War and Genocide in South Sudan

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CIVIL WAR AND THE FIRST GENOCIDAL PHASE

December 2013

On the night of December 15, the SPLA split into two. Accused by Salva Kiir of a coup attempt, Riek Machar ran for his life and headed for Bor. Meanwhile, Juba woke up on December 16 to the country’s largest systematic mass killing. The Juba massacre had started, and there was no stopping the third civil war. SPLA divisions split the country, soldiers turned on one another, Nuer commanders defected to join Machar, and soon the SPLA lost at least half of its troops. Kiir also ordered the arrest of the eleven politicians from the Machar-Garang coalition who had participated in the December 6 press conference with Machar. These events revealed to the international community what this regime had become over the past eight years: a very violent ethnocracy.

Machar had positioned himself as an opposition leader, especially after independence, and he had repeatedly angered and offended Kiir. He may have belonged to the category of politicians in opposition who could benefit from genocidal violence. Yet he may have been taken aback by the actions of former SSDF commanders like Peter Gadet, who splintered from the SPLA to join Machar’s group on December 18, 2013. Besides, Machar only had a few options. Not standing up for the Nuer being massacred in Juba and other locations would cause him to lose face and would mean his political death. It was not so much that he had something to gain from a rebellion; it was more that he thought he had nothing to lose and that he had little choice. The problem was that there was no chance to “win” this war: Kiir outsourced war-making to Ugandan troops already positioned at the border and to other armies and mercenary groups. This gave the SPLA the military advantage from the very beginning.
In hindsight, this new rebellion was a political mistake for Machar. This was probably why Kiir manufactured the third civil war in the first place: military victory for Machar was impossible, and the new rebellion supported Kiir’s narrative of an attempt to overthrow his regime and ultimately realized his self-fulfilling prophecy. If anything, members of the rebellion inadvertently served Kiir’s goals much more than those of the Nuer. The fact that the Nuer themselves had violently retaliated after being massacred in Juba made the violence against them by the SPLA look “ethnic” but not genocidal. In other words, the civil war narrative did not leave any room for the genocide one. The question of genocide was dismissed in one paragraph by the African Union’s investigative team. This chapter shows that some of the violence was genocidal. In fact, a key feature of the genocide in South Sudan was that it occurred in several phases precisely because it was not binary: the Dinka hardliners targeted first the Nuer, then the Equatorians, and then the Shilluk, in addition to other minorities already victimized by the SPLA in the past eight years. The fact it was carried out in phases was the only way that the Dinka majority group, which was still a minority against all the others aggregated, could take over. Yet it was, as in most genocides, the result of a political and military escalation rather than an earlier elite master plan.

**FIGURE 7.1.** Remains of a house destroyed during the Juba massacre of December 2013. Photo taken by Adriane Ohanesian in the neighborhood of Munuki West on January 19, 2014.
Fostering Dinka Groupness

In-Group Policing and the “Attempted Coup” Narrative

The Juba massacre was the first phase of the genocide. It set the tone—deadly—and it was the first attack on the Nuer as a people in what became the third civil war. It started fully on the morning of December 16, as the fighting that broke out on December 15 carried over to the morning.

During the massacre, two key events fostered Dinka groupness and were as such instrumental in enabling and accelerating the killing: first, in-group policing, and second, the activation of the dormant “chosen trauma” of the 1991 Bor massacre. I first explore those before turning to the massacre itself, because they contributed to increase the massacre’s magnitude.

In-group policing by the state, dominated by Kiir’s faction, was key in silencing dissenting Dinka voices who could have acted to restrain the massacre. On December 16, Kiir appeared on television and announced that he had successfully quashed a coup attempt led by Machar and his accomplices. The “attempted coup” narrative was used to justify in-group policing. On the same day, the Ministry of the Interior, headed by a Kiir loyalist much like every other security institution, started arresting eleven members of the Garang faction (including Pagan Amum) under the suspicion of “coup plotting.” One of the “political detainees” remembered, “Around 10am that day, one of the other future detainees [name withheld for the protection of the former detainee] called me. He told me the Minister of Interior was in his house to ask to accompany him to the police headquarters. I was warned by my cousin in this state agency [name of institution withheld for the protection of the respondent and his family] that I needed to pack. I was considered a ‘Garang boy.’ There was a list and I was on it. Machar stayed in Juba for two days hiding until he discovered everyone was arrested.”

