

Ex-combatants as social activists: War, peace, and ideology in Burundi

Introduction

On a relatively quiet Bujumbura evening in August 2015, when most of my interlocutors were staying put in their own neighbourhoods, I joined an international development expatriate and a few of her upper middle-class Burundian friends for a beer. When asked what brought me to Burundi, I told them I was doing research with ex-combatants. 'Ah, ex-combatants. They are all recyclable' one of the men exclaimed. 'They go from combatant to ex-combatant to combatant again'. Everyone laughed. It was an innocent enough joke, but one that was very telling of the dominant discourse on ex-combatants.

This was during a time of high tension in Burundi. Popular protests against President's Nkurunziza's third term had broken out four months earlier, a coup attempt had failed in May, and the newly-conducted elections had been accompanied by a fair share of violence. Scattered incidences of violence had become commonplace after the protests and the potential for greater violence—even a new, full-scale civil war— loomed in the air. Ex-combatants were considered a major threat.

There is nothing uniquely Burundian in the notion that ex-combatants pose a threat to peace. Both the academic and policy-oriented literature on peace-building has discussed the problems of disarming and demobilising ex-combatants, viewing them as potential threats to a fragile peace and a problem to be solved. [1] This is not illogical, given that violence committed by ex-combatants in countries around the world has, indeed, posed a threat to peace.[2] There is, however, other research that points towards the possibility that the threat of

ex-combatants returning to violence is smaller than usually assumed,[3] and suggests that when it happens the causes are more complicated than the simple disgruntlement of well-trained men and women who lack economic opportunities.[4]

Many of my ex-combatant interlocutors were doing paid and unpaid work relating to community development, conflict prevention and peace-building. They explained their reasons for having joined the war in social activist, and sometimes patriotic, terms, wanting to do something for their country and community. These post-war projects, and their explanations for participation in war, were very similar, whether the combatants had come from the former state military or former rebel groups.

There seems to be a shift towards a more nuanced approach to research on ex-combatants, with more diverse ideas becoming more prominent, something I intend to contribute to. In this article, I look at the connection between the active combat during armed conflict and the social activism of ex-combatants in the aftermath of armed conflict. I argue that the role of ideology needs to be taken seriously as a motivation for both violent and peaceful modes for positive change. Choosing to fight in civil war and to work for peace or community development during peacetime are thus not necessarily polar opposites. Following from this, I suggest that ex-combatants are an untapped resource for peace-building and conflict prevention, and that their willingness or interest in remobilising is far from given.

What is unique about this research is its timing. The data was collected in Burundi throughout the year 2015, when tension was high. Incidence of violence was commonplace in certain areas, a large number of people fled the country and new potential rebel groups were forming. The fear of a renewed full-scale civil war was thus tangible and justified, rather than being an abstract notion. The situation offered a unique opportunity to research the reaction of ex-combatants regarding potential re-mobilisation.

I begin this article by discussing the literature on ex-combatants and the role of ideology in conflict. I then provide a brief overview of conflict in Burundi, followed by an account of my methodology. I thereafter discuss Burundian ex-combatants' disinterest in violence and re-mobilisation, and how their social activism can be seen as a continuation of ideology rather than a transformation from their experience as active fighters.

Understanding ex-combatants and the role of ideology

Since 1989, projects on Disarmament, Demobilisation and Reintegration (DDR) have become increasingly prevalent in peace-building and reconstruction in the aftermath of war.[5] A number of academic studies on DDR have followed suit.[6] These programmes, and the academic work that studies them, have had a tendency to focus on processes and technicalities, rather than on the political, social and economic contexts in which they take place, and it has been argued that this focus hinders their effectiveness.[7] There has been less focus on the political aspect of reintegrating ex-combatants into their communities following armed conflict.[8]

Due to this focus on DDR as a technical process rather than as part of a larger political problem, there has been a tendency to view ex-combatants as a potential threat to peace. Conventional DDR programmes have viewed ex-combatants as individualised problems of violence in otherwise peaceful societies.[9] This is a simplification of the post-conflict situation, but changing individuals rather than whole societies may seem the less daunting task. This focus is perhaps not completely illogical, as there are a number of instances when some ex-combatants have turned to violence,[10] even though this is not all ex-combatants, and not under all circumstances.[11]

Ex-combatants are not a homogenous group, which is an essential starting point when discussing their violence or peace-building potential. A shift has taken place in the literature,

with more research emphasising the complexities of DDR, as well as more nuanced understandings of ex-combatants.[12] There is some evidence indicating that ex-combatants do not participate in violence to a great degree— for example, from Colombia.[13] Due to their experiences, ex-combatants can, in many ways, be more difficult to attract back to conflict with promises of economic or political gains. Many ex-combatants become disillusioned with their former armed groups due to the high costs they paid in the war, for few benefits.[14] Their intimate experience of violence may also turn them into adamant non-violence activists.[15] Regarding Burundi, Peter Uvin points out that many of the ex-combatants there wanted to demobilise. They were fed up with the war, the military structure, and they felt they had already achieved what they aimed for.[16] Many were thus eager to leave the military lifestyle.

