

# Critical Dialogue

**Rape During Civil War.** By Dara Kay Cohen. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2016. 288p. \$89.95 cloth; \$26.95 paper. doi:10.1017/S1537592718001135

— Kerry F. Crawford, *James Madison University*

In her book, Dara Kay Cohen presents a landmark study of an undertheorized form of violence against civilians: gang rape. As Cohen and other scholars of sexual violence have observed, rape is not inevitable in war, it is not cost free, its frequency varies across and within conflicts, and not all armed groups commit or tolerate it. Rape in war is not a static phenomenon, but one that becomes more or less likely as wartime realities shift. While rape and other forms of sexual violence are deeply disturbing acts in war as in times of peace, it is impossible to bring an end to these forms of violence unless and until we truly understand their use and the purpose—if any—that they serve for armed groups. *Rape During Civil War* makes significant progress in this vein by debunking some of the prevalent myths about rape in armed conflict and advancing a logical explanation with clear implications for policy and practice.

Cohen addresses three puzzles through rigorous cross-national statistical analysis and three in-depth case studies. First, if gang rape is rare in peacetime, then why is wartime rape frequently perpetrated by multiple actors? Second, why do ordinary men *and women*, who do not reasonably fit within the perpetrators-as-monsters trope, commit rape in war? And third, if rape is used as a weapon as often as policy, media, and advocacy narratives seem to suggest, then why is evidence of rape as official strategy so scant and why do armed groups not use rape *more* frequently? Cohen finds that armed groups are likely to turn to rape as a tool to socialize fighters who have been brought into the group through forced recruitment methods, such as abduction and press-ganging.

Rape, especially gang rape, may serve to improve cohesion within the group by creating “bonds of loyalty and esteem from initial circumstances of fear and mistrust” (p. 2). Where professional military organizations establish basic training or boot camps to socialize recruits and disconnect them from their past (civilian) lives, armed groups without the resources for intensive training of combatants must find other ways to foster cohesive

units. Gang rape functions as a mechanism for hazing new fighters and reaffirming the hierarchy among established group members “while also communicating norms of masculinity, virility, and strength” (p. 3). The combatant socialization argument suggests that when armed groups resort to forced recruitment of strangers, levels of rape and gang rape increase. Cohen’s cross-national data, compiled using reports of rape in the U.S. State Department Country Reports on Human Rights Practices for the period 1980–2012, as well as interview research in El Salvador, Sierra Leone, and Timor-Leste, support the combatant socialization thesis. Rape, then, is less a deliberate weapon of war than an attempt to socialize fighters through shared culpability in a taboo act. Such socialization is essential if the armed group is to keep forced recruits from deserting at the first opportunity when they are not united by a shared commitment to the group’s victory over opposing forces. Understood this way, rape has little to do with the rape victim or survivor’s identity; instead, rape tells us more about the need to create a cohesive identity among those who fight unwillingly.

Alongside the combatant socialization explanation, Cohen assesses competing arguments focused on opportunism/greed, ethnic hatred, and gender inequality. Each argument draws from narratives in the literature on sexual violence and violence against civilians, as well as public perceptions of rape in war. The opportunism argument attributes the occurrence of rape to decreased inhibitions in the context of state collapse and wartime chaos, lack of professionalism or discipline in armed groups, or the importance of material resources in a conflict. If individuals are inclined to rape, they will seize upon opportunities presented in conflict zones. Opportunism can partially account for instances of rape in civil war in the case studies Cohen examines, but it cannot sufficiently explain the use of *gang* rape or the extreme brutality of some rapes.

The second competing argument suggests that rape is linked to ethnic hatred and communicates a message of domination from the perpetrator group to an out-group. If rape is motivated by ethnic hatred, it should be more likely in ethnic wars, genocides, and secessionist conflicts than in civil wars that are not driven primarily by ethnic divisions. Cohen’s cross-national analysis finds little

support for this argument, and some interviewees noted that commanders viewed rape as separate from fighting, further undermining the notion of rape as military strategy.

The third competing argument claims that wars in states with high gender inequality are more likely to experience high levels of rape. Cohen finds little support for a link between gender inequality and levels of rape in civil war, a finding that speaks to research on sexual violence as part of a continuum of gendered violence (e.g., see Jelke Boesten, *Sexual Violence During War and Peace: Gender, Power and Postconflict Justice in Peru*, 2014). The observation that opportunism and secessionist aims offer partial explanations for rape in some cases highlights the complex relationship between war and rape; an analysis that embraces this complexity helps move the academic literature and public discourse on conflict-related sexual violence forward.

