

Introduction: Situating Ethiopia in Genocide Debates

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Genocide scholars have largely neglected Ethiopian histories of atrocious violence, with rare exceptions.¹ This looks set to change given the violent conflict and spiralling human rights violations over the past year, under the government of Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed. In July 2020, the Ethiopian government cracked down on protests in Oromia region with extrajudicial killings and mass arrests.² Soon afterwards, amid rising political instability, regional militias targeted local minorities in what was described as “ethnic-cleansing.”³ Then, in early November 2020, Tigray erupted into armed conflict, following a dispute between the regional government, led by the Tigray People’s Liberation Front (TPLF) and the federal government, and leading to intense warfare and violence against civilians in the region and beyond. Over the months since, various armed forces – principally the Ethiopian National Defence Forces (ENDF) and the Eritrean Defence Forces (EDF) – have perpetrated massacres, sexual violence and forced starvation likely to amount to war crimes, crimes against humanity, or possibly crimes constitutive of genocide.⁴

There is bound to be a surge in scholarly responses to these atrocities in Ethiopia, of the kind we witnessed (and contributed to) after the genocide in Rwanda in 1994 and the atrocities in Darfur in 2003-05. Such an explosion of interest is not without its problems. Western scholars were overly-represented in early debates on Rwanda and Darfur – not least because small communities of domestic scholars were devastated, lacking resources, or still at risk. New

¹ E.g. in this journal, Edward Kissi, “Rwanda, Ethiopia and Cambodia: Links, Faultlines and Complexities in a Comparative Study of Genocide,” *Journal of Genocide Research* 6, no. 1 (2004): 115-133.

² Human Rights Watch, *Ethiopia Cracks Down Following Popular Singer’s Killing*, 1 July 2020.

³ Minority Rights Group, “Recent Violence in Ethiopia’s Oromia region Shows Hallmark Signs of Ethnic Cleansing Says MRG,” *Statement*, 22 July 2020.

⁴ Amnesty International *Ethiopia: Eritrean Troops Massacred Hundreds of Tigray Civilians - New Evidence*, 25 February 2021; Amnesty International, *Ethiopia: Troops and Militia Rape, Mutilate and Abduct Women and Girls in Tigray Conflict - New Report*, 11 August 2021; United Nations Human Rights, “Ethiopia: Persistent, Credible Reports of Grave Violations in Tigray Underscore Urgent Need for Human Rights Access – Bachelet,” Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights, Geneva, 4 March 2021.

country experts and comparativists were nominally “outsiders,” but they could not automatically side-step the malign politics. In Rwanda, some scholars fuelled the “politicization of even the most basic concepts and research questions.”⁵ In Darfur, the international advocacy movement promoted the framing of the atrocities as “genocide” with the explicit intention of provoking an international military intervention, politicizing and dividing the academy.⁶ Like human rights activists, scholars working in atrocity environments must negotiate multiple moral and political dilemmas and are prone to “getting it wrong.”⁷ Not least, they may unintentionally contribute to the fatigue of traumatized survivors;⁸ or carelessly propose theories that could only ever make sense from a distance.⁹

Future research on atrocities in Ethiopia can learn from the failures and successes of knowledge-production in previous African conflict and genocide research. One positive lesson is the need and potential to support domestic scholars through research endeavours; international academia must strive to “bolster” fragile or divided scholarly communities.¹⁰ Another striking insight is that many of the historical and ethnographic studies produced before tragic events remain profoundly relevant, in one way or another. The best efforts to understand catastrophic episodes of violence, and the possibilities for justice and social repair, have often built

⁵ Peter Uvin, “Reading the Rwandan Genocide,” *International Studies Review* 3, Issue 3 (2001): 75-99, 76.

⁶ Alex de Waal, “Reflections on the Difficulties of Defining Darfur’s Crisis as Genocide,” *Harvard Journal of Human Rights*, 20 (2007): 25-33.

⁷ Alex de Waal, “Writing Human Rights and Getting it Wrong,” *Boston Review*, 6 June 2016.

⁸ This issue is discussed in Eddah Mutua Kombo, “Their Words, Actions, and Meaning: A Researcher’s Reflection on Rwandan Women’s Experience of Genocide,” *Qualitative Inquiry* 15, no. 2 (2009): 308-323, 316-7.

⁹ E.g. Chaim Kaufmann, “Possible and Impossible Solutions to Ethnic Civil Wars,” *International Security*, 20, no. 4 (1996): 136-175.

¹⁰ See Felix M. Ndahinda et al. “Bolstering Rwandan Voices Writing About Rwanda,” *The British Academy Blog*, 5 December 2018, <https://www.thebritishacademy.ac.uk/blog/bolstering-rwandan-voices-writing-about-rwanda/> (accessed 19 September 2021); Hannah Logan, “Researching Education, Conflict and Civicness in South Sudan: The Project Rationale and Process,” *Conflict Research Programme Blog*, LSE, 10 February 2021, <https://blogs.lse.ac.uk/crp/2021/02/10/researching-education-conflict-and-civicness-in-south-sudan-the-project-rationale-and-process/> (accessed 21 September 2021).

selectively and carefully upon foundational research accomplished in the period before atrocities intensified, were mediatized, and the countries came into (academic) fashion.¹¹

Ethiopia boasts a long-established academic community that has routinely led sophisticated debates about history and politics in Amharic and English, in interaction with international contributors to Ethiopian Studies. Their work demands greater recognition, but also – as recent reflections suggest – a measure of scrutiny. For example, Bahru Zewde has written a painful reflection on the way in which the politics of the Ethiopian student movement, strongly influenced by Marxist social science, embraced violence.¹² Meanwhile, Elleni Zeleke has persuasively explored how “positivistic” notions of social science interacted with revolutionary practices in the decades after 1970. Ethiopian scholars were expected to deliver socially beneficial research, articulating their research around “whatever social engineering project currently dominated social science practice.” They lacked the open environment in which to pursue a much-needed “critical and philosophical dialogue on social reality.” All too often, the result was the politicization of concepts in the context of war and social conflict.¹³

In this precarious moment, the space for scholarly action and debate within Ethiopia is narrowing again. War, political repression, and the restrictions of the coronavirus pandemic, have placed extraordinary limits on domestic and foreign scholars alike. Threats also cross borders, such that those members of Ethiopia’s academic diaspora who continue to provide

¹¹ Such foundational texts include, for Rwanda, Catherine Newbury, *The Cohesion of Oppression: Clientship and Ethnicity in Rwanda, 1860-1960* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1988). And for Sudan, Francis M. Deng, *War of Visions: Conflict of Identities in the Sudan* (Washington DC: Brookings Institution Press, 1995).

