Frontlines of Peace, by Séverine Autesserre (2021)

Alex Horne
PS 6120

From the preface:

> The very concept of working at the grassroots to address tensions that may affect only a few hundred people (but are connected to broader conflicts) was utterly foreign to them. So was the idea that the individuals most affected by violence – and not outsiders – should figure out what it would take for them to feel safe and how they can achieve this goal. (8)

This is a great definition of what we've discussed as "peacebuilding" in the past, and I like it because it acknowledges the agency of people in conflict zones. Often, they know best what will make them safe, and the Western interventionist mindset precludes this possibility. Sure, some people will lie about what is needed because they are serving their own interests. But that should not mean categorically dismissing the input of people on the "frontlines" to which the book's title refers.

In addition, we've been searching for a definition of "peace success" which we could use for project evaluation. In the anecdote about Justine and Luca in the Congo, we don't get a quantitative measure per se, but Autesserre suggests that, when people hope for the future rather than despair over it, peacebuilding has succeeded. I imagine it wouldn't be difficult to make this a quantifiable metric, but I wonder what correlation there already is between future outlook and reduced conflict intensity or lasting ceasefires. Something to think about.

Towards the end of the preface, she writes that cases of success are just as confounding to our understanding as cases of failure. Echoing week-1 readings, she cautions against the assumption that war and peace are symmetric or mirrored phenomena.

Part I: *Peace Possible*

Chapter 1: Idjwi Island, South Kivu Province, DRC

The Congolese Wars are, in Autesserre's own words, the deadliest ongoing conflict since 1945. The Eastern provinces of the Congo around Lake Kivu have proven to be the most violent area; neighbouring conflicts in Burundi, Uganda, and Rwanda spillover into East Congo and vice versa. The Congo's sheer size makes it hard for authorities to project force far into the interior from the capital in the West, and, if that wasn't bad enough, valuable mineral resources in

the East make it possible for armed militias to capture and live off the land. Idjwi is unique, therefore, as an island of stability in the rocky seas of war.

Since the inauguration of the Congo Crisis in the '50s, the state, where it is present, has been hardly preferable to the militias. In a word, the state is illegitimate in the eyes of many Congolese. Ordinary people rank political violence as a top concern next to poverty and unemployment, and they see these issues are "inextricably linked." The author agrees on this point: violence makes gainful employment impossible, so people resort to more violence. The Congo is not unique in this regard. Therefore, Autesserre asks why Idjwi is an apparent exception to the rule.

The simplistic explanation is that Idjwi island has the natural barriers of the lake. Autesserre doesn't buy that: other islands in Lake Kivu don't have a reputation as a safe haven. Some raise the point that Idjwi has no valuable minerals, even if it is renowned for delicious pineapples. Again, this observation runs against previous conflicts where the island *was* invaded by outsiders. Maybe it's just ethnically homogenous? Not so: 5% of the island's population are ethnic Pygmies [sic], who are the underclass of Idjwi society. While Pygmies often sided against Bantu in previous conflicts, the levels of inter-ethnic violence on Idjwi were comparably, overwhelmingly, lower on the island than on the mainland. In short, the usual scholastic heuristics which we use to analyse conflict are baffled by Idjwi. Maybe this is merely an edge-case exception – or maybe, something is going *right* on Idjwi which isn't going right elsewhere.

Autesserre argues that the islanders themselves are responsible for the relative peacefulness. She doesn't mean the peculiar political arrangement of two kings claiming sovereignty over the whole island, but citizens on the ground level. They emphasize their culture of pacifism which transcends all other divisions in the island's society. Social ostracism against predatory government authorities and would-be militia leaders makes it hard for any violent group to get a toehold on Idjwi. The Catholic Church also serves as an important intermediary in resolving disputes and in creating this culture of peace.

In PoliSci speak, we might say that Civil Society organisations are the ballast which keeps the island stable in turbulent seas. These CSOs were established without outside help, but this doesn't necessarily mean that outsiders should rush to provide assistance to their cause. Perhaps their success has been that they were *organically* founded and are thus free from foreign associations which could tarnish their reputation and authority. Importantly, Idjwi islanders don't rely on militias or the state to settle scores. They rely on themselves.

Autesserre touches on the effects of modernity on traditional mores and the unintended consequences of "rationalising" social interaction rather than relying on mysticism. The old customs of many culture around the world may indeed be backwards and inscrutable to outsiders, but they can be used to create a culture of peace which late modernity and Enlightenment rationality erodes. It is best to seize onto and promote local beliefs which promote peaceful coexistence. One

can only hope that Idjwi remains an enduring example of success.

