Duclos, N. Courtiers de la Paix, les vétérans au cœur du statebuilding international au Kosovo

(Armed men as peace brokers rather than spoilers? Duclos takes a closer look at the role of veterans in post-war Kosovo)


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Peace-, state- and nation-building processes have become topical in academia, especially since the failed experiments in Somalia, Afghanistan, Iraq or, more recently, Libya. A central piece of the rebuilding jigsaw is the reintegration of armed men into civilian lives. In numerous post-war countries, UN-led Disarmament, Demobilisation and Reintegration programmes (DDR) have been set up to that effect. Based on a range of incentives and coercion measures, these programmes were partly built on the work of the influential British economist Paul Collier. In the 1990s, Collier and his research teams at the World Bank emphasised the peace-spoiling potential of militias (Collier 1994, 2000). Thus, even today, most peace process administrators seek to encourage armed groups, especially young men, to give up their weapons in exchange for material advantages (jobs, trainings, money) and/or to coerce them into doing so with threats of exclusion, penal justice proceedings, etc.

Drawing from historical and sociological research traditions, and working from archives, grey literature and interviews, Nathalie Duclos challenges this dominant approach. Her dense and detailed analysis of the peace-building decade, following the 1999 NATO intervention in Kosovo, suggests that its war veterans should be understood as important peace brokers. For Duclos, they played a key role in state-building by engaging with international administrators in a constant struggle for recognition and legitimacy, as well as for the control of space, political processes and even historical narratives. These complex and ambiguous interactions contributed to the emergence of Kosovo both as a Weberian state and as an ‘imagined community’: that is, as a nation (Anderson, 1991). Her research portrays a post-war situation in its full complexity, beyond binary dichotomies such as “armed vs. civil”, “cooperative vs. spoiler”, indeed “good vs. bad”. It is a welcomed reassessment of the contributions of veterans in state-building and a solid contribution to a topic, the complexity of which we are slowly grasping.

Duclos’ starting point is the disarmament of the Kosovo Liberation Army (UCK) forces, which had expanded in the late 1990s, militarily challenging Serb rule over the province. This was required by UN resolution 1244 of June 1999, following the NATO air campaign against Serbia. She shows that both the disarmament and the
demilitarisation in Kosovo were superficial and incomplete. Large numbers of UCK combatants were initially absorbed into a new ‘civil’ security force, the exact mandate of which became the object of multiple frictions and negotiations. As an attentive observer of this process, Duclos highlights the extent to which Kosovo leaders could negotiate, exert pressure and influence international civilian administrators, often new to the territory. As such they controlled parts of the process and managed their transformation into legitimate political figures whilst recasting most of their troops into a ‘Kosovo Protection Corp’ (KPC). Officially unarmed, this body progressively imposed itself, especially after the riots of 2004 during which it intervened efficiently, as well as in response to humanitarian disasters. Not only did these veterans become the backbone of the future armed forces of Kosovo, but they also lobbied effectively for veteran recognition (symbolic and material), wrote history, especially that of the war, and organised memorials and rituals so as to impose a particular nation-building narrative. Veterans indeed co-produced the emergence of Kosovo in a set of transactions with international authorities.

Written for specialists, the text is dense. In the course of the study, Duclos spends quite some time on seemingly technical issues, such as the political and legislative battles over the definition of a veteran itself. She retraces the evolution of the concept in the 15 years that followed the war, showing how it became progressively centred around martyrdom and thus came to exclude civilian participants in the uprising against Serb domination. She discusses at length the subtle use of threats of extremist destabilisation by Kosovo military leaders to convince international administrators of the necessity to keep armed men enrolled, in order to control them. Indeed, these leaders could play on Western fears to gain co-optation, freedom of organisation and, in the end, the recognition of secession. Conversely, Duclos also showed the progressive institutionalisation and discipline that came from this participation to the exercise of power. Nationalist Kosovo forces and leaders assumed their responsibility in maintaining law and order: extremists amongst them were slowly pushed aside whilst the status of veterans narrowed to the fighters. In parallel a war narrative emphasising the heroic engagement of UCK fighters became consolidated. Duclos manages to enlarge our understanding of DDR processes. Particularly interesting is the construction of the war memory controlled by the veterans, an illustration and echo of the notion of ‘chosen trauma’ (Lederach, 2005). Fascinating as well is the notion of conflictual collaboration that she unveils from inside the hybrid peace fabric and which reminds us of the creative potential of political frictions. In addition, her emphasis on the fact that armed actors can be peace actors is convincing. It takes us beyond black and white dichotomies. It also leads us to challenge the standard evaluation methods of DDR and reconstruction processes. Her work should contribute to reviewing accounting approaches to success and failure in DDR, in particular assessment criteria often focused on ‘numbers’ of men disarmed, demobilised and more or less back to civilian life.

