

“Guerrillas Don’t Die Easily”: Everyday Life in Wartime and the Guerrilla Myth in the National Resistance Army in Uganda, 1981–1986

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SUMMARY: This article examines the civil war in central Uganda between guerrillas of the National Resistance Army and the government of Milton Obote between 1981 and 1986. Its central focus is the wartime experience of guerrilla fighters – men, women, and children. The material for the article has been collected through interviews with participants about their experiences. The interview partners described their motives and expectations as guerrillas as well as their perception of the reality of war “in the bush”. Their narratives differ from the victorious guerrilla’s official history of the war and the guerrilla myth cultivated in that history, as they lack the subsequent certainty of victory and emphasize the fighters’ disappointments and suffering. In this way, the method of oral history provides important points of departure for a social history of this war and allows us, at the same time, to differentiate and correct our current understanding of it in significant ways.

Guerrillas don’t die easily. We used guerrilla tactics of fighting. Sniping, for instance, is a very effective guerrilla way of fighting. You just go and snipe at one soldier who is on sentry meeting and then you disappear into the forest for a week. Just kill one. But then he demoralizes the rest. Somebody who has gone to fetch water from the borehole, you aim at him, shoot him, and then you disappear. These are guerrilla tactics of fighting. So that your job is to reduce the numbers of the enemy but to preserve yourself. Preservation of the self is most important in a guerrilla war.¹

This statement by Major Kenneth Ruhinda, a guerrilla fighter in the National Resistance Army (NRA) in Uganda from 1981 to 1986, reads like an excerpt from a guerrilla handbook: it admits no uncertainties, setbacks, or fears. This is part of the NRA’s guerrilla myth, which has its roots in the classical political writings on guerrilla warfare, for example, by Mao Zedong. A number of African resistance movements opposed to apartheid and colonialism have also cultivated a guerrilla myth to varying degrees, for example, FRELIMO in Mozambique, ZANLA in Zimbabwe, or

1. Interview 3, Kenneth Ruhinda, Kampala, December 1993.

SWAPO in Namibia. More recent African rebel movements – for example in Somalia, Sierra Leone, Liberia, or the Congo – have, on the contrary, stood for conduct of war without any recognizable political goals beyond attaining power. The result has been warlordism, political disintegration, endless violence, and chaos.²

The NRA in Uganda is one of the few rebel movements in postcolonial Africa that not only designates itself as a guerrilla movement in the classical sense, but whose success, according to outside observers as well, has been based on the politicization and discipline of its fighters and their support among the civilian population – like fish in water.

THE WAR IN THE LUWERO TRIANGLE, 1981–1986

In February 1981, the NRA began its battle with twenty-seven men against the government of Milton Obote and his Uganda People's Congress (UPC), which had come to power through election fraud in December 1980. Obote had been the first Prime Minister of Uganda after the country attained independence in 1962. At that time, he inherited Uganda's colonial political structure, which was based on regional disparities. Since the beginning of British colonial rule, the south had been the economic centre, while the north remained economically marginalized but the main area of recruitment for the army and police. Beginning in 1966, Obote, who himself came from the north of Uganda, abolished the kingdoms in the south and southwest of the country and introduced a new presidential one-party system. In 1971, he was overthrown by Idi Amin, the head of the army.

Amin's brutal military dictatorship ended only in 1979, after his troops marched into the Tanzanian border region on the Kagera River. In response, the Tanzanian army not only liberated its own territory but continued on to Kampala, driving out Amin and attempting to initiate a new political beginning in Uganda. The transitional phase following the Amin regime ended in 1980 with the first parliamentary elections since independence. With the support of Uganda's new army, Obote's UPC was able to gain a parliamentary majority in decisive constituencies through election fraud. Once again Obote became the President of Uganda. Particularly in the south of the country, the NRA was able to draw on popular discontent about this seizure of power. The NRA saw itself in the tradition of leftist guerrilla movements such as FRELIMO in

2. I. William Zartmann (ed.), *Collapsed States: The Disintegration and Restoration of Legitimate Authority* (Boulder, CO, 1995); Mary Kaldor and Basker Vashee (eds), *Restructuring the Global Military Sector, vol. 1: New Wars* (London, 1997); William Reno, *Warlord Politics and African States* (Boulder, CO, 1998); Paul Richards (ed.), *No Peace, No War: An Anthropology of Contemporary Armed Conflicts* (Athens, OH, 2003).