In fact, there was no coup attempt by the Machar-Garang coalition. Kiir’s faction had military superiority, and the Garang-Machar coalition was acutely aware of it. As a matter of fact, it had even rung the alarm bells about the presence of Dinka militias in Juba. Machar knew that if he were caught in a coup attempt, he could be killed, and he did run for his life. Twenty-seven of his relatives were killed. As for his so-called accomplices (the political detainees), only strong international pressure would get them freed.

The attempted coup narrative served to cover up a military process underway for years, which had escalated in recent months and meant to violently crush any opposition. Not only did Kiir’s attempted coup narrative not stand up to facts, it came after the Juba massacre had already started at dawn on December 16.
Activating the Dormant Chosen Trauma of the Bor Massacre

Kiir articulated his attempted coup narrative in a speech on the afternoon of December 16. The fact that Kiir delivered the speech around 1pm while killings had already started early in the morning and the SPLA Nuer splinters had already been pushed out of Juba suggest that his speech was meant to legitimize the violence, galvanize perpetrators, and enroll prospective ones to accelerate the killing. Effectively, this speech played a key role in legitimizing, expanding, and accelerating the Juba massacre. Kiir’s speech reignited shootings in the barracks on December 16, incited violence, and motivated supporters.

Kiir’s appearance on national TV in military attire was meant to convey a sense of existential threat. Kiir reactivated the “chosen trauma” of the Bor massacre, largely dormant throughout the interwar years, especially after Machar’s apology to the Bor Dinka community in August 2011 and his rapprochement with Garang’s followers. After accusing Machar and his accomplices of an attempted coup, Kiir declared, “Let me reiterate my statement during the opening of the NLC [National Liberation Council] meeting two days ago, in which I said that my government is not, and will not allow the incidents of 1991 to repeat themselves again. This prophet of doom continues to persistently pursue his actions of the past and I have to tell you that I will not allow or tolerate such incidences once again in our nation.” Kiir was surrounded by his allies, including Kuol Manyang, the minister of defense and one of Garang’s kinsmen, from Bor. Manyang was always known for his strong dislike of Machar, whom he never forgave for the 1991 Bor massacre. His presence served Kiir’s narrative.

Coining Machar as an enemy of the Dinka served to foster Dinka groupness and mask the fact that the Bor Dinka from Garang’s factions had in fact been the victims of in-group policing and ethnic ranking favoring Kiir’s constituency for the past eight years. The fact that Kiir, a western Dinka from Bahr El Ghazal (Warrap), positioned himself as the defender and leader of the Dinka “group” under Nuer attack was a clear indication that the center of gravity of Dinka identity had shifted west. This was the sign of an attempted takeover of Dinka identity.

With his references to 1991, Kiir successfully merged the threat to Dinka identity and the threat to national sovereignty. In Kiir’s account, Machar never changed: he was still the same treacherous man who had doomed the prospects of an SPLA victory over Khartoum and independence ten years before the CPA negotiations. The subtext was that without him, the SPLA would have secured independence for South Sudan earlier. First, this implied that the Nuer would never change, that they could never be trusted. The Dinka had to strike first. Second, references to 1991 and the use of the word “doom” implied that the nation
was under attack. Since Machar had received support from Khartoum after 1991, it was not just South Sudan’s stability but its very sovereign existence that was under threat of destruction.

Kiir’s speech accomplished several things by tapping into the collective memory of 1991-related trauma and the feelings of humiliation from past centuries of servitude. It made Dinka supporters more likely to support a violent reaction to what Kiir depicted as an assault on their life, freedom, and sovereignty. References to the 1991 Bor massacre and its reactivation worked so well on the ground that it reached Dinka groups that were not from Bor—such as in Malakal.12

On the ground, another rhetorical strand meant to slow down the Nuer response. The government attempted to control the narrative in order to manage the timing of the violence. Controlling the timing would be key throughout the war. Kiir and his allies in all the security organs denied that the conflict was ethnic. Even if they defended a very predatory ethnocracy, they still painted their adversaries as petty politicians motivated by greed. This was the message they sent to the international community, which was shocked and overwhelmed by the speed of South Sudan’s unravelling. It was also the message they sent on the ground. In Malakal and Bentiu, state and army officials framed the conflict as a political competition between the elite to contain opposition and above all gain time: this was not an ethnic conflict, they said.13 Of course, this political conflict was ethnic, and denials were meant to contain what was the largest systematic massacre in South Sudan’s recorded history. Thus the government’s framing of the violence served its perpetration.