Chapter 2, LPI in the Congo

Vijaya and Autesserre both point to the Life & Peace Institute as an example to emulate for promoting peace. It pioneered the "back-seat" approach in contrast to the "generalist" mindset which guides most "Peace Inc." strategies. The LPI liaison in the South Kivu, Hans Romkema, was eventually shouldered out of his work there when the status quo pushed back against it. Ultimately, Autesserre concedes that the failure of LPI was not letting Congolese people lead the efforts at building peace themselves. Romkema's successor, Alexandra Bilak, found through her project evaluations that LPI's work was not sticking, a failure attributable to their lack of local knowledge and networks despite a sound theoretical basis and international expertise.

The breakthrough in rural South Kivu (centred in the Nindja chiefdom and Kaniola sub-territory) was informational: the bandits who were stealing and attacking women and girls had played up their size to be more intimidating. This fact was always out of reach for foreigners because they didn't know how to get the honest answer. State authorities also dismissed the truth, because a big threat from Rwandan militants in exile was more useful for their political purposes than a small group of local bandits. Little wonder that large operations to find the Rwandans found nobody to capture: there were none in the first place. The peasant farmers association, with the assistance of the LPI, oversaw a truth and reconciliation roundtable to identify and prosecute accomplices while giving amnesty to those acting under duress. LPI was instrumental in facilitating transportation and communication with UN Peacekeepers and the Congolese army; this is the role which Autesserre suggests that INGOs should fill.

Under the leadership of Pieter Vanholder, LPI worked with three Congolese organsations to promote peace in the Ruzizi Plain of South Kivu. Previously, all had assumed the conflict was between Rwandan proxies and Kinshasa's; the peace-workers realised that the actual tension was between farmers and ranchers, not between two warring states. The opposing militias were patrons to the different parties only because they lacked the means to resolve the conflict between themselves. LPI's job, then, was to provide such a forum for conflict resolution:

> Instead, the role of outsiders is to help local people to better analyze their problems – by providing safe spaces for residents to share their perspectives and confront difficult questions, which helps them move from accusations to enquiry. (56)

Women and men of each party would meet to discuss what they wanted and what their proposals were before meeting with their counterparts on the other side. Through comparing notes, so to speak, the communities realised the presence of ethnically aligned militias had actually deepened the divide rather than protect their own. The dialogues lasted two and a half years. They resulted in a

framework which allowed safe passage for herders under the supervision of chiefs who would protect the interests of farmers. LPI was also instrumental in keeping Kinshasa stakeholders informed of the process and bringing them on board to the agreed-upon framework.

So in the end, the community conflict-resolution committees ended up replicating the function of a court system, but without the need for lawyers on retainer or bribes to judges (probably unavoidable, considering the lack of legitimacy the DRC government has). They success rate for settlements is far from perfect – rising form 28% in 2013 to around 68% in 2014 – but it's a remarkable start. Significantly, the framework eliminated the need for militia protection for both sides, so fighters demobilised and disarmed. By the end of Vanholder's tenure, LPI's Congo mission was their largest in the world. The successes of their work challenged long-held assumptions of international peace work, especially by doing it cheaply.

Once LPI gained notoriety in the international discourse, their partners were flooded with funding to scale up rapidly. Unfortunately, this had more to do with disbursement targets of philanthropic foundations and less to do tangible results; on the local end, the new cash provided opportunities for embezzlement. Donors lost confidence and the LPI project imploded. Formerly demobilised militias took up arms again, which meant the farmer-herder framework broke down. The conflict-resolution committees were overwhelmed and the situation returned to status quo ante.

There are two interpretations of what went wrong. First, as Autesserre would probably argue, the Peace Industrial Complex can completely destroy a promising start because it is incentivised to maximise return on investment. The alternative explanation is that these promising starts are not necessarily sustainable in the long term without low-level outside assistance. Would the Ruzizi framework have lasted at all, even if the money hadn't smothered it all? As a counterfactual, there's no way of knowing for sure. But at least for a brief moment, people in the Ruzizi plain lived peacefully, and Participatory Action Research continues to shows promise where applied elsewhere in the Congo and in East Africa.

