

When Mao Misfires: A Military Appreciation of the Tigray Conflict

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The internal conflict between Ethiopia and its dissident state Tigray, known generally now as the Tigray Conflict, has been seen as a considerable amount of reporting and analysis. This is not surprising, as given its scale it is one of the largest conflicts on the African continent in the 21st century, involving hundreds of thousands of combatants on both sides, considerable amounts of military hardware, significant intervention by neighbouring countries, and even the deployment of newer military technologies such as drones. However, the discourse around the conflict itself has focused largely on either the political or humanitarian aspects of the conflict, with the actual military aspects of the conflict often placed as a background upon which these other topics are occurring. This is not necessarily a harsh critique; both of these factors are critical to understanding the future dynamics of the Horn of Africa. The atrocities committed by both sides of the conflict and the continuing humanitarian crisis in Tigray

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will shape internal relations in Ethiopia for decades to come. In turn, the political relationships in Ethiopia and the Horn writ broadly have been remade by this conflict and will likely have a large impact on the region.

Still, this approach has left the larger analysis of the conflict itself adrift, at best pieced together from the contextual discussions of news reports. In these early days, following the ceasefire of November 2022, much of the primary evidence is still spotty outside of the Horn. Basic things like the exact number of fighting men and women on both sides are unknown; the names of critical commanders and leaders are still shrouded in uncertainty for most audiences; and even in many cases how decisions were made will not be known for some time if ever. However, even piecing together the course of the conflict from the limited available open-source reports and discussions, a rather fascinating portrait emerges, one that links together the military legacies of the previous sixty years of conflict in the Horn of Africa with the current shifting geopolitics of the region. As such, this essay is intended to trace these linkages and offer a preliminary appreciation of the strategies pursued in this conflict, including analysis of how the leadership of both sides viewed the war, how they chose to pursue it, and ultimately why Ethiopia prevailed despite several signal Tigrayan successes in the field.

Context

As with all conflicts, the Tigray Conflict did not spring forth from nothingness. There is a long and detailed history of conflicts between the center and periphery within Ethiopia stretching back to antiquity, much as almost all multiethnic empires have experienced.² However, the proximate seeds of the current conflict were sown in the political settlement following the fall of the Marxist Derg government of Ethiopia in 1991. The Derg had come to power in a 1974 coup, overthrowing the teetering imperial government of Emperor Haile Selassie but inheriting his long-running and bitter conflict with Eritrean insurgents in the North as well as the uncertain state structures within Ethiopia itself. While the Derg government had little capacity at the time to deal

² Zewde in particular does an excellent job discussing the consistent centrifugal forces in the modern multiethnic state of Ethiopia, particularly with the state trying to contain multiple peripheral groups like the Oromo and the Tigrayans. See: Bahru Zewde, *A History of Modern Ethiopia, 1855–1991* (Athens: Ohio University Press, 2002).

with the Eritreans, it focused much of its limited efforts on cracking down on potential dissidents within the Ethiopian state, fomenting what became known as “The Red Terror” in much of the traditional Ethiopian territory.³ This proved to be extremely counterproductive, instead driving increasing opposition to Derg authority and seeing a series of regional, ethnically-aligned insurgent groups, most notably the Tigrayan People’s Liberation Front (TPLF).⁴ The TPLF emerged as the most potent of the guerrilla fronts fighting the Derg in no small part due to its pragmatic alliance built with the capable and well-organized Eritrean People’s Liberation Front with which they shared a border. The Eritreans offered a significant amount of aid and advice to the emergent Tigrayan resistance group, but this did not mean the relationship was free of tension. Political and personal disagreements were ever-present and at times the EPLF and TPLF entered into an open conflict with one another.⁵ However, ultimately the two groups managed to reach enough of a consensus to fight unified against an increasingly unstable and beleaguered Derg during the 1980s.

During the same conflict, the TPLF also undertook significant outreach to the other regional opposition groups within Ethiopia, both lending them their knowledge and support as well as forming a larger umbrella organization that would eventually be named the Ethiopian People’s Revolutionary Democratic Front, or EPRDF.⁶ This work finally came to fruition in 1990 when, following a series of crushing defeats of the Derg forces in Eritrea and Tigray, the EPLF and EPRDF marched on Addis Ababa, taking the city in 1991. The EPRDF assumed its position as the new government of Ethiopia, creating a multiethnic federal republic in place of the previous Marxist dictatorship. In turn, the EPRDF government also agreed to an Eritrean plebiscite, which led directly to Eritrean independence in 1993.

Sadly, the postwar years did not see a deepening of the cooperation which had led to the military triumphs in the Ethiopian Civil War. While Ethiopia was now formally a federal government constituted of several ethnically and regionally aligned parties, the TPLF retained the lion’s share of control within the Federal Government.

³ Gebru Tareke, *The Ethiopian Revolution: War in the Horn of Africa* (Yale University Press, 2009), p. 40.

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 42.

⁵ John Young, “The Tigray and Eritrean Peoples Liberation Fronts: A History of Tensions and Pragmatism,” *The Journal of Modern African Studies* 34, no. 1 (1996): pp. 105–20.

⁶ Tareke, *The Ethiopian Revolution*, p. 109.

The head of the TPLF, Meles Zenawi, assumed the presidency and the Tigrayans maintained a dominant position in the government, much to the chagrin of the other groups in the alliance. As an independent country, Eritrea in turn took an even more authoritarian path. The leader of the EPLF, Isais Afewerki, continued the harsh structures of the wartime government and deepened his control over the Eritrean state.⁷ His increasingly harsh rule and outward aggression clashed heavily with the TPLF-dominated EPRDF government in neighbouring Ethiopia. The strained relations between the two countries eventually led to open warfare in 1998, when Eritrea launched a localized attack in Northern Ethiopia over several unresolved territorial disputes.⁸ The conflict eventually ended in 2000 through regional mediation but not before two bitter years of fighting and what was increasingly appearing to be a decisive Ethiopian battlefield victory.

Following the war, Zenawi's Ethiopia managed to continue its international outreach and bring a significant amount of new development to what was seen as the lynchpin country in an increasingly unstable Horn and becoming an important regional ally of the United States in the post-2001 *War on Terror*. However, despite this development enriching the whole of the country, many of the peoples of Ethiopia believed that its main effect was focused on the still-dominant Tigrayans and the TPLF. While Zenawi's TPLF-led government won the parliamentary elections in 2005 and 2010 there were bitter protests and crackdowns throughout the country. Zenawi himself passed in 2012 but his successor Hailemariam Desalign continued his larger political and economic program, winning his term as Prime Minister in the 2015 elections.⁹ However, by this point, the frustrations of the non-Tigrayan groups boiled over, with the Oromo region erupting into violent protests in 2016. While these protests were dealt

⁷ This harsh control by Afewerki's government led to deeply unflattering comparisons to North Korea. See "Why Eritrea Is Called Africa's North Korea," *The Economist*, 14 August 2018, <https://www.economist.com/the-economist-explains/2018/08/14/why-eritrea-is-called-africas-north-korea>, accessed 4 February 2023,

⁸ Dan Connell, "Shootout in the Horn of Africa: A View from Eritrea," *Middle East Report*, no. 210 (1999): pp. 4–5, <https://doi.org/10.2307/3012491>; Richard Reid, "Old Problems in New Conflicts: Some Observations on Eritrea and Its Relations with Tigray, from Liberation Struggle to Inter-State War," *Africa* 73, no. 3 (August 2003): pp. 369–401, <https://doi.org/10.3366/afr.2003.73.3.369>.

