Simple soldiers? Blurring the distinction between compulsion and commitment among Rwandan rebels in Eastern Congo

Anna Hedlund

Introduction

This article is an exploration and analysis of the perceptions and motivations of fighters, high-ranking military leaders and civilian dependants associated with the ethnic Hutu-dominated rebel group the Democratic Forces for the Liberation of Rwanda (FDLR), currently fighting in the eastern territories of the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC). I focus on how members of the FDLR perceive their own situation in the context of ongoing conflict and how they incentivize and justify acts of violence. I argue that, if we are to achieve a deeper understanding of the motives behind violence in conflict zones, we must understand the structural context, as well as the individual life stories, background and life strategies, of those engaged in perpetrating violence.

The article is informed by fifteen months of research conducted between 2010 and 2012 in the South Kivu province of the Eastern Congo. Aspects of the fieldwork were carried out in a geographically remote and isolated military camp controlled by the FDLR, five days' trek from the nearest town. Here I conducted interviews and participant observation among active fighters and their family members to gain insight into the membership and organization of the group. Through analysis of the ethnographic data, I discovered that most FDLR members regarded themselves as victims, but at the same time they believed that they were fighting for a good cause. Hence they often identified themselves simultaneously as victims and perpetrators. Violence among those fighters I interviewed was not just a political or military tactic; it was also a cultural and personal act that articulates with a cosmology that links violence with personal agency. If we seek to understand the behaviour of combatants and their motives for violence in war, we must begin by examining the political context and the conditions under which they fight. By engaging with actors who perpetrate violence, we can further achieve a broader understanding of individual life strategies in conflict situations, and of how it is that violence sustains itself. A basic premise of anthropological enquiry is that by understanding the everyday lives and world views of the people we study, we can obtain a more nuanced appreciation of their actions. People adopt multiple life strategies to make sense of and negotiate their life circumstances. Brutal, seemingly spontaneous violence may be one such strategy.

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A number of anthropological studies of conflict and violence in Africa have shown that victim and perpetrator identities are often ambiguous and unclear (Utas 2005). Scholars have dismissed the simplistic victim/perpetrator dichotomy as erroneous and as an inadequate device for understanding contemporary conflicts. Research from numerous conflict zones has shown that, rather than conforming to simplistic dichotomous definitions, most inhabitants experience themselves as being 'caught up' in such conflicts and may variously see themselves as victims, bystanders, witnesses or perpetrators, with these identities being subject to change as conflicts evolve over time. While victim/perpetrator identities in war are now a relatively well-researched topic, the blurred victim/perpetrator line is still absent in the discussion about the FDLR in the Congo. The dominant narrative in the media and among peacekeepers on the ground describes the rebels as one single group of *genocidaires* (those guilty of genocide) without taking into account the more complex reality and diversity within the group. Thus, this article hopes to add to the literature on conflict and violence in Africa by providing ethnographic data from inside an active rebel camp, but it also hopes to provide agencies, peacekeepers, organizations and other key actors working in the region with information that may assist them in finding peaceful strategies to prevent conflict and violence in the Congo.

This article specifically focuses on how fighters perceive and justify their own victim identities, and in particular their apparently contradictory subjectivities. Members of the FDLR rationalize their engagement in acts of violence in terms of an obligation to be obedient to military orders and commands. At the same time, they express commitment to their group's political ideology and personal convictions. Thus, this article demonstrates how the victim and perpetrator line is blurred and what that means for the performance of violence in the case of the FDLR. Those I interviewed often identified themselves as being victims of a politically driven military machine, compelled to follow orders, while also believing that they were fighting for a just cause in the hope of returning to their homeland, Rwanda. How do fighters reconcile this dual sense of compulsion and commitment?

Here, I explore and analyse how members of the FDLR reconcile their victim and perpetrator identities and especially how 'being victims' becomes locally meaningful and profitable for the group members. The victim identity and the blurring of the distinction between 'compulsion' and 'commitment' in relation to the group's ideological goals are discussed against the backdrop of war and insecurity that defines the setting for (violent) events. It is important to analyse victim identities in order to understand how violence is produced and reproduced. In a comprehensive study of armed groups in war, Jean-Jacques Frésard and Daniel Munoz-Rojas (2004) showed that it is common for combatants to see themselves as victims. The study further demonstrated that if a combatant believes he or she is a victim, it becomes easier for that individual to harm or kill others. Combatants who had experienced violence against their property, their loved ones or their own persons were more likely than other combatants to carry out violence against others (*ibid.*). The experience of victimization, the authors argue, was a key factor leading to the perpetration of violence. Similarly, as is evident in the ethnographic material presented below, the victim identity articulated by FDLR members is certainly one factor that leads to violence. While the position canvassed by Frésard and Munoz-Rojas is true and common in the literature, what

is often elided is the complicated self-understanding of the combatants regarding their agency – or their lack of agency. Therefore, this article will show that the rebels are often caught between being compelled to commit violence and being committed to it as individuals. The fact that these are not mutually exclusive possibilities is important for understanding how fighters behave in a conflict situation.

