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# **The SAGE Encyclopedia of War: Social Science Perspectives**

## **Rape as a Weapon of War**

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Rape, in wartime, refers to situations in which soldiers from national armies or nonstate belligerents sexually assault women as part of their military campaign in order to establish their domination. Sexual violence has always been a side effect of armed conflicts, as modern examples highlight: during the Napoleonic Wars, many women were assaulted; in the first half of the 20th century, hundreds of thousands of women were abducted as “comfort women” by the Japanese Army; during World War II, German soldiers assaulted western European and Russian women prior to Russian troops engaging in large-scale rape of German women and girls; more recently, during the Vietnam War, American soldiers allegedly also engaged in large-scale rape of Vietnamese women.

Rape during wartime was previously perceived as collateral damage, but the concept of rape as a weapon of war emerged in the 1990s. The systematic and military use of rape in the former Yugoslavia conflict and in the Rwandan genocide motivated the international community to analyze rape as a war strategy. In these two cases, rape was a military stratagem and a genocidal tool. Later on, rape would expand in many civil wars in Africa and elsewhere, becoming a global concern in a very short time. The large media coverage of these post–Cold War crises contributed to the emergence of an international awareness that led to academic research and active humanitarian emergency programs.

This entry begins by discussing rape as both a weapon of war and as a means of ethnic cleansing. It then explains the consequences of rape for both the victims and their communities. Lastly, this entry examines the international response regarding the use of rape as a weapon.

### **Rape as a Weapon**

Rape is considered a weapon of war when, in the context of conflict, it is committed by a group of armed men (be they part of the army or of a rebel group) who respond to concrete orders and execute a predetermined plan. In such cases, rape is an actual war strategy, used to destroy and exile targeted communities. When rape is part of such a widespread scheme, it is likely that a large number of women will become victims of rape. It is also likely that they will be abused repeatedly and collectively by several men. Such violence against women, thus, is by no means collateral damage but part of a concerted and calculated plan.

Rape as a weapon of war has significant consequences for the social harmony of the affected communities. The goal of the military armed groups is to weaken and even destroy a given community by targeting the women and children. It is thus a threat to social identity and cultural integrity. In a genocidal context, the aim is to completely annihilate a given community. In a war context, the intention is to cut off the enemy from its civilian support by brutalizing the population and/or to “punish” civilian populations for their alleged or effective aid to the opposing group. For the victims and their clan, the village itself becomes associated with the assault.

Furthermore, military or paramilitary groups use rape as a concerted tool to compel allegiance to the group. The members of the armed groups who perpetrate rape may do so because of intimidation or retaliation over their position in the group’s structure, risk of being raped themselves, or even threats upon their or their families’ lives. A dimension of (para)military socialization through rape has been observed. New recruits are often forced to commit such abuse as an anthropological ritual, a *rite de passage*, in order to prove their unconditional compliance to the group’s objectives and their readiness to obey any order. As a result, the

rapists may also experience psychological consequences.

The Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) became the paradigmatic example of the use of rape as a weapon of war when, in the past few decades, the militias and the army extensively used rape as such a weapon. The United Nations estimates that between 1998 and 2007, 200,000 people were raped in the eastern part of the DRC, mostly women and girls. But this takes into account only the reported offenses, as many victims may never speak out to humanitarian workers or local authorities about the assault they survived. Rape was often used when a city or a particular area was (re)taken by a militia or even the army.

In this context, civilians are expiatory victims of the grievances that armed groups maintain for each other; rape is thus another expression, along with looting, slaughters, forced enrollments, recruitment of child-soldiers, for example. It is the illustration of the unbearable situation of the civilians, who remain at the center of the violence circle and are the principal victims of the war. It also highlights that rape is the most dishonest weapon, used by the weakest groups, because it can bring in major gains to these groups with a minimum investment by emptying entire areas.

The reason why rape is used in such a widespread manner thus lies in its effectiveness, based upon a rigid conception of honor in the Congolese society and more broadly in African societies. The destruction of the familial cell can only be achieved if the shame of the rape is unbearable enough to provoke it. This is one of the reasons why war rapes in the DRC are perpetrated in public and with a particular nonhuman violence, conceived to wound the women and to humiliate the men and the families. In Eastern Congo, after being raped, most victims are banished from their homes because of the dishonor connected to their abuse. Thus, raping a woman is a strategy to dishonor the entire family, village, and community. The infamy becomes a collective shame—the indignity is not an individual case but a collective case involving the destruction of social networks.

### **Rape as Ethnic Cleansing**

In the wars that took place after the Cold War in former Yugoslavia, rape was used not only as a weapon of war but also as a means of ethnic cleansing. During the conflicts in Bosnia-Herzegovina and Croatia, Serb soldiers and, to a more limited extent, other armed groups, executed the crime of rape on very large scales. The Serbian forces raped between 20,000 and 50,000 Bosnian women. In a large majority of these cases, the women were raped several times and by several soldiers. In addition, victims were sometimes jailed until they became pregnant with a Serbian baby in order to ethnically “purify” Bosnia.

