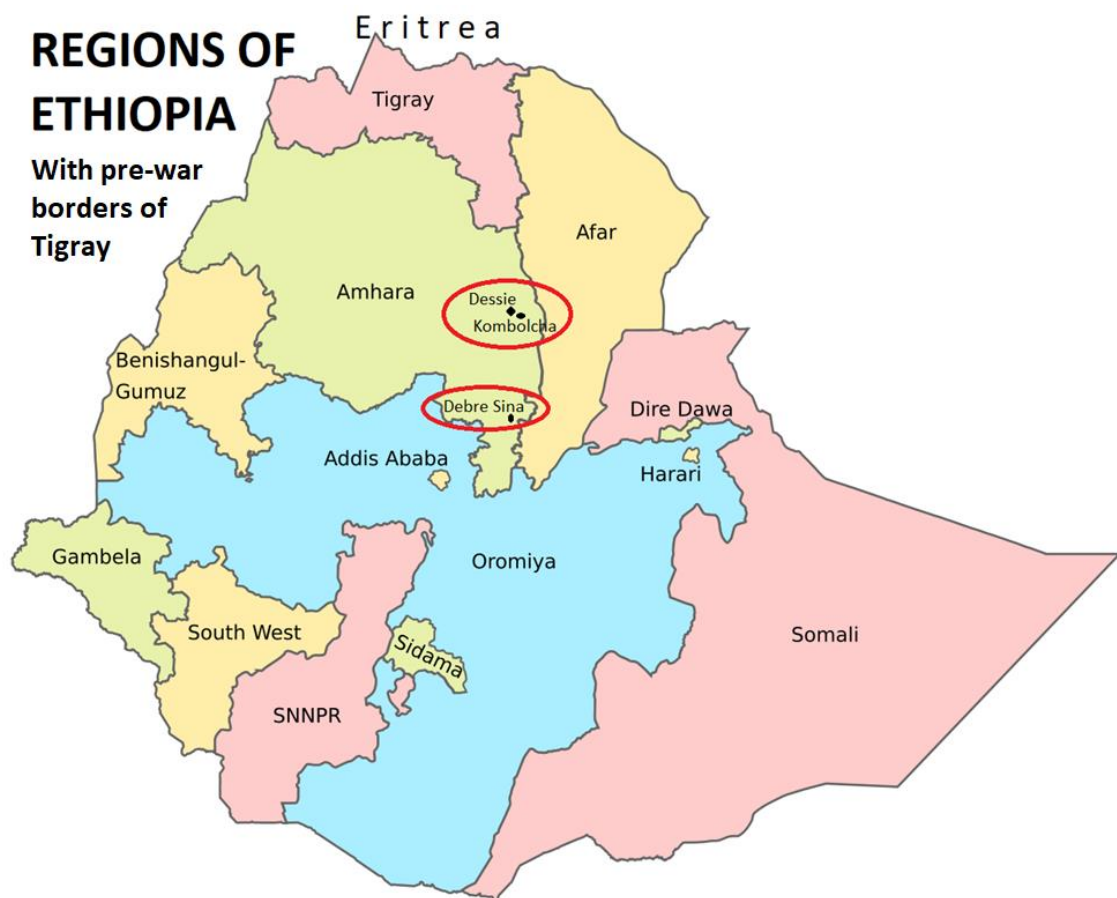


We shall return to the information that this was based on, and what happened after this tweet. Fast forward to October 2021. The war has now been raging for nearly a year, moving from Tigray towards the east into Afar and towards the south into Amhara.



The astonishing advances of Operation Mothers of Tigray has Getachew Reda, chief TPLF spokesperson gushing with confidence in his troops.

The cities referred to lie about 400 km from Addis Ababa, and are taken ten days later. For over a month, the TPLF army keeps approaching the seat of government, until [reaching](#) Debre Sina, some 200 kilometers away, in the last week of November 2021.



The TPLF is not the only ethnic militia closing in on the center of power. On November 8, Jaal Marroo, commander of the Oromo Liberation Army, OLA, [claims](#) that his fighters are within 40 km and is confident of “victory very soon”. He [reports](#) that government soldiers of Oromo ethnicity are defecting *en masse* to his side, which, if true, means Ethiopia’s unitary state is doomed. After all, while Tigrayans are only 6%, Oromos make up about a third of the population. Hardcore Oromo ethnonationalists like to say the real share is [up to 60%](#),⁵⁷ so as to make the case that Oromos, for all their success integrating into Ethiopia’s multiethnic mainstream, are still underrepresented, and that Oromos in senior positions are token collaborators.

However, while the TPLF of today has a long record of governing, building international networks, accumulating [wealth](#) in foreign currency,⁵⁸ and communicating with skill and sophistication, the OLA comes across more like the TPLF in its [infancy](#) in

⁵⁷ For instance, Asafa Jalata suggests it is between 40% and 60% in “Fighting against the injustice of the state and globalization: comparing the African American and the Oromo movements,” Springer, 2002.

⁵⁸ David Steinman wrote a memorable exposé of the TPLF’s corrupt reign in the article “Ethiopia’s cruel con game”, Forbes magazine, March 3, 2017.

the [1970s](#), that is, as a ragtag bunch that finances itself by [robbing](#) banks and [kidnapping](#) for [ransom](#). The OLA is a recent [splinter group](#) from the Oromo Liberation Front, the OLF, which was in exile until 2018, when it [accepted](#) an invitation from the new Oromo Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed to participate in the fledgling democratic framework. The OLA, also known as Shene, has by now built a reputation for [massacring](#) civilians, especially among the [ethnic minorities](#) who inhabit the vast, lush, diverse and otherwise welcoming Oromo Region, called *Oromia*.

At this decisive stage of the war, in October-November 2021, the pressing question about the OLA is this: Given its repulsive methods, its [new-found alliance](#) with the TPLF so shortly after Oromo protestors were at the forefront of dislodging the TPLF from power, and with an Oromo leading the country, flanked by numerous Oromo ministers and Oromo senior [officers](#), does the OLA really enjoy much popular support among Oromos? Mr. Tronvoll believes that it does.



Kjetil Tronvoll
@KjetilTronvoll

A sure sign of collapsing authority is defecting soldiers. I will not vouch for the numbers, but it is likely [#Oromo](#) reg. forces & [#ENDF](#) troops will defect in high numbers to [#OLA](#). Likewise fighting moral of other regional forces will likely wither, as [#TDF](#) / OLA approach [#Addis](#).



Odaa Tarbii  @OdaaTarbiiWBO · Nov 3, 2021

Today, 1165 Oromia Special Forces defected to the OLA. 400 of them joined OLA forces in the vicinity of Laga Tafo. Our forces continue pushing on from all directions, we r very close to seeing the end of this oppressive dictatorship.

[#OromoLiberationArmy](#) [#Ethiopia](#)

8:32 AM · Nov 4, 2021

Ordinary Oromos are onboard with the OLA, Mr. Tronvoll assumes.

TDF: Tigray Defense Forces, the TPLF army. ENDF: Ethiopian National Defense Force.

At this point of the international press coverage, it has become a truism that tribal affiliation overrides loyalty to the multiethnic federal setup. Moreover, this comes hot

on the heels of Kabul falling to the Taliban in Afghanistan on August 15, creating a sense of foreboding.

Another historical parallel is frequently brought up in the news. In 1991, the TPLF marched from Tigray to Addis Ababa to overthrow *the Derg*, the Soviet-aligned communist dictatorship under Colonel Mengistu Hailemariam. The big difference is that, in 1991, they were greeted as liberators, whereas this time, in 2021, fierce resistance is expected. The US State Department [appeals](#) to both parties for ceasefire and negotiations. Kjetil Tronvoll, having now accumulated 31 years of research to back up his analysis, will have none of it.



By comparison, the [leader](#) that The Economist publishes on November 4, 2021, is less cocksure of the outcome. It has the sensible headline: “Act now to avert a bloodbath in Ethiopia”. But then it trains all its verbal firepower precisely on those who are acting now to avert a bloodbath in Ethiopia. Ethiopians’ ongoing mobilization to defend their capital is portrayed as a craze of persecution targeting the city’s numerous ethnic Tigrayans, incited by a leader who uses “dehumanizing language” about them. This is cause for alarm, if true, but both defamatory and inflammatory, if untrue, so Part 3 shall look carefully at this and other grave charges leveled by The Economist at this dangerous crossroads for Ethiopia.

Admitting to [cluelessness](#) as to how to avert a bloodbath, as “no one knows whether catastrophe can be averted”, The Economist suggests “outside powers should try, with a determined mix of pressure and persuasion”. However, it thinks those well-intentioned Westerners might find Abiy Ahmed difficult to even converse with, as he is

“exuding a Messianic zeal”. This judgment is backed by an unnamed diplomat saying: “He can’t understand why the West is not supporting him in fighting the forces of darkness.”

But is it really so delusional to think that the West would support an elected leader with a liberal reform agenda against an armed assault by the authoritarian old guard? The answer turns out to be: yes, totally delusional! The Economist leader’s preferred [source](#), simply labelled “diplomats”, also [believes](#) that the TPLF “may be holding back from an immediate attack on the capital so as to give Abiy a chance to give up and escape.”

The proverbial CNN fake news

On November 5, 2021, CNN, its website having two days earlier [quoted](#) an unnamed “senior diplomatic source” saying that the two rebel groups were on the outskirts of Addis Ababa, announces this as news on live television, though this time only for “Tigrayan troops”.



CNN’s shocker, using old and unrelated footage. Notice the use of “Tigrayan” rather than TPLF or Tigray Defense Forces (TDF). A consistent trait of CNN coverage has been to portray the conflict in crude tribal terms.

This provokes some anxiety. It would have induced all-out panic in a city of about six million inhabitants, had CNN not taken care to [destroy](#) its trustworthiness among Ethiopians over the previous two months.

First, on September 5, 2021, its star journalist Nima Elbagir had [reported](#) on dead bodies floating down the Tekeze River from Tigray into the Setit River in Sudan.⁵⁹ This claimed “to reveal what appears to be a new phase of ethnic cleansing in Ethiopia’s war”. The corpses were presented as civilian Tigrayans killed by Ethiopian death squads for their ethnicity. However, intriguingly, according to a first version of the article, out on September 5, some experts affirmed that all the corpses had been exposed to “some form of chemical agent after death” in order to preserve them.⁶⁰ What could possibly explain this? No theory was presented, but it confirmed the suspicion voiced by Ethiopians that these were the TPLF’s war dead used to play a propaganda trick on the international media. Moreover, about ‘Gerri’, the Tigrayan inside Sudan who was featured as a key witness, the article said: “his community usually finds the exact number of bodies it has been told to expect”. This indicated [coordination](#) between the people dumping and collecting the bodies. Worse still for CNN’s credibility, on September 10, it discreetly [edited](#) out the crucial information about the chemicals. However, it admitted there had been an elaborate process to preserve the bodies lasting “at least three months”. This sat oddly with the article’s [headline](#) and its anonymous [testimony](#),⁶¹ which suggested that the victims had been marched out of prison moments before floating down the river. And why would murderers go to such lengths to preserve the evidence, then dump it into an international river and let others downstream know with numerical precision what to pick up? Rather than attempting to make sense of it, Nima Elbagir [stood by](#) her blaming of Ethiopia and [contextualized](#) it as a genocide.⁶²

Incidentally, this is just a foretaste. Part 3 will present a whole pattern of shocking accusations that cannot be sustained, yet are just papered over by moving on to new ones.

⁵⁹ CNN Online on September 5, 2021: “Men are marched out of prison camps. Then corpses float down the river”, by Nima Elbagir, Katie Polglase, Barbara Arvanitidis, Gianluca Mezzofiore, Laura Smith-Spark, video by Alex Platt and Mark Baron.

⁶⁰ This original version can still be dug up, using a tool like the Wayback Machine: <https://web.archive.org/web/20210905125010/https://edition.cnn.com/2021/09/05/africa/ethiopia-tigray-humera-sudan-bodies-cmd-intl/index.html>

⁶¹ The article says: “Sixteen-year-old Natay and 17-year-old Gebrey, whose names have been changed for their safety, are among the Tigrayans who said they fled prison camps in Humera. Now in Wad El Hilou, they confirmed to CNN that they heard reports of men, with their hands tied, being marched in single file towards the Humera riverfront, to the area between St. Mary’s and St. Michael’s Church. The boys both say they heard shots ring out and the men did not return.”

⁶² In an interview on Democracy Now on October 7, 2021, Nima Elbagir says: “In the last few weeks, Tigrayans say the bodies of over 60 victims have floated into Sudan from Ethiopia, evidence of a methodical campaign, one which bears all the hallmarks of genocide as defined by international law.”



The primary CNN source for the floating-corpse story was Gebretensae Gebrekristos, or 'Gerr'. He is seen in the interview video wearing a ballcap with the TPLF's founding date and insignia. This indicates that he was a TPLF-affiliated fixer. But his community was probably not supposed to reveal it knew exactly how many bodies to collect and when.

Nima Elbagir went on to [attack](#) Ethiopian Airlines, the national flagship carrier, which is a major source of foreign currency (incidentally with a [Tigrayan CEO](#) at the time). CNN had [played dirty](#) with this company before, coming after its safety record over a crash on March 10, 2019, which turned out to have been caused by Boeing's defective software.⁶³ Now the accusation was of [transporting](#) weapons, prompting the Biden administration to threaten [sanctions](#). Ethiopian Airlines [denied](#) it, and no charges were ever brought before an international entity, probably because, even if it did occur, it was not against aviation law. One year later, when CNN received an [award](#) for this story, Nima Elbagir would be heartily [praised](#) for all of her reporting by Getachew Reda.

⁶³ The CNN website on March 24, 2019: "Ethiopian Airlines is a symbol of national pride. Now a disaster has put it under scrutiny", by Jenni Marsh.



Getachew K Reda
@reda_getachew

Follow



Thank you @nimaelbagir for being the voice of the voiceless; for the courage, integrity and determination you displayed in taking up the cause of victims of senseless violence not just in Tigray but also elsewhere in the world often at the cost of putting your own life at peril.

3:33 PM Sep 29, 2022



53



697



951



It is now November 5, 2021, the day when CNN announces that rebels are at the gates of Ethiopia's capital, the seat of the African Union. Up next should be chaotic scenes in the airport. Will there be people clinging to and falling off planes, as in Kabul? No, because most of the inhabitants of Addis Ababa shrug it off as just some more of the proverbial CNN fake news. And yet, for nearly a month, the pundits' cliché continues to be that Addis Ababa is [falling](#) in "a matter of weeks if not days".⁶⁴ The rebels put it more [modestly](#): "A matter of months, if not weeks".⁶⁵

"Face your day of reckoning"

Also on November 5, 2021, a farcical [spectacle](#) is acted out in Washington DC, playing up the notion of oppressed Ethiopian ethnicities scrambling to join the TPLF-OLA victory parade.⁶⁶ A massive press corps attends, as the leaders of seven more rebel armies sign on to join in the new nine-group coalition of Revolutionary Front this and Liberation Movement that.

In Ethiopia, nobody has ever heard of these outfits. Officials roll their eyes and [call](#) it "a publicity stunt". It is indeed, and not a sophisticated one at that. But the world press [laps it](#) up and spreads it across the globe. No major news outlet cares to conduct any research into these entities, or to listen to Ethiopian researchers who easily [dismiss](#) their threat level.⁶⁷ The story is good, and it is at least nominally true, even if

⁶⁴ For instance, Matt Bryden and Rashid Abdi write, in their article titled "Abiy has lost his war, but Ethiopia could reinvent itself", published in The Elephant on November 29, 2021: "The Ethiopian army has effectively disintegrated, partly from major battlefield losses and partly from self-inflicted attrition as the high command weeded out and disarmed troops with ethnic ties to the Tigrayan and Oromo rebels. Addis is expected to fall in a matter of weeks, if not days."

⁶⁵ Stated, for instance, in France24 on November 3, 2021: "Rebels say Ethiopia capital could fall within weeks as US plans to send envoy".

⁶⁶ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hJc3wnME2ns>

⁶⁷ In its November update, the Ethiopia Peace Observatory writes: "Ultimately, upon examining both historical and recent events in Ethiopia, it is clear that this newly formed

giving it any importance is actually a deception. Worse still, no editorial finds fault with the capital of the free world hosting a pledge to snuff out an elected government with machineguns, artillery and tanks.

On November 10, Alex de Waal [writes](#): “The Tigray Defense Force has comprehensively defeated the Ethiopian National Defense Force. Abiy has lost the war”.⁶⁸ In a video uploaded on November 11, intended for educational purposes at the University of California, he [says](#) with aplomb: “The current situation is that the Tigrayan Defense Forces have won a decisive military victory. On the battlefield, they have won and Abiy has lost.”⁶⁹ Little does he know that, less than a year later, when it is the TPLF that is on the verge of losing, he too [shall resort](#) to saying that “there’s no military solution”.⁷⁰ Now it is November 16, 2021, as he live-streams an exultant victory address. It includes a short [message](#) to the presumably already toppled prime minister, quoting a poem about a dying despot, composed by Rudyard Kipling (somewhat inappropriately also the author of *White Man’s Burden*). Mr. de Waal [asserts](#) that Ethiopia is about to change into something radically different, perhaps “a commonwealth of independent states”. And with an austere expression, [he rubs](#) it into the faces of the vanquished: “Face your day of reckoning!”⁷¹

Meanwhile, the approximately 15 million people in Amhara and Afar who live under TPLF occupation are suffering [pandemonium](#). Already in August 2021, USAID Mission Director Sean Jones had [stated](#) that the TPLF loots food-aid warehouses wherever it takes territory outside of Tigray.⁷² There is no attempt to administer those areas, let alone win over the local population, but only to extract resources for the TPLF war machine. There is ample photographic evidence that equipment in [hospitals](#) and

alliance has little capacity to actually threaten the federal government as they stand now. The main reason for this is that while the TPLF provides military heft to the coalition, its history of violence and repression has in many ways severed the relationship between these groups and their communities of support. This is especially true in Afar and Agaw areas. Furthermore, unlike the Derg regime, the current government led by Abiy enjoys popular support from around the country.”

⁶⁸ Alex de Waal’s article “Ethiopia: Salvaging a failing state”, in Responsible Statecraft on November 10, 2021, says: “The brute reality: the Tigray Defense Force has comprehensively defeated the Ethiopian National Defense Force. Abiy has lost the war. One of Africa’s most professional and powerful militaries has been reduced to an assemblage of conscripts, militia, and remnants of his soldiery that resembles a fighting force but is disorganized and demoralized — and no match for the TDF.”

⁶⁹ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gcCR8W6Mskw&t=2625s>

⁷⁰ In the BBC article “Ethiopia Civil War: why fighting has resumed in Tigray and Amhara”, on September 1, 2022, Alex de Waal writes: “The suffering and death of the last week has so far only proven something that Ethiopians and the international community should already have known - there's no military solution to the war in Tigray.”

⁷¹ On the date of publication, this memorable delirium by Alex de Waal was still available online at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YUlyHvMYVxA>. Of course, copies are available, were it to be deleted.

⁷² <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9kOxCyqcKK8>

other [health facilities](#), [pharmacies](#), [schools](#), [universities](#), [offices](#), [factories](#), even [waterworks](#), is plundered, and, if it cannot be transported to Tigray, it is [destroyed](#). [Rapes](#) and [executions](#) are reported, though we also [hear about](#) TPLF [child soldiers](#) asking locals to hide them in order to defect.⁷³ We get a foretaste of what to expect if Addis Ababa falls.

This is when Alex de Waal, in his aforementioned victory address, [tells the TPLF army](#): “You have won the respect of everybody. The doctrine of a just war has rarely had so clear an exemplar.”

A few months later, when the regime change that he so jubilantly poetized has turned out to be a pipedream, Alex de Waal will strike a more somber note, always [prefacing](#) his interviews with “condolences” to the Tigrayan people. But had he cared for their lives as he did for the political claims of their leaders, he would not have said that they had “every motive to fight to the death” two weeks before a peace agreement, which he then poured scorn on.

Not feeling oppressed

I was in Addis Ababa when the city was being marched upon. I experienced none of the pessimism, chaos and disunity anonymously [reported](#) in The Guardian.⁷⁴ On the contrary, it was a moment of urgent fraternization across every divide. People here have fresh memories of the TPLF-led regime and the sacrifices made to get rid of it. They were in no mood to let it back in. Even chubby, well-to-do family fathers vowed to pick up a gun if the enemy came to town.

Conducting politics along ethnic lines has been the hallmark of the TPLF, and on this occasion, it pinned its hope on driving a wedge between the two big ones, the Oromo and the Amhara, playing up Oromo grievances and appealing to Oromo revanchism. This tactic played not only on the questionable notion that the Amhara were once an [oppressor](#) people,⁷⁵ but also on the dangerous falsehood that they are still so today. This kind of thinking does indeed have eerie echoes of the Rwandan genocide. Incidentally, as we shall see in Part 3 and 4, it has also been fomenting an

⁷³ The Canadian journalist Jeff Pearce, in his report from the frontline titled “Ethiopia: Rape, Dread and Despair amid the churches of Lalibela”, published on October 17, 2021, writes: “According to Firegenet, the child soldiers who made up the first wave of invasion of Lalibela came hungry, even willing to exchange their weapons for food. Wanting to be deserters, they asked locals to hide them.”

⁷⁴ The Guardian on November 5, 2021: “‘We are living in terror’: Ethiopians say PM’s tactics have stoked war”, by an unnamed “Reporter in Addis Ababa”. In fairness, it did report that nobody wanted the TPLF to take the city, but also made the claim that “most residents the Guardian spoke to in Addis Ababa blamed Abiy Ahmed for the worsening crisis”. If this is so, it certainly was not a representative cross-section of residents.

⁷⁵ For instance, a BBC article published on December 18, 2022, headlined “Ethiopia’s PM sees OLA rebellion grow in his own backyard”, called the Amharas “the historic rulers of Ethiopia”. This is not contextual information, but a rather crude and incendiary claim.

extremist Amhara ethnonationalist reaction. But as for tapping into Oromo resentment in its war against the federal government, the TPLF and its new ally, the OLA, had to contend with the strong Oromo representation at the central level, starting with an Oromo prime minister.



Rashid Abdi 
@RAbdiAnalyst

There are only 4 types of Oromo leaders:

- The detained
- The killed
- The hiding
- The complicit

3:51 AM · Dec 4, 2021

292 Retweets 15 Quote Tweets 920 Likes

The analyst Rashid Abdi managed to win the ear of [The New York Times](#), the [BBC](#), and [CNN](#), among [others](#), by presenting Ethiopian politics in [crude](#) tribal [terms](#), casting the Amhara ethnic group as perennial [oppressors](#) who [are](#) also [puppeteering](#) the Oromo prime minister.⁷⁶ Here, he plays up Oromo victimhood and taunts Oromo leaders serving in the federal government as being “complicit”.

A few years back, when the self-same TPLF leaders held power in the federal government, they would [accuse](#) armed Oromo factions of being foreign-[backed](#) terrorists. However, alliances shift quickly and opportunistically in times of war. For its

⁷⁶ Some examples of Rashid Abdi’s tweets:

July 24, 2021: “The Amhara hate me because I see through their falsehood and sense of entitlement. They entrapped Abiy, infected him with the One Ethiopia ideology, sent him to war against Tigray. So far, he has delivered for them. When the tide turns they will ditch him, even eat him alive.”

October 23, 2022: “To call Ethiopia's armed conflict "civil war" is an unfortunate misnomer. It masks a lot. If we are being honest, the war on Tigray draws its primary energy from a visceral and genocidal ethnic bloodlust. Simple.”

assault on the capital, the TPLF was looking to fellow violent ethnonationalists in order to expand its recruitment pool.

Stirring the pot, Mr. Tronvoll retweeted a video of unknown origin, showing mothers from an Oromo village weeping as their sons are carried away by bus, with an accompanying made-up story that they were being forcefully recruited for war.



Kjetil Tronvoll
@KjetilTronvoll

The current [#war](#) in [#Ethiopia](#) is fought for the same corr political reasons as the wars of the 1970s/80s (against a centralising state on cost of regional autonomy)- and [#AbiyAhmed](#) is using the same methods of forced conscription of civillians to the battlefields as the [#Derg](#). 🙄



Omar @omarhuseiin · Nov 4, 2021

Government soldiers in Sinana, Bale, Oromia restrain weeping mothers attempting to retrieve their sons being forcibly taken to fight for Abiy. Its no wonder the ENDF soldiers run from battle or give themselves up. [#Ethiopia](#)



In contrast to the total-war regime suffered by the population in Tigray, there was no conscription for the federal army. However, a maxim of the disinformation war was: Show any picture, make any claim. There has been no accountability for such blatant lies, not even for big-time media pundits like Kjetil Tronvoll.

Declan Walsh of the New York Times, who promoted Kjetil Tronvoll's expert status in his articles and, as we shall soon see, led the pack in forging the war narrative for

mass consumption, also [bought into](#) the notion of age-old resentment of the Oromo masses, who would not be fobbed off with an Oromo prime minister.⁷⁷

As we shall see in the final Part 5, ethnonationalism in Ethiopia is on a wide spectrum, and so is the Oromo [cause](#). At one end, it promotes [cultural pride](#) as part of Ethiopia, chanting “peace and unity”. At the other, it [warps](#) a [complex](#) history of empire to [wallow](#) in [victimhood](#),⁷⁸ hankers after an ethnically homogenized, [militaristic](#) utopia,⁷⁹ and [rejects](#) the multiethnic state as an Amhara or an Amhara-Tigrayan colonial project, even when Oromos [play leading roles](#) in it.⁸⁰ There are many shades of Oromo ethnonationalism that lie in-between. But the big fault line here is not between Oromos and other Ethiopians. It is between Oromos cultivating their Oromo identity within and against the Ethiopian unitary state, without violence and with violence.

Following the Pretoria Agreement, OLA has continued its armed attacks, assassinations, economic sabotage, robbery and kidnapping for ransom. Its fighters have been getting [frighteningly](#) near [multiethnic](#) Addis Ababa, on which they make an irredentist tribal claim going back to before the capital was even founded. Though the conflict with the OLA is not the topic of this book, there are some lessons from the vitriolic propaganda being cooked up to nurture it that apply to violent ethnonationalism in Ethiopia more generally. It follows a recipe that brews hate from historical half-truths, is artificially [flavored](#) with the struggle of black Americans and spiked with collective guilt, so that, hey presto, it can be served up as intellectually

⁷⁷ Declan Walsh’s article in the New York Times on December 15, 2021, titled “The Nobel Peace Prize that Paved the Way for War”, makes this sweeping generalization: “Accounting for about one-third of the country’s 110 million people, the Oromo have long felt excluded from power. Many hoped Mr. Abiy’s rise would change that. But the Prosperity Party catered to Mr. Abiy’s ambitions, not theirs (...)”.

⁷⁸ An example of wallowing in Oromo victimhood is the journal article: “Conquest, Tyranny, and Ethnocide against the Oromo: A historical assessment of human rights conditions in Ethiopia ca. 1880s-2002”, by Mohammed Hassen, Georgia State University, 2002.

⁷⁹ Quote: “Imagine a small but free Oromo country where every available human resource is converted into a military force. In this free land, everything is owned commonly, life is standardized, hence, no one has a house, a car, fancy shoes or clothing, there are no sign of envy, jealousy, tribe, region, differences of opinions, differences of accent or religion. The only property one has in this free Oromo country is the military uniform and the Barabaasoo sandals. The only visible neighborhoods are those structures made of straw and rug roof surrounded with rock walls built by the military.” From the article “The missing part of the OLF story” by Rundassa Asheetee Hundee on the website [advocacy4oromia.org](#). Date unknown.

⁸⁰ Quote: “As European colonialists did, the Amhara-Tigrayan colonizers have manufactured the Oromo collaborator elites in order to use them in their colonial projects.” From the article “The Oromo Nation: toward mental liberation and empowerment”, by Asafa Jalata and Harwood Schaffer, published in The Journal of Oromo Studies in 2016 and republished on the website [advocacy4oromia.org](#).

respectable grievance to the [taste](#) of The Conversation,⁸¹ a Western mainstream magazine and Gates Foundation grantee. Such exotic yet lethal fare is also apt to become [glorified](#) by a former US ambassador,⁸² [romanticized](#) by the Swedish state broadcaster,⁸³ [hyped](#) in an American fashion magazine,⁸⁴ and [poetized](#) in The New Humanitarian.⁸⁵ As this book shall demonstrate in much more detail with the TPLF narrative, too many Westerners lap it up, because they find fulfilment in handing out medals at the African Oppression Olympics, even if all they have to go on is the artistic-impression score.

⁸¹ Asafa Jalata, Professor of Sociology and Global and Africana Studies at the University of Tennessee, has been a regular contributor to The Conversation. His piece “Ethiopia’s other conflict: what’s driving the violence in Oromia”, published on July 20, 2022, makes the case for the extremist Oromo ethnonationalist version of history.

⁸² Former US ambassador Herman J. Cohen’s tweet on September 7, 2022, says: “In #Ethiopia, the largest ethnic group, the Oromo, have been excluded from political power for generations. Now, the heavily armed Oromo Liberation Front Will the assure that the Oromo voice will finally be heard.” On December 15, 2022, he went on to tweet a characterization of the Abiy government as “(...) the Amhara nationalist regime holding power in Addis Ababa (...)”. Oddly, while supporters of violent Amhara ethnonationalism accuse Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed of being an Oromo supremacist, supporters of violent Oromo ethnonationalism, including Mr. Cohen, paint him as an Amhara supremacist.

⁸³ Sveriges Radio on November 29, 2021: “Oromo-gerillan: Abiy är som en döende häst”.

⁸⁴ Mission Magazine: “The female fighters at the center of Ethiopia’s conflict”, by Jonathan Alpeyrie. The date of publication is not indicated, but it was downloaded by the Wayback Machine on February 17, 2022.

⁸⁵ An Oromo ethnonationalist poem by Soreti Kadir, titled “Ethiopia: A Dream for Many, A Nightmare for Many More”, published in the New Humanitarian on August 7, 2023, portrays Addis Ababa as a misnamed city on stolen Oromo land: “Ploughing land on the outskirts of the “*addis ababa*” - the “*new flower*”. Ya Tulumaa tiyyaa! Nobody really knows that entire bloodlines were wiped out so that Bole could hold the seat of the African union upon you.”

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Oromia promotes itself, rightly, as the land of diverse beauty and multilingualism. In the tough competition between the three major representatives of violent ethnonationalism in Ethiopia today, that is, the TPLF, Fano and OLA, the latter takes the prize for most deranged ideology, but also has the least popular backing. While there have been despicable massacres of Amhara civilians in Oromia, it must be kept in mind that Amharas make up around 9% of Oromia's population and live overwhelmingly in harmony with their Oromo neighbors.

Oromos have a wide variety of religions and political views. But every single one of those that I have met, in my frequent visits to Oromia, is happy to mix and mingle with the many other ethnicities that live among them. They may lament how the Oromo language, Afaan Oromoo, is losing out in their towns and cities to the national lingua franca, the Amhara language, called Amharic, which they are nevertheless perfectly comfortable speaking and singing along to in their favorite pop music. The *mainstream* Oromo identity is among the most easy-going in the world. However,

radical Oromos reserve their worst bile for pro-Ethiopian-unity Oromos, who are seen as either [traitors](#) or [sheep](#).⁸⁶

While marching on Addis Ababa, the TPLF and its supporters were keen to exploit this rift by pandering to OLA ideology, and especially by promising the OLA and its might-be recruits that they would be rewarded with Ethiopia on a platter. Thus, in a podcast in Norwegian on November 12, 2021,⁸⁷ Mr. Tronvoll reaffirmed the dubious talking point that, upon taking the capital, the TPLF would stay out of central government, [whereas](#): “The Oromo people’s army, the OLA, they see Addis Ababa as Finfinnee. Finfinnee is the Oromo name for Addis Ababa. This was originally [over 130 years ago, ed.] an Oromo village, as it lies in the middle of the Oromo heartland. So the OLA is there to liberate Finfinnee, to liberate the Oromo capital, and take control of the Oromo capital, not as Addis Ababa, not as the capital of Ethiopia, but as Finfinnee, the capital of Oromia.” He expressed no concern about this ruthless gang imposing its angry ethnonationalism on a multiethnic megacity against the will of virtually all its inhabitants, including the 20% or so identifying as Oromo, most of whom would have been deemed “complicit”. Mr. Tronvoll even echoed the extremist historical narrative, saying the Oromo people had suffered “black-on-black colonization”.

Generalizing freely, Mr. Tronvoll [explained](#) that the Oromo people had expected to rule the country, as one of their own became prime minister and seemed an authentic-enough Oromo: “But then Abiy turned around after six months. Suddenly he was no longer an Oromo. He was an *Ethiopianist*.”⁸⁸ And this is what set off the new internal Oromo conflict.”

The [intellectualized](#) insult for an Oromo deemed not Oromo enough is “[assimilated](#)”.⁸⁹ This label has also been [stuck](#) on Abiy Ahmed, who grew up in Oromia,

⁸⁶ Quote: “What makes the Oromo collaborator class different, however, is its total commitment to serve the oppressor (except in a few cases) without being sympathetic to their own people. Ethiopian history demonstrates that key Oromo collaborators have been king makers and have protected the Ethiopian Empire without seeking authority for themselves and their people.” Another quote: “The slave psychology of such assimilated Oromos has caused them also to prefer the leadership of the Amhara or Tigrayan oppressor.” Both are from the article “The Oromo Nation: toward mental liberation and empowerment”, by Asafa Jalata (professor at the University of Tennessee and a prominent ideologue of violent Oromo ethnonationalism) and Harwood Schaffer, published in *The Journal of Oromo Studies* in 2016 and republished on the website [advocacy4oromia.org](#).

⁸⁷ The podcast title is “Hva skjer med Etiopia: Med Kjetil Tronvoll”, as part of the series “Hva skjer med verden”, produced by Oslo Nye Høyskole, November 2021, available from multiple platforms.

⁸⁸ The term ‘Ethiopianism’ is often used in Ethiopia’s public debate, but it is not so clearly defined. The mildest version merely prioritizes the Ethiopian national identity over ethnic identity. The most extreme version aspires to abolish ethnic identity altogether.

⁸⁹ An online search for “assimilated Oromos” reveals how this is a staple term of extremist Oromo ethnonationalism.

identifies as Oromo, speaks Oromo, but fails the tribal purity test by having an Amhara mother and Amhara wife. And yet, Oromos were certainly no less active than other Ethiopians in mobilizing, when, on November 1, 2021, the prime minister [called](#) on citizens to prepare themselves to repel the invaders. One recruit was Feyisa Lelisa, an Oromo marathon runner. He had won silver at the 2016 Rio Olympics, where he [crossed](#) the finishing line with the “handcuff-me” gesture of crossed wrists over his head, symbolizing the peaceful protests at that time against the TPLF-led regime. Another volunteer was the legendary long-distance runner [Haile Gebreselassie](#). He had previously [gone](#) to Tigray to try to mediate and avert war.

My own predictions

Exactly one year into the war, on November 3, 2021, the prime minister gave a stirring speech. With a clumsy, literal translation of the various idioms in Amharic, one sentence was [rendered](#) in Western media as: “We will sacrifice our blood and bone to bury this enemy and uphold Ethiopia’s dignity and flag”. Kjetil Tronvoll’s podcast host, Bjørnar Østby, [jumbled](#) this into: “We will bury you in our blood”. Facebook [censored](#) it for “inciting violence”. I [wrote](#) acerbically about Winston Churchill inciting violence on the beaches. Then again, the social-media giant was not really drawing a line for acceptable language, but reacting to [bad publicity](#). For years, it had been [chided](#) for lending its platform to the instigation of murderous ethnic pogroms and [mass displacement](#) across Ethiopia.⁹⁰ It had to be seen to do something. Compared to [monitoring](#) millions of messages in dozens of languages, the cheap option was to remove one high-profile speech.⁹¹

In late October 2021, just as the Ethiopian unitary state was in the throes of a near-death experience, the International Crisis Group, a prominent think-tank funded by Western governments, [warned](#) of disaster if federal authority continued to weaken.⁹² If, however, the federal authority tried to assert itself and its constitutional monopoly on violence, the recommendation was to punish it economically.

Ethiopia retained tariff-free [access](#) to the EU market, but some 200,000 poor people, mainly young women, lost their jobs due to Ethiopia being [suspended](#) from AGOA, a scheme granting duty-free access to the US market. Of course, this had no effect on the course of the war. Ethiopians were not about to commit collective suicide over lost opportunities for trade. Beyond a draconian yet unenacted US [bill](#),⁹³ the

⁹⁰ One example is VICE News on September 14, 2020: “Hate Speech on Facebook is Pushing Ethiopia Dangerously Close to Genocide”, by David Gilbert.

⁹¹ Newspapers across the world reported on June 9, 2022, that Facebook had failed to block obviously violent hate speech related to Ethiopia, when ads in the Amharic language had been submitted with the aim of testing the automatic filter.

⁹² Briefing of the International Crisis Group: “Ethiopia’s Civil War: Cutting a Deal to Stop the Bloodshed”, October 26, 2021.

⁹³ H.R. 6600: “Ethiopia Stabilization, Peace, and Democracy Act”.

sanctions and aid cuts were not crippling. They were like a quack doctor slapping the patient in her pain, because she refuses to entrust her survival to his magic spells, preferring to swallow the bitter but tried-and-tested medicine, that is, military mobilization.

“British nationals should leave [Ethiopia] now!” said British Minister for Africa, Vicky Ford on November 24, 2021,⁹⁴ along with the other Western governments, who had not only abandoned solidarity with Ethiopia, but also lost confidence in its viability, scaring off foreign investors, tourists, even transit passengers using its hub airport.⁹⁵

However, moving around the capital, I continued to perceive an atmosphere thick with unity and grit. The most knowledgeable commentators, that is, not international pundits but Ethiopians with their fingers on the pulse, were anxious, but definitely not panicking.⁹⁶ This brought me to stick my neck out in my first journalistic work on the conflict, “Do-Gooders Doing Bad”, published in Danish and in English on November 11, 2021.⁹⁷ Contrary to the consensus of the world press, I stated that the fall of Addis Ababa was “still unlikely”.

A year later, as the Holocaust Museum was putting the world on genocide alert, I assured (on Ethiopian television, no less) that “there won’t be any genocide”. And just when the UN Secretary-General saw the war as “spiraling out of control”, I said: “it looks like the war is over.”⁹⁸

And my mispredictions

But before asking where I got my crystal ball from, consider that only a few months into the war, all my anticipation as regards the crucial geopolitics had been categorically refuted. And yet, I continued to be in denial for at least a year.

Never mind the somewhat simplistic question of who started it. Part 2 will look at the process of escalation. The moment the parting shots were fired on the night between November 3 and 4, 2020, I predicted, nay blindly assumed, that the West would support those Ethiopians who support the West, that is, those who most

⁹⁴ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GrtvU7Ypqf8>

⁹⁵ In his report for Dragonfly’s Security Intelligence & Analysis Service (SIAS) on 9 November 2021, titled “Ethiopia – Rebels advancing towards Addis Ababa”, Brian Horace writes that the UN has banned its staff from using Addis Ababa Airport, even for transit travel.

⁹⁶ A BBC article by Farouk Chothia on November 18, 2021, titled “Ethiopia’s Tigray Conflict: How the TPLF has Outflanked the Army” paints a picture of a TPLF being on the verge of victory. Apart from Alex de Waal, it quotes US-based Faisal Roble (easily identifiable as sympathetic to the TPLF) as an analyst: “Then they [the TPLF] went into combat to finish it off”. However, the dissenting voice of Ethiopian economist Achamyeleh Tamiru is also featured. He says: “Ethiopians from all walks of life are rising to defend and salvage Ethiopia”.

⁹⁷ POV International on November 11, 2021: “Godhedsimperialisme mod Etiopien”. Medium also on November 11, 2021: “Do-Gooders Doing Bad”.

⁹⁸ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-U1ld-2L2ag>

subscribe to the current Western ideals. These are supposed to be democracy, human rights and equality, our foundation for settling differences in peace and freedom, to which one might add a market economy, the key to our prosperity. The TPLF had a record of the opposite, namely dictatorship, brutality, chauvinism and statism. Overcoming these scourges had been the promise driving Abiymania. This may have been wishful thinking, but at least, as of 2020, substantial headway had been made and amply recognized, as we shall also see in Part 2.

Nobody expected Ethiopia to achieve high standards of rule of law overnight, even less so in wartime. The country's historical image problem gave credence to the first reports of atrocities committed by members of the Ethiopian National Defense Force (ENDF), and especially by its allies, the Eritrean Defence Forces (EDF), Special Forces under the Amhara regional government, and Fano, the aforementioned militia from Amhara, which would end up at war with the ENDF only two years later.

From the viewpoint of the Ethiopian cause at the time, Fano was a desperately needed military asset, but it was already becoming a moral liability. Fano is an unconstitutional irregular army, which was exactly the argument used against the TPLF. Moreover, as an ethnically-exclusive force of volunteers, it is bound to attract those driven by hate and prone to commit war crimes. Unlike the TPLF, however, Fano is decentralized and difficult to control. Thus, tensions began to brew between the federal government and Fano, and would surface in a [wave of arrests](#) in Amhara Region in May 2022. Going back to early 2021, when the war was still being fought in Tigray only, with Eritrea and Fano as protagonists on the battlefields, anger and a sense of dread spread among Tigrayans, while Ethiopian morale overall suffered. Yes, defeating the TPLF was a popular cause, but, contrary to the single story about tribal rage pushed in international media, to come under the microscope in Part 3, there was no public support for going into Tigray to kill civilians. I witnessed firsthand how people in Addis Ababa would make this clear to their Tigrayan friends. In fact, this was the time when people of all ethnicities in Addis Ababa carried out charity collections for Tigray.

Nevertheless, back then, I accepted every atrocity story from Tigray as the hard truth coming out. I cringed when the prime minister [claimed](#), implausibly, that “not a single civilian has been killed” in the first month of the campaign. The government's communications were generally abysmal, playing down the human costs, including its own massive losses, but succeeding mainly in coming across as callous and untrustworthy, since everyone knew the country was bleeding and headed for tough times. This hollow triumphalism reflected an old-fashioned military mindset of not showing weakness. In this new era, a more honest and empathetic style was sorely needed.

It was encouraging, however, when, in March 2021, the prime minister [admitted](#) that war crimes had taken place and [promised](#) accountability. And even more so when Ethiopian courts began to [indict](#) and [sentence](#) its own soldiers for criminal conduct, something unimaginable in previous times, and a healthy sign of expunging an authoritarian legacy. I never doubted that the only good outcome for Ethiopia was for the federal army to prevail, but at the time, putting my trust in mainstream news sources, I tweeted out some acknowledgement of atrocities, which has since been used to try to embarrass me. It was my attempt to be fair-minded, especially towards TPLF-supporting Tigrayans whom I knew personally. But it was also premature. As will be clear from Part 3, countless wild accusations against Ethiopia and Eritrea, even from supposedly respectable quarters, have since turned out to be pure disinformation. An example is “the Axum massacre” to be addressed in Part 3 and in the annex: “Going undercover to interview Cara Anna from Associated Press”. Accordingly, the utmost distrust is warranted till this day.

Back then, I envisaged that the West would step up support for Ethiopia’s justice system, which had long been awful, but had been showing signs of gradual improvement. It dumbfounded me whenever, throughout 2021, the West wielded [sticks](#) instead of carrots. Surely, the priority should be to bolster the federal government’s authority, since weakening it would only push it even deeper into dependence on allies who were less disciplined and largely beyond its control.

By mid-2021, I acknowledged that international media, including some that I had long trusted and treasured, were sensationalizing rather than analyzing. Story-telling works well with dramatic closeups. Zooming out to see the bigger picture was rarely attempted, and when it was, Ethiopian affairs were simplified to absurdity. A galling fixation on the prime minister’s [eccentricities](#) substituted for political and historical background. But at least, I thought, serious people were not suggesting it would be better if the TPLF won the war.

Or were they? It became increasingly hard to tell. Discussing who was in the right was almost considered in bad taste. ‘Who cares about petty politics, when our people are getting massacred?’, went a Tigrayan talking point, which made an impression. Of course, being concerned about the human rights of Tigrayans does not amount to support for the TPLF’s war aims. But it sure served to distract from the TPLF’s war aims.

Then a Zoom meeting was leaked of [senior diplomats](#) who both wanted and expected the TPLF to return to power soon.⁹⁹ However, they were speaking in a personal capacity. I put it down to individuals whose views had been colored by [personal friendship](#) with TPLF leaders, often [cultivated](#) during the Obama

⁹⁹ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=e4A8Ot5zpgg>

administration. I kept laboring under the illusion that reality would dawn on the chief Western policy-makers as the rebels closed in on the capital.

Instead, it became a cliché about the conflict [that](#) “there are no good guys”, when really it ought to have been about good and bad outcomes. Any analyst worth his salt, I reasoned, knew that the TPLF and OLA had no prospect of ruling in peace. In fact, Kjetil Tronvoll made no bones about it.



Kjetil Tronvoll
@KjetilTronvoll

4/7: If (or rather when) [#TDF](#) & [#OLA](#) take control of [#Addis](#), [#AbiyAhmed](#) can claim that he still represents the “legitimate” gov of [#Ethiopia](#), wherever he is in hiding or if he goes in exile. The old maxim “those who control the capital, holds the sovereignty” will be challenged.

7:20 AM · [Nov 25, 2021](#)

In the aforementioned podcast in Norwegian, Mr. Tronvoll [said](#): “If Addis falls, the war will go on. There won’t be peace because you take Addis”. Indeed, he [foresaw](#) that it would open up new, destabilizing fronts: “The war, or the wars, will carry on in new phases and with new intensities.” Indeed, the many ensuing wars between militias of ethnic statelets with undefined borders would have been as intense as during the breakup of Yugoslavia, but with five times the population, four times the territory, ten times the number of ethnicities. Mr. Tronvoll seemed [unconcerned](#) about this, but the West as a whole did not want to deal with 125 million refugees. Right?

Surely not. And while the initial optics, just glancing at the map, were of the Ethiopian behemoth swatting the Tigrayan minnow, by now the international community could see that the TPLF rebellion was truly an existential threat. Right?

Preaching to the savages

Well, rather than coming to grips with Ethiopian politics, influential Westerners assumed a stereotype of the African tribal war that civilized beings should not take sides in, but wag their fingers at.



Josep Borrell Fontelles ✓
@JosepBorrellF
EU official



The EU is alarmed by the state of emergency declared in [#Ethiopia](#). We oppose any moves by the TPLF or OLA to attack or be-siege Addis.

Mass mobilisation from the Government will only drag the country and its citizens further into civil war and disintegration. [#AUEU](#) (1/2)

3:59 PM · Nov 2, 2021

146 Retweets 130 Quote Tweets 303 Likes



Josep Borrell Fontelles ✓ @JosepBorrellF · Nov 2, 2021
EU official



Replying to @JosepBorrellF

All parties have the power and opportunity to embrace peace. Time to [#SilenceTheGuns](#). [#AUEU](#) (2/2)

80

32

66



With exemplary neutrality, the EU opposed both the attack on the capital and the defense against the attack on the capital. Four months later, Mr. Borrell would sing to a very different tune on the war in Ukraine.

“It’s time to put our weapons down. This war between angry, belligerent men – victimizing women and children – has to stop,” [said](#) Linda Thomas-Greenfield, US Ambassador to the UN, demanding “negotiations without preconditions”, just when the TPLF was as close to the capital as it would ever get.

The old adage of peace through strength is only for rich countries, went the logic. A poor one must make do with peace through power-sharing with its strongest warlords. The predominance of aid officials in charge of relations with Ethiopia gave the impression that, rather than using aid in pursuit of foreign-policy principles, foreign policy was being used in pursuit of aid principles. This may sound altruistic, but it is really just condescending, born of a sense of pity and charity rather than solidarity and

shared interest. Thus, in order to guide [development](#) cooperation, there is an elaborate 'peacebuilding framework' in place under UN [auspices](#). It generalizes about conflicts in poor countries being caused by resource scarcity and intercommunal animosity. These primitive motives contrast with how rich countries will invoke some high ideals for their own resort to violence. Top of that list is usually democratic legitimacy. But Edward Hunt, [writing in](#) The Progressive Magazine on November 18, 2021, had no time for that, and actually criticized the Biden Administration for wanting "to prevent the overthrow of the embattled Ethiopian prime minister, whom they see as the key to strengthening U.S. power in the region". Mr. Hunt [classified](#) the TPLF as leftist, that is, like himself, and [held](#) that, rather than having humanitarian concerns, "what they [the US government] really fear is that the rebels will seize power and reverse the neoliberal and [pro-American] geopolitical agenda of Abiy". This is interesting, because most Ethiopians had the opposite view of the American role. By then, their overwhelming [perception](#), [right](#) or [wrong](#), was that the number one superpower was not just neutral, but actively sponsoring the TPLF.

Keen to dispel this, President Biden's then-Special Envoy, career diplomat Jeffrey Feltman, held a [press briefing](#) in Addis Ababa on November 23, 2021. He was mistaken to rule out Ethiopia solving the problem militarily, but no, he was not crazy. Rather than entertaining regime change, he acknowledged the unconscionable danger of Ethiopia "unraveling". He said the TPLF had invaded Amhara and Afar, and ought to withdraw to Tigray. He understood that the Ethiopian view had been shaped by a long history of oppression under the TPLF, and observed that Addis Ababa would react "with unrelenting hostility" to a TPLF takeover, referring to such an event as "a bloodbath situation". Most importantly, he accepted the democratic legitimacy of Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed and his government: "Whatever the imperfections are in the elections, I think that they, in general, his premiership reflects a popular mandate that we recognize". And yet, he said over and over: "we are not taking sides here".

My model of reality upended

This made it official. The US was *not* taking the side of a fledgling democracy against those out to commit a bloodbath in its capital. And the main Western opinion formers did not even remark on it. At the UN Security Council, the US tried to have Ethiopia censured, [because](#) "it has publicly called for the mobilization of militia". Russia and China came to [Ethiopia's rescue](#), so WHO's Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus [changed](#) overnight from [friend](#) to [foe](#) of China.

The world had turned upside down! I pinched myself. Ouch. No, I had not entered an alternate reality. I had erred in my *model* of reality.

By the end of December 2021, it was clear that, hypothetically speaking, had Ethiopia refrained from mobilizing, as The Economist and the West more generally demanded, and even if negotiations from such a position of weakness had, against all

odds, succeeded in freezing the frontline rather than ending in that “bloodbath situation” inside the capital, then millions in Afar and Amhara would still be displaced, living or [dying under](#) a [nightmarish occupation](#). It has now been proved that the path to end this war was what Ethiopia did instead, mobilizing and fighting. And yet, Ethiopia is still waiting for an apology from all these trend-setting news outlets and powerful nations.

Part 4 will discuss why the geopolitics of the conflict played out the way it did, and what historical, ideological and psychological factors blocked our understanding of Ethiopians in the same way that we Westerners understand ourselves, that is, as reluctant yet principled users of armed force. Suffice to note here that, if someone had told me before the war, or even several months into the war, that in an imminent bust-up between Ethiopia and the West, I would basically take Ethiopia’s side, I would have scoffed and said: “get real!” I could have seen myself ending up on the opposite side of Alex de Waal and Kjetil Tronvoll, given their closeness to the TPLF, but never ever imagined that their perspective would get nearly all the talking time, whereas mine would be relegated to the fringe.

I continue to believe that a home-grown democracy along with the old-school definitions of human rights and equality are universal values. Violence against the state can be justified only as a very last resort to achieve these ends. My ideals have not changed. But my worldview has been shattered. Putting it back together remains a work-in-progress, though one conclusion is clear: the Western narrative about the war in Ethiopia says a lot more about the West than it does about the war in Ethiopia.

But before digging deeper into this, it helps to have a clearer idea of what the war was about and not about.

PART 2: CAUSES OF THE WAR

Dumbed down by the New York Times

What were the issues underlying the war? First, let's take a look at what became conventional wisdom in newsrooms.

Across the globe, American cultural influences dwarf knowledge of Ethiopia. It is not just Hollywood. The New York Times has particular brand value, and its articles are routinely translated into many languages. This is how, in December 2021, its Africa correspondent, the young Irishman Declan Walsh, having already [scripted](#) a David-and-Goliath-themed war romance, starring himself as the intrepid reporter from inside the camp of the plucky rebels,¹⁰⁰ cooked up a backstory to match, which has infected pop journalism ever since, like some awful Disney-movie adaptation of real history.

It goes [like this](#): “It was a war of choice for Mr. Abiy”, who plunged his country into it because he felt “emboldened”. Why? Because he had received the Nobel Peace Prize. Already at the start of the war, Mr. Walsh found academic support for this thesis by [quoting](#) Kjetil Tronvoll: “The Nobel Prize protected Abiy”.¹⁰¹ Seven and a half months into the war, Mr. Walsh [quoted](#) Judd Devermont, a former US national intelligence officer, on how “the glitter of the Nobel Prize” had “blinded many Western countries to his [Abiy’s] evident faults”.¹⁰² This idea caught on in the world press. Rather than tracing the political developments that led to war, as outlined by longstanding competent scholars and insiders, the attention was grabbed by shallow speculation about the prime minister’s psyche.¹⁰³ Then one year into the war, Mr. Walsh developed this theme into a grand theory with the catchy headline “The Nobel Peace Prize that Paved the Way for War”.¹⁰⁴

¹⁰⁰ Particularly in The New York Times on July 11, 2021: “How Local Guerilla Fighters Routed Ethiopia’s Powerful Army”, by Declan Walsh. It starts by describing the TPLF as just: “A scrappy force of local Tigrayan recruits”.

¹⁰¹ The New York Times on November 15, 2020: “They Once Ruled Ethiopia. Now They Are Fighting Its Government”, by Declan Walsh and Simon Marks.

¹⁰² The New York Times on June 21, 2021: “From Nobel Hero to Driver of War: Ethiopia’s Leader Faces Voters”, by Declan Walsh.

¹⁰³ One [example](#) is the Washington Post on June 22, 2021: “Abiy Ahmed and the tarnishing of the world’s most famous prize”, by columnist Ishaan Tharoor. Another [example](#) is Der Spiegel on October 28, 2021: “A Brutal War Waged By a Nobel Peace Prize Laureate”, by Fritz Schaap, reporting from Cape Town, South Africa. It portrays Abiy Ahmed as a madman who “believes in mysticism, is obsessed with power and thinks he has been chosen by God”. It accuses the Nobel Committee of giving him a “carte blanche” that went to his head. To back this claim, he also quotes Kjetil Tronvoll, among others.

¹⁰⁴ The New York Times on December 15, 2021: “The Nobel Peace Prize that Paved the Way for War”, by Declan Walsh.

Nothing in the pre-war news relating to Ethiopia could match the brand recognition of the Nobel Peace Prize. Those who did not tune into the ceremony in Oslo live on December 10, 2019, have probably seen the video clips. Mr. Walsh uses this as a hook, but goes further. Not only those [gullible](#) Nobel Committee members, but the West in general “got this leader spectacularly wrong”, since “the peace deal” that Abiy Ahmed struck in 2018 with Isaias Afewerki, the authoritarian leader of Eritrea, was really a sinister pact for these two “to secretly plot a course for war against their mutual foes in Tigray”.

Naming one disaffected government official as his source, this affirmation is based on testimonies of prior preparations and purges: “New evidence shows that Ethiopia’s prime minister, Abiy Ahmed, had been planning a military campaign in the northern Tigray region for months before the war erupted one year ago”, writes Mr. Walsh.

Really, only for months? More like for years!

Abiy Ahmed emphatically did not come to power in 2018 by promising war. But the old guard responded to his reforms with saber-rattling from the get-go. It took less than three months for the first attempt to [assassinate](#) him. We shall soon see how the TPLF refused to let go of its control of the military. So how could the prime minister *not* be planning for the eventuality of war? He was also sending [delegations](#) to Tigray to try to negotiate. If anything, he could be criticized for insufficient planning, given the massive losses of his forces during the initial clashes. The [purging](#) of the army was a delicate but vital task, which had been proceeding in the public view.

Nor was Mr. Walsh the first to observe that the new-found warm relations between Ethiopia and Eritrea were driven by the TPLF being a common enemy. “Ethiopia and Eritrea Have a Common Enemy” was the headline of Bronwyn Bruton’s aforementioned prescient [article](#) published fully two and a half years before the war. In 2019, Ann Fitz-Gerald had [mapped out](#) the growing threat to national security from regional militias, [proposing](#) urgent measures to defuse the tension between the federal and the Tigray regional government.¹⁰⁵ People with firsthand knowledge of Tigrayan politics warned, as early as 2018, [sometimes even in English](#),¹⁰⁶ that the TPLF was mobilizing for war, and that it was [framing](#) the purges of its loyalists from the security apparatus, and of its agents of corruption from the economy, [as](#) “ethnic-based attacks”.

