



Combatants: A Memoir of the Bush War and the Press in Uganda - Review

By Helen Epstein



Who is Uganda's enigmatic leader Yoweri Museveni? Since seizing power 33 years ago, his army has profoundly reshaped the politics of central and eastern Africa, and yet few outside of this region have even heard of him.

To some, Museveni is a visionary strategist who helped topple three brutal dictators, revived Uganda's economy, fought the AIDS epidemic and played a steady-handed diplomatic role in a volatile region. But for others, Museveni is himself a brutal dictator, who deliberately provokes conflicts within Uganda and in neighboring countries, brutalizes Uganda's political opposition and feasts on money stolen from Ugandan taxpayers and [foreign aid programs](#), all the while beguiling naïve Western journalists and diplomats with his signature charm.

I've been reporting on Uganda for almost 25 years, and I still find Museveni fascinating. As a rebel leader during the early 1980s, his shape-shifting exploits were legendary. Again and again, his small band of rebels would menace and outwit Uganda's much larger national army and then melt away into the bush. Ugandans joke that Museveni could turn into a cat and walk through roadblocks.

William Pike, who served as editor of Uganda's government-owned New Vision newspaper from 1986-2006 has almost certainly had more contact with Museveni than any other non-Ugandan

writer. Pike's gripping new book [Combatants: A Memoir of the Bush War and the Press in Uganda](#) provides an insider's view of the Ugandan leader and his movement.

By all accounts, Pike is a highly effective editor and manager. Former employees have described him to me as a gentle boss who ran a productive, disciplined newsroom. He wasn't afraid to go after cases of corruption involving senior cabinet ministers and even sporadic cases of torture and extra-judicial killings carried out by Museveni's security forces. Under his leadership, the New Vision soon became Uganda's most popular publication. I'm personally acquainted with Pike and have always found him kind, intelligent and extremely likeable. His book is also very well-written.

Unfortunately however, [Combatants](#) presents an overly flattering image of Museveni's regime that belies reality, overlooks recent scholarship that challenges Pike's version of events and sometimes contradicts the findings of Pike's own New Vision reporters.

Pike first met Museveni in 1984, when the young reporter snuck behind enemy lines during the so-called "bush war" against Uganda's then-president Milton Obote. By then, Museveni's rebels known as the National Resistance Army, or NRA- controlled a significant part of the Luwero Triangle, an 8000 square mile area northwest of Kampala that had been the site of intense fighting. Until then, the bush war was viewed internationally as a minor skirmish, but Pike's articles for the UK Observer and Guardian newspapers helped bring Museveni's struggle to the attention of western policymakers.

The Luwero Triangle is the rural homeland of the Baganda people—Uganda's largest ethnic group. Soon after launching his rebellion, Museveni, a Munyankole from western Uganda, promised Baganda leaders that if he managed to take power, he'd restore their traditional kingdom, which Obote had violently crushed in 1966. In return, the Baganda allowed Museveni to base his forces in their villages. When Museveni's men attacked army and police posts, Obote's undisciplined and brutal soldiers responded with disproportionate force, killing anyone, including innocent villagers whom they suspected of supporting the rebels. During his visit, Pike was shown areas littered with human skulls. Quoting Museveni, he estimated that Obote's forces had [killed](#) some 300,000 people—roughly half the population of the Luwero Triangle at the time.

The UK government, which supported Obote, was claiming that some 12,000 people had been killed on all sides of the fighting. If Pike was correct, Obote was responsible for genocide, and Britain's support was unconscionable. By then, the Reagan administration was already distancing itself from Obote. While Pike was in Luwero, then Assistant Secretary of State Eliot Abrams told a [congressional hearing](#) that Obote's regime had killed an estimated 100,000 to 200,000 people.

Normally such a huge figure would be referenced by a reputable source, ideally a forensic investigation, but like Pike, Abrams cited no independent source for those figures. When asked by Congressman Don Bonker where his source for the Luwero death toll came from, Abrams equivocated. "You wouldn't be able to document those numbers," he said. "There is no way of measuring directly, but there seems to be some kind of consensus that that is the order of magnitude." Around the same time, the Washington Post also published a brief article on Uganda. Citing unnamed refugee monitoring groups and "official US sources" the author, who had not visited Uganda, also wrote that Obote's forces had killed 100,000 to 200,000 people.

Since then, a more complex narrative about the Luwero skulls has emerged which Pike does not explore in [Combatants](#). Not only is there no evidence that the death toll was as high as Pike and Reagan Administration officials claimed, Obote's army, though undisciplined and brutal, may not

have been responsible for all the casualties that did occur. Most deaths probably resulted from disease and hunger as a result of mass displacement. In 1983, the government launched a counter offensive against the NRA, and in the process rounded up more than 100,000 villagers into squalid camps without adequate food, water and medicine. The NRA then ordered the evacuation of those who remained in the area. As thousands of peasants trudged north with the NRA, more reportedly died. When the NRA retook those areas, the bones of the casualties of these operations could have been among those shown to Pike.

