

NARRATIVES OF POLITICAL VIOLENCE IN THE TIGRAY WAR



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Abstract

Given the almost complete lack of access for journalists, diplomats, or any independent observers to the hot bed of the war in Tigray that lasted from 2020 - 2022, Ethiopians and observers of Ethiopian affairs have had no choice but to rely on communications coming from the warring parties themselves. As a result, a distinctive feature of the conflict has been the level of competition over narratives. This study attempts to implore into the narrative world of the war to examine how political violence was discursively framed by parties to the conflict. Taking three cases from the duration of the war where the battles at the narrative and war fronts were at their heights: 4 - 28 November, 2020; 1 October - 20 December 2021; and 24 August - 2 November 2022, it employed critical discourse analysis to analyse text, image and video content produced by the FDRE and TPLF that sought to rationalise and justify the war and the violence it observed. The findings show that parties to the conflict used strategic narratives to appeal to different audiences at different times. In the first case communication by the FDRE largely narrated the virtuousness of their reluctant military operation that was necessitated because of TPLF's consistent transgressions to ensure that justice is served and Ethiopians can live in peace. In the second case, narratives by the FDRE framed the government as a victim of concerted efforts fighting a war against global dominance while in the third, narratives of a resilient Ethiopian identity took centre stage. TPLF's narratives across the cases largely devoted to framing the group as a victim that was fighting an existential war against a senseless and irrational actor that can only be effectively dealt with through the use of fatal force.

Key words: Tigray war, Narratives, Political Violence, Ethiopia

Acronym and Abbreviations

ACLED	Armed Conflict Location and Event Data Project
CDA	Critical Discourse Analysis
CSOs	Civil Society Organisations
DFR	Digital Forensic Research
ENDF	Ethiopian National Defense Forces
EPRDF	Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Democratic Front
EPRP	Ethiopian People Revolutionary Party
FDRE	Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia
OLA	Oromo Liberation Army
PMO	Prime Minister's Office
TEAO	Tigray External Affairs Office
TPLF	Tigray People's Liberation Front
UAE	United Arab Emirates

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Chapter One

1. Introduction

Modern warfare, as we know it today, is waged on at least four fronts by the coordinated efforts of military, economy, diplomacy, and propaganda. Not least among these is propaganda (Qualter, 2020). Though the utilization of propaganda as a tool in violent conflict is as old as organized warfare itself (Taylor, 2003) it has grown increasingly complex in the twentieth century. The post second world war period saw a particular development of a practical process of persuasion (Taylor, 1992), as an integral part of war machinery. This was driven by the temper of the time when the world had witnessed the catastrophic effects of war upon humankind time and again, and calls for war had to be accompanied by convictions that one is fighting for truth and justice (Maynard, 2014).

Hiebert (2003) notes that the battle to win over public opinion is as important during a war as the battle on the war fronts. The stories told about why the state is engaging in war are essential to garner support for entry into war, maintain support for an on-going war, and legitimize actions taken during the war. This has led to states institutionalizing the production of war communications as an increasingly complex and multidisciplinary approach that draws from public relations, marketing, political theory and social psychology (Scriver, 2015).

It is through such carefully crafted narrative messages that actors in conflict attempt to exercise influence over the behaviour of others. Narratives (re)define power relations, produce political subjects (Barnette and Duvall, 2005), offer lenses through which to make sense of the world and inform social and political mobilisations. Actors often use visually evocative narratives of injustice, pain and suffering deliberately inflicted by the enemy on innocents to make a case for why they should engage in violence and construct public perceptions of the enemy (Ben-Portah, 2007). Periods of violent conflict are times where citizens pay an exceptionally heightened attention to political discourse (Zaller, 1994; Gabel et al., 2020), thereby making them more susceptible to political narratives.

This thesis explores the ways in which political actors in the Tigray war used strategic narratives to discursively frame political violence, define themselves in relation to the other, and mobilize military and diplomatic capabilities locally and internationally. In an attempt to do so, it implores into the narrative world of the war adopting a qualitative methodology that employs critical discourse analysis of text, audio, video and imagery material produced by parties to the war.

1.1 Background

Ethiopia's modern political history has been marred with a perennial culture of political violence. This is evident in that retention and transfer of power has nearly always been through force of arms (Negussay, 2010). Political violence has also been a key aspect of the rule of successive regimes from autocratic feudal, Italian occupiers, military rulers, authoritarian and competitive authoritarian regimes (Semir, 2022). The culture of political violence extends beyond state actors as organized resistance to the state has also often taken up violent means. Following the deposing of the last monarch in 1974, there is yet to be a decade in which armed opposition to the state, including ones that operate in neighbouring states, has not been present.

Hence it stands to reason that in a system where political violence has become a 'sine qua non' (Negussay, 2010:218), attempts of political ascendancy have almost always been violent. Nonetheless, over the span of the preceding five decades, there were at least three political openings that signalled that the culture of political violence could be broken.

The first of these was in early 1974 when a popular revolution led by soldiers, (Dawit, 1989) workers, and students (Markakis and Nega, 1977) erupted in Ethiopia. The revolution, driven by grievances of political repression, economic exploitation, the emperor's handling of the 1973 famine, spiralling inflation and catalysed by students organizing and the war in Eritrea had carried hope of embarking on a democratic journey where people's human rights and self determination are respected and wealth and prosperity was created for all instead of just the feudal lords.

Within a few months of coming to power, the Derg promoted the use of *Ethiopia Tikdem* as a “political philosophy which emanates from [Ethiopians’] great religions which teach the equality of man, and from [their] tradition of living and sharing together” (Dawit, 1989:14). The slogan was also used as a demonstration of the Derg’s commitment to reform the nation, and its commitment to the masses. However, it wasn’t long before the military regime proved to be a continuation of Ethiopia’s violent political culture (Andargachew, 1993). The popular people’s revolution succumbed to Derg’s autocratic control when the Derg criminalized political oppositions by proclamation, purged and summarily executed individuals that served in the previous government, and subordinated government and social institutions to the party (Ibid, 1993).

The increasing acts of political violence against political dissenters were soon refurbished as Red Terror by the Derg, a term chosen “to portray [the actions] as legitimate in the face of allegedly anti-socialist resistance and cast its opponents as anti-revolutionaries” (Wiebel and Admasie, 2019: 458). Though some maintain that the red terror arose as a response to the White Terror, an urban guerilla launched by the Ethiopian People’s Revolutionary Party (Mengistu, 2011; Toggia, 2012) others see the argument that it was EPRP that provoked the Red Terror as unconvincing apologia for the Derg’s widespread and brutal violence as the Derg had resorted to violence early in its reign long before armed resistance to its power arose (Kiflu, 1998; Marshet, 2018). Regardless of who initiated it, the period oversaw widespread and egregious acts of violence, narrated as necessary acts of ‘revolutionary violence’, of such a large scale by actors at different levels.

This ended in 1991 when the Derg was toppled by the TPLF led coalition of Ethiopian People’s Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF) forces after years of insurgency in rural areas. The new regime, which was seen as a continuation of the 1974 Ethiopian revolution (Gebru, 2009), had aspired to remove what it deemed were the deep roots of conflict and violence in the country by introducing a democratic arrangement, advancing socio-economic advancement and decentralizing state power (Vaughan, 2023). The EPRDF also took measures to hold members of the Derg accountable for their gross violation of human rights through a Special Public Prosecutor (Marshet, 2018). But the legacy of the Derg’s violence was “far

more pervasive than the imperial regime it had replaced” (Merera, 1999 as cited in Tafesse, 2012:80) and the EPRDF was merely prosecuting those whom it had overthrown while itself being accused of committing the same crimes (Leenco, 1999) perhaps with a drive to continue repressing and neutralizing factions until total victory is achieved over all real and potential opposition groups that could later reverse the order and try members of the EPRDF as they did to the members of the Derg (Ibid.).

The forced disappearance, torture and extra judicial executions that would later spread throughout the country under EPRDF’s rule were initially occurring in Ogaden, Oromia and Gambella (Mekuria, 2005; Vaughan and Tronvoll, 2003) against those whom it had deemed to be dangerous to the ‘peace and democracy’ of the country and the new civilian regime (Vaughan, 2003; HRW, 2005).

However, more than a decade into the reign of EPRDF came the opportunity to break the culture of political violence with regards to accession to power. In 2005, the newly reformed EPRDF opened up the political sphere for what came to be the most highly contested election in Ethiopia’s history to date. The May 2005 elections saw large-scale mobilization by opposition parties in both urban and rural areas, government spokespersons and opposition parties engaging in a series of widely televised debates and providing citizens with a meaningful chance to express their choice (Lefort, 2007).

This had been perceived as a dawn of political pluralism that would have perhaps led to the formation of a coalition government (Abbink, 2011). As the mobilizations intensified and the popularity of the oppositions grew ever more visible, the government cracked down. Just days before election day, the then Prime Minister, Meles Zenawi, accused the opposition of instigating ethnic violence that would lead to bloodshed like in the Rwandan genocide (Reuters, 2005). This set the narrative stage for the violence that would soon ensue. As the opposition swept the polls in Addis and a number of other cities, the state responded violently killing hundreds of people and jailing tens of thousands (Aalen and Tronvoll, 2009). Opposition leaders, journalists and critical voices in the civil society were jailed and prosecuted in what

remains the worst case of electoral violence in Ethiopia. This marked a renewed beginning of heightened political violence for the EPRDF where intimidation, detentions of political opponents, torture, became the rule of the day (Wondwosen, 2009). Key opposition groups that had taken part in the election also moved into armed insurgency a few years later.

The then-characterization of the Pan Ethiopianist opposition forces as ‘extremist’, ‘remnants of the Derg’ and ‘former red terror perpetrators’ (Lyons, 2011) as well as the late Prime Minister’s comparison of them to the Interahamwe, the paramilitary that carried out the Rwanda genocide, would resurface again in 2020 as a key narrative pattern after the third opportunity to depart from the culture of political violence was met by predictably dire results.

This third opening came in 2018 when Prime Minister Hailemariam Dessalegn was forced to resign following years of youth protests in different parts of the country and internal struggles within the EPRDF spearheaded by the Amhara National Democratic Movement and Oromo People’s Democratic Organization, popularly termed the *OroMara* coalition. His resignation came less than two months after the EPRDF sat down in a three-week-long congress where it diagnosed the deepening political fault lines in Ethiopia and its detrimental role in them. Soon after, the coalition elected Abiy Ahmed (PhD) as the chairman of the coalition and he was sworn in as Ethiopia’s prime minister.

It wasn't long before the new prime minister distanced himself from the years of EPRDF rule by condemning his predecessors of overseeing terrorism and opting to stay in power through brute use of force (Al Jazeera, 2018). The new Prime minister’s not-so-subtle acts of rolling back the influence of the TPLF both rhetorically and substantively was catchily described as ‘Game Over’ by the Eritrean president, a long-standing enemy of the TPLF. The PM’s introduction of a range of policy position changes that would overturn decades of EPRDF policy on democratization and the role of the state in the economy, and announcement of a rapprochement with Eritrea marked a significant juncture in the history of the country. His ideological shifts were warmly welcomed though a replacement wasn't clearly articulated yet (Fisher and Meressa, 2019).

The Prime Minister was popularly perceived to be a leader that successfully steered the country away from the verge of civil war (Elleni, 2019). His rhetoric of unity, national consensus and reconciliation, release of thousands of political prisoners, invitation of exiled opposition groups including armed ones operating from neighbouring countries, loosening of repressive counter-terrorism and CSO laws and admission of wrongs perpetrated against the Ethiopian people and vows to make amends and break the century year of cycle of violence led to the messianic fervour dubbed “Abiymania”.

The conceptual separation of questions for democratic reforms from questions of political economy that had both been voiced by the youth in the preceding years was increasingly fomenting the primacy of ethnicity as a framework to articulate collective demands and desires (Elleni, 2019). This heightened tensions resurfaced deep social divisions as alliances were remade (Ostebo & Tronvoll, 2020), old claims revived (Abdisa, 2023) and constituencies mobilized demanding self-determination and greater representation.

ACLED (2018) recorded a sharp increase and a shift in the geography of violence in the first six months of the new administration. Instances of political violence were moving away from urban areas and changing forms from what was previously largely riots and clashes between protesters and state forces to inter communal conflicts between militias and special forces.

In what was widely understood to be the work of those that had lost their privileges in the wake of the reform stirring unrest, various acts of political violence ensued both against civilians and public figures. Assassinations of senior political and military leaders and sporadic killings of civilians were early signs of the escalating political and security crisis that would soon culminate as the Tigray war (Addis et al., 2020).

1.2 The Tigray War

Several scholars locate the civil war in Ethiopia’s historical past and its nation building process. Matshanda (2022) for instance argues, TPLF and the federal government led by PM Abiy have a contradictory imagination about what Ethiopia needs to be and how it should be administered.

This aligns with what the commander of Tigrayan Forces, General Tsadkan said in an interview with Tigray TV where he said the main reason for the outbreak of the war was not the attack on the Northern command, but the very diverging understandings on nation building process Ethiopia was embarking upon (Tigrai Tv, 2021).

Some try to locate the cause of the crisis as historical, ideological, socio-political and economic. Ibreck and de Waal (2022) argue that current violence cannot be understood in isolation and has very much to do with past relationships. Adding on the historical and ideological factors, the escalation of the propaganda war where both the federal government and TPLF rhetorically defined the other as a distinct threat to the existence of one preceded the outbreak of war on the battlefield.

The TPLF rejected the dissolution of EPRDF to form the Prosperity Party and TPLF officials resigned from their top federal positions in Addis Ababa opting instead to be confined in a Tigrayan enclave. This along with the obscure peace pact with Eritrea, arrest of TPLF generals on corruption charges and the calls for accountability to human rights violations by ‘Tigrinya speakers’ was framed by the TPLF as an early sign of an Anti- Tigrayan coalition.

