

Musevenis War and the Ugandan Conflict

Thomas P. Ofcansky

Volume 19, Number 1, Spring 1999

URI: https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/jcs19_01re05

[See table of contents](#)

Publisher(s)

The University of New Brunswick

ISSN

1198-8614 (print)

1715-5673 (digital)

[Explore this journal](#)

Cite this document

Ofcansky, T. P. (1999). Musevenis War and the Ugandan Conflict. *Journal of Conflict Studies*, 19(1), 144–147.

Musevenis War and the Ugandan Conflict

Amaza, Ondoga. *Musevenis Long March: From FRELIMO to the National Resistance Movement*. London: Pluto Press, 1998.

Gersony, Robert. *The Anguish of Northern Uganda: Results of a Field-Based Assessment of the Civil Conflicts in Northern Uganda*. Kampala: United States Embassy and USAID Mission, 1997.

Museveni, Yoweri. *Sowing the Mustard Seed: The Struggle for Freedom and Democracy in Uganda*. London: Macmillan, 1997.

Africa has become synonymous with war, population dislocations, humanitarian crises, famines and a perpetual state of despair. During the 1966-86 period, no African country suffered more than Uganda. According to numerous human rights organizations, it is likely that state-inspired violence claimed more than one million lives and destroyed the political, economic and social fabric of the society. In 1981, 27 Ugandans, led by Yoweri Museveni, took to the bush to fight for an end to this carnage and for the creation of a new, more stable Uganda. The story of Musevenis war is one of the most important chapters of Africas post-independence military history.

The three books discussed in this review essay provide a comprehensive assessment of the conflict and its impact on contemporary Uganda. *Musevenis Long March* is the only available soldiers account of how Musevenis National Resistance Army (NRA) (later renamed the Uganda Peoples Defence Force) overthrew the regime of Milton Obote (1980-85) and Tito Okello (1985-86). The author, who died in 1995, joined the NRA in 1982, serving initially in the medical unit and then in the political unit.

Apart from providing a useful narrative account of military operations, Ondoga analyzes the NRAs strategy, tactics, capabilities and ideology. He also dispels many myths about the war. For example, he discounts the theory that those who joined the NRA acted out of a desire to establish a democratic form of government. Instead, the author argues that the yearning for physical survival forced us into the bush. This explains why Museveni initially based his guerrilla campaign in the Luwero Triangle, an area north of the Kampala that had been ravaged by government troops, many of whom were Acholi.

Ondoga believes that the armed forces have a vital role to play in Ugandas political development. In particular, he argues that the army must be part of an ongoing revolution to dismantle and recreate all state components, including the army, police, intelligence services, prison services, government bureaucracy and the judiciary. Such ideological determinism is at variance with Ugandas reputation of being a open, pragmatic society. Although the depth to which Odongos thinking permeates the military is unknown, it is likely that many officers believe that the army can at least help to lead Uganda into the twenty-first century.

The Anguish of Northern Uganda is the first comprehensive study of this conflict which has claimed tens of thousands of lives and has consumed ever increasing amounts of the governments budget. The author, under contract to the United States Agency for International Development (USAID) mission in Kampala, conducted considerable field research by traveling some 5,000 kilometers in northern Uganda and interviewing about 300 people, the majority of

whom lived in the war zone. He also consulted with diplomats from seven countries and representatives from the United Nations, other multilateral organizations and various religious groups.

Gersonys study has many strengths, the most important of which is the clear explanation of the intricacies of the norths relationship to the rest of Uganda. In the northeastern districts of Gulu and Kitgum, the Acholi people have a centuries-old warrior tradition that has given them a unique place in Ugandan history. During the pre-colonial, colonial and post-independence periods, Acholis earned a reputation for their prowess as soldiers, policemen and prison guards.

Idi Amin (1971-79), who is from West Nile District in northwestern Uganda, purged the armed forces of the Acholis and replaced them with West Nilers like the Kakwa and Aringa people and with Sudanese who had been long-time residents in Uganda. By the early 1980s, however, the Acholi influence in the military rebounded and they constituted approximately 30-40 percent of the armed forces and dominated the officer corps.

During the fight against the insurgent NRA, the author documents how Acholi soldiers committed widespread atrocities against the civilian population of the Luwero Triangle. After Museveni seized power in January 1986, Acholi troops fled to their traditional homeland in northeast Uganda or to exile in southern Sudan.

Since then, warfare between the Acholis and the NRA has plagued Gulu and Kitgum Districts. Gersony provides an excellent analysis of the evolution of this conflict. He also dispels the popular notion that the Lords Resistance Army (LRA) (earlier known as the Holy Spirit Movement), which has been dominated by mystics like Alice Auma (aka Lakwena) and Joseph Kony, represents little more than a degeneration into primitive atavism.

