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978-1-107-00419-1 - War and the Crisis of Youth in Sierra Leone

Krijn Peters

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War and the Crisis of Youth in Sierra Leone

The armed conflict in Sierra Leone and the extreme violence of the main rebel faction – the Revolutionary United Front (RUF) – have challenged scholars and members of the international community to come up with explanations. Up to this point, though, conclusions about the nature of the war and the RUF are mainly drawn from accounts of civilian victims or based on interpretations and rationalisations offered by commentators who had access to only one side of the war. The present study addresses this currently incomplete understanding of the conflict by focusing on the direct experiences and interpretations of protagonists, paying special attention to the hitherto neglected, and often underage, cadres of the RUF. The data presented challenge the widely canvassed notion of the Sierra Leone conflict as a war motivated by ‘greed, not grievance’. Rather, it points to a rural crisis expressed in terms of unresolved tensions between landowners and marginalised rural youth – an unaddressed crisis of youth that currently manifests itself in many African countries – further reinforced and triggered by a collapsing patrimonial state.

Krijn Peters, a rural development sociologist by background, is a lecturer in the Department of Political and Cultural Studies at Swansea University, Wales. He specialises in armed conflict and post-war reconstruction, focusing primarily on the disarmament, demobilisation, and reintegration of child soldiers and youthful combatants. Peters is the co-author of *War and Children* (2009) and a Visiting Fellow at VU University, Amsterdam.

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Advance Praise for *War and the Crisis of Youth in Sierra Leone*

‘This book goes more deeply into an understanding of RUF fighters – their beliefs and their atrocities – than previous studies. It is a very important contribution to our understanding of Sierra Leone and its war.’

– David Keen, The London School of Economics and Political Science

‘What are the real motivations and goals of rebels that commit atrocities among those whom they claim to represent? Krijn Peters offers an answer that is as simple as it is profound. Drawing on extraordinary field research in Sierra Leone among former Revolutionary United Front fighters and commanders, Peters finds a deep commitment to an egalitarian millenarian ethos borne of a rejection of a state-sanctioned system of subjugation of young men and women in rural areas. *War and the Crisis of Youth in Sierra Leone* is among the rare breed of books, essential for scholars and policy analysts, that is sure to make waves for all of the right reasons. It will become a classic for its sober and measured analysis that challenges conventional wisdom and for bringing a critical analysis to bear on the words and actions of members of a violent rebel group.’

– William Reno, Northwestern University

‘*War and the Crisis of Youth in Sierra Leone* is a startling, behind-the-scenes depiction of Sierra Leone’s notorious rebel outfit, the Revolutionary United Front. With compelling clarity and a spotlight on ex-combatant perspectives, Peters challenges readers to set aside easy judgements and take a hard look at thorny wartime realities, including just how a rebel group could be profoundly brutal yet internally coherent. Illuminating links between a predatory prewar society and rationales for predation and misogyny during conflict, Peters leaves the reader with a powerful sense of how and why Sierra Leone’s male youth got caught up in war and what the experience did to them. Strongly and thoroughly recommended.’

– Marc Sommers, The Fletcher School, Tufts University

‘*War and the Crisis of Youth in Sierra Leone* is a work of unique empirical depth and ethnographic knowledge. Peters sheds light on the RUF militia and the role they played during the Sierra Leonean civil war. He illuminates the social logics at play and clarifies the motives behind their constitution, conflict engagement, and conciliation. The book is a crucial contribution to our understanding of one of Africa’s most misunderstood and demonized militias.’

– Henrik Vigh, University of Copenhagen

‘*War and the Crisis of Youth in Sierra Leone* is a welcome addition to the literature on the civil war in this unfortunate land. Not only is this the voice of someone who knows the country and its young people well, but by situating the aetiology of war in terms of a rural crisis as symptomatic of unresolved tensions between landed gerontocracy and déclassé youth, Peters has been able to bring political economy in from the cold, which enabled him to debunk the misguided “greed not grievance” explanation of those intellectually remote from the problems of Sierra Leone. This is invaluable reading for policy makers and all those interested in how a land once described as the “Athens of West Africa” slumped to the poorest of the poor.’

