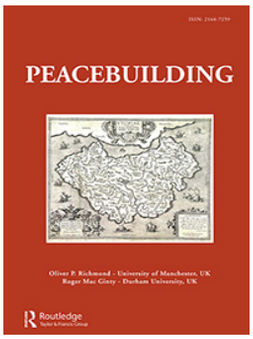

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BOOK REVIEW

OPEN ACCESS

Pluck, luck and peacemaking

Deniable contact: back-channel negotiation in Northern Ireland, by Niall Ó. Dochartaigh, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2021, 336 pp., £83.00 (hardback), ISBN: 9780192894762; £30.00 (paperback), ISBN: 9780192887535

Unofficial peace diplomacy: private peace entrepreneurs in conflict resolution processes, by Lior Lehrs, Manchester, Manchester University Press, 2022, 304 pp., £85.00 (hardback), ISBN: 978-1-5261-4765-3.

Interactive Peacemaking: a people-centred approach, by Susan H. Allen, London, Routledge, 2022, 156 pp., £130.00 (hardback), ISBN: 9781032037905. Also available Open Access.

It is very difficult to stand up for peace in relation to Ukraine. In Russia, those who have publicly opposed Putin's war on Ukraine have been silenced through imprisonment or being beaten off the streets. In much of Europe, there is significant consensus around supplying weapons to Ukraine and strengthening NATO. Those who ask questions and dissent from this view have been accused of being 'traitors' and pro-Russian. Those who suggest negotiations or ceasefires (in advance of Ukraine regaining its lost territory) have been criticised.[1] Feminist voices, like Cynthia Enloe who has long-criticised the malign impact of militarisation on society, are very much on the margins.[2] Among the very many casualties of the war on Ukraine has been some sort of middle ground that can identify the wrong of the Russian invasion but remain sceptical that NATO – a war-orientated organisation – is the answer. Nuance seems to be lost in the headlong rush into binarized positions of good and bad, right and wrong. For many European commentators, peace seems to be the militarised victory of one side over the other, and the route to peace seems to be fighting to the last Ukrainian.

To stand up against this consensus can be a lonely business. Arguments against the consensus are complex and involve messy compromises and ambiguity. Quite simply, they do not easily fit into preferred narratives of victory and defeat, and heroism and cowardice. At worst these awkward arguments about negotiated outcomes are regarded as surrendering in the face of grievous aggression by Russia. At best, they are seen as extremely naïve in believing that Vladimir Putin is capable of acting in good faith if negotiations were to occur. To maintain a countervailing position against the consensus requires broad shoulders to withstand the inevitable criticism. It risks being seen as some sort of crank or oddball, a tool for the enemy, or irrelevant.[3] Indeed, this charge of being irrelevant is serious. Conflict can be so totalising, group membership so all-encompassing, and narratives so closed, that anyone who

[1]See, for example, BBC, 'War in Ukraine: Irish President's wife defends letter after criticism', *BBC News*, August 22, 2022, https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-europe-62392574.

[2]Cynthia Enloe, 'Making Feminist sense of the Ukraine war. Diane Middlebrook and Carl Djerassi Visiting Professorship Lecture on Making Feminist Sense of the Ukraine War', November 7, 2022 Christ's College, Cambridge, https://sms.cam.ac.uk/media/4118807.

[3]Linus Hagström, 'Becoming a Traitor', *Life Writing* 18, no. 1 (2021), 135–143. doi:10.1080/14484528.2019.1644986.

is outwith the script can often be ignored. To make those in power sit up and listen takes courage, persistence and no little charisma. This takes us to the three books under review. All three are testament to the extraordinary role of pluck and luck in making and sustaining peace. They are a reminder that extraordinary individuals can make a difference.

