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978-1-107-02691-9 - Mercenaries in Asymmetric Conflicts

Scott Fitzsimmons

Excerpt

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Introduction

Why do small mercenary armies sometimes defeat much larger armies in asymmetric wars? This is an important and unresolved question in the study of international politics. Neorealism, the leading school of thought in this field, approaches this question by emphasizing the importance of materialist factors such as the size of a military force and its available military technology. *Mercenaries in Asymmetric Conflicts*, by contrast, offers a fresh answer by developing a constructivist theory of military performance, which argues that the behavioural norms that make up an armed force's military culture have an especially important role in influencing the outcome of asymmetric conflicts and testing it against a neorealist theory of military performance. Moreover, by testing these theories against the empirical record of an under-studied category of conflicts – asymmetric conflicts involving mercenary forces – this book also makes an original empirical contribution to the literature on international politics.

Addressing the question through a multi-theory analysis of the outcome of a set of asymmetric conflicts is important to the study of international politics because neorealism, a theory that was specifically developed to explain the use of military force in international politics, has long-dominated the study of military affairs.¹ Constructivism, which, in contrast to neorealism, was not specifically developed to explain the use of military force, has nevertheless been applied by a number of scholars to explain some aspects of the use of military force, such as the decision to undertake humanitarian interventions or to avoid using certain kinds of weapons such as chemical or nuclear weapons.²

¹ Kenneth Waltz, *Theory of International Politics* (New York, NY: McGraw-Hill, 1979).

² Dana P. Eyre and Mark C. Suchman, "Status, Norms, and the Proliferation of Conventional Weapons: An Institutional Approach," in *The Culture of National Security: Norms and Identity in World Politics*, ed. Peter J. Katzenstein (New York, NY: Columbia University Press, 1996); Martha Finnemore, *The Purpose of Intervention: Changing Beliefs about the Use of Force*

However, existing scholarship on international politics has rarely pitted constructivism directly against neorealism in order to determine which approach best explains the outcome of military conflicts.

Examples of scholarship that has directly engaged this topic include Jeffrey Legro's *Cooperation under Fire*, which argued that the nature of military culture will lead countries to employ major weapons systems or strategies, and decline to use others even when they are likely to prove useful.³ Legro concludes that military culture provides a better explanation for the behaviour of the military forces that took part in the Second World War than does neorealism, which predicts that nations will use weapons whenever they expect to gain a military advantage from doing so. Conversely, Barry Posen argued in *The Sources of Military Doctrine* that neorealist balance-of-power theory explains the choice of military doctrines adopted by France, Britain, and Germany during the Second World War better than do ideational factors such as organizational culture.⁴ In a rejoinder to Posen, Elizabeth Kier argued in *Imagining War* that France and Britain failed to develop military doctrines that might have countered the German threat before the Second World War, and that this failure was caused by flaws in the military culture of the French and British armies rather than by external strategic concerns emphasized in realist explanations of military affairs.⁵

Although of considerable quality, the existing literature engaging the neo-realist–constructivist debate over the outcome of military conflicts has not directly engaged the puzzle of whether the balance of the combatants' material capabilities or their norm-influenced tactical behaviour most strongly influence the course of asymmetric conflicts. Nor has the existing literature applied these theories to our understanding of the dynamics of asymmetric conflicts involving mercenaries. Given the continued importance of military force in international politics, and the growing use of private military forces in inter- and intra-state conflicts, this is a gap in the theoretical literature that is worth filling. This book, therefore, seeks to make an original theoretical contribution to the literature of international politics by testing constructivist and neorealist theories of military performance against four asymmetric conflicts involving mercenaries in order to determine the relative capacity of these theories to

(Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2003); Jeffrey Legro, *Cooperation under Fire: Anglo-German Restraint During World War II* (Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press, 1995); Richard Price, *The Chemical Weapons Taboo* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1997); Nina Tannenwald, "The Nuclear Taboo: The United States and the Normative Basis of Nuclear Non-Use," *International Organization* 53, no. 3 (Summer 1999).

³ Legro, *Cooperation under Fire*.

⁴ Barry Posen, *The Sources of Military Doctrine: France, Britain, and Germany between the World Wars* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1984).