With the advent of Covid 19 and the following disagreement on the postponement of national election and the repeated acts of violence perpetrated against civilians in different parts of the country - which the federal government has alluded to being orchestrated by the TPLF and its allies intensified the difference (Abdisa, 2023; EBC, 2020; Labzae, 2022). The discursive battles that were shaping public opinion on internal affairs pre-war continued well into the war. In fact, the war was fought as a discursive, as much as actual, war (Semeneh, 2021).

The war that ensued marks a significant event in Ethiopia’s political history that gave rise to large-scale humanitarian crisis and observed obscene scales of violence that were rhetorically mediated and framed to perpetuate and enable mass violence.

1.3 Statement of the Problem

The foundations of the just war theory laid by early thinkers like St. Augustine and Cicero detail on how states (and governments) morally and legitimately rationalize going to war and provide frameworks on how and why war should be conducted. Western conceptions of just war identify up to five principles on which conceptions of a just war are found: lawful authority, just cause, right intention, right means and distinction between combatants and non-combatants. However, the just war doctrine is not particularly helpful to understand the construction of the enemy by account of narratives in African context precisely because it fails to account for the contextually informed and ideological concepts of justice and rights within different traditions (Ugwuanyi, 2020).

Mass violence and civil wars are complex and ambiguous processes (Klayvas, 2003). Those that partake in them do so with self-interested rational calculation, conviction of a just cause or of war being the only means to claim rights (Maynard, 2014; Ugwuanyi, 2020). Discursive practices and popular narratives have major ideological effects in constructing social realities and shaping perceptions that build such convictions (Fairclough and Wodak, 1997). Through the strategic use of language, political violence can be framed as a necessary and even applaudable act. This conviction of just cause, Maynard (2014) argues, can be seen by how most of the perpetrators that carry out violence out of conviction do so passionately and go beyond the orders they received from superiors.

The Tigray war has been a point of focus for several researchers in political science, media and communication studies, environmental sciences and peace and conflict studies. Researchers and scholars have paid significant interest in the political (Abbink, 2021; Alamineh et al., 2021) ideological (Labzaé, 2022), humanitarian (Annys et al., 2021; Makonye, 2022) infrastructural (Gebregziabher et al., 2022; Kidanu, 2023), economic (Abdulkadr and Neszmelyi, 2021) diplomatic (Aidi, 2021; Verjee, 2021; Wontango, 2021) and media (Hamdie, 2023; Nigussie, 2024; Wilmot et al., 2021) aspects and consequences of the war. But little attention has been paid to the narratives of the warring sides that aided and enabled the violence. The few that do have based their analysis on social media engagements of proponents of either sides of the war mainly focusing on trending hashtags such as #TigrayGenocide and #NoMore (Agengehu, 2022; Wilmot et al., 2021) or on media representation of these narratives (Tofa, Ababau and Kinkoh, 2022).

Although studying the (social) media narratives does give a lens to understand why and how significant numbers demonstrated support for either side of the war and the violence they were inflicting, it contributes little to understand how the belligerents rationalized engaging in war to mobilise their bases and public resources.

1.4 Significance of the Study

Conflict is an emotionally engaging experience for a nation. So it is not particularly unexpected that times of national emergency witness rare moments of heightened citizen attention to political discourse (Zaller, 1994). Accordingly, understanding the nature and nuances of wartime rhetoric becomes vital to understanding the formation of conviction and public perception towards the war and the driving actors in to violence.

This thesis contributes to the limited yet developing body of knowledge that posits language and narratives as key aspects in the study of political violence in intra state contexts by directly engaging with the narratives of conflict actors. Wars and instances of mass political violence exacerbate societal divisions and undermine trust and social cohesion. An understanding of what transpired during the conflict and in what claim the violence were carried out would be key to efforts to repair the damage that followed and seek redress. So far as we intend to break away from a culture of political violence, an understanding of how perpetrators eschew possibilities of other options of handling conflict through narrations becomes pertinent.

1.5 Objectives

The main aim of this study is to investigate how political violence was rationalised to popular perceptions of violence by the parties to the Tigray war.

It specifically intends to:

1. Asses how political violence was discursively framed by parties to the conflict.
2. Identify whether variations exist in the narratives promoted to different audiences.
3. Examine whether fluctuation in military advantage were accompanied by changes in narratives.

1.6 Research Questions

Emanating from the above objectives this thesis attempted to answer the following questions:

- a) How did the parties to the Tigray war discursively frame political violence?
- b) Do the narratives promoted by the parties to the Tigray war vary depending on the audience?
- c) Were fluctuations in military advantage accompanied by changes in the narratives promoted by the parties to the Tigray war?

1.7 Scope

This study will delimit itself to three key instances of the war where the narrative battles were particularly heightened and battle ground power was shifted: The first instance is from the initiation of military operation to the Federal forces' control of the Tigrayan capital where the federal force had the military upperhand (4 November 2020 - 28 November 2020) and the second instance from the expansion of the war into neighbouring Amhara and Afar regions following the declaration of the first unilateral ceasefire by the federal forces, when the Tigrayan forces seemed to have the military advantage up until their expulsion and retreat in late December, 2021 and a third period from 24 August - 5 October, 2022 when the last round of conflict had erupted after a period of relative calm where talks of truce had dominated. Additionally, conflict actors for the analysis will be limited to top level officials in the federal government and the TPLF.

1.8 Limitation

The main limitation of this study is its reliance on translations for analysing texts and interviews that were communicated in Tigrinya. The researcher's dependence on translators could lead to distortion of nuances in relation to cultural references and emotional undertones. To circumvent these challenges, the researcher has consulted multiple native Tigrinya speakers to cross-check translations.

Chapter Two

2. Review of Related Literature

The ‘constructivist turn’ in the 1990s has witnessed a growing interest by scholars seeking to understand how constructions of meaning and multiple understandings of reality shape human behaviour (Zulaika and Doughlass, 1996; Jarvis, 2009). Given the rising prominence of currents of poststructuralism and postmodernism, social scientists challenged what had traditionally been an area that had heavy reliance on objective truths and generalizable theories. As the social sciences became cognizant of the complex and multi-faceted ways in which context, interpretations and subjectivity interplay to result in a nuanced human experience, the doors opened to a new way of studying and analysing social life.

This ‘narrativist turn’ opened a new route to studying social interactions. Social scientists that encompassed individual’s and group’s history in their study of social phenomenon emerged as a result. The particular influence of this shift of focus could also be seen in the study of terrorism and political violence as researchers began embracing narratives as fundamental research tools to understand terrorism (Graef, Da Silva and Lemay-Hebert, 2020; Roberts, 2006; Nanlohy, 2020).

Rather than solely focusing on political, ethnic, or religious factors that lead to violence, researchers began engaging the use of language and construction of narratives that accompanied the violence. However, literature that critically engages narratives on a conceptual and analytical level to examine its usage in enabling, promoting and justifying political violence still remains scant (Graef, Da Silva and Lemay-Hebert, 2020).

This chapter is thematically organized in a manner that looks into literature on the principal themes this thesis grapples with. The first section covers broad literature on the study of political violence, the second section looks at how have been used to study and understand

political violence and the third and final section reviews the literature on political violence in Ethiopia.

2.1 Political Violence

Our modern political sensibilities take political violence as a midwife of historical progress (Mamdani, 2003). A number of thinkers like Foucault (1977; 1983), Derrida (1978; 1992), and Fanon (1963; 1967) consider violence to be a crucial aspect of their political thinking while others, like Ardent (1969), see violence as being diametrically opposed to power. Though there were attempts at different times to divorce politics from violence, violence in its various forms has come to be an unquestioned aspect of contemporary political life. And yet, in the occasion where said violence is presumed to be 'extreme' or 'horrific' it continues to raise massive uproar.

Both violence and politics are contested concepts. Mamdani (2003) uses political violence to refer to the use of force, coercion, or intimidation by individuals, groups and governments for political purposes. Frazer and Hutchings (2007:196) expounded on this when they noted that political violence is “the potentially lethal use of physical force and the direct and indirect effects of such a use of force in terms of killing and injury, material destruction and the mental and spiritual effects on people”. Sousa (2013:173) describes it as the “deliberate use of power and force to achieve political goals”. It is further defined as the use coercion “by actors in the public sphere for publicly acknowledged, collective ends, from national security to national liberation or social revolution” (Frazer and Hutchings, 2007:196).

Kalyvas (2006) describes violence as a ‘conceptual minefield’ that displays variations across time and space. This falls in line with Clausewitz’s (1976: 609) assertion that the nature of war, and the violence it employs, “is determined by the nature of societies, as well as by their times and prevailing conditions”. More recent findings such as those by Anderson (2004) and Weinstein’s (2003) also find that the types and levels of violence vary across cases. Strategic factors and leadership (Shepherd, 2002), available resources (Besley and Persson, 2011; Weinstein, 2003), nature of social relations (Jackson and Dexter, 2014), group cohesiveness (Hughes, 2013), individual agency (Littman and Paluck, 2015) and group’s ideology

(Anderson, 2004) are some of the known factors that contribute to the variation of violence in different settings.

Given the expansive nature of the concept and the abstract nature of its application, several scholars have attempted to conceptualize violence by setting up various distinctions that could be employed to form typologies. Distinctions could be made in relation to the aim and intentionality of the violence, the actors involved, the producer of the violence, and the nature of its application (Baron, et al., 2019; Galtung, 1969).

Key among these is Johan Galtung, who provided six distinct typologies of violence in his piece, **Violence, Peace and Peace Research**. Firstly, he distinguished between *physical* and *psychological* violence. Although the narrow and most recognized concept of violence is a somatic one, Galtung (1969:169) makes distinction between “violence that works on the body, and violence that works on the soul”. This proved important in conceptualizing forms of violence that take covert forms and serve to either limit or decrease mental, spiritual and psychological potentialities.

Secondly, he calls into attention the differentiation between the *negative* and *positive* approaches to violence that a reward-oriented setting that sets constraints to one’s range of actions, not by an overt extension of pain but by withholding reward. The third distinction is based on whether or not there is an object receiving the violence. Here Galtung makes the case that we should be able to talk about violence even in cases where there is no physical or biological object that has received the violence, which he calls “truncated violence” (Galtung, 1969:170). Coward (2006) builds on this in his study of the nature of destruction of a built environment as a form of political violence: urbicide. Notwithstanding the obscurity of applying violence when there is no receiving object, Galtung offers explanations that this truncated violence could be “destruction of things as a foreboding or threat of possible destruction of something very dear to persons” (Galtung, 1969: 170).

Following this, he distinguishes between *personal* and *structural* violence based on whether or not the source of the violence can be traced back to physical actors. If the violence is embedded in the prevailing system and cannot be traced back to a singular actor, it is to be understood as structural violence. The fifth distinction is in regards to the *intentionality* of violence. Though Galtung was referring to whether the destruction caused was intentional or collateral damage, Baron, Havercroft et al. (2019) further build on this to describe what they term *pacification*. Drawing on post-colonial thoughts, they demonstrate that the liberal peace model transforms violence in ways that are concealed, intersubjective and fused into societal structures.

Moreover, the final distinction between *manifest* and *latent* violence is made upon the observability of the violence, regardless of whether it is *personal* or *structural*. Galtung (1969) argues that the absence of perceptual awareness does not negate the presence of violence. In fact, it is often latent violence that is under the surface that takes an observable form when it is triggered by events or certain phenomenon.

In light of Galtung's typology, it becomes evident that most studies of political violence are studies of direct and intentional violence. However, Kalyvas (2006) in his ground-breaking study on the logic of violence in civil wars notes that not all forms of violence resulting in fatalities take physical form. Building on the typologies by Galtung, Kalyvas (2006) identified three types of violence undertaken by a multitude of actors: *coercive*, *selective* and *anomic*. He argues that violence carried out with both strategic and tactical values falls into the *coercive* category as it fulfills both a strategic goal of eliminating a risk and/or an enemy while at the same time having a deterring effect. *Selective* violence, on the other hand, entails production of violence in a "systematic and predictable way" (Kalyvas, 2006:6). Since the methods used in coercive and selective violence appear indistinguishable, Kalyvas suggests a way to discern between them by asking whether an actor intends to govern the population its violence has targeted and if so, whether the targets of the violence have been presented with an option to surrender that would entail an immediate end to the violence.

The third type, which he identifies as *anomic*, is violence which he observes is used to serve no pragmatic or utilitarian value or purpose. He refers to this as nihilistic violence. Kalyvas holds that this understanding of violence dominates scholastic and journalistic accounts of violence that emphasize the ‘madness’ and ‘irrationality’ of violent action and behaviour.

Such understanding of violence as a mere expressive tool is what is presupposed by studies of violence that fall into intellectual queries that try to address what Hannah Ardent (1963) termed the ‘question of evil’. These works focus on the discursive and non-utilitarian character of violence. Although attempts to understand violence had traditionally preferred more rational and logical approaches, the attribution of ‘mass evil’ to large scale violent acts has not been uncommon particularly in genocide and atrocity studies.

Another important aspect that comes up when discussing political violence is the actors involved. Drawing from Armed Conflict Location and Event Data Project (ACLED), several agents who produce violence can be identified: state forces, rebel groups, political militias, identity militias, rioters, protesters, civilians and other forces. Observations by Muller (2004) and Valentino (2000) suggest that the production of political violence tends to be undertaken by a small group of people while, what can be termed as the majority, remains uninvolved. Many have also furthered the idea that extreme cases of mass violence and atrocities are carried out by those who simply carry out orders of a few.

Kalyvas (2006), however, argues against the understanding of violence being undertaken by a small group of people while the mass remains a passive pawn with no agency. By decoupling civil war from the violence that occurs in the context of civil war, Kalyvas made a theoretical and methodological leap to the study of violence both as a process and as a result of war. His work was particularly pioneering in rationalizing violence beyond what is often described as an inhumane, irrational act of madness. Studies by historians and social psychologists have also found that perpetrators of mass political violence tend to be products of situational social environments with agency. As such, political violence is often used as a means to maintain or seek (im)balance in relations of power.