Age is another important factor to take into consideration. The older ex-combatants grow, the less interested they are in violence, and the more interested in family life. In Colombia, for instance, criminal organisations in have replaced ex-combatants, and rely on younger recruits.[17] Thus, age may deter ex-combatants themselves from participating in violence, and may deter the instigators of violence from approaching them.

The motivation of entrepreneurs of violence— political or military elites that initiate violence— is also necessary for ex-combatants to take up arms again. The majority of ex-combatants themselves usually lack the resources and leadership skills necessary for organised violence.[18] Related to this, it is important to take note of what Brett and Specht[19] have identified as one of the primary causes for young people's participation in war: the fact that there is already a war going on. Most people join armed groups under violent circumstances, not during peaceful times.

Not only are ex-combatants not always a threat to peace, some are reported to be potential agents of positive change. Research from a wide variety of conflict settings have identified many former combatants with what Shobna Sonpar[20] calls an 'activist identity'. In

some cases, ex-combatants were social activists before joining armed groups[21]. In some cases, an in-country history of social activism helped insurgent groups mobilise fighters for their cause.[22] Activism may be guided by a desire to contribute to the community. Van der Merwe and Smith,[23] focusing on ex-combatants in South Africa, whilst also drawing lessons from Angola, Burundi, Mozambique, Sierra Leone and Zimbabwe, emphasise the passion many ex-combatants have for making contributions to their communities. They argue that these men and women are often social activists with a good understanding of the causes of social injustices.[24]

Thus, joining armed groups is not necessarily a complete rotation in the life trajectories of these men and women. Of the many diverse and interlinked reasons motivating an individual to join an armed group, ideology should be considered as one factor. By ideology, I refer to the definition put forward by Gutierréz Sanín and Wood[25] to

> *mean a more or less systematic set of ideas that includes the identification of a referent group…, an enunciation of the grievances or challenges that the group confronts, the identification of objectives on behalf of that group…, and a (perhaps vaguely defined) program of action*

It is important to note that the referent group can be very loosely defined; some of my interlocutors thought of the Hutu as that group, but many seemed to think of it in much looser terms, such as 'the marginalised' or 'the oppressed'.

In recent years a number of theories regarding motivation to participate in civil war have been put forward, including on greed and grievance[26], and structural factors such as poverty and demography,[27] amongst others. These theories have naturally been met with criticism; for example, for simplification and lack of contextualisation.[28] Other scholars have rather focused on de-pathologising the motivations of combatants.[29] It is important to note that different theories explaining engagement in violence should not be considered mutually

exclusive.[30] There can be a number of different reasons that motivate an individual to join an armed group, and these reasons may change during the course of the conflict.[31]

Ideology, as one reason for joining armed conflict, is perhaps sometimes overlooked, especially in conflicts where economic reasons are more obvious.[32] Elisabeth Jean Wood has drawn attention to the emotional and moral reasons contributing to the emergence of insurgent collective violence in situations where the poor are marginalised and excluded, and their claims on the state are met with repression. She uses the term *pleasure of agency* to explain that the participants in El Salvador's insurgency took pride in being agents in the making of history. Their motivation was not simply based on changing their own lives, but on those of others as well.[33]

Northern Ireland offers a good example of how former combatants' social activism has been successful in peace-building efforts. Former combatants there have been agents, and leaders even, in the peace-building process.[34] They have taken part in projects engaging with young people allowing youth to learn about the realities of violent conflict.[35] Similar projects have taken place in Serbia.[36] A number of community-based organisations of former combatants have formed in Northern Ireland, and it has been argued that they have given their members a new identity: the 'politically-motivated' former combatant.[37]

The benefits of involving former terrorists/combatants/militants in conflict prevention is becoming normalised in the literature on Europe. Based on the experience of Northern Ireland, there is now a discussion on whether returning Islamic State fighters in the United Kingdom can have a role in preventing violence.[38] Literature on former ETA members in Spain,[39] and on ex-combatants in Croatia,[40] discuss the potential of these groups in peace-building and conflict prevention. Currently, research concludes that these groups have not been effective in this way in these countries. This is an interesting focus however, and different to the general discussion on ex-combatants elsewhere in the world.

There has been a shift in the discourse on ex-combatants, from viewing them simply as troublemakers to a more diverse understanding. There is now an accumulation of research that problematises a simplistic view of the diverse group of people that former fighters are, and offers a more nuanced perspective. Ideology and social activism should be taken into account as factors that motivate individuals to participate in armed conflict. I aim to contribute to the existing theorising on the role of ideology and social activism in the actions of combatants and ex-combatants. I will do this by exploring the case of Burundi during a time when the potential for a renewed civil war was looming and new rebel groups were being formed.

