

# THE 'GREAT WAR' IN LIBERIA

as a Classic Example  
for Persistent Armed Conflicts  
and War Economies in Africa\*

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**LA “GRAN GUERRA” EN LIBERIA**  
como ejemplo clásico de conflicto armado  
persistente y economías de guerra en África

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## Abstract

Armed conflicts in less developed countries are often very persistent although one could expect the opposite due to lacking financial and material capacity in those areas. How can violent actors and warlords manage to continue warfare lastingly? The article presents, in its theory section, several assumptions regarding the longevity of these armed conflicts from the perspective of fragile statehood, collapse of neo-patrimonial networks, conflict-resources, social grievances and ethnicity. Additionally, the character of the “new” wars and particularly the design and functional logic of a typical war-economy is analysed as the latter is assumed to fuel armed conflict significantly. The “Great War” (1989–2003) in Liberia is a classic example for persistent armed conflicts in connection with war-economies in Africa and thus suits well as empirical illustration to employ the preceding assumptions on.

**Key words:** Africa, Liberia, civil war, armed conflict, war-economy, “new wars”, natural resources, state failure, ethnicity, grievance, sources of financing.

## Resumen

Los conflictos armados en países poco desarrollados son a menudo persistentes, aunque uno podría esperar lo contrario, debido a la deficiencia en la capacidad financiera y material en esos sectores. ¿Cómo logran los actores violentos y señores de la guerra prolongar la guerra durante largos períodos? El artículo, en su sección teórica, presenta varios supuestos sobre la longevidad de estos conflictos armados desde la perspectiva de la fragilidad del Estado, el colapso de redes neopatrimoniales, recursos del conflicto, agravios sociales y etnicidad. Adicionalmente, se analiza el carácter de las guerras “nuevas” y, en especial, el diseño y lógica funcional de una típica economía de guerra, pues se asume que es esto lo que promueve significativamente el conflicto. La “Gran Guerra” (1989–2003) en Liberia es un clásico ejemplo de conflicto armado persistente en conexión con las economías de guerra en África, y sirve efectivamente como ilustración empírica en la cual se pueden emplear los supuestos anteriores.

**Palabras clave:** África, Liberia, guerra civil, conflicto armado, economía de guerra, “nuevas guerras,” recursos naturales, insuficiencia estatal, etnicidad, agravio, fuentes de financiamiento.

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## Introduction

In the aftermath of 9/11 2001, the attention of state leaders and general public moved increasingly to the ‘peripheries of the world’ and towards weak and failed states with their latent crises and smouldering conflicts. The assumption is that a combination of disrupting statehood together with the rule of violence and a situation of continuous war has potential to become a breeding ground for organised crime and terrorists’ networks causing supraregional destabilisation and global threat.

Looking at the rather war-torn continent of Africa, one could ask the question why armed conflicts in obviously less developed countries are often very persistent and difficult to extinguish. How do violent actors in these poor regions obtain access to sufficient finances and military equipment necessary for continuous warfare?

The ‘Great War’ (1989–2003) in Liberia is a classic example of persistent armed conflicts in connection with war-economies in Africa. It suits well as empirical illustration to employ selected assumptions regarding the longevity of armed conflicts in Africa, which the article presents in a preceding theory-related part. That includes aspects of fragile statehood, collapse of neo-patrimonial networks, existence of conflict-resources, social grievances and ethnicity which are considered as advantageous preconditions. Further-

more, the character of the ‘new’ wars and especially the design and functional logic of a typical war-economy will be taken into consideration as the latter is assumed to fuel armed conflicts significantly.

Eventually, the knowledge and theory-based explanations of the ‘Great War’ in Liberia will contribute to the understanding of comparable (African) conflicts fought out against similar backgrounds in similar arenas.

### 1. Armed Conflict and War-Economies in Africa: Theoretical Considerations

#### a) *Favourable Preconditions fostering Persistency of War*

##### *Fragile Statehood and Breakdown of Neo-Patrimonial Networks*

Persistent armed conflicts require favourable preconditions that facilitate their emergence and foster continuity. Considering the political situation, the terrain for armed conflict and future war-economies is prepared best if the state – as decisive actor – is very weak and unable to interrupt an evolving conflict. Fragile and failed states are characterised by political instability and disintegrating state authority, whereas collapsed states are –in their extreme form– anarchic and with no state authority at all. Such circumstances can lead to the emergence of influent non-state actors –e.g. warlords<sup>1</sup> and rebellious organisations– that strive to fill the power-vacuum the state leaves behind (Münkler 2006: 142 ff, 195; Rotberg 2003: 4 f; Zartman 1995: 5 ff).

1 Various definitions try to explain this term. Taking many into consideration, a warlord is a local strong man able to autonomously control a territory by means of violence and warfare without being dependent on a superior, central authority (Le Billon, 2003: 155).

Nevertheless, these plain Weberian assumptions about state and state power are rather insufficient against African reality. The postcolonial state in Africa is mostly characterised by an interweaving or parallelism of patrimonial and bureaucratic rule which depicts just an outside façade of its European counterpart (Chabal 1992: 69). Political elites and officeholders use state resources to maintain extensive patronage-systems to secure their power-position and eventually enrich themselves. However, it is these numerous, rhizomatic neo-patrimonial networks and patron-client relations –sometimes even connected to religious beliefs and secret societies (Ellis & ter Haar 2004: 100 ff)– which keep the state and its bureaucracy fairly functioning, maintain its authority and link society to its institutions. Against this background, destabilisation and 'state failure' in Africa is likely to occur in case neo-patrimonial networks and patronage-systems are damaged or destructed. This could be caused by e.g. a radical exchange of elites or a shortage of the necessary inflow of resources (Bayart 1996: 60 ff, 218 ff; Chabal 1992: 68 ff; Mgbeoj 2003: 33 ff).

Facing such a faint state with powerless or absent executive and legal instruments, non-state groups can easily build their own regime and seek material gains by means of intimidation and violence. The emergence of war-economies then becomes likely.