Fear and mistrust have also been cited as important factors in mass political violence (Horowitz, 1985; Wiebel, 2022). Wiebel (2022) notes how fear has a dual orientation in such settings. On the one hand, it interplays with the perpetrators view of their victims as grave threats that must be eliminated and on the other, perpetrators fear consequences of non-participation in violence. Particularly when the violence is popular and backed by a strong regime, actors often fear that non participation would have severe repercussions.

Accordingly, Maynard (2014) makes categories of actors in violence albeit not exclusive: He identified *policy initiators*- key actors who make decisions to engage in violent action, *direct killers*- actors who are responsible to carry out the violence regardless of not being involved in the making of the initial decision of destruction, *bystanders*- actors who might not directly involve in physical acts of violence but poses the potential and provide moral and material support for the violent acts, and *indirect killers* - middle men who link the policy initiators with the direct killers via various apparatus and social/bureaucratic institutions.

Kalyvas (2006:20) lists the following as direct and intentional physical violence: “robbery, vandalism, arson, forcible displacement, kidnapping, hostage taking, detention, beating, torture, mutilation, rape, and desecration of dead bodies”. Whereas others also take alienation, pillages, collective punishment, sanctions and sieges to constitute a relatively broader act of violence (Robison, 2018; Staniland, 2010).

There is a long-standing debate in the literature as to how and why groups engage in political violence. Mamdani (2003) echoes Hitler’s (1939:200) assertion in *Mein Kampf* when he reflects that “Men stop fighting when they are told to fight for their daily bread,” because death would ultimately deprive them of that reward. What has “driven men against the spears of their enemies” since time immemorial has been ideals and values and the willingness of men to kill and die “for a cause higher than life” (Mamdani, 2003:132).

These higher causes are often narrated in terms of abstract ideals and values such as freedom and sovereignty. Leaders have used such abstractions to get their population to rally under the flag since the beginning of the formation of polities. A case in point would be Italy that alluded that their invasion of present-day Ethiopia and Eritrea was to free the people from the brutality of the Ethiopian Imperial regime (Wilcox, 1940). Beyond the “civilizing burden of the white man” that was a heavy part of the narratives of most, if not all, colonial aspirations, the Italian blackshirts were mobilized to “free Ethiopians” and specifically, Ethiopian women from the brutality of their bad black kings.

Seminal works also point to the instrumentality of violence for political ends, Weber (1970) forms a conceptual tie between violence and politics. Weberian thought asserts that violence, or the threat of it, is how states and political organizations establish and maintain their existence. Other explanations tended to point to a variety of factors that lead to violence such as: group grievances and relative deprivation, resource mobilization opportunity, rational calculations of gains and cost, structural and systemic factors and idiosyncratic factors (Bellamy, 2012; Maynard, 2014; Muller, 2000; Valentino, 2014).

More recent works direct to arguments from necessity, arguments from virtue and affective figurative arguments. Frazer and Hutchings (2007) describe how violence has been legitimized because it is sometimes the only way of achieving things. This depiction portrays violence as the sole or primary means of both prevention and attainment of a specific objective.

The second sets of arguments emanate from position of virtue. Even those that are wholly dismissive of justifying the instrumentalization of physical violence in politics, make exceptions to violence that is motivated by an existential threat. Such violence is broadly conceived as virtuous, ‘health giving’ violence (Fanon, 1963) as opposed to vicious destructive violence. The virtues are ones inculcated in the perpetrators in a variety of ways including through ideological or religious socialization, social norms and traditions, and military discipline that serves to subordinate the perpetrator's individuality to what is framed as a collective good. With this they present a case for the justification of violence undertaken ‘for

the right reasons' by the right people since 'we' (as opposed to 'them') are able to practice it virtuously for just ends (Frazer and Hutchings, 2007). Political violence and war can be legitimised so long as they are understood to be inflicted to "safeguard the political order of the state" (Weber, 1994:310). This often means that the process of attempting to present political violence as justifiable often depicts potential victims as either "dangerous threats" or "guilty criminals". This translates to framing the attacks against them as fulfilling one's duty to the nation or self-defence.

The third set of arguments for political violence are centred on figures that appeal to our ethical and aesthetic sensibilities. The construction of narratives that influence perceptions of figures such as the patriotic soldier, the colonial subject or the exploited proletarian lead to a rationalization of violent actions aimed at either emancipating these figures or eliminating perceived threats posed against them (Ibid.). This heavily relies of the use of language and particular narratives to depict the in- and out- groups.

Literature that has brought language in close conversation with violence has largely focused on hate speech or dehumanization in enabling and catalysing mass violence. And although there have been numerous studies on the correlation between hate speech and mass political violence, Benesch (2019) contradicts the conclusion by some scholars that speech can only encourage violence by ingraining hatred. Her argument is also supported by others like Browning (2001) who contends that perceptions that a group has ambitions that will threaten the in-group and a conviction that these ambitions can only be resolved through violent means may lead to violence without necessarily ingraining hatred. The language used to frame conflicts and the greater narrative surrounding violence has significant effects on the responses to them - both internally within a state's borders and by the international community.

The intellectual debate of why people engage in violence is also accompanied by questions of who engages in them. Most seminal works that look at conflict tend to exclusively attribute political violence to mainly state actors and few elites. More recent studies however tend to

diverge from this previous well-established assumption and engage with the productive plurality of political violence (Ginges, 2019; Mamdani, 2003).

It is increasingly becoming of interest that violence is not inflicted in a vacuum. Kuper (1981) expounds in the elite theory of violence that places responsibility on elites for mobilizing support for violence by noting that elites, however responsible they may be, work in tandem with social forces present within society. Wherever there is rampant violence, there too is a conducive environment created for it (Maynard, 2014). This conducive environment need not be created by mass public participation in direct violence. In fact, it is only a small portion of the population that become directly involved in actual direct violence infliction while the mass just enables it by granting emotional support and approval.

Furthermore, the multiplicity of actors involved in the production of political violence has implications as to the form it takes. When violence is produced under the provision of two or more actors, who enjoy fragmented and overlapping monopolies over violence, perpetrators find themselves having to anticipate the other's strategy whereas under unilateral provision, the violence produced tends to be a direct expression of the perpetrator's interest (Kalyvas, 2006).

Many studies from different disciplines have been devoted to the perpetrators of mass violence. The explanations offered about the natures of perpetrators vary greatly from ones that attribute an inherent evilness to perpetrators, to those who bring in psychological diagnosis of mental illness, and others more that point to the formation of perpetrators through prevailing social and political situations of their times (Kalyvas, 2006; Maynard, 2014; Straus, 2000). Literature on political violence has developed to almost conclusively reject depictions of perpetrators as ruthless killing maniacs who act mindlessly and are "caught up in bloodlust" highlighting instead the "ordinariness" of killers (Maynard, 2014). In presenting the role of perpetrators in violence, whom Maynard refer to as direct killers, Mann (2005) distinguished between what he calls ideological, bureaucratic, bigoted, disciplined and comradesly killers.

Building on the debate on the nature and motivations of perpetrators in lieu of the localization of agency during war, Kalyvas (2003) questions the appropriateness of describing all violence that takes place in war as political. In line with the rational choice theory of violence, he argues that some local actors take advantage of an existing war to settle private conflicts that are often in no relation to the causes and goals of the war. What Mamdani (2003) calls the social production of violence takes place through the dynamic interaction of several local and national actors, their different identities, interests and capabilities (Kalyvas, 2006).

The blurring of the lines between the private and the political in times of violence is what necessitates looking at violence as socially produced either by the privatization of the political or by the politicization of the private. This illustrates that the motives of violence in the context of war are multi-layered and complex and highlights the importance of closely looking into the stated narratives of conflict actors at both local and national levels since unitary intentions may not hold true for different actors at various levels.

2.2 Narratives and Political Violence

Broadly in politics and especially in conflict, language is a means, a 'locus and an object of contest' (Krebs, 2015:2). Especially after the end of the second world war, attempts to understand totalitarian regimes began to look into their political discourse (Wodak, 2009). The examination of the use and structure of arguments and rhetoric to identify oneself and discursively seek legitimation for one's action is the focus of the narrative concept. Narratives are the tools by which humans make meaning out of their experience. What we understand about the world, our ideologies, and presumption of the trajectory of our world are all heavily influenced by the sorts of narratives we engage with and subscribe to.

Cobb (2016) classifies narratives into two broad categories: simplified and complex. While simplified narratives are based on particular interpretation, they attempt to stifle all other alternative interpretations of historical events. By doing so, simplified narratives present dichotomous interpretations of the world: the truth vs the false, the good vs the bad. On the other hand, complex narratives maintain that various interpretations could be made about particular socio- political and historical events and do not make claims to truth value (Ibid.).

Narratives are key tools employed by political actors to configure normative boundaries and define relationships between in- groups and out-groups (Graef, Da Silva and Lemay-Hebert, 2019). A noteworthy demonstration of this is the deliberate and meticulous construction of narratives by successive US administrations following the events of 9/11 (Jackson, 2005).

Narratives serve to depersonalize opponents, instrumentalise members of the public to serve a specific role, legitimize acts of violence and create violence-facilitating societal structures (Maynard and Bensech, 2016; Wiebel, 2019). Earlier studies by Kuper (1981) also note how victims of what would turn out to be a genocide are first victimized through vilifying narratives launched against the entire group.

The utilization of narratives in the application of political violence has proved determinant in figuring out how the violence is produced and reproduced. Argomaniz and Lynch (2021) note how narratives that are well articulated and grounded in the historical victimisation of a group tend to be crucial moves in driving individuals into violence. Da Silva (2018) also notes that constructions of narratives have tangible effects on how perpetrators, victims and other audiences understand and respond to violence.

Maynard and Bensech (2016:76) in their study of the effect of language use as a driver for violence observe as follows:

“In the months or years preceding mass intergroup violence, relevant groups of perpetrators and their supporters come increasingly to see violence as permissible and even necessary. Repertoires of ideas and arguments that encourage such a perception become increasingly formulated and disseminated through speech- spoken, written or otherwise- allowing greater numbers of potential perpetrators to see violence as increasingly thinkable, possible and justified, and to possess the justificatory resources necessary to convince others. Such trajectories are complex, may be halting and uneven, and involve a mix of ‘top-down’, ‘bottom-up’ and ‘horizontal’ processes”.

Many studies on mass violence and atrocities have overstated the importance of dehumanization and radical othering of victims in enabling mass violence. However, these assumptions have not gone unchallenged. For example, Wiebel (2022) in his comparative study of atrocities in revolutionary Ethiopia underscores how in Derg's Red Terror it was not dehumanization that was at play. In fact, the violence "relied precisely on their very human exemplification of the price of non-compliance" (Wiebel, 2022: 140). He notes how depersonalization - the characterization of those as socially deviant (instead of dehumanization) was the official narrative. Lang (2003) provides support for this argument when he contended that much of political violence is aimed at extending one's sense of human power over others it deems as enemies.

Discourses and narratives play crucial roles in presenting violence as necessary, acceptable, even desirable and socially beneficial. Nanlohy (2022) in her study of the conduct of counter-terrorism efforts, looks at how discursive elements are applied as justifications for repression and mass atrocities. Taking the events observed during the 2007 Kenyan Presidential elections as one of her case studies, she notes how dangerous language was broadcast in which Kikuyus were constructed as threats to peace and civilizations that had to be violently wiped out from the region through a series of targeted campaigns (Ibid.).

Narratives around the inevitability of violence have allowed for the displacement of the responsibility for violence onto 'others' (often victims themselves) or abstract forces (Lamb, 1996). This, combined with leaders' tendencies to present complex conflict dynamics and interplays as simplified narratives of good vs. evil, have presented the public with what appear to be simple and clear options. Wiebel (2022) reflects how brutality and mercilessness towards the enemy were recognized as "loyalty" and "revolutionary zealotry" in the Derg regime in what was a bifurcated conception of revolutionary and reactionary forces.

When one is perceived to be a potential source of violence, one thusly becomes responsible for the violence one receives without the necessary presence of an underlying and overarching emotion of hatred. In fact, mass participation is primarily fear-induced, surpassing other

motivations (Valentino, 2004; Wiebel, 2022). Maynard (2015) also elaborates on the various degrees of conviction shown by perpetrators underscoring how perpetrators come to accept the necessity of violence not frantically but regretfully and for lack of clear options. However, even these weaker, non-enthusiastic and more nuanced levels of endorsement are still sufficient and conducive for participation.

Ben-Portah (2007) analyses post-cold war US presidential speeches to draw distinctions in the kinds of narratives that are applied when making a case for war versus when making a case to steer clear from war. He finds that when trying to mobilize for war, governments turn to emotive language that narrate stories of experienced atrocities often along with images that overstate the brutality and inhumanity of the enemy. On the other-hand, presidents that were disinterested in the US's involvement in war tended to refrain from narrative depictions relying instead on generalized condemnations that lack emotive and narrative ties.

The socio-political contexts within which narratives are produced and disseminated cannot be effectively discerned from the socio-political structures and perceptions they are attempting to construct. Maynard and Benesch (2016) develop an analytical framework that describes both context and content when analysing violence-inciting context of speech. They propose looking at 1) The source of the message/speech/narration 2) The audience and their propensity to violence; 3) The socio-historical context and 4) The means of dissemination.

They further remark that the means of dissemination of narratives of political violence the language used to disseminate. They found that if certain sections of a group have to predominantly rely on a particular source of information, like State TV, establishing epistemic dependence, the audience is more likely to accept messages which it otherwise wouldn't (Maynard and Benesch, 2016). This saturation caused by the epistemic dependence of a group on a certain source of information allows even horrific notions to be accepted as common sense (Fujii, 2009). Another factor found to be a significant factor is the language used to disseminate narratives. Message communicated to the in-group "in the mother tongue of an

ethnic group can have more force than if it were delivered in a language shared by other groups” (Maynard and Benesch, 2016:79).