Still, the underlying relationships between opportunism, combatant socialization, and gender inequality, or the gender norms that create and maintain inequality, prompt further questions that are left unaddressed by Cohen. While the author finds a lack of support for the argument that rape in war is linked to statewide levels of gender inequality, it is important to note that the combatant socialization and opportunism arguments explore gendered phenomena. For the opportunistic perpetrator, why rape instead of another type of crime? For the group looking to socialize new members, why gang rape instead of a different form of hazing? That gang rape serves to cement group hierarchies and communicate group norms about masculinity and masculine behaviors is a reminder that this form of violence is firmly rooted in gender norms, even if its occurrence is unrelated to measurable indicators of gender inequality in a state.

*Rape During Civil War* offers important lessons and prompts difficult questions for scholars, policymakers, and human rights advocates alike. The combatant socialization argument provides insights into the rationale for wartime rape and contributes to the ongoing conversations about how best to respond to it. Foreign and domestic policy initiatives focus heavily on reducing impunity for perpetrators and improving mechanisms for prosecution, but Cohen's work suggests that these efforts miss the mark if rape is not explicitly ordered by commanders. Related to this, the reminder that policymakers, advocates, and scholars alike must resist the temptation to presume that "widespread rape is systematic rape" (p. 198), or to infer intention from prevalence, is an important one. Furthermore, Cohen's exploration of the trauma experienced by forced combatants during the recruitment process highlights another important predicament for scholars, policymakers, and human rights advocates: What are the legal, political, ethical, and social ramifications for the perpetrator—victim distinction in cases of gang rape

committed by individuals who are forced into armed groups? While there is recognition of the plight of child soldiers, there is significantly less discussion of adult men and women who are abducted or press-ganged. Worse still, in a world of funding constraints and limited caring capacity, there are insufficient resources to attend adequately to the needs of survivors of wartime rape as well as to the rehabilitation of the perpetrators who are themselves also survivors of trauma.

Beyond the theoretical and empirical contributions of the book, Cohen communicates important messages about the difficulty of research on sensitive topics. First, the logistics of studying rape and sexual violence present significant challenges. It can be difficult to obtain accurate qualitative data and statistics on rape. The taboo nature of sexual violence can impede access to survivors and perpetrators, and official accounts may be incomplete or unreliable. Conceptually, the lack of a clear and consistent definition of "sexual violence" across the academic, policy, and advocacy arenas complicates efforts to study rape and other forms of gender-based violence. Second, studying sexual violence and other atrocities is emotionally demanding work for researchers and research participants alike. By recognizing this, scholars are better able to prepare themselves and their students for work in this area, and to ensure that research methods minimize potential harm. This work must be done with care, and Cohen has established a sound model.

Demonstrations of global political will throughout the past two decades show that policymakers are searching for ways to end the scourge of rape in war. Cohen observes that the assumption that mass rape is an element of military strategy or a weapon of war is now widespread, and she asserts that scholars "must study the perpetrators themselves" (p. 20) to parse out the motivations for and utility of wartime rape, especially since it is impossible for one explanation to account for all instances of rape in war. *Rape During Civil War* gives scholars, policymakers, and practitioners new material to work with in an effort to understand armed groups and their propensity—or aversion—to rape.

### Response to Kerry F. Crawford's review of *Rape During Civil War*

doi:10.1017/S1537592718001147

— Dara Kay Cohen

In her generous review of *Rape During Civil War*, Kerry Crawford highlights some challenging and important questions, with implications both for theories about why rape occurs and for the policy interventions that follow from the study.

First, Crawford notes that while the cross-national analysis fails to show a statistically significant

relationship between common proxy measures of gender inequality and increased levels of wartime rape, rape is “firmly rooted in gender norms.” As I show in the book, widely used state-level proxy measures for gender inequality, such as fertility rates and female labor force participation, are uncorrelated with reports of wartime rape. However, this finding only means that these rough proxy measures do not help us distinguish between war-affected countries that experience episodes of mass rape and those that do not. It does *not* suggest that gender inequality is irrelevant to understanding sexual violence. I ultimately argue that these variables are focused on the wrong level of analysis; the most important unit of analysis is not the country but, rather, the armed group itself. Furthermore, issues of gender are not neatly separated from other types of arguments. As Crawford points out, two of the major arguments about armed groups that I consider in the book—opportunism and combatant socialization—are also closely linked to “gendered phenomena.”

