

Commentaries & Replies

On “Confronting Africa’s Sobels”

Chris Mason

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This commentary is in response to the article, “Confronting Africa’s Sobels” by Robert L. Feldman and Michel Ben Arrous published in the Winter 2013-14 issue of Parameters (vol. 43, no. 4).

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Confronting Africa’s Sobels” by Robert Feldman and Michel Ben Arrous is a solid and scholarly discussion of the problem of military personnel in Sierra Leone who crossed sides in Sierra Leone’s bloody civil war from 1991 to 2002. They acted as “soldiers by day and rebels by night” to maximize their ability to prey on their own civil population, often coordinating with insurgent bands to deconflict the despoliation of villages where both forces were operating. The authors point out that in Sierra Leone, rebel leaders and the army both recruited young men from the same demographic of the same ethnic group. They note that in most civil conflicts in Africa, where government soldiers and rebels are drawn from different ethno-linguistic groups, massacres and reprisals driven by ethnic conflict are the norm. However, they do not suggest the Sobel phenomenon may be limited to rare cases like Sierra Leone where ethnic animosities were not a major factor fueling the insurgency. Indeed, a major shortcoming of the article is that the authors suggest there are other examples of this phenomenon but do not cite additional cases. This commends the potential for further research into the Sobel issue to determine if it exists elsewhere or was unique to the civil war in Sierra Leone.

The article is most intriguing in its discussion of the role of private military companies in Africa, and least satisfying in its conclusions. The intractable issues of post-colonial Africa have frustrated diplomats and development agencies for decades, and the vague and chimerical suggestions of the authors—that a troubled African nation should simply “get its own house in order,” for example—are not policy prescriptions likely to cut the Gordian Knot of Africa’s manifold governance problems. Furthermore, it remains an open question whether foreign military training efforts in Africa, which include several hours of classroom lectures on respecting human rights and so on, actually change deep-rooted social values and behavior and “professionalize” African armies or simply make them more lethal and efficient. Certainly, they do nothing to improve the governments which give them their marching orders. As John Foster Dulles advised President Eisenhower sixty years ago, “strong armies do not make strong governments. Strong governments make strong armies.”

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The Authors Reply

Robert L. Feldman and Michel Ben Arrous

The authors thank Dr. Mason for his thoughtful critique of our article. With regards to his request for further examples, let us preface our response by stating that shifting loyalties and periodic changeovers from soldier to rebel are certainly not limited to Sierra Leone. As discussed below, Algeria, Pakistan, Mexico, and the Central African Republic had or have various iterations of the Sobel phenomenon. In Sierra Leone the phenomenon may best be seen as a dramatic configuration of nonspecific patterns. The duration of whatever state (soldier or rebel) can be longer, as in the Tuareg case discussed in the article. Repetitive instances of army passivity, as in Algeria during the 90s, when villagers were massacred in the immediate vicinity of army compounds, do not occur without a degree of complicity within security forces. A similar point has repeatedly been made regarding the reliability of Pakistani military and intelligence agencies and their reluctance to attack a number of Taliban bases. Other disturbing configurations are observed in drug wars, such as that in Mexico where vigilante groups, some of them duly integrated in the army, fight specific cartels while banding up with others.

What was unique to the war in Sierra Leone was the concentration of military, political, and economic power in an urban lumpenproletariat. Condemned as a “recruiting ground for thieves and criminals of all kinds,” the lumpenproletariat was analyzed by Karl Marx as a “social scum” unable to develop a political struggle on its own, a “passively rotting mass thrown off by the lowest layers of society” that could only become, on occasion, “the bribed tool of reactionary intrigue.” The underprivileged youth of Freetown proved Marx wrong. One may wonder if history isn’t repeating itself in the Central African Republic, as the border between anti-balaka militias (many of them wearing army uniforms) and the rank and file of the army, who are largely drawn from the same social margins, appears extremely fuzzy.

Perhaps the most widespread security threat in Africa today is the destruction of citizens’ confidence in the institutions that are supposed to protect them. Military training programs may help to curb this destructive process, but we concur with Dr. Mason that these are often inadequate. Concerted efforts also need to be made in other key sectors like the judiciary and the police, though previous efforts here, too, have often fallen far short of desired outcomes. In this regard, we may mention the issue of “poldits,” a portmanteau of “police” and “bandits,” in reference to off duty policemen or checkpoint officers who rent their uniforms and weapons to *coupeurs de route* (personal observations in Benin, Burundi, and Cameroon): this is yet another variation of the Sobel phenomenon.