

Can Limited Intervention Work? Lessons from Britain's Success Story in Sierra Leone

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ABSTRACT Following frustrating campaigns in Iraq and Afghanistan, Western interventions are becoming more limited, with troops being deployed for short bursts and residual peace-building tasks being left to others. Although this approach limits exposure for the intervening government, it struggles to achieve meaningful political change. Examining the comparatively successful British intervention in Sierra Leone (2000–02), this article identifies the conditions for effectiveness in these campaigns. It challenges the historiography of the case by framing armed confrontations and raids as enablers of politics rather than ends in themselves; indeed, in both the conduct and study of intervention, politics must reign supreme.

KEY WORDS: Sierra Leone, United Kingdom, Intervention, United Nations, Peacekeeping

Despite two frustrating campaigns in Iraq and Afghanistan, Western military intervention to end wars and build peace is continuing apace, although in different forms. Seeking to avoid large-scale and potentially ruinous campaigns, states with expeditionary ambitions now opt for more limited actions, in duration or role, to facilitate the peacebuilding efforts of others. France in particular has frequently deployed in this fashion – in Chad, Côte d'Ivoire, the Central African Republic, the Democratic Republic of the Congo, and Mali; its forces go in for a carefully delimited military operation and delegate vestigial tasks to others, typically the United Nations. NATO's intervention in Libya was similarly 'limited by design' – with arguably disastrous results. Also for France, while its African deployments have proceeded according to script, 'the extent to which these operations have been effective in supporting a broader

political agenda remains an open question'.¹ In many cases, the transition between war-fighting and peace-making has been unclear and military gains transient. Thus, the question of *how to use force to wage peace* remains, perhaps unsurprisingly, a matter of deep confusion.

In going forward, it is worth examining a standard-bearer of similarly scaled operations, namely the British intervention in Sierra Leone in 2000–02. When Britain deployed, Sierra Leone faced a humanitarian and security crisis. With negotiations repeatedly failing, the UN operation on the ground was unable to effect peace or disarm the Revolutionary United Front (RUF). The combination of regional dynamics and internal decay made the conflict particularly intractable as it spread from Liberia to Guinea and back to Sierra Leone again. Yet against these challenges Britain was able to intervene at a critical moment, repel the rebels, rescue the elected government, and – alongside others – create a peace that is now more than a decade old and has witnessed the passage of political power through free and fair elections.

One would be hard-pressed not to recognise Britain's Sierra Leone intervention as successful. Yet less clear is precisely *why* the use of force produced the desired political results, and what those results have meant for the future of Sierra Leone. Instead, the case has generated a partial historiography and several misleading 'lessons' for the use of force in interventions and peacekeeping operations alike. A fuller account requires an examination of what British military inputs achieved *politically*, both nationally and regionally, and alongside other factors.

This article provides such an account. It first identifies the causes of the conflict and the crisis of statehood confronting Sierra Leone at the turn of the twenty-first century; the rudiments of this history are critical to understanding the effects and meaning of the British intervention. A subsequent section dissects the British campaign into its constituent phases, examining the role of each in winning the war – and the peace. This dissection is important as the historiography too often conflates or outright ignores critical components of what happened. The analysis is complemented by an assessment of other related or epiphenomenal factors that also contributed to the outcome of this intervention – factors that, if absent or overlooked, would have produced a radically different outcome. The article concludes by commenting on the broader lessons of this case on the *political utility of the use of force* in armed interventions, in Sierra Leone and beyond.

¹Thierry Tardy, 'The Reluctant Peacekeeper: France and the Use of Force in Peace Operations', *Journal of Strategic Studies* 37/5 (2014), 788–89.

Setting the Stage

Sierra Leone gained independence from Britain in 1961, inheriting a British system of government dominated by two major parties. In 1967, a contested election resulted in a military coup. Although junior officers launched a counter-coup, once in power the restored civilian regime soon turned authoritarian. Combined with Sierra Leone's extractive economy, based largely on diamonds, this autocratic system created a small elite that benefited from the country's resources to the exclusion of others.² Keeping war at bay was a patrimonial system that coopted those with power, connections or coercive capability yet left the rest to fend for themselves against the effects of poverty and neglect.³

This patrimonial system frayed in the early 1990s, amid economic difficulties, the end of great-power sponsorship, and regional instability.⁴ Sierra Leonean youth, marginalised and trammelled, provided a ready pool of recruits for those wishing to rise up against the state. Meanwhile, that state, through corruption, nepotism, and purges, had neither the legitimacy nor the capability to counter armed challengers. The moment came in March 1991, when RUF, supported by Liberian warlord Charles Taylor, crossed that country's border into Sierra Leone. At this point, the group, 300 strong, comprised middle-class youth with a populist agenda, some students, and guerrillas from Taylor's forces. Ostensibly, RUF's cause was to 'fight government corruption and claim accountability for the country's mineral resources' but their agenda soon shifted to 'taking control of rich resource areas such as Kono and revolt[ing] against social and political figures of authority'.⁵ Although the climate lent itself to broad-based rebellion, the group proved too easily distracted by the diamonds and too angry at the society it would need to mobilise. Its ranks nonetheless grew, through forced recruitment, and by 'incorporating a large body of economically and socially marginalised youth' from the fringes of society.⁶ Once isolated within its base areas, RUF came to see the people as its enemy, resulting in exceptional brutality being visited upon them. Because the government suspected the same population of collaborating with RUF,

²David Keen. *Conflict and Collusion in Sierra Leone* (Oxford: James Currey 2005), 9.

³Ibid.

⁴Krijn Peters, *War and the Crisis of Youth in Sierra Leone* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 2011), 45–46.

⁵Peter Alexander Albrecht, 'Foundational Hybridity and Its Reproduction: Security Sector Reform in Sierra Leone', PhD dissertation, Copenhagen Business School, Department of Business and Politics 2012, 121.

⁶Kieran Mitton, 'Engaging with Disengagement', in Mats Berdal and David H. Ucko (eds), *Reintegrating Armed Groups after Conflict: Politics, Violence and Transition* (Abingdon: Routledge 2009), 172.

civilians found themselves squeezed between a proliferating number of armed groups, organised for self-defence, predation, and war.

Frustration with the government's failing counterinsurgency led to military coups – in 1992, 1996, and 1997 – when following a brief period of democratic rule under Ahmad Kabbah the Armed Forces Revolutionary Council (AFRC) seized power. Inviting RUF to join it, the new junta spent the next two years engaged in a brutal war against ECOMOG (Economic Community of West African States Monitoring Group), a primarily Nigerian intervention force. ECOMOG's repulse of a particularly horrific AFRC-led attack on the capital in 1999 led to the signing of the Lomé Accord, whereby Kabbah was restored, RUF leader Foday Sankoh was given official control of the government's mineral resources, and RUF leaders were offered immunity and inclusion as part of a power-sharing agreement.

Lomé soon unravelled, given Charles Taylor's war-mongering (seeking regional leverage and resources), the obstruction of RUF senior commanders (fearing the loss of power and protection through disarmament), the failure to include AFRC or its soldiers in the deal, an underfunded and lacklustre disarmament, demobilisation, and reintegration (DDR) programme, and the absence of any force able to provide stability during the war-to-peace transition.⁷ In this context, despite growing war-weariness, 'the incentives for remaining in an armed group seem generally to have been underestimated'.⁸ Thus, when ECOMOG passed the mantle to the UN Mission in Sierra Leone (UNAMSIL) and this tenuous peacekeeping force sought to disarm RUF, the latter had both the motivation and opportunity to rebel. Refusing to demobilise, RUF surrounded the peacekeepers, abducted hundreds of them, and launched fresh offensives threatening the capital. RUF then numbered around 4000 well-armed fighters, with other hangers-on, and controlled 40 per cent of the country.⁹

Britain, a chief sponsor of the peace in Sierra Leone, was concerned by the collapse of Lomé and the threat to the Sierra Leonean government. On 6 May 2000, it deployed a reconnaissance team to prepare for a possible non-combatant evacuation operation (NEO) for its citizens. By 8 May, British forces had secured the airport at Lungi and key locations in Freetown. Through the personal initiative of the on-the-ground commander, the mandate then expanded to include supporting UNAMSIL and the Sierra Leone Army (SLA) against RUF. The first British engagement occurred on 17 May, when RUF tried unsuccessfully to seize the airport. Following the arrest of Sankoh the same day, the

⁷Keen, *Conflict and Collusion*, 253–56.

⁸*Ibid.*, 259.

⁹Riley, 'Sierra Leone, 2000–2001', unpublished transcript, 8–9.

momentum began to shift. Despite ongoing logistical challenges, Sierra Leonean forces and their British advisors retook ground, pushing RUF eastwards. The UN assumed defensive positions behind the front line and negotiated the release of the abducted peacekeepers.

In mid-June, the British force was replaced with a 200-strong advise and assist team. This transition was marred by the West Side Boys' (WSB's) capture of 11 British soldiers in late August 2000. With negotiations stalled, the UK launched a bold rescue operation on 10 September in coordination with SLA and UNAMSIL. Operation *Barras* extracted the UK hostages, freed 22 enslaved Sierra Leoneans, and effectively defeated the WSB. British elements then remained in Sierra Leone to advise the Sierra Leonean government and military, support the growing UN mission, and send a clear signal to any force intent on renewed violence. The new status quo enabled peace talks in autumn 2000, a revived disarmament programme, and the gradual spread of government control throughout the country. On 14 January 2002, the UNAMSIL commander officially declared the conflict over and, four months later, peaceful elections were held.

