In *Hutu Rebels*, anthropologist Anna Hedlund provides an authoritative ethnographic study of life in a military camp controlled by the Forces Démocratiques de Libération du Rwanda (FDLR). The book is based on fifteen months of field research in the Kivu provinces of the Eastern Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC), three of which were spent in one such camp: “Rainbow Brigade,” home to about 150 soldiers, women, and children (p. 29). It is located deep in the Itombwe Forest, in a region which has been marked by constant fighting between state and nonstate armed groups, regional intervention, and mass internal displacement since 2004.[1] Composed of lodgings, a training ground, and a bamboo church, it is but one of many such camps which form the base for an armed group established by former members of the Interahamwe, the militia which carried out much of the violence of the Rwandan genocide. Through an interdisciplinary approach, *Hutu Rebels* seeks to outline how members of Rainbow Brigade produce, experience, and legitimize violence in their day-to-day lives, while addressing the viability of “victim” and “perpetrator” as categories for understanding how people cope with violence within continuums of instability and insecurity. Seminal in its production and scope, Hedlund’s qualitative microstudy contributes the perspective of an academic to a field of perpetrator research on the Kivu conflict that remains dominated by journalists, humanitarian organizations, and international policymakers.

Hedlund draws on a variety of secondary sources. The rich bibliography of *Hutu Rebels* clearly situates Hedlund’s own analysis of the inhabitants of Rainbow Brigade within existing discussions on perpetration within the Kivu conflict. Chief among these secondary sources are quantitative studies by prominent humanitarian organizations working in the Great Lakes Region such as Amnesty International and the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR). These works, which form the bulk of existing literature on the conflict, often emphasize “the victim” as a monolith. A selection of conceptual and historical works on conflict and violence from authors such as Mahmood Mamdani, Jason Stearns, and Filip Reyntjens provides ample assistance in understanding the environment within which the FDLR operates. The study also cites theoretical works, particularly by Giorgio Agamben, to address the infliction, suffering, and experience of violence by those existing in states of continued “exception.” These sources provide a framework for the qualitative core of Hedlund’s material: her own inter-
views with and observations on FDLR officers, fighters, and civilians all living and/or fighting at the foothills of the Uvira Mountains. Hedlund engages in various activities that characterize daily life in Rainbow Brigade such as accompanying soldiers to church for prayer, or to the fields in search of food. While interviews sometimes occurred spontaneously in the field, Hedlund’s heavily monitored presence also led to other more choreographed interactions, often with camp commanders, meant to convey the groups official ideology of victimhood and righteous anti-Tutsi struggle. This grants the study depth, since Hedlund juxtaposes what she saw with what camp leaders wished for her to see. This is a core of material no less impressive for its extensive detail than for the great risk taken to obtain it.[2]

The interdisciplinarity of the book is reflected in its “matryoshka”-like structure.[3] The middle chapters present an ethnographic study of the individuals who inhabit Rainbow Brigade. Historical and theoretical contextualization in the first and last chapters allows Hedlund to interlink a micro-level analysis of camp life with the meso and macro levels within which the FDLR operates. The analysis of the FDLR camps’ structure, composition, and rituals provides insight into the uses of violence by FDLR fighters. This includes descriptions of how violence enforces adherence to camp routine by nonfighters, how hierarchies of power are maintained through the victimization of dissenters by superiors, and how the sustenance necessary to maintain the camp is acquired through violence from surrounding communities. Linking this micro-level analysis to historical and contextual works allows Hedlund to demonstrate that the justification and proliferation of such violence is informed by the meso-level historical and contemporary context of the Kivu conflict. More specifically, this violence is informed by the context of continued interethnic conflict among Hutu and Tutsi paramilitias that has been the legacy of the Rwandan genocide, as well as the current humanitarian situation in the region. Hedlund casts Rainbow Brigade and its inhabitants as but one group within a vast and complex web of states, private enterprises, international organizations, and armed groups operating with differing interests and motivations in the Eastern DRC.[4]