¹² Bahru Zewde, *The Quest for Socialist Utopia: The Ethiopian Student Movement, c. 1960-1974* (London: James Currey, 2017).

¹³ Elleni Centime Zeleke, *Ethiopia in Theory: Revolution and Knowledge Production, 1964-2016* (Chicago IL, Haymarket Books, 2020), 10.

critical commentary,¹⁴ do so at personal risk.¹⁵ All the more reason to turn, at this difficult time, to histories and archives as accessible entry points for scholars striving to make sense of the horrors of the present.

With this in mind, we have convened this forum on histories of mass atrocities and political violence in Ethiopia. Our rationale is that genocide studies will benefit from the work of historians and anthropologists who have studied large-scale violence in Ethiopia, while scholars of Ethiopia have much to gain from engaging with current debates within genocide studies. Moreover, Ethiopian history is rich in case material for the comparative study of large-scale violence, suggesting that recent violence in Tigray, or elsewhere in the country, cannot be understood in isolation.

The forum brings together four established historians with expertise on different periods of the country's history. Richard Reid provides an account of political violence over the *longue durée*. Mohamed Hassen focuses on the extreme violence perpetrated during the successive wars against the Oromo peoples during the nineteenth century, immediately before and during the period of empire formation that established modern Ethiopia. Ian Campbell examines the violence of the Italian Fascist invasion and occupation. Jacob Wiebel provides an account and analysis of the totemic political violence of the revolution, namely the "Red Terror." Together, the collection looks both at, and beyond, the specificities of Ethiopian episodes and practices of violent conflict and their legacies, identifying connections to wider debates. It illuminates research on Ethiopia's past violence, and offers new directions for thinking about the deeply troubling present.

¹⁴ See for instance Awol Allo and Fevan Girmay, "Why Ethiopia's Elections Should be Postponed," *Al Jazeera*, 18 June 2021.

¹⁵ See Will Brown, "Ethiopia Wants to Arrest a British Academic," *The Telegraph*, 4 December 2020.

Our introductory essay provides context for the forum, beginning with an outline of what we know so far about the contemporary crisis in Tigray. It reflects upon individual forum contributions, touching upon some of their key insights. It also looks for patterns, firstly situating the scholarship in the traditions of Ethiopian historiography; secondly, linking Ethiopian histories of violence to wider debates about genocide and its relations to imperialism, modernity, and war. Lastly, we point to gaps in knowledge and set out an agenda for further research.

The Present Crisis

The war in Tigray began on the night of 3-4 November 2020. Its causes are the subject of intense controversy. The TPLF had opposed key elements in Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed's political agenda including the dissolution of the ruling party, the Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF), of which it had been the leading member, and the postponement of national elections. Each side accused the other of unconstitutional actions and denied the legitimacy of the other. The first shots were fired by Tigrayan forces that overran the ENDF military bases in the region. But there is some evidence that Ethiopia and Eritrea were already preparing to launch a military operation and joint forces from the ENDF, Eritrean forces and militia and special forces from the neighbouring Amhara region swiftly launched a three-pronged military assault.¹⁶ Despite the claims by Prime Minister Abiy that this was a swift and successful "law enforcement operation"¹⁷ against the TPLF in which "not a single civilian was killed,"¹⁸ it

¹⁶ "Eritrea, Tigray and Ethiopia's Brewing Civil War," *Al Jazeera*, 8 November 2020; "News Analysis: Amhara Region Police Chief Reveals How Regional Police Force Guided Federal Steel-Clad Mechanized Forces to Join 'War' in Tigray," *Addis Standard*, 4 January 2021.

¹⁷ Cited in American Ethiopian Public Affairs Committee, "AEPAC Statement: Basic Facts on the Law Enforcement Operation in Tigray Region of Ethiopia," 11 June 2021.

¹⁸ "Ethiopia PM Ahmed Abiy Admits Eritrea forces in Tigray," *BBC News*, 23 March 2021.

quickly became evident that the war was accompanied by atrocities against the civilian population. Early on, there were reciprocal mass killings in Mai Kadra involving both Tigrayan and Amhara militia;¹⁹ and a well-documented massacre in the city of Axum, in which Eritrean soldiers are accused of killing over 700 Tigrayan civilians.²⁰ Subsequently, evidence has emerged of widespread targeted killing of Tigrayan men and boys with more than 230 sites of mass killing,²¹ widespread rape of women and girls (in many cases accompanied by torture),²² and the systematic use of starvation as a weapon.²³

Political leaders, official and private media, and individual Ethiopians have used highly charged language. Before the outbreak of the war, the country's leaders spoke of Tigrayans as "daylight hyenas."²⁴ The media uses belligerent and paranoid language depicting Tigrayans as traitors and agents of foreign powers. Survivors of atrocities report soldiers saying that they intend to "cleansing the bloodline."²⁵ On 18 July 2021, Prime Minister Abiy further reinforced fears – in a now-infamous speech to parliament, he labelled the TPLF a "cancer" and like "weeds" to be "uprooted."²⁶ Meanwhile, government statements accused the Tigrayan people as

¹⁹ Mia Kadra is an area of western Tigray in which coalition forces rapidly expelled the Tigrayan population Katharine Houreld, Michael Georgy, and Silvia Aloisi, "How Ethnic Killings Exploded from an Ethiopian Town," *Reuters*, 7 June 2021.

²⁰ Amnesty International, "Ethiopia: The Massacre in Axum," 26 February 2021.