### *Conflict-Resources, Ethnicity and Social Grievances*

Natural and mineral resources can have a strong influence on the persistency of armed conflicts in relatively poor African countries. So-called conflict-resources can "act as a 'honey

pot' that provides incentives for profit-seeking groups to engage in violent actions" (Soysa 2000: 115) and may become a 'curse' for affected countries (Le Billon 2005; Soysa 2000: 113 ff).

*Diffuse resources* are territorially widespread, easy to access and exploitable even by unskilled labourers. Trading is simple as their value is very high in relation to volume which makes already small quantities extremely profitable. Precious stones, rare ores, minerals –and to a certain degree tropical timber– belong into this category. *Point resources*, on the contrary, occur at fewer locations. Access and exploitation is generally difficult while their value is comparably low in relation to volume. This makes trade only profitable in large quantities. Oil, copper, iron-ore and non-alluvial gems fall into this category (Le Billon 2005: 32 ff; Ross 2003: 64 ff). *Diffuse resources* play the central role as they easily suit for trade and thus have the best potential to generate high profits for war entrepreneurs. If met with demand, their existence can strongly fuel a war-economy, lead to high fragmentation of actors and contribute to complexity and persistence of conflicts in such regions (Ross 2003: 66 f).

Nevertheless, the greediness and 'resource-curse' argument alone is probably insufficient regarding persistent civil wars in Africa. Various social grievances –especially among a youth without employment and promising perspectives in life– and open or latent cleavages among different ethnic groups, identities, religious groups, centre vs. periphery, rich vs. poor and traditional elites vs. newcomers may break the surface hand in hand with the evol-

vement of violence and thus add to the disruption of state, society and finally longevity of conflict. The high numbers of youths and children participating in an alleged status and wealth-promising war can to some extent be explained by the existence of these grievances (Keen 2000: 19 ff; Lock 2003: 102).

Furthermore, the aspect of ethnicity is particularly important as most African states are inhabited by numerous ethnic groups. This multitude alone is certainly no sufficient factor regarding the outbreak and persistency of armed conflicts (Keen 2000: 22). However, if a single ethnic group is able to dominate the others by e.g. capturing the state-apparatus or through repressive and exploitative measurements, the discriminated and disadvantaged groups may challenge the established order violently. In case of open conflict and weak national identity, ethnicity may finally become a useful tool for violent actors to reach their goals as existing ethnic cleavages and prejudices can easily be politicised and utilised to mobilise supporters, form military factions and create a common feeling of identity against hostile 'others' (Goulbourne 1997: 163 ff; Tshitereke 2003: 85 f).

### **b) *Character of belligerent Actors and Warfare***

With the onset of violent action of non-state actors opposing remaining state authority and competing against each other, the political reality becomes similar to Hobbes' anarchic state of nature. Participating military forces can be distinguished between regular (state) troops and paramilitary (non-state) forces. Additionally, foreign mercena-

ries and intervention armies may enter conflict from outside (Kaldor 2000: 148 ff; Klare 2004: 117).

The pattern of violence reminds of guerrilla warfare and the resulting armed conflicts are sometimes classified as 'New' or 'Small Wars' which are rather denationalised, autonomised and asymmetric. Lack of ideological background causes splitting and permanent metamorphosis of conflicting parties and the actors' individual strive for resources and gains adds to fragmentation. In accordance with group-theory, this strongly contributes to the duration of conflict as peace negotiations will be complicated (Kaldor 2000: 147).

States' regular armies are mostly badly equipped, unmotivated and poorly esteemed in collapsing states. Troops are likely to dissolve when finally facing war and tend to converge to paramilitary forces as discipline further decreases and their leaders need to organise financial and material resources by themselves. In such circumstances the decline from a superior officer to a gain-seeking warlord becomes likely (Kaldor 2000: 148; Münkler 2002: 10 f).

Paramilitary groups and armed irregular bands generally outnumber any other type of forces and act very autonomously. Led by warlords, who skilfully combine the logics of business, politics and warfare in one person (Münkler 2002: 161), those groups seek prey for self-enrichment and supplies for keeping themselves active and alive. They are often extremely undisciplined and brutal as their members are mainly recruited from deserted regular soldiers, criminals, daredevils and desperate people. Youths and children additionally contribute a major share

to their total number as they are very 'cost-effective' (Mcintyre 2003: 93 ff). Paramilitary bands are cheap to maintain as they are mainly alimented by plunder and not well equipped (Kaldor 2000: 148 ff).

The 'new' wars show a specific pattern of warfare which is characterised by brutality and extensive use of violence. This roots in the fighters' behaviour and is closely related to a war-economy's skim-off-system where plunder accounts as source of income or payment. Irregular troops and warlords, with no need to fear sanctions by the state or anyone else, are thus likely to behave solely according to their gain-seeking interests without deference for laws or other individuals. Unsurprisingly, (war-)crimes like extortion, pillage, mutilation and (ritual) murder are steady events of these conflicts, that can even be committed due to religious beliefs and spiritual 'necessity' (Ellis & ter Haar 2004; Münkler 2002: 131 ff).

A second distinctive feature of guerrilla warfare is affordability. Predominant use of cheap weapons such as automatic guns, pistols, hand grenades and landmines explains this feature. Although this equipment is often scrap or outdated, it is still fit for service and fulfils its deadly mission. Since the end of the Cold War, weaponry of the mentioned types from former Warsaw Pact member states has flooded (black-)markets and is widely available for low costs. The disposal of this decommissioned arsenal happens *inter alia* in these armed conflicts through 'practical application' and a steady influx of supplies contributes to their duration (Kaldor 2000: 154; Klare 2004: 123).

Cheapness of personal refers to its vast availability and cost-effective maintenance. Beside voluntary participation for e.g. ethnic reasons, additionally, the military career allegedly offers fighters the chance to accumulate wealth, power and prestige in a speed unknown in a civilian's life. Especially discontented youths are attracted by those temptations and easily to recruit because being an 'insider' provides certain security and material livelihood. Child soldiers, mostly enslaved for war and often drugged-up to 'function' well, are the cheapest military personnel as they are weak, undemanding and easy to control (Mcintyre 2003: 93 ff; Münkler 2002: 33 ff; 131 ff).

