

Book Review: Sierra Leone: A Political History by David Harris

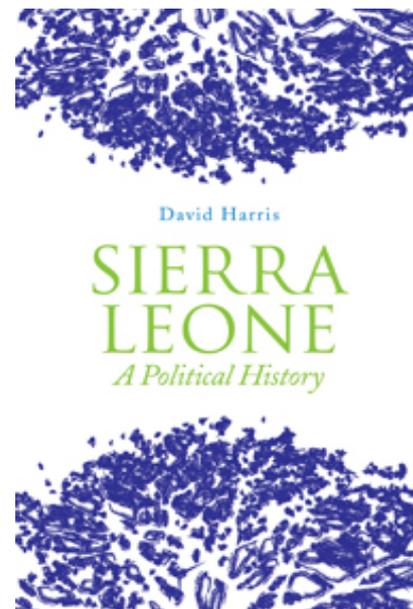
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Sierra Leone came to world attention in the 1990s when a catastrophic civil war linked to the diamond trade was reported globally. This fleeting interest, however, obscured much of the longer history of the region, and made Sierra Leone a laboratory for post-Cold War interventions. **Sierra Leone: A Political History** by **David Harris** examines 225 years of the country's history and fifty years of independence, placing state-society relations at the centre of this investigation of those who have tried to rule or change Sierra Leone. **Lenneke Sprik** finds that this read is useful for scholars and students with a specific interest in Sierra Leone, conflict analysis and African history.



Sierra Leone: A Political History. David Harris. Hurst. November 2013.

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In the light of recent events in Mali and the Central African Republic, [David Harris'](#) account of the Sierra Leonean political history provides an excellent understanding of African societies, including their chieftaincy system, complex colonial heritage and the rise of ethno-regionalism affecting the political balance in many African countries. Harris' clear writing style and thorough, in-depth analyses make this not just an enjoyable read for students and practitioners interested in Sierra Leone, but also for those who strive for a better understanding of African politics and conflict analysis in general.

As Harris points out in the introduction, his narrative aims to reflect the evolution of the complicated state-society relationship in Sierra Leone. Harris pursues this aim by looking at the traditional values and the urban-rural divide in Sierra Leonean society across ten chapters. From addressing these aspects as internal causes of the problems that the country has experienced over the years, Harris moves on to the actors and efforts which have attempted to reshape the political climate, but failed to do so. One can think of democratization efforts that have been made from the 1950s onwards but were not successful until the 1990s, but also the promises of change brought by external actors like Siaka Stevens and former Liberian president Charles Taylor.

To give readers a taste of the history covered, in the first chapter Harris describes the ethnic developments during the 1950s that resulted in a dominant position for [the Krios](#), and discusses the important role for the patron-client system and the divide of the country between the Colony and Protectorate. The decolonization and the integration of these two regions are addressed in the third chapter. Along with the continuing rise of geographically-based tensions, the rising ethnic tensions ultimately posed a serious threat to political stability. The heritage of the colonial era was a weak state and a divided nation. The election of Siaka Stevens as Prime-Minister and his influence on the already fragile situation are discussed in chapters three and four. Chapters six and seven give a detailed reconstruction of how the civil war in the 1991-1996 period developed, and eventually came to an end.

Harris divides the conflict into three periods: 1991-1996 is described as the initial phase; the second phase in which internationalization of the conflict took place started in 1992 and ended in 1999. The Lomé accord (1999) ended the hostilities and marks the start of the third period. In the chapter eight, Harris describes Sierra Leone's role as a 'guinea pig' for liberal post-conflict state-building. Little or no structural change had been made until 2007. The last chapter subsequently

questions liberal peace building and discusses the internal political shifts in Sierra Leone. His concluding thoughts embrace the implication that the war, despite everything, may have started revolution: a more modern nation-state came into existence, and the traditional structures were left behind.

Harris places the developments in Sierra Leone in a broader perspective by looking at other African countries and their developments, as well as placing it in a (post-)Cold War context. Striking is Harris' statement that the conflict would probably not have materialised if it was not for the conflict in Liberia that became an example of sorts for Sierra Leone. At the same time, the end of the Cold War introduced a decrease in international aid that was based on old economic circumstances, but also took in to account a new political reality. This combination of factors contributed to the rising tensions. Elsewhere in the book however, Harris also refers to the internal forces contributing to the conflict. Contradicting statements can be found regarding the importance placed on either internal or external factors in this regard. This can be justified by the highly complex nature of the conflict, as Harris so often refers to. In general, he states that the conflict was developed from within, but resolution was enforced by outside factors. Although he presents diamonds as one of the root causes for the internal tensions, the urge felt by the younger generations to rebel against the existing political and cultural structure together with the economic regional differences have had a great impact on the development of the armed conflict that took place in the 1990s.

In



Children younger than 14 are often seen working in the gold and diamond pits of Sierra Leone, working long hours in hard conditions. Credit: [UNEP Disasters and Conflicts](#)

terms of conflict resolution, Harris names Great Britain as one of the important outside actors that played a remarkable role. Harris accurately assesses the level of British post-conflict involvement in Sierra Leone and compares it with the inter-colonial relations between other western countries and their former colonies. Therefore this book not only provides insights into Sierra Leonean history, but also in post-colonial relationships, the correlation between Western support and conflict resolution, and post-conflict nation building.

Remarkable is Harris' criticism of international courts. Not only does he argue that the International Criminal Court's practice so far can be described as 'selective justice', Harris also points out that the focus on justice may imply that individuals should be seen as the main cause of war, which he deems inappropriate. Although the establishment of the [Special Court for Sierra Leone](#) is supposed to bring regime consolidation in Sierra Leone, Harris argues that its beneficence for conflict resolution has not been proven yet, based on the practice of other courts. Harris rightly states that too much focus on justice instead of politics may not benefit the welfare of the nation's people.

The varied use of different theories of analysis and the use of a wide range of perspectives puts this book among one of the best books in the field. Harris uses international relations theories to explain the different dimensions of the Sierra Leonean history, but also applies conflict analysis theories to assess how root causes and triggers eventually led to the brutal conflict

that still dominates our perception of Sierra Leone. Overall, this is an enjoyable read that contains a plethora of analyses useful for scholars, practitioners and students with a specific interest in Sierra Leone, conflict analysis and African history.

Lenneke Sprik is a PhD candidate in Public International Law at the University of Glasgow. She holds master degrees in both International Relations and Military law and has been focusing on ethnic conflict, conflict analysis, military interventions and military law for several years now. Lenneke tweets [@LSLena24](#), and you can find more about her research [here](#). [Read more reviews by Lenneke](#).