Needless to say, there is no justification for the brutal violence (including massacres, murders and mass rape) committed by members of the FDLR. It is clearly important to highlight the atrocities that the rebels have undoubtedly committed in order to determine human rights violations, identify war crimes and bring war criminals to justice. To identify criminal responsibility, the legal process needs to make a judgement call – to decide, in the given situation, if the individual was a victim or a perpetrator. However, in anthropological terms, this categorization is not sufficient. The task of the anthropologist is to analyse narratives and acts of violence as social practice. I argue, therefore, that we can gain a deeper understanding of life in a war zone if we view violence as a window for understanding other processes.

Conflict and violence in the Eastern Congo

The Eastern DRC has become a battleground for more than fifty armed groups operating across a zone contested by government forces and various hostile rebel factions.[1] Some of these groups are loosely linked to the current government led by Joseph Kabila. Others are associated with the Congolese political opposition, with the neighbouring foreign countries of Uganda, Rwanda and Burundi, or with local ethnic groups, territorial mafias and warlords. Against this backdrop, armed groups compete for sovereignty over villages, resources, land, identity claims and political power. Armed groups do not act in isolation but rather within a complex domain consisting of both Congolese and external players representing various interest groups. The Eastern Congo territory is heavily populated by 'enclaves' or 'clusters' (Beneduce *et al.* 2006) of extra-governmental ethnic, local and foreign armed groups as well as by commercial and other interested agencies and players who have implanted themselves throughout the region, and who have become, in an abstract sense, part of the conflict zone. These agencies include a wide array of NGOs, international aid organizations, multinational peacekeeping missions, church associations, mining companies and civil society organizations, as well as Lebanese, Chinese and other international traders and businessmen. In pursuit of lucrative new markets, resources and/or political goals, these players often enter into complex and unstable alliances with armed groups, acting within an environment of uncertainty, ruthless competition, and, of course, conflict and violence.

In common with equivalent conflicts in other African countries (such as Liberia, Sierra Leone and Uganda), the conflict in the Eastern Congo can be characterized as a 'continuum of violence' where it is 'neither-peace-nor-war' (Richards 2005), where the contrast between war and peace remains purely theoretical (Nordstrom 2007), and where conflict and violence have no clear beginning

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[1]For a useful overview of the conflict in the Eastern Congo, see Vlassenroot and Raeymaekers (2004), Lemarchand (2009) and Reyntjens (2009).

or end. In contemporary theories of war, it is often noted that most conflicts no longer have a visible front line where formal battles are staged (see, for example, Duffield 2001; Kaldor 1999). Rather, conflicts are more likely to take place in the midst of communities, and between people with a shared history and with social norms, ethnicity and cultural values in common (Richards 2005). The experience of living with this form of conflict can be understood as 'event-full living' (Hoffman and Lubkemann 2005), where political and social struggles lie at the very core of everyday life. Further, it is often posited that this type of conflict is not just a matter of tactics and territorial gain, but also depends on close-quarters combat, the use of small arms, and personal physical violence and bodily confrontation. A wider societal breakdown and disorder creates conditions where combatants can use close-quarters violence to control populations by installing a 'culture of terror' (Taussig 2002) or a 'culture of fear' (Green 1994) in the civilian landscape. Identities, personhood and bodies become primary targets, and the spread of fear in communities (through, for example, torture or sexual violence) can be more effective than actual killing (Nordstrom 1998; Linke and Smith 2009). At the same time, the civilian population may ally itself with one or more armed groups for protection or for profit through trade and other possible economic exchanges. In the Eastern Congo, some communities have established their own armed community defence militias (such as the Mai-Mai militia), complete with self-proclaimed officers and commanders. As Daniel Hoffman (2011) has noted, while conflicts may be devastating for some, they also have the potential to offer strategic benefits for others, through, for example, lucrative illegal trading in arms and/or natural resources. Hence, in areas of prolonged conflict, individuals, groups and communities may operate simultaneously as both perpetrators and victims.

As Sverker Finnström (2008: 89) explains in relation to the conflict in Uganda, the term 'civilian' covers a broad category of non-combatants who live in the midst of armed conflict, but who, under certain conditions, find themselves as both targets and participants in the wider politics of war. Boundaries between 'friends' and 'enemies', 'victims' and 'perpetrators' become blurred and the terms can become interchangeable, especially when victims become perpetrators and vice versa. Thus, we can see that the meaning of the terms 'victim' and 'perpetrator' is heavily dependent on the context to which they are applied.

Life strategies and unclear boundaries

In conflict situations where social institutions have failed to provide assistance and security to populations, people are often forced to adapt their own life strategies to survive. Researchers such as Utas (2003) and Vigh (2007) have used the concept of 'social navigation'[2] to explain the choices that individuals make, and the life strategies that people have adopted when living in volatile places. Social navigation is a particular sort of 'tactical agency' that people adopt to seek out their trajectories in uncertain circumstances, for example by using 'innovation' and 'improvisation' to get by, and to achieve certain goals or to escape events (Hoffman and

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[2]See also Hoffman and Lubkemann (2005) and Korf *et al.* (2010).

Lubkemann 2005: 318). Furthermore, a growing body of warscape ethnography underscores how pervasive uncertainty and insecurity can blur the categories between people's roles and identities in war. Anthropological literature has long confirmed that violence is never truly 'meaningless' or 'senseless' but often profoundly meaningful for people who live in the midst of conflict and war (Nordstrom 2007; Hoffman 2011). To study blurred and conflicting personal identities in the context of violence is particularly pertinent in war zones such as the Congo.