Recent conflict in Burundi

Burundi's post-colonial history has alternated between periods of relative peace and episodes of violence. This has been explained by Ngaruko and Nkurunziza as a cycle of predation, rebellion and repression.[41] After independence from Belgium in 1962, episodes of violence took place in 1965, 1972, 1988 and 1993, which lead to a full-scale civil war, usually considered to have ended in 2005, when democratic elections were held. Violence has thus become a structural pattern of politics.[42] Violence played an important role in blocking the process of democratization in the early years of independence, as well as protecting the power of the ruling Tutsi minority.[43] Progressively, both the main political party, UPRONA, and the army became 'tutsified',[44] leaving the Hutu majority with few options but armed rebellion as a means of resistance.[45]

The episodes of violence in independent Burundi followed a recurring pattern. In 1965, Hutu military officers staged a coup. The Tutsi military retaliated, killing Hutu government members and civilians. These acts lead to the elimination of Hutu leadership.[46] In 1972, a number of Hutu massacred thousands of Tutsi in the southern part of Burundi.

Again, the Tutsi military retaliated, this time killing between 200,000 and 300,000 Hutu, particularly targeting educated Hutu.[47] Crisis erupted again in 1988, when Hutu rebels killed civilians, this time in the North of the country. As before, the army reacted forcefully.[48] This time, the international community responded to the acts of violence, and the Burundi government was persuaded to make constitutional and political reforms leading to multiparty presidential and legislative elections in 1993. Melchior Ndadaye, a Hutu, and his party, FRODEBU, won a decisive victory,[49] making Ndadaye the first civilian and elected president of the Republic of Burundi.[50] Only three months into office, however, Ndadaye was killed in an attempted coup d'état. This was the trigger for civil war. The civil war pitted predominantly Hutu rebel groups— the most important being the Conseil National pour la Défense de la Démocratie - Forces pour la Défense de la Démocratie (CNDD-FDD) and the Forces Nationales de Libération (FNL) — against a predominantly Tutsi state military.

By the end of the civil war, the World Bank estimated that about 60,000 ex-combatants would be eligible for the Disarmament, Demobilisation and Reintegration (DDR) programme. By the end of the programme, approximately 26,000 ex-combatants had been demobilised and approximately 21,000 individuals reintegrated.[51] The definition of reintegration was simply that these individuals had received reintegration assistance. The reintegration process has not been free from criticism, and is considered by some not to have been truly implemented.[52] In addition, although research suggests that the DDR programme helped participants economically, this has reportedly not translated into social and political reintegration.[53]

Following the 2005 elections, there was optimism for Burundi's future.[54] However, Burundi's problems and history were not erased overnight, and the process of building a new democratic country remained. In addition, domestic conflicts, such as land disputes, persisted. Yet Burundi was generally presented as a success story, by peace-building practitioners and

academics alike. It is possible that the focus on success, and the need to present a success story, caused many of the problems since 2005 to be overlooked.[55]

The CNDD-FDD, the biggest rebel group during the war, and now the ruling political party, won the elections in 2005, and their leader, Pierre Nkurunziza, became President. The party seemed intent on holding onto power, and did so through corruption and the suppression of free media, civil society and the opposition. The party won the municipal elections in 2010, and the opposition, claiming election fraud, boycotted the legislative and presidential elections of that year. This boycott only strengthened the CNDD-FDD's power hold. Tension rose in 2014 ahead of the 2015 elections. On April 25, 2015, the CNDD-FDD announced that Nkurunziza would be their presidential candidate, thus a presidential candidate for (what many argued was) an unconstitutional third term, and in breach of the Arusha Peace Agreement from the year 2000. Protests broke out immediately across Bujumbura.[56] Two weeks into the protests, on the 13th of May, a coup attempt was made. Less than 48 hours later, it was clear that the attempt had failed. Grenade attacks and night-time shootings became the norm in Bujumbura after the coup attempt, and there were constant rumours and a pervasive fear that a new civil war would break out.

