Introduction

Tongo in a Time of War

On one of the last days of January 1994, the people of the small[1] but important diamond mining town of Tongo, in the eastern part of Sierra Leone, were alarmed by gunshots coming from the outskirts. It did not take long for them to discover that their town was under attack by a rebel movement named the Revolutionary United Front of Sierra Leone (henceforth RUF).

Three years before, on 23 March 1991, the RUF entered Sierra Leone across its border with war-torn neighbouring Liberia, seeking to over-throw – as it proclaimed – the one-party All People's Congress (hence-forth APC) regime of President Momoh. During the first months of the insurgency the ranks of the rebel forces swelled rapidly through a mix-ture of voluntary recruitment and forcible induction of predominantly young people – many of whom were under 18 years of age, the widely agreed minimum age to bear arms. Many recruits were young people who had dropped out of school or left their villages to survive on a day-to-day basis in the urban informal sector, or through small-scale illicit mining. The RUF – reinforced by more experienced combatants (Spe-cial Forces) from Liberian warlord Charles Taylor's rebel movement in Liberia – soon gained a reputation for cruelty and war crimes, respecting neither the lives nor the property of civilians. An army loyal to the APC government hit back, reinforced by anti-Taylor Liberian fighters, many of whom were from the Armed Forces of Liberia, driven as refugees into Sierra Leone after the collapse of the regime of President Samuel Doe of Liberia in 1990. By the end of 1993 the RUF was considered a spent force, with a few remaining fighters holed up in forested enclaves on the Sierra Leone–Liberia border.

But only a month after its supposed defeat in December 1993, the RUF launched a strong attack on Tongo. It was able to control the town for two days of destruction, looting, killing, and voluntary or forced recruitment.

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[1] The indigenous population of Tongo is not more than a few thousand. Throughout the year, however – but mainly during the low farming season – the town is crowded with miners coming from all over Sierra Leone, increasing its population ten times or more.

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Afterwards it retreated and established a new base camp in the village of Peyeima, about 10 kilometres east of Tongo. In line with a new forest-based guerrilla strategy, the movement created hiding places in the surrounding bush, so-called jo-bushes. Here it was safe from the Alpha jets of Nigerian peace keepers operating as part of the Economic Community of West African States Monitoring and Observation Group (henceforth ECOMOG) in Liberia, now also deployed to the war in Sierra Leone, and beyond the reach of the Sierra Leonean army operating with heavy ground equipment. Over the next two years Sierra Leone's sixth army battalion covered the Tongo area, allowing some of the displaced civilians to return to continue their mining activities. During this whole period the RUF launched pin-prick attacks on Tongo and its outskirts, often on a weekly basis, but never executed another full-scale attack.

In 1996 the army's position was weakened by the deterioration of its relationship with the Kamajoisia – civil defence forces employing initi-ated hunters and used by a new government installed after elections in February 1996 as a proxy force against the rebels. Clashes between the two took place in Tongo and other places. To prevent any further con-flict the army was ordered by the government to withdraw its battalion, leaving the defence of the mining town to the Kamajoisia and about 75 government special troops belonging to the main army but retrained in counter-insurgency by a South African private security group with links to diamond mining in Sierra Leone, Executive Outcomes (henceforth EO).

A successful military coup against the democratic regime in May 1997 by disgruntled and sidelined army troops resulted in a junta government, into which the RUF was invited on a power-sharing basis. For three months the Kamajoisia were able to prevent the junta forces and rebel col-laborators taking control in Tongo, but on 14 August they had to retreat to the nearby Panguma area (headquarters of Lower Bambara chiefdom, the chiefdom in which Tongo is located). By the end of 1997, Chief Hinga Norman, the overt 'leader' of the secretive Kamajoisia, announc-ed a general attack on the renegade soldiers and the RUF, code-named 'Black December'. Five months after their retreat the Kamajoisia recap-tured the town and repelled the renegade soldiers from the area in a quick but decisive attack.