¹⁰⁵ Ann Fitz-Gerald published the article “Ethiopia’s Security Dilemmas” on the website of RUSI, July 18, 2019, and contributed a section titled “4.1. Ethiopia’s Defense Reform Agenda: Progress and Challenges” to the book “Ethiopia in the Wake of Political Reform”, edited by Melaku Geboye Desta et al, Tsehai Publishers, 2020.

¹⁰⁶ Abraha Belay warned against war in the newspaper Borkena in an article headlined: “War is inevitable, says a journalist originally from Tigray region of Ethiopia”, December 17, 2018.

Declan Walsh's brief is to cover the vast continent of Africa. He could not be expected to specialize in 54 different countries, but he should have had the humility to study some of the vast public record of social, economic, political and military developments that led to war in Ethiopia. Having no patience for the complexity of a true story, he, and many of his media colleagues, went for freestyle psychoanalysis to build a villainous character for a cinematic drama. Alas, this captured the popular imagination much better than the serious scholarship, probably because it plays up the role of the West, and also fits the stereotype about the African war as a purely emotional affair ignited by big men on a whim.

Small wonder Mr. Walsh is constantly taken aback by events. After the TPLF's march on the capital was repelled, he [wrote](#) of "a stunning reversal".¹⁰⁷ He [gave short shrift](#) to the explanation obvious to those of us who had believed in the eventual failure of the TPLF's march on the capital, namely the high morale of soldiers in a country pulling together to face down an existential threat. Instead, he put it down to other countries' determination to keep the bad guy in power by supplying him with combat drones, even though this trade had been [written](#) about since the beginning of hostilities.¹⁰⁸ He also [assumed](#) Ethiopian arms [purchases](#) to be inimical to conflict settlement, although, quite predictably, they ended up shortening the war. On November 3, 2022, the day after the peace deal was signed in Pretoria, he [tweeted](#) that it was "a huge surprise", though it was not so for Ethiopians or even for lesser known Western journalists, [like](#) Alastair Thompson, who had written about the ongoing peace negotiations, in *Abren* magazine on October 29, 2022: "Meanwhile Ethiopians & close observers wait with a sense of hope and growing confidence that this long running nightmare may soon be over".

Two and a half years of escalation

Unlike Declan Walsh, Kjetil Tronvoll has indeed followed Ethiopian politics for years. He has clearly taken sides, and he is not a great forecaster, as when he [expounded](#) on how the AU-led peace process was doomed to fail two weeks before it succeeded.¹⁰⁹ But in that same interview, he was correct in [stating](#) that the buildup was gradual. Though no shots were fired when Abiy Ahmed took office, Mr. Tronvoll had a point when he suggested that this was when the conflict was set in train. He was also not far off in placing the origin story of the war as the end of the reign of Prime Minister Meles Zenawi, the TPLF strongman who passed away from an unknown disease in 2012, aged 57. Pro-TPLF Ethiopians see him as a visionary father figure, while anti-TPLF Ethiopians mostly remember him as a [tyrant](#), who [enriched](#) himself, his wife and his clique, put

¹⁰⁷ The New York Times on December 20, 2021: "Foreign Drones Tip the Balance in Ethiopia's Civil War", by Declan Walsh.

¹⁰⁸ See, for instance, *Military Africa* on November 16, 2020: "Tigray: UEA drones supports Ethiopia", by Patrick Kenyette.

¹⁰⁹ Interview on Tghat: "Kjetil Tronvoll on the war in Tigray – 'African Solutions to African Problems' is a defunct idea". <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2acbweInca0>

ethnicity on ID cards, played ethnic groups up against each other, and ruled through force and fear. Adding nuance, a stable dictatorship can feel safer to live in than an unstable semi-democracy, and throughout Ethiopia, far beyond the TPLF heartland, Meles [nostalgia](#) is not uncommon. His [tomb](#) remains well guarded in the foremost cemetery of Ethiopian Orthodox Christianity in Addis Ababa.

One could also date the first escalatory step to the election held on May 15, 2005, when an almost free and fair campaign descended into a vicious [crackdown](#) after Meles Zenawi clearly lost. It was at that point that Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus joined the cabinet, first as Minister of Health.



Dr. Tedros back in the days, flanked by the TPLF power couple Azeb Mesfin and Meles Zenawi.

In 2006, a judiciary inquiry led by [senior Ethiopian judges](#) documented summary executions of teenagers who had protested the election fraud. Needless to say, the investigators went into exile on the eve of publishing their report.



Ana Gomes

@AnaMartinsGomes



To @antoniogetherres and the @UNReliefChief on #Ethiopia: one thing I know for having direct experience since I led the 2005 #EUEOM - #TPLF are a dangerous band of criminal oppressors and liars.
youtu.be/OFA0v9th-58 via @YouTube



youtube.com
History Repeats Itself

3:02 PM · Oct 9, 2021

3,962 Retweets 650 Quotes 4,104 Likes 35 Bookmarks

The leader of the 2005 EU Election Observation Mission, a Portuguese politician named Ana Gomes, was among the few well-known Westerners who publicly took the side of the federal government in the war against the TPLF. She is still an [esteemed](#) figure in Ethiopia.

There were harsh words of condemnation from Western capitals and a few months' lull in the increase in aid budgets. Then it was back to business as usual. If we insist on centering the role of the West, it did incur some blame by cozying up to the TPLF-dominated regime for those 27 years from 1991 to 2018. The lesser evil, the devil you know, dealing with reality, all such excuses have validity. After all, many Ethiopians also collaborated with the regime, or worked to change it from the inside, which is what eventually paved the way for Abiy Ahmed's takeover.

My own position at the time was that seeking the violent overthrow of the TPLF-dominated regime was legitimate yet unwise. On this matter, I disagreed with, for instance, the current Minister of Education, Berhanu Nega, who had been a leading figure in the Coalition for Unity and Democracy (CUD), robbed of victory in the ill-fated 2005 election. He went to Eritrea in 2015 to prepare for armed struggle. Despite being sponsored by a dictatorship considered a pariah in the West, he would appeal to the international community to impose sanctions on Ethiopia. On this, I also took the view that this would be legitimate yet unwise, critical cooperation being the better option.

There were embarrassing excesses, however, particularly under the presidency of Barack Obama, who [said](#), in 2015, that the government of Ethiopia had been "democratically elected". In 2012, the US then-Ambassador to the UN, Susan Rice, [eulogized](#) Meles Zenawi at his funeral, calling him "a true friend to me". Whatever Ms.

Rice's role in US policy on this war, her presence in the Biden administration became a [source](#) of Ethiopian [distrust](#).

Nevertheless, it is easy to overstate Western power, whether it be denounced as the problem or promoted as the solution. Ethiopian politics is conducted mainly by Ethiopians in Ethiopia. Accordingly, here are the actual political flashpoints as reported in Ethiopia, by and for Ethiopians, prior to the war.

Not everyone was an Abiymaniac

Certainty that the war was coming was expressed, more than a year before it did, by Sebhat Nega, cofounder and grand old ideologue of the TPLF, who led a [purge](#) in the military as late as February 2018, just before Abiy Ahmed took over. In an [interview](#) with the BBC in Amharic on October 17, 2019, he [said](#): "It's clear that we are headed for civil war", [adding](#) that there would be "carnage within and between the regions".¹¹⁰

This raised some eyebrows, but nothing more than that. It was at the point of peak Abiymania. Only six days before, Abiy Ahmed's Nobel Peace Prize had been [announced](#). One month earlier, the prime minister had [invited](#) the public to see the inside of the [infamous](#) Maekelawi Prison, whose torture dungeons had [featured](#) in a [documentary](#) shown on Ethiopian television, recounting what happened there to regime opponents, from sodomy to amputation of limbs. The prime minister joined the first group of visitors, flanked by ordinary Ethiopians and Supreme Court President Meaza Ashenafi, who had recently been appointed for her distinguished career in the field of human and women's rights. Former political prisoner Daniel Bekele was also present. He had just become the head of the Ethiopian Human Rights Commission. He praised the government for closing this detention facility, yet also [complained](#) about a continuing lack of due process, highlighting that democratizing Ethiopia was an ongoing challenge. He was to keep up his [critical stance towards the government](#) until his tenure [ended](#) in July 2024.

These new establishment figures were illegitimate, according to Sebhat Nega, who is commonly referred to by his adversaries as the "godfather of the TPLF". He used the BBC interview to [accuse](#) the USA, under the Trump administration, of masterminding "coups" in plural, first by bringing Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed to power on the national stage in April 2018, and then by ridding some [regions](#) of [TPLF](#)-loyal governors. The most [notorious](#) case was in the Somali Region (not the country of Somalia, but Ethiopia's arid east with mostly Somali-speaking people). Despite Governor Abdi Illey's belated conversion to Abiymania, he was deposed and arrested in August 2018, after it was revealed that he had [housed](#) wild [animals](#) together with political prisoners. His [defense](#) was that he was just a pawn of the TPLF's man, Getachew Assefa, once a powerful torturer-in-chief, who was [described](#) by one Ethiopian journalist as: "de facto

¹¹⁰ BBC News in Amharic on October 17, 2019: "አባይ ስብሃት ነጋ: "ህወሓትን የሚተካ የፖለቲካ ኃይል የለም".

leader of the nation since the death of Meles Zenawi in 2012”.¹¹¹ This was perhaps an exaggeration, but Getachew Assefa was undoubtedly a menace to the transition of power. He was [fired](#) as Intelligence Director as early as June 2018. He took as many secrets and assets as possible with him to Tigray, where he was shielded from arrest by the TPLF-led regional government. He became a [suspect](#) in the aforementioned attempt on the prime minister’s life, when a bomb blew up at a public event on June 23, killing two and injuring some 150 people. Then he was wanted for instigating ethnic pogroms around the country, not to speak of his horrendous human-rights [violations](#) during the TPLF’s heydays. However, rather than handing him over to federal prosecutors, on October 1, 2018, the TPLF [reelected](#) him to its Executive Committee.

Sebhat Nega’s BBC interview also took place in the dying days of the long-ruling Ethiopian People’s Revolutionary Democratic Front, EPRDF, a coalition of ethnically-based parties, which was dissolved on December 1, 2019 and replaced by the Prosperity Party, a single outfit for all ethnicities, albeit divided into regional branches. The TPLF was invited to [join](#), but declined. The ruling-party name change — do notice how ‘revolutionary front’ turned into ‘prosperity’ — chimed in with a drive to replace militaristic statism with economic liberalism. At the World Economic Forum in 2019, the annual shindig for globalized capitalism in Davos, Switzerland, Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed was the [toast of the town](#), buzzing about “vibrant democracy” and “[opening up the economy](#)”. It was a radical break with EPRDF ideology.

The EPRDF had been founded in 1988 on the TPLF’s initiative as a vehicle of power, which it assumed in 1991, after winning a long guerrilla war under the leadership of Meles Zenawi. When Meles passed away in 2012, Hailemariam Desalegn was installed as prime minister. He came from a small ethnic group, the Wolayta, and was widely considered a puppet of the TPLF powers-that-be ensconced in the security apparatus. Popular protests and regime crackdowns intensified in a vicious cycle that was finally broken in March 2018, when Mr. Hailemariam mutinied simply by resigning. At this point, Abiy Ahmed became the new EPRDF leader with support from EPRDF-affiliated members of parliament from every region, except Tigray.

It was [not obvious](#) that he would become a reformer. Sebhat Nega may even have had some hopes for the new national leader, who, interestingly, started out in politics as a 14-year-old child soldier in the TPLF army. This is how he became fluent in Tigrinya, the language of Tigray, which served him well in his career as head of the regime’s cybersecurity.

However, Abiy Ahmed presented a vision for the country that differed from the TPLF’s. He started off by asking forgiveness for past oppression, [releasing](#) thousands of

¹¹¹ The Africa Report on December 20, 2021: “Ethiopia: The West’s Flawed Policy on the Tigray Conflict”, by Nagessa Dube.

political prisoners and inviting exiled politicians [back home](#) for dialogue. In contrast to the male-dominated culture of the TPLF, he appointed women, not just to the ceremonial [presidency](#), but also to the most powerful positions in the [cabinet](#), to [preside](#) over the Supreme Court, and as [chairwoman](#) of the National Election Board. Within a year, Ethiopians enjoyed unprecedented [press freedom](#).

All this was music to the ears of the Ethiopian masses, and to Western media and [governments](#) too. What the international community failed to hear was the background [grumbling](#) of the old guard. On June 12 and 13, 2018, the TPLF [held](#) an emergency meeting in Mekelle, the capital of Tigray, to address the two latest policy measures that had provoked their ire: [implementation](#) of an old [peace](#) deal with neighboring Eritrea and privatization of state corporations.

Obstructing peace with Eritrea

The peace deal that matters between Eritrea and Ethiopia was not actually the [Joint Declaration of Peace and Friendship](#) of July 9, 2018, as Declan Walsh implies, but the [Algiers Agreement](#) signed as early as December 12, 2000 to end a catastrophic two-year border war between the two countries. It provided for a Boundary Commission to have the final say on the demarcation. However, when its [ruling](#) came out in April 2002, awarding the most disputed areas to Eritrea, Meles Zenawi refused to abide, unable to acknowledge that his poor reading of international law had sent some 70,000 young people to their deaths. Thus, the border remained tense and sealed. This separated families and had a militarizing influence on Eritrea, living in the shadow of an enemy with over twenty times more population.

These two nations are historically and culturally entwined. What sets Eritrea apart is not ethnicity, but being colonized by Italy, starting in the 1880s and lasting until 1941. In fact, the dominant language in Eritrea is Tigrinya, that is, the same as that spoken by Tigrayans. In 1950, Eritrea was federated with Ethiopia, and in 1962, Ethiopian Emperor Haile Selassie removed its autonomy altogether. A long independence struggle ensued, culminating with secession in 1993. Its new leader, Isaias Afewerki, was initially a [friend](#) of the West. He has since [alienated](#) nearly everyone by turns. At present, his biggest ally seems to be Russia's Vladimir Putin.

In the course of 2023, the relationship between Abiy Ahmed and Isaias Afewerki soured for a number of reasons. However, throughout the war and still to some degree today, there is gratitude among Ethiopians for desperately needed Eritrean assistance against the TPLF. Though this sentiment is subtly qualified with expressions such as 'we thank *the Eritrean people*', at least while the war was raging, the etiquette in Ethiopia was to back off from denouncing the Eritrean regime. This is understandable. A nation that has its capital marched upon does not filter its allies for good governance. Western critics deserve to be reminded of their own countries' [continuing](#) record of

forging unholy alliances with autocrats (Saudi Arabia springs to mind). Besides, as we shall see, Eritrea had perfectly valid reasons to enter the war.

Nevertheless, I shall not economize with the truth about Eritrea. It is a dictatorship in every sense of the word. It does not do elections, not even sham ones. It has no parliament, not even a rubber-stamping one. Military service for men and women goes on more or less indefinitely, and the punishment for deserting is harsh imprisonment. To visitors from abroad, and here I speak from personal experience, Eritrea is extraordinarily beautiful, safe and welcoming. To the locals, it is a suffocating garrison state. This has resulted in a decades-long exodus of refugees, preferably to developed countries, but also in substantial numbers to Ethiopia.

And yet, ostracizing Eritrea and illegally occupying some of its territory had only made matters worse. Thus, when Abiy Ahmed began the rapprochement with Isaias Afewerki in 2018, this was [welcomed](#) by the international community without exception, and by most Eritreans in exile as well. This continued to be the case over a year later.



Secretary Pompeo 
@SecPompeo

I wish to congratulate [@AbiyAhmedAli](#) on this amazing achievement. Ethiopia has shown that peaceful relations with Eritrea are a top foreign policy priority, and the United States is committed to supporting Ethiopians on their path to a brighter future.
go.usa.gov/xVzkV

2:00 PM · Oct 12, 2019

In 2019, this became the chief motivation for awarding Abiy Ahmed the Nobel Peace Prize, at the expense of [odds-on favorite](#) Greta Thunberg, no less. This was a nice little recognition for him and his reform agenda, though hardly the policy-defining moment that the navel-gazing West, exemplified by Declan Walsh, has since made it out to be.

Of greater import on the ground was that TPLF members of parliament reacted to the very first peace overtures in June 2018 with [fury](#), saying Abiy Ahmed had no right to give up [sovereign](#) Ethiopian territory, and Tigrayan territory at that. The Prime Minister

averred that the territorial concession was really made by the TPLF's great idol, Meles Zenawi, as far back as 2000.

The potential benefit from the détente with Eritrea was not only to reunite families and resume trade and transport links between two brotherly countries, but also to [relocate](#) the Ethiopian military away from Tigray, so as to address worsening security problems in other parts of the country. Except the TPLF would resist this through its continued control of the army and the loyalty of many officers. Only with the Pretoria Agreement would the TPLF finally (Article 7): "Respect the constitutional authority of the Federal Government (...) to control (...) the international boundaries of the country."

In 2018-2020, the central government was reluctant to admit its weakness vis-à-vis the regions. Its struggle to assert control over the army was seen as an internal wrangle best kept under wraps, lest tempers flare. Nevertheless, what we now know about the military disobedience in Tigray helps explain why the leaders of Ethiopia and Eritrea kept getting closer, despite their dissimilar styles of rule. It was not until February 2020 that Isaias Afewerki [complained](#) publicly that Ethiopia was still occupying Eritrean territory, but with troops that were under the TPLF's control, in defiance of Ethiopia's federal authorities.¹¹²

Impunity or Armageddon

As to why the Americans had instigated a "coup" against the TPLF, Sebhat Nega [indicated](#) that "they do not like the developmental state".

Meles Zenawi cherished his version of "[the developmental state](#)", which he [presented](#) as an alternative to neoliberalism, and elaborated upon in extensive [conversation](#) with his [adoring](#) friend, Alex de Waal.¹¹³ It has the trappings of a market economy, but with government-linked corporations holding vast ownership stakes in nearly every industry. In his long [career](#), Sebhat Nega became a chief exponent of this policy, as he was put in charge of the Economic Affairs Department that ran the sprawling business empires under TPLF control.

This included the Endowment Fund for the Rehabilitation of Tigray, [EFFORT](#), [founded](#) in 1995. Mr. Sebhat was its CEO until 2009, when he was [replaced](#) by Meles Zenawi's wife, Azeb Mesfin. She, in turn, was [ousted](#) in late 2017 in an internal TPLF purge. EFFORT continued to operate under Abiy Ahmed's premiership, though its

¹¹² Ethiopia Observer on February 9, 2020: "Isayas Afewerki blames TPLF for refusing to return occupied territory".

¹¹³ Alex de Waal's paper "The Future of Ethiopia: Developmental State or Political Marketplace", World Peace Foundation, August 20, 2018, says: "In my case, one prism through which I interpret Ethiopian developments is the analysis derived from numerous discussions that I had with Meles Zenawi between 1988 and 2012."

accounts were [frozen](#) when the war started, as it was accused of funding the TPLF's nationwide destabilization activities.

Another big player has been the Metals and Engineering Corporation, [METEC](#), founded in 2010 and run by the TPLF-dominated military. It also spans far and wide, but has been especially known for entering into contracts with the government for major infrastructure projects. After Abiy Ahmed became prime minister, its complex embezzlement schemes came under the microscope of [prosecutors](#), as portrayed in a [documentary](#) aired on Ethiopian television in late 2018.¹¹⁴ Its CEO, Major General Kinfe Dagneu, fled arrest, but was [caught](#) in dramatic fashion.¹¹⁵

The developmental state produced lackluster results in the 90s, but high rates of growth from around the mid-00s. This progress, however, began from an extremely low baseline, since Ethiopia, having endured communism on top of feudalism, was one of the least developed countries in the world.

A rigged market economy was a good fit for a regime that saw wealth expansion chiefly as a means to wield power through patronage. Even the most inefficient public enterprise can become profitable. It needs not be a formal monopoly, if the bureaucracy and government-controlled courts make life hard for its competitors. In fact, this will deter investors from mounting a challenge in the first place. Under the TPLF/EPRDF, high tariffs on imports added yet another layer of protection.

A couple of weeks into the war, an Ethiopian intellectual, Kassahun Melesse, got this point through in an [article](#) published in Foreign Policy,¹¹⁶ setting out how the conflict was mainly about economic power. He also took issue with another common [interpretation, phrased](#) by Declan Walsh in The New York Times as: "Tigray emerged at the vanguard of a movement pressing for greater autonomy for Ethiopia's regions". While Mr. Walsh could only point to the extremist OLA as a strong TPLF ally in this "movement", Mr. Kassahun showed how Abiy Ahmed had refrained from adopting centralizing policies. This included sticking with *ethnic federalism*, introduced by the TPLF/EPRDF under the Constitution of 1995. The main controversy around this system is not about centralization versus autonomy, but rather how a political map based partly on ethnicity creates high-stakes border disputes within the same country, since there is no neat way to divide up territory between ethnicities who have been moving, mixing and mingling for centuries, and are doing it even more today due to urbanization. This problem could worsen, if demands for ethnic autonomy grow, as there are currently only eleven regions, plus two chartered cities, for a total of over 80 ethnicities. A

¹¹⁴ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kh841D3YcaM>

¹¹⁵ General Kinfe Dagneu was released in March 2024. [According](#) to the Ministry of Justice this was "for the sake of lasting public interest", that is, for political and not legal reasons.

¹¹⁶ Foreign Policy on November 19, 2020: "Tigray's War Against Ethiopia Isn't About Autonomy. It's About Economic Power", by Kassahun Melesse.

nuanced discussion of the tension in Ethiopian society, not so much between ethnic groups as between identity politics and unity discourse, between chauvinism and coexistence, might have brought us closer to understanding the war. Mr. Kassahun's economic explanation was also to the point, but proved no match for narratives foregrounding hate and bloodlust.

Although the war stalled the liberalization [agenda](#) needed to rouse the country's enterprising spirits, the Abiy administration did slaughter an old cash cow, Ethio Telecoms, which was [part-privatized](#) and forced to reduce the price of internet access to [compete](#) with a Kenyan entrant, with the licensing of [a third operator](#) being planned. Just before the Pretoria Agreement, it was made public that some foreign ownership of banks will be allowed. Then on July 29, 2024, the government announced a reform package, whose most important measure is to no longer dictate the exchange rate of the birr, the national currency. Letting the market decide simply by matching supply and demand will end the decades-old problem of "foreign-exchange shortage", which reserved dollars at the official rate for selected imports, whereas most people could buy them only on the illegal and much more expensive black market. The so-called "floating of the birr" met a key condition for a major loan from the IMF, so it was widely derided as caving in to foreigners. Nevertheless, it will end a host of [harmful market distortions](#). It will not eliminate corruption and rigged competition, but it will provide fewer opportunities for it.

By contrast, the TPLF-led "developmental state", to which Alex de Waal still, in 2023, [harks back](#),¹¹⁷ was a euphemism for tying down the country and milking it dry. David Steinman, writing for Forbes in March 2017, [stated it](#) bluntly: "Ethiopia's far-left economy is centrally controlled by a small ruling clique that has grown fantastically wealthy. Only they could be responsible for this enormous crime."

According to *vox populi*, the TPLF leader who most incarnates [self-enrichment](#) through combining political and business power is, precisely, Sebhat Nega. Asked about accountability for corruption in the BBC interview one year before the war, he [snapped](#) back that those making such [accusations](#) were "leading Ethiopia into Armageddon".¹¹⁸

¹¹⁷ Quote by Alex de Waal: "Abiy himself was the principal agent of transforming Ethiopia from an aspiring developmental state on the East Asian model into a turbulent hybrid of kleptocracy and gangsterism". In the article "Ethiopia is dangerously adrift after Tigray war", Responsible Statecraft, January 31, 2023.

¹¹⁸ BBC News in Amharic on October 17, 2019: "አባይ ስብሃት ነጋ: "ህወሓትን የሚተካ የፖለቲካ ኃይል የለም".

Final trigger: takeover of the army

On Twitter, Kjetil Tronvoll explained his ten-day prophesy in a little-noticed thread added underneath.



Kjetil Tronvoll @KjetilTronvoll · Oct 25, 2020

Based on 30 years of research, I have earlier this year warned that there has seldom been a clearer case of a coming violent [#conflict](#) than the ongoing altercation between [#TPLF](#) [#Tigray](#) and [#PP](#) [#Ethiopia](#) [#Federal](#) gov., a dynamic in the making since the dissolution of [#EPRDF](#).



864



608



809



Kjetil Tronvoll
@KjetilTronvoll

The last step in the cycle is the current dispute over the [#federal](#) [#army](#) [#ENDF](#), the leadership of the [#NorthernCommand](#) (based in Tigray), and its resources and heavy equipment stationed in Tigray (about 80% of the federal armory is based in Tigray).

5:55 AM Oct 25, 2020 Twitter Web App

Kjetil Tronvoll attributed the final trigger to a dispute over control of the military and weaponry. He had yet to receive the brief that the war was about ethnicity and genocide.

In fact, just one day before Mr. Tronvoll's predicted an imminent war, a bombastic TPLF [statement](#) categorically rejected the authority of the "personalistic dictatorship" and the "illegal group in power", ending on a note of "eternal glory to our martyrs".

The TPLF argued that Abiy Ahmed's constitutional mandate had run out, since elections for the House of Peoples' Representatives, the parliament which appoints the prime minister, had not been held as required by September 2020. Going to the polls had been postponed for the same reason as in so many other countries around the world, namely the Covid pandemic. Security challenges in some constituencies may have been an unofficial factor in the decision, which had been approved by the proper institutions. Ethiopia lacks an unquestionably neutral constitutional tribunal, so the TPLF elevated itself into one. On September 9, 2020, Tigray went ahead and [voted](#) for its seats in parliament, [won](#) overwhelmingly by the TPLF. Kjetil Tronvoll [was proud](#) to be there as the only accredited international observer.¹¹⁹

¹¹⁹ On September 6, 2020, Kjetil Tronvoll tweets a photo of himself in Tigray with the text: "Out of quarantine and out and about to observe the #TigrayElection2020, as the only

A region holding unauthorized elections and no longer recognizing the central government was obviously a major escalation. In response, the Ethiopian parliament cut off federal funding of Tigray's budget. This was also an escalation. So was the sudden [change](#) of all banknotes, [capping](#) the amount of old money that could be swapped for new, which rendered the cash in national currency stashed by the TPLF worthless overnight. By then, in September 2020, it was reasonable to fear that such funds would ultimately be spent on killing Ethiopians. It did not testify to a *wish* for war to start taking the danger seriously.

On October 25, 2020, on the same day that Mr. Tronvoll declared war to be imminent, Daniel Berhane, a longstanding pro-TPLF blogger, tweeted that the federal army stationed in Tigray had, in effect, been taken over.



Daniel Berhane
@daniel_berhane



[#Ethiopia](#)'s army Northern Command in limbo. Former command head resigned and [#Tigray](#) wouldn't accept Abiy Ahmed's new appointee. Further, Tigray declared Abiy can not make any decision regarding the army. In effect, Tigray took over the most heavily armed wing of the military.

1:04 PM Oct 25, 2020 Twitter for Android

74 Retweets 102 Quote Tweets 248 Likes

The only pertinent correction to this tweet is that the former command head, General Diriba Mekonnen, did not resign. He lost consciousness during lunch with TPLF leaders, was flown to Addis Ababa, and took months to recover. Abiy Ahmed would later [confirm](#) that he was almost certainly [poisoned](#).

All this would have been plenty of cause for war in any country. By then, preparations were certainly intense and troop movements took place. Nevertheless, given the high stakes and, as mentioned by Mr. Tronvoll, since 80% of the federal

accredited international observer. Here getting a formal brief by election commissionair [@MeressaTsehaye](#), with proper social distancing. [#Tigray](#) [#Ethiopia](#)"

armory was in Tigray, Ethiopia's government continued to show restraint. It took a horrific act of aggression to unleash the fratricidal war.

The attack on the Northern Command

On November 3, around one thousand senior Ethiopian commanders stationed in Tigray went for a dinner party with regional government officials. The invitation, however, was a ruse to take them [prisoner](#).

That same night, while the world was focused on vote-counting in the US presidential election, a total of five federal military bases in Tigray came under [fire](#). Defenders were killed or captured, though those in the Sero Base, near the border with Eritrea, [held out](#) for a grueling ten days. Tigrayan soldiers turned on their comrades of other ethnicities, many of whom had lived in Tigray for decades, [working](#) alongside the local communities. Reports about soldiers killed in their [pyjamas](#) and [arbitrary](#) cruelty [shocked](#) the Ethiopian public.

Thankfully, Michael Pompeo, Secretary of State under the outgoing Trump administration, condemned it immediately.



Secretary Pompeo 
@SecPompeo

We are deeply concerned by reports that the Tigray People's Liberation Front carried out attacks on Ethiopian National Defense Force bases in Ethiopia's Tigray region. We urge immediate action to restore the peace and de-escalate tensions.

7:49 PM · Nov 4, 2020

Wisely, Secretary Pompeo left it open to interpretation how to “de-escalate tensions”, but surely “immediate action to restore the peace” meant arresting those responsible for such a ferocious assault on the constitutional order.

For the first year or so, the world [press](#) downplayed or omitted this manifest *casus belli* altogether, even in [longreads](#) on the war, which focused on the prime minister's personality and on how the Nobel Peace Prize had [gone](#) to his head.¹²⁰

¹²⁰ A typical example is Der Spiegel on 28 October, 2021: “A Brutal War Waged by a Nobel Peace Prize Laureate”, by Fritz Schaap. Despite being 2000 words, there is no mention of the attack on the Northern Command, and the origin of the war is reduced to this: “Just 11 months after receiving the Nobel Peace Prize, Abiy launched a military campaign in his own country.

Even a newspaper as high-brow as The Economist, in October 2021, while TPLF troops were getting dangerously close Addis Ababa, published a shockingly defamatory and inflammatory [leader](#), to which we shall return in Part 3, attributing the cause of it all to an “increasingly paranoid and erratic” Abiy Ahmed deciding to attack the regional government of Tigray, “which he accused of rebellion”. This shallow phrasing amounts to speculating that the attack on the Northern Command was made up.

In fact, only ten days into the war, the high-ranking TPLF leader, Sekoture Getachew, speaking on Tigrayan [television](#), [confirmed](#) that an elaborate plan had been executed, using soldiers from inside and outside the bases, with the aim of taking over the firepower of the Ethiopian army.¹²¹ Some two weeks later, this was [admitted](#) by Getachew Reda being interviewed by the BBC, with the excuse that “whatever we did, we did in self-defense”. In January 2021, Kjetil Tronvoll [mentioned](#) it,¹²² as [did](#), in March 2021, the pro-TPLF magazine Tghat,¹²³ albeit portraying it as a preemptive strike [justified](#) by an enemy plan to commit genocide. Accordingly, the world press eventually began to incorporate this event into its timeline.

From the [first day](#) of the war,¹²⁴ Declan Walsh and co-author Simon Marks, writing in The New York Times, put the war down to the notion that “Mr. Abiy presented a radically different face”, from his Nobel-Peace-Prize face that was. They studiously ignored the crucial dispute over the control of the army, except for [stating](#) that “Mr. Abiy said his hand had been forced by Tigrayan leaders who brazenly defied his authority”. Of course, there is no quotation mark around the prime minister saying: they brazenly defied my authority. But this is how The New York Times interprets his denunciation of the attack on the Northern Command, which it does not even bother to mention. What the New York Times would take for granted at home in the US, namely state monopoly on violence under democratic rule of law, is reduced for Ethiopia to the big man exercising “his authority”.

Eleven days into the war, Mr. Walsh and Mr. Marks [did report](#) “a purported Tigrayan attack on an Ethiopian army base in Tigray early this month”.¹²⁵ This is when

Tensions with the Tigrayans escalated after they held regional elections in defiance of a directive from Addis Ababa, and Abiy invited Eritrea’s dictator to send his troops into Tigray as well.”

¹²¹ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=H1yThWjhYYo>

¹²² In the online magazine Ethiopia Insight, in an article titled “Ethiopia re-enters the abyss of war”, as early as January 29, 2021, Kjetil Tronvoll writes: “But Tigray would attack first. On the eve of 3 November, Tigray security forces, in cooperation with Tigrayan federal military officers, carried out what they called a ‘pre-emptive’ strike against the Northern Command of the federal army in Tigray.”

¹²³ Tghat on March 31, 2021: “Who Started the War on Tigray?” by Franz Kassa.

¹²⁴ The New York Times on November 4, 2020: “Having Made Peace Abroad, Ethiopia’s Leader Goes to War at Home.”

¹²⁵ The New York Times on November 15, 2020: “They Once Ruled Ethiopia. Now They Are Fighting Its Government”, by Declan Walsh and Simon Marks.

Kjetil Tronvoll is [introduced](#) in the New York Times as a “a scholar of Ethiopian politics”. Conversations with him might have colored Mr. Walsh’s views, as he continued to overlook not only the foregoing two and a half years of political developments as the source of the tension, but also the attack on the Northern Command as the point of no return. The New York Times [explanation](#) would continue to focus on the “messianic” prime minister, who had “plunged Ethiopia into a war”.¹²⁶ Finally, by December 2021, Declan Walsh must have felt challenged, as the attack on the five federal bases had become acknowledged as fact and was getting more [mention](#) in the media. This accounts for the timing of the “new evidence” that the prime minister “had been planning a military campaign in the northern Tigray region for months before the war (...)”. Mr. Walsh was rationalizing his early choice of virtually ignoring the attack on the Northern Command.

The fact that this is how the war began is no longer controversial. Yet even as of 2023, The Guardian’s *official* view frames it as a mere [accusation](#): “Fighting broke out in November 2020 when Ethiopia’s prime minister Abiy Ahmed deployed the army to arrest Tigrayan leaders who had been challenging his authority for months and whom he accused of attacking federal military bases.”¹²⁷

Once again, legitimacy to rule Ethiopia is reduced to the big man exercising “his authority”. And “challenging his authority” is a hell of a euphemism for usurping the command of the national army and raiding national armories in a terrifying bloodbath.

The Mai-Kadra massacre

On November 9 and 10, 2020, less than a week after the attack on the Northern Command, the first big massacre of unarmed civilians took place in the small town of Mai-Kadra, near the border with Sudan. The various investigations range in their estimates between 600 and 1,100 deaths. The killings were perpetrated by TPLF-loyal militia members with rudimentary arms, accompanied by gun-carrying policemen, who were formally under the command of Tigray’s regional government, and who spent the morning of November 9 locating those to be killed. These were all or nearly all Amharas.

The Mai-Kadra massacre ended when various forces loyal to the Ethiopian constitution arrived. Reuters did a fairly thorough journalistic [report](#),¹²⁸ although it has been criticized for the [testimonies](#) about revenge killings coming from refugee camps in Sudan, full of escaped militia members and under TPLF control. Like countless other media throughout the war, Reuters also used a source exclusively interested in

¹²⁶ The New York Times on June 21, 2021: “From Nobel Hero to Driver of War. Ethiopia’s Leader Faces Voters,” by Declan Walsh.

¹²⁷ The Guardian on January 11, 2023: “Tigray rebels start handing over weapons to Ethiopian army”, authored by “Guardian staff and agencies”.

¹²⁸ The Reuters website on June 7, 2021: “How ethnic killings exploded from an Ethiopian town”, by Katharine Houreld, Michael Georgy and Silvia Aloisi.

Tigrayan casualties, who is located in Belgium, though he used to reside in Tigray. His name is Jan Nyssen, a geography professor from Ghent University, who gives speeches at TPLF [rallies](#) and [events](#),¹²⁹ yet passes off his '[research](#)' as neutral. We shall look more at his incredibly successful propaganda role in Part 3.

In general, TPLF-friendly analysts have glossed over their misprediction that Ethiopian military victory would lead to genocide, by going for a more expansive definition. Thus, in an [interview](#) eight days after the peace deal, Kjetil Tronvoll [said](#): "Definition of genocide does not rely on numbers killed, but the intent behind why they were killed."

If this is so, the Mai-Kadra massacre qualifies as genocide. Ethnonationalist extremists went from door to door to kill men and boys solely for being Amhara. The use of knives, machetes and rope is indeed reminiscent of the Rwandan genocide. So are the many incidents of Tigrayans who risked their lives by hiding their Amhara neighbors. This book presents enough outrages to emotionally drain the reader without the need for personal closeups. War crimes, it cannot be repeated enough, occurred on both sides, having been widely reported in graphic detail, albeit mainly to attract audiences and score partisan points rather than to present evidence that can hold up in court. Suffice to note that, although Martin Plaut [tried](#) to [obscure](#) the culpability for some days,¹³⁰ the atrocity in Mai-Kadra [was](#) thoroughly [investigated](#) on the ground, [including](#) by the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights, OHCHR.¹³¹ There is also abundant photographic and forensic evidence.

The Mai-Kadra massacre may have sought to turn the war into an ethnic one, sowing terror and provoking acts of revenge. Sadly, it had some success in the north-

¹²⁹ For instance, on November 16, 2022, Tghat publishes the article "Professor Jan Nyssen's Speech at the 'Save Tigray' demonstration in Brussels", which was held two days earlier. The speech is skeptical of the Pretoria Peace Agreement, ending with a triple "Free Tigray!" He demands economic sanctions against Ethiopian Airlines, and makes a bad-faith interpretation of an Ethiopian top general's statement that "Tigray has been sufficiently punished" as an admission of guilt.

¹³⁰ On November 15, 2020, Martin Plaut tweets: "Did Amnesty International wrongly blame the Tigrayans for the Mai-Kadra massacre?" He links to his own article on Eritrea Hub, which makes this claim, citing Tigrayan refugees in Sudan. This has since been deleted, but is available on the Wayback Machine:

<https://web.archive.org/web/20201115102343/https://eritreahub.org/did-amnesty-international-wrongly-blame-the-tigrayans-for-the-mai-kadra-massacre>

¹³¹ "Ethiopian Human Rights Commission Rapid Investigation into Grave Human Rights Violation in Maikadra, Preliminary Findings", November 24, 2020; "EHRCO Preliminary Investigation Report on Major Human Rights Violations in and around Maikadra", December 25, 2020; and "Report of the Ethiopian Human Rights Commission (EHRC)/Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR) Joint Investigation into Alleged Violations of International Human Rights, Humanitarian and Refugee Law Committed by all Parties to the Conflict in the Tigray Region of the Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia", conducted from May 16 to August 30, 2021.

western corner of Ethiopia where Mai-Kadra is located, compounded by a brutal history in the pre-war years and a still-lingering territorial dispute, which will also be addressed in Part 3.

On November 13 and again on November 20, 2020, the TPLF [fired missiles](#) against two airports in Amhara Region, arguing that this was retaliation for air raids in Tigray, which the federal government, in turn, said were intended to blow up arms depots. Getachew Reda also [threatened](#) cross-border strikes into Eritrea, which were carried out on November 14 and 27, when multiple rockets hit the capital, Asmara. This internationalization of the conflict was [denounced](#) by Secretary Pompeo.



Secretary Pompeo ✓

@SecPompeo

We strongly condemn the attack by the Tigray People’s Liberation Front against Eritrea and the attempt to internationalize the conflict. We urge the TPLF and the Ethiopian authorities to take immediate steps to de-escalate the conflict, restore peace, and protect civilians.

6:29 PM · Nov 17, 2020

Declaration of a people’s war

Even after the TPLF had started the war by killing thousands of soldiers and civilians, and while it was firing missiles north and south, some of the Ethiopians that I talked to disagreed with sending soldiers to Tigray. This was not because they supported the TPLF, but because the insurgency seemed to have been too well-prepared, be too heavily armed and have too much popular backing in Tigray for the government to deliver on its promise of swift victory. This apprehension turned out to be well-founded, as the federal takeover of the region only held out for seven months. There was also concern that the war would strengthen the hand of extremists and undermine the already-fragile process of democratization by compelling the leadership to become survival-oriented rather than reform-minded. Arguably, this has also come true.

But was there an alternative? Could Ethiopia have contained the TPLF from lashing out from Tigray? Could the TPLF have been left in control of the border with Sudan without weapons being smuggled in? Without more Mai-Kadra-style massacres? Without missile strikes? Without sponsorship of the OLA’s offensive in central Ethiopia? No, this is illusory. The two realistic prospects were to defeat the rebellion or to plunge the country into warlordism.

As hostilities intensified, the President of Tigray Region, Debretsion Gebremichael, [said](#) in a speech to his people: “This war is not going to be conducted by special forces

or a militia. All the people will take part. This is why we call it a people's war. An invasion is on its way, and so we will start a people's war. A people's war means a war fought by the people. It means everyone will get involved, starting with the children.”

This call for total war, drawing on every resource of Tigray, down to the children, was bound to cause immense hardship and suffering. The key question is: was it justified? ‘Yes’ has been the answer given till this day, not just by TPLF recruiters, but also by numerous Westerners in positions of influence and power. Their failure to call for the TPLF to lay down its arms conferred legitimacy on an irregular army. And based on what?

As we have seen, the pattern of escalation was complex. But the TPLF's steps along the way were consistently contrary to legal means of settling disputes. Yes, Eritrea is under one-man rule, but its armed intervention originated in defense of internationally recognized borders and in response to missile attacks on its capital. And Ethiopia had every right and reason to enforce the rule of law against a massively destabilizing terrorist act. Given the TPLF's long history of corruption and oppression, it was also out of the question to pretend that it was fighting for ideals like democracy, human rights and equality. Or for liberal economics for that matter. Instead, the rationale put forward was that the Tigrayan people, led by the TPLF, had no option other than to resist extermination.

What were the truths, the half-truths, the lies and the still-unknowns about this narrative? Who shaped it and, given that it was overwhelmingly and demonstrably false, if not outright self-projection, how could they be so successful at it?

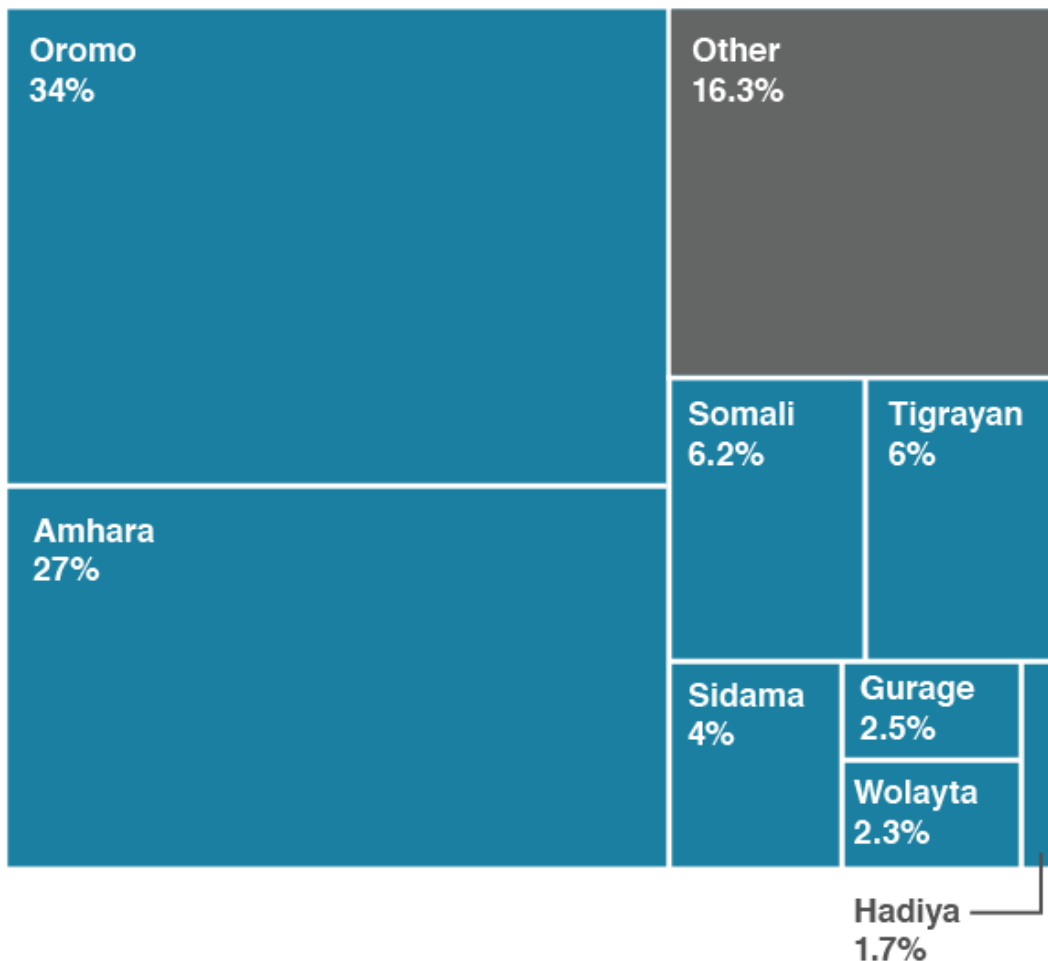
PART 3: NARRATIVE ABOUT THE WAR

Who are the Tigrayans?

Before addressing the most serious accusations of genocide, weaponized rape and man-made famine, let us look at what was said to underlie it, namely Ethiopia being in the grip of hate and hate-speech-fueled persecution directed against a vulnerable minority, the Tigrayans.

There are approximately six million of them living in Tigray. In the rest of Ethiopia, a guesstimate is around two million. Do notice that the intensity of their Tigrayan identity varies, as ethnicity is not as rigid as people assume (see the comment to the figure below). Certainly, Tigrayans in non-Tigrayan Ethiopian communities do not live in segregation. In Eritrea, around half the population, some two million people, speak Tigrinya as their first language and have cultural similarities with the *Tegaru*, the Tigrinya term for ethnic Tigrayans.

Ethiopia's major ethnic groups



Source: Ethiopia population census 2007



This box only provides a rough idea of the composition of Ethiopia's approximately 125 million inhabitants. Ethnic identity can be mixed and fluid due to intermarriage, internal migration and assimilation. City dwellers, in particular, often see themselves as just Ethiopian. The national language Amharic was originally the tongue of the Amhara people, but is today spoken by nearly everyone, including as a first language by many who are not of Amhara descent.

As Alex de Waal often emphasizes, Tigray is the heartland of Ethiopia. This goes back to long before the ethnic identities of the current era. Around the time of Ancient Greece, Tigray was the birthplace of the Axum Empire, which made Orthodox Christianity the state religion in 330 AD and [welcomed](#) Prophet Mohammed's exiled followers in the 610s. Tigray also has the city of Adwa, where Emperor Menelik II's army, composed of all the ethnicities, Christians as well as Muslims, defeated the Italian would-be colonizers in 1896. The decisive Battle of Adwa was on March 1, but it is celebrated every March 2, because proudly independent Ethiopia decided to keep its own [calendar](#), also invented in Tigray, which has since had one leap day more than ours. Tigrinya is the living language closest to Ge'ez, or Classical Ethiopic, which has played a role in the country's history similar to Latin in Europe, and which is also related to Amharic and, more distantly, to fellow Semitic languages like Hebrew and Arabic. Tigrayan culture is celebrated throughout Ethiopia. Its folkloric music is played in restaurants, cafés, even gyms and discos, including at the height of the war. On their part, educated Tigrayans speak native-level Amharic.

Conflating the TPLF with the Tigrayans

The TPLF was founded in 1974. Despite its Marxist roots, it was born in opposition to Ethiopia's Soviet-aligned 1974-1991 Derg regime. An old joke goes that, whenever TPLF forces seized a town, they would topple the statues of Marx and Lenin. So as to make room for even bigger statues of Marx and Lenin.

After taking power in May 1991, the TPLF did have the sense to get rid of those statues for good. However, the party held on to certain ideas "On the question of nationalities in Ethiopia", the title of a brief but influential [paper](#) by radical student, Wallelign Mekonnen. Published in 1969, it proposes to complement scientific socialism with ethnonationalist grievance politics, dismissing the shared Ethiopian identity as a ruse by the ruling class. Mr. Wallelign died young, in 1972, while attempting to [hijack](#) a civilian passenger plane, but he made it into the TPLF's pantheon of martyrs.

This is the ideological baggage for which there is widespread contempt in Ethiopia, exceeded only by bitterness over the TPLF's oppressive and corrupt record in

national government. Has this gone hand in hand with simmering enmity towards Tigrayans as a people?

This is not the impression one gets from daily life in Ethiopia's ethnically mixed cities. Back when the TPLF held sway in Addis Ababa, some would utter subtly resentful comments to me along the lines of "it's easier to get a job/permit/benefit if you're Tigrayan". And yet, to this day, basically everyone has Tigrayan friends. Many also have a Tigrayan branch in their family tree.

On the other hand, extremists victimizing Tigrayans for the TPLF's misrule were not unheard of. Mobs torched businesses and houses of random Tigrayans after the election fraud in 2005. Extremist anti-Tigrayan hate has indeed been expressed and amplified online, in one instance with [slander](#) and [incitement](#) on Facebook leading to the gruesome murder of Meareg Amare, a chemistry professor and accomplished researcher from a Tigrayan family, who was [otherwise](#) admired and beloved in Amhara and in the rest of Ethiopia.

But here is some background knowledge that was absent from the insanely overblown media reports soon to be addressed: Tigrayans are everywhere in Ethiopia, from homeless beggars to the uppermost elite. The Tigrayan CEO, until [recently](#), of Ethiopian Airlines has been mentioned.



Rashid Abdi 
@RAbdiAnalyst



Unverified reports say CEO of Ethiopian Airlines
Tewolde Gebremariam has fled country.

Tewolde is Tigrayan, has been under intense pressure
in last one year.

Tewolde rebuilt ET into global brand. Helped carrier
navigate Covid by pivoting to cargo.

Big blow for ET if true



12:15 PM · Dec 25, 2021

263 Retweets 14 Quote Tweets 537 Likes

*On Christmas Day 2021, less than two months after [suggesting](#) that the prime minister was on his way into exile, Rashid Abdi – the aforementioned analyst so often quoted in big media, e.g. in *The New York Times* from [Day One](#) of the war¹³² – presented yet another of his trademark*

¹³² Quote from *The New York Times*: “‘Abiy has just made the worst strategic blunder of his career,’ Rashid Abdi, a Horn of Africa analyst based in Kenya, said on Twitter.” From the article by Declan Walsh and Simon Marks on November 4, 2020: “Having Made Peace Abroad, Ethiopia’s Leader Goes to War at Home”.

“unverified reports”, which always fit a current-affairs narrative, and are never taken up again after being [proved](#) wrong.

The Ethiopian [Minister](#) of Defense from October 2021 to May 2024, Abraham Belay, was Tigrayan. The biggest name to speak out against the TPLF in English, the massively [adored](#) Ethiopian-American journalist Hermela Aregawi, has Tigrayan parents. As she has [explained](#) at length,¹³³ at first, she took up what she believed to be the noble Tigrayan cause. Nearly a year into the war she was still under fierce tribalist pressure to echo the TPLF narrative. She ended up [battling](#) it instead, giving [interviews](#) in [established](#) media and running her own [online channel](#), for which she gave up the glamorous position as a CBS news anchor. She has continued to pay a heavy price. In September 2023, she was hired as the press secretary of congresswoman Maxine Waters. However, this return to employment lasted just days, as pro-TPLF activists [campaigned](#) to have her fired, and Ms. Waters quickly gave in to the mob. In this sorry saga of the media battles over Ethiopia, Hermela Aregawi stands out as the exception of someone who placed integrity over career.



hermela aregawi ✓
@HermelaTV



It is pure propaganda that Ethiopians hate Tigrayan Ethiopians. So many of you in the diaspora know it too b/c until a year ago when TPLF activists told you that lie, you were living peacefully w/ your longtime friends, & family members of all ethnic backgrounds. [#NoMore](#)

6:18 PM · Nov 22, 2021

3,851 Retweets 177 Quotes 5,855 Likes 6 Bookmarks

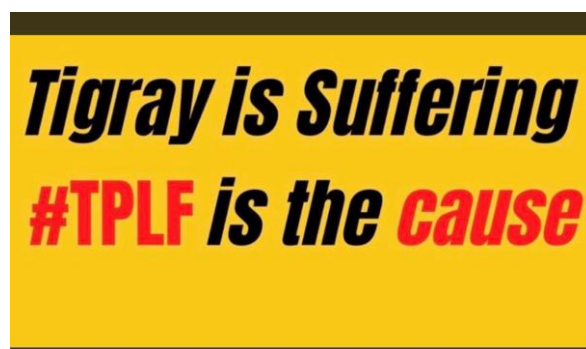
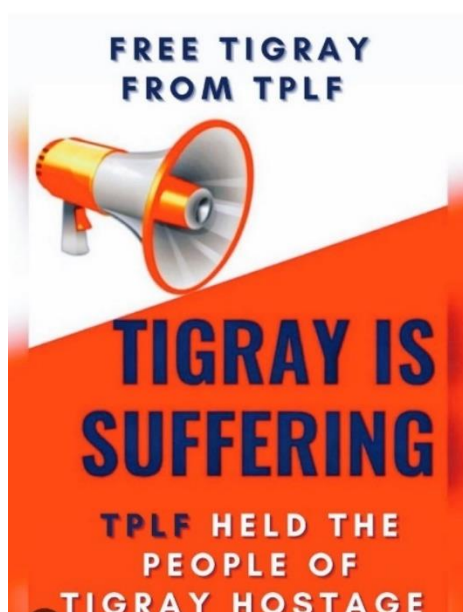
Famous Tigrayan athletes also spread the love. Long-distance running is one global scene in which Ethiopia cuts a stellar figure (others are gourmet coffee, Ethio-jazz and fashion modelling). The Athletics World Championship held in Oregon, USA, in July 2022 was no exception, as Ethiopia took second place in the medal table after the host nation. However, while the Ethiopians sprinting first across the goal line had historically tended to come from Oromia, on this occasion, most of them were from Tigray.

How did non-Tigrayan Ethiopians take this? Everyone bar none celebrated the new national heroes. The President of the Ethiopian Athletics Federation, Derartu Tulu, herself a [legendary](#) runner, made a widely-shared statement about how Tigrayan athletes were worried sick about their families in Tigray, suggesting ways to alleviate

¹³³ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=n5TXqFu9-ZU&t=2097s>

their plight. Some reproached her for not placing the blame squarely on the TPLF, but most saw it as proper of her to express humanitarian concern without any of the politics. Many changed their profile picture on social media to a photo of a radiant Letesenbet Gidey draped in the Ethiopian flag.

I wrote a [short piece, titled “The beautiful political inside story behind Ethiopian athletic triumphs”](#), about the heart-warming people-to-people peacebuilding aspect of this. Non-Ethiopian readers were surprised, because they assumed, based on recent media reports, that Tigrayans were running *from*, not *for* Ethiopia.



On the whole, Ethiopian slogans during the war were neither in denial about the hardship in Tigray nor directed against Tigrayans for their ethnicity.

Cranking up the narrative

Not just TPLF activists, but respectable Western media, painted a picture of persecution as in the grimmest annals of history.

On November 4, 2021, The Economist [reported](#) that “all ethnic Tigrayans” were being detained in the capital, whether on indirect or direct [orders](#) from up high, and [went](#) into graphic detail. “Tigrayans were grabbed and shoved in warehouses and old factories. Even doctors and nurses were dragged out of hospitals if they were Tigrayan.”

On November 28, the young Africa correspondent for The Telegraph, Will Brown, went further. In an article headlined “Briton released from death row accused of inciting genocide in Ethiopia”, which pieced together mistranslated quotes out of context, ironically to expose “inflammatory rhetoric”, he casually [added](#) that “ethnic Tigrayans are allegedly being rounded up into concentration camps and murdered”. What to make of the little caveat “allegedly”? The sentence is so extreme it [brings to](#)

[mind](#) Nazi Germany and the Jews.¹³⁴ Can such an alarming and incendiary claim just be “alleged” without a shred of evidence? Would it be legal for me to publish, without any source, that “Will Brown is allegedly a ...” (let your darkest imagination run wild)? And yet, the only thing that might have surprised a Telegraph reader at this stage was that any Tigrayans were still alive. From his perch in Nairobi, Will Brown had been throwing everything plus the kitchen sink at Ethiopia. On the basis of “exclusive footage and accounts of witnesses and victims smuggled out” – read: probably TPLF disinformation – he had even experimented with an [accusation](#) that the Ethiopian air force was using chemical weapons against Tigrayan civilians.¹³⁵ This was vehemently [denied](#), and soon fizzled out in the absence of proof. So Will Brown left it at that, and, as we shall see later, moved on to the next defamatory and inflammatory claim, until he came to this one about an all-out extermination campaign.