### c) *Model of a Typical War-Economy*

A variety of ideas and notions regarding the character and functional logic of war-economies can be found in the literature but no standard definition exists yet. War-economies can be spoken of if violence and resources condense to a self dynamic relation that perpetuates armed conflicts because the accumulation of (financial) resources through means of compulsion and force becomes a profitable business that is likely to stabilise itself (Tull 2003: 380). With the help of this economic system, its sources of income and distributive channels, war is able to fuel and prolong itself in accordance with the old principle *bellum se ipse alet*.

### *Internal Sources of Financing and Income*

The most simple and frequent method to source goods and finances is the so-called 'transfer of assets'. This euphemism includes offences like theft, robbery, extortion and looting.

Pillage of larger settlements particularly worthwhile as the prospect for rich booty is better among urban citizens and their shops and warehouses. Mineral/natural resources can also fall prey to war entrepreneurs if they are easy to access and exploit (Kaldor 2000: 162). In doing so, conflicting parties disregard sustainability as they are in competition with other groups and only interested in short-term gains. Abduction belongs also to this category as humans are 'living capital' useful for ransom demands, forced labour and warfare (Kaldor 2000: 162; Rufin 1999: 27 ff).

Finances are moreover generated by reprisals and economic levers. Conflicting parties can control markets, dictate prices and force inhabitants to buy and sell goods under unfair conditions. They can introduce 'taxes' on certain products or services and collect tolls on roadblocks or checkpoints in their sphere of influence. Besides generating finances this also demonstrates a certain degree of parastatal authority as sovereign functions of the state are absorbed (Kaldor 2000: 162 f).

Regarding (international) companies and their production facilities, conflicting groups may impose special taxes, charges or demand protection money. In case of compliance, companies are spared from pillage and can continue operation. Due to their financial strength, they can contribute a big share to a warlord's budget which makes areas they are located in often highly embattled (Kaldor 2000: 163).

Organised smuggle, money laundering and other informal or criminal business activities on a local or regional level require certain organisation. Without threat of legal prosecution,

this lucrative business with –even illicit or internationally banned– goods and resources is very attractive as it promises highest profits. Examples include trade with drugs, ivory, precious stones and especially 'blood diamonds'. Participation in local informal black-markets does also generate income although margins are probably much smaller as legal goods are mainly traded there (Atkinson 1997: 13; Rufin 1999: 32).

#### *External Sources of Financing and Income*

External sources of income play the major role in a war-economy's system and fuel armed conflicts significantly.

Foreign remittances from private persons and associations are one channel directing cash into troubled regions and to individuals, clans or organisations located there. Of significant importance are financially strong Diaspora communities with political or economical interests in the crisis region and good connections to the global economy. They can easily direct financial and material resources to particular conflicting parties despite spatial distance and may even function as reservoir for motivated fighters (Lock 2003: 104; Rufin 1999: 41).

Beside private actors, foreign states may act as financiers or patrons of particular conflicting groups for similar reasons. This can significantly fuel war as the financial capacity of nation states is by far stronger. Generally, foreign states and governments support parties serving to their own interests and thus help a kin-country, befriended government or armed ethnic group mainly for ideological, political, economical or strategic reasons (Kaldor 2002: 164 f). It is noteworthy to mention again, that

through the conflicts, ethnic identities are often manipulated for political and economical purposes.

Even international aid agencies and NGOs can act as external sources of financing. Their relief supplies may be misdirected by corrupt recipients and their freight 'tolled' or directly fall prey to armed groups. The dilemma of aid assistants is based on the fact that those 'friction losses' are mostly unavoidable if relief supplies are brought to suffering people in crisis regions controlled by imperious belligerent groups. In extreme, the latter may deliberately increase the degree of human suffering with the purpose to direct additional flows of aid into their sphere of influence (Kaldor 2000: 165; Rufin 1999: 64).

Analogous to the trade with conflict-resources and (legal, illegal) goods on local and regional level, conflicting parties may additionally find customers for these (raw) materials far beyond their own realm. The connection to the legal, informal and/or criminal global economy opens up much wider markets with more demand and financially stronger customers. This characteristic is prevalent in most present-day war-economies and gives them an open character. Depending on the sort and value of exported resources and goods, the link to the global (shadow-)economy taps significant external sources of financing and can become the main pillar of income for war entrepreneurs. Export directs high flows of cash into the war-economy's system and provides its actors

with desired convertible currencies. The latter is needed to purchase weaponry and other strategic equipment on global markets (Lock 2003: 106 ff).

## 2. Lessons from Liberia: The 'Great War' and its War-Economy

### a) *Tinder for the Spark: Favourable Preconditions for persistent Conflict*

The Republic of Liberia is a small tropical country in West Africa with an area of 111,370 Km<sup>2</sup> and a population of about 3.5 million people. The state declared its sovereignty in 1847 and was never colonised during imperialism. However, it was politically dominated by a privileged oligarchy of settlers consisting of mostly freed slaves from the Americas. This small elite of Americo-Liberians ruled the state and its rather discriminated indigenous inhabitants<sup>2</sup> for decades through the *True Whig Party* (TWP) and its influential patronage-system and extensive clientelistic networks. Regarding its economy, Liberia was always highly dependent on the export of natural/mineral resources (Clapham 1976; Ellis 1998: 158 ff; Levitt 2005).

### *Declining until total Breakdown: A Neo-Patrimonial State collapses*

In 1980 Sergeant Samuel Doe<sup>3</sup> and some members of the *Armed Forces of Liberia* (AFL) succeeded in a *coup d'état* against President Tolbert and took over government in Liberia. This violent incident was a crucial event for the Republic's political

2 The hinterlanders' access to political power and socio-economic status was limited, as the Americo-Liberians were for a long time a rather closed elite and looked down on the indigenous inhabitants (Clapham 1976: 6 ff, 17 ff).

