
The Congo Wars

Filip Reyntjens, Emeritus Professor of Law and Politics, University of Antwerp

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Summary

The successive Congo wars (1996–1997; 1998–2003) involved many countries of the region and myriad governmental armies and nonstate armed groups. They were, to a large extent, a spillover from the 1990–1994 Rwandan civil war and the 1994 genocide against the Tutsi. 1.5 million people who fled the country in the wake of the Rwanda Patriotic Front’s military victory settled in Zaire just across the border, and refugee-warriors among them threatened the new regime in place in Kigali. Uganda, Burundi, and Angola were also attacked by insurgent groups operating, at least in part, from Zaire. This led to a regional alliance in support of a Zairean rebel movement that toppled the Mobutu regime in May 1997. The problems at the origin of the first war were not settled with the installation of Laurent Kabila as the new president of what became the Democratic Republic of Congo. Rwanda, followed by Uganda, launched a new war in August 1998, but this was not a remake of the first. As all actors reasoned in terms of “the enemy of my enemy is my friend,” alliances shifted dramatically and erstwhile friends became enemies. Hostility between Rwanda and Uganda persists up to today. This led to a military stalemate and eventually to a fragile peace deal in 2003. However, the main factors behind the wars have not disappeared, namely the weakness of the Congolese state and the territorial extension of neighboring countries’ civil wars and insurgencies. Eastern DRC remains unstable and widespread violence continuous to claim many civilian lives.

Keywords: Angola, Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), Rwanda, Uganda, Congo wars, regional alliances, human rights abuse, state weakness

The Setting

Considered in the past as peripheral, landlocked, and politically and economically at the margins, in the 1990s the African Great Lakes region found itself at the heart of a profound geopolitical recomposition with continental repercussions. The Congo wars involved the armies of countries as far apart as Namibia to the south and Chad to the north, and Angola to the west and Uganda to the east, in addition to numerous nonstate armed groups. The seeds of instability were sown from the beginning of the 1960s: the massive exile of the Rwandan Tutsi, who fled to neighboring countries during and after the revolution of 1959–1961, and the virtual exclusion of Tutsi from public life in Rwanda; the radicalization of Burundian Tutsi, who monopolized power and wealth; and the insecure status of Kinyarwanda-speakers in the

Congolese Kivu provinces. These factors merged with others to create the conditions for war. The premises of instability and war were enhanced by the extreme weakness of the Zairean state, whose ongoing demise began in the 1970s.

The acute destabilization of the region started on October 1, 1990, when the predominantly Tutsi Rwanda Patriotic Front (RPF) attacked Rwanda from Uganda with Ugandan support. After the collapse of the 1993 Arusha peace accord, which was supposed to end the civil war, and following the genocide of the Tutsi by Hutu radicals and massive war crimes and crimes against humanity committed by both parties to the conflict, the RPF won a military victory and took power in July 1994. More than a million Rwandans died and, between April and July, more than two million fled abroad, mainly to Zaire and Tanzania. Eight months earlier, the democratic transition had ended in disaster in Burundi: tens of thousands of people were killed, and the country embarked on a decade-long civil war. At the end of 1993, some 200,000 Burundian refugees inundated the Zairean Kivu provinces, followed in mid-1994 by 1.5 million Rwandans. This was the beginning of the dramatic extension of the neighboring conflicts, most prominently of the Rwandan civil war.

The progressive implosion of the Zairean state since the 1970s, undermined by generalized predation, was a major contributory factor to this extension. However, Zaire was also surrounded by nine neighboring countries, seven of which were endemically or acutely unstable. In a perverse cycle, the instability of its neighbors threatened Zaire, just as Zaire's instability was a menace to its neighbors. Circumstantial alliances played a crucial role in a situation where borders are porous, actors follow the logic of "the enemy of my enemy is my friend," and regime survival is a key concern. State collapse resulted in disruptive actions of diverse local and regional, public and private actors, each with contradictory interests. Such a context favors the privatization of public violence and the challenging of states' territorial spaces.

The decay of the Zairean state was not the only factor. Rather, a unique combination of circumstances explains the unraveling of the successive wars. The main contributory factor can be found in the post-1990 history of Rwanda. Although it is the smallest country in the region, it is the epicenter of all the crises. Without it, the conflicts would not have developed to the extent they did. The status of regional superpower acquired by this small and poor country is truly astonishing, and it was obtained through the force of arms, which was allowed to prevail because of the tolerance inspired by international feelings of guilt after the 1994 genocide against the Rwandan Tutsi.

Background

The Congo wars have been extremely complex, with numerous domestic and regional, public and private, civilian and military players; shifting alliances; diverse motivations ranging from economic interests to security concerns; and immense human suffering. This section provides an outline of the basics.

At the end of the Rwandan civil war and the genocide against the Tutsi in 1994, about 1.5 million people, most of them civilians but also the defeated government army and militia, fled the country. They settled in huge refugee camps in Zaire (currently the Democratic Republic of Congo—DRC) just across the border. The militarized elements threatened the new regime

in Kigali, which in 1996 decided to dismantle the camps. In order to avoid claims that this was an international aggression, Rwanda hid its invasion behind a Zairean rebel movement set up in Kigali, called the *Alliance des forces démocratiques pour la libération du Congo-Zaïre* (AFDL). Uganda and Burundi, two eastern neighbors threatened by rebel forces operating from Zaire, joined the operation. Angola to the southwest faced a rebellion by the *União Nacional para a Independência Total de Angola* (UNITA), which enjoyed the support of the Mobutu regime in Kinshasa. Angola joined the regional alliance at the end of 1996, which led to the overthrow of the Mobutu regime in May 1997. The AFDL chair, Laurent Kabila, became the new president, and Zaire was renamed the DRC. In the meantime, around 200,000 Rwandan civilian Hutu refugees were slaughtered by the Rwanda Patriotic Army (RPA), which supported the AFDL in its march westward.