Around that time, I would take strolls through Addis Ababa, using my white face to draw attention and making the most of my Amharic, which is just good enough for a leisurely one-on-one. Addis Ababans do not sound off about their ethnicity, but a chitchat may go into which parts of the country they have travelled to, where their relatives are from, and whether they speak any language other than Amharic. It may be a factor that I am a foreigner, but nobody seemed afraid of saying: ትግርኛ እችላለሁ. I speak Tigrinya. So I did my best to pronounce “ጽቡቅ”, which means great, nice, beautiful in Tigrinya with a tricky throat sound at the end. I struck up such conversations with the taxi driver, the shopkeeper, the hotel manager, a café-goer, a friend of a friend. Tigrayans are an industrious people who move around for job and business opportunities, particularly in urban centers. These people were not in hiding or looking over their shoulders, but they did have strong and understandable concerns.

Those were the days when the prime minister was calling on citizens to mobilize against two advancing militias, the TPLF and the OLA, which posed a terrifying threat to life and liberty. It is well-known that fear can make people callous. There was indeed a sense of vulnerability among Tigrayans in Addis Ababa. Even those who just had Tigrayan-sounding names told me about experiences similar to those of Muslims in New York in the days following 9-11: angry stares, rough service, bigoted outburst, colleagues demanding loyalty oaths, neighbors no longer greeting them. This does not amount to being rounded up into concentration camps and murdered, but it is

¹³⁴ The aforementioned Professor Jan Nyssen also writes, in the article “Ethiopian officials admit using a Biafra-like siege to starve Tigray” published in Ethiopia Insight on August 11, 2022, that Nazi ideas about what to do with the Jews have been implemented in Ethiopia against Tigrayans.

¹³⁵ The Telegraph on May 24, 2021: “Exclusive: Ethiopians suffer horrific burns in suspected white phosphorus attacks”, by Will Brown and Lucy Kassa.

nevertheless profoundly unsettling. One day, you feel perfectly at home in your own city. The next, you are being eyed up as a might-be infiltrator.

However, there was also the opposite, a determined friendliness towards Tigrayans to prove the ethnic-hatred narrative wrong, as we saw with the celebration of the Tigrayan athletes. ‘Non-Tigrayans hate the TPLF, but a majority of them also put themselves into the shoes of ordinary Tigrayans’ would have been the accurate way to report the predominant mood, though it did not make for a storyline as catchy as ‘Ethiopia beset with tribal rage’.

What these Tigrayan Addis Ababans told me they were most scared of was not the government or even the police, but an extremist mob. And the government was afraid of this too. It would have been blamed for it, whether for instigating it or for not preventing it. It was in its vital interest to avoid incitement to civil disorder. Remember, the focus on what ethnic group was doing what to what other ethnic group was the strategic framing of the TPLF, an ethnically-based militia with ethnically-based allies, whereas it was a recipe for splintering the multiethnic federal government and army. This explains why the official media was remarkably low-key about the [war crimes](#) of the TPLF going on in Amhara and Afar at that time. Even private newspapers and television channels held back. Yes, the TPLF was consistently referred to as “the terrorist TPLF”, but on the whole, the coverage of the Addis Ababa-based press was surprisingly non-jingoistic and gave a wide berth to the sensationalized gore that was all over the Western media landscape. Mobilizing for war without stirring up hate is a tough balancing act. So how did Ethiopia do?

Well, there were horrendous incidents around the country, such as the murder of Professor Meareg Amare, as well as mob killings of suspected infiltrators in rural areas. But there were no riotous attacks on Tigrayans in the cities, thank God. Although the mobile network in Tigray was down during much of the war, there would be exchange of messages with fellow Tigrayans in other parts of Ethiopia, for instance through satellite connections [provided](#) by aid organizations. The inhabitants of Tigray also shared in the news of Tigrayan athletes’ triumphs in Oregon, competing as members of the Ethiopian team. This served to rebut the propaganda that being Tigrayan in Ethiopia had become criminalized. It undermined Alex de Waal and his ilk’s message that: “The Tigrayans have every motive to fight to the death”.

Erring on the side of fear

Across Ethiopian cities, the TPLF counted on an extensive [network](#) of Tigrayan businessmen, who got rich during its long reign. There were also civil servants still in service, who had been promoted chiefly for their political loyalty. It is unsurprising that many of them were minded to pay back their old patrons, and also that, when caught and having their businesses closed and [positions](#) stripped away, this was [put down to](#) ethnic profiling. Terrible mistakes and outright discrimination cannot be discounted. It

[happens](#) even in the most advanced nations on Earth. But I do know for sure that plenty of Tigrayan businessmen and civil servants were *not* accused.

In addition, so-called sleeper cells of local Tigrayans were reported to have committed war crimes in Amhara and Afar in coordination with invading TPLF forces. Even if this was hard to verify, an enemy marching on the capital would have provoked angst and overreactions in any country, and so it did in Ethiopia.

As an activist, I would love to say that Tigrayans were overwhelmingly anti-TPLF, as many [patently](#) were.¹³⁶ But as a journalist, my first loyalty is to the truth. I am not going to venture a percentage figure, but, unfortunately, the TPLF did have widespread support among Tigrayans, incomparably more so than, for instance, what the OLA has among Oromos. During the TPLF-led dictatorship, I often heard non-Tigrayans observe about their Tigrayan friends that “we get along by not talking about politics”.

In 2021, while debating TPLF supporters online, I would ask: “Do Tigrayans living around Ethiopia mostly want the TPLF to win this war or not?” They would dodge the question, because it put them in a bind. If they answered that ethnic Tigrayans outside Tigray had little sympathy for the TPLF army, that would contradict the narrative about the TPLF’s sole war aim being the survival of the Tigrayan people, because what Tigrayan, except the odd self-hating collaborator, would not be in favor of that? But if they said the TPLF had widespread support among Tigrayans throughout Ethiopia, that would admit to the uncomfortable reality that many of these people posed a security risk. I know firsthand of pugnaciously pro-TPLF Tigrayans walking freely around in non-Tigrayan Ethiopian cities, and I will not be more specific than that, lest I be [accused](#) of setting a mob on them.¹³⁷ Ethiopian lives matter, so we need to think through the huge stakes and tread delicately here.

Or we can just assume the worst about Ethiopians and take zero interest in their security. This was the approach of my country of origin, Denmark, along with the UK, US, Australia, Canada and the Netherlands, in their “Joint Statement on Detentions in Ethiopia” [released](#) on December 6, 2021. It accused the Ethiopian government of “detention of large numbers of Ethiopian citizens on the basis of their ethnicity”.

It came out while Ethiopians were sacrificing their lives to repel the TPLF’s march on their capital and to avert the “bloodbath situation”, as President Biden’s envoy Jeffrey Feltman had phrased it. All that these rich and powerful nations had to say about this in their open letter was: “It is clear that there is no military solution to the conflict” and “all armed actors should cease fighting”. It purported to express

¹³⁶ For instance, a well-attended Tigrayan anti-TPLF rally was held in Addis Ababa in early December 2021.

¹³⁷ I was accused of just that and of a “profiling that fits a fascist mindset” after revealing, in a tweet on August 30, 2022, that I had been on a ride in Addis Ababa with an openly pro-TPLF taxi driver, despite offering no clues to identify him.

humanitarian concern, but it was read by Ethiopians as disdain for Ethiopian lives, because the notable thing about it was its disinterest in who had the legitimacy to use force.

Just to get an idea of how Ethiopians reacted to this open letter, picture a collection of whatever countries that see themselves as the vanguard of morality, writing to the US government right after the 9-11 attacks in 2001, not to utter one word of solidarity, not even to perform perfunctory condolences, but to state some pacifist inanities and sternly reprimand the US over reports of rampant Islamophobia, demanding that the FBI stop arresting people for their religion. Surely, American middle fingers would have flicked skywards. Well, Ethiopian middle fingers sure did, and many have been stuck in that position ever since.

Meanwhile, there was public [discussion](#) of the life-or-death moral dilemma.¹³⁸ Yes, extremism and paranoia drove some public figures to [call](#) for the internment of every single one of the two million or so Tigrayans outside of Tigray, modelled on the treatment of Japanese-Americans during World War II. But there is no indication that the government ever considered this. It would have been a logistical nightmare, a humanitarian catastrophe, and everlasting poison for coexistence.

Even dismissing the [official version](#) that all arrests were by the book, let us put this into perspective.

The TPLF's ethnic-persecution narrative has been full of self-projection. The 1998-2000 border war between Eritrea and Ethiopia did not threaten national survival, but was fought over some slivers of territory. And yet, the TPLF-led regime arrested at least [52,000 Ethiopian citizens](#), expropriated their homes, cars and other assets, and deported them on a grueling bus journey, with people lined up along the route to throw stones at them. Their crime? Being of Eritrean descent, including children and youth who had never set foot in Eritrea. Meles Zenawi [justified](#) it with this infamous quote: "If we say 'go, because we don't like the color of your eyes', they have to leave".

The flawed Ethiopian state

Now, two wrongs do not make a right.

The Ethiopian Human Rights Commission (EHRC) understood the difficulty of respecting individual rights while dealing with security threats in a state of emergency. Nevertheless, it [complained](#), on its own website on November 8, 2021, that ethnicity had become cause for suspicion in itself, criticizing the detention of children, obstacles to family visits, and poor prison conditions. Two months later, it [reported](#) encouraging

¹³⁸ For instance, Borkena newspaper on November 11, 2021: "The Moral Dilemma of Internment: The Case of TPLF Sleeper Cells", by Wondimu Mekonnen.

developments, as many had had their day in court and been released. It called for speeding up investigations to release more.

This was not so different from what Reuters conveyed in a lengthy [article](#) in June 2022,¹³⁹ stating that as many as 18,000 Tigrayans had been arrested during the state of emergency, of whom some 9,000 were still detained. This is probably many more than what was warranted by evidence of wrongdoing, yet a far cry from media reports, such as the sweeping arrests of all Tigrayans claimed in *The Economist*, let alone the extermination campaign conjured up in *The Telegraph*.

Much of the abuse reported by Reuters would have been recognized by Ethiopians as an age-old feature of their police and judicial system, namely arbitrariness, appalling detention facilities, heavy-handedness and demands for bribes. Were some innocent Tigrayans [targeted](#) for extortion? Yes, the only question open to debate is how widespread this was. Abiy Ahmed has often vowed to combat corruption, though this is obviously easier said than done, and starts with empowering the citizenry to denounce it.

It is possible to side with Ethiopian self-defense against the TPLF, yet also be sympathetic to Tigrayans who were punished without committing any crime. Among these were senior army officers and civil servants, who were dismissed, placed under house arrest and interned. Reuters' [Special Report](#)¹⁴⁰ from May 2021 reproduced many such people's profession of innocence and counteraccusation of ethnic profiling. Undoubtedly abuse occurred here too, but it did not descend into a "witch hunt", as TPLF supporters and Western human-rights activists [claimed](#). And, again, it must be seen in the context of an existential threat. When the war began, the TPLF not only killed and [captured](#) Ethiopian officers in Tigray, but also got its supporters in other parts of Ethiopia to send money, commit [sabotage](#) and escape to Tigray to join the rebellion. The Ethiopian army must have had intelligence on who was likely to heed such calls. Reacting on this [deprived](#) people of liberty without due process, but also saved Ethiopian lives, including, with a high likelihood, the lives of some of the interned officers themselves.

In 2024, I talked to a civilian in a technical position related to the military. All her Tigrayan superiors were thrown in jail at the beginning of the war. But some were released after a few weeks, others not until months after the Pretoria Peace Agreement, depending on their perceived loyalty to the TPLF. "They and their families went through a tough time," she told me, having learned about their fears and

¹³⁹ The Reuters website on June 17, 2022: "Reuters investigates: Deadly Detention", by Dawit Endeshaw and Katharine Houreld.

¹⁴⁰ The Reuters website on May 7, 2021: "Reuters investigates: Ethiopia at War", by Guilia Paravicini, Dawit Endeshaw and Katharine Houreld.

financial troubles. “But now they’re back in their old jobs. No hard feelings. They’re good people and we get along great.”

Was there hate speech?

In 2020, just two months before the war, Abiy Ahmed was given [space](#) in The Economist to make the case for tolerance, denouncing those out to derail the transition to democracy by sowing hatred and division with violence.¹⁴¹ He also [wrote](#): “For those accustomed to undue past privileges, equality feels like oppression.” This was a dog whistle to stir up hatred against Tigrayans, TPLF loyalists would say. Others would describe it as just the truth of the situation after 27 years of favoring the members of an ethnically-exclusive party that had captured the state. It certainly passed muster for publication in The Economist.

A year later, as Ethiopians were mobilizing to defend their capital, the aforementioned [editorial](#) in The Economist on November 4, 2021, “Act now to avert a bloodbath in Ethiopia” accused the prime minister of, among other outrages, “[dehumanizing language](#)” that could herald “[widespread ethnic killings](#)”. It spelt out the two offending words, namely “cancer” and “weeds”. In contrast to [other news outlets](#), at least The Economist specified: “His office insists that he means only the armed group, not all Tigrayans. But some of his followers make no such distinction.”

It is unclear who “some of his followers” are, but if we widen it to everyone who had taken his side in the war against the TPLF, then, of course, there were Tigrayan-hating extremists among them, just as some Islamophobes in the US must have been inspired to hate all Muslims, even more than they already did, when President Obama [called](#) the Islamic State a “cancer” that “it will take time to eradicate”.

Much of what was supposedly hateful sprang from absurdly bad-faith interpretations. On this account, once against The Telegraph’s Will Brown deserves an [additional](#) award, on top of all [the others](#) he has accumulated,¹⁴² for Most Dishonest Translation. On October 18, 2021, some five weeks before he would casually suggest that Tigrayans were being “rounded up into concentration camps and murdered”, he wrote an [article](#) headlined “Ethiopian PM threatens to stop food aid entering the country”. This followed the most highly profiled accusation against Ethiopia of them all, to be dissected later, namely that of starvation used as a weapon of war, which Mr. Brown had just levelled, albeit with only one [source](#), the senior UN official Mark Lowcock. Thus, Mr. Brown may have felt compelled to come up with something to back it up. The claim that the prime minister was cracking down on food aid was based on a quote: “If we make sure that this thing called wheat [food aid] does not enter

¹⁴¹ The Economist on September 17, 2020: “By invitation: Abiy Ahmed on the threats to Ethiopia’s democratic transition”.

¹⁴² He is presented online as “multi-award-winning”, including as “Young Journalist of the Year” at the Press Awards in 2020.

Ethiopia, 70 per cent of Ethiopia’s problems will be solved.” The square bracket was inserted by The Telegraph, but the prime minister did say “wheat”, and he did not mean food aid. The sentence was taken out of a long speech about aspirations of self-sufficiency, tackling the [single story](#) about Ethiopia and food.

The Telegraph ignored the [scathing](#) Ethiopian [reply](#)¹⁴³ and never apologized. This is a general theme: *libeling Ethiopia is a free-for-all*. There is no cost to being proved wrong. You just stop talking about it and move on to the next accusation. Yes, perhaps one day this *will* end up in court. It certainly should. But today’s Western media see no such threat from a developing country with an historical image problem as big as Ethiopia’s. The Western public is ill-equipped to judge whether words are hateful or not, when they are spoken in a very different language, and when the implicit context is [the single story](#) about Africa and tribalism. This leaves the field open for activists and journalists to fabricate evidence for their preferred theses.

Google Mistranslate

There has, as mentioned, been real hate speech uttered with fatal consequences in Ethiopia, the worst of which has been published anonymously on social media. However, to the extent that ethnonationalist extremism exists in Ethiopia, this ought to have been one more reason to rally behind the multiethnic coalition in charge of the federal government.

So the aforementioned BBC veteran, Martin Plaut, went out of his way to [stick it](#) to Abiy Ahmed’s social affairs advisor, Daniel Kibret, who had supposedly engaged in what was “plainly hate-speech” and “an open call for genocide”.¹⁴⁴ Mr. Plaut starts off his article in January 2022 with a falsehood that distorts everything else in his presentation. He [translates](#) “Weyane” into “Tigray”. But Weyane (or Woyane) is part of the TPLF’s name in both [Amharic](#) and Tigrinya. It is unambiguously a [reference](#) to the TPLF.¹⁴⁵ After that, Mr. Plaut pieces together disparate elements of a barely

¹⁴³ Letter to The Telegraph from the Ethiopian Ministry of Foreign Affairs on October 20, 2021: “Lethal Journalism of the Telegraph exposed in October 18 Article by Will Brown: (...) According to the Telegraph, the Prime Minister stated, ‘if we make sure that this thing called wheat [food aid] does not enter Ethiopia, 70 percent of Ethiopia's problems will be solved’.

This translated quotation from Amharic is, of course, a gross manipulation of the Prime Minister's words, which were initially delivered in Amharic. In actuality, the Prime Minister stated his desire to see ‘Ethiopia become food self-sufficient and less dependent on food aid coming from abroad,’ a noble goal widely shared among the Ethiopian public. (...)”

¹⁴⁴ This refers to an article on Martin Plaut’s website on January 24, 2022, headlined “Ethiopian Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed’s social affairs advisor in public call for genocide”. Daniel Kibret’s speech was criticized as “dangerous rhetoric” by the US State Department as early as September 2021, although the press coverage at this early stage did let the Ethiopian government clarify that the comments were about the TPLF, and not about the Tigrayan people.

¹⁴⁵ And yet, as we shall see later, in 2023, the UN International Commission of Human Rights Experts on Ethiopia (ICHREE) would refer uncritically to Martin Plaut’s version, not only as

comprehensible, ultra-literal translation, full of his own insertions in square brackets, so as to change meanings and impute sinister motives. Whether or not the religious Daniel Kibret’s fire-and-brimstone [rhetoric](#) is worthy of some censure, he absolutely did not call for genocide.

The Ethiopian government blamed it on Google Translate, but a multilingual Ethiopian, Awol Allo, Senior Lecturer at Keele University, UK, understood the original Amharic and [backed up](#) the hate-speech accusation against Daniel Kibret live on the BBC.¹⁴⁶ Professor Awol is a high-flying intellectual, who trades accusations of “[epistemological violence](#)”,¹⁴⁷ but he is also one of those aggrieved Oromos, mentioned by Kjetil Tronvoll. He wrote that Abiy Ahmed [has](#) “completely betrayed the Oromo cause” by [espousing](#) liberal ideals while lending himself to “the old assimilationist Amhara-centric model of the state”.¹⁴⁸ Awol Allo has also [defended](#) the word *neftegna*,¹⁴⁹ used historically to whip up hatred against Amharas living outside of the Amhara Region, playing down its polarizing effect to that of “whiteness” and “white supremacy”. However, there has been nothing supremacist about the humble, unarmed citizens of Amhara origin suffering [massacres](#) at the hands of [extremists](#) in certain parts of western Oromia in recent years. And Awol Allo greeted it with [enthusiasm](#) when the worst of these radical groups, the [kidnapping-funded](#) OLA, “that is widely supported now by the Oromo population”, as he [claimed](#) on Al Jazeera,¹⁵⁰ [entered](#) into a military alliance with the TPLF to violently overthrow the elected government. His tweet celebrating this development on August 13, 2021, has since been deleted, but is [available](#) on the Wayback Machine.¹⁵¹ His hatred of all things Amhara goes a long way back.

regards the translation of ‘Weyane’ into ‘Tigrayans’, but also by placing the sentences in the wrong order to change the meaning of Daniel Kibret’s reference to the Tasmanian genocide.

¹⁴⁶ The audio is only available through the Wayback Machine today:
<https://web.archive.org/web/20211125020917/https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fac95bZSVmY>

¹⁴⁷ This is narrated in Ethiopia Insight on September 25, 2020: “The ‘Epistemological Violence’ of Awol Allo”, by Sehin Teferra. It concludes this about the professor: “Rather than trying to speak across the divides, the academic-activist has fanned the flames of ethnic bigotry.”

¹⁴⁸ Al Jazeera on March 30, 2021: “Ethiopia urgently needs inclusive national dialogue. And in order to start one, it needs to face its imperial past and legacy”, by Awol Allo.

¹⁴⁹ In a tweet by @awolallo on July 25, 2020.

¹⁵⁰ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zT7dUxcDcil&t=425s> and
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mEmHWAvs2oA&t=60s>

¹⁵¹ <https://web.archive.org/web/20210813233153/https://twitter.com/awolallo/status/1426325604694118402>



Awol Allo ✓

@awolallo

Yes, Abiy Ahmed is ethnic Oromo but the vision of a future he is offering Ethiopia is an Amhara vision, namely, Ethiopian unity under Amhara dominion. This vision is not new. It is assimilationist, supremacist and grotesquely racist.

1:44 AM · Mar 11, 2021



199



517



943



14



Awol Allo, who has been chairing the Equality and Diversity Committee at Keele University, knows a thing or two about hate speech. In a follow-up to this tweet, he also calls Ethiopia an “Amhara cultural construct”.

Nevertheless, war does harden our mind and language, as [happened](#) in Ethiopia on both sides. How are we Westerners doing, when it comes to separating an innocent ethnicity from its guilty leaders in the way we talk about an armed conflict that impinges on *our* security? Petr Pavel, in October 2022, shortly before he became the Czech president, [said](#) that young Russian men are fleeing military conscription because they are too cowardly to do any killing themselves, but they still want Putin to kill Ukrainians. He knows this, because they are Russian. Nobody batted an eyelid over those comments.

It is not just the manipulative selectiveness in the definition of hate speech. Those who accuse Ethiopia of hate speech should actually take a good look in the mirror. What could possibly be more hateful than to reduce your disagreement to the disagreed-with side’s pathological hatred? It declares your enemy to be beyond reasoning, thus dispensing with the one big humanizing tool, which is engaging in a good-faith exchange of arguments.

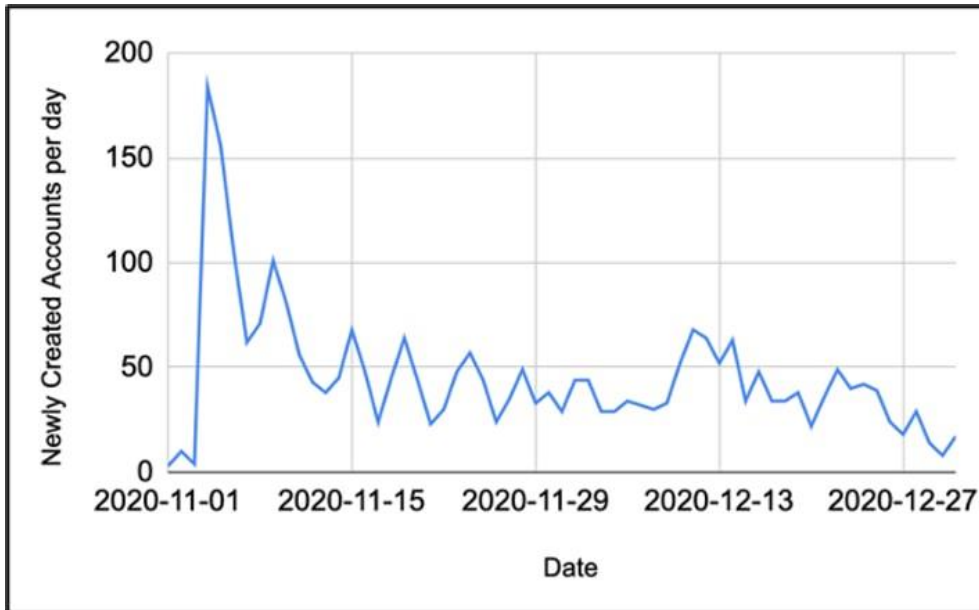
Good people are against hate speech, but contrived and malicious accusations of hate speech are, well, a form of hate speech. And we have still only scratched the surface of what became relentless demonization of Ethiopians, painting a picture so hideous and hostile that it became, in effect, a call for total war.

Trigger word: genocide

Equating anti-TPLF with anti-Tigrayan, anti-party with anti-people, must be the oldest trick in the book of authoritarian scoundrels. The TPLF, however, refined the concept by framing political adversaries as nothing less than genocidal as early as 2005, when its strongman, Prime Minister Meles Zenawi, responding to complaints of ethnic favoritism, [called](#) the opposition “Interahamwe” (after the perpetrators of the Rwandan genocide).

The hashtag #TigrayGenocide was launched exactly as the first shots were fired on the Northern Command bases. Clearly, the accusation that this was about a genocide was prepared before any Ethiopian act of war.





Source: waltainfo.com

Ethiopian data analysts from GETFACT.et have mapped out social-media trends during the war, showing that the creation of new accounts using the hashtag #TigrayGenocide spiked with the onset of armed hostilities, and not with the reporting of atrocities.

A “Tigray genocide” was [never](#) alleged by any government¹⁵² or intergovernmental [organization](#) (except when Dr. Tedros [spoke](#) for the WHO), despite [this](#) being [pushed](#) for by [TPLF](#) activists and a handful of [politicians](#).¹⁵³ The Economist, for all its unproven accusations, was among the few big newspapers that did not use this term. The NGO Genocide Watch [declared](#) a ‘Genocide Emergency Alert’, though this was not exclusively for Tigray, and it also [implicated](#) the TPLF.¹⁵⁴

Still, the TPLF’s claim about a “Tigray genocide” was relentlessly promoted by most of the media and by its preferred academics, [even](#) after [the](#) peace agreement.¹⁵⁵

¹⁵² See, for instance, the article in The National News by Bryant Harris on December 1, 2021: “US halts decision on genocide determination to pursue diplomacy in Ethiopia”.

¹⁵³ In the article “Bill in US Congress could lead to Tigray genocide designation” published in The National News on September 24, 2021, Bryant Harris mentions Representative Tom Malinowski.

¹⁵⁴ On November 21, the organization wrote on its website: “Genocide Watch is issuing a Genocide Emergency Alert regarding the Ethiopian government’s persecution of the Tigrayan people in its war with the Tigray People’s Liberation Front (TPLF). Genocide Watch also condemns the TPLF’s targeting of the Amhara ethnic group.”

¹⁵⁵ A good example is Africa correspondent Geoffrey York’s article “Recognize genocide in Ethiopia’s Tigray region, experts urge Canadian committee”, published in The Globe and Mail (Canada) on November 6, 2022, just four days after the Pretoria Peace Agreement had proved the dire warnings about imminent mass killings wrong. Throughout the war, Geoffrey York would enlist so-called academics and experts closely associated with the campaign to promote the TPLF narrative, passing them off as neutrals.

It came to suffuse mainstream coverage, and was often stated as fact, including in the [headline](#).¹⁵⁶

Western diplomats had to be seen to ‘do something’ or at least ‘say something’, but they usually avoided the genocide label. As Alex de Waal [admitted](#) on May 29, 2021, there was fear in official circles that it would “inflame emotions that would impede, not facilitate, a solution”.¹⁵⁷ And yet, soon after, the Finnish foreign minister and special EU envoy to Ethiopia, Pekka Haavisto, all but spelt it out. On June 15, 2021, he held an [online briefing](#) with a European Parliamentary Committee.¹⁵⁸ During the final Q&A, he made all [hell break loose](#): “When I met Ethiopian leaders in February, they really used this kind of language, that they are going to destroy the Tigrayans, they’re going to wipe out the Tigrayans for one hundred years and, and so forth.” He then asked rhetorically: “If you wipe out your national minority, what is it?” Well, everyone knew which word to fill in. And nobody cared for his little [caveat](#), “if this is true”.

Kjetil Tronvoll, among many others, [pounced](#) on this with glee, saying it “revealed” that “Abiy Ahmed had told him [Mr. Haavisto] quite clearly that we shall *wipe them out, we’re gonna kill them all.*”

It is highly improbable that the Ethiopian leadership would talk in such terms to anyone, let alone to an EU envoy, but even if, hypothetically speaking, they did, what brought such a senior diplomat to make such a serious claim fully four months later? Notice, it was *not* scripted. It was a spontaneous response to a question from Irish MEP Mick Wallace, a far-left, ‘[anti-imperialist](#)’ firebrand who sat in the parliamentary chamber wearing the Tigrayan flag as his face mask. Mr. Haavisto was manifestly not quoting but paraphrasing (“they really used this kind of language”). This is a remarkably flippant manner in which to accuse of plotting genocide!

The Ethiopian Ministry of Foreign Affairs [reacted](#) strongly in an official letter on June 18, [calling](#) it “utterly irresponsible, outrageous and undiplomatic”. Mr. Haavisto seemed genuinely perplexed that his words had such an impact, not only as a propaganda coup for [Mick Wallace](#) and for the [TPLF](#), whose supporters never cease to [bring it up](#), but [also](#) as [an insult](#) to [Ethiopians](#), who were incensed by the inflammatory allegation and expressed their anger in letters to the press and in international forums.

¹⁵⁶ For instance, “There’s Genocide in Tigray, but Nobody’s Talking About it – the reasons range from internet shutdown to just pure racism”, by David Volodzko, published in *The Nation* on May 10, 2022. The main sources were Dr. Tedros, Professor Nyssen and the “Tigrayan activist” Meaza Gebremedhin.

¹⁵⁷ The BBC website on May 29, 2021: “Ethiopia Tigray Crisis: Warnings of genocide and famine”, by Alex de Waal.

¹⁵⁸ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dnXwurdG6aw>

Mr. Haavisto has never elaborated on who said what to him. He may have heard something and made the usual mistake of conflating the TPLF with the Tigrayan people. There is actually no evidence that Pekka Haavisto was in cahoots with the TPLF. Because, in another part of his briefing that got no attention, he [described](#) how humanitarian aid had improved somewhat, but that the main impediment was the danger of moving around inside an unpredictable war zone. This was off-message with the TPLF line, which sought to blame the lack of access on government obstruction. Most likely, Mr. Haavisto fell for “the danger of the single story”, as his memories got intertwined with his impressions from Western media about public discourse in Ethiopia being full of hate speech.

Nevertheless, it ought not be so hard to understand the sheer recklessness of a foreign minister accusing another country’s leaders of declaring genocidal intentions in private, and to do so without proof, or even a name, time and place. Pekka Haavisto never apologized or paid [any professional price](#) for it. Remember: *libeling Ethiopia is a free-for-all*.

Incitement in The Guardian

One highly influential opinion piece was “The warning signs are there for genocide in Ethiopia – the world must act to prevent it”. As nearly all articles in The Guardian about Africa, it was sponsored by the Gates Foundation. This one was also promoted by every TPLF supporter. Dr. Tedros would even tweet it out a second time nearly a year later, as his side was losing the war.



Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus

@DrTedros



The warning signs are there for genocide in (Tigray) Ethiopia – the world must act to prevent it: Helen Clark, Michael Lapsley and David Alton| The Guardian |



theguardian.com

The warning signs are there for genocide in Ethiopia – the world must act to p...
The country has been scarred by violence on all sides, but there may be much worse to come as Tigrayan civilians are targeted

2:36 PM Oct 23, 2022

3,106 Retweets 251 Quotes 2,367 Likes 20 Bookmarks

It was [published](#) on November 26, 2021 by Helen Clark, a former prime minister of New Zealand and head of the UNDP, who used the opportunity to [call for](#) the UN Security Council to intervene; Michael Lapsley, an elderly South African priest with an anti-Apartheid past; and Lord David Alton, a veteran British politician. We shall see more examples of how Helen Clark and Lord Alton spent the war hate-mongering in a tone of sanctimony, dodging the politics to play on the single story about Africa. In addition to being card-carrying members of the great-and-good club, all three authors have one thing in common: no particular insight into Ethiopian affairs, or at least none that they will confess to. Thus, the op-ed had nothing to say about the causes of the war, let alone about who had the legitimacy to use force. They had followed the news about atrocities, and now they wanted to warn that “there may be much worse to come”. This came out just when big media had spent the past three weeks abuzz about the imminent fall of Addis Ababa. It was two days after President Biden’s envoy Jeffrey Feltman [called](#) such a scenario “a bloodbath situation”. But the authors clearly implied that this bloodbath situation would be justified in order to prevent an even worse

horror, namely “a possible mass killing of interned civilians in Addis and elsewhere”. As evidence, it cited “hate speech against Tigrayan people as an ethnic group”, resorting to the usual ruse of conflating statements against the TPLF with ditto against Tigrayans. Interestingly, although this is not exactly the main takeaway, the piece admitted it could be wrong: “We hope that the worst will be avoided. But to prevent genocide, we must sound the alarm before we arrive at certainty.”

On the scale of potential liabilities, it must have seemed safer for these big-name pursuers of noble causes to make one accusation of genocide too many than one too few. The journalist Martin Plaut called it a “[precautionary principle](#)” to have Ethiopia punished diplomatically, economically and militarily for genocide.¹⁵⁹ And despite the awkwardness of this op-ed mixing extreme alarmism with heavy caveats, there is no doubting its strategic brilliance to shut down debate.

In my private conversation with one American journalist who wrote about a “Tigray genocide”, he did what I interpret as beating a retreat by quibbling over the meaning of genocide. This is easy to do. The UN says it is “the intentional destruction of a people in whole or in part”, which brings little clarity, because there is rarely an objective way to determine intent, let alone what amounts to destruction of a people “in part”. Never mind the semantics. The choice between a narrow and an expansive definition of genocide is up to one’s political biases. Suffice it to notice that TPLF campaigners have used “genocide” interchangeably with “extermination”. The point is that, certainly in the African context, the word genocide infuses the public space with dread of coming across as pro-genocide.

Let us go into the head of a reasonable newspaper editor. Imagine she is approached for a response to this op-ed in The Guardian from, say, me. She hears me out arguing that baseless speculation about “mass killing of interned civilians in Addis and elsewhere” is not to “sound the alarm”, but to demonize and incite. She takes in my broader point that the genocide accusation distracts from the core issue of legitimacy to use armed force. This intrigues her, but she has limited knowledge of Ethiopia, and the tiniest risk of me being wrong daunts her. What if there is a massacre with gruesome pictures the next day? She will be hung out to dry. It can end her career. Her newspaper will be left to apologize for years. It seems safer to misjudge the conflict along with nearly everyone else and give a wide berth to dissenting views.

However, the miseducation of international audiences was not the worst consequence of the genocide accusation. The real harm was that it boosted the TPLF’s mobilization drive among Tigrayans by echoing the lie that that this war was not to avenge the TPLF leaders’ loss of wealth and power, but about the survival of the Tigrayan people. Western mainstream coverage validated the views and actions of Tigrayan ethnonationalist hardliners, which made Tigrayan moderates seem

¹⁵⁹ In a tweet by Martin Plaut on January 3, 2022.

treasonous or suicidal. It hammered home the TPLF's message to its people that it was a case of *killing or getting killed*.

I introduced this book with examples of such doomsday rhetoric, and could produce [countless more](#).¹⁶⁰ "We are left with one option – changing the situation; otherwise we'll all be massacred", was how the former Ethiopian foreign minister and senior TPLF leader, Berhane Gebre-Christos [justified](#) the march on the capital in The New York Times back in November 2021,¹⁶¹ that is, one year before military defeat made him accept state monopoly on violence as the better option.

The genocide narrative is like a *moral nuke*. Every ethical consideration is blown apart, if the alternative is annihilation. This explains why Declan Walsh seemed to be onboard with the TPLF [using](#) child soldiers, [calling them](#) "highly motivated young recruits".¹⁶²



Patrick Wight
@PatrickWight1

Replying to @BDR_Photography and @BronwynBruton

You guys have provided no evidence of the TPLF recruiting children. If some children are fighting, it's because of the ENDF and EDF order to rape, kill and starve them. They have no choice but to defend themselves. Now go buy your pro-genocide pom-poms.

1:57 AM · Jul 17, 2021 · Twitter Web App

Once the genocide narrative is believed, sending children to the front becomes, at the same time, deniable and justifiable, even to this Canadian academic and editor of the website Ethiopia Insight. However, he has since deleted this tweet and changed his Twitter handle.

¹⁶⁰ For instance, Alex de Waal's BBC article "Ethiopia Civil War: Why fighting has resumed in Tigray and Amhara" on September 1, 2022 has this to say: "In an open letter to international leaders on the eve of the fighting, TPLF leader Debretsion Gebremichael said: 'We are fast approaching the point at which we face death which ever way we turn. Our choice is only whether we perish by starvation or whether we die fighting for our rights and our dignity.'"

¹⁶¹ The New York Times on November 5, 2021: "Eight Groups Join Tigray Rebels Vowing to Oust Ethiopia's Leader" by Abdi Latif Dahir and Lara Lakes.

¹⁶² The New York Times on July 11, 2021: "How Local Guerilla Fighters Routed Ethiopia's Powerful Army", by Declan Walsh.

Kjetil Tronvoll made a valid point when he [admitted](#) that, yes, the TPLF ruled in an authoritarian manner, “but that was then, and this is now”.¹⁶³ Indeed, if the genocide label can be made to stick, then the TPLF’s awful record against democracy, human rights and equality is no longer a big deal. Mr. Tronvoll [explained](#) how his contacts inside Tigray operated “with an understanding that this is not a conventional war, but a genocide-driven war. So their feedback has been, Kjetil, listen up, we have two choices. Either we can sit in our homes and watch our mothers or wives or daughters get raped. Or we get killed. Or we can go and enlist in the army. And they choose the latter. Tens of thousands of Tigrayans have joined the army. They have no other alternative. If you sit at home, you starve to death. Or you get killed or raped. And this gives them a unique fighting spirit. This has proved to be so, and there will surely be many stories written about the heroic struggles waged by this army.”

Do we know what happened in Axum?

To give minuscule credit where minuscule credit is due, responsible governments and less sensationalist media, including *The Economist*, stopped short of using the genocide label. And they were undoubtedly correct in stating that war crimes occurred on both sides. Probably the most iconic of these became known as *the Axum massacre*, dated to the early days of the war, when Eritrean and Ethiopian soldiers had just entered Tigray, struggling to suppress the TPLF insurgency.

As of today, the short answer to the question above is: no, we do *not* know what happened in Axum. In late November 2023, the massacre was ceremoniously commemorated, at least on social media, but no clear description was offered of what was being commemorated, that is, of happened those three years before. We ought to find out. If just a fraction of what has been claimed is true, it cries out for justice. However, after the first horror story turned out to be blatant disinformation, the media instantly forgave and moved on to another, still unproven version of events. Thus, not only mispredictions and misreporting from the front, but also thoroughly debunked atrocity testimonies, have been loudly spread and then quietly abandoned without the slightest follow-up, let alone accountability. This has been symptomatic of the war coverage, which makes the Axum massacre worth zooming in on.

It all exploded on January 9, 2021 by means of a tweet by journalist Martin Plaut.

¹⁶³ This and the next quote are from the podcast in Norwegian “Hva skjer med Etiopia: Med Kjetil Tronvoll”, as part of the series “Hva skjer med verden”, produced by Oslo Nye Høyskole, November 2021, available from multiple platforms.



Martin Plaut ✓
@martinplaut



Report: Maryam Tsiyon Church in Axum has been attacked. Locals fear the aim is to take the Ark of Covenant to Addis Ababa. As many as 750 hiding in the Church were taken outside and shot in the square.

martinplaut.com/2021/01/09/sit...



11:47 AM · Jan 9, 2021

1,144 Retweets 771 Quotes 1,208 Likes 28 Bookmarks

Axum is the cradle of Ethiopian Orthodox Christianity, famous for its ancient obelisks and stones with inscriptions in classical languages. The holiest of holy relics, the Ark of the Covenant, containing the original tablets of the Ten Commandments, is believed to be stored in the city's Church of Our Lady Mary of Zion ('Maryam Tsiyon'), shown in the picture.

At first, the gruesome martyrdom of 750 church-goers [was](#) divulged [by](#) a [list of](#) mainly [Christian](#) news [outlets](#).¹⁶⁴ At this early stage, the misdeed was [attributed](#) to

¹⁶⁴ I have dug up six examples, namely, Church Times on January 15, 2021: "Massacre 'of 750' reported in Axum church complex", by Rebecca Paveley. Christian Broadcasting Network (CBN) on January 22, 2021: "750 People Massacred at Ethiopian Church, Alleged Hiding Place of Ark of the Covenant", by Steve Warren. Coptic Solidarity on January 23, 2021: "Hundreds reportedly dead after massacre at orthodox church in Ethiopia", by the Catholic News Agency,

“Ethiopian federal troops and Amhara militia” and dated December 15, 2020.¹⁶⁵ This was [put out](#), for instance, on January 11, 2021, on the website of Lord David Alton, one of the three authors of the genocide warning in The Guardian, with Martin Plaut as the source. The Polish government [issued](#) a condemnation, but stopped short of placing the guilt.¹⁶⁶ Noticeably, one analyst in the Jesuit America Magazine [let](#) the accused side get in a word. He remarked on the lack of material evidence, and asked for withholding judgement.¹⁶⁷ In January 2021, the only big newspaper to mention the point-blank slaughter of the 750 seems to be The Guardian in two articles, [one](#) of which was more concerned with the danger to religious artefacts, such as the fabled ark, while the other took this [precaution](#): “The report has not been independently verified.”¹⁶⁸

The Guardian should have dug deeper into the original source, It was, as per Martin Plaut’s original [tweet](#) and [article](#), a [report](#) by EEPA.¹⁶⁹ This acronym stands for the official-sounding *Europe External Programme with Africa* and also for *Europe External Policy Advisors*, two [closely related](#) Belgian-based NGOs, whose joint [website](#) had recently removed the names of those behind the outfit. Other pages, however, still [revealed](#), as [confirmed](#) in the database of deleted internet pages,¹⁷⁰ that its founder and leader is Mirjam van Reisen. She is mentioned in the EU transparency register as director and legally responsible in 2020, although a few months into the war, her position was officially taken over by the Irishman Paddy Maguinness.

CNA. Independent Catholic News (ICN) on January 23, 2021: “Ethiopia: massacre at historic church + update”, by Fionn Shiner. Metro Voice on January 27, 2021: “750 Christians killed at Ethiopian church that is said to house Ark of the Covenant”, also by Steve Warren from the Christian Broadcasting Network. Christians United for Israel (CUFI) on January 29, 2021: “750 people massacred at Ethiopian church that claims to hide the Ark of the Covenant”, author not indicated.

¹⁶⁵ Situation Report EEPA HORN No. 53, January 12, 2021.

¹⁶⁶ Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Republic of Poland on January 22, 2021: “Statement regarding the massacre in front of the Church of Our Lady Mary of Zion in Axum in the Tigray Region”.

¹⁶⁷ America magazine, the Jesuit Review on January 29, 2021 (with several updates since then): “Were Orthodox Christians Massacred in Ethiopia?”, by Kevin Clarke.

¹⁶⁸ The Guardian on January 24, 2021: “Fabled Ark could be among ancient treasures in danger in Ethiopia’s deadly war”, by Harriet Sherwood, and also on January 24, 2021, “Ethiopia’s leader must answer for the high cost of the hidden war in Tigray”, by Simon Tisdall.

¹⁶⁹ Situation Report EEPA HORN No. 53, January 12, 2021.

¹⁷⁰ https://web.archive.org/web/20180504233623/https://www.eepa.be/?page_id=119

ERITREA'S ROLE IN THE TIGRAY GENOCIDE

Prof. Kjetil Tronvoll
Peace & Conflict studies researcher
specializing in Eritrea, Ethiopia &
Zanzibar

Prof. Mirjam Van Reisen
Chair International Relations,
Tilburg University

SOMA Martin Plaut
Journalist specializing in the Horn
of Africa & Southern Africa

TIME
2:00 PM EST

DATE
01 November, 2022

A lineup of like-minded speakers.

The Dutch university professor Mirjam van Reisen has long been known for [activism](#) alongside the Eritrean exile community, a small part of which, and her more than anyone, saw the war through the lens of 'my enemy's enemy is my friend'. Thus, she spent the war churning out pro-rebel disinformation, including on Twitter for others to retweet. Here are some examples, which have since been deleted.



Mirjam van Reisen

@mvreisen

#Tigray announces that TDF was fighting against more than 100 divisions in the last three weeks and defeated the majority. There are still #Eritrean divisions in Sheraro in Western #Tigray. These may be in difficulty. TDF confident it will be able to defeat these invading troops.

17:37 · 13 Sep 22 · [Twitter for iPhone](#)

661 Retweets **36** Quote Tweets **724** Likes



Mirjam van Reisen @mvreisen · 1d

I also receive confirmation that ENDF has lost control of Melle #Ethiopia which is critical for the Djibouti - Addis route. This is a serious development.

253 389 852



Mirjam van Reisen

@mvreisen

Update: there is still some fighting on one front in Mille #Ethiopia with one ENDF mechanized force left.

22:27 · 14 Nov 21 · [Twitter for iPhone](#)

♥ Martin Plaut and Hayelom Kebede liked



Mirjam van Reisen

@mvreisen

[#Ethiopian](#) and [#Eritrean](#) forces have started putting [#Tigray](#) youth in concentration camps after they are rounding up hundreds of young people from Sheraro and Shire. They are taken to concentration camps in Adi Goshu and Adi Tsetser areas, I am told.

14:49 · 23 Oct 22 · [Twitter for iPhone](#)

410 Retweets **30** Quote Tweets **201** Likes

Sensible observers, whether or not they knew about Mirjam van Reisen being behind EEPA, or were aware of Martin Plaut's penchant for fanning the flames, dismissed the initial report, seeing it as an attempt to stir religious emotions.



Armed Conflict Location & Event Data Project ✓ @ACL... · Jan 12

There is no credible evidence that an attack in Axum has led to 750 deaths [#Ethiopia](#)

This conflict, like all conflicts, is awful. Pushing false information about events does not help, and is a hindrance to understanding who can be helped and what can be done.

🗨️ 137

↻ 165

♥ 198



A fabrication and a fig leaf

Then, on February 18, 2021, an outlet as big and reputed as Associated Press [took](#) the bait with the article headlined “‘Horrible’: witnesses recall massacre in Ethiopian holy city”. Reporting all the way from Nairobi, Kenya, correspondent Cara Anna started out: “Bodies with gunshot wounds lay in the street for days in Ethiopia’s holiest city. At night, residents listened in horror as hyenas fed on the corpses of people they knew.” Apart from changing the perpetrators from Ethiopians to Eritreans and the date from December 15 to “late November”, Cara Anna confirmed Martin Plaut’s and EEPA’s

version of the bloodbath in the central square by quoting the deacon, “who spoke on the condition of anonymity” about “soldiers bursting into the church, cornering and dragging out worshippers and shooting at those who fled”, with a death toll of “some 800”. When this was published, the federal government was tenuously in control of Axum, where it had restored the communications network. This had enabled Cara Anna to conduct [phone](#) interviews with various unidentified people from the city. She [concluded](#) that: “Ethiopia’s narrative, however, has crumbled as witnesses like the deacon emerge”. It was later discovered that Alula Solomon, a prominent [figure](#) in the TPLF propaganda apparatus, had [tweeted](#) in Tigrinya about Cara Anna reaching out to him for sources on the Axum massacre.

Such a prestigious news agency lending its credibility to the story opened the floodgates. The [tabloids](#) went wild,¹⁷¹ and [several](#) others [followed](#),¹⁷² usually [referring](#) to Associated Press or to its sources, showcasing either the [hyenas](#)¹⁷³ or how it happened in a [place](#) that is to Ethiopian [orthodoxy](#) what Saint Peter’s Basilica is to Roman Catholicism.¹⁷⁴ Some [continued](#) to describe the perpetrators as Ethiopian troops.¹⁷⁵

The story was drawing massive attention, so the world-renowned human-rights organization Amnesty International launched an investigation. On February 26, it published its [report](#) “Ethiopia: The Massacre in Axum”. It contained enough horrors for Martin Plaut to boast about being [vindicated](#),¹⁷⁶ which testifies to how little he cares for accuracy, because it was about bloodshed that had been spread out all across

¹⁷¹ For example, The New York Post on February 20, 2021: “At least 800 Ethiopians killed after defending ‘Ark of the Covenant’”, by Elizabeth Elizalde.

¹⁷² For example, The Sun on February 21, 2021: “Sacred Treasure: At least 800 worshippers die defending the ‘Ark of the Covenant’ from looters amid ethnic massacre in Ethiopia”, by Katie Davis.

¹⁷³ The hyenas were headlined in The Times on February 19: “Tigray: Hyenas pick over the unburied dead of Ethiopian war”, by Jane Flanagan.

¹⁷⁴ The religious aspect was played up in The Daily Mail on February 20, 2021: “Defenders of the lost ark: Hundreds of worshippers protected Ark of the Covenant as Ethiopian rebels and soldiers battled near church where it is secured, it was revealed”, by Harry Howard for Mail Online. And in a follow-up article in The New York Post on February 23: “Christians in Ethiopia never saw ‘Ark of the Covenant’ they died for”, by Lee Brown.

¹⁷⁵ The New York Post on February 20, 2021 wrote: “The battle between Ethiopian soldiers and rebel fighters happened in the fall, [The Sunday Times reported](#), but it is only being reported now.”

¹⁷⁶ On February 26, 2021, Martin Plaut tweeted: “Now that the Amnesty International report has been published, is @ACLED going to publish a reassessment of its assertion that there was “no credible evidence” of the attack on Axum leading to hundreds of deaths?” In fact, what ACLED had called into question was Martin Plaut’s claim about a church segregation being dragged out and gunned down by Ethiopian soldiers on December 15, 2020, none of which was borne out by Amnesty International’s report.

Axum, with absolutely nothing about any church congregation being dragged out and gunned down.

That initial version of the Axum story was not only a fabrication, but also a poor one that could not be sustained over time. There is no precedent of 750-800 people being murdered in one go in the most central open space of a relatively modern city, and remaining a secret for over a month. There are plenty of cameras, and many people had been travelling in and out of this urban area of about 67,000 people. The new claim about a citywide killing spree, by contrast, could make a case for plausibility.

According to the Amnesty report, after causing random casualties by “indiscriminately shelling the city”, Eritrean and Ethiopian soldiers entered Axum together on November 19, 2020. Witnesses say that Eritrean forces then committed extrajudicial executions, as well as widespread looting. On Saturday morning, November 28, a group as small as 50-80 TPLF fighters attacked an Eritrean position at a nearby mountain, and were joined by local youths “with improvised weapons, such as knives, sticks and stones”. This was as suicidal as it sounds, and the response of the Eritrean soldiers, still according to the Amnesty report, was to go on a revenge rampage inside the city, killing “hundreds of civilians” during a 24-hour period on November 28-29. As a side note not mentioned in the Amnesty report, early on Sunday, November 29, TPLF leader Debretsion Gebremichael texted to [Reuters](#) that his forces had retaken Axum,¹⁷⁷ but presumably this was just more fog of war. What the Amnesty report describes going on at that time is a frenzy of house-to-house searches for teenage and adult men, who are summarily executed. This was reminiscent of Tigrayan militiamen’s massacre two and a half weeks earlier in Mai-Kadra.

So how did Amnesty gather this information? With the war still raging, there was no question of travelling to Axum. Instead, eleven days were spent talking to “41 witnesses and survivors of the massacre”, who could not be named “given security concerns”. Testimonies were either delivered face-to-face in a refugee camp of Tigrayans in Sudan, or by means of “numerous phone interviews with witnesses in Axum”. Crucially, it says nothing about how these 41 persons were identified or by whom, which obviously raises suspicion that they were selected and coached by the TPLF.

The first part of the Amnesty report mostly reproduces the testimonies verbatim. Then it tends towards its own narration of the witnesses’ accounts, tacitly assuming that all 41 speak the truth, albeit still garnished with quotes, such as this from a man

¹⁷⁷ According to Reuters: “In text messages on Sunday [November 29, 2020], he [Debretsion Gebremichael] said that his forces had shot down an Ethiopian military plane and captured the pilot, and had also retaken the town of Axum. From the article “Tigray forces claim to have shot down Ethiopian plane, taken town”, published on November 30, 2020, at 10.16am local time.

who said he saw six men killed through his window on 29 November: “They lined them up and shot them in the back from behind”, he says. This must be the inspiration for a leader in *The Economist* on October 9, 2021. It states as fact, without indicating any source, [that](#): “Late last year in the city of Axum, for instance, Eritrean troops fighting alongside Ethiopian forces murdered hundreds of civilians, mostly men and boys. Some were lined up and shot in the back.” In the Amnesty report, the same witness goes on to say that the soldiers killed three people with one bullet. “They were lined up perfectly”, he explains.

Amnesty makes no mention of hyenas, but says that, on Sunday morning, November 29, Eritrean soldiers were still preventing residents from picking up the bodies. Then: “On the request of local elders, Ethiopian soldiers gave permission for people to bury the dead in the late afternoon on 29 November. Most of the dead bodies appear to have been buried on 30 November, but witnesses said that people found many additional bodies in the days that followed. (...) The bodies were brought to the Arba’etu Ensessa Church (next to the Axum Tsion St Mary Church), as well as [various other churches].” One witness said up to ten bodies at a time were piled onto carts. Another “estimated that he saw 400 bodies on 30 November alone”.

The conclusion is: “Amnesty International was unable to calculate the massacre’s precise death toll, but estimates that hundreds of people were killed”.

The Amnesty report includes two satellite images with three places of recently “disturbed earth” consistent with mass graves. But this is a moot point. Nobody denies that there was a war going on at the time with a high death count. And no other photographic material was even mentioned. Ethiopian city dwellers do have smartphones. The power grid might have been down for days, but this is so frequent that many have generators, power banks and solar chargers. It stretches belief that the people attacked a fortified position of a professional army, but nobody took sneak photos or videos of piles of dead bodies spread all over the streets for days.

Human Rights Watch did indeed present five videos one week later, as part of its [Axum massacre report](#), which was even shorter than Amnesty’s and based on 28 witness statements. The first is of Brana Hotel hit by artillery on November 25. The other four were accompanied by bold claims, but showed absolutely nothing, even supposing that they were authentic, correctly dated and without soundtrack alterations. Anyone can examine them.¹⁷⁸ The toughest [image](#) to watch is that of a group of people carrying a dead body on a stretcher, though only the hand is visible.

Returning to the mass burials as recounted in the Amnesty report: “30 November marked the anniversary of St Mary, a major celebration in Axum, which on another

¹⁷⁸ At the time of publication, the link is: <https://www.hrw.org/news/2021/03/05/ethiopia-eritrean-forces-massacre-tigray-civilians>

year would have drawn the faithful from across Ethiopia and tourists from around the world. In light of the exceptional circumstances, the celebrations were canceled.”

This is demonstrably false, because the religious festival *was* held. Fana Television, a state-owned channel, had a crew in Axum to cover it. A [clip](#) was soon after uploaded to YouTube,¹⁷⁹ and later translated from Amharic into [English](#) by the Eritrean foreign service.¹⁸⁰ It shows 100-200 people dressed up for the occasion. An Ethiopian flag can be glanced in the background. The faithful interviewed on screen lament the war and the consequent poor turnout for the event, but say that things are now peaceful. There has been no expression of regret by Amnesty International over this clear and grave error in such a serious report.

It is not completely impossible, albeit hard to imagine, that simultaneously, just across the square from these celebrations, carts were being pushed around with up to ten bodies each, while others were lying around decomposing, and hundreds of victims were being laid to rest, none of which was photographed by any of the thousands of smartphones in the city. At least this is what we should now believe, according to the numerous respectable media and personalities invoking the Amnesty report.

But nobody ever tried to contend that the festival was held where 750-800 worshippers had just been sprayed with bullets and eaten by hyenas. That incendiary version with religious overtones had to be definitively abandoned. Yet it had been propagated by the EEPA report, amplified by Martin Plaut, and then given so much credence by Cara Anna from Associated Press that it was splashed on headlines across the world.

So how did the world’s media, big and small, face up to having run way too fast with a fabrication? Did they do a *mea culpa*? Did they learn a lesson about sharpening their critical faculties so as to give the public a reason to trust them again?

