

## A Critical Discourse Analysis of Narratives on the beginning of the 'Tigray<sup>1</sup>' war<sup>2</sup>

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### Un análisis crítico del discurso de las narrativas sobre el inicio de la guerra de 'Tigray'

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#### Abstract

The main objective of this article is to analyze the narratives on the beginning of the "Tigray" war, or the northern Ethiopian war. The paper argues that there are always two sides to every story, and those about the beginning of the Tigray war were no exception. To that end, the purpose of this article is to unpack the various narratives surrounding the start of the Tigray war and to reveal the ideologies hidden behind these narratives. The article employed a qualitative critical discourse and narrative analysis, and the data were collected from several media outlets. The information includes news stories, interviews, future stories, expert analysis, documentaries, and official briefings from both sides of the conflict. The findings show that the TPLF and the federal government used competing narratives regarding the beginning of the war. Mainly, there are two dominant narratives: the first bullet view and the buildup view. Both reports were loaded with propaganda and framed in a "them-and-us" manner. Thus, both parties accuse each other of starting the war and causing devastating destruction.

**Keywords:** Ethnic groups, Ethiopia, War, East Africa

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#### Resumen

El principal objetivo de este artículo es analizar las narrativas sobre el inicio de la guerra de "Tigray", o guerra del norte de Etiopía. El artículo sostiene que siempre hay dos lados en cada historia, y aquellas sobre el comienzo de la guerra de Tigray no fueron una excepción. Con ese fin, el propósito de este artículo es desentrañar las diversas narrativas que rodearon el inicio de la guerra de Tigray y revelar las ideologías escondidas detrás de estas narrativas. El artículo empleó un discurso crítico cualitativo y un análisis narrativo, y los datos fueron recopilados de varios medios de comunicación. La información incluye noticias, entrevistas, historias futuras, análisis de expertos, documentales y sesiones informativas oficiales de ambos lados del conflicto. Los hallazgos muestran que el TPLF y el gobierno federal utilizaron narrativas contrapuestas sobre el comienzo de la guerra. Principalmente, hay dos narrativas dominantes: la primera visión de viñeta y la visión de acumulación. Ambos informes estaban cargados de propaganda y formulados en forma de "ellos y nosotros". Así, ambas partes se acusan mutuamente de iniciar la guerra y causar una destrucción devastadora.

**Palabras clave:** Grupos étnicos, Etiopía, Guerra, África del Este.

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<sup>1</sup>Alternatively known as 'the northern Ethiopia war', an expression preferred by the federal government and its allies and affiliates.

<sup>2</sup>This is a qualitative case study that falls in the disciplines of Social Sciences and Humanities within the sub-disciplines of narrative analysis and critical discourse analysis. It's an independent research conducted individually by the author at Addis Ababa University from June-December 2022.

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## Introduction

In November 2020, an armed conflict emerged in Tigray, the northern province of Ethiopia, which borders neighboring Eritrea. At the beginning of the battle, the Ethiopian National Defense Forces (ENDF), accompanied by the Amhara Special Forces (ASF) of the adjacent Amhara Regional State, fought the Tigray Regional State's military forces, now referred to as "TDF" for "Tigray Defense Force" (Annys *et al.*, 2021). Though the Ethiopian government denied it then, the Eritrean Defense Forces (EDF), a few Somali soldiers, and a paramilitary faction known as *Fano* have also participated alongside the Ethiopian forces, ENDF. Fighting has been going on for more than two years, destabilizing the country and leaving thousands of people dead and displaced (Moses, Alagaw, and Hubert, 2022).

As the war on the ground intensifies, so does the war of narratives between the media who support the TPLF and the Ethiopian government (CARD, 2021). Both parties committed to their respective lines in reporting the war's causes and the enemy's aims and intentions. Both sides shaped and re-shaped the war narratives to fit their existing discourse, primarily using language and semiotics. Looking through the language used by both sides, one can quickly identify the ideological lineage of each media outlet. From the Ethiopian government's side, the media outlets view the war as law enforcement,' now transformed into 'existential war.'<sup>4</sup> From the TPLF and some allied international media outlets' view, the war has been framed as an 'invasion,' 'genocidal,' 'civil war,' (Teferi, 2020), and 'act of aggression' (BBC, 2021). Apart from these two parties, some attempted to remain balanced by reporting the situation with titles such as 'war broke out' and 'armed conflict' (Center for Preventive Action, 2023).

Aside from the massive destruction, the real causes of the war seem obscured by the narratives propagated by the parties involved. As they say, there are two sides to every story, and those about the Tigray War were no exception, as both parties blamed each other for

starting the war through competing narratives. Conscious of that, this article analyzes these competing narratives through a qualitatively oriented narrative case study. In so doing, the article unravels the historical causes, immediate build-up, and existing war narratives through critical discourse analyses and narrative theory.