It is on this basis that the British intervention is lauded a success. Before the fraught wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, it marked a highpoint in Tony Blair's foreign policy; the Prime Minister was 'greeted as a hero and crowned a paramount chief of the West African state'.¹⁰ Kabbah himself described the British Army as 'the architects of Sierra Leone's salvation' while in Freetown graffiti read, 'Queen Elizabeth for king!' and 'Return us to our colonial mother!'¹¹ At the UN secretariat, the British intervention was widely recognised as having bailed out a failing peacekeeping mission and, with it, the government of Sierra Leone.¹² Given the plaudits, and because in all this Britain suffered but one fatality, defence analysts generally agree that Sierra Leone provides 'a useful template for future British interventions'.¹³

It is tempting in the face of such unanimity to play the contrarian, yet this is not the purpose here. Indeed, it should be stated plainly: the British intervention was a success. The question animating this study is

¹⁰Tristan McConnell, 'Blair gets hero's welcome in Sierra Leone', *Christian Science Monitor*, 1 June 2007.

¹¹As cited in David Richards, 'Sierra Leone – Pregnant with Lessons?', *Whitehall Papers* 62/1 (2004), 19. See also Alex Renton, 'Sierra Leone: one place where Tony Blair remains an unquestioned hero', *The Guardian*, 17 April 2010.

¹²In his autobiography, Kofi Annan notes that 'the UN Operation was saved . . . in large part' through British intervention. See Kofi Annan, *Interventions: A Life in War and Peace* (New York: Penguin 2012), 117.

¹³Andrew Mok, 'Operation Palliser: Spearheading the Future', *Defence Viewpoints*, 7 May 2010.

how to explain the *political utility* of force in this case. The answer must weigh multiple factors, many of which are excluded from mainstream accounts, and frame force as a possible enabler of politics rather than as an end in itself.

Explaining the Outcome

General works and more superficial takes on the British intervention in Sierra Leone typically treat it as one unified campaign. In reality, of course, the intervention was split across four main operations – *Palliser*, *Basilica*, *Barras*, and *Silkman* – whose sequence was unforeseen and largely improvised. This matters, as the shifts and setbacks of the intervention, when studied, help explain what worked and why. The more specialised literature on the intervention tends to recognise these different phases, yet problematically the focus is overwhelmingly on just two of the four operations – *Palliser* and *Barras* – which are deemed the most dramatic or exciting and, not coincidentally, are also the most violent.¹⁴ Google reveals the lopsided focus: *Palliser* generates 4760 hits, *Barras* a full 56,400, yet *Basilica* yields only 1010 and *Silkman* 489.¹⁵ The imbalance is harmful, not just because parts of the intervention are confused for the whole but because its latter, neglected phases were in fact critical to its overall outcome. Put differently, attempting to replicate the success of Sierra Leone on the basis of its high-profile moments is likely to fail. To remedy this trend, it is necessary to identify and explain, for each relevant phase, the conditions that led to success and the limitations encountered.

Operations Palliser and Basilica

Operation *Palliser* dominates the historiography of the Sierra Leone intervention and, in defence circles in particular, often becomes a synecdoche for the whole campaign. *Palliser* was when British forces first engaged, first confronted RUF, and repelled its advance on

¹⁴See Andrew M. Dorman, *Blair's Successful War: British Military Intervention in Sierra Leone* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2009); William Fowler, *Operation Barras* (London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 2012); Larry Woods and Timothy Reese, *Military Interventions in Sierra Leone: Lessons from a Failed State* (Fort Leavenworth, KS: Combat Studies Institute Press, 2008), 55–82; or Paul Williams's self-proclaimed 'evaluation of Britain's military intervention in Sierra Leone', which focuses, for reasons unknown, 'particularly [on] the deployment in May 2000' at the expense of subsequent phases. See Paul Williams, 'Fighting for Freetown: British Military Intervention in Sierra Leone', *Contemporary Security Policy* 22/3 (2001), 141.

¹⁵Search conducted on 2 June 2015. Note that Operation *Basilica* is also the name of an unrelated operation.

Freetown. Retrospectively, it is said that *Palliser* irrevocably changed the momentum – that it saved the Sierra Leonean government. *Palliser*, writes one journalist, was when ‘a small British force ended a bloody civil war in just a few weeks’.¹⁶ A BBC documentary produced in 2010 goes further: it was ‘remarkable to see this country’s fortunes turn around in the space of perhaps 48 hours’.¹⁷ Academics have compared Operation *Palliser* to ‘a glass of water to douse an early fire, thus obviating the need for a massive fire brigade-sized response’; they describe it as ‘an overwhelming success that turned the tide’, having ‘intimidated the RUF and others while inspiring UNAMSIL and the government of Sierra Leone’.¹⁸

To varying degrees, these characterisations are all misleading: they overplay the strategic decisiveness of just a few isolated armed clashes and obscure the role of subsequent actions in consolidating the gains made, such as they were. Torn between the opportunity to do good and the political costs of ‘mission creep’, the British government did more than it intended with *Palliser*, but far less than would be needed to meet its more ambitious objectives. The result was a six-week operation that was indispensable in rescuing Sierra Leone’s government but insufficient to address the country’s continued dysfunction and instability.

Operation *Palliser* was launched following the RUF offensives in early May 2000. Having begun disarming and demobilising in line with the Lomé Accord, SLA numbered only 2000–3000 poorly trained soldiers and crumbled in the face of the rebel advance.¹⁹ On 6 May, the UK deployed a reconnaissance team commanded by Brig.-Gen. David Richards to prepare for a possible NEO for UK and Commonwealth citizens. On 7 May, this team was converted into a Joint Task Force, which (along with the British High Commissioner) was given ‘full political and military decision-making powers’ concerning the NEO and any assistance given to UNAMSIL and the local government.²⁰

Richards assessed that defending Freetown and securing the airport at Lungi were critical to preserving the option for an evacuation, never mind assisting UNAMSIL and SLA. On the evening of 7 May, and with Kabbah’s agreement, he directed elements of the 1st Parachute Regiment (1 PARA) and UK Special Forces to establish a perimeter

¹⁶Con Coughlin, ‘A last salvo from General Sir David Richards’, *The Telegraph*, 17 July 2013.

¹⁷*Our World*, ‘Returning to Sierra Leone’, BBC, 28 May 2010.

¹⁸Richard Connaughton, ‘The Mechanics and Nature of British Interventions into Sierra Leone (2000) and Afghanistan (2001–2002)’, *Civil Wars* 5/2 (2002), 84; Mok, ‘Operation Palliser’; Woods and Reese, *Military Interventions in Sierra Leone*, 77.

¹⁹Albrecht, ‘Foundational Hybridity’, 133.

²⁰Dorman, *Blair’s Successful War*, 79.

around the airport.²¹ In parallel, British officers were sent to advise and assist UNAMSIL and SLA forces defending the southern approach to Freetown.²² The following day, they were reinforced with additional troops from 1 PARA just as escalating violence in Freetown prompted the High Commissioner to request the NEO and the deployment of UK troops to secure key areas of the capital.

Even as British forces deployed, the British government faced sharp questions in the Houses of Parliament about its deepening involvement in the conflict. On 8 May, Foreign Secretary Robin Cook defined the operation's objectives narrowly as securing the airport to enable the evacuation and allowing reinforcements to reach UNAMSIL. Cook assured the House of Commons, 'There is no question of a long-term commitment by the troops that have been sent'.²³ Whereas Cook had initially rejected any fixed timeline, assessing the value of the British presence on a 'day-to-day basis',²⁴ in mid-May he told the BBC, 'We want it to be over in a month, and we want to keep that deadline there as pressure on the UN to get their people there in a month. We don't want that timetable to slip'.²⁵

On 14 May, the lean UK presence was bolstered by the arrival of a UK Amphibious Ready Group (ARG) and the aircraft carrier HMS *Illustrious* off the coast of Sierra Leone. The ARG began providing artillery and ammunition to SLA while using show-of-force flights and information operations to reinforce the UK presence. Defence Secretary Geoff Hoon explained that, while the NEO was still the 'primary task' and that UK forces would 'not be deployed in a combat role as part of UNAMSIL, the presence of UK troops on the ground has helped stabilise the situation in Sierra Leone and we are providing technical advice to the UN as to how matters might be further improved'.²⁶ Less than a week in, the goals of the small UK force had expanded to include strengthening the resolve of the UN and Sierra Leonean forces and deterring the RUF advance.

²¹Ibid.

²²David Richards, 'Expeditionary Operations: Sierra Leone – Lessons for the Future', *World Defence Systems* 3/2 (2001), 135.

²³House of Commons, Debate 8 May 2000, Vol. 349 cc518–29, <<http://hansard.millbanksystems.com/commons/2000/may/08/sierra-leone>>.

²⁴Mark Tran, 'No combat role for British troops, says Cook', *The Guardian*, 9 May 2000; Chris McGreal, Richard Norton-Taylor, and Ewen MacAskill, 'Britain takes war to Sierra Leone rebels', *The Guardian*, 12 May 2000.

²⁵BBC, *Breakfast with Frost*, 14 May 2000, <http://news.bbc.co.uk/hi/english/static/audio_video/programmes/breakfast_with_frost/transcripts/cook14.may.txt>.

