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REVIEW ARTICLE

The 'Rebel' Wars of Africa: From Political Contest to Criminal Violence?

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Warfare in Independent Africa by WILLIAM RENO
Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011. Pp. 294. £18·99 (pbk)

What Rebels Want: Resources and Supply Networks in Wartime by JENNIFER HAZEN
Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2013. Pp. 240. £29·95 (hbk)

I spent a grim afternoon in January 2008 with Joshua Blahyi, a notorious factional leader during Liberia's civil war. Blahyi, also known as General Butt Naked, had a few days earlier told his country's South African-style Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) that he killed 20,000 people during Liberia's civil wars. He had started as a boy soldier for the United Liberation Movement of Liberia for Democracy–Johnson faction (ULIMO-J), an ethnic militia group, and later formed the Butt Naked Brigade, a band of naked child fighters who believed that nudity made their bodies impervious to bullets. This faction fought in the very destructive battles of Monrovia in April 1996; claims that the group committed ritual cannibalism were widespread at the time.

We met in downtown Monrovia, Liberia's capital. Blahyi, appearing eager to be interviewed, confirmed to me the claims that his group committed ritual cannibalism. But he regretted that this happened; he was now a born-again Christian and wanted to send a message of contrition to his fellow citizens. Curiously, though, he was insistent on the sensational point that he did indeed kill 20,000 people during the war. Why was he so certain about this large detail, I asked? Did he count

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his victims? As a good Christian, Blahyi said, he did not want to lie. Why, I asked, did he fight? What was the point of the Butt Naked Brigade? Here, Blahyi was far less certain. He said simply that there was a war, and fighting was all that mattered at the time. He didn't want to be a victim; that wasn't the manly way to go. As a former 'tribal priest', he said, he knew how to protect himself and his people, and this was what he was doing. He was happy now that it was all over, and he was asking for forgiveness from all Liberians.

What accounted for a group like the Butt Naked Brigade? Was it a 'rebel' movement? What was it rebelling against? Did he have an idea of Liberia as a political and social community when he led those naked boys to inflict unspeakable violence on mainly defenceless people? What, in any case, constitutes rebellion in this context?

Blahyi, like many of those he recruited, belonged to the Krahn ethnic group in Liberia. Master Sergeant Samuel Doe, the dictator who exercised tomcatting powers over Liberia from 1980 to its descent into civil war in late 1989, belonged to that group. Charles Taylor's National Patriotic Front of Liberia (NPFL), which started the war against Doe, was made up largely of rivals of the Krahn, whose primary motivation was to wreak vengeance against the Krahn for past outrages under Doe. It was in that atmosphere that Blahyi and his Butt Naked Brigade emerged: more or less as an entrepreneurial ethnic militia. Violence, in other words, had merely begotten more violence; and warfare was more or less a correlate of state collapse. It was Hobbes' fantasy realised. In important ways, in other words, the state, in all its fissiparous complexity, was central to the widespread violence, even as a now-neutered agent. In neighbouring Sierra Leone at the same time, the Revolutionary United Front (RUF) was having the bodies of its child recruits crudely tattooed with the words R-U-F and then sending them – flagellant and immensely lethal machines – to inflict a regime of terror and rapine on defenceless people, much like the écorcheurs who desolated parts of Europe in its period of deranged transition several centuries ago.

William Reno's *Warfare in Independent Africa*, probably the most penetrating and comprehensive account of the many wars, petty and large, postcolonial Africa has suffered, gives an extended treatment to the RUF but does not mention Blahyi and his colourful gang. This is partly because the RUF was far more significant than the short-lived and puny Butt Naked Brigade; and also because Reno has devoted more time to the study of Sierra Leone (the subject of his first, profoundly illuminating, book)[1] than any other country in Africa. But the choice underlies a difficulty this book attempts to grapple with: why call all

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these diverse armed groups rebels? Why lump together the exalted anti-colonial guerrillas in the Portuguese colonies of Guinea-Bissau and Angola, the armed vigilante groups in Nigeria, anarchic gangs in Somalia, and the largely criminal outfits like Taylor's NPFL and its sidekick, the RUF, about which there was absolutely nothing enobling? 'Whatever these armed groups are called', Reno writes, 'they share the feature of challenging the authority of Africa's state regimes over the last half century, and for that purpose they will be called 'rebels' in this book' (p. 3).

One can quibble: many of the groups discussed in the book did indeed challenge state authority, but some others emerged precisely because such an authority no longer existed. In his introductory overview Reno discusses the evolving nature of warfare in Africa over several decades, sketching a depressing trajectory which accurately mirrors the changed fortunes of the African state, from the great hopes of independence to the great meltdown of the 1980s and 1990s. Guinea-Bissau, the tiny West African state whose inspiring liberation struggle under the great Amilcar Cabral has now been completely forgotten as it degenerates into Africa's first narco-state, emblematises this journey more than every other; and Reno rightly begins his book with a reference to its exalted beginnings and the pathos of its current condition.