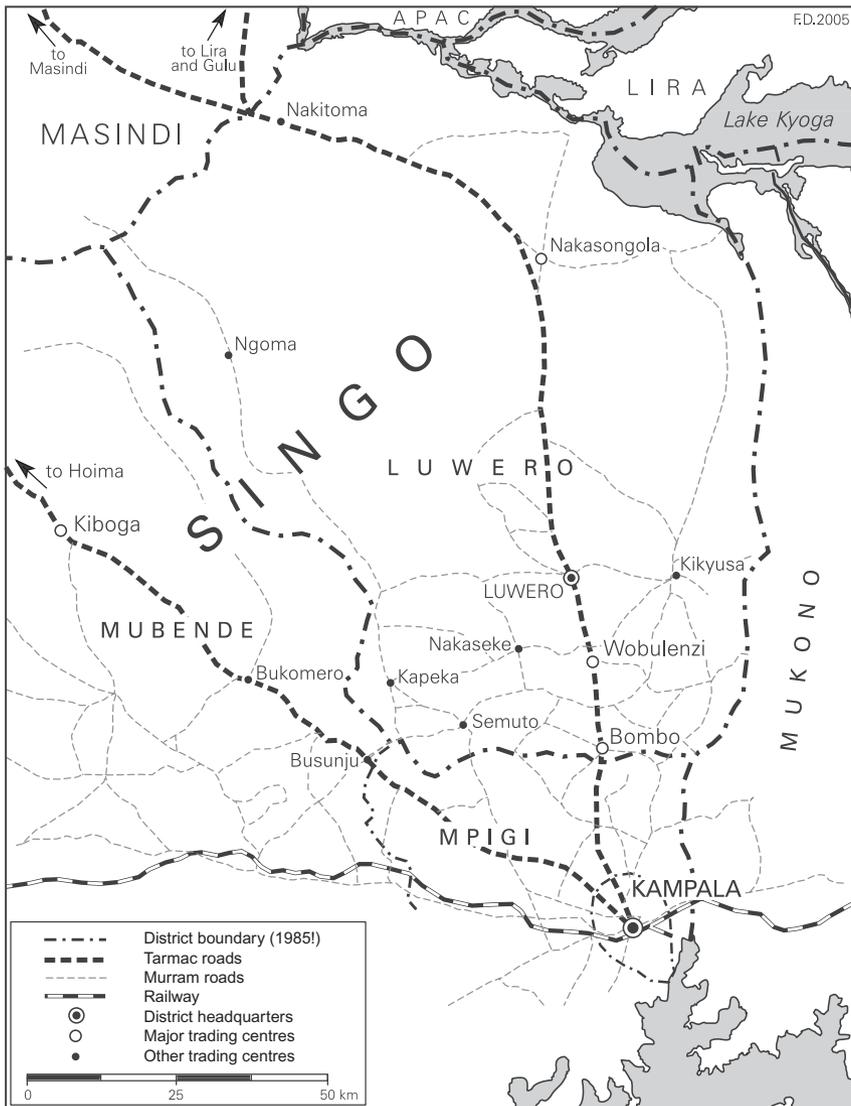


Figure 1. Luwero Triangle, Uganda.

Mozambique, although its own political statements were not dominated by Marxist theory. The central focus of its political rhetoric was overcoming political and economic underdevelopment. While the NRA promised to end the ethnic regional policies that had originated with colonialism, its own unambiguous regional centre was located in Ankole in the southwest of the country.

The NRA's operational territory was the so-called Luwero Triangle, an area north of the capital, Kampala, between the main roads to the north and to the west. In the Luwero Triangle, the NRA carried out attacks against the police and the military, established training camps, and began to recruit from the local population. At the end of 1982, a massive counter-insurgency of the government army, the Uganda National Liberation Army (UNLA), began, which attempted to destroy the guerrillas and break their support among the civilian population through massive violence and expulsion. The NRA, which was militarily inferior to the UNLA, was able to retreat to Singo in the north of the Luwero Triangle and survive the government offensive despite a serious shortage of food. During this period of great difficulty, the NRA also recruited civilians, in particular youths who had fled from the government army and the marauding Youth Wingers, the youth organization of the ruling UPC.

After a coup in July 1985, UNLA General Tito Okello assumed power in Uganda. Okello initially continued the war against the NRA, which had moved to the west of Uganda and begun to engage in conventional warfare. In January 1986, the NRA was able to conquer the capital Kampala with approximately 8,000 to 10,000 men and woman fighters, despite a formal peace agreement with Okello's military government. Since that time, the guerrilla leader, Yoweri Museveni, has been President of Uganda. This has been the first time that a rebel movement in postcolonial Africa, operating from the middle of the country and without substantial support from the outside, has been victorious militarily and assumed political power.

The war in the Luwero Triangle was one of Africa's forgotten wars. In the bipolar world order of the 1980s, Uganda possessed no particular strategic importance. As a consequence, the political and military involvement of foreign powers was minor. Significantly less has been written about this war than about other wars in Africa, for example, the Mau Mau uprising in Kenya in the 1950s, the civil war in Nigeria in the 1960s, or the war in Zimbabwe in the 1970s. There are hardly any published texts examining the war in detail.³ In addition to studies on the historical causes of the conflict,⁴ scholarly research after 1986 has focused in particular on questions of economic reconstruction and the political reordering of Uganda. There have been only two published war memoirs

3. Pascal Ngoga, "Uganda – The National Resistance Army", in C. Clapham (ed.), *African Guerrillas* (Oxford, 1998), pp. 91–106.

4. Samwiri R. Karugire, *The Roots of Instability in Uganda* (Kampala, 1988); Abdu B.K. Kasozi, *The Social Origins of Violence in Uganda, 1964–1985* (Montreal, 1994); Tarsis B. Kabwegyere, *The Politics of State Formation and Destruction in Uganda* (Kampala, 1995).

or biographies,⁵ and relatively few propaganda texts,⁶ disseminating the myth of the guerrilla. According to this myth, the NRA was the logical product of the previous regime's repression. It represented the will of the people and was based on a politicization of the masses. It led a disciplined and rational war. Its initial military inferiority and the hunger of its fighters are reinterpreted as part of a long-term plan ultimately leading to victory.

ORAL HISTORY

It was not only the lack of written sources but also the search for perspectives of the war beyond the commander's view of battle that led me to collect and evaluate participants' experiences through interviews.⁷ I have carried out forty-nine interviews, twenty-five of these with former fighters, including two former UNLA soldiers. At the time of the interviews, two of the soldiers still served in the NRA after it had become the government army in 1986; both of them had attained the rank of major. Twenty-one of the soldiers interviewed came from the war zone and had joined the NRA during the course of the war, several of them only in 1984 or 1985. I interviewed most of these soldiers as part of a documentation project on the partial demobilization of the Ugandan army between 1992 and 1995.⁸

I began all of the interviews by requesting that my interview partners tell me about their experiences during wartime. My own questions then arose in response to what they told me. I did not use a questionnaire. I have not eliminated statements referring to issues or events before or after the war. Nevertheless, the interviews focused on the war and do not represent an attempt to collect life histories. My interview partners' reports did not result in biographies; the goal of the interviews was not to reconstruct coherent or continuous life stories. The focus instead was personal experiences, my interview partners' behaviour and their reflections about the specific situation of the war. For this reason, I have always – and almost always successfully – attempted to conduct the interviews only

5. Yoweri K. Museveni, *Sowing the Mustard Seed: The Struggle for Freedom and Democracy in Uganda* (London, 1997); Ondoga ori Amaza, *Museveni's Long March from Guerrilla to Statesman* (Kampala, 1998).

