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# The Truth About Museveni's Crimes

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Despite Western claims that he brought peace to Uganda after years of violence under his predecessors, his regime has been bloody from the start.



Luke Dray/Getty Images

Voters in line at a polling station during the Ugandan presidential election, Kampala, January 14, 2021

### Reviewed:

#### How Insurgency Begins: Rebel Group Formation in Uganda and Beyond

by Janet I. Lewis

Cambridge University Press, 277 pp., \$99.99; \$34.99 (paper)

On January 18, four days after Ugandans went to the polls, Yoweri Museveni, who has been the country's president since 1986, claimed his sixth election victory—this time against the musician and legislator Robert Kyagulanyi, also known as Bobi Wine—with 59 percent of the vote. During the campaign period, Wine was arrested multiple times, and in one particularly violent two-day interval in mid-November, at least fifty-four people—some Wine supporters, others bystanders—were shot dead by security forces or crushed by military vehicles; one was just fifteen years old. Shortly before election day, Wine's entire campaign staff was jailed, including security, medical, and media teams, and his offices were ransacked by regime agents.

The day before polls closed, the Internet was shut down nationwide, presumably to hinder reports of ballot box stuffing, the bribing, beating, and detention of poll watchers from the opposition parties, and other abuses committed by Museveni's forces that are now coming to light. When Wine returned from voting the next day, he found soldiers camped on his property, and for the next eleven days, he and his wife remained under house arrest, unable even to gather vegetables from their garden. US ambassador Natalie Brown was refused entry by the soldiers, and when one of Wine's parliamentary colleagues tried to see him, he was so badly beaten by security officers that he had to be hospitalized.

On January 25 a Ugandan High Court judge ordered the security forces to withdraw from Wine's property, but he remains under constant surveillance. Helicopters hover over his house and security vehicles follow him everywhere he goes. Wine has petitioned Uganda's Supreme Court to annul the election, citing regime violence, ballot box stuffing, the illegal detention of opposition supporters, and other offenses. Yet each time aggrieved challengers have attempted this after previous elections, the justices have ruled in Museveni's favor—apparently, according to one justice and to a journalist who interviewed another, under pressure from the president.

Museveni's security forces are among the most brutal and violent in the world. They have tortured legislators and killed opposition supporters, gunned down unarmed villagers, and sparked conflicts in neighboring countries. But Museveni has long been one of the Pentagon's closest partners in sub-Saharan Africa. In the early 1990s he funneled US weapons to Sudanese rebels fighting the Islamist-dominated government of Omar al-Bashir. Today the US relies on Museveni's forces to fight al-Shabaab militants in Somalia, and they also serve as guards under US command in Iraq. In return, Museveni has received tens of billions of dollars in foreign assistance from the US, UK, European Union, and other donors.

I've been following Ugandan politics for decades, and one thing that struck me in the international news coverage of this harrowing election was the claim—repeated in one form or another by reporters for the BBC, *The Washington Post*, *The Guardian*, and other publications—that when Museveni and his rebel insurgency seized power thirty-five years ago, he initially brought peace to Uganda after years of violent strife under his predecessors Milton Obote (1966–1971 and 1980–1985), Idi Amin (1971–1979), and Tito Okello (1985–1986). The implication is that his tyrannical behavior is relatively new. In reality, Museveni's regime was bloody right from the start. No definitive counts exist for deaths under any of Uganda's postindependence regimes, but Museveni's has almost certainly claimed more lives than Obote's, Amin's, and Okello's combined.<sup>1</sup>

Between 1986 and 2006 war raged across huge swaths of Uganda, as both rebel and government forces looted houses, granaries, and farms and murdered and tortured civilians. Museveni's soldiers bombed hundreds of thousands of people out of their villages and confined them to internment camps where the death rate from disease, hunger, and rebel attacks spiked fivefold above the rate in normal times—higher, even, than in Darfur or Iraq during the peak of the conflicts there. Museveni then backed violent rebels not only in Sudan but also in Rwanda and Congo, and more recently inflamed South Sudan's civil war, prolonging a conflict that has claimed over 400,000 lives.