Less than a year after taking power, Kabila fell out with his eastern allies, particularly with Rwanda whose obtrusive presence created a problem for the new president's domestic legitimacy. In addition, the underlying tensions that lay at the heart of the first war had not disappeared, as the eastern neighbors continued to suffer from insecurity emanating from the uncontrolled spaces in eastern DRC. In August 1998, they again attacked, once more hiding behind a "Congolese" rebel group, this time the *Rassemblement congolais pour la démocratie* (RCD). However, the regional coalition that had supported Kabila during the first war fell apart. As all players reasoned in the logic that "the enemy of my enemy is my friend," alliances shifted dramatically. A Rwandan military operation to the west of Kinshasa was defeated by its erstwhile ally, Angola. Several other countries, in particular Zimbabwe, joined the pro-Kabila coalition, and thus compensated for the weakness of the Congolese government army, the *Forces armées congolaises* (FAC). These interventions made this war different from the last one and led to military stalemate. In the meantime, other spectacular shifts occurred. In particular, against the background of disagreements on how to deal with the situation in the DRC, competition over the exploitation of Congolese natural resources, and personal issues between presidents Kagame and Museveni, Rwanda and Uganda fought several battles in the Kisangani region. Uganda also launched its own Congolese rebel group, the *Mouvement pour la libération du Congo* (MLC).

The military stalemate led to the signing of the still-born Lusaka accord in July 1999, but it took the assassination of Laurent Kabila in January 2001, his succession by his son Joseph, and years of further negotiations to sign a "Global and Inclusive Accord" in 2003. This formally put an end to the war, but it continued in a more covert fashion. Rwanda in particular actively supported successive Tutsi-dominated Congolese rebel forces *Conseil national pour la défense du peuple* (CNDP) and later the *Mouvement du 23 mars* (M23), as well as secessionist political forces in the Kivu region. Even after the defeat of M23 by an international intervention in 2013, eastern DRC remained unstable, with dozens of domestic nonstate armed groups and Rwandan, Burundian, and Ugandan rebel forces remaining active in the region.

This summary of events requires a brief analytical presentation to better understand what follows. The Congo wars have been the consequence of a unique and contingent combination of circumstances. The first is the extreme weakness of the Zairean/Congolese state, which does not perform essential functions of sovereignty, such as territorial control, security, public taxation, the provision of essential services, the monopoly of violence, and the rule of law. The second is the extraterritorial extension into the territory of this weak state of neighboring countries' civil wars. The third is the phenomenon of shifting alliances mentioned earlier. The

fragility of circumstantial coalitions became evident during the second war, when yesterday's friends became today's enemies almost overnight. This created an unpredictable and profoundly moving politicomilitary landscape. A fourth factor is the profitability of war. Elite networks, both Congolese and from neighboring countries, both public and private, seized the opportunities offered by war, instability, and state decay to generate revenue, most prominently by illegally exploiting natural resources, which in turn spurred conflict. Local dynamics are the fifth and last factor. The regional megaconflicts developed against the background of several local-level conflicts, some of them dating from precolonial and colonial days, linked to (ethnic) identity, migration, land, and refugee flows. More particularly, when ethnic fault lines cut across national borders, conflicts tend to migrate from one national arena to the next.¹

“The War of Liberation”

As mentioned earlier, 1.5 million Rwandans fled to Zaire in 1994 when the Tutsi-dominated RPF won the civil war. Most refugees were Hutu, and they were accompanied and to some extent controlled by the defeated former government army, *Forces armées rwandaises* (FAR). Installed in huge camps just across the border, they were intent on retaking power. Rwanda had faced a security threat since 1995, particularly in the three western *préfectures*, affected by commando operations of refugee-warriors operating from Zairean territory. During a visit to the United States in August 1996, one month before the beginning of the “rebellion” that started the war, Rwandan vice president and effective ruler of the country Paul Kagame told the Americans that he was about to intervene.² According to some sources, the FAR were preparing a large-scale offensive against Rwanda from Goma and Bukavu.³ Faced with the obvious unwillingness or inability of both the international community and Zaire to tackle this problem, Kigali's patience had reached its limits. At the same time, Uganda and Burundi were confronted with incursions from rebel movements that operated from eastern Zaire. The three countries therefore had parallel security concerns and interests.

Two linked developments triggered the war. On the one hand, faced with violence by “autochthonous” groups, the Tutsi of South Kivu, known as Banyamulenge, organized their self-defense. On the other hand, the Rwandan regime stoked the fires, training and equipping the Banyamulenge, while at the same time introducing troops on the ground and bombarding the border area. Facing a disorganized and unmotivated Zairean army (*Forces armées zaïroises*—FAZ), the Banyamulenge, supported by the RPA, rapidly conquered South Kivu: Uvira fell on October 28, followed on October 30 by Bukavu. The rebel advance was accompanied by the flight westward of hundreds of thousands of civilians, mostly Rwandan refugees.