6. National Resistance Movement Secretariat, *Mission to Freedom, Uganda Resistance News 1981–1985* (Kampala, 1990); Yoweri K. Museveni, *Selected Articles on the Uganda Resistance War* (Kampala, 1986).

7. On oral history in Africa, see Jan Vansina, *Oral Tradition as History* (London, 1985); Toyin Falola and Christian Jennings (eds), *Sources and Methods in African History: Spoken, Written, Unearthed* (Rochester, NY, 2003); Greet Kershaw, *Mau Mau from Below* (Oxford, 1997).

8. Frank Schubert, *Documentation of the Demobilisation Process and the Socio-Economic Reintegration of Veterans in Uganda* (Eschborn, 1998).

with an interpreter, i.e. without any visitors, “onlookers”, or official representatives.

The interviews with veterans of the Gulu district in northern Uganda, the UNLA’s territory of origin, were quite different. Here I was able to speak to an additional twenty soldiers; however, other veterans and public employees of UVAB (the state veterans authority) were always present. In one case, the interview took place in a local school classroom filled with an audience. The interview became a social event, including engaged and in part threatening interventions by the audience.⁹ At the time of the interviews, the political and military situation in northern Uganda was very tense, as the government troops of Museveni were fighting armed rebel groups.¹⁰ In light of these circumstances, and given the peculiar interview situation, I was not able to question former UNLA soldiers about their wartime experiences in the Luwero Triangle – a war that they had lost.

For this reason, the interviews with veterans in Gulu focus on the problems of reintegration following their discharge from the army in the 1990s. Descriptions of everyday life in the army deal exclusively with the time beginning with their integration into the NRA after 1986 up to their demobilization. Veterans answered questions about the beginning of their army careers in the UNLA only briefly and reluctantly. None of these interview partners appears to have been in the Luwero Triangle. At most, they conceded that they were there for a very brief period of time or only on the margins of the war zone, or were exclusively in locations where there was no fighting or violence.

These conversations also demonstrate of the limits of group interviews, which were still widely used in rapid rural appraisal development-policy surveys during the 1990s.¹¹ In the existing conditions, veteran groups did not want to participate in discussions about the war in the Luwero Triangle. They probably feared that such debates would deflect attention away from their own pressing problems (i.e. from the violence of the NRA in northern Uganda) on to the previous violence of the UNLA in the Luwero Triangle. The audience at several interviews urgently demanded silence from my interview partners as soon as they began to answer questions about the war between 1981 and 1986. For this reason, the present article concentrates on NRA guerrilla fighters. Their statements are reproduced here as citations or as summaries of their experiences.

9. Norma Kriger has had similar experiences in her field research in Zimbabwe. See Norma J. Kriger, *Zimbabwe’s Guerrilla War: Peasant Voices* (Cambridge, 1992), p. 245.

10. On the history of northern Uganda after 1986, see Heike Behrend, *Alice Lakwena and the Holy Spirits: War in Northern Uganda, 1986–1997* (Oxford, 1999); Sverker Finnström, *Living with Bad Surroundings: War and Existential Uncertainty in Acholiland, Northern Uganda* (Uppsala, 2003).

11. Jennifer A. McCracken, Jules N. Pretty, and Gordon R. Conway, *An Introduction to Rapid Rural Appraisal for Agricultural Development* (London, 1988).

There has been no armed combat in the Luwero Triangle since 1986. I encountered a general willingness among interview partners to talk about the war, since most former guerrilla fighters from the lower ranks believed that their service and their suffering during the war had not been sufficiently recognized and honoured by the army leadership or by the government after 1986. For this reason, my request for an interview not only appealed to a “collective sense of pride”,¹² but certainly to an individual sense of pride as well. My interview partners were interested in being heard and recognized, in having their own existence and their claims about their own version of history documented.

The interviews with guerrilla fighters who had become high officers after the war demonstrate that oral history does not necessarily introduce to new perspectives that deviate from existing published texts. In such interviews, personal motives and experiences often receded behind general political considerations. To a great extent, interviews with officers amounted to standardized texts from a discourse of victory. These interviews reproduced the image of war and the conception of history that are propagated in the writings of the NRA and that have taught at their cadre schools since 1986. In contrast, guerrilla soldiers below the command level reported about their personal motives for going into the bush and for joining the NRA, about their fears and doubts, and about the enormous problems of the NRA particularly during 1983 and 1984, which often ran contrary to their own expectations.

MOTIVES FOR JOINING THE GUERRILLAS

The NRA’s guerrilla myth emphasizes the significance of political mobilization in the recruitment of its fighters. This, however, proved to be the case only for a portion of guerrilla fighters, above all, for those who joined the NRA during the first two years of the war. In the first weeks of the war, the guerrillas consisted of a small group of political activists. Most of them belonged to the UPM party, which had been founded in 1980 and had been unsuccessful in the elections of 1980; most of them had already had contact with Museveni or other NRA leaders such as Eriya Kategaya or Elly Tumwine before the war. These political activists decided to take up an armed struggle, refusing to subordinate themselves to Obote’s government or to go into exile. Throughout 1981, additional politically motivated recruits in particular from Kampala joined them:

Kenneth Ruhinda began his studies at the Makerere University in Kampala in 1980 and supported the UPM’s election campaign. At the beginning of 1981, he and other UPM activists were driven from campus by UPC supporters among

12. Sharon E. Hutchinson, *Nuer Dilemmas: Coping with Money, War and the State* (Berkeley, CA, 1996), p. 44.

the students. He hid in the city and then decided to look for opportunities to join the guerrillas. At the end of March 1981, a recruiter of the NRA spoke to him in Kampala and then a few days later brought him to an NRA training camp in the Luwero Triangle.¹³

Both the military situation and the NRA's recruiting practices changed at the end of 1982. During this second phase of the war, which lasted until the beginning of 1985, the NRA was forced to fend off the counter-insurgency of government units. In 1983, the NRA retreated to Singo, where it faced military pressure from advancing UNLA formations. During this phase of the war, the NRA had hardly any new recruits from the politicized urban middle class; recruits came instead from the villages of the Luwero Triangle. The decision of these recruits to fight as guerrillas was less a political declaration than a survival strategy in the midst of an extremely violent counter-insurgency by government units. For them, becoming a guerrilla was a survival strategy which, like all survival strategies in wars, was based not only on rational considerations and risk calculation, but also on emotions such as hope, honour, fear, hatred, and desperation. Guerrilla recruits chose a very individual survival strategy, in contrast to the vast majority of the population who did not join the guerrillas but sought to secure the survival and cohesion of their families and to flee the war zone. Guerrilla fighters, however, had often lost their own families or had been separated from them through the war.

