Why We Kill: The Political Science of Political Violence against Civilians

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Keywords

Abstract

This article reviews the political science literature on political violence against civilians, including genocide, mass killing, and terrorism. Early work on these subjects tended to portray this kind of violence as irrational, random, or the result of ancient hatreds between ethnic groups. Most scholars studying political violence today, however, understand it to be primarily, if not exclusively, instrumental and orchestrated by powerful actors seeking to achieve tangible political or military objectives. Scholars continue to disagree, however, about the specific motives that drive belligerents to target civilians or the conditions under which large-scale violence against civilians is most likely.

INTRODUCTION

Few observers of the blood-soaked years since the dawn of the twentieth century would deny the veracity of the Roman proverb "man is a wolf to man." International wars, civil wars, genocide, terrorism, and their tragic sequelae have scarred the lives of most living people, especially those born before the end of the Cold War. Since 1900, these and related forms of political violence have likely killed well over 100 million people, the majority of whom were civilians (Valentino 2004). Untold numbers of survivors lost their homes, their physical or mental health (Ghobarah et al. 2003), their livelihoods, their loved ones, or their freedom.

Scholars have long searched for explanations for the carnage. Through at least the 1960s, and perhaps still today, the majority of this scholarship was produced by historians, most of whom focused on explaining the origins of particular episodes of political violence rather than developing general theories of its incidence. Constructing such theories, of course, is one of the distinguishing ambitions of the field of political science. Indeed, political scientists have been generating theories of war and revolution—the settings in which most political violence occurs—since the field first emerged. These early efforts by political scientists to understand political violence, however, suffered from two key limitations.

First, although the interest of political scientists in the subject of violent conflict may have been motivated by a concern for its terrible consequences, until the mid-1990s, most political science research on violent conflict focused primarily on its causes. Writing in 1998, Brubaker & Laitin (1998, p. 425) observed that political science "accounts of conflict have not been distinguished sharply from accounts of violence." Even as late as 2006, Kalyvas (2006, p. 35) concluded that political scientists had, "with few exceptions, focused on the causes of war (and civil war) rather than on their violence." This focus proceeded from the reasonable premise that understanding the causes of wars and violent revolutions would provide the key to preventing them in the future. In practice, however, the attention devoted to the causes of these phenomena seems to have distracted many scholars from their consequences. Because scholars were primarily searching for the causes of wars and revolutions, they tended to treat all wars and revolutions as equivalent observations and ask why they began, rather than ask why some are so much more violent than others—especially for civilian populations. Because the killing starts only after war has begun, variations in the severity of the violence, its character, or the nature of its targets cannot be a part of a theory of war's causes.

Most quantitative analyses of war, for example, define war by the level of military fatalities incurred by the armed forces of the belligerents, without regard to the severity of the consequences of the conflict for civilian life. No analytic distinction is drawn between strictly military clashes that produce a few thousand combat deaths and conflagrations that result in hundreds of thousands or even millions of civilian fatalities. The 1982 Falkland Islands conflict between Britain and Argentina, for example, lasted less than three months and killed just over 1,000 people, including only three civilians. Yet this conflict is usually included in international war datasets as an equivalent observation alongside, for example, the Soviet War in Afghanistan, which lasted nearly 10 years, killed well over one million people—the vast majority of them civilians—and resulted in one of the twentieth century's largest refugee flows.

Thus, while historians attended to individual instances of political violence, rejecting general theorizing, political scientists staked out the other extreme. By searching for general theories of war and revolution, political scientists overgeneralized, obscuring the wide variation in the form and degree of violence within these phenomena. Put another way, by the 1980s, political scientists had developed theories to explain the onset of conflicts like World War II but not to explain events like the Holocaust or the bombing of Hiroshima. Numerous political science theories sought to

explain the causes of political upheavals like the Russian Revolution, but few to account for Red Terror or the Great Purges.

The second limitation of early political science scholarship on political violence was that its focus on interstate war and major revolutions tended to crowd out the study of other arenas for political violence as well as other forms of violence, including civil wars, genocide (and other types of mass killing), ethnic cleansing, and terrorism. Although these forms of violence frequently overlap with war and revolution, none of them constitute necessary features of war or revolution. Sometimes, although rarely, terrorism and mass killings occur outside of the context of broader armed conflicts or political revolutions. As a result, even political scientists working on war or revolution seldom chose to study these "unconventional" forms of violence directly. The failure of political scientists to direct sustained attention to these modes of violence was ironic because, as later research would show, the most terrible violence is often the most intensely political.

In this article, I review the new wave of political science scholarship on political violence that has emerged during the past two decades. By political violence, I mean any form of organized violence carried out by political actors, including governments, rebel groups, insurgents, or terrorist organizations. Although political violence includes the killing of armed combatants in interstate war and civil war, this review focuses on violence against noncombatants. However, as noted above, political violence against civilians most often occurs in the context of armed conflicts involving military organizations. This new research has begun to address many of the key limitations of previous political science scholarship and has confirmed the relevance of political science to the study of political violence.