It was not to be the last time that Tongo and its diamond fields changed hands. In February–March 1998 the junta forces were driven out of the capital Freetown and other major towns by forces loyal to the elected gov-ernment, but during the second half of 1998 regrouped junta forces and allied RUF units started a nationwide offensive, characterised by extreme brutality and vengeful atrocities. By the end of that year an ECOMOG battalion withdrew from nearby Kono – another major diamond-mining area to the north – with its equipment and thousands of civilians in its

slipstream, passing through Tongo as it retreated. Civilians residing in Tongo understood the message and started to leave, with rebel forces only 7 kilometres to the north. Early in January 1999 Tongo fell into the hands of the RUF once more. The Kamajoisia took position in Panguma and nearby Giehun, a forested hill overlooking Tongo from the south, on which sat a Kamajoi base camp not unlike the jo-bushes created by the RUF, and fighting continued during the following months.

After the Lomé peace accord between the reinstated democratic government and the army/RUF junta forces was signed in July 1999, displaced civilians started once again to return to Tongo. However, the diamond area was still under the de facto control of the RUF, which extracted several days a week in obligatory labour from every miner. The RUF behaved and considered itself as the 'government' in the territories under its control; disputes and offences were brought to the RUF Military Police if these involved RUF fighters or to the RUF G5 (civil–military liaison) office when civilians were involved.

United Nations (UN) peace-keeping forces replaced ECOMOG in April 2000 and – attempting to force the pace of disarmament agreed under Lomé – found themselves in various confrontations with the RUF. A British military intervention in May 2000 stabilised the situation, and allowed the United Nations Mission in Sierra Leone (henceforth UNAMSIL) to deploy fully. But it was only at the end of 2001 – after further demobilisation agreements with the RUF, signed in Abuja, Nigeria, in November 2000, had been fulfilled in the rest of country during the following year – that the UN peace-keeping forces entered Tongo and fully established themselves. Tongo, together with the RUF stronghold of Kailahun district was the last place to disarm. It was not until the completion of this process (in the course of 2002) that the government and chiefdom authorities returned.

In seeking to research the war and its aftermath from the neglected perspective of the RUF – one of the aims of the present book – it was clear that Tongo would be a good place to work, despite security concerns. Other studies have focused on ex-combatants disarmed and reintegrated at an earlier period (cf. Peters and Richards 1998a, 1998b; Shepler 2005). Susan Shepler's thesis, based on fieldwork from the period 1999–2001, makes it clear that war is a resource over which many vested interests struggle. This includes peace makers and humanitarian agencies as well as political interests and the armed groups themselves. The plain issues of conflict soon become encrusted in multiplicitous layers of claim and counter-claim, myth and misinterpretation. Shepler shows that not least among the claimants contributing to this post-war fog we should number the ex-combatants themselves. They quickly become adept – she argues – at understanding and reflecting back the needs and perspectives of the agencies assisting them.

The advantage of the focus on Tongo, and neighbouring Kailahun district for the work I report here is that conditions allowed me to work with former fighters of the RUF very soon after they entered the misty world of post-war reconstruction. Even as I worked, many became rather reticent in expressing views, partly because they had begun to sense what adaptations they would need to make to post-conflict Sierra Leone – a rather different place from the one they had envisaged – but also because they feared indictment by the Special Court in Sierra Leone. This fear was strengthened partly through a campaign of misinformation during 2003, apparently mounted by some of their former commanders and government-licensed agents of alluvial diamond mining who offered ex-combatants low-wage work in return for political protection. It would be naïve of course to take what informants say at face value without cross-checking evidence. But what I claim in regard to the material presented in this book is that in many cases it was collected as close to the effective end of the war as possible, and that it tells a significantly different story to those emanating from ex-combatants more deeply embedded within the post-war world.