An additional narrative approach taken by state-actors to make a case to justify political violence are the narratives of counter-insurgency and counter-terrorism. Nanlohy (2022) found that at times when the language of terrorism is applied, it immediately served to legitimize any action undertaken by state actors against what they deem to be security threats. Kuper (1968) had earlier furthered this argument when observing how states implicitly claim “the right to commit genocide” as an integral part of their sovereignty. This is often done under the nuanced rubrics of maintaining law and order or preserving the territorial integrity of the state.

Furthermore, narratives of terrorism disincentivize external action as any attempt to prevent or halt the violence can simply be framed as support for terrorism and terrorists. The ambiguity that comes with widely held beliefs of terrorism result in ambivalence in how the political violence is understood and intervened with (Bellamy, 2012). Nanholy (2022) observes how the international community was hesitant to mobilize political capital in the 2009 Sri Lankan civil war for the cost of being seen as supporters and protectors of terrorists.

After the end of the second world war, human psychology began to be centred in the military. With this came the identification of human hesitance to pull a trigger on another human as a weakness in the battlefield. This led to the military increasingly investing in technology that would increase the firing rate surpassing human emotions and hesitance. Lorenz (1997) argues that routineised exaggerated destruction was made possible in modern warfare with the invention of weapons which remove human inhibitions by allowing for more impersonal methods of killing. These technological advances have also had innumerable tactical underpinnings that have transformed the way modern warfare is carried through. A key example here would be the use of drones: which has allowed forces to present damage to the enemy’s forces while preserving their own forces.

Military training was also designed in a way that would make the soldier an “automatic killing machine” (Stahl, 2009:558). Stahl (2009:535) in his study of the rhetorical evolutions of American warfare, sees how “Support the troops” is a rhetorical phrase developed not just to justify war but to “construct a war that needs no justification” by re-centering one’s commitment to the in-group. Weber (1970) notes how the modern army “transforms older versions of violence- frenzy, chivalry, ecstasy, piety, devotion, enthusiasm- into an ethical and routinised skill with a sense of duty”. A key advance made in the military was the renavigation of the narrative that surrounded war. Stahl (2009) observes how the narrative went from “Kill the enemy!” to “Protect your buddy!” and “Protect the integrity of your unit!” thus mobilizing an effective element of duty and loyalty.

Colvin and PISOIU (2018) used Sykes and Matza’s neutralization theory, initially designed to uncover the roots of juvenile delinquency, and tested the application of subcultural neutralization in narratives of political violence. In this, they found five sets of techniques of neutralization are applied to justify the violence within the existing and accepted cultural constructs:

- i. Denial of responsibility* is a technique used by perpetrators to claim that the in-group cannot be responsible for the violence observed as the enemy “had it coming”. Whatever violence that took place was carried out because the enemy failed to abide by the demands set for it.
- ii. Denial of injury* is used to undermine the violence inflicted, accusing the enemy of lying about the level of violence, exaggerating it or at times even fabricating accusations.
- iii. Denial of the victim* insists that it is permissible to attack certain kinds of people so long as it is done to protect the in-group.
- iv. Condemnation of condemners* defends the violence for being a resistance or virtuous violence in the face of those who need to be condemned.
- v. Appeal to higher loyalties* indicates that the acts of violence no matter how brutal, cannot be bad as they were undertaken in the service of freedom, the people, the nation or any other higher abstraction.

2.3 Political Violence in Ethiopia

One of the earliest on record calls for mobilisation in Ethiopia, made by Menelik II's call for national mobilisation against Italy's aspiration to annexe Ethiopia provides a good example to how narratives can be used to mobilise for violence. In his famously powerful call for arms, the emperor

“I have ruled thus war by the grace of God who has vanquished my enemies and expanded my territories. If it comes now, I will not be aggrieved by death since it awaits us all. Till now God has never forsaken me. And I have no doubt that he will continue to guide me. Now, an enemy that seeks to destroy the country and change our religion has come crossing our God given boundaries. I had remained silent as I watched my country's cows dwindle and my people weaken and suffer because of the famine. But the enemy took advantage of this and is encroaching further into our land. With Gods help I will not relinquish my country. My countrymen, I do not feel that I wronged you, nor have you wronged me. I now ask for your help. You who are strong, lend me your strength. Those who don't, for the sake of your child, your wife and your faith, help me with your grief and prayers. You who tries to cheat and refuse to respond, you will choose to cross me, and I will not have and intercessor for this...”¹

-Emperor Menelik II

Sep 17, 1895

(Translation by author)

The above quote from the emperor that is centred in the conception of Ethiopians as people who have ensured their freedom by the use of force provides a starting point to understand how and when war is justified. In his statement the emperor necessitated the use of force and mobilised the population by invoking emotions of love, care and fear. The call to go to war to protect one's valued attributes - one's faith, spouse and offspring was coupled with a threat of actions that would follow failure to act on the call.

Political violence has been framed in the literature on Ethiopia as an unfortunate but inevitable reality. Large breadth of available literature on violence in Ethiopia often takes violence to be

¹ Emperor Menelik's call for mass mobilisation <https://ebc.et/newsdetails.aspx?newsid=6072>

synonymous with ethnic conflict, insurgency and war. And though it is true that these makes way for violence, violence is “a phenomenon in its own rights” (Arendt, 1970) that should be studied and conceptualized separately. In fact, a lot of the violence that takes place during war does so outside of the battlefield (Kalyvas, 2006). Harkavy and Neuman’s (2001) finding reasserts the distinction between war and violence as they found that an inverse relationship exists between the scale of war and the sophistication of belligerent forces' arms and the extent of violence taking place.

Reid (2022) notes how violence has been an essential ingredient in the making and remaking of historical Ethiopia. He contends that at the core of Ethiopia, lays the violence perpetrated against those identified to be an existential threat to the state or as obstacles to its civilizational aspirations. Abiy (2021) too places violence at the centre of Ethiopian political and social life. By looking into Amharic folklore and syntax, he describes how violence has been deeply embedded in the Ethiopian popular culture and the art of political leadership intrinsically tied to violence.

Amongst the scholastic works that deal with political violence in Ethiopia, studies of violence during the Derg’s reign of terror stand out. Abbink (1995) Wiebel (2022) identify several changes and continuities that draw from the country’s long and violent history in the Derg’s production of violence. Wiebel (2019) counters common and monotonous descriptions of the Red Terror being violence by the Derg against Ethiopian youth to draw a broader picture of the context in which the violence of the Red terror took place through the continuous decisions of local and national actors. By introducing the concept of infrastructures of violence, as a framework to explain the extent to which political violence was shaped by the synergy of actors that operated at different levels of analysis – from national government to local neighbourhoods – but within shared violence-facilitating institutional settings.

Partakers in the Derg’s violence, Wiebel (2022) argues, had the pressure of developing institutional and operational norms within and across newly formed organizational structures established primarily to carry out violence. The formation of these new structures created

opportunity for the adoption of new and brutal mechanisms, as a way for individual actors to prove their ‘commitment to the revolution’, that circumvented the pre-existing behavioural norms and accountability structures of state security services.

Researchers of mass political violence employ a variety of terms that describe specific aspects of violence such as the nature of its victims, its mode, scale, perceived intentions and socio-political contexts and implications of it. such as mass killing, atrocity (nature of victims), civil war, violent conflict (manifestations), politicide, democide, genocide (possible intentions) and nature of their victims. However, anyone of these terms is not indisputably appropriate to describe the Tigray war. Some are too narrowly defined, others lack established presence in the academic literature while some others are heavily loaded with historical and political connotations that lead to unproductive and perhaps unnecessary debates about whether they apply to certain cases.

The new and rapidly growing literature on the Tigray war has been scattered in its focus. Yihenuw (2022) has attempted to look at the narratives that surrounded the Mai Kadra massacre, by making use of thematic analysis of media and rights organizations reports. His findings show that two competing narratives have been advanced as to who the victims and perpetrators were and why the massacre happened. However, the attempted search for a truth value had meant that the narratives have not been studied in their own right but as mere cover ups.

Another study by Ermias et al. (2022) explores the interaction of ethnic behavior, economic development and political violence by consulting economic and conflict data from ACLED conflict data. Their findings show that growing urbanization, economic grievances and youth bulge are positively correlated with increased risks of political violence.

A study by Agengehu (2022) of the competing narratives advanced by allies to Federal government and the Tigrayan forces, finds that both follow similar discursive approaches.

These approaches of situating one's cause in the global mobilization for justice and sovereignty, centering historical injustices and identity constructions present interesting lenses for the study of political identity formation.

Chapter Three

3. Research Methodology

In an attempt to explore the narrative world of the conflict to examine how political violence was discursively framed by parties to the Northern war, this thesis adopted a qualitative methodology that employs critical discourse analysis of text, audio, video and imagery material produced by parties in the war. A qualitative methodology, by placing emphasis on in-depth exploration of expressions and meanings that could be derived from them, allows the researcher to examine and analyse social phenomena (Bryman, 2016; Creswell, 2013; Kothari 2004).

As Pink et al. (2015:8) assert, “each research design must be uniquely designed to the research question” it raises. Accordingly, with the aim of understanding how political actors created and promoted narratives of political violence in different times and contexts and to different audiences, this study employs critical discourse analysis to examine the communication from key government and party officials in three cases.

The selection of multiple cases, as an empirical enquiry allows the researcher to contextualize the study and identify generalizable patterns and variations across cases using an in depth investigation (Robson, 2002; Yin, 2009). Since the whole duration of the war lasted for two years, analysing all the content produced during that extensive time-line proved cumbersome. The researcher, therefore, selected three distinct cases within the entire period of the war that marked key developments and where the violence and narrative battles were particularly heightened. The first case begins with the initiation of the war in 2 November 2020 and covers the time until 28 November 2020 where the FDRE had taken full control of Mekelle and announced the end of military operations. The second case covers the time line from 1 October - 20 December 2021 where the TPLF had expanded the war into neighbouring Afar and Amhara regions occupying several cities in these regions up until it was pushed back by the federal governments’ counter offensive. The third case covers the period from 24 August - 2 November 2022 where intense fighting had resumed after a period of truce and covers the

timeline up until the signing of the Cessation of Hostilities Agreement in Pretoria. Broad contexts of these cases is provided in chapter four.

Data for these cases was collected using an advanced search feature from official facebook and X (formerly twitter) accounts (both verified and unverified by Meta) of key governmental or party officials in three time periods. The results included posts, tweets, politician's speeches, briefings and interviews, and media produced by government and/or party affiliated outlets that were shared by the accounts in interest and can be attributed to contributing to the framing around the war. Attempt was made to include a fair and representative sample from both sides.

The narrative agents from the Federal government side included in this study are PM Abiy Ahmed; Dr Gedion Timotheows, Attorney General later Minister of Justice; Billene Seyoum, spokesperson of the Office of the Prime Minister; Ambassador Redwan Hussien the then spokesperson of the state of emergency. In addition, communication by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and FDRE Communication Service were included because of their official and significant role in communicating the government's activities and positions to both local and international audiences. The State of Emergency Fact check (SOEFactCheck) was also included in lieu of it being an official effort by the government to regulate information flow.

When it comes to the narrative agents of Tigray, one finds that the prolonged internet disruption in Tigray has meant that TPLF officials and elites have had limited online presence and international engagement particularly in the first month of the war. During this time, there were efforts from the Tigrayan diaspora elites to fill the narrative gap that was created. In some instances, some of these elites and media personalities claimed to be speaking based on the information they have gotten from TPLF officials. For this reason, Tigrayan elites such as Mehari Tadele and Alula Solomon were included in the initial periods of data collecting. However, the contrast these contents had in lieu of the official narratives being pushed by TPLF officials has compelled the researcher to sideline these accounts and instead rely on the narrative agents media appearances and interviews on Tigray TV, Dimtsi Woyane, Reuters and Tigray Media House.

Moreover Debretsion Gebremicahel, chairman of the TPLF and the then-president of the Tigray region; General Tadesse Werede, Commander-in-chief of Tigrayan Forces; Getachew Reda, spokesperson of the TPLF and General Tsadkan Gebretensay, Commander of Tigrayan forces are the narrative agents whose communication were analysed. Additionally, statements from Tigray External Affairs Office, an office established by the TPLF in August 2021 to “cooperate with international community, facilitate communications and provide timely information to interested parties” (Tghat, 2021) was inspected.

The text and image data were collected separately by taking screenshots, keeping a link (although some content have been deleted since) and using internet based web archiving services such as Internet Archive and archive.today. The collected data was then separately read through and categorized into different sections based on its source, the time of its dissemination and the language used (its intended audience) and coded to easily identify the themes it touches upon. This was then analysed by closely reading between the lines and taking note of repeated patterns, expressions and expressed intentions along with the context in which the piece was produced so as to situate the online narratives with (and not against) the grain of offline mobilization and violence.

Digital data collection helps researchers to look beyond just the content produced and locate it in the larger socio-cultural context in which it was produced and disseminated. The past few years have especially witnessed a rise in social science research employing digital data collection tools as a result of difficulties associated with going to the field in pandemic conditions, leading to the internet ‘becoming *the* field site’ instead of one of the field sites (Varghese and Ranganathan, 2022: 517 emphasis added). As Deuze argues, our daily lives are so submerged in the digital media that “we no longer live with, but in media” (Deuze, 2011:137). Accordingly, data collected from the digital space is understood as having implications in conduct and mobilization offline as opposed to the ‘online’ being the centre and sole location of the work (Pink et al., 2015).

The digital setting being one of the main discursive battle grounds between the two sides of the conflict (Agengehu, 2022; Pohjonen, 2022), makes an additional case for digital data collection as a crucial aspect in contextualizing the narrative battles. Data from StatCounter, a web traffic analysis website based in Dublin, and DFR lab, the Atlantic Council's digital forensic research lab, show that online engagement responding to the conflict has overseen an uptick on social media usage (Wilmot et. al, 2021). It is also worth factoring that either side of the conflict were propping their supporters and allies to get into the digital spaces to the extent of doing twitter (now X) account creation segments on state TV, WhatsApp groups and other platforms.

