*Communication, Culture and Critique*, 2025, **00**, 1–3
https://doi.org/10.1093/ccc/tcaf028
**Forum**

# Undoing dominant narratives: three critical perspectives for rethinking the war in the DRC

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## Abstract

The Rwanda-backed M23 Movement has escalated the war in eastern DRC. This article moves away from dominant—at times, problematic—interpretations of the conflict common in certain strands of Peace and Conflict Studies. Drawing on debates from the second wave of African political science, it formulates three critiques of prevailing explanations: a critique of deep-rooted causalities, a critique of African exceptionalism, and a critique of postcolonial sovereigntist framings. It calls for reconceptualizing the war through the lens of local agency, global imperial ambitions, and violence legitimized by lethal sovereigntist narratives.

**Keywords:** Eastern DRC, the M23 movement, Rwanda, war, agency

## Introduction

Since the beginning of their renewed offensive in 2021, Rwanda-backed M23 rebels have continued their advance through eastern Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC). The fall of Bukavu in March 2025 marked a dramatic turning point in the more than three decades of conflict (Batumike & Bisoka, 2024). It reactivated memories of the First Congo War in 1996 (Lemarchand, 2009) when the city was also occupied by Rwanda-supported rebels—some of whom now form the core of the current M23 movement (Stearns, 2021; 2012). This historical continuity complicates interpretations of the conflict.

While diverse explanatory narratives can enrich public debate, they also generate confusion exacerbated by information asymmetries, the rapid circulation of narratives, and the spread of misinformation (Bisoka, 2025). Rather than adding yet another reading, I offer a critical framework for rendering intelligible the political logics that reproduce violence in the DRC today. This article takes inspiration from the second wave of African political science (1980s–1990s), which rethought the relations between structure, power, and agency (Gazibo & Thiriot, 2009). The article mobilizes three analytical perspectives for rethinking the current conflict.

First, it challenges explanations grounded solely in so-called "root causes." While historical legacies certainly matter, they cannot predict how the war will unfold. It is more important to recenter analyses of actor agency (Bayart et al., 2006; Chabal & Daloz 1999): political decisions, individual and collective strategies, and the instrumentalization of structural constraints. Second, the article rejects African exceptionalism and culturalist or fatalistic readings (Mbembe, 2001; Mkandawire, 2001). The conflict exists within global dynamics and can be meaningfully compared to other contexts shaped by imperial or securitarian logics (e.g., Ukraine, Palestine, or beyond). Third, the article adopts a decolonial perspective that questions the analytical centrality of the state (Sarr, 2020). This approach invites us to consider the effects of war on transborder dynamics, local organization, popular resistance, and imaginaries of justice—dimensions often rendered invisible by the postcolonial obsession with the nation state. This threefold framework situates the war in the DRC as a (not inevitable) product of political choices, power struggles, and contemporary strategic narratives.

This reflection is grounded in over twelve years of research on political life in the DRC, including the *Chroniques politiques de la RDC*, which I have written for more than a decade. It is also informed by my positionality: a native of Bukavu, an ethnographer of the region, and a scholar trained in law and political science. Against the media spectacle surrounding the conflict, I advocate for a politically grounded, responsible, and justice-oriented analysis—one that centers the experiences and aspirations of local populations, the primary victims of the ongoing war.

## Beyond root cause explanations

Debates on the conflict in eastern DRC are dominated by "root cause" explanations. This analytical framework, common in studies of African conflicts (Collier, 2007; Stearns, 2011), establishes links between current wars and historical and structural factors (e.g., colonial legacies, the ethnicization of politics, the marginalization of Rwandophones, and the aftermath of the Tutsi genocide). While they do contextualize contemporary tensions, any solely "root cause" account has significant theoretical, ethical, and political limitations.