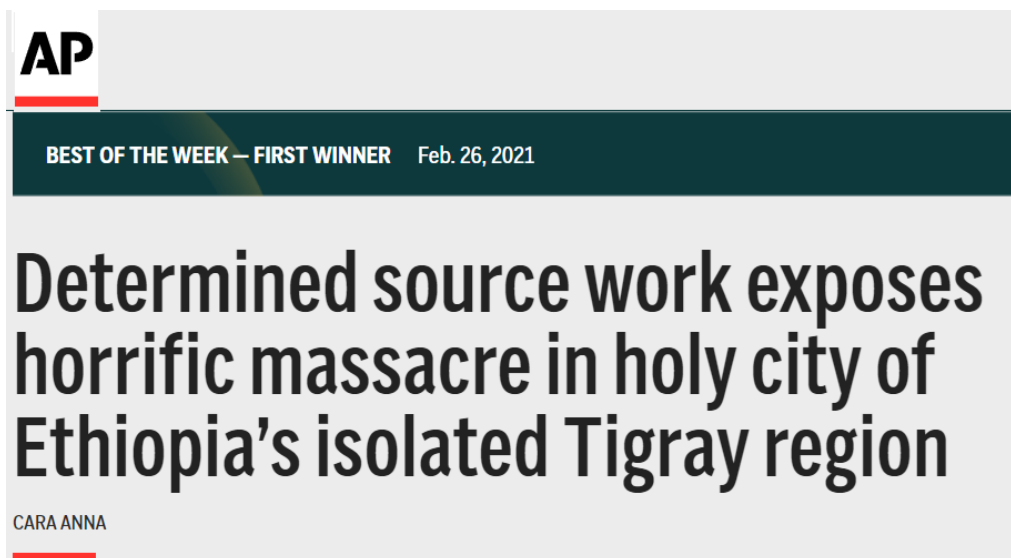
Not at all. They quietly ditched the church massacre and loudly adopted Amnesty’s completely different story. And they did so instantly and uncritically, so as to forget and dissipate accountability for a month and a half of spreading a barefaced lie. There was not a hint of regret or retraction. In fact, Cara Anna had the jaw-dropping chutzpah to [write](#): “The new [Amnesty] report echoed the findings of an Associated Press story last week”.¹⁸¹ And a few days later, she [went on](#): “The Associated Press and Amnesty International have separately documented a massacre

¹⁷⁹ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=flaBCMPuQ4U>

¹⁸⁰ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PXyhikpFmJU>

¹⁸¹ Associated Press News on February 28, 2021: “Amnesty Report describes Axum massacre in Ethiopia’s Tigray”, by Cara Anna.

of several hundred people.”¹⁸² She actually insisted that she had “documented” something! These were the truth contortions with which she wiggled out of avidly endorsing a macabre false testimony, which had sent shockwaves around the globe. The Amnesty report served as a fig leaf. It was an ill-fitting one for sure, but good enough for other big media [to go](#) along with the pretense that the Associated Press article and the Amnesty report had sort of shown the same thing, as if all the hair-raising specifics had been just a little innocent adornment.¹⁸³



On the same day that the Amnesty report came out and prompted every news outlet, including the Associated Press, to quietly ditch Cara Anna's insanely incendiary story from Axum, Associated Press [awarded](#) her the “Best of the Week”, gushing that: “Anna’s exclusive reporting not only scooped all other media, she was ahead of human rights groups who had been investigating what happened in Axum.” But no other investigation made findings that conferred any credibility on Cara Anna’s “determined source work”.

¹⁸² Associated Press News on March 3, 2021: “Ethiopia now calls Axum massacre allegations ‘credible’”, by Cara Anna. In this article, the Ethiopian authorities’ decision to investigate what happened in Axum is spun by Cara Anna as a semi-confession. She also writes that “alarm grows over the fate of the region’s [Tigray’s] 6 million people”, thus echoing the TPLF’s line that the alternative to its insurgency is a full-fledged genocide.

¹⁸³ For example, The Telegraph wrote on April 7, 2021: “In February, AP and Amnesty published accounts of several hundred people being killed by Eritrean soldiers in Tigray’s holy city of Axum”, giving the false impression that these completely different accounts confirmed one another. From the article “‘Their bodies were torn into pieces’: Ethiopian and Eritrean troops accused of massacre in Tigray”, by Lucy Kassa.

Thus, Cara Anna could carry on producing vaguely-sourced reports of insane cruelty against Tigrayans, winning [accolades](#)¹⁸⁴ and being [paraded](#) before the next generation of journalists as an idol and an inspiration.¹⁸⁵ However, I went undercover online as a young man pretending to have scripted a student movie based on her version of the Axum massacre. She took the bait, and a not unamusing exchange ensued, reproduced in its entirety with my comments in an annex to this book. Wary of incriminating herself from an Associated Press email account, she could neither admit her story had been false nor stand by its veracity.

Though other media took Cara Anna's church-massacre story to be true for only a week, it lives on in the realm of myth. It continues to pop up, usually with a touch of ambiguity. For instance, speaking in the British House of Lords shortly after the peace agreement, Lord David Alton [conjured up](#) Cara Anna's anonymous deacon saying "800 civilians had been executed", albeit this time without specifying the location or the perpetrators. He added the Amnesty version on top.¹⁸⁶

Other investigations

As soon as the security situation allowed, the Ethiopian Human Rights Commission (EHRC) dispatched a rapid investigation [mission](#) from February 27 to March 5, 2021.¹⁸⁷ It also relied mainly on eye witnesses, who could have been coached to lie, given the TPLF's tight control of the population. But at least they were interviewed face-to-face and comprised a large and diverse group of people in Axum. They talk of Eritrean soldiers committing extrajudicial executions, identical or similar to those in the Amnesty report, albeit without any claim to have seen hundreds of dead bodies, or to have carted ten at a time. There are also testimonies about looting both by Eritreans and by locals who took advantage of the breakdown in law and order. While the Amnesty report often summarizes its sources, as if they had spoken with one voice that could be distilled into an indisputable finding, the EHRC report contains more individual and often differing accounts. This makes for fewer conclusions, but also comes across as more credible. While the locals decry the inaction of the ENDF (federal

¹⁸⁴ The Pulitzer Center boasts of funding her and her Associated Press team's coverage of Ethiopia's Tigray conflict, which won the AP's "top journalism award" in 2021.

¹⁸⁵ According to Elon University's website on November 15, 2022: "Pulitzer Center grantee Cara Anna visits communications classes" by Tommy Kopetskie, which says: "The Associated Press correspondent visited campus as part of Elon's partnership in the Pulitzer Center's Campus Consortium, speaking with nine classes and dozens of students. (...) Anna's important and insightful work led to the Ethiopian government barring her from the country. (...) Accompanying Anna during her visit was Mikaela Schmitt, program coordinator for Outreach and Campus Consortium for the Pulitzer Center."

¹⁸⁶ https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3l_p06a6CoE&t=132s

¹⁸⁷ The Ethiopian Human Rights Commission in March 2021: "Investigation into Grave Human Rights Violations in Aksum City, Report on Preliminary Findings."

army), they recount that “on December 23, an attempt by Eritrean soldiers to enter Aksum Tsion Church to loot it was foiled by the combined efforts of ENDF and residents.” The EHRC report suggests a more moderate estimated death toll of “over a hundred civilians”. When this came out, once again, Martin Plaut [expressed](#) a sense of vindication, blithely passing over his previous claims.¹⁸⁸

The EHRC hits a compromise note as regards the festival: “Although the November 30 Aksum Tsion holiday was marked within the Church’s compound, they [residents of Axum] have been saddened that the media did not report the state of grief the city was in.”

Finally, Ethiopia’s Attorney General sent a team of [criminal investigators](#) to Axum who spoke to 95 witnesses and gathered “documentary evidences” up until May 3, 2021.¹⁸⁹ They gave a completely different account of what caused the deaths. The Ethiopian army had withdrawn from Axum on November 27 to fight elsewhere, leaving a small number of Eritrean troops “stationed in the mountainous area of the city”. They were attacked, not by 50-80 TPLF soldiers, as claimed in the Amnesty report, but by 1,500 local youths, who had been trained and armed by the TPLF. Heavy fighting ensued, resulting in a death toll of 93.

The Attorney General also [received](#) 116 denunciations of rape, and identified some perpetrators as members of the federal army and police, transferring the prosecution of these cases to the military courts. The investigation [blamed](#) the TPLF for some of the increase in crime due to its “release of tens of thousands of notorious criminals from prison and attiring them with ENDF’s and Eritrean military uniforms”.

Again, I make no claim to know what happened in Axum. The point is that finding out calls for hard-nosed investigators on the ground. What they must look for is not the stories that will grab the attention of the international community, but the kind of evidence that will hold up in court. Even the EHRC’s effort falls short of that. It is fair to dispute the impartiality of the EHRC and the Attorney General. But nor will it do for activism-oriented human-rights organizations to draw exclusively on anonymous witness accounts from one side.

¹⁸⁸ Martin Plaut tweets on March 24, 2021: “Good to see the Ethiopian Human Rights Commission report on Axum, which broadly backs the earlier findings by Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch. Eritrean troops “killed over 100 civilians”. Final figure likely to be much higher.”

¹⁸⁹ Reported in English by Fana Broadcasting Corporate on May 10, 2021: “AG [Attorney General] Unveils Report Concerning Criminal Investigation On Crimes Committed In Axum City”.



Michael Rubin

@mrubin1971

Join April 3 (11a NY/5p Geneva): Tigayan Diaspora Council in Europe webinar on justice for [#Ethiopia](#), [#Eritrea](#) crimes in [#Tigray](#). Panelists: [@reda_getachew](#), [@LaetitiaBader](#), [@FissehaTekle](#), [@wdavison10](#), [@mrubin1971](#), [@GualJeganu](#). Moderator: [@Melhabtu](#)

Zoom: 84591442860

Pass: 044675

8:18 PM · Mar 27, 2023 · **13.8K** Views

On April 3, 2023, Human Rights Watch (HRW) Director for the Horn of Africa, Laetitia Bader, and Amnesty International (AI) Researcher for Ethiopia, Fisseha Tekle, were invited by a fiercely pro-TPLF organization to discuss “justice for war crimes”. Fellow panelists included Getachew Reda, who needs no further introduction, Michael Rubin, the one journalist who [advocated](#) for the West to arm the TPLF, and [Millette](#) Birhanemaskel, a prominent champion of the TPLF insurgency. The debate was moderated by [Melat](#) Habtu, yet another ardent pro-TPLF activist. Although HRW and AI have also denounced TPLF’s war crimes, there is no example of their representatives attending similarly partisan events with the other side in the war.

There is nothing about Amnesty International today that justifies [accepting](#) its claims so readily. Over the past decade, this worldwide entity, with a vast contingent of volunteers and some [pampered](#) executives,¹⁹⁰ has expanded its founding focus on prisoners of conscience to every issue under the sun, [advocating](#) for sex work to be legalized, [demanding](#) medicalization of trans children, [campaigning](#) for a [far-left constitution](#) in Chile, [fighting](#) for a feminist internet. As a result, its saintly aura has worn off, as it is being increasingly treated with the same suspicion as any other big player with an ideological agenda. For instance, in August 2022, after it accused Ukraine of violating international humanitarian law, it was [blasted](#) for [lack](#) of professionalism, thanks to its arguments being carefully dissected and fiercely challenged.

Alas, there was no chance of its work on Ethiopia being subjected to such scrutiny. With the notable [exception](#) of Francesca Ronchin reporting for Italy’s Panorama magazine¹⁹¹, established media gave [Ethiopian](#) and [Eritrean](#) objections short shrift. The framing of the war within the single story about Africa laid the groundwork for believing the worst. No matter how flimsy the evidence, news editors’ backs would be

¹⁹⁰ The high salaries and massive payoff packages to its senior figures Irene Khan and Kate Gilmore caused some scandal in March 2011.

¹⁹¹ Panorama on March 25, 2021: “Axum: il massacro denunciato dalle ong”, by Francesca Ronchin.

adequately covered by pointing to a Western-based organization as the source. Thus, Amnesty International basked in the glory of yore, when its moral authority went unquestioned on all things human rights. Only a big war in Africa could have provided such an opportunity. Inability to meet basic standards of proof was not going to get in the way.

The strategic importance of Welkait

When the war broke out, military strategists zoomed in on the north-western corner of Ethiopia. Not only is it fiercely disputed between Amhara and Tigray Region. It also borders Sudan, where the TPLF had a safe haven to run [camps](#) and procure weapons. Within a few weeks of hostilities, the TPLF had been dislodged everywhere west of the Tekeze River. Thus, its arms supply line was reduced to secret [flights](#) from Sudan that would get [shot](#) down.¹⁹² To dissuade the rebels from trying to retake the area, a vast contingent of mainly Amhara and Eritrean troops took up defensive positions there. This may well have decided the outcome of the war.

Alas, this land could also become the spark that reignites the war. It is green and bountiful, yet also low-lying and hence hot, malaria-infested and sparsely populated. It has been known for ages as the provinces of Kafta Humera, Welkait, Tegede (Tsegede in Tigrinya) and Telemt (Tselemti). Ethiopians refer to these four provinces collectively as Welkait (also transcribed into the Roman alphabet as Wolqayit, Walkeit, etc.). However, during the war, international media and organizations consistently called it “Western Tigray”. This term was coined by the TPLF as late as the 1990s in pursuit of an ethnonationalist agenda that is the root cause of the current tragedy in this territory. We shall return to this in a moment.

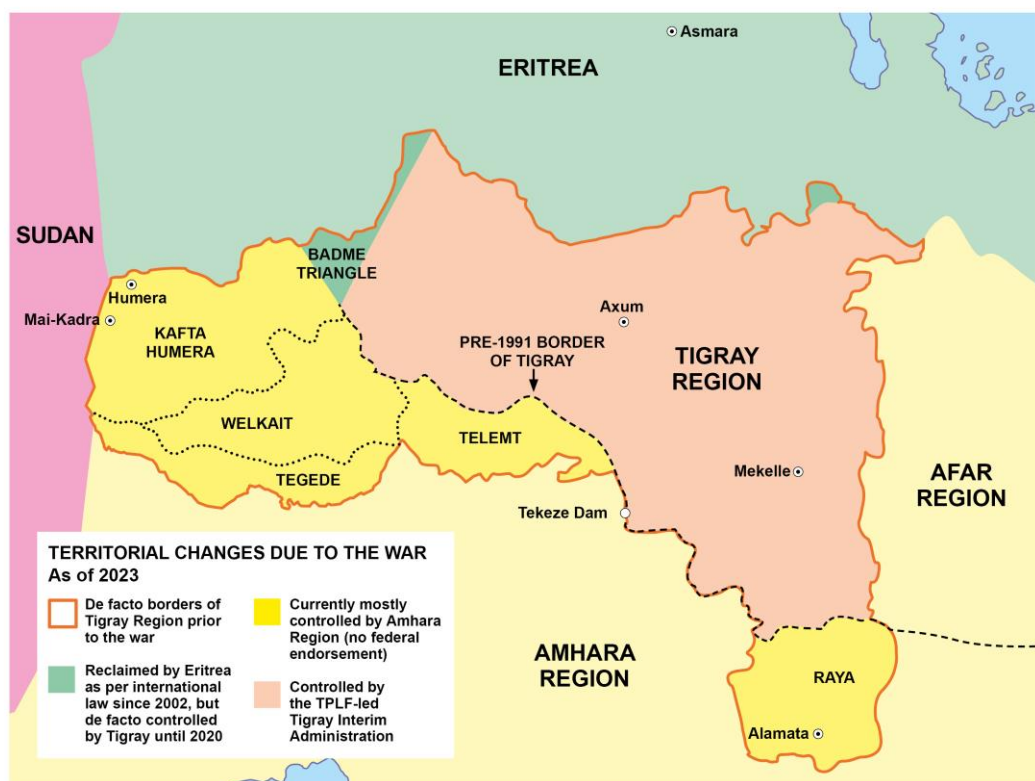
Although reliable investigations so far have been scanty, there is no doubt that atrocities were committed on both sides during the war in Welkait, starting with the Mai-Kadra massacre described in Part 2. The widely-[quoted](#) figure of 700,000 Tigrayans who fled “Western Tigray”¹⁹³ would be more than the total population, according to various censuses from the TPLF/EPRDF era. However, the testimonies of such displaced people about property crimes, violence and threats of violence against them for their ethnicity are simply too numerous, and also contain too much nuance, to be written off as all TPLF propaganda. Civil war tends to empower the extremists. In this area, the Amhara Fano militia was particularly active. It was composed of volunteers and was prone to attract the most hateful ethnonationalists. Even if truth became mixed up with propaganda, there is no doubt that innocent Tigrayans in Welkait suffered gut-wrenching injustice.

¹⁹² Reported, for instance, in Sudan Tribune on August 24, 2022: “Ethiopia downed plane carrying weapons to TPLF rebels”.

¹⁹³ This figure is given, for example, in the report of Human Rights Watch on April 6, 2022: “We will erase you from this land”.

What should be the solution then? The new Tigray Interim Administration [demands](#) the reincorporation into Tigray. “Over our dead bodies”, [say](#) the Amharas who now control Welkait and equate a TPLF takeover with more Mai-Kadras. But if Amharas and Tigrayans get along fine in Addis Ababa and elsewhere, why is there so much bad blood between them in Welkait?

As mentioned in Part 2, when the TPLF took power on the national stage in 1991, it introduced so-called ethnic federalism. Still in force, this system currently provides for regional autonomy to seven of Ethiopia’s over 80 ethnicities (though the Harari are actually a small minority in the tiny [Harari](#) Region), while two cities and four regions have been conceived as multiethnic. Sadly, this placing of ethnicity on the political map, however half-baked, has given rise to a series of border disputes within the same country, incentivizing demographic engineering by force. A particularly [brutal](#) case became the TPLF’s drive to [stamp out](#) the Amharic-speaking Welkait identity. It [began](#) with the incursions of TPLF guerilla fighters in the 1980s, when the area was administered from the Amhara city of Gondar. It culminated with the Mai-Kadra massacre in the dying days of rule from the Tigrayan capital Mekelle.



I lack the knowledge to weigh in on the hotly-debated demographic composition of Welkait throughout the centuries. But rather than focusing on whether it is the western part of Tigray or the northern part of Amhara, it is important to ask why the ethno-linguistic map of Ethiopia has become so obsessed over. Historically, borders

between provinces have been soft, or determined by aristocracy and geography, not ethnicity. In many parts of the country, the norm is multilingualism, mixed families and fluid identities.

Pre Axumite and Axumite kingdom

Main article: [Kingdom of Aksum](#)

Geographical and anthropological evidence show that Western Tigray has been part of Tigray since Pre-Axumite times ^{[6] [7]}

Tigrayan ethnonationalists have been editing many Wikipedia articles into crude propaganda pieces. This is from [one](#) on Tigray's 'Western Zone'.

In addition to both Amharic and Tigrinya, it has long been common for people in Welkait to speak Sudanese Arabic. What matters is that, as of today, different Ethiopian citizens wish to live there, and are supposed to have the freedom of movement to do so. To the extent that foreigners involve themselves in this, it ought to be in favor of peaceful coexistence, caring about *civil* rights, not ancestral rights. Alas, some are busy fanning the flames of identity politics instead.

“This land is ours”

The signature ink had barely dried on the peace deal, when the Belgian academic and TPLF [activist](#), Jan Nyssen, dug even deeper than he had [done already](#)¹⁹⁴ into the files of ancient Africa explorers in order to [publish](#) a “comprehensive analysis of historical maps and records”.¹⁹⁵ Though he found no old usage of the term Western Tigray, this is what he argues that it has been historically and should be today.

Professor Nyssen was particularly eager to correct Tibor Nagy, a former US Ambassador to Ethiopia. Mr. Nagy also served as President Trump’s Assistant Secretary of African Affairs, and had just [written](#): “When the TPLF came to power, they

¹⁹⁴ A Jan Nyssen article “Unearthed evidence maps out Western Tigray dispute”, published in Ethiopia Insight on May 13, 2022, claimed that: “Two recently discovered 19th-century maps show Welkait as part of Tigray”.

¹⁹⁵ Ethiopia Insight on November 17, 2022: “Amhara nationalist claims over Western Tigray are a smokescreen for ethnic cleansing”, by Jan Nyssen.

transferred a fertile section of Amhara State (Welkait district) to Tigray, renaming it Western Tigray, and brought in ethnic Tigrayans to displace ethnic Amharas”.¹⁹⁶

Indeed, the TPLF imposed an unprecedented regime of ethnic [chauvinism](#) on the [population](#) of Welkait.¹⁹⁷ This crucial background was not, however, what Jan Nyssen was moved to address. Instead, he pointed out that there was no Amhara State prior to 1991. This is true. Because, again, the country’s political map was not based on ethnicity. Arguably, pre-1991 Tigray merely describes a geographical area, whereas the TPLF’s new Tigray was conceived ideologically as an ethnic homeland. Accordingly, if this is phrased as Tigray expanding westwards into Gondar Province and southwards into Wollo Province, it is only fair to mention that Tigray also shrank in the east to make room for the new Afar Region.

Leave aside the complex arguments over ethnic federalism. Whatever region Welkait is a part of would barely have been an issue, if the TPLF had ruled it with a hands-off approach to language and identity. The renaming to Western Tigray may be no big deal by itself, but it expresses the intent. For over three decades, Welkait was turned into a laboratory for ethnonationalist extremism, which was drummed into the Tigrayans, including former TPLF fighters, who were rewarded with land there and, not least, into the local administrators. Jan Nyssen does not care to deny any of this, but he does [write](#): “The 1994 census data collected by the EPRDF [the TPLF-led government coalition, ed.] shows ethnic Tigrayans constituted 96.5% of the population in the disputed areas, while only 3% were Amharas.”

Well, yes, because in 1994, to identify as Amhara in Welkait was to invite trouble. By then, many Amharas had been pushed out. However, for the vast majority, the survival strategy was simply to identify as Tigrayan in public, sometimes with a name change. For those few who did not [already](#) speak Tigrinya, their life suddenly depended on learning it, which is, after all, no harder for an Amharic speaker than, say, learning French is for a Spanish speaker. Those who were [vociferous](#) about their Amhara identity would be [rounded](#) up and imprisoned, [tortured](#), and [killed](#). When Abiy

¹⁹⁶ The Washington Examiner on October 31, 2022: “Peace in northern Ethiopia — looking for the end of the rainbow”, by Tibor Nagy.

¹⁹⁷ An exhaustive account of this in English is the book “Tears of Welkait, Gonder and The Amhara People”, by Fitaye Assegu Abetew, published on January 1, 2021. There is a good summary of the Welkait issue in a short article by Sonja John on the London School of Economics website, titled “Civil rights activists in Welkait give hope for peace and democracy in Ethiopia”, September 13, 2021. One of the few references to this history in mainstream Western press can be found in Le Monde on April 30, 2022. Despite a headline that was hostile to Amhara aspirations, namely “Demeke Zewdu: the warlord who wants to avenge the Amhara in Ethiopia”, it admitted that: “Welkait, located on the border of Sudan and Eritrea, became part of Tigray in 1991. After the fall of the communist Derg regime, the TPLF leadership in Addis Ababa encouraged the settlement of thousands of Tigrayans on the fertile land and carried out a forced land reform that benefited party members. Thousands of Amhara were forced to flee, either because of political dissent or their land being taken away”.

Ahmed took power, he [promised](#) to address this festering sore,¹⁹⁸ which only [hardened](#) the TPLF's oppression in Welkait.¹⁹⁹

Breaking the cycle of revenge

The [history](#) taught by Tigrayan ethnonationalists takes the cycle of revenge further back, ascribing the original "annexation of Tigrayan land" to Emperor Haile Selassie as punishment for the first [Woyane Rebellion](#) in 1943.²⁰⁰ Point taken. Haile Selassie must never again rule over Tigray. But by that same token, the TPLF cannot rule over Welkait again, certainly not in the way it used to.

Tigrayan refugees should be able to return to Welkait without fear of Amhara ethnonationalist violence, in return for Amharas in Welkait feeling safe from Tigrayan ethnonationalist oppression. Building the trust to enable this will take patience. Tigrayans displaced during the war have begun to return to certain districts, but the situation remains tense, complicated by the new war in Amhara Region, fought since April 2023 between the ethnonationalist Amhara militia Fano and the federal army, to be addressed in the final Part 5.

In the other disputed area, the smaller but more densely populated district of Raya (see map above), the TPLF seems to have [sent](#) in armed men in the course of late March and April 2024, arguing that this was to safely return Tigrayan IDPs. However, it caused [thousands](#) of Amharas to [flee](#), and later other Amharas to take to the streets in [protest](#) in Alamata, the capital of Raya. Fano supporters accused the federal government of conniving with the TPLF's invasion of Raya and expect the same to happen in Welkait. They have long [expressed](#) fears that the federal government will give in to international pressure, such as that exerted by US Secretary of State Antony Blinken back in May 2021, when he [urged](#) Ethiopia to let "western Tigray" be ruled from Mekelle again.²⁰¹ However, the TPLF's move into Raya was [condemned](#) by the

¹⁹⁸ For instance, Africa News on December 2018: "Ethiopia PM to regulate border and identity disputes in regional state", by Daniel Mumbere.

¹⁹⁹ In the words of Sonja John on the London School of Economics website: "Shortly after Ahmed was appointed as Prime Minister in April 2018, he met with Welkait Committee members in Gondar. In the meeting, they agreed that the Tigray security forces must stop harassing and killing civilians. Ahmed promised that the Welkait Committee would be able to work in peace and that the Welkait question would be dealt with according to the constitution. In exchange, he demanded the Committee keep the people calm. However, while the committee members in Gondar were free, the TPLF terror has gotten worse in the annexed areas. People expressing their Amhara identity (such as speaking the language or listening to Amharic songs) were beaten, incarcerated, shot or pushed over cliffs to their deaths. In 2019, the TPLF-funded informal youth group *samri* chased many Amhara from their indigenous area in May-Kadra, the town which in November 2020 became infamously known for a massacre."

²⁰⁰ Omna Tigray has published a paper titled "Amhara Annexation of Western Tigray", August 2021.

²⁰¹ From "Statement by Secretary Antony J. Blinken on the Continuing Atrocities and Denial of Humanitarian Access in Ethiopia's Tigray Region" on May 15, 2021: "We equally urge the

Amhara regional government, which is closely allied to the federal government in the conflict with Fano. Clearly, sending Tigrayan militiamen into Raya is a violation of the Pretoria Agreement, but returning Tigrayan IDPs to Raya is an overdue implementation of it.

In an [interview](#) on Ethiopian television on July 3, 2024, the ENDF's General Berhanu Bekele admitted that, in the process of returning Tigrayan IDPs to Raya, clashes had taken place. He promised to learn the lessons from this so as to achieve a more orderly process in Welkait, which had already begun in Telemt. He also said the federal government, Amhara regional government and Tigray interim administration (the name chosen for the post-Pretoria Tigray regional government) had agreed to set up a transitional administration in Raya, though it remains unclear what this is a transition towards.

The federal government has said it will settle regional borders with referendums in disputed territories. Despite assurances that Tigrayan IDPs would return before any voting, the TPLF-led Tigray interim administration has thus far [rejected](#) this formula, while the current Amhara administration in Welkait seems to be on board. This [suggests](#) that the majority of the population in Welkait, and perhaps in Raya too, continue to identify as Amhara, regardless of what they have told census takers before. Moreover, some locals identifying partly or fully as Tigrayan could nevertheless vote for Welkait or Raya being in the Amhara Region, if this is perceived as the best chance of keeping the peace. But much will depend on who gets to vote, as both sides would like to register as many 'returnees' as possible. Moreover, it is inconceivable that the losers would recognize the result.

Meanwhile, despite the fierce war going on between Fano and the federal government, not just the Amhara regional government, but also the current Amhara administration in Welkait continues to work with the federal government. This cooperation counts on the blessing of Colonel Demeke Zewdu, a historical leader of the Welkait cause, formerly a big hero to Amhara ethnonationalists and long reviled by the TPLF. He understands that associating himself with Fano would bring him on a collision course with the federal government, hindering rather than helping Amhara control of Welkait. On its part, the federal government must know that transferring Welkait to Tigray would strain its alliance with the moderates in the Amhara regional government, and boost Amhara popular support for Fano. And yet, Tigrayan ethnonationalists will never cease to demand to get "Western Tigray" back.

Government of Ethiopia to withdraw Amhara regional forces from the Tigray region and ensure that effective control of western Tigray is returned to the Transitional Government of Tigray." It should be noticed, however, that the "Transitional Government of Tigray", albeit composed of Tigrayans, had been appointed by the federal government, that is, Antony Blinken was suggesting that Welkait should be returned to Tigray, but not to the TPLF's rule.

It is a delicate balance to keep extremists on both sides at bay, but the course charted so far makes sense: gradually disarming everyone except the federal army, and gradually enabling the return of displaced Tigrayans. Time will tell whether the holding of referendum(s) is a realistic solution.

Though outsiders have no business drawing Ethiopia's internal borders, they might support dialogue and trust-building to enable coexistence in Welkait and Raya. And also facilitate negotiations to halt the violence in Amhara Region, which is exacerbating toxic identity politics across the country and posing a huge threat to a united Ethiopia. Unsurprisingly, the hardcore TPLF camp, the same actors who portrayed Fano as particularly bloodthirsty in "Western Tigray", see the Fano rebellion as a godsend that is instrumental in bringing about the state collapse that Alex de Waal has been going on about for so long that it reeks more of a wish than a prediction. Also unsurprisingly, hardcore TPLF supporters are delighted to see their two former enemies now killing each other. And most unsurprisingly of all, the crudest of them is Martin Plaut.



Martin Plaut ✓
@martinplaut



Report from Abri Harnet - Eritrean underground: Eritrean troops pulling out of Humera and Wekayit looked rushed - as if they were not expecting to withdraw.

We expect Tigrayans will take over in the next few days; the Amhara administration has also been instructed to withdraw

9:47 · 04 May 23 · 56.9K Views

144 Retweets 27 Quotes 399 Likes



#JusticeForTigrai @haile20... · 04 May ·
Replying to @martinplaut

I hope it is true Mr. Plaut.
Thank you



1,855



Rasmus Sonderriis @RSon... · 04 May ·
Don't get your hopes up. Plaut doesn't do "true".

Stirring the pot was the essence of this fake-news tweet from Martin Plaut in May 2023. It played on Amharas' distrust regarding Welkai to incite more clashes between Fano and federal forces. Even the TPLF-supporting follower who replied was skeptical. She, along with everyone else, should take this as yet another lesson about Mr. Plaut's unscrupulous character.

One Ethiopian who became lionized in the West

Since the 1990s, the 'Tears of Welkai' has been a prominent and emotional topic for Amharas, though it has rarely featured on the international stage. At first, the West was grateful to the TPLF for getting rid of the Derg regime. And over time, the oppression in a sparsely populated north-western corner was drowned out by so many

other horrific human-rights violations across the country. Besides, the TPLF did not allow access to investigators.

But in 2021, the University of Gondar was able to move in its team of researchers, who [mapped out](#) changes of placenames, collected testimonies from locals, located holes in the ground used as prisons, and, most noticeably, dug up mass graves²⁰². Though this was covered intensely in Ethiopia, only [minor](#) Western [media](#) paid attention.

Until May 2022, when the BBC ran a shocking [story](#) suggesting that these graves were, in fact, filled with much more recent Tigrayan victims, and that the real purpose of digging them up was to do away with the evidence, carried out by security forces from Amhara supervised by the professors from Gondar. This allegation was based on telephone interviews with 15 unnamed eyewitnesses. It was backed by such journalistic research as: “experts have confirmed that it is possible to dispose of human remains using certain chemicals”. The claim was that the academics had gone to “western Tigray” to give specialist advice on doing away with the bodies, Mexican-mafia-style.

The conflation of 1-year-old corpses and 30-40-year-old bones would have involved a vast number of accomplices, and the story was so unsubstantiated that someone at the BBC seems to have gotten cold feet. Because, rather unusually, the University of Gondar’s indignant reply was also [covered](#).²⁰³ However, the university’s [full letter](#) is not available on the BBC website,²⁰⁴ and the BBC has not, it appears, taken up the offer of going to the site with university staff. It is a safe bet that no attempt will ever be made to prove the accusation, which became quickly and quietly archived, just like, for instance, the massacre of the 750-800 Axum church-goers, and the chemical-weapons [story](#), which, incidentally, Will Brown did not author alone for The Telegraph, but alongside the same journalist who implicated the University of Gondar in a grisly conspiracy.

Her name is Lucy Kassa, and she became massively sought-after during the war. In addition to the BBC and The Telegraph, she delivered reports to The Guardian, Al Jazeera, Los Angeles Time, VICE, The Globe and Mail, and many more.

Born and bred in Ethiopia, she speaks both Tigrinya and Amharic. Thus, she should have been better equipped to deliver context analysis than, say, Declan Walsh. However, she never tried her hand at edifying zoom-outs, specializing instead in horrifying closeups. In the casting of heroes, it fell to the white man to be

²⁰² <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kyih7zq1oBQ>

²⁰³ The BBC website on May 10, 2022: “Ethiopia’s Gondar University denies aiding grave destruction in west Tigray”.

²⁰⁴ At the time of publication, it can be found on: <https://www.scribd.com/document/576459711/Letter-to-the-BBC-1>

“[knowledgeable](#)”²⁰⁵ and to the black woman to be “[courageous](#)”²⁰⁶. Lucy Kassa got her big break by masterfully pushing the buttons of the single story about Africa: famine, tribalism, savagery.

One of her honors became the [Magnitsky](#) Human Rights Award, bestowed upon her shortly after the Pretoria Peace Agreement. One reason given on the Magnitsky award website was: “She debunked misinformation, lies and propaganda on both sides”. In June 2022, to [acclaim](#) from Lord Alton,²⁰⁷ a whole BBC Assignment [program](#) was dedicated to her supposedly doing so.²⁰⁸

What it really did was to distill the media manipulation thus far into 26 minutes. For instance, it has the standard mistranslation of Daniel Kibret to pass him off as a genocidal maniac. It omits the BBC’s and Lucy Kassa’s hastily aborted accusation against the University of Gondar levelled just one month earlier, ascribing opinions “rooted in conspiracy theories” to someone else, namely the Eritrean-American Simon Tesfamariam, who is introduced as the cofounder of “a means to popularize war-crimes denial”. Representing the opposing view, he is allowed a brief mention of the globally-publicized yet demonstrably made-up massacre and hyena feast of the church-goers in the central square of Axum, after which the producer and presenter, Chloe Hadjimatheou, remarks: “By the way, the Ethiopian government’s own Human Rights Commission has now admitted that the massacre in Axum took place, but for some reason Simon Tesfamariam is still denying it.” This obfuscation is followed by Lucy Kassa complaining that those people will never believe her, no matter what.

Indeed, any claim *should* be fiercely tested. With so much killing and dying going on, we should expect the crucial battle for the hearts and minds of the rich and powerful nations to be dirty. And what is the difference between Lucy Kassa debunking and *creating* misinformation, lies and propaganda? It is the truth. And what is the standard of truth? It is proof. Yet Lucy Kassa is no criminal investigator. In the BBC Assignment program, she replies to the token critical question on this by referring to medical records of rape being “smuggled out”, that is, out of a region where the TPLF’s propaganda apparatus has hundreds of doctors at its disposal.

Lucy Kassa wrote her stories based on personal testimonies, usually gathered by phone and presented anonymously. It is a fully acceptable narrative technique to

²⁰⁵ “Knowledgeable” is how UN high-up Mark Lowcock (we shall return to him) referred to Declan Walsh in a tweet on October 12, 2021.

²⁰⁶ Googling “Lucy Kassa courageous” shows how much this epithet and its synonyms were used about her.

²⁰⁷ Lord David Alton’s published his review on July 1, 2022, headlined: “Tigray – BBC Assignment Podcast examines Ethiopia’s disinformation war, featuring the courageous Lucy Kassa as she tries to unpick fact from fiction in Ethiopia’s information war.”

²⁰⁸ BBC Assignment on June 30, 2022: “Ethiopia’s Disinformation War”, with Chloe Hadjimatheou.

sprinkle articles with unverifiable quotes from unnamed people to provide a *vox populi* perspective. However, Lucy Kassa did so to accuse of crimes against humanity in harrowing detail. She did it as stirring as the best fiction. But was it real? Was it even realistic? Take what was allegedly asked by a four-year-old Tigrayan boy who crosses path with Ethiopian soldiers: “Mummy, are these the ones who were bombing us with planes? Are these the friends of Abiy and Isaias? Why don’t we just beat them with stones and go?” This quote was [published](#) in June 2021 as part of an autobiographical piece by Lucy Kassa in *The New Humanitarian*,²⁰⁹ a magazine with roots in the UN humanitarian system. The Amharic-speaking soldiers get the gist of the toddler’s Tigrinya, and subject the mother to a vicious grilling as to what was said. She desperately tries to placate them, but their hearts are cold as stone, as they sentence the little boy to death and shoot him right there, threatening to kill one more child if the mother takes the dead body with her for burial.

Did this happen? Or was it made up to provoke the emotional response that would draw in newspaper readers and justify war by an irregular army that was, at that exact time, committing atrocities in Amhara and Afar and marching on the nation’s capital? If the answer to this question is not about solid proof, it all becomes a matter of preconception. *The New Humanitarian* needed but one woman’s word to paint Ethiopian soldiers as subhuman. Ethiopians would need much more than this retelling to accept that a whole group of their countrymen in public service could be so evil. Try, for instance, to replace it with American soldiers singling out a Muslim toddler for execution before the eyes of his mother. A potential Islamic State recruit might well accept that on faith, and even consider the author a champion of human rights, like *The New Humanitarian* did with Lucy Kassa. Western audiences, on the other hand, would have no trouble calling that out as incitement.

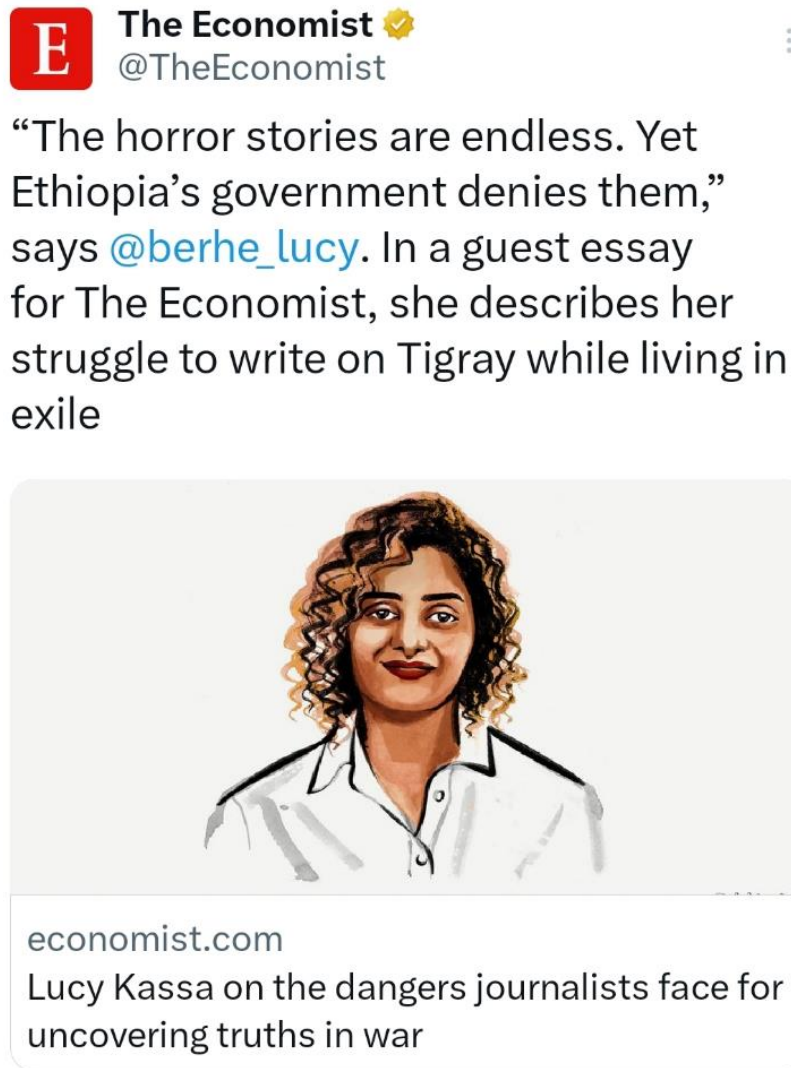
I have seen clueless Western teenagers on Tiktok, crying for Tigray while re-telling Lucy-Kassa-style atrocity stories. If I could reach them, I would let them know that they are not standing up for human rights, but being manipulated into playing their part in tribal hate-mongering. But unless I get them to read my whole book, they could easily dismiss me saying something like: “Who are you to question a magazine as honorable as *The New Humanitarian*? Why should we trust you more than the wildly sought-after Lucy Kassa?”

The other prominent Ethiopian journalist on the international stage was Zecharias Zelalem. He also stuck mostly to the TPLF-friendly narrative, but he did [report](#), as early as August 2021 and in *The Telegraph* of all places, on TPLF troops’ “horrific revenge attacks” on Amhara civilians.²¹⁰ Lucy Kassa, on the other hand, showed no interest in

²⁰⁹ *The New Humanitarian* on June 29, 2021: “Death threats and sleepless nights: The emotional toll of reporting Ethiopia’s Tigray conflict”, by Lucy Kassa.

²¹⁰ *The Telegraph* on August 17, 2021: “‘They are out for revenge’: Evidence of war crimes as rebels roar out of Ethiopia’s Tigray region”, by Zecharias Zelalem.

the rebels' massacres during their victorious spell in 2021, such as those in [Galicoma](#), [Chenna](#) and [Kombolcha](#). At the height of the bloodshed, she even slipped up by [mocking](#) the enemy people, tweeting out an Ethiopian flag with a donkey, which is a slur for Amharas. She quickly deleted it.²¹¹ None of this would dent her heroine status with big media.



18:27 · 14 Aug 22

Among the last to join in the adulation of Lucy Kassa was The Economist, which invited her to present her working methods. It resulted in [a brief article](#) that was, characteristically, rich on accusations and poor on specifics. Lucy Kassa was correct in stating that the Ethiopian government would not let journalists wade into war zones. Her more dubious claim that Ethiopia was under a “communications blackout” will be addressed in a later section.

²¹¹ Borkena online newspaper on September 6, 2021: “Ethiopia: UK’s Telegraph journalist recants ethnic slur post after controversy”, by Teshome Borago.

“The Ethiopian reporter lives in exile because of her articles from Tigray”, [announced](#) the Economist on May 3, 2022, though Lucy Kassa never went to Tigray during the war, which she began to cover from Addis Ababa. She [says](#) her home was ransacked three months later. Concerned about her liberty and safety, she decided to leave the country.

In an ideal world, this should not have been necessary, but what is it fair to compare this to? Picture a Ukrainian journalist of Russian ethnicity who reports from Kyiv, based on phone calls to the Donbas Region, which she calls ‘western Russia’, about, among other outrages, a group of Ukrainian soldiers who gun down a Russian four-year-old after a sadistic mock trial. She would probably run into trouble with the Ukrainian authorities, which would seem perfectly understandable to us, just as we would expect her to be a shoo-in for the Putin Prize for Courageous Journalism.

If courage is to shirk the burden of proof, yet win raving reviews by pandering to the darkest prejudice about Africa, then Lucy Kassa is indeed singularly [courageous](#). As we shall see later, there was to be an interesting twist to her work towards the end of the war, auguring a long and illustrious career, with more prizes yet to come.

It is as if Lucy Kassa being Ethiopian gave her license to go one up on her colleagues in portraying Ethiopians as depraved, fiendish, diabolical. In her [depictions](#), civilians would not only be rounded up and murdered, but also mutilated and dismembered.²¹² Women and girls would not only be [raped](#), but [gang-raped](#) with a hot metal rod being inserted to burn the uterus for the purposes of genocide.²¹³

Was rape used as a weapon?

Rape is even more taxing on the human heart than murder. We feel both empathy with the horrified victim and revulsion that a mind could be so sick as to obtain sexual gratification, or whatever it is, from such a misdeed. So when a woman accuses a man of rape, we do not jump to the defense of the accused, but listen to the accuser. This is how it should always be.

Nevertheless, before judging whether a man is guilty or not, civilized societies will hold a trial. Even in countries with well-funded legal systems, rape is notoriously difficult to prove in the courtroom. The presumption of innocence gives the defendant the right to have his accuser cross-examined, and material evidence will usually be required, or certainly looked into. This precaution against miscarriage of justice is taken despite how little a *rational* woman would gain from sending someone innocent

²¹² The Telegraph on September 5, 2021: “Ethiopia's Tigrayans rounded up, mutilated and dismembered in civil war ethnic purge”, by Lucy Kassa.

²¹³ Al Jazeera on April 21, 2021: “‘A Tigrayan womb should never give birth’: Rape in Tigray”, by Lucy Kassa.

to prison. The appropriate standard of proof is a hotly-debated issue, but few would suggest there should be none at all.

When it comes to sexual violence *in a war scenario*, however, lying does not require a crazy or vindictive woman, but merely a cold political calculation. And rather than one person shouldering the burden of deceit, a propaganda department can be at hand to reward and organize it.

The Tigrayan populace had many friends and relatives among fellow Ethiopians of other ethnicities further south, as well as [among](#) Eritreans to the north. This was an obstacle to mobilizing the anger required for a “people’s war”. To overcome this, the TPLF knew exactly which buttons to push.



The 120k and 130k figure became widely megaphoned by activists. Nobody knows the exact number, but *Der Spiegel* [ventured](#) ‘tens of thousands’.

There is no doubt that rape was committed by soldiers, and [yes](#), on [both](#) sides. The best way forward is to support [Ethiopian civil society](#) and legal practitioners in investigating cases and bringing them to trial.²¹⁴ Alas, the general discourse on this issue thus far has not allowed for distinguishing between facts demanding justice and disinformation to dehumanize, let alone for determining the extent of this ugliest of crimes.

²¹⁴ One example is the organization “Lawyers for Human Rights Ethiopia”, [lhrethiopia.org](#).

This does not hold back the BBC, which [reports](#), in 2023, that “systematic rape” has been “documented by the United Nations, human rights organizations and journalists”.²¹⁵ The meaning of ‘documented’ and ‘systematic’ is left unclear. The article adds its own case, an anonymous woman who [testifies](#) from Tigray “on a crackly phone line”. The fact is that, while Ethiopian courts have tried and convicted [a handful of](#) its own soldiers of sexual violence, the media’s concept of documenting a litany of rape horror stories has never gone beyond gathering evidence that an organization as resourceful as the TPLF could easily have fabricated. These are mostly the statements of women, doctors and aid workers on TPLF-controlled territory.

On this basis, in April 2021, Helen Clark, the former prime minister of New Zealand, who would seven months later put her name to the genocide alert in The Guardian, co-wrote an [emotional piece](#) in Foreign Policy about mass rape of Tigrayan women.²¹⁶ The first few lines dismiss the problem of equating accusation with proof during an intense disinformation war: “It takes courage for any woman to speak about her experience of rape. In a conservative society such as Ethiopia’s, it takes special bravery for a woman to share the most intimate and agonizingly raw details about her ordeal.”

It is easy to foresee any qualification of this half-true statement being branded as a heartless apology for rape. So when a Tigrayan journalist [deserting](#) from Radio Dimtse Woyane (‘Voice of the TPLF’) [testified](#) on Ethiopian television (incidentally to a famous interviewer who is also Tigrayan) about Tigrayan sex workers being paid to pose as university students and tell rape stories to foreign NGOs,²¹⁷ nobody in the Western media or human-rights circles would touch it with a bargepole.

There were, however, seven African UN professionals serving in Ethiopia in 2021, who privately discussed the difficulty of sorting facts from fabrication, feeling under pressure to feed the media sensationalism and thus fuel the war. The audio of their meeting was [leaked](#) by a pro-TPLF website,²¹⁸ indignant that Letty Chiwara, representative of UN Women to Ethiopia and to the AU, had used language such as

²¹⁵ The BBC website on February 15, 2023: “Ethiopia war in Tigray: Eritrean soldiers accused of rape despite peace deal”, by Catherine Byaruhanga.

²¹⁶ Foreign Policy on April 27, 2021: “In Tigray, Sexual Violence Has Become a Weapon of War”, presented as “An expert’s point of view on a current event”, by Helen Clark and Rachel Kyte (who is dean of Tufts University’s Fletcher School, where Alex de Waal teaches).

²¹⁷ Ethiopian Herald on June 23, 2022: “T-TPLF bribes sex workers to appear as rape victim”, by Yesuf Endris. Can be viewed at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SCVs5-iTwUw&t=1602s>

²¹⁸ Omna Tigray on August 14, 2021: “Leaked Audio Recording of Tigray Meeting on Weaponized SGBV Held by the Ethiopian Country Offices of Various UN Agencies”.

“take it with a pinch of salt”. While the sensationalist press ignored it, it still caused a [bit](#) of a [stir](#).²¹⁹ Once again, one scholar had the guts to swim against the current.



Bronwyn Bruton
@BronwynBruton



The disconnect between @UN statements on rape as a weapon of war and the CURRENT evidence at hand in #Ethiopia is problematic & merits your outrage. Just as important, though: I hope all will praise the professionalism and integrity of UN local & regional staff on the call.

5:14 PM · Aug 18, 2021

It is precisely the heinous nature of rape that makes the accusation so incendiary, and no less so in a conservative society. There is a reason it was the Ku Klux Klan’s standard recipe for instigating lynchings of Black men in southern USA. In the phrasing of her op-ed, Helen Clark was oozing benevolent concern, so it may seem harsh to say she was really being a KKKesque hate-monger. But, hand on heart, who thinks she would have applied no higher standard of proof for soldiers from Scandinavia?

Moreover, the title of Ms. Clarke’s article strikes a more demonizing tone than criminal indiscipline by individual soldiers: “In Tigray, Sexual Violence Has Become a Weapon of War.” This explosive accusation was repeated, [for instance](#), by Declan Walsh and Simon Marks, who exemplified it with the case of Mona Lisa Abraha, an 18-year-old Tigrayan.²²⁰ According to her harrowing story in the New York Times, she was shot and had her arm amputated after fighting off a sadistic Ethiopian soldier, although it was a whole group of Eritrean soldiers who had attempted to rape her in the version [published](#) by Al Jazeera one month earlier.²²¹

Mr. Mulueberhan Haile was one of many Tigrayans who risked their [lives](#) by serving as interim administrators during the seven months, from November 28, 2020, to June 28, 2021, when the federal army tried, but largely failed, to take charge of

²¹⁹ Foreign Policy on August 27, 2021: “U.N. Officials Downplayed Sexual Violence in Ethiopia in Leaked Call” by Robbie Gramer and Colum Lynch. The article starts off: “In a conversation in March, U.N. officials on the ground questioned whether some reports of mass rapes in the Tigray fight were ‘media hype.’”

²²⁰ The New York Times on April 1, 2021: “‘They Told Us Not to Resist’: Sexual Violence Pervades Ethiopia’s War”, by Declan Walsh and Simon Marks. The article starts: “Rape is being used as a weapon as fighting rages in remote parts of Tigray region.”

²²¹ Al Jazeera’s website on March 1, 2021: “Trauma, anger as Tigrayans recount Eritrea troops’ ‘grave crimes’”, by Al Jazeera staff.

security in Tigray.²²² [Talking](#) to Voice of America a few months into the war, he said: “When we started investigating, we found out there were women instructed to make false claims of rape and to engender a feeling of anger and resentment in the Tigrayan youth. (...) The evidence we did find was that there were local thugs, affiliated to and ordered by the TPLF, wearing Eritrean and Ethiopian army uniforms and carrying weapons, who were involved in burning crops, raping women and knocking on doors claiming they were Eritrean forces.”

Until Mr. Mulueberhan’s evidence has been properly assessed, it is, of course, just another witness account that could also have been shaped for propaganda purposes. Whether one considers him a Tigrayan [dove](#) or a [traitor](#), I recommend listening to his testimony in its [entirety](#) (subtitled in English).²²³ He makes a point of not passing judgement on what he has not investigated. Indeed, prudence calls for being alert to the sophistication of the TPLF’s disinformation, particularly in an area as emotive as sexual violence. Such healthy skepticism may, admittedly, do injustice to real victims. It also passes up many a gripping human-interest story and slam-dunk virtue-signaling opportunity.

Accordingly, the coverage of this conflict has not only featured close-up-and-personal interviews with rape survivors, but also [insisted](#) ad [nauseum](#) on [using](#) the broader term “rape as a weapon of war”.²²⁴ Amnesty International even [called](#) it an Ethiopian “strategy of war”.²²⁵

But how does this work? Assuming that there is the mental capacity for such inhumanity, not just among some bad apples, but in the high command of decision-makers, what can possibly be gained by ordering soldiers to descend into depraved cruelty? Yes, rape is life-destroying to be at the receiving end of, and yes, it can indeed terrify a whole community. But it does *not* make an insurgent population roll over and surrender. Quite the opposite. The TPLF used it as its number one recruitment tool: ‘Either you join us to kill the rapists, or you let those monsters have their way with your mother and sisters.’ It appeals to men’s honor. In some cases, it also appeals, alas, to their *dishonor*, as when some TPLF fighters [invoked](#) “revenge” as a [motive](#) for

²²² On May 26, 2021, the Ethiopian government reported “TPLF kills 22, kidnaps 20 leaders of Tigray interim administration”. On July 6, 2021, Borkena newspaper published: “TPLF unleashing revenge executions in Tigray after gov’t troops withdrew”, alleging hundreds of summary executions of Tigrayan “traitors” in several towns.

²²³ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=yseub74G5Xk>

²²⁴ Some examples are The Telegraph on March 27, 2023: “‘We’re here to make you HIV positive’: Hundreds of women rush to Tigray hospitals as soldiers use rape as weapon of war”, by Lucy Kassa and Anna Pujol-Mazzini. Der Spiegel on June 30, 2021: “The Horrors Faced by the Women of Tigray”, by Fritz Schaap. Deutsche Welle (DW) on March 17, 2023, months after the war: “In Ethiopia’s Tigray war, rape is used as a weapon”, by Mariel Müller.

²²⁵ The BBC website on August 11, 2021: “Ethiopia using rape as a strategy in Tigray war - Amnesty”, by Vivienne Nunis.

raping women in Amhara and Afar.²²⁶ Yet, regardless of the side of the soldiers committing it, it is ill-suited to prevailing militarily and well-suited to undermining morale. The New York Times article tacitly [conceded](#) this point: “The sexual attacks are so common that even some Ethiopian soldiers have spoken out”. Why the word ‘even’? Of course, they will speak out! Ethiopian soldiers are human beings. Yes, sick bastards exist, and war can suppress their moral inhibitions and provide them with opportunities. But what is truly common is for human beings to abhor rape, including for soldiers on both sides of this war, many of whom were [women](#).²²⁷

To suggest otherwise is to dehumanize Ethiopians. A humanizing position recognizes that, while it is indeed in the mental-contortionist nature of our species to perceive reality as whatever suits our political biases, *we want our own side to be the [righteous](#) side*.

Thus, while “rape as a weapon of war” works better as a shocking headline than as a meaningful strategy, how about weaponizing [selective accusations](#) of rape? How about weaponizing caring, compassionate, decent people’s gut desire to *kill* rapists? Yes, that sure makes a ton of sense.

Tony Magaña: From accused to accuser

Neurosurgeon and [self-styled](#) “Christian humanitarian”, Dr. Tony Magaña, was an American living in Mekelle, Tigray, when the war broke out. He was to be frequently rolled out as a [truth witness](#), including to the [United Nations Human Rights Commission](#), about such horrors as [rape](#) and its use as a biological weapon.²²⁸

²²⁶ This was mentioned in the first report of the International Commission of Human Rights Experts on Ethiopia (ICHREE), to which we shall return. On the occasion of its release, commission member Radhika Coomaraswamy said: “The fact that Tigrayan forces told Amhara and Eritrean survivors they were being targeted as a reprisal for rape of Tigrayan women and girls shows how unchecked violence and hatred only sows further division and perpetuates cycles of abuse.” From the OHCHR press release: “UN experts warn of potential for further atrocities amid resumption of conflict in Ethiopia”, September 19, 2022.

²²⁷ A video about Ethiopia’s women soldiers came out in the beginning of the war:
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bISW37SiGas>

²²⁸ My key source about Tony Magaña is his own statements in online interviews. If these recordings were to be removed online, you may write me to obtain downloaded copies. Here are some links that are valid on the date of publication:
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OJ1FCifKABo>
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=si2FUxANhs4>
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jiALe7juqHk>



Tony Magaña
@TonyMaganaNS



ENDF and Eritrean forces order to use of HIV+ soldiers to rape and infect #Tigray women qualifies as act of biological warfare under UN conventions and mandates UN investigation #TigrayGenocide #Ethiopia #Eritrea #HIVbiologicalweapon bit.ly/3NJkOcl

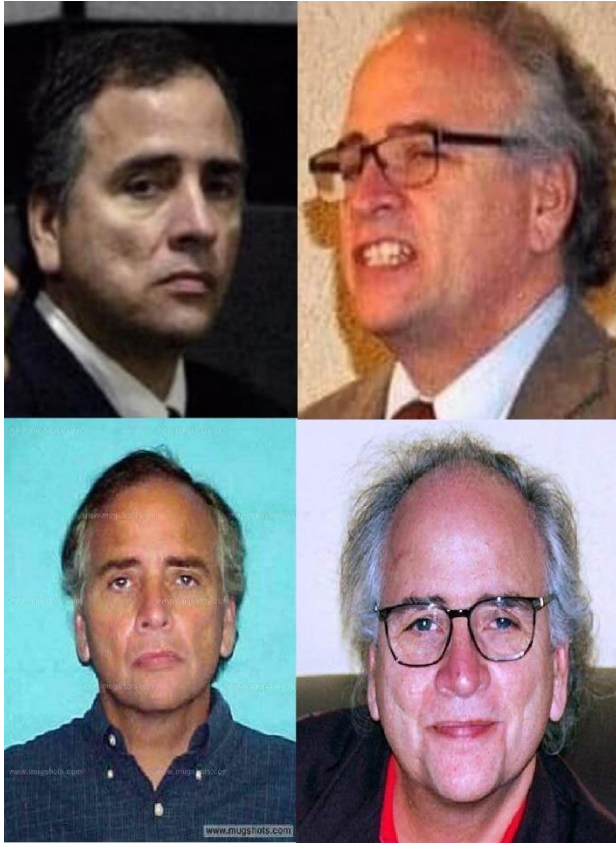


8:37 AM · Apr 5, 2022

As known by many and verified on the [iCliniq website](#), his full real name of this US citizen is Ignacio Antonio Magana. In Florida, he was [arrested](#) as far back as 2002 due to a series of sexual-assault accusations from his female patients.²²⁹ He was [also](#) hung out to dry in The Washington Post²³⁰ after he was [suspended](#) from practicing medicine on June 10, 2002, [in order to](#) protect the public. In 2004, he pleaded guilty to [battery](#) and was sentenced to one year in the county jail.