Reno writes of the 'changing fields of leverage' in which 'rebels' have operated in Africa over the decades, and he identifies five categories of rebels who have reflected these circumstances or in some cases shaped them. The first were the anti-colonial rebels who took on their repressive European overlords: they systematically liberated their territories from the Europeans, building up alternative regimes and providing coherent visions for the future. These were followed by 'majority-rule' rebels, groups rather similar to the former in modus operandi and who fought mainly against racist European settler minority regimes in South Africa, Rhodesia (now Zimbabwe) and Namibia. A third set of rebels to have emerged in Africa, more or less chronologically, have been 'reform rebels' who, in the 1980s, launched what they consciously felt were 'second liberation' struggles against regimes as hopelessly repressive to the vast majority of their citizens as the European colonial regimes they had replaced. Yoweri Museveni of Uganda best exemplifies this category. The 1990s, probably the worst period of regression in postcolonial Africa, saw the emergence of a category that Reno well-delineated in a previous book,[2] 'warlord rebels'. Their successors or contemporaries – but certainly their inferior in organisation and capacity to wield political

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influence – Reno calls 'parochial rebels'. These are groups often in the pay of sociopathic political entrepreneurs or acting on their own. Their aims are mostly limited to criminal appropriation and carrying out assassinations and limited violence or thuggery. Reno insists on calling them 'rebels'; United Nations reports often refer to such groups, not at all inaccurately, as 'militias'; the media and many ordinary people may see them merely as gangsters. Young fighters in all these categories were similar, Reno writes, but the aims of the leaders of the groups in the 1990s 'were more parochial: to grab power in the existing political system instead of creating a new one, or to defend a particular ethnic group' (p. 1).

Reno elaborates that the leaders of warlord and parochial rebels are often insiders holding important positions in the pre-war patrimonial political order, and their aim is merely to capture the political order for themselves once that order starts to hollow out or they find themselves out of favour, but not to change the system. Ideologically driven rebels do not emerge in such a degraded political system because 'the regimes in Africa that base their authority most thoroughly on the manipulation of access to patronage opportunities, have been very effective in disrupting the organizing strategies of ideologues, and have made deployment of rebel commissars considerably more difficult than under colonial or apartheid regimes'. These categories, he writes, 'do not fit easily into a simple scheme of state collapse and ungoverned spaces' (p. 246).

There is much truth in this observation. Liberia's prolonged civil wars had rebel leaders like Charles Taylor, Alhaji Kromah and George Boley, all of them former senior government officials. In Côte d'Ivoire, Alassane Ouattara, a former Prime Minister, emerged as the 'godfather' for the so-called Forces Nouvelles de Côte d'Ivoire (New Forces: FNCI or FN), who led a successful rebellion against Laurent Gbagbo. But Sierra Leone's Foday Sankoh and his colleagues were entirely different: they were totally alien from the governing elite, and completely lacked political instinct, never mind sophistication. The evidence collected by the Special Court for Sierra Leone, which Reno makes no use of, exhaustively shows that the RUF survived and became powerful largely because it was a (sort of) sub-warlord force tied to Taylor in Liberia, fighting a near-collapsed patronage state in Sierra Leone. Reno remarks of Joseph Kony, the demented sex-crazed leader of the Lord's Resistance Army (which began its depredations in northern Uganda, but now operates in parts of the Democratic Republic of Congo and Central Africa Republic), that his group largely reflects his ideas, style and

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initiatives, but this is entirely true of almost every rebel group in all the categories Reno delineates. Surely, as Brian Crozier remarked long ago, the objective conditions notwithstanding, without the emergence of a rebel, there can be no rebellion.[3] All rebellions are inevitably shaped by the character of their charismatic leadership, and this remains a very important point about rebels and rebellions anywhere and at any time but particularly, I suggest, about warlord and parochial rebels.

Another important point is that the earlier categories of rebels faced exclusionary and powerful regimes, and their leaders had to be men (always men) of character and vision. They were, therefore, able to provide alternative systems that were both more humane and more effective than those they sought to destroy. Moreover, they were operating during the cold war and politics mattered then: rebel leaders were perforce to demonstrate some sophistication in international affairs; had to be able to speak the language of one or the other of the superpowers.

Must one repine, therefore, at the absence of ideological commitment of the so-called warlord or parochial rebels? There are, in fact, immensely well-organised and ideologically sophisticated rebels operating in Africa, but they are as depressing as the warlord and parochial types: Nigeria's Boko Haram and Somalia's Al Shabaab, Islamist terrorist groups whose outrages against the civilian populace compare rather favourably with the depredations of the likes of Taylor.

Towards the end of this important book, Reno reflects mordantly on the nature of the African state, which, despite the destructive warfare and internal contestations, its fissiparous vulnerability, has remained sacrosanct so far as its international borders are concerned even to those forces whose activities are profoundly inimical to its very survival. African countries have supported rebel groups operating in neighbouring states, but even powerful states in Africa have not tried to remake the map of Africa. Reno writes that this is a 'fortunate outcome' of the cold war (p. 243). This is probably true to a point; but far greater credit must be given to African regional organisations and, most importantly, the United Nations, that very influential factor in African decolonisation. In recent years, the United Nations has contrived the concept of 'peacebuilding' (and fashioned the Peacebuilding Commission) precisely to make sure that failing or collapsing states which it has helped bring into existence are put back together and protected.

