A critical analysis of the narratives on the beginning of the Tigray war

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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, this article aims to unpack the narratives surrounding the start of the Tigray War and reveal the hidden ideologies 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, projections, expert analysis, documentaries, and official briefings from both sides of the conflict. The findings show that the Tigray People's Liberation Front and the federal government used competing narratives regarding the beginning of the war. Principally, two dominant narratives exist: 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.

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. 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, proyecciones, análisis de expertos, documentales y sesiones informativas oficiales de ambos lados del conflicto. Los hallazgos muestran que el Frente de Liberación Popular de Tigray 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

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[1] Alternatively known as the "northern Ethiopia war", an expression preferred by the federal government and its allies and affiliates.
[2] 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 is an independent research conducted individually by the author at Addis Ababa University between June and December 2022.
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 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.

Introduction

In November 2020, an armed conflict emerged in Tigray, a northern province of Ethiopia bordering neighboring Eritrea. At the beginning of the battle, the Ethiopian National Defense Forces (ENDF), with the Amhara Special Forces (ASF) from adjacent Amhara Regional State, fought against Tigray Regional State military forces, now referred to as "TDF" for "Tigray Defense Force" (Annys *et al.*, 2021). Though the Ethiopian government denied it back then, the Eritrean Defense Forces (EDF), a few Somali soldiers, and a paramilitary faction known as *Fano* have also been involved alongside Ethiopian forces, the ENDF. The fighting has been destabilizing the country for more than two years, leaving thousands dead and displaced (Tofa *et al.*, 2022).

As the war on the ground escalates, so do the narratives between the media supporting the Tigray People's Liberation Front, TPLF, and the Ethiopian government (Center for Advancement of Rights and Democracy [CARD], 2021). Both sides engaged their respective lines in reporting the war's causes and the intentions of the enemy, and they molded and re-shaped the war narratives to suit their discourse, primarily using language and semiotics. Through the language both sides use, one can quickly identify the ideological lineage of each media outlet. From the Ethiopian government side, the media sees the war as "law enforcement", now transformed into "existential war."[4] From the TPLF, and some allied international media, the war has been defined as an "invasion", "genocide", "civil war" (Mergo, 2020), and "act of aggression" (BBC, 2021). Besides these two parts, some tried to maintain balance by reporting the situation with titles such as "war broke out" and "armed conflict" (Center for Preventive Action, 2023).

Apart from the massive destruction, the true causes of the war seem shadowed by the narratives the involved parties propagated. As the saying goes, there are two sides to every story, and those of the Tigray war were no exception, with both sides blaming each other for starting the war through competing narratives. Mindful of this, this article analyzes these competing accounts through a qualitatively oriented narrative case study. Hence, the article unravels the historical causes, immediate build-up, and existing war narratives through critical discourse analysis 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 Ethiopian revolution of 1974, following the Ethiopian student movements of the 1960s and early 1970s. Emperor Hailessilasie I, the last and longest-reigning king of the Solomonic dynasty, was ousted from power and replaced by the *Derg*,[5] a military leadership that claimed to be leftist and socialist (Zewde, 2005; Zeleke, 2020). However, seeing the military controlling power seemed unacceptable to the different political actors involved in realizing the revolution. Consequently, political-ideological divergences emerged between the new government and members of the student movement (Zeleke, 2020). These differences gave rise to various political groups that sought to overthrow the military government through diverse forms of struggle (Andargachew, 1993).

The parties can be classified into two ideological groups: pan-Ethiopians and ethno-nationalist. On the one hand, the former group includes the largest parties of the time, such as the EPRP[6] and MEISON[7], which advocate a pan-Ethiopian ideology that designates a unified sociopolitical and cultural identity. This ideology is an extension of the long-established identity of *ityopyawinnät*[8], which was dominated by the Semitic culture (i.e., Amhara and Tigrean) through Amharic language (Levine, 1974; Marye, 2019). On the other hand, the ethnonationalist group includes parties such as the TPLF that operate within a designated ethnic group (Young, 1997). These ethnonationalist parties argue that although Ethiopia is home to several ethnic groups, the identities, and rights of these were denied by the "Amhara and, to some extent, Amhara-Tigray supremacy." Therefore, the central objective of their struggle was to deconstruct the long-established Semitic-based Ethiopian identity and replace it with an ethnic-based order that recognizes equally the languages and cultures of all ethnic groups.