It is of course undeniable that rape—like other forms of wartime violence—is gendered. The best evidence on civilian victimization across conflicts clearly shows that although men make up the vast majority of victims of nearly every direct form of wartime violence (including killing, disappearance, and beating), women are far more likely to report rape and other forms of sexual violence than are men. Why women are disproportionately represented among victims and survivors of rape is still an open question, but is likely influenced by variation in norms about masculinity. Scholars of political violence are just beginning to measure and analyze these norms empirically (see Elin Bjarnegård, Karen Brounéus, and Erik Melander, “Honor and Political Violence: Micro-level Findings from a Survey in Thailand,” *Journal of Peace Research*, 54(6), 2017). There is still much to be learned in future research about how and why norms of toxic masculinity vary, and how they affect the calculation of men and women to use particular forms of violence.

Second, Crawford emphasizes the lessons of the study for policymakers and practitioners, particularly as they relate to the victim/perpetrator dichotomy. If forced recruitment is systematically associated with rape—that is, if many armed groups that perpetrate rape are themselves comprised of victims of terrible trauma—this raises enormous challenges for policy interventions. As I have written elsewhere (see Elisabeth Wood and Dara Kay Cohen, “How to Counter Rape During War,” *New York Times*, 28 October 2015), the current focus on closing the impunity gap for perpetrators is insufficient to deter future crimes, and often ignores completely the past plight of perpetrators. Crawford’s own excellent book can shed light on how these complex policy issues may be pursued by activists and practitioners in the future.

**Wartime Sexual Violence: From Silence to Condemnation of a Weapon of War.** By Kerry F. Crawford. Washington, DC: Georgetown University Press, 2017. 224p. \$89.95 cloth, \$29.95 paper. doi:10.1017/S1537592718001159

— Dara Kay Cohen, *Harvard University*

While the problem of wartime sexual violence is now at the forefront of major policy agendas at the U.S. State Department, the UK Foreign Office, and the United Nations Security Council, this was not always the case. How did this issue move from obscurity to a focus of intensive attention? In *Wartime Sexual Violence*, Kerry Crawford sets out to explain the remarkable changes in how this problem has been viewed by policymakers—from the aftermath of World War II, when sexual violence was seen as commonplace but also taboo, to an era of activism in the 1990s inspired by the horrors of mass rape in Bosnia-Herzegovina and Rwanda, to today’s “costly efforts” (p. 2) by powerful actors to prevent and respond to contemporary atrocities. These changes are due in no small part to a number of savvy activists who successfully reframed (or “sold,” as Crawford puts it) the problem of wartime sexual violence as a “weapon of war” in order to appeal to the strongest states and the most powerful security-focused international organizations. Although several scholars have recently critiqued the “weapon of war” frame (e.g., see Maria Eriksson Baaz and Maria Stern, *Sexual Violence as a Weapon of War?* 2013) and more broadly have asked how a given issue becomes an international priority (Charli Carpenter, “*Lost Causes*,” 2014), Crawford carefully traces the development and the persistence of the frame, while also highlighting its various costs and benefits to a range of actors.

In Chapter 1, Crawford develops an idealized five-stage process of the ways in which international actors might respond to incidents of wartime sexual violence; this ranges from ignoring the problem at stage 0 to treating sexual violence as impermissible and punishable in stage 5 (p. 38). The selection of a frame, which makes complex ideas “relatable, understandable and generalizable” (p. 27), occurs in the earlier stages, when activists must make crucial decisions about which violations to condemn and which to publicize.

The book focuses on the past two decades, using process tracing to analyze a host of documents, including speeches, press releases, and meeting transcripts. Crawford supplements this analysis with interviews of experts, such as government officials and staffs of nongovernmental organizations, as well as participant observation in meetings, symposia, and hearings. She examines three distinct cases, each in a separate chapter: the U.S. response to sexual violence in the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) (Chapter 2), the adoption of UN Security Council Resolution (UNSCR) 1820 in 2008

(Chapter 3), and finally, the British efforts to create the Preventing Sexual Violence Initiative (PSVI), led by then-foreign secretary William Hague (Chapter 4). In every case, Crawford traces what, if anything, happened at each of the five stages of response. Finally, the book addresses the impacts of the weapon-of-war frame (Chapter 5), especially on marginalizing certain types of victims, perpetrators, and forms of sexual violence.