Methodology

This article is based on data gathered from ethnographic fieldwork, which took place throughout the year 2015 in the unstable political environment referred to above. Fieldwork lasted for just under 10 months. An ethnographic approach is particularly useful for researching the practices of war and peace[57] as it allows us to go beyond politicised discourse to scrutinise everyday political life.[58]

The focus of my fieldwork was to build strong relationships with a small number of interlocutors in order to get a deeper, more holistic knowledge and understanding of people's

lives than one-time interviews can achieve. Therefore, 'deep hanging out',[59] as coined by anthropologist Clifford Geertz, was the most suitable method. This meant that I met many of my interlocutors on a daily basis at their workplace. Some informants I met on a weekly basis, usually either after work hours, or during weekend afternoons. With other interlocutors, meetings took place on an approximately monthly basis. Aside from these meetings, I also took part in major events in my interlocutors' lives, such as weddings and funerals, celebrating the birth of a child, or the graduation of a sibling. On these occasions, and sometimes during our regular meetings, I was introduced to wives, family members and friends. In addition to about 160,000 words of field notes, 18 individual interviews and four focus group discussions were recorded. The recorded interviews focused on their motivations for joining armed groups, their experiences and attitudes towards being a part of an armed group and their experiences going back to civilian life.

The ex-combatants were from three different groups: the former state military, Forces Armées du Burundi (FAB); and the two biggest rebel groups during the war: the CNDD-FDD, and the FNL. Three women were interviewed, but otherwise the interlocutors were men. They all joined the war at a young age, but at different times during the war; very few joined at the beginning. The age range when I met them thus varied from late twenties to mid-forties.

My introduction to the field came through a local civil society organization (CSO) based in Bujumbura. This CSO had conducted work with ex-combatants, and many of the staff members were ex-combatants themselves. Especially in the beginning, this CSO was vital for my research, identifying people to interview, setting up interviews and helping with translation as necessary. As my fieldwork progressed, I used my expanding network to find other participants, and was less reliant on the CSO. The ex-combatants I found through my network were mainly university students living in areas hard-hit by the protests in 2015,

which they were participating in. However, the CSO office remained my most important field-site, and many of my closest interlocutors were either staff members or in some way affiliated with the CSO. To protect the anonymity of my interlocutors, I have given them pseudonyms in this article, and the CSO will go unnamed.

Having established that long-term relationships and 'deep hanging out' was the most appropriate method for acquiring holistic data meant that my main interlocutors had to be able to converse in French or English. Given this requirement, and the fact that so many were affiliated with the CSO, these men are perhaps not 'typical' Burundian ex-combatants, if there is such a thing as a typical Burundian ex-combatant. They are better-off than many others when it comes to economic, social and cultural capital. The purpose of the article is not to claim that they represent all ex-combatants in Burundi or elsewhere. My intention is simply to point out that this group of people does exist. They usually don't receive much attention; thus, a good reason to acknowledge them and understand them better.

Burundian ex-combatants, violence and re-mobilisation

As the joke that opens this article shows, the general discourse on ex-combatants in Burundi during my time there concerned their possible re-mobilisation. This discourse encompassed a belief that ex-combatants were violent in general. Many of my ex-combatant informants spoke of encountering this attitude, especially just after demobilisation, and how it affected their reintegration. Felix recalled how people were terrified of him in his old village, and believed he was a thief. 'I don't think anyone even dared sleep inside when I was around, knowing I was coming from the bush [coming back from the war]' he stated. He claimed that even his own siblings were afraid of him, and he worried that the villagers might end up killing him, so he left for a bigger town. Elise told a similar story. People were afraid of her

when she came back from her years as an FNL fighter, and thought she would continue her violent behaviour. Alain often talked about this subject, and the injustice of it.

> *For example, you can hear on the radio that in a commune x or y, a woman has been raped; automatically they say it is an ex-combatant who raped her. In Burundi society they are so judgmental, every time something happens, it is always ex-combatants. But I remember when I was a child in the 80s, there were people who raped women, there were thieves … so even before, these people were around, but today because there are people who joined armed groups, when anything wrong happens it is always ex-combatants [who are blamed].*

Alain brought this up on a couple of occasions. He did, however, later mention something somewhat contradictory. He said that when the ex-combatants returned to his neighbourhood, the rate of theft went down; 'even the thieves knew that when the ex-combatants were back in the neighbourhood there would be no leniency'. He backed away from this position a little bit at a later stage.

> *Well, it was a way to earn back the trust of the people [living in the neighbourhood], it wasn't, we didn't throw people [burglars] to the dogs. But still, they knew that there would be a price to pay, those that came to rob and destroy would be severely punished.*

The implicit expectation that returning ex-combatants would use force to protect their local communities from crime is also found in South Africa, Sierra Leone and Liberia,[60] although Alain was the only one of my informants who mentioned it. The others focused on the need to prove their peaceful behaviour to regain the trust of their communities. But it is an interesting paradox for ex-combatants to wrestle with; to be expected to be both peaceful and violent, depending on the needs of the community.

During the tension in Burundi in 2015, the concern was mostly not on the general violence of ex-combatants, however, but on whether they would go back to war. People were afraid that ex-combatants would escalate the violence that was occurring, and possibly cause civil war. Dieudonné, a former CNDD-FDD fighter, did not think that ex-combatants were going to be the main problem, though he admitted that some ex-combatants were unhappy. I asked him if this sort of discussion bothered him. 'Yes, it bothers me because I see many ex-combatants who are humble, who live with other people without problems. It bothers me to hear talk of ex-combatants going to be violent again.' He paused and continued, 'People who talk about war are the ones who don't know its meaning'.