## The genesis of the war

To discover the genesis of the Tigray war that broke out in November 2020, one must go back to the distant days of the 1974 Ethiopian revolution, following Ethiopian student movements in the 1960s and early 1970s. Emperor Haileseilasie I, the last and longest-serving king of the Solomonic Dynasty, was toppled from power and replaced by the *Derg*,<sup>5</sup> a military leadership that claimed to be leftist and socialist (Bahru, 2005; Elleni, 2020). However, seeing the military controlling the power seemed unacceptable to different political actors who took part in realizing the revolution. Consequently, politico-ideological differences between the new government and members of the students' movement emerged (Elleni, 2020). These differences led to different political groups that aimed to overthrow the military government through diverse forms of struggle (Andargachew, 1993).

The parties can be categorized into two ideological groups: pan-Ethiopians and ethnonationalism. The former group includes the biggest parties of those days, such as EPRP<sup>6</sup> and MEISON<sup>7</sup> that advocate a pan-Ethiopian ideology that designates a unified single sociopolitical and cultural identity. This ideology is an extension of the long-established identity of *ityopyawinnät*<sup>8</sup>, which was dominated by the Semitic culture (i.e., Amhara and Tigre) through Amharic language (Levine, 1974; Hewan, 2019). On the other hand, the ethno-nationalist group includes parties such as the TPLF<sup>9</sup> that operate within a designated ethnic group (Young, 1997). These ethno-nationalist parties argue that though Ethiopia is home to several ethnic groups, the identities and rights of these ethnic groups were denied by the "Amhara and to a certain extent Amhara-Tigre supremacy." Therefore, the core aim of their struggle was to

<sup>4</sup> The government changed the discourse of the war, and the media affiliated with it represented the war accordingly.

<sup>5</sup> *Derg* (literally meaning 'committee' in Amharic) was led by middle-ranking military officers.

<sup>6</sup> Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Party.

<sup>7</sup> *Mela İtyōppya Soshalīsit Nik'inak'ē* (English: All-Ethiopia Socialist Movement).

<sup>8</sup> Being Ethiopian.

<sup>9</sup> Tigray People's Liberation Front.

deconstruct the long-established Semitic-based Ethiopian identity and replace it with an ethnic-based order that equally recognizes the languages and cultures of all ethnic groups.

Both of the above-discussed opposition groups took on their ways of struggling to topple the military regime. Some pan-Ethiopian groups, particularly those without an armed base, began to work with the military rule in the hope of changing it over time, while others started an urban armed struggle against the regime and its allies (Bahru, 2005). This urban armed struggle yielded a bloodbath, and the parties couldn't survive the military regime. The ethnic-nationalist parties chose to operate a long-term rural armed struggle and got different kinds of support from Arab countries such as Sudan and Egypt. After 17 years of devastating war, the EPRDF<sup>10</sup>, a coalition of four ethnic-based parties led by the TPLF, dethroned the military regime in May 1991.

The new regime, the TPLF-led coalition, restructured the country into a federation of nine ethnic regional states and two city government administrations through the ethnic-federalism political ideology. Ethnic and linguistic emblems replaced the long-established Ethiopian identity. In 1995, a new constitution accorded equal recognition to all the country's cultures and languages. Despite its symbolic value of granting linguistic and cultural rights to most Ethiopian languages, especially the minority ones, the constitution has become a source of divergence between the ruling regime, elites, and opposition parties. Particularly, elites from the Amhara<sup>11</sup> ethnic group, who champion the long-established pro-Ethiopian identity, became disappointed by the new political arrangement arguing that the new ruling ideology, ethnic-federalism could potentially prevent Ethiopians from moving and working in places other than where their ethnic ancestors possess. Consequently, critical voices of opposition began to appear here and there, demanding the regime reconsider its position.

Despite critical opposition, the regime established authoritarian control through vassal leadership (Hewan 2019). Individuals or groups who opposed the regime became targets of the security apparatus.

Politicians, journalists, and other elites were imprisoned or sent to exile under orchestrated legal pretexts. As a result, the opposition camp effectively disbanded and adopted new strategies for struggle. Some began an armed struggle, while others, who live in the diaspora, continued their struggle through the media. Yet, "those subject to the authority of the elite either become passive and accept their situation, or their acts of resistance are muted and remain unacknowledged" (Hewan 2019, p. 97). Though the regime effectively silenced the critics, it could not erase them. As such, these critics grew from everyday resistance to full-scale uprisings, protests, and public disobedience (Branch and Mampilly, 2015).