The FDLR has been the focus of many accusations of killings and atrocities committed against civilians (see, for example, Laborde-Barbanègre *et al.* 2014). It is important to emphasize that there is more than one underlying motive that prompts the perpetrators to carry out such acts of violence. In the following section I explore the multifaceted and shifting roles and identities exhibited by members of the FDLR, both as victims and perpetrators. The ethnographic case study is intended to shed light on how identities and violence are lived out in the context of prolonged warfare, and on the ways in which members of the FDLR act in accordance with their own circumstantial opportunities and constraints. I further argue that their practices of violence are best understood not by considering FDLR members as a fixed category of person or group, but rather by showing that their identities are constantly shifting between those of victim and perpetrator, refugee and warrior.

Rwandan rebels in the Eastern Congo war

As mentioned in the introduction, the FDLR are often portrayed by the media and the government of Rwanda as *genocidaires*.[3] They are held to be one of the most brutal and dangerous rebel groups involved in the Congo conflict, and their leadership is accused of being responsible not only for the orchestration of the genocide in Rwanda in 1994, but also for war crimes such as massacres, mass rape, the burning down of villages and the mutilation and murder of civilians in the Eastern Congo conflict (see, for example, Human Rights Watch 2009).[4] The dominant narrative of the genocide describes how, over a period of 100 days, extremist Hutu rebels, supported and armed by the Rwandan government, killed more than 800,000 Tutsis and moderate Hutus. The genocide began a few hours after a plane carrying the former Rwandan President Juvénal Habyarimana was shot down. Hutu extremists, former government soldiers, the Rwandan Armed Forces (FAR) and Interahamwe[5] rebels accused the Rwandan Patriotic Front (RPF) of having carried out the attack, and promptly declared

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[3]For further information on the genocide in Rwanda and the FDLR, see Straus (2006) and Hatzfeld (2000; 2003).

[4]As I have described the history and background of the FDLR in previous publications, I will not do so again here; for a more exhaustive discussion, see Romkema (2007; 2009), Rafti (2006), Pole Institute (2010) and International Crisis Group (2003).

[5]These rebels were called *Interahamwe* in Kinyarwanda, which is translated as 'those who fight/ work/stand together', and *Impuzamugambi*, which is translated as 'those who have the same goal'. The Hutu extremist groups were supported by the former Hutu government under President Juvénal Habyarimana.

war against the Tutsis. A few months later, Paul Kagame, the new Tutsi political leader of the RPF, managed to put an end to most of the violence. Kagame assumed power in Kigali and proclaimed himself head of state. To avoid Tutsi retribution, millions of people, mostly Hutus, fled Rwanda. Over a million sought refuge in the Congo, while many more fled to neighbouring countries. The majority of refugees to the Congo ended up in temporary camps in the provinces of South and North Kivu. Housed within these camps were innocent victims and bystanders, but also Hutu extremists, key leaders and participants in the genocide who had managed to escape Rwanda. Those who had participated in the genocide lived in fear of reprisals by the new regime in Kigali, so, to protect themselves from potential attack, the Hutu extremists mobilized people from inside the refugee camps, and the FDLR was born.[6] In 1996, the Rwandan Army engaged in a campaign to destroy the Hutu rebels, wiping out, or disbanding, the refugee camps. Since then the FDLR has been operating from remote areas, where it continues to play a major role in the Congo conflict. Twenty years later, despite several attempts by the Congolese and Rwandan governments to track down the FDLR leaders, some of them are still at large (International Crisis Group 2009). Although some of the high-ranking members of the FDLR were involved in the 1994 genocide, most of the current combatants are new recruits drawn from refugee camps in the Eastern Congo or second-generation Hutu refugees (see also Perera 2013). While members of the FDLR see themselves as a 'government in exile', the local population often blames the Hutu rebels for prolonging the conflict in the country, accusing them of deadly attacks, plunder, rape, war crimes and crimes against humanity. While accurate data are hard to obtain, there are reported to be approximately 1,500 to 2,000 fighters in Congo alone, and it is estimated that the FDLR moves about with another several thousand Rwandan refugees who identify themselves as being part of the movement (Mueller and Bafilemba 2013).

In the Eastern Congo, the rebels are divided into military brigades stationed at different headquarters with subdivisions located in remote mountainous areas. They carry out military activities and operations in both North and South Kivu. Economic activities, such as taxation of villagers and transportation of minerals, are key to the survival of the FDLR, whose members are widely known to be involved in illegal activities across the region (*ibid.*). Members of the leadership communicate with each other using modern devices such as mobile and satellite phones powered by solar panels.