3 Doe belonged to the Krahn ethnic group and was the first ruler of the country who was not an Americo-Liberian (Duvesteyn 2005: 24).

system and power-structures, as it suddenly overthrew the lasting reign of the TWP, destroyed its established patronage-machine and interrupted numerous patron-client relations. With the ruling elite deprived of power and its numerous personal networks and patronage-channels cut off from necessary resources, the rather neo-patrimonial system of Liberia was seriously shaken (Ellis 1999: 60 ff; Mgbeoj 2003: 12 ff, 35). Although Doe and his military regime introduced a similar system of patronage and nepotism, maladministration, financial mismanagement and ethnic discrimination soon led to deep crisis, economic depression and finally civil unrest. After a failed coup in 1985, the rule of law diminished entirely and legal statehood was significantly hollowed out as Doe prohibited most political activities<sup>4</sup> (van den Boom 1993: 11 ff, 297) and governed the country by decrees and coercive measures. Liberia finally lost its global reputation and foreign direct investments and aid nearly stopped. The state's economy and patronage-system collapsed after the financial reserves were finished (van den Boom 1993: 17; Reno 1998: 86 ff).

The decline of the Liberian state turned into total collapse with the attack of Charles Taylor<sup>5</sup> and his rebellious *National Patriotic Front of Liberia* (NPFL) in December 1989. Aiming to overthrow Doe's regime, Taylor's initially small force increased on its

rapid advance through the country to about 10,000 fighters by June 1990 (Reno 1998: 79). By then the battle between the NPFL and the regular army had turned into a full-grown civil war and various other rebellious groups and warlords emerged and participated in the conflict autonomously. Despite huge internal competition and regardless the intervention of the *Economic Community of West African States* (ECOWAS), Taylor remained the strongest actor and his NPFL controlled about 90 percent of Liberia's territory by August 1990. The usurper declared himself president and head of government even before Doe was removed from office<sup>6</sup> (Tetteh 2000: 121).

At this stage the formal state of Liberia, its institutions and legitimate government were physically nearly non-existent. The sphere of influence and governmental authority of the *Interim Government of National Unity* (IGNU) under President Amos Sawyer was limited to the capital city Monrovia protected by the *ECOWAS Monitoring Group* (ECOMOG). State disruption manifested in the breakdown of (public) infrastructure as e.g. lack of electricity and non-operating schools and hospitals. Formal Liberian trade came to an end as the export of natural/mineral resources through Monrovia's port became impossible due to territorial isolation and surrounding rebels' activity (Adebajo 2002: 74 ff; Montclos 1999: 224 ff).

4 Particularly activities of protesting students were banned and their leaders prosecuted. This added to the dissatisfaction of the higher educated young generation (Mgbeoj 2003: 17).

5 Charles Taylor was a half Americo-Liberian and aligned himself to the Manos and Gios (Mgbeoj 2003: 19).

6 The atrocities and murder of Doe by Prince Johnson, leader of the *Independent National Patriotic Front of Liberia* (INPFL), were videotaped and distributed among the public (Youboty 1993: 411 ff).

Taylor filled the power-vacuum. With the help of his military power he fairly successfully established a parastatal regime and new patronage-system tailored according to his needs (Adebajo 2002: 74 ff). Taylor's shadow-state, also known as *Greater Liberia* (Korte 1997: 66) or *Taylorland* (Reno 1998: 92), was the undisputed authority on Liberian territory from 1990 until 1994. It had its own government, army, currency and capital city. However, the power of Taylor's parastatal entity slowly declined by the end of the 1990s despite his 'election' as president in 1997. Other conflicting parties and warlords increasingly gained influence and thus Liberia's fractionalisation and disintegration gathered speed as more violent actors were able to establish their autonomous realms (Montclos 1999: 229 ff; van den Boom 1993: 53).

Summarising the findings, Taylor's rebellious campaign could be seen as the last step in a long-time degenerating process that gave an already weak and disrupting Liberia the final death-blow. In this violent surrounding the "state simply disappeared into the maelstrom or morphed into autonomous paramilitary bands" (Klare 2004: 119). Destructing of long-established neo-patrimonial networks and crumbling of central state authority in combination with highly fragmented, more or less powerful parastatal actors thus created in Liberia very advantageous preconditions for persistent armed conflict and a war-economy.

*Dangerous Cocktail:  
Plenty of Natural Resources,  
Discontented Youths and Ethnic Tensions*

Liberia has plenty of natural/mineral resources which are widely distributed across its territory. In the East, the Nimba-Region, are consid-

erably diamond deposits and mines, while gold and the majority of the country's rare timber are in the part west of Buchanan. The large rubber plantations together with some smaller gold and diamond deposits are within a triangle framed by the cities Monrovia, Buchanan and Yéképa in the centre of Liberia. Iron-ore and other less precious non-ferrous metals can be found all over the country (Atkinson 1997: 9 ff, 17; Montclos 1999: 220).

Most of Liberia's precious raw materials fall into the category of *diffuse* and thus lootable resources. Due to their plenty and dispersal across the country, chances were good that every conflicting actor would be able to find and exploit one or more of them within their sphere of influence and thus secure survival. Even small quantities allowed warlords to generate high personal profits and buy necessary equipment to continue warfare. Demand was given as particularly Western countries purchased gold, diamonds, ores, raw rubber and rare timber from Liberian warlords without considering the illegal circumstances of its production and origin (Atkinson 1997: 9 ff; Ross 2003: 49, 60, 66). Although the multitude of diffuse conflict-resources did not directly cause the war, it surely contributed substantially to its duration as it fuelled the war-economy significantly.

Furthermore, various social grievances and ethnic cleavages have probably had an impact on the outbreak and duration of violence in Liberia. Worth mentioning is the (indigenous) youth –including students– and their growing discontent with oligarchic rule, closed elites, repressive governments, economic crisis and limited perspectives in

life. Although Doe's coup overturned the Americo-Liberian establishment and was initially welcomed by the discriminated youths, they were soon confronted with coercive measures, intimidation and socio-economic standstill (Levitt 2005: 193 ff). The 'crisis of the youth' –which also depicts the cleavage between hinterland/periphery vs. centre– was not settled and the outbreak of war finally offered this disaffected and hopeless young generation profoundly new 'career-opportunities' to reach their long-awaited economic goals and social status. Becoming a fighter was thus one promising option in a violent environment with diminishing social values and support (Duyvesteyn 2005: 57 f; Ellis 1999: 285 ff; Moran 2006: 141 ff).

