



Interdisciplinary Political Studies

<http://siba-ese.unisalento.it/index.php/idps>

ISSN: 2039-8573 (electronic version)

IdPS, Issue 5(1) 2019: 261-264

DOI: 10.1285/i20398573v5n1p261

Published in June 24, 2019

BOOK REVIEWS

Rape During Civil War, by Dara Kay Cohen. Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 2016, pp. 272.

Emel Elif Tugdar

Webster University, Ghana Campus

Sexual violence is a phenomenon that is widely associated with war within the literature on conflicts and contentious politics. At the same time, the extent of how sexual violence is conceptualized, as well as the explanation of its reasons and analysis of its consequences greatly differ depending on the context. In her book *Rape During Civil War*, Dara Kay Cohen successfully answers the question of why wartime rape happens. Based on the analysis of a dataset of ninety-one major civil wars between 1980 and 2012 as well as on her fieldwork in Sierra Leone, Timor-Leste and El Salvador, Cohen introduces a new concept to the literature: ‘combatant socialization.’

In Cohen’s study, the concept of sexual violence is limited to merely act of ‘rape.’ In literature, rape is commonly seen as inevitable element of war as it is associated with both revenge and victory from the perpetrators’ perspective (Seifert 1996; Vikman 2005). Thus, the likelihood of rape is expected to increase during wartime (Wood 2013). Much of the book is devoted to making readers understand why rape is associated with civil war. Cohen claims that wartime rape happens in

Work licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-Non commercial-Share alike 3.0 Italian License
--

the form of gang rape during civil wars. Evidence from the regression analysis confirms that the armed groups recruit their fighters randomly during civil wars, thus a need to establish bonds is inevitable. Her interviews with the perpetrators also reveal that, rape during civil wars is more than sexual desire, but a motivation of building solidarity and loyalty among the members (p.17). Hence, combatant socialization refers to the establishment of intra-group social ties and cohesion among combatants by wartime gang rape (p13). Unlike other psychological investigations for rape action during wartime in the field, which claim for a correlation between weak psychological position and engagement with sexual violence (Horwood 2007; Kassimeris 2006; Weiner 2006; Staub 1992), Cohen maintains that the perpetrators can be ordinary people with no significant mental problems. Also, psychological variables like ethnic hatred and greed are not statistically significant in her analysis.

As for the book's structure, Chapter One introduces the logic of wartime rape. Drawing on the aforementioned dataset, Chapter Two deals with the perpetrators of rape. Chapter Three, Four, and Five investigate the rape incidents during civil war in Sierra Leone (1991-2002), Timor-Leste (1975-1999) and El Salvador (1980-1992) utilizing the data gathered by Cohen during her extensive fieldworks, including interviews with perpetrators of wartime rape in these countries. And this is exactly the peculiar and innovative dimension of the book: providing insights from both these two perspectives. In addition, particularly interesting is the difference between her case-studies: rape was widespread in the civil wars of the Sierra Leone and Timor-Leste but was less common during El Salvador's civil war. Differently from the cases of Sierra Leone and Timor-Lest, in El Salvador's civil war the National Liberation Front (FMLN) guerilla units engaged in less rape, reportedly because they had less need of socialization, since recruitment into FMLN units was also voluntary and they did not need to 'socialize' to act together.

Most of the previous studies in literature investigate the issue of wartime rape from the victims' perspective. In that sense, Cohen fills a gap by providing new patterns of perpetrators' via her interviews with them during her fieldworks (p. 57). Among other variables tested, the significance of 'combatant socialization' appears as the strongest one (p. 85). Also, another important finding of the study is that the general perception that massive scale rape is ordered by commanders is false (p.195). The strategic selection of the three cases fills another gap in literature by the in-depth and enriched analysis of the issue.

Despite these unique aspects of Cohen's research, a few methodological points can be marked as weaknesses. Selection bias appears to be a common problem in comparative research and seems to affect Cohen's work as well. In addition to a weak justification for the case selection, the collection of data on the phenomenon of rape during civil wars has presented a number of criticalities, as Cohen admits with particular reference the case of El Salvador (p.175). According to the author, the peak of violence during the initial phases of the civil war in 1980s constitutes a memory problem among the interviewees. Moreover, cultural discomfort of interviewees to talk about rape brings in the question of the reliability of the data, especially in the case of El Salvador which is presented as an "outlier" case (p.176). Furthermore, even if a variance in the peak points of sexual violence in civil wars in Sierra Leone, Timor-Leste and El Salvador is analyzed, the explanation for such a variance is not univocal.

Rape During Civil War is a significant contribution to the literature despite few small methodological shortcomings. As one of the first systematic cross-national study on rape during recent civil wars, Cohen's book is an inspiration for future research in academia. The insights of the book about the reasons of rape from both victims and perpetrators perspective are also useful to policymakers and

human rights organizations seeking to understand, prevent and treat the wartime rape. Application of the analysis to other cases and post-2012 time period is very promising to understand the wartime rape phenomenon deeper. Middle East and North Africa is another context that witnessed civil wars due to religious and ethnic conflicts, specifically after 2005. The recent ISIS invasion of the Yezidi land of Sinjar in Iraq and their acts of sexual violence towards Yezidi women including rape, forced marriage, and slavery would specifically be a significant new contribution to the literature if considered by future researchers.

References

Horwood, C, 2007, *The Shame of War: Sexual Violence against Women and Girls in Conflict*, Malta: OCHA/IRIN.

Kassimeris, G, (ed) 2006, *The Barbarization of Warfare*, London: C. Hurst & Co.

Seifert, R, 1996, "The Second Front: The Logic of Sexual Violence in Wars", *Women's Studies International Forum*, vol. 19, no. 1-2, pp. 35-43, [https://doi.org/10.1016/0277-5395\(95\)00078-X](https://doi.org/10.1016/0277-5395(95)00078-X).

Staub, E, 1992, *The Roots of Evil: The Origins of Genocide and, Other Group Violence*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge.

Vikman, E, 2005, "Ancient Origins: Sexual Violence in Warfare, Part I", *Anthropology & Medicine*, vol. 12, no. 1, pp. 2-31, DOI: 10.1080/13648470500049826.

Weiner, A, 2006, "Something to Die For, A Lot to Kill For: The Soviet System and the Barbarization of Warfare, 1939-1945", in G Kassimeris (ed), *The Barbarization of Warfare*, C. Hurst & Co, London, pp. 101-125.

Wood, E J, 2013, "Multiple Perpetrator Rape During War", in M Horvarth and J Woodhams (eds), *Handbook on The Study of Multiple Perpetrator Rape: A Multidisciplinary Response To An International Problem*, Routledge, London, pp. 132-59.

Emel Elif Tugdar