Though it claims to be a coalition representing the majority, the EPRDF is a vassal to the TPLF, one of the four parties in the coalition that represents the minority Tigre ethnic group, which covers only five percent of the entire Ethiopian population. Despite being a minority, the TPLF seized all key positions in the government and military. The trade has been captured by a minority of Tigre ethnic group members and politically well-connected police-military elites (Tefera and Hout 2018). This created animosity among other Ethiopians, who believe that the power and wealth of the country are controlled by the minority Tigre ethnic group members and their affiliates. Besides, TPLF has been continuously indicted by Amhara elites and people for grabbing a huge tract of land from the neighboring Amhara region and transferring it to its ancestral territory, the Tigray region. In fact, this annexation has been the center of political struggle among the Amhara population and one of the causes of the current war.

As wars have both historical and immediate causes, so does the Tigray war. In fact, the current war in Tigray is not simply an armed conflict resulting from a dispute between Prime Minister Abiy and the TPLF,<sup>12</sup> but rather, "it is the latest battle in a long-standing war over the country's identity as a unitary or federal state" (Teferi, 2020). As such, the war is a result of the long-standing friction between the regime and those elites and groups that claim to have been violently suppressed by the regime for more than three decades.

### **The immediate buildup of the war**

<sup>10</sup> Ethiopian People's Liberation Front.

<sup>11</sup> The 2<sup>nd</sup> largest population in Ethiopia after the Oromo and had ruled the country for centuries. They were blamed for imposing their culture and language on other ethnic groups violently.

<sup>12</sup> Tigrayan People's Liberation Front.

In 2015, Ethiopia, the second-most populous country in Africa, conducted its fifth national election, which comes every five years. It was a sham election in which the ruling coalition party, the EPRDF, claimed a landslide victory, winning 90 percent or more of the vote, as in previous elections (Cochrane and Bahru, 2019). Soon after, the country was rocked by a wave of protests here and there. The Oromos, who comprise one-third of the country's 110 million population, protested against possible land seizures under the government's Addis Ababa Integrated Master Plan, which aimed to expand the capital's administrative control into surrounding Oromia towns and villages (Elsabet, 2022). The protests later spread to Amhara (the second-largest ethnic group after the Oromo), expressing solidarity with the Oromo protests and respect for regional autonomy rights enshrined in the constitution. However, the protests were not just over the government's proposed Master Plan policy; instead, they were over deep-rooted socio-economic, cultural, historical, and political marginalization being perpetrated by successive regimes against the Oromo people.

The ruling coalition, established by four regional political parties, had tried to crush the protests through a state of emergency and military operations. Despite the tortures and killings carried out by the government, the protest kept growing until it reached its climax. As part of the protest, Tigrians living in other parts of the country were attacked, abused, and displaced, while trucks loaded with goods that were headed to Tigray were looted in the neighboring Amhara region. In some cases, main roads leading to Tigray were blocked, and trucks were burned to ashes. Finally, in February 2018, Prime Minister Hailemariam Desalegn, the leader of the ruling coalition, announced his resignation and urged its party members to make serious leadership and political changes. Consequently, in April 2018, Abiy Ahmed emerged as the leader of the ruling coalition, the EPRDF, and eventually became Ethiopia's prime minister. These changes sparked many hopes for transformation while also raising many concerns.

In his early days, Abiy Ahmed received tremendous support from Ethiopians in and out of the country. He made "international headlines in 2018 for several reasons: making peace with Eritrea, freeing political prisoners, opening the political space for opposition parties and the media, making significant political changes within the ruling party, and a plan for free and

fair elections in 2020" (Cochrane and Bahru 2019, pp. 2-3). Furthermore, he was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize in 2019 for breaking the two-decade-long Ethio-Eritrean border impasse.

Despite the bright picture, the prime minister and his cabinet were trapped in severe problems caused by internal and external factors. Internally, the prime minister cannot fully control his party, which comprises four political parties. Of these, the Tigrayan Liberation Front (TPLF), a representative of the Tigrayan ethnic group in the northern part of the country, disapproved of the reforms proposed by the prime minister and resigned itself from the coalition. Externally, armed political parties that were returned from exile continued their armed activities, destabilizing the western and eastern parts of the country. Currently, the Federal Government of Ethiopia, led by Prime Minister Abiy, is engaged in a devastating armed conflict in Tigray (the northern part of the country) against its former ally, the TPLF. At the same time, it is fighting with *Shane*, a paramilitary group formed from the Oromo Liberation Front (OLF). Hundreds of thousands have died or been injured in both cases, and millions of Ethiopians have been displaced. As the current war results from deep-rooted causes, its immediate buildup has layers of events and happenings. The primary layers are discussed below.