One of the central arguments of the book is that the development of the weapon-of-war frame was the result of a process of trial and error. Women's rights and human rights groups had previously framed wartime sexual violence as a women's rights issue and human rights problem, but these frames failed to capture international audiences at the highest levels of politics. Crawford details the value of the weapon-of-war frame—which suggests that sexual violence is “criminal, punishable and preventable” (p. 103)—for key actors. She argues that for activists, this frame countered the prevailing notion that sexual violence is inevitable, as well as the idea that it is a marginal women's issue. For the most powerful state actors, she maintains that the-weapon-of-war framing is appealing because it does not threaten their core interests or credibility. Instead, the frame allows states to separate sexual violence as an atrocity for nefarious war-making purposes from sexual violence that is committed for other more common, banal, and opportunistic reasons (such as sex work around military bases, and sexual exploitation during peacekeeping operations).

In tracing why the weapon-of-war frame became dominant (p. 50), Crawford delineates four central reasons: a resonance with international humanitarian law (in particular, by focusing on a limited period of time (conflict) for a small set of acts defined as sexual violence); collective shock at sexual violence being used as a tool of ethnic cleansing and genocide in Bosnia-Herzegovina and Rwanda; the rise of nonstate actors in international politics; and the role of powerful individuals who adopted the issue as a pet cause. One related issue that is not addressed at length by Crawford is that Bosnia-Herzegovina is a European country; the relative proximity of the mass rape likely played an essential role in forcing American and British policymakers to confront the fact that sexual violence is not a problem confined to sub-Saharan Africa.

By providing a behind-the-scenes view of how the weapon-of-war narrative came to be, *Wartime Sexual Violence* is a significant contribution to the growing literature on conflict-related rape and other forms of sexual violence. Nonetheless, there are a few points that are raised—and left largely unanswered—by the book.

First, a theory exploring the conditions required for international recognition and acceptance of wartime sexual violence within the weapon-of-war frame is never explicitly articulated. What are the conditions under

which a case of wartime sexual violence becomes internationally recognized and eventually called a weapon? The book hints at an answer in its brief discussion of the First and Second Chechen Wars (pp. 167–68): Crawford argues that sexual violence in Chechnya has been ignored due to the lack of firsthand accounts and to being overshadowed by other cases of sexual violence, and because the perpetrator (Russia) is a strong state with a Security Council veto. But a more comprehensive theory is mostly absent from the book.

On a related note, some of the details about the sources and methods are left too vague. The number and types of interviews, as well as the particular meetings and symposia that the author attended as a participant observer, are not specified. For example, it is not clear if the author herself was in attendance at one of the key events in the book, the 2014 Global Summit to End Sexual Violence in Conflict in London. In terms of the case studies, why these three actors (the United States, the UN, and the UK) are essential subjects for analysis is briefly addressed (p. 19), but why the particular cases were selected is never discussed. As a result, it is hard to know what to conclude from the cases. For example, the DRC is a unique case in many ways—the scale of the sexual violence was immense and its brutality was extreme. It also would have been illuminating to include a detailed “negative” case study, in which activists attempted to employ the weapon-of-war frame but failed. More broadly, the reader is left wondering about generalizability. How systematic is nonresponse (stage 0) to incidents of wartime sexual violence? Given that there now exist cross-national data on wartime rape and sexual violence (e.g., the Sexual Violence in Armed Conflict [SVAC] data set), future research could use Crawford's scale of responses to determine how frequently severe cases of wartime sexual violence are ignored or only barely acknowledged by international actors.

While the author understandably focuses on strong states and the UN, she does not address what impact the weapon-of-war frame has on other types of actors. It is not only high-level politics but also grassroots advocates and local people whose incentives are altered by the hyper-focus on sexual violence (see, e.g., Severine Autesserre, *Peaceland*, 2014). Does the weapon-of-war frame have any impact on the use of rape, and if so, how? It is notable that the perpetrators themselves are only observed in stage 5 of Crawford's scale of recognition, at the point where behavioral change happens (it is also notable that this stage of norm internalization has yet to occur). From the perspective of armed groups, when is the weapon-of-war frame a deterrent, as Crawford's scale of response suggests, and when does it become a perverse incentive to commit sexual violence, as Autesserre has argued in the case of the DRC?