²¹ Sofie Annys et al., "Tigray: Atlas of the Humanitarian Situation," *Journal of Maps* (online version) (Ghent University, 2021).

²² Amnesty International, "Ethiopia: 'I Don't Know If They Realized I Was a Person': Rape and Sexual Violence in the Conflict in Tigray, Ethiopia," 11 August 2021; Dyan Mazurana et al., "What 'Rape as a Weapon of War' in Tigray Really Means," *World Peace Foundation Blog, Reinventing Peace*, 10 August 2021, <https://sites.tufts.edu/reinventingpeace/2021/08/10/what-rape-as-a-weapon-of-war-in-tigray-really-means/> (accessed 19 September 2021).

²³ World Peace Foundation, "Starving Tigray: How Armed Conflict and Mass Atrocities Have Destroyed an Ethiopian Region's Economy and Food System and Are Threatening Famine," *Report*, 6 April 2021.

²⁴ Gebrekristos Gebremeskel, "The War on Tigray: A Multi-Pronged Assault Driven by Genocidal Undercurrents," *Ethiopia Insight*, 18 December 2020.

²⁵ Bethlehem Feleke et al., "'Practically This Has Been a Genocide': Doctors Say Rape is Being Used as a Weapon of War in Ethiopia's Conflict," *CNN*, 22 March 2021.

²⁶ There are variant translations from the Amharic, some of which are "incurable disease" rather than cancer. A translation with a copy of the original Amharic is available at Tghat, "'The Cancer of Ethiopia': Statement by PM Abiy Ahmed," trans., 18 July 2021, <https://www.tghat.com/2021/07/18/the-cancer-of-ethiopia-statement-by-pm-abiy-ahmed/> (accessed 20 September 2021).

a whole of “treasonous” acts in support of the TPLF and against the ENDF,²⁷ so that Tigrayans feared that they were collectively being branded in this way. There were detentions of ethnic Tigrayans in Addis Ababa, closures of their businesses, restrictions on their travel, and other forms of targeted harassment.²⁸

Tigrayan diaspora activists began mobilizing around calls of “genocide” in Tigray in the early days of the war. Their claims have gained weight in line with evidence and analyses from human rights organizations and journalists²⁹; anti-genocide organizations,³⁰ academics,³¹ and even religious and political leaders. In an unprecedented intervention in May 2021, the Patriarch of Ethiopia's Orthodox Church His Holiness Abune Matthias described the massacres, forced starvation and the destruction of churches, as a “genocide on the people of Tigray.”³² A month later, European Union Special Envoy Pekka Haavisto revealed that senior Ethiopian leaders had frankly told him that we “are going to wipe out the Tigrayans for 100 years.”³³ The prime minister’s spiritual advisor, Deacon Daniel Kibret, said of the Tigrayan leadership, “they should vanish from the human mind, from consciousness, and from historical records. In case people in

²⁷ Cited in Cara Anna, “‘Clean Out Our Insides,’ Ethiopia Detains Tigrayans Amid War,” *Associated Press*, 19 April 2021.

²⁸ Ibid; “Statement by United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights, Michelle Bachelet, at Enhanced Interactive Dialogue on the Situation of Human Rights in the Tigray Region of Ethiopia,” *48th Session of the Human Rights Council*, Geneva, 13 September 2021.

²⁹ Feleke et al., “Practically this has been a Genocide.”

³⁰ In May 2021, Genocide Watch issued a statement summing up violence against minorities within Ethiopian regions by ethnic regional militias, and labelling violence by Ethiopian and Eritrean forces in Tigray as “systematic violence with genocidal intent” “Updated: Genocide Emergency Alert: Ethiopia,” *Genocide Watch*, May 2021.

³¹ Ayantu Tibesio and J. Khadijah Abdurahman, “Tigray, Oromia, and the Ethiopian Empire,” *The Funambulist*, Issue 37, Against Genocide, ed. Zoé Samudzi, 31 August 2021.

³² This message was recorded on video and shared publicly. “News: Ethiopian Orthodox Patriarch Says War in Tigray ‘Barbarism’ and ‘Attempt to Erase Tigrayans’; Says His Repeated Pleas ‘Censored,’” *Addis Standard*, 8 May 2021; the video is available at *YouTube*: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=toGKVOUD5uU> (accessed 20 September 2021).

³³ Cara Anna, “EU envoy: Ethiopian Leadership Vowed to ‘Wipe Out’ Tigrayans,” *Associated Press*, 18 June 2021.

the future want to study/research about them, they shouldn't find anything about them except after digging the ground.”³⁴

Tigray is the most extreme but not the only contemporary locus of such violence, incitement, and contested narratives within Ethiopia. Ethnic Amhara, Gumuz, Qemant and Oromo communities,³⁵ among others, have been subject to violence, and there have been reciprocal claims of genocide by members of targeted communities. For instance, as Tigrayan forces took the military offensive in Amhara and Afar regions in August, reports of violence against civilians³⁶ fuelled a government narrative that all citizens should take up arms and defend their land.³⁷

Contemporary conflict in Ethiopia is multifaceted with no prospects of peace in view. The immediate human costs and the long-term significance for regional and global politics are devastating. Ethiopia was once the least unstable and most institutionally capable state in a turbulent region, providing peacekeepers and hosting refugees; now it is among the most volatile. Ethiopians have streamed across the border to Sudan, and humanitarian organizations are trying to negotiate access to famine-stricken Tigray. The viability of the nation-state itself is increasingly coming into question in political commentary.³⁸

Among international policymakers, the principal question is not “is it genocide?” but, “how can solutions be found to the crises of war, state collapse, starvation and mass atrocity?” For instance, senior officials in the administration of US President Joe Biden – carrying the

³⁴ His speech is available on *YouTube*, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RSrKkU7u2vU> (accessed 21 September 2021); “US Blasts ‘Dangerous’ Rhetoric by Ally of Ethiopia PM,” *AFP*, 20 September 2021.

