

Book Review: "Understanding Ethiopia's Tigray War" | Hurst Publishers, February 2023, pp.443, ISBN: 9781787388116 | By Martin Plaut and Sarah Vaughan

"*Understanding Ethiopia's Tigray War*" by Martin Plaut and Sarah Vaughan offers a comprehensive exploration of one of the most complex and devastating conflicts in recent history: the Tigray War in Ethiopia. The book takes the reader on a journey through the web of historical, political, social, and international factors that have ignited and perpetuated this crisis. This comprehensive examination not only analyses the conflict's origins and evolution but also highlights its broader impact, extending beyond Ethiopian politics to the entire Horn of Africa region.

The book commences its journey with a solid grounding in the "History" section, where Sarah Vaughan skilfully guides readers through centuries of Ethiopian history. She traces the nation's historical trajectory, highlighting the ever-changing landscape of political power and the empires that have shaped Ethiopia's identity. This historical context is not merely informative but serves as the bedrock for understanding the conflict's origins. Vaughan also underscores the significant role of historical narratives as tools of power, shedding light on the manipulation of these narratives to further political agendas. Additionally, she examines the historical tension between centralized and decentralized power struggles within Ethiopia, setting the stage for a deeper exploration of the conflict's context.

The second section, "Living Memory," delves into the post-Mengistu era, providing a comprehensive analysis of Ethiopia's political evolution during this period. Vaughan's insights into the intricacies of ethnic politics, economic viability, and power dynamics are expertly interwoven into this section, allowing readers to grasp the complexities of Ethiopia's political landscape. Furthermore, her focus on the dominance of the TPLF within the EPRDF and the repercussions of the Ethio-Eritrean war (1998-2000) offers invaluable background knowledge for understanding the broader context of the Tigray War. The transition from historical context to contemporary politics ensures that readers can connect the dots between the past and the present.

Moving forward to the "Path to War," the third section offers a deeper understanding of Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed's leadership and Eritrea's role in escalating the conflict. Vaughan's chapter, titled "The Revival of Imperial Politics and the Path to War," serves as a guiding light through Abiy's rapid ascent to power, his strategic narrative, and the missteps that heightened tensions. The chapter also explores the influence of external support and opposition groups, providing readers with a comprehensive understanding of the myriad factors that converged to trigger the 2020 Tigray conflict. Martin Plaut's chapter, "Eritrea,

the Horn, and the Path to War," adds an international perspective, focusing on the peace agreement between Ethiopia and Eritrea and its implications for regional dynamics. Plaut's analysis delves into Isaias Afwerki's ambitions to eliminate the TPLF, which he perceived as a threat to his regime, and his aspiration to expand his influence across the Horn of Africa. The section's final part, which examines the formation of a trilateral alliance between Eritrea, Ethiopia, and Somalia and its implications for regional dynamics, including regional organizations like IGAD, deepens our comprehension of regional geopolitics.

The fourth section, "WAR," takes a close look at military operations, the humanitarian crisis, and the remarkable resilience exhibited by the TPLF in the conflict. This section provides an exhaustive overview of how the conflict unfolded, the involvement of various armed forces, and allegations of massacres. The inclusion of personal accounts, such as Nayna's, adds a human dimension to the conflict, giving readers a firsthand perspective on the experiences of Tigrayans both within and outside the conflict zone. Nayna's journey vividly portrays the sudden shift from normalcy to chaos, highlighting the pervasive fear and uncertainty that gripped the region. These narratives not only engage readers emotionally but also underscore the deep human toll exacted upon the Tigrayan population during the conflict. The careful integration of these personal accounts into the broader analysis ensures that the human aspect of the conflict remains at the forefront of the discussion.