Former NRA soldiers have told me personally that they witnessed and even participated in such “false flag” killings, as have former NRA Kadogos—child soldiers—speaking with other reporters.

The NRA was also probably not blameless. Shortly after Pike’s visit, a journalist for the London Daily Telegraph visited one of the villages where the army was alleged to have massacred hundreds of people a year earlier. He found “nothing to support [these] claims.” The army had withdrawn to allow the Telegraph reporter to freely interview the chief and villagers. “The surprise these people showed when asked about a massacre could not have been an act,” he wrote. However, they did mention that Museveni’s rebels had recently killed three men and four children. Some of the rebels came from the area and locals recognized them, even though they were partially disguised in army uniforms. “They were dressed halfway,” the chief said. “I mean they were in army and civilian clothes, all mixed up.”

Former NRA soldiers have told me personally that they witnessed and even participated in such “false flag” killings, as have former NRA Kadogos—child soldiers—speaking with other reporters. In his 2011 memoir *Betrayed By My Leader*, former NRA Major John Kazoora describes an NRA massacre of Obote-loyalists belonging to the Alur tribe. “They would dig a shallow grave,” he writes, “tie you [up] and lie you facing the ground and crack your skull using an old hoe called Kafuni.”

In some cases, the NRA may even have killed its own. At first, Museveni mainly recruited from his own Banyankole tribe and Buganda, but after Obote brutally forced Uganda-based Rwandan Tutsi refugees into camps where many starved and died, some of them joined the rebellion as well. They grew close to Museveni, whose Hima people are closely related to the Tutsis, and soon began to dominate the force. Toward the end of the war, Baganda NRA soldiers began dying mysteriously and some suspected foul play. “We were fighting tribalism,” one Muganda NRA veteran told *The Monitor* newspaper, “but it was growing in the bush.” In 1983, Museveni warned all Westerners, including aid workers and diplomats, to leave Uganda at once. “We don’t possess the power to prevent accidents,” he wrote in a signed letter issued by his representatives in Kenya. Three weeks later, a Canadian engineer was gunned down on his doorstep in Kampala; four other European aid workers were killed a few months later. While the killers were never definitively identified, the NRA had kidnapped and released four other Swiss hostages and a French doctor around the same time.

In July 1985, Obote was toppled by his own army. The NRA continued to battle for power as desultory peace talks dragged on in Nairobi. Eventually, the NRA took Kampala from the disorganized, weak Ugandan government forces, and Museveni was sworn in in January 1986.

Back in London, a series of glowing tributes to Museveni appeared in the *Observer* and *Guardian* newspapers, many of them written by Pike. “Polite Guerrillas End Fourteen Years of Torture and Killing,” read one headline; “The Pearl of Africa Shines Again,” read another. According to his

admirers, Museveni was Robin Hood, Che Guevara, and Field Marshal Montgomery all rolled into one.

As the war was winding down, Pike and Times of London journalist Richard Dowden toured NRA held areas, where villagers unanimously told them that all the atrocities were the fault of Obote's forces; none were committed by the NRA, they said. However, both journalists were being escorted by NRA officers. Under the circumstances, it's conceivable that villagers might have been afraid to report NRA atrocities, if they knew of any.

In recent years, opposition politicians including Kizza Besigye who served as Museveni's doctor during the bush war, have called for a forensic investigation of the Luwero killings. Museveni has refused. Such an investigation would be very difficult in any case, since the NRA ordered locals to rebury the bones or gather them in memorial sites after the war.

Whatever the reality, the Luwero skulls provided Museveni with political capital early on. Shortly after coming to power, he escorted diplomats around the Luwero Triangle, pointing out the scattered remains and mass graves that Pike had seen. This helped bolster international support for Museveni, who came to be seen as Uganda's best hope for a way out of the quagmire of its bloody history. Billions of foreign aid dollars would soon flow into his treasury.

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During the 1996 presidential campaigns, the New Vision reported that Museveni's main challenger, Paul Ssemogerere was planning to invite Milton Obote back from exile and appoint him to his cabinet. Ssemogerere vigorously denied this, but Pike insisted it was true. The article was published alongside a Museveni campaign ad with images of Luwero skulls heaped up in a pyramid and the following slogan:

"Don't forget the past. Over one million Ugandans, our brothers, sisters, family and friends, lost their lives. YOUR VOTE COULD BRING IT BACK."

According to historian Pauline Bernard, Pike claims credit for the article and the ad. But the inspiration for the skull propaganda may actually have come from highly controversial Museveni stalwart Roland Kakooza-Mutale, whose state-backed militia known as the Kalangala Action Plan attacks and terrorizes opposition supporters during political campaigns. After the fall of Amin in 1979, Kakooza-Mutale ran a pro-Museveni newspaper known as *Economy*. Shortly before the 1980 election, he published an anti-Obote editorial illustrated with drawings of skulls and the headline, "PEOPLE ADVISED TO VOTE AGAINST DEATH."

More recently, Uganda's tourism board has proposed creating a museum to commemorate those killed by previous regimes, including the Luwero dead.

