In its first year, the SPLA looked like an activist rebellion: a national liberation movement with a Marxist rhetoric, constrained by scarce resources and therefore entertaining better relations with civilians it had to rely on. But the SPLA’s ideology was highly contextual and short lived. Regional politics explain why the SPLA formulated a Marxist project in the first place. Sudan and Ethiopia each sponsored rebel groups in one another’s territory, and the SPLM/A ended up depending on Ethiopia’s support. This was used by some officials in Washington to justify continued American military support to Khartoum. In reality, the SPLM/A had few options other than relying on regimes disapproved of by the West (such as that of Mengistu). The SPLM/A’s main and immediate goal was to overthrow Sudan’s President Nimairi, who was backed by the West. But it was not the only anti-Nimairi group and it needed to ally with the national opposition. Ethiopia was fighting its own separatists as well, and a “national liberation movement” was expected to attract more sympathy. Besides, without clear borders, implementing separation from the north of Sudan posed many problems. The north and the south could not exclude each other physically or economically. The last decade following the Addis Ababa Agreement had proved that establishing a first front in Juba instead of Khartoum was already admitting defeat. Former SPLA members explained, “Garang thought that for us to get what we wanted, we needed to go to the head of the snake in Khartoum, and the tail was in the south. He thought we needed to go to Khartoum.”

As a result, “revolution” and not “separation” became the official motto of the SPLM/A. The problem was that this decision was mainly taken by the leadership
to attract national and external support but did not reflect the aspirations of the SPLA’s (increasingly Dinka) constituency. According to the same former SPLA members,

Garang came up with his agenda of unity, but the songs of his soldiers were all about separation. So there was a division between the political and the military. In 1986, it was still not even clear that Garang was so pro-unity. He would openly declare that getting the Nuba Mountains on his side was meant to neutralize the Anya Nya II. Garang was struggling with his Arabic. He never lived in Khartoum much. When he addressed these constituencies, he called it a tactic... Garang’s problem was his constituency. He had a message for his constituency in the south, another for the north, and another for the international community.7

The SPLM/A exposed its ideology in its July 1983 manifesto, which focused on the specific grievances of the south.8 Through language focusing on underdevelopment, religion, and nationality, this manifesto was designed to win broader support by appealing to other regions and sectors of Sudanese society. The SPLA’s

**FIGURE 2.1.** John Garang, leader of the SPLA, speaks to journalists on June 11, 2002, in Kapoeta, then southern Sudan. Photo by Simon Maina/AFP via Getty Images.
project of a “New Sudan,” a secular state, enabled it to forge political and military alliances with other neglected regions of Sudan. It purported that the central government’s attempts at creating a Sudanese national identity based on Islam and the Arabic language and culture had obscured the common grievances the south shared with other neglected regions of Sudan (especially the west and the east). It built on the failure of the 1972 Addis Ababa Peace Agreement implementation and on the central government’s intent of undermining it.9

With this rhetoric, the SPLA gained popularity in both the south and the north. Even though the US government and opponents to Mengistu dismissed the SPLM/A on account of its Marxist rhetoric, John Garang started to address a wider audience over Radio SPLA broadcast from Ethiopia and to talk about the real experiences of Sudanese without the communist jargon. He mentioned social and economic problems that were common to all Sudanese, and although he admitted that the south’s grievances were a more intense form of these issues in Sudan, he dismissed the idea of separation as a solution to it.10 On the contrary, Garang proposed a true autonomy of the regions of Sudan, the restructuring of the central government, and the fight against racism and tribalism as the foundations of a “New Sudan.”11

The SPLM/A purported to fight against imperialism and reactionaries in general but identified its enemies as religious fundamentalists and members of the elite—both northern and southern Sudanese—preoccupied with their own jobs. This was a clear reference to non-Dinka southerners (mostly Equatorians) who had supported the redivision (the korora) of the south into three regions and were considered unpatriotic. Other southern Sudanese enemies included Anya Nya II warlords (often Nuer) who were reluctant to ally themselves with the SPLA and who, along with ex-Anyanya (mostly from Equatoria), were dedicated to a separatist agenda. In other words, political enemies were mostly non-Dinka. Different ethnic constituencies competed for different political projects (revolution/unity, separation, redivision). Yet even within the SPLA ranks, the question of revolution/unity versus separation was never solved, and competition also divided different Dinka constituencies. Such unresolved dilemmas gave room for future dissension within the movement.12

It is not surprising then that the SPLM/A’s military machine was a strategic means for winning military support and impressing colleagues, not an engine meant for radical Marxist-inspired social transformation.13 By 1991, at the time of the SPLA’s split, no one was talking of socialism anymore and the 1983 manifesto had been forgotten.14 Did it matter? After all, even Stalin had a very primitive reading of Marx, and the overthrow of old regimes by revolutionary vanguards often has little to do with ideology.15 In the case of the SPLA, the mostly pastoralist recruits loathed Marxism and harbored conservative views of society.
Inside the SPLA: Recruitment, Brutality, and Ethnic Discrimination

Recruitment and Organization of the Guerrilla Group

The SPLA drew most of its recruits from the Upper Nile and Bahr el Ghazal regions. The thousands of soldiers and refugees fleeing South Sudan in the beginning of the war were the first source of manpower for the SPLA. The guerrilla army organized their movement into Ethiopian refugee camps where they could access food and medical supplies. The first wave of recruits was mostly composed of secondary school and university students as well as office workers, all of whom were trained and incorporated into the Jamus (Buffalo) battalion in 1983.

But the SPLA still had to organize recruiting campaigns by sending officers into Bahr El Ghazal. These campaigns seem to have been quite successful, since thousands of recruits quickly crossed the Nile River into Ethiopia. Most recruits were Dinka. Soon the SPLA rank and file was composed of poorly educated and ill-trained recruits. Mostly illiterate, they made foreign and national observers compare the SPLA to a peasant army of volunteers.