The prevailing and internationally accepted narrative of the 1994 Rwandan genocide is hotly contested by the FDLR. They assert that the mass killings were planned by the RPF in order to replace the Hutu government, to seize power in Kigali and to exterminate the Hutu population. FDLR hardliners have further argued that there was a 'double genocide' carried out by the Tutsis in 1996, when thousands of Rwandan refugees were massacred by the Rwandan

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[6]After they arrived in the DRC, parts of the group moved towards western Zaire while others stayed in the east. The group in the east founded the Armée de Liberation du Rwanda (ALIR 1) in 1995 (which was later split into ALIR 1 and ALIR 2), while a section of the group in the west founded the FDLR in 2000. For a more detailed background discussion, see Romkema (2007; 2009).

military (Lemarchand 2009). As noted by Hans Romkema (2007; 2009), when the FDLR leadership communicates with outsiders, they often affirm that they do not strive for a military solution to their situation. Rather, they call for an 'inter-Rwanda dialogue', including the demand that the government in Rwanda allow them to return to Rwanda without persecution.[7] The combatants, especially the high-ranking officers that I interviewed, repeatedly said that they would keep on fighting until justice has been achieved for the Hutu population. Justice, they said, means being allowed to return to Rwanda 'with peace and dignity', and without being denounced as *genocidaires*.[8] The 'peace' rhetoric is part of the FDLR's political propaganda, in which they insist that the international community will have to recognize the Tutsi government and the RPF as the instigators of the genocide and reject claims that the Hutu rebels played any part in it.

Although there is clearly good reason for high-ranking leaders to avoid identifying themselves as perpetrators in a legal sense, it is noteworthy that the majority of the members of the FDLR do indeed believe that they are victims and that the political elite in Congo and Rwanda has dealt with the Hutu population unfairly. This victim identity is important, since, as we will see, it is one mechanism that legitimizes violence on the part of the FDLR. Later, I look at how discourses of violence and victim identities are shaped among the FDLR members. But first, in order to understand how FDLR fighters interpret their own situation in life, and how violence is reproduced, it is important to analyse the camp setting as a vibrant and dynamic community.

Militarized redoubts in the Congo mountains

The fieldwork was carried out in a military unit located on a mountain top, deep in the Itombwe forest, in the South Kivu province. This camp was home to about 200 soldiers and their family members. The population lived in small huts built of bamboo without access to electricity or running water. Despite its geographical isolation, the military post was far removed from the conventional image of a rebel camp as an 'antisocial' and dysfunctional environment. Rather, it was a profoundly complex social space, with an unusual set of power relationships. At the time it was a military intelligence unit whose main job was to report on security issues to the FDLR headquarters. As an important military camp, it was also a permanent base for high-ranking officers, commanders and colonels. (By contrast, many low-ranking soldiers were only temporary residents of the camp, patrolling on foot between various military posts and territories.)

Despite its military status, the camp was also a refuge for uprooted and displaced families. Some of these fled Rwanda after the 1994 genocide; others were Rwandan displaced persons from other parts of the Congo. Others were born in the camp, while still others had been recruited in the Congo as fighters, child soldiers or bush wives. Thus there was a wide diversity within the camp, indicated by this range of ethnicities, kinships and military/civilian status, which points to a

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[7]See Social Science Research Council (SSRC 2014) for a longer discussion on FDLR ideology.
[8]Author's interviews with members of the FDLR, Itombwe camp, 2011 and 2012.

comparable diversity within the FDLR as a whole. It is also noteworthy that the majority of FDLR members were, in fact, civilians.

Everyday life in the camp consisted of routines and everyday tasks. Women and lower-ranking combatants were working in the fields, collecting food and water. Higher-ranking soldiers often sat around a fire; they followed the news on the radio and communicated with leaders from other camps via satellite phones. The population was deeply religious. In the camp, there were three charismatic churches visited several times a day for collective prayers and religious ceremonies. Besides attending the churches there were few collective activities. Many referred to life in the camp as tedious and tiring, a life-long waiting to return to Rwanda. Young fighters often spent time 'hanging around' in the camp, chatting to friends, washing clothes, cooking food and polishing their boots, or they gathered firewood. Although there was a school (also built of bamboo) in the camp (without books or materials), children spent most of their time helping their mothers to collect firewood and water.

It was clear that the camp was a military post: most fighters carried heavy weapons, there were soldiers guarding the camp and bodyguards shielding high-ranking soldiers, and most conversations revolved around politics or military activity. I observed organized military training, but most of the time, fighters said, they worked hard to survive in difficult conditions and did not leave the camp to insult civilians or carry out attacks. It is difficult to say how often soldiers are involved in acts of violence; 'It depends on the situation,' as a middle-aged fighter told me. Even if I did not observe any physical violence taking place inside or outside the camp, violence – and threats of violence – was spoken about on a daily basis as something that 'could happen at any time' and it was emphasized over and over again that they were living in a war situation and had to be prepared to fight whenever necessary.

As I have described elsewhere, the displaced populations who move about with the soldiers have little power to resist the authority of the FDLR leaders (Hedlund 2014) – they are monitored and controlled, subjected to propaganda and lies, and threatened with death if they try to leave the camp. At the same time, civilians who are associated with the FDLR often support the political ideology of the group. For example, I observed how those who called themselves civilians took part in political demonstrations and military activities, such as collecting information in nearby villages, as well as supporting fighters by cleaning, washing clothes and cooking. Importantly, however, the civilian population have little power to change their own situation and are technically held captive in the camp by the high-ranking officers.