Why do so few Western journalists and editors seem to know this? For decades, Museveni's reputation has been protected by highly paid American lobbyists, World Bank officials, diplomats and politicians from the donor countries that enlist his military to do their dirty work around the world, and sometimes by journalists who have, knowingly or not, tended to downplay his abuses or divert attention from them by criticizing the opposition.<sup>2</sup> This image-burnishing has been so effective that in 2004 Museveni was even praised by the Nobel Peace Prize committee “for his efforts in helping to resolve regional conflicts and combating the spread of HIV/AIDS.”

Most scholarly studies have taken a different view of Museveni, revealing a pattern of abuses committed by his army over the past thirty-five years.<sup>3</sup> *How Insurgency Begins* by Janet Lewis, a political scientist at George Washington University, is an exception, portraying instead a regime that responded militarily only to serious national threats.

Lewis's subject is important. Since 1980 sub-Saharan Africa has been beset by over seventy wars, most of which have been insurgencies—from Islamist movements like Nigeria's Boko Haram and Somalia's al-Shabaab to the myriad gangs whose members dressed up in wedding gowns and Halloween masks and terrorized Liberia during the 1990s. Uganda, which has possibly had the most insurgencies—at least sixteen against Museveni's regime alone—provides an important case study.

The subject is a vital one for another reason. **Africa's insurgencies have long posed a puzzle to political scientists. Unlike the independence fighters who battled to liberate their countries from colonial rule in the twentieth century, many post-cold war insurgents have seemed, to outsiders at least, to be fighting for power for its own sake. Journalists such as the foreign policy analyst Robert Kaplan and scholars such as the Oxford economist Paul Collier maintain that the spoils of war—looting, gunrunning, mineral and gem smuggling—generate parallel economies that provide meaning and a way of life for bored, uneducated young men unable to find their way in the rickety formal economies of underdeveloped African states.**<sup>4</sup>

In a 2010 *Foreign Policy* article entitled “Africa’s Forever Wars,” the reporter Jeffrey Gettleman summarized this “new predatory style.” Africa’s wars “are not really wars,” he wrote. “The combatants don’t have much of an ideology; they don’t have clear goals.... All they want is cash, guns, and a license to rampage.” To evoke the irrationality of Africa’s conflicts, Gettleman concluded with an interview with a former Ugandan rebel. Asked what her group had been fighting for, she simply looked off into the distance and said, “I am just thinking of the road home.”

What’s troubling is how sweeping this analysis is. Gettleman himself admits that one theory—let’s call it the “new predatory style hypothesis”—can’t possibly explain dozens of wars on a vast continent of fifty-four countries comprising thousands of ethnic groups and languages. After all, scholars still argue about the causes of World War I. Had Gettleman asked survivors of Gallipoli what they thought they were fighting for, he might well have received the same vague response. One of Britain’s most famous war poems includes the line “Theirs is not to reason why.”

In order to understand any war, it’s necessary to explore, as deeply as possible, the history, culture, and politics of the societies in which that war occurs, and to trace the events that led to violence. This is why Lewis’s *How Insurgency Begins* seems at first glance so promising. Its focus, despite the ambitious title, is on Uganda, a single country that has experienced a disproportionate share of Africa’s postcolonial insurgencies. Unfortunately, the book obscures the reality of Uganda’s history behind a fog of scientific detail.

Lewis enumerates the various groups that have taken up arms against Museveni and attempts to explain why they emerged where they did by exploring such factors as local poverty rates, forest cover, ethnic diversity, and ethnic representation within Museveni’s cabinet. Finding no relationship between any of these factors and rebel group formation, she concludes that the anti-Museveni insurgencies were idiosyncratic: rebel leaders emerged due to their own “individual histories, proclivity and judgment,” and then persuaded gullible peasants to support them by spreading rumors about their supposed chances of success.