⁹ Simona Foltyn, "Ethiopia's Ruling Party Sweeps Elections," *Al-Jazeera News*, 27 May 2015, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2015/5/27/ethiopias-ruling-party-sweeps-elections>, accessed 4 February 2023.

with harshly by the Ethiopian security forces, their ferocity convinced Desalign to resign in 2018 and he maintained only a caretaker government until new elections could be held.¹⁰

The new elections in 2018 continued EPRDF dominance but brought to power a non-Tigrayan Prime Minister, Ahmed Abiy.¹¹ Abiy was himself an Oromo and promised a new path forward in Ethiopia and the broader Horn of Africa region. In 2019 he dissolved the EPRDF and formed his own Prosperity Party, which explicitly rejected the earlier focus on ethnic federalism in Ethiopia.¹² While this was viewed with some skepticism, Abiy was bolstered by a series of foreign policy triumphs, including mending relations with Afewerki's Eritrea in 2019 and the struggling Somalia Federal Government in 2020. The first of these two resulted in Abiy being awarded the Nobel Peace Prize, as much of the international community saw it as the first major step in fostering peace and stability across the whole of the Horn.¹³

However, despite Abiy's international prestige and increasing ability to navigate the challenges within Ethiopia, his new program and party were not met with universal acclaim. The Tigrayans had lost their dominant position in the government and now were largely frozen out of the developing Prosperity Party, leaving the TPLF leadership increasingly marginalized within the rapidly changing state.¹⁴ When the 2020 elections were delayed, reportedly due to COVID concerns, the Tigrayan leadership assumed an even more defensive position against Abiy's proposed changes within Ethiopia,

¹⁰ "Hundreds Killed since Start of Oromo Protests," *Deutsche Welle*, *dw.com*, 12 November 2016, accessed 4 February 2023, <https://www.dw.com/en/hundreds-killed-since-start-of-oromo-protests/a-36369836>; "Ethiopian Prime Minister Hailemariam Desalegn Quits," *CNN News*, 15 February 2018, <https://www.cnn.com/2018/02/15/africa/ethiopian-prime-minister-resigns-intl/index.html>, accessed 4 February 2023.

¹¹ "Ethiopia Swears in First PM from Ethnic Oromo Community," *Al-Jazeera*, 2 April 2018, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2018/4/2/abiy-ahmed-sworn-in-as-ethiopias-prime-minister>, accessed 4 February 2023.

¹² "Ethiopia's Prime Minister Wants to Change the Ruling Coalition. Who's Getting Left out?" *Washington Post*, 23 December 2019, accessed 4 February 2023, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/2019/12/23/ethiopias-president-wants-change-ruling-coalition-whos-getting-left-out/>.

¹³ "Ethiopia's Abiy Wins Nobel Peace Prize for Resolving Conflict with Eritrea," *Reuters*, 11 October 2019, sec. World News, <https://www.reuters.com/article/uk-nobel-prize-peace-idUKKBN1WQ12Q>, accessed 4 February 2023.

¹⁴ "Ethiopia's Prime Minister."

including changes to the regional military commands that Abiy had insisted upon. In response to Abiy's programs of reform, the Tigrayans mobilized their militias and rejected much of the central government's planned new electoral process. This created a tense standoff between the regional and national governments, a standoff that was finally broken on 2 November 2020, when the TPLF regional government announced its intentions for what it called a preemptive attack on the Ethiopian Northern Command facilities across Tigray. These attacks were launched in Mekelle, Adigrat, Agula, Dansha, and Sero on 3 and 4 November, beginning the Tigray Conflict.

The Combatants

The two sides of the conflict could not be more dissimilar but carried with them echoes of conflicts past. As noted, Ethiopia has a lengthy history of a centralized government trying to exert its authority over the periphery and in turn that periphery waging war to defend its autonomy or prerogatives. Particularly following the centralization of imperial authority under the Solomonid Dynasty in the 1200s, the continual struggle between the centralized state against the various constituent populations of the empire was a consistent theme, with Ethiopian states using what military capacity they had to bring more peripheral groups to heel. Following the establishment of the modern imperial Ethiopian state in 1855 and its increasing centralization, these were increasingly unequal contests that saw a powerful Ethiopian military increasingly able to exert its power over peripheries and even expand into new territories. However, this did not mean that these struggles disappeared, just that they changed form and often assumed a far more asymmetric form- a form that continued through the Second World War and past it, eventually becoming the more dominant type of warfare for imperial peripheries not only in Ethiopia but across the globe. This newer adoption of older asymmetric methods was eventually codified in the writings of revolutionaries across the globe and reified in countless liberation struggles. And, as these forms found success in the struggle against the Solomonids and the Derg, they would echo again in the Horn of Africa during the Tigray conflict as a smaller and weaker Tigray faced a larger but potentially vulnerable Ethiopia.

However, this discussion of Tigray as the smaller and weaker combatant in the struggle is both relative and potentially deceptive. The Tigrayan leadership had a clear

goal in the conflict- they could not at the time reconcile their political goals with those of Ahmed Abiy and wished to retain their regional and potentially national power. As such, their war was to either force concessions in the evolving political system or remove the Abiy government, either one of which was potentially within their power. Despite being a single region of the larger Federal Ethiopia, Tigray as a region was a potent force, with a regional militia that was leavened by many experienced soldiers and officers who had served in the Ethiopian National Defense Forces but had left when the conflict looked to be inevitable. The reported numbers of their forces varied widely, with figures ranging from 10,000 to 250,000, but this likely reflects the variance between their initial forces and then those fighters recruited when the fighting had begun in earnest. The local forces also had a surprising amount of equipment beyond the small arms that the term militia suggests, with local depots or deserters bringing with them heavy weaponry and armour that the Tigray Defense Forces (TDF) put to good use. Reliable open-source reporting shows the TDF with significant amounts of armour, artillery, anti-aircraft weaponry, and other military vehicles that a modern military would have in its arsenal.¹⁵ However, perhaps more importantly, the TDF had, as mentioned, a strong core of experienced leadership in both its administrative and leadership cadre. While the initial core of TPLF leadership had experience from the earlier struggles against the Derg and then building the new Ethiopian state, there was now a newer generation of military and political leaders who had led Ethiopia in its foreign and domestic policies through the Horn for the past several decades. Militarily this included the more senior officers and experienced soldiers who were involved in the Ethiopian intervention in Somalia in 2006.¹⁶ As such, although Tigray was smaller, it was not bereft of resources and was likely far more unified, experienced, and organized

¹⁵ "The Tigray Defence Forces - Documenting Its Heavy Weaponry," *Oryx* (blog), 01 September 2021, <https://www.oryxspioenkop.com/2021/09/the-tigray-defence-forces-documenting.html>, accessed 31 January 2023.

¹⁶ An excellent example of this dynamic is General Tsadkan Gebretensae, who served as a General in the ENDF before being forcibly retired. General Gebretensae then took a commission with the TPLF when conflict looked inevitable and is credited with being one of the prime organizers of the TDF. See: "Tigray Crisis: A Conversation With General Tsadkan Gebretensae, Tigray Defense Force Central Command," *The Elephant*, 9 July 2021, accessed 4 February 2023, <https://www.theelephant.info/oped/2021/07/09/tigray-crisis-a-conversation-with-general-tsadkan-gebretensae-tigray-defense-force-central-command/>.

than its opponent. As will be seen, the Tigrayan leadership did its best to take full advantage of these potential advantages.