²⁶House of Commons, Debate, 15 May 2000, Vol. 350 cc23–38, <http://hansard.millbanksystems.com/commons/2000/may/15/sierra-leone#S6CV0350P0_20000515_HOC_113>

Events on the ground encouraged further evolution of the UK approach. On 17 May, RUF tested Britain's commitment by attacking the Lungi airport. The Pathfinder Platoon of 1 PARA countered the offensive and, unaccustomed to taking effective fire, the rebels withdrew. Along with the patrols in Freetown, the confrontation at Lungi Lol framed British troops as the country's guarantors of security. The same day, RUF's political leader, Foday Sankoh, was arrested in Freetown following a protest outside his home. These events underlined RUF's vulnerability and created an opportunity to reverse the flow of the conflict.

The dilemma for Whitehall was that longer-term success against RUF would require a concerted military campaign and the translation of operational progress into political gains. The UK had resisted this type of investment yet, without it, initial achievements looked likely to unravel, turning an unexpected operational success and a golden opportunity to do more into a possible fiasco. Bridging this gap between 'doing something' without 'doing everything' remains a difficult balancing act.

Richards presented the UK government with three options.²⁷ The first was a British task force deployed to defeat the RUF through sustained combat operations; this would require in excess of 5000 troops and was deemed politically infeasible. The second was that UNAMSIL could somehow be emboldened to enforce its Chapter VII mandate and defeat RUF. Despite a UN resolution upping the UNAMSIL's strength on 19 May 2000, this option remained unlikely bordering on impossible, as the mission lacked 'the command and control arrangements, the training, equipment, or the resolve in the case of some contingents to react robustly'.²⁸ The third and remaining option involved working through SLA, yet it was still too weak and reconstituting SLA would take time.

In the interim, Richards decided to defend the capital using a loose coalition of pro-government factions stitched together by Johnny Paul Koroma, the erstwhile AFRC leader turned government ally. With British training, equipment, and advice, the 'unholy alliance', as it became known, repelled RUF toward their headquarters at Makeni. Meanwhile, with British encouragement and support, UNAMSIL took up defensive positions behind this advance and negotiated the release of peacekeepers held hostage by RUF since its advance on Freetown.

Reacting to the rapid advances, the British government on May 23 formally set out unprecedentedly ambitious objectives, including

²⁷This draws on Dorman, *Blair's Successful War*, 97.

²⁸'Notes on the Security Council Retreat held at Pocantico Conference Center, Pocantico Hills, New York, on 2–3 June 2000', 8. It should be noted that, as recognised by some Security Council members, the mission did have the necessary authorities to counter RUF.

'sustainable peace and security, stable democratic government, the reduction of poverty, respect for human rights and the establishment of accountable armed forces'. Yet reflecting Britain's ambivalence regarding its own role, the objectives also included the formulation of 'an exit strategy for UK forces which does not undermine either the Government of Sierra Leone (GOSL) or the UN but demonstrates the ability to avoid mission creep'.²⁹ Unveiling the strategy at the House of Commons, Geoffrey Hoon linked 'a withdrawal of British forces to the question of an effective training team in Sierra Leone which, working on behalf of the forces of the Government of Sierra Leone, can provide appropriate advice, assistance, equipment and logistical support to carry through what I accept and agree is the much more difficult process of bringing the remainder of the country under control'.³⁰

The idea of a training team had been mooted in 1999, as part of Britain's efforts to build on the Lomé Accord. It now re-emerged as a way of consolidating on *Palliser* yet avoiding a long-term commitment. It also signalled Britain's doubts about UNAMSIL's ability to fulfil its role. The transition happened on 15 June 2000, the British presence scaling back to a 250-strong Short-Term Training Team (STTT) commanded by Brig.-Gen. Gordon Hughes. Dubbed Operation *Basilica*, the STTT launched a six-week training programme for 1000 SLA recruits at a military barracks refurbished by the Royal Marines. The first round of training concluded on 22 July, with two fresh battalions made available to SLA.

The question, in gauging *Palliser*'s meaning and legacy, is what it had achieved by the time it ended and whether the transition to an STTT was appropriate given British objectives. Reviewing the conditions in June 2000, it is difficult to conclude that this was the case. On the one hand, UN and SLA forces had seized the initiative from the embattled RUF, the latter having experienced an apparent split between its eastern and northern commands shortly after the British intervention.³¹ On 25 May, RUF released more of its captive peacekeepers. In a show of confidence, UNAMSIL was in early June able to reinforce the SLA's lines when one of its units was forced to withdraw – an unprecedented move by the UN mission. Together, UNAMSIL (at full mandated strength of 11,500 by 11 June), the SLA, and its allies could then advance towards Lunsar, prompting the RUF leadership to flee its

²⁹See Dorman, *Blair's Successful War*, 96.

³⁰House of Commons, Debate, 23 May 2000, Vol. 350 cc863–74, <<http://www.publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm199900/cmhansrd/vo000523/debtext/00523-09.htm>>.

³¹Gwyn Prins, *The Heart of War: On Power, Conflict and Obligation in the Twenty-First Century* (London: Routledge 2003), 202.

nearby headquarters at Makeni. By mid-June, sustained combat and information operations led RUF to abandon this HQ altogether, relocating to Kailahun district along the Liberian border.³² In early July, the UN force launched Operation *Khukri* to rescue Indian peacekeepers in Kailahun, defeating local RUF units.

The transition to *Basilica* was grounded on these types of advances. As Richards argued, 'With UNAMSIL holding the Lungi/Freetown horseshoe and the SLA again advancing east, conditions were in place'.³³ Maintaining that the UN force had 'been transformed', he told journalists that,

bar finishing it off ourselves, which was never the government's intention ... there's not much more that you can ask the British to do. The RUF are strategically right on the back foot, they're talking openly in large numbers about surrendering. The U.N. know what they've got to do next. They've been given five weeks to refocus and retrain where necessary, become clear on their mandate and take the whole process forward.³⁴

Adopting a broader lens, Richards's confidence appears to reflect Whitehall's political desire to get out rather than the situation on the ground. Indeed, despite its territorial and psychological gains, *Palliser* had had no appreciable impact on RUF's strategic and operational centres of gravity: the support and safe haven provided by Liberia, and the impressive revenue yielded by its control of diamond-rich areas. Nor had SLA and UNAMSIL demonstrated the ability to sustain the campaign against RUF, which in mid-June continued to control and/or influence vast swathes of territory in the northwest, centre, and east of the country.³⁵ Indeed, whereas Richard's own estimate for defeating RUF had called for 5000 British troops, the Sierra Leonean military was still weak: with no workable air force, its army lacked tactical mobility and was limited to small- and medium-scale offensives.

As for UNAMSIL, an internal UN report in June 2000 spoke of the poor standard of many of the military units deployed; 'critical deficiencies' included communications, transport, intelligence, and, above all, the absence of unity of command caused, in part, by the frequent refusal of contingent commanders to accept orders through the

³²Ibid., 204–06.

³³Richards, 'Expeditionary Operations', 136.

³⁴See, respectively, 'UK pullout from Freetown', *BBC News*, 12 June 2000, and Richards, as cited in *Sierra Leone News*, 12 June 2000, <<http://www.sierra-leone.org/Archives/slnews0600.html>>.

³⁵Prins, *The Heart of War*, 204.

UN.³⁶ Although these shortcomings were being addressed, even in ideal circumstances strengthening the UN mission would take time. And circumstances were really far from ideal: the mission was split between its political and military leadership, ridiculed by the local population, and unwilling to assert itself.³⁷ Tellingly, even the successful Operation *Khukri* envisaged UN forces *falling back* to secure positions rather than seize 'RUF territory' around Kailahun.³⁸

Finally, it should be recalled that the government's gains had come on the back of a ragtag militia involving former and, as it would turn out, future adversaries of the government. One party to the alliance, the Kamajor – armed hunters from the Mende ethnic group – certainly opposed RUF but also had a history of abuses and poor discipline, something often missed due to the overwhelming international focus on the RUF. The continued unaccountability of these forces undermined the government's legitimacy and compelled RUF fighters to band together.³⁹ Another party were the WSB, an AFRC splinter group. Within days of the British withdrawal an argument prompted some of its members to open fire on SLA in the frontline town of Lunsar, leading both sides to withdraw and RUF to recapture the area.⁴⁰ By early July, the WSB had established a base in the Occra Hills and set up checkpoints along the main road connecting Freetown to the interior, harassing and robbing civilians, and blocking SLA movement. The UN launched an operation on 24 July to clear the illegal checkpoints, but it could not stem WSB predation in the Occra Hills or restore government control over its own territory.⁴¹

Given these factors, it is difficult to agree with David Richards that *Palliser* had 'create[d] order out of Sierra Leone's chaos, put the UN back on its feet, reconstitute[d] the Sierra Leone army, give[n] the rebels a bloody nose and depart[ed], *all within six weeks*'.⁴² Indeed, Foreign

³⁶'DPKO Assessment Mission to Sierra Leone, 31 May–8 June 2000' (Eisele Report), UN Document. See also United Nations Security Council, 'Fifth Report of the Secretary-General on the United Nations Mission in Sierra Leone', 31 July 2000, 9.

