

## Book

### Rape as a weapon of war

On Sept 25, 2012, the distinguished gynaecologist Denis Mukwege addressed the UN with a passionate plea not to forget “Africa’s World War” in the eastern Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC). For 16 years, he reminded them, Congolese women had borne the brunt of this conflict and endured rape, sexual slavery, and torture. He began his speech by saying that he regretted that he was unable to state that he was honoured to be able to address them. Honour was impossible because the “women victims of sexual violence in Eastern DRC are in dishonor”. At the Panzi Hospital in Bukavu, South Kivu province, DRC, Mukwege has treated tens of thousands of women who have survived sexual violence. He has repaired so many vaginal fistulae that he is a leading expert in this kind of surgery. As he told those assembled at the UN, “My heart is heavy. My honour, it is to be with these courageous women victims of violence, these women who resist, these women who despite all remain standing.”

Around the same time that Mukwege was addressing the UN, historians Raphaëlle Branche and Fabrice Virgili published *Rape in Wartime*. It is a fine summary of interdisciplinary scholarship in the field, including legal, anthropological, cultural, and gender studies, with a particularly strong historical component. The range of essays in this volume is laudable, stretching from France, the Rhineland, and Spain in the early decades of the 20th century, to mid-century conflicts in the Soviet Union and Greece, and, finally, to more recent upheavals in Colombia, Chechnya, India, Bangladesh, and some African countries.

Remarkably, before the late 20th century, there was relatively little academic interest in wartime sexual violence. As Branche and

Virgili explain, this changed in part as a response to feminist thinking in the late-1960s, which insisted that attention be paid to female sexual autonomy, power, and pleasure. In addition, while the mass rapes that took place in Bangladesh in 1971 and in Guatemala between 1960 and 1996 tended to be largely ignored by the mass media in the west, the eruption

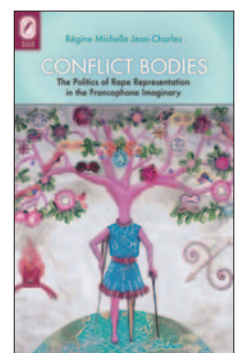
**“As the Global Summit to End Sexual Violence in Conflict takes place in London this week, it is important to remember that it is possible to forge a future without sexual violence.”**

of sexual violence during the breakup of former Yugoslavia in the 1990s and in Rwanda in 1994 brought conflict-related sexual violence to worldwide attention. Even then though, the issue was regarded by many as a “women’s problem”. It was only in 2001 that International Criminal Tribunals for the former Yugoslavia and Rwanda recognised rape and sexual violence as a crime against humanity.

For the authors in Branche and Virgili’s volume, the specificities of sexual violence in armed conflicts

are important. Although there are continuities between sexual violence in times of peace and war, military conflict changes the nature and extent of sexual violence. Such cruel acts constitute what philosopher Mikhail Bakhtin called “authorized transgression”: military authorities officially disapproved of “rape and pillage”, but “turned a blind eye” to such antics, accepting them as necessary for effective atrocious performance in battle. The essays in *Rape in Wartime* explore how historically women belonging to the “enemy group” are particularly vulnerable but once sexual abuse has been normalised for the enemy, it does not take long to spread to the other side.

Although war facilitates rape, it does so in distinctive contexts and to varying levels in different settings. *Rape in Wartime* examines perpetrators within the legitimate military services, paramilitary groups, guerrilla units, and civilians. Similarly, the book highlights how sexual violence in conflict has a multitude functions. Such attacks are an assault on the integrity of individual women as well as their communities. They are a form of public desecration; they are often a deliberate attempt



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**Rape in Wartime**  
Raphaëlle Branche, Fabrice Virgili, eds. Palgrave Macmillan. 2013. Pp 256. US\$90.00. ISBN 0230363997