If Tigray now represented the dissident periphery, Abiy's Ethiopia remained the increasingly centralizing core. The goals of Abiy and his allies were simple: the defeat and removal of the dissident Tigrayan leadership and the integration of Tigray into the Ethiopian state as a part of a whole as opposed to a distinct ethnic federated territory. With the failure of peaceful methods of doing so, Abiy turned to his national military as well as several allied sources of military power to achieve these goals. The Ethiopian National Defense Force on its own was recognized as a formidable military force. With a total of around 135,000 personnel across all branches at the start of the war, it was one of the largest militaries on the continent.¹⁷ The ENDF was also equipped with a large number of modern weapons, ranging from main battle tanks, modern artillery, jet interceptors and bombers, and large numbers of armoured fighting vehicles.¹⁸ The ENDF also had recent operational experience, having been involved in the 2006 Ethiopian intervention in Somalia as well as several peacekeeping missions following this initial intervention. However, despite these strengths, the ENDF did have several potential weaknesses. The first is that as noted above, a good number of the experienced officers and men were Tigrayan and many had either left the ENDF or been cast out in the months leading up to the conflict, draining some of the more effective soldiers.¹⁹ Even those Tigrayans that remained in the service of the ENDF were likely not able to be used in any campaigns against Tigray as Abiy and his commanders would not want to risk the strained allegiances such a deployment might engender.²⁰ Above and beyond the issues of Tigrayans, the ENDF itself as a whole had already

¹⁷ "Ethiopia," in *The Military Balance, Chapter Nine: Sub-Saharan Africa*, p. 407, accessed 4 February 2023, <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/epdf/10.1080/04597222.2022.2022935>.

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ Horn of Africa analyst Rashid Abdi noted that in the early days of the conflict the purge was already having notable effects. See Rashid Abdi [@RAbdiAnalyst], "Ethiopia Defence Ministry Pulling out Tigrayan Officers from AMISOM in Somalia. The Purge of Tigrayans in Military and Security Services Is Deep, Severely Undermining Morale. Kenya and Djibouti Upset at How Ethiopia's Internal Crisis Destabilizing AMISOM," Tweet, *Twitter*, 13 November 2020, <https://twitter.com/RAbdiAnalyst/status/1327153519800020992>.

²⁰ Even those Tigrayans still within the armed forces were seen as potentially compromised and were disarmed by other ENDF forces. "Exclusive: Ethiopia Says Disarms Tigrayan Peacekeepers in Somalia over Security," *Reuters*, 18 November 2020, sec. Emerging Markets, accessed 4 February 2023, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-ethiopia-conflict-somalia-exclusive-idUSKBN27Y1HC>.

proven itself troublesome for Abiy's regime. As his new government pushed a series of reforms through the military, significant sectors of it had mutinied as late as 2019, with many armed troops confronting Abiy himself.²¹ While the Prime Minister had been able to defuse that situation, the military had shown itself as potentially unreliable even as it went through a series of reforms that were bound to create tension. Finally, although the ENDF had impressive numbers on paper, it continued to be involved in several multinational deployments such as the African Union Mission in Somalia (AMISOM) that would keep several experienced formations away from the battlefield.²²

The Ethiopian forces also would not have to face the conflict alone. Its period as the main central power had created several enemies for the TPLF that now found themselves with a more welcoming partner in Prime Minister Abiy's government. Internally, the Amhara regional state had found itself often severely marginalized by the TPLF government and had even lost a large amount of fertile territory to the Tigrayan regional state following the establishment of the EPRDF government.²³ The conflict now allowed the Amhara state to call up its ethnic militias to try and both take this territory back as well as potentially take some measure of retribution on the Tigrayans. Other regions also called up their militias at various times in the conflict to take part in the struggle against the Tigrayans.²⁴ While the regional troops may not have been as well equipped as the Tigrayans at the outset, they had the support of the central government and were given significant leeway in their operations. Perhaps even more critical than additional internal help though was Abiy's new friend and ally Isaias Afewerki. Afewerki had long had an axe to grind with the TPLF government, ranging

²¹ "Abiy Ahmed: Protesting Ethiopian Soldiers Wanted to Kill Me," *BBC News*, 18 October 2018, sec. Africa, accessed 4 February 2023, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-africa-45903244>.

²² Admittedly during the conflict many forces were withdrawn from the ENDF's deployment in Somalia, but it was unclear whether these forces were withdrawn for use in the conflict or because they were Tigrayan troops that were now considered suspect. See "Ethiopia Withdraws Thousands of Troops From Neighboring Somalia," *Bloomberg.Com*, 13 November 2020, accessed 4 February 2023, <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2020-11-13/ethiopia-withdraws-thousands-of-troops-from-neighboring-somalia>.

²³ Kjetil Tronvoll, "Ethiopia's Tigray War Is Fueling Amhara Expansionism," *Foreign Policy* (blog), 28 April 2021, accessed 4 February 2023, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2021/04/28/ethiopia-tigray-war-amhara-abiy-ahmed-expansionism/>.

²⁴ Dawit Endeshaw, "Three More Regions Reinforce Ethiopia Army, Amhara against Tigray Forces," *Reuters*, 16 July 2021, sec. Africa, accessed 4 February 2023, <https://www.reuters.com/world/africa/three-more-regions-reinforce-ethiopia-army-amhara-against-tigray-forces-2021-07-16/>.

from the disagreements during the conflicts of the 1980s to the TPLF-led war that Afewerki was widely perceived to have lost in 1998-2000. With a new friend in Abiy and a chance to intervene to crush the Tigrayans, Afewerki was more than happy to have Eritrea join the conflict. Unlike the internal militias, Eritrea had a well-structured military of reportedly up to 200,000, albeit with much of those numbers being conscripts.²⁵ Additionally, despite arms embargos, Eritrea was known to have large amounts of dated but still effective armour, artillery, transport, and airpower, all of which would likely be brought to bear.

The Conflict Begins

As noted, the Tigrayans undertook the first actions of the conflict, attacking numerous facilities of the ENDF Northern Command on 3-4 November 2020. These actions were carried out quickly and decisively, with few overall casualties on either side. Given the relative strengths of the two sides of the developing conflict, it is obvious the Tigrayans wanted to both seize the initiative and remove any potential ENDF rallying points within Tigray itself.²⁶ Additionally, this offered the chance for Tigrayan forces to collect what materiel and supplies existed within these bases to add to their own limited stocks. With this accomplished though, the next steps of the conflict would prove to be critical, particularly as ENDF troops had been massing along the borders of Tigray and the Tigrayan forces still faced a significant deficit in terms of military power and supply.

The Tigrayans did not have to wait long for the expected Ethiopian response, with the surrounding ENDF forces launching an offensive into Tigray beginning later on the 4th with the support of several airstrikes. While the Tigrayans initially fought against the Ethiopian forces, they at best slowed them down and within two weeks the strategic towns of Adwa, Axum, and Shire had all been captured by the ENDF and by

²⁵ "Eritrea," *The Military Balance, Chapter Nine: Sub-Saharan Africa*, p. 469.

²⁶ "Ethiopia's TPLF Admits It Started War with Attempt to 'Disarm' ENDF's Northern Command," *Sudans Post* (blog), 24 March 2022, accessed February 4, 2023, <https://www.sudanspost.com/ethiopias-tplf-admits-it-started-war-with-attempt-to-disarm-endfs-northern-command/>.