What makes these books all the more interesting is that they do not profile political or militant elites. The 'great statesmen' (and it is usually men) genre is well-stocked and the study of peace processes has benefited from diaries and memoirs that reveal how peace was 'won'. Or, at least, they reveal a version of how the peace was 'won'. Instead, the books under review in this essay are studies of individuals who have taken it upon themselves to be interlocutors or voices that make a difference. They have been unofficial, self-appointed, and self-starting individuals who have sought to act as connectors, entrepreneurs of ideas, and persistent advocates for alternatives to the continuation of violent conflict.

Niall Ó Dochartaigh's *Deniable Contact* tells the story of long-running back-channel communications between the Irish Republican Army (IRA) and the British Government that eventually resulted in the Northern Ireland peace process of the 1990s. The book is principally organised around the work of Brendan Duddy, a businessman from Derry in Northern Ireland, who acted as a go-between for much of the Northern Ireland 'Troubles'. Duddy is described as having 'almost inexhaustible energy' and 'toughness, determination, and discipline'. After his intermediary work was done, and ceasefires and a peace process in place, Ó Dochartaigh was able to develop a rapport with him. As well as being an intermediary, Duddy was a scrupulous record-keeper and his archive – scribbled notes as well as coffee shop receipts that gave the time, date and place of secret meetings with MI5 agents – has been lodged with Ó Dochartaigh's home institution. The beauty of Ó Dochartaigh's book, and indeed his other published outputs, is its ability to zoom out from very specific details of a case study to make connection with wider literature on peacemaking. Thus the book is essential reading for those interested in the minutiae of the Northern Ireland peace process, but also those interested in peacemaking in other contexts and interested in the role of secrecy or timing in negotiations.

Lior Lehrs' *Unofficial Peace Diplomacy* profiles four cases of what he terms 'private peace entrepreneurs', or highly-motivated individuals who take it upon themselves to act as interlocutors between those involved in conflict. The four individuals profiled are Norman Cousins and Suzanne Massie, two Americans who worked for United States-Soviet dialogue during different phases of the Cold War, the above-mentioned Brendan Duddy, and Uri Avnery, an Israeli journalist-activist who maintained communication with the Palestine Liberation Organization at a time when most of the Israeli political establishment eschewed such links. Lehrs' work shows the value of patient, indeed persistent, mediation – especially in times of crisis when conflict actors find that they need subterranean communication channels. During times of crisis, actors who have spent decades building barriers between themselves and their adversaries suddenly find that they need trustworthy interlocutors. It is here that the existent links developed by private peace entrepreneurs have a value. These links are also useful in signalling that conflict schisms are not total; that there are work-arounds, exceptions, and spaces of tolerance. Although the cases in the book are quite different, Lehrs works hard to extract the commonalities and to set out criteria for the private peace entrepreneur category. This identifying of patterns from seemingly disparate cases marks this book as a real contribution to our literature.

Susan Allen's *Interactive Peacemaking* tells the story, through a mix of biography and autobiography, of a group of peacemakers in the Georgian-South Ossetian context who have

worked together over a sustained period. The book is full of emotions and personal journeys and takes us beyond the dry literature on negotiation as a science. Instead, through a series of vignettes, mini-profiles of peacemakers, and personal reflections we find a rich representation of what John Paul Lederach referred to as 'middle out', or those individuals who seek to make a difference.[4] While not members of elites, they have some social capital and try to use it to good effect. The book is refreshing because it reflects many of the things we know but rarely see written down. Thus, for example, the book expands on the awkwardness of first meetings between members of an in-group and out-group, and the sensitivities involved in such meetings. The book is a great advertisement for deep knowledge of a context. Allen has been a repeat visitor to the region, building up contacts and relationships, and getting a feel for what is culturally acceptable and what is not. This contextual knowledge gives the reader confidence: they are in a safe pair of hands. It should also be noted that Allen's book is available as Open Access. This is especially important as the book ends with observations Allen has found to work in her own practice, some of which might be transferable to other contexts.