In some important areas, it is fair to say that scholars have approached consensus. Most significantly, the new research has overturned the once widely held view that large-scale violence against civilian populations was irrational, random, or the result of ancient hatreds between ethnic groups. Instead, most scholars studying political violence now understand it to be primarily, if not exclusively, instrumental and coordinated by powerful actors seeking to achieve tangible political or military objectives. Violence against civilians, once assumed to be a tragic, if virtually inevitable, side effect of wars, is now understood to play a central part in the deliberate strategies of belligerent groups.

Scholars continue to disagree, however, about the specific motives that drive belligerents to target civilians or the conditions under which large-scale violence against civilians is most likely. Several other critical questions in the field of political violence remain unstudied. Perhaps most important is the question of whether large-scale violence against civilians "works." If there is now agreement among scholars that political violence is usually a means to an end, the obvious question is whether it succeeds in achieving that end. Thus far, scholars have also failed to provide convincing explanations for the dramatic decline in the incidence and severity of political violence that has occurred, especially since the end of the Cold War.

THE PRE-1990s CONSENSUS ON POLITICAL VIOLENCE

Prior to the 1990s, a broad consensus on the causes of anticivilian violence shaped most thinking about phenomena like mass killing, genocide, and terrorism. This consensus was rarely articulated by political scientists, who, as described above, seemed less interested in these violent events than in the causes of the wars and revolutions in which they tended to occur. The consensus view was consistently articulated, however, in discussions of these phenomena by historians, journalists, and policy makers.

The pre-1990s consensus tended to interpret large-scale violence against civilians as a result of two main processes. First, in many discussions of international and civil wars, civilian deaths were

described as "collateral damage." From this point of view, civilian suffering is the tragic side-effect of almost any large-scale armed conflict, and the degree to which it occurs is due primarily to exogenous or idiosyncratic factors such as the accuracy of available weapons systems or whether battles happened to occur in densely populated areas. For Americans at least, it is likely that motivated reasoning helps explains why this view became so widely accepted. As the historian Sahr Conway-Lanz (2006, p. 220) has observed, although the term collateral damage emerged from military specialists during the Vietnam era, it "encapsulated much of the post-World War II reinterpretation of noncombatant immunity. It acknowledged the lack of control that U.S. armed forces had over the violence they employed, but implied that the violence they inflicted on civilians was unintentional, literally beside the point."

Alternatively, when it was impossible to ignore the intentionality of the killing of civilians, the pre-1990s consensus tended to portray this violence as either the result of ancient, often "tribal" hatreds, or the "wanton and senseless" acts of individual madmen or sadists. This view was most notably popularized by the journalist Robert Kaplan in his widely read book (and related articles) about the former Yugoslavia, *Balkan Ghosts* (1993). Kaplan depicted the violence during the collapse of Yugoslavia as driven by irrational, ancient hatreds between Catholics, Muslims, and Eastern Orthodox adherents who literally could not tolerate each other's company. At about the same time, Huntington's (1993, p. 29) influential article "The Clash of Civilizations?" argued that the slaughter in the Balkans heralded a coming era in which the "fault lines between civilizations are replacing the political and ideological boundaries of the Cold War as the flash points for crisis and bloodshed."

These views also became widely accepted in government circles in the early 1990s and were espoused publicly by high-ranking members of the George H.W. Bush and Clinton administrations (Sadowski 1998, pp. 13–15). Acting Secretary of State Lawrence Eagleburger summed up this view of the Yugoslav conflict in 1992, lamenting that "this war is not rational. There is no rationality at all about ethnic conflict. It is gut, it is hatred; it's not for any set of values or purposes; it just goes on" (quoted in Power 2002, p. 282). As Sadowski (1998, p. 22) described the early 1990s consensus, "lacking any real political purpose, warfare was becoming more nihilistic and less distinct from conventional crime and individual deviance."

Interestingly, the pre-1990s consensus that violence against civilians lacked political purposes did not seem to extend to the relatively small group of political scientists studying terrorism. Although, even today, the general public seems to conceive of terrorism as almost purely nihilistic, propelled by irrational hatreds, fanaticism, or sadism, most political scientists have long accepted Jenkins' (1975, p. 15) oft-quoted claim that "terrorists want a lot of people watching and a lot of people listening and not a lot of people dead." Writing in 1990, Crenshaw (1990, pp. 7–8) put it even more plainly, arguing that "terrorism can be understood as an expression of political strategy . . . a willful choice made by an organization for political and strategic reasons, rather than the unintended outcome of psychological or social factors." These views have not gone unchallenged, of course, especially by those outside of political science (see, e.g., Post 1990). However, in part because Jenkins' words seemed to hold true for over a quarter of a century, with only a handful of terrorist attacks killing more than a dozen people, the strategic view of terrorism has remained dominant among political scientists.[1] Perhaps because the field of terrorism studies was so small before September 11, 2001, and was politicized (Stampnitzky 2010) and segregated among diverse disciplines (with few political scientists), theories and findings from these scholars failed to transfer readily to the study of other forms of political violence.