### **Propaganda mobilization: Hate speech and labeling**

After assuming office in April 2018, Abiy officially visited Mekelle as a prime minister (Daniel, 2019), the capital of Tigray National Regional State and the home of the TPLF leaders, who ruled Ethiopia for nearly three decades. Abiy's visit and speech made the veteran TPLF politicians and many Tigrays to build trust in the new government. In his speech, the Premier boldly underlined the role of Tigray for the existence of Ethiopia, saying, "It is impossible to think of Ethiopia without Tigray and vice versa." Hearing such precious expressions articulated by the premier gave an emotional relief to the veteran TPLF leaders, who feared not being held accountable by the new government for the corruption and human rights abuses committed during their heydays of leadership at the federal government offices. Likewise, many Tigrays supported Abiy, hoping for change and aspiring to the beginning of a new era of democracy and equality.

Soon after, the hope and relief felt by the TPLF leaders and many Tigrrians began to perish, yielding a suspicious relationship between the TPLF's veteran leaders and Prime Minister Abiy's leadership. Gradually, the communication between the two camps took the form of propaganda decorated with hate speech, labeling, blaming, and defamation. The major (if not the only) reason for creating such an unpleasant situation is the ambitious reforms made by the premier. Among these reforms, the major ones are reshuffling the old cabinet dominated by members of the TPLF and its affiliates, the peace talks with Eritrea, and reshuffling the Ethiopian Defense Forces (ENDF) leadership. These moves ousted many TPLF members from the federal and Addis Ababa city government cabinets, ministerial positions, and high-level security acquisitions. As a result, many high-level TPLF leaders, who lost their power in Addis Ababa, made their way to Mekelle to join their party members who were ruling the Tigray National Regional State in a way akin to the history of the Chinese Nationalist Party, the Kuomintang<sup>13</sup>.

After securing their absolute leadership in Tigray, the TPLF leaders continuously accused, blamed, defamed, and undermined Abiy's administration through their media, 'academia,' and western allies. Equally, the Abiy administration took a synonymous path and engaged in offensive and counter-offensive propaganda, creating a battle of narratives. Every decision of Abiy's leadership began to encounter a counter-offensive narrative characterized by character assassinations, accusations, blaming, and defamation. Consequently, Prime Minister Abiy officially began to label<sup>14</sup> and defame the TPLF veterans, targeting their personalities and wrongdoings during their days of power. For instance, he called them '*yeken jib*' (lit. day-time-hyena), distorting their image and personality (Philing, 2019). Following this rhetoric, the Ethiopian state television - ETV, and other affiliated media outlets such as *Fana TV* and *Walta TV*<sup>15</sup> produced and aired several documentaries, affiliated news, interviews, and feature stories that distort the images, names, personalities, and family and societal affairs of the TPLF leaders. Most of these

productions focused on demonizing the TPLF, and attributing all breads of crimes to their leadership.

Similarly, TPLF leaders engaged in assassinating Abiy's image through documentaries, news, and 'academic'<sup>16</sup> symposiums. Abiy has been portrayed as a dictator, a deceitful and undereducated person who is not capable enough to lead the country. In fact, news reports and other forms of reports about the premium on Tigray TV, DW TV<sup>17</sup>, and TMH TV<sup>18</sup> most often use adjectives such as 'dictator', 'tyrant', 'egoistic', and 'usurper'. Besides, several 'academic' symposiums aimed at unraveling the foreboding danger and political crisis due to the wrongdoings of Abiy Ahmed's leadership. Most of the ideas and recommendations presented in these symposiums were Xerox copies of the TPLF's thoughts and were presented by scholars, politicians, and elites who have allegiances and affiliations with the TPLF. Among others, Martin Plaut (2023), Daniel Berhane (2023), Kjetil Tronvoll, Alex De Waal are typical examples.

In a nutshell, the media battle to control discourse and narratives has been used to shape any event that falls into political or societal categories such as cultural, entertainment, and development spheres. As such, both parties used polarized and politicized narrative structure and contents decorated with propaganda, regardless of the presented topic (Mulatu, 2022). The line between fact, opinion, and truth and lie has become increasingly hazy. In theory, such narrative construction is well explained by van Dijk's (1988) "ideological discourse," which claims that media representation of sensitive issues is primarily designed through positive self-representation and negatives other representations following the THEM and US distinction. Such representations and narrative constructions, in turn, began to shape and influence the public discourse and were geared towards the actual war (Abdissa, 2023).

### **Military buildups and parades**

Parallel to the propaganda battle, there were military buildups that included recruiting new personnel, restructuring the existing command, and showing parades in both sides. The TPLF veteran leaders, in

<sup>13</sup> The Kuomintang retreated to Taiwan after encountering defeat in civil war and losing control of the mainland China, in 1949.