Regarding ethnicity, the longstanding cleavage between Americo-Liberians and indigenous ethnic groups has already been mentioned. Under Doe's rule, the formerly discriminated Krahn and Mandingos gained political influence and preferred access to new patronage-structures, while after a failed putsch the Gios and Manos became victims of his repressive regime and persecutions (Mgbeoij 2003: 18 f). With Taylor's take-over the situation changed again, as he aligned particularly to the latter ethnics groups in order to gain supporters in his fight against Doe. This was not least the time when ethnic origin became increasingly politicised and utilised by violent actors to form their factions and mobilise personal. However, although several paramilitary groups (initially) had a certain ethnic backbone and support, the conflict lost most of its ethnic character soon as other rivalries gained more meaning (Smith & Wiesmann 2003: 2, 7).

Obviously the discontent of the youth and ethnic tensions are additional factors with impact on the persistency of the 'Great War' as they fuelled it with hatred and numerous cheap, motivated fighters.

**b) *Complex, cheap and brutal: Liberia's Guerrilla War***

Special about Liberia's war was its extraordinarily brutal nature of warfare and the huge number of conflicting actors of which the following are worth mentioning:

The *Armed Forces of Liberia* (AFL) in strength of 6,000 soldiers represented the state's regular army. Nevertheless, they were unable to defeat Taylor's rebels due to poor discipline, lack of training and shortages in military equipment (Duyvesteyn 2005: 29). During the campaign, the AFL changed its character significantly and shifted away to a mere band of marauders with many soldiers moving "from village to village, shooting at the inhabitants indiscriminately, looting the properties and burning huts and houses" (Duyvesteyn 2005: 27). Starting to dissolve by late 1990, the AFL's lost meaning in 1994 with several high-ranked officers becoming warlords.

The numerous paramilitary groups commanded by warlords constituted the majority of all conflicting parties. They fought autonomously and competed against each other in loose and varying alliances for the purpose of power, resources and wealth accumulation (Korte 1997: 59 ff). The NPFL was the most influential rebellious group and changed from a small raiding party to the parastatal army of Taylor's shadow-state. The faction recruited increa-

singly 'amateurs', youths and children and conjoined the latter in special child-battalions of which the *Small Boys Units* were most notorious due to their fear and recklessness. Parallel to Taylor's declining influence, several 'officers' of the NPFL emancipated themselves from the organisation and fought as autonomous warlords on their own account (Sesay & Ismail 2003: 146 f). One of them was the *Independent National Patriotic Front of Liberia* (INPFL) under the command of Prince Johnson. As political aims were rather absent, the INPFL and its leader can be classified as predominantly self-interested and gain-seeking actors (Duyvesteyn 2005: 25 f; van den Boom 1993: 38).

The major opponent of Taylor was the *United Liberation Movement of Liberia for Democracy* (ULIMO). Founded in 1991, the organisation strived to remove Taylor's regime and destroy his parastatal entity. However, in reality ULIMO aimed to seize the state apparatus and its sinecures for better participation in the war-economy and thus for the sake of profits and personal enrichment. By 1994, the organisation broke apart along an ethnic fault-line into two competing factions with rather little influence (Duyvesteyn 2005: 34; Korte 1997: 60 f). Other worth mentioning paramilitary groups were the *Liberian Peace Council* (LPC), the *Lofa Defence Force* (LDF), the *Liberian United for Reconciliation and Democracy* (LURD) and the *Movement for Democracy in Liberia* (MODEL). These

groups and all the numerous small commandos, militias and warlords with micro combat-units were acting autonomously and engaged in war predominantly for profit, status and economical reasons than for political aims (Duyvesteyn 2005: 33; Korte 1997: 70 f; Levitt 2005: 216 ff).

Regular foreign troops have participated in conflict since the intervention of ECOWAS in August 1990. Fearing further destabilisation in the region, neighbouring states<sup>7</sup> sent 3,500 troops to support and safeguard the legitimate Liberian government against Taylor's aggression. ECOMOG became a conflicting actor itself as it actively engaged in the conflict and its war-economy. Similar to the AFL, the character of these international regular troops changed over time and shifted towards that of paramilitary units as ECOMOG's atrocities and pillage gave proof of (Duyvesteyn 2005: 30; Montclos 1999: 238). The impact of the *United Nations Observer Mission in Liberia* (UNOMIL), entering the country in 1993, was rather insignificant (Mgbeoji 2003: 117 f).

Beside the multitude of competing actors, the typical pattern of violence of the 'new' wars was prevalent in the Liberian case. Lack of discipline, inexperience, young age, drug consumption, brutal leadership and dubious idols<sup>8</sup> caused an environment of brutality within those armed groups<sup>9</sup> that created a feeling of solidarity among insiders and deterred

7 Countries providing troops were Gambia, Ghana, Guinea, Nigeria und Sierra Leone (Duyvesteyn 2005: 30).

8 According to Ellis, "few Liberians doubt that [...] fighters were influenced by violent action videos they had seen, often American-made, which encouraged armed robbery, rape, and other related crimes" (Ellis 1999: 121).

9 Armed splinter-groups often gave themselves martial names like e.g. 'Cobra', 'Jungle Fire' or 'Marines' (Montclos 1999: 227).

outsiders and especially enemies. For this reason atrocities were generally not concealed and some units even “advertised their ferocity by putting skulls at the side of their road-blocks” (Ellis 1999: 146). The own brutality –sometimes spiritually motivated and including deadly initiation rites– was openly celebrated and made publicly known (Pham 2004: 119). This behaviour inevitably sparked the fuse to a spiral of violent retaliation, revenge and self-justice with no central authority available to stop it. Therefore this particular pattern of brutal warfare is another factor contributing to the tenacity of conflict (Duyvesteyn 2005: 65; Ellis 1999: 120, 129, 146 ff).