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[1] For an exception see Abrahms (2008).

THE NEW CONSENSUS

In retrospect, it is evident that the pre-1990s consensus on political violence contained the seeds of its own revision. With the end of the Cold War, scholars began to turn their attention to civil wars and ethnic conflicts. Though hardly new, these conflicts had been overshadowed for decades by the possibility of another great power war. Many scholars who began questioning the consensus view appear to have been motivated by their dissatisfaction with its ability to explain events in Yugoslavia and Rwanda. Although no one denied that the killing in these conflicts was barbaric and occurred primarily along ethnic lines, scholars quickly recognized that the motives for the killing were significantly more complex than mere "ancient hatreds." As Gagnon (1994, p. 164) argued,

> Violence on a scale large enough to affect international security is the result of purposeful and strategic policies rather than irrational acts of the masses. Indeed, in the case of the former Yugoslavia there is much evidence that the "masses," . . . did not want war . . . . The current major conflicts taking place along ethnic lines throughout the world have as their main causes not ancient hatreds, but rather the purposeful actions of political actors who actively create violent conflict.

In 1995, Human Rights Watch (1995) produced an influential book, *Slaughter among Neighbors*, to refute the claim that ethnic violence is the "product of 'deep-seated hatreds' or 'ancient animosities." Drawing on dozens of field reports from ten contemporary conflicts, including Rwanda and the former Yugoslavia, the book's authors claimed that "time after time the proximate cause of communal violence is governmental exploitation of communal differences" (p. 2) in the effort to achieve political ends (see also Brass 1997).

Critics of the "ancient hatreds" account pointed out that although ethnic tensions and cultural differences were commonplace in most societies, ethnic war, let alone genocidal violence, remained extremely rare (Fearon & Laitin 1996). There was little evidence that ethnic tensions in Rwanda and Yugoslavia were substantially worse than in states that had managed to avoid bloodshed. Indeed, in the years before the killing, both societies had been touted as examples of relative ethnic toleration compared to some of their more starkly divided and troubled neighbors (Lemarchand 1994). Even when the case could be made for the existence of particularly severe "ancient hatreds," these social attitudes—which, by definition, persist for long periods of time—could not effectively explain the episodic timing of ethnic violence. Subsequent cross-national studies failed to turn up strong links between ethnic differences and the likelihood of violence against civilians, even in times of war (Azam & Hoeffler 2002, Harff 2003, Valentino et al. 2006).

Moreover, scholars began to notice that although most of the violence in these conflicts was interethnic, there was a surprising amount of intraethnic violence as well, usually targeted against the politically moderate coethnic opponents of radical elites. As Gagnon (2004, p. 11) notes, "the terror against and killing of Croats by the Croatian nationalist forces in Bosnia-Herzegovina—or the killing of Serbs by Serb forces in Krajina or Republika Srpska—is difficult to categorize if we use the framework of ethnic conflict." In Rwanda, scholars pointed out that many of the first victims of the genocide were moderate Hutu who might have opposed the systematic killing of Tutsi (Human Rights Watch 1995, p. 23; Straus 2006, pp. 51–52). Although ethnic violence was often portrayed in the media as "neighbor killing neighbor," scholars observed that, in fact, the perpetrators were almost always members of military or paramilitary groups and their numbers were often surprisingly small, usually only a fraction of one percent of the adult male population (Mueller 2000, Valentino 2000).

But if widespread ethnic hatreds alone could not explain why blood flowed in places like Yugoslavia and Rwanda, what could? If the violence was not "wanton and senseless," what rational

motives could drive people to slaughter unarmed civilians by the tens of thousands? Political scientists studying political violence have devoted much of the past 20 years to this question. They have produced widely different explanations, but two common, and related, narratives on the killing of civilians have emerged, one focusing on war, the other on politics.

WAR BY OTHER MEANS

One of the earliest findings of the new scholarship on political violence, and the one that has proved the most enduring, is the appreciation of the intimate connection between armed conflict and violence against unarmed civilians, including genocide, mass killing, and ethnic cleansing (Melson 1992; Fein 1993; Kalyvas 1999, 2006; Valentino 2000; Arreguín-Toft 2001; Harff 2003; Straus 2006; Downes 2008). Since the early 1990s, scholars have increasingly come to recognize that large-scale violence against civilians during interstate and civil wars is neither arbitrary, unintended, nor distinct from the central logic of war itself. Rather, to modify Clausewitz's famous dictum, "sometimes mass killing is simply war by other means" (Valentino 2000, p. 47). From this perspective, civilians are not merely bystanders to armed conflict; they play a central, if often involuntary, role as the underwriters of war's material, financial, and human requisites. Sometimes they become the objects of war itself.