It might seem surprising that people actively participated in this war as the result of fear. Interview partners designated this decision as a last resort in a situation of all-encompassing and constant danger. Quite often their personal experience with the brutality of government soldiers and UPC Youth Wingers was the direct trigger for their joining the guerrillas. Sometimes this decision occurred very quickly, almost spontaneously: Several young people took the initiative themselves and looked for recruiters after government soldiers had attacked their villages and robbed or even murdered their parents or other family members, as occurred in the following cases.

Godfrey Lwanga was eighteen years old and a 10th grade student. He reports that he wanted to collect his school fees from his parents in a village near Kikyusa in the middle of 1982. However, he found his parents murdered in their home. Since he had no relatives in the village or in Kampala who could have supported him, he sought out an NRA recruiter and joined the guerrillas a few days later.¹⁴

In 1982, Jamir Gyagenda was only thirteen years old and lived with his family in a village ten miles from Kampala. One night, soldiers came from Kampala. They searched his family's house and then destroyed it with a hand grenade. His father was arrested. Jamir Gyagenda fled to an uncle near Bombo in the Luwero

13. Interview 3, Kenneth Ruhinda, Kampala, December 1993.

14. Godfrey Lwanga, Wabusaana County, Luwero District, December 1995.

Triangle. Three weeks later, government soldiers came and murdered most of the adult men in the village. The boys remained and buried the dead. During the next six months, Jamir Gyagenda lived off the fields of his murdered uncle. He didn't know where to go, but did not want to return to his home village. Finally, an NRA recruiter spoke to him and then took him and several village youths of the same age to the NRA.¹⁵

In this way, the *counter-insurgency* of the government army created in young people a readiness to join the armed struggle, or in the words of Mugishu Muntu, who was later Commander of the NRA: “[T]he main recruiting officer for NRA was Obote himself.”¹⁶ However, many former NRA fighters said that it was not only the UNLA that they feared. While there is no evidence of forced recruitment by the NRA in the Luwero Triangle, many civilians reported that they felt threatened by the guerrillas as well and thus caught between the fronts. Young men in particular worried about rejecting recruiting attempts by the guerrillas, because they feared that they would be treated as traitors.¹⁷ For this reason, they felt beset by both sides; faced with two evils, they chose the side that dealt with them less violently. Many recruits tried other survival strategies before becoming guerrilla fighters. However, in contrast to the vast majority of civilians, they believed at a certain point in time that they had no other alternative than to fight with the guerrillas: “There was running to save our lives and the only alternative was to join the rebels.”¹⁸

According to interviews, political mobilization through NRA cadre did not play a significant roll in comparison to these individual reasons for joining the guerrillas. Norma Kriger has assumed an “individual political agenda” for guerrilla fighters in Zimbabwe, which in part complemented and in part also contradicted the guerrillas’ own programme.¹⁹ In interviews with many NRA guerrilla fighters, explicit political motives recede completely into the background. Their individual agenda was to protect themselves with a rifle and thereby attempt to survive the war.

FREEDOM FIGHTERS OR RAGTAG SOLDIERS?

In the NRA’s language, guerrilla fighters were proud freedom fighters. Many guerrilla fighters, however, were disappointed, particularly with the equipment of the NRA. The NRA only had a small arsenal of captured weapons, and new recruits had to practise shooting with wooden rifles. In addition, the NRA had no uniforms, which surprised many of its new

15. Interview 19, Jamir Gyagenda, Kyaddondo County, Mpigi District, October 1994.

16. Major General Mugisha Muntu, cited in Ngoga, *The National Resistance Army*, p. 98.

17. Interview 17, John Kakembo, Kyaddondo County, Mpigi District, October 1994.

18. Interview 44, Nassan Kagawa, Katikamu County, Luwero District, January 1996.

19. Kriger, *Zimbabwe’s Guerrilla War*, p. 20.

members. Even those who later became officers recalled the disappointment (if in an ironic form) that they had felt at their arrival in the Luwero Triangle:

They were putting on tattered combat shirts. One or two were holding rifles. I remember the present army commander was one of them and you looked funny in a tattered combat shirt and holding an ancient G3 rifle. We kept whispering, is this what we have come to do really? What we had imagined was that we would just find piles of modern glittering rifles, shiny brand-new combat uniforms, Russian tinned food, and that kind of stuff. That's what we thought. We never knew we would go through a lot of trouble even to get dressed on our own.²⁰

Even in 1984, many NRA fighters remained unarmed and only scantily clad. The clothing of new recruits was torn after only a few months in the bush and could not for the most part be replaced. Many guerrilla fighters wore rags; hardly any of them had shoes.²¹ The appearance of NRA fighters did not, in other words, accord with their own expectations. Unarmed, dressed in rags and without shoes, older guerrilla fighters had more the external appearance of poor children than mature, respected guerrilla fighters.