The two opposition groups mentioned adopted their forms of struggle to topple the military regime. Some pan-Ethiopian groups, particularly those without an armed base, began to collaborate with the military regime in the hope of eventually changing it, whereas others initiated an urban armed struggle against the regime and its allies (Zewde, 2005). This city-based conflict ended in bloodbath, and the parties could not survive the military regime. The ethno-nationalist parties chose to launch a long-term rural armed struggle and obtained different types of support from Arab countries such as Sudan and Egypt. After 17 years of devastating war, the EPRDF[9], a coalition of four

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[4] The government changed the discourse of the war, and the media affiliated with it represented the war accordingly.

[5] Derg (literally meaning "committee" in Amharic) was led by middle-ranked military officers.
[6] Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Party.
[7] Mela Ītyōp̣p̣yā Soshalīsit Nik'inak'ē (English: All-Ethiopia Socialist Movement).
[8] Being Ethiopian.
[9] Ethiopian People's Liberation Front.

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 administrations through the political ideology of ethnic-federalism. Ethnic and linguistic emblems replaced the long-established Ethiopian identity. In 1995, a new constitution granted equal recognition to all cultures and languages in the country. Despite its symbolic value in conferring linguistic and cultural rights to most Ethiopian languages, especially minority ones, the constitution has become a source of divergence between the ruling regime, the elites, and the opposition parties. In particular, the elites of the Amhara ethnic group, who defend the long-established pro-Ethiopian identity, became disappointed by the new political settlement. They argue that the emerging ruling ideology, ethnic-federalism, might prevent Ethiopians from moving and working in places besides those owned by their ethnic ancestors. Consequently, critical opposition voices began to appear here and there demanding the regime to reconsider its stance.

Despite critical opposition, the regime established authoritarian control through vassal leadership (Marye, 2019). Individuals or groups who opposed the regime became targets of the security apparatus. Politicians, journalists, and other elites were imprisoned or sent into exile under orchestrated legal pretexts. Consequently, the opposition camp dissolved and adopted new strategies of struggle. Some began an armed struggle, while others, living in the diaspora, continued their fight via 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" (Marye, 2019, p. 97). Although the regime effectively silenced critics, it could not erase them. As such, these critics grew from everyday resistance to large-scale uprisings, protests, and public disobedience (Branch & Mampilly, 2015).

Even though it claims to be a coalition representing the majority, the EPRDF is a vassal to the TPLF, one of the four coalition parties representing the Tigray ethnic minority, which comprises only five percent of the Ethiopian population. Despite being a minority, the TPLF seized all key government positions and the military. A minority of Tigray ethnic group members and a politically well-connected police-military elites have captured the trade (Gebregziabher & Hout, 2018). That creates animosity among other Ethiopians, who believe that the power and wealth of the country are controlled by the minority of Tigray ethnic group members and their affiliates. Besides, Amhara elites and people have continuously accused the TPLF of grabbing a vast tract of land from the neighboring Amhara region and transferring it to its ancestral territory, the Tigray region. This annexation has been at the center of the political struggle among the Amhara people and one of the causes of the current war.

Just as wars have historical and immediate causes, so does the Tigray war. Indeed, the current conflict in Tigray is not simply an armed conflict stemming from a dispute between prime minister Abiy and the TPLF but "is the latest battle in a long-standing war over the country's identity as a unitary or federal state" (Mergo, 2020). As such, the war is the result of the protracted friction between the regime and the elites and groups that claim to have been violently suppressed by the regime for more than three decades.

The immediate buildup of the war

In 2015, Ethiopia, the second-most populous country in Africa, held its fifth national elections, which occur every five years. They were a sham election in which the ruling coalition party, the EPRDF, won a landslide victory, with 90% or more of the vote, as in previous elections (Cochrane & Bahru, 2019). Soon after, the country was rocked by a wave of protests here and there. The Oromos, who constitute one-third of the country's 110 million people, protested against possible land confiscations under the government's Addis Ababa Integrated Master Plan, which aimed to expand administrative control from the capital to surrounding Oromo towns and villages. Subsequently, the protests spread to the Amhara, expressing solidarity with the Oromo protests and respect for the rights of regional autonomy enshrined in the Constitution. However, the protests were not only about the Master Plan policy but also about the entrenched socioeconomic, cultural, historical, and political marginalization perpetrated by successive regimes against the Oromo people.