A Zairean rebel movement, the AFDL, was officially founded in Lamera (South Kivu) on October 18, 1996, more than a month after the beginning of the “Banyamulenge rebellion.”⁴ The document detailing the founding of the AFDL was signed by representatives of four small political movements. In order to avoid the claim put forward by the Zairean government from September 13 onward that this was an external aggression, it was necessary to exhibit leadership that was not linked to Rwanda. Laurent Kabila was not a Tutsi and, while his erstwhile *maquis* was in South Kivu, he was a Katangan. This made it possible to present him as a “national” leader.

By early November, the Rwandan and Burundian borders were secured by a buffer zone stretching from Uvira to Goma, which was about 250 kilometers long. On November 20, Masisi fell, Butembo was taken on November 27, and on November 30, the Ugandan army (Uganda People's Defence Force—UPDF) took Kasindi and opened the way to Beni. As Bunia was captured with the help of the UPDF on December 25, the area under “rebel” control at the end of 1996 constituted a buffer zone about 800 kilometers long and some 100 kilometers deep along the Ugandan, Rwandan, and Burundian borders. This ended the first phase of the war (figure 1).



Figure 1. DRC in the region.

Rwanda had a central role during this phase. Indeed the “rebellion” in the Kivu region was to a large degree an extension of the Rwandan civil war. Although Kigali denied that it had troops on Zairean soil, the Rwandan army was deeply involved. After the end of the war, Kagame himself unveiled the public secret in an interview in *The Washington Post* on July 9, 1997.⁵ He said that “the Rwandan Government planned and directed the rebellion,” that “Rwandan forces participated in the capture of at least four cities” and that “Rwanda provided training and arms for (the rebel) forces even before the campaign to overthrow Marshal Mobutu began last October.” Kagame added that it would have been “more suitable if Congolese rebels had done most of the fighting,” but they were not “fully prepared to carry it out alone.”

Up to early 1997, the advance of the “rebellion” was rather limited. During the first four months of the war, about 80,000 square kilometers were occupied (i.e., less than 5 percent of the total surface area of Zaire). The advance halted for a short time after the fall of Bunia. According to several sources, including *Washington Post* reporter John Pomfret, once the buffer zone was in place to secure the eastern neighbors, there was some hesitation and even controversy within the AFDL and its regional sponsors.⁶ Uganda in particular was reluctant to engage in the conflict beyond its immediate security interests.⁷

Just like Rwanda, Uganda, and Burundi, Zaire’s southern neighbor Angola faced a rebellion waged by UNITA, which operated in part from Zaire and was supported by the Mobutu regime. By the end of 1996 the Angolan government realized that its security concerns had not been met by the rebellion taking place in eastern Zaire and decided to make a difference.⁸ Luanda’s position, which was to expand the ambitions of the rebellion in the east to the whole

of Zaire, eventually convinced Kagame and Museveni.⁹ During two weeks in mid-February 1997, several Angolan battalions were airlifted to Kigali and were taken from there by road to Goma and Bukavu. The entry of the Angolan army caused the rebellion to pick up speed. While it took the rebellion four months (October 1996–January 1997) to occupy less than one-twentieth of the country, the remainder of Zaire was captured in the three months that followed the arrival of the Angolan troops (mid-February to mid-May 1997). Kinshasa fell on May 17 and Laurent Kabila was sworn in as president on May 29. By then the terminally ill Mobutu had left the country for Morocco, where he died in September. Zaire was renamed the Democratic Republic of Congo.

The advancing rebel forces and their foreign allies committed widespread massacres, particularly against Rwandan Hutu refugees. The RPA systematically shelled numerous camps in South and North Kivu, where mass killings were also committed with light weapons. Thousands of refugees, most of them unarmed civilians, were killed. These attacks continued and intensified as the refugees moved westward. The largest massacres occurred between Shabunda and Kingulube, at Shanji, Walikale, Tingi-Tingi, Kasese, and Biaro, and finally between Boende and Mbandaka. A UN joint mission reported that atrocities had been committed at 134 sites. At the end of May 1997, when the AFDL had taken control of the whole country, the UN High Commission for Refugees found that 246,000 refugees were unaccounted for. On July 8, 1997, the acting UN High Commissioner for Human Rights stated that “about 200,000 Hutu refugees could well have been massacred.”¹⁰ The death toll is thought to have been about 233,000.¹¹ Most killings were committed by elements of the RPA. This was already the case when the camps were attacked in the Goma region, but the presence of Rwandan military could then still be seen in the context of the campaign aimed at putting a buffer zone in place. However, the operations of the RPA in the Kisangani and Boende-Mbandaka regions clearly focused on the refugees, who became the object of a systematic extermination project. Some soldiers reportedly spoke Kinyarwanda or wore uniforms donated to the RPA by Germany. Several witnesses saw Rwandan “search and destroy” units land at Kisangani, to be deployed on the Kisangani-Ubundu axis. A mapping exercise conducted on behalf of the UN High Commission for Human Rights confirmed and detailed a long list of atrocities uncovered earlier by UN panels, national and international nongovernmental organizations, and investigative journalists. The report concluded that the vast majority of the 617 listed incidents were to be classified as war crimes and crimes against humanity. On the issue of genocide, it noted that “several incidents listed in this report, if investigated and judicially proven, point to circumstances and facts from which a court could infer the intention to destroy the Hutu ethnic group in the DRC in part, if these were established beyond all reasonable doubt,” an explicit reference to the genocide convention.¹²