Many guerrilla fighters recalled hunger and disease during 1983 and 1984. There was less food in Singo than in the southern part of the Luwero Triangle, and the nutritional situation was worsened through the influx of refugees. The UNLA used road blocks to obstruct the search for food in the surrounding areas. During this time, NRA soldiers attempted to find food on abandoned fields or even to plant cassava or matooke (bananas of the plantain type) themselves. Several guerrilla fighters tried to nourish themselves with cooked cow-skins, cassava peels, grass, or tree bark.²² Hunger became a problem that threatened the existence of the NRA:

Sometimes we got one stick of cassava and it was for three days because we had to hide from government soldiers. You ate and sometimes you could spend four hours there and then you had to go to another place. Most people on the rebel side suffered a lot because they didn't have legs and they were attacked by them.²³

The NRA ran out of medicine over the course of 1983. Many guerrilla fighters died from malaria and intestinal illnesses as a result of contaminated food and drinking water.²⁴ Even bandages were so scarce

20. Interview 3, Kenneth Ruhinda, Kampala, December 1993.

21. Interview 44, Nassan Kaggwa, Katikamu County, Luwero District, January 1996; interview 49, Juliet Naluwoje, Nakaseke County, Luwero District, January 1996.

22. Beatrice Mugambe, *Women's Role in Armed Conflict and Their Marginalisation in the Governance of Post-Conflict Society: The Case of the 'Luwero Triangle', Uganda* (Addis Ababa, 2000), p. 13.

23. Interview 19, Jamir Gyagenda, Kyaddondo County, Mpigi District, October 1994.

24. *Ibid.*; interview 41, Enoch Kasirye, Wabusaan County, Luwero District, January 1996; interview 43, Godfrey Girugu, Katikamu Distrikt, Luwero District, January 1996.

that NRA soldiers were forced to look for mattresses in abandoned houses to use as material for dressing wounds.²⁵ The NRA did set up a sick bay for fighters suffering from illness and malnutrition. However, many of their soldiers died of starvation and disease.

During this time, the responsibilities of young guerrilla fighters consisted primarily in searching for food. Others stood watch in the guerrilla camps or accompanied older NRA fighters as so-called “commandos”. Commandos were unarmed and had to guard the retreat paths or the looted weapons and uniforms during guerrilla attacks on small posts and transports of the government army. Even during the NRA’s attack on the city of Masindi in February 1984, only 375 of 700 fighters were armed; the rest were unarmed commandos.²⁶ This military sounding title was supposed to build their courage and mollify their dissatisfaction: “We nicknamed them ‘commandos’ to indicate to them that they were so experienced that they went into battle without the need for arms. Of course, the truth was that we had no arms to give them.”²⁷

Only in the final year of the war was the NRA able to arm all of its guerrilla fighters. Before this time, the unarmed commandos in particular remained as personally defenceless as they had been as civilians before joining the guerrillas. Guerrilla commanders demanded that they be patient and refrain from “adventurism”. Adventurism is an important concept in the NRA’s self-definition. The meaning of the term remained highly unclear, since every military action in which guerrilla fighters died, were taken prisoner, or lost their weapons could be designated as “adventurism” after the fact. Refraining from adventurism was a popularization of the classical guerrilla strategy and served as internal legitimation for NRA’s long prevailing military weakness. It was necessary that retreat and other actions to evade the enemy did not appear as weakness or cowardice, as the citation at the beginning of this article suggests – “Guerrillas don’t die easily”. In most of the interviews, however, there is no mention of effective self-protection:

People died there! Malaria! People didn’t have blood. They died and they staggered being mobile to and fro. We ran and the government had got to know that we are going to Entebbe. They sent flying patrols and you had to run back at night. We died in swamps. They called it *bitebe* [quicksand] and it took many of us while crossing the river.²⁸

This statement emphasizes not the superiority and careful consideration of guerrilla fighters but instead their weakness – they were diseased and

25. Interview 3, Kenneth Ruhinda, Kampala, December 1993.

26. Museveni, *Sowing the Mustard Seed*, p. 159.

27. *Ibid.*, p. 136.

28. Interview 19, Jamir Gyagenda, Kyaddondo County, Mpigi District, October 1994.

dying. They had joined the NRA in order to defend themselves against government soldiers, and now they often had to run for their lives – from their perspective, hardly heroic behaviour.

In general, soldiers and guerrilla fighters share a particular notion of military and soldierly honour, as is evident, for example, in another article in the present volume on “Low German Foot Soldiers of the Low Countries”. This kind of honour is connected as well with particular ideas of masculinity. Male guerrilla fighters often described their motives for joining the NRA in the idiom of masculinity. They experienced being a defenceless civilian in the Luwero Triangle as profoundly unmanly. The recruiter Ibrahim Kinabi reported that youths, in explaining their readiness to become guerrilla fighters, claimed that they did not want to be killed like women.²⁹ According to Liisa Malkki, in such statements by men gender becomes a “metaphor for expressing docility and inequality of power”.³⁰ She cites a Burundian refugee in Tanzania: “Because the Tutsi have the government, to kill Hutu is very easy. [...] We had no guns. To kill was easy. We were like women in the house.”³¹

FEMALE FIGHTERS

Many women, however, did not remain defenceless in their houses. At the end of the war, there were reportedly 800 female fighters in the NRA.³² Like male recruits, these women believed that they were in a hopeless situation in the Luwero Triangle. For these female fighters, even more so than for male recruits, concrete threats of violence triggered their move to the guerrillas. For them, government soldiers driving people from their villages and murdering their relatives were not the only reason for them to become soldiers. They had been witnesses to rape or had even been raped themselves in villages and in internment camps.³³

In contrast, Museveni’s and Ondoga’s war memoirs do not mention women fighters at all, although the latter book does include a photograph of armed NRA female fighters.³⁴ Museveni himself addressed the role of women in the NRA only once, in connection with a plan to get civilians to leave the war zone at the beginning of the war. Museveni regarded women here as a special strategic problem: “I had proposed that the civilians should

29. Interview 27, Ibrahim Kinabi, Busiro County, Mpigi District, November 1994.

30. Liisa H. Malkki, *Purity and Exile: Violence, Memory, and National Cosmology among Hutu Refugees in Tanzania* (Chicago, IL, 1995), p. 100.

31. *Ibid.*, p. 99.