³⁵ Sara Kifle, “Ethnic Cleansing in Ethiopia,” *Harvard Political Review*, 19 April 2021. Also see Stop Amahara Genocide, <https://www.stopamharagenocide.com/> (accessed 21 September 2021).

³⁶ Robbie Corey-Boulet, “Shell-Shocked Survivors Describe Brutal Tigray Rebel Advance,” *AFP*, 26 August 2021.

³⁷ Cara Anna, “Ethiopia Calls ‘All Capable Citizens’ to Fight in Tigray War,” *Associated Press*, 10 August 2021.

³⁸ Alex de Waal, “Five Scenarios of State Collapse in Ethiopia,” *World Peace Foundation Blog, Reinventing Peace*, 26 July 2021, <https://sites.tufts.edu/reinventingpeace/2021/07/26/five-scenarios-of-state-collapse-in-ethiopia/> (accessed 18 September 2021).

bruises of fights over policy in Bosnia, Kosovo, and Darfur – are apparently not keen to be drawn into what they see as a distracting contest over legal definitions without actionable consequences.³⁹ Genocide scholars should also be cautious in how they frame their research questions. The immediate issue is not simply whether Tigray fits within the canon of paradigmatic genocides (or doesn't) but rather: “What is actually happening in Ethiopia and why?” It is vital for scholars to examine and expose genocidal practices, but they must also be open to historical insight and debate. The case of Tigray and parallel violence in other parts of Ethiopia may have as much to teach us about the wider problem of “permanent insecurity” ingrained in the nation-state system as it does about the intentionalist targeting of a single group.⁴⁰ Each of the warring parties has cast the conflict in existential terms, with the federal government, Amhara region and Eritrean state arguing that their security requires the definitive subjugation of the TPLF – often extending this to the Tigrayan people as a whole – and the resurgent Tigrayan resistance now arguing that they will settle for nothing less than ironclad guarantees that there can be no future assaults on their region – a guarantee ultimately provided only by their own army.⁴¹

The Violent Patterns of the Past

Many elements of what is happening in Tigray and elsewhere in Ethiopia exhibit patterns and parallels from the country's past. There are also intrinsic relations between present and past, and

³⁹ Based on Alex de Waal's personal communications with policymakers, February-May 2021.

⁴⁰ See A. Dirk Moses, *The Problems of Genocide: Permanent Security and the Language of Transgression* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2021).

⁴¹ This point is implicit in the agenda for ceasefire talks laid out by Mulugeta Gebrehiwot, “Ethiopia: Definition and Politics of Ceasefire,” *World Peace Foundation Blog, Reinventing Peace*, 22 Sept 2021, <https://sites.tufts.edu/reinventingpeace/2021/09/22/ethiopia-definition-and-politics-of-ceasefire/> (accessed 22 September 2021).

forms of discursive power at work in the forms of vernacular narratives, popular chronicles, or the work of professional historians. Histories of atrocious violence and genocidal practices are important in their own right; and because of the ways in which they have influenced contemporary thinking and practice.

The “great tradition” of Ethiopian historical scholarship has focused on the contests for power among the princely class along with their martial exploits and artistic and spiritual values (including failings on the last count). As Richard Reid describes in this collection, the fourteenth century epic chronicle *Kebre Negist* (“Glory of the Kings”) is a foundational text in this tradition, combining royal genealogy, religious devotion, and martial exploits in the style of the Old Testament. In this and the wider Royal Chronicles there are episodes in which the countryside is laid waste and peoples put to the sword. Subsequent writings by Ethiopians and Europeans present the country as an exception from the paradigmatic African state, an Oriental kingdom accidentally located on the African continent.⁴² As Ethiopia began to modernize in the early twentieth century, this exceptionalism was embraced by the court diplomats and chroniclers who liked to compare their country to (for example) Japan, as a rare case of a nation that successfully resisted colonization.⁴³ In parallel, European anthropological research mainly focused on ethnographic study of exotic peoples at the margins of the “highland state,” extracted from political context.⁴⁴

The Ethiopian social science academy changed after the revolution. Historians wrote pioneering studies of the groups marginalized or entirely excluded from the scholarly canon,

⁴² Edward Ullendorff, *The Ethiopians: An Introduction to the Country and the People*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1960); Richard Pankhurst, *The Ethiopians: A History*, (Malden MA: Blackwell 1998, 2001); Donald N. Levine, *Greater Ethiopia: The Evolution of a Multi-Ethnic Society* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000).

⁴³ James De Lorenzi, *Guardians of the Tradition: Historians and Historical Writing in Ethiopia and Eritrea*, (Rochester NY: Univ. Rochester Press, 2015).

⁴⁴ See: Jon Abbink, “Comparing Cultures in Southern Ethiopia: From Ethnography to Generative Explanation,” *Northeast African Studies*, New Series, 7, no. 3 (2000): 1-13.

especially the Oromo.⁴⁵ There was an upsurge in interest in topics such as “social bandits”⁴⁶ and provincial rebellions,⁴⁷ and ambitious attempts to reconceptualize Ethiopia as a state “invented” at the height of European imperialism.⁴⁸ Historians and anthropologists collaborated in the study of the lowland peripheries of the state, focusing on the violent incorporation of those communities into the polity and the modes of resistance.⁴⁹ The extraordinarily high levels of violence in these margins were interrogated. For example, the long-time ethnographer of the Mursi of the Omo Valley, David Turton, documented a massacre in which a very large proportion of the entire population of the ethnic group were killed, posing searching questions about how to represent such violence and the obligation on the scholar to respond.⁵⁰

As violence and forced displacement overwhelmed peripheral peoples, ethnographers revisited some of their assumptions about the status of origins stories, transferring them from mythological status to having vernacular representations of traditions of survival in times of extreme distress.⁵¹ The peoples of these frontier-lands have developed social technologies for survival that combine strong ties of local solidarity (such as sister-exchange marriage whereby a

⁴⁵ Mohammed Hassen, *The Oromo of Ethiopia: A History, 1570-1860* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1990).

⁴⁶ Timothy Fernyhough, “Social Mobility and Dissident Elites in Northern Ethiopia: The Role of Banditry, 1900-69,” in *Banditry, Rebellion and Social Protest in Africa*, ed. Donald Crummey (London: James Currey, 1986).