⁵ Elizabeth Kier, "Culture and Military Doctrine: France between the Wars," *International Security* 19, no. 4 (Spring 1995); Elizabeth Kier, *Imagining War: French and British Military Doctrine between the Wars* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1997).

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explain the outcome of those conflicts. In more precise terms, the book seeks to determine whether it is the interplay of the combatants' norm-inspired tactical behavioural or their material resources that best explains their degree of military success and failure in these conflicts.

THEORIES AND CONCEPTS

Military Performance

Military performance, the dependent variable in this study, is specifically concerned with winning and losing battles and conflicts. Military performance refers to the outcome of a battle or conflict, not how a military force behaves during a battle or conflict.⁶ Therefore, a military force that has won a conflict or a battle has achieved "good" or "high" military performance. Likewise, a military force that has lost a conflict or a battle has achieved "poor" or "low" military performance. This concept does not equate with military effectiveness (another major variable in this study), meaning the range of tactical behaviour that a military force is capable of undertaking. Armed forces may be highly effective yet still be defeated. For example, the German Army was arguably the military force with the highest military effectiveness in both the First and Second World Wars because it fought very well in those conflicts even though it faced more numerous and better-armed foes.⁷ However, its military performance was poor because it ultimately lost both conflicts. Therefore, while military effectiveness and military performance are related concepts, it is important to recognize that they are quite different, and that military effectiveness is only one possible determinant of military performance.

The Normative Theory of Military Performance

As discussed further in Chapter 1, the central hypothesis of the normative theory of military performance is that a military force's cultural norms influence its tactical behaviour (its military effectiveness), which in turn influences its military performance. The core logic of the theory is that a materially inferior military force must be highly flexible and adaptable if it is to perform the range of military tasks required to defeat materially superior opponents. Norms encouraging the pursuit of a wider range of military behaviour, such as personal initiative, should therefore increase military effectiveness, which in turn should increase a force's prospects for military success. If the theory is correct,

⁶ Allan Millett, Williamson Murray, Kenneth Watman, "The Effectiveness of Military Organizations," *International Security* 11, no. 1 (Summer 1986): 38.

⁷ Martin Van Creveld is a leading proponent of this view. Martin Van Creveld, *Fighting Power: German and U.S. Army Performance, 1939–1945* (London, UK: Arms and Armour Press, 1983).

a military force's performance should be conditioned by the degree to which the members of the force have been indoctrinated into norms that encourage them to exhibit high military effectiveness. Specifically, the theory reasons that military forces that strongly emphasize norms encouraging creative thinking, decentralized decision-making, personal initiative, free transmission of accurate military information, technical proficiency, and group loyalty should exhibit higher military effectiveness than forces that do not strongly emphasize these norms. Moreover, it reasons that military forces exhibiting relatively high military effectiveness should achieve higher military performance than military forces exhibiting relatively low military effectiveness, all else being equal.

Neorealist Combat Balance Theory

As discussed further in Chapter 2, neorealist combat balance theory assumes that the quantity of military personnel, along with the quantity and quality of the military equipment fielded by the combatants in a conflict, determine the material combat balance between those combatants, which in turn determines their military performance – that is, which combatant should prevail.⁸ The theory hypothesizes that the materially superior combatant, whether in a conflict or a battle, should prevail. In other words, if the material combat balance favours one combatant in a particular conflict or battle, the theory predicts that that combatant should win. However, if the material combat balance does not favour either combatant, the theory cannot predict which combatant should win.

METHODOLOGY

In order to test the theories outlined here, this book analyzes four asymmetric conflicts involving mercenary forces (Table I.1, page 6). These include two conflicts that were won by mercenary forces that were much smaller, numerically, than their opponents: the Simba Rebellion, which took place in the Congo between 1964 and 1965, and saw 5 Commando, a mercenary group employing fewer than 300 fighters, defeat a force of between 5,000 and 7,000 Simba insurgents; and the 1993–1995 period of the Angola Civil War, which saw Executive Outcome's (EO's) 550-strong force defeat tens of thousands of União Nacional para a Independência Total de Angola (UNITA) fighters.⁹

⁸ The material combat balance is the balance of material capabilities fielded by the combatants in a conflict or a battle.