The Juba Massacre

Chronology

Killings started on the evening of December 15, 2013 (before Kiir’s speech), when the Nuer and Dinka contingents of Tiger Battalion split following an attempt to disarm the Nuer.14 Fighting spread at night from the SPLA barracks in Giyada (the general headquarters) to the SPLA ammunition store in New Site (near the Bilpam barracks) when both sides tried to secure control over weapons.15

A Nuer government official living in the Jebel Kujur area at the time remembered, “Many Nuer live behind the Jebel market . . . I was close to the SPLA’s general HQ in Jebel, at the old Joint Integrated Units compound, where the Tiger Battalion was. On December 15 at 8pm, the fighting started. From 9 to 10pm, it intensified with big tanks. Fighting went on to 1am and then stopped. It then resumed at 4 or 5 am at Bilpam on December 16, then from 5 or 6 am until 11am at Jebel. Then again at 3pm, they started again. This was on December 16.”16
Fighting especially accelerated in the early morning of December 16 because the Dinka militia of Dut Ku Beny, recruited by Kiir and Malong and including members of Mathiang Anyoor, had come in as a reinforcement on the government’s side. Some say that the Dut Ku Beny, also nicknamed the “Luri boys,” numbered about one thousand. But other estimates circulated: “Three thousand Dinka militia recruits from Aweil were in Luri camp. Salva Kiir brought these people in December 2013 to Juba. They were killing people, looking for Nuer house to house,” a Nuer member of Parliament in Juba at the time explained. This is indeed when fighting spread to residential areas.

On December 16, killings started at dawn and civilians started fleeing to the UN base. A Nuer government official recalled, “The massacres started on December 16 in the morning, first in New Site on Bilpam road and then in Gudele, and then thirdly, in Mia Saba.” That same day, government security organs gave dormant Dinka recruits planted in the earlier months in Juba both guns and uniforms. These recruits joined in the fighting and massacre. After recapturing the headquarters by midmorning, government troops turned to the rest of the town. By 1pm, they had routed out the Nuer soldiers south of Juba. Left with Nuer civilians to target, the massacre most likely accelerated in the afternoon of the 16th: “Then it extended to Lologo area, behind the SPLA barracks in Jebel in the afternoon, and to Kor William,” recounted the same survivor. “Then the people ran to the UN house. In Gudele and New Site and Mia Saba, people ran to the UN Tongping site.”

For the next week, different groups of perpetrators took part in the massacre: Tiger was reinforced by Dut Ku Beny, the National Security Services (NSS), Mathiang Anyoor, the SPLA, the military police, wildlife services, and commandoes, as well as some armed civilians. They all killed, raped, and tortured Nuer civilians in the neighborhoods of Munuki 107, Khor William, New Site, Gudele One, Mangaten, Mia Saba, Customs, and Nyakuran. Four SPLA Dinka generals from the Bahr El Ghazal region coordinated the killings in their own respective operation sectors. Considering ethnic ranking favoring the Dinka Bahr El Ghazal constituency, the recruitment of parallel Dinka militias in that region in 2010–11, and their involvement in the massacre, the majority of the perpetrators and their commanders were most likely Dinka hailing predominantly from Bahr El Ghazal.

Equatorian inhabitants in Juba witnessed “seven days of killings, from house to house,” an Acholi man and his wife in one of these neighborhoods said. “After four days, we saw six soldiers through the fence. A Nuer man just opened his door and was shot in the head.” The killings also extended to the Konyo Konyo area, New Site, Bilpam, Gudele around Buwaba and Lou areas, Gudele police station, Jebel, the military headquarters of 116, and Lologo. “I was indoor for two days,” recalled a Nuer survivor. “I came out on December 18. The massacres lasted from
December 16 to December 22, with the deadliest days from the 16 to the 20. On December 21 and 22, people started coming out, and the SPLA was not doing it so openly.30

Killings were sometimes performative: some were done outside to show what happened to anyone contesting Kiir’s rule.31 They also meant to signify extreme ethnic ranking and hierarchy by dehumanizing the victim. For example, in the Gudele One area, perpetrators forced some of their victims to eat the flesh of people they had just pushed into a bonfire, and to drink the blood of a victim they had poured into a plate.32

But efficiency also mattered. For example, the Nuer government official who survived recalled how some of the killings were performative while others were done in haste or with the clear intent to destroy both people and their residence: “My neighbor was shot in front of his gate. People were not always drawn out of their houses . . . In Lologo, Kor William, New Site, Gudele, Mia Saba and Mangaten (between New Site and Mia Saba—people also fled to UN Tongping), people were drawn out of their houses. The killings were done with guns. But sometimes in Kor William and Lologo, the SPLA came with trucks and crushed people within their houses.”33

