



2013-036

Philippe Le Billon, *Wars of Plunder: Conflicts, Profits and the Politics of Resources*. New York: Columbia Univ. Press, 2012. Pp. xi, 363. ISBN 978-0-231-80026-6.

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Most wars around the world in recent years have been local or regional, often intrastate rather than interstate, though in most cases foreign meddling and the international weapons market have intensified and prolonged them.¹ Such conflicts are characterized by kleptocratic faction-based regimes fighting fragmented insurgencies. The latter are sometimes ideologically motivated, but more often waged by private armies seeking raw power and wealth. Almost indistinguishable from brigand bands led by society's criminal elements, the insurgents' untrained, undisciplined, and poorly supplied armies typically live off the land, terrorizing civilian populations and devastating their fields and forests. The conflicts can go on intermittently for many years, blurring social and geographical boundaries and seldom adhering to international norms or laws of military conduct. They more closely resemble the chaotic nightmare of the Thirty Years War of the seventeenth century than interstate wars of the industrial era.

In the 1990s, in the aftermath of the Cold War, civil wars became more pervasive and unmanageable, as former client regimes of the Great Powers lost ideological support and, along with their challengers, turned to the proliferating global arms trade for support. To finance their arms transactions, both threatened regimes and insurgents exploited internationally marketable natural resources. As a reflection, the literature on resource wars has proliferated in recent years.² The relevant vocabulary can be misleading, since "wars" often means confrontations and controversies, not overt large-scale fighting. Discussions of resource wars and environmental security often relate only tangentially to military history.

In *Wars of Plunder*, Philippe Le Billon (Univ. of British Columbia) joins the debate with a penetrating study of resource wars and ways of resolving them. He is exceptionally well qualified to write on the subject. French born, he worked for the UN peacekeeping mission in Cambodia in 1992, witnessing massive illegal logging by Khmer and Thai contractors. After the NGO Global Witness was founded in London in 1995 to monitor environmental damage caused by civil conflicts, Le Billon worked for the organization in Cambodia, Angola, Colombia, the Democratic Republic of the Congo, the former Yugoslavia, and Sierra Leone. He has also worked at the International Institute for Strategic Studies. This long and varied experience, both on the ground and in monitoring agencies and NGOs, informs every page of his impassioned book.

Chapter 1, "Resource Wars Reframed," seeks clarity by highlighting warlordism, peasant wars, and (a constant dimension) foreign intervention. Chapter 2, "Material Motives," surveys the wartime extraction of strategic natural resources through history. Already in the ancient Near East, "Whereas food was the main resource associated with wars, metals became a central preoccupation of emerging states, particularly copper, tin, silver and gold" (48). Le Billon briefly traces this theme through medieval and modern Europe to the global dominance achieved through links among the military, the state, and industrial economies up

1. For a useful global survey of forty-one wars, see Karl DeRouen Jr. and Uk Heo, eds., *Civil Wars of the World: Major Conflicts since World War II*, 2 vols. (Santa Barbara: ABC-CLIO, 2007). Providing a summary of the field is John O'Loughlin, "The Political Geography of Conflict: Civil Wars in the Hegemonic Shadow," in Colin Flint, ed., *The Geography of War and Peace: From Death Camps to Diplomats* (NY: Oxford U Pr, 2004) 85-110. On the chaotic political economy underlying these wars, see Ian Bannon and Paul Collier, eds., *Natural Resources and Violent Conflict* (Washington: World Bank, 2003).

2. One scholarly controversy concerns whether countries engulfed in civil wars have been rich or poor in resources like oil and diamonds. See, esp., Michael Klare, *Resource Wars: The New Landscape of Global Conflict* (NY: Metropolitan, 2001); Michael Renner, *The Anatomy of Resource Wars* (Washington: Worldwatch Inst, 2002); Paul F. Diehl and Nils Petter Gleditsch, eds., *Environmental Conflict* (Boulder, CO: Westview, 2001); and Michael L. Ross, *The Oil Curse: How Petroleum Wealth Shapes the Development of Nations* (Princeton: Princeton U Pr, 2012).

through the two world wars and the Cold War. This context may be unfamiliar to most military historians, but Le Billon puts it to innovative use in his succeeding diagnostic analysis.

After this overview, a chapter each (3–5) is devoted to “Oil,” “Diamonds,” and “Timber,” and finally chapter 6, “Spoiling War,” suggests ways of improving international control over the flow of disruptive forces into strife-torn countries. Le Billon isolates three effective strategies: one is such non-state initiatives as the South African mercenaries’ Executive Outcomes campaign to deprive rebels of oil and diamond assets in Angola and Sierra Leone. On balance, such “international” schemes have not been particularly welcome or stabilizing. The second strategy is intervention by a single nation, as with US operations in Colombia and the Australian army’s in East Timor. Third is the peacekeeping efforts of the United Nations and regional UN-affiliated forces in Cambodia, Liberia, Sierra Leone, and elsewhere. Thanks to his personal experiences, Le Billon offers a vividly realistic perspective on these missions.

Chapter 7, “Resources for Peace,” characterizes the distinctive military realities of these conflicts:

Civil wars involving resources not only often last longer, they are also more likely to restart than those that do not.... The relationship between durable peace and “post-conflict” resource exploitation is thus far from straightforward.... Resource sectors tend to attract armed groups in search of economic opportunities. Peace spoilers tend to hold on [*sic*], or hang around, resource areas in the hope of accessing funding for renewed hostilities. Former combatants and army units frequently engage in illegal resource exploitation and extortion schemes targeting resource companies and workers. Corporate-sponsored military units and private militias also frequently expel local residents, artisanal miners and loggers to make way for new resource concessions. (189)

The chapter goes on to show how governments and, especially, the United Nations and other international agencies can cope with the aftermath of civil violence and build more stable political and economic systems.

Much of the literature on resource wars and their mitigation aims to alleviate the social and institutional pressures that cause mass violence or to publicize (and thereby control) the links between local turmoil, foreign corporate intrusions, and the arms trade. The environmental costs and consequences of recent wars, though a secondary emphasis, permeate the narrative. Monitoring environmental impacts is more difficult and dangerous than assessing social impacts. Systematic ecological research has been rare. Although this critical subject exceeds the scope of Le Billon’s survey, he points toward it clearly and provides the relevant framework for further study.