To understand the internal organization of the camp, it is important to draw a distinction between the leaders who have an interest in maintaining the conflict – they may, for example, want to avoid arrest for the commission of war crimes – and the second generation of Rwandan refugees (or group members with other ethnicities) who are not linked to the 1994 genocide. Rather than defining all members of the FDLR as *genocidaires*, I prefer the term 'exiles' to denote the population who are not fighters but are nonetheless part of the rebel group – even if some members, such as Congolese Hutus and members of other ethnicities captured or recruited from Congolese communities, are not, strictly speaking, in exile. My use of this term reflects common parlance among those I interviewed, who refer to themselves as either 'the refugees' or 'the civilians' who live 'in

exile' in the mountains and forests of Congo (see also Hedlund 2015). When FDLR members speak of themselves as exiles or refugees, they do so to emphasize their displacement from their homeland and their new life in exile. But the terms 'refugee' and 'exile' are also part of the political rhetoric of the FDLR membership, emphasizing that they are victims and have the right to legal refugee status under international law and are thus entitled to food, a tent and other resources as enshrined in the 1951 Geneva Convention. Although organizations such as the United Nations High Commission for Refugees (UNHCR) recognize that not all FDLR members are fighters and that many refugees (and locals) live under the protection (and persecution) of the group, those I interviewed during fieldwork repeatedly said that they are being ignored by international law makers and treated unjustly by the international community. Informants further opined that the latter's failure to acknowledge their status as refugees (and to help them return to Rwanda) was a consequence of pro-Tutsi propaganda that the government in Kigali is disseminating throughout the international community.[9] In short, FDLR members used the refugee/rebel dichotomy to claim a victim identity for themselves and to repudiate definitions of themselves as *genocidaires* or 'perpetrators'. In this context, to achieve legal 'refugee' status was not only potentially profitable; it also served to structure and maintain an ideology of victimization.

At a personal level, it was clear that, for the FDLR members I spoke with, the shared experiences of living through conflict and of isolation from the rest of society had strengthened their social ties, their sense of belonging and their collective identity as 'Hutu rebels'; they also felt abandoned by the rest of the world (see also Perera 2013; Bøas and Dunn 2013), sharing and propagating a strong perception of themselves as victims.

Victim identities and performances of violence

What does it mean to be a victim? Research has shown that oppressors who define someone else as a perpetrator are often casting themselves as victims (Mamdani 2002). Jean-Jacques Frésard (2004) points out that if a combatant believes he is a victim, this perception of his situation might make him feel he has the right to kill. That there exists a collective memory of victimhood among Hutu diasporas and exiles is not a novel suggestion. Scholars such as Liisa Malkki (1995) and Mahmood Mamdani (2002) have shown how both Hutus and Tutsis have created a shared, collective, victim-based narrative of themselves throughout history. Hutu and Tutsi victim narratives are often fundamentally opposed to one another, with each group using their respective account to identify the 'Other'. This narrative of victimhood was central to the discourse of those I interviewed (see also Hedlund 2015). The victim identity was evident in almost every conversation I had with members of the FDLR. For example, leaders argued that history had dealt with the Hutu population unfairly, since the Tutsi populations had been favoured by colonizers, who granted them access to political, economic

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[9]Author's interviews with FDLR members, Itombwe camp, 2011 and 2012. See also Romkema (2007).

and social spheres from which the Hutus were excluded. For others, the experience of victimhood dominated the course of daily life. It was common for fighters to say, 'Our individual freedom and political rights are being neglected,' and 'We are pushed to the forest,' or 'We are excluded from society,' and, moreover, 'We are suffering in the forest.'[10]

The victim discourse was also present in the collective ceremonies and prayers that took place several times a day in one of the three bamboo churches. For example, I observed how high-ranking leaders, fighters and civilians would all gather for hour-long praying sessions in the church; during these they would stare up at the ceiling, crying, weeping and praying, and asking God why he had neglected them and why no one came to 'help them out of this situation'.[11]

According to Frésard (2004), fighters often believe that they act from a marginalized victim position. The production of violence among fighters can be understood in the light of the victim discourse that can further be traced to what Frésard (*ibid*.: 66) describes as a 'distancing mechanism'. This, he argues, plays a major role in overcoming an individual's aversion to participating in violent acts – seeing oneself as a victim can justify committing atrocities against other individuals.

Among those I interviewed, feelings of being unjustly treated were certainly one factor that they used to justify certain acts of violence. And it was notable that the discourse of victimization was passed down from one generation to the next. Indeed, many of the children with whom I spoke were adept at articulating their position as subjected victims. For example, one day, a girl of around five years old approached me with a letter in her hand. The letter, addressed to 'all children worldwide' and signed 'all children in the forest', had clearly not been written by the girl herself. Rather, it was a piece of propaganda penned by the FDLR leaders, who hoped to use me, a foreign researcher, as a means of communicating their plight to the international community, as the following excerpt illustrates:

> Here we are in the great forest of Congo, where we are living in bad conditions. We suffer. We have illness. We don't have clothes and we don't have a life. We don't have good water in the forest, its [*sic*] only dirty water; this is the life we are living. Do you live in the same condition too? Our fathers have become animals, our mothers the same, they weep, we sing, they die and we have to see it, is it the same for you too? … the life we are living, it is a genocide intellectually, or it is an intellectual genocide while we have not participated in your genocide. We don't know what genocide mean [*sic*], we are suffering because we hear our parents are suffering from the sins of others, are we not God resemblances like you? Other children are glad to their parents, they may play, or cook, or laugh together, they may sing. For us, our songs are the bombs and sounds of guns. You children of the world, we don't know what we can ask you apart from your prayers of everyday. May you help us to go out of the forest and ask our parents who are in Rwanda to accept us and to go back to our country that even we don't know but we call Rwanda?[12]

Throughout my fieldwork, I encountered very similar stories over and over again. The language used was often highly emotive: those I interviewed said that Kagame

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[10]Author's interviews with members of the FDLR, Itombwe camp, 2011 and 2012.
[11]Author's observation, Itombwe camp, 2011 and 2012.
[12]Letter given to the author during fieldwork, December 2011.

was carrying out 'an intellectual genocide against us'; he 'has a cold heart'; he 'treats Hutus badly'; and 'children are innocent'. When I asked the children what 'intellectual genocide' meant to them, they were often unsure about the historical background of the genocide or were unable to link that history to their own situation in life – but they did know that they were victims.[13] It was clear that, in general, the children reproduced messages that were articulated by the adult population.