In some other instances, government troops also threw people in shipping containers or in prison. One of the deadliest episodes of the massacre occurred at around 8pm on December 16. Between two hundred and four hundred Nuer men were crowded into a 17.5 square meter (188.3 square feet) room of the Gudele police station, shot several times at close range through the windows, while others allegedly died from suffocation.34

Killings also achieved an ethnic purge of high- and mid-level Nuer politicians and members of the security apparatus. As for the higher-ups who managed to escape or were not in Juba, their immediate and extended families were not spared.35 “All the compounds of Peter Gadet and James Hoth Mai had people killed inside,” recalled a former Dinka battalion commander. “James Hoth’s brothers were killed. Families were killed. The ministers of Jonglei were killed as well.”36 Even though Dinka perpetrators especially focused on killing the men, they also killed women and children. They gang-raped women, killing some of them afterwards.37

Although most of the victims were Nuer, other ethnic groups associated with the Nuer were killed in the massacre too.38 For example, Equatorian women married to Nuer men were killed, along their children.39 There was violent in-group policing of the Dinka as well. Some who opposed the killing and torture of Nuer civilians and who were from different Dinka sections than the perpetrators from Northern Bahr El Ghazal and Warrap were persecuted on grounds of being too close ethnically to the Nuer.40
The perpetrators had a particularly broad understanding of Nuer ethnicity, extending to non-Nuer relatives and lookalikes. This illustrated their extremist, uncompromising, and ultimately genocidal views.41

Intent to Kill

The perpetrators made clear to their victims that they felt threatened by Machar’s presidential ambitions and would never allow the Nuer to preside over the country.42 This was quite telling of their extreme sense of Dinka group entitlement. Nuer victims were executed by shots to the head, abdomen, or back, which indicated that the intent was to kill. The goal was to kill as many Nuer as possible, across all Nuer sections, and to let no one escape. The security forces searched house to house for Nuer civilians. Policemen and soldiers blocked the roads and checked for Nuer.43

Since Dinka and Nuer look similar, fleeing civilians at roadblocks were asked to speak Dinka. If they did not, they were shot.44 Dinka soldiers also tricked Nuer civilians by greeting them in Nuer. Dinka civilians were occasionally mistaken for Nuer since some Dinka groups have the same facial scarification rituals as the Nuer (six lines on the forehead).45 A Nuer explained, “I have six marks on my forehead—I’m a Nuer, and the Nuer always have six marks . . . But the Dinka from Baliet and from Pigi county can have six marks. In Pariang and Abiemnohm, the Dinka can have six or seven marks, as in Abyei. The Dinka of Lakes have five or more marks. The Nuer always have six.”46

Death Toll

No one knows how many people died in the Juba massacre, but the African Union accorded credibility to the estimate of fifteen to twenty thousand Nuer deaths.47 The security forces, after carrying out the massacre, hid or destroyed the evidence. They thoroughly cleaned up the Gudele police station and buried the bodies in haste in mass graves. In the Giada barracks, the SPLA also removed the bodies to prevent the UN from seeing any evidence.48

It was clear that the killing targeted not just Nuer soldiers but the Nuer as a people.49 Most people were killed in Juba between December 15 and 18, 2013.50 Nearly every Nuer in the country lost some relatives, friends, or acquaintances in the massacre. A Nuer civilian who escaped the massacre illustrated its impact: “In Juba alone I lost ten relatives. Two were my brothers from different mothers, one was my nephew, two were my brothers-in-law to my sisters and uncles, plus the in-laws. They were killed in the Gudele area, in the same house. They were
twelve in that same house. There were others who were suffocated in the Gudele area in a container where they locked them in. In this family, three survived.”

**The Functions of the Juba Massacre**

Of course, the Juba massacre was not just intended to achieve mass killings and traumatize the Nuer as a group. It made civil war inevitable in less than eight hours, from the start of fighting within the Presidential Guards at 10:30pm on December 15 to the dawn of December 16. Kiir’s faction used it to crush the opposition and cement power right when it was hotly contested. Because the Juba massacre was the largest systematic massacre in South Sudan’s recorded history, it mobilized the Nuer communities for revenge against the Dinka on an unprecedented scale. In reaction, the Nuer assembled into the “White Army,” a collection of Nuer community defense groups. They joined hands with the Nuer SPLA soldiers who had split from their Dinka SPLA peers throughout the country. A long-time Dinka SPLM/A member and former high-ranking government official stressed the political magnitude of the Juba massacre: “Even 1991 could not divide the SPLA as much as now. Now it’s much worse.”