Museveni’s army quashed these insurgencies years ago, and many of their fighters fled into exile. But some signed amnesty agreements with Museveni’s government and remained in Uganda. Lewis tracked down dozens of them to see if they could shed further light on why they rebelled. Strangely, the answers she records are so vague that it’s as though these hardened ex-combatants hadn’t seriously considered the question before. “We felt that unless we fought, [our region] wouldn’t be recognized,” said one of the rebels, without explaining what his region wanted to be recognized for. Another said he “wanted a voice” for his community, without explaining what that voice would

say. “We wanted to keep hitting [the government] and use that as a bargaining chip,” said a third, without specifying what his group wanted to bargain for.

It’s hard to believe that the decision to launch a rebellion was taken so casually that the combatants couldn’t articulate any specific reasons for doing so. Countless Ugandans have been imprisoned, tortured, and killed just for belonging to the nonviolent political opposition, not to mention being suspected of belonging to a rebel group. In the years when most of these insurgencies were forming, Museveni’s signature torture method was the “three-piece tie,” in which the victim’s arms are bound tightly behind the back above the elbows, so that the chest protrudes outward, producing searing pain.

“You can’t breathe at all,” a former aid worker who’d witnessed someone tortured in this way told me recently. Sometimes the legs are also bound to the hands and the victim is hung from a tree or rafter. Those subjected to it usually end up with permanent nerve damage. Would someone really risk the three-piece tie just for unspecified “recognition,” “voice,” or “bargaining chips”?

A large scholarly literature on Uganda gives an explanation very different from Lewis’s for why the country has been so beset by insurgencies. When Museveni took power, his army behaved reasonably well—or at least less destructively than the armies of Obote, Amin, and Okello—in the southern part of the country, where the capital, Kampala, is located and the Bahima, Museveni’s ethnic group, traditionally resides. But it behaved very differently in Uganda’s northern and eastern regions, home of the Acholi, Langi, and Iteso people, who had filled the ranks of the police and army under previous regimes.

Reporters were intermittently barred from these areas during the late 1980s and early 1990s, but the London-based Ugandan activist Josephine Apira provided me with some sense of what life was like in the war-torn part of northern Uganda she came from. In early 1986, months before any of the insurgencies against Museveni emerged, her brother was beaten for complaining that Museveni’s soldiers had looted his home. Then one of her friends was dragged out of her vehicle, accused of spying for as yet nonexistent rebels, and shot dead before her horrified companions. In 1987, by which time several insurgencies had emerged in response to the abuses of Museveni’s army, Apira’s cousin was gunned down on suspicion of belonging to one rebel group, and then her mother and twenty-one others were shot and killed at the young man’s funeral.

Later that year, Apira’s husband was also accused of helping the rebels and subjected to the three-piece tie, permanently disabling one of his arms. In 1988 Museveni’s soldiers rounded up villagers in Koc, Apira’s home area, and told them to await an important announcement. Her

sister-in-law Yolanda was in the crowd, with her grandchild tied in a cloth wrap on her back. After two days, some hungry and frustrated villagers tried to leave. The soldiers began firing wildly. One found Yolanda huddled behind a bush and shot the baby in the head, killing them both.

In 2014 Museveni admitted that his soldiers had committed atrocities in northern and eastern Uganda but claimed that the rebels started the conflicts. However, eyewitnesses and even some of his former officers maintain otherwise. In 2013 Samson Mande, a former commander in Museveni's army who now lives in exile in Sweden, told a Ugandan journalist that in March 1986 he led the fifteenth battalion, part of the brigade that captured Gulu, the largest town in northern Uganda. The army of Tito Okello, whom Museveni had just overthrown, had dispersed, but many of its soldiers were hiding out in the countryside, waiting to see what would happen.