³⁷Adekeye Adebajo and David Keen, 'Sierra Leone', in Mats Berdal and Spyros Economides (eds), *United Nations Interventionism, 1991–2004* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 264. See also Chris McGreal, 'UN to Sack its General in Sierra Leone', *Guardian Weekly*, 29 June–5 July 2000.

³⁸Anil Raman, 'Operation Khukri: Joint Excellence', *United Services Institute Journal* 227 (2002), 515–31.

³⁹Adebajo and Keen, 'Sierra Leone', 262.

⁴⁰Chris McGreal, 'Panic as rebel stronghold scents battle', *The Guardian*, 16 June 2000. Infighting appears also to have enabled a successful RUF attack on SLA in Masiaka on 3 July.

⁴¹'West Side Boys Cleared from Illegal Roadblocks', *IRIN*, 24 July 2000.

⁴²Richards, 'Expeditionary Operations', 134, my emphasis.

Secretary Cook had adopted a more sober tone on 6 June when he suggested that *Palliser* had ‘avert[ed] an immediate threat to Freetown’ but that ‘we shall secure lasting stability there only if we, the international community, and the Government of Sierra Leone follow through the gains of the past month with a sustained effort’. The analysis was realistic but unpopular; responding in the same debate to fierce questioning as to ‘mission creep’, Cook backtracked: ‘I set out two objectives: that British nationals should come out and that UN troops should go in. We have secured both objectives. We have met them on schedule and we are now withdrawing’.⁴³

While acknowledging the fragile nature of progress, the UK government was determined to withdraw. To justify this departure, some voices painted *Palliser* as more decisive than it really was, and *Basilica* as a neat epilogue to a happy story rather than as a largely inadequate fig leaf for the political inadequacies and insecurity that still marred this war-torn country. Indeed, the ability of a small short-term training team to mitigate those shortcomings, and extend the gains of *Palliser*, was never very convincing, and the rapid transition appears to have owed more to British politics than sound military judgement. This is also something Richards acknowledged in his interview with me: ‘I wound up *Palliser* early, or really, it was wound up early by London and PJHQ [the Permanent Joint Headquarters]. More would have been required to sustain the momentum. It was why we had to go back in the autumn’.⁴⁴

This finding forcefully challenges *Palliser*’s central place in the historiography of this intervention. To Gwyn Prins, within the fuller history of the British campaign, *Palliser* should be recalled as a *strategic raid* in which ‘the strategic advantage was not exploited to the full’.⁴⁵ It was critical in halting the collapse of the Sierra Leonean state and produced an opportunity to do more, but its strategic effect relied on continued engagement and deliberate consolidation. In so far as the operation was ‘stunningly successful’,⁴⁶ it was only in achieving the narrowest of the many objectives elaborated at the time.

Operation Barras

Nothing illustrates the limitations of *Palliser* and *Basilica* better than the abduction of 11 British soldiers by the WSB on 25 August 2000. These abductions were more than just a setback; they revealed the full

⁴³House of Commons, Debate, 6 June 2000, Vol. 351 cc161–72, <<http://www.publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm199900/cmhansrd/vo000606/debtext/00606-05.htm>>.

⁴⁴Interview with Gen. David Richards, 12 August 2015.

⁴⁵Prins, *The Heart of War*, 207.

⁴⁶Woods and Reese, *Military Interventions in Sierra Leone*, 77.

fragility of Sierra Leone and the tenuousness of the security and political arrangements put in place.

On 25 August 2000, a Royal Irish patrol stumbled into a WSB checkpoint where, outnumbered, it was disarmed and taken to the WSB main camp at Gberi Bana. Five of the 11 abducted soldiers were released in exchange for supplies. Thereafter, the erratic behaviour of WSB leader Foday Kallay, and the increasingly unrealistic nature of the group's demands, prompted the UK to launch a rescue operation early on 10 September in coordination with SLA and Jordanian UNAMSIL elements. Operation *Barras* involved the Special Air Service, Special Boat Service, and 1 PARA in a joint air-ground-riverine raid that extracted the UK hostages and freed 22 Sierra Leoneans kept as slaves. The assault lasted just 90 minutes, yet fighting raged on for an additional five hours. It resulted in the effective defeat of WSB, whose members were captured, killed, or soon thereafter surrendered to the Sierra Leonean government.

In its popular telling, Operation *Barras* is portrayed as an exclamation point to the British intervention in Sierra Leone: the final hammering home of previous British gains to the dead-enders too 'drunk, drugged, and dangerous' to accept the status quo.⁴⁷ The operation also caught the imagination of the British public, given its cinematographic nature and the straightforward parable of UK forces rescuing British hostages, freeing Sierra Leoneans, and routing the forces of savagery. Going further, commentary speaks of the 'major impact' that the operation had 'on the situation in Sierra Leone'.⁴⁸ To William Fowler, the author of the eponymous book, Operation *Barras* 'was a political act ... an exercise in nation-building'.⁴⁹ A decade on, *The Guardian* cast it as 'the last significant event in Sierra Leone's long civil war', suggesting that it tied up the campaign's last loose ends.⁵⁰ Such framing must be challenged on at least two counts.

First, by September 2000 there was no real link between WSB and RUF and it is therefore difficult to see how an assault on the former would compromise the latter.⁵¹ To make this case, it has been argued that the operation had a deep *psychological* effect on other non-state

⁴⁷Michael Dynes, 'Jungle rebels "drugged, drunk and dangerous"', *Independent (Ireland)*, 28 August 2000.

⁴⁸Dorman, *Blair's Successful War*, 114.

⁴⁹Fowler, *Operation Barras*, 158.

⁵⁰Renton, 'Sierra Leone'.

⁵¹This should be obvious, yet needs stating given the frequent characterisation of WSB as 'a breakaway faction of the RUF'. See Mark Malan, Phenyio Rakate, and Angela McIntyre, *Peacekeeping in Sierra Leone: UNAMSIL Hits the Home Straight* (Pretoria: Institute for Security Studies: Pretoria 2002), or Virginia Page Fortna, *Does Peacekeeping Work?: Shaping Belligerents' Choices after Civil War* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2008), 59, both of which simply put words to a more

groups. For example, Geoff Hoon, then the British Secretary of Defence, argued that Barras had sent a message that should compel ‘the West Side Group [sic] and other rebel units in Sierra Leone ... to accept the rule of law and the authority of the democratically elected government’.⁵² The British military would go on to use the raid in its information operations: ‘we would talk both about Lungi Lol and Barras and say that something similar could strike the RUF at any time... It played an unexpectedly useful role for us’.⁵³ Still, RUF actions during and following the raid suggest no significant change of heart. On 13 September, three days after *Barras*, RUF renewed its assault on Pamelap, a border town in Guinea.⁵⁴ In October, RUF offensives in northern Sierra Leone caused mass displacement and many deaths. At this point, RUF still maintained control of northern stretches of the country along with the diamondiferous Kono region. As we shall see, a series of factors would be needed to arrive at a ceasefire in November 2000 and, among them, the psychological impact of *Barras* does not rank very high. Indeed, to Richards, the operation, ‘other than the ability to exploit it from an informational perspective, was a great annoyance’.⁵⁵

Second, WSB needs to be understood within its political context. Once in the spotlight of international attention, accounts of the group focused on its eccentric attributes: here was ‘a maverick group’, ‘known for wearing bizarre clothing – women’s wigs and flip-flops are favourites – and being almost perpetually drunk’.⁵⁶ This group’s criminal mode of survival resulted in its characterisation as ‘murderous thugs’ or ‘brigands’ who were ‘just there to cause trouble’.⁵⁷ Such descriptors are not necessarily incorrect, though they can easily subvert the logic of the group’s existence and behaviour at the time, given the legacies of protracted war and dysfunction in the country, post-*Palliser* and post-*Basilica*.

general yet implicit understanding. A 2015 retrospective on *Barras* in *The Independent* also ascribes victory over RUF (which is never mentioned) to the raid on WSB. See Peter Osborne, ‘General John Holmes’ battle to rebuild Sierra Leone 15 years after a daring rescue’, *The Independent*, 12 September 2015.

⁵²As cited in Dorman, *Blair’s Successful War*, 113.

⁵³Interview with Gen. David Richards, 12 August 2015.

⁵⁴‘Border raids terrifying Guinea town’, *New York Times*, 17 September 2000. Going further, even WSB remnants continued to resist, requiring concerted mopping-up operations well into the autumn. Interview with Gen. Jonathon Riley, 26 June 2015.

⁵⁵Interview with Gen. David Richards, 12 August 2015.

⁵⁶‘Who are the West Side Boys’, *BBC News*, 31 August 2000.

⁵⁷See, respectively, Kim Sengupta, ‘West Side Boys leader ordered seizure in “fit of drunken pique”’, *The Telegraph*, 11 September 2000; Dorman, *Blair’s Successful War*, 104; ‘Eyewitness: held by the West Side Boys’, *BBC News*, 30 August 2000.