**The Question of Planning**

Leaders rarely plan a genocide as their main objective: they conceive of genocide as their plan B or C, when other plans have failed. Genocides are the result of processes of escalation. In the case of the Juba massacre, genocide was a very natural extension of crushing the opposition (plan A). It may not have been “conceived” as genocide by its organizers, but most likely only because punishing the Nuer for their unsufferable insubordination was such a given.

Indeed, the scale and the planning behind this massacre were unprecedented, precisely compared to the 1991 Bor massacre that Kiir referred to in his speech on December 16. “The Juba massacre was tougher than the 1991 Bor massacre,” noted a former Dinka SPLA battalion commander who fought there. “The Juba massacre, it was not Riek Machar who started it. It was the SPLA. Riek was going to be killed even before the massacre.” A Dinka former high-ranking SPLA and government official from Rumbek who had also fought Machar’s troops in Bor in 1991 explained, “Juba was intended as a massacre and designed by intellectuals, unlike what happened in cattle camps like in Bor in 1991. Juba was an organized massacre.” And the goal of the massacre was quite clear to him: it was to have “one nation for one tribe.”
Did the perpetrators succeed in Juba? A Nuer government official who survived the massacre had an interesting theory. According to him, the massacre was planned but unsuccessful because incomplete. The Nuer soldiers fought back and some of them managed to escape alongside Nuer civilians. “I think the massacre was planned,” he said. “Otherwise it would not have been so quick. They thought that they would capture Riek Machar. They wanted to make people shut up. If you are killed, you have to be quiet. But it didn’t happen as was planned. The Nuer were not captured and they were not quiet... The fact that people were able to run to UN camps makes it different from Rwanda.”

He was not wrong. Indeed, there was planning for at least a military escalation, and one of the organizers who had acted in the shadows for two to three years, Malong, was seen actively participating in the fighting and massacre in Juba. And true enough, international presence did play a role in mitigating the duration of the massacre. “The deadliest days were from the 16 to the 20,” said the Nuer official. “On December 21 and 22, people started coming out and the SPLA was not doing it so openly.” This decline corresponded to a speech given by Kiir that now called for calm. Kiir had to contend with Western backers aghast at how quickly the country had been plunged back into war. His instructions confused the perpetrating troops, who relaxed the intensity of their killings without stopping it entirely. But by the same token, Kiir tested the international community with the Juba massacre, and the lack of a strong international response to the Juba massacre signaled to him that he could get away with the first phase of what would turn out to be a multiethnic genocide.

The First Phase of a Genocide

As such, the Juba massacre would set the tone for genocidal violence. First, genocidal violence against the Nuer quickly expanded to other areas—particularly Unity state, the birthplace of Machar. The atrocities perpetrated in Juba against Nuer civilians were mirrored upstate in several locations (particularly in Unity state), which illustrated a transference of violence. Second, the Juba massacre also removed the taboo of killing non-Dinka groups other than the Nuer in a systematic manner. The massacre affected Equatorian groups: “Even the people from the Bari and Mundari were killed in the December massacre,” noted a Bari civil society member. It also hit ethnic groups from Western Bahr El Ghazal, already victimized by the Dinka state in the past eight years. A Balanda doctor from Wau, at the time in Juba, recalled, “My neighbor was killed driving from there on the way home when hearing of the fighting. He’s a Kresh from Raja.”

During the Juba massacre, the cotargeting of non-Dinka groups—including Equatorians, the Balanda and Kresh, and the Shilluk—sent a message to these
groups and set a precedent. After the massacre, these groups continued to be targeted in Juba, before their home areas fell prey to campaigns of genocidal violence. A student in Juba recounted, “My neighbor, a Balanda, was in Gudele and she was killed in February. Killings continued after December, even in May 2014... On a smaller scale, but still.”

The Juba massacre had so efficiently removed the taboo of eliminating non-Dinka groups that the perpetrators made sure to convey to these groups that it was just the beginning. SPLA Dinka soldiers warned Equatorian groups, during the massacre and in the months following, that they would be next. This was especially flagrant in Yei (Central Equatoria), a future target of genocidal violence. “In December 2013, when the Nuer commander defected, the SPLA brought a Dinka to take over the leadership in Yei,” a Kakwa civil society member explained. “He came with the mindset that every Nuer was a rebel. By then the SPLA in Yei was mixed. But then the commander and deputy commander, the head of the store ammunition, were Dinka. They could remove the guns from the hands of the Equatorians,” just like they had to the Nuer in Juba in December 2013. He continued, “They said to the Equatorians in December 2013, ‘You people are cowards.’ ‘You Equatorians are still here but the day we’re done with the Nuer, we’re coming for you and you won’t like it.’ They said it openly, in the market. They said: ‘The next people killed should be you.’ They said ‘you people [from Equatoria], your time is coming. When we’re through with these people,’ the Nuer.”