23 November, Mekelle was surrounded by Ethiopian forces.²⁷ These advances were accompanied by the Ethiopian government shutting down the communications services heading into and out of Tigray, leading to an internet blackout within the region and hampering as much of the coordination of resistance as they could.²⁸ Ultimately, by 28 November, the Ethiopian forces had captured Mekelle, the capital of the Tigray region, albeit several days after the Tigrayan forces and government were reported to have departed the city.²⁹

Despite the loss of the major cities of the region and the capital, the Tigrayans continued their struggle and, in fact, managed to transition to a position of potentially greater strength. The military forces they had and the increasing number of recruits from the mobilizing population were recast and reorganized as the Tigray Defense Forces (TDF) from the safety of the mountainous regions of Northern Tigray.³⁰ From this newer base of operations and with breathing room to prepare, the Tigrayans managed to organize a much more wide-ranging defence in the countryside, organizing their forces to act as an insurgency against the ENDF forces within Tigray itself. The engagement of Eritrean forces within Tigray, which began in late November, as well as Amhara regional forces, led to a series of attacks on civilians, further fueling the rapidly organizing Tigrayan insurgency throughout December.³¹ By January 2021, while the ENDF and its allies controlled the major roads and urban centers, much of the countryside had returned to the de facto control of the Tigrayans. This led to a lengthy insurgency, with ENDF, Eritrean, and Amhara forces trying to unsuccessfully dislodge Tigrayan insurgents and instead fueling a more dangerous insurgency.

²⁷ "Ethiopia Says Tigray Capital Encircled after Surrender Ultimatum," *Reuters*, 23 November 2020, sec. Editor's picks, accessed 4 February 2023, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-ethiopia-conflict-idUSKBN2830BV>.

²⁸ "Ethiopia Hosts UN Internet Meeting after Cutting off Tigray," *AP News*, 12 November 2022, accessed 4 February 2023, <https://apnews.com/article/technology-africa-internet-access-ethiopia-abiy-ahmed-4370e0a6ee0c7a30c128b7bc50d70a5c>.

²⁹ Jason Burke and Jason Burke Africa correspondent, "Ethiopian Troops in 'full Control' of Tigray's Capital, Says Country's PM," *The Observer*, 28 November 2020, sec. *World News*, accessed 4 February 2023, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2020/nov/28/ethiopian-military-shelling-tigray-capital-reports-say>.

³⁰ "Gen Tsadkan Gebretensae: Ethiopia's Tigray Rebel Mastermind," *BBC News*, 1 July 2021, sec. Africa, accessed 4 February 2023, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-africa-57583208>.

³¹ "Gen Tsadkan Gebretensae."

By June the Tigrayans shifted gears, launching a series of offensives throughout Tigray, initially demonstrating their improved capabilities by shooting down an Ethiopian cargo plane.³² Before the end of the month, TDF troops had retaken Mekelle, marking a resurgence in their fortunes, and continued their offensive to retake the urban centers and transit corridors within Tigray.³³ In many cases, such as in the town of Shire, they found that the ENDF had abandoned the location before they themselves arrived, making their jobs considerably easier. These immediate losses caused Prime Minister Abiy to call for a ceasefire, but the Tigrayans felt they had momentum on their side. By early July the TDF units had begun to retake Southwestern Tigray from the Amhara forces that had occupied the region, with their offensive proving potent enough to lead Ethiopia to call upon the regional governments to call up their militias to counter the potential Tigrayan invasion of Amhara. In turn, the now potent forces of the TDF invaded first the Amhara region and then the Afar region in early to mid-August.³⁴ Although the latter region was not directly involved in the conflict, the Tigrayan attack cut off one of the most vital supply lines for the Ethiopian government that led from Djibouti to Addis Ababa.³⁵

At this point, the Amhara and Afar regional governments called for states of emergency and mobilized their local forces to the fullest extent they could. Between these forces and the reorganization and rest offered to the ENDF closer to Addis, the Ethiopian forces looked primed to drive back the Tigrayans. However, the Tigrayans had also managed to expand the scope of the conflict, forming an alliance with the Oromo Liberation Army (OLA) on 11 August.³⁶ The OLA was a dissident armed group of Oromo who opposed the Abiy government and declared their intent to aid the

³² "Tigray Forces Claim to Have Shot down Ethiopian Plane, Taken Town," *Reuters*, 29 November 2020, accessed 4 February 2023, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-ethiopia-conflict-idUSKBN28905M>.

³³ "A Regional Capital Falls, and so Does the Stature of Ethiopia's Leader and Its Military," *France 24*, 2 July 2021, accessed 4 February 2023, <https://www.france24.com/en/africa/20210702-a-regional-capital-falls-and-so-does-the-stature-of-ethiopia-s-leader-and-its-military>.

³⁴ "Ethiopia: Tigray Forces Push South as Amhara Militias Mobilise," *Business Daily*, 14 July 2021, accessed 4 February 2023, <https://www.businessdailyafrica.com/bd/news/ethiopia-tigray-forces-amhara-militias-mobilise-3472940>.

³⁵ "Ethiopia Tigray Crisis: New Front Opens as Aid Fears Grow," *BBC News*, 22 July 2021, sec. Africa, accessed 4 February 2023, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-africa-57926832>.

³⁶ "Ethiopia Armed Group Says It Has Alliance with Tigray Forces," *AP News*, 11 August 2021, accessed 4 February 2023, <https://apnews.com/article/africa-only-on-ap-ethiopia-b280e6622d66b7e7f9b12cd1d0041ae8>.

Tigrayans in defeating the current Abiy regime. The Tigrayans also were reported to be reaching out to other dissident armed groups in an attempt to broaden the war and perhaps engulf the Abiy government in an overall conflagration similar to that that had overthrown the Derg.³⁷

By the end of this first period of the war, the initiative and the momentum appeared to be on the side of the Tigrayans and it is worthwhile to discuss why before moving on to the next stage of the conflict. The previous decades of conflict in the Horn of Africa, particularly the Eritrean independence struggle and the Ethiopian Civil War, had seen significant parallels to these opening stages of the conflict. Both the EPLF and TPLF in their struggles against the Ethiopian government during the 1970s and 1980s had largely practiced warfare along the lines laid out by Mao Zedong, who preached that in order to ultimately win against a stronger and better-equipped enemy one must look towards waging a protracted struggle that would transition through three stages: the strategic retreat, the strategic stalemate, and the strategic offensive.³⁸ In the strategic retreat, the smaller enemy's main concern was survival and maintaining their forces until they could reach a place where they could be safe and the enemy could be potentially overextended. At that point, the smaller combatant would enter the stage of strategic stalemate, where the smaller enemy would keep their opponent engaged from a position of relative security and use irregular or guerrilla forces to constantly strike at their rear echelons and supply lines to weaken them. Once the invader was weakened enough from the attrition and raids, the initially smaller enemy would transition to the strategic offensive and use maneuver warfare to try and force a decisive confrontation where they would achieve victory.

In the Eritrean struggle against first the Ethiopian Empire and then the Derg regime, the two major Eritrean fronts used these strategies extensively. Both the Eritrean Peoples Liberation Front (EPLF) and its forebear the Eritrean Liberation Front (ELF) fought lengthy guerrilla engagements with the forces of Haile Selassie and

³⁷ Associated Press, "Tigray, Other Groups Form Alliance Against Ethiopian Leader," *VOA*, 5 November 2021, accessed 4 February 2023, <https://www.voanews.com/a/tigray-other-groups-form-alliance-against-ethiopian-leader/6301306.html>.

