Review - Dancing in the Glory of Monsters

https://www.e-ir.info/2011/09/21/review-dancing-in-the-glory-of-monsters-2/

ALEX STARK, SEP 21 2011

Jason Stearns' recently released book ***Dancing in the Glory of Monsters: The Collapse of the Congo and the Great War of Africa*** brings an analytical lens to a conflict that until now has largely been discussed in sentimental terms, if at all. In his Introduction, Stearns laments the lack of news media coverage for the ongoing war in the Congo; a tragedy, sometimes referred to as the Third World War, which has cost the lives of over 5 million people and involved 10 states since 1996. New York Times columnist Nicholas Kristof is one of many journalists and commentators who have also hit this refrain.

As Stearns himself points out, while the brutal violence in the Congo is almost uniquely horrific, it is not enough to examine the motivations of individuals to understand this war: "the book focuses on the perpetrators more than the victims, the politicians and army commanders more than the refugees and rape survivors… rather than dwelling on the horror of the conflict, which is undeniable, I have chosen to grapple with the nature of the system that brought the principle actors to power, limited the choices they could make, and produced such chaos and suffering" (8). In taking this approach, Stearns steps beyond the journalistic hand-wringing to provide a clear theoretical analysis of the causes of this conflict, laced with enough powerful stories to keep things interesting for the casual reader. In this way, the book brings together the best of both approaches, while discarding what often is the mawkishness of the one and the ponderousness of the other. Stearns delivers a fresh perspective on the conflict and an understanding of not just its symptoms, but its roots.

The lack of coverage of the war in the Congo can be partly attributed to the fact that "the conflict is a conceptual mess that eludes simple definition, with many interlocking narrative strands" (5). Luckily, the author is well equipped for tackling this challenge, having worked on the conflict for the past 10 years, serving as the lead on a special UN investigation into the violence in the country, as well as working with a Congolese human rights group, for the UN peacekeeping operation and for the International Crisis Group. Stearns effectively teases out complexity by dividing his analysis into three time periods, which he refers to as Prewar, the First War and the Second War.

Prewar

It is hard to assert a definitive beginning to a conflict that has roots in the colonialist past and beyond. While acknowledging this difficulty, Stearns locates the Prewar section of his book in the legacy of the Rwandan genocide, contending that "in part, what was to play out in the next decade [after the 1994 genocide] in the Congo was a continuation of the Rwandan civil war" (15).

As the Hutu-led Rwandan Army lost ground to the Tutsi RPF (Rwandan Patriotic Front) militia, they withdrew into the Kivu region of eastern Congo, accompanied by about 1 million refugees. Having brought with them the entire treasury of Rwanda, the 22,000 soldiers were able to regroup and organize, planning an incursion back into Rwanda to retake the government (27). They were able to effectively intermingle with civilian refugees in camps set up by the international community, some of grew to be among the largest in the world, swelling to up to 400,000 inhabitants each (34).

Ironically, while the international community had largely stood by as the genocide in Rwanda proceeded, the ensuing refugee crisis "provoked a mobilization of resources that the genocide never had" (34). The genocide was seen as a politically charged conflict or civil war, whereas the refugee crisis was perceived by many to be a 'neutral' humanitarian crisis. An unintended consequence of international contributions to the refugee situation was that the Rwandan civil war was allowed to continue to smolder, unresolved.

While there was some talk at the UN of trying to separate the soldiers from civilian refugees, the various proposals by Secretary General Boutros Ghali to secure the camps ultimately foundered on the perennial issue of a lack of political will to deploy international peacekeeping troops. This situation infuriated the new Rwandan government, which saw the international community's behavior as blatant hypocrisy. Worse, the Congolese Mobutu regime refused to take action, and even covertly seemed to be supporting the Rwandan government-in-exile. Mobutu also cynically stoked anti-Tutsi sentiments in Congo to boost the popularity of his own government, and his government passed resolutions demanding the repatriation of all Rwandan and Burundian refugees and immigrants, further provoking the Rwandan

government as well as Tutsi immigrants from Rwanda and Burundi who had long made their home in Congo (66).

Frustrated with continual inaction, Rwanda's new President Kagame led regional plans for military action against the camps. Several bordering states, previously slighted by the Mobutu government, quickly allied themselves to the mission. Together, they were able to leverage the existence of a multitude of rebel groups based in and around the Congo (then Zaire), creating a "complex web of alliances and proxy movements in the region" (51). This alliance and its drive to overthrow Mobutu constitute, according to Stearns, not a civil war within Zaire but "a regional conflict, pitting a new generation of young, visionary African leaders against Mobutu Sese Seko, the continent's dinosaur" (54).