⁹ Colin Baker, *Wild Goose: The Life and Death of Hugh van Oppen* (Cardiff, UK: Mpemba Books, 2002), 182; Anthony Clayton, *Frontiersmen: Warfare in Africa Since 1950* (New York, NY: Routledge, 1999), 149 and 197; James R. Davis, *Fortune's Warriors: Private Armies and the New World Order* (Vancouver, BC: Douglas & McIntyre, Ltd., 2000), 125–127; Scott Fitzsimmons, "Interview with Cobus Claassens" (George, SA: August 22, 2007); Piero Gleijeses, *Conflicting Missions: Havana, Washington, Pretoria* (Alberton, SA: Galago, 2002), 111; Yves Goulet, "Executive Outcomes: Mixing Business with Bullets," *Jane's Intelligence Review* 9,

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These conflicts also include two that were lost by numerically inferior mercenary forces: the 1976 period of the Angolan Civil War, which saw a 140 member mercenary group known as “Callan’s Mercenaries” defeated by a combined Cuban-Movimento Popular de Libertação de Angola (MPLA) unit numbering approximately 2,000 troops; and the First Congo War in 1997, which saw the 200-strong White Legion defeated by an Alliance of Democratic Forces for the Liberation of Congo-Zaire (ADFL) force numbering approximately 10,000.¹⁰

- no. 9 (September 1997): 429; Ernesto “Che” Guevara, *The African Dream: The Diaries of the Revolutionary War in the Congo* (New York, NY: Grove Press, 1999), 99; Mike Hoare, *Congo Mercenary* (London, UK: Robert Hale, 1982), 66; Herbert Howe, *Ambiguous Order: Military Forces in African States* (Boulder, CO: Lynne Rienner Publishers, 2001), 199; Herbert Howe, “Private Security Forces and African Stability: The Case of Executive Outcomes,” *The Journal of Modern African Studies* 36, no. 2 (June 1998): 313; David Isenberg, “Combat for Sale: The New, Post-Cold War Mercenaries,” *USA Today*, March 2000, 14; W. Martin James, *A Political History of the Civil War in Angola, 1974–1990* (New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction, 1992), 97; William Minter, *Apartheid’s Contras: An Inquiry into the Roots of War in Angola and Mozambique* (Johannesburg, SA: Witwatersrand University Press, 1994), 191 and 195; Anthony Mockler, *The New Mercenaries: The History of Hired Soldiers from the Congo to the Seychelles* (New York, NY: Paragon House Publications, 1987), 63; Kevin O’Brien, “Private Military Companies and African Security: 1990–98,” in *Mercenaries: An African Security Dilemma*, eds. Abdel-Fatau Musah and J. ‘Kayode Fayemi (Sterling, VA: Pluto Press, 2000), 52; Thomas P. Odom, *Dragon Operations: Hostage Rescues in the Congo, 1964–1965*, *Leavenworth Papers* 14 (Fort Leavenworth, KS: Combat Studies Institute, U.S. Army Command and General Staff College, 1996); Sarah Percy, *Mercenaries: The History of a Norm of International Relations* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2007), 210; David Reed, *Save the Hostages* (New York, NY: Bantam, 1988), 131; Anthony Rogers, *Someone Else’s War: Mercenaries from 1960 to the Present* (London, UK: Harper Collins, 1998), 19; Fred Rosen, *Contract Warriors: How Mercenaries Changed History and the War on Terrorism* (New York, NY: Penguin Books Ltd., 2005), 15–16; Elizabeth Rubin, “An Army of Their Own,” *Harper’s*, February 1997; David Shearer, *Private Armies and Military Intervention* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 1998), 46; Ken Silverstein, *Private Warriors* (New York, NY: Verso, 2000), 164–165; Peter W. Singer, *Corporate Warriors: The Rise of the Privatized Military Industry* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2003), 108; Gerry S. Thomas, *Mercenary Troops in Modern Africa* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1984), 34–36; Peter Tickler, *The Modern Mercenary: Dog of War, or Soldier of Honour?* (London, UK: Thorston Publishing Group, 1987), 27 and 39; Al J. Venter, *War Dog: Fighting Other People’s Wars* (Havertown, PA: Casemate Publishers, 2006), 412; Alex Vines, “Mercenaries, Human Rights and Legality,” in *Mercenaries: An African Security Dilemma*, eds. Abdel-Fatau Musah and J. ‘Kayode Fayemi (Sterling, VA: Pluto Press, 2000), 172. Adam Roberts offered a much higher estimate of 1,000 EO personnel, but no other sources support this figure. Adam Roberts, *The Wonga Coup* (New York, NY: Public Affairs, 2006), 10.
- ¹⁰ Megan Arney, “Rebels Take More Ground in Zaire,” *Militant*, March 24, 1997; Raymond Bonner, “France Linked to Defense of Mobutu,” *The New York Times*, May 2, 1997; Sean Boyne, “The White Legion: Mercenaries in Zaire,” *Jane’s Intelligence Review* 9, no. 6 (June 1997): 278; Clayton, *Frontiersmen*, 189–191; Howard W. French, “Zairian Rebels Push Past Army in Final March Toward Capital,” *The New York Times*, May 14, 1997, A1; Edward George, *The Cuban Intervention in Angola, 1965–1991: From Che Guevara to Cuito Cuanavale* (New York, NY: Frank Cass, 2005), 107; Gleijeses, *Conflicting Missions*, 257, 334, and 338; Christopher Kinsey, “Private Security Companies: Agents of Democracy or Simply Mercenaries?” in *Private Military and Security Companies: Chances, Problems, Pitfalls and Prospects*, eds. Thomas Jäger and Gerhard Kümmel (Wiesbaden, Germany: Vs Verlag für Sozialwissenschaften, 2007), 96;