Here, however, comes the question of Duclos’ position in the literature on post-war reconstruction. Though she is right to point out the importance of sociological and political processes in state-building, her differences with the current literature on the topic seems overstated. If the general DDR framework remains largely economic and problem-solving, it does not exclude other perspectives. Her own rich bibliography shows the extent to which historical, sociological and political factors in DDR have been discussed academically. It is also debated from Peace
Research, sociological and/or gender perspectives (Watteville, 2002, Ramsbotham, Woodhouse, Miall, 2011; Flisi 2016). Even quantitative peace studies specialists such as Peter Wallensteen are aware of the ‘internal security dilemma’ linked to decommissioning and of the security guaranties often given to leaders in peace negotiations (Wallensteen, 2011). Beyond the literature on DDR frameworks, many case studies of violent armed groups and dynamics have addressed this complex interplay of factors that leads groups to taking up arms, or to laying them down and engaging in conflict transformation (amongst others Perouse de Montclos 2003; Rolston 2007; Kaplan and Nussio 2012).

In fact, Duclos’ work fits well in the literature on DDR. She offers a rich perspective by focusing in on intertwined processes, highlighting ‘how’ Kosovan nationhood was woven over the decade. Yet, ten years ago, Collier himself had already insisted that post-war processes required decades (rather than years) of international attention: at least a point on which they could agree. Another notable contribution of her work should be progressiveness. On the one hand, Duclos insists that a sequenced approach to peace processes is out of date. On the other hand, her very demonstration shows that most veterans moved to normalised lives in steps, from one category to the next, as their status and advantages evolved and the definition of a veteran stabilised. Her case study enriches the literature rather than offsets it.

In reality, it would be risky to draw general conclusions from one particular setting. If case studies are brilliant standpoints from which to discuss (and challenge!) theories, models or political practices, they have their limits. In this context, it is important to bear in mind that Kosovo was a very particular situation, differing from most UN-led DDR operations (notably African ones). It is unique because of the Bosnian background and the extensive involvement of NATO, because of the small size of the territory and, according to Duclos herself, because the perspective of independence mobilised people and armed men in a particular way. It also means that international pressure for demobilisation was fundamentally weaker than in most DDR situations, where there are existing armed forces and only a small part of rebels can possibly integrate within these (Columbia, Côte d’Ivoire, Mali). In Kosovo a state was being built and this changed the equation. Cautiousness in extending conclusions more broadly is therefore required. Even drawing conclusions can be delicate here. Listening to combatants has been a key part of the research. Yet the large majority of Duclos’ interviews (in the book) took place after the 2008 declaration of independence. Such an event is likely to have affected the narratives of her discussion partners, mostly international and local decision-makers. Interpreting these reconstructed memories is difficult. As an experienced researcher, Duclos mitigated this potential hindsight bias by embedding the testimonies within a mass use of archive documents. Nevertheless, her story has its silences. For instance, she mentions that the rise of the gendered warrior narrative marginalised the historical roles of civilians and non-violent movements in Kosovo. Yet she does not really explore the consequences of this, especially for women, the voices of whom are totally absent from the book.

Still, dense and well-researched, ‘Courtiers de la paix’ is an interesting study that gives depth to the state/nation building literature and insights for the on-going reflection on DDR processes. Duclos’ analysis does not invalidate our current assumptions on armed groups in state and nation building but completes, enlarges and deepens them.
References


