

Maggie Dwyer, *Soldiers in Revolt: Army Mutinies in Africa*. New York: Oxford University Press. 237 page. \$34.95. ISBN: 9780190876074.

Writing in the early 1980s, a pair of political scientists funded by the Defense Intelligence Agency (DIA) envisioned a day when the use of statistical data in the systematic study of military coups d'etat in Africa might be able to "forecast the location of future coups in a fashion not much different from weather forecasting with its probabilities of tomorrow's rainfall."¹ While ambitious hopes for a data-driven predictive model for military interventions failed to materialize, scholars continue to seek an explanation for the widespread incidence of coups, mutinies, and other related acts of collective insubordination that have continued to destabilize African nations over the past three decades. Maggie Dwyer's *Soldiers in Revolt: Army Mutinies in Africa* offers a fresh and insightful new perspective on this longstanding question. The great strength of *Soldiers in Revolt* is that it eschews the abstract statistical approach favored by an earlier generation of social scientists. In contrast to studies like the DIA project, which rely primarily on "data sets" drawn from journalistic reports, Dwyer's work is based on extensive and meticulous fieldwork in West and Central Africa. Where most conventional studies of military instability treat the African soldiery as an abstraction, Dwyer conducted two hundred interviews with foreign diplomats, African university students, civilians in the military orbit, and, most importantly, soldiers, some fifty of whom were admitted former mutineers. Fieldwork of this sort is arduous, time consuming, and often dangerous. Political and military elites are unfavorably disposed to foreign researchers who ask uncomfortable questions about the reliability of their armed forces, and Dwyer drew the attention of plainclothes security officers over the course of her research.

Dwyer's persistence paid off, and the result is a thoughtful and nuanced book that offers a fresh and convincing explanation for why soldiers in eight West African states have mutinied in the last twenty years. Its most insightful core chapters are in-depth case studies of mutinies in Sierra Leone, Gambia, and Burkina Faso. One of the most satisfying aspects of *Soldiers in Revolt* is that Dwyer treats rank-and-file African soldiers as reasonable and rational individuals. Her central thesis is that these young men resorted to the drastic and dangerous tactic of collective insubordination to demand reasonable pay and benefits and equitable treatment.

1 Thomas Johnson and Patrick McGowan, "Analysis of the Causes of Military Coups d'Etat in Sub-Saharan Africa, 1960–1982," Report for Defense Intelligence Agency, U.S. Department of Defense, April 1983, Section III, page 9.

Quite convincingly, Dwyer thus defines mutiny as a form of communication between ordinary soldiers and their military and political leaders. Describing collective insubordination as a form of high stakes poker, she argues that mutineers hoped to advance their cause by threatening violence without actually having to resort to armed force against the government. Where conventional social science studies of military instability tend to posit a direct link between mutinies and coups, Dwyer shows that the ordinary soldiers who mutinied in West Africa in the past twenty years almost never aspired to seize power for themselves. Dwyer also makes a convincing case that the democratization movement of the 1990s and the peacekeeping operations sponsored by the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) in the following decade made African soldiers more inclined to mutiny by raising their expectations for fair treatment while sending them on dangerous foreign deployments with insufficient compensation, equipment, and even uniforms. Another interesting finding is that Facebook, WhatsApp, and other forms of social media contributed to military instability by allowing West African peacekeepers to compare their conditions of service with soldiers in other African nations.

Soldiers in Revolt will doubtless become required reading for all those who study African militaries, but Dwyer is less convincing in the broader claims for her research. In seeking to engage the older data-driven social science literature on coups and military instability, Dwyer occasionally over-reaches. *Soldiers in Revolt* is an exceptional in-depth study of the mutinies that have taken place in West Africa over the last two decades, but it is not the first book to look at mutinies across time in all of Africa, nor is it the first study of ordinary African soldiers. Dwyer's own bibliography shows this to be the case.

Furthermore, there are places where her efforts to correct some of the over-generalizations of the social science literature get tangled with the findings of her own fieldwork. For example, in rebutting characterizations that mutinies are often the result of the stress of war, Dwyer declares that the recent mutinies in West Africa did not take place in a combat setting. But her excellent chapter on the mutiny and coup in Sierra Leone shows that the stress of fighting the Revolutionary United Front was a key factor in the decision of rank-and-file soldiers to support their junior officers' decision to seize power. Moreover, Dwyer also shows that the risks of combat during peacekeeping missions was a key factor in the decision of soldiers to resort to collective insubordination to press their demands for better compensation.

One of the great challenges in writing about these sorts of incidents is sorting out the nomenclature of military instability. When soldiers collectively refuse to follow lawfully given orders, is it mass insubordination, a strike, a coup, praetorianism, treason, or a mutiny? Dwyer makes a compelling case for decoupling

coups and mutinies, but it would be worthwhile for her to reconsider whether these incidents were strikes in the more conventional sense. To be sure, military and civilian leaders often dismissed collective action by soldiers as strikes because mutinies suggested an embarrassing failure of leadership that required drastic action. On the other hand, Dwyer demonstrates time and time again that mutinous soldiers used the language of labor activism to frame demands for better pay and benefits. Many of her informants spoke of military service as a form of “contract,” one that civil and military leadership had violated in failing to provide adequate compensation for a form of employment that entailed considerable hardship, loss of civil liberties, and personal risk. While soldiers are not workers in the conventional sense, it would have been interesting for Dwyer to explore whether the literature on trade unionism can provide insights into the mutinous behavior of the African rank-and-file.

It is very much to Dwyer’s credit, however, that *Soldiers in Revolt* raises these sorts of questions. This is a book that makes the case for fieldwork over data sets, one that will hopefully set a high bar for the further study of military instability in Africa. Coups and mutinies cannot be predicted like the weather, but, as Dwyer points out, a better understanding of what leads African soldiers to mutiny will help prevent such outbreaks in the future.

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