War in Liberia was cheap and cost-effective. The weaponry consisted mainly of light weapons such as pistols, AK-47s, grenade-launchers, machine-guns and landmines which were widely available and could be purchased for low prices directly or through middlemen. Additionally machetes, knives and sticks were used if no modern equipment was available. It was vital for conflicting parties that weapons were easily transportable in difficult terrain and that even unskilled and physically weaker fighters such as youths and children could handle them (Duyvesteyn 2005: 27, 58). Instead of military vehicles, most conflicting parties used cars and pick-up trucks for transport of personnel, equipment and loot as they were simple in maintenance and requisition. Expenditures for uniforms were inexistent in paramilitary groups as their fighters either wore their own style of civil-clothes or were just fitted out with specially imprinted or coloured t-shirts. Their appearance

itself added to the blurring of bounds between soldiers and civilians which was another distinct characteristic of the Liberian war (Ellis 1999: 115 f, 122; Kaldor 2000: 148).

Beside cheap weapons and equipment, expenditures for fighting personal were very low or even nonexistent at all. Recruitment either happened by compulsion and violent round-ups or by putting up desperate volunteers. Military training was deficient or done on the job while the multitude of youth –and child– soldiers were rather enslaved and in most cases not paid at all. Fighters from the latter age group made up about 30 percent (that is roughly 20,000) of all combatants and were highly valued due to their cheap costs of maintenance, risk-taking attitude, easy supervision and ‘programmability’. Adolescents were regarded as reservoir of potential soldiers and conflicting parties competed heavily for this easy exploitable ‘human resource’ (Sesay & Ismail 2003: 146 f).

Fighters from paramilitary groups, warlords –and even the regular army– did not have a fixed pay. Robbery and pillage occurred “when unpaid fighters at last saw the opportunity to capture things which they thought to be their reward for taking up arms” (Ellis 1999: 124). Plunder as compensation for absent salary was thus in the interest and authorised by military leaders. This had influence on the scene where war was actually taking place. In Liberia, “fighting occurred where easy money could be made. In towns, the shopping districts were looted almost systematically” (Duyvesteyn 2005: 57). Nevertheless, plunder generally only covered the

current costs of warfare. Additional capital needed to be generated to purchase expensive supply, equipment and weaponry not available locally. This could only be managed through the system of a war-economy (Atkinson 1997: 5 f).

**c) Greedy and Grievous:  
*The War-Economy in Liberia***

The origins of the Liberian war-economy root back to the time of Doe's regime when the rather formal economic system was turned into a smuggle-economy managed by a corrupt state elite. This system was already in peacetime connected to global informal and criminal markets and thus met well the preconditions to become an open war-economy as soon as violence would activate it (Atkinson 1997: 12 f; Montclos 1999: 222 f). The following empirical account will focus on *Greater Liberia* and Taylor, as he is regarded as most influential warlord and by far biggest exploiter and beneficiary of the war-economy (Montclos 1999: 228; Pham 1993: 121).

*Plunder and Protection Money:  
Internal Sources of Financing and Income*

Virtually all conflicting parties extensively 'transferred assets' to seize goods and money. Fighters strived to get "what they considered to be their just deserts, the consumer goods which they prized as marks of high status and which were so hard for the poor to come by" (Ellis 1999: 122). Big cities, especially Monrovia, were the most lucrative locations to loot and plundered goods from there were (forcefully) exchanged over and over again. The higher the degree of

organisation and capacity of the actor, the more could be 'transferred'. That is why e.g. the NPFL could steal fuel worthy 1.5 million US-\$ from the *Liberian Petroleum Refinery Corporation* and the ECOMOG tons of scrap metal, machinery and cars with Liberians joking that ECOMOG stood for 'Every Car Or Moveable Object Gone'. Stolen goods of inhabitants were often turned to cash on local 'Buy-Your-Own-Thing-Back-markets' in order to get hold of their last financial reserves (Atkinson 1997: 13; Ellis 1999: 124 ff; Pham 1993: 128).

Other goods –especially food-stuffs– were gained through 'taxes', e.g. on locals' harvests. Additionally, conflicting parties established road-blocks along main roads that were used to control passengers but also for collecting various tolls and 'custom duties' on transported freight. The NPFL created a close-meshed net of road-blocks along arterial roads leading from Monrovia to *Greater Liberia* which suited this purpose perfectly. Even the AFL used its control-posts for skimming off finances and material (Atkinson 1997: 13; Ellis 1999: 116, 120; Williams 2002: 147).

Beside charging individuals, major factions and warlords imposed 'extraordinary taxes' and demanded protection money from international companies operating within their spheres of influence. This was perhaps the war-economy's most gushing internal source of income. Taylor and his NPFL in particular profited from it during their rule over most of Liberia's territory because several international companies located there agreed in contracts with them. In exchange

for their regular payments, companies received a guarantee to remain unharmed and allowance to continue production. The *Liberia Mining Company*, a branch of the *British African Mining Consortium Limited*, paid Taylor monthly several million US-\$ and *Firestone* recommenced rubber production in 1991 in exchange for a special war-related 'tax' to be paid in foodstuffs to the NPFL. The company's additional protection money was about 2 million US-\$ a year (Atkinson 1997: 10 f; Montclos 1999: 229 ff). Many enterprises of the timber industry, like e.g. *Timco*, paid several different 'taxes' to the NPFL and after a local power-shift finally protection money to the LPC. The *Coca-Cola Company* stopped production in Liberia but was keen to financially compensate prevailing warlords for protecting the bottling plant and its inventory (Atkinson 1997: 11; Montclos 1999: 232, 236).