“The War of Occupation”

Contrary to what many in the region and in the wider international community had hoped and believed, Kabila’s accession to power heralded neither the reconstruction of the Congolese state nor the end of regional instability. On the contrary, all the ingredients for the resumption of war came to the fore during the first half year of Kabila’s presidency. The two problems that were the immediate roots of the war had not been solved. These included the status of the “populations of doubtful citizenship,” a coded expression for Kinyarwanda-speakers in eastern

Congo. Indeed the resentment against the Banyarwanda by the “autochthonous” populations had become worse than before. In addition, the Rwandan security concerns did not disappear: the repatriation to Rwanda of hundreds of thousands of Hutu refugees during the fall of 1996 simply displaced, at least in part, the problem from outside to inside the country; in addition, pockets of former FAR and *Interahamwe*, the militia that played a major role in the 1994 genocide, remained active in South and North Kivu. The persistence of these problems contributed to the regional extension of the ethnic bipolarization that showed its destructive potential in Rwanda and Burundi. Rapid ethnogenesis was underway: increasing numbers of voices in Congo and in the Kivu region in particular developed the theme of a conflict between “Bantu” on the one hand and “Hamites,” “Hima,” or “Nilotics” on the other.

By intervening in the way they did, the states of the region not only operated in a fashion that was clearly contrary to international law and to conflict prevention mechanisms provided by both the UN and the Organization of African Unity, they also opened a Pandora’s box whose contents became clear from mid-1998 onward.¹³ In addition, besides the unilateral intervention of regional states, the phenomenon of the privatization of public space and, therefore, of crisis management increased dramatically. Mafialike and highly speculative networks entered the fray, accompanied by private instruments for the maintenance of “order,” such as Executive Outcomes, Military Professional Resources Inc., and Ronco Consulting, a private company run by former US military. The near absence of the Congolese state offered expanding maneuvering space for all sorts of particular interests, including under the form of warlords, rebel movements, and “entrepreneurs of insecurity” operating in a context of increasingly hazy territorial boundaries. In the pursuit of their perceived interests, these state and nonstate, legal and illegal, visible and less visible actors concluded short-term and rapidly shifting alliances, thus creating a complex, moving, and unpredictable politicomilitary environment.

The proverbial last straw came on July 26, 1998, when the *directeur de cabinet* of the Congolese Defence Ministry, a portfolio managed by Kabila himself, declared that “the Rwandan and other foreign military” were ordered to leave the Congolese territory. On July 29, some 600 Rwandan soldiers left Kinshasa for Kigali. In the making for several months, a new war had become inevitable. Finally, during the evening of August 2, Sylvain Mbuki, the commander of the FAC 10th brigade, read out a message over Goma radio, announcing that “we the army of the DRC have taken the decision to remove President Laurent-Désiré Kabila from power.” The statement accused Kabila of “misrule, nepotism and corruption,” and urged the Congolese people to remain calm and carry out their normal activities. The next day, the Bukavu-based 12th brigade joined the uprising. Just as in 1996, the rebellion revealed visible leadership faces only after its inception. On August 12, ten days into the war it was supposed to have initiated, the rebel group was named *Rassemblement congolais pour la démocratie* (RCD). Like in 1996, Rwanda was behind its launch and justified its intervention on the ground that Kabila was not providing the anticipated security along its western border. Although Uganda’s concerns were less crucial, it immediately joined the fray, perhaps in part because it would not allow Rwanda to operate on its own along its western border.

While the rebellion spread at a fast pace in the east, an RPA-coordinated airborne operation was launched on August 5 against the Bas-Congo, west of Kinshasa. The RPA impounded cargo aircraft at Goma airport and troops were airlifted to Kitona army base, where several thousand ex-FAZ were undergoing “re-education.” This daring operation, 2,000 kilometers

away from the RPA's bases, offered a huge potential dividend as it threatened Kinshasa directly and tied the FAC in the west while they were most needed in the east. In the context of shifting alliances, Angola, Zimbabwe and Namibia intervened on the side of Kabila against their erstwhile Rwandan and Ugandan allies. On August 20, a first battalion of Zimbabwean troops arrived in Kinshasa. On August 22, the entry of several Angolan battalions from Cabinda, supported by the air force, heavy artillery, and armored vehicles, rapidly defeated the insurgent forces in the Bas-Congo. Rwandan troops retreated, either by air or through UNITA-held territory in Angola. By the end of August, control over the region west of Kinshasa was reestablished by the government coalition. The entry of Angola and Zimbabwe made the difference as compared with the first war when the Mobutu regime was totally isolated against a unified regional alliance. It was a meeting of the Southern African Development Community (SADC) held in Harare on August 19 that formally authorized the deployment of Angolan, Zimbabwean, and Namibian troops, thus compensating for the weakness of the FAC, which was no more of an army than the FAZ had been in 1996.