Though the digital space cannot be used to reliably examine citizen's response to the war and the narratives surrounding it because of the internet disruption in Tigray and the many misinformation and disinformation campaigns unleashed by both sides of the war (BBC, 2024; Zelalem, 2022; Wilmot et al., 2021), it is still a valuable approach to record official narratives in the course of the war as federal forces as well as TPLF- affiliated media and even TPLF officials themselves (albeit to a lesser degree) have had online presence throughout the periods of interest. The selection of official partisan accounts also helps to circumvent complications relating to authenticity, relevance and identity that normally accompany digital data collection in social sciences.

3.1 Critical Discourse Analysis

Critical discourse analysis is a method of a qualitative analysis that examines the subjective and underlying meaning of language within the context it is applied to by looking into the intended meaning of the words used beyond just their definitions (Krzyżanowski, 2011). Critical discourse analysis is a late bloomer in the social sciences only becoming well established in the 1990s as an interdisciplinary and problem-oriented research program (Fairclough 2003; Wodak, 2009). Though many early uses of CDA were by linguists who sought to explore the lexico-grammatical meanings of produced text, over the years it has developed to be understood as a school of thought (Blommaert et al., 2001; van Dijk, 2007; Wodak and Meyer, 2009). Recent application of CDA has also taken a step further from studying text and speech to account for the multimodality of communicative practices (van Leeuwen, 2006).

Van Dijk's (1997) theorization of discourse as a social practice describes discourse both as an action in its own right and as a social practice that generates material effect. Fairclough (1992) reasserts this by stating that discourse is not an individual's task but a practice that is formed by broader power structures. This has led to a growing number of researchers seeking to understand enduring social structures by using linguistic analysis with a social theory. This understanding of discourse as a social practice has led social scientists to focus on the identification and analysis of discourse as an important tool to understand society (Fairclough, 2003).

Discourses are communicative representations of "the processes, relations and structures" of the physical world that not only present the world as it is perceived by the agent but also the potentialities of an arrangement thought to be possible (Fairclough, 2003:124). Developing on this, Wodak (2014) identifies a dialectical and reciprocal relationship between a discursive event and social structures whereby the discursive practice is shaped by, but also shapes the social structure.

Corresponding to Fairclough's 2003 three levels of discourse: piece of text, discursive practices and social practice, three stages of analysis were identified: description, interpretation and explanation. This study employs a critical discourse analysis approach to describe what was said, what was done and how what was (being) done was justified by discursively.

Reisigl and Wodak (2005: 32) make distinctions between text or discourse-immanent, socio diagnostic and prospective critiques in discourse analysis. Whilst text-immanent critique looks at the logico-semantic elements, cohesion, syntax and text structure, it is largely apolitical. In contrast, the socio diagnostic critique, which this thesis undertakes, aims to unveil the socio-political goals (Van Dijk, 1997) and functions of manifest or latent discursive practices (Wodak, 2009). It does this by analysing both the discourse in itself as well as by inferring from the social, historical and political context in which it was spoken/written.

Critical discourse analysis takes language as a political tool that is deployed in social relations, beyond just a social practice (Gee, 2011; Fairclough, 2003). And as a method, it is helpful to examine the relations between discursive practices and the larger social and cultural structures. It aims to shed light as to how discourse or language affect the development and (re) production of power, and by extension violence (Van Dijk, 2001; Wodak, 2009).

Complex social phenomena such as war invites itself to critical investigation that requires a multidisciplinary and multimethodological approach. Amer (2017) employs critical discourse analysis to examine the representation of political actors in the media coverage of the 2008-2009 Gaza war by analysing text from international newspapers. Kalsi (2017) used critical discourse analysis to analyse and explain the discursive constructions of meaning in news coverage of the end of the Iraq war. Biset Ayalew (2023) also employed critical discourse analysis to examine local newspaper reporting of the Tigray war. Biset (2023:2) maintains that CDA is the “most suitable framework to get to the bottom of the ideological motivation within the process of textual content production and intake related to the information about the war”.

The development and dissemination of narratives cannot be seen independently of the communicative devices of the time. Chouliarari and Fairclough (1991) had earlier commented on how radically the technological revolution has changed discourse. This still holds and is even extended due to the instant and very broad reach of social media platforms that impede passive spectatorship (Agengehu, 2022; Chouliaraki, 2006). This holds especially true in light of the social and political cleavages that were laid bare by the Tigray war and the layered grievances expressed by different sides. The different social media campaigns launched by allies of either side of the war as studied by Wilmot, Tveteraas and Drew (2021) are examples of this.

Critical discourse analysts take particular interest in studying latent types of everyday speech that largely go unchallenged by their audiences and are often presented as analogies and metaphors (Lakoff and Johnson 1999). These kinds of discourses, as will be in the next chapter,

are cases in point of the effort by either side to secure dominance over the contestation for narratives and framings.

No official text or speech is an island unto itself, but is dialectically related to its broader discursive environment and indeed to ongoing events, given that the times in which we read a text or hear a speech impacts and transforms our interpretation of them. Accordingly, this research integrates the use of digital data collection to inform and contextualise the analysis. It does this by providing descriptions of the context and interpretive analyses of the narratives that seek to make sense of the phenomenon to map the qualitative shifts in the narration by both parties.

Chapter Four

4. Findings and Discussion

This chapter begins by providing an overview of the lead up to the war and contextualizing the cases in question, indicating forms of violence that have been identified by both parties and qualifying the sources of the narratives. Subsequent sections of this chapter will analyse how the prevalent narratives in the communications by the two parties served to justify and rationalize various forms of violence taking place within the context of the Tigray War during the three cases. The findings suggest that the rationalization of political violence relies on at least five categories of narratives that have been found to be predominant features of communicative practices by the federal government and TPLF: Narratives of self identification, Narratives of victimization, Narratives of virtue, Narratives of inevitability and Narratives of senselessness. There is however, a considerable overlap and continuity between these narratives making it impossible to cleanly delineate one group of narratives from the other. For example, the narratives of victimization that frame the enemy as a brutal, genocidal invader also serve to portray the in-group's own violence as a virtuous act of resistance to evil.

4.1 The lead up to the war

The outbreak of the conflict on the night of 3 November, 2020 was preceded by a long period of widening political differences and straining of relations between the two sides. The already problematic relations were further strained and edged towards military confrontation in September when the TPLF defied² decisions by the House of Federations³ to extend the terms of the federal and regional governments until the Covid 19 pandemic allowed for holding the elections that were planned to take place in August 2020. The party administering the Tigray region rejected the decision on the basis of it being in violation of the FDRE constitution and unilaterally conducted elections after establishing a regional election board⁴. Later on, the TPLF claimed to have won some 98% of the seats in the regional council.

² Letter by the TPLF to the HoF, 3 August, 2020

<https://www.facebook.com/photo/?fbid=3418692824849624&set=a.1183967098322219>

³ Decisions by the HoF were made endorsing recommendations made by the Council of Constitutional Inquiry(CCI) after the matter was deferred to the latter by the House of People's Representatives. www.hofethiopia.gov.et/web/guest/decisions-document/preview/29608/21536

⁴ Tigray state council approves appointment of regional electoral commission, 16 July 2020, <https://addisstandard.com/?p=16203>

In October, 2020 TPLF claimed that the federal government's mandate has expired and that it will no longer be responsive to decisions and regulations by what it called “an illegal and illegitimate” government. The party went further to recall its representatives⁵ in the upper and lower houses of the Ethiopian parliament. And as a way out of this conundrum, it suggested the formation of an inclusive and independent caretaker government that will be in charge until national dialogue is held.⁶

The federal government responded by passing a decision through the House of Federation to cut ties with Tigray regional council and higher executive bodies formed following the “null and void” September election and decided to only maintain relationships with lower level city/town and woreda administrations.⁷

The situation stayed highly volatile with the regional state flexing its military muscle, staging military parades bearing heavy weapons, and stating that it is ready to take on the federal government.⁸ It finally exploded on the night of 3 November 2020 with an attack opened on the Northern Command of the Ethiopian National Defence Forces. The story of when and how the violence started however, remains to be a contested narrative throughout the period in question. Analysis of narratives from both the TPLF and the FDRE government has shown that both sides have been promoting divergent interpretations as to the outbreak of violence. While the Federal government maintains what finally led it to war, after years of restraint to the TPLF’s provocation and incitement was the attack on the Northern Command, the TPLF will later say that its ‘preemptive strike’ to neutralize the command was a mere change in the form of violence that have been perpetrated to subjugate Tigrayans at large⁹ since the coming to power of the prime minister.

4.2 Forms of political violence

The data collected for this research shows several forms of violence have been identified by both parties to the war. Through several of its produced content, the federal government

⁵ TPLF Executive Asmelash Woldeselassie in an interview with Tigrai Tv, 28 Septemebr 2020 <https://youtu.be/zWyyT5g0bWI?si=jK-a3UiK8-5j6uG8>

⁶ TPLF Statement, 29 Septemeber 2020 <https://www.facebook.com/tplf.officia/posts/3580276162024622>

⁷ House of Federations decision regarding Tigray, 6 October 2020 <https://www.fanabc.com/archives/36766>

⁸ BBC Tigrinya, 2 August 2020, <https://www.bbc.com/tigrinya/news-53627997>

⁹ Getachew Reda interview with DW (8 November 2020) https://youtu.be/0PUM7U--YsE?si=qk4Uc38y4P_IMn4a

accuses the TPLF of violence that include direct killings, sexual violence, looting, crop destruction, destruction of public legal and financial documents, economic attack and sabotage, infrastructure destruction, violence against the dead and truncated violence such as those perpetrated against the values of the people and the sovereignty of the state. The TPLF too accuses the federal and allied forces of several covert and overt violence that include massacres, torture, sexual violence, unlawful detention, travel ban, sieges, structural violence and truncated violence against the dignity of Tigrayans.

Though each of these acts of violence were not produced with clearly stated political goals and interests, the fact that they were created within the overall political environment and the infrastructures of violence it created compels one to consider them as acts of political violence.

4.2.1 Key events and Timeline

For the purpose of this thesis, the researcher took three case studies from the period of the war focusing on around three key events (the seizure of Mekelle by federal forces, the southward March of Tigrayan forces into Amhara, the resumption and re-escalation of the conflict leading to federal forces recapturing Tigrayan cities before the signing of the Cessation of Hostilities Agreement) where the violent interaction and narrative battles between the belligerents was at its climax.

4.2.1.1 Case One: 2- 28 November 2020

On November 2, 2020 a day before the outbreak, the FDRE Prime Minister made an Amharic post¹⁰ in light of a massacre that happened in Wollega, accusing ‘enemies of Ethiopia’ of accepting a mission from foreign forces and using all their might to destabilize the country. The statement warned that the government will take all the necessary measures to finally bring an end to the mayhem that had been spurring the country. Although no specific actor was named in the statement there were previous and subsequent accusations of TPLF training, organizing and supporting opposition forces to cause chaos in different parts of the country¹¹.

¹⁰ Tweet: <https://x.com/AbiyAhmedAli/status/1323248491599187969>

¹¹ “[TPLF has been] bankrolling, training and instigating faith based and ethnic violence in various parts of the country.” Amb. Redwan Hussien in a briefing to diplomats. 7 November 2020
<https://x.com/mfaethiopia/status/1325103295392845831>

On the same day, Debretsion Gebremichael, chairman of the TPLF, addressed¹² the media in Tigrinya accusing the federal government of trying to forcefully subdue Tigray and calling on the population in Tigray to prepare for what he called, the ‘impending people’s war’. In the same statement, the chairman forbade transfer of information regarding military activity through any mainstream or social media platforms that does not come from his administration; a day later his forces attacked the Northern Command of the Ethiopian National Defense Force which marked the formal beginning of the war.

The next morning, a state of emergency¹³ was declared by the FDRE Council of Ministers and fighting continued. In the coming days government services in Tigray would be halted,¹⁴ the immunity of TPLF leaders lifted¹⁵, and a transitional government in Tigray established¹⁶.

Within the first month of the war news of two massacres in Mai Kadra and Humera would reach international media. The first phase of the war would be carried out through various land and air strikes including drone attacks and rocket fires. The involvement of foreign forces particularly would also be a source of contention in this period (Hirt, 2022).

After less than a month of fighting, on the evening of November 28, 2020 the Prime Minister would declare that the ENDF has taken full control of the regional capital of Tigray, Mekelle bringing the first phase to an end (Annys et al., 2021).

In the subsequent months the Tigrayan forces would enter into an armed insurgency amidst several reports of human rights violations, atrocities and humanitarian crisis implicating the Eritrean and Ethiopian forces. The US State Department would also announce imposing economic and security sanctions on parties to the war. In June, federal government conducts national elections and declares a unilateral humanitarian ceasefire upon the request of the Tigray Provisional Administration and withdraws its forces from Tigray. The TPLF would

¹² Media Address: https://www.facebook.com/watch/live/?ref=watch_permalink&v=660920374590237

¹³ Decision by the Council of Ministers: <https://x.com/PMEthiopia/status/1323901191902822406>

¹⁴ Reporter: <https://www.thereporterethiopia.com/10417/>

¹⁵ Though the TPLF had recalled its members and deemed the government illegal, the term of previous MPs along with their immunities had been extended
<https://www.facebook.com/EBCzena/photos/a.542045289160685/3864747016890479/>

¹⁶ Resolution passed to establish a transitional government in Tigray. 7 November 2020
<https://addisstandard.com/news-alert-house-of-federation-adopts-resolution-to-establish-a-transitional-government-in-tigray/>

then recapture Mekelle and continue spilling over the conflict into neighbouring regions until a major escalation in October.

