

Reviews

Understanding Ethiopia's Tigray War. MARTIN PLAUT & SARAH VAUGHAN: Hurst, 2023. 392 pages. \$34.95 (pbk).
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The period leading up to the November 2020 outbreak of war in the Tigray region represented one of the periodic ruptures that have marked Ethiopia's turbulent history (see Reid 2021). Sustained and often violent protests in the Oromo region (2014–2018) and fractures within the Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF) that had ruled since 1991 provided what many hoped would be an opportunity to put in place a new balance between the center and the peripheries and between the contradictory impulses of Ethiopian unity and national self-determination. Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed came to power in 2018 and promised reform and regional peace. This hope, however, coincided with a new wave of political violence across the country. In November 2020, levels of violence increased dramatically as civil war erupted in Tigray, resulting in what some estimate as 600,000 deaths, systematic use of food and sexual violence as weapons of war, and widespread destruction, looting, and displacement across northern Ethiopia.

Martin Plaut and Sarah Vaughan's *Understanding Ethiopia's Tigray War* is the first full length account of what was the world's deadliest and least understood war. The book will serve as a valuable first draft assessment of this horrible carnage. Of course, the challenges of writing such a study as the conflict still raged clearly are daunting. Informed discussions have been hampered by the lack of first-hand information due to a near complete denial of access for media, the shutdown of phone and internet services in Tigray, and by the distorted and often deliberately false information and hate speech that characterized social media discourse. Given these hurdles, *Understanding Ethiopia's Tigray War* does a considerable service in providing a first cut of this contentious history and thereby framing questions (and criticisms) that will shape future research and debate.

This book is a collaboration between Vaughan, a long-time scholar of Ethiopia, and Plaut, a former BBC journalist with a prominent profile on social media, often amplifying posts critical of the Eritrean regime. It is a surprising partnership of two specialists with quite different profiles. However, apart from the introduction and conclusion, they do not co-author any of the chapters and the book is largely two separate accounts of the war. While both analyze the many dreadful facets of the violence, Vaughan focuses largely on Ethiopian history and political culture while Plaut emphasizes the role of Eritrea.

Vaughan writes the first five chapters and does an excellent job of teasing out the historical origins and competing visions of the Ethiopian state. Vaughan's analysis builds upon decades of research, including interviews with most of the key actors and a broad survey of existing scholarship with due recognition to research by Ethiopians. She provides a deeply historical account of the evolution of Tigrayan identity and animosity toward the Tigray People's Liberation Front (TPLF), the long dominant constituent party in the ruling EPRDF coalition.

The thrust of her argument is that the protagonists in the war “were entangled in long-standing patterns of power, land and empire” (p. 3). Diametrically opposed positions on whether the Ethiopian state should be centralized or decentralized and devolved to its constituent peoples is a thread throughout these chapters. Several sections are particularly detailed, such as the account of how the TPLF constructed Tigrayan nationalism during the period of the armed struggle and the careful analysis of the early 1990s transitional government. The lead-up to the November 2020 outbreak of civil war makes clear that all sides mobilized in anticipation of the coming crisis.

While Vaughan offers a clear overarching historical narrative, civil wars often have multiple and contradictory micro-narratives (see Kalyvas 2012). In Tigray, different actors with distinct agendas fought in Welkait (western Tigray), along the border with Eritrea, and among non-Tigrayan populations around Alamanta, as well as many other specific episodes within the larger conflagration. Conflicts outside of the northern highlands often had different logics and built upon specific narratives and historical processes of identity construction in the Oromo region or other parts of lowland and southern Ethiopia. Vaughan emphasizes elite metanarratives around competing ideas on the nature of the Ethiopian state. But, at the more parochial level, grievances over land, local power, and score-settling drove significant violence that had little direct connection to larger struggles over nation-building.

Plaut and Vaughan are clear on the focus of this volume: “While a detailed discussion of the war in Oromia (or conflicts elsewhere) lies beyond the scope of this book, it is important to remember that the war that broke out in Tigray in November 2020 was only one of the powerful and complex thread of violence” (p. 187). This clarity is important, but every scope inherently illuminates some dimensions while making others harder to see. Focusing on the war in Tigray entails highlighting specific facets in a more complex security assemblage of political violence and consequently risks missing key dynamics that may suggest alternative explanations.