In the authors view, the war has passed through five distinct stages, each of which he examines in detail. He points out that during the initial stages of the insurgency, most Acholis backed the rebels. However, popular support waned as the LRA became more abusive toward the civilian population. Gersony cautions that the increasing unpopularity of the rebels should not be misconstrued as support for Musevenis regime, which is viewed negatively by the majority of Acholis.

The next section of *The Anguish of Northern Uganda* deals with the conflict in West Nile District. The author shows how Sudan facilitated the emergence of the insurgent West Nile Bank Front (WNBFF) - which was led by Juma Oris, a former minister in the Amin government - by exploiting local resentment against the Museveni government, especially among the large numbers of unemployed former soldiers and youth. Additionally, many West Nilers believed that Kampala had exacerbated the security situation by allowing the Sudanese Peoples Liberation Army (SPLA) led by John Garang to establish bases in northwest Uganda. The level of fighting in northwestern Uganda has been far less destructive than Konys activities in Gulu and Kitgum districts. According to Gersony, there are several reasons for the difference between the two rebel groups. He explains that, although there was some minor unrest in the early 1990s, it was not until 1994 that the WNBFF emerged as a credible guerrilla force. Unlike the LRA, the WNBFF has not brutalized the civilian population or attacked civilian targets such as schools. Also, dislocation of civilians has been minimal while the material impact of the war has been only a

fraction of that in Acholi areas. As a result, many communities in the northwest supported or at least tolerated WNBK activities.

Gersony concludes his study with a comprehensive set of recommendations to end the fighting in northern Uganda. Sadly, by early 1999, neither Washington nor Kampala had tried to implement any of the authors suggestions.

Sowing the Mustard Seed has a pronounced tendency toward long-windedness and hagiographic pretentiousness. Nevertheless, Musevenis autobiography is indispensable for understanding Musevenis war of liberation, his efforts to transform the NRA into a conventional military force and his failure to end the insurgency in northern Uganda.

Nine out of fourteen chapters are devoted to military matters. Apart from providing an appreciation of Musevenis military strategy and tactics, the book is filled with highly factual information. The author focuses largely on the building blocks of a successful guerrilla war. These include the ability to smuggle arms, conduct successful ambushes, infiltrate rebels into government-controlled areas and then conceal them, disseminate propaganda, and win the hearts and minds of local populations. Much of this information is unavailable elsewhere.

Additionally, *Sowing the Mustard Seed* contains material about the post-1986 period and the difficulties of trying to transform a guerrilla force into a conventional army, the requirements of an effective demobilization program and the problems associated with waging a counterinsurgency war in northern Uganda. Museveni also pontificates about the role of the army and the ruling-party, known as the movement, in recreating a functioning state, establishing order and restoring the rule of law.

On a broader level, *Sowing the Mustard Seed* raises the inevitable question about how Museveni, who was such a masterful guerrilla leader, has proven to be such an inept commander-in-chief. The military situation is worse now than at anytime since he came to power. Gross corruption plagues all levels of the UPDF. There are more active insurgent groups in northern and western Uganda than ever before. Musevenis Combined Arms Element counterinsurgency strategy, which calls for the use of heavy weapons such as tanks, armored personnel carriers, helicopter gun ships and fighter aircraft, has been a dismal failure. Apart from lacking the capabilities and personnel to operate and maintain such equipment, command and control is nebulous at best. The growing cost of Ugandas military intervention in the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DROC) threatens to derail development programs and alienate donors who want to reduce military spending. Acknowledging and resolving these problems requires a circumspect and capable personality rather than one imbued with an exaggerated sense of military infallibility.

Since these three books were published, the military situation in Uganda has deteriorated. In western Uganda, the Allied Democratic Forces (ADF) - it is comprised of Ugandan Muslims; remnants of the National Army for the Liberation of Uganda (NALU) that had been active in the Ruwenzori mountains during the early 1990s; and, reportedly, former soldiers from Rwanda and the DROC - has scored some major victories but lacks the power to deliver a decisive military victory over Uganda. The Uganda National Rescue Front II (UNRF II) has started minor operations in northeast Uganda while the UPDF has deployed some units to eastern Uganda in response to growing unrest. Meanwhile, the UPDFs intervention in the DROC, which has lasted

far longer than expected, continues to consume ever increasing amounts of Ugandan resources. Recently, there were reports of clashes between the UPDF and its ally, the Rwanda Patriotic Army, in eastern DROC.

Despite these growing problems, Museveni refuses to negotiate with any of the rebel groups, preferring instead to seek a military victory over his adversaries. However, his repeated threats to crush the insurgents have failed to produce any tangible results. Museveni's dirty little wars, coupled with the DROC fiasco, provides little hope that stability will be restored to Uganda anytime soon.

Thomas P. Ofcansky
Department of State, Washington, DC