²²⁹ The article “Neurosurgeon held on new sex, burglary charges” in the South Florida Sun Sentinel on June 12, 2002, reports the arrest and says: “The state Department of Health released an emergency order Monday indicating Magana’s physician’s license had been suspended to ‘protect the public.’”

²³⁰ The article “Rogues in the Hierarchy” in The Washington Post on July 1, 2002, says: “In June, the Florida Department of Health suspended the medical license of Ignacio Magana, a well-known, Harvard-trained neurosurgeon in Palm Beach, after he was charged with sexual battery. ‘The particularly egregious nature of Dr. Magana’s sexual misconduct is such that a continuation of his medical practice would pose a serious and immediate danger to the health, safety and welfare of the public,’ concluded Florida’s health secretary in his order of emergency suspension.”



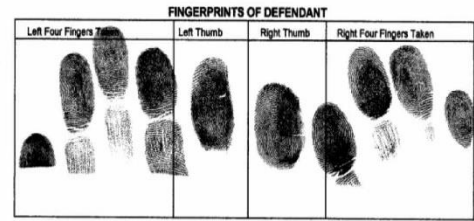
IN THE COUNTY COURT
 19TH JUDICIAL CIRCUIT OF FLORIDA
 IN AND FOR MARTIN COUNTY

STATE OF FLORIDA
 vs
 MAGANA, IGNACIO A

FILED FOR RECORD
 MARTIN COUNTY, FL
 Date: 5/14/04 Time: 1:30 PM
 MARSHA EWING CASE NUMBER: 02002738MMMA
 CLERK OF CIRCUIT COURT
 By: J. [Signature]

YOU, IGNACIO A MAGANA, being now before the Court, attended by your Attorney, RICHARD BARLOW, and having () been tried and found guilty of, () pleaded guilty to, (X) pleaded nolo contendere to 12B BATTERY as set forth or included in the () indictment; (X) information filed in this court, the court adjudges that you are guilty of said offense. DONE AND ADJUDGED in open court STUART, FLORIDA this 14th day of May, 2004.

SENTENCE
 Inquiry having been made of the defendant why sentence should not now be imposed and the defendant saying nothing that could influence the Court in it's decision, it is further ADJUDGED that defendant be sentenced to:
 Year county jail, 1 year, \$151 Rape
 Crisis Trust Fund, \$201 Domestic Violence Trust
 Fund.
 DONE AND ADJUDGED in open court at STUART, FLORIDA this 14th day of May, 2004.



I hereby certify that the above and foregoing fingerprints on this judgment are the fingerprints of the defendant IGNACIO A MAGANA and that they were placed thereon by said defendant in my presence, in open court, this 14th day of May, 2004.

[Signature]
 STEWART HERSEY

D/S [Signature] 754

Ignacio Antonio 'Tony' Magana and his finger-printed sentence. The photos to the left were taken when he was in the dock in Florida. Those to the right are from his later years in Ethiopia.

Also in 2004, he [staved](#) off more time behind bars by pleading “guilty in his best interest” to five more cases, receiving 15 years’ probation.²³¹ In 2005, he [went on trial](#) again for no less than [ten women](#) saying he forced himself on them across three [counties](#) in Florida,²³² though he was cleared of the rape charges.

²³¹ This was reported in the article “Doctor avoids jail time over sex charges” in Herald Tribune on July 3, 2004.

²³² South Florida Sun Sentinel on June 7, 2005: “Doctor back on trial in [sic.] sexual assault cases”. The ten accusers are also mentioned in an article headlined “Jurors clear doctor of one sexual charge” in Tampa Bay Times on June 12, 2005, which says about the one-year sentence: “Magana still faces a possible year in jail after a Martin County jury last year convicted him on a misdemeanor battery charge in a case in which a patient testified that he tried to kiss and rub against her. He is appealing that sentence.”



Eshetu Homa Keno

May 17, 2017 · 🌐



Who is professor Tony Magana [Ignacio Antonio Magana]???

He came to Ethiopia in 2012 to teach and practice Neurosurgery at Bethel Medical College. He then moved to Wollo University. Now he is working for Mekelle University as a neurosurgeon. He also advises the Federal Ministry of Health. His profile on the Mekelle University's website does not give information about his work experience before he moved to Ethiopia.

Ignacio Antonio Magana was a prominent Harvard-educated neurosurgeon who served as the former chief of staff at Palm Beach Gardens Medical Center. While he was in Florida six different sexual assault charges were brought against him. He even pleaded guilty to some of them and a court handed him a 15-year probation. In addition, his medical license was revoked.

After losing his license, he said on his facebook page that God called him for service in Ethiopia. Then he moved to Ethiopia. He seems to have adjusted well in Ethiopia and doing good job treating patients.

But the big question is whether the authorities in Ethiopia knew about his background when they gave him work permit???

Just curious.



👍👎😱 283

67 🗨️ 40 ➦

The backstory of Dr. Magana has long been publicly [discussed](#) among Ethiopians on social media, such as in this post in English from 2017.

In an interview with Tigray TV premiered on September 28, 2021, Tony Magaña [says](#) he came to the country in 2012, and was later recruited to work at Ayder Hospital in Mekelle, Tigray, “[by](#) leaders of the university, who were also members of the TPLF”.

In a [video](#) from 2015,²³³ he presents his life story, minus the sexual-assault charges. While the war was raging, he [said](#): “I know the leaders of the TPLF.”²³⁴ So how well did *they* know *him*? Since his sex-offender record was googleable and people knew about it on Facebook, the authorities at the time must have been aware of it, yet decided they could make him grateful and useful by taking him in.

To be fair, this Harvard graduate is probably an excellent neurosurgeon. He seems to have done some [good work](#) in Ethiopia.²³⁵ No complaint has surfaced that he molested women in Tigray. However, if he did, he is unlikely to go to Ethiopian prison, because the US embassy helped him [leave](#) the country early on in the war, he has explained in interviews.

But such a character is clearly not a reliable truth witness. For instance, in a livestream with UMD Media on August 19, 2021, he said: “We saw women where their vaginas were shot, you know, somebody put a rifle in their vagina. I saw boys that their penises and testicles were cut off.” He also spared no graphic detail on the show *Mereba Esset Conversations*, premiered on October 7, 2021, and put it into context: “So these ideas about having bodies eaten by hyenas (...), these are not new ideas, these have been present in eastern Africa for a long time”. He went on: “We know now that the Ethiopian leaders and the Eritrean leaders told their soldiers: Kill male children! You can do whatever you want to the women!”

The shoddy making of a death toll

So did those august human-rights bodies that Tony Magaña talked to behind closed doors also believe in his testimonies? We cannot know for sure, but, since fleeing Ethiopia, Dr. Magaña has featured as a medical authority on Tigrayan suffering and civilian death toll in a newspaper as prestigious as the Spanish [El País](#), specifically in a superficially researched article published as late as January 2023, which quickly became widely linked to across the world as a source of authority.²³⁶ Tony Magaña’s prominence in this connection arose from his [input](#) to the Belgian academic and TPLF [activist](#) Jan Nyssen’s “[estimate](#)” of a death toll, first mentioned in March 2022, of about *half a million in Tigray alone* (Professor Nyssen was never interested in

²³³ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nVzEk2jgbJQ>

²³⁴ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OJ1FCifKABo&t=2805s>

²³⁵ Dr. Tony Magaña co-authored a study titled “High burden of neural tube defects in Tigray, Northern Ethiopia: Hospital-based study”, released on November 14, 2018.

²³⁶ *El País* in English on January 27, 2023: “Ethiopia’s forgotten war is the deadliest of the 21st century, with around 600,000 civilian deaths”.

casualties in other regions).²³⁷ This figure was revised upwards in October 2022, once again crediting the contribution of Tony Magaña.²³⁸



Tony Magaña ✓

@TonyMaganaNS

...

#ProfessorJanNyssen #GhentU latest #Tigraydeaths estimate relating to #Ethiopia #Eritrea war range from 385k to 600k. References my estimates of crude death rate history and comparison with 1980s famine that 125k dead from starvation now #GhentU



From martinplaut.com

7:12 PM · Oct 19, 2022

For lack of other reliable data, this number, which was essentially plucked out of thin air, became fabulously [widely-quoted](#), as can be attested by googling something like “Ghent University study death toll Tigray”. It became described as the work of “researchers”, in plural, at the University of Ghent, as it was co-authored by Tim Vanden Bempt, who also [takes](#) an openly [activist](#) approach.²³⁹ El País even [referred](#) to “Estimates by European institutions and academics”²⁴⁰ about what seems to be just

²³⁷ This earliest mention of the “estimate” that later became known as a “study” seems to be on Martin Plaut’s website on March 13, 2022 in the article “BREAKING: Tigray war mortality: half a million people? Professor Jan Nyssen, Ghent University”. It also refers to input from Tony Magaña.

²³⁸ Martin Plaut’s website on October 19, 2022: “New estimate of the Tigray death toll”.

²³⁹ It is mentioned that his wife is Tigrayan in an article in Irish Times on April 23, 2023, headlined “‘Nobody is talking about it’: Researchers seek to highlight scale of Ethiopia’s deadly conflict”.

²⁴⁰ El País in English on January 27, 2023: “Ethiopia’s forgotten war is the deadliest of the 21st century, with around 600,000 civilian deaths”.

the work of Jan Nyssen, assisted by Tim Vanden Bempt and Tony Magaña, albeit echoed by countless other actors in a kind of feedback loop that turned it into a truism. It led to the frequent [statement](#), also echoed in El País, that this war was deadlier than the one in Ukraine. This could be true, but it is safe to assert that the vast majority of deaths occurred on the battlefield, with relatively little urban fighting.

The total death toll was gradually [revised](#) upwards in the media, although The [Guardian](#), interestingly, ended up changing it [into a more](#) noncommittal “tens of thousands”.²⁴¹ [Politicians](#) and supposed [statesmen](#) would throw this and higher numbers around without as much as indicating a source.



Josep Borrell Fontelles ✓

@JosepBorrellF

We must call out human rights situations that are not on the front pages

Almost 800.000 people killed in the war in [#Tigray](#)

The savage reality for the people of [#Afghanistan](#), especially women & girls

1,450 political prisoners in [#Belarus](#)

They deserve [#accountability](#).

2:13 PM · Dec 14, 2022

Alex de Waal [made](#) it a million for good measure, and this round figure is what I have since heard from countless Tigrayans on social media, who tend to transform it into a figure for Tigrayans alone and into an argument against reconciliation, along the lines of “we now know that they killed a million of our people, and we can never forgive them for that.” Mr. de Waal also wrote that the number is “according to research published by academics in Belgium”.²⁴² But *where* was this research published? I searched for it in vain. So I went undercover online as a sympathetic and naïve journalist to ask Jan Nyssen for the original study. He was keen to help out. But all he had to show for it was an [update](#) of the original brief [article](#) on Martin Plaut’s

²⁴¹ The Guardian on April 12, 2023: “Gun battles erupt in Ethiopia as PM axes Amhara region’s security force”, by an anonymous reporter.

²⁴² The BBC website on November 3, 2022: “Ethiopia civil war: Tigray truce a triumph for PM Abiy Ahmed”, by Alex de Waal.

website²⁴³ with the link to Tony Magaña’s [blog](#).²⁴⁴ The first piece from March 2022 was a back-of-the-envelope calculation with many wild assumptions, claiming that between 150,000 and 200,000 Tigrayans had died from starvation alone, while in October 2022, this was [revised](#) upwards to between 228,398 and 356,102. In April 2023, Tim Vanden Bempt [suggested](#) a total between 248,753 and 555,082 fatalities, again this is from famine alone.²⁴⁵

This represents terrifying carnage with emaciated bodies on a scale impossible to hide. So where was the evidence for it?



Lord (David) Alton
@DavidAltonHL



Tigray famine has higher death rate then 1980s Ethiopian famine -
Professor Tony Magaña



From blog.ethiopianeurosurgery.com

10:17 PM · Oct 18, 2022

The right honourable Lord Alton uses the right dishonourable Tony Magaña as his truth witness as a variation from his usual reference to the “experts” [Kjetil Tronvoll](#), [Alex de Waal](#) and [Jan](#)

²⁴³ Martin Plaut’s website on March 13, 2022: “BREAKING: Tigray war mortality: half a million people? Professor Jan Nyssen, Ghent University”. And October 19, 2022: “New estimate of the Tigray death toll”.

²⁴⁴ Tony Magaña at blog.ethiopianeurosurgery.com on August 7, 2021: “Estimate of total civilian deaths of the Tigray in the conflict with Ethiopia”.

²⁴⁵ Irish Times on April 23, 2023: “‘Nobody is talking about it’: Researchers seek to highlight scale of Ethiopia’s deadly conflict”.

[Nyssen](#).²⁴⁶ *One constant throughout the war became partisan voices bouncing off one another as sources of evidence.*

Was famine used as a weapon?

Ever since the legendary 1985 Live Aid concert, with every good person singing along to “We are the world”, weaponized starvation in Ethiopia has been a huge cultural meme. And tapping into cultural memes is the number one effortless way to situate the public in a complex and little-known context.



Samantha Power ✓
@PowerUSAID

BREAKING: @UNReliefChief declares just now on #Tigray: “There is famine now. There is famine now.”

He adds: “This is going to get a lot worse.”

9:12 AM · Jun 10, 2021



Kjetil Tronvoll
@KjetilTronvoll



2/3: c) hate speech against #Tegaru and famine as a weapon of war targeting the total population of #Tigray, indicate continued #genocide intent by #NobelPrize laureate #AbiyAhmed. #UNSC must address #sanctions and future prosecution of #Ethiopia gov for the ongoing atrocities.

9:24 PM · Jul 1, 2021

²⁴⁶ Professor Nyssen gets to brief readers of Lord Alton’s website on May 23, 2022, under the headline: “Jan Nyssen provides a devastating critique and comprehensive archive of the consequences of Africa’s Forgotten War in Tigray”.



Helen Clark ✓
@HelenClarkNZ

"How can Ethiopia claim to have laid down its arms (in #Tigray) when it continues to weaponize starvation?" asks @washingtonpost Editorial Board. @USAID estimates 900,000 Tigrayans are experiencing #famine conditions, with millions more on the brink. 9:02 AM · Jul 4, 2021



Declan Walsh ✓
@declanwalsh

Why international aid is not reaching famine-struck Tigray. (And why it's not about "missing" trucks.) 5:29 AM · Sep 30, 2021

Famine caused by Ethiopia's government starving Tigray on purpose was mentioned so many times, it turned into a truism. But was it true?

After the TPLF took possession of most of the nation's heavy weaponry in the attack on the Northern Command, the Ethiopian government imposed a *military blockade* on TPLF-controlled territory. This was to prevent more weapons and cash from entering, as well as to control the flow of dual-use products, such as fuel. The need to smuggle in imports combined with the TPLF demanding, at machine-gunpoint, that all resources of little Tigray be dedicated to a big war. This crippled the economy and led to immense hardship among ordinary citizens throughout the Tigray Region, compounded by the degrading or the disappearance of public services, to which we shall return.

The economy of Tigray sustained lives, but it also sustained a war machine that was taking lives. This was the grim dilemma faced by Ethiopia. A brutal attack that posed an existential threat was the context in which to seek evidence for Ethiopia's culpability, not just for extreme poverty, but also for a widely proclaimed man-made famine in Tigray. As it turned out, the burden of proof was simply pushed aside with the cultural meme.

I have subscribed for ages to The Economist, which has an admirable track record of challenging the consensus with empirical evidence and rational arguments. So it still had loads of credibility credit on *my* account when it [wrote](#), two and a half months into the war, that "Ethiopia's government appears to be wielding hunger as a weapon",²⁴⁷ using that celebrated 1985 pop concert as the establishing shot. An accompanying article suggested that a million deaths were just a couple of months away.²⁴⁸ This was

²⁴⁷ The Economist on January 23, 2021: "Ethiopia's government appears to be yielding hunger as a weapon".

²⁴⁸ The Economist on January 23, 2021: "After two months of war, Tigray faces starvation".

based on [quoting](#) an anonymous “Western diplomat”. At the time, I considered this worrying, yet implausible. Food crops are grown all over Tigray. And killing on such a scale has historically been committed by Utopian ideologues, not by liberalizing multiethnic coalitions.

Disturbingly, The Economist praised the EU for suspending aid to Ethiopia, making the case for even more financial pressure on its sputtering war economy, which was at odds with The Economist’s own [reporting](#) of government-appointed bodies that were seeking to address the humanitarian crisis. “It is possible that Ethiopia’s government is too incompetent to realise that its actions are likely to cause starvation. But it seems more likely that the authorities are deliberately holding back food in an effort to starve the rebels out”, [said](#) The Economist. The newspaper did not entertain the possibility that it could itself be too incompetent to see through the fog of war and comprehend the dilemmas involved. But at least its opinions at this point were littered with caveats, such as “if true” and “there are credible reports”.

Such doubt had been washed away by October 9, 2021, eleven months into the war, and three months after the fighting and misery had moved from Tigray to Afar and Amhara, with Addis Ababa looking exposed. Now The Economist [leader](#) was headlined: “No favours for killers: Ethiopia is deliberately starving its own citizens”. Among a string of terrifying claims, including the aforementioned one about the Axum massacre, [was](#) that more than 5m people did not have enough to eat, that 400,000 were facing catastrophic hunger, described as “the last step on the path to mass starvation.”

The other side of the story was presented [thus](#): “Ethiopia’s government insists it is doing all it can to help the hungry in Tigray and, in particular, that it is letting aid pass through its blockade. Data from the UN tell a different story.”

What UN data? The UN is a vast organization, but one particular UN high-up became the [source](#) for the mass-starvation [story](#) that became a fixture in media [big](#) and [small](#), namely the United Nations Under-Secretary-General for Humanitarian Affairs and Emergency Relief Coordinator, Mark Lowcock, colloquially known as “the Relief Chief”.

As reported in countless places, Mr. Lowcock [declared](#) on June 10, 2021: “There is a famine now”, and “this is going to get a lot worse”. On BBC, Alex de Waal graphically [described](#) slow starvation death.²⁴⁹ For evidence, he referred to the “researchers” at the University of Ghent. He noted, however, that the technical report into the matter did not use the word famine, which he put down to it being “so politically sensitive – the Ethiopian government would object”. In an educational [video](#)²⁵⁰ uploaded on

²⁴⁹ The BBC website on June 11, 2021: “Ethiopia’s Tigray crisis: Tragedy of the man-made famine”, by Alex de Waal.

²⁵⁰ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gcCR8W6Mskw&t=2969s>

November 11, 2021, he invoked his 40 years of study to claim that, to see mass-starvation tactics on such a scale, “you probably have to go back to World War II.”

A week earlier, when Will Brown used Mr. Lowcock as the source for his [piece](#) in The Telegraph “Starvation used ‘as a weapon of war’ in Ethiopia”, he [added](#) that: “Senior observers have hailed Mr. Lowcock as one of the few senior UN voices speaking truth on the catastrophic situation on the ground.” Indeed, he was *one of the few* who said there was a famine. But the media and [fellow](#) high-ups from the aid world, like the head of USAID, Samantha Power, quickly decided to use him as the one and only authoritative voice of the UN humanitarian system.

An insider who served the people of Tigray

So did any UN high-up say that there was *not* a famine?

Yes! The foremost UN official specialized in this matter, someone on the frontline of organizing humanitarian access with leaders on both sides, the key person in the logistical thick of it all, [would talk of](#) “deep food insecurity”, but say this about Mr. Lowcock’s announcement of a famine: “To those of us on the ground in Ethiopia, it was an astonishing declaration. Not only was it not his role to declare a famine, we knew that he had no evidence to back such a declaration. There was no expert who could credibly support his claim. On the contrary, experts had just announced that there was no famine in Tigray. But the voice of the ERC [Mark Lowcock] could not be ignored. Every major news outlet carried the story.”

The quote is from the [book](#) “At the Centre of the World in Ethiopia”, released on October 17, 2022. The author is Steven Were Omamo, a Kenyan national with an accomplished [career](#) in agricultural development and food security, who became the UN World Food Programme (WFP) Country Director for Ethiopia in 2018. He concludes: “As I write this [in the dying days of the war in 2022], there is no famine in Tigray. During my service in Ethiopia [until the end of 2021], there was no famine in Tigray. Whether there was ‘near famine’ in Tigray will never be known. But we do know with certainty that every single one of the loudly proclaimed conditions for ‘near famine’ to turn into ‘famine’ came to be, but without any appearance of famine.”

Dr. Omamo’s written testimony drew some [attention](#) from one magazine specialized in development issues,²⁵¹ [but](#) has been ignored by big media, since it makes for uncomfortable self-questioning in newsrooms. It reveals how nuanced reality was consistently trumped by alarmist narrative, and also reflects more broadly on the UN

²⁵¹ Apart from appearing on pro-Ethiopian Youtube channels, Steven Were Omamo was featured in Devex magazine on February 1, 2023 under the headline “Tigray ‘famine’ was ‘overt politicization’, says former WFP official”, by Sara Jerving. And: “Devex Dish: Former WFP Ethiopia head says no evidence for famine in Ethiopia”, by Teresa Welsh.

humanitarian system, created as a safety net for the world's most vulnerable people, yet run as a big-money industry by top-level careerists.

Dr. Omamo paints a picture of hard-working, committed UN workers on the ground in dire tension with senior UN political appointees, who prioritized moral grandstanding over distributing relief supplies, let alone being honest with the public. For instance, on June 8, 2021, the then-head of the WFP, David Beasley, [tweeted](#) that people were “dying of hunger in Tigray”. Dr. Omamo writes: “As usual, WFP Ethiopia had not been consulted. This tweet damaged our standing among important food assistance partners who, like us, were receiving reports from staff in Tigray that there was no evidence of famine at all. Zero. (...) I called trusted staff in Tigray. (...) There was no evidence at all of anyone dying of hunger. None. Zero. Yet here was the WFP boss claiming that there were. All without evidence. It was tough to explain.” Dr. Omamo did, however, have an inkling of what was going on: “The need to align science and politics for the benefit of the needy was ignored. Raw politics took over.” And: “There seemed to be only one acceptable narrative. Bad-guy Government, good-guy TPLF.”

To be clear, Dr. Omamo does write about obstacles that were not just the fault of the TPLF. To reach Tigray, the humanitarian convoys had to move through areas where the “WFP and other UN agencies were being openly vilified, threatened and attacked by the local population with the tacit encouragement of politicians.” And yet, under Dr. Omamo's leadership, solutions were negotiated with the Amhara regional authorities. Dr. Omamo saw his mission first and foremost as saving lives. This required the tough balancing act of getting on with both sides in a brutal war, adhering to ‘neutrality’ and ‘impartiality’, among other humanitarian principles. He had no choice but to take all perspectives into account. For Ethiopia, there were security concerns. And for the TPLF there were, as he recounts vividly, “more important strategic priorities” than food insecure Tigrayans, namely spending fuel and food on its army, which, by July 2021, began to advance into Amhara and Afar, causing humanitarian [distress](#) there too, aggravated by the TPLF's aforementioned [looting](#) of food-aid warehouses.

Dr. Omamo describes how, during his coordination visits to Mekelle, he badly needed to get on with the TPLF's man in charge of humanitarian assistance. But Dr. Omamo knew how edgy the Ethiopian government was about the risk of fuel for food distribution ending up in the TPLF's war machine, that is, not to save but to take lives, so he pushed for the TPLF to allocate some of its own fuel for humanitarian purposes. This was flatly refused. So was permission to bring food assistance by air or road into TPLF-held parts of Amhara. Dr. Omamo also got nowhere in the delicate task of complaining about TPLF soldiers who were harassing UN workers in Amhara, including sexually. On a more positive note, however, the TPLF representative admitted that Dr. Omamo had traveled to Mekelle with the purpose of serving the people of Tigray.

Life-saving rebuked

As fighting intensified in Amhara, an alternative route for relief supplies to Tigray was through the hot desert in north-eastern Ethiopia, inhabited by the traditionally camel-herding Afar people. However, Afar Region was also attacked by the TPLF, mainly because a crucial [supply line](#) runs through it from the port in Djibouti to Addis Ababa and beyond.

Incidentally, *if* the TPLF had been, as Declan Walsh [claimed](#) in the New York Times, “at the vanguard of a movement pressing for greater autonomy for Ethiopia’s regions”,²⁵² Afar should have joined the invaders. The only Afar person to do so was the one who had been installed as regional president when the TPLF was in power at the center, namely Haji Seyoum Awel. He relocated to Mekelle and [supported](#) the TPLF verbally from there. The other Afar people resisted tenaciously and paid with ravaged towns and innumerable lives.

SKY News published a [report](#) from the ground in Afar on October 21, 2021,²⁵³ which subtly challenged the narrative that Ethiopia’s government was blocking food aid. It describes the fury of the locals who had been left hungry, exhausted and grieving after the TPLF’s raids, and now had to watch convoys of trucks driving right through their territory to bring food, even fuel, to their enemy. Unsurprisingly, some young fighters decided to distribute those supplies among their own people by seizing trucks along the narrow road.

Dr. Omamo’s diplomatic skills were sorely tested, but were up to the task. While his boss in Rome, David Beasley, was [posturing](#) by tweeting (as the then @WFPChief) an urgent demand for WFP convoys to start rolling “not in a month, not in a week, NOW”, they had in fact been rolling through Afar into Tigray for many weeks. Dr. Omamo elaborates: “This was made possible with support and facilitation from the Afar President’s Office and several federal authorities. We were receiving this support and facilitation despite the cognitive dissonance and political difficulties it created for them while the TF [TPLF] offensive into Afar and Amhara continued. (...) I had personally been negotiating with the Ministry of Peace and the NDRMC [National Disaster risk Management Commission] for approval for the fuel tankers to go in.”

An official WFP press release on August 9, 2021, provided alarming figures about malnutrition in Tigray and [said](#) it had been unable to reach “communities on the verge of famine”.²⁵⁴ However, it also reported feeding “another 1 million people in Tigray

²⁵² The New York Times on November 15, 2020: “They Once Ruled Ethiopia. Now They Are Fighting Its Government”, by Declan Walsh and Simon Marks.

²⁵³ Sky News website on Oct. 21, 2021: “They kill us and we are helping them’: Ethiopia’s increasingly nasty civil conflict”, by John Sparks.

²⁵⁴ The press release was headlined: “WFP delivers food to another 1 million people in Tigray during June and July but is only reaching half of those it should be”.

during June and July”. Several obstacles were mentioned, but the Ethiopian government was featured only as a partner, not as an adversary.

And yet, while Dr. Omamo pours praise on his team members on the ground for these impressive results under grueling circumstances, he writes that Ethiopia-based UN workers, especially African ones, were profoundly distrusted by the political UN leadership. Indeed, this [tension](#) was confirmed by other incidents, such as the [firing, in](#) October 2021, of Dr. Omamo’s compatriot, the UN Migration Agency’s Ethiopia Chief, Maureen Achieng, after audio was leaked of her complaining that UN high-ups from outside of Ethiopia were aggressively pursuing a pro-TPLF agenda. Steven Were Omamo managed to keep his job, but was repeatedly berated for being “too close to the government”. He found this nothing to be ashamed of: “I had developed deep relationships with Government officials at all levels because that was my role. That was my duty. That was my obligation. I did it well. WFP was trusted and admired as an organization. How could that be a problem?”

This is a crucial point. For it to make sense that starvation was being used as a weapon, the WFP staff moving the food on the ground should have been prevented from operating or kicked out by the Ethiopian government. Instead, they were treated as partners. Ethiopia’s beef with the WFP was exclusively with the leaders making incendiary statements from afar.


The self-serving glory-seeker

In October 2021, as the TPLF was pushing deep into Amhara and Afar, [Helen Clark](#) advocated for the UN to declare a famine in Tigray.



Helen Clark
@HelenClarkNZ



When will @UN  declare that there is a #famine in #Tigray? There are credible reports of people dying of hunger & others being very severely malnourished. Very little humanitarian aid has been allowed to enter the region. Time to call a spade a spade:



From bbc.co.uk

1:41 PM · Oct 16, 2021



The link was to a BBC [article](#) by Alex de Waal that concluded: “The question is no longer whether there is famine in Tigray, but how many people will starve to death before it is stopped.”²⁵⁵

Then, starting in September 2021, it [transpired](#) that of the [466](#) last trucks entering Tigray, only 38 had returned. They too were commandeered for “more important strategic priorities”.

²⁵⁵ The BBC website on October 16, 2021: “Viewpoint: Why Ethiopia's Tigray region is starving, but no famine declared”, by Alex de Waal.

Concerning. None of the 149 trucks in the convoy that reached [#Mekelle](#) [#Ethiopia](#) last week returned. Only 38 out of 466 trucks that entered [#Tigray](#) since 12 July returned. We need trucks to deliver lifesaving assistance to people in [#Tigray](#). [@OCHA_Ethiopia](#) [@WFP_Ethiopia](#)



8:51 PM · Sep 16, 2021

Mark Lowcock's replacement as UN Relief Chief, Martin Griffiths, [insisted](#) that the central government was at fault.²⁵⁶ About the missing trucks, he [speculated](#) that "they probably don't have the fuel to come out", as if this were not his responsibility. He went on to say: "And secondly, they may not wish to, so the consequences for humanitarian operations – whatever the cause – is problematic."

Dr. Omamo's book confirms that Tigrayan drivers had been harassed by local militiamen along the route, so some of them stayed in Tigray. If this was voluntary, it was their right, but keeping the trucks was not. The Ethiopian government later [proposed](#) a buffer area for the swapping of drivers, which was ignored.

[According](#) to the NDRMC, by June 2022, a total of 1,128 UN food-aid trucks had not returned from Tigray. There was hardly any UN protest, let alone self-reproach, over its capital stock thus contributing to taking rather than saving lives. The Ethiopian government was [not impressed](#). However, even with a shortage of trucks and battles raging along all access points, in December 2021, the government [reported](#) a

²⁵⁶ Reuters website on September 29, 2021: "U.N. aid chief to Ethiopia on famine in Tigray: 'Get those trucks moving', by Michelle Nichols.

substantial number of flights and truckloads of humanitarian supplies going into Tigray.²⁵⁷ This did not make the news.

Compared to UN bosses working from Italy, Switzerland and the USA, the Western diplomats living in Ethiopia tended to express more understanding of the Ethiopian perspective. For instance, USAID's Mission Director in Ethiopia, Sean Jones, praised Ethiopian officials for being cooperative.²⁵⁸ Dr. Omamo observes how their embassies in Addis Ababa would steer clear of controversial relief-aid and human-rights issues. Yet the UN humanitarian system was squeezed to the last drop for "overt politization".

Steven Were Omamo's book does not mention Mark Lowcock by name, but he is easy to identify by his title. He must also have inspired Dr. Omamo's witty archetype of the "glory-seeking self-serving cowboy", who gets easily bored reading, fact-checking and getting the life-saving job done, but relishes the chance to hog the limelight with histrionic declarations about himself fighting for good against evil.

Never mind Lowcock lying

In April 2021, 'Mark Lowcock says' was also headlined as 'the UN says' that there is weaponization of rape.²⁵⁹ Helen Clark's aforementioned piece in Foreign Policy affirmed that, speaking behind closed doors to the UN Security Council, Mark Lowcock had said that "there is no doubt that sexual violence is being used in this conflict as a weapon of war, as a means to humiliate, terrorize and traumatize and entire population today and into the next generation".²⁶⁰

It was nigh-impossible for the UN Security Council to verify Mr. Lowcock's retelling of an anonymous Tigrayan woman's ordeal of being gang-raped by Eritrean soldiers after her baby and husband were killed. But there was one detail in his testimony on April 15, 2021, that was relatively simple to check, or at least should have been easy to back up with piles of evidence. He had received reports of 150 people starving to death in a district called Ofla, just a little south of Mekelle.²⁶¹ This was immediately spread across the globe, as one would expect. Only Ethiopian media gave serious consideration to the Ethiopian government's vehement denial.²⁶² Next up should be

²⁵⁷ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WHy2Y1CtSBM&t=578s>

²⁵⁸ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9kOxCyqcKK8&t=224s>

²⁵⁹ This is how it is phrased, for instance, on April 15, 2021, in a Reuters article headlined "Sexual violence being used as a weapon of war, U.N. says", by Michelle Nichols.

²⁶⁰ Foreign Policy on April 27, 2021: "In Tigray, Sexual Violence Has Become a Weapon of War", by Helen Clark and Rachel Kyte.

²⁶¹ The 150 dying from hunger in Ofla were directly mentioned by Associated Press News on April 15, 2021: "UN: Tigray's humanitarian crisis worsens, no Eritrean exit, by Michelle Nichols. And on Voice of America (VOA) News, also April 15, 2021: "UN: Hunger, Rape Rising in Ethiopia's Tigray", by Margaret Besheer.

²⁶² ENA on April 16, 2021: "No One Dies from Hunger in Tigray: Commission". This brief article quotes the findings of The National Disaster Risk Management Commission (NDRMC).

the harrowing photos, like the ones from 1984-85, of throngs of villagers with emaciated bodies roaming the highway.

Except such pictures were never produced. On September 21, 2021, USAID Chief Samantha Power [tweeted](#) a distressing picture of an emaciated child (from an Associated Press [article](#) written by Cara Anna in Nairobi).²⁶³ This and another harrowing photo had been “provided anonymously”, it said, with an unverifiable claim about where and when they were taken. In the group photos, the children and their mothers appeared to be of normal body weight.

As for Mr. Lowcock’s claim about Ofla, Steven Were Omamo’s book notices in passing how it was “shameful” that Mr. Lowcock “had falsely claimed that the UN knew of ‘more than 150 people’ who had ‘starved to death’ in a place called Ofla, south of Mekelle. Mr. Lowcock had added that he believed ‘many more people’ had died but could ‘not provide a figure’, and that he was already seeing echoes of the ‘colossal tragedy’ of the 1984-85 famine in Ethiopia.”

And yet, Lowcock dropped it right away when pushed by the government to produce the evidence for the Ofla tragedy. He did what everyone has done throughout this conflict after failing to back up their wild accusations against Ethiopia and Eritrea. He just stopped talking about it and moved on to the next accusation. Thus, Mr. Lowcock’s climbdown was not splashed on the front pages, or even made searchable online. In fact, the claim about the 150 deaths from starvation in Ofla continues to be presented as fact to this day, for instance, in a [book](#) from 2023 by Martin Plaut and Sarah Vaughan.²⁶⁴

A special [report](#) on the Tigray situation, published by the Dutch Ministry of Foreign Affairs in August 2021,²⁶⁵ treats the veracity of Mark Lowcock’s claim as an irrelevance: “In response to UN Representative Mark Lowcock’s statement that 150 people had starved to death in the Tigrayan woreda of Ofla, the Ethiopian authorities claimed that no one in Tigray had died of starvation and that humanitarian assistance in the region was going well. However, a confidential source stated in May 2021 that humanitarian aid was still insufficient to help the 4.5 million people in need properly.”

Is this saying that the Ofla story was true or untrue? It is remarkable how little interest there was in finding out whether or not Mark Lowcock was lying to the UN Security Council and, in effect, to the whole world about this matter, and whether he should thus be trusted or distrusted on so many [others](#). The media were fed what they

²⁶³ Associated Press News on September 21, 2021: “‘I just cry’: Dying of hunger in Ethiopia’s blockaded Tigray”, by Cara Anna.

²⁶⁴ “Understanding Ethiopia’s Tigray War”, by Martin Plaut and Sarah Vaughan, Hurst Publishers, May 2023.

²⁶⁵ Ministerie van Buitenlandse Zaken: “Thematic Country of Origin Information Report on Tigray 2021”, The Hague, August 2021.

needed for a horror story that was a cultural meme, and this time not from the undeniably partisan Jan Nyssen, but from such a respectable-seeming ‘neutral’ as Mark Lowcock. There was no appetite for digging into the real scandal here, namely that the UN Relief Chief was violating every humanitarian principle in the book to [demonize](#) one side in the war and politicize the UN humanitarian system, instead of reporting the knowable facts.

Conversely, there was a burning hunger for activism on what seemed like a slam-dunk issue of good against evil. For instance, in June 2021, the trendy leftist columnist George Monbiot [wrote](#) in The Guardian about “the looming famine in Tigray”.²⁶⁶ He is not exactly an Ethiopia specialist, but he was already adventurous and idealistic back in 1984, when communist dictator Mengistu Hailemariam lied to deny that starvation was being used as a weapon. And so he slammed Abiy Ahmed for doing the same again. “There is great weight of evidence”, he claimed, with reference to – surprise, surprise – the statements of Mark Lowcock. Linking to the works of assorted TPLF propagandists, he then waxed lyrical about pre-war Tigray being an “outstanding example” and a “world-renowned success story”. According to Mr. Monbiot, Tigray is so full of communal spirit that “every fit person over the age of 18 spends 20 days a year on collective projects to rehabilitate the land.”

Watch out for Mr. Monbiot’s next attempt to romanticize some authoritarian clique’s war games as a progressive cause.

Relief aid fuels the war, literally

Apart from its continued raids into Afar, the TPLF was pushed back into Tigray at the end of 2021. However, the federal government decided not to pursue the rebel army into its home region. In explaining [why](#),²⁶⁷ the government was [candid](#) about its failure to win over the local population during the seven months when it tried and largely failed to run the local affairs of Tigray, that is, from November 28, 2020 to June 28, 2021.

On March 24, 2022, the Ethiopian government declared a unilateral [truce](#). During the lull in fighting that followed, the WFP convoys [rolled](#) unhindered.²⁶⁸ A tweet from @UN on June 29, 2022 said: “Ethiopia: Humanitarian supplies have been flowing into

²⁶⁶ The Guardian on June 30, 2021: “The looming famine in Tigray is an avoidable catastrophe”, by George Monbiot.

²⁶⁷ The full text of the Government Communication Service issued on December 24, 2021, which denounces fake genocide narratives and explains the decision not to send the federal army into Tigray for now, can be found online by googling the exact words “The Ethiopian Defense Forces have successfully completed liberating TPLF occupied areas”. On the same date, the online newspaper Borkena also published the article: “Ethiopian PM explains unpopular decision of halting army march to Tigray”.

²⁶⁸ See, for instance, UN News online on May 5, 2022, which published an article headlined: “Ethiopia: Essential aid reaches Tigray region, but more still needed”.

Tigray since the truce was announced. Since April 1, @WFP has delivered enough food to feed 5.9 million per month”. And yet, without becoming more [specific](#) than “according to the UN”, a “de facto humanitarian blockade on Tigray” [continued](#) to be the go-to truism in mainstream war coverage, and has [remained](#) so ever since. This would not only ignore official Ethiopian [sources](#), but also WFP Ethiopia’s steady [stream](#) of announcements of food being transported into Tigray, as well as into Afar and Amhara.

At this point, Mark Lowcock, now *former* UN Relief Chief, [accused](#) the humanitarian system of bowing to Ethiopian pressure by not officially declaring a famine.²⁶⁹ This was [reported](#) by Will Brown in The Telegraph, on June 8, 2022.²⁷⁰ As the source for “estimates of hundreds of thousands facing famine”, Mr. Brown linked to an [article](#) that his own newspaper had published in March,²⁷¹ right before the truce. It invoked the authority of the WHO, whose Director-General, Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus, blasted Ethiopia for “the blockade, the siege”. It was mentioned that he grew up in Tigray, but not that he had dedicated his adult life to rising through the ranks of the rebel group.

Dr. Tedros would press on with the same successful formula of claiming that a famine was ongoing, and even that medical doctors were [collapsing](#) from hunger.²⁷²



Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus ✓
@DrTedros

The famine in [#Tigray](#), Ethiopia is lasting for months. With famine comes widespread disease & death. We’ve been calling on Ethiopia & Eritrea govts for immediate, unimpeded entry of humanitarian aid: food, medicines, fuel. People are dying under our watch. 8:00 AM · Jun 8, 2022

Then, on July 15, 2022, the WFP declared that famine in Tigray had been [averted](#)!

²⁶⁹ Reported, for instance, in Devex magazine on June 7, 2022: “Mark Lowcock: Ethiopian government blocked Tigray famine declaration”, by Sarah Jerving.

²⁷⁰ The Telegraph on June 8, 2022: “Ethiopia blocked famine declaration in Tigray, UN chief suggests”, by Will Brown.

²⁷¹ The Telegraph on March 16, 2022: “Tigray facing world’s biggest health ‘catastrophe’, WHO warns”, by Sarah Newey.

²⁷² Reported, for instance, in Today News Africa on June 3, 2022: “Tigray’s Largest Hospital Suspending Operations As Conflict Continues, Resources Dwindle And Doctors Collapse From Hunger”, by Noah Pitcher.



Famine in Ethiopia's conflict-hit Tigray region has been averted, says @WFP, as food trucks have managed to deliver essential supplies, but the crisis is far from over.

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11:06 PM · Jul 15, 2022

Apart from [Ethiopian](#) media and one BBC podcast (since deleted), this was not found newsworthy. The [attention](#) it did get was from Getachew Reda in a tweet on July 16, 2022, describing it as “gross”. He now [insisted](#) the problem was a “lack of fuel” for distribution. “The claim that they have averted famine is the height of irresponsibility!” he ended his announcement. Dr. Tedros [chipped in](#) with a video of a crying mother and the message that “the siege must end”, emphasizing the lack of fuel, without which the food could not be distributed. Because, by then, the massive [inflow](#) of humanitarian supplies, albeit ignored or [played down](#) in the world press, was being [officially recognized](#).²⁷³

²⁷³ For instance, a press statement by US Secretary of State Antony Blinken on June 7, 2022, said: “In the past seven days, more than 1,100 trucks have reached Tigray to deliver life-saving food, malnutrition treatment and health supplies, and other essential relief items to those who are most vulnerable as a result of the hard work of all the humanitarians committed to saving

This is when a new narrative was created, echoed by the EU Commissioner for Crisis Management, Janez Lenarcic: “So now we have a situation, where humanitarian houses in Mekelle are full, but the people out there in the countryside are still hungry,” he said when he visited Ethiopia, including Tigray, in June 2022. “There's a need to lift restrictions, especially on the provision of fuel.”²⁷⁴

The TPLF’s thirst for fuel culminated on August 24, 2022, when it took twelve WFP fuel tankers at gunpoint, sparking condemnation from the WFP and beyond.



David Beasley ✓
@WFPChief



Hours ago, Tigrayan authorities stole 570,000 liters of fuel for @WFP operations in #Tigray! Millions will starve if we do not have fuel to deliver food. This is OUTRAGEOUS and DISGRACEFUL. We demand return of this fuel NOW.

1:43 AM · Aug 25, 2022

5,308 Retweets 1,458 Quotes 7,075 Likes 108 Bookmarks

lives. We particularly appreciate the cooperation of the Government of Ethiopia, Afar regional authorities, and Tigrayan regional authorities to facilitate the delivery of this assistance, as well as the efforts of the United Nations agencies, international organizations, U.S. government partners, and humanitarian organizations across Ethiopia.”

²⁷⁴ VOA News on June 22, 2022: “Ethiopian Government Calls Tigray Fuel Shortage a 'Myth'”, by Halima Athumani.



Samantha Power
@PowerUSAID



.@USAID strongly condemns the TPLF's theft of over 150,000 gallons of fuel for @WFP's work, and its harassment of aid workers. Impeding efforts to help feed Ethiopian civilians is deeply cruel, and we call on the TPLF to return the fuel and respect humanitarian operations.



Bureau of African Affairs @AsstSecStateAF · Aug 25, 2022

The US joins the @UN in expressing concern about 12 fuel trucks that have been seized by the TPLF. The fuel is intended for the delivery of essential lifesaving humanitarian assistance & we condemn any actions that deprive humanitarian assistance from reaching Ethiopians in need.

11:24 PM · Aug 25, 2022



Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus
@DrTedros

You've to stand up for yourself. If you don't, no one else will.
Sharad.

9:43 PM · Aug 25, 2022

3,139 Retweets **369** Quotes **5,213** Likes

Dr. Tedros did [not comment](#) directly on the fuel robbery, but produced one of his characteristic cryptic tweets, easily [interpreted](#) by fellow Ethiopians.

This showed not only that the TPLF's humanitarian discourse was purely instrumental, but also that the Ethiopian government had good reason to be apprehensive about unrestricted fuel deliveries to Tigray. Because the fuel heist on August 24, 2022, was immediately followed by the breaking of the truce. Both sides blamed each other for starting hostilities, but the TPLF moved south of Tigray and [captured](#) Kobo, a town in Amhara Region. This was, as I predicted in a [tweet](#) on August 28, a last-gasp offensive that would only [worsen](#) the TPLF's position in the later negotiations.

Alex de Waal, however, responded to the rekindling of war by [blaming](#) the international actors who had tried to bring the parties to the table, [foreseeing](#) that fighting would now carry on to the bitter end.²⁷⁵

Kjetil Tronvoll, meanwhile, [declared](#) that the TPLF was within its rights to take the fuel.²⁷⁶

From then on, no truck would make it through the frontline until after the Pretoria Peace Agreement on November 2, 2022. And yet, on November 1, the WFP [boasted](#) of mass distribution from its warehouses in Mekelle.

²⁷⁵ In Responsible Statecraft on August 25, 2022, Alex de Waal writes: “Even more culpable are the international players that have backed a peace process in name only for the last 12 months, hiding behind a casual and complacent African Union High Representative, General Olusegun Obasanjo of Nigeria, who shows neither an understanding of the complexities of the Ethiopian crisis nor an appetite for engaging with them. That process is now dead. Appeals for restraint will fall on deaf ears. (...) When the battles are over, the protagonists expect that at least one of them will have collapsed.”

²⁷⁶ A VOA News article headlined “WFP Chief Alleges TPLF Stole Fuel Designated for Humanitarian Use” by Henry Wilkins on August 25, 2022, says: “Kjetil Tronvoll, a professor at Oslo New University College and an expert on the Ethiopian conflict, said on Twitter that a U.N. situation report stated the fuel had been loaned from Tigray authorities and claimed, therefore, that the TPLF was within its rights to take the fuel.”



WFP Ethiopia
@WFP_Ethiopia



.@WFP continues to distribute food in #Mekelle - aiming to reach over 535,000 people within the next two weeks. We've reached 178,000 so far.

@WFP food assistance operations are also ongoing in Amhara, Afar & Somali regions.



5:27 PM · Nov 1, 2022

The food-for-cannon-fodder scheme

In a tweet on December 29, 2021, shortly after the war had turned against the TPLF, Getachew Reda [intoned](#) the musical lyrics of the cultural meme: “Children in Tigray have no clue if it’s Christmas”. As someone often mocked for being overweight talking about famine, he might have pondered his own culpability, not just for starting the war, but for Tigrayan misgovernance. Even in the absence of war or famine, child malnutrition has [long](#) been a huge problem in the region.²⁷⁷ George Monbiot’s vision of a community-spirited Tigray contrasted with a reality in which the TPLF leaders’ own children were living abroad, and the rich could [buy](#) freedom from military service,²⁷⁸

²⁷⁷ See, for instance, the paper published on August 14, 2019: “Stunting and associated factors among under-five children in Wukro town, Tigray region, Ethiopia: a cross sectional study”, by Tesfay Tsegay Gebru et al.

²⁷⁸ Ann Fitz-Gerald’s survey “The frontline voices: Tigrayans speak on the realities of life under an insurgency regime” from April 2022 says: “Respondents described how regional authorities and paramilitary forces (‘Liyu Hail’ – translated as ‘Special Police’) came door-to-door in search of recruits. The only alternatives to recruitment that they offered were to be

whereas young people running away from the insurgency regime would have their parents [imprisoned](#).²⁷⁹



This graphic meme became popular among pro-Ethiopian activists during the war.

The Tigrayans interviewed by Ann Fitz-Gerald in Amhara and Afar in March-April 2022 testified that the TPLF leaders appropriated food aid, making its distribution conditional on families enlisting their children in the rebel army. The report [says](#): “Sixty percent of the respondents described how any individuals inquiring about food directly to aid organizations would be arrested.”

This was confirmed from an unexpected quarter, the aforementioned massively sought-after, Tigrinya- and Amharic-speaking journalist Lucy Kassa, who invalidated the fuel pretext by [writing](#), a whole week before the robbery and final TPLF offensive,

fined, ‘see bad come to their family,’ and have their family members, no matter what age, be imprisoned.”

²⁷⁹ This was acknowledged in a Reuters report on May 16, 2022: “Insight: Some Ethiopians claim forced recruitment by Tigrayan forces”, by Guilia Paravicini and Katharine Houreld.

that warehouses in Mekelle were full of food, while people living in the same city were “dying unable to receive the aid they are entitled to”.²⁸⁰

It is not that Lucy Kassa ought to have had any credibility left by then to accuse either side. But the fact is that she had acquired superstardom in big media. Therefore, *her* holding the TPLF rather than Ethiopia responsible for the hunger made quite an impact. Her reports unfavorable to the TPLF did not take off until June 2022, and were never to become as graphic and grisly as the ones she did against the federal government and its allies. Nonetheless, people on both sides of the war were astonished to discover that she was not actually a dyed-in-the-wool Tigrayan ethnonationalist. Her main desire was to be the “[courageous](#)” one, which was ill-served by staying wedded to the TPLF’s increasingly [discredited](#) cause, as its authoritarian nature and human-rights violations were getting increasing attention. Thus, Lucy Kassa saved her good reputation with a claim to have exposed both sides.

A gut-wrenching BBC documentary, however, slammed only the Ethiopian government for the misery in Tigray.

²⁸⁰ The Guardian on August 19, 2022: “Hunger in Tigray pushing women and girls into sex work”, by Lucy Kassa.



The BBC Africa Eye [program](#) titled “Tigray under Siege” premiered in October 2022, using Arte TV [footage](#) from July. It featured many hungry people and a couple of starving individuals. A Tigrayan girl blamed “the enemy”. The regional president, Debretsion Gebremichael, portrayed it as an attempted genocide. A despondent African-accented voiceover said the Ethiopian government started the war. No alternative viewpoint about the conflict was presented.

So many reputable voices echoing the propaganda lie that Ethiopia was creating a famine in Tigray provoked angst and sowed hatred, especially in the Tigrayan diaspora. Thus, the urgent conversation about the political causes and the democratic solutions was shouted down by a crude victimization discourse, which tore into so many interethnic [friendships](#), even into some interethnic marriages. It also served to mobilize, fundraise and lobby for the TPLF’s military campaign, bringing death and destruction, including to the people in Tigray who were supposedly being championed, but, as anyone with eyes can see today, would have been spared a lot, if the TPLF had given up sooner.

Was Ethiopia responsible for services in Tigray?

The Irish MEP, Clare Daly, summed it up in the European Parliament when she [accused](#) the Ethiopian government of weaponizing “all basic services [in Tigray] such as water, electricity, communication, and even access to bank accounts”, describing it as “collective punishment”.²⁸¹ This sounds like something out of a vicious occupation regime. However, Ms. Daly said this on October 5, 2022, when the Ethiopian army had not been in control of Tigray for over 15 months, rendering it unable to provide the one service more basic than the ones she did mention, the *sine qua non* for all the other services, namely security.

When Ethiopia tried to take charge of Tigray’s security after November 28, 2020, it fully [understood](#) its obligation to [provide](#) all those services and more.²⁸² This was despite the fact that the TPLF, simultaneously with the attack on the Northern Command, [shut down](#) the region’s mobile network, among other acts of sabotage.²⁸³ Should Ethiopia have carried on providing services after its troops were pushed out by the insurgents on June 28, 2021?

This is what leading voices in the international community consistently [demanded](#),²⁸⁴ the idea being that the services were not so much produced on site as [enabled](#) simply by not switching them off remotely, as expressed in a tweet by The Economist’s Ethiopia correspondent, Tom Gardner.



Tom Gardner
@TomGardner18



Good point - restoring comms and banking is a flick-of-the-switch confidence-building measures which can't be obstructed down the food chain.

7:18 PM · Mar 24, 2022

Indeed, the telecoms network was probably deactivated by Ethiopian troops before retreating from Tigray, seeking to hamper enemy communications. Nevertheless, keeping it activated would always have required maintenance. The Tigrayan water supply comes from Tigray. The power grid in northern Ethiopia is fed almost exclusively

²⁸¹ European Parliament, Verbatim Reporting of Proceedings, October 5, 2022, Strasbourg.

²⁸² For instance, the press release “PM Office Issues Statement On The Tigray Region Rule Of Law Operations” on March 3, 2021, presents the federal government’s efforts to repair the TPLF’s extensive destruction of infrastructure, including telecoms, transportation, roads, electricity and banking services.

²⁸³ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4znDI8o7rNA>

²⁸⁴ For instance, the aforementioned EU Commissioner for Crisis Management, Janez Lenarcic, is quoted in a series of media for saying, during his trip to Ethiopia in June 2022: “I do not see the rationale for keeping the blockade of banking services, electricity and telecommunications in place”.

by the Tekeze Hydroelectric Dam on Tigray's border with Amhara, which the TPLF invaded with Operation Mothers of Tigray on July 12, 2021. Interestingly, Dr. Aregawi Hagos [said](#), after he escaped from Tigray around April 2022, that water was scarce, but electricity in Tigray was "fully available".²⁸⁵

And yet, in a [declaration](#) on October 7, 2021, while the TPLF troops were marching on Addis Ababa, the European Parliament: "Calls for basic public services such as electricity and banking services to be fully reestablished, and for restrictions on telecommunications and internet access in Tigray to be lifted."²⁸⁶

This held the Ethiopian central authorities to account for not providing services in an area in which its representatives were being [paraded](#) as hostages in the street!²⁸⁷ Actually, at that stage of the war, it was the TPLF which was responsible for providing services to the 15-million-strong non-Tigrayan population under *its* control in Afar and Amhara. But nobody even mentioned that.

Of course, the hardship of living without those amenities was real, not just for the city dwellers, who were used to them, but also for rural folks, who had their economy crippled and, for instance, their teachers and doctors going without pay. Using the non sequitur that this suffering was proof of Ethiopian perfidy, the uppermost voice of the UN insisted, only one day after the Ethiopian government's unilateral truce declaration on March 24, 2022:

"[The](#) Secretary-General [António Guterres] therefore reiterates his call for the restoration of public services in Tigray, including banking, electricity and telecommunication."²⁸⁸

Well, good luck with that. By then, the special [legal regime](#) in rebel-controlled territory [banned](#) anyone from collaborating with representatives of the federal government, with penalties ranging from 15 years in prison to death.²⁸⁹ These were

²⁸⁵ Fana Broadcasting Corporate (fanabc.com) on May 3, 2022: "TPLF Holds People Of Tigray A Hostage, Uses Aid As A Political Tool: Escaped Physician", by Wondesen Aregahegn.

²⁸⁶ European Parliament resolution of 7 October 2021 on the humanitarian situation in Tigray (2021/2902(RSP)).

²⁸⁷ https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JFGyv_0mrEO

²⁸⁸ "Statement attributable to the Spokesperson for the Secretary-General - on Ethiopia", March 25, 2022.

