Reading Summary: “War and the State in Africa” by Jeffrey Herbst

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Research Question: What is the impact of war on the development of a strong political state, and how can this be seen by studying a state’s tax system and presence of nationalism?

Hypotheses tested, if any: European states are strong and efficient because they were developed during times of war and external threats, while African states are weaker and less united because they have primarily existed during a period of global peace, where it is more difficult to enact fundamental economic and societal changes.

Type of Evidence: Mostly secondary sources, as Herbst frequently cites journals and studies also published at the end of the twentieth century. However, Herbst also cited a primary source from Prince Otto von Bismarck of Prussia.

Main Findings:

1. War caused European states to sharply increase their tax revenue and caused their citizens to unite in nationalism in the face of external threats. This is because it forced leaders to generate more income, and citizens were more likely to agree to tax increases when their state was threatened.
2. African states have inefficient tax collection institutions because their governments cannot justify a tax increase, and little nationalism as their citizens primarily root their identity to ethnic and sub-national identities
3. African states have been unsuccessful to consolidate their power in times of peace because there is no crisis that forces their people to unite and support their government, and “no challenge that causes them to respond as a nation.”
4. International forces and actors during times of no conflict have been unable to pressure Africa to strengthen its states and unite its people with the same pressure that war forced upon the Europeans.
5. In the future, some African leaders could turn to war to unite, expand, and reform their governments.

Three questions you have about the article:

1. Recognizing that Europe went through a period of warfare while being demographically stable (low population growth rate) while Africa is currently in a period of peace while being demographically unstable (high birth rate leading to a high population rate), is it possible that Herbst did not consider the regions demographic differences?
2. Is it a lack of war that could prevent African states from developing efficient political states, or simply a lack of nationalism that primarily stems from the various ethnic, national, and linguistic conflicts inside African states?
3. Would the author still believe that African leaders could potentially turn to war to strengthen their governments when it has been 28 years and there have not been major interstate wars inside Africa?

On a scale from one to ten, how difficult to read and understand did you find this article?

3. The article was very straight forward, as Herbst presented facts in a straightforward and conversational manner. Additionally, Herbst’s organized his article into clear sections that guided the reader’s focus and attention.