"I gave [Okello's soldiers] assurances that we would not kill them," Mande recalled, "[and] they went and told their friends who surrendered in large numbers." But then another officer turned up and ordered Mande to "stop handling the Acholi people with kid's *[sic]* gloves." Some of the soldiers then went on a rampage, looting people's property—refrigerators, sofa sets, cars, even a hospital generator. "We were going to start a war that we may never finish," Mande said he warned Museveni. But he was soon transferred.

One of Museveni's senior officers dismissed Mande's account when I asked him about it in 2014, but the reports of looting and torture are too numerous and consistent to ignore. At the International Criminal Court in The Hague, Nathan Opolot, a former officer in Museveni's army, testified that rebellion emerged in eastern Uganda after Museveni's soldiers began "attacking villages, attacking everybody left and right, looting and killing people." "What do I do now?" Opolot says he asked himself. "The elders decided that, no, you young people you must defend us." So he deserted Museveni's army and joined the rebels.

Yusuf Adek told the International Criminal Court that he too joined a rebel group after witnessing the torture by Museveni's soldiers of suspected rebels:

People were being tied upside down, being tied by the legs with their heads hanging down and their arms tied behind them, and...[Museveni's soldiers] tried to strangle those people with wire. So the people who had not yet been arrested came and started fighting, and that was the first time that people started fighting against the government soldiers.

According to Mande, the soldiers who surrendered to him and handed over their weapons in good faith were herded onto trucks and driven away. Many were never seen again. Opolot testified that when he served in Museveni's army, he visited a camp where many of these

former soldiers ended up. Inside the heavily guarded compound, he said, he saw “something appalling.” Captured officers “were lying on [the] ground, no accommodation, no food, macheted. The corpses were everywhere,” overseen by child soldiers. “You know, with guns.”

Lewis doesn't name the ex-insurgents who told her that they rebelled because of vague aspirations for “voice” or “bargaining chips,” so there's no way of knowing whether they too might have been motivated by the crimes of Museveni's army but preferred not to say so. She writes that she identified some of the insurgencies she discusses through the Ugandan government's Amnesty Commission, which negotiates the surrender of former rebels. Many of her informants had been “bought off,” as Lewis herself points out, with government posts, which tend to come with power and money—rare commodities in one of the world's poorest countries. In her acknowledgments, she warmly thanks Brigadier Richard Karemire, who served as Museveni's army spokesman during the period when she was conducting her study.

Lewis never questions whether her informants censored themselves because of her friendship with Karemire, Museveni's brutal repression, and fear of losing their sinecures.<sup>5</sup> However, it's likely that telling her the truth about Museveni's crimes would have been tantamount to suicide.

**F**or the roughly 100 million viewers of the YouTube video *Kony 2012*, produced by the NGO Invisible Children, the Ugandan warlord Joseph Kony exemplifies the senseless, power-crazed African insurgent described by Kaplan, Collier, Gettleman, and Lewis. Much has been written about the surreal brutality of Kony's Lord's Resistance Army, which terrorized northern Uganda from 1987 to 2006. Rather than attacking Museveni's army, Kony's forces mainly attacked civilians, kidnapping children and training them to rob, maim, and kill people they believed supported Museveni. How could this possibly advance any rational goal?



Sumy Sadurni/AFP/Getty Images

Ugandan presidential candidate Bobi Wine speaking to reporters after his car was shot at by police while he was campaigning in Jinja, December 2020

What Lewis, along with the filmmakers behind the *Kony 2012* video, fail to point out is that Museveni's forces also seemed to behave irrationally. They were strong enough to defeat Kony but delayed doing so for decades. According to one of Museveni's commanders, Kony surrendered in 1992, but then Museveni ordered his release. In 1994 cabinet minister Betty Bigombe organized a cease-fire, but after Museveni ordered Kony to surrender at once or face attack, the warlord called off negotiations, fled into the bush, and resumed his kidnapping and killing spree. In 1997 Spanish and Italian priests met with Kony's envoys to try to revive the peace talks, but Museveni's soldiers attacked the meeting and held the aging priests in a bare cell for twenty-four hours without food or water. Throughout the war, locals repeatedly warned Museveni's soldiers when Kony was about to attack them, but the soldiers frequently withdrew. Thus, the people of northern Uganda were trapped between two violent, seemingly irrational forces.