4.2.1.2 Case Two: 1 October - 20 December 2021

The month of October began with the federal government expelling top UN officials for alleged meddling in the internal affairs of the country.¹⁷ Renewed and intensified attacks marked the end of the unilateral ceasefire that was declared by the government back in June as the prime minister is sworn in for another term. The war encroaches into neighbouring Amhara and Afar regions as Tigrayan forces seized cities and towns in the regions and announced forming a military alliance with the Oromo Liberation Army (OLA) to march to Addis Ababa¹⁸. A year after initial fighting started, on 5 November 2021, the TPLF and OLA along with seven other smaller opposition forces based both at home and in the diaspora announced the formation of a united front that aims to overthrow the government and seek a political transition from the US capital¹⁹.

Fighting continued in the TPLF's favour as it threatens to March towards the capital capturing major cities in Amhara before the prime minister announces that he will go to lead the army from the front lines²⁰. Soon after, Tigrayan forces' incursion into Amhara and Afar were successfully repelled and the forces were pushed back to the Tigray region. The federal government, however, made a decision to not advance further into Tigray wary of being implicated in accusations of genocide²¹ amongst other reasons.

4.2.1.3 Case Three: 24 August - 2 November 2022

After federal forces pushed back Tigrayan forces in December, 2021 fighting had slowed down and there were talks of negotiation and reconciliation²². The federal government's declaration

¹⁷ Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 30 September 2021 <https://x.com/mfaethiopia/status/1443596419068305408>

¹⁸ 11 August 2021, <https://apnews.com/article/africa-only-on-ap-ethiopia-b280e6622d66b7e7f9b12cd1d0041ae8>

¹⁹ A year into the war, on 6 November 2021 <https://www.reuters.com/world/africa/nine-ethiopian-groups-form-anti-government-alliance-2021-11-05/>

²⁰ Statement from the PMO, 22 November 2021, <https://www.facebook.com/PMAbiyAhmedAli/posts/666400078107992>

²¹ Statement by FDRE Government Communication Service, 24 December 2021 <https://x.com/FdreService/status/1474361954441605122>

²² See "We need national reconciliation and peace to reverse the abuses committed in our country including the conflict that occurred in the past year following the Junta's attack on our defense forces." Statement by Abiy

of an indefinite humanitarian truce and talks about the potential resumption of services²³ was also another sign of good faith to finding a peaceful end to the conflict.

Nonetheless, in 24 August 2022, there was yet another reignition of intensified conflict in Northern Wollo. While both sides accused one another of initiating this round of conflicts²⁴, the fighting intensified with tens of thousands being reported killed within only few weeks. The use of human wave tactic also became a prominent description of the military engagement of both parties. The FDRE had secured the military upper-hand and recaptured several cities in Tigray as the African Union Chairperson announced the commencement of peace talks in Pretoria and the period was concluded with the signing of the cessation of hostilities agreement²⁵.

4.2.2 Narrative Agents

The findings in this chapter are informed by the narratives that were being produced and disseminated by the top level officials of both the Federal government and the TPLF and its armed forces as well as press statements and media briefing that were given through the various institutions of these actors such as the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, and the FDRE Communications Services in the case of the federal government and the National Government of Tigray, The Military Command of Tigray's Army and Tigray External Affairs Office and are taken to represent the official positions.

Official government and party narratives are of a particular interest as their engagement in war is heavily reliant on public resources and the lives of the citizens. Convincing the public that the war is rational, justified and necessary therefore becomes a central objective of designing wartime communications (Nanlohy, 2022).

Ahmed. 6 January 2022. <https://www.facebook.com/PMAbiyAhmedAli/posts/694927258588607> and Africa News (12 June 2022) Ethiopia PM says committee looking into possibility of peace talks with Tigray rebels. <https://www.africanews.com/2022/06/14/ethiopia-pm-says-committee-looking-into-possibility-of-peace-talks-with-tigray-rebels/>

²³ US and EU Joint statement, 2 August 2022 <https://et.usembassy.gov/u-s-and-eu-joint-press-statement/>

²⁴ See Tigray's Army Command, 24 August 2022 <https://x.com/TigrayEAO/status/1562365739100667904> and FDRE Governemnt Communication Service, 24 August 2022 <https://x.com/FdreService/status/1562418289162309632>

²⁵ African Union, 2 Novemeber 2022, <https://www.peaceau.org/uploads/press-release-cessation-of-hostilities-pretoria-2-11-2022.pdf>

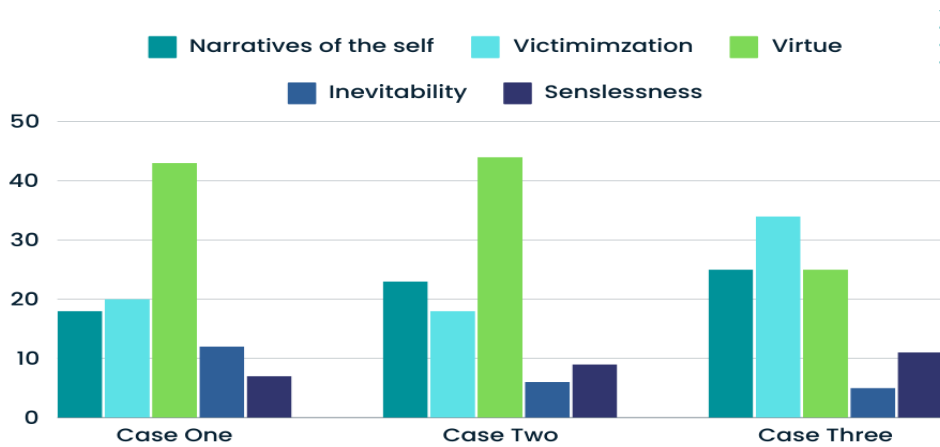


Figure 1: Narrative variation across the three cases

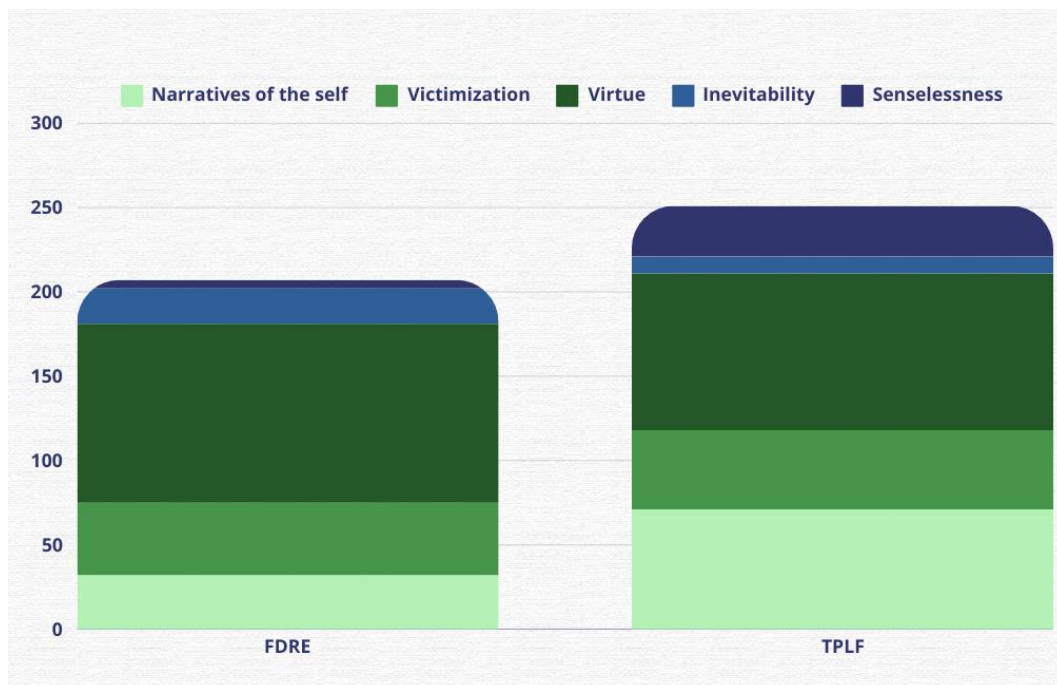


Figure 2: Narrative variation between the two actors

Figures 1 and 2 above, offer a visual representation of the thematic distribution across the three cases and between the FDRE and TPLF. The first graph illustrates the thematic breakdown for three distinct cases, each case displays varying levels of these themes, with noticeable differences in their prominence. The second graph compares these themes between two major entities, the Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia (FDRE) and the Tigray People's Liberation Front (TPLF). It highlights how each entity employs these themes, with significant differences in their thematic emphasis. These visualizations provide a comprehensive understanding of the narrative strategies used by the actors, facilitating a deeper analysis of their rhetorical approaches.

4.3 Narratives of the self

Narratives form the bedrock upon which individuals and groups understand themselves in relation to others by providing frameworks through which collective experiences are understood and interpreted. Though they might not directly engage violence, political narratives of the self mediate a range of social, economic and historical experiences and shape how they are conceptualized and remembered. The processes of constructing political identities do not just point out differences one group has from the other, they build relevance on those differences to make them politically and psychologically relevant (Maynard, 2015). Discursive approaches to identity formation serve to conceptualize and communicate who one is, how they came to be and where their collective journey will take them.

The war time narratives from both the federal government and the TPLF had devoted significant portion of their communication to framing their respective groups and how they understand themselves relationally to the other to lay the groundwork for the narratives that directly mediate violence. The findings show that discursive formation of identities has had several layers and has been geared towards different audience for different purposes. Nonetheless, the discursive construction of identities at the national and international levels were done in a totalizing and homogeneous manner by both parties. The narratives corresponding to identities of the self presented actors' identities as Ethiopians, Africans, Tigrayans; and depicted the other as the nemesis to either of these identities in an attempt to drive a wedge between the self-claimed identities of the parties at war and the broader population implicated in the formation of the identity group.

The African identity was invoked by both sides at different times across the three cases. Attaching oneself to the African identity came along with detaching the other and positioning them as the enemy of it (Agengehu, 2022). Communication from TPLF took the lead in the invocation of Africanness as they framed Tigray as fighting an African war against a coordination of non-African forces²⁶ (with references to Iranian, Turkish and UAE weapons²⁷ used by the federal government). The TPLF, especially during the first case, called on fellow

²⁶ National Governemnt of Tigray Regional State, 16 November 2020 <https://www.facebook.com/tplf.officia/posts/pfbid0PMUQsfttXrXdAGv6eNcUiMK3C3rzzKvwkPUqT7i6b6zcZEXELOKC3SPiLiC6LnmWl>

²⁷ Getachew Reda, 15 November 2020 https://x.com/reda_getachew/status/1327874109355778059

Africans to collectively stand up to condemn the violence being perpetrated against them. The TPLF chairperson in a letter addressed to the then Chairperson of the African Union, H.E. Cyril Ramaphosa, in the first few days of the war requested the latter to play a role in averting an all out civil war in Ethiopia in the spirit of African solidarity²⁸.

The federal government too invoked the African identity in their narratives. Particularly in the second case, Ethiopia's position was historically placed as the symbol of African liberation and sovereignty that continued to be the face of African struggle; this time against Western domination, incursions and sanctions²⁹. With references to the many African countries that have adopted the colours of the Ethiopian flag into their own flags as a base for solidarity, Africans were discursively mobilized by agents in the federal government, to call out the overt double standards by Western powers that were threatening the sovereignty of Africa's symbol of independence.

In the second case, the war had narratively evolved from being for the sovereignty and territorial integrity of Ethiopia to being an African war against undue Western pressure, unsolicited intervention and agenda-driven, coordinated campaigns by international media. The Libyan case was invoked³⁰ by official government communications to draw similarities and demonstrate the devastation that would become of Ethiopia, the pioneer of independence, if the country fails to stand up to Western pressures. Calls for Africans and African states to take back narratives of the continent into their own hand were further substantiated by efforts to effectively mobilize African states to demand a permanent representation at the United Nations Security Council.

Western accusations against Ethiopia were also located in a global prejudicial and stereotypical frame of discourse as can be seen by the following quote from a "Statement on depictions made by some international mainstream media" by the FDRE Government Communications Service:

²⁸ Letter from the president of Tigray regional state, 6 November 2020

²⁹ See Ministry of Foreign Affairs 17 December 2021 <https://x.com/mfaethiopia/status/1471897222446997508>

³⁰ Statement by the PMO 3 November 2021 <https://x.com/AbiyAhmedAli/status/1455730830450569218>

“To the average Western reader.... it all sounds plausible, and the premise is all too familiar. A poor African country and a regime with a natural inclination to brutalize its own people is the image that comes up instinctively.”³¹

The Ethiopian identity was also claimed by both parties across the three cases. From the initiation of the war, federal actors have articulated their Ethiopian identities relationally. In the first case the Ethiopian identity was narrated in relation to shared values and recent history of suffering under the TPLF led EPRDF’s decades long repressive regime. Official communications in November 2020 drew focus to Ethiopians, the people of Tigray included, as peace-loving people who have been denied their rights to security, unity and well-being by the TPLF in the recent past³². Ethiopians were presented as proud people aspiring for national unity, peace and prosperity. The heroism of the people was alluded to though it was yet to be a central part of the Ethiopian identity formation that would come in later months. In the first case, Ethiopian’s quest for justice and their love for their country took centre stage and the soldier was represented as the embodiment of generations of Ethiopians who have sacrificed their lives for the sovereignty and territorial integrity.³³ Several images shared by accounts from the federal government in the first month depicted a soldier in uniform with the Ethiopian flag, urging Ethiopians to increasingly identify with the soldier, particularly the soldiers assaulted by the TPLF in the November 3 attack.

