

Book Review: Useful Enemies: When Waging Wars is More Important Than Winning Them

by blog admin

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*There are currently between twenty and thirty civil wars occurring worldwide, while at a global level the Cold War has been succeeded by the War on Terror, which continues to rage a decade after 9/11. When we know how destructive war is in both human and economic terms, why do wars continue for so long? Why do the efforts of aid organizations and international diplomats so often fail? **David Keen** investigates why conflicts are so prevalent and so intractable, even when one side has much greater military resources. Reviewed by **Meike de Goede**.*



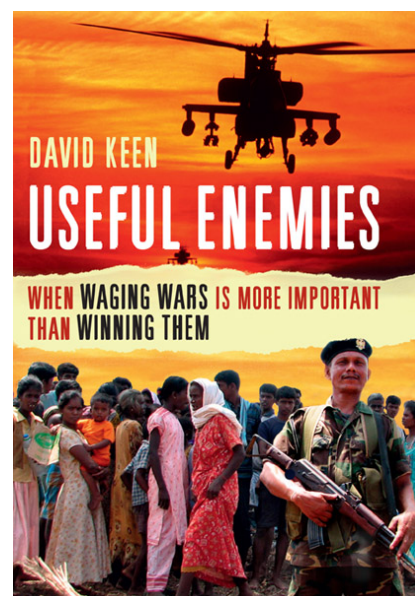
Useful Enemies: When Waging Wars is More Important Than Winning Them. David Keen. Yale University Press. May 2012.

In 2009, the government of the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) and Tutsi rebels in the east of the country signed a peace deal, under which the rebel movement changed into a political party. It was hoped that the deal would generate much needed peace and stability, but by April 2012, the rebel movement mutinied from the Congolese national army and launched a new movement, plunging the troubled eastern DRC into a whole new cycle of violent conflict.

For those who have not been following events in the DRC, recent events such as this bear a striking resemblance to many other violent events which have taken place there since the early 2000s. Many are left wondering whether these cycles of violent conflict can ever be put to an end. In this context of civilian and NGO desperation in the Congo, [David Keen](#)'s latest book *Useful Enemies: When Waging Wars is More Important than Winning Them* engages with the often heard sentiments that, apart from the local population, nobody actually wants peace. Keen's book intellectually engages with these sentiments and aims to stimulate alternative ways of thinking about complexities such as those faced by the DRC.

The book builds on Keen's earlier work about the hidden functions of war. In his latest book, Keen focuses not only on the economic functions of war but also on the psychological functions of violence and strategies of political manipulation. The book contributes to a growing and broadening literature on violent conflict that aims to rationalise what are often considered as irrational, brutal and 'exotic' wars unique for the development world.

Keen's argument that wars serve other interests than merely defeating the enemy is in itself not new. What is particularly interesting is that Keen expands this perspective on conflict by including not just rebels but also counter insurgencies (governments) as well as foreign (Western) interventions, in both historic and contemporary cases. He uses a wide variety of case material including Sierra Leone, the DRC, Sudan, the Balkans War, the Vietnam War, the interventions in Iraq and Afghanistan, as well as WWII. In doing so, he takes away the exoticism of the argument: brutality and conflict driven by economic and political opportunism is not the exclusive domain of post-Cold War rebellions in the developing world. The book



thus challenges naive ways of thinking about conflicts in terms of victims and perpetrators, good guys and bad guys, them and us. The reality of conflict is often more complex.

This perspective is highly relevant for understanding conflicts such as the one in the DRC. Ordinary Congolese people as well as other critical voices question the willingness of the Congolese government, rebel movements, neighbouring countries, Western powers and even the UN peacekeeping mission to end the conflict and round up the rebel movements. Keen's book does not qualify or disqualify these suspicions about interests in maintaining the continuous state of conflict in the Congo. However, it does confront policy makers and members of the donor community with important questions about themselves and the actors they cooperate with in this context. It is therefore also a critique which is hard to deal with, as it has profound consequences for their engagements in these conflict environments. How can it be justified to invest in a state and its government through state-building programmes when its representatives are guilty of the manipulation of violence and shame, while they deliberately maintain conflict as a means to consolidate their power? These important dilemmas raise the principle of 'do no harm' to a whole new level.

But this is where some readers may encounter an important gap in *Useful Enemies*. A problem with much of the literature on the rationality of conflict and use of violence is that it focuses largely on elites, while ordinary people are reduced to passive victims of elite driven violence.

Keen makes an effort to bring ordinary people into the equation in the chapter on the psychological functions of violence. While an interesting contribution, some readers may find that it does not go far enough, as the agencies of ordinary people are represented only as coping strategies or responses to violence. Although it cannot be denied that ordinary people are often victims of the brutality of conflict, it is important to move beyond their victimisation. Many are not isolated from the conflict and cannot be considered in isolation from its political economy. Reconsidering the role of ordinary people is necessary for a more complete comprehension of conflict.

Even more so because the victimisation of ordinary people enables policy-makers to use the argument that projects are in the interest of the people, or that they invest in people. Implementing these projects often requires a form of cooperation with the government and other actors which may play a dubious role in the conflict environment, as Keen so aptly describes. Often, a less critical engagement with counterinsurgencies is chosen to enable the implementation of projects aimed to help the victimised people. A problematic blind spot is created, which becomes a dangerous pitfall.

Readers working in development may welcome a more careful consideration of how local people take part in the economic, political and psychological interests of conflict beyond their victimisation, which could provide better applied strategies that do less harm. There is currently developing a growing scholarship on the local and everyday agencies of ordinary people in the context of war and peace building, and a dialogue between Keen's work and this research could certainly result in interesting outcomes.

Keen's book challenges us to reconsider our way of understanding conflict and its purposes. Written in an easily approachable style, it is full of anecdotes and uses a minimum of academic jargon, making it a valuable and accessible read for a wider audience. Although it does not contain explicit policy guidelines, it has the potential to stimulate debate in policy-making circles and the donor community.

Meike de Goede completed her PhD in International Relations at the [University of St Andrews](#). Her research focuses on the interaction between local agencies and liberal peace building in Africa. She previously studied History at Leiden University, and Peace and Conflict Studies and Human Rights at Utrecht University. She currently lives in Kinshasa, Democratic Republic of Congo, where she works in democratisation and development. [Read more reviews by Meike.](#)

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