²⁸⁹ The "Armed Groups and International Law blog" published a study by Marishet Mohammed Hamza, an alumnus of the Geneva Academy of International Humanitarian Law and Human Rights, titled: "The Tigray People's Liberation Front: A Provincial Ruling Political Party turned into a Rebel Government". It affirms that: "The TPLF's new criminal law proscribes acts such as refusal to perform military services, collaboration with the enemy (i.e., the Ethiopian government and allied forces), treason, unconstitutional change of government, and armed resistance. (...) Depending upon the circumstances and gravity of the acts, these crimes may entail from 15-25 years of imprisonment to the death penalty."

not mere words. In the seven months when Ethiopia was tenuously in control of the region, Tigrayans working with the interim administration were [killed](#) as traitors.²⁹⁰

The one move that Ethiopia *could* have made was to deliver truckloads of cash for the TPLF to run banking services. This is when we get to the *should*. The Ethiopian people were [angry](#) enough with their government over its “goodwill gesture” on January 7, 2022, of releasing Sebat Nega, the aforementioned ‘Godfather of the TPLF’, who had been [captured](#) in the early stages of the war.²⁹¹ They would have been livid, had their rulers also replenished the banks of a region whose entire economy had been repurposed to kill and conquer them. Incidentally, in August 2022, Lucy Kassa also [wrote](#) that cash was being [confiscated](#) arbitrarily by the Tigrayan authorities.²⁹²

In a [press briefing](#) in [Addis Ababa](#) on September 20, 2022,²⁹³ Mike Hammer, the latest of a string of US Special Envoys, [said](#) that the TPLF leaders, when they talked to him during his trip to Mekelle back on August 2, had made it “very clear that they were preparing for potential hostilities if there wasn’t a restoration of services, as they were making the case that Tigrayans were suffering badly. I mean, it’s not only Tigrayans; in fact, the Afar and Amhara people are without services as well.”

Thus, Mike Hammer not only placed the blame for breaking the truce on the TPLF, but also pulled the rug out from under the notion that the lack of services in Tigray was down to Ethiopian truculence, even more so, as he [commented](#) that the Ethiopian government had “recognized their responsibility for *trying* to provide services for all Ethiopians. But you need a conducive environment in order to do so. You need a conducive security environment.”

Commendably, Mr. Hammer stuck to this line, whereas USAID Director, Samantha Power [joined](#) Dr. Tedros in continuing to [scold](#) Ethiopia for not providing banking, telecoms etc. in Tigray. So did a Western-[sponsored](#) UN resolution,²⁹⁴ which called for the lifting of restrictions on cash and fuel supplies into Tigray (it also condemned

²⁹⁰ Associated Press News on May 27, 2021: “Ethiopia says 22 regional officials killed by Tigray rebels”.

²⁹¹ See, for instance, an opinion piece by Worku Aberra in Borkena on January 10, 2022: “No Amnesty for War Criminals”, referring to the release of Sebat Nega.

²⁹² The Guardian on August 19, 2022: “Hunger in Tigray pushing women and girls into sex work”, by Lucy Kassa. This article says: “Smugglers described harassment, criminalisation, unpredictable restrictions on the amount of money one can carry into Tigray, and confiscation of money intended for hungry people. (...) Others accused Tigray authorities of confiscating the money for themselves at the checkpoints.”

²⁹³ Digital Press Briefing with U.S. Special Envoy for the Horn of Africa, Mike Hammer, Special Briefing, September 20, 2022.

²⁹⁴ Human Rights Council fifty-first session, 12 September–7 October 2022, “Agenda item 4 Human rights situations that require the Council’s attention”, A/HRC/51/L.19, September 29, 2022.

TPLF's "forcible removal of fuel tankers"), all this simultaneously with the fierce battles that would soon after end the war and enable the gradual restoration of normality.

Understandable though the frustration over lack of services was, holding Ethiopia responsible for providing them inside rebel-held territory lay somewhere between disdaining its security and demanding the impossible. It was not the most virulent scapegoating of Ethiopia in the war, but it was the most preposterous.

As law and order returned to Tigray, technicians were brought in to [repair](#) broken infrastructure, including the normalization of flights. Some Ethiopians muttered that the government was prioritizing the rebuilding of Tigray over equally affected areas in Afar and Amhara. If this was true, it could have been both to respond to the international focus on Tigray and to prevent the conditions for an insurgency.

At first, Mike Hammer came across as an airhead unfit for such a delicate job. On September 11, 2022, while fierce fighting was raging and the death toll mounting, the superpower's Special Envoy [tweeted](#) passionately from Addis Ababa about an American football game that he was going to watch, ending on a note of "Go @commanders beat @Jaguars!" Nevertheless, eventually Mr. Hammer did contribute more to peace than his predecessors. He declined to back the TPLF's wildest claims, to the [chagrin](#) of Alex de Waal, who hammered Hammer for being "comforting to Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed and discouraging to the Tigrayan authorities" and described "the corpses of Tigray's starved children" as "the lubricant for a lackadaisical imitation of diplomacy".²⁹⁵ In particular, Mike Hammer repeatedly [stressed](#) that the US [opposed](#) the breakup of Ethiopia.²⁹⁶ This made sense. A newly independent Tigray would have been landlocked, in territorial disputes with its neighbors, and even more of a refugee-producing garrison state than Eritrea.

A stubborn myth about the right of secession needs to be dispelled here, widely believed among Ethiopians themselves, and spread by sloppy foreign journalists and academics. For instance, Alex de Waal [expounded](#), in his basic explainer for the BBC early on in the war,²⁹⁷ that the ethnic autonomy enshrined in the Constitution of 1995 (ratified in 1994) was the real bone of contention. He even set out the historical rationale for its unique provision of allowing "a region to go its own way". Well, he just forgot to read it. Because the relevant [Article 39](#) is not about secession for the regions (called 'States' in the [version](#) in English), but for: "Every Nation, Nationality and

²⁹⁵ Responsible statecraft on September 27, 2022: "US diplomacy failing at critical moment in Ethiopia war", by Alex de Waal.

²⁹⁶ Mike Hammer said this on many occasions. See, for example, "Digital Press Briefing with U.S. Special Envoy to the Horn of Africa, Mike Hammer", held on September 20, 2022, in which he said: "I should be clear that U.S. policy, as you probably are well aware, is that the United States is committed to the unity, sovereignty, and territorial integrity of Ethiopia (...)".

²⁹⁷ The BBC website on November 15, 2020: "Tigray crisis viewpoint: Why Ethiopia is spiralling out of control", by Alex de Waal.

People”. Section 5 clearly [defines](#) this as an ethnic group. There are over 80 of these, but only six of the eleven regions are conceived as the homeland of one majority ethnicity, and even they have many minorities in their midst, who could in turn, as per [Article 47](#), carve out their separate entities. In theory, Tigrayans could break away as a Nation, Nationality and People, but without any automatic right to the Tigray Region’s territory.

Human-rights processes: the joint report

Notwithstanding the propaganda lies disguised as human-rights discourse, there is no doubt that real war crimes were committed that cry out for justice.

Online debate between supporters and opponents of the TPLF has mainly consisted of trading accusations of atrocities, usually based on eyewitness accounts, occasionally on photographic materials. Ann Fitz-Gerald was quick to [point out](#) how only advanced *forensic* instruments can see through the fog of war,²⁹⁸ in which each side is convinced that the other side’s claims are fabrications and that their own side always speaks the truth. Indeed, nearly all Ethiopians would support justice, including against individuals from their own side, for outrages like rape, murder of civilians and of prisoners of war, provided that guilt is ascertained in an impartial manner.

From the moment the war broke out, the Office of the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR) and the Ethiopian Human Rights Commission (EHRC) intensified their communications. In March 2021, they [agreed](#) to conduct a joint investigation,²⁹⁹ carried out from May 16 to August 30. We shall soon look at the criticism of it, which was [intense](#) already [prior](#) to its findings.³⁰⁰ These were [presented](#) on November 3, 2021, that is, at a highly sensitive moment, just as the TPLF’s Operation Mothers of Tigray was advancing dangerously towards the capital and committing atrocities in Afar and Amhara, none of which was covered in what was to be dubbed “the joint report”,³⁰¹ as it dealt only with events until June 28, 2021, the date when federal forces withdrew from Tigray and declared a unilateral ceasefire. Nevertheless, it remains by far the least-bad study of human-rights violations during

²⁹⁸ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Syp7vOibp9w&t=693s>

²⁹⁹ Press release on March 25, 2021: “Ethiopia: The Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights and the Ethiopian Human Rights Commission to conduct a joint investigation with a view to a credible accountability process”.

³⁰⁰ See, for instance, The World Peace Foundation on October 11, 2021: “Neither Impartial nor Independent: The Joint UN-EHRC Human Rights Investigation in Tigray”, by Alex de Waal, Chidi Odinkalu, Paulos Tesfagiorgis and Delia Burns. And Ethiopia Insight on November 3: “A statement of concern on the joint investigation of OHCHR and EHRC”, by the Tigray Human Rights Forum.

³⁰¹ Its title is: “Report of the Ethiopian Human Rights Commission (EHRC)/Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR) Joint Investigation into Alleged Violations of International Human Rights, Humanitarian and Refugee Law Committed by all Parties to the Conflict in the Tigray Region of the Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia”.

the conflict, with access to some of the crime scenes and face-to-face contact with some of the witnesses. It described incidents of shocking contempt for the laws of war, such as extrajudicial executions and rape committed by soldiers on both sides. There was plenty in there to tarnish the rebel army as well as the federal army and its allies.

The Ethiopian government's extensive reply basically accepted the report, expressing partial vindication.³⁰² It was established that the war began with the attack on the Northern Command. Genocide was discussed, but not applied to the Ethiopian war effort. Nor was it claimed that rape had been ordered from above. Investigators looked into the strong accusations leveled by Mark Lowcock. Not only did it find no evidence of "starvation as a weapon of war". It also "could not confirm deliberate or willful denial of humanitarian assistance to the civilian population in Tigray" by the Ethiopian government, although more research into this subject was suggested.

Incidentally, this meant that The Economist's claim, less than a month earlier, that "Ethiopia is deliberately starving its own people" had now been tested and found unproven by a UN-sponsored investigation that was, whatever its flaws, much more thorough than any journalistic research conducted into the matter. So I sent an email to The Economist correspondent in Addis Ababa at the time, Tom Gardner, who, to his credit, responded with a good-faith exchange. I asked him whether there was now going to be a retraction and apology for a grave and consequential accusation not being backed by the verifiable facts. He replied categorically in the negative, not because he had any better evidence, but solely because he had "absolutely no doubt that it [starvation] is a weapon of war". He and his employer were just too comfortable floating along with the cultural meme to be weighed down by the burden of proof.

The TPLF outright rejected the joint OHCHR-EHRC report as biased. The intense criticism from this side focused on the EHRC being based in Addis Ababa and forming part of the Ethiopian state apparatus.³⁰³ This is actually common in established democracies, which have taxpayer-funded watchdogs to uphold citizens' rights. But fair enough, Ethiopia is not an established democracy, and so does not qualify for such trust in its institutions. So how independent is the EHRC?

Once again, the TPLF's complaints are full of self-projection. Under the TPLF/EPRDF regime, and especially during the brutal repression of the popular protests starting in 2015, the EHRC was indeed toothless.³⁰⁴ In July 2019, the Ethiopian

³⁰² This is presented on waltainfo.com on November 3, 2021: "Ethiopia Issues Statement on JIT of EHRC, UNOHCHR" [sic.], by Adimasu Aragawu.

³⁰³ This was emphasized by the internationally renowned Ethiopian journalist, Zecharias Zelalem, writing for New Lines Magazine on January 19, 2022, in an opinion piece headlined: "The UN's Purlblind Human Rights Reporting in Ethiopia".

³⁰⁴ This is described in an Amnesty International report released on June 17, 2019: "Ethiopia: Skirting human rights violations: Recommendations for the reform of Ethiopian Human Rights Commission", Index Number AFR 25/0123/2019.

legislature appointed a new chief commissioner, Daniel Bekele, mentioned in Part 2, former Executive Director of the Africa Division of Human Rights Watch. The TPLF had reason to distrust him, because they used to imprison him for years. Nevertheless, under his leadership, and before the release of the joint report, the EHRC had denounced both the Eritrean and Ethiopian army.³⁰⁵ This had caused rows with senior officials and hardliners, who threatened to close the EHRC down. And yet, the EHRC has survived and kept up its habit of embarrassing the authorities, most recently by denouncing human-rights violations in Amhara and Oromia, allegedly committed not just by armed insurgents, but also by agents of the government. It faces frequent obstacles,³⁰⁶ but continues to operate both with state funds and foreign donations. Following the rigorous international review process of the Global Alliance of National Human Rights Institutions (GANHRI) in 2021, it received ‘A-status’ accreditation for compliance with standards of independence.

Even so, the doubt over the EHRC’s impartiality was precisely why the investigation was *joint*, that is, closely overseen by the UN body OHCHR, which had to endorse the findings. How is Ethiopia supposed to become a human-rights-respecting country if not by using and building the capacity of its own institutions? Some aid donors have been wise in supporting such institutional-reform processes with Ethiopians taking the front-row seats.

At first, the diplomacy of major Western powers rushed to commend the joint report, acknowledging the official Ethiopian commitment to its recommendations and urging the TPLF and Eritrea to respond likewise.³⁰⁷ However, for all the horrors depicted, the joint report failed to live up to the media narrative, in which many within

³⁰⁵ The Guardian on June 2, 2021: “Ethiopia’s human rights chief as war rages in Tigray: ‘we get accused by all ethnic groups’”. This article also goes into Daniel Bekele’s personal background.

³⁰⁶ For example, the ERHC was reported to have been prevented by the authorities from fully investigating the case of Bate Urgessa, a politician from the Oromo Liberation Front, OLF, who was murdered on April 10, 2024.

³⁰⁷ A joint statement on November 6, 2021 said: “We, Australia, Belgium, Canada, Denmark, Finland, France, Germany, Iceland, Ireland, Luxembourg, the Netherlands, New Zealand, Norway, Sweden, the United Kingdom and the United States, would like to extend our gratitude to the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR) and the Ethiopian Human Rights Commission (EHRC) for their joint effort to investigate allegations of human rights violations and abuses, and of serious violations of international humanitarian law and international refugee law, committed by parties to the conflict in the Tigray region of Ethiopia between November 3, 2020, and June 28, 2021. Notwithstanding the considerable challenges faced in gaining access to places, people and documentation, we commend OHCHR and EHRC for their impartial and transparent work. (...) In that regard, we acknowledge the Government of Ethiopia’s commitment to provide redress to victims of the violations and abuses identified in the report, noting, in particular, the need for redress and support for victims of gender-based atrocities. We urge a similar commitment be made by the Government of Eritrea and the Tigray People’s Liberation Front, and all other parties to the conflict.”

the Western establishment had by then become profoundly invested. Thus, rather than deepening the collaboration between the OHCHR and the EHRC, contributing much-needed forensic resources, lobbying was set in train to create a UN pronouncement that could be spun as per the narrative.

Henceforth, the EHRC was sidelined, receiving no more UN cooperation. In connection with an interview, Daniel Bekele wrote to me: “It was really a shame that on-the-ground investigation with the partnership of a local and international human-rights body (EHRC and OHCHR) had to be interrupted to give way to the ICHREE which never had access to do the same type of on-the-ground investigation as the joint investigation team.”

The ICHREE: making it easy for journalists

The campaign to discredit the joint report culminated with the appointment of a completely different setup, namely the International Commission of Human Rights Experts on Ethiopia (ICHREE) through UN [Resolution S-33/1](#) adopted on December 17, 2021. Notice that none of the thirteen African countries on the UN Human Rights Council voted in favor, not even those that usually vote with their biggest donors. This pattern was [repeated](#) on October 7, 2022, when the ICHREE’s mandate was [extended](#) for another year. These no-votes and abstentions from usually sympathetic African governments must have [worried](#) Western diplomats seeking African support for the standoff with Russia.

The ICHREE was composed of three experts, including its chairperson, the Kenyan national Kaari Betty Murungi. It soon transpired that she had, as early as April 2021, [invoked](#) “R2P” in Ethiopia, which is UN-speak for demanding foreign military intervention. Other tweets of hers condemned the Ethiopian army by taking the truthfulness of media stories for granted. Thus, nobody was surprised when the resulting [report](#), released on September 19, 2022, closely mirrored the media output as well, including the context analysis, which was the single story about Africa, [focusing](#) on ethnic hatred rather than on political and military affairs.³⁰⁸ The start of the war was correctly dated to the TPLF’s nightly attacks on five bases of the Northern Command, but this massive event was described in just two words: “fighting erupted”.

The Ethiopian UN Mission in Geneva drew up [a lengthy reply](#).³⁰⁹ It was completely ignored by the world press, though for an official communique, it was extraordinarily impassioned and eloquent. It highlighted the much greater [depth](#) of the joint OHCHR-

³⁰⁸ An OHCHR press release on the day of the report’s publication, September 19, 2022, quoted commission member Radhika Coomaraswamy: “Violations and abuses during the conflict show that atrocities do not occur in a vacuum, and are directly linked to ethnically-motivated hate speech and hostility. Such sentiments have not only been allowed to flourish unchecked, they have been actively promulgated by state officials and the media.”

³⁰⁹ The full text can be found at the [abren.org](#) website, published on September 26, 2022, and headlined: “Ethiopia’s Official Response to the UN Human Rights Council”.

EHRC investigation, and [lamented](#) how the ICHREE was failing to disclose the methods used to arrive at findings and conclusions, [which](#) “greatly resemble a rough-patching of news columns and informational pieces”.

The background provided in this book helps understand why the Ethiopian government, despite acknowledging some hard truths in the joint report, had come to see Western-media-driven human-rights denunciations and Western-instigated human-rights processes as politicized and dishonest. This resulted in distrust, reluctance to cooperate, even in two failed [attempts](#) to have the ICHREE defunded, whether or not active engagement might have been the more advisable strategy.

Thus, in its report, “the Commission [ICHREE] deeply regrets that the Federal Government did not grant it access to any areas outside of Addis Ababa” and that “the Governments of the Sudan and Djibouti had not granted the Commission access to interview Ethiopian refugees within their borders”. For this reason, the ICHREE was limited to “carrying out the bulk of its investigations remotely” in the shape of 185 phone interviews. Unable to prove or disprove anything substantial without access to crime scenes and without any forensics, it embraced the standard of “reasonable grounds to believe”. This expression was used fully 12 times in the first report, such as in “reasonable grounds to believe” that Ethiopia had sought to “systematically deprive the population of Tigray of material and services indispensable to its survival, including health care, shelter, water, sanitation, education and food”. With these words, and although the OLA and the TPLF (consistently called “Tigrayan forces”) were also accused of war crimes, the federal government alone was held responsible for the misery in Tigray, even for the failure to maintain water infrastructure, all the way down to Tigrayan children not going to school. There was no mention that it had [cooperated](#) with the WFP and other agencies to let relief supplies in.

To spare journalists the effort of reading through the full report, a little textbox in the beginning said: “The Commission concludes that there are reasonable grounds to believe that violations such as extrajudicial killings, rape, sexual violence and starvation of the civilian population as a method of warfare have been committed in Ethiopia since 3 November 2020.” With this snappy sentence, the ICHREE could be easily [quoted](#) by Alex de Waal and like-minded public figures as an authority for their claims, which seemed to be the sole point of this exercise.³¹⁰

The second ICHREE [report](#) was dated September 14, 2023, adding 360 anonymous interviewees to its source material. By then, Kaari Betty Murungi had been replaced.

³¹⁰ For instance, in Responsible Statecraft on September 27, 2022, under the headline “US diplomacy failing at critical moment in Ethiopia war”, Alex de Waal writes: “As the recent [Report of the International Commission of Human Rights Experts on Ethiopia](#) makes clear, the Ethiopian Government is committing crimes against humanity targeting the people of Tigray, including systematic use of starvation as a weapon of war.”

However, the only slight difference in tenor consisted in implicating the TPLF somewhat more in the list of diabolical acts. And yet, the healthcare providers within TPLF-controlled territory were cited as the source for a figure of over 10,000 survivors of sexual violence in Tigray. Once more, the war was exclusively contextualized as driven by hatred against Tigrayans. Just as in an aforementioned [article](#) by Martin Plaut,³¹¹ the ICHREE's second report indicates, in Article 32, that "woyane" is an insulting, derogatory and pejorative term about ordinary Tigrayans, never mind that it is a part of the TPLF's official name in Tigrinya and Amharic. Then in the subsequent Article 33, it says that Abiy Ahmed's social affairs advisor, Daniel Kibret, had called for the "erasure of woyane". If Martin Plaut's fingerprints were not evident enough by now, the cryptic phrasing is that the erasure of woyane is "equivalent to the population of Tasmania". Where could this have come from? Well, by reshuffling some sentences, Martin Plaut had made it appear as if Daniel Kibret had suggested doing to the Tigrayans what the British once did to the Tasmanians, that is, eradicating them. For all its UN-mandated budget, the ICHREE did not bother to check Daniel Kibret's actual speech, or even the Google Translate version of it, which was reproduced at the bottom of Martin Plaut's article. Reading the words in the correct order, he compared what the British did to the Tasmanians to what the TPLF did to the Amhara townspeople of Shewa Robit. His point, admittedly a far-fetched one, was that those colonialist Westerners could relate to the TPLF's cruelty.

The ICHREE's second report also skipped former WFP Country Director Steven Were Omamo's extensive testimony, which had, in the meantime, completely contradicted the ICHREE's first report about starvation being weaponized. Instead, it claimed that Eritrean troops were still committing gross human-rights violations in northern Tigray. However, the failure to specify the locations gave rise to suspicion that these were actually the Eritrean territories that the Tigrayan authorities had refused to vacate before the war.

In its presentation of the second report before the UN Human Rights Council, the ICHREE made a spirited appeal to have its mandate extended for a third year. This bid was supported by a campaign of international human-rights organizations alongside pro-TPLF activists in the diaspora. However, the TPLF in Tigray was no longer so keen on a process that tainted itself along with its new partner-in-peace. Nor did the West have the appetite for another confrontation with African countries for the sake of a third round of Eritrea- and Ethiopia-bashing without actionable facts. Thus, the ICHREE was closed down in the course of October 2023.

Is there anything better on the justice horizon? The Pretoria Peace Agreement implies that those at the top have been [granted](#) impunity. There will be no

³¹¹ Martin Plaut's website on January 24, 2022: "Ethiopian Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed's social affairs adviser in public call for genocide".

accountability for the attack on the Northern Command, nor for the murder of civilians in Tigray, Amhara or Afar, if the orders came from up high. Whoever is convicted will be the lesser criminals. Still, this would be better than nothing. Ethiopia is officially [committed](#) to its own “transitional justice”, which may yet hold some of the perpetrators of looting, rape and extrajudicial killings to account. As with the Axum investigation, seeing through the fog of war requires serious forensic resources. There is really no need for more human-rights specialists with long Twitter records and *reasonable grounds to believe*, but for legal professionals, untainted by activism and agendas, who can demonstrate guilt *beyond reasonable doubt*.

Was there a media blackout?

What a contradiction, said newspaper articles and activists in the days following the Pretoria Agreement, [that](#) a “UN body devoted to promoting broader and better access to the internet is about to hold its annual meeting in Ethiopia, whose government has cut off internet in its northern Tigray region during a two-year war there.”³¹² Although satellite phones became widely used by aid agencies, [allowing](#) ordinary Tigrayans to [send](#) occasional messages to loved ones,³¹³ communications were severely rationed. Activists [alleged](#) that this was a “weapon to control and censor information”.³¹⁴

Once again, yes, Tigray was under a military blockade, and no, Ethiopia was not minded to boost a deadly enemy’s war economy. However, the idea [propagated](#) by Dr. Tedros and [others](#) that such a large part of Ethiopia could be “sealed off from the rest of the world” needs to be put into perspective.³¹⁵ This is the 21st century. There were hundreds of UN staff and aid workers in Tigray with their own power generators, smartphones, and access to satellite internet. Jan Nyssen’s data set was [supposedly](#) based on “thousands of phone calls to social scientists at Mekelle University”.³¹⁶ Needless to say, the TPLF leaders and their Tigray-based media never ceased to upload

³¹² From Associated Press News on November 12, 2022: “Ethiopia hosts UN internet meeting after cutting off Tigray”, by Cara Anna and Jamey Keaten.

³¹³ This is acknowledged even in articles that are otherwise critical of the Ethiopian government, such as The Guardian on July 29, 2022: “‘Don’t know if they are alive’: anguish of Tigrayan families cut off by telecom shutdown”, by Fred Harter. And by Reuters on September 29, 2022: “FEATURE: Six million silenced: A two-year internet outage in Ethiopia”, by Zecharias Zelalem.

³¹⁴ Reuters on September 29, 2022: “FEATURE: Six million silenced: A two-year internet outage in Ethiopia”, by Zecharias Zelalem.

³¹⁵ “About 6 million people in Tigray are ‘effectively sealed off from the outside world’, according to the UN, and 5 million people, including 500,000 children, are in urgent need of food.” From an article in The Guardian on March 24, 2022: “Ethiopian government declares Tigray truce to let aid in”, by Emmanuel Akinwotu. The exact source within the UN is not indicated, though it sounds exactly like Dr. Tedros’s tweet on July 23, 2022.

³¹⁶ El País in English on January 27, 2023: “Ethiopia’s forgotten war is the deadliest of the 21st century, with around 600,000 civilian deaths”.

their contents. The strict censoring of what came out of Tigray was their doing, and nobody else's.

In response to the armed threat, Ethiopia [did restrict](#) the freedom of its own media. We should not be surprised. The crackdown on the free press was a lot worse the last time an enemy [threatened](#) Western capitals.³¹⁷ In July, 2021, [Addis Standard](#), an opposition newspaper whose editor-in-chief, Tsedale Lemma, generally [blamed](#) the Ethiopian government for the war, had its media license [revoked](#), and then a week later [reinstated](#). It continues to have reporters on the ground and to be sold in the street. On the other hand, in Davos in 2019, Abiy Ahmed [said](#): "Today, we don't have a single journalist in prison, and we're proud of that." He could [no longer](#) say so, which is certainly a [cause](#) for [concern](#), even though the journalists detained have arguably been agitating for violence, and even though normal citizens are noticeably less fearful of debating politics, say, with colleagues and neighbors, than they used to be in the bad old days, when Getachew Reda was [in charge](#) of the Ethiopian Ministry of Communications, presiding, for instance, over a sweeping crackdown on independent bloggers in 2014.

As for the international media during the war, they were, as the reader will have noticed, generally hostile to Ethiopia. And yet, the truism spread by the international media was that Ethiopia was hostile to them, and even that it imposed a "blackout" on them. Cara Anna from the Associated Press, who, as we saw, played a pivotal role in spreading the initial, since discredited version of the Axum massacre, was indeed barred from the country, a fact that served to [boost](#) her brand. And a handful of Western journalists were deported. We shall soon look at one notorious example, The Economist's Tom Gardner. However, there were [plenty](#) of accredited foreign news outlets at all times. They needed a journalism visa and a permit to travel to war-affected areas, and it is possible that these were more easily obtained by the few who sided with the federal forces. Do the Ukrainians, for example, let pro-Russian reporters roam freely? Of course not. They [ban](#) foreign press over the slightest failure to identify with their national cause. This is what happens in the context of a war for survival.

And yet, in Ethiopia, CNN's staff were only really prevented from wading into war zones to take pictures of dead bodies, as they were recently [found](#) doing on the sly in Thailand.³¹⁸ They were free to conduct research and talk to people in places that were under the rule of law. Regrettably, the channel showed no interest in learning about Ethiopian society, as it quickly made up its mind to sell a simple story about a persecuted ethnic minority being the victim of a genocide. And yet, despite the channel's shrill and activist stance, it was not kicked out of Ethiopia, not even after

³¹⁷ Read, for instance, The Conversation, September 12, 2014: "World War II began 75 years ago with censorship chaos that echoes down the decades".

³¹⁸ Associated Press News on October 9, 2022: "CNN apologizes for entering Thai massacre site, pulls video", by David Rising.

being caught in reckless fabrications that imperiled the country's security, such as announcing that the rebels had reached Addis Ababa. The Ethiopian government's means of retaliation against the onslaught of bad press, in its darkest hour of need in November 2021, was to write a strongly-worded statement titled: "This is not a country that crumbles under Foreign propaganda, we are fighting an existential war!"

For safety reasons, but undoubtedly also politically motivated, there was no access to TPLF-controlled territory via Addis Ababa. Does Ukraine permit foreign journalists to cross into Russian-controlled territory to cover the Russian side of the story? Of course not. And yet, countless journalists, documentary teams and so forth were smuggled into Tigray, where they were escorted around under the watchful eye of their TPLF-affiliated fixers, participants in an entrenched intelligence system [known as](#) "one-in-five", where one out of five Tigrayans serve as the elite eyes and ears of the TPLF. For instance, the Arte.tv [documentary](#) "Chronicle of a Massacre", released on September 1, 2022, featured Ethiopian soldiers in TPLF captivity being pressured to confess to war crimes in facial close-ups.

The expulsion of The Economist's man

A prominent voice in the chorus protesting poor treatment of the press, and especially of his own person, became the aforementioned correspondent for The Economist, Tom Gardner. He arrived in Ethiopia in 2016 and was expelled in May 2022, although his employer [was allowed](#) to send a new journalist.

Mr. Gardner's subsequent [piece](#) "I was a war reporter in Ethiopia. Then I became the enemy" takes the Grand Award for Pot Calling Kettle Black. One [sentence](#) is particularly soot-stained: "That an established journalist would spread such lies, and in a publication that many thought was respectable, marked a disturbing shift." This is a perfect description of the infamous leader in The Economist on October 9, 2021, which stated as fact that Ethiopia was out to starve every Tigrayan to death and called for "no favours for killers".

But no, what disturbed Mr. Gardner was a comment in the *Ethiopian* press, which had claimed that he and like-minded colleagues were in on the attempt to violently overthrow the Ethiopian government. To be fair, there is no indication that Mr. Gardner was an agent, or that he had any agenda other than going along with the narrative expected of him by his superiors, just as in 2018, when he went through the [Abiymaniac](#) phase that was in vogue back then, and which he has since characterized as naïve.³¹⁹

Mr. Gardner goes on to [berate](#) the Ethiopian leader: "Abiy himself poured fuel on the fire of the propaganda war. In April 2021 he urged Ethiopians not to 'bow' to

³¹⁹ In Foreign Policy on December 5, 2018, under the headline "Abiy Ahmed Is Not a Populist", Tom Gardner writes: "The Ethiopian prime minister's opponents fear that he's an African Erdogan. His rhetoric and policies suggest he's more of a liberal democrat."

Western media ‘campaigns’. In August, he called for a mass social-media campaign to counter ‘lies’ in the Western media.”

At that time, Mr. Gardner was still being treated politely at press conferences in Addis Ababa. Yet he puts a dark spin to his own international audiences being reached by ordinary Ethiopians through the new channels for people-to-people communications. To him, The Economist making unproven allegations with the opening line “no favours for killers” is within the bounds of respectability, but fuel is being poured on the fire, when citizens are encouraged by their elected leader to express their frustrations with The Economist.

About the last straw that triggered his expulsion, Mr. Gardner [writes](#): “I was interested in how research conducted in Ethiopia by a Western scholar seemed to be enabling the government to whitewash war crimes, which included the use of hunger as a weapon against Tigray. A polite email I sent on May 1st to a Western think-tank sparked yet another [online](#) campaign, this time against me personally, lasting two weeks.”

The scholar referred to is Professor Ann Fitz-Gerald and the [research](#) is “The frontline voices: Tigrayans speak on the realities of life under an insurgency regime”. Mr. Gardner had good reason to be uncomfortable about this. The Tigrayan informants contradicted his blaming of Ethiopia’s government for the suffering in Tigray. They also suggested a dimension of class division in Tigrayan society that undermined his [insistence](#) on seeing the conflict chiefly through the lens of ethnic rivalry, as he presented the background to it as “fractious rivalries within Ethiopia, particularly between the country’s three most powerful ethnic groups, the Oromo People, the Amharas and the Tigrayans.”

If Mr. Gardner believed Professor Fitz-Gerald’s scholarship had the potential “to whitewash war crimes”, he could have put some hard questions to her, as he was invited to do. I would personally have loved to have the opportunity to interrogate *him* about *his* work enabling an irregular army to pass off its violent pursuit of power as a choice between killing and getting killed. As for “hunger as a weapon”, Mr. Gardner could have directed his concern to the WFP, which declared, just three weeks after he published about his expulsion from Ethiopia, that federal-government-approved deliveries into Tigray had averted famine.

Policy-makers paying attention to Ann Fitz-Gerald’s work from April 2022 would have been a step ahead of events. On the eve of the August 24 offensive, the top TPLF leader, Debretsion Gebremichael, [said](#) to his own people that those staying out of the fighting “will not have an equal place in Tigray”. Other speeches of senior officials [confirmed](#) that forced conscription was becoming ever harsher. Ironically, Mr. Gardner’s [interview](#) with an escaped Tigrayan published in December 2022 would

confirm Ann Fitz-Gerald's finding about the TPLF imprisoning the parents of children refusing to serve in the rebel army.

Mr. Gardner's account of his deportation is a tour de force of sanctimonious self-projection. However, it worked with most Western readers by being premised on the ingrained assumption that our media are, sort of by definition, the free-speech good guys. It comes naturally to us to suspect an African leader, and never The Economist, of fueling a war with lies. Thus, outside Ethiopia it was misread as, not the pot, but the shining white knight calling the kettle black. Part 4 will grapple with the Western moral-superiority complex that lies at the root of getting Ethiopia so dead wrong.

The Least-Bad-Journalism Prize

Jon Lee Anderson's [feature story](#) published in The New Yorker on September 26, 2022, marked a step up from previous mainstream coverage. Admittedly, this is not saying much, and Ethiopians hated it from the moment they read the headline.

THE
NEW YORKER
A REPORTER AT LARGE OCTOBER 3, 2022 ISSUE

DID A NOBEL PEACE LAUREATE STOKE A CIVIL WAR?

*After Ethiopia's Prime Minister, Abiy Ahmed, ended
a decades-long border conflict, he was heralded as a unifier.
Now critics accuse him of tearing the country apart.*

By Jon Lee Anderson

September 26, 2022



Then they cringed over their prime minister spending several days on touring the country with a big-shot American pop journalist in tow, whose starting knowledge about Ethiopia was based on, no surprise there, shallow international media reports and cultural memes.

And yet, the end result showed that the government had learned a lesson about the need for more proactive communications. For all the focus on Mr. Abiy's eccentricities, Mr. Anderson did it in an intimate reportage style without painting him as a warlord, let alone as an enemy of the West, but rather as someone well-

intentioned caught up in a complex political context, which the author, quite refreshingly for the genre, did not presume to have totally figured out. It was noted that the Minister of Defense was a Tigrayan, nuancing the notion that the war was driven by hatred against Tigrayans. It also gave voice to the President of Afar, who recounted his people's massive losses from the TPLF's incursions, refuting the misconception that this was a dispute over regional autonomy.

Alas, the piece had to feature the usual clueless "senior Western official" expressing [contempt](#) for the savages: "They're all as bad as each other". And it reproduced the questionable truisms about "widespread starvation caused by the siege" and "cutting off its [Tigray's] electricity, communications, airlinks and food supplies". Otherwise, the timeline presented was uncommonly accurate, and it mentioned, however fleetingly, the attack on the Northern Command.

Jon Lee Anderson barely scratched the surface of how dead wrong the international community was getting Ethiopia in this war. Nevertheless, it was uplifting that such an accomplished writer cast doubt on a big chunk of the prevailing narrative and answered the question posed in the headline with a tacit *no*.

Activists part ways with story-tellers

While the TPLF had plenty of heavy weapons and military expertise, it had no fighter planes or drone capabilities. The federal army did. And, of course, it made use of it to degrade the enemy's assets. According to the TPLF-controlled Tigrayan press, the bombs would always hit a university, a hospital, a refugee camp, and on August 26, 2022, the biggest story despite many question marks over its veracity, a [kindergarten](#). After that airstrike, Reuters news agency showed a touching video of Tigrayan mothers grieving over loved ones, copied from a TPLF-controlled channel. When the footage was [revealed](#) to be from before the war, it was quietly removed. Meanwhile, on the same day, children killed in Afar by TPLF shelling was only [news](#) in Ethiopia.³²⁰

The TPLF man with the biggest international platform, Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus, [tweeted](#) on October 24, 2022, about "daily carpet bombing" in Tigray. Tragic mistakes may have been committed, but it would not have been in Ethiopia's interest to spend expensive bombs on anything other than high-value military targets. There was undoubtedly reckless shelling of areas with civilians, but no picture ever emerged of a major residential building hit from the air, let alone of entire neighborhoods lying in ruins, like what we become used to seeing from places like Syria, Ukraine and most recently Gaza.

Indeed, the illustrations of damage to the kindergarten [did not even look](#) like bombing, which causes smoke, fine rubble, charred materials and melted plastics. But

³²⁰ Awasa Guardian on August 27, 2022: "6 Afar children 'burned to death,' 2 more killed by TPLF artillery: NGO".

there was always a UN high-up at hand ready to believe the TPLF account so as to put “the UN condemns” in the [headline](#).³²¹ And Declan Walsh continued to [present](#) the TPLF version of the air raids as fact in The New York Times.³²² Nevertheless, to be fair, this last stage of the war saw the world press becoming [warier](#) of copy-pasting from official Tigrayan media, and giving just a little space to Ethiopian [counterclaims](#) of fabrications.³²³

As the fortunes of war turned, the David-and-Goliath theme lost its shine. Journalists who had thus far focused on demonizing Ethiopia began to de-romanticize the TPLF. This was read as betrayal by the activists. Case in point once again: the ever-rising superstar Lucy Kassa.

³²¹ Al Jazeera on August 27: “UN condemns deadly air raid that ‘hit kindergarten’ in Tigray”.

³²² The New York Times on August 26, 2022: “Ethiopian Airstrike Hits Kindergarten as Fighting Spreads in Tigray”, by Declan Walsh.

³²³ For instance, Al Jazeera on August 26, 2022, in the article “Ethiopia forces accused of deadly attacks as Tigray war escalates”, includes the following official reply: “‘The Ethiopian Air Force is clearly reversing the attack launched against Ethiopia by targeting only military sites,’ the Government Communication Service said. ‘However, the terrorist TPLF has begun dumping fake body bags in civilian areas in order to claim that the Air Force attacked civilians.’”

14:02



bothsidesism Inbox



Jan Nyssen 13:36

to me ▾



Hello Lucy,

I did not yet see anything about the Mekelle bombings on your twitter thread.

But you were rapid and gullible to come with the fuel story.

What is happening?

I think it is time to stop the bothsidesism...

Jan

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After the TPLF launched its last-ditch offensive on August 24, 2022, the ubiquitous Lucy Kassa performed a daring U-turn, remaining loyal to her shocking style, but incurring the wrath of TPLF supporters, as she started to portray life in Tigray as not just miserable, but also

oppressive. This provoked Jan Nyssen, the massively-quoted academic from Ghent University, into sending her this confidential email, which Lucy Kassa then [published](#) on Twitter on August 26, 2022. Unfazed, she went on to report, for instance, that the TPLF was torturing and [executing](#) captives in Amhara Region.³²⁴



Rashid Abdi
@RAbdiAnalyst



[@berhe_lucy](#) picks one Tigrayan fighter to slant an entire piece to demonstrate TDF losing.

In the report there is no empathy for her people's agony, the genocidal nature of conflict, Eritrea's involvement.

The sub-text is clear. It is all TPLF's fault.

Shame on you Lucy Kassa

the bodies of my friends scattered. Almost everyone had died. Many ded. I got used to hunger. I could not get rid [myself] of the scenes of s ... they wake me up at night,” said one ethnic Tigrayan fighter who tly paid £500 to a smuggler to escape the war.

12:39 PM · Oct 4, 2022

The aforementioned [so-called](#) analyst, Rashid Abdi, was one of many who went from admiring to being upset with Lucy Kassa. Faithful to his habit of misrepresenting battlefield developments, on the early morning of October 3, 2022, he [tweeted](#): “Tigray has once again prevailed against heavy odds. Abiy and Afewerki have failed. If Abiy is clever he would sue for peace now, end the siege”. Shortly after that day, however, he read Lucy Kassa suggesting that the TPLF was losing and [demoralized](#).³²⁵

Anything goes for reporting on Ethiopia

Immediately after the Pretoria Peace Agreement on November 2, 2022, massive inflows of all kinds of relief [supplies](#) were proudly [announced](#) by the big [aid agencies](#), like WHO, ICRC and UN OCHA. And yet, speaking in the name of the WHO, Dr. Tedros and his sidekick, Michael Ryan, still [lamented](#) some unspecified impediment to

³²⁴ The Guardian on October 10, 2022: “Tigray rebels tortured and killed civilians in renewed fighting, survivors claim”, by Lucy Kassa.

³²⁵ The Telegraph on October 3, 2022: “How a new ‘Great War of Africa’ is raging under the cover of a media blackout”, by Lucy Kassa, Will Brown and Zecharias Zelalem. The article quotes an “ethnic Tigrayan fighter” who paid 500 pounds to be smuggled out of the war zone.

humanitarian access.³²⁶ Even more worryingly, [stories](#) about continued [looting](#), abductions, [rape](#), and outright massacres [were](#) still [pumped out](#) by the world press for months, now pointing the accusing finger at Eritrean troops.³²⁷ The sources indicated were TPLF-controlled Tigrayan authorities, anonymous aid workers and eyewitnesses. The Associated Press, never held accountable for spreading the church- and hyena-centered rendering of the Axum massacre, once again lent its credibility, and was uncritically [cited](#) by senior human-rights figures, such as Kenneth Roth, former executive director of Human Rights Watch, who tweeted about “a supposed truce” on November 27, 2022.



Mirjam van Reisen

@mvreisen

! Receiving disturbing news that in the last two weeks, [#Eritrea](#) n troops carried out extrajudicial killings of 400 to 600 people in May Abay, Adi Daero, around Adi Awuala of the North Western Zone of [#Tigray](#). AU Monitoring Team must look at the status of civillian protection.

1:44 · 28 Nov 22 · [Twitter for iPhone](#)

329 Retweets **44** Quote Tweets **222** Likes

As mentioned, Mirjam van Reisen’s EEPA organization was the source of Martin Plaut’s original fabricated version of the church massacre in Axum. When she reported yet another

³²⁶ Today News Africa on December 2, 2022: “WHO Says ‘No Evidence Of Unfettered Access To Tigray’ A Month After Well Celebrated Ethiopia Peace Deal: ‘Starvation’, ‘Isolation’ And ‘Massacres’ By ‘Eritrean Forces’ Continue, Laments Tedros”.

³²⁷ For example, PBS News Hour on November 27, 2022: “Kidnappings, looting reported in Ethiopia’s Tigray region in weeks after truce”, by Rodney Muhumuza for AP in Kampala. Bloomberg on November 30, 2022: “Ethiopia Peace Process Undermined as Eritrean Forces Continue Attacking Civilians”, by Simon Marks and Samuel Gebre. Reuters on December 2, 2022: “Looting, forced removals plague Ethiopia’s Tigray despite truce - witnesses”. Associated Press News on December 2, 2022: “Eritrean forces still killing Tigrayan civilians, report says”, by Cara Anna. The BBC website on February 15, 2023: “Ethiopia war in Tigray: Eritrean soldiers accused of rape despite peace deal”, by Catherine Byaruhanga.

massacre on November 28, 2022, her credibility had finally been exhausted. Her fans would still retweet eagerly, but no serious news outlet picked up this latest piece of disinformation. She has since deleted this and countless other such tweets.



Kindeya Gebrehiwot, PhD, Prof ✓
@ProfKindeya



Recent pic of Eritrean troops at [#Adwa](#) town [#Tigray](#) with camels and donkeys looted from poeple. They do search houses & take anything! The same is true in all other areas they have occupied. Heinous crimes continue unabated with impunity despite an agreement [#EritreaOutOfTigray](#)



8:18 AM · Jan 9, 2023 · 124.8K Views



On January 7, 2023, Professor Kindeya Gebrehiwot (named as the high-ranking TPLF man who brought the disgraced American neurosurgeon Tony Magaña to Tigray) [presented](#) the Tigrayan authorities' figure as 3,708 Tigrayans killed by foreign troops after the peace deal. Two days later, he published a [photo](#) of some donkeys, supposedly documenting Eritrean troops looting people's livestock.

I cannot know for sure if any of these horrors might have occurred, but this war has taught me to exercise caution in trusting poorly sourced reports, even when coming from reputable news organizations. And yet, mindless repetition can turn anything into a truism. Thus, on January 12, 2023, The Economist did not even bother

with a source, but stated as [fact that](#) Eritrean troops “have continued to loot towns and rape and murder civilians”.³²⁸

While the media had little concern about running with evidence-free factual claims, and routinely [repurposed](#) photographic material to fit their stories,³²⁹ they bothered even less with the quality control of their overall analysis. This gave free rein to glory-hunting Africa adventurers. Declan Walsh is a textbook example of the so-called Dunning-Kruger effect. He was [referred](#) to as “knowledgeable” by Mark Lowcock,³³⁰ who was returning the favor after Declan Walsh had just [quoted](#) Mark Lowcock’s opinion piece from October 8, 2021, “How to destroy a country: does Ethiopia have a future”, suggesting that Abiy Ahmed’s war aim was to “destroy Tigray”, invoking an “expert consensus” to confidently predict that Abiy was either going to be destroyed himself or perish in the backlash of destroying Tigray.³³¹ Indeed, all the analysts and academics ever quoted in an authoritative manner by Mr. Walsh have been of the same pro-TPLF bent. He has clearly not researched Ethiopian affairs in any depth. Yet he devised a grand unified theory about the cause of the war being Abiy Ahmed’s mental state, addled by the Nobel Peace Prize.

However, Michael Rubin takes First Prize for Self-Overestimation, which he boasts on top of the previously awarded title as Craziest of Crazy Journalists for [calling](#) for the US to arm the TPLF.³³² He also [bought](#) into the notion that “prior planning” was tantamount to starting the war.³³³ It is remarkable how little his publisher, the American Enterprise Institute, cared to follow up on his mishits. It began with his [assurance](#) that Abiy Ahmed had “condemned Ethiopia to dissolution”, which was not

³²⁸ The Economist on January 12, 2023: “Ethiopia’s war in Tigray has ended, but deep faultlines remain”.

³²⁹ One example of photographs of Amhara IDPs being presented as Tigrayan in The Guardian is described in the Ethiopian Herald on May 12, 2022: “The new fronts of information warfare against Ethiopia”, by Addisalem Mulat.

³³⁰ A tweet from Mark Lowcock on October 12, 2021: “Important update on Ethiopia from the knowledgeable Declan Walsh of the New York Times. Ethiopia Launches New Offensive on Tigray Rebels as Famine Looms”.

³³¹ The phrasing in Declan Walsh’s article on October 12, 2021, referred to in the tweet was: “‘Abiy’s game plan cannot work,’ Mr. Lowcock wrote, citing what he said was a growing expert consensus. ‘If he tries and fails to destroy Tigray, he will be destroyed himself. If he succeeds, he will never survive the backlash that will follow.’”

³³² The American Enterprise Institute’s website on September 9, 2022: “The US Should Support the Tigray Defense Forces”, by Michael Rubin. Also published in 19fortyfive.com.

³³³ On the American Enterprise Institute’s website on September 28, in the article “How Ethiopia’s Abiy Ahmed Lost the World”, Michael Rubin writes: “His [Abiy Ahmed’s] supporters say the TPLF fired the first shots on Nov. 3, 2020, when Tigrayan forces attacked the Northern Command headquarters. But the speed and scale of the Ethiopian reaction suggest prior planning on Abiy’s part.”

just a looming danger but had now gone “beyond the point of no return”.³³⁴ He went on to compose the most extreme version of every TPLF-sponsored [falsehood](#), fixating on the personality of the prime minister, whom he compared to [Idi Amin](#), [Mohammed bin Salman](#), [Robert Mugabe](#) and [Saddam Hussein](#).³³⁵ As the TPLF’s last-gasp offensive was running out of steam, and most media were becoming more nuanced, he [persisted](#) in his alternate reality: “The simple reality is the [United States](#), [European Union](#), and many African countries no longer see Abiy as redeemable. For peace and prosperity in Ethiopia, the only course of action is Abiy’s exit.”³³⁶ Ironically, he [pontificates](#) about Abiy failing to learn from his mistakes. So what can we learn from *Mr. Rubin’s* mistakes? That there is zero accountability for an opinionated journalist who is proved even more dead wrong than anybody else.

Don’t Let Abiy Ahmed Become the Next Saddam Hussein

By Michael Rubin

19fortyfive.com

November 22, 2022



Op-Ed



Michael Rubin

Senior Fellow

Even after the Pretoria Peace Deal had disproved his analysis on Ethiopia, Michael Rubin kept coming up with new absurd takes.

No apology, just more getting it wrong

As the end came into sight, I looked forward not only to Ethiopian military victory, but also to the media having to accept that the Ethiopian war aim had all along been peace through state monopoly on violence, and not genocide. On Ethiopian television on October 24, 2022, I said: “We just need to give it a little more time. These people, they

³³⁴ The American Enterprise Institute’s website on May 16, 2021: “Abiy Ahmed Has Condemned Ethiopia to Dissolution”, by Michael Rubin. Also published in The National Interest.

³³⁵ These comparisons are from Michael Rubin’s articles on the American Enterprise Institute’s website, namely “Abiy Ahmed Has Condemned Ethiopia to Dissolution” on May 16, 2021, “Is a Coup in Ethiopia Imminent?” On July 19, 2021, “How Ethiopia’s Abiy Ahmed Lost the World” on September 28, 2022, and “Don’t Let Abiy Ahmed Become the Next Saddam Hussein” on November 22, 2022.

³³⁶ The American Enterprise Institute’s website on September 28: “How Ethiopia’s Abiy Ahmed Lost the World”, by Michael Rubin.

hate being proved wrong, so they'll try to come up with something. But as time goes on, I think we will win the media battle."³³⁷



Rasmus Sonderris

@RSonderris



Yeah, I guess in a few months we will all be laughing about it. It's absurd! Do-gooder wannabe saviours are working themselves into a savage frenzy, all because the TPLF cult has sold them its evil, about-to-be-exposed political lie.



Kifle @gk_kifle · Oct 27, 2022

Replying to @RSonderris

This is hilarious!

Just as I correctly foresaw the war was drawing to a positive close, I let down my guard and tweeted out this misprediction. As [pointed out](#) in an astute comment to my tweet, I was engaging in wishful thinking about the media being about to admit to its mistakes. Some may remember Elizabeth Shackelford from 2017, when she resigned from US diplomatic service [with](#)

³³⁷ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-U1ld-2L2ag&t=426s>

[great fanfare](#) in protest against the Trump administration. After her macabre [smear job](#) on the very soldiers who would bring peace, she had to block a stream of Ethiopians from her [Twitter feed](#), all of whom had infinitely more insight into the conflict than her.

This was my last pang of [being in denial](#) about the media's lack of interest in truth-seeking, let alone in self-questioning.

For instance, on July 27, 2023, US National Public Radio put out a slick and shiny 52-minute [program](#) for mass consumption, titled "The Hidden War". It gives special thanks to Martin Plaut, who might as well have scripted it. It starts off with audio from the Nobel Peace Prize ceremony, before portraying Abiy Ahmed as a centralizing, religious fanatic, who rode to power on a popular wave of resentment against Tigrayans in order to snuff out the 27 years of progress under the TPLF/EPRDF. The historical context description goes back to pre-Biblical times and covers everything until the war, except the crucial two and a half years of escalation and the attack on the Northern Command. The fighting is presented as a one-way street of ethnic violence against Tigrayans. There is no mention that the rebels marched on the capital, or that their military defeat brought peace, not genocide. The main interviewee is Gebrekirstos Gebreselassie, the Netherlands-based founder and editor of the fiercely Tigrayan ethnonationalist magazine [Tghat](#). He gets to end it on a note of "it's not over".

As mentioned, The Economist always refrained from using the term genocide. And it was too highbrow to report that hundreds of people had been eaten by hyenas in the central square of Axum. But it did level shocking accusations. On July 9, 2023, it set about justifying its inability to produce the evidence by [writing](#) that war crimes in Tigray were now being "covered up or forgotten".³³⁸ Apart from the usual unnamed sources, fantastical readings of satellite pictures and insinuations that would provoke scorn in a serious courtroom, this latest claim was backed by reference to two other media stories, both of which have been looked into in this book. [One](#) was about the bodies floating down the Tekeze River. The source for this must have been CNN dispatching from eastern Sudan with a backstory that contradicted the channel's own forensic experts and ignored the signs of coordination between those dumping and those collecting the bodies. The other [was that](#) "the BBC [reported](#) that security forces from Amhara (...) had been digging up mass graves and disposing of bodies". Invoking the BBC sounds more respectable than what the BBC based it on, namely Lucy Kassa's anonymous witness statements, which also featured professors from the University of Gondar as body-dissolving specialists in a vast conspiracy to pass off 1-year-old corpses as 30-40-year-old bones. In practice, rather than digging any further, CNN and BBC have since abandoned these two stories by no longer talking about them and by not

³³⁸ The Economist on July 9, 2023: "War crimes in Tigray may be covered up or forgotten".

awarding any prizes for them. This does not stop The Economist from keeping them reverberating inside the media echo chamber.

Meanwhile, The Economist's harshest war-crimes accusation of all, namely that humanitarian aid was being blocked by the federal government wielding starvation as a weapon, seems to have been quietly ditched. Who knows, some diligent editor might have gotten a bad taste in the mouth after reading former WFP Country Director Steven Were Omamo's testimony about overt politicization of this issue. Having read and loved The Economist for decades, I cannot put it completely beyond the human beings who work for it to have a conscience.

Then, on November 26, 2023, the Washington Post published harrowing tales of sadistic rape of Tigrayan women by Eritrean and Ethiopian soldiers.³³⁹ The author was Katharine Houreld, who covered the war for Reuters, based in Nairobi, and has been mentioned thus far in several footnotes. There was no mention of the TPLF, and the Pretoria Peace Agreement was referred to as a mere "cease-fire", the term preferred by hardcore Tigrayan ethnonationalists who dream of fighting on until victory. Of course, the individual horror stories told by anonymous victims cannot be proved or disproved, but the central claim of the article was that: "More than 100,000 women may have been raped during the two-year civil war in Ethiopia's northern Tigray region, according to the most comprehensive study so far of these attacks in research conducted by the Columbia University biostatistician Kiros Berhane."

My first instinct was to google Kiros Berhane, who, surprise, surprise, had been an active propagandist for the TPLF during the war. An Ethiopian-American friend of mine posed as an admiring student to engage with Ms. Houreld by email. She volunteered her sources and admitted that: "Regarding the political leanings of Dr. Kiros, I haven't looked into it." If this is true, it is reckless incompetence. As truth witnesses at a more general level, she referred to human-rights organizations and the UN (although ICHREE had come up with a figure of 10,000 rapes, using the Tigrayan health system as its source). Admittedly, this knee-jerk appeal to authority might have worked on me too, before the war. But now I scrutinized the references provided by Ms. Houreld by email. A series of red flags indicated that the "research" conducted by Kiron Berhane was designed with a foregone conclusion. This resulted in my piece: "African Rape in The Washington Post".³⁴⁰ I wrote: "It is inconceivable that this study could have reached any other conclusion [than the 100,000 or so rapes], because that would have amounted to TPLF subjects disproving the TPLF's war propaganda on TPLF soil. The BMJ [medical journal] might as well have published a survey by North Koreans conducted in North Korea documenting North Koreans' love for their leader." Despite

³³⁹ The Washington Post (and also The Boston Globe) on November 26, 2023: "Raped during Ethiopia's war, survivors now rejected by their families", by Katharine Houreld.

³⁴⁰ Substack on December 16, and also Abren magazine on December 17: "African Rape in The Washington Post", by Rasmus Sonderris.

my harsh accusations of stereotypes substituting for evidence, neither Katharine Houreld nor The Washington Post bothered to respond.

Linking to Ms. Houreld's Washington Post article, the 100,000 figure was also featured in The New York Times on March 20, 2024, when the all-Tigrayan team behind Kiros Berhane's dubious study was referred to as "health experts".³⁴¹ The New York Times' guest essayist, a Tigrayan-American,³⁴² opens by recounting how a sexual assault was attempted on her by some man appearing out of nowhere at an open-air market in Mekelle in the summer of 2023, that is, when the city was under a TPLF-controlled police force. This anecdote, including the lighthearted reactions of passersby, actually goes to show a disturbing rape culture in Tigray, which was [confronted](#) in the "Yikono" [campaign](#) prior to the war.³⁴³ Yet the rest of the article trots out the propaganda line that the TPLF's enemies are to blame.