The recruits, despite some ethnic differences, shared nationalist and patriotic sentiments. The leadership initially thought that, socialism being the ideology of the poor, more people would rush to join the struggle. But it soon found out that very few of the southerners who joined were socialists. Anger and frustration at Khartoum’s regime, especially after the division of the southern region and the imposition of shari’a law in September 1983, were what drove recruitment into the SPLA, combined with an economic crisis and the paralysis of state institutions. Dinka communities also feared that ethnic rivalries and animosities would be instrumentalized and magnified by Khartoum. This was quite useful to the SPLA, who tapped right into the Dinka cattle-keepers’ anxiety of losing their herds to raiding by other groups supported by Khartoum, such as the Murle. A Bor Dinka remembered, “The people who joined the SPLA and had cattle didn’t really know what they were fighting for. But the SPLA sent in mobilizers to tell them they had a training center: ‘You better come and train so you can protect your cattle from the Murle,’ they told the Dinka. So basically, 80 percent of the able male population in 1985–86, joined the movement. Very few were politicized. Most just wanted to protect their cattle.”

Meanwhile, a clear divide emerged between the military officers, the politicians, and the intellectuals. “Bourgeoisie,” “reactionary,” “revolutionary,” and “comrade” were common terms in the vocabulary of the SPLA and of some civilians behind the SPLA frontlines. The SPLA ostracized, marginalized, and imprisoned intellectuals and politicians. This Marxist political game (especially practiced by young officers) did not reflect the reality of South Sudan. Many
members of the SPLM/A were not socialist, even at the highest levels. They did not read the war in terms of conflict between capitalism and socialism. And as for the “peasants,” most of them were hostile to it. The very harsh and dehumanizing training conditions of new recruits and the techniques used within the movement to control the potential for dissent created mistrust and frustration at the improvised Marxist cadres. Those who had gone through the school of political training were the most assiduous reactionaries against the “revolution.”

Aversion for the movement’s revolutionary ideology contributed to inhibit the formation of a strong link between the national liberation movement’s soldiers and the very people they were supposed to fight for. Some commanders also appealed to the soldiers with the lure of gain or invoked fear or hatred for different ethnic groups to motivate them to fight. Aversion to Marxism only strengthened the conservative reactions of many recruits, who felt that the Marxist ideology advertised in these SPLA camps threatened traditional social structures and practices. As a matter of fact, most men in the SPLA, from high-ranking officers to the lowest rank, felt a strong repulsion at the idea of women’s participation in direct combat and believed that the traditional social order should be protected.

By 1984, the mostly illiterate Nilotic men, many of them cattle herders, farmers, and other poor workers from the towns, were given weapons by the SPLA. In 1984, the Jarad division graduated, followed by the Mour Mour (1985), Kazuk (1986), Zalzal (1987), Intifada (1988), and Intisar divisions (1989)—all in Ethiopia’s Bonga training camp. They numbered over fifteen thousand troops. Understandably, the guerrilla army had not exerted any social, political, or economic criteria to select its recruits. The SPLA had welcomed people from all walks of life, including fugitives from the Sudanese justice system who took refuge in the new rebel group. Some people lied about their occupation prior to their joining to obtain higher ranks, thinking they could start a new life at a higher social level and with a clean slate. An insider, Peter Adwok Nyaba, attributed to these “rogue” recruits many of the human rights abuses and wastes of resources that occurred during SPLA advances. But this is very unlikely: most of the SPLA recruits were fathers, brothers, uncles, and cousins belonging to the same set of families, not to mention their female relatives who also contributed to the struggle. They and a new generation of men born just prior to and during the war—not lone delinquents—made up the bulk of the troops. They were the ones more likely to be involved in human rights abuses than this minority of outlaws first recruited, especially considering the length of that civil war (twenty-two years).

Violence

Nyaba also traced back the origin of some SPLA soldiers’ violent behavior toward civilians to a particularly brutal training. But violence went back even earlier:
the recruits had already experienced violence prior to joining the SPLA. In the early years of the war, they had suffered through the arduous journey to Ethiopia's training camps and were sometimes met by either hostile SPLA troops or by other armed groups.32

This triggered a cycle of SPLA retaliation, which had serious repercussions on Nuer civilians and lasted until 1988.33 It also formed the backdrop of the 1991 massacre, as a Bor Dinka explained: “The SPLA soldiers passed through Nuer Gajaak land and were commanded by Kerubino and William Nyuon, who were both horrible guys. They made reprisals on the Nuer Gajaak. From 1985, the Dinka from Bahr El Ghazal trying to join Ethiopia were killed on the way . . . Bad blood between the Dinka and the Nuer goes back to the years between 1984 and 1986, when Dinka recruits from Bahr El Ghazal crossed to go into Ethiopia for training—the Dinka Agar, Dinka Malual. The Gajaak Nuer were particularly targeted in reprisals.”34 Decades later, while the Dinka remembered the 1991 Bor massacre, the Nuer remembered the massacres of 1987–88: “When the SPLA troops came to the area of Lankien, in 1988, Kerubino was killing cattle for meat, and you just kept quiet, otherwise you'll be harmed. They just raped and left, forbidden by commanders from taking the women with them.”35

Once they reached Ethiopia, the new SPLA recruits, who were both survivors and perpetrators of violence, were brutalized by their future brothers-in-arms. Training was very harsh, often involving menial tasks for months on end, especially in the early days.36 SPLA training camps, even if rather typical of military training camps, were described as spaces of dehumanization. Insiders linked the soldiers’ internalization of oppression there to the violence they perpetrated later, characterizing it as a way to regain their manhood.37

But more important, violence acted as a group crystallizer.38 And the new guerrilla army was desperate for internal cohesion: struggles over leadership had not fostered unity. Besides, even the Dinka were far from being a homogeneous “group.” So violence acted as a glue between the new recruits: escaping attacks from the Anya Nya II on the way to Ethiopia, surviving brutality in the training camp, and afterwards fighting both the government and its militias. Research shows that “primary group relations, i.e. solidarity and cohesion in the small, face-to-face units of an army, based fighting morale, not the soldiers’ identification with anonymous, imagined ‘secondary’ groups such as the entire army or their country.”39 Decades later, the Dinka recruits drawn from Lakes state were still friends with each other—they behaved as members of the SPLA “big family.” Paternalistic ties and comradeship typically ensure combat effectiveness, and the sponsoring of soldiers’ marriages by commanders and their own contributions to their comrades’ marriages did just that: they successfully reinforced those patrimonial ties and became part of the military strategy of the SPLA.40 The perpetration of violence against civilians—particularly
sexual violence and the forceful accumulation of women—would also foster groupness.