32. Mugambe, *Women’s Role in Armed Conflict*, p. 24.

33. Interview 49, Juliet Naluwoke, Nakaseke County, Luwero District, January 1996; Edith R. Natukunda with Harriet Birungi, *Women at War: A Study of Women’s Involvement in War and its Implications* (Kampala, 1990), pp. 8f.

34. Ondoga, *Museveni’s Long March*, p. 27.

be encouraged to leave the operational areas. Our people, however, had their own interests, such as girlfriends in the area, and my line of argument was defeated in a meeting of the High Command and the NRC.”³⁵ Women are not presented here as part of the guerrillas. For Museveni, they apparently fulfilled no important responsibilities, instead diverting male fighters from the proper path and impairing their insight into military necessity. Museveni and Ondoga concealed the significance of women fighters for the NRA, denying them their part in the military victory.

Women did play an important military role in the war; however, here too they have been removed from the official war history, as the NRA is constructed as an exclusively male preserve. In particular, beginning in late 1983, women actively participated in NRA battle deployments. Before this time, the NRA had been hesitant to use women in battle, particularly as there were not enough weapons to arm all male and female fighters. However, in the early war years as well there were women such as Gertrude Njuba,³⁶ and Olivia Zizinga,³⁷ who assumed important and very risky responsibilities for the guerrillas. They recruited, brought news, and transported medication, money, food, and even weapons and munitions into the Luwero Triangle. The participation of women in battle deployments began very slowly. Before 1983, women were primarily used for nursing and for searching for food in guerrilla groups. It appears that the NRA, like ZANLA in Zimbabwe in the 1970s, wanted to create gendered spaces³⁸ by defining certain domains as appropriate or inappropriate for women.

The fact that women were not permitted to participate in the deployments of mobile guerrilla units was justified with the argument that women fighters had to be protected from special risks.³⁹ Although these feminized spaces had less battle prestige, they were nevertheless extremely dangerous. It was often women in the NRA, for example, who spied on government unit positions. Equally risky were the long journeys to watering places in Singo, where there was a danger of meeting UNLA patrols. Nevertheless, as in the rural society in general, waterholes remained the responsibility of women. The NRA commanders regarded both spying on enemy positions and travelling to waterholes as too dangerous for male fighters.⁴⁰

Battle deployments by women increased in 1984, after the NRA was

35. Museveni, *Sowing the Mustard Seed*, pp. 151f.

36. Rosalind E. Boyd, “Empowerment of Women in Uganda: Real or Symbolic”, *Review of African Political Economy*, 45/46 (1989), pp. 106–117, 113.

37. Mugambe, *Women’s Role in Armed Conflict*, p. 9.

38. Josephine Nhongo-Simbanegavi, “Zimbabwean Women in the Liberation Struggle: ZANLA and its Legacy, 1972–1985” (Ph.D., Oxford University, St Anthony’s College, 1997), pp. vi–vii.

39. Mugambe, *Women’s Role in Armed Conflict*, p. 24.

40. *Ibid.*, pp. 10–13.

able to expand its weapons arsenal through an attack on the UNLA barracks in Masindi. Over the course of 1985, women participated in all of the NRA's larger battles until Kampala was captured. Thus during the last year of the war, gendered spaces were temporarily dissolved. In interviews, however, female fighters emphasised that they were "real soldiers" for the entire duration of the war.⁴¹

CHILD SOLDIERS

When the NRA captured Kampala in January 1986, the city's population was surprised not only by the women fighters, but also by the many child soldiers. In June 1986, after the NRA had conquered the entire country, Museveni's new government reported the number of child soldiers to be 3,000.⁴² According to this figure, child soldiers comprised 25 to 30 per cent of the NRA at the time its assumed power. It remains unclear, however, what age limit was used here to define child soldiers.⁴³ Before 1986 the existence of child soldiers in the NRA – as well as the war in general – received little international attention. It was only when the NRA reached the capital and the child soldiers became, as it were, visible that international criticism began and the issue of child soldiers became a serious legitimisation problem for the new government.

The NRA has always denied intentionally recruiting children. Museveni does not mention child soldiers in his memoirs any more than women fighters. After 1986, he declared that the parents of NRA child soldiers had died during the war and left their children as helpless orphans, who were then taken up and cared for by the guerrillas.⁴⁴ In any event, many of the guerrilla fighters I interviewed were only thirteen or fourteen years old when they were recruited by the NRA. One NRA recruiter confirmed that not only youths under eighteen, but also children under fifteen were deliberately addressed: "We started putting people in aged thirteen and above, like my son Waswa who was in P6 when he joined. We took persons of all ages – thirteen, fourteen, fifteen, and above. [...] If the

41. Interview 36, Harriet Nakintu, Katikamu County, Luwero District, January 1996; interview 49, Juliet Naluwoye, Nakaseke County, Luwero District, January 1996.

42. Cole P. Dodge, "Child Soldiers of Uganda and Mozambique", in C.P. Dodge and M. Raundalen (eds), *Reaching Children in War: Sudan, Uganda, and Mozambique* (Bergen, 1991), pp. 51–58, 54; Oliver Furley, "Child Soldiers in Africa", in *idem* (ed.), *Conflict in Africa* (London, 1995), pp. 28–45, 37.

43. The Additional Protocols of 1977 to the Geneva Convention of 1949 as well as the United Nations' Convention on the Rights of the Child of 1989 define child soldiers as combatants who are younger than fifteen years of age. See Graça Machel, *Impact of Armed Conflict on Children* (New York, 1996).

