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SPECIAL THEME:
THE COMMON SOLDIER IN REBEL
ARMIES

The Common Soldier in Rebel Armies: An Introduction

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With the following two contributions the *International Review of Social History* hopes to focus scholarly attention on a rather neglected theme: the labour conditions of the ordinary foot soldiers in rebel armed forces. Although quite disparate in time, social setting, and method, both articles deal with the position and circumstances of common soldiers; both study these soldiers during a period of civil war; and both deal with rebel forces that were ultimately to emerge victorious and eventually be transformed into a regular army. Erik Swart's contribution on the soldiers in the army of the northern Netherlands is set in the late sixteenth century, just after the start of Holland's war of independence. Within a couple of years, the military underwent a comprehensive process of professionalization. The consequences for ordinary soldiers were far reaching: lower wages, fewer privileges, fewer rights, and an obligation to carry out digging work and other forms of manual labour. By contrast, their predecessors (the *Landsknechts*) had enjoyed a significantly higher status, with a system of organization not much different from that of nineteenth-century trade unions.

Frank Schubert's contribution on the guerrilla fighters of twentieth-century Uganda is wholly different in time and space, but it yields additional insights that could not be derived from the study of written archival sources alone. Using interviews, Schubert is able to focus on the circumstances of individual guerrillas and their motives in joining the rebel troops. Again, the reality of a rank-and-file existence did not live up to their expectations. Significantly, the young rebels expected to achieve a high status as freedom fighters in the National Resistance Army in Uganda's "Luwero Triangle". However, living conditions in the bush were extremely harsh, worse even than in the villages. The fighters suffered extreme hardship due to the lack of guns, food, shelter, and medical help. Girls who joined even found their status as fighters denied in the official rhetoric of the rebel leadership.

In dealing with the motives of the rebels in joining, their expectations regarding their future status, and the problem of the occupational mobility of the common soldier, both contributions can be linked to the debate on survival strategies. This debate is of a rather recent origin, and has also led to a

lively exchange of views in this journal.¹ The notion of strategy itself has been crucial in breaching the strict structuralist approach in social history. It has brought the individual historical actor back to centre stage, while also allowing for structural societal constraints.² Not all social historians were immediately convinced though. Some pointed to the fact that strategy implies rational behaviour, while people often follow a course of action more or less unconsciously. In addition, motives are particularly difficult to study, and there is always the lack of adequate historical records and data. Still, the concept has proven its value, as it allows historians to establish different options available to (in particular) the lower classes, without reducing them to a plaything of changing economic conditions. The concept of survival strategies has since acquired a fairly strong foothold in the historiography – initially, predominantly among family historians, but also among scholars of migration, poor relief, and collective action for example.³

So far, however, few scholars have used the notion of survival strategy to study the option of joining the armed forces and the consequences of such joining.⁴ The following articles on the common soldier in rebel armies reveal several links to that debate. For the Ugandan and Dutch fighters alike, one major reason for joining the rebel troops was the social disruption caused by civil war. Many of these fighters were mere refugees

1. See in particular Laurence Fontaine and Jürgen Schlumbohm (eds), *Household Strategies for Survival 1600–2000: Fission, Faction and Cooperation*, *International Review of Social History*, 45 (2000), Supplement 8; Pier Paolo Viazzo and Katherina A. Lynch, “Anthropology, Family History, and the Concept of Strategy”, *International Review of Social History*, 47 (2002), pp. 423–452; Theo Engelen, “Labour Strategies of Families: A Critical Assessment of an Appealing Concept”, in *ibid.*, pp. 453–464; and Jan Kok, “The Challenge of Strategy: A Comment”, *ibid.*, pp. 465–485.

2. Louise Tilly was one of the first to adopt this kind of approach. See her “Individual Lives and Family Strategies in the French Proletariat”, *Journal of Family History*, 4 (1979), pp. 137–152. Among others, Tamara Hareven responded with a significant reformulation, particularly in her “A Complex Relationship: Family Strategies and the Processes of Economic and Social Change”, in R. Friedland and A.F. Robertson (eds), *Beyond the Marketplace: Rethinking Economy and Society* (New York, 1990), pp. 215–244. The concept has been recently reformulated in Theo Engelen, Jan Kok, and Richard Paping, “The Family Strategies Concept: An Evaluation of Four Empirical Case Studies”, *The History of the Family*, 9 (2004), pp. 239–251.