WSB had been involved in Johnny Paul Koroma's security detail following his return to the capital in October 1999, and formed part of the 'unholy alliance' that repelled RUF in the spring of 2000.⁵⁸ Yet when that crisis was over and only WSB's senior leadership were awarded title or benefit, the rest of the group returned to crime. Antagonism with the government resumed, and, following the arrest of its commander, 'Bomb Blast', WSB relaunched its hostage-taking campaign, which the group used to maintain (and to signal) their power and potential, and thereby their claim to recognition and 'reward'. To the degree that the group vocalised it, its political aim was to gain power and privilege in Freetown and to amend the Lomé Accord (which mentioned neither WSB nor AFRC).⁵⁹ In the interim, WSB at once resisted the regime's call for disarmament and challenged it through violent acts, yet also embraced any opportunity to rejoin the political game.⁶⁰ The group therefore set up camp in the Occra Hills, given its proximity to Freetown (the font of political power), its access to trade and transport (targeted for economic survival), and the opportunities for 'force build-up and escape routes'.⁶¹

This context matters to our assessment because it brings out the fraught national context in which *Barras* unfolded and, in so doing, the effects that this one-day assault could possibly have had. First, WSB's very ability to hold territory and contest government power demonstrates the UN mission's continued weakness. Indeed, the UN force was then limited to a few armed camps near the country's main cities of Freetown, Bo, and Kenema and hardly ever patrolled beyond these bases.⁶² There were even allegations of Jordanian peacekeepers supplying WSB so as to 'keep the peace' in what the group considered its 'area of responsibility'.⁶³ At this point, UNAMSIL could not be counted on to support or enable the government's quest for full territorial control.

Second, WSB's navigation indicates the inadequacy of the Sierra Leonean state. WSB may have been 'drugged, drunk, and dangerous' in the summer of 2000, but months earlier it had compensated for the lack of a Sierra Leonean military capable of taking the fight to RUF.

⁵⁸See Prins, *The Heart of War*, 202.

⁵⁹William Reno, 'The Failure of Peacekeeping in Sierra Leone', *Current History* 100 (2001), 223.

⁶⁰One of the group's many demands was for its representatives to 'be included in a new interim government'. 'IRIN focus on the West Side Boys', *IRIN*, 5 September 2000.

⁶¹Mats Utas and Magnus Jörgel. 'The West Side Boys: Military Navigation in the Sierra Leone Civil War', *Journal of Modern African Studies* 46/3 (2008), 495.

⁶²Douglas Farah, 'Internal disputes mar U.N. mission; power struggle cripples troops in Sierra Leone', *Washington Post*, 10 September 2000.

⁶³On UN allegations, see Farah, 'Internal disputes'. On WSB's view of 'their' territory, see 'Interview with the West Side Boys'. *BBC News*, 1 September 2000.

The shifting kaleidoscope of political loyalties underlines the weakness of the government's own forces, but also contrasts with the arguably facile framing of 'state' and 'spoiler' that more celebratory accounts of Operation *Barras* take for granted.

Third, in such a context, what Comfort Ero terms the 'de-institutionalization' of violence, 'being part of the group' – far from senseless or irrational – 'developed into a way to survive in the general security vacuum of the war zone'.⁶⁴ This is important, in that it points to how much more, beyond *Barras*, would be required to achieve lasting stability. WSB's existence reflects the brutalisation of an entire generation, deep political cleavages, and state dysfunction. These issues, and the political malaise that underpinned the conflict – what Paul Richards terms 'the crisis of a patrimonial state' – would need to be addressed through a substantial investment in peacebuilding, and even then their legacy continues to haunt Sierra Leone long after RUF's transformation into a political party.⁶⁵

Against this backdrop, it is difficult to accept *Barras* as in any way strategically decisive or as the finale of earlier British efforts, per more popular accounts. Instead, as Gen. Jonathon Riley, later the commander of the UK Joint Task Force, would note, 'It was now recognized ... that Britain, if it was to stay engaged in Sierra Leone, had to develop a far more coherent policy. There was a democratically elected government, internationally recognized, but whose writ hardly ran outside the capital. The economy was in ruins'.⁶⁶ Accordingly, on 4 September, the British government set out more concrete aims – to ensure the 'immediate freedom of access throughout Sierra Leone for UNAMSIL and government forces' and end abductions.⁶⁷ The British government also authorised a robust follow-on operation aimed at bolstering the government and its security forces. That effort, Operation *Silkman*, is an under-studied component of the British intervention but without it preceding gains would likely have unravelled. And yet, for appropriate lessons to be drawn, *Silkman* must itself be seen within *its* context and in light of the enablers that allowed it to succeed.

⁶⁴Utas and Jörgel, 'The West Side Boys', 489.

⁶⁵Paul Richards, *Fighting for the Rainforest: War, Youth and Resources in Sierra Leone* (Oxford: James Currey, 1996), xvii; Mitton, 'Engaging Disengagement', 178–90.

⁶⁶Jonathon P. Riley, 'The UK in Sierra Leone: A Post-conflict Operation Success?', *Heritage Lectures* 958, 15 June 2006, pp. 1–4.

⁶⁷Dorman, *Blair's Successful War*, 117.

Operation Silkman

Rather than end a conflict, *Palliser* opened a path towards political progress, and, rather than decisively defeat remaining spoilers, *Barras* indicated how long that path would be. Thus, whereas Richards frequently cast *Palliser* as having ‘cracked it’ within weeks, he himself returned to Sierra Leone in late autumn the same year, this time (in his own words) ‘because there was a resurgence of violence and worrying signs that the RUF were again on the warpath’.⁶⁸ In explaining the eventual outcome of the British intervention, we need to turn to this final phase – one neglected in mainstream accounts: what did the British forces do differently and how does this input relate, inter alia, to the eventual peace?

Following *Barras*, the British government deployed a reconnaissance team to conduct a fresh estimate of the situation and recommend a new course of action. On the basis of this study, on 10 October the government announced an increase to its presence in Sierra Leone and the establishment of a joint operational-level headquarters that would lead the overall UK effort and provide ‘high-level operational advice’ to SLA. Building on *Basilica*, the British government also announced three further training teams and the allocation of 5000 troops for in extremis contingencies. As some recognised at the time, ‘the government clearly believes that its earlier limited plans to help train the local soldiers were far too optimistic’.⁶⁹

Full-scale violence did not erupt in the autumn of 2000, but it was a tense period. WSB were disarming or being hunted down, but most analysts feared that RUF quiescence would last only until the end of the rainy season. Adding to the brew, the beleaguered UNAMSIL was facing a new crisis. In September the Indian commander of the now 13,000-strong force, Maj.-Gen. Vijay Jetley, accused his deputy and the Special Representative of the Secretary General (SRSG), both Nigerians, of having direct contact with RUF and profiting from the diamond trade. Jetley was himself under fire for the failings of the UN mission to date and this spat further paralysed the mission. Meanwhile, reports detailing Jordanian links with WSB were coming to light.⁷⁰ As the Security Council moved to bolster UNAMSIL, both India and Jordan – the largest and third-largest troop contributors – elected to withdraw, stretching the undermanned force.

In light of the UK’s bolder ambitions post-*Barras*, UNAMSIL’s implosion was deeply problematic. In early November, Britain sent a

⁶⁸David Richards, *Taking Command* (London: Headline 2014), 161.

⁶⁹Richard Norton-Taylor and Ewen MacAskill, ‘Britain builds up Sierra Leone force’, *The Guardian*, 11 October 2000.

⁷⁰Farah, ‘Internal Disputes’.

task force, including 500 troops of the 42 Royal Marine Commando, to shore up the UN force. Around the same time, it sent a senior army officer, Brig. Alistair Duncan, to serve as chief of staff and British liaison within UNAMSIL. Still, the UN – and Sierra Leone – clearly needed more. Accordingly, throughout the autumn, Britain bolstered its presence and signalled its commitment. On 13 November, it launched a new operation, *Silkman*, to defeat RUF and re-establish democracy. The operation was guided by a new campaign plan, made in the UK yet codified in January 2001 as a Republic of Sierra Leone Armed Forces (RSLAF) product.⁷¹ Notably, it put the conflict in regional perspective in that it recognised Liberia's support of RUF as the group's strategic centre of gravity. It also identified RUF's operational centre of gravity as its control of lucrative diamond fields. Hence the campaign plan recommended a regional, politico-military effort to isolate Liberia; to build up the capability and legitimacy of Sierra Leonean government, its military, and other government-friendly forces; and to march upon RUF territory, to deny it its smuggling routes, close off its revenue, and force it to surrender or be defeated.

Britain recognised that SLA was not ready for operations of this type and, in contrast to past assessments, that UNAMSIL could claim only a 'precarious hold' over some areas of the country.⁷² The plan was therefore to proceed in phases: Phase I would build confidence and organise available forces, Phase II cut RUF's supply lines, and Phase III return government authority to RUF-held territory in the north and northwest. From then on, in Phase IV, SLA or UN forces would go after RUF's diamond fields in Kono and cut the group's ties to Liberia, after which Phase V would establish a robust security sector to deter further violence. British forces would be instrumental throughout, but never engage in combat.

On 10 November, days before *Silkman*'s launch, RUF and government representatives met in Abuja, Nigeria, and signed a 30-day ceasefire predicated on the Lomé Accord. RUF agreed to re-engage with the UN-led DDR programme (abandoned in May) and to allow UNAMSIL to deploy throughout the country to ensure humanitarian relief.⁷³ How to explain this volte-face, in the midst of government weakness and crisis within UNAMSIL? First, following *Barras*, Richards returned to command the British effort, again via a joint force headquarters. The renewed commitment, reinforcement, and

⁷¹Defence Headquarters (RSLAF), 'Campaign Plan for the Defeat of the RUF by Government Forces in Sierra Leone', OpPlan 1/1 (2001).