Despite the setback in the Bas-Congo and the support of the SADC-led alliance for Kabila, the rebellion continued to advance rapidly in the east. By early September, some nine Rwandan and five Ugandan battalions had taken Moba, Kisangani, and Watsa. On October 12, Maniema province capital Kindu fell after heavy fighting. This caused the government side to lose an airport within striking distance of Rwanda, and it opened the road to the diamond-rich Kasai region. In mid-November, a new rebellion started in the northern Equateur province, which the rebel group largely occupied after defeating the FAC and its Chadian allies, who suffered heavy losses. Jean-Pierre Bemba's MLC was launched by Uganda, which now had its own proxy and seized this opportunity to distance itself from the RCD, dominated by Rwanda. Indeed, it was the Ugandan army that captured territory for Bemba, who initially had no troops of his own.

The fall of Kindu and the ensuing threat to the diamond mines in Eastern Kasai convinced Zimbabwe and Angola to dramatically extend their intervention. In addition to the fear that the rebellion and its allies would "feed" on the proceeds of diamonds, for Angola the perspective of the rebels making a junction with UNITA fighters was unacceptable. Zimbabwean President Mugabe's business associates and high-ranking officers wanted to protect their investments in the Congolese mining sector. Fighting continued on several fronts, but the tendency was toward consolidation of positions. During 1999 and 2000, the RCD/RPA made some advances in the Kasai and North Katanga (even taking Kabila's town of origin Manono on May 11, 1999), but they were unable to capture Mbuji-Mayi and Kananga. In Equateur province, the MLC—with the support of elements of UNITA and thousands of Ugandan troops—extended its hold on the entire region, but was unable to take Mbandaka. In Katanga, Pweto changed hands on several occasions, before being captured by Rwandan troops in December 2000, but the rebel forces were blocked west of the town and failed in their attempts to push toward Lubumbashi. Although occasional fighting continued, some sort of a frontline stabilized, by and large along the line extending from Mbandaka, via Kananga and Mbuji-Mayi, up to Pweto. This military stalemate contributed to the emergence of negotiations, which is the main difference with the 1996–1997 war: tens of thousands of troops from countries that were allies during the previous war were committed to opposing sides, thus compensating for the absence of a Congolese state and army and the ineptness of the rebel groups.

Although the countries involved in the war (Angola, DRC, Namibia, Rwanda, Uganda, and Zimbabwe) signed a peace accord in Lusaka in July 1999 (the MLC and the RCD only signed in August), it took the January 2001 assassination of Laurent Kabila (who was succeeded in a dynastic fashion by his son Joseph) and almost four more years of negotiations before a “Global and Inclusive Accord” was officially agreed upon in South Africa in April 2003. This formally ended the second war, and Rwanda and Uganda gradually withdrew their troops. However, this was not the end of hostilities, which continued in a more covert fashion until 2013. The Kivu and Ituri regions continue to experience widespread violence into the 2020s.

Rwanda’s Proxy Warfare

Rwanda created proxy rebel movements behind which it could hide its aggression in 1996 (AFDL) and 1998 (RCD). The Rwandan presence in the DRC continued well after it officially withdrew its troops in 2002, as was made clear by the unpublished part of a UN experts panel’s report of October 2003.¹⁴ The “Rwanda Network” was considered by the panel “to be the most serious threat to the Congolese Government of National Unity. The main actor in this network is the Rwandan security apparatus, whose objective is to maintain Rwandan presence in, and control of, the Kivus and possibly Ituri.”¹⁵ A later UN panel was concerned that “the territory of Rwanda continues to be used for recruitment, infiltration and destabilization purposes.”¹⁶ A report released at the end of 2008 documented supplies of uniforms and ammunition, financial support, and military backing to a new Tutsi-dominated Congolese rebel movement, the CNDP.¹⁷ As a result, the Netherlands and Sweden, considered “friends of the New Rwanda,” suspended part of their budget support, and influential voices in the UK suggested that Rwanda’s main bilateral donor should follow suit.¹⁸

Rwanda orchestrated a coup within the CNDP, and after the rebel movement collapsed it took again the risk of destabilizing North Kivu in the spring of 2012. Several reports showed that Rwanda supplied weapons, ammunition, and recruits to a new rebel movement, the M23, an offspring of the CNDP.¹⁹ These reports documented direct interventions by the Rwandan army into Congolese territory to reinforce the M23, as well as support to other mutinies and secessionist politicians in eastern DRC. While Rwanda flatly denied the charges, even its staunchest allies now took a distance. The United States, the United Kingdom, the Netherlands, Germany, and Sweden suspended aid payments, and the head of the US War Crimes Office suggested that Rwandan leaders might be accountable under international criminal law for aiding and abetting a group committing war crimes.²⁰ At a summit held in August, SADC, of which the DRC is a member, noted that rebel groups operated “with the assistance of Rwanda, and urged the latter to cease immediately its interference that constitutes a threat to peace and stability, not only of the DRC, but also of the SADC region.”²¹ Despite these strong warnings, Rwanda continued to actively support the M23, as noted by subsequent reports.²²

SADC finally reacted forcefully. An international Force Intervention Brigade (FIB), authorized by the UN Security Council in March 2013, was put in place by the organization with units from South Africa, Tanzania, and Malawi under Tanzanian command. Around 3,000 elite troops with a solid mandate were deployed from late May, thus significantly internationalizing the conflict. This soon bore fruit. Supported by the FIB and reinforced by a considerable improvement of their tactical and logistic capacity, the FARDC (*Forces armées de la*

République démocratique du Congo, the name of the government army since the 2003 peace deal) inflicted increasing casualties on the M23, which was also weakened by another Rwanda-engineered split. On October 25, the FARDC pushed the M23 toward the border with Rwanda, where it was supported by Rwandan army tanks. The M23's fate was sealed on November 1, when US and UK Foreign Affairs ministers told Kagame in no uncertain terms to keep out of the conflict.²³ On November 3, the M23 chair acknowledged defeat and ordered the cessation of hostilities.