But first, within the SPLA training camps, violence against other peers from different ethnicities within the SPLA promoted a sense of exclusive groupness—a groupness that was ethnically differentiated, Dinka, and variable in scale following political events. That groupness between comrades from the same constituencies went hand-in-hand with ethnic discrimination is no surprise. Indeed, comradeship has been constituted through othering and both inclusion and exclusion in armies throughout the world, including the Wehrmacht army.41

**Ethnic Discrimination in the SPLA**

Power struggles over the SPLA leadership from the onset of the war greatly contributed to violence within the guerrilla army and against new recruits. The split between the Anya Nya II and Garang’s faction was as much ideological as personal. Garang had only served eight months in the Anyanya during the first civil war when he was made a captain, and he was often perceived as arrogant. Although a colonel by the beginning of the second civil war, he relied on more experienced Anyanya veterans for advice on how to conduct the war. His lack of military experience caused tension with some more senior experienced elements.42 Ethiopian interference into the struggles for the SPLA leadership created further dissension in Itang.43 Two factions emerged: one, under Samuel Gai Tut, represented the unfulfilled goals of secession of the Anyanya (with Akuot Atem and William Abdallah Cuol); the other, under Garang, expanded the political aspirations to a new national dimension (with William Nyuon Bany and Kerubino Kuanyin Bol).44

Meanwhile, there were also tensions from the onset between Garang and the Malual Dinka from Bahr El Ghazal. It was estimated that the Malual Dinka made up about 45 percent of the SPLA ranks once they arrived in Ethiopia, and their percentage would only grow throughout the years. But some of them also joined the Anya Nya II. The Malual leader Kawac Makuei was made lieutenant colonel and appointed fifth in line in the SPLA leadership. He commanded the Jamus battalion in Bahr El Ghazal. Garang arrested Makuei after he refused to turn on his own community, and Makuei would remain one of the longest-held prisoners of war in SPLA camps. His imprisonment would strain the relationship between the Malual and Bor Dinka troops up to the end of the war.45

As a result, by 1988 and the neutralization of the Anya Nya II, there were three factions in the SPLA: the Dinka of Bahr El Ghazal, the Bor Dinka (in fact from around Twic East and Bor), and some Nuer. There were some representatives of
other ethnicities, but they mattered little at the highest leadership level. All in all, about 80 percent of the SPLA was Dinka.

Ethnic discrimination was key in the process of “ethnicizing” further the Dinka-dominated SPLA. The SPLA’s ethnicization was also the result of the past century’s legacy of ethnic ranking. By promoting ethnic homogeneity through discrimination, the SPLA removed what Donald Horowitz calls the “irritating comparison” with other ethnic groups inherited from colonial times. The ethnicization of the SPLA effectively removed non-Dinka recruits who had been, in the eyes of Dinka recruits, favored by the colonial administration and were once at the top of the ranking system. Since the Dinka were not a coherent group, ethnic discrimination against other non-Dinka recruits increased their “groupness.” This groupness was driven by the Bor Dinka, led by Garang, and culminated in the 1991 split, when Garang openly played the “ethnic card” against his Nuer rival Riek Machar, a popular commander in northern Upper Nile who had called for his removal and displayed the attributes of an ethnopolitical entrepreneur (much like Garang) to mask governance issues and contain intragroup issues within the SPLA.

Ethnic Discrimination against the Nuer

Nuer recruits were the first victims of racism in the SPLA. They had been considered suspicious especially following the SPLA assassination of Samuel Gai Tut (a Nuer) in 1984 over leadership struggles and over debates on what exactly the SPLA should “liberate” (the south or the entire country). Access to training was ethnically discriminatory: Dinka recruits from Bor and from Bahr El Ghazal were given privileged access to military training. One former SPLA soldier, a Nuer trained in Itang, remembered, “The majority of the people in senior military positions, and those military officers who had been sent to military school, were Dinka, most of them from Bahr El Ghazal and Bor. During training, the Nuer felt the difference between Dinka and Nuer due to the suspicion against Nuer soldiers following the rift between Gai Tut and Garang. You remained an NCO when your other colleagues went for training. There was racism in SPLA troops against Nuer recruits during the training.” SPLA soldiers used derogatory terms and insults against the Nuer, including the term nyagat, which meant “looter” or “rebel”—a direct reference to how the SPLA viewed the predominantly Nuer Anya Nya II, and a reminder of colonial stereotypes of the Nuer as “usurpers.”