<sup>14</sup> This is similar with the findings reported from Colombia during internal conflicts (Garcia-Marrugo, 2013).

<sup>15</sup> Fana TV and Walta TV are private media outlets owned by the ruling party per se.

<sup>16</sup> Despite their names, most of these symposiums were venues for TPLF's propaganda.

<sup>17</sup> *Dimtsi Woyane*, a local TV station owned by the TPLF.

<sup>18</sup> Tigray Media House, a US-based TV channel owned by TPLF affiliated diaspora community.

particular, began to build a massive army, supplementing the existing Tigray Special Police Force. The aim of this buildup, as the TPLF leaders claimed at the time, was to avert any potential aggression that could come from the federal government through the Ethiopian Defense Forces (ENDF). As a result, every city in Tigray has fallen under tight security measures, and several checkpoints were established at the entrance and exit points of each town and village. Apart from building their own military, the TPLF leaders were also critically watching the movements made by the ENDF through their spies. The TPLF has kept a close eye on the ENDF's northern command, which had its headquarters in Tigray and possessed more than half of Ethiopia's soldiers and weaponry. On the other side, the adjacent Amhara Regional State was building a huge military force under the name Amhara Special Forces with the support of the Eritrean government (Walsh, 2021).

Consequently, the TPLF managed to obstruct decisions made by Abiy's administration regarding the movement of troops and command changes in the northern command of the ENDF. For instance, mobility of ENDF was blocked by residents in Tigray a couple of times and these blockages were believed to be orchestrated by the TPLF (Engidu, 2019). Besides, the TPLF leadership rejected the appointment of a new commander to the Tigray-based northern command of the ENDF, claiming that Abiy's order to reshuffle the ENDF was unacceptable at that moment (Aljazeera, 2020). The newly appointed commander was detained at the Alula Aba Nega Airport in Mekelle and immediately sent back to Addis Ababa. The situation brought the two parties one step closer to entering a destructive war, as the tension escalated rapidly.

### **The take-off: COVID-19 and the elections**

The worrisome relationship between Abiy's administration and the TPLF's veteran leaders has become tenser as a result of COVID-19, the pandemic that claimed the lives of millions of people around the world and forced people to stay behind their doors. Before the pandemic, Abiy had established a new party, merging the ruling coalition, the EPRDF, made up of four ethnic-based regional parties, including the TPLF, and naming it the Prosperity Party (PP). The TPLF, which believed to be the father of the EPRDF,

opposed the establishment of the PP at the expense of the old party that ruled the country for nearly three decades. The TPLF chose not to join the new party, PP, and took a different path. Consequently, several members of the TPLF who had been holding power in several government offices at different levels were removed from their posts under the pretext of reform. This in turn worsened the tension between the TPLF and PP leaders. It was in the middle of this that COVID-19 broke out and escalated the tension.

The National Electoral Board of Ethiopia (NEBE) postponed the 6<sup>th</sup> general election, which was originally scheduled to be held in June 2020 (Reuters, 2021). However, the TPLF-led Tigray region has vowed to hold the election in defiance of NEBE's decision. As promised, the TPLF held a regional election in Tigray in defiance of the federal government and declared a landslide victory. After the election, TPLF leaders declared themselves as legitimate governors of Tigray and claimed that they would not take orders from the federal government<sup>19</sup>, except for some organizations such as the military - ENDF. Though they didn't issue an official declaration, the TPLF leaders aimed to make Tigray a de facto state and eventually an independent nation-state, drawing on the experiences of Slovenia (Anderson, 1995) and Croatia in the former Yugoslavia. As a response to such defiance, the federal government cut off its budget and other supplies and incentives that were supposed to be sent to Tigray. At the time, the TPLF leaders perceived Abiy's decision to cut ties with Tigray as a declaration of war. Finally, on November 24, 2020, an armed conflict broke out in Tigray. Yet, the question of "who began the war" is unanswered.

### **Theory, methods, and data**

This article seeks to understand the meaning and implications of what the two fighting parties have said about the beginning of the Tigray war. The study employs critical discourse analysis (CDA) and narrative theory as a theoretical underpinning within a qualitative paradigm. The general notion underlying the concept of 'discourse' is that "language is structured according to different patterns that people's utterances follow when they take part in different domains of social life" (Jorgensen & Philips, 2002, p. 1). Accordingly, using CDA as an analytical

<sup>19</sup> Getachew Reda, the spokesperson of TPLF accused the federal government for postponing the election and labeled Abiy as illegal.

framework, discourse is conceptualized as “a set of meanings, metaphors, representations, images, stories, statements, and so on that in some way together produce a particular version of events” (Burr, 1995, p. 32). CDA sees discourse—language use in speech and writing—as a form of ‘social practice’ (Fairclough 1995).