44. Mohamed Amin, "Uganda's Children at War", *Africa Now*, 60 (1986), p. 8; Hope Kivengere, "In Defence of Uganda's NRA", *New African*, 256 (1989), p. 15.

soldiers had not shot at our children they would not have joined the rebels.”⁴⁵

In addition, there were also even younger soldiers in the NRA, as Enoch Kasirye, who fought with the guerrillas as an adult beginning in February 1982, recounted:

We even got children with less than ten years. They grew up in the bush. You could give a gun to a child that couldn't touch the trigger because the hand was too small. But we tried to train them. We gave them an Uzi gun because it is short. Those children came when government soldiers had entered the area. Their parents had been killed [...] Those ones older than ten were taken by us and we stayed in the camps with those of twelve years. They had to do what is to be done – to learn how to use the gun. They learnt it and they managed to use it. But there were also the real young ones we had to stay with.⁴⁶

While Enoch Kasirye does adopt two of the NRA's central justifications for the use of child soldiers, he also introduces further distinctions here for children younger than fifteen years of age. In doing so, he confirms the impression that many NRA recruiters and officers regarded only boys and girls under twelve as real children who were only seldom recruited directly. In any case, it is clear here that even small children taken up by the NRA over the course of the war were used militarily. Children between twelve and fifteen, on the contrary, were deliberately recruited and then given arms training in guerrilla camps. Many of these children were not orphans. They lived – albeit under the precarious conditions of the counter-insurgency – with their parents or relatives. Many recruiters were apparently well aware of this. Several children ran away from their parents to join the guerrillas. The NRA recruited them, and their parents were not informed of this.⁴⁷ There is no evidence that the NRA kidnapped children by force, as RENAMO did in Mozambique.⁴⁸ However, the NRA's claim that it took up only children who had been helplessly wandering about in the war zone is also not accurate.

THE NRA AND ITS STRUGGLE AGAINST PREMODERN BELIEFS

Just as guerrilla leaders have denied deliberately recruiting child soldiers, they also deny integrating aspects of religion or spirituality, witchcraft or magic into their own mobilization and legitimization strategies, as had been

45. Interview 27, Ibrahim Kinabi, Busiro County, Mpigi District, November 1994.

46. Interview 41, Enoch Kasirye, Wabusaan County, Luwero District, January 1996.

47. Interview 22, Grace Nalongo, Kyaddondo County, Mpigi District, November 1994; interview 25, Saphina Nakibuuka, Butambala County, Mpigi District, November 1994.

48. William Minter, *The Mozambican National Resistance (Renamo) as Described by Ex-Participant: Report for the Ford Foundation and the Swedish International Development Agency* (Washington DC, 1989), pp. 3f.

the case in Zimbabwe during the 1970s.⁴⁹ For the NRA leadership, this issue is a symbol of the backward rural Africa that they are trying to overcome: “[I]n political affairs we always support right against wrong and rely on the masses but at the same time struggle against popular but erroneous traditional beliefs like witchcraft that could be very injurious if they were given free reign on the platform of the quest for cheap popularity.”⁵⁰

The interviews with guerrilla fighters provided little information on this issue. Many did not talk about visits to the *abasawo*, traditional healers who treated not only physical ailments but also claimed to provide protection from danger and witchcraft. However, like soldiers in many other wars, NRA fighters sought spiritual protection and a means of overcoming or suppressing their fears of death and injury. In interviews, *abasawo* confirm that it was fighters of mobile guerrilla units in particular that they treated, although the military situation often did not permit long-lasting ceremonies for healing and purification, and the *abasawo* merely dispensed their medicines.⁵¹ As a rule, guerrilla fighters went to the healers on their own and presumably without express permission from their commanders.⁵² In an address at Makerere University in 1991, Museveni depicted this spiritual assistance as a temporary phenomenon:

We also had some of our peasant soldiers who believed that if they carried reeds into battle, they would not be shot. We had to confront this and rule that anybody who said anything more about carrying reeds into battle would be shot by firing squad. We said we would give him his reed, let him perform his ceremonies and shoot him to see whether or not his reed would protect him. That was the end of the reed theory in our army [...].⁵³

Despite Museveni’s arrogance here, the NRA did not prevent its fighters from seeking spiritual support during the war. While the NRA denounced healers and emphasized its own modernization claims, its stance during everyday war life was more pragmatic than dogmatic. Thus, during periods of chronic medication shortage, the NRA accepted what it called “herbalists” as an African alternative to Western medicine. In this way, it sought to differentiate between a positive African tradition in the sense of naturopathy and the bad “superstition” of witchcraft and spiritual protection.

However, this division into good and bad traditions – already a standard

49. David Lan, *Guns and Rain: Guerrillas and Spirit Mediums in Zimbabwe* (Harare, 1985), pp. 147–153.

50. Museveni, *Selected Articles on the Uganda Resistance War*, p. 40.

51. Interview 14, Livingstone Sselumansi Baguma, Kampala, October 1994; interview 16, Abey Kabengwa, Kyaddondo County, Mpigi District, October 1994.

52. Per Tidemand, “The Resistance Councils in Uganda: A Study of Rural Politics and Popular Democracy in Africa” (Ph.D., Roskilde University, 1994), p. 82.

53. Yoweri K. Museveni, *What is Africa’s Problem?* (Kampala, 1992), p. 116.

model of rule in colonial states – could not be maintained in practice, as many *abasawo* were active in both fields. Even NRA leaders such as Museveni could not avoid spiritual ceremonies at which the spirits of ancestors were called on to support the war:

They would reason [...] that since the spirits of our ancestors had been mobilised and were now part of the war effort, we did not have to worry about the actual scientific preparations for waging a war. Then I would say: [...] “Please, tell our ancestors that since I am on the spot (conducting the war) let me handle the present situation – tell them just to bless me!” And my peasant comrades would agree to leave the conduct of the war effort to me. In this way, I would combine collaborating with them with educating them, because I could not allow the peasant ideology to gain the upper hand in the Movement: that would have been very dangerous if not totally disastrous.⁵⁴

In opposing his own scientific approach to war to a rural superstition and in attributing an educational project to the war, Museveni places himself above rural society. During the war, however, guerrilla fighters and civilians hardly regarded Museveni’s attendance at these ceremonies as part of an educational project to eliminate them.