A Kakwa (Equatorian) SPLA captain from Yei county, then fighting alongside the government in Jonglei and Upper Nile, also confirmed hearing similar threats from his colleagues early in the war—two weeks after the Juba massacre: “By that time, we were fighting the Nuer and my colleagues—Dinka—were telling me, when they were drunk: ‘Once we’re finished with the Nuer, we’ll turn to the Equatorians.’ They said it openly.” The Juba massacre was thus the first phase of a genocide targeting non-Dinka ethnic groups.

Yet none of this means that this multiethnic genocide was a plan designed by Kiir’s faction from as early as the 2011 independence. It may have been a plan designed later, or it may not have been designed at all before the 2013 Juba massacre. Instead, the plan to target other non-Dinka groups may have emerged during the massacre itself and in the following days. This may account for the discourse by Dinka SPLA troops to Equatorian civilians in Juba during the massacre and in other towns. After all, local perpetrators can also push for genocidal violence from the ground, anticipating orders from the top. This would be a generous interpretation. But in the absence of more information on the topic, we are left to speculate. At any rate, not every genocide needs planning, and genocides are often not fully conceived strategies.
Looking back at the period from December 2013 to July 2017, what is most likely is that the multiethnic genocide that unfolded was the culmination of at least two things. First, it was the result of planning for at a minimum a military confrontation following a political crisis in Juba. Second, it was the consequence of an escalation of government violence led by the elite and driven by the will to crush the unbearable threat posed by a growing number of non-Dinka groups, a perception explained by an ideology of extreme group entitlement, or ethnic supremacy, long bred.

If there was no planning for a genocide in 2013, key conditions were at least present for one to unfold: the government had prepared for an absolutely crushing military confrontation; the perpetrators practiced ethnic groupism in identifying targets for destruction from the start, including targets other than the Nuer; and the military elite displayed an impressive capacity to adapt to and anticipate the changing military landscape on the ground. It expected conflict spill-over from its military campaigns and sent in more troops to control new areas, sometimes in advance (as in Equatoria). The increased SPLA presence pushed non-Dinka communities against the wall. The ideology driving military decisions thus became a self-fulfilling prophecy: government violence forced non-Dinka communities to flee or take up arms to defend themselves or die. In fleeing or resisting, these communities unwittingly confirmed the ethnic supremacist narrative, along the lines of: “See? I told you those (non-Dinka) were always rebels. They are not South Sudanese. We are.”

Denationalizing and Conquering

The Juba massacre was “typical” not just because the violence perpetrated there was a blueprint for future violence. This first phase also expanded the Dinka conquest cemented since 2005 in Juba. In eliminating the Nuer in Juba and chasing them away from their houses, the perpetrators cleared the way for Dinka settlers. In addition to looting Nuer houses, Dinka soldiers moved into those houses deserted by the Nuer who had either died or taken refuge at the United Nations Mission in South Sudan protection of civilians camp (UNMISS POC). An Acholi man and his wife recalled, “On the road to Bilpam, they killed all the Nuer. In Jebel Kujur, all the Dinka moved into the houses of the Nuer, even if the Nuer are still alive and in Juba . . . They’re all staying in the villas of the Nuer who fled in December.”

The despoiling of the Nuer conveyed the Dinka perpetrators’ sense of group entitlement. The perpetrators attacked the residents whenever they risked returning home to collect their belongings. Returning home was out of the question, including for the Nuer from the formerly ethnically diverse dominant class.
“The worst is that they take your house,” lamented a Nuer politician six months after the massacre. “Even now I live in a hotel. Because you never know, I might be pulled out of my house and killed. Even now there’s stealing.”

The sense of entitlement on the part of the Dinka settlers who silenced the Nuer was not lost on the Equatorians either. A Latuka civil society activist in Juba noted, “In the mixed areas, the Dinka who remained will not say that the Nuer were killed, because they’re happy about it. And the Nuer fled so it’s very difficult to get information.” Ultimately, the Nuer would not return to their homes until the time of writing (six years after the massacre). But losing their homes to the perpetrators was just the beginning.

