

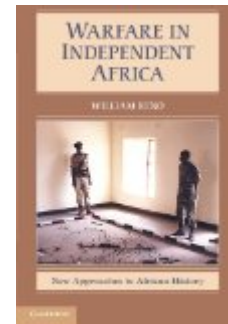
William Reno. *Warfare in Independent Africa*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011. xxii + 271 pp. \$85.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-521-85045-2; \$27.99 (paper), ISBN 978-0-521-61552-5.

Paul Williams. *War and Conflict in Africa*. Cambridge: Polity, 2011. xii + 306 pp. \$69.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-7456-4544-5; \$24.95 (paper), ISBN 978-0-7456-4545-2.

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The End of the Beginning: New Syntheses on Modern War in Africa

It seems safe to suggest that scholarship on modern African warfare has come of age. The field has certainly witnessed remarkable growth over the last twenty years, and especially over the last decade, as even a truncated survey of the literature suggests: as warfare has proliferated, so too have the researchers seeking to understand them. There have been studies of guerrilla movements of various hues, and of a range of “peripheral” armed groups locked in conflict with one another or with adjacent states; of warlords and local insurgency; of proxy war and transnational complexes of violence. Particular regions have attracted much of the attention: in West Africa, Paul Richards’s *Fighting for the Rainforest* (1996) and David Keen’s *Conflict and Collusion in Sierra Leone* (2005) both dealt with Sierra Leone’s self-destruction from the late 1980s onward, while Stephen Ellis’s *The Mask of Anarchy* (1999, 2007) similarly sought to comprehend the catastrophe which had unfolded in Liberia. William Reno—one of the authors under review here—examined the (largely) West African phenomenon of the “warlord” in *Warlord Politics and African States* (1998), although his study also encompassed the Democratic Republic of Congo, another key focus of research in recent years. Several books have appeared on this historically violent entity since Georges Nzongola-Ntalaja’s *The Congo from Leopold to Kabila* (2002), including Gerard Prunier’s *From Genocide to Continental War* (2009), Filip Reyntjens’s *The Great African War* (2009), and more

recently Jason Stearns’s *Dancing in the Glory of Monsters* (2011). If Sierra Leone, Liberia, and Congo have been vortices of research, so too has northeast Africa, a region with more than its fair share of violent conflict in recent years—including guerrilla insurgencies, wars of secession, and arguably the most dramatic instance in Africa of the otherwise rare spectacle of full-scale interstate war, that between Eritrea and Ethiopia. Katsuyoshi Fukui and John Markakis’s *Ethnicity and Conflict in the Horn of Africa* (1994) remains an important reference point, as does Simon Simonse and Eisei Kurimoto’s *Conflict, Age and Power in North East Africa* (1998). The number of case-specific studies is too great to allow anything like a full list here, but relevant examples include Douglas Johnson’s *The Root Causes of Sudan’s Civil Wars* (2003, 2011), Kjetil Tronvoll’s *War and the Politics of Identity in Ethiopia* (2009), Gebru Tareke’s *The Ethiopian Revolution* (2009), and the reviewer’s own *Frontiers of Violence in Northeast Africa* (2011).

In the meantime, a number of important collections of essays appeared, indicating significant progress toward overarching analyses and broad trends linking apparently disparate case studies. Perhaps seminal among these was Christopher Clapham’s *African Guerrillas* (1998); a later volume, edited by Morten Boas and Kevin C. Dunn and also titled *African Guerrillas* (2007), showcased the latest research on subject matter which