⁷²Ibid., 3.

⁷³For the text of the treaty, see 'The Sierra Leone Web', <<http://www.sierra-leone.org/ceasefire1100.html>>.

ensuing shows of force had a strong psychological impact on RUF.⁷⁴ Targeted by information campaigns, RUF feared Britain would get involved directly, something that the local media also seemed to confirm: as Prins notes, several newspapers ‘published headlines such as “RUF beware! British give 30 day notice!” (Salone) or “Britain shows big stick!” (Awoko)’.⁷⁵

Second, with its ramped-up training mission, Britain had by 10 October trained 3000 SLA forces and aimed to train another 3000 by spring 2001. With British advice and embedding, the force became increasingly robust and active. As Richards explains, during this period, ‘the SLA had British officers deployed quite far forward amongst them. We were coordinating the campaign, absolutely took it back from the Sierra Leoneans, and were coordinating with the UN as well’.⁷⁶ This support and activity compelled RUF to sue for peace – at least with the Freetown government. Indeed, as an offensive on the country’s diamond areas was widely expected, some saw the ceasefire as another attempt by the rebels to buy time ‘by manipulating a desperate desire for peace’.⁷⁷

Third, the Abuja ceasefire should not be confused with a peace agreement, much as a peace agreement should not be confused with actual peace. While the British-supported government in Freetown was proving too strong, RUF had since early September shifted its focus to the Guinean borderlands, attacking the Forecariah area and, later, the Forest region in the southeast, including attacks in early 2001 on Guékédou, the diamond-rich areas around Macenta, and Kissidougou.⁷⁸ Though Charles Taylor denies it,⁷⁹ testimony from RUF’s then-commander, Issa Sesay, alleged that the former had paid, armed, and instructed RUF to conduct these attacks, plausibly to reach Guinea’s diamond fields and punish it for its support for Liberians United for Reconciliation and Democracy (LURD), a rebel group fighting Taylor’s regime in Liberia. Given this regional context, ‘it is hardly surprising that the RUF organized a ceasefire ... This gave it the

⁷⁴Richards, *Taking Command*, 161.

⁷⁵Prins, *The Heart of War*, 208.

⁷⁶Interview with Gen. David Richards, 12 August 2015.

⁷⁷Chris McGreal, ‘Britain doubles Sierra Leone force’, *The Guardian*, 13 November 2000.

⁷⁸Malan et al., *Peacekeeping in Sierra Leone*, 12.

⁷⁹Alpha Sesay, ‘Taylor did not order the RUF to attack Guinea’, *International Justice Monitor*, 22 September 2009.

space it needed for its attacks over the next five months on Guinea'.⁸⁰ In October–November, 600 civilians were killed in the violence. By February 2001, the UN High Commission for Refugees described the attendant displacement as 'the worst refugee crisis' of the time.⁸¹ The violence would last until April 2001.

So, despite appearances, the Abuja agreement does not answer the question of how Sierra Leone went from its fragile state in late 2000, when conflict was ongoing and RUF controlled vast territory, to actual peace, declared formally only some 14 months later in January 2002. This question matters greatly to our understanding of the British intervention. The answer has two parts. First, the five phases of Operation *Silkman* were critical, but importantly also rested on a broader international political drive, by the United Kingdom, to galvanise support for UNAMSIL, isolate Taylor, and choke off RUF's resourcing. Second, Britain's actions also relied on various regional developments over which they had little to no control but which were either deftly exploited or otherwise critical to the outcome of the campaign. These two points signal the importance of integrating the use of force within a multi-faceted political strategy, one that will typically evince significant international and regional dimensions. This is crucial also in terms of *understanding* the intervention. Indeed, it then becomes critical, to quote Jeremy Black, that 'military history becomes an aspect of total history; not to "demilitarize" it, but because the operational aspect of war is best studied in terms of the multiple political, social and cultural context that gave, and give, it meaning'.⁸²

Starting with British inputs during *Silkman*, Britain's assistance had the cumulative impact of giving the government new confidence, greater capability, and strategic direction. Britain deepened the work of the International Military Advisory and Training Team (IMATT), now 65-strong and focused on structural reform and strategic-level advising (through embeds in the units created by the STTT). Meanwhile, with the Sierra Leonean Police Force (SLP) already headed by a British inspector-general, a team of Commonwealth policemen were deployed to rebuild and advise the force. The effort was greatly facilitated by Sierra Leone's British legal system and colonial policing model, and

⁸⁰Lansana Gberie, 'Destabilizing Guinea: diamonds, Charles Taylor and the potential for wider humanitarian catastrophe', Occasional Paper 1, Partnership Africa Canada/International Peace Information Service/Network Movement for Justice and Development, 2001, 11.

⁸¹Alex Duval Smith, 'Sierra Leone rebels flee and take war to Guinea', *The Independent*, 19 November 2000; 'U.N. seeks safe passage for Guinea refugees', *CNN.com*, 12 February 2001.

⁸²Jeremy Black, *Rethinking Military History* (New York: Routledge 2004), 19.

hence the existence of valuable common ground. Britain also sent embeds for the police, as well as for the civil service, and funded salary hikes to security forces and government employees to deter corruption. Leading the entire effort was Gen. Jonathon Riley, who was

simultaneously, Commander British Forces West Africa with about 1,000 British troops ashore on any given day; Commander Military Advisory and Training Team; Military Adviser to the Government of Sierra Leone, with a seat on the national security council, responsible for coordinating the military effort to support government objectives; and Commander Joint Task Force, the over-the horizon reaction force of an embarked brigade, with supporting aviation, naval, and air firepower. I was also the de facto commander of the 14,000 strong Sierra Leone Army and its small air force and coastal navy.⁸³

By embedding, advising, equipping, reforming (and initially commanding) SLA, British commanders greatly boosted its confidence and ability.⁸⁴ The British military also provided SLA with critical intelligence, having completely penetrated RUF's communications (to the point of bankrolling the mobile phone accounts of its leadership to sustain the flow of information).⁸⁵ This support enabled SLA deployments further away from the capital, to Masiaka, up north to Kabala and Bumbuna, and far east to Kenema by January 2001, causing panic and despondence within RUF.⁸⁶ With more forces trained, by April 2001 a full two brigades could be fielded and a third was nearing completion. The build-up and confidence were such that Kabbah insisted, with British and Nigerian support, on renegotiating the Abuja ceasefire, which was predicated on the Lomé Accord, in favour of RUF's full surrender without government positions, perks, or benefits.⁸⁷

⁸³Riley, 'The UK in Sierra Leone', 2.

⁸⁴To Barry Le Grys, 'While there were some courageous and capable SLA officers at battalion level and below, they were in the minority. UK officers were formally embedded in command positions, including that of the joint force commander.' See Barry Le Grys, 'British Military Involvement in Sierra Leone, 2001–2006', in Peter Albrecht and Paul Jackson (eds), *Security Sector Reform in Sierra Leone, 1997–2007: Views from the Front Line* (Berlin: Lit 2010), 56.

⁸⁵Riley, 'Sierra Leone, 2000–2001', 19–20.

⁸⁶Peter Albrecht and Paul Jackson, *Security System Transformation in Sierra Leone, 1997–2007* (London: Peter 2009), 56.

⁸⁷Riley, 'Sierra Leone, 2000–2001', 26.

Regional and International Efforts

While the military balance shifted, Britain worked internationally to meet its political objectives. At the Security Council, Britain elevated the issue of Sierra Leone and galvanised international support for UNAMSIL so that it could eventually take over. These efforts included a Security Council visit to the country in October 2000, led by Ambassador Sir Jeremy Greenstock, as well as heightened activism in New York. Through such efforts, Britain turned the United States' attention to the crisis and pushed three Security Council initiatives that would drive the war-to-peace transition: sanctions on blood diamonds, an international war crimes tribunal, and the strengthening of UNAMSIL.⁸⁸ To signal its commitment and improve coordination, Britain in 2002 filled the position of UNAMSIL chief of staff and deputy SRSG for governance and stabilisation, and provided the mission 18 British military observers and four senior staff.⁸⁹

In revamping UNAMSIL, Britain was helped by the mission becoming a bellwether for UN peacekeeping.⁹⁰ Partly as a result, and through British efforts, UNAMSIL was provided various UN assets, including helicopter gunships, a full signals battalion, detailed maps and satellite imagery, all while troop numbers were dwindling. A Military Information Cell was also established in Freetown, allowing UN forces to gather multi-source intelligence.⁹¹ Most important, however, was the change in mindset following the arrival of a new force commander and deputy force commander in November 2000. Though UNAMSIL and the British command never quite agreed on whether to defeat or reintegrate RUF, the two grew closer, both politically and structurally. Over the next year, new troops arrived from Bangladesh, Nepal, and Ghana, allowing UNAMSIL to adopt a more assertive posture, deploying to and holding areas liberated by SLA. Most critical was the arrival of a Pakistani brigade ready and capable of holding RUF's heartland in the east, though this did not occur until autumn 2001. At this point, UNAMSIL had met its authorised ceiling of 17,500 troops, including 260 military observers – then the largest peacekeeping mission ever deployed.