To make a connection to some of the literature we've already read on mediation, many of the authors wrote that connecting elites to one another in mediated fora can be conducive to ending conflicts. While the empirical evidence suggests this method may work, Autesserre would be sceptical of the long-term results. She doesn't necessarily eschew elite involvement, she just prefers to focus on elites only one or two rungs from the bottom rather than from the top.

Part II: *Peace, Inc.*

Chapter 3, Kosovo

In part II, Autesserre talks about the dominant approach of international peace organisations. Foreign interveners are half right that Europeans should abandon their sensibilities and ideas, but wrong as to why. It is not that violence is a primordial trait of people in conflict zones (and that Europeans should get used to it), but that they should actively decentre themselves as the primary agent of peacebuilding. At times, this chauvinism manifests more covertly: local partners couldn't be trusted because it was too much of a liability to explain to the organisation's leaders back home.

She writes about the "technocratisation" of peace work, by which I mean the insertion of professionals and academics into situations that require local more than general knowledge. This happens because country experts typically work for governments, not INGOs, and generalists can respond to a crisis anywhere with an existing "scientific" template that rests on observations empirically derived from large survey data across time and space. Career incentives for technocrats also discourage remaining in-country for long periods of time and building the necessary specialised skills. UN Peacekeepers are also rotated out on a half-year basis, and most UN troops are not themselves fluent in local language or custom to begin with. Peaceworkers who *do* have regional specialisation are often sent where they have no qualifications do work. Baffling.

Autesserre's first deployment at 23 was to Kosovo, and she admits she accomplished nothing. As the token foreigner, her job was to oversee locals who honestly should have had her job. Being in over her head, she writes that this eroded her natural human empathy and patience, which undeniably reduced her impact as someone trying to build peace.

The task of foreign interveners is not to assess the situation on the ground and derive solutions. Instead, they are to persuade locals that a pre-drafted program is good for them and to mobilise support for it. The only consultation is with national or local elites, not the intended beneficiaries of any program (I wonder if the *elites themselves* might be more rightly called the beneficiaries…). Local workers hired by INGOs are also keenly aware of the power hierarchy, and will sacrifice their own interests to do what is "expected" of them. (Enter Franz Fanon's entire body of work.) The sum of these prejudices and ignorances engenders resentment in the communities that need help.

It isn't a surprise, then, that colonialism has rubbed off on technocratic peacebuilding. The same bourgeois cultures are still trying to "civilise"" the same "Others" – often the exact same "Others" who were so intensely colonised. Even if the extraction-colonialism has (mostly) ended in practice, the colonial mindset still governs the behaviour and perception of aid-workers.

Path dependency on existing templates can be deadly. But there is hope, Autesserre writes: when peace-workers are deployed to places in which they *actually* are prepared to work, the work is not only more personally fulfilling

but yields better results.

Chapter 4, Designed Intervention

Autesserre moves on from the "technocratic" mindset to the state-centric approach. These two are undeniably related, but this time she focuses on the non-NGO side of the equation. While many point to the success of the top-down, "trickle-down" approach in places like El Salvador and Ireland, and Southwest Africa, Autesserre regards these conflicts not as "resolved" peaces but as frozen conflicts. They fall short of the "peace possible" she describes in chapter one. In the Congo since 2010, the failures of this strategy are easily visible.

Tight deadlines, donor pressure, and lack of knowledge compound the already difficult work that peacebuilders face. Path dependencies mean that assumptions are often unchallenged, and trendy solutions bring in donations without actually assessing their efficiency. Autesserre names a few specific variables that are useful for self-evaluation:

1. Internal Displacement
2. Repatriation
3. Crime
4. Gang violence
5. Intergroup or Interpersonal Conflict
6. Perceptions of safety

Often, even this isn't enough for good project evaluation. Some variables require too much theoretical formulation to be thought up during a six month deployment, or are necessarily out of reach for foreigners who lack the means or know-how to get the data. The advantages of a local, bottom up approach, thus seem apparent. Autesserre mentions Pamina Firchow's methodology (relying on focus groups to collect quantitative data) as a promising approach which has nevertheless not seen wide adoption.