Discrimination against the Nuer by the Dinka also concerned child recruits, and ethnic ranking imbued society in SPLA-controlled areas. For example, a Nuer man remembered joining the SPLA as a boy and being merely used as a domestic slave by a Dinka family: “In 1991, the Bor Dinka would keep Nuer children as
house boys while they sent their own Dinka boys to school. I was used as a house boy by a Dinka family, a foster family. In 1987–91 and then onwards, John Garang would tell children that they would go to school and in fact I could not.” Discrimination against Nuer recruits would continue impacting the composition of the SPLA for decades: most of its trained senior military officers would be Dinka, and the Nuer recruits would never be trained to handle heavy artillery, which would leave them at a disadvantage in the third civil war (2013–). The wound left by Gai Tut’s assassination and the discrimination against Nuer recruits would also fester and become a recurrent grievance of the Nuer, who felt robbed of the liberation movement’s leadership by a treacherous Dinka-led SPLA. The Nuer did have a role in the start of second civil war, marked by the defection of army battalion 105 with garrisons in Bor, Pibor, and Pochalla in January 1983. A former Dinka commander acknowledged the part played by these garrisons: “Jamus, following the 104–5 battalions, was a battalion that moved to Aweil and recruited in Bahr El Ghazal into Mourmour division in 1984–85. Timsa battalion remained in Jonglei and attacked Pibor. Timsa was mostly Nuer . . . Jamus was three-quarters Nuer. Koryom had mostly recruits from Jonglei and Upper Nile. Battalions 104 and 105 were mostly Nuer recruits. Battalion 104 was headed by Kerubino (a Dinka), and battalion 105 by William Nyuon Bany (a Nuer). The Dinka came after the formation of Koryom division . . . Therefore the movement was started by the Nuer. Anya Nya II was started by Bol Kuany (a Nuer) in 1975.” The assassination of Gai Tut and the SPLA massacre of Nuer civilians in 1986–88 in Upper Nile would serve in 1991 to justify to the Nuer troops their massacre of Dinka in Bor. The Nuer political elite would also use Gai Tut’s assassination to gain political capital and motivate its constituency around the prospect of the assassination of another Nuer leader, Riek Machar, in the third civil war. Ultimately, as one Nuer respondent explained, “the Nuer feel they’ve been spoiled of their military leadership since 1955. Garang took over after the assassination of Gai Tut.” All in all, Nuer “groupness” varied just as much as that of the Dinka and other ethnic groups. Violence acted as a catalyst of group crystallization, and so violence against Nuer recruits of various places contributed to group-making there as well.

Ethnic Discrimination against Others

But the Nuer were not the only ones to be discriminated against within the predominantly Dinka SPLA. A former Equatorian (Lango) SPLA first lieutenant recounted, “I joined the SPLA in 1989. I was trained in Kapoeta . . . a Dinka was the commander . . . There was unity among the South Sudanese to win independence, but most officers were Dinka. So by the time of independence, most
high ranking officers were Dinka. The Equatorians were voiceless. If you raised your voice, they killed you. When Dinka people mistreated other tribes, before 1991, they were united. Most of the high-ranking officers were Dinka and they gave ranks to Dinka only. It was not only the Equatorians (who were discriminated), the Shilluk too—the Nuer were a bit better off—the Balanda people had no people in high ranking positions—neither did the Murle.”58

Ethnic discrimination against non-Dinka recruits extended across all ages and genders and culminated with the creation and promotion of a female Dinka elite matching the Dinka SPLA cadres.59 The promotion of Dinka recruits to positions of power to the detriment of others raised the question of the leadership’s responsibility. A long-time Western observer of the country argued that “the initial formulation of SPLA was very much Dinka. (But) Garang was against others when it came to tribalism … Garang was trying to build a national movement and the role of Yusif Kuwa (a Nuba), Malik Agar (from Blue Nile) and the National Democratic Alliance and the Eastern Front were big.”60 Yet this observer also admitted that it took until the 2004 Rumbek conference, on the eve of signing the 2005 peace agreement and amid an internal political crisis, for the SPLA leadership to advocate publicly for broader ethnic representation in the SPLA. Not much would change afterwards. A Kuku civilian had a much soberer diagnosis of Garang’s nationalist appeals, which echoed the statements of earlier Nuer SPLA recruits about the vacuity of the SPLA’s communist project and its appeal to the non-Dinka and non-southerners: “Garang wanted to ‘liberate’ Equatoria. He used that language because it was the expectation and it made the people join.”61

Under Mengistu’s patronage until 1991, Garang concentrated both the political and military leadership from the start. No SPLM/A convention would be held for another ten years after the founding meeting of the movement in 1983. Civilian figures had no role or say in the making of policy, which was telling of how much the SPLA privileged its military organization over its civilian base.62 For the troops, this also meant that force was used instead of persuasion to maintain cohesion, thus suppressing the dissenters but not the causes of dissent.63 The SPLA had the same military structure as the Sudanese army, with an internal security branch, and mimicked its relationship to its own soldiers and to civilians.64 After 1984 and the escalation of the war with Anya Nya II, the SPLA purged suspected government agents within its own ranks.65 Garang’s inner circle was instrumental in organizing those purges over the years. That included his wife, Rebecca, and Salva Kiir, the future president of South Sudan, as former government officials remember: “Salva was the first military intelligence chief in the SPLA. He was trained as a first lieutenant by the SAF in military intelligence … One unique skill he has is that he remembers faces, remembers the
names, even the rifle numbers. He’s good at it. He’s an introvert. He’s discreetly intelligent in blackmailing people. He knows how to manage people... Salva was the right hand of Garang to eliminate all his colleagues—so he didn’t have to do it himself. All in all, the SPLA employed ruthless methods to enforce discipline and obedience to the leadership, demoralizing soldiers and making them feel indifferent, apathetic, fearful, and distrustful.

Despite the SPLA’s savagery against certain ethnic groups and ethnic discrimination and violence within its own ranks, the SPLA still grew rapidly in numerical strength, attracting more Dinka recruits. Within a couple of years, the SPLA turned from a hit-and-run guerrilla into a rebel group capable of fighting using conventional warfare. By 1991, it totaled between 100,000 and 120,000 troops: nearly the size of the Sudanese army, minus the air force and navy. The SPLA had a much stronger command than its predecessor, the Anyanya, but its reliance on Ethiopia and the fact it sent its “national” force wherever needed created further frustration among its recruits—especially those of Bahr El Ghazal, who could not protect their home areas from raids by government militias.