TABLE I.1. *Cases of Asymmetric Conflicts Involving Mercenaries*

Conflict	Country	Dates of mercenaries' involvement in conflict	Mercenary group	Client	Opponent	Outcome
Simba Rebellion	Democratic Republic of the Congo	1964–65	5 Commando (300 troops)	Congolese government	Simba rebels (5,000–7,000 troops)	Simbas defeated
Angolan Civil War	Angola	1993–95	Executive Outcomes (550)	Angolan government	UNITA rebels (“tens of thousands”)	UNITA defeated
Angolan Civil War	Angola	1976	Callan’s Mercenaries (140)	Frente Nacional de Libertação de Angola (FNLA)	Cuban-MPLA unit (2,000)	Callan’s Mercenaries defeated
First Congo War	Zaire	1997	White Legion (200)	Zairian government	ADFL rebels (10,000)	White Legion defeated

These cases were chosen for several reasons. First, in contrast to asymmetric conflicts involving purely state-based military forces or state-based forces and non-private armed groups, asymmetric conflicts involving mercenaries have rarely been examined by political scientists. The lack of scholarly attention paid to asymmetric conflicts involving mercenaries is unfortunate given that the degree of asymmetry between the opposing combatants in these conflicts is very high, which makes them ideal cases for testing theories purporting to explain the outcome of asymmetric conflicts. Taking this into account, testing the theories of military performance against the empirical record of asymmetric conflicts involving mercenaries permits this book to make both a theoretical and an empirical contribution to the literature of international politics by simultaneously establishing the relative explanatory power of the theories and, for the first time, illuminating the probable causes for the outcome of these asymmetric conflicts.

Second, given that both successful and unsuccessful mercenary operations are represented, these cases cover the range of variation in the dependent variable. As a result, they permit the testing of the theories' predictions about military success and failure rather than merely one or the other. Third, these cases are broadly similar in many respects, which is essential to the logic of the method of difference utilized in this book.¹¹ All of the mercenary groups