The notion that ex-combatants would not go back to war because of their intimate experience of it came up frequently. Ex-combatants are the ones who know and understand war, and therefore, the last to go back it, was often claimed. Many of my interlocutors were sick and tired of the war, and longing for a different lifestyle, a finding corroborated by Uvin.[61] Some of my interlocutors had been waiting for years for the war to end, since they wanted a different life but could not leave their armed group, as they feared they would be killed if they made the attempt.

It was often added that those who really posed a threat to peace were those with no experience of participating in war, who therefore did not know or understand what they would be getting themselves into. Francine framed it like this: 'What may surprise you is that because of what they [ex-combatants] went through, they no longer commit violence. This is only done by people who do not know what happened [in the war], [who] fantasise about what they have only heard of'.

It should be emphasised once again that ex-combatants are far from a homogenous group. My aim is not to claim that no ex-combatants pose a threat to peace. None of the ex-combatants I spoke to would make this claim. When I asked Francine if, by her above

comment she meant that ex-combatants were in fact less violent than the average civilian, she did not want to confirm this. 'No, ex-combatants are no saints. Both sides [ex-combatants and civilians] have some violent people'.

In this way, some of my informants took part in the discourse of some ex-combatants being a threat, although they always made it clear that they themselves were not part of the threatening group. Whether they had specific individuals in mind who might pose a threat, or if they were simply taking part in the popular discourse is unclear. Discussing the fear of ex-combatants going back to war, Alain stated:

> *It is true that there are people who were demobilised but up to now are still ex-combatants, who are likely to re-join the rebellion if war would erupt tomorrow. Personally, for me, the war is no longer an option, it has no more space [in my life]. I am in a place where I am thinking about my future, where I need to think, where I must take time to think before acting.*

This was similar to what Olivier expressed:

> *Now I can´t just decide in one moment to join the rebellion or an armed group, I must take time to think about the decision I am going to make … now I have a certain experience, I don't know how to explain it … now, before making any decisions I must think about the impact of the action I am about to take.*

There seems to be an added maturity that both Alain and Olivier speak of. This could be due to their experiences gained with their armed groups. But another factor could simply be age and social standing, as Kaplan and Nussio have pointed out. Ex-combatants can, like other groups of people, simply age out of interest in violence and crime. Especially if they have strong family ties and children.[62]

Some of my interlocutors were quite honest in saying that they did not know what they would do if civil war actually broke out. It was easy to say they did not want to

participate in war again, but difficult to predict what they would do if it broke out, although they hoped they would stay away. In the scenarios put forward, war was already happening, however; no one could see themselves, or would admit to seeing themselves, as part of the group that initiated war and violence.

The exceptions were the occasional ex-combatant who had, for one reason or another, strong ties to former commanders who were now powerful people. Two of my interlocutors said they would be likely to join if civil war broke out, but it would be against their will. 'That is why war is a bad thing, you find yourself involved in it without choosing. If I join, it will be by force, not by choice' one of them explained.

Social activism of ex-combatants: continuity of ideology

Far from making a living by violent means or stating an interest in re-mobilisation, many of my interlocutors were actively working on conflict prevention and peace-building programmes. Ex-combatants taking part in this line of work is not as great a contradiction as it may seem. The importance of ideology and social activism are consistent in the life trajectories of these men, and violence was often chosen in desperation during times when there were no other available options. I follow the anthropological trend of viewing war and peace not as complete opposites.

In anthropological theorising, war and peace are viewed as intertwined and connected, as part of a continuum. War is thus not essentially different to peace, but relies on the same social and organisational skills that people use to sustain peace.[63] War is a long-term struggle organised for political ends.[64] Aspects of the struggle may predate the war, and may continue after its formal ending in different forms. War can thus be seen, as famously put by Clausewitz, as politics by other means.[65]

Samuel's story demonstrates the continuity of activism in different forms depending on circumstances. Samuel has been a proponent of Mandela, Gandhi and Martin Luther King from a young age. As a boy, he already had a keen interest in history and current affairs. He was active in the youth centre in his neighbourhood as a teenager, participating, for example, in their young leadership training programmes. He was also active in projects assisting orphans in the neighbourhood, of which there were many, since his neighbourhood was hard-hit during the war. He seems to have been, judging by his own account, a model youth, someone donors of international aid would have invested in as a 'leader of tomorrow'. Then, one day, at the age of 17, he joined a rebel group.