New Lines, old story

On June 3, 2024, a little-known US-based think-tank, [New Lines Institute](#) for Strategy and Policy, released a 120-page report titled "Genocide in Tigray: Serious Breaches of International Law in the Tigray Conflict, Ethiopia, and Paths to Accountability". It was launched to great media fanfare. For instance, Geoffrey York, the South-Africa-based correspondent of The Globe and Mail (Canada) [showcased](#) it as vindication of his own news coverage of the war, which had used many of the same sources.³⁴⁴ Just like him, the New Lines report frames the war as an outbreak of tribal rage, or as it puts it, "deeply entrenched competition between ethnic groups". Abiy Ahmed is singled out as the initiator of the war on November 4, 2020, "allegedly in response to an attack on Ethiopian armed forces", though the attack on the Northern Command is immediately dismissed in a footnote as an irrelevance, with reference to Kjetil Tronvoll and Martin Plaut, among others. The rest of the report sums up the crudest versions of the many accusations which have been addressed in this book. Playing down the political power struggle, it makes the case that the war was conceived and executed as a genocide of Tigrayans.

³⁴¹ The New York Times on March 20, 2024: "Guest Essay: When African Women Are Raped, Where Is the Outrage?" by Maebel Gebremedhin.

³⁴² She writes about her life in Vogue Teen on October 31, 2023: "The Tigray Crisis: My Family Fled Ethiopia Amid War — Here's What It Was Like to Return", by Maebel Gebremedhin. Her family fled decades ago, during the Derg, not during Abiy. Sadly, her piece reflects a diaspora upbringing in an ethnonationalist bubble. She draws on falsehoods-turned-truisms exposed in this book. And she makes it into the pages of Vogue Teen, because she essentially translates the TPLF's case for war into a sob story from Africa.

³⁴³ See, for instance, the magazine African Feminism on March 5, 2020: "#Yikono Campaign Gives Ethiopian Women the Language to Challenge Violence," by Mehret Berehe. The article is exclusively about the terrible situation for women in Tigray.


³⁴⁴ The Globe and Mail on June 3, 2024: "Ethiopia committed genocidal acts against Tigrayans during two-year war, study says", by Geoffrey York.

The New Lines Institute [presented](#) its findings as “ground-breaking”, yet the text admits that it is “based primarily on desk research”, which “involved examining reports from specialized NGOs (...) academic commentaries, news articles and blog posts”. So who were the authors of this material substantiating the conclusions? The footnotes read like a who-is-who of the people exposed here. Okay, Tony Magaña and Mirjam van Reisen must have been deemed too problematic to be featured, but Martin Plaut is referred to by name 35 times, Lucy Kassa 11 times, Alex de Waal 5 times, Tim Vanden Bempt 21 times, Kjetil Tronvoll 9 times, Declan Walsh 28 times, Will Brown 3 times, Mark Lowcock 4 times, Jan Nyssen 24 times, Cara Anna 24 times, and so forth. These names are all over this book too, because I have presented and then challenged their output, without shying away from any hard topic, admitting to what is unknown and to whatever are their grains of truth. The New Lines Institute, by contrast, passes them off as independent experts, and completely overlooks contradicting witnesses and scholars. For instance, Ann Fitz-Gerald and Bronwyn Bruton are not mentioned, not even trying to refute their contributions. Steven Were Omamo’s crucial firsthand account has been left out rather than making the difficult attempt to paint him as a liar. Needless to say, it also paid no heed to my initial publication of *Getting Ethiopia Dead Wrong* on September 3, 2023. This makes perfect sense. A dominant but false narrative is better served by ignoring rather than engaging with its critics.

The New Lines Institute calls for bringing the Ethiopian leadership before the International Criminal Court. This is unlikely to happen, but if it does, bring it on! I believe this book contains abundant ideas on how to go about the defense.

To anyone who has read this so far, it is easy to see through the hyper-politicization of human rights, of which the New Lines report is but one more example. But to the casual follower of the news, it is easy to be taken in. The New Lines report made quite a splash, painting Ethiopia’s government as genocidal once again in Al Jazeera, ABC News, Globe and Mail, a host of small and medium-sized newspapers, television reports, numerous websites of think-tanks and NGOs, and in countless social-media posts. Predictably, it led to yet another round of angry online abuse being traded between fellow Ethiopians.



From **Tigray Update** 

8:30 PM · Jun 15, 2024 ·

Tsedale Lemma, the aforementioned editor in chief of the opposition newspaper [Addis Standard](#), endorsed the New Lines Institute's perspective that the war was about ethnic hate in a television interview. Hanging in the background to the right is the flag used by the extremist Oromo Liberation Army, OLA.

Coverage of the report failed, however, to make it into the biggest newspapers, such as The Washington Post, The Economist, The Guardian or The New York Times. This could be because someone there took the precaution of googling The New Lines Institute. Its website alludes to US government funding, which initially led many to assume it was a mouthpiece of the US government. However, the think-tank turns out to have changed its name a couple of times to run away from a bad reputation, not least over [links](#) to the Islamist Muslim Brotherhood.³⁴⁵ Moreover, the New Lines Institute has zero previous record of research into Ethiopian affairs. I obviously cannot prove it, but it is hard not to suspect that its report on June 4, 2024, was made to order.

Diplomacy versus media

In short, despite the Pretoria Peace Agreement, and the battlefield developments that enabled it, completely contradicting the claim that Ethiopia's war aim was to

³⁴⁵ See Center for Security Policy on November 12, 2020: "New Muslim Brotherhood-linked Think Tank Tries to Launder Credentials, Fails", by Kyle Shideler. The name was changed from Center for Global Policy to [Newlines Institute](#) on February 8, 2021, later spelt *New Lines Institute*.

exterminate Tigrayans, the media have solidified rather than questioned their narrative about the war.

However, in the realm of diplomacy, the outlook is no longer auspicious for the TPLF. Here, the Pretoria Agreement is seen as the only game in town, not least because it is strongly backed by the African Union. Were the TPLF to be tempted into another round of military action, it may still count on its various backers presented in this book, but it would find little sympathy among foreign governments. The TPLF has already been rubbing the rich and powerful countries the wrong way by challenging the borders with Eritrea. In December 2023, on the occasion of the 23th anniversary of the Algiers Agreement, the [UK](#), [EU](#) and [USA](#) each published a short but strong statement in support of this instrument of international law and border demarcation. TPLF spokespeople stop short of rejecting the Algiers Agreement outright, but [claim](#) that Eritrea has taken more land than provided for in the 2002 ruling of the Boundary Commission.³⁴⁶ However, it does not inspire trust, when they [describe](#) all land taken by Eritrea after 2020 as “occupied”, and quibble about the correct interpretation of the Algiers Agreement. Thus, in a [tweet](#) on April 7, 2024, Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus complained that Tigrayans are “harassed and intimidated by Eritrean forces, including to forcibly change their identities.” Dr. Tedros fails to mention that the area concerned was awarded to Eritrea in 2002, and was in fact illegally occupied by the TPLF until 2020. Difficult though it is, the locals will either have to evacuate or become citizens of Eritrea. There is no appetite in the international community for revising neither the Algiers Agreement nor the Pretoria Agreement. Regardless of the echoes of the war and the propaganda war, the world basically wants to get over it and do business with Ethiopia.

It will be interesting to observe how the split between media narrative and diplomacy plays out. In a video panel set up to promote the New Lines report and its genocide accusation, Sarah Vaughan, who co-authored the book “Understanding Ethiopia’s Tigray War” with Martin Plaut, [lambasted](#) Western diplomats for “doing active harm” by providing, as she puts it, “this kind of performance legitimacy” to the Ethiopian authorities and justice sector.³⁴⁷

It is frustrating that those who have been ‘performance-legitimizing’ an irregular army in Ethiopia, like Ms. Vaughan, have kept their privileged access to the channels of mass communication, escaping scrutiny of their mispredictions and disproven analysis. But it was always naïve of me to expect the media to examine their own role in channeling lies and fueling war, let alone to apologize for the damage they have

³⁴⁶ UMD Media on May 25, 2024: “Over 67% of Land under Eritrea’s Continued Occupation Violates the 2000 Algiers Agreement and Obstructs the 2022 Pretoria Agreement”.

³⁴⁷ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gxI5p0Tmx10&t=3184s>

caused. Unless something forces their hand, they will not revisit former claims, and they will shun debate.

The Economist's man, Tom Gardner, for example, blocked me on Twitter, which is easier than proving his claim that Ethiopia used starvation as a weapon. Compared to his colleagues presented here, like Nima Elbagir, Will Brown, Cara Anna, Lucy Kassa, Declan Walsh and Martin Plaut, it must be acknowledged that Mr. Gardner delivered the most nuanced coverage of the war. Alas, this is not saying much. His [book](#) released in 2024, and the publicity around it, focuses on psychoanalyzing Abiy Ahmed.³⁴⁸ It does not critically examine but merely drones out the conventional wisdom about what happened during the war. To blame the prime minister for causing it, there is a memory-holed account of the escalation process. In an interview on July 15, 2024, he also points the finger at the Nobel Peace Prize Committee.³⁴⁹

Before the war, I would have been honored to hang out with all of these high-flying journalists. During the war, in November 2021, I got the chance to engage in a good-faith email exchange with Tom Gardner, though I obviously failed to make an impression.

I no longer care for discussion with these people in private. Today I just want to hold them to account in public. I have learned the hard way that they are not interested in putting their narrative to the reality test, at least not as much as they are in their careers in the story-telling business.

The real hyenas

In conclusion, the real hyenas in this conflict were big media. From beginning to end, they howled as a pack, lacking the instinct for individuality. When Ethiopia's experiment in democracy set off, strutting with youthfulness and promise, they bowed to it and purred. But as soon as it came under attack, was weakened and fighting for survival, they bared their teeth and salivated in anticipation of it succumbing for them to devour the pieces. Since the attackers were fought off, they have been perplexed and sullen, but not the least contrite over their hyena-like nature.

This creature is not that clever, not even in human form. As the historian Noah Yuval Harari has highlighted, Homo sapiens is less of a truth-seeking than a story-loving animal. It is not the ambitious reporter's fault that that portraying suffering up close grabs more attention and wins more prizes than painting the bigger political picture. We have seen time and again how easily the media will fall for the most ridiculous [hoax](#), as long as it fits their plotline. The TPLF's [well-oiled](#) disinformation [machine](#) had

³⁴⁸ "The Abiy Project: God, Power and War in the New Ethiopia", Hurst Publishers 2024.

³⁴⁹ Semafor on July 15, 2024: "How Ethiopia's Abiy changed his country", an interview with Tom Gardner by Semafor Staff.

a field day, playing deftly to the prejudices of Westerners ready to always believe the worst about Ethiopia.



Gebrekirstos Gebreselassie

@GebrekirstosG

I read the Wahsington posts article about Shire before sleep. Sleepless night with images of terrified Tigrayans at the hands of the merciless Eritrean beasts. Thousands desperately fleeing from terror. What has happened in Shire so far? How many have been massacred already?

6:28 · 18 Oct 22 · [Twitter Web App](#)

253 Retweets **10** Quote Tweets **197** Likes

♥ Addis Alemu and Rudy Gevaert liked



Prof. Awet T. Weldemichael

@Prof_Awet

I was relieved to hear from someone in [#Shire](#), to learn that city itself wasn't bombed, no fighting in city streets, ppl slowly coming back... As happy as I'm with that, I'm pained by senseless war and unimaginable suffering of ppl of [#Tigray](#) & call for its immediate end.

3:26 · 22 Oct 22 · [Twitter for iPhone](#)

83 Retweets **98** Quote Tweets **220** Likes



ቆምጩ ጻ
@Qomche



TPLF Mouthpiece on Telegram (Channel 29|Tigray|) is telling Tigrayans to stop sending voice messages saying Shire is peaceful.

They are afraid that the fake “Ethiopian Forces are Killing Tigrayans” narrative is gonna fall apart.



7:04 PM · Oct 19, 2022

Big media and activist hangers-on hitching their wagon to the TPLF propaganda train put pressure on Western [politicians](#) and diplomats to get tough on Ethiopia. It also served to sow fear, division and hate in Ethiopia, making the Russian-funded fake-news trolls undermining Western societies look like complete amateurs by comparison. But the worst consequence was probably to strengthen the hand of the TPLF against the Tigrayan people. From the perspective of worldly Tigrayans, that is, those best placed to challenge the narrative with some healthy skepticism of the old, discredited leaders and their shrill tribalism, it must have made a huge impression that the ethnic-war narrative was echoed by The New York Times, The Guardian, the BBC, CNN, Der Spiegel, El País, The Globe and Mail, The Telegraph, The Economist, you name it.



@timnitGebru@dair-community.social on Mastodon 
@timnitGebru

.@RepMaxineWaters How about the time your newly minted PRESS SECRETARY accused none other than the @HolocaustMuseum of “regurgitating propaganda” for raising awareness about #TigrayGenocide? You can delete the tweets but the archives are still there.

8:36 AM · Sep 27, 2023 · 4,564 Views

The moral authority of mainstream Western institutions became a powerful tool for the proponents that the war was “genocidal”. Here it is [invoked](#) by the Eritrean- and Ethiopian-born artificial-intelligence expert, Timnit Gebru, to paint someone as beyond the pale. The target is Hermela Aregawi, the aforementioned American-Ethiopian journalist with Tigrayan parents, who came out against the TPLF during the war, and was subsequently prevented from relaunching her career as Congresswoman Maxine Waters’s press secretary, when an on-line mob, led by Timnit Gebru, set out to have her ‘canceled’.

As a curious aside, Timnit Gebru, who became famous in late 2020 for a public spat with Google, her employer, also campaigns for the Palestinian cause. And she herself would most certainly not cede to the moral authority of the Holocaust Museum’s [line](#) on the Israel-Palestine conflict.

Among those living in Tigray, this validation from the venerable Western mainstream reinforced the kill-or-get-killed choice presented to them by their TPLF rulers. But the effect was probably much stronger among Tigrayans living in the West, as it gave an aura of righteousness to their mobilization to raise funds and advocate for the rebel army.

Their brief was simple: Vilify the enemy; play on the stereotype of the African genocide; make the emotional appeals to humanity that are so associated with Ethiopia; distract from the politics to focus only on atrocities. As this strategy worked its magic with the sources that Westerners trust, the steps required for rebuttal by those of us who knew better became tricky: Explain the intricacies of Ethiopian affairs and how this is no longer the 80s; convey the nuances of relations between as well as within numerous ethnicities; condemn unjustifiable acts, yet dispute that killing civilians is the government's war aim; complain, like some far-right or far-left conspiracy theorist, about the uniformity of mainstream media; and tear into a string of figures with shining halos, such as established academics, award-winning journalists, humanitarian high-ups, and yes, as Timnit Gebru puts it, "none other than the Holocaust Museum".

This is why, outside of Ethiopia, we were so few who insisted that Ethiopian military victory was not the path to genocide, but the path to peace. Even though we were proved right in the terrains of northern Ethiopia, and may yet be so by future historians, we are still facing an uphill battle in the media landscape of our post-factual world.

And frankly, if I had not known Ethiopia personally, I doubt I would have been able to withstand the imbalance of forces in the overall narrative about the war. I do like to think, however, that I would have questioned the scant attention being paid to the legitimacy to use force. That I would have been curious about dissenting views. And that I would have distrusted the most over-the-top accounts.

Part 1 ventured that the Western response to the war in Ethiopia says a lot more about the West than it does about the war in Ethiopia. So what *does* it say about us?

PART 4: LESSONS ABOUT OURSELVES FROM THE WAR

Why was Ethiopia gotten dead wrong?

Part 3 suggested that the media put pressure on Western policy-makers to let down Ethiopia. But many Ethiopians [suspect](#) it was the other way around, that is, that the powers-that-be in the West directed the media to make up justifications for their anti-Ethiopian designs. From this perspective, it was not that the stupid West got Ethiopia wrong, but that the evil West got Ethiopia right.

Just as the West has its single story about Africa, in Africa there is a bit of a stereotype about the West as a calculating pursuer of self-interest. After all, you do not become rich and powerful by getting things wrong and messing up. Moreover, while Ethiopia is socially conservative, it has one of the youngest populations in the world, and the numerical superiority of activists at or near university age makes for radicalism. Thus, especially within the #NoMore mass movement, which mobilized Ethiopians at home and abroad against the narrative in the West, one broad-sweep explanation became popular. It held that this was yet another neo-colonial regime-change proxy war to install a pliant puppet in place of a strong, proud, sovereign Ethiopia. In some variants, it was even a Western goal to keep the country poor and divided, so as to be able to dominate it.

Does this way of thinking have a point? Well, the [West](#) evidently [had](#) a number of very bad actors. As we have seen, they brilliantly managed to shut out friends of Ethiopia from the public debate, defame sensible people and inflame a senseless war. They had less success in [weakening](#) the federal government. And, there are no two ways about it, they fervently desired but abysmally failed to make the TPLF win the war. They were not only opportunistic journalists and activist academics, of whom I have presented a considerable list. They also included senior political and diplomatic figures, of whom the reader has met, and shall soon meet again, Lord David Alton, Helen Clark and Mark Lowcock.

However, the idea that the media took their cues from a higher level of power play is contradicted by the fact that the Western policies never became half as bad as the Western rhetoric. An example was CNN's failed campaign to [get](#) the US government to destroy the world-class status of Ethiopian Airlines, which would have been the easiest way to deal a massive blow to the country. And despite the best

[sabotage](#) efforts of the bad actors,³⁵⁰ Western diplomacy has been [keen](#) to repair [relations](#) quickly [after](#) the war.



Wiping the slate clean? The Ethiopian first couple was hosted in the White House on December 14, 2022, to the [chagrin](#) of many public figures wedded to the genocide narrative. But now when the war is over, Tigrayans also stand to benefit from their country being in good standing in Washington.

This puzzlement about Western motives gave rise to a low-key debate internally on the pro-Ethiopian side, often conducted with more open-ended curiosity than clarity of mind, as to whether the West was, to put it crudely, *stupid* or *evil*. A fair compromise position would be both, because even the most well-meaning stupidity manifested itself as self-righteous delusion, which was also what got women burnt at the stake for witchcraft and indeed has caused most of the evil in history.

My claim has been that Westerners, ranking among the great and the good, demonized a *friendly* people, because, in the bigger picture, Ethiopians look up to the West as their preferred destination of emigration and as a source of inspiration for progress. Thus, wary of the isolation and unfreedom that would follow from joining the anti-Western camp, and wishing to move on, most Ethiopians place themselves cautiously in the the-West-is-stupid camp, which is also where I find myself, wanting to slap the West back to its senses, and not to bring it to its knees. Nevertheless, in terms of argument, the the-West-is-evil-camp has the upper hand. Their anger comes with a sense of vindication, whereas ours is tinged with disillusionment. Their worldview was

³⁵⁰ See, for instance, News24 on December 21, 2022: “US Congressman [Brad Sherman] calls for sanctions on Ethiopian Airlines over alleged role in Tigray conflict”, by Lenin Ndebele.

confirmed, whereas ours was put to shame. They can disown the evil Western mind for its evil, whereas we must x-ray the stupid Western mind for pathologies that may help us understand, but can never excuse, the stupidity.

When the survival of a beloved country is at stake, one learns to appreciate those of very different ideologies being on one's side, such as the far-left channel BreakThrough News. It defends regimes like those in Venezuela and Cuba, and even did a video expressing nostalgia for communist East Germany. But though it is no stickler for liberal democracy, it [contributed](#) desperately needed counternarrative in Ethiopia's darkest hour. However, while they saw the conflict through the anti-Western lens that they call anti-imperialist, I will try my hand at explanations suited to my worldview, which some would call pro-Western, but is only so to the extent that pro-Western means pro-democracy, pro-human-rights and pro-equality, that is, the proclaimed ideals, and not the hypocrisy of failing to live up to them.

The broader point is this: had these bad actors had their way, Ethiopia would have been ripped apart. The tolerant majority would have sought refuge abroad, leaving the minority of radicalized ethnonationalists to slog it out atop the ruins. As we shall see in the next and final Part 5, Ethiopia is not out of the woods, but at least it has not become a failed state, like Somalia since the 90s, and lately also Sudan. Such a catastrophe was indeed promoted by Western *actions*, but it takes a sinister outlook to consider this to be in the Western *self-interest*.

Moreover, as we saw in Part 1, [other](#) left-wingers found more basis for championing *the TPLF* as anti-imperialist, associating Abiy Ahmed with [neoliberalism](#). Two of the loudest anti-Ethiopian voices were the aforementioned far-left Irish MEPs, Mick Wallace and Clare Daly, who have since been invited to BreakThrough News, of all places, albeit to talk about the Israel-Palestine conflict. People like Dr. Tedros may have learned to talk the talk of liberal ideals, but this has never been part of the TPLF's DNA. Overall, the relationship between the West and TPLF/EPRDF-ruled Ethiopia from 1991 to 2018 was no rose garden. There was cooperation on security, there was friction on economics, democracy and human rights, and there was a bit of [both](#) on development aid. The West would gain nothing from destabilizing the Horn of Africa in pursuit of an impossible return to this far-from-ideal past. And, frankly, the commentators at BreakThrough News also seemed mystified as to why the Western establishment would try to oust the Ethiopian leader so shortly after awarding him the Nobel Peace Prize and toasting him in Davos.

Geopolitics versus geopoliticians

One remotely plausible *geopolitical* rationale for betraying Ethiopia is the longstanding Western priority, particularly of the USA, to reward Egypt for making peace with Israel. Egypt has been opposing Ethiopia's giant hydroelectric project, the Grand Renaissance Dam, which is temporarily withholding some of the flow of the Nile. Interestingly, US

Senator Bob Menendez, convicted in July 2024 of taking huge bribes from Egypt, took the lead in [pushing](#) for a “genocide determination” and [for](#) sanctions against Ethiopia during the war. Overall, however, the Western interest in pleasing Egypt is hazy compared to the tangible Western interest in stability and in the hope, however distant, of building a fellow democracy.

Another line of reasoning is that the West wished to punish Ethiopia for teaming up with Eritrea, which has come to be seen as a rogue state. In this light, the TPLF goading Eritrea into the war by firing rockets at its capital makes sense as a way to attract Western sympathy. On the other hand, as we saw in Part 2 and 3, the West heartily endorsed the pre-war rapprochement between Ethiopia and Eritrea, and continues to support the Algiers Agreement as the basis for keeping the peace. Enmity towards Eritrea was undoubtedly a factor in Western attitudes, but the rational way to pry Ethiopia away from Eritrea would have been to provide diplomatic and military support with strings attached. Instead, Ethiopia was pushed further into gratitude for vital Eritrean assistance.

In a nutshell, though some influential Westerners, the bad actors, were fully devoted to the TPLF’s cause, the West as a whole did not just gun for Ethiopia, or for the TPLF. It fired in many directions, and mainly hit itself in the foot. Right after EU envoy Pekka Haavisto made his flippant accusation that Ethiopian leaders “used this kind of language” about plotting a genocide, he went on to [complain](#) that “there is this kind of hostile language against Westerners now in Ethiopia”, saying the Ethiopian government was “turning it into some kind of hatred campaign against the Westerners.”

Being in the capital city while it was threatened with a bloodbath, and while the official Western reaction oozed disdain for Ethiopian lives, I can testify that this newfound hostility towards the West was a popular sentiment, and not government-directed at all. Ethiopian hospitality never faltered, but, yes, my white face occasionally elicited an acerbic remark or a frustrated outburst. I just listened to people, finding that Ethiopia still was and always will be friendly to Westerners who are friendly to Ethiopia.

Mr. Haavisto also expressed concern about Ethiopia moving closer to Russia and China. The irony is that Vladimir Putin and Xi Jinping could not have dreamed of a better campaigner for that than Mr. Haavisto. In the many UN votes on Russia’s invasion of Ukraine, Ethiopia has generally abstained, except for one minor occasion where it voted with Russia. This is the inevitable result of Russia protecting Ethiopia from Western censure at the UN Security Council. There is little doubt that Ethiopia would have remained reliably in the Western camp, if the West had backed Ethiopia, at least diplomatically, in its war with the TPLF. Though Alex de Waal [made much](#) of

one Russian flag being waved at a rally in Addis Ababa in October 2022,³⁵¹ the Ukraine War is very far from the Ethiopian people's minds. Anger and disappointment with the West, by contrast, looms large.

So *why* did the West behave so stupidly? Perhaps the question is the wrong one. The West, each and every country, and even all the organizations, are *not* sentient organisms. We should not expect them to rationally pursue their ideals or self-interest, because they have no self at all. Only the individual human being has that.

Colonialism in progressive clothing

Western journalists, academics, aid officials, politicians and diplomats do chase their self-interest, as we all do, such as prestige, money, job promotion, and what not. As for their ideals, whatever their political leanings, they do not perceive themselves as cogs in the wheel of a world order, but they do carry ideological baggage from their societies about what it means to be a good person. This ranges from deep-seated prejudice to the latest social fads. So which of these factors could have influenced their views and behavior in the case of Ethiopia?

Some of it brings to mind the current culture wars, but may have existed throughout the ages, such as the aura of virtue bestowed upon an accuser, and, for those who merely refrained from asking critical questions, the paralyzing fear of being labelled with something nasty. Other aspects seem unique to our era, such as victimhood as the hard currency in the attention economy, which incentivizes extremists to trade in counterfeit, and gives rise to such a fine line between championing human rights and inciting hatred and violence, with institutions as venerable as the Holocaust Museum falling plainly on the wrong side. But, yes, and here is another point of agreement with those anti-Western radicals: there has also been plenty of that plain old, smug, arrogant, domineering colonialist mindset!

In describing the power imbalance, we have gone from “white man's burden” to “partnership for development”. This is more than a churn of the euphemism treadmill, because it is now essentially up to *them* to improve their political culture, grow their economies, and become our true equals. But the steps turning *us* from colonial powers into donor countries has further inflated our moral-superiority complex.

“Everybody wants the best for Ethiopia”, [was](#) how CNN anchor Becky Anderson attempted, on November 10, 2021, to soften a [tense live interview](#) with Ethiopia's spokeswoman, Billene Seyoum, who took CNN to task for its fake-news psychological warfare on Addis Ababa, yet got belittled rather than [apologized](#) to.³⁵² The reward for

³⁵¹ In Responsible Statecraft on October 24, 2022, in the article “Will the US use its leverage now to end the killing in Ethiopia?” Alex de Waal writes: “On Saturday, a government-organized rally in Addis Ababa saw demonstrators trampling American and European flags and waving the Russian one.”

³⁵² <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wWQiaF3G9Wc>

charity is a sense of doing right, which can be wholesome when mixed with humility, but becomes toxic when it interacts with a widespread mental disorder, hyper-charged by the outrage algorithm of the social-media era, that is, the taking of strong stances on issues we know very little about.

Thus, the editors and journalists of big media were not only eager to sell horror that rhymed with a cultural meme and built on the single story about Africa. They also felt so overconfident in their righteous calling that they rode roughshod over standards of proof for rape and atrocities, man-made famine and genocide. Those accused of crimes against humanity are not considered to deserve the right of response. So there was no bias control, no follow-up to one glaring [misprediction](#) after another of the types that would have been pounced upon mercilessly, if the sloppy reporting had been about any of the armed conflicts in which we, the rich and powerful nations, are involved directly, or at least care more about.

And just as the colonizers of yore had an incentive to portray the natives as brutes in need of civilized administrators, there is a vested interest today among the individuals who staff the aid-industrial complex to exaggerate both the distress and the relief. Former WFP Country Director Steven Were Omamo addresses this in his book: “There is a multi-billion-dollar hunger industry in which the ‘risk of famine’ is a powerful hook for generating money. If you can say you have averted one famine, then the case for more money to avert others is easier to make. Even if it is all fabrication.”

Donors have long talked about the importance of recipients taking ‘ownership’, but he who pays the piper calls the tune. It is against human nature to give something away for nothing, or, for that matter, to receive without feeling an obligation to give back. This is how the concept of ‘African voices’ has degenerated into a patronizing alibi and a cynical farce. For example, a knowledgeable and gripping [open letter](#) to Dr. Tedros by Ethiopia’s own healthcare staff, reporting from the red-hot frontline, had to make do with an easily ignored space in the small English-language part of the Ethiopian press.³⁵³ But a week later, twelve obviously donor-funded and donor-pleasing so-called “African civil society groups”, with zero firsthand experience of Ethiopia and absolutely nothing novel to say, made it into mighty The Guardian, once again sponsored by the Gates Foundation, with the tired fallacies about “hate speech” and the standard comparison between Ethiopia’s war effort and the genocide in Rwanda.³⁵⁴

The new-fangled, advocacy-centered, so-called rights-based approach to aid may have a point in prescribing social change as the recipe for pro-poor development. But

³⁵³ Borkena on May 10, 2022: “Nine Organizations write an Open letter to WHO Director Tedros Adhanom”.

³⁵⁴ The Guardian on May 18, 2022: “Learn lessons of Rwandan genocide and act now to stop Ethiopian war, UN urged”.

buying social change is a bit like buying love, that is, what you get is lip service to it rather than the real thing. Worse still, it cultivates the ethos that we bring them not just our superior resources and superior knowhow, but also our [superior morality](#). This self-image may soothe our guilt over being so well off, but it *damages* the standing of the West.



Denmark in Addis @Denmark_Addis · Dec 5, 2022

Take responsibility to help and empower women. We want all women to feel safe and to be safe in their homes, in the streets, and at their workplaces.

#DKaid #16daysEthiopia



2:05 PM · Dec 5, 2022

An example of counterproductive moral-superiority complex was the European Union's tone-deaf campaign #16daysEthiopia, conducted in December 2022 through the embassies of all EU member countries, including Denmark. It elicited mostly acerbic and angry comments from Ethiopians on social media. No decent person could object to the declared goal of fighting gender-based violence, but it is bound to rankle when the official West, fresh from being seen to side with a deadly enemy, roars out a message that portrays Ethiopians as sexual predators and wifebeaters. Of course, Westerners themselves would never put up with foreign governments taking a front-row seat in addressing their social problems.

Western conservatives, on their part, have been asleep at the wheel, closing their eyes to the villainous treatment of Ethiopia by so many of their usual bugbears from mainstream media and globalist elites. Notable exceptions were US Senator Jim Inhofe, presented in the introduction, and *The American Conservative*, which [published](#) the argument against imposing sanctions on Ethiopia, penned by Jon Abbink,³⁵⁵ a veteran Dutch Ethiopologist, who [contributed](#) several [insightful papers during](#) the [war](#).³⁵⁶

In conclusion, ‘the West’, defined as a geopolitical force that pursues a mix of ideals and self-interest, stood to benefit the most from staying on reasonably good terms with the Ethiopian government and especially with the Ethiopian people, minding the difficult balance between democracy-building and security, and addressing human-rights concerns by supporting the country’s newly independent institutions with money and technical expertise. But this concept of ‘the West’ is an abstraction. The flesh-and-blood Westerners reporting on the conflict and dealing with its fallout had more to gain from “self-serving glory-seeking”, as Steven Were Omamo puts it, by sensationalizing and sermonizing. And the Western public went along with this, supposing, in the words of Becky Anderson, that “everybody [in the West] wants the best” for those poor and troubled Africans, because our societies are successful and we give them aid, which shows that we are kind and wise.

What struck me in my email correspondence with *The Economist*’s Tom Gardner during those anxious days of November 2021 is not that he wished ill on Ethiopia, but that he viewed Ethiopians as being in the grip of irrational emotions, even claiming that “civilians are going to the front carrying machetes and knives”. This was contrasted with Westerners’ sober advice to appease the advancing rebel army through “negotiations to work out a new configuration of power”. Mr. Gardner would twist both facts and principles for the sake of assuming Western kindness and wisdom. And, yes, had I not personally experienced those facts and the struggle for those principles in Ethiopia for so many years, I would have assumed Western kindness and wisdom too. The difference between Mr. Gardner and me is that I searched my soul and revised my assumptions, because there was clearly nothing kind or wise about getting Ethiopia dead wrong. It was not kind but malicious of our media and so many

³⁵⁵ *The American Conservative* on March 30, 2022: “Congress Risks Prolonging the Ethiopian Civil War”, by Jon Abbink.

³⁵⁶ “The Ethiopia Conflict in International Relations and Global Media Discourse”, November 21, 2021. “The Atlantic Community mistake on Ethiopia: counter-productive statements and data-poor policies of the EU and the USA on the Tigray conflict”, African Studies Centre Leiden ASCL, ASC Working Paper no. 150, 2021. “The Politics of Conflict in Northern Ethiopia, 2020-2021: a study of war-making, media bias and policy struggle”, African Studies Centre Leiden, ASC Working Paper no. 152, 2021. “JON ABBINK: Tendency to demonise Ethiopia and give free pass to TPLF is false narrative”, in *Business Day* (South Africa), November 12, 2021. “Has Religion Been Fueling the Politics of Conflict in Ethiopia? A Cautionary Tale”, in *Canopy Forum on the Interactions of Law & Religion*, October 2022.

of our great and good to spread incendiary lies in cahoots with a brutal assault on the Ethiopian people and their elected government. And it was not wise but reckless of our diplomacy to prescribe condescending [clichés](#) like “there is no military solution”, as if our own security policy consisted of holding hands and singing together around a bonfire.

Three do-gooder baddies

Lowering the level of analysis from grand geopolitical interests to petty individual incentives also helps appreciate the power of personal connections, which is, after all, how we often form our opinions, particularly on issues with which we are unfamiliar. The TPLF, throughout its long reign in Ethiopia, placed its people in positions from which to exert influence within developed countries and international organizations. It is not fair to list names, because their ethnicity and family relations combined with my suspicions are not proof. But certainly, Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus was their number one. As the WHO Director General, his agenda was packed with meetings with senior figures, leaving him uniquely placed to reach beyond academia and journalism all the way into global politics and diplomacy.

Thus, Helen Clark’s closeness to Dr. Tedros was a matter of [public record](#) already before the war.³⁵⁷ Together, they published a [research paper](#) in 2021,³⁵⁸ and co-authored an [article](#) in 2022.³⁵⁹ Of course, these texts were not about the war in Ethiopia. But given how much both of them dedicated themselves to that topic, they probably discussed it intensely, giving him the opportunity to influence her. They still seem to be [getting](#) on.

³⁵⁷ An article in The Guardian on July 12, 2020: “Helen Clark: WHO coronavirus inquiry aims to ‘stop the world being blindsided again’”, recounts her long conversations with Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus. She portrays him as a hero who tried to warn the world, but was not listened to.

³⁵⁸ “Uniting for adolescents in covid-19 and beyond”, in the British Medical Journal, BMJ, March 2021, by Helen Clark, Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus, Anne-Birgitte Albrechtsen, Jorge Alcocer.

³⁵⁹ The WHO website on March 14, 2022: “It’s time to stop infant formula marketing practices that endanger our children”, by Helen Clark and Dr Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus.

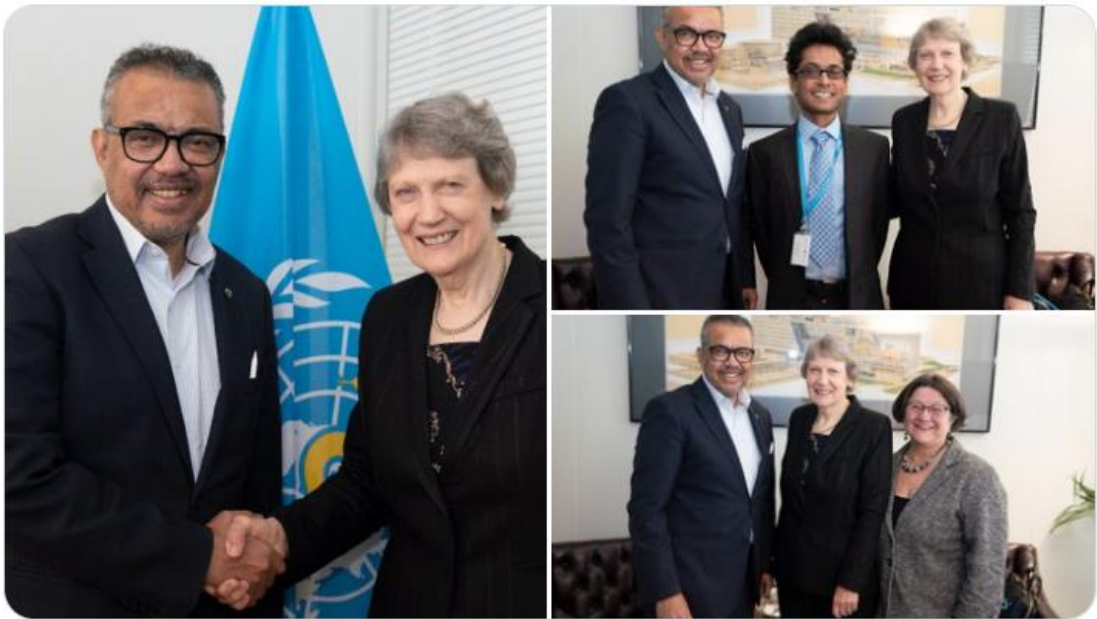


Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus ✓

@DrTedros



Had a great meeting with @HelenClarkNZ on:
-how to increase @PMNCH advocacy, esp. on adolescents' wellbeing
-the importance of sexual & reproductive health to be part of
[#HealthForAll](#)
-starting her new role as @AllianceHPSR Board Chair
Thank you for your leadership, Helen!



10:53 PM · Jan 20, 2023 · 34.6K Views

In Ethiopia, Helen Clark became seen as an unscrupulous hate-monger. Yet in the eyes of the international community, she came across as compassionate and caring. This sets the scene for a vital exchange of views, if not to settle who is right and wrong, at least to try to understand what is behind this remarkable contrast in perception. However, the whole point of dehumanizing the adversary is to avoid this. You do not reason with ‘supporters of genocide’ and ‘apologists for rape’, do you? As with nearly all the exponents of the TPLF narrative, Helen Clark would thunder and pontificate, but never [deign](#) to debate.



Helen Clark

@HelenClarkNZ

Those trolls descend on every tweet they don't like with offensive comments. Best to restrict commenting!

9:50 AM · Oct 27, 2022

Even little me found myself blocked before I had commented on any of her tweets. I would have told her that there was one realistic solution, namely for the legitimate side to prevail over the illegitimate side, but she [deluded](#) herself that the war was “one of the most intractable in the world”.³⁶⁰

As we have seen in Part 3, Helen Clark was, to all effects and purposes, one of the shrillest propagandists for the rebel army. Nevertheless, she wanted to have her do-gooder cake and eat it by feigning [impartiality](#). Thus, in a foreword to a [paper](#) titled “Starving Tigray”, published by the Alex de Waal-led World Peace Foundation on April 6, 2021, she prefaces her usual accusations of Ethiopian barbarism: “Whatever political differences may have sparked the outbreak of armed conflict in Tigray (...)”. This studied ignorance conveys an exclusively humanitarian concern that falls apart in a subsequent sentence, in which she praises the TPLF/EPRDF regime for “decades of hard-earned gains” and “slow and painstaking human development progress”. During eight of those years, she led the UNDP, which had a vast portfolio of human-development cooperation with Ethiopia, so she had her legacy to protect.

Another top diplomat who gave the game away was Mark Lowcock. He also once co-authored an [article](#) with Dr. Tedros.³⁶¹ In July 2021, he left the UN Relief Chief position, which, as described in Part 3 and in more detail in Steven Were Omamo’s important [book](#), he had been abusing to spread lies and grandstand at the expense of food-insecure Ethiopians, only to become even more overtly pro-rebel with his widely publicized [opinion piece](#) on October 6, 2021, titled: “How to destroy a country”. It was a generalized attack on the Abiy-led government, all the way down to its economic policy, which he contrasted with the “huge economic progress Ethiopia has made over the last 30 years”. He then patted himself on the back for working with the TPLF/EPRDF regime from 2011 to 2017, when he was the most senior civil servant in the UK aid apparatus: “Western countries are (whether they should be or not) proud of the contribution they have made to progress in Ethiopia in recent decades, especially what their development aid has helped achieve,” he wrote, loth to face up to how the vast majority of Ethiopians had despised his TPLF partners all along.

At any rate, these peeps on policy were drowned out by his roaring accusations of government-ordered rape, starvation and genocide. In an [interview](#) as late as October 26, 2022, one week before the peace agreement, Mr. Lowcock was still putting on his

³⁶⁰ Eritrea Hub on November 2, 2021: “Helen Clark, former prime minister of New Zealand’s message on the Tigray war”, since deleted but available on the Wayback Machine. <https://web.archive.org/web/20231106071448/https://eritreahub.org/helen-clark-former-prime-minister-of-new-zealands-message-on-the-tigray-war>

³⁶¹ The Washington Post on March 24, 2020: “Opinion: The coronavirus threatens all of humanity. All of humanity must fight back”, by Mark Lowcock and Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus.

do-gooder face to amplifying the TPLF's kill-or-get-killed message: "For them [the Tigrayans] this is an existential struggle. They genuinely believe, and, you know, I understand why they believe this, that there's an attempt going on to exterminate them."³⁶²

This is not the first time, and unlikely to be the last, that the great and the good run with a narrative instead of following the evidence. Lord David Alton personifies this. As a veteran politician with a life peerage in the UK House of Lords since 1997, he rarely bothers with the nitty-gritty of governance in his own country, but scours the globe for evil to condemn, from China to Iran, from Turkey to Cuba, from Niger to, alas, Ethiopia. As the social psychologist Jonathan Haidt has [observed](#), framings within the emotion of 'good versus evil' tend to sacrifice the intelligence of 'true versus false'. Then again, if the good pursued is democracy, human rights and equality, it may well be that Lord David Alton *usually* gets it right. But obviously he cannot be familiar with so many different countries. And if he knows anything about Ethiopian politics, he is good at hiding it. In November 2020, he [talked](#) before his peers about the war that had just begun.³⁶³ He said nothing about what had led to it, or who was fighting for what. He did not once pronounce the acronym TPLF, but he already [used](#) the word genocide three times. He would always imply that this was a purely tribal conflict, for instance by referring to the TPLF supporters coming to [meet](#) him as just "Tigrayans".

I have no inkling what brought Lord David Alton to his stance on this war. Perhaps, while out hunting for noble causes, he fell into the TPLF echo chamber by chance. Like Helen Clark and Mark Lowcock, he made a bit of a pose of standing aloof from the power games underlying the violence. However, also like them, he would withhold condemnation whenever his own side stood accused of atrocities.

³⁶² Monocle, The Briefing, Episode 2878, October 26, 2022.

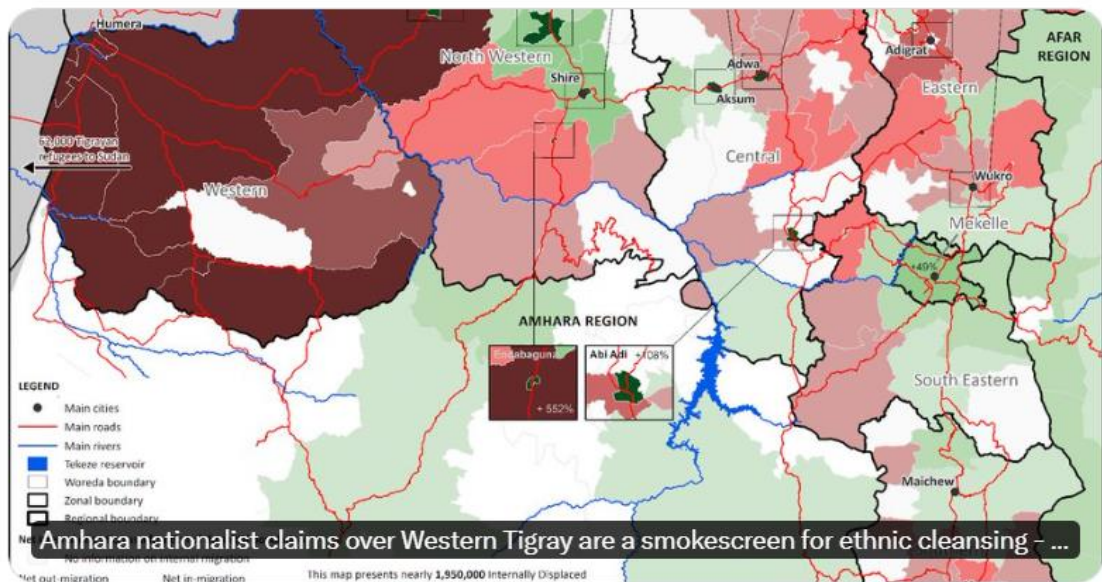
³⁶³ https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=AKB_cy2GZ9U



Lord (David) Alton
@DavidAltonHL



Tigray: Professor Jan Nyssen uses cartographic and ethnographic evidence to analyse the territorial dispute between Tigray and Amhara regions which was not directly addressed in the peace agreement signed on 2 November in Pretoria



From ethiopia-insight.com

1:37 PM · Nov 21, 2022

He [endorsed](#) Jan Nyssen’s take on the territorial dispute over Welkait, thus descending from the moral high ground of humanitarianism into the muddy terrain of this-land-is-ours ethnonationalism. Just four days before the Pretoria Agreement, he [tweeted](#) that there should be a “just and durable settlement”. He did not specify what that might be, but it does suggest a political agenda, not just a humanitarian concern. He subsequently [deferred](#) to Alex de Waal’s skepticism about the peace deal. The fact that Ethiopian military victory brought peace, not genocide, provoked not one iota of self-reflection.

In the House of Lords on November 15, 2022, on the [occasion](#) when he alluded to the discredited testimony from the deacon about the Axum massacre, he invoked the “expert analysis” of Alex de Waal, Kjetil Tronvoll and the Holocaust Museum to insist that this had been a genocidal war.³⁶⁴ He described rape and other horrors in graphic detail, ending on a note of “this isn’t over”. As long as it really is over, his continued [talk](#) about Ethiopia [starving](#) Tigrayans on purpose is no longer so inflammatory, but it is

³⁶⁴ https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3I_p06a6CoE

still defamatory.³⁶⁵ It is as if he can say anything in that august yet clueless chamber. Nobody would suspect an honorable member of making such grave accusations with so little care for the evidence.

The R-word

I have thus far been at pains not to use the R-word, *racism*, there, I said it. It has, however, been a subtext throughout this book, as when suggesting that historical, ideological and psychological factors have blocked our understanding of Ethiopians in the same way that we Westerners understand ourselves, that is, as reluctant yet principled users of armed force.

Calling someone a racist has lost its sting in the process of *label inflation*. For sure, when it sticks, it ruins reputations, but mostly it can just be shrugged off as a slur. Moreover, its actual meaning has been expanded and diluted by *concept creep*. This makes it more intellectually rigorous to find other words for it. In my reportage from Addis Ababa “Do-gooders doing bad” in November 2021, I [used](#) the established term “saviorism” and “the savior complex”. The standard ‘white’ can be attached in front of this, but strictly speaking, it is not a racially-defined but a general rich-country phenomenon. Thus, Ethiopians made many attempts to rally blacks in the West to their anti-TPLF cause, which generally failed. After all, fighting among Africans does not appeal to black pride. A major leftist African-American umbrella organization, published the statement “[Movement for Black Lives](#) Stands in Solidarity with the People of Ethiopia & Across the Region” in March 2021. It was keen to cast blame on the West, yet uncritically [swallowed](#) the Western media narrative about the war. The Black Lives Matter organization made one [tweet foray](#) into the war as early as December 18, 2020, attaching a typical mainstream [article](#), which prompted TPLF supporters to applaud and other Ethiopians to frown. Black Lives Matter never again mentioned the conflict.

My final and most important reason for holding back with the overt racism accusations is that an argument is stronger when it concedes the benefit of the doubt. Were they stereotyping the African race or the African political culture? The latter is also dangerous, but tarring it with the racism brush compounds the label inflation and the concept creep. As Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie has [said](#), “the problem with stereotypes is not that they are untrue, but that they are incomplete.” Romanticizing Ethiopia’s political culture would land us in the opposite elephant trap.

Nonetheless, one might have thought that center-left news outlets, having tied themselves in knots to expunge racism from within their staff in response to the 2020 George Floyd protests, would be wary of bias against the second-most populous Black country. For instance, they could have taken its official statements seriously and cared for equal standards of proof. But no, the anti-racist sensitivities of today’s ‘liberals’ are

³⁶⁵ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Tz9gGSuVSTA>

exhausted in the policing of taboo [words](#) and in the taking of [offense](#) to jokes. As I have shown, none of this prevents them from playing on every anti-African prejudice in the book, fanning the flames of hatred and pouring fuel on a fratricidal war with speculative demonization and malicious lies, and yet become celebrated as humanitarian progressives.

One person who had no hesitation about accusing the Western response to the war of being racist was Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus. He complained to the press, both in [April](#) and [August](#) 2022, that racism was behind Ukraine taking attention away from Tigray. In a way, the only good thing about big media's coverage of the war in northern Ethiopia is that there was so little of it. The less people followed it on the news, the less they were disinformed. Then again, had the conflict featured more prominently on the public agenda, getting just a fraction of the attention paid to the Ukraine-Russia and the Israel-Palestine conflict, the many commentators left, right and center, who are sometimes critical of the establishment and its narratives, would have taken issue with the wildest claims, rather than allowing, for instance, Cara Anna from Associated Press to emerge unscathed from the church-massacre fabrication. Regardless, what should alert us to racism is not that a war in Europe interests us more than another in Africa, but that we are perfectly capable of distinguishing between legitimate and illegitimate use of force in Ukraine, but not, alas, in Ethiopia.

I overheard Ethiopians, blissfully ignorant of Western progressive fads, wondering if Dr. Tedros's racism accusations meant he was now throwing his white accomplices under the bus. The answer is: not at all. He merely feeds them some material for performative white guilt [tripping](#). This aims to absolve them of their *real* racism of not holding a black man to the same standard as they would a white man, as they overlook the shameful record and violent associations of Dr. Tedros, who knows exactly how to charm them by talking the talk of a simple-minded donor darling and doing a victim [impression](#).³⁶⁶

³⁶⁶ For instance, nobody could or would verify his claim, made in December 2022, that his old uncle had been murdered in Tigray.



Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus ✓

@DrTedros

...

Always a pleasure to see my friends, 🇫🇷 President @EmmanuelMacron and 🇿🇦 President @CyrilRamaphosa. Thank you, both, for your steadfast support for #HealthForAll. #G20



5:51 PM · Nov 16, 2022

How long can Dr. Tedros continue to hang out with the cool guys? He massively [politicized](#) his office to provide propaganda cover for a brutal insurgency. His permanence at the helm of the WHO is the international community [slapping](#) Ethiopians in the face.

Dr. Tedros and the TPLF played big media and international organizations like a fiddle, using victimhood propaganda to the point of garnering worldwide sympathy for a military campaign against an elected government. This continues to inspire other strands of armed ethnonationalism in Ethiopia, mainly the age-old Oromo Liberation Army, and especially the upstart Amhara insurgents, the Fano militia.

Their lies, half-truths and omissions are straight out of the TPLF's astonishingly successful manual: *How to pass off the violent pursuit of power as our people's survival struggle*. Ominously, as we shall see in the final Part 5, they too are getting support for their murderous methods and fake narratives from influential Westerners. Be warned!

PART 5: DO NOT GET THE NEXT WAR WRONG TOO

Incitement to violence in human-rights language

A quick Google search finds that “Meaza Mohammed is an Ethiopian journalist and human rights activist”. Countless newspaper articles depict her as an advocate for raped women. International organizations dedicated to press freedom [portray](#) her as persecuted for speaking truth to power. The website of the US State Department, no less, [pays](#) homage to her in this manner:

“Courage is choosing the truth and to stand for it, even if it isn’t popular, because in the end, the truth shall make you free.”



Meaza Mohammed, a veteran Ethiopian journalist, is the founder of Roha TV, an independent YouTube-based news and information channel.

This honorable mention is because the State Department [bestowed](#) upon her the International Women of Courage [Award](#) on March 8, 2023, at a ceremony with First Lady Jill Biden and Secretary of State Antony Blinken. Following up on this event, a Voice of America [video](#) opens with the words: “Meaza Mohamed was arrested three times within the span of one year, all for doing her job.”³⁶⁷

Meaza Mohammed is not only the founder, but also the chief editor and voiceover woman of Roha TV, one of the more successful of a plethora of ethnic-based Youtube channels produced by Ethiopians in the West. These can be watched freely in Ethiopia too (although until July 2023, a VPN was required). Most of the worldwide sympathy with Meaza Mohammed predates the Fano insurgency in the Amhara Region, which broke out in April 2023, but she was known in Ethiopia as an ethnonationalist firebrand before that. Certainly, Roha TV today is wholly dedicated to

³⁶⁷ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8IjH1geoj8c>

propagandizing for Fano, which is, as of 2024, just like the TPLF was until late 2022, an irregular army with the ambition of toppling the elected federal government. However, in this case, the first obstacle on its warpath is the local Amhara regional government, which also has a democratic mandate dating from 2021. We shall return to how Fano both resembles and differs from the two other major ethnonationalist militias in Ethiopia, the TPLF and OLA.

Roha TV serves up a fare of ethnicity-obsessed hate-, fear- and war-mongering. One claim is that the capital Addis Ababa, whose population is majority Amhara, is now in the hands of Oromo extremists who hate all things Amhara.



A screenshot from Roha TV. What has been billed as slum clearance and progress by the Addis Ababa city administration, and painted in some international [media](#)³⁶⁸ as high-handed urban planning, is distilled into ethnic incitement on Roha TV. This collage shows three Oromos in positions of power, namely President of Oromia Region, Shimelis Abdisa, Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed, and Mayor of Addis Ababa, Adanech Abebe. Even though these politicians are engaged in a bitter war with the OLA, that is, with the real Oromo extremists, Roha TV attributes to them the imaginary quote: “We are tearing down Addis Ababa to build Finfinnee” (the Oromo name for Addis Ababa).³⁶⁹ This majority-Amhara mixed charter city is surrounded by Oromia, and there are indeed Oromo ethnonationalists pushing for making it more Oromo, as well as extremist Oromo ethnonationalists threatening to invade it. Roha TV plays on the fears

³⁶⁸ For instance, The Economist on April 25, 2024: “The historic heart of Addis Ababa is being demolished”.

³⁶⁹ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BDpAHnwitzg>

that this evokes among Amharas by presenting the renovation projects as deliberate erasure of Amhara cultural heritage.

Roha TV is not all doom, however, as a triumphalist tone is important for recruitment.



Another screenshot from Roha TV. The subtitle says: “Fano’s march on Arat Kilo (the seat of national government in Addis Ababa)” and in smaller letters: “[Commander] Asegid Mekonnen said Fano will enter Arat Kilo in two months”. This video came out in March 2024, but Fano’s claims to be on the verge of taking the capital have been a constant since it took up arms in Amhara Region in April 2023.

Just like the TPLF’s propagandists during the TPLF’s war, Fano’s Meaza Mohammed plays a tune about human rights in English, but beats the drums of war in her own language. For instance, at the Amhara Grand Convention, held by the Confederation of Amharas in North America in Atlanta, USA, on March 9-10, 2024, she delivered a fiery [speech](#) in Amharic.³⁷⁰ Dressed in a T-shirt with three raised fists in the Ethiopian colors, she denounced the realists within the movement who seek a negotiated settlement: “We’re not talking about politics, in which we engage in compromise,”³⁷¹ she thundered, and ended on this note: “We’re saying that if we don’t achieve victory, the outcome will be our destruction as a people. If this does not bother you, those of us who do care will struggle and we will win, and you better get out of our way!”³⁷²

³⁷⁰ https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rnzzyR8y_wU&t=129m15s

³⁷¹ Since translation of sensitive speech is always subject to fair challenge and in the interest of transparency, I shall indicate the original Amharic in footnotes. Here it is, including the one word she used in English: “ስለ ፖለቲካው አይደለም የምናወራው:: በፖለቲካ ውስጥ እንደዚህ አድርገን እንደዚህ አድርገን ብለን compromise የምናደርገው::”

³⁷² “ውጤቱ ማሸነፍ ካልሆነ እንደ ህዝብ መጥፋት ነው እያልን:: ቁጭት ውስጥ የማትገቡ ከሆነ ቁጭት ውስጥ የገባን ሰዎች እንታገላለን እናሸንፋለን ከመንገዳችን ዘወር በሉልን::”

The last part is a thinly veiled threat to fellow Amharas who disagree with her. Many of them have been killed. Apart from attacks on federal soldiers and officers, basically anyone in constitutional authority in the Amhara Region, such as mayors, policemen, journalists for government media, and elected members of the regional parliament live with the risk of assassination. In some cases, bounties have been placed on their heads on social media.



Netsanet
@NetsaFree



How can you live with yourself? You will face justice for the crimes you and your likes committed against the Amhara children. It is only a matter of time.



6:38 PM · May 4, 2024 · 22 Views

Another day, another anonymous death threat on Twitter. This one is against a civilian communications worker of the Amhara regional government, not a military man.