³⁸ Mao Zedong, "The Three Stages of Protracted War," in *On Protracted War*, Sections 35-50, accessed 4 February 2023, https://www.marxists.org/reference/archive/mao/selected-works/volume-2/mswv2_09.htm.

transitioned to taking territory and directly fighting Ethiopian forces during the early chaos of the Derg. Following the influx of massive amounts of Soviet aid to the Derg, it was the EPLF's accurate analysis of the situation that saw them transition back to the strategic retreat phase and survive a long withdrawal to the mountain sanctuary of Nacfa.³⁹ Meanwhile, the ELF tried to maintain its territorial gains and fight against the Derg forces conventionally and was effectively destroyed except for a few small remnants.⁴⁰ The EPLF used the safety of Nacfa to return to the strategic stalemate while their new allies, the TPLF, organized significant insurgent activity within Ethiopia itself, eventually weakening the Ethiopian forces enough that they were able to break out of Keren and forcing a decisive battle in northern Ethiopia, the 1988 Battle of Afabet. As part of the larger guerrilla resistance, the TPLF played a critical part in this process and then later led the conventional advance on Addis Ababa along with their EPRDF allies.

The early stages of the recent Tigray conflict reflect many of the same lessons which the earlier wars had imparted. While the Tigrayans immediately seized the initiative and attacked the facilities of the Northern Command, this was largely in line with the need to both get additional materiel and remove any immediate areas where threats to the Tigrayan regional government might originate. However, once this was done, the Tigrayan forces largely waged a fighting retreat that allowed the majority of their forces to remove themselves from direct engagement with the ENDF and withdraw to the countryside surrounding the major transportation lanes and population centers in Tigray. From this strategic retreat, they were largely able to both regroup and reorganize their forces and then take on the large numbers of recruits that were motivated by the occupation by the ENDF. This also marked the beginning of the insurgency which was effectively the strategic stalemate- at the time the Tigrayans were not able to defeat the Ethiopians in the field, but they could avoid defeat, gather their strength, and slowly but surely bleed out the weakening ENDF forces. Finally, the dramatic downing of the Ethiopian C-130 aircraft over Tigray in June 2021 marked the Tigrayans asserting their return to the strategic offensive and the reorganized forces undertook a series of conventional offensives that saw them not only regain their initial

³⁹ Dan Connell, *Against All Odds: 2nd Edition with a New Update & a Reappraisal* (S.I.: The Red Sea Press, 2021), Chapter 10 covers the EPLF's reactions and decisions regarding the resurgent Ethiopian forces.

⁴⁰ Alexander De Waal, *Evil Days: Thirty Years of War and Famine in Ethiopia* (New York: Human Rights Watch, 1991), p. 114.

territory but drive into Amhara and Afar territories. This was so unexpected that Prime Minister Abiy called for an immediate ceasefire and the two invaded regions were forced into a state of emergency. At this point, by following the earlier playbook that had been established by generations of revolutionaries and insurgents, the Tigrayans had managed to not only effectively maintain and grow their own armed forces, but in less than a year had driven the larger combined forces of their opponents out of Tigray, threatened two additional regions, and even stood astride critical supply lines for their opponent. However, as will be seen, the key to this Maoist conception of protracted war is that the transitions may not only go one way and the timing and flexibility involved for the forces engaging in the protracted struggle remains the key to survival and, ultimately, victory.

The Tigrayan Offensive

Beginning in October 2021, the Ethiopian forces had recovered enough to build up significant forces among their own formations and those of the allied Amhara and Afar regional states. On 8 October, they launched these forces in an overall counterattack across the front, using their advantages in air power and armoured vehicles to try and push the Tigrayans back and damage them as much as possible.⁴¹ The Tigrayans had reportedly been aware of this buildup and had prepared their own forces. The offensive was described by both sides as being a “decisive” engagement and inflicted a large enough amount of casualties to be notable for both sides.⁴² However, ultimately this attempt to defeat the Tigrayans and press them back into their borders was not successful, although the need to redeploy troops in preparation for other operations had earlier reopened the Ethiopian supply lines.

In fact, by the end of October, it appeared as if the ENDF and its allies had finally used the last of their strength. In the most dramatic episode of the war, the TDF

⁴¹ Katharine Houreld, “Airstrikes against Tigrayan Forces Intensify in Ethiopia’s Amhara Region -TPLF Spokesman,” *Reuters*, 9 October 2021, sec. Africa, accessed 4 February 2023, <https://www.reuters.com/world/africa/airstrikes-against-tigrayan-forces-intensify-ethiopias-amhara-region-tplf-2021-10-08/>.

⁴² “Fears for Humanitarian Crisis as Abiy Ahmed Launches Make or Break Tigray War,” *The Independent*, 20 October 2021, accessed 4 February 2023, <https://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/africa/ethiopia-tigray-war-humanitarian-population-b1938975.html>.

launched a joint offensive with their Oromo Liberation Army allies, driving primarily southward towards Addis Ababa. For the first several days of the offensive, the ENDF seemed unable to effectively respond and the regional forces allied with Abiy's government were busy with the conflict that continued in their own regions.⁴³ By the middle of November, there were scattered reports of the OLA being near the outskirts of Addis Ababa and on November 25th Prime Minister Abiy declared a state of national emergency and informed his country that he was travelling personally to the battlefield.⁴⁴ While Abiy's presence was reported, it was not simply the Prime Minister being close by that turned the tide.⁴⁵ Beginning on November 26th, ENDF units and Amhara militias began to strike back against the Eastern and Western flanks of the new Tigrayan salient while coordinated defences and airstrikes slowed and then stopped the Tigrayan spearhead.⁴⁶ While the TDF had made a swift and potentially deadly advance from the beginning of November, it was ground to a halt and then began to be driven back by the Ethiopian forces throughout December. The Tigrayan forces by this point had little ability to stop them and to avoid being cut off gave ground and even withdrew their other troops from Amhara and Afar, with all their forces being back in Tigrayan territory by 20 December.⁴⁷

⁴³ "Ethiopia's Tigray Defense Forces Advance Toward Addis Ababa," *Jamestown Foundation*, accessed 5 February 2023, <https://jamestown.org/program/ethiopias-tigray-defense-forces-advance-toward-addis-ababa/>.

⁴⁴ Declan Walsh, "Ethiopian Leader Heads to Front Line as War Threatens to Widen," *The New York Times*, 25 November 2021, sec. *World*, accessed 4 February 2023, <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/11/25/world/africa/ethiopia-abiy-troops-battlefront.html>.

⁴⁵ Although the highly respected Professor Kjetil Tronvoll has noted the morale effects of Prime Minister Abiy's advance and as such his presence cannot be dismissed entirely either. See "Ethiopia Civil War: How PM Abiy Led Fight-Back against Rebel Advance," *BBC News*, 15 December 2021, sec. *Africa*, accessed 4 February 2023, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-africa-59552888>.

⁴⁶ In particular, observers note that Ethiopia's acquisition and deployment of armed drones managed to have a very significant effect on the tide of battle, with the Chinese sourced drones having inflicted a wide range of damage to the TDF forces. See "Ethiopia Civil War."