The ruling coalition, established by four regional political parties, had attempted to crush the protests through a state of emergency and military operations. Despite the tortures and killings committed by the government, the protest continued to grow to a climax. As part of the protest, while Tigrians living in other parts of the country were attacked, abused, and displaced, truckloads of goods heading to Tigray were looted in the neighboring Amhara region. In some cases, main roads leading to Tigray were blocked, and trucks burned to ashes. Finally, in February 2018, prime minister Hailemariam Desalegn, leader of the ruling coalition, announced his resignation and urged his party members to make earnest political and leadership 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 raised many hopes for transformation but also many concerns.

In his early days, Abiy Ahmed received tremendous support from Ethiopians inside and outside 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 & Bahru 2019, pp. 2-3)

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Furthermore, he was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize in 2019 for breaking the two-decade-long border stalemate between Ethiopia and Eritrea (Editorial Board, 2021).

Despite the bright outlook, the prime minister and his cabinet were caught 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 TPLF, a representative of the Tigrian ethnic group in the northern part of the country, disapproved of the reforms proposed by the prime minister and resigned from the coalition. Abroad, armed political parties returning 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 immersed in a devastating armed conflict in Tigray (northern Ethiopia) 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 been killed or wounded in both cases, and millions of Ethiopians have been displaced. Since the current war dates back to root causes, its immediate unfolding has layers of events and occurrences. The main ones are discussed below.

Propaganda mobilization: Hate speech and labeling

After taking office in April 2018, Abiy officially visited Mekelle as prime minister, the capital of Tigray National Regional State and the home of the TPLF leaders, who ruled Ethiopia for almost three decades. Abiy's visit and speech made veteran TPLF politicians and many Tigrayans confident in the new government. In his statement, the premier boldly underlined the role of Tigray in Ethiopia's existence, saying "it is impossible to think of Ethiopia without Tigray and vice versa." Hearing such precious expressions articulated by the premier came as a relief. to the veteran TPLF leaders, who feared that they would not be held accountable by the new government for corruption and human rights abuses committed during their heyday at the helm of the federal government offices. Likewise, many Tigrians 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 TPLF leaders and many Tigrians began to perish, leading to a suspicious relationship between the veteran TPLF leaders and the leadership of prime minister Abiy. Gradually, the communication between the two camps took the form of propaganda embellished with hate speech, labeling, blaming, and smearing. The main (if not the only) reason for creating such an unpleasant situation is the ambitious reforms of the premier. Chief among these reforms is the reshuffle of the former cabinet dominated by members of the TPLF and its affiliates, the peace talks with Eritrea, and the restructure of the ENDF leadership. These moves ousted many TPLF members from the federal and Addis Ababa city government cabinets, ministerial positions, and high-level security positions. As a result, many high-level

TPLF leaders who lost their power in Addis Ababa headed to Mekelle to join their party members ruling the Tigray National Regional State. This was in a way akin to the history of the Chinese Nationalist Party, the Kuomintang.

After securing absolute leadership in Tigray, the TPLF hierarchy continuously accused, blamed, defamed, and undermined Abiy's administration through its 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 represented by character assassinations, accusations, blaming, and defamation. Consequently, prime minister Abiy officially began to label[10] and defame the TPLF veterans, targeting their personalities and wrongdoings during their days of power. For instance, he called them *"yeken jib"* (lit. daytime hyena), distorting their image and personality (Philing, 2019). Following this rhetoric, Ethiopian state television —ETV— and other affiliated media such as *Fana* TV and *Walta* TV[11] produced and aired several documentaries, affiliated news, interviews, and reports distorting the images, names, personalities, family and social issues of TPLF leaders. Most of these productions focused on demonizing the TPLF and attributing all sorts of crimes to its leaders. Similarly, TPLF leaders engaged in assassinating Abiy's image through documentaries, news, and "academic"[12] symposiums. Abiy has been portrayed as a dictator, a deceitful and undereducated person incapable of leading the country. Indeed, news and other forms of reports about the premier on Tigray TV, DW TV[13], and TMH TV[14] most frequently use adjectives such as "dictator", "tyrant", "egoistic", and "usurper." Besides, numerous "academic" symposiums sought to unravel the foreboding danger and political crisis due to the misdeeds of Abiy Ahmed's leadership. Most of the ideas and recommendations presented at these symposiums were Xerox copies of TPLF thoughts addressed by scholars, politicians, and elites with allegiances and affiliations with the TPLF: Martin Plaut (2023), Daniel Berhane (2023), Kjetil Tronvoll, or 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 social categories, such as the cultural, entertainment, and development spheres. Thus, both parties have used polarized and politicized narrative structure and content decorated with propaganda, regardless of the presented topic (Alemayehu, 2022). The line separating fact from opinion and truth from lies has