Still on the international scene, Britain was centrally involved in weakening Charles Taylor's regime in Liberia. Britain had since May

⁸⁸John L. Hirsch, *Sierra Leone: Diamonds and the Struggle for Democracy* (Boulder, CO: Lynne Rienner 2001), 102. See also Funmi Olonisakin, *Peacekeeping in Sierra Leone: The Story of UNAMSIL* (Boulder, CO: Lynne Rienner 2008), 94.

⁸⁹Michael Dobbs, *British Intervention in War-Torn Sierra Leone, 1997–2015* (Leighton Buzzard: West Africa Study Circle 2015), 19.

⁹⁰'Notes on the Security Council Retreat', 4.

⁹¹Olonisakin, *Peacekeeping in Sierra Leone*, 98–99.

2000 led international efforts to stem the role of conflict diamonds, but initial certification-of-origin systems were proving too weak.⁹² In the face of continued smuggling, and Liberia's role in the trade, Britain lobbied to tighten the noose. In January 2001, it helped pass a resolution targeting the Taylor regime, imposing sanctions on the Liberian elite, freezing assets, and preventing trading, also of diamonds. As David Keen concludes, 'Despite the fact that large numbers of diamonds continued to be exported from RUF areas via Sierra Leonean government channels, the growing difficulty of trading with Liberia appears to have significantly reduced rebel profits'.⁹³

Through its international, regional, and national actions, Britain had effectively countered RUF's strategic and operational centres of gravity: the support from Liberia and its control of diamond fields. More than *Palliser*, more than *Barras* – though both were necessary to reach this point – it was this congruence of British actions on the ground and internationally that choked the RUF and enabled the government to stand on its own feet (with continued help from the UN). Still, this success relied also on a number of factors over which Whitehall and in-country commanders had at most limited control. These factors must be acknowledged to appreciate, without belittling or exaggerating, the British role in Sierra Leone's war-to-peace transition.

Extraneous Factors

Of these extraneous factors, the most critical was surely the role of Guinea, which responded forcefully to RUF incursions on its territory and imposed devastating costs on the rebel group. By January 2001, Guinea's armed forces were attacking rebel positions with artillery strikes and helicopter gunships, acquired via French channels and through US military aid. The end result was a military defeat for RUF, whose fighters were now squeezed by Guinea and an empowered SLA. In early February, local newspapers reported the surrender of 15 RUF commanders near the Guinean border: 'The commanders say they were tired of fighting and noted they did not want to lead troops to fight in Guinea as they had been ordered by their bosses'.⁹⁴ The following week, RUF set up an eight-member Political Council to advance the stalled peace process. In May of that year, RUF dropped the major demand of SLA disarmament and agreed to return to the DDR process.

⁹²Lansana Gberie, *A Dirty War in West Africa: the RUF and the Destruction of Sierra Leone* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press 2005), 186.

⁹³Keen, *Conflict and Collusion*, 271.

⁹⁴As cited in 'RUF commanders surrender', *IRIN*, 12 February 2001.

Britain provided Guinea's army with intelligence and other support (Riley from the outset sought close coordination and sent a Sierra Leonean liaison officer to Conarky to this end).⁹⁵ Still RUF's critical miscalculation and Guinea's devastating response were both largely epiphenomenal to the British intervention. Significantly, to one analyst, they constituted 'probably [the] most important' factor in 'paving the way for an accelerated peace process'.⁹⁶ This should not obscure British inputs but illustrates the need for such efforts to detect, engage with, or otherwise exploit shifting opportunities and developments.

Another extraneous factor – further removed from British inputs but critical in isolating the Taylor regime – was LURD's steady encroachment into Liberia. From its first cross-border attack from Guinea in mid-2000, LURD went on to occupy the northern city of Voinjama, and by December 2002 LURD 'controlled most of Lofa County and parts of neighbouring districts, in total around 30% of Liberia'.⁹⁷ The effect on RUF was to stem further the resources from Liberia, particularly as the territory first seized was that neighbouring RUF's eastern heartland. In the longer term, with the defeat of Taylor in 2003, 'the opportunity for Sierra Leone's ex-combatants to remobilize was significantly reduced', thus halting the regional rotation of instability that had perpetuated conflict theretofore.⁹⁸

On the topic of remobilisation, a final break, although one for which Britain was *partially* responsible, was overall war-weariness. Certainly, in Sierra Leone, the most frequently cited explanation for the war's conclusion is that all sides – including RUF – were tired of war and felt it brought nothing of value. War-weariness primed the country for peace, but the British intervention – along other factors – enabled the transition.⁹⁹ This opportunity will not always obtain and relates closely to the ten years of conflict and, even more so, the specific relation between RUF commanders and foot soldiers. RUF's claim to a cause or populist platform never went beyond rhetoric: it failed to mobilise not just a base but also its own fighters, many of whom were pressganged and fought in awful conditions without

⁹⁵Interview with Gen. Jonathon Riley, 26 June 2015.

⁹⁶Keen, *Conflict and Collusion*, 268.

⁹⁷James Brabazon, 'Liberia: Liberians United for Reconciliation and Democracy (LURD)', Armed Non-state Actors Project Briefing Paper 1, Royal Institute of International Affairs, 2003, 6.

⁹⁸Kieran Mitton, 'Where Is the War? Explaining Peace in Sierra Leone', *International Peacekeeping* 20/3 (2013), 328.

⁹⁹On this point, I am indebted to Kieran Mitton and his fieldwork in Sierra Leone in autumn 2015.

adequate recompense.¹⁰⁰ Counter-factually, a more populist, committed, or cause-oriented group might have proved more resistant to pressure. In this sense, RUF presented itself as a less formidable spoiler, an advantage that also helped sustain peace in a post-conflict environment affording precious few opportunities for demobilising combatants. In this case, as Mitton shows, ‘the miserable conditions experienced by combatants towards the end of war were often far more instrumental in encouraging them to seek peace than promises of employment and education’.¹⁰¹

Britain’s Post-conflict Reforms

By May 2001, the British training team had trained 8000 Sierra Leonean troops and officers, UNAMSIL was being reinforced and extending its presence in the countryside, and RUF was disarming. By January 2002, the DDR process was deemed complete and the UNAMSIL force commander, Gen. Opande, declared the war officially over. Elections were held in May 2002, in which Kabbah was re-elected and the new RUF party failed to win a single seat. Still, the peace held – as it did months later during the contentious indictment of RUF’s leadership by a Special Court set up to try war crimes.

Clearly, peace in Sierra Leone stemmed from a range of factors, some central to the British intervention, others less so. This point may be obvious to Africanists and area experts, yet is too often glossed over in celebratory accounts of British inputs, which tend to converge narrowly on *Palliser* and *Barras* and overplay the role of armed force in effecting their supposed outcomes. Even among accounts that acknowledge *Silkman* and the role of Guinea, a second set of factors is typically obscured, namely Britain’s longer-term support for the fragile peace it helped create. It should be recalled that when Britain intervened in May 2000 the Sierra Leonean state had all but collapsed: state structures on the periphery were deliberately destroyed, government influence beyond Freetown was minimal, and half the population was displaced.¹⁰² To bolster the peace signed on paper, the UK led a post-conflict reform process, working closely with the Sierra Leonean government and UNAMSIL. Whereas Sierra Leone remains plagued by very real socio-economic challenges, this support helped

¹⁰⁰Mitton, ‘Where Is the War?’, 325. As Mitton explains, while some fighters had ‘enjoyed the short-term benefits of looting, diamond mining, and exercising power over civilians, by the end of the conflict, most had little to show for it’.

¹⁰¹*Ibid.*, 326.

¹⁰²Peter Albrecht and Paul Jackson, ‘Introduction: The Roots of Security Sector Reform in Sierra Leone’, in Peter Albrecht and Paul Jackson (eds), *Security Sector Reform in Sierra Leone, 1997–2007: Views from the Front Line* (Berlin: Lit 2010), 4–6.

avert another war and established a democratic foundation upon which further progress could be made. This is exceptional, and notable given the devastating effects that the absence of such support has had on war-to-peace transitions elsewhere.

With the continued insecurity (even in peace, violence did not altogether stop) and lack of government control over significant territory, a first priority was to strengthen further the government's security forces. Hence, Britain revamped and broadened its Sierra Leonean Security Sector Reform Programme (SILSEP), officially in operation since 1999. Because this programme was a shared endeavour of the Department for International Development (DfID), UK Foreign and Commonwealth Office, and Ministry of Defence, it correctly framed security not as a purely military concern, but as a public good and basis for post-war development. Enabling such lofty goals was the continued work of IMATT. It now focused on imparting ethos and professionalism, advice and assistance, all on an initial *ten-year* timeline (it finally withdrew in April 2013, transferring vestigial tasks to a 6–8 strong International Security Advisory Team). In this time, a UK-commanded SLA was transformed into a 'credible, non-partisan, well-trained fighting force', the RSLAF, which has since conducted its own peacekeeping in both Somalia and Darfur.¹⁰³

Police reforms were also sustained, funded by the UN, the Commonwealth, and DfID. From 2002 onwards, the SLP increased its responsiveness and presence across the country and, in 2006, it could assume primary jurisdiction over internal security, while the RSLAF guarded against external threats – an unusual division of labour within the region. Resource scarcity and a lack of international support meant the police reforms lagged, but they nonetheless saw vital innovations, such as increased oversight and accountability structures, and the inclusion of Family Support Units to care for the dislocated population of post-war Sierra Leone.¹⁰⁴

Strengthening the security sector was necessary, yet it threatened further instability given Sierra Leone's history of coups. Hence the UK

¹⁰³Alfred Nelson-Williams, 'Restructuring the Republic of Sierra Leone Armed Forces', in Peter Albrecht and Paul Jackson (eds), *Security Sector Reform in Sierra Leone, 1997–2007: Views from the Front Line* (Berlin: Lit 2010), 147. For a more detailed examination of RSLAF's evolution and its peacekeeping participation, see Peter Albrecht and Cathy Haenlein, 'Sierra Leone's Post-conflict Peacekeepers,' *RUSI Journal* 160/1 (2015), 26–36.