The root cause approach rests on a teleological conception of history (Popper, 2013) that assumes present events are the inevitable continuation of a frozen past. This neglects agency—a central concern of the second wave of African political science (Gazibo & Thiriot, 2009; De Waal 2009)—and renders political leaders into prisoners of history. Historical determinism also dilutes contemporary responsibility and diverts attention from the immediate suffering of civilians by

**Received:** 2 June 2025. **Revised:** 2 June 2025. **Accepted:** 8 June 2025

naturalizing war as a structural inevitability. Those currently responsible for violence are implicitly exonerated, while victims are transformed into objects of knowledge instead of political subjects. Finally, root cause frameworks often fail to ask why *this* war exists, here and now, and with such intensity. The focus on the past obscures present-day mechanisms of power, economic interests, and regional alliances and cannot conceptualize choices, contestations, and potential ruptures.

Rwanda's involvement in the DRC illustrates these limits. Its military presence in Congolese territory relies on an exaggerated narrative about the threat of the Democratic Forces for the Liberation of Rwanda (FDLR) (Stearns, 2012). For more than three decades, this discourse has legitimized Rwanda's enduring influence over mineral-rich Congolese territories (Vogel, 2022). The "FDLRization" of Rwanda's opponents also advances the criminalization of dissent. The Kigali regime has turned war into a political resource, placing it at the center of authoritarian survival. The memory of the genocide justifies military interventions in the name of national security, while really pursuing strategies of regional expansion and power consolidation (Desrosiers, 2023).

The sovereign state of Rwanda should indeed safeguard its security. However, political manipulation lies in the blurred distinction between public and private interests (Mitchell, 1999), as rulers deliberately conflate personal ambitions with the general interest. This produces a so-called "state effect" that legitimizes violence in the name of sovereignty (Migdal, 2001). Political actors pose as guardians of a higher interest to justify acts that would otherwise be indefensible.

## Against African exceptionalism

Following African political scientists of the 1990s, we must reject reductive views that portray Africa as inherently prone to violence and irrationality (Van de Walle, 2009). Rather, we should advocate for comparative perspectives that situate African conflicts within broader global dynamics akin to those observed elsewhere (Gazibo & Thiriot, 2009). The war in the DRC shares important features with other contemporary conflicts: the instrumentalization of so-called "root causes," the mobilization of identity-based and historical claims, and their deployment in service of immediate political goals (e.g., regime survival or regional dominance).

According to the Kigali regime, eastern Congo historically belonged to Rwanda, so any intervention has the pretext of national security and the protection of Tutsis (Mathys, 2025). Yet, this rhetoric hides more basic expansionist objectives like resource control, geopolitical influence, and the consolidation of authoritarian power. This imperial logic is sustained by Rwanda's strategic discourse, the complicity of Congolese actors, and the Congolese state's inability to protect its population. Western partners' support for Kigali, despite its repeated military incursions into DRC, also enables this strategy. Rwanda cultivates a narrative of permanent war, reframes territorial claims as non-negotiable imperatives, and maintains its presence in eastern Congo to ensure the regime's longevity. This playbook mirrors other regimes (e.g., in Russia or Israel) that merge regime interests with state interests, blurring the lines between governance and personal power. Violence becomes a tool of political survival, and democracy is stifled. Peace becomes a threat to the regime's legitimacy and endurance.

As always, the greatest burden falls on the (poorest) people. War not only claims lives but also dismantles the infrastructures of resilience: local institutions, economic initiatives, and peacebuilding efforts. In the DRC, dynamic cities like Bukavu and Goma have had their development stifled. Cross-border ties between Rwandan and Congolese communities are eroded by growing mistrust and hardened borders. African institutions have proven largely incapable of responding effectively. Other African regimes cooperate with Western interests—through mining deals or arms sales—making any critique of neocolonialism increasingly hollow (Vlassenroot et al., 2021). Therefore, we must move beyond culturalist and fatalistic readings to reframe this war within its contemporary political logic. Like other conflicts around the world, the war in the DRC is the result of deliberate decisions, concrete strategies, and calculable interests.

