# *Frontlines of Peace*, by Séverine Autesserre (2021)

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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.

## 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, *Role Models*

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.

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.