

“Men Have Raped Our Nation to the Bone”: A Gendered History of the Uganda National Liberation Army, 1979-1986



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On April 11, 1979, a ragtag band of soldiers marched into Kampala and ousted Idi Amin from power, thus ending one of Africa's most brutal military dictatorships. Although most Ugandans celebrated their newfound freedom, they soon discovered that their “liberators” were hardly peacemakers. Instead, members of the newly formed Uganda National Liberation Army (UNLA) engaged in widespread violence and looting, which created even greater instability. Much of this violence was explicitly gendered, targeting women because they were women and men because they were men. Although UNLA soldiers utilized various types of gender-based violence to dominate and terrorize the population, this presentation focuses on their systematic use of rape and other forms of sexual violence against women and girls. My goal is not to argue that such violence was inherently worse than other types of gendered violence – or that sexual violence was previously unknown – but instead, to explore the gendered logics that account for its widespread usage within the UNLA. I maintain that we cannot understand the history of this military institution without understanding its relationship to sexual violence.

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