To illustrate, looking beyond Tigray may help us understand the war as an example of more contemporary dynamics rather than the outcome of historical processes of state and nation as argued in this volume. The 2018 transition that brought Abiy to power marked a profound weakening of the center and the rise of political violence across Ethiopia. These earlier conflicts had only limited links to the story of Tigray nationalism and its discontents. Before the war in Tigray, Ethiopia faced conflict in Gedeo-Guji (resulting in 1.8 million internally displaced), a brutal counter-insurgency campaign in western Oromia, locally driven conflict between indigene and settler populations in the Metekel zone of Benishangul-Gumuz, as well as political assassinations, border skirmishes between regional state security services, proxy wars, land grabs, fights over control of gold mines, urban riots, and ethnic pogroms. Civil war in Tigray, in other words, was the deadliest example of a much larger and more diverse experience of violence in Ethiopia.

There are many strands in the story of contemporary Ethiopian politics that contribute to the civil war, as Vaughan both acknowledges and carefully documents, but she regards anti-Tigrayan and anti-TPLF sentiments as key. Narratives advanced in often vitriolic terms – particularly in diaspora-based media – certainly identified the TPLF and Tigrayans more generally as the source of injustice. But this framing may be understood differently by recognizing that “the TPLF” often served as a stand-in for “the government” or “the privileged” by those who perceived themselves as powerless and without prospects. During the Oromo protests, for

example, the specific targets of grievance were often local Oromo officials who doled out access to land and economic opportunities rather than more distant Tigrayans. Similarly, clashes between Sidama and Wolaya peoples in southern Ethiopia had their own local origins and dynamics.

While Vaughan emphasizes the nature of historically constructed ideas around the nation and the state in chapters 1-5, the chapters written by Plaut and his co-authors (Ermias Teka for chapters 7-8, Felicity Mulford for chapter 10) largely see the hand of Eritrea behind contemporary Ethiopian political dynamics. Asmara's role is of "equal – maybe greater – importance" in explaining the path to war as Eritrea gained "a remarkable level of influence over the Ethiopian domestic political sphere" (p. 190). Plaut agrees with Vaughan regarding the importance of anti-Tigrayan sentiments but emphasizes that these attitudes were "fostered" by Asmara's hatred of the TPLF rather than the product of historical processes of identity construction.

As difficult as it is to document and assess developments in Ethiopia during the wartime media black out, uncovering dynamics in Eritrea is significantly more challenging. Eritrea is among the most closed societies in the world and, as the authors note, our understanding "is limited but not negligible" (p. 226). Plaut and his co-authors emphasize alleged secret meetings, aircraft with unexplained flight plans, and reports of clandestine movement of Ethiopian troops to Eritrea before the war. To sketch out these covert activities, the authors rely upon information that in many instances is "uncorroborated but hardly implausible" (p. 324). As a result, these chapters read as more speculative in contrast to Vaughan's more analytical arguments.

Eritrea's roles in conflict in Tigray and in the larger political processes in Ethiopia are undoubtedly important. But the decisions by political and military leaders in Addis Ababa and in the regional capitals of Tigray and Amhara regional states to pursue disastrous policies owed far more to endogenous political dynamics, hubris, and miscalculation. Furthermore, developments around Amhara identity, the evolution of political violence in the Oromo region, the move to constitute new regional states in southern Ethiopia, and a host of interrelated episodes of violence owe more to internal and often very localized political dynamics that do not need to be explained by foreign machinations.

In the end, this is an important but also incomplete and sometimes frustrating book. This is not surprising given that it was produced as the war remained unresolved and fieldwork remained impossible. It is strongest in the chapters written by Vaughan where she traces the deep historical roots of Ethiopia's political culture, the specific origins of Tigrayan nationalism, and competing conceptions of the Ethiopian state. The role of Eritrea is certainly essential, but the authors overstate external intrigues to explain processes that are fundamentally driven by incentives and opportunities as perceived by Ethiopian actors.

REFERENCES

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