¹⁰⁴See Kadi Fakondo, 'Reforming and Building Capacity of the Sierra Leone Police, 1999–2007', in Peter Albrecht and Paul Jackson (eds), *Security Sector Reform in Sierra Leone, 1997–2007: Views from the Front Line* (Berlin: Lit 2010), 167–76. See also Albrecht and Jackson, *Security System Transformation*, 38–39.

took the lead in institutionalising civilian control of the military and addressing government weakness and corruption. As Riley explains, this effort included ‘embedding civil service advisers; running courses for Sierra Leone civil servants; sending Sierra Leone civil servants and senior officers on courses at British universities and defense institutions; and using [DfID] funds for selected projects like infrastructure, communications, and information technology’.¹⁰⁵ To further address the legitimacy and reach of the state, Britain funded an anti-corruption unit in Freetown focusing specifically on government officials and assisted in the rehabilitation of the chieftaincy system through which to exercise government control away from the capital.¹⁰⁶

In terms of development, DfID also recognised the need for long-term support and guaranteed the Sierra Leonean government £40 million per year for an initial ten-year period.¹⁰⁷ The UK having already ‘virtually bankrolled the Sierra Leone government’ throughout the early post-conflict years, this was now its largest aid-per-capita programme. This aid was conditional on progress made by the Sierra Leonean government and therefore compelled the elite to remain committed to reform.¹⁰⁸ At the same time, DfID formulated a poverty reduction strategy that related to SILSEP, and funded a community rehabilitation project that rebuilt housing in war-ravaged areas.¹⁰⁹ Notably, as part of SILSEP, development funds were even allocated towards intelligence reform and, through the 2005 DfID-sponsored Justice Sector Development Programme, judicial reform (again on a ten-year timeline).¹¹⁰

This post-conflict assistance belongs to the story of British intervention because it gave longer-term meaning to initial military and political gains. The implementation of these efforts was not unproblematic: countless analyses speak of the lack of coordination, strategy, commitment, and results. In general terms, inadequate development assistance was too often spent in unproductive ways, and the country struggled to retain the world’s attention, or undertake its own reforms, once

¹⁰⁵Riley, ‘The UK in Sierra Leone’, 3.

¹⁰⁶Gberie, *A Dirty War in West Africa*, 176.

¹⁰⁷Mark White, ‘The Security–Development Nexus in Sierra Leone’, in Peter Albrecht and Paul Jackson (eds), *Security Sector Reform in Sierra Leone, 1997–2007: Views from the Front Line* (Berlin: Lit 2010), 87.

¹⁰⁸Lansana Gberie, ‘Rescuing a Failed State: The Case of Sierra Leone’, in Lansana Gberie (ed.), *Rescuing a Fragile State: Sierra Leone 2002–2008* (Waterloo, ON: LCMSDS Press 2009), 11.

¹⁰⁹Gberie, *A Dirty War in West Africa*, 175–76.

¹¹⁰Albrecht and Jackson, *Security System Transformation*, 41. See also Le Grys, ‘British Military Involvement’, 43.

sufficient stability was achieved.¹¹¹ As a result, Sierra Leone remains at the bottom of the UN Development Programme's Human Development Index. Poverty and unemployment are endemic, particularly among youth (whose alienation had been a prime cause of war). And while the elections in the country are a good-news story, they remain heavily swayed by patrimonial politics and intimidation, often by ex-combatants recruited by local big men.¹¹² In many ways, Sierra Leone's society has not changed, but the war is over and democracy is functioning.

The mixed longer-term outcome illustrates the difficulty of turning initial gains, both military and political, into longer-term progress. Britain should be lauded for doing as much as it did, not just in re-engaging during Operation *Silkman* but for years thereafter. This goes beyond Britain's status as former colonial master of the country – even among such patrons, its commitment in this case is unusual – and appears to relate instead to an extraordinary awareness of what was necessary and an exceptional level of cooperation between Whitehall and the ministries of defence, development and diplomacy. Despite the problems still faced by Sierra Leone, the important progress that has been made would have been impossible but for Britain's continued engagement.

Conclusion: Unpacking a Success Story

In terms of ending war and building peace, the British intervention deserves its status as success story, but it is a story whose plot is far longer and intricate than commonly thought. More could have been done, particularly by the international community, to assist this fragile nation, but peace has held for more than a decade in a region marred by conflict. Along with war-weariness and other regional factors over which Britain had little or no control, its intervention – including its spearheading of international assistance efforts following the war and its close collaboration and sponsorship of other 'partners for peace' (notably the UN) – has immeasurably helped Sierra Leone grow from a defunct war-torn nation into a capable, peaceful West African democracy able to police its 2007 elections largely on its own. As Jackson and Albrecht wrote in 2010, 'The vast majority of the population now live without the fear of extreme violence that haunted the country for at least ten years during the war, and before that inside a rapacious and

¹¹¹See Ian Smillie, 'Orphan of the Storm: Sierra Leone and 30 Years of Foreign Aid', in Lansana Gberie (ed.), *Rescuing a Fragile State: Sierra Leone 2002–2008* (Waterloo, ON: LCMSDS Press 2009), 16, 22–23.

¹¹²Mitton, 'Where Is the War?', 326, 329.

authoritarian state.’¹¹³ The challenge of doing better remains, and should greatly inform expectations of what even successful interventions achieve.

As for the contribution of the use of force in achieving this outcome, three key points stand out. First, the ability to use and threaten credible force was critical to Britain’s initial entry into Sierra Leone in that it averted the potential collapse of the government and the UN mission supporting it. It was also critical to the squeeze put on RUF during Operation *Silkman*, when Britain mentored, advised, and – at times – commanded local forces in ambitious and successful operations. Conversely, the UN mission’s unassertive posture proved wholly inappropriate for the conflict zone in which it was deployed, illustrating the costs of misreading the context and relying on hope as a strategy.

Despite forays into robust peacekeeping, future UN operations cannot always be expected to have the capabilities, mandate, leadership, and sheer gumption to act forcefully against spoilers and other adversarial actors. The partnership established with Britain in Sierra Leone shows the potential of cooperation of this type, and the case is indeed pregnant with lessons as to how such cooperation can work. Specifically, the case speaks to the importance of quick deployment in the face of sudden crises and the attendant value of pre-deployed assets – this was also a key aspect in France’s recent deployment to Mali. The complementariness of UNAMSIL, British, and host-nation actions was also indispensable to the ultimate outcome.

Yet if the use of force was critical in creating an opportunity for political progress, it was not in itself decisive or even that strategically significant (if by ‘strategy’ we mean the linking of military means with political ends; typically where international military interventions falter). In this case, Britain changed gear following *Barras* and enacted an inter-ministerial, multi-faceted, and long-term approach. Required in this instance was the British government’s ability to justify apparent mission creep, allowing it to oversee a gradual, responsible transition from British to UN and then to local leadership. Such transitions have been the Achilles heel of other similarly scaled operations.¹¹⁴ Critical in this regard was the close collaboration with the UN, both at the Security Council and regionally, to push a political process to which the use of force could contribute. Indeed, for a military force sent to wage war, the imperative of political consolidation suggests precisely the need for integration with other, more politically or developmentally oriented

¹¹³Albrecht and Jackson, ‘Introduction’, 5.

¹¹⁴Mats Berdal and David H. Ucko, ‘The Use of Force in UN Peacekeeping Operations: Problems and Prospects’, *RUSI Journal* 160/1 (2015), 8–10.

actors, whether those of the host country, the intervening government, or regional and international organisations.

This takes us to the third major lesson from this case. As with every success story, the celebration of *agency* must also acknowledge the *structure* in which it unfolds. A key requirement for the effective use of force was Britain's ability not only to understand the political context, but to calibrate and target its use of force accordingly. In this effort, it was helped by good leadership and effective liaising, and by the familiarity with the country brought by Britain's colonial experience and continued engagement in the years preceding the military intervention. Added to this analysis must be the notion of *contingency* – epiphenomenal factors and developments that contributed serendipitously to mission objectives, primarily the Guinean offensive, RUF's popular bankruptcy, and the conflict in Liberia.¹¹⁵ For British agency to be effective, it had to detect and respond to these developments in a way that contributed to mission objectives. This finding reinforces the need for deep familiarity with the society in which an intervention is to take place, and for the ability to integrate such knowledge into strategic planning. As Robert Thompson, counterinsurgency expert, put it in one of his last interviews, the only formula available to such a force is to 'Get in place that which is correct, get in place that which is sustainable, and play for the breaks'.¹¹⁶

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¹¹⁵Note should also be made of Sierra Leone's diminutive size. Its population in 2000 was a fifth that of Iraq or Afghanistan, and its size is one sixth and ninth of each, respectively.

¹¹⁶Sir Robert Thompson in interview with Thomas A. Marks, March 1989.

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