Three Explanations of the Conflict

From this point onwards I must engage with highly controversial issues. The RUF from the outset was denied what Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher once termed, in relation to the Irish Republican Army in Northern Ireland, 'the oxygen of publicity'. The RUF was a by-product of radical student agitation in the 1970s and 1980s. Some of the radical agitators were driven into exile and went to Ghana. From there some tried to recruit supporters in Freetown to join them for insurgency training in the camps in Bengazi, Libya (Abdullah 1997). Others were educated on UN scholarships, and some later went to work for that organisation, or took overseas academic posts, particularly in North America (Richards 2005a). These people were quickly and understandably embarrassed by what their violent step-child – the RUF – had become and chose to deny it a core of rationality – perhaps to protect their own ongoing Pan-Africanist political projects or the interests of the international agencies for which they worked in contributing to a peace process under the rubric of 'African solutions to African problems'.

Buccaneer capitalists, meanwhile, mainly interested in Sierra Leone's rich mining resources, were quick to seize on arguments about a mysterious and mindless rebel movement without legitimate political grievances and interested only in butchery. With help from well-placed allies in the British government a consortium of private security operators and mining companies began to play an increasingly important part in the war in Sierra Leone. The RUF claimed to be fighting government corruption

and wanted accountability for the country's mineral resources. The ex-Marxist radicals and buccaneer capitalists found common cause – the RUF was mindlessly violent and the only language it would understand was peace enforcement. A promising peace negotiation – Abidjan 1996 – was squandered, as EO[2] set about imposing the preferred military solution. It was not in the interest of its mining partners to have their activities scrutinised by a rough-and-ready RUF admitted to politics and power-sharing through a negotiated settlement. This much is apparent from the account of the EO operations in Sierra Leone by a journalist friend of the company, who claims that the former South African Defence Force officers in charge of EO in Sierra Leone did everything in their power to make the elected president – Ahmad Tejan-Kabbah – abandon his peace agreements with the RUF (Hooper 2002).

Future historians may judge that much of the storm of subsequent violence can be traced to these breaches. My focus, however, will be on documenting what RUF cadres say about the war and their part in it, and in trying to establish a critical context to help the reader form sensible judgements about the likely value of this information. I then discuss three broad explanations of the war and will make clear that one of these explanations – war as a result of the collapsing patrimonial state – makes best sense of the material my informants provided. In addition to this model, I will argue that in the case of Sierra Leone state collapse intertwined with and accelerated a crisis in rural areas, where the abuse of customary law by ruling landholding elites had particularly severe consequences for young people.

There can be no doubt that the conflict in Sierra Leone has challenged both scholars and international observers to come up with new explanations. It stands in the literature as one of the prime instances of so-called new war – conflicts that evolve beyond the established explanatory paradigms developed since Clausewitz (1832) in literature mainly focused upon inter-state war. The extreme violence against civilians, the high number of youths and children actively taking part in the conflict, the shifting alliances between the factions, and the unexpected coherence of the RUF during the decade-long conflict are just some of the features that have challenged the more simplistic or confidently announced

[2] Executive Outcomes (EO) was a South African–led mercenary group hired by the National Provisional Ruling Council – the military government ruling the country from 1992 to early 1996 – and was paid in cash and diamond concessions. EO continued to operate under the Kabbah government, but was sent home after the signing of the November 1996 Abidjan peace accord. It disbanded in 1998. A successor in Sierra Leone – the British company Sandline – became embroiled in controversy over whether or not it broke an international arms embargo, with or without United Kingdom (UK) government agreement, and disbanded in 2004, stating on its website that this was due to lack of support for private security options in 'places like Africa'.

explanations. In every case, the same sets of facts can be – and have been – taken to support opposite interpretations.