**Conflict Bodies : the Politics of Rape Representation in the Francophone Imaginary**  
Régine Michelle Jean-Charles. Ohio State University Press, 2014. Pp 320. US\$69.95. ISBN 9780814212462



Women take part in World March of Women in Bukavu, South Kivu Province, DRC



Sven Torfinn/Panos

Denis Mukwege

to humiliate enemy men for failing to protect “their” women. Genocidal motivations emerge time and again. Branche and Virgili observe that the “rapes of Bosniac women by Bosnian Serbs could be seen as an expression of male domination over women, but equally plausibly as an attempt to assert nationalist supremacy by one ‘ethnic’ group over another”. In other words, contradictory feminist and national-political interpretations could be applied to explain what took place.

In many conflicts, sexual violence is shrouded in silence, largely due to the shame of violation for both victims and their communities. The book points to how in South Africa, some women testifying before the Truth and Reconciliation Commission might have minimised their own experiences of sexual violence in order not to draw attention away from the way their menfolk suffered in confinement and prison. By contrast, as in Bangladesh in the early 1970s, governments might set out to publicly eulogise female

victims of rape as “war heroines” and actively seek to help them. And the legacy of sexual violence can be very long indeed. Victims were often infected with sexually transmitted infections or became pregnant. As late as the 1950s, we are told in *Rape in Wartime*, the Italian Government was still struggling to screen for and treat the sexually transmitted infections that resulted from the mass rapes of women by French troops during World War 2.

Branche and Virgili’s volume illustrates what rigorous historical scholarship about rape in times of conflict can tell us about the contexts that trigger such atrocities. Importantly, it also explores how sexual violence is not a feature of all conflicts. A more recent book by Régine Michelle Jean-Charles takes a very different approach. In *Conflict Bodies: The Politics of Rape Representation in the Francophone Imaginary*, Jean-Charles seeks to engage in debates about sexual violence taking place today. As a literature scholar, she turns an acutely sensitive cultural eye to representations of rape in Haiti, Guadeloupe, Rwanda, and the DRC. She also has some pertinent things to say about male victims of sexual violence. She agrees with the contributors in Branche and Virgili’s volume that the male body is as vulnerable as the female one. She observes, however, that responses to male-on-male violation mean that when these victims are discussed in public media they are more easily turned into nationally symbolic figures. She points to how the rape of women in Haiti is depoliticised, whereas the rape of a young man was elevated to the status of a “collective” rape on national sovereignty. In her words, “certain types of rape by certain actors matter more than others”.

Jean-Charles’ account is remarkable for its fierce refusal to portray women who experience rape as passive receptacles of violence. She emphasises the role of African women as agitators

and advocates. They are more than merely survivors: they resist, create, and recreate—even if they do so from a starting point that is never of their own choosing. They rail against injustices. In Jean-Charles’ words, these women are “not brutalized and victimized women in need of a Western vehicle to make their voices audible”. She is referring to women like Chouchou Namegabe Nabintu, journalist and founder of the Association des Femmes des Médiias du Sud Kivu, who broadcasts Congolese women’s stories of sexual violence. Namegabe found that many women refused to suffer in silence. She also rejoiced in her sense of personal empowerment, explaining that “I don’t have guns to fight against it, but I’ve got my microphone, to use it, to fight against the rape and sexual violences. That’s why we give the microphone to victims, to tell their stories...To make it known, to call for actions, because we want it to end”. Jean-Charles reminds her readers that women survivors of sexual violence seek to represent themselves as active, speaking subjects.

What the authors in both books reiterate time and again is the fact that, even in armed conflicts, sexual violence is not inevitable. Resistance is possible because rapists are not born; they become. We can imagine a world in which different choices are made. In the words of Denis Mukwege, “the courage of women victims of sexual violence in the Eastern Congo will in the end overcome this evil. Help them restore peace!” As the Global Summit to End Sexual Violence in Conflict takes place in London on June 10–14, it is important to remember that it is possible to forge a future without sexual violence.

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