Since the end of the war, he has been involved in a number of community projects, paid and unpaid. Nowadays he does not believe that violence can be a problem-solver. He is self-demobilised, and is quite disillusioned by his experience of the war, as well as with the political developments of his old armed group. Samuel's active participation in the war should not be seen as incongruous with his social activism; his social activism is not something he started before joining the war, rejected during his time in the armed group, and returned to after the war. Samuel's active participation in the war can be viewed as a part of his social activist trajectory; something he regrets today, but, at the time, something he felt was necessary for making positive change for Burundi and its people.

As Samuel himself explained, many combatants were motivated by ideology: 'Well, most of the people that went to the bush to help in the rebellion were people who actually had ideals; they were people that … they understood that there was a struggle to be lead, a change to be lead'. Given Samuel's admiration for Mandela and other important figures related to peace and non-violence, this is not a surprising depiction of (ex-) rebels, but I was given the same explanation by a number of other interlocutors as well.

It was in fact quite remarkable to notice how frequently the reasons given for joining the war sounded like reasons for doing peace-building or other types of community work. Dieudonné explained his reasons for joining the war like this: '…my feelings were to help my country to maintain a lasting peace. For that to happen we had to fight with the group of people that mistreated people…'. Jean Claude, also focusing on the injustice that prevailed in Burundi at the time, said, 'We couldn't travel from one district to another without an ID, and sometimes even if you had an ID they would not let you travel. There was a lot of injustice, so joining was the only way to escape that injustice'. Given the oppression and social injustice in Burundi before the civil war, and the lack of peaceful avenues for resisting it, it can easily be argued that some of the people who chose to join would otherwise have taken part in more peaceful social activism. The role of ideology should thus be taken seriously as one of the factors that explain the many, interrelated reasons people take up arms during civil war.

Ideology was also important for many of my interlocutors to keep them motivated and get them through the war. Three of my interlocutors had joined their armed groups by force. They spoke of this with surprisingly little bitterness or victimisation. All three had similar stories to tell: they had been kidnapped or otherwise coerced, but soon accepted their fate. Henri stated that 'in the beginning I didn´t know what I was doing, because I had joined without planning it, but after some months I chose to fight and I was motivated.' I am inclined to believe this swift resignation to the unwanted situation was a survival strategy for these three men. They found themselves in dire, unsolicited circumstances and needed to justify being there in order to endure it.

Of the three, Prosper was the one who resisted longest and made several attempts to flee. When I asked if he had wanted to leave the whole time, or if he had, at some point, felt a need to fight for the Hutu cause, he was quick to decline.

Me, I never fought for the Hutu…During the first months in the bush I was always thinking about fleeing, but in the long run I saw that this was risking my life and …there were peace negotiations going on and I thought there could be a way to find my family…so after these eight months, I decided to continue fighting. I tried to, to be open to the political ideology that was being taught, and understood that even though there were some extremists that confused the CNDD-FDD ideology with ethnicity, the ideology was that it isn´t ethnicity that kills, it is bad governance that kills…And after that, I understood that the CNDD-FDD ideology comprehends that the Hutu and the Tutsi can live together, and that lifted my spirit up a bit…the ideology of the CNDD-FDD never claimed to be for the Hutu, it was about fighting for democracy, human rights and equal rights of everyone…

Finding a part of the ideology he could identify with helped Prosper get through his time actively taking part in the war, even though his interpretation was not shared by all of those around him. In this way ideology, or perception of ideology, can play an important part in war, even when the movement´s actions are not always in line with it.

A lack of coherence between the actions of armed groups and their ideologies was noted and brought discomfort. One focus group participant, reacting to another participant saying how much easier life had been, economically, during the war, discussed this.

…this is not my point of view…we were fighting for what we called justice, and for me to get what I wanted, like food and money, most of the time I used violence without justice. This is why I prefer life after the war. I don´t have money, but I am proud of myself because what I fought for has been achieved.

This quote recalls the *pleasure of agency* coined by Wood[66] and the pride of taking part in making (positive) history. However, many of my informants had been quite discontent about

their stay in their armed groups and wished to leave long before the war was over. Most stated that they had not dared try to escape out of fear for their lives. Dieudonné and Henri, however, did successfully escape. Interestingly, both continued to work with their armed group afterwards; Henri, in particular, on outreach, mobilising youth and promoting the ideology of the group. Concern for personal safety surely played a part in their decisions to maintain these connections, yet, despite not wanting to take active part in the war, they seemed not to have lost belief in their armed group's cause.

Activism and ideology seem to have played a part in all stages of my interlocutors' lives, pre-combatant, combatant and ex-combatant. It is, therefore, perhaps not a huge shift in life trajectory for those now actively working on conflict prevention and peace-building. I asked Pascal once whether he thought ex-combatants could make good peacebuilders. Pascal was certain that they could—, they are the ones who know what war and combat are all about, after all. But he worried that they did not have the power to tackle what he considered to be the root causes of armed conflict: the sense of injustice. According to Pascal, the main reason people choose to join armed movements is their perception of injustice and the absence of paths to seek justice peacefully.