Wars are fought not only with weapons, but with narratives.<sup>6</sup> Kony, brutal as he was, called himself a "freedom fighter" who wanted to liberate Uganda from Museveni's grip. He even had a manifesto asking for reasonable things like negotiations to end the war, free elections, the dismantling of the internment camps, reparations for cattle raids, an end to the slaughter of the Acholi people, and their integration into national politics on an equal basis with other ethnicities.

Museveni shrewdly suppressed Kony's pamphlets and speeches, and asserted, both to his own people and to Uganda's foreign aid donors and diplomats, that Kony was simply crazy. At the same time, Museveni suppressed saner opposition voices in war-torn areas, ordering the arrest of politicians who complained about the cattle

raids. Even traditional Acholi dances were censored; participants in school competitions were allowed to perform only pieces praising Museveni and his policies.

As Kony continued to wreak havoc, Museveni bolstered his own image as a champion of peace and stability. Sympathetic donors poured ever more foreign aid into his coffers, even though he and his henchmen were stealing much of it with impunity and his forces were also inflicting terror.<sup>7</sup> Kony's gruesome torture methods—which included cutting off the lips and ears of his victims—were meant to silence, literally and symbolically, those who supported Museveni's account of the war, but his brutality fed into that narrative, which is partly why so many observers failed to realize just how brutal Museveni was too.

This does not excuse Lewis, who had many years and ample resources to discover the truth, as other scholars—including Adam Branch, Sverker Finnström, Chris Dolan, and Ogenga Otunnu, as well as the journalist Caroline Lamwaka—have succeeded in doing. Lewis was clearly aware of these authors, some of whom she cites, though selectively. Lewis's work has been funded in part by the Minerva Research Initiative, a US Defense Department program that supports social science research, and the US Institute for Peace, which has also received Defense Department funding. Her dissertation supervisor at Harvard, Robert Bates, has received CIA grants. It's hard not to wonder if these funding sources might have influenced not only her portrayal of a US-backed tyrant but also her research methods.

Last year, the National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine produced a list of the Defense Department's Minerva grants up until 2018. Many deal with the predictors of conflict, but strikingly, virtually all of those focus, like Lewis, primarily on how circumstantial factors such as geographical conditions, ethnic composition, marriage rates, or Internet use influence the likelihood of violence. It's as though Minerva's grantees had accepted uncritically the new predatory style hypothesis without considering the history of the countries where conflicts occurred or the personalities and actions of powerful individuals. Such scholarship risks perpetuating what the late anthropologist David Graeber and the archaeologist David Wengrow call the Myth of the Stupid Savage: the idea that certain people have no politics and that their history is determined solely by environmental conditions and emotional impulses.

No independent agency has estimated the total number of civilians who died in the war in northern Uganda, but many Acholi, with some justification, consider what happened to them a form of genocide.<sup>8</sup> It isn't over. One of the most tragic consequences has been an epidemic of trauma and mental illness that persists to this day. By the end of the war, the suicide rate in the camps where Museveni's army interned the Acholi people was about twelve times higher than in the peaceful southern region, and about six times higher than it had been in

Acholiland in colonial times. According to researchers at the London School of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine, rates of PTSD among displaced Acholi were among the highest ever recorded, and many still suffer from anxiety, depression, alcoholism, recurrent nightmares, hallucinations, flashbacks, and gender violence as a result of the trauma and humiliation they suffered.

In response to this crisis, NGOs arrived to deliver mental health services to the Acholi after the war was over. According to a fascinating study by the anthropologist Adrian Yen, the counseling these programs offer is sometimes helpful, but mainly focuses on managing stress and interpersonal and domestic difficulties.<sup>2</sup> Because Museveni is still in power, anger at his forces for prolonging and intensifying the conflict, and at the international community for abetting his crimes, is not dealt with openly. Perhaps as a result, the antidepressants and antipsychotics introduced by these NGOs have become so popular among northern Ugandans struggling to manage their emotions that there is now a black market in them.