Indeed, Dinka perpetrators also confiscated the passports, phones, and other belongings of the Nuer who survived and were crowded in the UNMISS POC. Passport confiscation symbolically excluded them from citizenship and as such was a clear attempt at denationalizing them. It also prevented them from leaving the country, which along with the seizure of their wealth and means of communication was meant to bury—both socially and politically—the thirty thousand Nuer crammed into the open-sky prison of the UNMISS POC. The Nuer could not leave the Juba POC without risking death or rape by marauding SPLA soldiers planted on its outskirts. Killings and kidnappings continued at lower rates after the Juba massacre ended. Six months after the massacre, a Nuer politician described how “killings at night still continue. Most of the Nuer are in UNMISS.” The SPLA thus sent a clear message to the Nuer: “If you come out, we will kill you.” The Nuer’s stay in the POC presaged a long social, political, and mental death under UN auspices instead of a swift gruesome one at the hands of their government.

For the first time, the UNMISS POC had effectively averted the death of many more Nuer by providing them with a refuge. But in doing so, the UN had been instrumentalized by the government. In effect, the POC refuge saved the government the logistical burden and the international opprobrium of massacring more Nuer. At the same time, the Juba massacre still accomplished the several functions I described earlier—starting a civil war, a multi-phased genocide, and expanding the Dinka conquest. As the government painted the massacre as an offshoot of Machar’s attempted coup, the fact that some Nuer civilians survived it by fleeing to the POC meant to prove that the massacre was not genocidal but rather the result of uncontrollable troops with emotions running high. Combined with the beginning of the third civil war and the retaliatory violence by Nuer troops, the government easily painted the massacre as an unfortunate side-effect of fighting. This could not be further from the truth given its timing and resonance throughout the country—for example, a few kilometers south, in Yei.
Resonance of the Juba Massacre

Expansion and the Case of the Equatorians

The Juba massacre was exceptional in its execution and magnitude. But this event masked the fact that Nuer civilians were being massacred at the same time in other towns. In Yei, similar events to what happened in Juba took place. On December 13–14, 2013, the Nuer SPLA soldiers were not given assignments in preparation for the NLC. On the 15th, fighting broke out between the Dinka and Nuer when the Dinka tried to disarm the Nuer.78 A Nuer student residing in Yei at the time remembered, “On December 15, 2013, our home was very close to the barracks in Yei. The soldiers divided themselves. One of my friends was a soldier and he came to me to tell me that what happened in Juba was not only targeting soldiers and said I should move away from the barracks. On December 16, I evacuated my relatives 10km (6.2 miles) away . . . In Yei, around five Nuer families were neighbors to me. When the war started in Juba, the government closed all cell networks, and we heard all five families were killed when [fleeing on foot] to Uganda. Salva Kiir has a house in Yei with many soldiers, with heavy weapons. Those people staying around and who were Nuer and renting houses to send their children to school—all those were killed. They were very close to the barracks . . . they were killed by the bodyguards of Salva Kiir.”79

The political crisis and fighting in Juba radiated especially quickly in Yei. Indeed, these “bodyguards”—potentially comprising some Mathiang Anyoor but most likely Tiger—had been deployed there as early as 2012. They were hosted in an area called New Site, which is not to be confused with Juba’s New Site where Salva Kiir had a house. They were most likely joined by new recruits from the Dut Ku Beny militia, and all served in the Presidential Guards. The Nuer student recalled how Mathiang Anyoor soldiers started to flock Yei town in 2012: “Those were Salva Kiir’s relatives from Warrap, this Mathiang Anyoor . . . Some of these men were in school, but when they came back home in the evening, they came back to their guns. When the crisis started, those people at school surprised us with their guns. They were fully active—they had guns, uniforms, salaries.”80

The speed at which events unfolded in Yei again indicated planning for at least a military confrontation following a political crisis. There as well, Nuer civilians were quickly massacred.81 The Juba massacre against the Nuer also radiated to Kajo Keji, another town of Central Equatoria bordering Uganda—also the scene of future genocidal violence against Equatorian civilians. In both Kajo Keji and Yei, Equatorian inhabitants hid Nuer civilians. A trader in Kajo Keji at the time recalled, “In December 2013, I took some Nuer in my house to protect them in Kajo Keji. The government was shooting the Nuer.”82
All in all, the Juba massacre radiated to future sites of genocidal violence against Equatorian groups, where some civilians refused to be bystanders. As I explain later, the Juba massacre had a role in attracting Equatorian sympathy for the Nuer. This sympathy caught the attention and fed the paranoia of the Dinka hardliners and perpetrators. But would Equatorian groups have been spared if they had been more passive bystanders? In other words, did the Equatorian saviors provoke the Dinka hardliners? It was more complicated than that, as I explain later.