The NRA also did not contradict stories and myths that circulated during the war about Museveni’s ostensibly supernatural powers. Nevertheless, in their historical accounts of the war the NRA leadership has consistently maintained that it was victorious in the Luwero Triangle because of its political and ideological superiority. While this does imply the subsequent denial and denunciation of spiritual elements, the NRA did not engage in a cultural war against the *abasawo* during the war. The healers played a greater role for NRA soldiers during the war than the guerrilla leadership was ever prepared to admit publicly, and this in turn contributed to the guerrilla commanders’ mistrust of their own fighters.

GUERRILLA DISCIPLINE

NRA commanders also doubted the personal motives of fighters recruited from rural areas. They regarded them as talkative and in general as politically and militarily unreliable and undisciplined.⁵⁵ The discipline of its own fighters, however, was essential for the NRA’s legitimation and mobilization in the Luwero Triangle. The NRA had no continuously secure areas of retreat in inaccessible territories or beyond national borders. For this reason, the NRA’s lack of arms and its military inferiority before 1985 meant that basic acceptance among the local civilian population was absolutely necessary for its survival. In contrast to

54. *Ibid.*

55. Museveni, *Sowing the Mustard Seed*, pp. 132, 137.

RENAMO in Mozambique, the NRA did not force new recruits to commit crimes in their own villages or even on their own families in order to undermine their social roots and place them entirely at the mercy of their military leaders.⁵⁶ The NRA's strategic position also differed from that of guerrilla armies such as the SPLA in southern Sudan, which operated in large areas and made little effort to prevent its fighters from committing atrocities on the civilian population.⁵⁷

Given the small size of its operational territory, the NRA's greatest fears were betrayal and infiltration. For this reason, they not only had to prevent civilians from collaborating with government troops, but also had to avoid internal conflicts or divisions. Already in December 1981, the leadership issued the NRA's Code of Conduct,⁵⁸ which provided regulations for guerrilla fighters' behaviour toward the civilian population as well as toward other guerrillas. The Code of Conduct contains a wide variety of instructions and rules regulating the military behaviour of a guerrilla fighter. The central concern of the NRA leadership was its weapons and munitions supplies. Due to the NRA's acute lack of weapons, the number of captured weapons, along the uniforms and shoes of government soldiers, was for a long time the most important measure for the success of a military operation or attack. The needless waste of munitions or even the loss of one's own weapon could be punished severely:

We looked for weapons. At the beginning, they used to count your bullets. Each bullet had to go for a person and you had to make sure that you don't lose any gun or weapon. They said that if you shot a free [missing] bullet or it failed to get out, they would charge you for that and they would even shoot at you. By that time, there was no waste of bullets.⁵⁹

According to Code of Conduct, murder, rape, betrayal, and the refusal to obey an order leading to fatalities were punished with the death penalty. Depending on the severity of the offence, other violations were punished with imprisonment, beating, or demotion. The interviews provide no evidence that NRA fighters were locked in holes in the ground for days or punished with the *kandoya*.⁶⁰ Trial by court martial and the punishment of fighters were exemplary acts intended to demonstrate internally and externally the NRA's seriousness about the Code of Conduct. This was particularly true of one case in 1985, where two drunken NRA fighters killed several villagers in Semuto and were then executed themselves.⁶¹

56. Ken B. Wilson, "Cults of Violence and Counter-Violence in Mozambique", *Journal of Southern African Studies*, 18 (1992), pp. 527–582, 531ff.

57. Peter A. Nyaba, *The Politics of Liberation in South Sudan* (Kampala, 1997), pp. 39, 43.

58. Ondoga, *Museveni's Long March*, pp. 246–251.

59. Interview 20, John Mugisha, Kyaddondo County, Mpigi District, October 1994.

60. Tidemand, *The Resistance Councils in Uganda*, p. 81. *Kandoya* is a method of torture in which the victims' elbows are tied together behind their backs.

61. Museveni, *Sowing the Mustard Seed*, p. 134.

The Code of Conduct added to the uncertainties of guerrilla fighters, as it was anything but a clear guideline for action. The list of punishable offences was never precisely defined and was subject in part to wide interpretation. What particular behaviour, for example, could be designated as a “quest for cheap popularity” or as “intrigue and double-talk”? When did groups in the NRA become “cliques”, and what precisely was “soliciting information for its own sake”? Given these rigid but unclear rules, NRA soldiers lived in constant fear – not only from the UNLA, from hunger and disease, but also from being disciplined by their own commanders or from being denounced.

One example of this is the repeated claim by NRA leaders that fighters were free to leave the guerrillas at any time and return to their families.⁶² This was a rhetorical instrument intended to instil confidence in victory in NRA soldiers. Many fighters, however, would never have dared to ask their commander about this or to desert, although they did think about it:

Life among the rebels was very bad because what we got to eat was as bad as all other aspects of life. We were infected with lice, what not. Let me tell you, I felt like running away as life was terrible. [...] But there was no running away because they guarded us. If you had run away, they would have come for you, even this way [in the village], and they would have waited for you to kill you.⁶³

This and similar statements in interviews with ordinary fighters testify to their fears, which the Code of Conduct did not eliminate but rather seemed to intensify. This was yet another reason why the narratives of low-ranking NRA fighters were not constructed as “heroic stories”.

For the most part, the interviews lacked the subsequent certainty of victory, feelings of superiority, and even guerrilla romanticism. As a result, they allow for a different, more differentiated view of the war and the course of the war. They also help to evaluate how successful the official production of history and historical myths can be over the long term. In the case of Uganda, the NRA’s official version of history has not been adopted by the broader population, neither by civilians in the Luwero Triangle,⁶⁴ nor even by the NRA’s own fighters. The guerrilla myth remains a discourse of the political and military elite.

62. *Ibid.*, p. 129; interview 15, Fred Mwesigye, Kampala, October 1994.

63. Interview 44, Nassan Kaggwa, Katikamu County, Luwero District, January 1986.

64. Frank Schubert, “War Came to Our Place’: Eine Sozialgeschichte des Krieges im Luwero-Dreieck, Uganda 1981–1986” (Ph.D., University of Hanover, 2003), pp. 127–240.