In Tongo, for example, the RUF recruited mainly among a social and economic underclass of people such as poorly paid diamond diggers, which might suggest that it tried to address underclass grievances. But the same rebel movement, in targeting the diamond-producing areas of Sierra Leone, also might have been driven mainly by economic incentives. Again, the atrocious behaviour of the RUF and its lack of support among the peasantry – the traditional allies of left-wing guerrillas – might suggest that we are dealing with a movement populated by criminal elements, more drawn to sadism than to ideologically motivated actions. I shall simply summarise in bald terms the three main rival sets of theories for the purpose of establishing the context.

Riley and Sesay state that in explaining the conflict in Sierra Leone, 'there is a basic division between those who blame the central state, its agents and politics, and those who focus upon the rebels, their backers and rural society' (Riley and Sesay 1995: 121). Of the three explanations dominant in Sierra Leonean discourse about the war, summarised here, the first two focus on the rebels and the third focuses on the state.

'New Barbarism',[3] or 'the Apocalyptic View'[4]

With the ending of the Cold War the African continent witnessed a proliferation of mainly intra-state conflicts. This was contrary to a general expectation that after the collapse of communism the world would focus on global development, resulting in peace. In search of an explanation, some scholars and journalists reminded us of the old Malthusian theory of overpopulation and/or diminishing natural resources. They argued that what was happening in the 1990s 'at the ends of the earth'[5] was social breakdown caused by the environmental collapse of an overpopulated continent.

Robert Kaplan was perhaps the best-known protagonist of this neo-Malthusian theory. Two of his most influential publications (Kaplan 1994, 1996) take the conflict in Sierra Leone as a key illustration of his argument. Kaplan (1996) describes how the Sierra Leone battlefield is ruled by a pre-modern chaos, not dissimilar to the battlefields of late feudal Europe before the Treaty of Westphalia in 1648. The concept of a nation state has lost its meaning in Africa, and weak governments no

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[3] A term introduced by Paul Richards.
[4] A term used by Thandika Mkandawire.
[5] Robert D. Kaplan wrote an influential book called *The Ends of the Earth, a Journey at the Dawn of the Twenty-First Century* (Kaplan 1996) which starts in Sierra Leone, Liberia, and Ivory Coast.

longer maintain a monopoly on military violence. Kaplan refers to an
article by Mark Danner in the *New Yorker* (1993) about a massacre in El
Salvador, after which he introduces the idea that many of the intra-state
conflicts during and after the Cold War should not be understood in
ideological terms. According to Kaplan's somewhat idosyncratic read-
ing, Danner's article 'demonstrates how the killing – not to mention the
whole war – bared wells of primitivism for which the local culture itself
must also be held accountable' (ibid.: 45, fn.). In another 'observation'
Kaplan is clear about the Malthusian roots of this 'primitivism':[6] 'Des-
pite all the wars in Sierra Leone, the population was growing at anywhere
from 2.6 percent to 3.9 percent annually – nobody knew exactly. The
average woman conceived six children over her adult lifetime. However,
while 60 percent of the country was nutrient-rich, tropical rain forest at
independence over 30 years ago, only six percent was rain forest now.
Disease was out of control' (ibid.: 46). The weaknesses of the Malthu-
sian argument are thoroughly explored in Richards (1996) and will be
discussed in Chapter 8. Kaplan served a moment in which the American
superpower wished to focus on its internal high-technology revolution
('It's the economy, stupid'). It did not wish or know how to intervene in
the conflicts in Liberia and Sierra Leone, despite the anxious demands
of African-Americans with roots in West Africa.

Greed, Not Grievance

As the war unfolded diamonds became more and more a central con-
cern, both to the RUF and to the so-called peace enforcers (ECOMOG
and EO). Analysts began to wonder whether diamonds had always been
the main motivation for the conflict. The view is widely held by popu-
lar opinion, especially in the capital (for most of the war far from the
fighting). Smillie et al. (2000) insist that the crisis in Sierra Leone is a
product of a criminal conspiracy seeking to control readily exploitable
alluvial diamond resources. The ambassador of Sierra Leone to the UN
commented that 'the conflict was not about ideology, tribal or regional
differences. It had nothing to do with the so-called problem of marginal-
ised youths, or . . . an uprising by rural poor against the urban elite. The
root of the conflict was and remained diamonds' (McIntyre, Aning and
Addo 2002: 12).