⁴⁷ "Tigray Forces Announce Withdrawal From Afar, Amhara Regions," *VOA News*, 20 December 2021, accessed 4 February 2023, <https://www.voanews.com/a/tigray-forces-announce-withdrawal-from-afar-amhara-regions/6362138.html>.

At this point, the Tigrayans and Ethiopians both slowed their military operations and both sides called for a ceasefire.⁴⁸ Although there had been several airstrikes into Tigray by the Ethiopians, the ENDF had halted operations into Tigray in January 2022 and the leadership of both combatants had expressed a willingness to open discussions.⁴⁹ Beginning in March there was the declaration of a humanitarian ceasefire, with Tigray in particular, requesting the transit of food, medicine, and other essentials for its citizens which had been denied throughout the conflict and now were in critically short supply.⁵⁰ However, during this period of time, despite the ENDF remaining relatively passive its allies in Eritrea and Amhara were both active and continued occupations of territory and occasional strikes into Tigray, continuing to weaken the TDF's capabilities. At the same time, despite the negotiated humanitarian aid and service provision, the Ethiopian government remained extremely slow in its efforts throughout March and August.⁵¹ Despite the ceasefire and peace talks, this was not the end of the war, simply the end of this phase of the war.

So how had the TDF managed to go from effectively winning the war, driving back the ENDF in disarray, to dealing with a series of harsh reversals that now had them pressed back into Tigray's borders and negotiating for the simple requirements of life for its civilians? As noted above, while Mao's conception of protracted conflict often gives a weaker opponent a chance to overcome a stronger one, the transitions between its phases are challenging to effectively time and accomplish.⁵² In particular, the

⁴⁸ Gelmo Dawit, "Analysts: Ethiopian Forces' Halt at Tigray Opens Window for Ceasefire," *VOA News*, 24 December 2021, accessed 4 February 2023, <https://www.voanews.com/a/analysts-ethiopian-forces-halt-at-tigray-opens-window-for-ceasefire-/6368897.html>.

⁴⁹ "Ethiopia Declares Unilateral Truce to Allow Aid into Tigray," *Al Jazeera*, 24 March 2022, accessed 5 February 2023, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2022/3/24/ethiopia-declares-truce-to-allow-aid-into-tigray>; AfricaNews, "Ethiopia: TPLF Fighters Agree to Uphold Humanitarian Ceasefire," *Africanews*, 25 March 2022, <https://www.africanews.com/2022/03/25/ethiopia-tplf-fighters-agree-to-uphold-humanitarian-ceasefire/>.

⁵⁰ "A Fragile Ceasefire Offers Hope in Ethiopia," *The Economist*, 2 April 2022, accessed 5 February 2023, <https://www.economist.com/middle-east-and-africa/2022/04/02/a-fragile-ceasefire-offers-hope-in-ethiopia>.

⁵¹ "Biggest Aid Convoy since Cease-Fire Nears Ethiopia's Tigray," *AP News*, 27 March 2022, accessed 6 February 2023, <https://apnews.com/article/united-nations-africa-ethiopia-humanitarian-assistance-5e490733ec5564862a92556a439058ca>.

⁵² Mao in particular noted "...circumstances are continually changing. In the course of the war, *provided we employ correct military and political tactics, make no mistakes of principle and exert our best efforts* [sic], the enemy's disadvantages and China's advantages will both grow as the war is drawn out, with the

transition from the strategic stalemate to the strategic offensive is supposed to occur when the enemy can potentially be drawn into a decisive engagement where the attacker holds the advantages. However, this requires knowing when the enemy is weak enough that they may be decisively defeated and drawing them into a potentially deadly engagement while being so. Particularly with a modern state that can draw from deep wells of manpower and source new materiel, it can be rare for these periods of weakness to be lasting unless following a particularly punishing period of the strategic stalemate. In fact, during the Eritrean independence struggle, both the EPLF and ELF had transitioned to the strategic offensive in 1976-1977 during the period when the chaos of the Derg's coup had upended the military situation in Eritrea. This transition by both fronts saw unprecedented territorial gains, with the EPLF making it as far as Massawa along the Red Sea Coast before a previously unprecedented stream of Soviet arms and equipment reinvigorated the faltering military of the Derg.⁵³ Now rearmed and reinforced, the Communist Ethiopian forces launched a series of punishing offensives that forced a decision point on the Eritrean fronts. The ELF miscalculated and remained a conventional force to retain the territory it had gained and was subsequently defeated in detail by the massively stronger Ethiopians. In contrast, the EPLF largely abandoned its territorial gains to seek safety and preserve its forces, which allowed them to reset the cycle of protracted war and wait for further chances to turn the tide.

For the Tigrayans during the recent conflict, their transition to the strategic offensive and eventually the sustaining of their drive towards Addis Ababa appears to have largely been a miscalculation. Not only did their attack not prove to be decisive, but it offered the Ethiopians a chance to cut off and destroy a large portion of their forces in detail. It was to the TDF's credit that they were able to quickly withdraw their troops once the momentum was lost, but even then, they simply returned to a more static and conventional defence of Tigray and its environs. However, there are numerous aspects of the strategic calculus involved that help explain how and why this

inevitable result that there will be a continual change in the difference in comparative strength and hence in the relative position of the two sides. When a new stage is reached, a great change will take place in the balance of forces, resulting in the enemies defeat and our victory." Mao Zedong, in *On Protracted War*, Section 33, accessed 4 February 2023, https://www.marxists.org/reference/archive/mao/selected-works/volume-2/mswv2_09.htm.

⁵³ Connell, *Against All Odds*, pp. 153–54.

hopefully decisive but ultimately failed offensive took the shape it did. The first is simple: whereas Mao consistently discusses that the strategic stalemate is a period of safety and largely equilibrium with almost unlimited time for the defender, this did not match the Tigray situation. Although Tigray was largely holding its own in the field, the region was filled with civilians and citizens as well as warfighters and thanks to the geographic location of the region, it was existing in a state of siege with a dwindling supply of food and medical supplies. Beyond this, while the Tigrayans had begun the conflict with a robust amount of military materiel and had captured more over the course of the war, there was no steady method of supply for the TDF. Given these factors, it was likely that the TDF was making this calculation with the same benefits and constraints as Mao was discussing but faced the very real concern of when might they have enough strength to make a decisive attack against an enemy that seemed weak enough to be beaten.⁵⁴ Given this construct, the period following the failed ENDF offensive probably seemed like the last time that the TDF might truly outmatch the ENDF enough to achieve the goal of taking Addis Ababa and destabilizing the Abiy government in order to achieve the Tigrayan's primary strategic goals.

However, if the Tigrayans understood their own strengths and how they were temporary at best, they may have also underestimated some of the advantages that the Ethiopians had that proved decisive in defeating the TDF offensive. The first was the resiliency of the remaining ENDF forces and their allies, who proved to be able to consolidate and stand against the Tigrayans after a time. However, this was backstopped by the natural advantage that Ethiopia had against Tigray as a recognized state. While the international community may have been willing to engage with the TPLF, this was largely a humanitarian effort with the goals being to minimize human suffering and perhaps negotiate an end to the war. Ethiopia and the Abiy regime, on the other hand, were actually recognized international actors who governed a key territory in a strategic region of the globe.⁵⁵ This offered them significant room for sourcing arms,

⁵⁴ Mao of course is writing on the strategic outlook of the Japanese invasion of mainland China, although later on his strategic thoughts would also lead to the discussion of the coming war against the Nationalists.