Many of my interlocutors spoke of their knowledge and understanding of war and combat as the reason they would be good peacebuilders. They know what they are talking about when they discourage youth from turning to violence. This is similar to the arguments made about ex-combatants and their work in terrorism prevention in Northern Ireland. Their experience gives them legitimacy. The local CSO that hosted me used this kind of legitimacy to encourage youth affiliated with political parties to avoid violence. During workshops and dialogue meetings they spoke in general terms, rather than about their personal experiences, but they emphasised the guilt that many ex-combatants suffered due to bad acts they participated in during the war.

There is certainly potential for ex-combatants to take part in peace-building and conflict prevention in Burundi. However, their low status presents an obstacle. One of the reasons that ex-combatants in Northern Ireland have become good leaders in terrorism prevention is that they are more respected than regular community workers.[67] This is not the case in Burundi, where ex-combatants generally command very little respect. In one interview, the interviewee held that people from the community came to him for conflict resolution because he was an ex-combatant. This was, however, a very unusual claim; nowhere else did I hear of ex-combatants gaining from their status as ex-combatants in this manner. Yet actively involving ex-combatants in peace-building and conflict prevention, thus giving them new, useful roles may however be one step to better involve them in society.

Conclusion

The focus on ex-combatants' potential as agents of positive change has been both underexplored and mostly limited to white, western former combatants, neglecting those residing outside the global north. There is plenty of empirical evidence illustrating that some ex-combatants tend to remobilise for armed conflict or participate in violent crime. However, this evidence is often interpreted to be representative of all ex-combatants.

The purpose of this article was to explore what drives ex-combatants to engage in social activism, such as conflict prevention and peace-building work. I have argued that ideology should be considered as one important motivating factor in joining active combat, and, therefore, that engaging in social activism when the war ends is a logical continuation. Many of my informants described themselves as social activists, and were eager to do work for their community. Many were also active in the sphere of conflict resolution and peace-building. These activist attitudes, in many cases, predated their time participating in the war.

Viewing ex-combatants, not as a homogenous group, but as a diverse group of individuals, driven by different motivations and desires, certainly complicates the work of DDR programmes. It may make them more relevant, however. Not all ex-combatants are unhappy to return to civilian life. Many of my interlocutors had been waiting for that opportunity for years, but had been unable to leave their armed group for fear of being killed. It can be argued that ex-combatants who want to use their experience to help build a more peaceful country are an untapped resource in peace-building and conflict resolution. Making use of this resource could support work on conflict prevention and peace-building, and would be beneficial for the individual ex-combatants themselves.

Notes

[1] Berdal and Ucko, 'Introduction to the DDR Forum'; Colletta and Muggah, 'Context Matters'; Muggah, *Security and Post-Conflict Reconstruction*; Knight and Özerdem, 'Guns, Camps and Cash'; Kingma, 'Demobilization of Combatants after Civil Wars in Africa and Their Reintegration into Civilian Life'; Gear, *Wishing Us Away*.
[2] Nussio, 'Ex-Combatants and Post-Conflict Violence'; Themnér, 'A Leap of Faith', 296.
[3] Nussio, 'Ex-Combatants and Post-Conflict Violence'.
[4] Themnér, 'A Leap of Faith'.
[5] Colletta and Muggah, 'Context Matters'; Muggah, *Security and Post-Conflict Reconstruction*.
[6] See for example Berdal and Ucko, 'Introduction to the DDR Forum'; Colletta and Muggah, 'Context Matters'; Knight and Özerdem, 'Guns, Camps and Cash'; Muggah, 'No Magic Bullet'; Muggah, *Security and Post-Conflict Reconstruction*; Özerdem, 'A Re-Conceptualisation of Ex-Combatant Reintegration'; Theidon, 'Transitional Subjects'.
[7] Colletta and Muggah, 'Context Matters', 431.
[8] Berdal and Ucko, 'Introduction to the DDR Forum'.
[9] van der Merwe and Smith, 'Ex-Combatants as Peacebuilders: Opportunities and Challenges', 9.
[10] Debos, 'Fluid Loyalties in a Regional Crisis'; McMullin, 'Reintegration of Combatants'; Subedi, 'Ex-Combatants, Security and Post-Conflict Violence'; Themnér, 'A Leap of Faith'; Zyck, 'Former Combatant Reintegration and Fragmentation in Contemporary Afghanistan'.