Paul Collier, an Oxford professor who for a time headed the World
Bank's research department, wrote an article in 2001 under the title

[6] On page 55 he refers explicitly to his Malthusian beliefs: 'Thomas Malthus, the philo-
sopher of demographic doomsday . . . seems to have more to say about what is happening
in West Africa.'

'Economic causes of civil conflict and their implications for policy'. He argues that:

Based on empirical patterns globally over the period 1965–99 . . . the risk of civil war has been systematically related to a few economic conditions, such as dependence upon primary commodity exports and low national income. Conversely, and astonishingly, objective measures of social grievance, such as inequality, a lack of democracy, and ethnic and religious divisions, have had no systematic effect on risk. I argue that this is because civil wars occur where rebel organisations are financially viable. (Collier 2001: 143)

Although many rebel leaders state that grievance was the reason to take up arms, he goes on to assert, their 'revealed preference' – what people gradually reveal about their true motivation through their patterns of behaviour – shows that often it is greed, not grievance, that truly explains their motivations. The case of Sierra Leone comes in when Collier gives his ultimate illustration of a rebel movement motivated by greed rather than grievance:

The rebel [RUF] organisation produced the usual litany of grievances, and its very scale suggested it had a widespread support. Sierra Leone is, however, a major exporter of diamonds, and there was considerable evidence that the rebel organisation was involved in this business on a large scale. During peace negotiations the rebel leader [Foday Sankoh] was offered and accepted the vice presidency of the country. This, we might imagine, would be a good basis for addressing rebel grievances. However, the offer was not sufficient to persuade the rebel leader to accept the peace settlement. He had one further demand, which once acceded to, produced a (temporary) settlement. His demand was to be the minister of mining.[7] (Collier 2001: 146)

And to those unconvinced by the economic basis of rebel movements, and persuaded still that injustice and grievances may motivate rebellions, Collier (2001: 153) baldly asserts: '*It is a key task of the rebel organisation to make people realise that they are the victims of injustice* [his emphasis]. The economic theory of rebellion accepts this proposition and makes one simple but reasonable extension: the rebel organisation can inculcate a subjective sense[8] of injustice whether or not this is objectively justified.' Collier's arguments have provoked sharp responses (see, for example, Arnson and Zartman 2005). Although little evidence has been provided that economic factors alone are enough to trigger wars, there is

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[7] Collier is, in fact, slightly carried away by his argument; Sankoh only asked for (and received, as a result of the 1999 Lomé negotiations) the chairmanship of a newly formed national minerals authority. This post had attached to it protocol status equivalent to vice-president.

[8] Note that the rebel leaders act like rationalists and *homo economicus*, in line with the greed model; but, curiously, their followers are apparently not rationalists and can be manipulated (through propaganda) into harbouring subjective feelings of injustice (cf. Mkandawire 2002). There is further discussion of this explanation in Chapter 8.

widespread agreement that durable conflicts are most likely where there are the resources to keep opposed factions in the field. What needs to be noted here, however, is that the evidence in Sierra Leone is highly ambiguous. The war was fought for several years without major diamond income (see also Chapter 8). But to the wider public the conflict in Sierra Leone is cited and regarded, if it is known at all, as one of the best examples of a conflict motivated by greed, not grievance.

State Collapse and a Pent-Up Rebellion of Youth

The Sierra Leonean Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) presented its 1,500-page final report in 2004, in which it concludes that 'it was years of bad governance, endemic corruption and the denial of basic human rights that created the deplorable conditions that made conflict inevitable' (TRC 2004: 10) and that 'the exploitation of diamonds was not the cause of the conflict in Sierra Leone; rather it was an element that fuelled the conflict' (ibid.: 12).