– Tunde Zack-Williams, University of Central Lancashire

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To Loes, Linde, and my young son, Tage

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Abbreviations

AFRC	Armed Forces Revolutionary Council (military junta of renegade soldiers in power from May 1997 until March 1998)
APC	All People's Congress (political party ruling from 1968 until 1992)
BANBATT	UN Bangladesh peace-keeping battalion
BANSAL	Bangladesh/Sierra Leone Cooperative Farm
CCM	Cooperative Contract Mining
CDF	Civil Defence Forces (general name for the various hunter-based civil militias which took part in the war)
DDR	Disarmament, Demobilisation, and Reintegration
DfID	Department for International Development (of the UK)
ECOMOG	Economic Community of West African States Monitoring and Observation Group
EO	Executive Outcomes (mercenary group hired by NPRC and President Kabbah to fight the RUF)
GTZ	Deutsche Gesellschaft für Technische Zusammenarbeit (German NGO)
ICRC	International Committee of the Red Cross
IDP	internally displaced person
IDU	Internal Defence Unit
IMATT	International Military Advisory and Training Team (UK-dominated team of specialists training the Sierra Leone police and armed forces)
IMF	International Monetary Fund
IO	Intelligence Officer
IP	implementing partner (organisation or training centre implementing one or more reintegration projects as part of DDR)
ISU	Internal Security Unit (later SSD)
IVS	inland valley swamps

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KADO	Kalamayrah Agricultural Development Organisation
KPM	Kono Progressive Movement (political party in Kono during the 1950s and 1960s)
LBYC	Lower Bambara Youth Council
Le	Leone, the Sierra Leonean currency
MAP	Mass Awareness and Participation (revolutionary student group in Sierra Leone during the 1980s)
MP	Military Police
NADA	Niawa Agricultural Development Association
NCDDR	National Commission for Disarmament, Demobilisation and Reintegration
NDMC	National Diamond Mining Company
NGO	non-governmental organisation
NPFL	National Patriotic Front of Liberia (rebel movement in Liberia, headed by Charles Taylor and ally of the RUF)
NPRC	National Provisional Ruling Council (military junta of junior army officers in power from April 1992 until March 1996)
NWO–WOTRO	Netherlands Organisation for Scientific Research–Foundation for the Advancement of Tropical Research
PANAFU	Pan-African Union (revolutionary student group in Sierra Leone during the 1980s)
RADO	Robureh Agricultural Development Organisation
RSLMF	Republic of Sierra Leone Military Force (name of the government official forces up to 1998)
RUF	Revolutionary United Front (the main rebel movement in Sierra Leone, fighting from 1991 until 2002)
RUF/SL	Revolutionary United Front of Sierra Leone (official name of the RUF)
SIEROMCO	Sierra Leone Ore and Metal Company
SLA	Sierra Leone Army (general name for the military forces)
SLAF	Sierra Leone Armed Forces (government official forces after 1999)
SLPIM	Sierra Leone People's Independent Movement
SLPP	Sierra Leone People's Party (political party ruling from 1961 until 1967 and from 1996 up to 2007, despite eight months of exile during the AFRC/RUF reign)
SLST	Sierra Leone Selection Trust

Abbreviations

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SSD	Special Security Division (previously ISU)
TA	Traditional Authorities
TRC	Truth and Reconciliation Commission
ULIMO	United Liberian Movement for Democracy (rebel movement created by Liberian exiles in Sierra Leone opposed to the NPFL and the RUF)
UN	United Nations
UNAMSIL	United Nations Mission in Sierra Leone (peace-keeping mission)
UNESCO	United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization
UNOMSIL	United Nations Observer Mission in Sierra Leone