Nicholas Kotch, "Zaire Rebels Advance, Frustrating Army – Sources," Reuters News Service, January 30, 1997; Marcus Mabry, "Soldiers of Misfortune: European Mercenaries Fighting for the Zairean Government," *Newsweek*, February 24, 1997, 40; Peter Macdonald, *Soldiers of Fortune: The Twentieth-Century Mercenary* (New York, NY: Gallery Books, 1986), 94–95; Peter McAleese, *No Mean Soldier: The Story of the Ultimate Professional Soldier in the SAS and Other Forces* (London, UK: Cassell, 2003), 154 and 346–353; O'Brien, "Private Military Companies and African Security," 55; Khareen Pech, "The Hand of War: Mercenaries in the Former Zaire 1996–97," in *Mercenaries: An African Security Dilemma*, eds. Abdel-Fatau Musah and J. 'Kayode Fayemi (Sterling, VA: Pluto Press, 2000), 134 and 142; Jonathan C. Randal, "Serb Troops Paid to Go to War – In Zaire," *The Washington Post*, March 18, 1997, A13; Rogers, *Someone Else's War*, 72, 78, 286, and 310; Daniel Spikes, *Angola and the Politics of Intervention* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland and Co. Inc., 1993), 297; James Larry Taulbee, "Mercenaries, Private Enterprise, and the Shift in Strong State-Weak State Relations," in *Global Society in Transition: An International Politics Reader*, ed. Laura Neack (The Hague, Netherlands: Kluwer Law International, 2002), 95; Stewart Tendler, "Mercenaries Recruiting in Britain Leave for Angola," *The Times*, January 29, 1976, 1; Stewart Tendler, "Rush of Volunteers to Join the British Mercenaries," *The Times*, January 30, 1976, 8; William G. Thom, "Congo-Zaire's 1996–97 Civil War in the Context of Evolving Patterns of Military Conflict in Angola in the Era of Independence," *The Journal of Conflict Studies* XIX, no. 2 (Fall 1999): 14; Thomas, *Mercenary Troops in Modern Africa*, 37; Tickler, *The Modern Mercenary*, 73; Venter, *War Dog*, 187, 266–267, and 271; Vines, "Mercenaries, Human Rights and Legality," 181; Koen Vlassenroot, "A Societal View of Violence and War: Conflict and Militia Formation in Eastern Zaire," in *Violence, Political Culture and Development in Africa*, ed. Preben Kaarsholm (Athens, OH: Ohio University Press), 61.

¹¹ As Stephen Van Evera summarizes, "In the method of difference, the investigator chooses cases with similar general characteristics and different values on the study variable (the variable

are numerically small in absolute terms and in relative terms compared with their opponents. Consequently, these cases are broadly similar in the sense that, at least on the basis of numerical strength, they are all asymmetric conflicts. In addition, the type of war is held constant; these are all cases of civil wars. Moreover, all of these cases involved major, repeated, and extended use of military force.

Fourth, the available information on these cases is quite extensive. These cases are therefore well-suited to testing the competing theories' predictions and, ultimately, answering the research question driving this inquiry. With this said, however, first-hand accounts of these conflicts are, unfortunately, relatively scarce. Moreover, many of the available first-hand sources were produced by members of the military forces involved in these conflicts or by individuals who directly observed and often travelled with these forces during the conflicts. The nature of these sources raises inevitable questions about the risk that they could be biased in favour of one particular combatant in each conflict. In an attempt to minimize this risk, efforts were made to corroborate claims made in these accounts with other primary and secondary sources. Furthermore, as is made clear in the case chapters, some of the least favourable accounts of a particular military force's culture and behaviour, such as Chris Dempster and Dave Tomkins' *Fire Power* and Che Guevara's *The African Dream*, were produced by veterans of the military force they openly disparage.¹²

Lengthy interviews were conducted with mercenaries and former members of South African elite military units in South Africa in 2007 to supplement the existing information on Executive Outcomes' operation in Angola. The interview subjects were located with the assistance of the veterans associations of the South African security units from which Executive Outcomes drew most of its personnel, and which are largely made up of the units' former officers and senior non-commissioned officers. Attempts were made to interview junior enlisted members of Executive Outcomes; however, this proved impossible due to the fact that almost all of these personnel reside in Pomfret, an isolated town near the Botswana border. Most important among the interviews that were conducted were those with Lieutenant Colonel Des Burman and Staff Sergeant Johann Anderson, who are specialists in the process of indoctrinating military personnel into accepting specific cultural norms, and Major Cobus Claassens, a mid-level commander in Executive Outcomes' force in Sierra Leone.¹³ Although

whose causes or effects we seek to establish). If we seek to establish the causes of the study variable, the investigator then asks if values on the study variable correspond across cases with values on variables that define its possible causes." Stephen Van Evera, *Guide to Methods for Students of Political Science* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1997), 57.