Taken together, the books signal the importance of three crucial factors in peacemaking. The first of these is the role of sheer bloody determination. All three volumes tell the story of doggedly determined individuals who are engaging in counter-hegemonic activities. The main narratives and trends in all the cases is a resignation towards the dominance of conflict and the organisation of societies into oppositional groups. The individuals portrayed in these books do not accept this. Such a stance, and associated activity, makes them awkward, odd, and difficult to place in a category. In contexts in which group membership is the principal way of organising the society, to stand apart from the group can involve risk and ridicule. Disappointments and setbacks are a near permanent backdrop to all of the cases in the book, yet the individuals portrayed in these books keep plugging away. They are also a reminder of the prevalence of 'slow peace' or how actors come to terms with the need to scope out alternatives over a long period of time.

The second factor that comes through in the books is the power of personality. Many of the individuals covered in the books are awkward (as well as being interested in de-escalating conflicts). One gets the impression that a few of them could be termed pains in the ass. They have enough emotional intelligence and sense of timing to navigate through the sensitivities of conflict-affected contexts. Yet they also have some 'tactical belligerence' to get their message across in the face of opposition. This raises the issue of the power of personality as opposed to peacemaking, mediation and negotiation as activities that are taught. All of the people portrayed in these books were autodidactic and used their personality and intuition to navigate through what were often very murky waters. If private peace entrepreneurship is a self-taught activity involving self-motivating individuals, then it is worthwhile asking questions about the added value from courses on peacemaking, mediation and negotiation. Doubtless there is room for both – the taught and the self-taught, the personality-driven and the textbook-driven – yet can we have the textbook-driven without the requisite interpersonal skills?

The third factor that comes through in the books is the unknown. All of the stories involve taking a leap of faith or beginning a journey without knowing where it will end. Susan Allen admits to not knowing what she was getting herself into when shepherding Georgians and South Ossetians towards talks. The risks facing those covered in the books tended not to be physical (although those did exist). Instead the risks were of ridicule and being ignored. A more important risk was of spoiling

[4]John Paul Lederach, Building Peace: Sustainable reconciliation in divided societies (Washington, DC: United States Institute of Peace Press, 1997).

opportunities for peace initiatives that might follow. Private peace entrepreneurs risked expending valuable social capital to no avail, or potentially wasting the social capital of others. Yet, as the cases covered in these books show, sometimes the risks paid off and punctured the notion that differences were irreconcilable.

All three books are to be recommended as they make serious contributions to our understanding of negotiations and particularly the calibration of key variables: secrecy versus transparency, slow versus speedy, and force versus diplomacy. The books are testament to 'the power of theory-informed practice, and practice-informed theory' (Allen, page 53). While they are deep dives into particular cases, they are mindful of the importance of comparison, and of the wider literature on peacemaking. Niall Ó Dochartaigh asks, for example, 'Why did it take so long to negotiate an end to the Northern Ireland conflict? And what implications does the answer have for efforts to resolve protracted violent conflicts elsewhere?' (page 266). Indeed the first question is a good one. While there is widespread agreement that time is complex and non-linear, there must also be room to acknowledge that time is also linear and peacemaking takes time that is processed in days, weeks, months and years.

Ultimately, the books are reminders that peacemaking is a transcalar activity involving multiple structures and types of agency. In the midst of structural factors, entrenched institutions, and complex regional contexts there can be extraordinary individuals who make a difference. It is hoped that in the seemingly intractable conflicts of the moment there are individuals who are acting as connectors, kite-flyers, and mongers of hope.

The difficult question facing these studies of peace entrepreneurs is to what extent can individual efforts – as brave and noteworthy as they are – confront and disrupt broader structures of power that perpetuate violent conflict? In a way, the question places an unfair burden on peace entrepreneurs. Yet, it is legitimate to ask if such efforts would have the opportunity to confront, and change, power structures – many of which are embedded in identity politics. The answer is: probably not, and certainly not alone. Structural change usually only happens when multiple points of pressure are applied. Yet, to disrupt the path dependencies and sets of logic upon which many violent conflicts rest is a valuable thing.

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