In my interpretation, the example above demonstrates how victim ideologies become embedded in daily life through propaganda and the discourse of high-ranking officers and leaders. By these means, FDLR members learn the organization's version of the 'truth'. Furthermore, it clearly shows that social relations among members of the FDLR often have a structure of victimization, and that collective beliefs and associated manifestations of violence become legitimized through appeals to common ethnicity, identity and feelings of marginalization and exclusion (cf. Jackson 2013). The following section explores the main motives for perpetrating violence as expressed by those fighters I interviewed. The accounts reveal the dual (victim/perpetrator) identity of members as well as how this duality was reconciled.

'We are just simple soldiers'

During interviews, FDLR fighters gave varying explanations as to why they fight, and about how they perceive their situation in life. This variation needs to be understood against the backdrop of their individual life histories, their age, their gender, and their hierarchical position and role in the camp. Narratives differed according to whether FDLR members were Congolese or Rwandans; whether they may have played a role in the genocide, were recruited, captured or were born into the group; and whether they served as soldiers or as child soldiers, as porters, cooks or wives, or if they served as priests or pastors in the camp.

For example, the younger combatants, who had played no role in the genocide, often forcefully expressed their frustration at being falsely accused of being *genocidaires*. Many of them explained how, since they were born in the forests of the Congo, they were 'just simple soldiers' and should not be branded as perpetrators of genocide. While this frustration is justified in relation to the genocide, it is also the case that many of the younger FDLR soldiers have been active in the Congo conflict, carrying out attacks, looting, pillaging and even killing – in that sense, they cannot be regarded as victims. But they were insistent that they were innocents at the mercy of history, arguing that it was necessary to carry Kalashnikovs in order to protect themselves from the Congolese military and other enemies or enemy groups, and that the major motivation for carrying weapons was to protect oneself and one's family. They also often complained of their deep dissatisfaction at being condemned to life in an armed group, with few possibilities of escape.

For example, a seventeen-year-old male combatant said:

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[13]Author's interviews with children of members of the FDLR, Itombwe camp, 2011 and 2012.

No one wants to live in the forest; it is not a life here. We live like animals. We sleep on the ground; we eat from the ground … It is cold, rainy, no food. But what else is there to do? We know Kagame is trying to kill us, and his propaganda [makes out we] are *genocidaires*. We are not; we grew up here [in the forest]. What can we do? We have to fight.[14]

Jean-Jacques, an eighteen-year-old combatant, echoed these thoughts:

[Life in the FDLR is] not easy; I am suffering in the army, I was a very little boy, you know that good things that you can have in the army when you are a soldier is … really … only bad things … for instance, to loot, no good things, killing people, we kill Tutsi and other people that we meet in the way.[15]

The interviews from which the extracts above are taken, along with other similar testimonies, are strong indicators that the young FDLR combatants do not enjoy their life as fighters. In addition to their complaints about being 'trapped' in the forest, the combatants often argued that they suffered from an absence of food, healthcare, schools and a peaceful environment. At the same time, the majority of those I spoke to were also adamant that they see no alternatives to their life in the forest, and some fighters were ready to fight 'for justice'. One day I had a conversation with a group of fighters. When I approached the group they had just finished a military training session. I asked about their life as fighters and why they fight. A man in his mid-thirties told me:

If he [Kagame] refuses to sit down with us and find a peaceful solution; no worries, we will use our weapons. We will take him down with it [kill him].

Another man in the group, of a similar age, pointed his Kalashnikov in the air and said:

We are being left with no choice. We will shoot him [Kagame] if we have to. We have been taught how to use guns. We are soldiers and know how to do it.

As seen above, it is also true that some fighters clearly demonstrated agency in carrying out violence. And many fighters I spoke to expressed personal motives for fighting, for example to acquire a new military uniform or firearm, or to gain access to basic necessities such as food and medicines. One fighter to whom I talked proudly informed me that he would have to 'kill an enemy to get new clothes [a new uniform]'. Although all of the informants primarily identified themselves as victims, they nonetheless sided with (the cause of) the perpetrators, echoing statements such as 'We fight for justice to liberate Rwanda' or 'We must fight until we can go back to Rwanda.' In this respect, the combatants are not 'innocent' youngsters who are forced to fight; rather, they are active participants

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[14]Author's interview with a seventeen-year-old combatant, Itombwe forest camp, November 2011. Translated from Kinyarwanda to English by my co-worker (whose name remains anonymous to protect his identity).
[15]Author's interview with an eighteen-year-old ex-member of the FDLR whom I interviewed in a demobilization camp in Bukavu, October 2011. Translated from Kinyarwanda to English.

who exhibit personal agency and have their own vision and goals for continuing to participate in the conflict.