[Combatants](#) also covers the early years of the war in northern Uganda that would give rise to the terrifying warlord Joseph Kony. But here, again, Pike paints an overly rosy picture of the NRA's role. After Museveni was sworn in, his troops continued to pursue soldiers of the former Ugandan army,

most of whom came from northern and eastern Uganda. In March 1986, former government soldiers in Acholiland—comprising the northern districts of Gulu and Kitgum—finally put down their guns. When the NRA arrived in Gulu they were “disciplined, friendly and respectful,” according to New Vision journalist Caroline Lamwaka. They requested the former army soldiers to surrender their weapons and some did so. Then in late April, the NRA began conducting raids on villages where they suspected guns were still being hidden. Property was looted, women were raped and unarmed people were shot and killed. Some Acholi ex-soldiers who surrendered were taken to Western Uganda and never seen again. As political scientist Adam Branch puts it, the NRA appeared to be launching “a counter-insurgency without an insurgency.” In August 1986, a few thousand former members of Obote’s army who had escaped over the border to Sudan invaded and attacked the NRA. In turn, NRA attacks against Acholi civilians escalated, and more rebel groups, including Kony’s Lord’s Resistance Army soon emerged. Uganda’s twenty-year northern war was soon underway.

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In [Combatants](#), Pike attributes the NRA atrocities to a few bad apples in the ranks or to poorly integrated former rebel groups, including one named FEDEMU, that weren’t mainstream NRA. But the New Vision’s Caroline Lamwaka disputes this. “I do not agree with the common argument advanced by some NRM officials, as well as some Acholi,” she writes in her posthumously published memoir,

“that it was the actions of FEDEMU soldiers that caused the rebellion....the NRA proper is equally to blame for the mess. If it were only FEDEMU, war would not have broken out in Teso and Lango, or in the whole of Acholi. The government’s argument that the war was due to former [government] soldiers fighting to recover “lost glory” or the “soft and easy life” or that they were “criminals” who feared to face the law, also misrepresents and oversimplifies the complex causes of the conflict.”

Throughout [Combatants](#), Pike emphasizes how Museveni’s government respected media freedom, and insists that he was never prevented from printing stories critical of the government. However, he does not mention that many journalists have received bribes and death threats from the regime, and some have been tortured, including his own employee Lamwaka, quoted above. In 1988, she was assaulted by a Ugandan army officer after reporting on cattle thefts by government forces. In her memoir, she writes that what she experienced was so humiliating she could not describe it in print.

Pike also downplays NRA abuses in eastern Uganda, where another rebel group emerged after the NRA, which was at first welcomed by locals, committed atrocities similar to those in Acholiland. He downplays Museveni’s involvement in arming the Rwandan Patriotic Front, which invaded Rwanda from Uganda in 1990, setting the stage for the 1994 genocide of the Tutsis. Pike also downplays Museveni’s responsibility for the Congo war which claimed over five million lives. According to Pike, Museveni ordered his troops not to engage in business on Congolese soil. He nevertheless fails to explain how Museveni’s own brother and son came to be linked to a company that traded in smuggled Congolese diamonds during this time.

During the 1990s, Pike and other western journalists helped create a new narrative about central Africa. By then, many of Africa’s independence movements were a mess—in part because of western

Cold War meddling, but also because of the limited capabilities of some African leaders. But Museveni, along with Paul Kagame of Rwanda and Meles Zenawi of Ethiopia, would be celebrated in the Western media as Africa's great new hope. All had come to power by the gun and distained democracy, but made well-spoken promises to keep their countries in order and concentrate on development.

Western leaders from Bill Clinton's Secretary of State Madeleine Albright to the President of the World Bank quickly bought into the idea that Africa needed "strong leadership" -a wiggly phrase which could mean anything from a firm stance on corruption to outright tyranny. Foreign aid and military hardware flowed into the coffers of the "new leaders". But even as the chorus of praise was rising around them, they were using Western largesse to escalate wars with their neighbors, giving rise to an orgy of violence that would claim millions of lives from Eritrea to Uganda to Congo and southern Sudan.

In the end, Pike blames democracy for Uganda's problems. After Uganda's first presidential election in 1996, he writes, "The politicians triumphed over the technocrats,"; "loyalty had become more important than principle"; "incompetent or corrupt ministers were retained in office to cater to their constituents...."

Pike never questions whether Museveni's harsh repression, not democracy, might have been the source of these problems; nor does he ask himself whether this repression might help explain why Uganda was so riddled with rebel groups in the first place. There is something tragic about Pike's *Combatants*, which could have been a much more powerful book. Where it falls short is in the matter of empathy, like the half-hearted white religious leaders who supported civil rights in the southern United States in principle, but chastised Martin Luther King for what they considered his "unwise and untimely" civil rights activism.

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"The Negro's great stumbling block in the stride toward freedom is not the White Citizens Councillor or the Ku Klux Klanner," wrote King in frustration, "but the white moderate who is more devoted to order than to justice...who paternalistically feels that he can set the timetable for another man's freedom....[Shallow understanding](#) from people of good will is more frustrating than absolute misunderstanding from people of ill will."

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