The majority of wartime violence against civilians is carried out by governments, probably because governments are more likely to possess the capabilities to kill in large numbers and to have direct access to their adversaries' civilian populations. As a result, much of the literature on violence against civilians has focused on mass killing by governments. Nevertheless, rebel and terrorist groups have sometimes proved prodigious killers, and political scientists have begun to explore patterns of violence committed by these groups, as well. Scholars have pointed to several ways that war generates incentives for intentional violence against civilians.

One of the most firmly established findings is the strong association between the military strategy of insurgency/counterinsurgency and violence against civilians. As Wickham-Crowley (1990, p. 225) observed in one early study, "terror against civilians is apparently a far more regular, even 'natural,' concomitant of modern guerrilla warfare than of modern conventional warfare." The killing of civilians in guerrilla wars is not simply a function of the difficulty in distinguishing ununiformed insurgents from civilians, as the "collateral damage" narrative suggested. Rather, the new scholarship shows that civilians are intentionally targeted during insurgencies because of the unique relationship that exists between civilians and insurgents in such wars. Much more than regular military forces in conventional wars, insurgent organizations must rely directly on local civilian populations for supplies, intelligence, shelter, and recruits. As a result, practitioners of both insurgency and counterinsurgency have long recognized that prevailing in an insurgency usually means winning control of the civilian population. If, as Mao famously counseled, guerrillas should aim to be like the fish swimming in a nurturing sea of civilians, then counterinsurgents have incentives to catch the fish by "draining the sea" (Valentino et al. 2004, Downes 2008). This strategy may be particularly attractive when the insurgency draws on an especially large base of civilian supporters (Valentino et al. 2004) or when the government lacks the capacity to defeat or appease the insurgency in other ways (Valentino 2004, Downes 2008). In practice, the effort to control civilian populations or separate them from insurgents has resulted in violence ranging from relatively low-level coercive targeting of individual rebel supporters, to massive programs of forced population resettlement, to indiscriminant campaigns of mass killing against villages or entire ethnic groups (Fjelde & Hultman 2013) suspected of supporting the rebels. Instances of the latter type can easily escalate to genocidal levels.

More recently, scholars have begun to focus on the incentives that insurgents themselves face for killing civilians (Chenoweth & Lawrence 2010). Much of this work has been characterized by the utilization of innovative, subnational research designs that develop and test theories using painstakingly collected micro-level data on a small number of cases (see Kalyvas 2008 for a review of this methodology). Like the governments they oppose, insurgents often use targeted violence to coerce civilian populations into providing support for them or at least withholding support from their enemy (Azam & Hoeffler 2002, Kalyvas 2006, Kalyvas & Kocher 2009, Wood 2010).

Violence against civilians by rebel groups can also be part of a coercive strategy designed to inflict costs on governments in the effort to extract concessions (Hultman 2012). Although terrorism scholars often seek to distinguish insurgent violence against civilians from terrorist attacks that occur outside the context of civil wars (Hoffman 1998, p. 41), many groups commonly perceived as terrorist organizations, including the Palestine Liberation Organization, the Irish Republican Army, and most regional al-Qaeda affiliates, meet the criteria for belligerents in most definitions of "civil war" (Crenshaw 2001, Pape 2005). It is important to emphasize, as de la Calle & Sánchez-Cuenca (2011) clarify, that terrorism is not necessarily synonymous with the targeting of civilians. Many groups usually classified as terrorists also attack military targets or government property—and some do so nearly exclusively. Rather, the term terrorism can be applied to a wider variety of tactics utilized by militarily weak groups that operate underground, without territorial control. Nevertheless, as de la Calle & Sánchez-Cuenca acknowledge, anticivilian violence is a common tactic among terrorists—and theories of violence against civilians have sometimes been exported to explain terrorism, and vice versa.

Thus, as Pape (2005, pp. 27–28) concludes, "terrorism is a strategy of coercion, a means to compel a target government to change policy. The central logic of this strategy is simple:... to inflict enough pain on the opposing society to overwhelm its interests in resisting terrorists' demands, and so to induce the government to concede, or the population to revolt against the government" (see also Kydd & Walter 2006). Pape argues that this strategy is most often used against democratic regimes because they are most sensitive to the security of their citizens.