¹² Chris Dempster and Dave Tomkins, *Fire Power* (London, UK: Transworld Publishers Ltd., 1978); Guevara, *The African Dream*.

¹³ Scott Fitzsimmons, "First Interview with Des Burman" (Cape Town, SA: August 24, 2007); Scott Fitzsimmons, "Interview with 'Tony'" (Somerset West, SA: August 20, 2007); Fitzsimmons,

only a limited number of interviews were conducted, owing to the considerable difficulty of earning the trust of people who have been roundly criticized by North American scholars and journalists, the interviews that were conducted provided rare insight into the development and influence of a military force's culture.

Finally, these cases have inherent importance. Virtually all literature on mercenaries, whether directly focused on these actors or employing them as illustrative examples, uses some combination of these cases as the empirical point of departure. This means that these four cases are the basis of most scholars' understanding of mercenaries and their behaviour. This suggests that these particular cases are important tests of the competing theories and also that illuminating these cases holds the greatest potential for developing knowledge that will be useful to the broader academic community.

Readers more familiar with mercenaries' role in coup attempts may question this book's focus on larger-scale combat operations. This decision was taken for two principal reasons. First, unlike cases of mercenary-supported coup attempts, which were only a few hours or days long, all of these military operations lasted at least many weeks. As a result, the volume of data available on the military performance of the forces involved in coup attempts is comparatively small. Second, in most mercenary-supported coups, very little fighting occurred, and success or failure often resulted from factors not related to the mercenaries' military performance.¹⁴ As a result, cases of coups, unlike cases of larger-scale combat operations, cannot provide a solid empirical foundation on which to determine the relative influence of ideational or materialist factors on the military performance of mercenary groups.

Readers may also question why this book does not discuss certain other large-scale combat operations that involved mercenary forces, such as the Sierra Leonean Civil War and the Biafran War. The Biafran conflict was not included in this book because very few mercenaries were actually involved in that conflict. Indeed, fewer than a dozen mercenaries fought as ground troops for the Biafran rebels, and although they served in prominent leadership positions, they left virtually all of the fighting in this conflict to a much larger force of non-mercenary local personnel. This case was therefore not suitable for inclusion alongside the four conflicts examined in this book. The Sierra Leonean conflict was not included because it involved many of the same mercenaries who fought with Executive Outcomes in Angola. As a result, it is highly likely that the military culture of Executive Outcomes' force in Sierra Leone

"Interview with Cobus Claassens"; Scott Fitzsimmons, "Interview with Johann Anderson" (Cape Town, SA: August 23, 2007); Scott Fitzsimmons, "Second Interview with Des Burman" (Cape Town, SA: August 27, 2007).

¹⁴ For example, the mercenary-supported coup attempt in the Seychelles in 1981 failed because customs officials discovered AK-47s in the mercenaries' luggage as they were entering the country, and detained them before the coup attempt could even begin. Rogers, *Someone Else's War*, 162.

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was very similar to that maintained by its force in Angola. With this in mind, the Sierra Leonean case was excluded from this book because it was felt that it would read as a repeat of the chapter on Executive Outcomes in Angola.

ORGANIZATION OF THE BOOK

Chapters 1 and 2 of this book discuss the normative theory of military performance and neorealist combat balance theory in greater detail than is possible here. Chapters 3–6 evaluate these theories through a detailed analysis of both the military cultures and military effectiveness of the combatants identified earlier and the balance of their material capabilities. In doing so, these chapters explain why similarly outnumbered mercenary groups have experienced radically different degrees of military performance, and determine which theory provides the most satisfying explanation for this. Finally, Chapter 7 provides a summary of the book's findings, and discusses the implications of these findings for scholarship on international relations and military performance and also on the practical implications of these findings for the use and development of military forces.