

A young boy in a white shirt and brown pants is running away from a group of riot police in a city street. The riot police are wearing helmets and carrying shields. A yellow car is visible on the left side of the street. The scene is chaotic and suggests a moment of conflict or violence.

Violence against Civilians

Political Violence

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Key questions

- Why are some civil wars so much deadlier than others?
- What accounts for severity of civil wars in terms of battle-related deaths?
- Why do some warring factions engage in indiscriminate violence?
- What is the logic (if any) of indiscriminate and targeted (strategic) violence against civilians?

The pre-1990s consensus 1/2

- **1. civilian deaths were described as “collateral damage”**
- 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 factors such as the accuracy of available weapons systems or whether battles occurred in densely populated areas
- **2. Alternatively, when it was impossible to ignore the intentionality of the killing of civilians:**
- this violence was portrayed as either the result of ancient, often “tribal” hatreds, or
- as the senseless acts of individual madmen or sadists

The pre-1990s consensus 2/2

- popularized by the journalist Robert Kaplan who was writing about the former Yugoslavia, *Balkan Ghosts* (1993)
- Kaplan described 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
- similar account existed of the mass violence in Rwanda
- however, there was little evidence that ethnic tensions in Rwanda and Yugoslavia were substantially worse than in states that had managed to avoid bloodshed

A new post-1990 academic consensus

1/3

- Although it is undeniable 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”
- scholars began to notice that although most of the violence in these conflicts was interethnic,
- there was a surprising amount of intra-ethnic violence as well, usually targeted against the politically moderate co-ethnic opponents of radical elites

A new post-1990 academic consensus

2/3

- civilians are not merely bystanders to armed conflict; they play a central, if often involuntary, role
- insurgency and counterinsurgency have recognized that in order to prevail, they needed to win control of the civilian population
- they try to catch the fish by “draining the sea” (Mao Zedong)
- just 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

A new post-1990 academic consensus

3/3

- 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
- Most scholars acknowledges that not all violence against civilians is purely strategic or instrumental: regional, local, or even personal motives can sometimes result in violence that runs contrary to the central political division
- A wide range of personal, psychological, or irrational motives explain why individuals choose to 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

Why are some civil wars so much deadlier than others? 1/3

- one way to start is to investigate whether factors commonly associated with the outbreak of civil wars are also responsible for conflict severity
- **state strength**: is conflict severity a result of weak state capacities? (since weak states provide a favorable context for civil war outbreak)
- proxies for state strength: external military assistance, states with rougher terrain, and military quality (expenses per military personnel)
- **ethnicity and religion**: ethnic and religious loyalties are often less flexible than other collective identities, i.e. ideologies (ethnic and religious fragmentation as a proxy)

Why are some civil wars so much deadlier than others? 2/3

- **regime type:** type of political regime may matter; democracies tend to win wars (perhaps because they pick the fights, they are likely to win, and try to minimize casualties to avoid public backlash),
- democracies may be less willing to use the harshest measures against rebels, or perhaps because democratic governments are in a better position to negotiate, and co-opt rebels than are other governments
- Lacina (2006) analyzed civil wars between 1946 and 2002
- what did she find?

Why are some civil wars so much deadlier than others? 3/3

- 1. **state strength** variables do not explain why some civil wars kill more people in combat than others
- the availability of foreign assistance to the combatants is a strong predictor that a civil war will be severe (Cold War experience?!)
- 2. **ethnic or religious heterogeneity** does not explain the severity of internal war: no evidence that cultural diversity gives the elites an instant tool to mobilize their followers and convince them to bear the costs of war
- 3. **democracy** is also associated with fewer battle deaths

Differences between warring groups?

- why do some warring factions abuse noncombatants while others do not?
- armed groups face a strategic challenge:
- when they try to build, maintain, and deploy their fighting units, they inevitably rely on material resources and logistical support from civilians (noncombatants)
- therefore, we can assume that coercive tactics are potentially costly because they undermine the civilian base of support for the warring parties

Why differences between warring groups?

- Humpreys and Weinstein (2006) study unique data from a nationally representative survey of ex-combatants in Sierra Leone
- the conflict was known for its unusually cruel treatment of the civilian population
- five warring factions were involved in the civil war, committing all kinds of atrocities: sexual violence against women, the forcible recruitment of child soldiers, campaigns of killing and amputations perpetrated by the rebel groups
- however, there was significant variation in how the militias treated civilians: rates of death and displacement varied dramatically in different parts of the country

Are there Incentives for Restraint?

- the rebel groups are in repeated interactions with the population
- one can assume that such **interactions facilitate more restraints** on part of the rebels (it makes it worthwhile to refrain from total extraction, because the militias expect they will need their resources)
- alternatively, if strong links exist between individual combatants and the population, the rebels may face higher costs if they employ abusive tactics in their own communities:
- in the regions where warring factions share their ethnic identity with the local population, one can expect lower levels of abusiveness

Contestation: between-group strategic considerations

- the extent of civilian abuse may depend on who/how many rebel groups operate within a given territory:
- if more than one rebel group can at least occasionally take hold over the territory, the incentives for restraint may decrease
- (they do not want the other rebel group to benefit from civilian resources too)

Internal composition of the warring factions

- a diversity of rebel group characteristics and the formal structures may affect their ability to coordinate and police the actions of its warriors
- the rebel groups who recruit their new members by promising them **private benefits** may be more abusive of the civilian population
- factions with loose disciplinary structures are likely to engage more in civilian abuse