Scholars have pointed to a variety of different possible motives to explain the wide variation in the severity and character of anticivilian violence committed by rebel groups. Some have suggested that, like governments, rebel or terrorist groups may resort to violence against civilians when they are too weak to challenge government military forces directly (Valentino 2004, Pape 2005, Hultman 2007). Weakness can also create incentives for rebels to use violence to coerce support from local civilians. As Reed Wood (2010, p. 604) shows, "facing a highly unequal balance of capabilities, weak insurgent groups may view violence as an inexpensive alternative to supplying positive incentives" to gain cooperation from civilians (see also Wood et al. 2012).

Other scholars have focused on the nature of rebel organizations' relationships with the civilian population to explain why some rebel groups are more violent than others. Most notably, Weinstein (2007) finds that rebel groups that depend on civilian cooperation for critical resources are much less likely to abuse civilians than rebels whose resources come from easily exploited crops, minerals, or wealthy foreign supporters (see also Hovil & Werker 2005). Weinstein suggests that rebels with access to abundant material resources or foreign financing face few incentives to treat local civilians well and tend to attract members who are more interested in plunder and material gain than positive social transformation. In some cases, Weinstein argues, the indiscriminant violence unleashed by these "resource-rich" groups may not be a conscious strategy but rather the result of the inability or lack of motivation of rebel organizations to discipline their own members (see also Humphreys & Weinstein 2006). According to Elisabeth

Wood (2009), similar motives may drive variations not only in lethal violence against civilians but also in the incidence of sexual violence during war.

Goodwin (2006) also sees the relationship between civilians and rebel groups as the key to understanding patterns of violence, although he focuses on political and social, rather than economic, aspects of the relationship. He argues that indiscriminant rebel violence against civilians is most likely when large numbers of "complicitous civilians" are perceived by the rebels to benefit from extensive state violence against the rebels and their supporters. Goodwin asserts that the chances of indiscriminant violence further increase as the "social distance"—the absence of social and political connections—between the rebels and "complicitous civilians" increases.

Although insurgency and civil war represent the most frequent settings for mass killing, conventional interstate wars can also create powerful incentives for killing civilians. As Valentino (2000, 2004) and Downes (2006, 2008) show, belligerents in interstate wars face pressures to target enemy civilians when defeating the adversary's military forces proves too difficult. As Downes (2008, p. 3) writes, "desperation to win and to save lives on one's own side in costly, protracted wars of attrition causes belligerents to target enemy civilians." In these circumstances, killing enemy civilians may serve to weaken the adversary's civilian productive capacity, undermining the adversary's military ability to continue fighting a protracted war (see also Pape 1996). Alternatively, killing civilians may simply impose costs on the adversary that could not be imposed through conventional military engagements, coercing the adversary to surrender or settle the war on terms more favorable to the attacker.

Less frequently, but often even more brutally, civilians may be targeted in interstate wars when the aim of one or more belligerents is to conquer and annex foreign territories occupied by large civilian populations (Valentino 2000, 2004; Downes 2006, 2008). In such cases, conquerors face incentives to clear the territory of existing populations in order to more fully exploit the territory's resources or to eliminate the threat of rebellion from occupied populations. Similar motives have driven much of the violence against civilian populations in imperial or colonial contexts (Valentino 2004) and in some conventional civil wars (Balcells 2010). "Clearing" or "pacifying" conquered territories does not necessarily require large-scale killing. In practice, however, extremely high levels of violence are often required to force inhabitants to accept occupation or to expel them from their homes.

BLOODY POLITICS

Although war has spawned the majority of violence against civilians, political scientists aver that politics usually spawns war. Indeed, much of the scholarship on political violence produced in the past 20 years has focused on demonstrating how the motives of political elites can interact with certain environments to create incentives for violence. From this perspective, elites promote violence against civilians to obtain private political or material benefits or to achieve ideological goals. Most scholars exploring the motives of political elites see violence, usually violence directed against other ethnic groups, as a tool used by elites to seize or maintain political power. Put simply, elites in competitive, although not necessarily fully democratic, political systems may use violence and the fear of other ethnic groups to generate political support from their coethnics (Brass 1997). As Snyder (2000, p. 32) argues, elites in these quasi-democratic systems have powerful incentives to make ethnic or nationalist appeals because "nationalism is a convenient doctrine that justifies a partial form of democracy, in which an elite rules in the name of the nation yet may not be fully accountable to its people." Although large-scale violence is not a universally necessary part of this political strategy, it is the almost inevitable "by-product of elites' efforts to persuade the people to accept divisive nationalist ideas" (p. 32). The fear generated by bitter nationalist rhetoric and

low-level ethnic clashes can also set in motion a chain of ethnic counter-mobilization and escalatory measures that ultimately result in ethnic cleansing or even genocide as ethnic groups seek to carve out homogenous territories for themselves (Posen 1993, Lake & Rothchild 1998).