The 1991 Split and the Dinka SPLA

In 1991, the movement split. The split was rooted in the SPLA leadership style and ethnic discrimination of the past decade. On August 28, 1991, two senior SPLA commanders from Upper Nile, Riek Machar (a Nuer) and Lam Akol (a Shilluk), declared the “overthrow” of Garang via the SPLA two-way radio network and repeated it in a BBC interview. Since they were politically and militarily marginalized, they decided to attract Khartoum’s military support. This event signified the beginning of the split of the SPLA into two factions, and paved the way for the multiplication of armed groups throughout the rest of the war. What it also did was to considerably increase the Dinka composition of the SPLA, which ultimately left room for tensions between Dinka constituencies spearheaded by Garang and his deputy Kiir.

Further Ethnic Discrimination after 1991

The increasing ethnicization of the SPLA during the post-1991 period was the result of both ethnic discrimination and defections. Such defections increased suspicion and reinforced ethnic discrimination against non-Dinka recruits still in the SPLA, perceived as potential traitors. This in turn increased defections in a self-sustaining cycle of disintegration and further ethnicization. A former Equatorian SPLA first lieutenant remembered the rise of degrading insults
against Equatorians after the split and their demoralizing effects: “They [SPLA] called us niam-niam, us Equatorians: ‘people who eat people.’ They called people of Equatoria like this, from 1991 onwards. That was when we didn’t want to be with them. There was no niam-niam before 1991.”

Discrimination also extended to other areas beyond military promotions and was meant to create long-term structural inequalities to the advantage of Garang’s inner circle. This included access to education, a valuable commodity in the south. An Equatorian (Kuku) respondent evoked how “the Bor Dinka were sent abroad to get an education and rule over the country should they win the war.” In the end, discrimination against non-Dinka groups further coalesced anti-Dinka sentiments born out of the interwar period. The creation of the South Sudan Defense Forces (SSDF) under Khartoum’s auspices in 1997 not only allied all the non-SPLA militias—it “made” this group (composed mostly Nuer and Equatorian, but also Murle, Fertit, etc.) and formalized the rift between this new group and the Dinka. The SPLA leadership and rank and file—and, by extension, the Dinka, depending on the varying levels of Dinka groupness fostered by the leadership—would also build their own perceptions of the SSDF group (encompassing in fact a myriad of non-Dinka ethnicities): they saw them mostly as funded by Khartoum and therefore as traitors and enemies.

**Dinka Tensions within the SPLA**

Ethnic discrimination against non-Dinka recruits, the 1991 split, and the trauma of the Bor massacre had contributed to increase the level of groupness of the Dinka, coalescing around the person of Garang, a Bor Dinka. The instigation, provocation, and dramatization of violence with ethnic outsiders can be used to define ethnicity. The 1991 Bor massacre contributed to defining the Dinka as the Bor constituency. But more important here, the provocation and dramatization of violence also worked to deflect challenges within the group. The ethnicized split and violence, the Bor massacre, and intragroup policing within the SPLA all worked to deflect challenges against Garang.

But this was not enough. Within a few years, emotions around the Bor massacre subsided as the war continued, and the ethnicized and ethnicizing SPLA was left to deal with its own ethnic demons and its own dwindling groupness. The leadership was very much identified with the Bor Dinka. Not only was the SPLA leader a Bor Dinka, but most of the early recruits in 1984 were from the Upper Nile region, especially from Bor and Baliet. Back then, these early recruits faced a much stronger Sudanese army, and the SPLA suffered a lot of casualties between 1983 and 1985. Dinka recruits from Bahr El Ghazal came in 1985. Bahr El Ghazal had suffered especially from the legacy of unequal access to education.
Therefore, the most educated officers in the SPLA were from Jonglei, in the Bor region. Garang reinforced this trend by fostering the education of Bor Dinka recruits, especially after the 1991 Bor massacre: he sent Bor Dinka officers abroad for training and Bor Dinka youth who had been separated from their families (called “lost boys”) were provided education in the West. Meanwhile, officers sent their relatives abroad.

The promotion of Bor Dinka recruits over others nurtured frustration that dated back to the 1970s, when the Bor Dinka were especially accused of domination. One of those Bor Dinka “lost boys” explained: “In 1972, a lot of civil servants were from Bor. That was a problem for the Equatorians and the Dinka from Bahr El Ghazal. In 1983, the SPLA promoted people often based on education. In 1991, the Bor massacre led to displacement . .. The ‘lost boys’ proximity to Ethiopia meant that they were educated in Kenya, Ethiopia and then the USA, Canada.”

A further aggravation was that the Dinka recruits from Jonglei, although less and less numerous throughout the years than their Dinka peers from Bahr El Ghazal in the SPLA, were perceived as contemptuous of them.

The Bor Dinka also acquired a reputation for focusing on “business,” both inside the south and in neighboring countries. Meanwhile, the Dinka recruits from Bahr El Ghazal, the bulk of the troops, thought of themselves as doing most of the fighting. Their families were the victims of Arab militias raiding for slaves in the northern areas of Bahr El Ghazal. They thought the Bor Dinka were profiting from the war without fighting it anymore. Tensions mounted between these two competing Dinka constituencies, especially after 1991, when fewer non-Dinka recruits acted as a “buffer” between them: “There was tension between the people of Bor and of Bahr El Ghazal: most of those in the frontlines were of Bahr El Ghazal and the leader [Garang] was from Bor, but his people didn’t participate in the war. Most of the people of Garang were in the refugee camps.”

Tensions combined with increasing political competition between, on the one hand, Garang, followed by his constituency and officers he favored (the future “Garang boys”); and on the other, his second-in-command Kiir, perceived as the representative and spokesperson of the Bahr El Ghazal faction. This competition occurred in the context of a growing SPLA administration marred by corruption, which fostered ethnic patronage that contributed to group-making.

Tensions and competition between those two Dinka constituencies were reflected in the evolution of military kinship ties. After 1991, not only did such interethnic military ties and interethnic marriages decrease, but these ties were organized more and more at the Dinka section and clan level. Relations between soldiers and commanders became much more based on ethnicity and nepotism than before, including among the various Dinka sections.
The allegiance of troops was ever more important, given the post-1991 wave of desertions. Commanders who dominated the war economy and turned into warlords posed political threats. But Garang had difficulty removing individuals like Paul Malong, an increasingly powerful Dinka commander from Northern Bahr El Ghazal who would become the SPLA chief of staff in the third civil war, from these positions. This meant that Malong continued to amass wealth, to sponsor his soldiers’ marriages, and to marry from different clans locally. Effectively, he was, in the words of a respondent, building a local “empire”: “Malong has 86 wives. Where does he get the cattle? From the people. His close family is made of 400 people.”