⁴⁷ Gebru Tareke, *Ethiopia: Power and Protest: Peasant Revolts in the Twentieth Century* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991).

⁴⁸ Bonnie Holcombe and Sisai Ibssa, *The Invention of Ethiopia: The Making of a Dependent Colonial State in Northeast Africa* (Trenton, NJ: Red Sea Press, 1990).

⁴⁹ Donald Donham and Wendy James (eds.) *The Southern Marches of Imperial Ethiopia: Essays in History and Anthropology* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987).

⁵⁰ David Turton, “Warfare, Vulnerability and Survival: A Case from Southwestern Ethiopia,” *Disasters*, 15 (1991): 254-264.

⁵¹ See the first and third of Wendy James’ trilogy of monographs on the Uduk of the Blue Nile: Wendy James, *Kwanim Pa: The Making of the Uduk People: An Ethnographic Study of Survival in the Sudan-Ethiopian Borderlands* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1979) and Wendy James, *War and Survival in Sudan’s Frontierlands: Voices from the Blue Nile* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007).

brother and sister marry a sister and brother) and mechanisms for maximizing invisibility in the face of state penetration.⁵²

The country never having been officially “colonized,” Ethiopian studies avoided the frontal challenge of “de-colonizing” an established academic corpus generated by a foreign imperial power. Nonetheless, as Reid observes, “as with all empires, the decolonization of historical knowledge is vital.”⁵³ What occurred in Ethiopian scholarship with the revolution was that the range of topics and discourses widened, and new subaltern studies of the historically oppressed coexisted with, rather than supplanted, the traditional state-centered histories. As Zeleke notes, most historians and social scientists applied their scholarship to promoting a particular cause.⁵⁴ Unlike other Africanist scholarship, Ethiopian studies retains an unbroken, though not uncontested, tradition of literature that celebrates an indigenous state. There is a powerful domestic constituency – in the academy, media, and politics – that nurtures a nostalgia for the imperial era and its cultural values. Ethiopians do not agree on whether their country needs to be culturally and politically decolonized. Controversies swirl around which cultural celebrations are permitted in the national capital and which statues should be allowed to stand. For Oromo nationalists, a monument of Emperor Menelik II glorifies the man who suppressed their people with atrocious violence, and they demand that it should fall.⁵⁵ For those seeking to resurrect a glorious greater Ethiopia, Menelik II is their hero. No historical or social science scholarship can remain innocent of these fierce debates.

⁵² This begs comparison with James Scott’s alternative history of “Zomia,” See James C. Scott, *The Art of Not Being Governed: An Anarchist History of Upland Southeast Asia* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2010).

⁵³ See Reid’s contribution to this forum.

⁵⁴ Zeleke, *Ethiopia in Theory*.

⁵⁵ The first such public protest occurred during the early days of the 1991 transition when the Oromo Liberation Front was in the coalition government, “Dead Emperor Stirs Controversy,” *Associated Press*, 23 December 1991.

Our review suggests three patterns of extreme violence emerge from these histories. They are not fully distinct, and there is much overlap, but distinguishing between them provides one way to steer through the complex histories.

War and Political Competition

The first flash point is associated with contestation over who should rule, and what form that rule should take. This includes peer-to-peer military conflict – often conducted with very large armies – and extreme violence against civilians in the war zones and by the winners against the constituency of the loser. Three examples include the succession of nineteenth century wars in which Amhara kings sought to dominate the Oromo of Shawa and Wollo, detailed by Mohammed Hassen in his essay in this collection; the Red Terror, described by Jacob Wiebel; and the 1998-2000 Ethio-Eritrean war, touched upon by Reid. Although that latter case is usually classified as a conventional inter-state war, it can also be seen as a violent rivalry between the Eritrean People’s Liberation Front (EPLF) (in total control of the Eritrean state) and the TPLF (then controlling Tigray and the dominant power in Ethiopia) over who should be most powerful actor across the region.

The violent political competitions that recur in Ethiopian history might fruitfully be compared with other African cases and integrated into debates about the relations between political competition, war and mass atrocities, including in relation to Biafra (Nigeria);⁵⁶ civil wars in Sudan and South Sudan; and the relation between genocide and political conflicts at the

⁵⁶ Douglas Anthony, “‘Ours is a War of Survival’: Biafra, Nigeria and Arguments about Genocide, 1966–70,” *Journal of Genocide Research* 16, no. 2-3 (2014): 205-225.

highest level of state power in Rwanda.⁵⁷ Today's violence in Tigray, pitting the Ethiopian central state and the Eritrean ruler and his state against Tigrayan resistance, and between Amhara and Oromo, also echoes this mode of exceptionally violent peer-to-peer contestation.

The second form of violence is the killing, enslavement and subjugation associated with the conquest of the peripheries. The forested, savanna and desert lowlands surrounding the historic centres of state power in the highlands, have long been the location of punitive missions, slave raiding, and the creation of armed outposts and military-feudal and commercial command posts. The lowlanders could fight back, but they rarely posed a strategic threat to highland rulers. In neighbouring Sudan, organized violence against the people of the peripheries has commonly been discussed under the rubric of slavery and the associated racial hierarchy; both were in Ethiopia too. Across the region, genocidal practices were routine, and in some periods, some unfortunate people were caught between two violent imperialisms; and crafted social techniques of minimum visibility and maximum resilience to survive. The contest between Amhara rulers and Oromo peoples, spanning both highlands and lowlands, straddles the first and second categories. The conquest of Oromo peoples and lands includes both assimilation into the dominant social-political hierarchy (usually at a disadvantage) and also the imposition of armed Amhara settlers – known as *neftenya*, “riflemen” – as a controlling presence in Oromo lands.

