

The Economics of Peace and Security Journal

© www.epsjournal.org.uk, ISSN 1749-852X

Book Note

Graduate Institute of International Studies, Geneva. 2006: *Small Arms Survey 2006: Unfinished Business*. Oxford: Oxford University Press. viii + 344 pp. ISBN: 0-19-929848-3 (paperback). Price: £17.99.

by Bjørn Møller (29 November 2006)

This is the sixth edition of the yearbook from the Geneva-based Small Arms Survey project, hosted by the Graduate Institute of International Studies. It covers more or less the whole field of issues related to small arms, ranging from gun legislation in the United States to the use of these weapons in intrastate wars in Africa and elsewhere.

The yearbook provides estimates of global production, stockpiles, and transfers of small arms (not concealing the inevitable uncertainty of some of the estimates) and surveys developments with regard to the control of these matters, e.g., the “international tracing instrument.” It also features more substantial analyses, for instance regarding the demand side of the proliferation of small arms, acknowledging that “there is little chance that measures to reduce small arms supply will succeed over the longer term if demand for these weapons remains constant” (pp. 141-2).

Following a brief survey of the literature and its various economic and sociological theories, the authors suggest an explanation based on the interplay of motivations and means. As far as motivation is concerned, they distinguish between deep and derived preferences, the former perhaps reflecting cultural patterns, e.g., a prevalent “gun culture,” whereas the latter may represent a rational response to insecurity. If everybody else is armed, it may indeed enhance an individual’s security to arm himself or even to join an armed group. As far as means are concerned, one might think that the decision whether to purchase a weapon or not might be a simple function of income and price, but it turns out to be more complicated than that, as purchasing a firearm may also constitute an investment in future income since it may allow its owner to extort, loot, or pillage others.

A similarly complex analysis is provided of armed groups, subdividing these into pro-government and rebel groups, but rejecting the simplistic association of the former with security and the latter with insecurity. Some armed rebel groups are also security providers for their respective communities, whereas government-sponsored or supported groups often behave as predators vis-à-vis the civilian population. The fact that most armed groups (of both categories) largely consist of young men motivated the inclusion of a chapter devoted to “angry young men,” in which some of the findings of the new discipline of “security demographics” are recorded (and partly questioned) along with other explanatory approaches such as psychology.

In addition to these general analyses, the yearbook also features several region and country case studies, e.g., of armed groups in West Africa and on the Lord’s Resistance Army in northern Uganda as well as on the relationship among rebellion, crime, and small arms and light weapons proliferation in Columbia and Papua New Guinea.

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