Atrocities, Diamonds and Diplomacy: The Inside Story of the Conflict in Sierra Leone
Peter Penfold
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South Yorkshire, Pen and Sword

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Published in July, 2012, Atrocities, Diamonds and Diplomacy: The Inside Story of the Conflict in Sierra Leone [hereafter referred to as Atrocities, Diamonds, and Diplomacy] provides a fresh perspective on the various, and often, conflicting narratives about the causes, manner, and effects of the civil war in Sierra Leone (1990-2001). The words “atrocities, diamonds, and diplomacy” in the book’s title provide a narrative trajectory that investigates the connection between the Sierra Leone civil war and that country’s rich mineral resources, plus the role played by international diplomacy in fueling or harnessing the conflict. In addition to representing the war as the result of bad governance and pervasive corruption, Penfold’s narrative subverts the all too familiar story of diamonds being the cause of the war, but emphasizes their role in exacerbating the conflict, and attracting a British diplomacy that is hypocritical and duplicitous in its dealings with African countries. Moreover, within the larger frame of global politics and economic exploitation, this narrative exposes the neo-colonial positions that characterize contemporary Western diplomacy, and the multi-lateral relationships among nations of unequal economic strengths.

The book gives an account of Peter Penfold’s diplomatic mission in Sierra Leone from 1997 to 2000. Hence, it could fall into two genres—a memoir and a historical account of the war. It is both a narration of Penfold’s first-hand experiences of the traumatic events that characterized that nation’s history from 1997-2000, and a historicization of those events as well, focusing on historical details such as names of places, people, dates, events, documents, and political actors (national and international) that impacted the war negatively or positively. Though Penfold’s account makes use of the first person narrative, the book cannot be seen exclusively as a memoir in the literary sense of the word. The narrative is drawn from personal notes and substantiated with secondary materials that are cited in the bibliography at the end. This kind of historiographical approach in writing a memoir conflates the personal with the political, and raises questions about Penfold’s purpose[s] in this book.

To a very large extent, one can clearly see that one of the purposes of this book is to set the records straight, from Penfold’s perspective, about the events surrounding the war, and the role played by both national and international actors in exploiting the situation or containing it. But within such a grand project is the personal intention of Penfold to provide an alternative narrative to his diplomatic mission in Sierra Leone that frees him from the suspicions and accusations of his alleged involvement in the Sandline scandal. He also intends to represent himself as a hero who did everything within his
power to help out resolve the war in Sierra Leone. But his heroic efforts were met with suspicions, accusations, and denial of promotion by the Foreign Office in Britain. Such persecution engendered an intense frustration that led to his early retirement. Thus, Atrocities, Diamonds and Diplomacy seeks to expose the diplomatic blunders of Great Britain in handling the war in Sierra Leone, their duplicity in legislating against arms sale to Sierra Leone while supporting the supply of $10M worth of arms to that country by Sandline in exchange of mining concession, the weak governance of President Ahmed Tejan Kabba in submitting to such exploitative schemes, and the general atrocities of the war.

The book is divided into fourteen chapters that present a somewhat chronological account of Penfold’s arrival in Sierra Leone on the 9th of March 1997 up to his departure in 2000. But within such a linear narrative, he highlights very significant issues like his contacts with Sandline (chapter 4), the arms to Africa scandal (chapter 6), and the Lome Peace Agreement (chapter 10) that seem to provide the basis for the inside story behind the war. Chapter 4 particularly talks about a network of mercenaries/miners/war-financers in the West such as Blackstone, Sandline, Branch Energy, Executive Outcomes, Lifeguard, and so on, which work together in financing different sides of rebellions in Africa with the aim of gaining access to the continent’s mineral wealth or for other interests. Although they pose as private organizations, these consortiums, as Penfold makes clear, have some “shady” connections with the British government. This is evidenced by the fact that Penfold was asked by the Foreign Office to contact Rupert Bowen, Branch Energy’s representative, as part of his pre-posting briefing to Sierra Leone. Penfold’s chapter on the Lome Peace Agreement exposes the duplicity, superficial analysis of Africa’s problems, and forced decisions that sometimes characterize peace brokerage by the West in Africa. Among the many diplomatic blunders highlighted by Penfold in reaching the peace agreement at Lome, the power sharing deal itself turned out to be a decision that was forced upon the majority of Sierra Leoneans against their will.

In his representation of the different actors involved in the civil war in Sierra Leone—rebels, government forces, renegade soldiers, international community, and mercenaries—Penfold’s text provides a complex narrative about the war. His exposure reinforces the notion of state complicity, pervasive corruption, and a breakdown of democratic processes as causes of the war. Penfold presents the mineral wealth of Sierra Leone not as the cause of the war, but as the source that attracted a duplicitous Western diplomacy whose selfish interest was buttressed by their corroboration with mercenary groups, miners, and war-financers. This narrative about the duplicity of Western diplomacy calls into question their approach to, and imposition of, democracy in Africa. The African reader may eye with suspicion Penfold’s seeming preference for this kind of democracy, colonial in its logic, as the answer to the problems in Sierra Leone. This is evidenced in his description of the formation and financing of the Movement for the Restoration of Democracy (MRD) in Sierra Leone during the war. Accordingly, this approach is tinged with a colonial arrogance which, failing to consider the political culture of the country, believes that Western democracy is what is good for Sierra Leone and should be imposed upon it irrespective of the outcome of the war. It is a narrative that re-echoes the rhetoric of the “civilizing” mission of colonization, which fails and is
unwilling to acknowledge that such imposed political structures do not always work in Sierra Leone.

Although quite controversial in its representation of Sierra Leone, Sierra Leoneans, the war, the international community, and other actors involved in the war, *Atrocities, Diamonds and Diplomacy* is very relevant in the way it stages world politics in a global age. It is significant in the way it redefines western diplomacy to mean duplicity sometimes. As a counter narrative to Sierra Leonean perspectives on the civil war, Penfold’s story provides an outsider’s view to it. However, sometimes, Penfold’s story seems to advance the theories of international conspiracy, greed, and internal state complicity as the causes of the civil war in Sierra Leone.