Autesserre has a somewhat negative regard for the democratic peace hypothesis, which she describes as an "elections fetish." She points to the Rwandan peace agreement which inadvertently catalysed a genocide, the democratisation of Angola and former Yugoslavia, and of course the Congo. She writes that democracy itself isn't the problem, but the forced transition which overlooked the safety of the people on the ground. In the absence of pre-existing democratic institutions, political movements mobilise along ethnic and religious lines in a competition to win power, not representation. If this fact is ignored, then new elections can devolve into violence. The longer a transition takes place, the smoother it goes, but this runs counter to the demand which peace-organisations face or visible results in the near-term. Importantly, elections do not necessarily remedy problems which ordinary people identify as the most pressing problems: poverty, inequality, and unemployment. They also do not immediately address the material causes of many conflicts, such as land access and justice for war crimes. It's easy to imagine a grid-locked national parliament doing nothing at

all to fix these problems, which undermines faith in a democratic project exactly when it is most needed. Therefore, peace theorists often cite state capacity as a priority, but, again, states and the political class are never neutral parties in transitions to democracy. If instead you purge the old order and replace it, as the US did in Iraq with "de-Ba'athification," you're asking for an insurgency. In all, I find that her conclusions are quite compatible with existing research on democratic transition.

Beyond democracy, she also lists two problematic assumptions which shape intervention efforts. First, peace workers assume that local and national tensions mirror one another; second, they also believe that national-level peace agreements will trickle down to the local level. Land access – either for farming or for natural endowments – is a high-stakes competition with livelihood on the line. The fight over the right to sustain a peasant living leads people to pick powerful patrons on the national level, which can escalate the intensity of violence. The root issue is not alliance to one side or another, but ordinary people's material interests at odds with one another. One might describe this as a dialectical relationship between the mode of production and the superstructure of state and culture which governs it.

As part of her bottom-up analysis, she writes that mediators often overestimate the actual control that leaders have over their subordinates. Often, the interests of leaders is not the same as their soldiers – this debunks assumption number one from the last paragraph. This is not to say that all elites are powerless at curtailing violence, but that a top-down approach can only accomplish so much. Luckily, the bottom-up approach has proved cheaper in the long-run for better results, provided the funds aren't simply embezzled.

The resistance she encounters stems from the state-centric structure of international politics. She explicitly mentions the UN Security Council and the need to obtain permission of host governments before peacekeepers can enter a country.

Part III: *The New Peace Manifesto*

Chapter 5, *Peace by Piece*

Autesserre next turns to Somaliland, a de facto autonomous breakaway territory within the recognised borders of Somalia. The divergent paths of the North and South began under different colonial regimes: the British in the north, who preferred hands-off indirect rule, and the Italian in the south, who marginalised the indigenous elites and directly administered the colony. After independence, the unified state failed to make good on promises of national renewal and development, leading to increased resentment in the north. The 1969 coup began decades of communist-aligned military rule which discriminated against Northerners. In 1977, the government switched allegiance to the US, but northern secession nevertheless began in 1981. By 1991, Somaliland had effectively seceded, but remains an unrecognised state to this day.

Local elders in the north organised peace conferences to resolve the grievances leftover from the war of secession. Ironically, as it isn't an internationally recognised state, international peace organisations weren't part of the process, unlike in the South, which experienced war and famine during the '90s despite the presence of UN peacekeepers and foreign aid. In still further irony, the struggle for international recognition has created national solidarity in the North absent in the South. That isn't to say that there has been no foreign aid in Somaliland – there are still humanitarian assistance programs and anti-terrorism campaigns.

Autesserre describes the reasons for peace in Somaliland as being broadly similar to the reasons Idjwi is peaceful, but Somaliland has its own state apparatus to assist in peacekeeping whereas Idjwi does not. Communities surveil themselves and report trouble to the authorities whom they trust to enforce law and order fairly. This has made it difficult for blood-feuds to spiral out of control and for terrorist groups like al-Shabaab to gain a foothold in the North.

The author switches gears to describe the evolution of peace in Colombia. In the decades since the 1960s, Colombia's countryside has been the site of clashes between government paramilitaries and left-wing guerillas; the material issue at the core was the land which peasants lived on, which latifundistas have sought to exploit since the era of Spanish rule. The system worked out in "peace zones" is a strict no-tolerance policy for interacting with partisans or growing drug crops. They maintain complete neutrality in the conflict around them, even going so far as to refuse state services. Even with the surrounding hostile environment, the people in peace zones haven't been displaced.

Autesserre moves on to Palestine and the community of Wahat al-Salam / Neve Shalom, a 48 year experiment in peaceful coexistence between Israeli Jews and Palestinian Muslims and Christians. The village isn't supported by the Israeli state as a settlement, so it selects whom it wishes to join the community. During the second Intifada, it remained peaceful. One can only hope that such an experiment can be replicated elsewhere in Israel and Palestine. She rounds out the chapter by listing communities organised around peace in otherwise violent regions.