The post-1991 era was especially favorable to the rise of the Dinka Bahr El Ghazal constituency within the SPLA. This was illustrated in the rise of Malong and in his association with the likes of Bona Malual, a long-time Dinka politician from Bahr El Ghazal (Warrap) and one of the future architects of the postwar version of the Jieng Council of Elders (JCE), the group of Dinka interests associated with genocidal violence from 2013 onwards. The political faction of the Dinka from (northern) Bahr El Ghazal formed by Malong and other prominent members of the diaspora aggregated around Kiir. As a former Bor Dinka SPLA commander explained, “Salva was chief of staff and vice-chairman—the next most powerful. Bona Malual and Justin Yach wanted to use him as a steel point to help them break through leadership . . . Garang favored Salva a lot. Salva was just a Sudanese Armed Forces captain when he went to the bush. Garang promoted him as major and member of the High Command. He’d keep him close to him. Garang was always happy with people not challenging him. He took him as a loyalist . . . But over time, it cracked, because of pressures of Salva’s constituency.”

As the relationship between Kiir and Garang deteriorated and Kiir mobilized his troops in Yei in November 2004, Malong saw the opportunity to step in and offer him military and financial backing.

A few different interpretations exist of the reasons for the rift between Garang and Kiir, but they center around the very issues of ethnic representation and leadership, tribalism, and money. The rift followed rumors in November 2004 that Garang intended to arrest and replace Kiir as his deputy with Nhial Deng, another Dinka from Bahr El Ghazal (also from Warrap). At the time, peace negotiations had already started and Garang and Kiir did not see eye to eye on the issue of self-determination or on the issue of the other southern militias grouped in the SSDF. Kiir, a known separatist, supported negotiating with the SSDF and had pushed for the self-determination clause in the 2002 Machakos Protocol, which was a roadmap for the future secession of the south. This completely caught Garang off guard. Garang was a secular unionist and did not support negotiations with the SSDF, in his eyes Khartoum’s agents. Garang’s reaction
had been to remove Kiir from the negotiations and replace him with Nhial Deng. Kiir then felt largely excluded from decisions taken by Garang, who was surrounded by his close circle of allies, the “Garang boys.” Without strong personal constituencies, they were the exact opposite of Kiir—educated and considered loyal—and they included Nhial Deng, Kiir’s competitor.90

Another interpretation of the rift was that it was the result of the growing influence of the emerging faction around Kiir (what would become the JCE) who, paid by Khartoum, sought to postpone the signing of the peace agreement to delay sharing oil revenues with the south. Garang explicitly referred to how much Khartoum would gain from this strategy (US$2.5 billion).91 To him and his loyalists (one is quoted below), Khartoum sought to split again the SPLA just as it had in 1991, by sponsoring the future JCE faction and by bolstering the SSDF to question the SPLA’s legitimacy as an equal partner at the negotiations’ table:

In Yei in 2004, there were tensions between Salva and Garang. One layer was the problems between Garang and Bona Malual, who was very close to Salva. And Bona tried to mount pressure on Salva: Bona Malual wanted to lead but he didn’t have any direct link with the SPLM . . . This was one of the factors behind the tensions with Garang . . . Khartoum saw an opportunity to divide the SPLM and to scatter the peace process . . . They promised Salva they’d conclude a peace agreement with him, just like Riek Machar in 1991. If the SPLM split, they would buy time . . . In 2004, Khartoum paid a lot of money to Salva’s group to achieve this strategy of splitting the SPLA. They were ready to bring all militias on board. Negotiations with Matiep (the SSDF leader) started then, to make the split of the SPLA bigger and undermine the signing of the CPA and question who was legitimate to signing the CPA and buy time regarding the oil money flowing.92

Surely Khartoum’s financial gains from a split between the predominantly Bor Dinka leadership and Kiir’s constituency do not automatically mean that it engineered it. Garang’s appeal to the elusive prospect of power-sharing could very well have been meant to sweep under the rug issues of governance and ethnic favoritism within the SPLA. But Kiir and Garang were certainly at loggerheads when it came to negotiating with the SSDF, and because of Garang’s resistance, the Comprehensive Peace Agreement (CPA) would ultimately be signed without incorporating the rest of the south’s plethora of armed groups. Only after Garang’s death—in 2006, when Kiir was in charge—would the Juba Declaration be signed with the SSDF, formalizing their integration into the SPLA. It is also true that after the 1991 split, this group of Dinka interests—composed of
seasoned South Sudanese politicians from the period of the Addis Ababa Agreement and since exiled to London, who had been accused of Dinka domination and were known as anti-Garang—would eventually make their comeback through Malong and Kiir.

Interestingly, Equatorian SPLA soldiers in Yei still considered Garang less tribalistic than Kiir, even though they were no longer enticed by the SPLA’s nationalist rhetoric. To them, Kiir’s tribalist inclinations were even part of his rift with Garang, and it was clear he had the upper hand: “When Salva came to address the crowd [in Yei], he said ‘you people have issues with the Dinka? The Dinka can stay anywhere and nobody can talk.’ When the people of Yei heard this speech, people were annoyed . . . That’s what brought the tension. Salva saw that the soldiers from Bor were few—the Dinka from Bahr El Ghazal were more, so he had power there . . . he was trying to overcome Garang because he had that manpower with many people from Bahr El Ghazal.”