⁵⁵ Particularly in sub-Saharan Africa, recognition and international legitimacy is only offered to the sovereign states, which gives them a stranglehold on any international aid and support. For a brief discussion of the effects of this on internal dissident groups, see Charles G. Thomas and Toyin Falola,

ammunition, and technology from abroad while being able to deny them to their opponents. As such, even from the early days of the conflict, Ethiopia was able to reach out to numerous allies, including China, Iran, Turkey, and the Gulf States to arm itself and update its own military capabilities.⁵⁶ As such, the Ethiopians not only had an advantage in manpower but throughout the conflict there was a continuous improvement in their armaments and capabilities, an improvement their opponents could not match. Several of these updated weapon systems, such as the Ethiopians' newly acquired drones, were held to have been decisive in the halting and eventual reversal of the Tigrayan offensive.⁵⁷

Three Front Siege

While both the Abiy government and the TPLF had agreed on a ceasefire, this period did not necessarily bring relief to the Tigrayans. Despite the international community pressuring Ethiopia to facilitate the delivery of humanitarian aid to Tigray and to restore the various public services they had cut off in that region, the Ethiopian government dragged its feet on all counts. This led to a situation where Ethiopia continued to regain its strength while Tigray found itself still in effectively a state of siege despite a ceasefire. Additionally, while there was technically a ceasefire between Ethiopian and Tigrayan forces, there were still provocations and disagreements about

Secession and Separatist Conflicts in Postcolonial Africa, Illustrated edition (Calgary, Alberta, Canada: University of Calgary Press, 2020), pp. 14-15.

⁵⁶ While drones remained a focal point for many observers, it is also important to note the massive more traditional military aid sourced from partners such as the UAE. See Inder Singh Bisht, "Images Suggest Ethiopia Using Iranian Drones in Civil War," *The Defense Post* (blog), 25 August 2021, accessed 4 February 2023, <https://www.thedefensepost.com/2021/08/25/ethiopia-iranian-drones-tigray/>; Oryx, "Iranian Mohajer-6 Drones Spotted In Ethiopia," *Oryx* (blog), 11 August 2021, accessed 31 January 2023, <https://www.oryxspioenkop.com/2021/08/iranian-mohajer-6-drones-spotted-in.html>; "Made In China: Ethiopia's Fleet Of Chinese UAVs," *Oryx* (blog), 2 September 2021, accessed 31 January 2023, <https://www.oryxspioenkop.com/2021/09/made-in-china-ethiopias-fleet-of.html>; "UAE Air Bridge To Ethiopia Continues Unabated - Surpassing 100 Flights," *Oryx* (blog), 19 November 2021, accessed 31 January 2023, <https://www.oryxspioenkop.com/2021/11/uae-air-bridge-to-ethiopia-continues.html>.

⁵⁷ Alex Gatopoulos, "How Armed Drones May Have Helped Turn the Tide in Ethiopia's War," *Al Jazeera*, 10 December 2021, accessed 6 February 2023, <https://www.aljazeera.com/features/2021/12/10/how-armed-drones-may-have-helped-turn-tide-in-ethiopia-conflict>.

the ownership of contested territories, leading to considerable tensions.⁵⁸ In particular, the Western region of Tigray was occupied by Amhara forces who claimed this region as well and the Tigrayans insisted on their retaining this territory as part of any settlement. While Tigray continued to press for the restoration of services, territories, and a constitutional guarantee for its status within Ethiopia, the talks slowly made little progress between March and August and the ceasefire finally collapsed in late August amongst recriminations on all sides.⁵⁹

While it is ultimately unclear who initiated the renewed hostilities, it quickly took the form of a series of brutal Eritrean offensives in Northern Tigray.⁶⁰ While the Ethiopians continued a series of aerial and artillery bombardments on the Tigrayan defences, the Eritreans announced a larger callup of their reservists, indicating a larger commitment intended for the struggle in Tigray. This predicted offensive finally began in late September, with the Eritreans bringing significant military resources to bear, including armour, airpower, and artillery.⁶¹ The ENDF joined this offensive including into the northern reaches of Tigray, pressing hard into the prepared defences of the TDF, leading to massive casualties on all sides. By October, the Eritreans renewed their assaults, forcing the TDF to reposition several of its units, a costly tradeoff in what was now a three-front offensive with the Amhara forces in the West, the ENDF in the South, and the joint ENDF-Eritrea forces in the North.⁶² Ultimately by late October, the Ethiopian and Eritrean forces were announcing they had taken considerable territory

⁵⁸ Getachew K Reda [@reda_getachew], "The #AbyRegime Has Launched an Offensive against Our Positions in the Southern Front. After Week-Long Provocation Using Amhara Special Force Divisions, Amhara Militia from All over the Region and beyond as Well as Fano from Wollo, the Southern and Sixth Command of the Regime Has," Tweet, *Twitter*, 24 August 2022, https://twitter.com/reda_getachew/status/1562319589119229952.

⁵⁹ "Ethiopia's Tigray War: New Fighting Shatters Humanitarian Truce," *BBC News*, 24 August 2022, accessed 6 February 2023, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-africa-62664225>.

⁶⁰ "Tigrayan Forces Accuse Eritrea of Launching Offensive," *Al Jazeera*, 20 September 2022, accessed 6 February 2023, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2022/9/20/tigrayan-forces-accused-eritrea-starting-offensive-in-ethiopia>.

⁶¹ "Satellite Images Show Eritrea Military Buildup near Tigray," *AP News*, 28 September 2022, accessed 6 February 2023, <https://apnews.com/article/africa-kenya-ethiopia-eritrea-198df2c3323b6d480648f7fe042bfb87https>; Alex de Waal, "Tigray Faces a New Onslaught by Eritrean-Ethiopian Forces," *Responsible Statecraft*, 14 October 2022, <https://responsiblestatecraft.org/2022/10/14/tigray-faces-a-new-onslaught-by-eritrean-ethiopian-forces/>.

⁶² De Waal, "Tigray Faces a New Onslaught by Eritrean-Ethiopian Forces."

even as both sides were estimated to have suffered around 100,000 casualties in the previous few weeks of fighting.⁶³ It was these final few weeks of brutal Eritrean and Ethiopian offensives against stubborn Tigrayan defences that proved to be the framing events of the renewal of peace talks in late October and November, talks that have continued to the present day but look likely to bear fruit.

The last few months of the conflict proved to be incredibly punishing for all sides involved, with the Ethiopians and Eritreans accused of having adopted human wave tactics to break formidable Tigrayan defences, at a high cost for all sides.⁶⁴ However, despite the costs, it remains obvious that these assaults led to the result that Ethiopia wished- they now had the TPLF in a position of obvious weakness as they entered into a period of critical negotiations.⁶⁵ Once the conventional Tigrayan offensive towards Addis Ababa failed and Ethiopia was able to effectively rearm and reinforce, the result was almost foregone even if the cost was unknown. However, this does raise the question of what remaining options did Tigray have? The conventional defence the TDF was waging was well executed, as can be seen by their ability to continue to mobilize troops and wage their war on an even footing, but ultimately was one that led to failure against a larger and more well-supplied ENDF and its allies.

Tigray itself had in fact faced this same rough calculus earlier- unable to necessarily stop the larger and better equipped ENDF, the TPLF and its forces had instead chosen the route of protracted war, retreating to the hills where they waged a deadly guerrilla campaign against the Ethiopians. Barely a year earlier, this campaign had managed to weaken the ENDF to a shadow of its former self and allow an almost-successful *coup de main* at Addis Ababa. Why not simply continue to echo the earlier conflicts in the Horn and return to the strategic defensive and stalemate, cause attrition to the Ethiopian forces as best they could, and wait for another opening?