Finally, the book raises important (depressing) questions about the irrelevance of social science for the politics of advocacy on wartime sexual violence. The final text of UNSCR 1820 makes statements—based on activists’ claims—about the impact of sexual violence in “exacerbat[ing] situations of armed conflict and . . . impeded [ing] restoration of peace and security” (p. 96). But these are empirical questions about the long-term consequences of wartime sexual violence that are still unsettled—and largely unexplored—in the social science literature. In addition, the PSVI is focused on increasing prosecutions as a deterrent for future perpetrators. But here again is a failure of social science to penetrate the policy discussion: There are persuasive arguments from within the academic community that accountability for sexual violence, at least in the form of international criminal trials, is not an effective deterrent (see, e.g., Kate Cronin-Furman, “Managing Expectations: International Criminal Trials and the Prospects for Deterrence of Mass Atrocity,” *International Journal of Transitional Justice* 7[3], 2013.) Why have academics, and particularly social scientists, been left out of the policy discourse about sexual violence as a weapon of war? And if, as seems to be the case, social scientists are increasingly rejecting the accuracy of the frame, will academic research be even further marginalized in the future?

*Wartime Sexual Violence* is a thought-provoking and accessible assessment of the meteoric rise of a once-ignored policy issue. Crawford’s analysis—along with rich detail from three recent cases—provides a valuable framework that can serve as the foundation for future scholarship.

**Response to Dara Kay Cohen’s review of *Wartime Sexual Violence: From Silence to Condemnation of a Weapon of War***

doi:10.1017/S1537592718001160

— Kerry F. Crawford

I appreciate the opportunity to respond to Dara Kay Cohen’s insightful review and emphasize key themes from my book. Of Cohen’s critiques, two stand out as central not only to this exchange but to the broader pursuit of research on conflict-related sexual violence and transnational advocacy: the overarching lessons learned from the development of the weapon-of-war frame and the role of social science in informing advocacy efforts and policymaking.

It is important to understand how changing ideas affect policy and programmatic agendas. This assumption is at the heart of my book. The case studies reflect key points in the trajectory of the weapon-of-war frame for sexual violence, and the frame’s impact reveals useful information about the significance of advocates’ phrasing and sensitivity to audiences’ interests and constraints. These lessons apply to the efforts to respond to wartime

sexual violence and other atrocities and vulnerable populations. Still, the conditions under which specific cases gain recognition within the weapon-of-war frame merit further study, as Cohen observes. Interviews offered glimpses of an answer to this question: Put simply, the decision to frame a particular case as characterized by sexual violence used as a weapon requires evidence that sexual violence is widespread and systematic, but such evidence is difficult to obtain in the course of armed conflict, and political considerations (e.g., alliances or a state’s role in key international bodies) factor in and complicate the response.

What I have laid out in the book is an exploration of the ways in which this particular frame affected the perception of conflict-related sexual violence over time and prompted actions by two influential states and the United Nations Security Council, noting that as frequent targets of advocacy efforts, these actors are crucial to our understanding of the international response. Further research on the specific conditions that lead to recognition of sexual violence as a weapon of war in a given case and on the effects of this frame on local or grassroots actors will benefit scholarship, policy, and practice.

This brings me to Cohen’s final point: How relevant is social science to advocacy? The weapon-of-war frame and the recommendations that followed from it in recent years diverge from research on the nature of sexual violence and (in)effective responses. There are points of convergence among scholars, advocates, and policymakers working to address sexual violence. It follows, then, that the weapon-of-war frame stems not from a lack of awareness of academic work on the subject but from an understanding of the target audience’s priorities and the best way to get a seat at the table. Further, the essential role of embedded advocates is clear. Recognition of sexual violence has advanced through persistent, strategic engagement between advocates and sympathetic state or organizational actors; similar avenues exist to improve the relevance of social scientific research through dialogue with those in positions of influence. The expansion of the UN’s discussion of sexual violence to include recognition of male, lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer survivors of rape suggests that there is potential to make policy and practice more reflective of complicated realities, given the opportunity for engagement.

A fundamental theme ties my book and Cohen’s to prior work on the nuances of sexual violence: The popular frame through which the world views sexual violence in war is incomplete. The quandary becomes what to make of this frame. Do the benefits of outrage-induced attention and funding outweigh the costs of obscuring the complexity of sexual violence, or is that trade-off too costly in the end? Is the weapon-of-war frame a helpful, if imperfect, way to cut through the apathy barrier and generate political will, or does it do

---

## Critical Dialogue

more harm than good? My book discusses the extent to which advocates and policymakers have been able to leverage the persuasive weapon-of-war frame to generate attention for an issue they care about, and the evidence suggests that effective frames yield advantages for policy and programmatic agendas. While we must be able to see beyond the weapon-of-war frame, we would do well to

learn from the changes it has generated. Through a willingness to engage the complexities of sexual violence and participate in open dialogue among scholars, advocates, and policymakers, we can improve our collective understanding of conflict-related sexual violence and the best practices for preventing, responding to, and mitigating it.