So, was Kiir’s mobilization of troops in Yei mostly about a struggle over leadership, resource allocation, and ethnic representation between, on the one hand, Garang, his “boys,” and Bor Dinka constituency; and on the other, the Bahr El Ghazal constituency and those dissatisfied with Garang, spearheaded by Kiir? Or was the rift engineered by Khartoum through the group of Bona Malual for financial gains? Or was it a testimony of the tensions between unionists and separatists who undermined the SPLA’s nationalist rhetoric, by their manipulation of peace negotiations and their tribalism? It was probably all those things at the same time.

The SPLM Rumbek conference, organized between November 29 and December 1, 2004, right after this military build-up in Yei, became a forum for voicing many grievances. Discussions concerned the corruption of the movement leaders and Garang’s personal control over the movement. They also featured the issue of negotiations with the other southern militias (especially SSDF) and the tensions between the unionists and the separatists. It was openly said that the rift between Garang and Kiir dated back ten years, to 1994, when Khartoum had refused to sign the Declaration of Principles (DoP) that first acknowledged the right to self-determination. The minutes of the Rumbek meeting were a testimony to how much contestation there was against Garang then and to how vocal Kiir was about it. The meeting turned into a trial of Garang’s leadership. It also featured clear references to the London-based group of interests coalescing around Malual. It revealed the constitution of a clear coalition from Bahr El Ghazal around Kiir. This block included Malong but also other commanders from Bahr El Ghazal and non-Dinka commanders dissatisfied with Garang (such as the Equatorians Mamur Obote and James Wani Igga), who would all stick
with Kiir in the third civil war. The SPLA was then a pressure cooker. Yet after Rumbek much of the same autocratic structure remained, and Garang continued to favor Bor Dinka officers over others.

The SPLA’s Political Myth of Liberation, Dinka Group Ownership, and the Seeds of Exclusionary Ideology

Ethnic Ranking within the SPLA

Social groups are only evaluated comparatively, and ethnic comparisons are especially potent because, as Horowitz writes, “to lose out in competition and comparison to others who are differentiated on a birth basis is to be afflicted with an apparently permanent disability.” Of course, the colonial era had already compared groups and grouped them into the categories of “advanced” and “backward,” a language so internalized that it appeared in the SPLA manifesto (the south was part of the “Backward Areas”). Groups labeled as “backward” are generally more intent on securing their place in the political system to confirm their group worth. Especially when a country becomes independent, the greatest anxiety of a “backward” group is a renewed ranking system reminiscent of colonial times, where it is again at the bottom. As struggles over relative group worth transferred to the political system, the SPLA acted as exactly that: a political system. It imported ethnic and social tensions from the Addis Ababa Agreement period.

Ranking permeated the SPLA, where appointment of non-Dinka to high-ranking positions merely amounted to ethnic window-dressing. It also pervaded society in areas it controlled, since most of the administrators were Dinka, even in non-Dinka areas such as Equatoria. I next illustrate how the predominantly Dinka SPLA came to amass and monopolize resources in such areas and eventually created a new dominant Dinka class, the ultimate form of ranking. The SPLA was not just ethnically but also socially ranked—a system that patrimonial ties between commanders and soldiers meant to soothe, ethnicized violence and rhetoric against outside groups meant to hide, and the postwar nationalist discourse meant to mask.

The post-1991 period continued to validate the myth rooted in the past century of military slavery that the Dinka were a “martial race,” as the SPLA became further ethnicized. The peace negotiations, culminating in the signing of the CPA, endorsed the ethnicized SPLA as the sole representative of all southerners, including those non-Dinka that it had discriminated against, and the SPLA’s
political myth of liberation. Promoted to the position of the only southern counterpart of the government in the CPA, the Dinka as a “group” had “liberated” and therefore officially “owned” the south. Yet tensions broiled in the predominantly Dinka SPLA.

**Power Dynamics in the SPLA: The Pressure Cooker**

The SPLA and the government of Sudan signed the Comprehensive Peace Agreement on January 9, 2005, and Garang became first vice-president of the Sudan. On July 30, 2005, just six months later and less than a year after the Rumbek meeting where he was put on trial by his peers, Garang died in a helicopter crash. He had lost considerable authority among other high-ranking officers who criticized him for his authoritarian leadership style and ethnic favoritism. He had contended with a mounting faction coalescing around Kiir. Kiir was the only other surviving officer of the original members of the High Command. Once reputed to be Garang’s hitman, he was immediately nominated as his replacement upon his death.99

Garang’s few long-time soldiers who had weathered the splits and the rise of the Northern Bahr El Ghazal’s constituency left the SPLA. Their decision to leave was related to Kiir being in charge, which spoke volumes about the rift and the changing dynamics within the SPLA by the time of Garang’s death. Kiir, who was perceived as “meek-mannered,” “in the shadow of John Garang,” and “ uninspiring,” was in every way less charismatic than Garang.100 He was said not to have “demonstrated any interest in or capacity for politicking or visionary leadership.”101 He was much less known to the international community and had always been vastly underestimated. Over the next decade, he would radically change the demography of the SPLA to retain its control.

**Group Legitimacy and Group Entitlement: Toward Exclusionary Ethnic Nationalism**

Different discourses of group legitimacy, inherently tied to one’s place in the country, were born out of the second civil war. They did not dissipate with time.102 With the endorsement of SPLA claims by the international community with the CPA, the Bor Dinka SPLA leader Garang was catapulted into the status of “national hero” (especially after his death). The Dinka felt they owned the national liberation project and the south’s new equal footing with the north.

But the Dinka were divided in competing constituencies with their own discourses of Dinka group legitimacy. The Dinka from Northern Bahr El Ghazal felt that they were the ones who fought the war—not the Bor Dinka—and suffered
the most from northern slave-raids. The discourse of group legitimacy of the Dinka from Northern Bahr El Ghazal, coalescing around the figure of Kiir, would eventually prove lethal. What made this group within the SPLA different was that it was the one to most openly embrace separatism, which opened the question of who “owned” the south—not the vast multiethnic Sudan that the SPLA never in the end “liberated.” This paved the way for ethnic and therefore exclusionary nationalism. The Bahr El Ghazal Dinka discourse of group legitimacy held that they had fought the government when others had not. This was only made worse by the constitution of the SSDF, which clearly identified in one block—one “group”—those who had not and who were of different ethnicities. After the CPA, this nationalism would translate into a more and more aggressive discourse of group entitlement and an uncompromising style of governance.