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[10] This is similar to the findings reported from Colombia during internal conflicts (García-Marrugo, 2013).
[11] Fana TV and Walta TV are private media outlets owned by the ruling party per se.
[12] Despite their names, most of these symposiums were venues for TPLF's propaganda.
[13] Dimtsi Woyane, a local TV station owned by the TPLF.
[14] Tigray Media House, a US-based TV channel owned by TPLF affiliated diaspora community.

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become increasingly blurred. Theoretically, van Djik's (1988) "ideological discourse" explains this narrative construction, underlining that media representation of sensitive issues is primarily designed through positive self-representation and negative representations of others following the THEY and WE distinction. Such depictions 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, military reinforcements took place, which included recruiting new personnel, restructuring the existing command, and conducting parades on both sides. The veteran TPLF leadership, in particular, began to build up a massive army, complementing the existing Tigray Special Police Force. The purpose of this build-up, as TPLF leaders stated at the time, was to prevent any possible aggression from the federal government through the ENDF. As a result, all towns in Tigray have been placed under tight security measures, and several checkpoints were established at the entry and exit points of each town and village. In addition to building their army, the TPLF leadership critically monitored the movements of the ENDF through its spies. The TPLF has kept a close eye on the northern command of the ENDF, which had its headquarters in Tigray and possessed more than half of Ethiopia's soldiers and weaponry. So, 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 succeeded in obstructing decisions made by the Abiy government regarding troop movements and command changes in the northern command of the ENDF. For example, Tigray residents blocked ENDF mobility on a couple of occasions, and it is believed that the TPLF orchestrated these blockades (Woldie, 2019). Besides, the TPLF leadership rejected the appointment of a new commander for the northern command of the ENDF, based in Tigray, 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 tension escalated rapidly.

The take-off: COVID-19 and the elections

The troubling relationship between the Abiy administration and the veteran TPLF leadership became after COVID-19 when the pandemic claimed the lives of millions around the world and forced people to stay behind doors. Before the pandemic, Abiy had established a new party, merging the ruling EPRDF coalition of four ethnic-based regional parties, including the TPLF, and renaming it the Prosperity Party (PP). The TPLF, which believed to be the parent of

the EPRDF, opposed the establishment of the PP harming the former party that ruled the country for nearly three decades. The TPLF decided not to join the new party, the PP, and took a different path. Consequently, several TPLF members who had been in power in several government positions at different levels were removed from their posts under the pretext of reform. This, in turn, aggravated the tension between the TPLF and PP leadership. Amid this situation, COVID-19 erupted and tension escalated.

The National Electoral Board of Ethiopia (NEBE) postponed the sixth general election, originally scheduled for June 2020 (Reuters, 2021). However, the TPLF-led Tigray region has vowed to hold the polls in defiance of NEBE's decision. As promised, the TPLF held regional elections in Tigray in defiance of the federal government and declared a landslide victory. After the elections, TPLF leaders declared themselves legitimate governors of Tigray, adding that they would not take orders from the federal government[15] except from some organizations such as the army ENDF. Although they did not issue an official declaration, the TPLF leaders intended to turn Tigray into a de facto state and eventually an independent nation-state, drawing inspiration from the experiences of Slovenia (Anderson, 1995) and Croatia in the former Yugoslavia. As a response to such defiance, the federal government cut its budget and other supplies and incentives to be sent to Tigray. At the time, 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. However, the question of "who started the war" remains unanswered.

Theory, methods, and data

This article seeks to understand the meaning and implications of what the two fighting parties have said about the start of the Tigray war. The study employs Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) and narrative theory as theoretical underpinnings 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 framework, discourse is conceptualized as "a set of meanings, metaphors, representations, images, stories, statements, and so on that in some way together produces a particular version of events" (Burr, 1995, p. 32). CDA describes discourse—language use in speech and writing—as a form of "social practice" (Fairclough, 1995).

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

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[15] Getachew Reda, the spokesperson of TPLF, accused the federal government for postponing the election and labeled Abiy as illegal.