3. See, among others, Laurence Fontaine and Jürgen Schlumbohm, “Household Strategies for Survival: An Introduction”, in Fontaine and Schlumbohm, *Household Strategies for Survival*, pp. 1–17, esp. pp. 8–10; Michiel Baud, “Families and Migration: Towards an Historical Analysis of Family Networks”, *Economic and Social History in the Netherlands*, 6 (1994), pp. 83–107; Marco H.D. van Leeuwen, “Logic of Charity: Poor Relief in Pre-Industrial Europe”, *Journal of Interdisciplinary History*, 24 (1994), pp. 589–623; Marcel van der Linden, “Introduction”, in Jan Kok (ed.), *Rebellious Families: Household Strategies and Collective Action in the Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries* (New York [etc.], 2002), pp. 1–23.

4. An exception is Rosanne Rutten, “High-Cost Activism and the Worker Household: Interests, Commitment, and the Costs of Revolutionary Activism in a Philippine Plantation Region”, in Kok, *Rebellious Families*, pp. 166–198.

and had little alternative.⁵ In the Netherlands, large numbers had fled war-stricken Flanders and Wallonia, thereby contributing to the process of proletarianization.⁶ In Uganda's Luwero Triangle, young adolescents and children from the age of twelve were particularly at risk, as they were suspected by government soldiers and the police of participating in the guerrilla movement. Girls were subjected to brutal sexual abuse.⁷ Children, adolescents, and above all young women were thus strongly inclined to take up the gun and side with the National Resistance Army. Needless to say, they were all received with open arms.

Yet when they joined, both the Dutch and the Ugandan fighters did not find what they expected. That, in retrospect, many soldiers were disappointed by their experiences is hardly a novelty.⁸ But the Ugandan female guerrillas especially were marginalized by their commanding officers – a fate, alas, not much different from that experienced by women soldiers in European armies.⁹ In the case of the Ugandan guerrillas, there was another edge to the phenomenon of disappointment, due to the unfounded expectation that the Soviet Union would provide money and weapons. In the light of this, the National Resistance Army had an impressive disciplinary record, since wartime “greed” and “grievances” are most likely to become blurred in societies with few resources.¹⁰ The

5. On societal disruption during prolonged periods of civil war, see also Helmut Bley and Gesine Krüger (eds), *Überleben in Kriegen in Afrika* (Leipzig, 1998), published as a special volume of *Comparativ*, 8 (1998); and Carl Friedrichs, “The War and German Society”, in Geoffrey Parker (ed.), *The Thirty Years' War* (London [etc.], 1997), pp. 186–191.

6. Jan Luiten van Zanden, *The Rise and Decline of Holland's Economy: Merchant Capitalism and the Labour Market* (Manchester, 1993), p. 35.

7. Freya Grünhagen and Frank Schubert, “Kindersoldaten in Afrika. Uganda und Mosambik in den 1980er Jahren”, in Dittmar Dahlmann, *Kinder und Jugendliche in Krieg und Revolution. Vom Dreissigjährigen Krieg bis zu den Kindersoldaten Afrikas* (Paderborn, 2000), pp. 203–224, 207–208; on the strong incentives to join the NRA, see E.A. Brett, “Neutralising the Use of Force in Uganda: The Role of the Military in Politics”, *The Journal of Modern African Studies*, 33 (1995), pp. 129–152, 142.

8. On the difficulties in finding regular employment after leaving service, see Ineke Maas and Richard A. Settersten, Jr, “Military Service during Wartime: Effects on Men's Occupational Trajectories and Later Economic Well-Being”, *European Sociological Review*, 15 (1999), pp. 213–232; and R.L. Johnson, “The Civil War Generation: Military Service and Mobility in Dubuque, Iowa, 1860–1870”, *Journal of Social History*, 32 (1999), pp. 791–820.