Imperialism and Conquest

As Hassen shows, the nineteenth century Ethiopian empire can be interpreted not only as a case of African resistance to European colonialism, but African participation in the colonial scramble

⁵⁷ André Guichaoua, *From War to Genocide: Criminal Politics in Rwanda 1990-1994*, trans. Don E. Webster (Madison WI: Wisconsin, 2015).

for Africa as a junior partner. Ethiopia carved out its boundaries in competition with more powerful competitors, using the mechanisms of imperial diplomacy and the imported technologies of killing (including French weapons and training) in pursuit of those goals. Such conquests were all-the-more sanguinary because of its rulers' anxieties of their weaker position. Ethiopian emperors had the justified fear that, given a choice between colonial masters, the peoples of the peripheries would see the Europeans as the lesser evil. The logic of such violence by secondary European and Asian powers in this early period has been explored by Mark Levene, who finds that "weaker continental empires responded by striving with increasing urgency to consolidate fully within their realms those frontier regions whose very existence as such was being persistently questioned."⁵⁸ This analysis has not hitherto been applied to the Ethiopian case, where it would evidently be a fruitful framework.

In contrast to cases such as Sudan and Congo, where European capital was a driving force in the conquest and exploitation of people and land, Ethiopia's early entanglement with global capital was limited. Nevertheless, imperial violence, peripheral subjugation – and resistance to that – were manifest since at least the nineteenth century and continue to flare. Violent insurgency and brutal repression have been a persistent feature of politics in the Ogaden to the point that "exceptional strategies" have been normalized as a mode of government dating back as far as 1890.⁵⁹

The proposition that the lands and livelihoods of the peoples of the southern and western peripheries are to be sacrificed for central nation and state-building has endured through

⁵⁸ Mark Levene, *Genocide in the Age of the Nation State, Vol. 2: The Rise of the West and the Coming of Genocide* (London, UK: IB Tauris, 2005), 221.

⁵⁹ Tobias Hagmann and Benedikt Korf, "Agamben in the Ogaden: Violence and Sovereignty in the Ethiopian–Somali Frontier," *Political Geography*, 31, no. 4 (2012): 205-214.

successive regimes.⁶⁰ As Dereje Feyissa and Meron Zeleke point out, the position of the “borderland peoples” has changed over time, including because of the restructuring of the polity and establishment of ethno-federal arrangements in 1991, with provisions for “ethno-cultural justice.” Yet the historical enslavement and persistent discrimination against people of Gambella, ethnic Anuak and Nuer, on the basis of skin colour and purported lack of “civilized” attributes has remained a factor in recent conflicts.⁶¹ Similarly, the peoples of Beni Shangul-Gumuz state, including the Gumuz, were historically denigrated as *shankilla*, meaning “enslavable” or “lesser” people. The 1995 constitution gave the indigenous peoples of the state political and cultural privileges, even though in some zones, such as Metekel, there was a long-standing ethnic Amhara settle community that constituted a demographic majority. The Amhara fear that the Gumuz are seeking to expel them by force; the Gumuz fear that the Amhara are seeking to annex the area to Amhara state or dismantle the Beni Shangul-Gumuz state altogether. A recent upsurge in violence needs to be seen in this context.⁶² A serious effort to prevent frontier violence would also require attention to the ways in which Ethiopian historiography and politics has been shaped by the dominance of the Orthodox Christian highland elite and racialized notions of civilization and superiority.⁶³

Furthermore, based on his analysis of the Red Terror of 1976-78, Jacob Wiebel proposes to take this a step further to consider the relationship between colonial and metropolitan atrocities. Informed by Mark Mazower’s insight that much of the contemporaneous outrage at

⁶⁰ John Markakis, *Ethiopia: The Last Two Frontiers* (Oxford: James Currey, 2011).

⁶¹ See Dereje Feyissa and Meron Zeleke, “The Contestation over the Indigenous in Africa: The Ethiopian Example” in the University of Cologne Forum, *Ethnicity as a Political Resource: Conceptualizations Across Disciplines, Regions, and Periods* (Bielefeld: Transcript Verlag, 2015), 123-5; A massacre of Anuak civilians in Gambella in 2003 was followed by a wave of land grabs, local resistance and genocide claims, see Rachel Ibreck, “Contesting Dispossession: Land Rights Activism in Gambella, Ethiopia and Pujehun, Sierra Leone,” in *Against Colonization and Rural Dispossession*, ed. Dip Kapoor (London: Zed Books, 2017): 251-275, 262-7.

⁶² Tom Gardner, “All is Not Quiet on Ethiopia’s Western Front,” *Foreign Policy*, 6 January 2021.

⁶³ Hagmann, and Korf, “Agamben in the Ogaden.”

Nazi atrocities in Europe was due to their treatment of Europeans in ways that had hitherto been reserved for colonial subjects, he poses the question: “to what extent did atrocities against citizens in Ethiopia’s political ‘core’ build on earlier imperial violence against new subject in the Empire’s ‘periphery’?”⁶⁴ Ian Campbell’s contribution is directly relevant to this question, examining how the atrocious violence of the Italian invasion and occupation of 1936-41 stemmed directly from the ethos of fascism, and prompting us to reflect not only on how imperial violence in Africa set the stage for the European genocides that followed, but also how those violent practices may have become part of the political repertoire of the imperialists’ local proxies.

Ethiopia and Global Politics

The third pattern of violence manifest in the historical record relates to the interventions by external interests in the region which have enabled or shaped domestic forms of violence. The clearest case of this is the violence perpetrated by the Italian Fascists, detailed by Ian Campbell in this forum.