Findings

- patterns of abuse are largely explained by **internal characteristics** of the fighting units
- the type of **linkages** that exist between combatants and **communities** or the degree of contestation between warring factions **matter less**:
- abuse is more likely when groups lack the tools that they need to prevent individual combatants from committing abuses
- warring factions that recruit combatants with the promise of private benefits are more likely to exhibit high abuse of civilians
- interestingly, there is **no strong relationship between** the extent of **combatant-community ties** and patterns of **abuse** (i.e. sharing ethnic/tribal bonds between militias and civilians has no effect on the level of abuse)

What is the logic driving indiscriminate violence? 1/3

- violence is indiscriminate when selection criteria are **rough**
- indiscriminate violence is generally (seen as) counterproductive in civil wars
- yet, it is a phenomenon that takes place in most civil wars
- Kalyvas argues that it is because **indiscriminate violence is much cheaper** than its selective counterpart for the combatants
- it is most likely:
 - 1. under an imbalance of power between warring groups or
 - 2. when there is scarcity of resources and information are not available

What is the logic driving indiscriminate violence? 2/3

- **incumbent indiscriminate violence** typically takes place in context of military campaigns that seek to search and destroy insurgents and to undercut civilian basis of the insurgency
- the fact that **insurgents do not shy away** from this practice confirms that indiscriminate violence is related to lack of information (rather than to ideology)
- **Insurgents** also use it when they lack information: against villages that openly support the incumbents, or in the areas where their presence is limited (such as urban centers)

What is the logic driving indiscriminate violence? 3/3

- indiscriminate **does not mean meaningless**:
- it aims to deter people from collaborating with the rival actor; it collectively sanctions suspected collaborators and also those who are related to them
- if the “guilty” cannot be identified and arrested, then violence targets innocent people that are somehow associated with them
- the **underlying assumption** is that the “innocent” will either force the “guilty” to change their behavior OR the “guilty” will change their course of action when they realize its impact upon “innocent” people they care about

How effective is indiscriminate violence?

- a general perception is that it fails to achieve its strategic goals
- there is a tendency of insurgents to actually welcome incumbent indiscriminate violence because such reactions bring in new recruits
- the most infamous example of the futility of indiscriminate violence is possibly the Nazi reprisal policy in occupied Europe
- several reasons for its alleged failure are put forward

1. Emotional reactions

- it targets people independently of what they did, and as such is perceived as **deeply unfair**
- However, the desire for revenge produces armed reaction only if there is an organization that makes such action possible:
- the absence or weakness of **organizations** leads to passivity or sloppy actions doomed to failure
- no matter how outraged, civilians will have no choice but to collaborate with the indiscriminate actor

2. Ambiguity of structure of incentives for cooperation 1/2

- indiscriminate violence lacks almost every feature generally considered to be necessary for the effectiveness of sanctions:
- it is
 - 1. late,
 - 2. arbitrary,
 - 3. inconsistent, and
 - 4. disproportionate
- furthermore, credible protection requires the establishment of incumbent control

2. Ambiguity of structure of incentives for cooperation 2/2

- however, incumbents typically raid an area, kill civilians to take revenge for their lack of support, and then depart
- There is a lesson for a counterinsurgency: try to “clear-and-hold” rather than “search-and-clear” the area
- when there is no prospect of holding an area that may be cleared, no effort should be made to involve the inhabitants on the side of the government

3. Reverse discrimination and selective incentives for rivals

- Incumbent indiscriminate violence often produces a reverse discrimination against “non-rebels” and “anti-rebels,” who wrongly believing that their “innocence” will protect them
- civilians will be likely to collaborate with a political actor who credibly offers them protection, when its rival produces only indiscriminate violence

Why does indiscriminate violence occur anyway?

- there is **no systematic empirical evidence** that indiscriminate violence is ineffective
- most accounts of indiscriminate violence focus on the individual level, pointing to a combination of weak discipline and strong emotions that generates frustration and stress, eventually leading to indiscriminate violence
- they remain unsatisfactory, because they do not consider whether emotions and attitudes, such as fear, anger, or racism, are the causes, the correlates, or the results of using indiscriminate violence

A general theory of indiscriminate violence

- a shift to higher levels of discrimination in violence over time is well documented in civil wars
- it can be explained by combatants having better **access to local information**
- the persistent use of indiscriminate violence indicates that political actors are fundamentally weak: this is the case with civil wars in **failed states**
- high levels of indiscriminate violence emerge because no actor has the **capacity** to set up the sort of administrative infrastructure required by selective violence (state collapse)

When does selective violence occur?

1/2

- selective (discriminate) violence is process, jointly created by the actions of both warring actors and civilians
- information and violence are the key resources around which the process is ordered
- political actors need information in order to be able to target selectively, to distinguish civilians who are helping the enemy
- civilians have information, which they provide through **denunciation**

When does selective violence occur?

1/2

- there is a great potential for abuse in such a system, but violence need only be *perceived as selective* in order to avoid the pitfalls of indiscriminate violence
- denunciation will only occur when potential denouncers perceive the political actor as able to protect them from retaliation
- in civil wars, **selective violence can only take place** in those areas **where control is complete enough** for denouncers to denounce
- (but not so complete that defectors have either fled or simply ceased to be of concern to the political actor)