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Several approaches to the CDA paradigm take distinct disciplinary backgrounds based on their notions of "discourse" and "discursive structures." However, these approaches share basic characteristics. The present study employs Fairclough's three-dimensional model of CDA. It proposes that each instance of language use in a communicative event consists of three dimensions: (a) it is a text; (b) it is a discursive practice involving the production and consumption of texts, and (c) it is a social practice (Fairclough, 1995).

The other principle in this study is narrative theory. Narratives are powerful tools that shape people's perceptions of a particular issue or event (Barbehön & Münch, 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 is a construction of actual events, narrative can be used and promoted to serve political, social, cultural, or ideological purposes (Cochrane & Skjerdal, 2015). As such, narrative theory is a crucial tool for investigating controversial topics such as the one proposed in this article, as it provides an outstanding analytical framework.

Narrative theory has several versions and methodological elements based on the context and academic disciplines in which it is 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 views narrative as a triangular relationship between narrator, addressee, and message, as well as the context of communication. Thus, words, images, hidden propositions, and other linguistic and semiotic elements acquire a marked emphasis (Toolan, 2001). Accordingly, this study employs a linguistically oriented narrative theory to investigate the narratives surrounding the onset of the Tigray war and unravel the ideological clues hidden behind these narratives.

Accordingly, this study combines CDA and narrative theory within a qualitative approach. To that end, interviews, news stories, documentaries, press releases, and official communiqués issued by both the federal and the Tigray governments in different media outlets inside and outside Ethiopia were collected as core data. The major media outlets are ETV, TMH, DW Tigray, FBC, Walta TV, and several internet-based press outlets. The topic and the qualitative analysis helped categorize the data, focusing on language use, narratives, and contextual aspects. Besides, the historical, contemporary, and situational war contexts were addressed through the social and discursive practices of Fairclough's (1995) model. Reliability is ensured using Lincoln and Guba's taxonomy of quality criteria to reduce bias; this classification implies four components: credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability (Zoltan, 2007), corresponding these components to their

quantitative counterparts: credibility equals to "internal validity"; transferability to "external validity"; dependability to "reliability", and confirmability to "objectivity" (Shenton, 2004; Zoltan, 2007).

Data presentation and analysis

There are two divergent views on the onset of the Tigray war, as both warring parties continue to accuse each other through their propaganda apparatuses. This section presents these views and a critical analysis of the narratives propagated by their respective parties.

The thesis: The first-bullet theory

In the early morning of November 4th, 2020, Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed appeared on the Ethiopian National Television, ETV, wearing a dark black coat as a sign of mourning. He announced that the TPLF had mounted a premeditated attack on the northern command of the ENDF based in Tigray. 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 Ethiopian media and communication facilities, 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 Ethiopian public discourse, creating a sense 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. Leaders and members of the TPLF have officially admitted to attacking the ENDF. In particular, Seko Toure Getachew[16], a TPLF political analyst, clearly admitted the attack on live TV as follows:

> 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 to destabilize or demobilize them. The operation we undertook was a rapid 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 TPLF forces attacked the northern command of the ENDF. The attack was somehow synonymous with the one in the U.S., where the South Carolina militia attack

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[16] 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.

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on Fort Sumter started the American Civil War (Nagy, 2022). Seko Toure was not the only TPLF ally to admit the attack. Dr. Debretsion Gebremichael, chairman of the TPLF, also acknowledged that they attacked the northern command in his first and immediate interview soon thereafter. Here is the English translation of his words in Tigrinya: "almost all weaponry (of the northern command) is now under our control… Now we have full weaponry, and we have already begun to defend ourselves using it, and we will continue to use it." Apart from these voices, several TPLF leaders admitted the attack on the northern command and called the action heroic.

Likewise, general Tsadkan Gebretesae, a member of Tigray's military command, admitted the attack and praised it as self-defense. Below is a translation of an excerpt of 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 areas near 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? The federal government and its allies and supporters in Ethiopia and abroad mainly propagated it, claiming that the war started because of the first bullet fired by the TPLF. Accordingly, the TPLF is accused of starting the war by killing ENDF members in their sleep.

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 result of political differences, propaganda, and military buildup by the federal government. The TPLF claims that the war has been dragging on 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 TDF, describes the beginning of the war as follows[17]:

> 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 militiamen. Gradually, signs of war began to emerge. Among other things, the plan to form a new ENDF command, to be based in Bahir Dar, was a clear

sign of war. The intention of forming this command collides intending to the Amhara elite, who claim to take back a vast amount of land in the western and southern parts of Tigray.