Informal and criminal business activities on local and regional level –especially smuggling– were another source of income for particularly less influential conflicting parties with poor connection to the global economy. However, their smuggle of diamonds, precious metals and raw rubber –especially with partners in Sierra Leone and Ivory Coast– was rather small scaled. Nevertheless, the majority of war-related economic activity happened on this level and virtually all factions participated in this business with civilians in border regions even profiting (Atkinson 1997: 6, 10; Ellis 1999: 120; Montclos 1999: 235).

In case of Liberia, the war-economy's internal sources of income –especially looting and 'taxation'– were particularly important for less

powerful conflicting groups and warlords as they contributed the major part for satisfying the fighting personnel. Thereby costs of daily warfare were significantly reduced what made continuous engagement in conflict possible. Although only limited wealth and capital could be accumulated by these methods, the violent actors' chances for individual self-enrichment were enticing enough to continue warfare. Thus the war-economy's internal sources of financing fuelled the conflict considerably at its roots and therefore contributed to its persistency (Rufin 1999: 30 f).

#### *Collaboration and Conflict-Resources:*

##### *External Sources of Financing and Income*

The major violent actors generated most part of their income through the war-economy's external sources of financing and income.

Remarkable are material and financial inflows and remittances from abroad. The Diaspora of about 140,000 to 400,000 Liberians living in the USA supported their people in West Africa with regular, small-scale transfers of cash. Around Christmas 1994, about 1.5 million US-\$ were sent via *Transglobal* to Liberia within a few days (Montclos 1999: 225). Although this money was mainly donated by private persons for their relatives in the crisis region, the NPFL and other groups opposing Doe received significant financial and logistical backing by the American-Liberians. Especially backflows from the drug-business in the USA (Reno 1998: 97 f). The opposing ULIMO benefited from expatriates of the Krahn and Mandingo ethnic groups (Duyvesteyn 2005: 25 f).

Several foreign powers have contributed to fuel the Liberian conflict although little details are known. Libya financed, trained and supplied the rebellious NPFL in order to undermine traditional American influence in the country. Gaddhafi helped the NPFL to gain access and purchase cheap weapons from Eastern European states and assisted in transporting the military equipment from Northern Africa to Liberia. Payments were mainly met by profits of the NPFL's external sources of income (Körner 1996: 136 ff; Huband 1999: 85). Ivory Coast and Burkina Faso also assisted Taylor as they intended to balance Nigeria. The latter, together with Sierra Leone and Guinea, supported opposing groups like the ULIMO –and later the LURD– with finances, military equipment and logistics. The USA played a minor role as they only financed ECOMOG's intervention besides supplying food to the IGNU. Thus many conflicting groups had a foreign country acting as their patron (Adebajo 2002: 34 ff, 93 f; Körner 1996: 149 ff.; Smith & Wiesmann 2003: 4 ff).

International aid organisations and NGOs operating in Liberia unintentionally became another source of income for warlords. The latter competed to persuade them to work in their territories as this had the effect of an inflow of foodstuffs, vehicles and other goods into their sphere of influence. The organisations were regularly 'taxed', often embezzled and eventually plundered if fighting occurred close to their headquarters or residences. Taylor and his NPFL clearly perceived relief aid as source to fund their war-efforts and 'taxed'

it extensively (Shearer 2000: 192). One huge delivery arriving via Ivory Coast was intercepted on the scene and diverted to the NPFL (Körner 1996: 150). A 'highlight' was the pillage of Monrovia in April 1996. Several paramilitary groups and warlords managed to take 322 cars from the *United Nations* (UN), 167 from other NGOs together with their computers and other precious equipment. Even ECOMOG took advantage of the chaos and participated in plundering and trading the aid organisations' possessions (Ellis 1999: 108; Pham 1993: 129). In Liberia, looting of those agencies was a central aim of competing factions. However, its overall impact on fuelling the conflict was rather marginal (Ellis 1999: 139 f; Montclos 1999: 240; Williams 2002: 107, 145, 175).

The most important external source of income and financing of the Liberian war-economy was the connection of its local and regional trade in conflict-resources and other precious (illicit) goods with the spheres of legal, informal and criminal trade –and business– networks of the global economy. Beside international involvement and obvious evidence, this fact has often been neglected regarding its impact on fuelling the war-economy and prolonging the conflict (Atkinson 1997: 5).

Taylor and the NPFL were by far the biggest beneficiaries in this respect. By June 1990, they exploited iron-ore mines in Nimba County in cooperation with a French company and shipped the raw material from the harbour-city Buchanan to business partners in Dunkirk/France (Ellis 1999: 164 ff). ULIMO and its

succeeding splinter-groups did the same in Bomi County from 1993 onwards and sold iron-ore via Nigerian middlemen to international customers (Pham 1993: 121).

Considerably high incomes generated *Taylorland* with the illicit trade of precious woods. About 200,000 m<sup>3</sup> of this slowly regenerating natural resource was exploited by the NPFL and cooperating logging-companies in 1992 alone. Its majority was exported to the European Union with France in particular. For Taylor, this trade was “an important source of extra-budgetary revenue [...] he then used to fuel the conflict” (Global Witness 2004: 10). At this time Liberia became the third largest exporter of precious tropical woods in the world and it was estimated that half of the country’s rainforests would vanish if indiscriminate logging would have continued for another five years. Other warlords –especially Boley and the LPC– were also heavily engaged in this business albeit on much smaller scale (Pham 1993: 121; Sawyer 2005: 38).

Production and trade with raw rubber was managed by *Firestone* in *Taylorland* with its rulers indirectly profiting through licenses and ‘taxes’. Furthermore, various smaller conflicting groups were involved in this business as rubber plantations were nearly everywhere and relatively easy to exploit. However, due to their limited spheres of influence their harvest and trade-volumes were rather small. As an example, in 1994 Boley’s LPC sold 3,000 tons illegally harvested raw rubber for about 1.5 million US-\$ via Buchanan –excluding ‘taxes’ to be paid to ECOMOG who was in con-

trol of the harbour at that time and equally involved in the illicit trade of this resource (Ellis 1999: 167; Pham 1993: 121). Export destinations were mostly Europe and Southeast Asia. Later on, MODEL was remarkably active in selling raw rubber to customers in overseas via Ivory Coast (Atkinson 1997: 10).