According to Fowler (1996, p. 2), CDA is instrumental linguistics that uses the study of language to understand something else. In other words, it is an analysis designed to get the ideology coded implicitly behind the overt propositions and examine it, particularly in social formations.

There are a number of approaches in the CDA paradigm having their own distinct disciplinary backgrounds based on their notions of ‘discourse’ and ‘discursive structures’. However, these approaches share basic characteristics. In this study, Fairclough’s three-dimensional model of CDA is employed. The model argues that every instance of language use in a communicative event consists of three dimensions: 1) it is a text; 2) it is a discursive practice that involves the production and consumption of texts; and 3) it is a social practice (Fairclough 1995).

The other theory employed in this study is narrative theory. Narratives are powerful tools that can shape people's perceptions of a particular issue or event (Barbehon and Munch, 2022). Narratives differ from the actual truth, as “narrative” involves a constructed account of experiences, not a factual record of what ‘really’ happened. “The focus is on how events are understood and organized” (Wertz et al. 2011, p. 225). Because it’s a construction of real events, narrative can be utilized and promoted to serve some kind of political, societal, cultural, or ideological purpose (Cochrane and Skjerdal 2015). As such, narrative theory is an important tool to investigate controversial issues like the one proposed in this article, as it provides an excellent analytical framework.

Narrative theory has several versions and methodological elements based on the context and academic disciplines in which it’s used. Despite some differences, however, all versions of narrative theory view narrative as “a perceived sequence of non-randomly connected events” (Toolan, 2001, p. 6). With this in mind, this study employs the linguistic turn of narrative theory, which sees narrative as a triangular relationship between teller, addressee, and message, as well as the context of communication. In so doing, words, images, hidden propositions, and

other linguistic and semiotic elements get a bold emphasis (Toolan, 2001). Accordingly, this study employs a linguistic-oriented narrative theory to investigate the narratives surrounding the beginning of the Tigray war and to unravel hidden ideological clues behind these narratives.

Accordingly, this study combines CDA and narrative theory within a qualitative approach. To that end, interviews, news reports, documentaries, press releases, and official communications issued by both the federal and Tigray governments were collected as core data from different media outlets that were stationed in and out of Ethiopia. The major media outlets are ETV, TMH, DW Tigray, FBC, Walta TV, and several internet-based press outlets. The data were categorized thematically and analyzed qualitatively. The analysis focused on the language use, narratives, and contextual aspects. The contextual aspects of the war were analyzed through the social and discursive practices of Fairclough’s model (1995). In doing so, the historical, contemporary, and situational contexts of the war have been thoroughly analyzed. To reduce bias, trustworthiness is ensured using Lincoln and Guba’s taxonomy of quality criteria. The taxonomy is composed of four components: credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability (Zoltan, 2007). These components correspond to their quantitative counterparts: credibility corresponds to ‘internal validity’; transferability corresponds to ‘external validity’; dependability parallels “reliability”; and confirmability corresponds to ‘objectivity’ (Zoltan, 2007; Shenton, 2004).

### **Data presentation and analysis**

There are two divergent views on the beginning of the Tigray war, as both the fighting parties continue to accuse each other through their propaganda machines. This section presents these views together with a critical analysis of the narratives propagated by their respective parties.

### ***The thesis: the first-bullet theory***

On the early morning of November 4, 2020, Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed appeared on the Ethiopian national TV, ETV, wearing a dark black coat as a sign of mourning, and announced that the TPLF had mounted a premeditated attack on the northern command of the Ethiopian National Defense Forces (ENDF), which was based in Tigray. Verbatim, Abiy uttered the following words:

Dear people of my country, today, treasonous Ethiopians attacked Ethiopia. They have bitten her

(Ethiopia's) feeding arms and breasts. Our defense forces, which have been in a foxhole for the last twenty years, dead and wounded, defending their people and country, have been attacked by treasonous forces and their allies in different places, starting from Mekelle.

Following Abiy's speech, almost all media outlets and communication facilities across Ethiopia, except in Tigray, framed the incident, blaming the TPLF for starting the war by firing the first bullet. The news had an immediate effect on the Ethiopian public discourse, creating a feeling of anger among many Ethiopians. Despite the propaganda, the ENDF attack on the northern command appears to be true and, of course, officially admitted by the TPLF. In fact, top leaders and members of the TPLF have officially admitted that they have attacked the ENDF. Particularly, Seko Toure Getachew<sup>20</sup>, a political analyst of the TPLF, clearly admitted the attack on live TV in the following manner:

This is why we worked with members of the northern command who were willing to collaborate with us and used force over those who were not willing to work with us in an effort to destabilize or demobilize them. The operation we undertook was a very quick one. Within 45 minutes, we were able to control the entire northern command, except for a few pockets of resistance here and there. The measures taken were in accordance with the internationally accepted concept of anticipatory self-defense.