As mentioned in the text above, 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 the ENDF, which was the dominant (if not the only) line of argument for the cause of the war from the federal government side, is considered only a fractional incident of the war. Supporting this view, the TPLF propaganda machines repeatedly quote the speech of Abere Adamu, commissioner of the neighboring Amhara Region Police Commission, who admitted that they have been preparing to defend themselves 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. The Amhara Region Police and Temesgen Tiruneh (president or the region) knew this was about to happen because of TPLF preparations. They were right in front of 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 language, I told him to continue as discussed, and he agreed. Assistant commissioner Biset called me back and told me that everything was going as we had discussed.

The above speech of Abere Adamu, police commissioner of the Amhara region, clearly supports the TPLF's view that the neighboring Amhara region, together with the federal government forces, was preparing to wage war against Tigray[18]. However, it also reveals that the first bullet was fired from the TPLF side. Representing the attack against the northern command as a self-defense mechanism was the main storyline in the news disseminated by the TPLF-affiliated media. For example, the following news from the state-owned Tigray TV is typical:

> The November 4 attack by the Tigray government on the northern command was a successful operation that nullified the command's orchestrated plan of erasing Tigray's leaders, Tigray military officers.
>
> […] 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.

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[17] The interview was made in Tigrigna and the text presented is an annotated translation.

[18] Details of the war preparation made by the Amhara region was exposed by Declan Walsh's article in *The New York Times*.

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

Synthesis of the two points of view

As both parties accuse each other of starting the war, it is important to read their stories between the lines. To that end, first, it is crucial to pin down the facts, and in this regard, there are two bold issues. First, the northern command of the ENDF was attacked by TPLF forces at night, while its members were asleep. 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 result of these events.

Though the federal government's view of the "first-bullet" as the beginning of the war is true, it is essential to unpack the ideology behind this view. On the one hand, Abiy's administration's propaganda centered mainly on the attack on 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. To this end, propaganda was embellished with dehumanizing expressions aimed at assassinating the characters and images of TPLF leaders.

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 the Abiy administration. This includes the veteran TPLF leaders. Indeed, since prime minister Abiy came to power, there have been numerous incidents that have brought the relationship between the two parties to the brink of animosity. Of these incidents, the most crucial are: (a) an Ethiopia-Eritrea peace pact; (b) a reshuffling of military and civil officials, and (c) elections. Consequently, it is important to unpack the intentions behind these incidents.

First, the peace agreement between Ethiopia and Eritrea, which 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 excluded Tigray's interest, despite sharing a long geographical border with Eritrea. As such, the pact was an ill-intentioned agreement between Abiy and Isayas but not between the people of Tigray (Ethiopia) and Eritrea. Second, the new Abiy administration reshuffled officials from high-level ministerial cabinets and military commanders to lower-level positions. In so doing, as TPLF declares, many Tigrians who were in power before Abiy assumed office were replaced by new faces under the pretext of reform.

In particular, Abiy's plan to reorganized the military and replace top Tigrian commanders who served in the army was unacceptable to TPLF veterans. The move is considered a check on the military and preparations for war. Therefore, the TPLF and/or the Tigray administration openly opposed the plan and sent letters to the international community. Third, postponing the sixth general elections 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 the Tigray administration held the election in its designated region in defiance of the decision. It, in turn, escalated the unpleasant relationship and brought the two sides one step closer to war.

Following the elections, TPLF leaders stated that they would not accept the federal government authority because their term had expired. In particular, Getachew Reda, TPLF spokesman back then, repeatedly expressed his party's position in a way that undermined the power of the federal government. In response, the Abiy administration began cutting ties with the Tigray region, slashing budgets and other resources. Soon after, the war broke out from the TPLF attack on the northern command.

Conclusion

The main objective of this article was to establish the beginning of the Tigray war, alternatively known as the northern Ethiopian war, from a narrative analysis perspective. To that end, data were collected from media reports, news articles, interviews, and other related documents addressing 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 started to founding constitutional order and territorial integrity in the country. Thus, the war was justified as an act of response to the attack on the northern command of the ENDF by TPLF forces. Besides, the TPLF and/or government of Tigray consider the war an act of self-defense to protect Tigray from potential harm, rights abuse, and political subjugation. Apart from the actual damage on the ground, media propaganda and the unjust intervention of the international community intensified the war further. Particularly, western media outlets, UN agencies, and other foreign entities contributed to fueling the war.

Conflicts of interest

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

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