Whereas most scholars argue that nationalism and ethnic violence are fomented by elites in the effort to mobilize support from coethnics, Gagnon (2004) argues that violence can also be used by elites to "demobilize" political adversaries, both in other ethnic groups and among coethnics. Drawing on case studies from the former Yugoslavia, Gagnon argues that conservative elites fanned the flames of ethnic mistrust in an effort to "shift the focus of political discourse away from issues of [political and economic] change toward grave injustices purportedly being inflicted on innocents, thus serving to demobilize—by silencing and marginalizing—those who posed the greatest threat to the status quo" (p. 180). From this perspective, large-scale ethnic violence played a critical role in breaking down powerful bonds of interethnic solidarity that existed in Yugoslavia before the 1990s and threatened conservative elites' efforts to construct new, ethnically homogenous political communities.

Elite ideology is frequently overlooked or deliberately downplayed in recent research on large-scale violence against civilians. Most contemporary scholars of political violence tend to view elite ideology as largely opportunistic. In this view, elites incite ethnic hatred and orchestrate violence against other ethnic groups as a means to accrue and maintain political power, not out of conviction. Although the scholars cited above have constructed a convincing case for this model in many contemporary conflicts, it is difficult to deny the central role that political ideas and ideologies played in many of this century's bloodiest episodes of political violence. Most notable among these are mass killings committed by communist regimes such as the Soviet Union, China, and Cambodia. As Valentino (2004) argues, the majority of the violence that occurred in these societies was a direct result of the effort to impose communist policies—especially communist agricultural policies such as radical land redistribution or the collectivization of agriculture—on unwilling peasant populations. These ideologically motivated policies were not designed to shore up elite political power. On the contrary, in each case these policies provoked violent uprisings and internal political opposition that threatened to topple ruling elites. Racist ideologies can also drive ethnic mass violence, of course, although these ideologies are seldom as explicit as Nazi anti-Semitism, the most frequently cited case of racist ideology. Nevertheless, many cases of ethnic violence seem to be sustained by the belief—if not explicit ideology—among elites that all members of other ethnic groups are united by ethnic bonds that render them inevitable enemies. As Straus' (2006, p. 9) study of the Rwanda genocide concludes, "the logic of extermination in Rwanda depended on the idea that Tutsis are fundamentally alike. The genocidal mandate from the hardliners was to equate 'enemy' with 'Tutsi' and to declare that Rwanda's 'enemies' had to be eliminated."

An important puzzle emerges from this elite-politics perspective of political violence. If elites provoke political violence to further their own private objectives, often against the interests of the majority of the public, how do they get away with it? Scholars have offered several explanations for this puzzle. Most obviously, as Gagnon (2004) argues, they can simply use even more violence to suppress dissenters. Others scholars, however, have focused on elite control of media in nondemocratic or partially democratic societies (Snyder & Ballentine 1996). According to this view, when elites control the information available to the public, they can use it to hide their own crimes, silence opponents, and convince the public that other ethnic groups pose threats that justify extreme, violent measures. As the former US Ambassador to Yugoslavia, Warren Zimmermann, described the role of media in the Yugoslav wars, "What we witnessed was violence-provoking nationalism from the top down, inculcated primarily through the medium of television. The virus of television spread ethnic hatred like an epidemic throughout Yugoslavia" (Zimmermann 1996, pp. 151–53).

The last solution scholars have offered to this puzzle is simultaneously the simplest and most disturbing: elites can manipulate violence for their own gain and at great cost to the public because they do not need public cooperation. Even large-scale violence against civilians does not require the direct participation of large numbers of armed men, and elites can easily reward the small numbers they do need with private incentives. Mueller (2004, p. 1) makes this case most forcefully, arguing that many conflicts, especially those in the post–Cold War era, are "waged by packs, often remarkably small ones, of criminals, bandits and thugs" hired by "desperate governments" and motivated more by the chance for looting than by loyalty to their country or hatred of their victims. In this view, what elites need from the public is not cooperation or participation in violence against their neighbors. All they require is that the public not interfere with the small groups of armed men whose job it is to do the killing.

NONSTRATEGIC VIOLENCE

Most of the scholarship described above acknowledges that not all violence against civilians is purely strategic or instrumental. Even the most massive episodes of killing are not always meticulously planned in advance (Straus 2006). Many scholars emphasize that regional, local, or even personal motives can sometimes result in violence that is orthogonal to the central political rift between the belligerent groups in the larger conflict. These motives include score-settling in local political rivalries, resentment (Petersen 2002), personal revenge (Kalyvas 2006, pp. 58–61), private greed (Weinstein 2007), and pure sadism (Mueller 2004) or a psychological response to major political or military losses (Midlarsky 2005). Nevertheless, most recent research accepts that these motives are seldom sufficient on their own to produce violence on a massive scale. A wide range of personal, psychological, or irrational motives explain why individuals choose to join belligerent groups and participate in the murder of civilians. These motives, however, offer much less leverage in understanding why these groups were created, organized, and turned loose in the first place. Rather, these private motives and emotions tend to be unleashed in the context of larger conflicts between powerful political and military elites in which violence against civilians is largely shaped by a strategic logic.