Early Fighting, Nuer Displacement, and Dinka Settlements

Tensions would continue to simmer in Equatoria for at least another year, while fighting quickly expanded to the Upper Nile region, where both Dinka and Nuer groups cohabited. But no party seemed to have the upper hand. Machar lacked control over the White Army, even though he claimed control when it was convenient, especially in cases of victory. The White Army descended on Bor and Malakal and intended to reach Juba. Bor town changed hands six times before Uganda’s Popular Defense Forces (UPDF) secured control for the government on January 16, 2014, including through cluster bombs. Malakal and Bentiu also changed hands numerous times in the first few months. In less than a year, violence would displace over 1.5 million people.

Paul Malong, then governor of Northern Bahr El Ghazal, went to assist the SPLA troops in Jonglei. His trip to Jonglei coincided with the deployment of Mathiang Anyoor troops from Juba to Jonglei and Upper Nile, within two weeks of the Juba massacre. Four months later (in April 2014), Malong was appointed as the new SPLA chief of staff, replacing the Nuer James Hoth Mai. There was no more ethnic window-dressing. Malong and the Dinka from Bahr El Ghazal dominated the SPLA, and Mathiang Anyoor integrated the SPLA.

Despite the “messiness” of war, the aftermath of violence in Bor mirrored that of the Juba massacre. First, the displacement of the Nuer served Dinka settlers. After civilians ran for safety to the Bor UNMISS POC on December 18, 2013, the government came to the POC and ordered the Dinka civilians to leave the POC. For those who stayed, the POC quickly became a prison.

Second, the displaced Nuer in the Bor POC also felt threatened. Yet what distinguished Bor (and other locations) from Juba was that it was much more removed from international scrutiny. This allowed government officials like the Dinka minister of information Michael Makuei, a staunch Kiir supporter from Bor, to threaten the internally displaced persons (IDPs) directly in February 2014. And two months later, on April 17, 2014, between three and five hundred Dinka government security personnel (from the SPLA and from the prison
and wildlife departments) and Dinka civilians surrounded and attacked the Bor UNMISS POC compound, killing forty-six civilians and injuring thirty.88

The government’s daring incursion within a UN POC set a precedent that would be repeated—most notoriously in Malakal two years later, in February 2016. At that point, this was one way for Kiir’s faction to signal its sovereignty to the UN, and to the Nuer (and Shilluk) their own precariousness. Just like in Juba, the government crippled the Nuer displaced in Bor. It consistently refused to evacuate them for medical treatment in Juba. It screened Nuer people at the airport and prevented them from leaving from Bor and Juba. And, quite significant, the violent ethnocracy displayed its belief in ethnic ranking, Dinka group legitimacy, ownership, and entitlement by offering compensation to the Dinka for their property loss but not to the Nuer. Much like in Juba, violence went hand in hand with conquest in Bor. After the SPLA “victory” through UPDF cluster bombs, new Dinka occupants also quickly moved into the houses of the residents who had fled to the POC.89

The problem was that these trends got quickly buried under the pile of atrocities perpetrated by revengeful Nuer troops. Indeed, the Nuer White Army troops (descending from Uror, Ayod, Nyrol, and Akobo) who joined forces with the Nuer soldiers defecting from the SPLA to create the new SPLA-In-Opposition (IO) were obsessed with retaliating for the Juba massacre on any Dinka in their way. Much like their Dinka counterparts targeting Nuer civilians, the Nuer troops searched houses for Dinka residents in Bor. They targeted them on grounds of their Dinka ethnicity and perpetrated systematic rapes and killings that were incredibly violent and ethnically motivated.90

In Malakal, around December 23, 2013, SPLA troops started to search for Nuer house to house.91 There, Nuer civilians compared their scarifications to a “death certificate.” But IO troops also killed and raped.92 Throughout the rest of the country, the Nuer retaliated on the Dinka when they could, for example killing Dinka who had intermarried with the Nuer.93 Conversely, in Dinka areas such as Bahr El Ghazal, some Dinka targeted Nuer who had intermarried with the Dinka.94

Anti-Dinka and anti-Nuer hatred did not take in every Dinka or Nuer area. In Lakes, six months after the Juba massacre, the Dinka who had intermarried with the Nuer protected them. Yet this was the exception, and as violence pitted groups further against one another, it reinforced their group identity. This was particularly the case in the majority-Nuer Unity state, the most conflict-affected state of all.