The ease with which the M23 was defeated shows that it was a hollow shell with little military substance without Rwanda's support. For Rwanda, the outcome of this episode was catastrophic. With the M23's defeat it lost its last foothold in the DRC, thus depriving it of a political, military, and economic presence in a part of Congo it considered a "natural" area of influence. Another price it paid was the loss of sympathy—or at least a degree of understanding—on the part of powerful international allies. Finally, this episode also increased Rwanda's regional isolation. Not only was its proxy defeated with the crucial support of Tanzania and South Africa, but relations had already soured with Tanzania after President Kikwete suggested at an AU summit in May 2013 that the Rwandan government should engage in talks with the *Forces démocratiques pour la libération du Rwanda* rebel leadership, a move that led to violent verbal exchanges between the two countries. This regional isolation was to become even more pronounced when Rwanda fell out with Uganda.

Shifting Alliances

All players reasoned in the logic of "the enemy of my enemy is my friend." The fact that Mobutu mainly had enemies by 1996 explains the emergence of the formidable regional alliance that eventually defeated him during the first war. But that such a circumstantial alliance is also very fragile was clear during the second one, when yesterday's friends became today's enemies almost overnight. Indeed, coalitions shifted dramatically. Right at the beginning of the war, Kabila was saved by Angola and Zimbabwe, who turned against their former allies Rwanda and Uganda. Other realignments soon occurred. Thus the mai-mai militia in the east, which had been fighting Kabila even before he came to power, now aligned with him in the context of an "anti-Tutsi" coalition. Within the same logic, an even more spectacular shift brought the ex-FAR and former *Interahamwe* militia into Kabila's camp, although a year earlier, the Rwandan Hutu had suffered massive loss of life during and after the previous rebellion at the hands of Kabila's AFDL and his erstwhile Rwandan allies. The frailty of the alliances again showed when conflict erupted between Rwanda and a major section of the Banyamulenge, who had earlier sought the protection of Kigali, while at the same time being used as a pretext for the Rwandan invasion in 1996. Already by the Autumn of 1996, Banyamulenge leaders had realized that they were being instrumentalized by Rwanda and that, rather than protecting their community, their close association with Kigali further marginalized and threatened them.

The most dramatic shift occurred between the former core allies Rwanda and Uganda. In the words of Charles Onyango-Obbo, chief editor of the Ugandan daily *The Monitor*, in August 1999 "the impossible happened."²⁴ The Rwandan and Ugandan armies fought a heavy battle in Kisangani, and more clashes followed later. In May–June 2000, the RPA and the UPDF again confronted each other in the Kisangani area. Heavy weapons were used and some 400

civilians and 120 soldiers were killed. The rift had several causes. While Uganda wished to avoid repeating the mistake made in 1996–1997, when Kabila was parachuted into power without much Congolese ownership, Rwanda preferred a quick military fix and the installation of yet another figurehead in Kinshasa. In addition, “entrepreneurs of insecurity” belonging to the elite networks in both countries were engaged in a competition to extract Congolese resources. Finally, Museveni resented the geopolitical ambitions of his small Rwandan neighbor and the lack of gratitude displayed by Kagame, who owed his accession to power to the support of Uganda. Just like the Rwandan civil war spilled over into Zaire/DRC from 1996, the conflict with Uganda was fought on the soil of a weak neighbor and, in part, by proxy. Both countries supported rebel movements and (ethnic) militias in the context of an increasingly fragmented political-military landscape. They continuously traded accusations of supporting each other’s rebel groups, which both sides indeed did, and in March 2001, Rwanda was declared a “hostile nation” by the Ugandan government. Rwandan-Ugandan relations further deteriorated, and troops were massed on both sides of their common border. On November 6, 2001, UK Development Minister Clare Short summoned her two protégés to London to put an end to a situation that risked becoming a fiasco for the UK, with allies and major aid beneficiaries going to war. While relations did not become cordial, the threat of direct war subsided.

A dangerous escalation occurred again when, in early 2003, Rwanda started sending troops and supplies to the Ituri region in support of the rebel *Union des Patriotes Congolais* (UPC), which had been supported by Uganda until then. The attempt by the RCD-Goma and Rwanda to link up territory, and thus conflict, in North Kivu and Ituri was seen by Kampala as a lethal threat and again brought the two countries to the brink of direct war. The early 2000s fallout was followed by a long lull during which relations were correct without being cordial. However, relations between the two countries started to deteriorate again in early 2017 and remained hostile into the 2020s, but this development was linked to bilateral issues, not to Congo.