The fifth part of the book thoroughly scrutinizes the repercussions of the Tigray conflict on the region's social and economic fabric. Martin Plaut contributes a chapter that illuminates the devastating impacts of the war on Tigray's economy and social structures. He exposes the extensive destruction of critical infrastructure, including healthcare and education systems, as well as the disturbing deployment of sexual violence as a weapon of war. Turning to the humanitarian crisis, a chapter titled "Surrounded and Starving" depicts the circumstances in Tigray, emphasizing the deliberate use of hunger as a weapon of war and the challenges faced by humanitarian organizations due to government restrictions. This final section, impeccably integrated with the military operations and the humanitarian crisis, paints a holistic picture of the devastation wrought upon Tigray. It reinforces the idea that the consequences of the conflict extend far beyond military operations, making it impossible to separate the war's impact on the people from its economic and social fallout.

An interlude in this section delves into Feven's life as a clinical psychologist in Mekele, Tigray, amid the ongoing conflict and humanitarian crisis. Her role at Ayder Referral Hospital highlights the immense challenges resulting from essential supply shortages. In her encounters with survivors of torture, sexual violence, and psychological trauma, she unveils the depths of people's desperation. Patients contemplating suicide due to family members suffering from hunger and deprivation underscore the severe psychological toll of the

conflict. Feven's experiences vividly depict the harsh realities of Mekele, turning a simple walk to work into a journey through local hardships. It serves as a poignant call for international action to prioritize humanitarian aid, advocate for justice, and aid in rebuilding the region.

In addition to examining the physical aspects of the conflict, the authors explore the insidious rhetoric and ethnically charged hate speech that have further exacerbated the Tigray War. The book serves as a stark warning about the potential for further escalation if hate speech is not promptly and resolutely addressed. It underscores the imperative of initiatives promoting dialogue, reconciliation, and tolerance among the various ethnic groups in Ethiopia.

Diplomatic efforts and international responses to the Tigray conflict are dissected in a separate chapter authored by Martin Plaut. This chapter delves into the intricacies of diplomatic initiatives, mediation attempts, and the roles of global actors in the crisis. It highlights the challenges encountered in resolving the conflict, the influence of diaspora engagement and social media, and the divisions within the international community. Importantly, it underscores the necessity of a thorough understanding of the web of interests at play in the region's crisis.

The book concludes by offering a summary of the themes and lessons derived from the analysis within its pages. It emphasizes the obstacles to peace entrenched in historical and political factors, including ethnic tensions and disputes over land and resources. The book also acknowledges the targeting of civilians and the failure of the international community to respond to famines. This conclusion is a careful synthesis of the book's content, ensuring that readers leave with a clear understanding of the book's central arguments and their implications.

Generally, "*Understanding Ethiopia's Tigray War*" is a thoroughly crafted exploration of historical events, ideological shifts, and geopolitical factors that converge to explain the origins and escalation of the Tigray War. The authors' thorough research and insightful analysis make this book an invaluable resource for anyone seeking a thoughtful understanding of the conflict in Ethiopia. Martin Plaut and Sarah Vaughan, with their regional knowledge and experience, lend credibility to their work. However, it is crucial to approach their analysis critically, recognizing the inherent complexity of the conflict and the potential for individuals with regional knowledge to have specific perspectives or affiliations that could influence their analysis. A well-rounded understanding of the Tigray War should encompass a diversity of viewpoints.

While the book consistently emphasizes the importance of international intervention, it is also imperative to subject this emphasis to scrutiny. International involvement, while appealing, must be approached with caution, respecting Ethiopia's sovereignty and acknowledging the intricate local and regional dynamics at play. The effectiveness of intervention is not uniform and carries inherent risks, making it prudent to explore alternative approaches, such as diplomatic initiatives. Furthermore, conducting a critical evaluation of the motivations driving international actors to align with local interests is of utmost importance.

In conclusion, "*Understanding Ethiopia's Tigray War*" is a well-structured and insightful book that offers a comprehensive and integrated exploration of the conflict. The book's strength lies in its ability to effectively connect historical, political, social, and international dimensions, making it an invaluable resource for anyone seeking a deeper understanding of the Tigray crisis and its broader implications within the Horn of Africa. Its thorough organization and thoughtful incorporation of personal narratives make it a compelling and accessible read, inviting readers to engage with the complexities of the Tigray War on multiple levels.