was being handled with increasing confidence by political scientists, anthropologists, and economists. The list of such collections has lengthened indeed: T. M. Ali and R. O. Matthews's *Civil Wars in Africa* (1999); Paul Richards's *No Peace, No War* (2005); Patrick Chabal, Ulf Engel, and Anna-Maria Gentili's *Is Violence Inevitable in Africa?* (2005); Preben Kaarsholm's *Violence, Political Culture and Development in Africa* (2006); Bill Derman, Rie Odgaard, and Espen Sjaastad's *Conflicts Over Land and Water in Africa* (2007); and a pair of volumes edited by Alfred Nhema and Paul Tiyambe Zeleza under the auspices of the Organisation for Social Science Research in Eastern and Southern Africa, *The Roots of African Conflicts* (2008) and *The Resolution of African Conflicts* (2008). Bold these seeking to makes sense of, and indeed rationalize, the bewilderingly violent and the impossibly complex have been set out by Christopher Cramer in his *Civil War Is Not a Stupid Thing* (2006) and—dealing with war among other modern “crises”—in Robert Bates's *When Things Fell Apart* (2008), and by Paul Collier in *The Bottom Billion* (2008).

In other words, students of modern war have been subjected to a veritable bombardment, and at times it has been difficult to keep up. For that reason alone, the two books under review here are indeed welcome additions, because they represent the significant advances made in our understanding of contemporary conflict in Africa, as well as imposing analytical order on a dizzying array of case studies and material. They cover much of the same ground, although Reno's narrative begins with the anti-colonial violence of the 1950s and 1960s, while Williams is concerned with the post-Cold War world. Williams prefers to think in terms of “ingredients”—by which is meant specific issues which need to be identified as contributing to conflict situations—while Reno spies instead types of “rebels,” and seeks to explain how these evolve at each particular stage of Africa's modern history.

Williams's text opens with a section dealing with “contexts”—which essentially deals with the typology of warfare under consideration, and the chief political and social characteristics of conflict—and ends with one on “responses,” concerned with international (especially African) peacekeeping initiatives and operations, power-sharing, and peace deals. These are certainly useable overviews, especially the latter section which marshals a great deal of data on the peace industry. But the main body of the book is to be found in the middle section, which examines “ingredients.” There is nothing controversial about the explanatory factors laid before the reader; these represent, by now, well-established in-

terpretations. Thus we have “neo-patrimonialism,” “resources,” “sovereignty,” “ethnicity,” and “religion”—which pretty much covers everything one might expect. Reno's introductory overview is perhaps a more stimulating assessment of Africa's “evolving warfare,” highlighting the “changing fields of leverage” concept (essentially shifting circumstances both locally and globally) which serves Reno's purpose very effectively in later chapters. These “changing fields of leverage” are what give modern African wars their particular flavor, although Reno concedes, somewhat perfunctorily, that deep-rooted, pre-colonial influences may be important—more on which later. He identifies five categories of rebels. “Anti-colonial” rebels waged war against recalcitrant regimes in the last years of colonial rule. “Majority-rule” rebels—associated most obviously with southern Africa—fought against settler minorities in South Africa, Zimbabwe, and Namibia. “Reform” rebels emerged in the 1980s, well versed in the trials and tribulations of their forebears but now recognizing that mere independence was not enough and that the state itself needed to be transformed. “Warlord” rebels developed around those seeking to destabilize regimes whose patronage networks were seen to have outlived their usefulness, while warlords themselves tapped into wider pools of marginalization. And “parochial” rebels were those who eschewed large-scale warlord activities to form local defense forces and militias with essentially local concerns (Nigeria is the most cited instance) amid wider political and social breakdown. In essence, while Reno foregrounds the practitioners of violence themselves, Williams does the same with the “issues” with which these “rebels” grapple.

Perhaps inevitably, there are omissions and sacrifices. In neither book is there much treatment of the cultures of militarism that so often sustain such movements, and which have such a profound influence on both the domestic and the foreign policies of those movements which actually succeed in seizing political power—although Williams's discussion of religion and ethnicity allows for some discussion of internal cultures. Gender is largely absent. Warfare is rarely glimpsed in terms of the contours of social or economic change over the longer term, nor is it clear whether such patterns of change drive war, or are in turn driven by violence. The political and social creativity which so often attends warfare remains an elephant in the room.