The First War

The first war began on August 30, 1996, when a small group of rebels crossed the border from Rwanda into Zaire. The rebellion was led by four commanders hand-picked by the Rwandans. These rebel movements, along with elements of the Rwandan RPF, were rebranded as the Alliance for Democratic Forces for the Liberation of Congo-Zaire (AFDL), a group that Stearns contends "initially had little political or military significance other than providing a smoke screen for Rwandan and Ugandan involvement" (89).

Despite the fact that the rebellion was essentially engineered by outsiders (while the invasion involved an amalgam of Ugandan, Eritrean, Tanzanian, Rwandan and Congolese assets, the Rwandans largely called the shots), many Congolese greeted the rebels as liberators from the corrupt and aging Mobutu regime (indeed, Congolese usually refer to the 1996 war as "the War of Liberation") (94). At the same time, Stearns notes, the rebels often became embroiled in local feuds over identity and land, including anti-Tutsi demagoguery, leading to cyclical massacres and counter-massacres of civilians.

Stearns bravely explores the political hot-potato of a hypothesis that the massacres conducted by Rwandan troops against Hutus constituted a systematic genocide, a kind of counter-genocide to the events of 1994. While numbers are extremely difficult to pin down, he cites a report that says at least 60,000 refugees were killed, with a further 180,000 missing. A second report by a UN team found that Rwandan and AFDL troops massacred refugees, often in brutal ways using hatchets, stones and knives, and that the majority of victims were women, children, the elderly and sick (137). The killings were most likely systematic because "the Rwandan army…was known for its strict discipline and tight command and control. It is very unlikely that soldiers would have been able to carry out such large-scale executions… without an order from commanders" (138). Stearns deserves praise for tackling this controversial issue, in a context where pushback against the narrative of Rwanda's Tutsis as solely the passive victims of genocide is often labelled an attempt to re-write history

The Rwandan army might be described as the precipitating cause of the first war, but the decay of the Mobutu-led state was also an important factor. By the time of the 1996 invasion, Zaire was essentially a failed state, with an army propped up by foreign allies and mercenaries, a weakness rooted in the historical Belgian colonial state (113). The corruption and decay of the Zairian army and economy was also based upon Mobutu's paranoid fear of dissent-as he sidelined or eliminated competent officers who were deemed a threat to his own power, Mobutu corroded the institutions of his own state , ironically allowing the invading troops to complete an astonishing thousand mile trek through the jungle almost unchallenged. In May 1997, President Laurent Kabila entered the capital Kinshasa, the leader of the newly named Congo.

The Second War

Despite (or perhaps because of) the effort and carnage that it took to place Kabila in power, he was destined to reside over a peaceful Congo for just fifteen months, until August 1998. Stearns' expertly-painted portrait of the eccentric leader helps illustrate why. The reader encounters a Kabila who maintained a strict schedule of meetings with advisers throughout the day, but allowed himself a few hours each evening to read books on philosophy and history, including biographies of de Gaulle, Mao and Napoleon (166). Stearns points out with wry understatement that, "Kabila's idiosyncratic style extended to his personalized management of state funds," as he was "known to

keep large stashes of money at his residence, where he would dole out stacks of bills to visitors," including shocked visiting heads of state (175). Within just a few months of reaching power, Kabila's relationship with Rwanda began to sour, driven both by Kabila's acute paranoia and the Rwandan government's obsession with control (191). Rwanda's security situation at home had deteriorated, as the offensive actions in Congo left a security vacuum. In the months following the invasion, tens of thousands of enemy soldiers re-entered northwestern Rwanda, fuelling concern that Kabila was unable to control the territory of his country (182). Meanwhile, by 1998, concerned that the Rwandans and Congolese Tutsi would attempt to remove him from power, Kabila had begun recruiting ex-FAR troops to his army, the very troops that his AFDL rebellion had fought against. The Rwandans were further antagonized by arrests and attacks against Tutsi civilians by Congolese soldiers, prompted by anti-Tutsi sentiments (184).

Desperate to contain the situation and replace Kabila with a more amenable leader, Rwanda invaded in 1998, and within hours had taken control of most of eastern Congo, with the help of defected Congolese soldiers, lead by the former commander of the Congolese Army. However, regional battle lines were again quickly drawn, but this time they did not line up with the 1996 war, when the region sided overwhelmingly with Rwanda. Instead, the region split down with the middle, as Rwanda, Uganda and Burundi squared off on one side with Angola, Namibia, Chad and Zimbabwe on the other (192). This re-alignment can be explained by the fact that states were also pursuing new motivations: Zimbabwe, for example, wanted repayment for hundreds of millions of dollars loaned to Kabila during the first war, while Angola looked to tamp down its own ongoing civil war with the UNITA rebels (192). This new assessment of national interest would ensure that the second phase of the war was even more gruelling than the first.