Hedlund’s approach offers valuable conclusions. Chief among these is that a victim-perpetrator dichotomy is conceptually inadequate when aiming to understand actors within the continua of violence that define contemporary conflict in the Kivu conflict. Hedlund draws on Mamdani’s analysis of Hutu and Tutsi identities as opposed identities due to antagonistic victim-based narratives. She argues that the inadequacy of this dichotomy rests on the identity of an exiled “Hutu fighter” as defined by victimhood, but constructed and maintained through violence.[5] Indeed, most fighters interviewed argue they are victims of targeted ethnic violence and exclusion due to their expulsion from Rwanda by the Tutsi-led Rwandan Patriotic Front (RPF) in the 1990s. Their aim is to “return to Rwanda.” Feeling “abandoned” by the international community while facing constant threat from Rwandan and Congolese state forces and local armed groups, violence remains the sole way to protect themselves and advance their cause. However, this ideological justification often appears to be trumped by more banal concerns. Individual fighters concede that since they lack citizenship in any state, and thus exist outside formal aid structures, practicing violence provides basic necessities and control in the otherwise constantly shifting security climate of the Eastern DRC. In such a context, the roles of combatant and noncombatant collide and interweave, as do understandings of victim and perpetrator. This conclusion becomes all the more pertinent when Hedlund demonstrates that the majority of those inhabiting Rainbow Brigade are non-Rwandophone Congolese who have been displaced because of conflict and swept up by the FDLR, and maintain a position of security within the camp by supporting fighters through daily tasks in order to eke out a living. They are complicit in enabling perpetrators
of violence, but are victims of violence nonetheless. For this reason then, Hedlund describes Rainbow Brigade as an “exile military community,” rather than simply as a group of “perpetrators” (p. 24).

_Hutu Rebels_ consequently argues that for the inhabitants of Rainbow Brigade, violence has become both a social practice and a self-perpetuating social condition. Violence exists as a social practice because it provides security in an otherwise continuously insecure environment. Yet, if violence begets security, security begets violence. By continuing to practice violence, members of the FDLR remain placed within what Hedlund, referring to Giorgio Agamben, calls a “state of exception” between war and peace. Most of the inhabitants of Rainbow Brigade confess that they no longer wish to fight, but that they have no other choice. But why? Hedlund argues that by enshrining violence as a social practice, members of Rainbow Brigade have excluded themselves from the possibility of returning to Rwanda, from integrating into the Congo, or from receiving aid from humanitarian organizations. Such conditions facilitate the continued reproduction of violence and a militant ethnic Hutu identity based on exclusion and a narrative of victimhood, even as the FDLR becomes increasingly made up of members who are not of Rwandan origin.[6] Thus Hedlund argues, FDLR members maintain their position within the state of exception by practicing that which produces the state of exception in the first place: violence. As Mary Kaldor has argued, such conclusions demonstrate the liminality of the spaces in which the violence of contemporary conflict occurs.[7] These are spaces where the boundaries between combatant and noncombatant, victim and perpetrator, and commitment and coercion, appear to dissolve. And yet, they are spaces where identities can be constructed, maintained, and reproduced all the same.

The audience for this work will, owing to its restricted scope, most likely be researchers and humanitarian workers concerned with the ongoing violence perpetrated by armed groups in the Eastern DRC. Yet the book also appears as an invitation. Hedlund demonstrates that despite the methodological difficulties and restrictions regarding security and access, ethnographic research on armed groups in the Kivus is possible, and that many questions remain. For instance, Hedlund fails to articulate how a camp such as Rainbow Brigade affects surrounding communities. What’s more, while a micro study of Rainbow Brigade has provided an in-depth understanding of one FDLR camp, what about others? Are the dynamics and uses of violence similar? What about processes of narrative and identity production? And as the score of actors in the Kivu conflict continues to grow, what about other armed groups and militia? These are questions which Hedlund cannot answer but invites academics to take on themselves. Important in its scope, empirics, and insight, _Hutu Rebels_ serves as a strong example for any scholar of the Great Lakes wishing to do just that and cross this bridge, newly built.

Notes


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