In May 2024, I travelled to Bahir Dar, the beautiful capital of Amhara Region by the shores of Lake Tana. Despite a curfew in force after 8pm, life goes on. Amhara Region is suffering an insurgency, but not, as Tigray during the war with the TPLF, an all-encompassing insurgency *regime*. Banks and businesses continue to function. The mobile-phone network is up, but not for data. Those who can afford a coffee at a major hotel can get a wifi password for internet access. In general, the mood is depressed. People complain of disinvestment, economic sabotage, absence of tourists

and rich people fleeing the city: “If they don’t pay Fano, Fano kills them, and if they do pay, the government arrests them,” the locals explained to me. In the parts of the countryside where Fano is in control, either schools have been closed or parents are afraid of sending their children.



Amhara News Service ✓

@Amhara_News



Breaking 🚨: Lasta district officials and Lalibela Mayor have been assassinated. PP government losing control.



8:34 PM · May 1, 2024 · 14K Views

A pro-Fano news service, undoubtedly based in the West, gloats over the assassination of local government officials. Fano usually does not claim responsibility directly, but lower-level Fano supporters will celebrate these killings, and everyone knows who is behind.



YeguleleLij
@YeguleleLij

Collaborators are equally responsible for [#StateSponsoredAmharaGenocide](#)

3:52 AM · Mar 28, 2024

Asking senior people within the Fano movement who exactly is fair game for assassination provokes elusive answers. The Fano rank-and-file, however, speak more bluntly: anyone in constitutional authority should fear for his or her life. In fact, just paying taxes may earn someone the label of ‘collaborator’.



“Fano will win”, says the video headline. And in smaller letters: “Journalist Meaza Mohammed to the diaspora in Sweden”.³⁷³ One aim of this event in November 2023 was to collect money for the fratricidal war in Amhara Region to go on.

There are no two ways about it. Meaza Mohammed campaigns and raises funds for Ethiopians killing Ethiopians, and particularly for Amharas killing Amharas. Of course, she and her backers genuinely believe that this is for a noble cause. To convince themselves and others that Fano’s killings are just, rather than extremist, they play up how the State Department as well as do-gooders around the world

³⁷³ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DYYun1LI-0w>

celebrate Meaza Mohammed as a champion of human rights. The international community's failure to distinguish between legitimate and illegitimate violence is depressingly déjà vu from the war with the TPLF.

Different, but same same

Just like the TPLF and OLA, Fano has a strong contingent of activists in the diaspora. They have pulled many tricks from the TPLF manual, such as creating slanted Wikipedia articles with names like "[persecution of Amhara people](#)" and "[Anti-Amhara sentiment](#)". From extremist Oromo ideologues, they have learned to inflate Amhara population figures, making the case that Amharas are underrepresented, when they are, if anything, overrepresented in prominent positions in society.³⁷⁴

The Fano camp does not have the TPLF's powerful connections, but it makes up for this in numbers. Many of its young people have grown up in the West. They have less knowledge of Ethiopian politics and less skin in the game than their relatives in Ethiopia, but they have a keen grasp of Western sensitivities towards Africa. Thus, a hashtag that has been trending on social media is #AmharaGenocide. This is yet more fodder for what has been called the genocide-prevention industrial complex. For example, throughout the war in northern Ethiopia, the Lemkin³⁷⁵ Institute for Genocide Prevention denounced a "Tigray genocide". It is now going on about an "Amhara genocide". In the institute's edifying podcast series Genocide News Now,³⁷⁶ its genocide experts self-confidently pass judgements on good and evil in Ethiopian politics. Basically, the takeaway is that Oromos are the bad guys, Amharas are the good guys. However, they mispronounce the names of Ethiopian people and places, revealing unfamiliarity with the country. After all, they cannot dwell on one context for too long, as they must move on to campaign against numerous other genocides going on across the world, including a genocide of transgender people.³⁷⁷ However, while

³⁷⁴ For instance, on March 15, 2024, in the respectable US magazine The Hill, an op-ed titled "IMF Ethiopia loan must be conditioned on immediate reforms" by Mesfin Tegenu, Chairman of the American-Ethiopian Public Affairs Committee (AEPAC), claimed that the population of Amhara Region [is 60 million](#) (the real figure is less than half that). I personally interviewed Mesfin Tegenu back in December 2021, when he was lobbying the US Congress in *favor* of the Ethiopian government. After the Fano insurgency, he began to lobby *against* the very same Ethiopian government.

³⁷⁵ Named after Raphael Lemkin, the Polish-Jewish lawyer who coined the term genocide in 1944.

³⁷⁶ The Lemkin Institute's podcast 'Genocide News Now', by hosts Molly Reagan and Teresa Merk, May 13, 2024.

³⁷⁷ The Lemkin Institute's website on November 29, 2022: "Statement on the Genocidal Nature of the Gender Critical Movement's Ideology and Practice". One remarkably delirious phrase is: "The ideological constructions of transgender women promoted by gender critical ideologues are particularly genocidal. They share many features in common with other, better known, genocidal ideologies. Transgender women are represented as stealth border crossers who seek to defile the purity of cisgender women, much as Tutsi women were viewed in Hutu Power ideology and Jewish men in Nazi antisemitism". And yet, despite the social

some Westerners appear to go by the creed of ‘believe all genocides’, Fano supporters have no patience for the two other big-time Ethiopian genocide hashtags, namely #TigrayGenocide and #OromoGenocide.³⁷⁸

The peoples of Tigray, Oromo and Amhara are laconically referred to in Ethiopia as “sostu”. It literally means “the three”, and implicitly “the troublesome three”, because too many of their leaders push ethnonationalist grievance politics. Some do this legally. But the three’s extremist militias – TPLF, OLA and Fano – are a law unto themselves. What do they think gives them a license to kill? Well, they have a long list of complaints. Most of them are generalizing and delirious. Some are specific and reasonable, but not remotely enough to make the case for breaking the state monopoly on violence. As we saw with the TPLF’s war, *only* genocidal-level oppression can justify war. This is why Ethiopians promoting genocide hashtags invariably do so in support of an ethnically-exclusive irregular army.

This is not to say that these three insurgency groups are the same. In fact, the differences are stark. By now, the reader will have a good idea of the TPLF spirit: top-down discipline, tribal verging on secessionist, but historically happy to identify with a united Ethiopia, as long as the TPLF gets a good chunk of power. Part 1 and 3 portrayed the OLA ethos as equally militaristic, but decentralized, anarchic and anti-Ethiopian. The OLA sees the Ethiopian unitary state as the continuation of nineteenth-century injustices against Oromos by Tigrayans and Amharas, the historical hate figure being Emperor Menelik II, perhaps because he was, in his own time and still today, a symbol of a united Ethiopia, and also because he founded the Amharic-speaking city of Addis Ababa, which the OLA claims as Finfinnee. Amharas organizing along ethnic lines is a more recent phenomenon, because Amharas have a history of identifying and being identified as Ethiopians first, and as coming from a particular province second.

As we have seen in various parts of this book, already in 2021 and 2022, when the federal government and Fano were fighting the TPLF as allies, tension between them was brewing. As mentioned in Part 1, the federal government’s leniency towards the TPLF’s leadership following the Pretoria Agreement was unpopular across Ethiopia, but probably most of all in Amhara Region. The final trigger was the federal government’s order, in April 2023, that Fano disarm. Actually, this was supposed to apply to *all* ethnic militias, a noble goal that everyone could support in principle. Assurances were given that Fano fighters could be integrated into other security organs. However, many Amharas believed this to be a ruse and were alarmed. They felt vulnerable in the wake

conservatism of Ethiopians, pro-Fano politicians in the Ethiopian diaspora, like [Neamin Zeleke](#), will refer to the Lemkin Institute in support of Fano’s cause.

³⁷⁸ It should be noted, however, that the aforementioned Lemkin Institute is *not*, at least not at present, onboard with the hashtag #OromoGenocide. Because this could not be squared with how the it has bought into the crude Fano discourse about Amharas being victims and Oromos being victimizers.

of TPLF's brutal incursions into their lands. The haste was unseemly, they said, because the TPLF had not really disarmed, so why should they? Fano had disobeyed some orders from the federal government, but had not, at that time, attacked the federal army, like the TPLF, or kidnapped people and robbed banks, like the OLA.

Could the Fano insurgency have been avoided with more patience and trust-building? It is hard to tell what went on behind the scenes, let alone to speculate about a counterfactual scenario. Importantly, Amhara militancy was boosted but not invented in 2023. For instance, in an attempted regional coup on June 22, 2019, militant Amhara ethnonationalists killed regional president Ambachew Mekonnen, army chief Seare Mekonnen and other senior government officials. The war with the TPLF gave these forces of Amhara extremism a chance to acquire weapons, and it may have been inevitable that they would, given the opportunity in 2023, resume their violent pursuit of what they failed to accomplish in 2019. Thus, even if, for argument's sake, the federal government miscalculated the timing of its order to dissolve Fano, and even if Abiy Ahmed could have done much more to avoid losing Amhara public opinion, by now the fundamentals are the same as in the war with the TPLF: an elected multiethnic government against an irregular ethnically-exclusive militia. Moreover, taking yet another leaf from the TPLF playbook, Fano soon declared the aim of marching on the capital.

While mainstream Oromos have long been decidedly anti-OLA, at the time when the Fano insurgency broke out in Amhara Region in April 2023, Fano was held in high regard among the Amhara people for its role in repelling the TPLF invasion. Yes, there is a spectrum of opinion, including nuances such as "taking up arms against the federal government is legitimate but unwise". But by and large, it would be fair to say that Fano had grassroots backing when the war began in April 2023, and when a state of emergency was declared in Amhara Region on August 4, 2023. The number of people ready to fight for Fano is, and will likely remain, too high to end the conflict solely by force. However, after more than a year of struggle with nothing to show for it but death and misery, support for Fano within the Amhara population is in decline. This steady disenchantment has parallels to what happened among Tigrayans in the course of the TPLF's war.

Unlike the hierarchical TPLF, the OLA and Fano are loosely organized guerrillas. Sometimes they blend into the civilian population, sometimes they roam the countryside, ambushing federal troops and taking over urban centers for just enough time to raid weapons depots, free prisoners and kill whom they deem to be collaborators. Sabotaging economic activity and public services adds to the suffering of their own people. Road tolls, extortion ('tax collection') and kidnapping are also on the repertoire of both these groups. Spokespersons may say, however, that the worst acts of banditry are not committed by 'the real' Fano/OLA. This is hard to judge, since both

these rebel groups are prone to division and infighting. In fact, Fano [cannot even agree](#) within its diaspora support community who should speak for it.³⁷⁹

However, despite these similarities in structure, in terms of ideology, Fano is kind of the opposite extreme of the OLA.

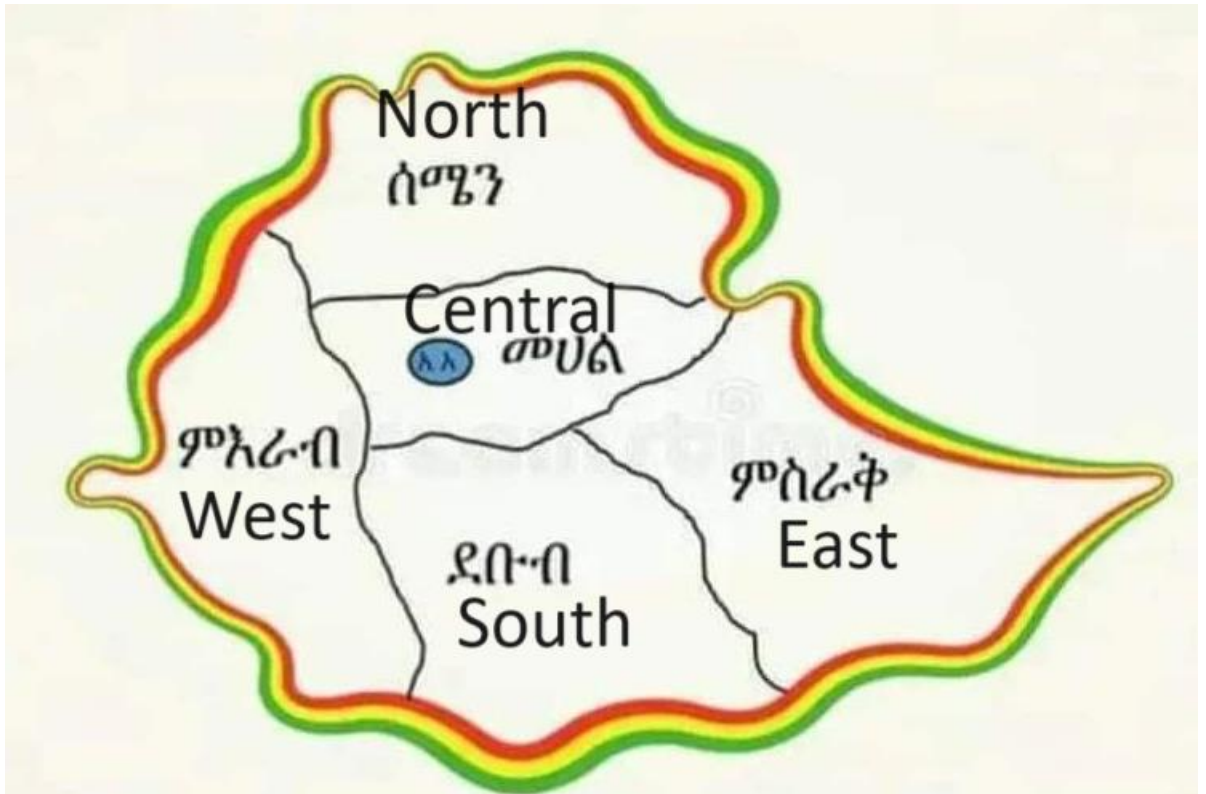
Why I am no fan of Fano

Before I explain this, a caveat is in place. Fano is a movement rather than an organization. Notwithstanding repeated and ongoing attempts to unify the various Fano factions, there is still no Fano central command, let alone an official Fano platform. Incidentally, this is why it is harder to negotiate with Fano than with the TPLF, as the most extremist Fano groups, who tend to become empowered under a state of war, will disavow concessions made by compromise-minded ones. It also makes it harder to pin down the Fano philosophy, so this is but a rough generalization based on reading and listening to pro-Fano individuals.

Their claim that Amharas have been persecuted ever since the overthrow of Emperor Haile Selassie in 1974 is an exaggeration. But there is a kernel of truth in that the scapegoating of Amharas has been the staple of various ethnonationalist discourses for decades in Ethiopia. This has even seeped into the world press. For instance, a recent BBC article describes the Amharas as “historic rulers of Ethiopia”.³⁸⁰ The characterization of Amharas as *oppressors* is inaccurate and incendiary. However, as already mentioned, it is fair to say that Amharas generally identify with and are identified with Ethiopia. *Fano* used to be the term for the patriotic guerrilla soldiers who resisted the fascist Italian occupation from 1935 to 1941 (which is why the militia’s adversaries today will often call it something else). Stressing how the Ethiopian and the Amhara identity are interwoven, Fano uses the basic version of the Ethiopian flag, just green, red and yellow, that is, without the blue disk with the golden pentagram, which was put there by the EPRDF in 1996. While secession is the lodestar of the OLA and a fallback option for the TPLF, only coming to power on the national stage makes any sense for Fano. If anything, people in the Fano camp wish to abolish the Amhara Region, which is a brainchild of the hated ethnic federalism.

³⁷⁹ This disunity is on display, for instance, in Addis Insight on January 11, 2024: “An open letter to Major Dawit W/Giorgis and Mr. Getachew Beyene”. More recently, the disagreement has been over the leadership of the journalist Eskinder Nega.

³⁸⁰ The BBC website on December 18, 2022: “Ethiopia’s PM sees OLA rebellion grow in his own backyard”, by Ameyu Etana, who usually writes for the BBC in the Oromo language.



A pro-Fano meme on social media envisages the new Ethiopian political map when Fano takes over and abolishes ethnic federalism (discussed in Part 2). However, many non-Amharas smell in this a plan to erase multiculturalism and to Amhararize Ethiopia. A degree of autonomy is a condition for some ethnic groups' loyalty to the Ethiopian unitary state. The current model needs to be overhauled, but this will take dialogue and compromise, and not a violent Fano takeover.

Another Fano talking point is that the federal government, elected though it is, has lost its legitimacy through acts of oppression, such as arrests of opposition leaders, journalists etc. The government likes to refute this by comparing to the darkest years of the TPLF/EPRDF. But it is hard to deny that the liberalization and democratization agenda has backslid to give way to the security state. We saw how the soft touch of Abiymania in 2018-2020 enabled violent ethnonationalism to bubble up across the country. The response to all this bloodshed has been a hardening of minds and policies. The Ethiopian judiciary has no history of being independent. Still today, it is safe to assume that both the jailing and the freeing of politicians, and probably of journalists too, takes place on orders from the executive. Thus, without examining the details, I will not vouch for the fairness of detentions and trials of politicians and journalists. Some of them may well be innocent by normal democratic legal standards. However, whenever I have cast a glance at their cases, there is direct or indirect advocacy for violence. Learning from the TPLF's propagandists, Fano supporters will portray the motive of the government and judiciary as ethnic-based persecution. In reality, not necessarily the justification, but the *root cause*, is the fact that people are

getting killed, which is making everyone involved, bar the diaspora activists, live in fear. It is simply unrealistic to have the same rules apply in peace and in war.



Joint Statement

World Press Freedom Day

May 3rd is World Press Freedom Day, a reminder of the importance of press freedom and the need to protect journalists and the media who work tirelessly to report the facts. Freedom of speech and the press is a fundamental human right that must be upheld. **In Ethiopia**, there are instances of journalists intimidated and unjustly detained for doing their job.

We mark this day to shine a light on the issue and advocate for their release. As we celebrate World Press Freedom Day, let's continue to work towards creating a world where journalists can report freely and without fear of persecution.



In May 2024, Western countries issued a joint condemnation of press unfreedom in Ethiopia. One angry counterargument was that it reeked of hypocrisy, since these countries have their own crackdowns arising from ever-expanding definitions of hate speech. But more substantially, what is missing from the West is any genuine interest in the Ethiopian problem of incitement to violence. Perhaps the Westerners behind this

finger-wagging communiqué would be more understanding, if they had been the ones living with a guerrilla on the outskirts of their cities and bounties being placed on their heads.

Another justification held up by the Fano camp is all manners of cruelty against Amharas *en masse*. Exhibit A for this accusation is, as mentioned in Part 3, the massacres in Wollega in western Oromia, which have cost the lives of *thousands* of unarmed Amharas, with whole families being slaughtered. A particularly nasty episode took place in August 2022, just as the war with the TPLF entered its final phase. These and similar crimes against Amharas in Oromia, including mass kidnappings of Amhara university students, have caused public outrage. The federal government has been rightly criticized for not providing security, and the prime minister for failing to strike the right empathetic note. But the perpetrators have been Oromo extremists, not least the TPLF's old ally, the OLA, which remains, as of mid-2024, at war with the federal government.

And quite a dirty war at that, it seems. According to a Reuters [investigation](#) from February 2024,³⁸¹ when Abiy Ahmed rose to power in 2018, senior government officials in Oromia set up a secretive *Korree Nageenyaa* (Security Committee in the Oromo language), aimed at crushing the OLA with extrajudicial killings. Fano supporters have used this to paint a picture of a government that operates with callous disregard for due process. This is a fair point, but it shatters a core tenet of Fano's case for war, namely that the leading Oromos in the governing Prosperity Party are on the same side as the OLA. If this does not hold true, it is in fact the Fano insurgents who are helping the OLA by keeping the federal army overstretched on two fronts.

Were it not for the federal army, the OLA and Fano would probably conquer their own regions, and then clash in a cataclysmic showdown. Thus far, there have only been occasional skirmishes between the two, but their hatred of one another helps fuel both regional wars. You never know in Ethiopian politics, but formal collaboration between the OLA and Fano is an absurd suggestion. And yet, they are both fighting the federal government. They are enemies in theory, but they are allies in practice.

As for the accusations of civilians being killed by federal troops in Amhara Region, trust in the reports of international human-rights organizations ought to be rock bottom after their partisanship during the war with the TPLF. Nevertheless, there is no doubt that the war in Amhara, like the one in Oromia, can be dirty. Extrajudicial revenge killings of mere suspects and other counterinsurgency measures outside the law must be condemned.

³⁸¹ Reuters on February 23, 2024: "A REUTERS INVESTIGATION: In Ethiopia, a secret committee orders killings and arrests to crush rebels", by Guilia Paravicini.

Again, this is no different from the war with the TPLF. There are the closeups of individual war crimes on both sides that call for justice. And there is the zoom-out of a political scenario that calls for respecting state monopoly on violence. The minimum requirements for taking up arms is that the established government is illegitimate, that the rebellion has broad popular support, that a sound context analysis is in place, and that a better alternative is within realistic reach. The Fano insurgency meets none of these conditions. In particular, those who paint Fano as fighting under the banner of democracy and human rights should notice how assiduously Fano politicians are courting the dictator of Eritrea, Isaias Afewerki, seeking his sponsorship, albeit apparently with limited success.

Amhara-friendly Oromos

The Oromos currently in government are undoubtedly prone to the vices of an authoritarian political culture, including militarism, denial of judiciary independence, cronyism, you name it. But, contrary to Fano's propaganda line, they are *not* resentful against Amharas. Unlike the OLA, they do not reject Ethiopia as an Amhara supremacist project, but rather take pride in Oromo participation in creating Ethiopia. They are what I called, in Part 1, *mainstream Oromos*. They talk and write native Amharic, usually even better than Oromo. They celebrate their Ethiopianness and its totems, which are often derived from Amhara culture. They revere Emperor Menelik II. They give their children names in Amharic. Many are Orthodox Christians. As also discussed in Part 1, extremist Oromo ideology sees this mainstream way of being Oromo as 'self-hate', as the 'sheepish mindset of the colonized' and other such epithets. Meanwhile, extremist Amharas fail to appreciate this Amhara-friendly mindset of mainstream Oromos, preferring to agonize over, say, measures to promote the Oromo language, fretting that Amharic could become displaced as the medium of national unity, which is as meaningless as worrying about English disappearing on the world stage. To be clear, Amharic dominates totally in urban Ethiopia, and will do so even more in the future, as rural-urban migration continues apace. A growing number of young Oromos speak the Oromo language poorly, or not at all.

Oromos are the most numerous ethnic group in Ethiopia. They are also the most diverse in terms of religions and political views. Yet Fano has made no attempt to win over any of them. Yes, Fano supporters will usually insist that they have nothing against Oromos, that they will work with anyone who also supports unity and equality. But their constant conflation between extremist and mainstream Oromos has an undertone of ill-will towards the Oromo identity, and occasionally, in ugly memes on social media, an overtone of hate. If Fano were really about unity and equality, at least a few mainstream Oromos would take up Fano's cause. But they do not. Not even mainstream Oromos who are critical of Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed will touch Fano with a bargepole. Because Fano's claim to be against tribalism contrasts with Fano being ethnically-exclusive.



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Breaking : Fano/Amhara forces captured 100+ ENDF Oromo soldiers after several days of fighting.



20:08 · 05 Jun 24 · 19.9K Views

128 Reposts **19** Quotes **378** Likes



Welkait-Tegedé #Amhara... · 10h

Replying to @Amhara_News

Thank you for being a voice for Amhara. You're doing great! But please don't post old videos without confirming their authenticity. This was from years ago. Please delete, tweet a disclaimer and be careful next time. Bless

As always, the first casualty of war is the truth. This time, it became too much even for

a sympathizer. Also note how this Fano propaganda outlet calls the multiethnic army “Oromo soldiers”.

As stated as early as in Part 1, ethnonationalism in Ethiopia is on a spectrum, ranging from cultural and reasonable to supremacist and violent. Even among the majority of Ethiopians who respect state monopoly on violence, these various shades of ethnonationalism rub up against each other. All kinds of public policies, from budgeting and building projects to taxation and educational reform, easily become ethnicized. In many cases, it is hard to tell if accusations of ethnic bias are true or hysterical. They could also be half-true and half-hysterical. Conversely, Ethiopianism is also on a spectrum, from merely prioritizing the Ethiopian national identity over ethnic identity, to aspiring to abolish ethnic identity altogether. The latter is also extremist, because ethnic identity has deep roots and needs to be accommodated, just like religion. The bottom line remains: the only realistic way to keep Ethiopia together is for compromise-seekers, particularly from the two big ethnicities, Oromos and Amharas, to settle differences through dialogue and voting. Ethiopia uses the first-past-the-post election system, and might consider a new set of rules that disincentivize ethnically-exclusive parties. However, I may be wrong on this. What I am sure about is that armed ethnonationalism is poison for coexistence.

In conclusion, each rebel group in Ethiopia has unique characteristics and goals. Yes, they occasionally have fair complaints. Yes, the Ethiopian security state resorts to unacceptable methods to contain them, with insufficient protection of innocent people. But in the bigger picture, the only good outcome is for all these rebel groups to lay down their arms. They bring nothing but economic misery and humanitarian disaster, starting with their own regions. They undermine the chances of building a democratic culture. And they push Ethiopia towards a catastrophic breakup of never-ending border conflicts and ethnic cleansing. It is a disgrace how they continue to be validated, even romanticized, both inside and outside Ethiopia. Let us look at some more examples regarding Fano.

Playing on prejudice

As we have seen in the war with the TPLF, skillful play on prejudice about Africa will be lapped up by clueless Westerners. This includes those who purport to be ‘alternative’ and to ‘expose the lies of mainstream media’, such as the popular Youtube channel, [Redacted](#). On November 18, 2023,³⁸² it featured Dr. Senait Senay, a US-based Ethiopian. She speaks for an outfit with the generic name “Genocide Prevention in Ethiopia”, but she would deny the existence of any Oromo genocide or Tigray genocide, whereas she has been an [avid user](#) of the hashtag #AmharaGenocide. She tells her American interviewers that Amharas were not represented in the peace negotiations with the TPLF in Pretoria. What she really means is that the unelected

³⁸² <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kKifLxejvLk>

gunmen from Fano were not in Pretoria. The federal government in charge of negotiating for Ethiopia was chosen by the elected members of parliament, some of whom are from the Amhara Region. There is also no shortage of appointed officials and military commanders of the Amhara ethnicity. Did she perhaps want the Amhara *regional* government to be in Pretoria? No, because: “the Amhara regional government itself is an enemy to the people”, she says, never mind that it is chosen by the elected [Amhara National Regional Council](#). She explains that “the war in Amhara Region is waged by the Ethiopian regime against the Amhara people with the Oromo Liberation Front”. As we have seen, this lumping together of mainstream and extremist Oromos amounts to flirting with anti-Oromo hate. It precludes compromise between moderates and reduces political difference to ethnicity.

The two Redacted journalists are in no position to challenge Senait Senay, as she carries on: “There is a siege. Amharas can’t go into the capital city.” This quarter-truth is based on [a report](#), from back in 2022, that some travelers entering Addis Ababa by land, but not by air, were turned away at checkpoints manned by Oromo policemen, solely because their IDs said they were from Amhara Region. This provoked understandable consternation, but these were isolated incidents a considerable time ago. Dr. Senait leaves viewers under the impression that Addis Ababa, which has some 55-65% Amhara population, has only Amharas hiding in basements. She spices it up: “They [Amharas] are literally being hunted down elsewhere in the country as well. So the only thing that the [Amhara] people have is their self-armed group called Fano (...)”.

During the war with the TPLF, accounts about Tigrayans being “hunted down” were rightly dismissed by pointing out, for instance, that there were still hundreds of thousands of Tigrayans living in the capital, who were mostly fine. Well, Amharas in Addis Ababa number in the millions. Many of them express sympathy with Fano, often openly so. And yet, much to the frustration of Fano commanders, Amharas in Addis Ababa have not taken up arms, or even taken to the streets in large numbers. There has been one serious incident, on April 12, 2024, during the arrest of three Fano members who, [according](#) to the police, were “on a mission to carry out a terrorist attack”, apparently to assassinate senior government officials, though all they managed to do was to gun down a taxi driver for refusing to help them escape.³⁸³ In the resulting [shootout](#), one of them was captured, the other two were killed.

Fano-ing the flames left and right

The well-known British journalist, Graham Peebles, writes for the far-left website Counterpunch. Unlike three other far-left grandees mentioned in this book, Mick Wallace, Clare Daly and George Monbiot, he saw through the TPLF’s overblown victimhood narrative. He wrote many articles to denounce what he saw as a Western-

³⁸³ Ethiopia Peace Observatory, Weekly Update, April 16, 2024.

backed regime-change agenda, celebrating when this was defeated at the ballot box. Thus, after the general election in 2021, he concluded: “The Ethiopian people (...) have given The Prosperity Party under the leadership of Abiy Ahmed a huge mandate to govern.”³⁸⁴

Now he is campaigning to drown this mandate in blood. In March 2024, he wrote, also in Counterpunch: “Dictators like Abiy, and the world is littered with such monsters, do not suddenly curb their behavior and embrace justice and democracy, they must be forced to do so.”³⁸⁵

There is little indication that Fano stands for “justice and democracy”, and it is particularly odd for leftists like Mr. Peebles to take up its cause, because the flavor of Fano is unmistakably reactionary. Some in the movement are nostalgic for monarchy, which they wish to reestablish in some form. In one op-ed resembling copy-paste of Fano propaganda, Giovanni R. Ruffini, professor at Fairfield University, USA, floats this unrealistic idea, which he must have gotten from some Fano-supporting Ethiopian friends.³⁸⁶ It almost goes without saying that the royal family would once again be Orthodox Christian, which is a non-starter in modern, multireligious Ethiopia. It is as if the Fano camp wishes to prove extremist Oromos right in hearing “Ethiopian unity” as a dog whistle for Orthodox Christian Amhara supremacy.

Mr. Peebles does not hark back to the glory of the Abyssinian Empire, but tells his international readers that “Amhara communities have been oppressed for generations”.³⁸⁷ This is no less misleading than portraying Amharas as historical oppressors. And he throws around figures with abandon: “Tens of thousands of Amhara men, women and children, have been killed (estimates range between 30–50,000), hundreds of thousands arrested, over three million displaced.” No source is indicated, though it is likely to be some Amhara diaspora organization that delivers these free-style statistics. Besides, Graham Peebles has overnight converted to the TPLF’s version of the death toll in the so-called Tigray War. He even inserts a link to the aforementioned El País article from January 27, 2023, the one which, as elaborated upon in Part 3, relies on the “study” of Professor Jan Nyssen and quotes ex-convict Dr. Tony Magaña as a truth witness.

³⁸⁴ Counterpunch on July 9, 2021: “‘Stop Interfering’: Ethiopia’s Opportunity After the Election”, by Graham Peebles.

³⁸⁵ Counterpunch on March 25, 2024: “The Hidden Genocide in Ethiopia”, by Graham Peebles.

³⁸⁶ Metaphore Magazine on March 1, 2024: “End Ethiopia’s War Against Its Own People”, by Giovanni R. Ruffini. The pro-monarchy passage is: “Perhaps the country should bring back its age-old monarchy to foster the unity of the Ethiopian people. A constitutional monarchy has, indeed, been known to aid in stabilizing democratic societies.”

³⁸⁷ Counterpunch on May 3, 2024, “Ethiopia beyond Pretoria: Is another war imminent?” by Graham Peebles

Mr. Peebles is not the only ex-supporter of the federal government turned Fano supporter who rides the coattails of TPLF propagandists. For instance, an op-ed in the Canada-based Ethiopian online magazine Borkena (which published one of my articles during the war with the TPLF) holds it against the Ethiopian government that “(...) over one million Ethiopians have perished in the Tigray war”.³⁸⁸

Another call for war by Fano rang out from the opposite end of the political spectrum, this one authored by an Ethiopian and published in The European Conservative.³⁸⁹ It reaches the same conclusions as the far-left Counterpunch, that is, the elected government of Ethiopia is ripe for a violent overthrow. However, rather than striking an anti-imperialist tone, it pushes right-wing buttons by portraying Fano as the good Christian Amharas fighting the bad Muslim Oromos, claiming that “US liberal media and radical Marxists misrepresent the Fano as an Amhara ethno-nationalist militia.” One of many shrill sentences is: “The Islamist beheadings and regime executions are part of a campaign to eliminate Orthodox Christians and Amharas from the country.”

Here is an ‘unfun fact’: the massacres of civilians in Wollega have been committed mainly by Christian Oromos against mainly Muslim Amharas. It is the case, however, that Fano has little support from the 15-20% of Amharas who are Muslim. In various parts of Amhara, there have been attacks and even massacres of Muslims. Muslims and Oromos living in Amhara have started to feel at least as vulnerable as Amharas and Orthodox Christians in Oromia. Religion gives vital meaning to the lives of most Ethiopians, but religious differences have not been the key fault line in modern Ethiopian conflicts. Now, however, Fano is seeking to pull in the Ethiopian Orthodox Church on its side. For instance, Fano commanders are reported to travel accompanied

³⁸⁸ Borkena on March 29, 2024: “Corridor project and heritage demolition in Addis Ababa”, by Minga Negash. The source directly indicated in the article is Olusegun Obasanjo, the former President of Nigeria who helped negotiate the Pretoria Peace Agreement. He actually said 600,000, feeling no need to explain where he got that from, probably because it was a standard figure thrown out by newspapers at the time. By clicking twice on the links indicated to back up the death toll, one ends up with a Wilson Center article on October 25, 2022, headlined “Ukraine Understandably in Focus, But Ethiopia’s Tigray Conflict is World’s Largest”, by Ambassador Mark A. Green. It says: “Since Ethiopia’s Tigray conflict began in November 2020, an estimated 350,000 to 500,000 combatants have taken up arms, and as many as 600,000 civilians have died in the violence, according to researchers from Belgium’s Ghent University.”

It is remarkable how many times this unavailable “study” has been invoked by people who have clearly not read it, let alone inquired into the so-called researchers’ activist backgrounds and motivations. When it comes to making deadly serious claims about the number of victims in Ethiopian wars, the thinnest veneer of scholarliness will pass without notice.

³⁸⁹ The European Conservative on May 4, 2024: “Ethiopia’s Struggle: From Harmony to Terror”, by Mariam Senbet.

by priests and monks ready for martyrdom. Fano commanders are sometimes seen on video donning large crosses and couching their struggle in Biblical terms.

The Ethiopian Orthodox Tewahedo Church has long been a force for interethnic cohesion. Today, this historical role is being challenged. While far from all Amhara priests are pro-Fano, all pro-Fano priests are Amhara. Some of these are using their freedom of preaching to sow division by asking congregations, even multiethnic ones, to say amen to Fano talking points. In Addis Ababa, Orthodox parishioners complain about going for a spiritual sermon, only to be treated to a political speech, in which the Christian message of loving thy enemy and turning the other cheek is replaced by violent demagoguery along the lines of “they’re killing us, let’s fight!” If this is common in Addis Ababa, it is probably the norm in Amhara Region. Incidentally, whatever the limitations on free speech in Ethiopia today, such priests would have been arrested on the spot prior to 2018.

To their credit, the senior clergy, following a painful fallout and some frustrated attempts to reconcile with their coreligionists in Tigray, have generally resisted the pressure to be dragged into Fano’s war. They must know that this would cause not just short-term tension with the federal government, but also a long-term loss of their vast non-Amhara following, including millions of Orthodox Oromos praying for unity.

Eventually, Asegid Mekonnen, that is, the Fano commander who promised on Roha TV in March 2024 to be in Addis Ababa within two months, did make it to the capital. In the custody of the federal army! On [Ethiopian television](#) on July 22, 2024, he said that he had given himself up due to disillusionment with Fano’s internecine fighting. Of course, being in captivity, he could have been pressured into saying this, but there is no doubt that Fano is riven with division. Some factions will probably start coming to the negotiation table soon.

For the OLA, chaotic ethnic war aligns with its goal of dismantling the Ethiopian unitary state in order to give way to a Utopian Oromo community way of life. But warlordism can only be counterproductive for supposedly anti-tribalist Fano, with its revindication of the country’s glorious past. Thus far, rather than making Ethiopia great again, Fano has made the Amhara Region more violent and poor. Since Fano is not secessionist, this is only meant to be a start. All of Fano’s loosely defined ideological agendas need to be imposed by force at the national level. While there is still some support for this among Amharas of an ethnonationalist bend, no-one else in Ethiopia is onboard. This is infecting the cherished Ethiopianness of Amharas with toxic identity politics, making Fano look more and more like the anti-Ethiopian monster that Fano claims to be fighting. Everything Fano has achieved, and also everything Fano can achieve, even if it were magically to get its way on the battlefield, is contrary to the movement’s declared aspiration of Ethiopian unity. In addition to murderous, the Fano insurgency is suicidal.

Get real for Ethiopia

Even in the event of peace, Ethiopia is not going to achieve a democratic political culture overnight. It may even get worse before it gets better. However, it is wrong and reckless to conclude that violence is now a last resort. During the darkest years of the TPLF/EPRDF, when armed resistance was in every way legitimate, I personally disagreed with that path, not out of pacifism, but from a strategic perspective. Because violence begets violence. Conversely, making the most of a small democratic space can expand democracy. There are plenty of [political parties](#) in Ethiopia that have taken this path. Some examples are the National Movement of Amhara (NaMA), Ethiopian Citizens for Social Justice, EZEMA, the Oromo Federalist Congress (OFC), the Enat Party, and the Tigray Democratic Party (TDP). Some of them complain of all manners of harassment. In the name of national unity, others have joined the government and been awarded with places in the cabinet, but they too will be running against the ruling Prosperity Party in the next election in 2026. Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed has often promised a peaceful transition of power, if he loses at the polls. It is admittedly hard to find Ethiopians who envisage that, if push comes to shove, he and the powerful people around him will just admit defeat and gracefully swap places with the opposition. But this needs to be tested rather than dismissed out of hand in a call to arms by actors whose democratic credentials are actually more dubious than the government's.

Many have accused me of “shilling for the regime”, even of being a paid mouthpiece and what not. Of course, I would never take money from a party to a conflict that I am covering as an independent. Apart from giving interviews to Ethiopian state media, I have never even met anyone from the Ethiopian government, which has committed and will undoubtedly continue to commit acts that I disagree with, even condemn. Most international classifications use the term “hybrid regime” about the current system, that is, a mix of authoritarianism and democracy. This is probably fair.

But it is the legitimate government. It may sometimes commit illegitimate acts, but none of the armed alternatives today has a shred of legitimacy, let alone any prospect of making things better. Even if the government sometimes categorizes fair criticism as “incitement” and misuses the judiciary as in the bad old days, constructive opposition is the only way to go. Ethiopians demand solutions to everyday problems like long lines for public transport, bribe-demanding traffic police, power cuts, red tape, pollution, unaffordable healthcare, homelessness, low-quality schools, etc. Fundamentally, ethnic rivalry is not the *root cause* of war, but ethnic rivalry is an *effective mobilizer* for war. Unresolved bread-and-butter problems can make people vote for the opposition, but do not usually make them pick up a gun. If the most urgent issue of security gets under control, peaceful political competition should be able to focus on the second-most urgent issues, like growing the economy and fighting

corruption. Conversely, if security continues to be the overriding concern, democracy, human rights and even good governance will look increasingly like unaffordable luxuries.

When I first got involved in opining on war in Ethiopia around November 2021, I set myself the goal of getting through it without regret. Notwithstanding some quick-tempered [tweets](#),³⁹⁰ the only thing I would change, if I could go back, would be the headline of my [speech](#) for the Danish Society of Engineers in March 2022, in which I characterized Ethiopia as “a fellow democracy”. This was overselling a point in the heat of the propaganda battles. Building an Ethiopian democracy, let alone a democratic culture, remains a daunting project with no guarantee of completion. As we have seen, it backslides under pressure and polarization. Tensions lurk and can erupt into the next big war, in which the security state takes over and rolls back the reforms.

And yet, there is hope. The vast majority of Ethiopians both preach and practice multiethnic cooperation. Although ethnically-exclusive rebel outfits brandishing genocide hashtags still have too much manpower and firepower, their popularity seems to be in decline.

Meanwhile, outside of Ethiopia, despite the endurance of a narrative about a “Tigray genocide”, the Pretoria Peace Agreement has become unanimously endorsed. The TPLF has not been properly disarmed or stopped being a threat, but nearly everyone agrees that it should. The TPLF is unlikely to get much international support for another round of aggression under the cover of resisting a genocide. A retired Western diplomat told me that one lesson had been learned after all: “We should have listened *less* to the media and *more* to the African Union.” Indeed, and the African Union is sticking firmly to the Pretoria Agreement.

However, there has been no reckoning over the tragic cost of achieving the Pretoria Agreement. Those who got Ethiopia dead wrong are *not* wondering aloud why the TPLF sent young Tigrayans to kill and die for peace terms that could have been easily obtained without firing a shot. Having learned so little, the world is perfectly capable of getting Ethiopia and other countries dead wrong yet again.

With this in mind, the final word goes to Dr. Steven Were Omamo, the results-oriented humanitarian sabotaged by self-serving, glory-seeking cowboy humanitarians during the war ‘[At the Centre of the World in Ethiopia](#)’:

“I also lament how the politics of major powers was allowed to infiltrate and corrupt a fragile but promising science-based process, destroying hard-earned credibility, along with the trust that went with that. Nobody has admitted that ‘the people are dying of hunger in Tigray’ narrative was total fabrication. There were no consequences. There are never any consequences as the ‘international community’

³⁹⁰ Follow me at @rsonderris

recycles itself from crisis to crisis. Incompetent and unethical people who lie, distort, and mess up can just walk away and do the same thing somewhere else. To me, that is annoying. For the world, it should be unacceptable.”

Annex: Going undercover to interview Cara Anna from Associated Press

Cara Anna, in case you skipped [the section “Do we know what happened in Axum?”](#), is the Associated Press reporter who spread, all across the world in numerous respectable newspapers, the fake news that some 800 church-goers in the holiest place of Ethiopian Orthodox Christianity had been cornered, dragged into the central city square, gunned down and eaten by hyena. Also rather shockingly, she got away with it without any mea culpa or stain on her reputation that we know of.

Whether she initially believed in her own Axum massacre story, there is no way to tell, but it is clear that, no less than eight days later, she knew that her key witness account, which she had validated in no uncertain terms, was made up.

Instead of eating humble pie, she went on to write many more atrocity stories based on anonymous sources. The Pulitzer Center website [presents](#) her thus: “Cara Anna is the East Africa correspondent with The Associated Press. Her team's Pulitzer Center-funded coverage of Ethiopia's Tigray conflict was nominated for a Pulitzer Prize, and Ethiopia's government barred her from the country. The team also won the AP's top journalism award in 2021.”

She probably thinks she can continue to escape scrutiny, as long as she avoids nosy journalists like me. It would be a waste of my time to request an interview with her, so I went undercover with nothing but a gmail account and an AI-generated portrait.



From: Fernando Silva <-----@gmail.com>
Sent: Thursday, February 15, 2024, 15:53
To: Anna, Cara <-----@ap.org>
Subject: Film script based on your reporting

Dear Cara Anna.

Thank you so much for your amazing work, which has inspired my dramatized student film project. I am referring to [your groundbreaking reporting](#) from Ethiopia for Associated Press on February 18, 2021, when you revealed in shocking detail that some 800 church-goers in Axum, Tigray, Ethiopia, had been cornered, dragged outside, gunned down and eaten by hyenas. My reaction to reading it was: “How come nobody made a movie about this before?”

I have been searching for some original documentary footage of the dead

bodies, the burials or the like, but have yet to come across any. Could you perhaps point me the way? Otherwise, given your prestige with many prizes to your name, naming you as my source for this true-story script must be enough, don't you think?

Thanks once again, and hoping for your reply.

Yours sincerely
Fernando Silva, film student from Chile

From: Anna, Cara <-----@ap.org>
Sent: February 15, 2024, 16:34
To: Fernando Silva <-----@gmail.com>
Subject: Re: Film script based on your reporting

Hi Fernando, thank you for asking and for being interested. It was very hard to get any images from a region where telecoms were cut. We often relied on people who physically left Tigray. Have you tried Human Rights Watch or Amnesty International, who also published reports based on their own interviews?

Cara
AP



From: Fernando Silva <-----@gmail.com>
Sent: February 15, 2024, 17:41
To: Anna, Cara <-----@ap.org>
Subject: Re: Film script based on your reporting

Dear Cara Anna.

Thank you very much for your prompt response! I will go carefully through all the documentation of Human Rights Watch and Amnesty International, and only come back to you if I have any questions after that.

Yours sincerely
Fernando



From: Fernando Silva <-----@gmail.com>
Sent: February 21, 2024, 19:47
To: Anna, Cara <-----@ap.org>
Subject: Re: Film script based on your reporting

Dear Cara Anna.

I have now carefully studied the Amnesty International and the Human Rights Watch reports on the Axum massacre. Your and the human-rights organizations' reports coincide on the dates and the perpetrators, but not on the location, also not on the description of what happened, certainly not in any of what I was going to use for my film script, that is, the 800 church-goers getting cornered, dragged out, gunned down and eaten by hyena, as told in your first article on February 18, 2021, and subsequently retold in The New York Post, The Sun, The Independent, The Times, etc.

Sorry, but can you clear up my confusion? Were there two separate events? Should I give up my script along the lines of your report from February 18, 2021?

Yours sincerely
Fernando Silva.

From: Anna, Cara <-----@ap.org>
Sent: February 21, 2024, 19:51
To: Fernando Silva <-----@gmail.com>
Subject: Re: Film script based on your reporting

Hi Fernando, that's very much up to you, especially since you're looking for footage from a time when basic communications and other services like electricity were cut in parts of Tigray and many people had difficulty just keeping their phones charged. Having enough for a film sounds challenging, but perhaps contacts in the Tigray diaspora can help now that the war is over and it's easier to reach people and share information.

Cara



From: Fernando Silva <-----@gmail.com>
Sent: February 21, 2024, 20:22
To: Anna, Cara <-----@ap.org>
Subject: Re: Film script based on your reporting

Hi Cara Anna.

Okay, thanks, but I don't want it to be up to me, but up to the evidence. If I present it as a true story and it turns out not to be so, I will be accused of slandering an African nation.

You did your report by talking to people in Axum over the phone, and so did the Amnesty researchers. From my own little research, I know that Axum is a fairly big, modern city with tens of thousands of smartphones and also many generators, powerbanks and what not. Yet even the Amnesty and Human Rights Watch reports have no footage revealing anything noteworthy, nor has anybody come up with anything since, at least not online. Moreover, Amnesty says the festival on November 30 was called off, which makes sense if up to ten dead bodies were being stacked on each cart for mass burials on November 30, 2020, as the Amnesty report says. But then I found an [Ethiopian television report from the festival](#), and it is definitely that exact festival from November 30, 2020.

Never mind, it is YOUR story and not Amnesty's that I care about. And after February 2021, there seems to be nothing about the 800 church-goers any more. Long question short: do you today have any doubt that your dramatic version of the Axum massacre is true or not?

Yours sincerely
Fernando Silva

From: Anna, Cara <-----@ap.org>
Sent: February 21, 2024, 20:33
To: Fernando Silva <-----@gmail.com>
Subject: Re: Film script based on your reporting

Hi, you reached out by looking for original documentary footage of what happened in Axum, and I encourage you to find what might exist. You'll see that for months, media coverage and humanitarian reports along with some government reports noted a long and wide cutoff of basic services in Tigray that affected communications, utilities and the supply of basic items like food and medicine. Even land lines weren't working in many cases. I do hope that with such conditions having eased, you'll have much more success reaching people and accessing any footage captured in Axum.

Cara



From: Fernando Silva <-----@gmail.com>
Sent: February 21, 2024, 23:27
To: Anna, Cara <-----@ap.org>
Subject: Re: Film script based on your reporting

Hi Cara Anna.

Okay, thank you for your prompt reply. But I can only take that as a "YES", you do have doubts if your shocking report that made it into headlines across the world is actually what happened.

Indeed, none of the factors you mention can explain a complete lack of photographic evidence, but I can and I will look more into it. And shouldn't you be doing that too? This is a big deal! Your report on February 18, 2021, made a huge impact on public opinion in the West and in Tigray too, stirring fear, hate, all the emotions of war. If those graphic details of insane savagery turn out to be a lie made up to justify revenge killings, and if you lent the trustworthiness of Associated Press to spread such dangerous disinformation, surely, your conscience would want to know and, if necessary, make you issue an apology, am I right?

Yours sincerely
Fernando Silva

Let me interrupt with some commentary:

Rather than answering the questions, Cara Anna trots out the half-truth about Tigray being cut off, which I have addressed at length in Part 3. All her focus is on not incriminating herself. This is why she neither defends the veracity of her story nor admits that it was a lie. Now she is being confronted with the common-sense observation that, surely, having a conscience requires her to care one way or the other.

So this is when she ends the exchange, which must have rattled her. Can anything lure her out of her shell again? Well, two weeks later, she gets this email from someone using the "Tigray genocide" hashtag as his avatar.



From: Gabriel Teklehaymanot <-----@gmail.com>
Sent: Mar 6, 2024, 19:23
To: Anna, Cara <-----@ap.org>
Subject: Can I ask for some advice?

Dear Anna Cara.

I am Gabriel Teklehaymanot, I work in real estate in the UK, where I have also been involved in activism against the Tigray genocide. You know all about that, because you have covered it and your journalistic brilliance and integrity have been widely recognised, including by the Pulitzer people, I just saw online.

I was contacted some days ago by someone interested in informing the world about what our people went through. He said he had been in contact with you a little while ago. He is the one who gave me this email. Is it okay if I ask you for some advice here? Because I know your work, your time is precious to me too.

Regards

Gabriel Teklehaymanot
Mekete Tigray UK

From: Anna, Cara <-----@ap.org>
Sent: Mar 6, 2024, 19:27
To: Gabriel Teklehaymanot <-----@gmail.com>
Subject: Re: Can I ask for some advice?

Hi Gabriel, thank you for reaching out. What advice are you looking for?

Cara
AP



From: Gabriel Teklehaymanot <-----@gmail.com>
Sent: Mar 6, 2024, 20:25
To: Anna, Cara <-----@ap.org>
Subject: Re: Can I ask for some advice?

Dear Cara.

Thank you for this opportunity to borrow some of your precious time.

Well, a young man from Chile, Fernando Silva, wrote me and we talked on the phone too, at length and on numerous occasions. He said you had suggested he reach out to someone like me in the diaspora for guidance. He was very confused and frankly a bit annoying, going into tiresome detail that I am not going to bother you with, but it came from a good place, as he cared about the Axum massacre, which he has scripted a whole film project around. This will be a great opportunity to raise conscience about what happened to our people. It may be an amateur production, but he is putting all his savings into it, and he has many volunteer actors lined up for this true-story drama, which might do well on Youtube. He even showed me how he plans to do the hyenas with blurry imagery of Chilean street dogs shot at night and some horrifying sound effects.

However, now he is having doubts about what actually occurred in Axum. He said you had suggested that we might have some original photographic material, to which I replied: "Hey, we do not always get to film it when we get killed! So YOU film it, Fernando!"

He objected that you had somehow not affirmed the deacon's story in his email exchange with you. I am sure he has misunderstood something. The testimony of the deacon was accepted by many, many important newspapers and even corroborated by the honourable Lord David Alton speaking in the UK House of Lords as late as November 2022.

I have more arguments on the ready when he calls me, I think tomorrow, for why his script should stick to your first report on the Axum massacre. Yes, the perpetrators and their supporters have denied everything, of course, this is their evil nature and the reason we had to fight them. But nobody independent or important in the media has ever questioned your story.

I hope you can attest that I am in the right here, thank you. And please, let me once more express my utmost admiration for your professionalism and also thank you for your solidarity.

Regards
Gabriel

From: Anna, Cara <-----@ap.org>
Sent: Mar 6, 2024, 20:30
To: Gabriel Teklehaymanot <-----@gmail.com>
Subject: Re: Can I ask for some advice?

Hi Gabriel, thank you for explaining. We didn't discuss the deacon, and I did encourage Fernando to see whether footage might be available now that communications and services in Tigray have resumed.

Cara
AP



From: Gabriel Teklehaymanot <-----@gmail.com>
Sent: Mar 6, 2024, 20:50
To: Anna, Cara <-----@ap.org>
Subject: Re: Can I ask for some advice?

Dear Cara.

Ah, I see, well, with me he discussed the deacon and every little clue like he

was Sherlock Holmes! As for footage, I found some from Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch, but it is very different from what the deacon said, and none of it would persuade the sceptics that there was any massacre at all. Anyway, the deacon's testimony was at the heart of your story and it is what we have been telling our children and grandchildren within our community as a reminder to know who we are and who are enemies are. So I can understand he cares about verifying it, even if he is a little bothersome.

Should I advise him to make adjustment to his script? I made another argument, a completely different one, that seemed to work much better with him, but the best option for me would be to insist on there being enough evidence for the deacon's testimony for him to follow his script, so do you think I can do that?

Regards
Gabriel

From: Anna, Cara <-----@ap.org>
Sent: Mar 6, 2024, 20:59
To: Gabriel Teklehaymanot <-----@gmail.com>
Subject: Re: Can I ask for some advice?

That's your conversation with him, and I have no advice to pass along for that.



From: Gabriel Teklehaymanot <-----@gmail.com>
Sent: Mar 7, 2024, 14:55
To: Anna, Cara <-----@ap.org>
Subject: Wonderful news!

Dear Cara.

Thanks for your time, yesterday, and I will not bother you anymore except to tell you this wonderful news:

I talked at length to Fernando Silva this morning, and he agreed to go ahead with his script as it is, except making it clearer that you are the one we can thank for knowing about it. I am going to raise more funds for the production, and I will personally go to Chile for a full week and be on set as his advisor, isn't that great?

The argument that I had hinted at before is that Western media are free to shine a light on the truth, as you did throughout the war, but also to debunk whatever is found to be inaccurate. We are a society of free speech. And of

checks and balances, because anyone can go to libel court, but nobody has done so in this case. What you reported from Axum was not trivia about, say a celebrity sleeping around. It was about, let's remember, 800 people being ruthlessly mowed down in an affront both to humanity and to our Christian faith. Your revelation of a crime so unforgivable shaped the worldwide perception of the war. I can tell you that in my community, it showed us the evil of our enemy and strengthened our will to fight at whatever the cost. Glory to our martyrs!

So what I said to Fernando which finally convinced him is that, if a news organisation as reputable as Associated Press were to get it that wrong about something that serious, there would be big consequences. But there has been no retraction, and you are still working for Associated Press and considered a highly respectable journalist.

Which means your story stands and is perfectly fit for being dramatised, crediting the original author, you, the incredible Anna Cara, who will be mentioned repeatedly in gratitude for your investigatory work. Your name will live forever in the annals of spreading knowledge of the Axum massacre.

Once the film is out, and provided it is as good as it promises, can we count on your help to promote it? Most of all, we would love to interview you, is that okay? Must we submit a formal request for this to your employer?

I hope this happy news makes your day, like it did mine, and that our interview can be scheduled soon.

Happy regards
Gabriel

Notice how both my fictional undercover personalities put an ordinary, very reasonable-sounding trust in the "respectable" institutions of the liberal world order, from our free-speech society to our human-rights bodies. This was myself until recently, and it would still be me today, had it not been my lot to realize how low they stooped in their insistence on getting Ethiopia dead wrong.

Two days later, a final message from Cara Anna did arrive, though I only discovered this a month later.

From: Anna, Cara <-----@ap.org>
Sent: Mar 9, 2024, 16:21
To: Gabriel Teklehaymanot <-----@gmail.com>
Subject: Re: Wonderful news!

Hi Gabriel, thank you for asking, but there's no need for me to take part. Now that it's easier for most people to travel to Tigray, one can go and speak to people there who lived through it.

Cara
AP

Cara Anna seems to believe the authenticity of the undercover personalities to the end!

And yes, as she says, one can go to Axum to ask around and investigate. Plenty of people and institutions have done that. Not a single finding remotely resembles Cara Anna's story of February 18, 2021. I refer once again to the section in Part 3: "Do we know what happened in Axum".

I left it here, as I published the exchange on March 30, 2024, having demonstrated sufficiently that Cara Anna is utterly shameless, and that Ethiopians were right to ban her from entering their country. If she had had the slightest conscience, she would have said: "Such a film wouldn't be a true story, so now I am going to retract my article and apologize in public for the profound harm that I caused. I shall also come clean about my sources throughout the war, and about the extent to which I knew beforehand or only found out later that I was spreading incendiary falsehoods."

Dream on, she will not say that of her own accord, because she and her employer have proved themselves indifferent to the truth and disdainful of African lives. Tellingly, in the aftermath of publishing this email exchange, in late March 2024, on my own Substack account and on the website abren.org, I tried but failed to obtain a reply from Associated Press. We just cannot expect these people to face up to what they did and repent. We must work to hold them to account. And take solace from the fact that history will judge them harshly.

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