[11] Themnér, 'A Leap of Faith'; Subedi, 'Ex-Combatants, Security and Post-Conflict Violence'.
[12] Söderström, *Peacebuilding and Ex-Combatants*; Themnér, 'A Leap of Faith'; Nussio, 'Ex-Combatants and Post-Conflict Violence'; Kaplan and Nussio, 'Explaining Recidivism of Ex-Combatants in Colombia'.
[13] Nussio, 'Ex-Combatants and Post-Conflict Violence'.
[14] Mitton, 'Where Is the War?', 325–26.
[15] Sonpar, 'A Potential Resource?'
[16] Uvin, 'Ex-Combatants in Burundi'.
[17] Nussio, 'Ex-Combatants and Post-Conflict Violence'.
[18] Themnér, 'A Leap of Faith'.
[19] Brett and Specht, *Young Soldiers*.
[20] Sonpar, 'A Potential Resource?'
[21] Cook, 'Veterans of Peace in Post-Conflict South Africa'; Sonpar, 'A Potential Resource?'; Wood, *Insurgent Collective Action and Civil War in El Salvador*.
[22] Graham, 'People's War?'
[23] van der Merwe and Smith, 'Ex-Combatants as Peacebuilders: Opportunities and Challenges'.
[24] van der Merwe and Smith.
[25] Gutierrez Sanín and Wood, Ideology in Civil War, 215
[26] Collier and Hoeffler, 'Greed and Grievance in Civil War'.
[27] Özerdem and Podder, *Youth in Conflict and Peacebuilding*.
[28] Richards, *No Peace, No War: An Anthropology of Contemporary Armed Conflict*.
[29] Hoffman, *The War Machines*; Utas, 'Sweet Battlefields'.
[30] Guichaoua, *Understanding Collective Political Violence*; Humphreys and Weinstein, 'Demobilization and Reintegration'.
[31] Guichaoua, *Understanding Collective Political Violence*; Özerdem and Podder, *Youth in Conflict and Peacebuilding*.
[32] Henriksen and Vinci, 'Combat Motivation in Non-State Armed Groups'.
[33] Wood, *Insurgent Collective Action and Civil War in El Salvador*.
[34] McEvoy and Shirlow, 'Re-Imagining DDR'.
[35] Emerson, 'Conflict, Transition and Education for "political Generosity"'.
[36] Simić and Milojević, 'Dialogues between Ex-Combatants and Youth in Serbia'.
[37] Dwyer, '"Sometimes I Wish I Was an 'ex' Ex-Prisoner"'.
[38] Clubb, 'The Role of Former Combatants in Preventing Youth Involvement in Terrorism in Northern Ireland'.
[39] Alonso and Bada, 'What Role Have Former ETA Terrorists Played in Counterterrorism and Counterradicalization Initiatives in Spain'.
[40] Clark, 'Giving Peace a Chance'.
[41] Ngaruko and Nkurunziza, 'An Economic Interpretation of Conflict in Burundi'.
[42] Wittig, 'Politics in the Shadow of the Gun', 144.
[43] Daley, *Gender & Genocide in Burundi*, 67.
[44] Prunier, 'Burundi'.
[45] Daley, *Gender & Genocide in Burundi*, 68.
[46] Lemarchand, *Burundi*.
[47] Lemarchand, 'The Burundi Genocide'.
[48] Ngaruko and Nkurunziza, 'An Economic Interpretation of Conflict in Burundi', 376.
[49] Lemarchand, 'The Burundi Genocide', 330.
[50] Chrétien and Straus, *The Great Lakes of Africa*, 320.
[51] World Bank, 'MDRP Final Report: Overview of Program Achievements'.

[52] Birantamije, cited in Grauvogel, 'Burundi after the 2015 Elections', 10.
[53] Gilligan, Mvukiyehe, and Samii, 'Reintegrating Rebels into Civilian Life'.
[54] Peterson, 'A Beacon for Central Africa'.
[55] Grauvogel, 'Burundi after the 2015 Elections'.
[56] Reyntjens, 'Institutional Engineering, Management of Ethnicity, and Democratic Failure in Burundi'.
[57] Richards, *No Peace, No War: An Anthropology of Contemporary Armed Conflict*, 12.
[58] Vigh, *Navigating Terrains of War*, 22.
[59] Geertz, 'Deep Hanging out'.
[60] van der Merwe and Smith, 'Ex-Combatants as Peacebuilders: Opportunities and Challenges'; Author interview with Mats Utas, Associate Professor in Cultural Anthropology, Uppsala University, Uppsala, 23 October 2017.
[61] Uvin, 'Ex-Combatants in Burundi'.
[62] Kaplan and Nussio, 'Explaining Recidivism of Ex-Combatants in Colombia', 23.
[63] Richards, 'New War: An Ethnographic Approach', 5.
[64] Richards, 4.
[65] Clausewitz, *On War*.
[66] Wood, *Insurgent Collective Action and Civil War in El Salvador*.
[67] Clubb, '"From Terrorists to Peacekeepers"'.

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