Humanitarian Catastrophe

In addition to the extermination of Rwandan refugees in late 1996 to early 1997, the humanitarian toll of the wars has been colossal for the ordinary Congolese, particularly in the east of the country. As stated by the UN Mapping Report, very few civilians managed to escape the violence and were victims of murder, maiming, rape, forced displacement, pillage, destruction of property, or economic and social rights violations. The International Rescue Committee (IRC) conducted four mortality surveys between 1998 and 2004. According to the data, from the start of the Second Congo War in August 1998 to the end of April 2004, approximately 3.8 million people were thought to have been the direct or indirect victims of the armed conflicts.²⁵ Although the methodology of the IRC has been criticized, this survey shows the extent of the humanitarian catastrophe.

Indeed, the report unveiled dramatic findings. The vast majority of deaths were among civilians, with 80–90 percent due to easily preventable and treatable causes such as infectious diseases and malnutrition. Civilians were also the victims of widespread and indiscriminate killings and subjected to the practices of “total war”: beatings, theft and destruction of property, civil repression, and forced recruitment. In addition, the war caused massive population displacements (including 3.2 million internally displaced persons and 440,000

refugees) and the systematic use of gender-based violence as a military tactic. Despite these and other observations, calls for justice were not heeded. The long-standing practice of impunity in the great lakes region is a major factor in the continuation of massive human rights abuse.

War and Natural Resources

There is a strong link between the wars and the criminalization of states and economies in the region. A UN “Panel of Experts on the Illegal Exploitation of Natural Resources and Other Forms of Wealth of the Democratic Republic of the Congo” set up in 2001 published a number of increasingly detailed reports on the criminal practices of “elite networks,” both Congolese and from neighboring countries, and identified elements common to all these networks. They consisted of a small core of political and military elites and businesspeople and, in the case of the occupied territories, rebel leaders and administrators. Members of these networks cooperated to generate revenue and, in the case of Rwanda, institutional financial gain. They derived this financial benefit from a variety of criminal activities, including theft, embezzlement, and diversion of “public” funds; underevaluation of goods; smuggling; false invoicing; nonpayment of taxes; kickbacks to officials; and bribery.

Military engagement and illegal economic activities were increasingly linked. Indeed pillaging was no longer an unfortunate side effect of war as economic interests became its prime driving force. Dietrich has drawn attention to what he calls “military commercialism,” whereby a stronger state deploys the national military in a weaker neighboring country, supporting either the sovereign power (as did Zimbabwe) or insurgents (in the cases of Rwanda and Uganda), in exchange for access to profits.²⁶ Put simply, “war facilitates excessive resource exploitation, and excessive exploitation spurs continued fighting.”²⁷ The UN panel confirmed that “the most profitable financing source for armed groups remains the exploitation, trade and transportation of natural resources. ... All supply chains from areas controlled by armed groups are compromised.”²⁸

This is what Jackson calls the “economisation of conflict”: a process whereby conflicts progressively reorient from their original goals (for instance, in the case of Rwanda, securing borders) toward profit, and through which conflict actors capitalize on the economic opportunities that war opens up.²⁹ In sum, the Congolese funded their own occupation by neighboring countries’ armies.

Cross-Border Faultlines

According to Lemarchand, political, economic, and social exclusion are the principal dimensions necessary for understanding the dynamics of domestic and interstate violence in the region. “The central pattern that recurs time and again is one in which ethnic polarization paves the way for political exclusion, exclusion eventually leading to insurrection, insurrection to repression, and repression to massive flows of refugees and internally displaced persons, which in turn become the vectors of further instability.”³⁰ He adds that “where ethnic fault lines cut across national boundaries, conflict tends to spill over from one national arena to the next.”³¹ This bottom-line analysis perfectly captures the dynamics at play in the great lakes region in the 1990s and early 2000s. The exclusion of the Rwandan Tutsi after 1959 led to

invasion by the RPF, which in turn led to anti-Tutsi violence and eventually genocide. After the RPF's victory, scores of Hutu left for Zaire, and the armed elements among them attempted to recapture power. Transboundary ethnic alliances exacerbated the conflict, which escalated to become a regional war that ignored national borders.

In fact, Lemarchand explains one of the paradoxes of the wars, namely that the smallest country in the region has played such a decisive role. Without the lead taken by Rwanda, the "AFDL rebellion" would not have taken place, and Kabila would not have replaced Mobutu. True, Uganda and Burundi were faced with similar security concerns, but they were less vital, and these countries would in all likelihood have limited their military action against the threats coming from Zaire to cross-border strikes. Only a few months into the conflict Angola joined the fray to carry the war to its ultimate conclusion: regime change in Kinshasa. Again in 1998, while Uganda was also unhappy with developments in the DRC, it was Rwanda that took the initiative to launch a new "rebellion," with Uganda following suit.

Further aggravating the destabilizing impact of the Rwanda conflict, a combination of factors came into play, some intrinsic to the Congo and others emanating from Uganda, Burundi, and Angola. As with all historical episodes, this combination of factors occurred in a unique and contingent environment, and explains the events, their sequence, and their outcome. On the Zairean/Congolese domestic side, state collapse played a determining role. This combined with a regional factor, namely the territorial extension of neighbors' civil wars. There were spillovers from Angola, Uganda, and Burundi, but the decisive factor occurred in mid-1994, when over a million Rwandan refugees fled to Zaire. They created an "insurgent Rwanda" just across the border, and thus not only threatened the security of the new regime in power in Kigali, but also disturbed an already fragile ethnic situation in the Kivus. This, again combined with the reality of a virtual state in Zaire, both allowed and forced Rwanda to intervene. The attack by Rwanda, Uganda, and Burundi was further reinforced by larger geopolitical interests and the ambitions of regional powers. Angola, in particular, would probably not have taken the initiative itself, but saw the war in the east as an opportunity to deal once and for all with Mobutu and his cronies who supported UNITA.