More specifically, one might take issue with Reno's system of distinguishing one group of armed men from another; there is in fact considerable overlap between the various categories utilized here. It is also surely highly

debatable whether “most rebels fight to take control of states” (p. 3): many do not, but rather fight to create political, social, and indeed cultural spaces for themselves on the frontiers of aggressive or disinterested state systems, or at most to win a stake in those systems. Reno’s discussion of the role of education (or the lack of it) is potentially stimulating, but here it reads somewhat digressively, and this reviewer longed for an enlargement of the thesis. In the sphere of economics, meanwhile, Williams argues forcefully that resources are means rather than ends, but I am not quite sure, ultimately, what is meant by this: when large numbers of people are denied access to the benefits associated with factor endowments, then resources are indeed “ends,” while the notion of “greed” (or at least material aspiration) is curiously removed from the equation. Moreover, Williams’s claim, reiterating that of Paul Tiyambe Zeleza, that there is really nothing exceptional about Africa’s wars may be true in the most general sense—that is to say, from a certain vantage point many conflicts do indeed look much the same. But deeper historical analysis suggests otherwise, in fact, and indicates that there are indeed a number of distinctive threads running through African violence over the longer term, a perspective denied by the narrow time-frame deployed here.

Historians—at least precolonial ones—can be such irritating colleagues. They raise hackles with their constant carping on the need to go further back, and are holier-than-thou about the failure of everyone else to contextualize temporally as well as spatially. This reviewer is already getting a reputation in this regard. But a couple of observations are worth making. The first relates to the problem of arbitrary starting points. In the case of Williams’s book, beginning in 1990 echoes the post-Cold War puzzle for many in the West: namely, why so much violence in Africa when the world’s great ideological struggle was won? The truth is that while there are certain elements which are distinctive to the post-Cold War era (presumably we are still in it, though this is far from clear), the roots of many of the wars—and certainly many of the conditions facilitating them—described in Williams’s book are to be found long before 1990. In fairness the same can be said of some of Reno’s cases. Of course, we can only take this so far: we have to start somewhere, after all. But the problem with such conventional chronological markers—the end of colonial rule, or the end of the Cold War—is that they tend to conceal some of the most important longer-term contours of African warfare, and bind discussions to superficial

“turning points.”

Moreover, it is an understandable but perhaps overdone ambition that texts such as these will be read by that most prized of audiences beyond the academy, comprising the policymaker, the military strategist, and the humanitarian worker. This is indeed an important audience for modern Africanists, but it is also stubbornly presentist in its outlook, disinterested, ultimately, in deep roots and long terms, for these take time to grasp and—it is believed—serve no practical purpose. One result is the absence of historical depth from much of the debate; another is the received wisdom that war is “bad” and must be “resolved,” which is unquestionably well meant but which comes at the expense of truly understanding how—and when—wars begin. In sum, not enough of the work being done on African warfare has been undertaken by historians, particularly those willing to make links between modern and precolonial phenomena. At the present time, history lags behind anthropology, political science, and development studies in this vital and energetic field.

None of this is really a criticism of the books under review themselves, however; the final point of this piece must be that both Paul Williams and William Reno have done what they set out to do, and have done so exceptionally well. The strengths of the Williams text are its synthesis of an enormous amount of material, its encyclopaedic nature, and its careful thematic structure. It contains a number of extremely helpful appendices, graphs, and inserts throughout, presenting data in a lucid and illuminating manner. Reno’s book is attractively and accessibly written, with a compelling analytical structure, even if one might quibble about categorizations and characterizations. It is rich in military detail as well as providing the political contexts within which these conflicts unfolded. It is a fine summation of complex events and dynamics. These two books are admirably researched and eloquent texts which will deservedly be read by students, fellow scholars, and—yes—those policymakers who wish to end Africa’s bloody present, and who seek swift but stimulating summaries of the key themes and processes. And so, to steal from Winston Churchill, these books do not represent the end, or even the beginning of the end; but they do signify, in terms of our understanding of conflict in Africa’s recent past, the end of the beginning. It is the hope of this reviewer that historical reach will now begin to lengthen, that scholars of the deep past will join the debate, and that policy folk might just continue to listen.

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