Ethiopia is indeed exceptional in Africa in that direct conquest by European colonists was confined to a short period (1936-41). However, Campbell’s work brings to light the intense brutality of the Italian occupation. And more generally, the forum contributions reveal ways in which Ethiopian rulers engaged with, depended upon, or acted as agents and proxies for, foreign great powers. Emperor Menelik II, famous for having safeguarded Ethiopian sovereignty against Italian invasion in 1896, was himself compromised by his dependence on European arms

⁶⁴ Jacob Wiebel, draft essay for this forum; Mark Mazower, *Dark Continent: Europe's Twentieth Century* (London: Allen Lane, 1998).

suppliers and the requirement to play the same game as his more powerful imperial rivals. Haile Selassie called upon Britain's Royal Air Force to suppress an armed uprising in Tigray in 1943. In modern times, Ethiopia has been both cockpit for strategic rivalries (infamously the U.S. and the Soviet bloc in the 1970s)⁶⁵ and protagonist in wars of reciprocal destabilization with its neighbours.⁶⁶

The persistent meddling by each state in its neighbours' affairs, including by hosting and arming opposition leaders and rebel forces, has ironically created a shared political community across the Horn, in which political leaders are at home in neighbouring capitals and have very often travelled on passports from those neighbouring states.⁶⁷ Moreover, not only have military, security and intelligence advisors from the U.S., Soviet Union, East Germany, Cuba and (more recently) Israel and the United Arab Emirates played important roles in Ethiopia's military, but their policies and narratives have also been imported into the country. In the early 1970s, the radical student movement was Marxist, and they consciously modelled their revolution on France, Russia, and China, while some Soviet military officers dispatched to Ethiopia vicariously enjoyed the merciless unfolding of a classic revolution which was part of their communist mythology but which they had been too young to see for themselves.⁶⁸ As Wiebel explains, the context of the Cold War facilitated and legitimated the extreme violence of the Red Terror. After 2001, the Ethiopian security establishment adopted the vocabulary, technologies, and logic of the U.S.-led "Global War on Terror," which it utilized opportunistically for its invasion of Somalia

⁶⁵ Louise Woodroffe, *"Buried in the Sands of the Ogaden": The United States, the Horn of Africa, and the Demise of Détente* (Kent, Ohio: Kent State University Press, 2012).

⁶⁶ Alex de Waal, "The Politics of Destabilization in the Horn, 1989-2001," in Alex de Waal (ed.) *Islamism and Its Enemies in the Horn of Africa* (London: Hurst, 2004).

⁶⁷ Leenco Lata, *The Horn of Africa as Common Homeland: The State and Self-Determination in the Era of Heightened Globalization* (Waterloo: Wilfrid Laurier University Press, 2010).

⁶⁸ Wiebel in this collection; Zeleke *Ethiopia in Theory*.

in 2006 and repression of domestic dissent.⁶⁹ United Nations and African Union peacekeeping operations also became a mechanism for the Ethiopian army to gain international stature and funds, and for the Ethiopian state to gain a hegemonic role in the region⁷⁰ – a strategy currently in full retreat as the Abiy Ahmed government withdraws from multilateral engagement and its troops earn a bad human rights reputation.

While many Ethiopianist scholars were sympathetic to Abiy’s reform agenda and highly critical of the EPRDF,⁷¹ few in the academic community have taken the line of justifying the extreme violence – a task currently being undertaken by an army of Ethiopian “twitter lions” (many in the diaspora); and by “digital diplomats,” following the evisceration of the Ethiopian foreign service,⁷² These vicarious warriors have espied a foreign plot against Ethiopia, supposedly orchestrated by the United States, and have rallied a strong segment of Ethiopian public opinion to rally to defend the nation. A touch of respectability is given to such views by academics who frame Ethiopia as the site of “a new proxy battlespace” in which great powers are battling for control.⁷³ Such a narrative entirely neglects the painful realities and the mounting casualties of escalating violence.

Conclusion: Themes Arising

⁶⁹ Abdi Ismail Samatar, “Ethiopian Invasion of Somalia, US Warlordism and AU Shame,” *Review of African Political Economy*, 34, no.111 (2007): 155–65, 171.

⁷⁰ Noel Twagiramungu et al., “Re-describing Transnational Conflict in Africa,” *The Journal of Modern African Studies*, 57(3), (2019): 377-391.

⁷¹ Melaku Geboye Desta, Dereje Feyissa Dori and Mamo Esmelealem Miheretu (eds.) *Ethiopia in the Wake of Political Reforms* (Los Angeles CA: Tsehai, 2020).

⁷² Kifleeyesus Abebe, “Defending National Interests via Digital Diplomacy,” *Ethiopian Herald*, 28 July 2021; Samuel Gebre and Claire Wilmot, “A Glimpse into the Future of Government Propaganda,” *The Mail and Guardian*, 8 December 2020; Geoffrey York and Zecharias Zelalem, “Tigray Conflict Sparks a War of Fake Tweets and Intense Propaganda,” *Globe and Mail*, 1 April 2021.

⁷³ Ann M. Fitz-Gerald and Hugh Segal, “Ethiopia: A New Proxy Battlespace,” *Commentary*, Royal United Services Institute, 19 April 2021. <https://rusi.org/explore-our-research/publications/commentary/ethiopia-new-proxy-battlespace> (accessed 21 September 2021).

Several specific themes arise cutting across the histories and the cases, which point to preliminary conclusions and prompts for future research directions.

First, atrocities against civilians have mostly occurred in the context of wars. Ethiopian wars are fought on a very large scale, fuelled by martial values, and framed by the practice of pitched battles that are an occasion for the display of heroism and strength as well as political decision. Reid writes (in this forum) of “military confrontations on appointed battlefields, which are like rivets in the Ethiopian historical edifice.” Yet, he observes, even comparatively recent histories recount those battles with scant reference to the accompanying atrocities against civilians.

Casualty levels among soldiers are also shockingly high. Battlefield tactics include human wave attacks mounted by scarcely-trained conscripts who are killed by the thousands; a pre-modern tactic of combat in which the lives of soldiers count for nothing. This was the case in the long civil war (1974-91), the Ethio-Eritrean war (1998-2000) and again in the current war. Pictures of more than 6,0000 prisoners of war captured by the Tigray Defence Forces prior to their re-occupation of Mekelle in June 2021 give an indication of the numbers of soldiers at the frontline and a hint at battlefield fatalities that may far exceed civilian deaths.⁷⁴

Second, sexual violence is rife, on a spectrum from the routine operation of a patriarchal system that has licensed soldiers to treat women and girls among captive populations as booty, to systematic sexual violence aimed at changing the identity of the next generation. A fourteenth century soldiers’ song both lauds and implicitly criticizes Emperor Amda Tseyon, “Whose face

⁷⁴ Declan Walsh, “How Local Guerrilla Fighters Routed Ethiopia’s Powerful Army,” *New York Times*, 11 July 2021.

have you not disfigured? Whose wife and child have you not captured?”⁷⁵ Mohammed Hassen’s nineteenth-century sources refer to the thousands of female captives delivered to the conquering king and his generals as “concubines,” which is presumably a small fraction of the rape and sexual slavery that followed in the wake of the campaigns. Jacob Wiebel observes that sexual violence was perpetrated during the Red Terror, though it has not been fully researched.