Discussion of the Literature

The first book-length treatment of the Congo wars is *The African Stakes of the Congo War* (2002), edited by John F. Clark. In addition to contextualizing the conflicts and addressing the issues of the rebel groups, economic aspects, arms proliferation, and refugees, the book analyzes the role played and the strategies followed by Angola, South Africa, Rwanda, Uganda, and Zimbabwe.

Thomas Turner's *The Congo Wars: Conflict, Myth and Reality* (2007) focuses on the historical, cultural, and ideological aspects of the wars and contains case studies of the violence in the Kivu region.

In 2009, three books attempted to offer a broad overview of the wars. In *Africa's World War: Congo, the Rwandan Genocide, and the Making of a Continental Catastrophe*, Gérard Prunier starts from the 1994 genocide in Rwanda and shows the central role it played in the unraveling of two successive wars in Zaire/Congo. The one that started in 1998 had truly continental repercussions and caused immense human suffering. Prunier takes the

international community to task for its lack of interest in what at the time was the most devastating conflict in the world. Filip Reyntjens's *The Great African War: Congo and Regional Geopolitics, 1996–2006* covers the same ground as Prunier's book. He argues that a unique combination of circumstances explains the unraveling of the conflicts: the collapsed Zairean/Congolese state; the extraterritorial extension of neighbors' civil wars; the shifting alliances in the region; the politics of identity in Rwanda, Burundi, and eastern DRC; the ineptitude of the international community, and the privatization and criminalization of economies and public spaces. In addition to five chapters not previously published, René Lemarchand's *The Dynamics of Violence in Central Africa* includes materials that earlier appeared in journals, edited volumes, and working papers. The book touches on diverse issues, and, by focusing on the historical and social forces behind the cycles of violence, it challenges much of the conventional wisdom about the roots of instability in the great lakes region.

Although this was already addressed in several reports by UN investigators, human rights organizations, and journalists, the extermination of Hutu refugees by the Rwandan army was studied in detail in a mapping report made on behalf of the UN High Commission for Human Rights: United Nations, Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights, *Democratic Republic of the Congo, 1993–2003. Report of the Mapping Exercise Documenting the Most Serious Violations of Human Rights and International Humanitarian Law Committed within the Territory of the Democratic Republic of the Congo between March 1993 and June 2003* (2010).

Published in 2011, Jason Stearns's *Dancing in the Glory of Monsters: The Collapse of the Congo and the Great War of Africa*, draws on the author's decade-long field experience working for the UN and nongovernmental organizations in eastern DRC. Using personal experiences and anecdotes, he shows the difficulties of researching war and human rights abuse in a destabilizing environment. Like other authors mentioned earlier, Stearns sees the Congo wars as a direct fallout of the Rwandan genocide.

A major new contribution came out in 2016. In *Why Comrades Go To War: Liberation Politics and the Outbreak of Africa's Deadliest Conflict*, Philip Roessler and Harry Verhoeven place the wars in the wider context of postliberation pan-Africanist regimes from Asmara to Luanda supporting a Rwanda-led formidable regional coalition intent on toppling the Mobutu regime. The authors make their case by drawing on almost 100 unique interviews with major diplomatic, political, and military actors in a dozen of countries that were involved one way or the other. Roessler and Verhoeven find that the "revolution" in the DRC failed because the initiators put the gun before the task of building institutions and organizational structures.

Primary Sources

As the Congo wars are part of contemporary history, there are no primary sources in the strict sense of the word. However, the reports of the Panel of Experts on the Illegal Exploitation of Natural Resources and Other Forms of Wealth of the DRC and of the Group of Experts on the Democratic Republic of the Congo, set up by the UN Security Council's Sanctions Committee, offer useful firsthand information on political, military, and economic aspects of the conflict, as well as on the role played by nonstate armed groups and neighboring countries.

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Notes

1. More details on these factors can be found in Filip Reyntjens, “Instability in the Great Lakes Region,” in John W. Harbeson and Donald Rothchild (eds.), *Africa in World Politics. Constructing Political and Economic Order* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 2017), 176–201. On more local issues, see Séverine Autesserre, *The Trouble with the Congo: Local Violence and the Failure of International Peacebuilding* (New York, NY: Cambridge University Press, 2010).
2. According to the U.S. Ambassador to Kigali, Robert Gribbin, Kagame had already told him in March 1996 that “if Zaire continues to support the ex-FAR/*Interahamwe* against Rwanda, Rwanda in turn could find anti-Mobutu elements to support,” adding that “if the international community could not help improve security in the region, the RPA might be compelled to act alone” (Robert E. Gribbin, *In the Aftermath of Genocide: The U.S. Role in Rwanda* [New York, NY: iUniverse, 2005], 144–145).
3. The existence of this project was later confirmed by documents discovered in Mugunga camp in November 1996 (author's archives).
4. The AFDL was in fact created in Kigali.
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16. UN Security Council, *Report of the Group of Experts on the Democratic Republic of the Congo*, S/2005/30, January 25, 2005, para. 185.
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