At approximately the same time, Rwanda became a well-known case study of the use of rape on a large scale during a conflict or genocide. As part of the 1994 genocide against the Tutsi, armed militia groups leading the killings widely used rape against Tutsi women, both premortem and postmortem, targeting not only adult women but also children, infants, and elderly women. Approximately 350,000 women and girls were raped during the three months of the genocide—only 50,000 survived. Rape was used not only as a way to humiliate the women and their communities but it was also used to destroy them. Repeated and unthinkably violent rapes, committed with the use of objects, knives, and guns, were intended to provoke death. Sexual assaults, thus, included rape but also mutilations and severe injuries.

Several developing countries—such as Guatemala, Liberia, Sierra Leone, and Darfur in

Sudan—faced comparable challenges in the context of civil wars in the 1990s and thereafter, even if these cases were less documented than the aforementioned conflicts. In the case of the conflict in Sudan that began in 2003, even though they were largely outnumbered, the Janjaweed emptied entire villages by using rape on a massive scale.

### Consequences

The moral and physical consequences of rape used as a weapon of war are very important and enduring. On the physical dimension, rape can leave many wounds and scars: sexual lesions, HIV, pregnancies, among others. On the psychological dimension, rape is detrimental not only to the direct victims but also their families, and the consequences can be particularly dreadful for the children. The victims of rape often suffer posttraumatic stress disorder, flashbacks, alimentation and sleep disorders, and self-inflicted injuries. The children conceived by rape or the children who witnessed women being raped also experience psychological traumas.

In places where conflicts have lasted for many years or even decades, as it is the case in the DRC, rape becomes an increasing practice among civilians. Human rights organizations thus decry the rise of civilian-on-civilian rapes, which represents an issue closely linked with the large number of men who had been part of an armed group, in which violence is legitimated and impunity surrounds sexual charges.

For the most part, war rapes in fragile or failed states are met with impunity and indictments are not common. Both military men and militia men are not held accountable for sexual abuses. The Congo case is illustrative of that situation: Although the Congolese government signed and ratified many international conventions prohibiting sexual violence in wartime, it had no means or will to enforce those texts. Some initiatives to oppose the use of rape as a weapon of war come from civil society, doctors, and nongovernmental organizations; however, the range of their action is limited by a lack of means and by the permanent insecurity characterizing the eastern part of the DRC.

### International Response

International responses to the use of rape as a weapon of war are multiple and of medical, psychological, political, and judiciary natures—each of which can only intervene after the crisis unfolds and do not have prevention components. The medical and psychological approaches are the most effective for the victims, whereas political and judiciary ones act on a broader stage. In the political context, diplomats often criticize the situation and the international community decries such cases through UN representatives, but very few concrete diplomatic steps have been taken to address the issue. In the judiciary context, in international law, rape in the context of war is considered a war crime and can be considered as a crime of genocide in certain circumstances.

The 1949 Fourth Geneva Convention took steps against sexual violence in a context of conflict. But the lack of judiciary courts to effect those rules undermined their effectiveness. It was only in the 1990s that judiciary responses to war rapes emerged in the statutes of both the International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia (ICTY) and the International Criminal Tribunal for Rwanda (ICTR). In 1998, Rwandan politician Jean-Paul Akayesu was found guilty of genocide in a trial that publicly recognized the victims of genocide-rape as victims of genocide and crimes against humanity.

Article 7 of the 1998 Rome Statute, which established the International Criminal Court (ICC), considers sexual violence as being part of the court's range of action in the categories of crimes against humanity and war crimes. Since the ICC released its first condemnations, several trials have resulted in punishment for instances of rape as a weapon of war, particularly in the DRC and in Sudan. For example, in the 2009 ICC arrest warrant against Omar Al Bashir, the president of Sudan, rape was included in the crimes against humanity category and separated from the genocide charges, which instigated an ongoing debate regarding the genocidal character of rape.

In October 2000, the United Nations Security Council adopted Resolution 1325, which put gender-based violence at the core of the international agenda. Although inadequately enforced, this resolution has become an important reference point for concentrating further attention on the problem of sexual violence in war. Practical recommendations for structural reforms of the armies and security forces were then adopted in Resolutions 1820 (2008) and 1889 (2009), but they remain nonbinding.

An important limit to the international fight against violence directed toward women is that it only uses tools adapted to postconflict situations and has poor impact in wartime. It is, thus, important for this issue to be more than just one of the many elements in a postcrisis toolkit, because women are at the center of social networks and central to reconstructing a community after the conflict ends.

**See also** [Congo, Democratic Republic of the](#); [Crimes Against Humanity](#); [Genocide](#); [Rwanda](#)

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#### **Further Readings**

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