

Review

Filip Reyntjens (2010) *The Great African War: Congo and regional geopolitics, 1996-2006*. New York: Cambridge University Press

Severine Autesserre (2010) *The Trouble with the Congo: local violence and the failure of international peacebuilding*. New York: Cambridge University Press

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Whether the direct and indirect deaths from the wars in the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) between 1998 and 2007 approximate the 5.4 million estimated by the International Rescue Committee in 2008, or the Human Security Report's estimate of around half that figure, the extent and depth of human suffering involved is unimaginable. These books help us understand the origins of recent wars in the DRC and why the interventions of the international community have had limited impact.

It is worth giving some background on the authors and their research methods. Reyntjens is a political scientist who has been working on the Great Lakes region for over 30 years. His book emphasises the decisions of top-level players inside and outside the DRC, and their consequences. He relies on 'grey' sources, ie contemporary documents and some conversations, most involving personal opinions which have yet to be verified. His analysis stops with the national elections in 2006, which perhaps leads him to be more optimistic than a consideration of subsequent events would allow. Autesserre, on the other hand, first went to the DRC as a humanitarian aid worker in 2001, and then moved into research. Her main data source is over 300 in-depth

interviews conducted in the DRC between 2004 and 2007 and her main argument is that ‘a dominant international peacebuilding culture shaped the intervention in the Congo in a way that precluded action on local violence, ultimately dooming the international efforts’ (pp 9-10).

I focus on several themes in this review. The first, about which I was truly shocked, concerns the massacre of over 200,000 Rwandan Hutu refugees by the Rwandan army, at first in the camps near the DRC-Rwanda border and then as they fled westward across the DRC. Reyntjens documents these atrocities in chapter 3 and provides four pages of sources in an appendix. Given Reyntjens’ careful analysis, denials will ring hollow. That the international community, following its failure to intervene in the Rwandan genocide, allowed this behaviour by the Rwandan government in 1997 – a classic example of the ‘victim turned bully’ (p 26) – is almost beyond belief. Was the international community still so guilty about their failures in 1994 that they were willing to condone atrocities by the Rwandans – the new local power – as something they were entitled to do? Incidentally, in case there is the view that the refugees were those guilty of genocide crimes, Reyntjens notes that only a maximum of 10-15% of the refugees were suspected of having been involved in the 1994 genocide (p 90).

Second, there is the issue of focus by the international peacebuilding on top-level leadership and national and regional issues. (Lederach’s three levels of peacebuilding actors – top-level, middle-level and grassroots – come to mind). As Autesserre emphasises, there is a profound gap between a top-level focus and the fact that most violence in the DRC occurs locally. Two of the most pressing local issues concern citizenship (just which ethnic group or country, for example, do the Kinyarwanda-speaking Tutsi in the eastern DRC really belong to? For them, the answer is probably where they see the greatest security); and land (given the huge influx of refugees since 1994 [but also well before that], how can finite amounts of land be shared between the indigenous people and the immigrants, both Tutsi and the more recent Hutu arrivals?).

Autesserre is adamant that these are not issues which can be settled in a top-down fashion by decision makers in Kinshasa or New York. This is particularly the case when the decision makers believe that the main problems of the DRC stem from lack of central government authority and that the Congolese are a people prone to violence (and, incidentally, that there was no violence before the Rwandan invasion in 1997). I am reminded of British economist Michael Lipton’s phrase ‘urban bias’, coined over 30

years ago to describe the attitudes, priorities and comfort zones of top-level decision makers. At the risk of insulting a few local and international public servants, most have never been to local conflict areas and most have no accurate knowledge of what is going on there, or why?

Local conflicts can only be managed or resolved locally by the parties to the conflicts concerned. Autesserre documents one of the few attempts of a local peacebuilding effort in Kivu within MONUC (United Nations Organization Mission in the Democratic Republic of the Congo) between 2002 and 2004, and its quiet demise (pp 193-203). Yet there were also some successes of the local approach in Ituri (pp 203 ff), including the work of the Life and Peace Institute; and Reyntjens also reports an interesting example of local peacemaking in North Kivu in 1993 using traditional 'reflection days' (pp 15-16).

Autesserre suggests (pp 261 ff) several ways forward, of which the most promising seem to be to facilitate cultural change (eg to educate people in conflict management and resolution skills which on-going violence has often damaged or destroyed), to develop local peacebuilding infrastructures, and to do peacebuilding work through local actors. This is not to say that national and international efforts are not needed. Reyntjens documents how international pressure on the neighbouring countries from late 2003 onwards to stop interfering in the DRC led to a significant reduction in violence and allowed the 2006 elections to take place. He also commends the sustained international efforts, led by South Africa, which resulted in the signing of the Global All-inclusive Accord by all the parties to the DRC violence in 2002 (p 284), but he notes a weakness. Without such pressure, the Congolese political leaders may have little reason to engage in good governance.

There are other themes which readers may wish to follow up, including the involvement of foreign military forces in the DRC, their involvement in natural resource looting and what Reyntjens (p 222) terms the 'privatization of public space', as armed groups take over control of local areas.

To conclude: these impressive books make it clear that it is not a case of either top down peacebuilding or local peacebuilding. Both are necessary.