There are probably as many discourses of group legitimacy as there are ethnic groups in South Sudan. The Nuer also had their own. It included the role of the Nuer in Anya Nya II and in the Bor mutiny of January 1983. The Nuer felt they had launched the (separatist) national struggle that culminated in independence. But their discourse, because it was never endorsed by the international community as was the Dinka’s through the signing of the CPA, would never prove as potent and therefore as lethal.

From discourses of group legitimacy derived discourses of group entitlement. Because the Nuer thought they had launched the struggle for national liberation (culminating in independence) and because they had lost the battle over SPLA leadership, they felt robbed from their leadership and from “owning” the country. So did the Equatorians, who would consistently bring up the 1955 Torit mutiny and their role in the first civil war as proof and justification of their own “ownership” of the country. In the third civil war, the anti-Dinka sentiments expressed in Nuer and Equatorian discourses of group entitlement would also form the basis of their alliance in opposition groups.

These two discourses of group entitlement, because they expressed frustration with the Bor Dinka and their domination of first the Southern Regional Government and then the SPLA, intersected at the time with the interests and discourses of group entitlement of the Dinka from Northern Bahr El Ghazal. Their own discourse of group entitlement was that they deserved more representation in the predominantly Bor Dinka leadership of the SPLA since they had done most of the fighting. After the war, Malong would tap more openly into the deteriorating intra-Dinka dynamics in the SPLA. Group entitlement discourse would permeate the Dinka militias he recruited, especially in Bahr El Ghazal, under the auspices of the future president Salva Kiir. It would foster group-making by resorting not only to what Brubaker has called a type of “middle-range” historical
legacy—like the SPLA struggle—but also to elements of the *longue durée*, such as slavery.\textsuperscript{104}

**Past and Future Ideology**

Yet the SPLA ideology in the second civil war was not anything like the ideology deployed in the third civil war. Even if the SPLA’s ideology was as versatile as Garang himself, there is no doubt that Garang was a unionist nationalist. As mentioned earlier, Garang’s goal was the “head of the snake”—Khartoum—and he could not afford openly to promote his own constituency, unlike Kiir, who seemed quite open about it both in Yi and in Rumbek in 2004.\textsuperscript{105} Garang’s newly gained popularity with the West, which propelled the SPLA to an equal footing with Khartoum at the negotiation table, acted as a form of moral restraint on the process of inner colonization. If Dinka expansion was violent on the ground, it was not genocidal. As a matter of fact, the Dinka SPLA soldiers came to settle in Equatoria through (often forceful) intermarriage—meaning they absorbed other groups.\textsuperscript{106} This was nothing like the annihilating campaign of the third civil war meant to get rid of the local population and replace it. An Equatorian (Kuku) explained, “In the last war, SPLA soldiers did not settle with the wives and children in Equatoria.”\textsuperscript{107}

But there was a relationship between the second civil war and the third, because the third war’s ideology made use of the political myth of national liberation promoted during the second civil war. The SPLA’s leadership—in the person of John Garang—had built a political myth of national liberation meant to attract foreign support and mask the ethnicization and tensions within the SPLA. The CPA, signed under international auspices, legitimized and endorsed this myth. It gave the SPLA legitimacy to rule over the region and the future country in 2005. It disregarded the other southern armed groups drawn from different (above all non-Dinka) ethnic constituencies and grouped under the SSDF and it thereby excluded them from the political community of the future country.

This was particularly hazardous because the danger of revolutionary—and in this case, violently ethnicized—movements is that once in power, they can seek to transform society in their image. Once in power, they “reconstruct the system of legitimacy and the political myth.”\textsuperscript{108} The ethnicization of the SPLA served the consolidation of this myth: what mattered was not if the Dinka had effectively liberated the south. What mattered was that the myth resonated with the “born-to rule” protoideology of the interwar period and that the predominantly Dinka SPLA rank-and-file believed that they—the Dinka as a “group”—had liberated the country. Symptomatically, as one of the few non-Dinka high-ranking officers
(James Wani Igga) complained, none of the non-Dinka signed important peace negotiation documents in the SPLA’s name. This was merely a reflection of who the leadership thought “owned” and propelled the movement.

In the third civil war, what was, in an Equatorian (Kuku) civilian’s words, a “new legitimizing myth of Dinka supremacy” made use of this older political myth that had emerged out of the second civil war. Perpetrators’ “utterances” to their victims showed that Kiir’s regime used the overwhelmingly Dinka composition of the SPLA in the second civil war as the backbone of its annihilating ideology. What was puzzling but consistent with both the resignation of Garang’s followers in 2005 and the contradictions inherent to myths was that neither the ideologues nor the perpetrators were the old fighters. In fact, the perpetrators didn’t even need to be in the SPLA anymore, as a Balanda victim from Wau noted, which illustrated the spread of this new ideology: “Now the Dinka come and take the land and say: ‘you’ve not been in the SPLA to the bush to fight, so we’re taking the land.’ Most of them came when they’re soldiers after 2013. They don’t wear uniforms when they come, but they come wearing weapons—guns.” Thus the ideology exceeded the confines of Dinka political and military circles.

All in all, Garang had managed to avert a coup and keep the lid on ethnic supremacist impulses until his death in 2005 through a mix of pan-ethnic Marxist ideology and autocratic rule. But his leadership could not prevent colonial and interwar legacies from combining with wartime violence and ethnic competition to further ethnic groupness on all sides. The groupness of the Dinka constituency from Bahr El Ghazal was arguably the strongest as they made the bulk of the SPLA troops. Yet this did not fully explain why violence in the context of a civil war would become genocidal. The post-2005 period would provide the triggers.