Over the course of the interviews, I found that both the FDLR fighters and the civilian dependants usually gave conflicting explanations for their personal experiences, their situation in life and their motives for fighting. Hence, there is a range of factors that must be considered when attempting to understand the diverse and sometimes contradictory attitudes among members of the FDLR. Here I find it useful to employ Alcinda Honwana's (2005: 49) concept of 'tactical agency' with which she explains the agency of child soldiers in war. The concept denotes 'a specific type of agency that is devised to cope with the concrete, immediate conditions of [the children's] lives in order to maximize the circumstances created by their military and violent environment'.

Paradoxically, this tactical agency, Honwana notes, is drawn from a position of weakness in which the combatants have few options to change or control their life situations. As previously mentioned, some of the FDLR members were recruited to the armed group by force, or grew up in a similar community militia; these usually argued that they had no other choice in life than to join (or remain with) the FDLR. Despite complaints of feeling forced or compelled to participate in violent acts, many of those I interviewed said that there are few alternatives in life. As Honwana (2005) notes, 'tactical agency' is a means for fighters to try to make the best of their situation, which may provide some reasons why members of the FDLR asserted that they were doing the 'right thing' by fighting for Hutu freedom, believing that they would one day return to Rwanda 'as heroes'. However, it should be noted that the very same combatants were prone to changing their perspectives from day to day, demonstrating some of the ambiguities of how life is experienced inside an armed group. In any event, it would be simplistic to view their actions as a (mere) product of coercion by their superiors.

As is well known from military studies, there is not always a clear distinction between the personal convictions that drive combatants to carry out violence and the orders of military personnel. To paraphrase Frésard and Munoz-Rojas (2004), combatants will often displace the responsibility for acts of violence from themselves to the leaders who gave them orders. However, as the authors (*ibid*.) have shown in a comparative study, combatants are indeed expected to obey the military hierarchy but will often find a personal motivation for engaging in violence as well. As noted above, this was true of my informants, especially the more proficient fighters and high-ranking personnel. It is most likely that a history of having participated in more battles than their fellow combatants made their prospects in a peaceful situation look bleak, since they are unlikely to be able to return to Rwanda without being punished. The majority of the younger fighters, on the other hand, still harboured hopes of eventually returning to Rwanda and rebuilding their lives.[16]

In summary, while the rebels are often submissive to their leaders, they may also have a personal motivation for fighting. They must combine commitment with the compulsion to obey orders. These two identities are often reconciled through a victimhood discourse, which, as I have shown, may simultaneously legitimize

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[16]Almost all of my informants expressed the wish to return to a peaceful life, go to school, find a job, and live a normal life instead of being a fighter.

and motivate acts of violence. Ordinarily, we would see external compulsion and personal commitment as contradictory, yet in the Congo they seem complementary. How can this be? The implication here is that personal convictions must be studied alongside those behaviours resulting from coercion. It is this interaction between personal motivation and organizational requirements that must be unpacked in order to understand the behaviour of FDLR fighters. As Frésard's (2004) work shows, there are times when combatants must carry out orders even if these are in conflict with their personal values, whereas at other times they may employ self-selected strategies to gain specific resources or individual benefits such as food, security or protection. In other words, the fighters sometimes strive for the short-term opportunities that warscapes can offer. Thus, there are various factors that can help us understand the behaviour of an individual or group in a war situation; these include discipline from above – orders, sanctions and penalties – as well as patterns already embedded in the structure and culture of the group itself and in the surrounding fragmented, if not broken, landscape. Hence, fighters are victims in some contexts, and civilians or outsiders in others; in carrying out violence, for example, they may be 'following orders' one day and acting voluntarily the next.

Conclusion

In this article I have analysed the dual, often conflicting, identities held by members of the FDLR. Taking as my point of departure the view that concepts such as 'victims' and 'perpetrators' are inadequate for capturing the complexity of the FDLR, I have shown that the categories are misleading – they are not descriptive of a specific social situation, and they hide important aspects of the various identities that different members of the FDLR act out, in accordance with their particular social status. As is true for any war, the conflict in Congo does not have a single root cause, and there are innumerable different reasons behind people's decisions to use violence. The conditions created by pervasive and long-term conflict are so enmeshed in people's lives that they affect the very foundation of social life. As a result, people's relationships are generally improvised and ambiguous rather than being built on long-term trust. In response to this, FDLR members try to make sense of their lives by creating zones of stability that will help them get through the day. Violence is a common behaviour among people with limited prospects in their lives – both present and future. I have shown that members of the FDLR perceive themselves as both victims and perpetrators. More significantly, those I interviewed highlighted the fact that, although they are compelled by others to use violence, they may also support the ideologies that inform those who compel them. Hence, the distinction between victim and perpetrator obscures a number of important factors, including the fact that obligation and choice are not experienced as mutually exclusive categories. For example, members would justify their own violence by speaking about themselves as 'Hutu rebels' who are fighting for 'freedom and justice', and their lived experiences and social imaginary of being Hutu 'victims' were central themes in almost all of our conversations. My informants perceived themselves as the victims of a long history of marginalization both from the Tutsis and from society as a whole. Furthermore, the ethnographic data collected in the

camp reveal that members of the FDLR have multifaceted perspectives on violence and identity. The majority of FDLR members do not perceive themselves as fighters even though they do see themselves as integral to the group, sharing a single Hutu identity, ideology and political goals. Even those who are not combatants participate in the public manifestations, rituals and political demonstrations – they are therefore complicit in the perpetuation of violence and the active dissemination of FDLR ideology.