As it can be read from the speech, regardless of the reason behind it, the northern command of the ENDF was attacked by the TPLF forces. The attack was somehow synonymous with the one that happened in the US, where the South Carolina militias attack on Fort Sumter started the U.S. Civil War (Nagy, 2022). In fact, Seko Toure was not the only TPLF ally to admit the attack. Dr. Debretsion Gebremichael, chairman of the TPLF, also admitted that they attacked the northern command in his first and immediate interview after the attack. Here is the English translation of his Tigrigna words: "Almost all weaponry (from the northern command) is now under our control ... Now we have full weaponry, and we have already begun to defend using it, and we will continue to use it." Apart from these voices, several

TPLF leaders admitted the attack on the northern command and hailed the action as heroic.

Likewise, General Tsadkan Gebretesae, a member of Tigray's Military Command, admitted the attack and praised it as self-defense. The following is a translation of an excerpt taken from his interview on Tigray TV:

The Tigray Regional State had two options: surrender and bend the knee (to the federal government) or take self-defense measures. The TPLF took the second option, self-defense, at the eleventh hour. Abiy's soldiers were already in Kobo and Gonder, two very close areas to Tigray. Tigray Special Forces did the operation in cooperation with members of the northern command, who were willing to cooperate. The operation was an eleventh-hour self-defense act aimed at saving Tigray.

In a nutshell, the "first bullet" view defines the beginning of the war in terms of answering the following question: who fired the first bullet? It's mainly propagated by the federal government and its allies and supporters in Ethiopia and abroad, who claim that the war was started due to the first bullet fired by the TPLF. Accordingly, the TPLF is accused of starting the war by killing members of the Ethiopian Defense Forces (ENDF) while they were sleeping.

### *The anti-thesis: the buildup view*

Contrary to the "first bullet" view propagated by the federal government and its allies, the TPLF forces define the war as the final result of political differences and propaganda and military buildups from the federal government side. TPLF claims that the war has been lingering here and there for more than three years and that the first-bullet incident is just the beginning of the actual theater. For instance, General Tsadkan Gebretesae, one of the top military commanders of the Tigray Defense Forces (TDF), describes the beginning of the war in the following manner<sup>21</sup>:

The war was started by our enemies, who prepared well and signed a pact among themselves. As they say, the war was started as a result of the attack on the northern command, but this is not true. Before the war, Tigray had only nine thousand Special Forces and thousands of militia. Gradually, signs of war began to emerge. Among other things, the

<sup>20</sup> He was working as a political analyst for the TPLF-affiliated DWTV in Tigray, and he had a close entanglement with top officials of the TPLF.

<sup>21</sup> The interview was made in Tigrigna and the text presented here is an annotated translation.



plan to form a new command of the ENDF, which will base itself in Bahir Dar, was a clear sign of war. The intention of forming this command collides with the intention of the Amhara elite, who claim to take back a vast amount of land from the western and southern parts of Tigray.

As it's clearly mentioned in the above text, TPLF leaders view the war as an outcome of pre-planned and continuing acts of aggression from the federal government, the Amhara elite, and Eritrean forces. As such, the attack on the northern command of ENDF, which was the dominant (if not the only) story line of the cause of the war from the federal government side, is seen as just a fractional incident of the war. Supporting this view, the TPLF's propaganda machines repeatedly quote the speech made by Abere Adamu, commissioner of the neighboring Amhara Region Police Commission, who admitted that they have been preparing to defend against a potential invasion from Tigray. The following is the English translation of his words:

It is history, and let me show you the incident. Amhara Region's police and Temesgen Tiruneh (the region's president at the time) knew this was going to happen because of the TPLF's preparations. They were right outside our door. Therefore, we have done our homework, and forces have been deployed along our borders from east to west. The war was started that night after we had already completed our preparations. At the time, Assistant Commissioner Biset, the commander of the Special Forces, called me... and told me that the war had begun and we were engaged. Because we had so many discussions in military languages, I told him to continue as discussed, and he agreed. Assistant commissioner Biset called me again and told me that it was going as per our discussion.

The above speech of Abere Adamu, the Amhara region's police commissioner, clearly supports the TPLF's view that the neighboring Amhara region, together with the federal government forces, were preparing to wage war against Tigray<sup>22</sup>. However, it also reveals that the first bullet was fired from the TPLF side. Representing the attack on the northern command as a self-defense mechanism was the main storyline in the news that was disseminated by TPLF-affiliated media outlets. For instance, the following

news from the state-owned Tigray TV is a typical example:

**The Tigray government's November 4 attack on the northern command was a successful operation that nullified the command's orchestrated plan of erasing Tigray's leaders, Tigray Military officials**

... The operation was not aimed at attacking the northern command but was a self-defense act by the Tigray region. However, the fascists propagated the incident as if the northern command was attacked, to mislead Ethiopians and the international community.

