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The SAGE Encyclopedia of War: Social Science Perspectives

Uganda

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Uganda is a landlocked country in Central Africa of almost 200,000 square kilometers, with a population of 33 million inhabitants. The geographical position of Uganda puts it at the core of several strategic issues, which led British statesman Winston Churchill to consider it the “pearl of Africa.” Uganda is a major regional power and a potential key actor of (in)stability in the region. Its internal issues, namely its economic, political, and social weaknesses, are thus of great concern for international diplomats.

From Precolonial Times to Colonization

Uganda has been occupied since the 4th century BCE. During the precolonial time, the political organization was established upon clans and subclans. Clans were based, in a rather loose manner, upon kinship, exogamy, symbols, and solidarity rules. Uganda evolved into different state constructions, the most powerful and dynamic being the Bunyoro-Kitara and the Buganda, which competed to extend their respective domination. States then matured into monarchies around the 18th century. The country was rather isolated from the outside world and especially from colonial expeditions.

In the late 19th century, the British colonized Uganda. The control of the area was key for the prosperity of Britain’s Egyptian colony. In 1894, formal British protectorate over Buganda was imposed, and Buganda became the heart of the English dominion. The Buganda kingdom assisted the British in the conquest of other territories such as the Bunyoro-Kitara. Subjugation was relatively easy because local kings were focused on the threat of Ismail, the Sudanese khedive who drove repeated attacks and attempted to invade Bunyoro and Buganda, rather than on the new British presence. The British colonial administration in Uganda was a backhanded, or indirect, rule. It used the preexisting kingdoms and their structures to dismantle the king’s authority and support a privileged oligarchy. At the end of the 19th century, Uganda was committed in prosperous international trade and was well-off economically, but preexisting socioeconomic and ethnic divisions deepened.

From Independence to Political Instability

Uganda became independent on October 9, 1962. Four kingdoms were recognized as subentities of the new Ugandan state, and no clear political majority emerged. Coalitions were thus necessary, which induced an important political instability in the years following independence.

Governments

The first Obote government, paralyzed by the claims of each kingdom, tried to introduce reforms. But a coup organized by Idi Amin ousted Milton Obote in 1967 and prevented their implementation. The Amin rule in Uganda was one of the worst dictatorships in the world at that time and one of the most violent periods in Ugandan history. His paranoid power, based on terror, had no political goal. The army was used to blindly slaughter so-called opponents in order to terrorize the people. Amin’s regime is still famous today for the worst acts of violence it perpetrated, including forms of torture and cannibalism. The Tanzanian army finally ousted Amin in April 1979. Ugandan political life remained in a chaotic situation until Obote came back to office. But his second mandate was despotic, and violence perpetuated in an attenuate version of Amin’s oppressive politics. Obote’s lack of political legitimacy inside a divided society increased interethnic violence. Opposition and guerilla movements emerged,

such as the National Resistance Movement (NRM) and National Resistance Army (NRA), led by Yoweri Museveni.

After a coup ousted Obote in 1985, Museveni initiated an attack over Kampala and seized power on January 26, 1986. At that time, the NRA included many Rwandan Tutsi soldiers, who had grown up in exile in Uganda. These soldiers, among the closest collaborators to Museveni, were appointed to strategic military and political positions. It was a bad sign for the population who perceived them as foreigners.

Museveni was originally inspired by Marxist theories and was militarily educated in Mozambique by the Frelimo rebellion. Once in power, he changed his ideological views and finally joined the liberal economy, inscribing Uganda in the global system. He concentrated on developing the country economically, but he also followed controversial national and international policies. The main criticisms he faced were about corruption, authoritarianism, and intrusion in other states' affairs. In particular, the former Rwandan government accused Museveni of supporting the Tutsi-led Rwandan rebellion of the Rwandan Patriotic Front (RPF) that started in 1990. Museveni had interest in sustaining this rebellion because it was a pertinent strategy to drive the Tutsi away from important Ugandan political positions. The Ugandans requested such ranks, but Museveni was also cautious to put in place a well-disposed power in Rwanda. During the three years of the Rwandan Civil War, the RPF possessed bases in Uganda and benefitted from trainings and funds. The RPF eventually seized power in Rwanda in July 1994, when it put an end to the genocide executed by the Hutu Power.

Wars

In the following years, the Ugandan and Rwandan governments carried on two wars in Zaïre and the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC). Both countries were under attacks from rebellions based in the DRC. The Rwandan Hutu rebellion comprised many ex-perpetrators of the genocide, and Rwanda launched the attack with the support of Uganda. The military operations of both countries in the first war, between 1996 and 1997, finally ended with the defeat of Mobutu Sese Seko and the political rise of Laurent-Désiré Kabila in the DRC. But the latter soon enjoined Uganda and Rwanda to leave the country. In consequence, the two nations responded by attacking the DRC, leading to the second war. The Congolese natural resources were attractive for both countries and became a real motivation for fighting the wars. After their defeat in the second Congo war, caused by the Angolan assistance to Kabila, Uganda and Rwanda started proxy rebellions in the DRC, financing, arming, and sustaining them while they continued to plunder the Congolese wealth. As of 2015, the situation is still very agitated, and the Eastern part of the DRC has been destabilized by numerous and rival rebellious movements.

Lord's Resistance Army Movement

Another important issue for Uganda in the regional context is the Lord's Resistance Army (LRA) movement that has been of great concern for the country for many years. Alice Lakwena created a military-spiritual movement in late 1987. She was an Acholi woman and proclaimed herself a prophetess, leading a group that fought against the newly established Museveni government. Another figure emerged in an associated rebellion, Joseph Kony, who eventually became the main leader of the group in Uganda in 1988 when Lakwena was forced to flee. He was soon surrounded by a reputation of medium and spiritual leader. The group has been accused of human rights violations and crimes against humanity since it fled from

Uganda to neighboring countries. The movement has been on the run, and its leader, Kony, has been tracked down during several years. The United States eventually provided—in vain—substantial assistance to the Ugandan forces in this particular matter.

Related to this rebellion and some other regional issues, Uganda's relations with Sudan also have to be evocated. For more than 10 years, Lakwena has received support from Sudanese president Al Bashir, whereas Sudanese rebel leader John Garang has received support from the Ugandan government.

See also [Congo, Democratic Republic of the](#); [Rwanda](#); [Sudan](#)

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Further Readings

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