Despite the Rwandan army's rapid progress into the Congo, the tide began to turn once other international actors became directly involved. A meeting of the Southern African Development Community (SADC) security committee, chaired by Zimbabwe's President Mugabe, hurriedly approved a military intervention to support Kabila against "foreign aggression," followed up by an invasion of Zimbabwean and Angolan troops over the border (197).

To maintain the façade that a homegrown Congolese rebellion was leading their military efforts, Rwanda assembled a political front to the rebellion, a motley bunch of leaders that encompassed everyone from former Mobutuist ministers to former AFDL rebels, under the banner of the RCD (Congolese Rally for Democracy). Predictably, while the RCD and Rwandan army made military gains, the RCD was a political disaster, continually at odds with itself and unable to convince the Congolese population that it was anything but a Rwandan proxy. Its struggle for legitimacy was certainly not helped by the RCD's tendency to target civilians in counter-attacks, conducting several massacres in which over 1,000 civilians were killed (211).

The second war continued to splinter into more complex fighting factions when the Ugandan and Rwandan armies, until then staunch allies, began to fight one another in the city of Kisangani in 1999, launching a particularly brutal urban battle. Amongst its many causes, the split was propelled by differences over the diamond trade, which helped finance both armies.

The trade and mismanagement of natural resource assets, including diamonds and rare earth minerals, has become a kind of trademark of the second war in the Congo, and Stearns devotes an entire chapter to it ("Paying for the War") which is well worth reading in full to capture the nuances of how trade was used to finance the fighting. Interestingly, in a departure from many accounts, Stearns argues that "the notion that the war was fuelled by international mining capital eager to get its hands on the Congo's wealth does not hold water; the war slowed down privatization of the sector by a decade, as insecurity and administrative chaos prevented large corporations from investing" (289-290). The often devastating trade in Congo's mineral wealth was more of a byproduct, rather than a central cause, of the second war, although later on it did become an important motivating factor for many factions to continue fighting.

One important shortfall of Stearns' account of The Second War is the scant coverage of the widespread use of rape as a weapon of war. By my count, he devotes precisely one paragraph to the issue, noting a UN report that found more than 200,000 women have been raped in eastern Congo since 1998, and up to 39% of women have experienced some form of sexual violence (263). Considering the pervasive nature of such violence in this conflict,

the lack of an attempt to trace its roots is deeply disappointing.

—

The book concludes with Joseph Kabila's rise to power after his father, Laurent Kabila's, assassination. Much more of a pragmatist than his warrior father, Joseph brokered peace talks with his enemies within the country as well as outside army factions, reaching a peace deal in Sun City in South Africa in February 2002. Stearns denotes the final chapter of the story of this war as "Neither War Nor Peace," because although fighting has officially concluded, the legacies of this war, including a deeply corrupt, failed state and a poverty-stricken populace persist.

Stearns reflects in the conclusion that many attempts to write about the Congo have been dominated by shocking descriptions of the brutal atrocities that occurred during the conflict rather than attempting to trace the causes of such atrocities and the conflict itself. He says that "they reinforce the impression that the Congo is filled with wanton savages, crazed by power and greed. This view, focusing on the utter horror of the violence, distracts from the politics that gave rise to the conflict and the reasons behind the bloodshed. If all we see is black men raping and killing in the most outlandish ways imaginable, we might find it hard to believe that there is any logic to this conflict" (328). Stearns' book is successful in shifting the paradigm to a new, and more productive, area of focus.

Perhaps the most perceptive aspect of Stearns' book is not his analysis, but his acknowledgement that the war (or wars) in the Congo belies straight-forward analysis: "like layers of an onion, the Congo war contains wars within wars. There was not one Congo war, or even two, but at least forty or fifty different, interlocking wars." Stearns' contribution to unravelling these interlocking wars is a fascinating and important read for any international relations scholar interested in the history-or the future-of the war in the Congo.

Alex Stark *is an Assistant Editor of e-IR.*

About the author:

Alex Stark is an Editor-at-large of E-International Relations and a member of E-IR's Editorial board. She is a PhD student in International Relations at Georgetown University. She received her MSc in IR from the London School of Economics and BA from Wellesley College, where she was an Albright Fellow. Follow her on Twitter: @AlexMStark