The above news text vividly shows that the northern command was attacked with the justification of self-defense, which aimed at protecting the people of Tigray and its leaders. In conclusion, the TPLF and/or Tigray's administration claim they attacked the northern command to protect themselves from potential danger.

**Synthesis of the two views**

As both parties accuse each other of starting the war, it's important to read their stories between the lines. To that end, first, it's crucial to pin down the actual facts, and in this regard, there are two bold facts. First, the northern command of the ENDF was attacked by TPLF forces at night while members of the command were sleeping. Second, there were vast preparations for war on both sides, including propaganda incubation, troop deployment, and military parades. Accordingly, the current war is the combined outcome of these developments.

Though the federal government's view of the 'first-bullet' as the beginning of the war is true, it's important to unpack the ideology behind this view. Abiy's administration's propaganda centered mainly on the attack of the northern command, painting it as an act of treason, and this in turn won the hearts and minds of millions of Ethiopians. As a result, hundreds of thousands joined the ENDF, regional Special Forces, and militias to defend the pride and sovereignty of Ethiopia against the TPLF and its allied forces. In so doing, the propaganda was decorated with dehumanizing expressions aimed at assassinating the characters and images of TPLF leaders.

<sup>22</sup> Details of the war preparation made by the Amhara region was exposed by Declan Walsh's article in the New York Times.

On the other hand, the TPLF leadership, which ruled Ethiopia for nearly 30 years before being ousted from power through youth protest, claims that the war is the outcome of several political differences between Abiy's administration and the veteran TPLF leadership. In fact, since Prime Minister Abiy came to power, there have been several incidents that have put the relationship between the two parties on the verge of animosity. Of these incidents, the most crucial ones are the following: 1) an Ethiopia-Eritrea peace pact, 2) a military and civil official reshuffle, and 3) elections. Accordingly, it's important to unpack the intentions behind these incidents.

First, the Ethio-Eritrea peace deal that ended the "no war, no peace" scenario that lasted for twenty years was unacceptable for the veteran TPLF leaders. They claim that the peace deal excludes Tigray's interest, despite sharing a long geographical boundary with Eritrea. As such, the pact was an ill-intentioned agreement made between Abiy and Isayas but not between the people of Tigray (Ethiopia) and Eritrea. Second, Abiy's new administration made a reshuffle of officials from high-level ministerial cabinets and military commanders to lower-level offices. In so doing, as the TPLF claims, many Tigrians who were in power before Abiy assumed offices were replaced by new faces under the pretext of reform. In particular, Abiy's plan to reshuffle the military and replace top Tigrayan commanders who served in the military was unacceptable to TPLF veterans. The move is seen as controlling the military and preparing for war. As a result, the TPLF and/or Tigray's administration openly opposed the plan and sent letters to the international community. Thirdly, the postponement of the sixth general election was the climax of the pull-and-push situation between the two parties. The federal government postponed the election for a year under the pretext of COVID-19, while Tigray's administration held the election in its designated region in defiance of the decision. This in turn escalated the unpleasant relationship and brought the two parties one step closer to war.

Following the elections, TPLF leaders stated unequivocally that they will not accept the federal government's authority because their term of office has expired. In particular, Getachew Reda, the spokesperson of the TPLF back then, repeatedly expressed his party's position in a way that undermined the power of the federal government. As a response, Abiy's administration began to cut ties with the Tigray Region, cutting budgets and other

resources. Soon after, the war broke out as a result of the TPLF's attack on the northern command.

### Conclusion

The main objective of this article was to investigate the beginning of the Tigray war, alternatively known as the northern Ethiopian war, from a narrative analysis perspective. To that end, the data were collected from media reports, news articles, interviews, and other related documents that dealt with the causes and the kickoff of the war. The findings show that both parties involved in the war have peculiar narratives that oppose each other. According to the Ethiopian government, the war began as a means of establishing constitutional order and the country's territorial integrity. Thus, the war was justified as an act of response to the attack on the northern command of ENDF by TPLF forces. On the other hand, the TPLF and/or Tigray's government view the war as an act of self-defense aimed at protecting Tigray from potential damage, rights abuse, and political subjugation. Apart from the actual damage on the ground, the war was further intensified by media propaganda and the unjust intervention of the international community. Particularly, western media outlets, UN agencies, and other foreign entities played their part in fueling the war.

### Conflicts of interest

There is no conflict of interest regarding funding, the data, materials, and references used in this study.

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