In the first and the second cases, narratives from the TPLF increasingly made relations with the Ethiopian identity and attempted to drive a wedge between the federal government and the rest of Ethiopians. Self-characterizations as people who have “martyred and sacrificed in hundreds of thousands to build a state and develop the country”³⁴ presented the TPLF and Tigrayans at large as statesmen by whose sacrifice present day Ethiopia was formed. The TPLF accused the federal government of being at odds with the people of Ethiopia as a whole and presented their case as being different only because they had a ‘strong organization and

³¹ Statement by the FDRE Communication Services, 2 December 2021 <https://x.com/FdreService/status/1466401063968329730/photo/2>

³² Stamenet by the PMO 22 November 2020 <https://x.com/AbiyAhmedAli/status/1330551525324754952>

³³ Prime minister 16 November 2020 <https://x.com/AbiyAhmedAli/status/1328270063468744704>

³⁴ Media Briefing by Tigrayan forces spokesperson 20 November 2020 https://youtu.be/UfxvVIHnojA?si=ISUyya9_728YVYcf

were a government'³⁵. This line of reasoning explains the way towards the self imposed responsibility of 'salvaging Ethiopia'³⁶ the TPLF said it was taking by standing together with members of the ENDF. The day of the November 3 attack, a public address by the TPLF chairperson alluded to the them fighting off pertinent attacks along with the ENDF, whom he referred to as "part of our people". These claims were later repeated by members of the TPLF who said a majority of the members of the ENDF had deflected and stood with the Tigrayan forces.³⁷

The narrative construction of the Ethiopian self was noticeably detached from the picture of the soldier by the FDRE in the second case analysed. Here, narratives that aimed at the conceptualization of the Ethiopian identity made references to Ethiopia as country with long history of statehood made possible by the unity and selfless struggle of citizens³⁸. The call for Ethiopians at this time wasn't merely to support the armed forces but to actively join the struggle as there is "no Ethiopianness without sacrifice!"³⁹. The heroism of generations of Ethiopians in coming together during difficult times to fight off those that attempted to subdue them was invoked along with the perseverance of the people and their collective will to save their country by all means against the coordinated threat from a range of internal and external forces that threaten the sovereignty and territorial integrity. The divinity of the country, historically anchored in the 12th Century document of *Kebre Negest* was also alluded to by the PM making references to the role played by "Ethiopia's lord"⁴⁰ in making his government withstand internal and external pressures. The country was framed as one standing on the sacrifices made for it so far and needing sacrifices to continue existing⁴¹ thereby mobilising the population to join the armed forces and head to the front.

The TPLF's invocation of the Ethiopian identity continued in other forms that attempted to estrange the FDRE from Ethiopians in the second and third cases. These included accusations of the federal government compromising Ethiopia's sovereignty by inviting foreign forces that

³⁵ Briefing by Debretsion Gebremicahel 3 November 2020 <https://youtu.be/G5nR-x88i14?si=4CGmx6hZRU8320PE>

³⁶ Getachew Reda, 8 November 2020 <https://youtu.be/0PUM7U--YsE?si=nLRAcvmWicm1wZKt>

³⁷ Getachew Reda, 9 November 2020 https://youtu.be/09_wlib7QwI?si=CUgxyLZXKveT61UL

³⁸ Prime Minister 6 November 2021 <https://x.com/AbiyAhmedAli/status/1456867930000527361>

³⁹ FDRE Government Communication 4 November 2021 <https://www.facebook.com/FDRECommunicationService/photos/a.104274498718181/115320134280284/>

⁴⁰ Statement by PMO 8 December 2021 <https://x.com/AbiyAhmedAli/status/146850764321183335>

⁴¹ Prime Minister: "We will either be Ethiopians or Ethiopia" 26 November, 2021

wanted to disintegrate Ethiopia and outsourcing national defence and security interests⁴². Accusing the FDRE of ‘prostrating before Ethiopia’s enemies i.e Egypt and Sudan, to do their bidding’⁴³ aimed at presenting the TPLF as being more concerned about Ethiopian national interest. The second and third cases saw several coordinated and repeated attempts of alienation focused on the Amhara identity. Key actors from the Tigrayan military and civilian leadership repeatedly stated that the war was not between Amhara and Tigray⁴⁴ “despite the federal government attempt to make the Amhara region a theatre of war”⁴⁵ by sending human waves of unarmed Amharas⁴⁶; perhaps, as a response to re-invocation of the historic accusations against TPLF of being anti-Amhara that resurfaced after one of the TPLF’s leaders speeches that promised to “settle scores” with Amhara elites.

The Tigrayan identity was also discursively mediated by agents of the TPLF as a political identity that has been formed through generations of struggle and martyrdom for freedom and self-determination⁴⁷. Constructions of Tigrayan identity, followed heavily essentializing⁴⁸ lines. Tigrayans were framed as people who have, like gold, been tested by fire and have proven their resilience and perseverance⁴⁹. Politico-historical tropes about consistent victimization of Tigrayans by successive Ethiopian regimes⁵⁰ with several references to bombings by the Haile Selassie and Derg regimes were made to effectively detach it from the Ethiopian identity and construct its existence as always being in opposition to the unitary Ethiopian state.⁵¹ This was driven further by citing present instances of violence against Tigrayans living in other parts of the country in terms of detentions, suspension from work, discriminations and travel bans. Thereby, framing the federal government’s war not just against the TPLF and the region it was governing but also against the political identity of Tigrayans.

⁴² Getachew Reda, 19 September 2022 https://x.com/reda_getachew/status/1571908649294958592

⁴³ Press Conference 30 August 2022 https://youtu.be/0_6uGAV9iIQ?si=eQeQY0qJFZvmq0S4

⁴⁴ Gen. Tadesse 31 August 2022 <https://www.youtube.com/live/EQI-rcRRsWo?si=3xsYhRZBtBwFaqPK>

⁴⁵ Press Conference Getachew Reda 30 August 2022 https://youtu.be/0_6uGAV9iIQ?si=bQTLcGzq7AVbzws9

⁴⁶ Getachew Reda 1 November 2021 https://x.com/reda_getachew/status/1455212346981429256

⁴⁷ Media Briefing by Tigrayan forces spokesperson, 20 November 2020

<https://youtu.be/UfxvVIHnojA?si=9WjuEsVEI8ZtOvh>

⁴⁸ For example, in response to allegations by Amnesty international of Tigrayan forces involvement in the Mai Kadra massacre, TPLF chairperson said “it is not the people of Tigray’s culture to yield knives and machetes”

⁴⁹ Debretsion Gebremichael, 4 December 2021

<https://www.facebook.com/Dr.Debretsion.Official/posts/pfbid0LabourDTHgPRDCW8vuLkKTrNRFW4TfrsQqnApTyuaWRd4RyEAmWP6o4WWwXHpVBtl>

⁵⁰ Getachew Reda, 7 November 2020 <https://youtu.be/zuX0GohprXE?si=hw8wWFFtXJPVknRq>

⁵¹ Getachew Reda, 7 November 2020 <https://youtu.be/0PUM7U--YsE?si=DkBX58nEPs9OSukO>

A few, albeit inconsistent and scant efforts were made by the federal forces to detach the TPLF from its Tigrayan base. At different times throughout the war the federal government appealed to the Tigrayan population in both Tigrinya⁵² and Amharic languages to distance themselves from the TPLF in light of the crimes the TPLF has committed against the people of Tigray. This was particularly prevalent in the first case where the federal forces would frame their seizure of Tigrayan towns as an act that liberated Tigrayans from the chokehold of the TPLF. Stories of Tigrayan youth realizing TPLF's 'evil intentions' and standing with the federal forces, handing over weapons that were given to them by the TPLF, freeing captive members of the ENDF, leading federal forces to the TPLF trenches and requesting for the defence force to remain in their towns were being told by the Ethiopian forces.⁵³ In an effort drive a wedge between the TPLF and the Tigrayan populous, further appeals to Tigrayans to not sacrifice their lives for the impunity of few 'greedy' individuals that 'do not hesitate to use human shields to evade accountability'⁵⁴ were accompanied with promises of protection for those that deflected.

In the second and third cases too, the federal government continued to frame the TPLF as enemies of Tigrayans that is holding the population of Tigray hostage⁵⁵, hijacking and curtailing humanitarian aid delivery⁵⁶. However, there was a shift in the tone of government communication after federal troops withdrawal from Mekelle in June 2021. Communications by the government after June 2021 also participated in the essentialization of the Tigrayan identity. For example, in a briefing to top government officials, the PM said:

Military code tells you that to win you have to know and think like your enemy, we cannot do that since we have inherent differences with them. Anyone in Tigray cannot think twice about this war..It is a natural condition.⁵⁷

-(translated and paraphrased)

⁵² PM Abiy 13 November 2020 https://youtu.be/eP60xGpNPPE?si=CYGHY2RWk9_vQBg2

⁵³ Statement by PMO 26 November 2020 <https://x.com/AbiyAhmedAli/status/1331853743810285575>

⁵⁴ Statement by PMO, 22 November 2020, <https://x.com/AbiyAhmedAli/status/1330551525324754952>

⁵⁵ Billene Seyoum, 11 October 2021 <https://x.com/BilleneSeyoum/status/1447565143378890756>

⁵⁶ Statement by Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 18 October 2021
<https://x.com/mfaethiopia/status/1450093110797774857>

⁵⁷ Prime Minister Abiy briefing on current affairs, 1 November 2021
<https://youtu.be/Rxmn4iA0KH0?si=YH3uZdctFjcAQcJV>

4.4 Narratives of victimhood

One key mechanism both sides brought to use in their attempt to promote, rationalize and legitimize the violence that was taking place was the attribution of blame to the out group. Narratives that fall under this category contribute to the understanding of the other as having committed egregious crimes that render the violence that is bestowed on them as return a mere consequence of their misdeeds. These lines of arguments focused on intentional actions committed by the enemy to harm the group. Even at times where concrete evidence was lacking, incessant repetition of crimes committed against the group by the other side create sufficient conditions to highlight the other's crimes while rendering one's own violence invisible. Maynard and Benesch (2016) remark that the means of dissemination of narratives of a group's intentional victimization determines reactions to them. If certain sections of a group have to predominantly rely on a particular source of information, the conditions of epistemic dependence as to the alleged crimes of a party play a key role in the popular perception of shared victimhood.

This was found to be true to both sides who were the largely the sole sources of consistent information to their respective audiences. Given the almost complete lack of access for journalists, investigators or any independent observers to the hot bed of the war, leaving the public no choice but to rely on communications coming from the warring parties themselves.

Through the ascription of guilt to the other, the period preceding the November 3 outbreak was marked by significant rhetorical contestations by both sides. The federal government was accusing the TPLF, who had lost a lot of its undue privileges since the coming to power of the new prime minister, of working relentlessly to cause mayhem throughout the country to climb their way to power once again. Significant portions of the massacres and political violences that took place in the post-2018 era including several top-level assassinations were popularly attributed to the TPLF. TPLF's repressive regime and narratives of suffering under it, as well as widespread violence that was threatening the lives and well being of citizens in recent years were invoked as stories of pain and victimization.

For its part, the TPLF accused the federal government of attempting to deconstruct the federation that many had died for in order to collectivize power unconstitutionally. They complained of the federal government side-lining Tigrayans and encouraging, if not actively

creating, anti-Tigrayan sentiments by selectively implicating the TPLF in the crimes committed by the EPRDF. The federal government was also accused of collaborating with Eritrea in the latter's threat towards the TPLF. The dissemination of such accusations and arguments, that follow a complex trajectory of formation and articulation through the social allow for greater numbers of violent actors to increasingly see violence as possible and justified as acts of self defence (Gerlach, 2010).

Guilt is often ascribed to an abstract group whereby the collective application of 'they' may lump the "whole population in the crimes of the leadership: by acquiescence or omission" (McMahan, 2008:6). The tales that followed the brazen attack on the Northern Command of the ENDF, the embodiment of the country's sovereignty, under the cover of darkness despite its decades of service to and protection of Tigrayans also implicated several Tigrayan military officers of aiding, abetting and enabling TPLF's treason. Particularly when referring to crimes committed in the context of a war that had popular support from both sides, the broader public is implicated since war crimes and crimes against humanity are deeds, by their very nature that could only been committed by groups (Fletcher, 2001 in McMahan, 2008) either by active participation or by compliant inaction.

The narratives that attribute guilt to an actor simultaneously present the self as the victim. This in turn, serves to lay the foundation for voluntary participation in violence that is framed as a response to an actor either from the need to defend oneself, punish wrongdoers (Hull, 2003) by avenging for past injustices, or as fulfilling an obligation and duty towards the dead and victimized (Semelin, 2005). Accusations of treason came with detailed accounts of the need to use violence to decrease the destructive capacity of the TPLF, rescue members of the ENDF who were held captive, bury the murdered officers as the enemy was leaving them there to rot and bring this destructive clique to justice⁵⁸. The MaiKadra massacre also added additional evidence to the destruction of the TPLF that must forcefully be stopped before any more lives are lost.

The government's claim of Ethiopians continuously being victimized by the TPLF culminated in the groups' designation as a terrorist by the House of People's Representatives. Nanlohy (2022) argues that the deployment of the term terrorism is often a license to implement mass

⁵⁸ Statement by PMO 22 November 2020 <https://x.com/AbiyAhmedAli/status/1330551525324754952>

violence with impunity. The term's historically and politically loaded nature and its use as a noun and an adjective that leads to an intuitive exclusion of those described as such from functioning in the conventional world of other oppositions (Pappe, 2009).

Throughout the cases, the TPLF claimed that Tigrayans were being victimized by 'invaders' that were aiming to forcefully return territories in the contested areas back to the Amhara administration. It had also accused the federal government of rallying foreign forces to 'subdue its own people' and aiming to cause large scale destruction. However, this was presented as a continuation of history where Tigrayans have been victimized by consecutive Ethiopia regimes⁵⁹. Repeated allegations of the government intentionally targeting civilian neighbourhoods⁶⁰ and infrastructures, criminalizing humanitarian activities, orchestrating famine,⁶¹ Tigrayan soldiers being under house arrest, federal servants being expelled from their jobs and the suspension of Tigrayan's bank account went into the framing of the TPLF needing to defend itself and the people of Tigray against whom a war of destruction has been waged. The TPLF was also using such reports of crimes perpetrated against Tigrayans to call for the African Union and the international community to make humanitarian interventions. However, as Nanlohy (2022) notes the embeddedness of violent actors within the society forces other actors to reconsider such decisions as their involvement could be easily taken as assistance to terrorists and insurgents.