REMAINING QUESTIONS ABOUT POLITICAL VIOLENCE

Although scholars have made enormous progress in the study of political violence in the past two decades, several key questions remain understudied. Below I focus on two critical areas in need of further research.

One of the most obvious questions that arises from the new consensus that violence against civilians is instrumental and strategic is whether this strategy works. Although the research described above makes it clear that elites resort to violence against civilians in the effort to achieve political or military ends, it is much less clear whether such violence succeeds in achieving those ends. Indeed, most scholars acknowledge that violence against civilians is at best a double-edged sword, even from the narrow perspective of its perpetrators. Although violence can coerce civilians into compliance, it can also stiffen their resolve or convince them they have nothing to lose by joining the opposing side. This may be especially true for indiscriminant violence that targets whole categories of individuals based not on their individual behavior but rather on their ethnicity or location (Kalyvas 2006, p. 154). Massive violence risks discrediting the ideologies it seeks to advance, as it ultimately did with communism. Killing enough people to significantly undermine an adversary's productive capacity can be difficult, even for highly capable military forces. Worse yet, large-scale killing of civilians sometimes can provoke retaliation in kind. Given the relative

ease with which powerful groups can kill civilians, these reasons at least partly explain why the strategy has not been even more commonly employed.

Of the relatively few scholars who have sought to explore this question in depth, most seem to agree that large-scale, indiscriminate violence against civilians generally is not effective, at least in the long run (Valentino 2004, p. 68). In civil wars, Kalyvas argues that indiscriminant violence tends to "backfire on those who use it" (2006, p. 388). Using a detailed dataset of coalition and insurgent violence from the Iraq war, Condra & Shapiro (2012) find that coalition attacks on civilians usually provoked higher levels of insurgent attacks against coalition targets in the same areas. Condra & Shapiro found that insurgents also appear to have lost support when they targeted civilians, a concern that motivated the well-known 2005 letter from al-Qaeda's then second in command, Ayman al-Zawahiri, to Abu Musab al-Zarqawi, then the leader of al-Qaeda in Iraq, urging Zarqawi to minimize indiscriminant violence against Shiite civilians (Filkins 2006). Pape (1996, p. 25), in a careful study of the use of air power in war, similarly concludes that punishing the adversary's civilian population through heavy bombardment usually "generates more public anger against the attacker than against the target government."

Scholars have raised a few partial exceptions to this consensus. Lyall (2009), for example, finds that indiscriminate shelling of villages by Russian troops in Chechnya seemed to reduce the number of subsequent insurgent attacks from targeted villages, at least in part by creating logistical problems for insurgents operating there and driving a wedge between them and the civilian population. Drawing on a case study of Stalin's Great Terror, Herreros (2006) argues that even arbitrary violence can be effective, if the perpetrators convince the population that the violence is not entirely arbitrary, as the Soviets did by extracting false confessions and holding rigged show trials (see also Kalyvas 2006, p. 192). Downes (2007) argues that indiscriminant violence by counterinsurgents can be effective, but only when the target population is small and geographically concentrated. Arreguín-Toft (2001, p. 123) also concludes that large-scale violence against civilians can sometimes succeed in counterinsurgency, but "only as a military strategy: If the desired objective is long-term political control, barbarism invariably backfires."

There is less consensus about the effectiveness of more selective, targeted violence against civilians, which more scholars acknowledge can be successful, at least in some circumstances. As Kalyvas (2006, p. 190) concludes, "though imperfect, selective violence is effective." The debate is especially evident in the literature on terrorism. Pape (2005, p. 22), for example, argues that "suicide terrorists have learned that this strategy pays" (see also Kydd & Walter 2006, Gould & Klor 2010). Abrahms (2006, p. 76), in contrast, concludes not only that "terrorism is an ineffective instrument of coercion, but that its poor success rate is inherent to the tactic of terrorism itself" because the resort to terrorism convinces the target of the attack that the terrorists cannot be bargained with, making accommodation less likely.

