Vol. XXIV No. 1, Summer 2004

Book Reviews

Ali, Taisier M., and Robert O. Matthews, eds. *Civil Wars in Africa: Roots and Resolution*. Montreal and Kingston, London, Ithaca: McGill-Queens University Press, 1999.

A decade after the Rwandan genocide, African conflicts remain largely peripheral to the foreign policy concerns of much of the international community. For the US and a few other Western countries, involvement in African wars has been inconsistent, traumatic, and self-interested. Military humanitarianism in Somalia in the early 1990s went wrong. Armed intervention in Rwanda mid-decade was too late and limited to have an impact on the dynamics of slaughter. Extreme crises in Liberia, the Sudan, and in the Congo barely registered on the radar. Operations in Chad, Morocco, Liberia, Cote d'Ivoire, Sierra Leone, and Ethiopia-Eritrea, were generally less than ambitious, and often accomplished little more than to soothe the anxieties of expatriate communities and corporate investment. The policy relevance of African civil wars was consistently subverted by the immanence of more centrally defined conflicts. For the Balkans and Chechnya, proximity to the metropoles meant they could not be ignored. The resource implications, nuclear shadow, and terrorist legacy of conflicts in the Balkans, the Gulf, the Middle East, and South and Central Asia, guaranteed them center stage. Self-reflexive analyses of the decade's interventionist debacles in Africa have debated the moral stain of excessive realism in foreign policy decision-making, as if to suggest that the greater tragedy of much of Africa's bloodletting was that it gave bystanders the opportunity to demonstrate their indifference.

Fortunately for students of African conflicts, there is life beyond foreign policy studies. A substantive body of conflict analysis and resolution literature has arisen in the wake of these dark episodes, dedicated to assessing the root causes of internal strife in Africa and palliating the messy trajectories of current and future unrest. Sudanese activist and scholar Taisier M. Ali and political scientist Robert O. Matthews compiled just such a collection of studies in their 1999 volume *Civil Wars in Africa: Roots and Resolution*. The book is divided into four sections, each dealing with varying types of conflict mediation and resolution. They consider, among many other factors, how post-colonial change and the end of the Cold War influenced root causes, and the role of foreign intervention in altering the prosecution of civil wars. Part 1 explores how civil wars in Uganda, Ethiopia and Eritrea, and Rwanda were resolved primarily through the use of force. Part 2 focuses on negotiation and external intervention as the road to closure in internal conflicts in Liberia and Mozambique, and Part 3 takes a glum look at the protracted strife in Somalia and Sudan. Conflict avoidance in Tanzania and Zimbabwe is explored in Part 4. Two concluding chapters examine the conflict resolution roles of regional (the Organization of African Unity) and international (the United Nations) institutions in Africa, and draw out the lessons learned from the various case studies included in the book.

Editors Ali and Matthews suggest that their study is "neither purely historical nor polemical." Indeed, the sober tone of *Civil Wars in Africa* points to a serious read worth due consideration by scholars and policy makers. Some of the case studies, however, are a little short on analytical depth, and most seemed to be based almost exclusively on secondary research. There were a few notable exceptions - Bruce Jones' chapter on Rwanda is superb - but this unevenness of tone suggests that the book would have benefited from a firmer editorial hand. It also minimizes, without completely neglecting, discussion of the middle part of a conflict's life cycle. In all fairness to the contributing authors, the book's premise is, after all, a study of "roots and resolution," not "causes, consequences, and conclusions." But thorough forensic studies of the RPF campaign in Rwanda from 1990-93, for example, or of the role of psychological warfare, hate propaganda, and information operations in the Liberian war of 1990-97, might reveal alternative perspectives on the dynamics of conflict and the means by which the war was managed or concluded. For the Liberian case - my own area of research - the actual prosecution of the war, with all its attendant social scarification and depletion of human and material resources, is critical to determining whether force or diplomacy ended the bloodletting. Surely case studies of conflict resolution in African civil wars must give due consideration to the complete array of consequences that follow causes and precede war termination.

These are unfair criticisms, however. *Civil Wars in Africa* is neither a work of history nor sufficiently historiographical to merit the term - nor, as the editors make clear, does it pretend to be. It is at once focused and ambitious, and succeeds at highlighting many of the impediments to peace in some of Africa's most troubled states. Taken as a whole, Ali and Matthews have done an excellent job of wringing useful generalizations from a number of cases whose complete stories have yet to be told.

Michael A. Innes is a Senior Analyst with the NATO Stabilization Force Headquarters in Sarajevo.