Reno (1995) describes in detail the rise of a post-independence political system in Sierra Leone, based on patrimonial principles. According to Richards, 'patrimonialism is a systematic scaling up, at the national level, of local ideas about patron–client linkages, shaped (in Sierra Leone) in the days of direct extraction of forest resources, about the duty of the rich and successful to protect, support and promote their followers and friends' (Richards 1996: 34). A key argument about the war in Sierra Leone is that it is a result of the failure of the state to honour its patrimonial promises. Increasing numbers of very poor people fall outside the scope of state social service provision, most notably educational provision, since one end point of much patrimonial redistribution was the payment of school fees (Richards 1996). Young people, socio-economically marginalised, soon proved to be a large reservoir to be tapped by those who wanted to cause mayhem and overthrow the government.

This process of state-driven marginalisation continued during the war. For Riley and Sesay (1995: 125), 'the hardship of IMF/World Bank sponsored structural adjustment since 1992 must surely have contributed to the growth of the RUF and the breakdown of discipline in the Sierra Leone Army (SLA). Simple theft by rebels, disaffected or unpaid soldiers and others has become a way of surviving adjustment'. This – the collapsing state failing to deliver basic entitlements – has led to moves among the very poor to find alternatives to patrimonialism. The RUF – according to Richards (1996) – was a violent and unstable attempt to impose an egalitarian system on Sierra Leone, as an alternative to a failing patrimonialism, and if the rebellion had succeeded would have led to a regime perhaps not incomparable to Cambodia under Pol Pot. Bangura (1997), however, argues that the collapse of the patrimonial state was not

as clear-cut as Richards (1996) and others have argued. Aid appropri-
ations, he suggests, tended to compensate for loss of mineral revenues
and poor world market prices (see also Chapter 8).

Defining the Problem and the Solution

The dilemma is clear: events can be used to illustrate certain explana-
tions, but in themselves are rarely sufficient evidence to come to a con-
clusion about the root causes of the war in Sierra Leone, let alone about
the nature of the RUF and the motivations of its cadres, as becomes
clear from the previous discussion. When studying the literature about
the conflict in Sierra Leone, and in particular about the main protagon-
ist, it becomes clear that there is a bias: conclusions about the nature of
the war and the RUF are drawn from accounts of civilians who became
its victims, or are based on interpretations and rationalisations offered
by the enemies and opponents of the RUF, and often there is no more
than a token effort – if there is any effort at all – to include information
gathered from the RUF, whether leadership or rank-and-file. Previously,
lack of opportunity could be given as the excuse. But it has been pos-
sible to talk to the RUF in post-conflict conditions since the last round
of demobilisation started (2000–1), and yet there is still a dearth of
material.

This book tries to address this gap, by focusing on the direct experi-
ences and interpretations of the protagonists of war, and paying special
attention to the hitherto neglected cadres of the RUF. In the light of
this new evidence, the value of the above three explanations is recon-
sidered. War is always hugely complex and controversial, and a careful,
balanced assessment of eye-witness evidence is often a casualty of heated
propaganda battles. The TRC for Sierra Leone provides a very import-
ant body of documentation concerning the war and its context, covering
the perspectives of many participants, not least the victims. Even so, it
is to be suspected that many ex-combatants held back in their accounts.
In addition to the widespread and exaggerated fears of eventual prosec-
ution by the Special Court (cf. Kelsall 2005), the culture of most rural
protagonists strongly emphasises the importance of secrecy, as an aspect
of social cohesion. It is normative not to speak out of turn or volunteer
information unless it is directly demanded.

Debate will continue about how effective the TRC process has been in
accounting for the war. Meanwhile, the present book takes a different –
low-key, anthropological – approach in which rapport was patiently built
with rank-and-file cadres over a long period, using a methodology in
which the researcher specifically retraced with participants some actual
operations as a stimulus to their memory and test of the accuracy of some
of their claims. An illustrative example of this approach was the visit to the