## From lethal Sovereigntism to a decolonial reading

The war is also shaped by a state-centric logic that continues to sacralize the notion of sovereignty inherited from colonialism. In both Kigali and Kinshasa, regimes invoke national sovereignty to justify authoritarian and militarized practices while disregarding the vital cross-border flows that sustain local populations. Sovereignty becomes necropolitical (Mbembe, 2019)—a mode of governance that decides who may live and who must die, under what conditions, and in service of which legitimations (Bisoka, 2025). The state becomes both executioner and savior, masking its violence behind narratives of national legitimacy.

The war in the DRC employs symbols designed to rally the masses—*Agaciro* (dignity, in Kinyarwanda) in Rwanda, and *Bendele* (flag, in Lingala) in the DRC—and sanctify death. These symbols reinforce regime longevity by staging, ritualizing, and internalizing violence against the external "other." This creates an illusion that the ruling regime is indispensable to national survival. According to elite narratives, defending the nation is indistinguishable from defending the regime (Mbembe, 2001). The Rwandan regime's discourse about the FDLR or a purported "genocide in the making" conceals its regional expansionist project, ironically legitimized by appeals to sovereignty. This contradiction reveals the paradoxical nature of postcolonial sovereignty: while rooted in the borders of the Berlin Conference, it projects outward in the name of state survival.

A truly decolonial perspective breaks with the obsession over the nation-state to recenter the lives of ordinary people, local forms of organization, cross-border dynamics, and shared historical memories. It advocates for a repoliticization of pan-Africanism—freed from its authoritarian appropriations and refocused on collective dignity and justice. This perspective demands a double critique: not only of Western neocolonialism, but also of African elites who reproduce colonial logics. Pan-Africanism cannot simply denounce external domination; it must be grounded in a critical examination of domestic practices of power. Ultimately, this war forces us to rethink sovereignty—not as the right to kill, but as the responsibility to protect, listen, and repair. Such an alternative—a genuine *Agaciro* (Mwambari, 2021)—is rooted in concrete solidarities, grassroots resistance, and transborder alliances. It is within these spaces that a post-sovereigntist

and decolonial politics for the peoples of the Great Lakes region might emerge.

## Conclusion

Two clarifications are necessary. First, critiquing root cause approaches does not erase history (whether the genocide against the Tutsi or the enduring hate discourse targeting Tutsi populations). Rather, it rejects the instrumentalization of this history to legitimize contemporary violence and refocuses the analysis on political choices, actor strategies, and consequences for local populations.

Second, the regime in Kinshasa also instrumentalized the war, particularly during the 2023 electoral campaign. The slogan *mokengeli ya peuple congolais* ("protector of the Congolese people"), echoed widely in media and political discourse, constructed a heroic image of the head of state. It reinforced personalized power and fueled a barely veiled ambition for constitutional reform. For the regime, war functions as both a tool of legitimation and as a pretext to consolidate a fragile political order through performative militarization (Batumike & Bisoka, 2024). The war also enables profit networks (see Verweijen, 2018), with numerous reports of informal enrichment linked to military logistics, humanitarian aid, and the exploitation of resources.

Many analyses of the war in the DRC remain trapped in a detached intellectual posture, disconnected from the immediacy of human suffering. This stance—inherited from colonial modes of observation—treats pain as an object of theorization. However, in an aggressive war, a clear position is necessary: analysis must align with the communities affected and denounce the violence justified in the name of power, control, or profit. Restoring the political temporality of the war in the DRC demands an analytical lens centered on actors' agency (discourses, decisions, alliances, and shifting powers). The current violence is neither inevitable nor natural; it is constructed and deliberate. To continue justifying Rwanda's intervention solely through the lens of historical trauma or governance failures in the DRC is, ultimately, to tolerate massacres, forced displacement, and pervasive violence—realities that Congolese populations have endured for more than three decades.

*Conflicts of interest:* None declared.

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https://doi.org/10.1093/ccc/tcaf028
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