I asked Josephine Apira, the London-based Ugandan activist whose family was devastated during the war, how she coped with the bitterness of having to swallow the international community's lies about Museveni for so many years. "Other than raising my children, activism has been my whole life," she said. She found solace in writing letters to parliamentarians and diplomats and speaking about Uganda to refugee and human rights groups from all over the world. She persisted when her family back in Uganda warned her that regime agents were threatening them because of her activism, and even though officials in human rights organizations were sometimes so beguiled by Museveni that they didn't want to listen. In 1994 Apira was invited to address a human rights group at Oxford University. As she was speaking, the moderator, a well-known Africa specialist with the now defunct nonprofit Africa Rights, interrupted her, insisting that Uganda was actually stable and peaceful. Apira continued telling her story anyway.

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## **Helen Epstein**

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1. Over the years, various sources have attributed different numbers of deaths to Uganda's postindependence leaders, ranging from a minimum of 100,000 to a maximum of 800,000 for Obote and Amin combined. (Okello was in power for a few months only, and I'm aware of no estimates of the number of civilians killed by his forces.) See, for example, Mark Leopold's *Idi Amin: The Story of Africa's Icon of Evil* (Yale University Press, 2021), pp. 215ff, and Robert D. Kaplan's *The Good American: The Epic Life of Bob Gersony, the US Government's Greatest Humanitarian* (Random House, 2021), p. 102. In *Another Fine Mess: America, Uganda, and the War on Terror* (Columbia Global Reports, 2017), I estimate that Museveni's forces have been at least partly responsible for millions of deaths if the totals from his military adventures in Uganda, Sudan, South Sudan, Rwanda, and Congo are combined. ↵
2. See Philip Matogo, "Opposition's Andrew Mwenda Complex," *Daily Monitor*, November 29, 2020; and my "Combatants: A Memoir of the Bush War and the Press in Uganda," *The Elephant*, June 20, 2019. ↵
3. See, for example, Sverker Finnström, *Living with Bad Surroundings: War, History, and Everyday Moments in Northern Uganda* (Duke University Press, 2008); Adam Branch, *Displacing Human Rights: War and Intervention in Northern Uganda* (Oxford University Press, 2011); Ogenga Otunnu, *Crisis of Legitimacy and Political Violence in Uganda, 1979 to 2016* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2017); *The Raging Storm: A Reporter's Inside Account of the Northern Uganda War, 1986–2005*, edited by Caroline Lamwaka and Ronald R. Atkinson (Kampala: Fountain, 2016); and Chris Dolan, *Social Torture: The Case of Northern Uganda, 1986–2006* (Berghahn, 2009). ↵
4. See Robert D. Kaplan, *The Coming Anarchy: Shattering the Dreams of the Post Cold War* (Random House, 2000); and Paul Collier, *Wars, Guns, and Votes: Democracy in Dangerous Places* (HarperCollins, 2009). ↵
5. On the dangers of criticizing the Ugandan army under Museveni, see Ketty Anyeko et al., "The Cooling of Hearts: Community Truth-Telling in Northern Uganda," *Human Rights Review*, Vol. 13, No. 107 (2012). ↵
6. I wish to thank Professor Ora Szekely of Clark University for discussing this point with me. ↵
7. "'Letting the Big Fish Swim': Failures to Prosecute High-Level Corruption in Uganda," Human Rights Watch, October 21, 2013. ↵
8. See Ebony Butler's documentary film *A Brilliant Genocide* (2016); and Olara A. Otunnu, "The Secret Genocide," *Foreign Policy*, October 19, 2009. ↵

9. Adrian Yen, *The Life After Life: Pills, Peace, and Cen in Postwar Northern Uganda*, Ph.D. dissertation, University of California at Davis, 2018, p. 133. ↵

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