Beyond providing frames for understanding the violence and actors presently, narratives of guilt and victimization provide evidence for the construction of a threatening future that would be realized if the enemy is not defeated and destroyed now. Maynard (2014) notes construction of threats happens through a stable and consistently used lexicon for defining the enemy that draws upon present and past experiences. Tropes of the federal government being a threat to the existence of Tigray and Tigrayans; and of the TPLF being a threat to the unity and national security of Ethiopia were effectively used to mobilize against 'fascist invaders' and 'terrorists' and 'greedy junta' respectively. These discursive processes of attributing guilt and defining both the present and future self as a victim lays the bedwork for violence as self-defense. Articulation of narratives that weave together group experiences of oppression, injustice and victimization and a shared glorious future (Lynch and Argomaniz, 2017).

⁵⁹ Briefing by TPLF Chairman 27 October 2021 <https://youtu.be/AGJXJ5by52s?si=QtNBPXDQ5n6jHrd7>

⁶⁰ Getachew Reda, 18 October 2021 https://x.com/reda_getachew/status/1450057644388016128

⁶¹ Statement by EAO 1 October 2021 https://x.com/reda_getachew/status/1443945493969649667

4.5 Narratives of virtue

Narratives of violence as a virtuous act are tightly woven with narratives of self identification. They appeal to the audiences emotion through an affective mechanism and invocations of valued characters. Throughout the cases, TPLF establishes the Tigrayan forces as virtuous actors by invoking the front's long history of struggle and martyrdom and the present forces fulfilment of responsibility in ensuring it wont all be in vain. By framing the war as a continuation of the one during the Derg regime, and drawing parallels between the tactics of the Imperial, Derg and current regimes, armed resistance is presented as a virtuous civic duty for any Tigrayan.⁶²

Historicising Tigrayan struggle and invoking memories of bitter struggle and martyrdom that are located in the public domain, and perceived to be dear to the heart of the population, mobilizes a sense of duty. Narratives of generations of Tigrayan youth who have and continue to secure 'survival and security through [their] strength' portray freedom and self administration as rights one secures through violence. As Leenco notes, "There is no more emotive slogan than continuing the mission on which comrades lost their lives " (Leenco, 1999:131).

"Just as gold is tested by fire our perseverance has been tested by coordinated operations of internal and external actors.... We are, yet again carrying out a struggle that will repeat our golden history that is a source of inexhaustible pride and glory!"⁶³

-Tigrinya Facebook post by TPLF Chairman Debretsion Gebremicahel

Reid (2022) notes that atrocities in Ethiopia are driven by memories of lost greatness and the determination to recapture it or to overthrow or punish perceived interlopers. This trope frames violent actors as exemplary and outstanding members of society that embody loyalty to one's people, courage and self-sacrifice. The communication of the message in Tigrinya is also another factor that reinforces solidarity amongst the in-group. Virtuous understanding of one's violence comes with the identification of the other's violence as barbaric, evil and at times,

⁶² Media Briefing by Tigrayan forces spokesperson 20 November 2020
https://youtu.be/UfxvVIHnojA?si=1SUyya9_728YVYcf

⁶³ TPLF Chairman, 4 Decembeer 2021,
<https://www.facebook.com/Dr.Debretsion.Official/posts/pfbid0LabourDTHgPRDCW8vuLkKTrNRFW4TfrsQqnApTyuaWRd4RyEAmWP6o4WWwXHpVBtl>

senseless. For the federal government the violence was enacted to ensure the existence, unity and territorial sovereignty of the “promise land” that had maintained its freedom through sacrifices.

“We stand on the shoulders of our ancestors that paid great sacrifices for us and today we stand committed to laying a solid foundation for generations to come.”⁶⁴

-Tweet by the Prime Minister

4.6 Narratives of inevitability

Narratives of inevitability framed violence as unavoidable by using using discourse strategically to render all other non-violent options of resolving the conflict as futile and nonviable. These narratives largely followed two strands: the violent action by the other party that can only be responded to in kind and/or the rejection of any other alternatives by the other party that necessitated the use of violence as a last resort.

For the FDRE government, the attack opened on the ENDF and federal police forces the guardians and protectors of Ethiopia and Ethiopians, meant that it had no other option but to violently neutralise the posed threat despite it not wanting to engage in violence. For the federal government, the war was imposed on it⁶⁵ and its sole option was to respond in kind because “such cruelty cannot be addressed or redressed by sitting at a table for negotiation. Negotiation makes sense only when there is good faith and desire for peace”⁶⁶ and the attack opened on the forces under the cover of darkness was anything but a signal of good faith.

The TPLF too used similar lines of argumentation saying that the war had been in the making for long⁶⁷ and they had no option but to defend themselves violently as their enemies “sought to exterminate”⁶⁸ them. This line of reasoning links closely with the previously discussed

⁶⁴ PM 4 Decemeber 2021 <https://x.com/AbiyAhmedAli/status/1457242371628937219>

⁶⁵ Gedion Timotehows, 27 November 2020, <https://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/w3cszby9>

⁶⁶ Statement by the PMO, 12 November 2020 <https://ethiopianembassy.org/context-for-the-current-situation-in-ethiopia-the-evolution-of-criminality-november-12-2020/>

⁶⁷ Media Briefing by Tigrayan forces spokesperson 20 November 2020
<https://youtu.be/UfxvVIHnojA?si=p5cFJSWKT8aF0KUH>

⁶⁸ Facebook post by TPLF chairperson, 29 October 2021
<https://www.facebook.com/Dr.Debretsion.Official/posts/pfbid0SCNiFeEGTL3f7wpQCSn6hTQyvCsiKiVcFsAbw2YQjoDkupfgEbQDj3HDRBy9hwkl>

arguments of virtue as it presents concessions as inconceivable when faced with a force that is trying to exterminate a people, legitimising the use of violence to save one's people from extermination.

The other discursive mechanism that went in to show the inevitability of violence was the exhaustion of all other non-violent means of resolving the conflict. The FDRE explained multiple trials to resolve differences through mediation and reconciliation⁶⁹. But the attempts of truce by the FDRE and the new government's set up of 'an inclusive and participatory' political system were being threatened by consistent transgressions⁷⁰ and defiance by the TPLF that was being enhanced and fuelled by the governments inaction. Even after the outbreak of the war following the attack on the ENDF, the federal government gave TPLF and forces aligned to it several 72 hour windows to surrender so that the military campaign would be finalized. The TPLF's refusal of these and several prior attempts before the altercations made violent action necessary.

This defiance by the TPLF was, according to the federal government, caused by its reliance on the support of Ethiopia's foreign enemies⁷¹. This mandated the use of force to permanently address this problem to ensure it will not resurface and deter other forces from following a similar path.

“This crisis is something that has been forced upon this administration... It is not by choice. Our forces in the Northern Command... were attacked. It was a perfidious and treasonous attack. The objective of the TPLF top brass was to take over the armaments of the Northern Command and to overthrow this government. [We] were left with no option but to respond with force.”⁷²

-Minister of Justice, Gedion Timothewos

According to Sami Adwan and Dan Bar-On (2004: 514), societies engaging in war develop stories which they present as “the only true and morally superior narrative”. For the federal government, it was the ‘criminal hubris and intransigence of the TPLF’ that culminated in the

⁶⁹ Tweet by the PM, 6 November 2020 <https://x.com/AbiyAhmedAli/status/1324632526527352832>

⁷⁰ Address by the PM, 8 November 2020 https://youtu.be/ReZ3A-2Ozjs?si=Q6eqed-dhTbq3h_C

⁷¹ Statement by the PMO 6 December 2021, <https://x.com/AbiyAhmedAli/status/1468507643211833351>

⁷² Gedion Timothewos 27 Novemeber 2020 <https://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/w3cszby9>

attack of the Northern command that finally drove it to violence despite several efforts of dialogue and negotiations that fell through. The lack of response to the announcement of ultimatums and 72 hour windows for the clique to surrender had left the federal forces no option but to bring it down violently.

“We will go as far as it takes to break the siege on the children and women of Tigray.”⁷³

- Tweet by Getachew Reda

Violence being the only effective method available to defend oneself and ensure the continuity of one's existence particularly when it is a violence of retaliation has been found from both sides. Available alternatives of dealing with conflict are brought down to two options: retaliate or perish. In light of the Tigrayan army's advance into neighbouring Amhara and Afar regions, the spokesperson of the TPLF framed their advancement into the neighboring regions as the only way to forcefully lift the siege in place. Here, the siege, as an act of violence is framed as one that necessitates a violent retaliation to rescue Tigrayans from extermination.

4.7 Narratives of senselessness

Narratives about the senselessness of the violence by both parties fall into three broad and interlinked categories: deagentification, a political psychoanalysis and irrationality.

One recurring theme by both actors the framed the war and the violence it oversaw as senseless was the violence actor's lack of meaningful human agency. In framing their enemies, both the Federal government and the TPLF depicted the forces the other deploys as actors who do not wield any agency of their own and merely act upon orders, urges and drives. Attempts of deagentification by both parties fall in line with Reid's (2022) arguments of Ethiopians being unable to make informed and meaning decisions about the the systems in which they live and about the things they are being asked to do and believe, attributing the violence that has marred Ethiopian history to the “ignorance and hopelessness of Ethiopians [that] makes them fall prey to manipulative elites who invoke historical harteds.” (Reid, 2022:3)

⁷³ Getachew Reda, 13 October 2021 https://x.com/reda_getachew/status/1448178003763212288

The TPLF's characterization of the ENDF and allied forces as 'juvenile errand boys'⁷⁴ that don't know anything⁷⁵ and being flogged into fighting⁷⁶ effectively reaps the actors of all their agency, virtue and responsibility to portray them as actors who do not have political objectives.

The federal government also used such deagentifying language to characterize TPLF's fighters as forces of 'evil' that are acting on drug consumption⁷⁷ and senselessly sacrificing their lives so that few greed individuals can evade accountability⁷⁸.

Narratives of senselessness by the TPLF often times got to apolitical and psycho-diagnostic presumptions about the federal actor's mental state. Frequent characterization by TPLF of the FDRE prime minister as 'power-crazed maniac'⁷⁹, that is in a 'questionable mental state'⁸⁰ and 'allergic to peace'⁸¹ are evidences of this. Additionally, both forces often highlighted the irrationality of the war and presented the violence as not being undertaken to achieve any certain political goal and aspirations.

⁷⁴ Tweet by Getachew Reda, 27 October 2021 https://x.com/reda_getachew/status/1453364931605172231

⁷⁵ Gen. Tsadkan 28 September 2022 <https://youtu.be/5b16EadLhGw?si=0VQY6Sf-CGrLVhM>

⁷⁶ Getachew Reda, 23 November 2020 <https://youtu.be/0477yJWz-bw?si=nKD0Eqx9I0aEjfJ8>

⁷⁷ Fana 5 September 2022 <https://www.fanabc.com/english/tplf-coerces-underage-recruits-to-use-hard-drugs/#:~:text=Addis%20Ababa%2C%20September%205%2C%202022,hard%20drugs%2C%20revealed%20the%20captives.>

⁷⁸ Statement by the PMO, 22 November 2020 <https://x.com/AbiyAhmedAli/status/1330551525324754952>

⁷⁹ Getachew Reda, 6 November 2021 https://x.com/reda_getachew/status/1457014516475105280

⁸⁰ Getachew Reda, 7 November 2020 <https://youtu.be/zuX0GohprXE?si=hw8wWFfTXJPVknRq>

⁸¹ Getachew Reda, 31 August 2022 https://x.com/reda_getachew/status/1564867035003338752

Chapter Five

5. Conclusion

Narratives of political violence create an impetus to moralize reality (White, 1984). Parties in conflict make use of stories and well-crafted narratives to rationalize engaging in and mobilise support for their violence. If we intend to break free from the cycle of violence, revisiting the narratives of conflict actors to interrogate how the public is made to perceive political violence and evaluating the role these narratives have in protracting violent conflict, regardless of their truth value, cannot be overlooked.

Mass political violence is socially produced (Kalyvas, 2006). As such, beyond fact finding, attempts to understand how and why violence occurs and avenues to pursue justice must look into what people are told by their leaders and what they believe that drives them to engage in or look past egregious violence. This is particularly implicated in the case under question where the lines between victims and perpetrators is not clearly and surly drawn.

Findings of this study have demonstrated that old and recent grievances, that had not been brought to the front, discussed and reconciled have been key factors in the messages produced by actors to instigate their bases towards violence. This study has further found that parties to the Tigray war have deployed carefully crafted, continuous and interlinked narratives to identify the in- and out-group, to locate their identities historically and derive virtues from the shared experiences. Narratives have also followed lines of reasoning that characterize the out group in a way that legitimises violence as the only viable way of relating to it.

In relating to the international community, both the FDRE and TPLF have disproportionately deployed narratives of victimhood. While TPLF actors added narratives of senselessness to depict the violence taking place as irrational and insensible taking place only to cause as much harm as possible. With content developed for local audiences, both actors messages heavily

constituted of language that served to identify the group and legitimise the action as virtuous and made attempts to delineate the enemy from its base.

The study across the three cases have also shown that the narratives promoted had a direct relation to performance in the battlefields. Actors enjoying battlefield victories tended to embrace narratives of inevitability and virtue while actors experiencing defeat in the field attempted to construct a shared group identity through narratives of self identification.

A close reading of Ethiopian history of political violence with the justification mechanism successfully used by the actors to protract, and maintain popular support throughout the duration of the war, leaves us with an age old question of whether the means justifies the end or whether it is the means that creates and shapes the end.

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