Teresa Koloma Beck

The Normality of Civil War

Armed Groups and Everyday Life in Angola

campus

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Mikropolitik der Gewalt – Micropolitics of Violence

Volume 7

Edited by Klaus Schlichte and Peter Waldmann

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List of Acronyms

ELNA *Exército de Libertação Nacional de Angola*, National Liberation Army of Angola (armed forces of FNLA)

FALA *Forças Armadas de Libertação de Angola*, Armed Forces of the Liberation of Angola (armed forces of UNITA)

FAPLA *Forças Armadas Populares de Libertação de Angol*a, People's Armed Forces for the Liberation of Angola (armed forces of the Angolan government)

FNLA *Frente Nacional de Libertação de Angola*, National Front for the Liberation of Angola

GRAE *Govêrno revolucionário de Angola no exílio*, Revolutionary Exile Government of Angola

MPLA *Movimento Popular de Libertação de Angola*, Popular Movement for the Liberation of Angola

PIDE *Polícia Internacional e de Defesa do Estado,* International and State Defence Police

SADF South African Defence Forces

SWAPO South West Africa People's Organisation

UNITA *União Nacional para a Independência Total de Angola*, National Union for the Total Independence of Angola

Acknowledgements

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1. Introduction

"The conditions in the Central Highlands were very complex. Especially in the villages it happened, for example, that at night it knocked on the door of a father. And his son, who was fighting on the other side, stood there, asking for money. Money for medicine, money for food. 'Father, we are dying out there!' he would say. What would this man do in such a situation? Would he act as one from the other side? Or as a father?" (Interview, 2005m)

The sound of shooting, the flickering of muzzle flash, burning houses and vehicles, people fleeing from the scenes of violence, corpses left behind—such or similar are the images that come to our mind thinking about war. Popular as well as academic discourse have cultivated an image of war as a state of emergency, as a temporary deviation from the "normal" course of affairs, a deviation that is marked by destructive and disruptive forces. But civil wars are not fought in one day; many of them last several years, some decades. In Sudan and Chad, Sierra Leone and Liberia, Angola and Mozambique, in Peru, Columbia and Nicaragua, in the Palestinian areas of Israel and the Kurdish territories of Turkey and Iraq, in Lebanon, as well as in East-Timor, Myanmar and Vietnam violent conflicts have been going on for ten to thirty years.[1] Given the time horizons of existential human activities such as cultivating fields or raising children, this seems to be a rather long period to be experienced as a transitory state of emergency. Moreover, as psychological research shows, a persistent experience of crisis quickly leads to a breakdown (Schauer, Elbert and Neuner, 2005). Therefore, a "state of emergency"-perspective on wars might be useful in the reconstruction of political and legal problems. Yet, its contribution to the understanding of the social processes in war situations can only be limited. This observation, however, raises a fundamental epistemological question: if not as a state of emer-

1 The data is drawn from the online database of AKUF (Arbeitsgemeinschaft Kriegsursachenforschung, Research Group Causes of War) at Hamburg University, Germany (AKUF, 2012).

gency, how can war situations otherwise be conceived? The aim of this book is to propose an answer to this question. In the spirit of qualitative empirical research, the discussion develops around a case study on civil war in Angola.

The account cited at the beginning vividly illustrates the limitations of an state of emergency-perspective on violent conflict. Collected during field research in Angola, it describes a situation, which, according to the interviewee, was typical for the civil war period: a father finds himself in a dilemma to choose between, on the one hand, loyalty to the armed group that is ruling the area he lives in, and, on the other hand, loyalty to his combatant son who is "from the other side". The confrontation takes place at his very doorstep, and the decision he is confronted with affects him in a rather personal and emotional way. Fatherly loyalty would be the obvious choice; yet, it would also bring him into perilous conflict with the armed actors ruling the territory. The story shows how, in a civil war situation, the civilian and the combatant milieu come to meet in a contentious everyday life. Moreover, the wording of the interviewee suggests that, to his experience, the scene was all but exceptional. This story, thus, defies the notion of war as a state of emergency; moreover, it contradicts the commonly assumed distance between the realm of the combatants and the non-combatants. While putting common implicit presumptions about violent conflict into question, it also serves to reveal the very same presuppositions: in the common epistemology of war, the latter appears, firstly, as crisis suspending "normality". And secondly, it is assumed that this crisis is driven by a particular constellation of agents, by the violent confrontation between at least two armed groups, fighting at the expense of an innocuous civilian population. The distinction between those who are waging war and those who fall prey to it is supposed to be identifiable and clear cut as well as the distinction between the armed opponents themselves.

Tacitly orienting research and analysis, these implicit presumptions have major implications for the study of wars in academia and beyond. Systematically, they draw the researcher's attention, on the one hand, to events indicative or emblematic for a state of emergency; and on the other, to the protagonists of war situations: armies and armed groups. Invariably, the warring parties and the so-called civilian population appear as mutually exclusive and intrinsically contradicting spheres, touching each other but episodically, typically in moments of violence and destruction.

The origins of these preconceptions can be found in the ideal of trinitarian warmaking, described by Carl von Clausewitz against the background of

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