Third, conspicuous punishment, including mutilation, recurs as a method of marking the triumph of the conqueror on the bodies of the vanquished. This element is brought into sharp focus in Mohammed Hassen’s account, which combines the social, spiritual, and bodily mutilation of the conquered. There seems to be a surprising continuity with the actions of the Italian Fascist forces in the 1930s, as contained in Ian Campbell’s contribution to this collection – except that the Italian perpetrators were also able to photograph themselves presiding over the atrocities, in some cases holding up the severed heads of their victims in a grisly parody of hunting-trophy photographs of that era. In the case of the Red Terror, the bodies of the victims were left in public, with labels affixed to identify them as enemies of the revolution.

Underpinning these three themes – and evident in each contribution to this forum – is a story of masculinities: war as an assertion of a hyper-masculine ethos, with emasculation as the price of defeat.

Fourth, starvation is commonly used as a tool of war and conquest. Conflict-associated hunger ranges from armies’ demand for provisions—as Emperor Teodros notoriously quipped, “soldiers eat, peasants provide”⁷⁶—to the total laying waste of the land inhabited by hostile populations and starvation sieges.⁷⁷ At the height of the 1984 famine, Acting Foreign Minister

⁷⁵ Quoted in Richard Caulk, “‘Armies as Predators’ Soldiers and Peasants in Ethiopia, c. 1850-1935,” *International Journal of African Historical Studies*, 11 (1978): 457-493, 460.

⁷⁶ Quoted in Donald Crummey, “Banditry and Resistance,” 142.

⁷⁷ Africa Watch, *Evil Days: Thirty Years of War and Famine in Ethiopia* (London: Africa Watch, 1991), 26-30.

Tibebu Bekele said to the U.S. Chargé d’Affaires, “probably with more candor than he intended,” that “food is a major element in our strategy against the secessionists.”⁷⁸ Widespread starvation crimes are an element of most recent famines and Ethiopia provides more than its share of material for the study of this form of atrocity.⁷⁹ Emperor Haile Selassie, Colonel Mengistu Haile Mariam and today, Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed have all concealed and denied famines brought about by their own policies.

Each of these manifestations of violence recurs across different historical periods, and within different political-economic systems, and are echoed in the present. Very similar patterns of mass violence can be seen in the imperial-feudal era, during the European invasion and resistance, during the revolution and the wars that followed; in the military expeditions to repress peripheral rebellions; and in the fierce struggles for state power. Mass atrocity in similar forms has been perpetrated by pre-modern polities; by modernizing states in the era of imperial competition; by both European and African colonizers and those resisting colonization; by revolutionaries and counter-revolutionaries; by capitalists and communists.

The consistency with which extreme violence is inflicted across these contexts – the ways in which “atrocities rebound” and are “normalized” as Reid perceives it⁸⁰ – raises a key, troubling question of the role of not only empire and state-making but also “habitus” in mass atrocity. To what extent do embedded histories and socializations shape political dispositions and actions? How has violence been validated by societal norms and state practices over time?⁸¹

Genocide scholars have tended to focus on singular events, their structural causes, and the

⁷⁸ David Korn, *Ethiopia, the United States and the Soviet Union* (Carbondale, IL: Southern Illinois University Press, 1986), 137.

⁷⁹ Alex de Waal, *Mass Starvation: The History and Future of Famine* (Cambridge: Polity, 2017), chapter 7.

⁸⁰ See Richard Reid’s contribution to this forum.

⁸¹ See Adam Baczko and Gilles Dorransoro, “Thinking about Civil Wars with and Beyond Bourdieu: State, Capital and Habitus in Critical Contexts,” *Journal of Classical Sociology* (2021): 1-23, especially fn. 4.

agency of leaders in planning and inflicting exceptional violence. Our contributions point to recurrence across very different political economic contexts and types of state.

That dismal conclusion provokes the question of what normative changes in society might serve to end or constrain such violence. Striking in their absence from the histories of mass atrocity are civic mobilization, constituencies for peace, or feminist movements. The progressive student movement of the 1970s embraced violence, and the hopes that the democracy movement of the 2010s, which was largely non-violent, would engender a new civic spirit, have been dashed. Well-organized and widespread social mobilization for the rights of women and girls, including against sexual violence and child marriage, became all-but-invisible in the context of war. Ethiopia's first-ever peaceful transfer of power took place in 2018 in response to the pressure of that popular uprising. Abiy Ahmed's espousal of inter-ethnic harmony and togetherness, and his headline concept of *Medemer* – “synergy” – briefly served as a screen onto which hopes for civic democracy could be projected. For example, Semir Yusuf argued that *Medemer* should be a form of *laïcité* that enabled Ethiopians to transcend ethnic politics.⁸² That moment has passed. Many of those who stood against the police state repression of the EPRDF era and welcomed Abiy have fallen silent. Some cannot speak out because they have been imprisoned, censored, or intimidated. Others are active supporters of his government, denying or seeking to justify the violence inflicted.

Histories of resistance to atrocious violence need to be recovered. Historians have painstakingly uncovered practices of violent resistance and escape, but less so the efforts to

⁸² Semir Yusuf, “Rethinking Transitology: Structural Influencers of Political Change in Ethiopia,” in *Ethiopia in the Wake of Political Reforms*, eds. Melaku Geboye Desta, Dereje Feyissa Dori and Mamo Esmelealem Miheretu (Los Angeles CA: Tsehai Publishers, 2020).

restrain violence and promote civic values. This is a research agenda crying out for further inquiry.