While the majority of the civilian dependants are not involved in actual combat, they are nonetheless embroiled in the conflict, collecting information from nearby villages and taking care of domestic duties such as cleaning and cooking within the camp. And while FDLR combatants see themselves as perpetrators at times, they also imagine themselves as exiles or refugees, helpless in the face of a large and powerful political scenario. Among the younger combatants, too, there was evidence of inconsistency and a blurring of identities. When asked about their violent behaviour, some asserted that they were just following orders; others said that they acted in self-defence or to protect the group or their family; while yet others explained that they were motivated by anger at being destined to live out their days trapped in the forest. Some claimed to use violence for survival in the short term – to obtain a few potatoes to stave off hunger, for example, or to steal a weapon to protect themselves.

It is important to remember that the way in which the international community defines individuals, such as characterizing them as either victims or perpetrators, has profound moral and legal consequences. For example, some FDLR members are refugees and should therefore be granted refugee status under international law. At the same time, such an acknowledgement would further compound the existing political complexities, since the granting of refugee status to FDLR members would both legitimize the group's victim identity and appear to justify past acts of violence. Legal and moral judgements are inappropriate here, and I do not judge the behaviour of perpetrators. The issue is, rather, to attempt to understand the ways in which people try to survive war and, in the process, perpetuate it. An examination of the context might not be adequate to explain all the motives that people might have for engaging in violence, but it can nonetheless shed light on how circumstances can suddenly turn people into perpetrators; it can also help explain how combatants may shape their identities, and develop and express their life strategies, as a means to achieving a certain goal – for example, to acquire refugee status. Members of the FDLR have multiple roles and relationships that weave into one another in complex ways. In the conflict in the Congo, it is evident that the boundaries between victims and perpetrators are unclear, but it is also evident that, ultimately, FDLR fighters perceive themselves as both victims and perpetrators simultaneously. It is a very blurred line indeed that separates individual choice and commitment to the group on the one hand, and, on the other, being compelled and pressured by the leadership of the organization to participate in acts of violence and brutality.

Acknowledgements

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Abstract

Media descriptions of the conflicts in the Eastern Congo usually depict violent events as being systematic attacks by rebels and militias (perpetrators) on the civilian population (victims). While much attention has been given to the victims of such violence, less effort has been made to understand the perspectives and underlying motives for violence of those who are actively engaged in fighting the war. Using anthropological arguments, this article argues that the use of the terms 'perpetrator' and 'victim' are scientifically problematic when attempting to explain contemporary conflict(s) in the Eastern Congo and other similar war situations in Africa. Based on ethnographic fieldwork among the Democratic Forces for the Liberation of Rwanda (FDLR), whose leadership was an orchestrating agent in the genocide in Rwanda in 1994, I demonstrate that not only is the victim/perpetrator dichotomy unclear, but also that combatants may frequently regard themselves as being both victims and perpetrators at one and the same time. I argue that the main factor behind this dual identity is that, while combatants in the Congo may be under a compulsion to commit violence, they may simultaneously be fully committed to their armed group and to its collective political ideology. While our conventional understanding of the membership of armed groups tends to make a sharp distinction between compulsory participation and commitment to a cause, I show how, in the context of the Eastern Congo, these categories are not, in fact, mutually exclusive.

Résumé

Les descriptions médiatiques des conflits dans l'Est du Congo dépeignent généralement les événements violents comme des attaques systématiques par des rebelles et des milices (auteurs des actes) sur la population civile (victimes). Alors que l'attention s'est fortement portée sur les victimes de cette violence, l'effort de recherche cherche moins à comprendre les perspectives et les motifs qui sous-tendent la violence de ceux qui participent activement aux combats. Usant d'arguments anthropologiques, cet article soutient que l'utilisation des termes « auteur » et « victime » est problématique sur le plan scientifique pour tenter d'expliquer les conflits contemporains dans l'Est du Congo et d'autres situations de guerre similaires en Afrique. S'appuyant sur des travaux ethnographiques menés sur le terrain auprès des Forces démocratiques de libération du Rwanda (FDLR), dont les dirigeants ont aidé à orchestrer le génocide au Rwanda en 1994, l'auteur démontre que la dichotomie victime/auteur n'est pas

claire, mais aussi que les combattants se considèrent souvent eux-mêmes à la fois comme victimes et auteurs d'actes de violence. L'auteur soutient que le principal facteur à la base de cette double identité est le fait qu'au Congo les combattants peuvent être amenés à commettre des actes de violence sous la contrainte, mais peuvent aussi simultanément être entièrement dévoués à leur groupe armé et à son idéologie politique collective. Alors que notre compréhension conventionnelle des membres de groupes armés tend à faire une nette distinction entre participation obligatoire et dévouement à une cause, l'auteur montre comment, dans le contexte de l'Est du Congo, ces catégories ne s'excluent pas mutuellement dans la réalité.