⁶³ Kjetil Tronvoll [@KjetilTronvoll], "2/: The Ongoing Combined #Eritrea / #Ethiopia Offensives on #Tigray Use WW1 Tactics of Ordering Massive Human Wave Attacks on Tigray Defense Lines. The Carnage Is Horrendous. Likely as Many as 100.000 Have Been Slaughtered over the Last Weeks.," Tweet, *Twitter*, 15 October 2022, <https://twitter.com/KjetilTronvoll/status/1581297399351631882>.

⁶⁴ Kjetil Tronvoll [@KjetilTronvoll].

⁶⁵ "Ethiopia Steps up Offensive Against Tigray Rebels," *Bloomberg.Com*, 20 October 2022, accessed 6 February 2023, <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2022-10-20/ethiopia-steps-up-offensive-against-tigray-rebels>.

The long and short of it was that the strategic calculus involved in the conflict had changed for the Tigrayans over the course of the previous year. The transition to strategic stalemate relied on establishing an equilibrium between the combatant forces that would allow for the attrition of your opponent over a long period of time while avoiding such attrition yourself. For Mao's Chinese Communists of the 1930s and 1940s, this had involved retreating to a remote base area called Yen'an where they were able to fortify themselves at a distance from their opponents. Mao's forces then set up a series of workshops and farms that allowed for the sustainment of their struggle over the lengthy period of the war against the Japanese and then the Nationalists. For the earlier generations of Eritreans and Tigrayans, this had involved retreating to the mountains, including the natural fortress at Nacfa, while managing to set up workshops and keep thin lines of supply open to support the struggle against the Ethiopians.⁶⁶ In all of these conflicts, this involved the creation of a situation where you had a region that allowed both a defensive advantage to your forces in the larger attritional struggle while also being able to sustain your own capabilities.

For the TPLF's current struggle, this had always been a challenging objective and one they had never quite convincingly achieved. The earlier strategic retreat to the mountainous terrain of Northern Tigray had occurred after the nascent Tigrayan forces had both organized their equipment and seized large amounts of hardware from the Ethiopian Northern Command. Additionally, during the course of the conflict, they likely captured more. However, the transition to maneuver warfare likely caused significant attrition to this equipment, particularly the drive towards Addis Ababa and the defence against the joint Ethiopian-Eritrean offensives. With at best thin supply lines leading into Tigray, there likely was little that the TDF could do to replace losses and the Ethiopians had made it an increasing priority to close off those routes. Of course, this does not draw into the equation the even more dire situation involving feeding the military and civilian populations of Tigray. There had already been a lengthy series of warnings about famine throughout the region and following both the devastating war and the Ethiopian slowing of humanitarian aid, there was decreasing food for the Tigrayan armed forces, much less the civilians they were fighting for.⁶⁷

⁶⁶ Waal, *Evil Days*, p. 115.

⁶⁷ Kjetil Tronvoll [@KjetilTronvoll], "4/: #Ethiopia Is Simultaneously Using Starvation as War Strategy, by Blocking Humanitarian Aid to #Tigray. Millions of Tigrayans Are on Verge of Famine. Thousands Are

Simply put, unlike earlier in the conflict, there were scant resources for the TDF to confidently wage a lengthy resistance against the Ethiopian and Eritrean foes.

On the other side of the ledger, there was also the need for an opponent that could be fought effectively during this period of stalemate and upon whom enough losses could be inflicted to eventually tip the balance of power. During the earlier period of the conflict where the ENDF occupied Tigray, this was a possibility, with a more motivated Tigrayan force leavened with experienced officers and men capable of waging an asymmetric conflict on Ethiopian forces intent on staying within Tigray state. By the later stage in the conflict, the ENDF was not necessarily focused on occupying Tigrayan territory beyond the strategic points needed to control the flow of food and goods into Tigray itself. As such, the ENDF could pick and choose its battles to avoid any potential unbalanced confrontations, even as they had an increasing advantage in manpower. By avoiding placing themselves necessarily in harm's way in continuous conflict in Tigray and instead blockading and strangling the flow of necessary resources, the Ethiopians effectively removed most opportunities for the Tigrayans to inflict any decisive damage upon the ENDF forces.

Ultimately, the strategy of protracted war that had been practiced in the earlier conflicts in the Horn required there to be an effective way to force a greater amount of attrition on the stronger invading force. This would then weaken them enough to allow the transition to a more decisive form of conflict. While this had been a possibility earlier in the recent Tigray conflict, the blockading of Tigray changed the calculus of the war; the Tigrayans no longer had the resources to maintain a lengthy strategy of avoidance and inflicting attrition while the Ethiopian forces and their allies were avoiding the earlier asymmetric encounters that cost them their strength. With this avenue closed off, victory was effectively an impossibility for the Tigrayans and their best route forward was to wage as stubborn and damaging of a defence as they could to both defend their suffering population and force the best deal they could at the negotiating table.

Dying for Lack of Medical Supplies. Children Are Suffering Tremendously.," Tweet, *Twitter*, 15 October 2022, <https://twitter.com/KjetilTronvoll/status/1581297403797602305>.

Conclusion

The Tigray War now has largely moved into the realm of political negotiation, with the TPLF leadership in acrimonious talks with Abiy's government. There is still considerable uncertainty as to the ultimate fate of Western Tigray and who will come to possess it. There are still reportedly Eritrean troops loose in Tigray and they have earned an ugly reputation for their conduct while these talks are ongoing.⁶⁸ Humanitarian aid and public services are slowly returning to the region, albeit with the surety that they can likely be halted again quickly. While the negotiations proceed, it is obvious that at least in their maximal hopes the Tigrayan government has not won this conflict and in the process has undergone deep suffering and significant human loss.

While this suffering is obviously a tragedy, the conflict itself has offered several revealing points of interest for the region. The first is that while it cannot be said that the older dynamics of asymmetric wars have been completely defeated, it is increasingly obvious that the stronger, centralized states such as Ethiopia have managed to learn to leverage their advantages effectively enough to counter them. In the earlier conflicts during the Cold War, the Derg military mobilized hundreds of thousands of conscripts who were equipped with hundreds of millions of dollars worth of Soviet military material and yet they were still defeated by a series of local insurgencies. Now, despite the cohesion and organization of the TPLF and their armed forces, the smaller insurgency was not able to crack the multiethnic state as easily as their forebears had. Instead, the Ethiopian state managed to keep enough of the country's regional governments on its side, mobilize enough forces and acquire enough newer hardware, and finally effectively leverage its own recognized sovereignty to avoid the TPLF gaining any sort of external lifeline. This meant that despite what initially appeared as an early and effective adoption of the tried-and-true concept of protracted war, the Tigrayans were not able to achieve the capture of Addis Ababa and the potential fracturing of the Ethiopian state. Instead, they were ultimately countered by swift mobilization of regional rivalries and international arms flows which led to Tigray being besieged and the war ending in starvation and the current negotiations for peace.

⁶⁸ Reuters, "Eritrea Troops Still on Ethiopian Soil: US," VOA, 28 January 2023, <https://www.voanews.com/a/eritrea-troops-still-on-ethiopian-soil-us/6938071.html>.