Jennifer Hazen's *What Rebels Want* begins by challenging the view that recent conflicts in West Africa have been purely civil or intrastate wars; and with great acuity she explores both the motivation and the reasons

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for the significant durability of the category that Reno calls 'warlord rebels' in Liberia, Sierra Leone and Côte d'Ivoire.

Hazen examines seven 'rebel' groups in the three countries, and sheds important new light on particularly three – the Liberians United for Reconciliation and Development (LURD), the Movement for Democracy in Liberia (MODEL) and the *Front Populaire Ivorien*. These groups, never particularly well-organised or integrated, had nonetheless immense impact due largely to the support they got from outside. A rebel group's capacity to fight, Hazen found, 'is the measurement of the group's access to resources' (p. ix). As a resourceful investigator for the International Crisis Group, Hazen saw first-hand Guinean government and military support for the LURD, which almost overwhelmingly accounted for its strength, leading her to conclude that intrastate conflicts 'are rarely purely intrastate in nature; most involve transnational dimensions of some kind' (p. 1).

The theory of 'greed versus grievance'– which seeks to explain, or to explain away, recent African civil wars, depoliticising them and dismissing them as criminal, rather than examining them as political – has been one of the seductive academic fads since Paul Collier published a paper for the World Bank with the title in 2000. Hazen rightly rejects this argument, noting that 'greed' plays only a 'minor role' in conflict (p. 175). This is debatable; generalisations such as this are unwise, particularly regarding intangible factors like greed and grievance. But it serves Hazen's purpose well. There is often a presumption, she writes, 'of [sic] access to resources rather than an assessment of access', leading to 'a focus on certain lucrative gems and minerals or drugs as primary sources of income'. This overwhelming focus, she argues cogently, 'detracts attention from the wide range of support groups receive and the numerous ways in which they obtain resources that enable them to continue fighting'. And this leads 'to an overestimation of group resources and capacity to fight and the assignment of certain motives (i.e. greed) to a group, all of which are less evident on closer scrutiny' (pp. 171–2).

This is Hazen's original – and important – thesis. From this, the picture she paints of the various rebel groups is a messy one which cannot fit any single theoretical frame. How does, she asks, having access to economic resources lead to enhanced military capacity? Or does it really? What economic resources are easily fungible into military resources? Hazen's careful examination of the rebel groups' decision-making, and how factors like resources, ethnic support, charisma of rebel leadership, and, most important, external interventions help to

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prolong civil wars, or ultimately end them, is an important contribution to the debate about how to end these petty wars quickly. On average, she writes, external interventions 'prolong rather than end civil wars' (p. 45). This is because such intervention 'alters the dynamics of civil war by changing the resources available to warring factions' (p. 46). This is both true and important; but from the evidence *Why Rebels fight*, all the civil wars in West Africa, that vortex of instability, were ultimately ended by external, mainly United Nations, interventions.

It is surprising that Hazen does not use the very copious and indispensable data from the trials of the Special Court for Sierra Leone, for they would have helped to both strengthen and to modify her arguments in parts. The 2493-page trial judgment involving Charles Taylor (including annexes of maps, sources, and a long table of authorities) detailed how 'beyond reasonable doubt' Liberian president Taylor's support and mentoring of the RUF helped prolonged the war in Sierra Leone and make it so deadly. The judgment noted that diamonds mined or stolen at gunpoint by the RUF in Sierra Leone were taken to Taylor in Liberia for 'safekeeping' – or in exchange for weapons. The trial Chamber unanimously found that Taylor's support for the RUF was driven by pillage not politics.[4]

I have drawn attention to this very careful, deliberative judgment to show that while Hazen's thesis can largely stand up to scrutiny it may not always be true. The RUF and some of the other groups she writes about in *Why Rebels Fight* may have started out with genuine grievances, but they more or less went septic, and warfare became little more than organised theft. This dynamic, it is important to note, was often driven by external interest. It is a small variation on Hazen's thesis.

That so-called rebel wars in Africa have become messier and in some cases anarchic, and rebel leadership less admirable, there can be no doubt. These two very valuable books tell us why this is so, and tell us a lot about Africa's current state and prospects of its future stability.

NOTES

1. William Reno, *Corruption and State Politics in Sierra Leone* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995).

2. *Warlord Politics and African States* (Boulder, CO: Lynne Rienner, 1998)

3. Brian Crozier, *The Rebels: A Study of Post-war Insurrections* (Boston, 1960).

4. Trial Chamber II of the Special Court for Sierra Leone, Judgment in Prosecutor v. Charles Taylor (Apr. 26, 2012) (SCSL website last visited on 14 July 2012).

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