9. See also Martin van Creveld, *The Transformation of War: The Most Radical Reinterpretation of Armed Conflict since Clausewitz* (New York, 1991), p. 187. For a fine study on male soldiers fearing the loss of status as “fighters” when women join the rank and file, and thus downplaying the contribution of women, see G. Kummel, “Complete Access: Women in the Bundeswehr and Male Ambivalence”, *Armed Forces and Society*, 28 (2002), pp. 555–573, 564–565. On the strong connection between masculinity and martial status, see Hal Brands, “Wartime Recruiting Practices, Martial Identity and Post-World War II Demobilization in Colonial Kenya”, *Journal of African History*, 46 (2005), pp. 103–126, 112.

10. Paul Collier, “Rebellion as a Quasi-Criminal Activity”, *The Journal of Conflict Resolution*, 44 (2000), pp. 839–853, 840. I am grateful to Rosanne Rutten for this reference. On the connection between unstable political regimes and low-income economies, see Pat McGowan

NRA's Code of Conduct regarding civilians in Luwero was enforced well, and in comparison with numerous other Black African rebel armies the worst atrocities were avoided.¹¹ In maintaining that discipline the role of ideology, alongside charisma, was paramount among the commanding officers. For most rank and file, though, it was neither ideology nor charisma that predominated: it was the fear of being punished by their commanders, as Schubert's interviews aptly show.

As regards military discipline, the comparison with the Low German foot soldiers is relevant again. Throughout the sixteenth century, "strikes" (mutinies) by soldiers had been a recurrent phenomenon.¹² Yet with the introduction of a regular system of pay, in itself a *sine qua non* for the professionalization of the armed forces,¹³ these mutinies subsided. As Swart shows, soldiers even accepted the decline in status and rights since their wages (although lower) provided security in a time of severe crisis and proletarianization. In the end, the soldiers lost a great deal of their individuality. The Low German foot soldiers had to accept that they were henceforth to be regarded as merely a number of identical and largely interchangeable parts – a status forced upon most freedom fighters in the twentieth-century guerrilla armies too.

and Thomas H. Johnson, "African Military Coups d'État and Underdevelopment: A Quantitative Historical Analysis", *The Journal of Modern African Studies*, 22 (1984), pp. 633–666, 653–658.

11. For a contrast with several of the "lumpen militariats" in Black Africa, see Anatole Ayissi, "Der Aufstieg des Lumpenmilitariats. Militärmacht und politische Ohnmacht in Afrika", *Le Monde Diplomatique/Die Tageszeitung/WoZ*, January 2003, pp. 18–19. The term "lumpen militariat" was coined by Ali Mazrui, "The Lumpen Proletariat and the Lumpen Militariat: African Soldiers as a New Political Class", *Political Studies*, 21 (1973), pp. 1–12. Over the past decade, the Museveni government has itself been faced with such a "lumpen militariat" in Uganda's north: the Lord's Resistance Army. See Tim Judah, "Uganda: the Secret War", *The New York Review*, 23 September 2004, pp. 62–64.

12. Cornelis J. Lammers, "Mutiny in Comparative Perspective", *International Review of Social History*, 48 (2003), pp. 473–482.

13. For a comparison between the tax system in European history and in Africa and the concomitant effects on army and state formation, see Jeffrey Herbst, *States and Power in Africa: Comparative Lessons in Authority and Control* (Princeton, NJ, 2000), pp. 130–136. On the precocious financial system of the Dutch state in the early modern period, and the resulting advantages for a society at war (i.e. providing regular pay for the soldiers), see Marjolein C. 't Hart, *The Making of a Bourgeois State: War, Politics and Finance during the Dutch Revolt* (Manchester, 1993). For a fine analysis of the failure to ensure that soldiers were paid and the remarkably rapid increase in military violence against civilians, see Mwlewa C. Musambachime, "Military Violence against Civilians: The Case of the Congolese and Zairean Military in the Pedicle 1890–1988", *The International Journal of African Historical Studies*, 23 (1990), pp. 643–664, 663.