By far most important were Liberia’s plenty gold and diamond deposits which were often exploited manually on very small scale. All conflicting groups and warlords made strong efforts to gain access to these highly profitable resources. Most successful were again Taylor and the NPFL who controlled during *Greater Liberia’s* peak of power most of the country’s –and part of Sierra Leone’s– alluvial deposits and mines. There is evidence that they exported gold and diamonds with a value estimated to 300-500 million US-\$ until 1995 while smaller factions like ULIMO and the LPC contributed only a little share to this total amount from 1993 onwards. Although Liberia officially exported only 2.5 carats of diamonds in 1994 (Montclos 1999: 235), the informal, real outflow of ‘blood-diamonds’ was incredibly higher as the country became “the third-biggest supplier of diamonds to Antwerp by 1994, and in 1995 its supplies increased by 227 per cent measured by carats and 91 per cent by value” (Ellis 1999: 168). The whole dimension of this trade is difficult to trace back as it was rather secretive. Nevertheless, middlemen helped to arrange contact to the global markets –especially to financially strong customers in Europe (Atkinson 1997: 10).

Even more secretive than the trade with 'blood-diamonds' was the drug-business in which most conflicting groups were equally engaged for same reasons. Marihuana could be cultivated well and with few efforts in the humid environment of Liberia's tropical rain-forests. This allowed particularly weaker and less organised factions to exploit this easy source of income. Nevertheless, again the NPFL was most active in the external trade and sold drugs from "NPFL-held territory via San Pedro in Côte d'Ivoire, where well-organised Ivorian, French, Lebanese and other crime syndicates operated" (Ellis 1999: 169). At a later stage, the NPFL directly traded drugs to customers in overseas, especially to the US, where members of the Liberian Diaspora in *inter alia* Staten Island, New York, New Jersey and Philadelphia had the right connections and assisted in creating and opening local and regional distributive networks. Although no data is available regarding total exports and profits, the drug-business must have been large-scaled and highly lucrative. Even high-ranked officers of ECOMOG were involved as the capture of a Ghanaian vessel leaving Monrovia with four tons of marihuana gave proof of in March 1994 (Ellis 1999: 170 ff).

Not last, illicit trade with rare pieces of African art and antiquities was part of the Liberian war-economy and thus a –for sure very marginal– source of income for acquainted warlords. By the mid of 1990s, a splinter-group of ULIMO was systematically searching for these artefacts and its leader Kromah successfully sold stolen pieces via middlemen to the global antiquities-market (Ellis 1999: 128).

Infrastructure such as major transport routes, harbours, airports and big cities were the war-economy's interface to the rest of the world and functioned as trade-hubs. The harbour-cities Monrovia, Buchanan und Gbarngba suited for large-scaled shipment of timber, iron-ore and raw rubber. Airports –later even simple runways in the jungle– were mainly used for the import of weapons and export of diamonds, precious metals and drugs (Vines 2005: 345). Loss of control over these centres caused severe cut-offs from trade networks. For this reason they were highly embattled. The NPFL's loss of Buchanan in 1992 e.g. brought their illicit trade in rare timber nearly to an end as the central place of transshipment was suddenly gone (Korte 1997: 61; Reno 1998: 100).

Several conflicting parties and warlords forcefully expanded their spheres of influences to promising, unexploited regions –even across national borders– in order to siphon off additional internal and external sources of income there. The LPC advanced several times into the Ivorian border-regions and the NPFL controlled vast diamond areas in Sierra Leone from March 1991 until ULIMO's military offensive in 1992. The violation of neighbouring country's territorial integrity in combination with resource exploitation and plunder destabilised the affected nations and even dragged Sierra Leone –and nearly Guinea– into the Liberian War (Ellis 1999: 179 ff; Williams 2002: 155 ff).

Conflicting parties and warlords altogether generated profits amounting to about 500 million US-\$ through Liberia's war-eco-

nomy between 1990 and 1994, with the peak of business in 1992. Although total figures vary, Taylor and the NPFL doubtlessly profited most from the war-economy and the international trade with (illicit) conflict-resources (Reno 1998: 99; Sawyer 2005: 38). Taylor himself is estimated to have extracted values worthy between 400 and 450 million US-\$ out of his sphere of influence from 1992 until 1996. Figures that highlight his central position as main profiteer of the Liberian war-economy and conflict. Exploitation intensified again after Taylor's 'election' for presidency, when he ordered the whole territory, its natural/mineral resources, agricultural products and other valuable commodities by decree under his personal disposal. With this 'formal authorisation', Liberia's most famous warlord had the key to exploit the country's riches much easier, extensively and recklessly (Sawyer 2005: 39).

#### 4. Conclusion

Summarising the findings, one can conclude that the persistency of the 'Great War' in Liberia roots in the combination of very favourable preconditions. The violently induced collapse of an already disintegrating state in combination with social grievances and ethnic tensions created an anarchic environment which became the breeding ground for countless violent non-state actors, warlords and particularly the emerging war-economy.

Warfare in Liberia was cheap due to inexpensive military equipment and an over-supply of potential fighters. The reason for their brutal conduct can be

best explained against the background of the war-economy's internal sources of financing. Robbery and plunder were main sources of income for fighters and smaller conflicting groups and significantly contributed to the cheapness of warfare and thus duration of the conflict.

Nevertheless, most important for fuelling the conflict were the war-economy's very diversified external sources of income as they provided the majority of financial and material inflows and kept the whole system running. Taking advantage of Liberia's plenty of conflict-resources and the uncritical demand in overseas, numerous warlords –with Taylor on top– enriched themselves and turned particularly 'blood-diamonds' into weaponry to continue warfare and maintain their comfortable status. Thus armed conflicts with the mentioned characteristics are likely to smoulder endlessly until they either virtually burn out or till their main sources of fuelling are cut-off by international embargos or military intervention. The end of the Liberian bloodshed, leaving 200,000 dead and 1.8 million as refugees (Sawyer 2005: 43), was caused by both.

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