Two profound methodological problems complicate the study of the effectiveness of violence against civilians and have slowed progress in this area. First, as virtually all the research described in this review has established, the decision to target civilians in large numbers is seldom a random choice but rather the result of a conscious strategy on the part of political and military actors. As such, the possibility of an endogenous relationship between the strategies groups choose and the outcomes they attain must be seriously considered. Indeed, because much of the research reviewed above posits that killing civilians is a strategy utilized in desperation, after other strategies have failed, it should not be surprising if it often fails as well. Kalyvas (2006, pp. 148–53) similarly argues that indiscriminant violence against civilians is chosen primarily when belligerent groups lack the information necessary to target their adversaries selectively. If so, we should not expect groups who use this kind of violence to be as effective as groups with access to superior information. Conversely, the killing of civilians might be endogenously related to success, since, at least in
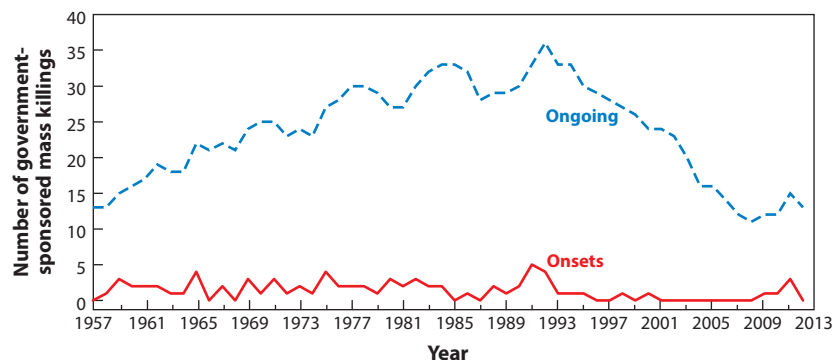
Figure 1

Incidence of government-sponsored mass killings (defined as episodes in which government forces intentionally killed at least 1,000 civilians) from 1957 through 2012. Source: authors' data compiled for the Political Instability Task Force.

some contexts, simply possessing the capability to kill civilians in large numbers may suggest a belligerent group has attained a relatively strong position. As Downes & Cochran (2010, p. 26) conclude, killing civilians appears to increase the chances of victory in wars of territorial annexation, but this relationship may result from the fact that states must already be "'winning'—advancing and taking enemy territory—in order to target civilians" in the first place.

The second methodological problem that confounds research on the effectiveness of violence against civilians is the difficulty in identifying the appropriate set of alternative strategies against which to compare violence against civilians. After all, civilian victimization can be said to succeed or fail only in comparison to some other strategy that its perpetrators might have chosen. Even Lyall's (2009) clever study of "random" artillery strikes conducted by drunken Russian soldiers against Chechen villages could only compare the effectiveness of these strikes with no strikes at all. It is impossible to know whether strategies of selective violence or positive incentives might have been more effective. These questions are further complicated by the likelihood that certain political or ideological goals—e.g., ethnic cleansing—might virtually require violence against civilians, rendering the question of the "effectiveness" of alternative strategies almost meaningless. Ultimately, these methodological problems mean that progress on the question of whether violence against civilians "works" is likely to require detailed case studies and careful process tracing to tease out the mechanisms of success or failure when different strategies are utilized.

Even more understudied, but arguably more important, is the question of why civilian violence appears to have declined so dramatically in the past two decades (**Figure 1**). Although political scientists have debated causes of the decline of interstate wars between major powers for decades (Mueller 1989), the realization that other forms of violence have been declining as well has dawned only recently. This trend has been described most thoroughly not by a political scientist but by the psychologist Steven Pinker (2011; see also Human Security Research Group 2013). Pinker (p. xxii) documents a global decline in violence of almost every form—including genocide, war, torture, rape, terrorism, homicide, and even corporal punishment—and at every scale: "in the family, in the neighborhood, between tribes and other armed factions, and among major nation states."

Pinker points to numerous historical trends, both normative and material, that have decreased the motives for violence, but he devotes more attention to describing the decline of violence than to explaining it. As for political science, just as early research on war lost focus on its consequences by concentrating too narrowly on its causes, political scientists today seem intently focused on

explaining the decline of war (e.g., Mueller 2004; Goldstein 2011) rather than the broader decline of violence itself.

CONCLUSION

The new consensus on political violence developed by political scientists was internalized in surprisingly short order by western political elites. As described above, Clinton administration officials had defended American inaction in Bosnia in the early 1990s by pointing to the intractability of ancient Balkan hatreds. By 1999, however, Clinton (1999) was defending the NATO intervention in Kosovo in nearly the opposite terms, arguing that

> you do not have systematic slaughter . . . unless some politician thinks it is in his interest to foment that sort of hatred. That's how these things happen. People with organized, political and military power decide it is in their interest that they get something out of convincing the people they control or they influence to go kill other people and uproot them and dehumanize them . . . . And if people make decisions to do these kinds of things, other people can make decisions to stop them . . . .

A clearer understanding of the sources of political violence, of course, is only a necessary, not sufficient, condition for preventing it. Whether scholars or policy makers can identify successful strategies of intervention to limit violence against civilians and whether our societies can muster the political will to implement them are among the most important questions for scholars of political violence in the coming decades.

DISCLOSURE STATEMENT

The author is not aware of any affiliations, memberships, funding, or financial holdings that might be perceived as affecting the objectivity of this review.

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