Chapter 6, *Recasting Roles*

Autesserre lists the characteristics of a model intervener: dedicated to a particular country for the long-term, happy to work from the backseat, remaining flexible, and fluent in the local language and customs. They don't call the shots and they always remember that local people know just as much or more than them. They listen to what everyone has to say first – women, elders, veterans, and elites. Foreign peace-workers also let local organisations take the credit and the spotlight, which prevents the programs from feeling alien to their beneficiaries. Good interveners also make concerted efforts to break out of their own diaspora-bubble and build informal networks with the communities they serve, even at risk to their own safety.

Autesserre discusses a fair criticism of her thesis, which orbits around the trade-off between negative peace and justice:

> Personally, I still wonder how I would have reacted if I had had to decide whether to join the resistance against Nazis during World War II or keep my head low and try to survive. If I had been born in San José de Apartadó, would I have enrolled in the farmers' union or would I have moved to the peace zone? If I were Israeli, or Palestinian, would I prioritize justice or peace? I can't be sure. What I do know is that I would want to make the choice myself. *I wouldn't appreciate it if someone tried to decide for me.* (162, emphasis mine)

Phrased with reference to occupied France, it becomes immediately clear why recognising the agency and dignity of the people whom peace-workers serve is paramount. Not everyone can commit to fight for justice – some of us are too old or too young, or have old and young people depend on us for a living. The tension rises when young people with nothing at stake have grand ambitions to change their world through force if necessary. I've seen evidence against the unmarried-man theory of war-genesis (see Kustra, 2017)

She pre-empts another criticism that locally-derived frameworks may be at odds with internationally recognised priorities, such as the rights of women. She quotes one of her colleagues, who says, "some of these priorities can be step two – and yes, that sucks." (163) Peacebuilding is a long process, and interveners and donors should prepare for the long haul. Incrementalism may be a kiss of death for social movements in the first world, but when putting an end to bloodshed, working one step at a time is better than a top-down Peace Industrial Complex trying to do everything at once.

Autesserre also raises the question: if locals know best, why not just get out of the process entirely? She once held this position, but was persuaded by locals who, while broadly sympathetic to this position, reminded her of the positive benefits peace intervention brings. Foreign groups shouldn't *impose* foreign templates on every conflict they encounter, but simply bringing in new ideas from around the world to local assistants can help them think up novel solutions. They also provide a network for financial support (although this also runs close to cultivating dependency). On the one hand, there is no ethical reason to withhold money from people in dire poverty, but on the other, we see that flooding a conflict zone with money can completely derail successful peace programs. Foreign presence can also be a buffer to warring factions, similar in function to UN peacekeepers. Even if peace-workers make good hostages, they can also protect people if militias fear retaliation for harming foreign nationals. Lastly, when outsiders are there in country, in person, it shows that they are physically committed to a program. As long as they play support to local leaders, this legitimises the process of building peace. For all these reasons, Autesserre concludes that peace organisations shouldn't just quit entirely – they should rethink how they operate.

Chapter 7, *The Homefront*

Autesserre adopts the corollary of "imperial war coming home" – she argues that peacebuilding in the Global South can be applied to political problems in the Global North. The inner cities of the United States resemble conflict zones in Congo despite being in the most prosperous nation in human history. The lessons learned from peacebuilding around the world are already being applied to these issues, which involves not just gang wars but also mass incarceration, police brutality, and deportation. Rephrase that as "political prisoners, state repression, and internal displacement" and you could just as easily be describing Colombia, East Timor, or the Congo. It's a cliché to say it at this point, but American foreign policy and the empire came home; the US has colonised itself. The true test of Autesserre's thesis will be if these programs work here in the US too. Already, domestic NGOs like Cure Violence and the Live Free network have shown the promise of her theories applied here. Especially when police are trained to think of themselves as an occupying force in ghetto-ised neighbourhoods, the best way to build peace is to not rely on the state and the Peace Industrial Complex's electoral obsession.

In conclusion

Throughout Autesserre's book, she repeatedly underlines the pervasive sexual violence that women face in conflict zones. She also writes briefly about the participation of women in peace settlements and round-tables in the Congo. While she never calls direct attention to this, it relates to course-long themes about the need to empower and include women in the peace process: what's good for women is good for everybody.