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Revisionist History

As many as 500,000 people lost their lives in the wake of the Soviet experiment. Civil wars were fought in Azerbaijan, Bosnia, Croatia, Georgia, Kosovo, Moldova, the North Caucasus, Romania, and Tajikistan. Though the thought experiment requires a grisly kind of arithmetic, social scientists can assert with confidence that longer civil wars likely would have resulted in many more deaths. How did order consolidate so quickly in the post-Soviet space?

This book presents a host of new data and original game theory to revisit the basic intuition of Thomas Hobbes (1651): anarchy creates strong incentives for people to build states. I demonstrate that political order arose out of violent anarchy because violence entrepreneurs – warlords hereafter – realized that the great powers would pay handsomely for local order. Order facilitates efficient markets (for foreign investors) and local-language intelligence collection (for foreign militaries). Warlords understood that they were in a position to extort certain rents of sovereignty from the international system and wanted to be bought out in the scramble that followed the collapse of the USSR. The ancient truism that "war is bad for business" was quickly grasped by certain individuals who realized that they were in a rare position to extort civilian governments directly – and the international community indirectly – with anarchy. Foot soldiers were recruited from the sub-proletarian underclass through promises of future state spoils. Some warlords initially colluded to provide order, access international wealth, and allocate themselves monopoly rents from the state apparatus that fell under their control. A local puppet president served as a placeholder for opaque coalition politics. Many warlords became violence subcontractors for the regime. Some did not. Complicated bargaining followed. Back-room deals were struck. A great deal of property changed hands. Peace emerged as local criminals developed techniques to hold civilians hostage and

rewrite local history to their advantage. In other words, the warlords became the state.

post-soviet settlement patterns: successful third-party interventions?

It is clear that helping people to build states in the wake of civil disorder will be a core foreign policy challenge for the United States and the United Nations for the foreseeable future. The threat of catastrophic terrorism has changed the terms of the debate about national security, increasing the emphasis on threats that can emerge from very weak actors in the international system. Events that transpire in the global periphery can directly threaten the safety of voters living in states shielded by strong professional militaries and oceans.

This book is motivated by a question rarely given voice by Western diplomats or academics: What did the Russians get *right* in their relations with their new periphery? After all, wars that broke out during the Soviet collapse were shorter – and thus far less bloody – than similar civil wars emerging from decolonization. The average length of post-Communist wars is only 3.9 years, compared to an average length of 9.8 years for all civil wars since 1945.[1] Violence in the wake of the Communist collapse was brutal, but drawn-out insurgencies would have produced many more deaths. Appendix A at the end of this volume shows that even with numerous statistical controls, the subset of civil wars resulting from the breakup of the USSR was a group of unusual outliers in terms of overall duration.

Is this unusual regional trend attributable to local politics and path-dependent institutional history? Or is it attributable to the successful actions of a third-party intervention force, with Russia acting as the lead state? Reasonable people disagree.[2] Each cell of Figure 1.1 is meant to represent a different internally consistent narrative of how civil wars remain settled, including different assumptions about the possible role of third-party foreign assistance in shaping peace processes.[3] The horizontal dimension is the assumed

[1] Nearly a dozen individual states housed civil wars that each surpassed a half-million deaths – Afghanistan, Angola, Cambodia, China, the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Ethiopia, Greece, Lebanon, Mozambique, Uganda, and Vietnam. These conflicts lasted 16.5 years on average. Lacina (2006) demonstrates that the length of a civil war is a robust predictor of the overall battle deaths.

[2] This disagreement may be no one's fault. Military professionals, diplomats, missionaries, and development assistance professionals often hold different root assumptions about what it takes for a war to stay resolved. Theoretical assumptions inevitably leak into descriptions. By selectively omitting deviant facts, different narratives can be fit to the same observations.

[3] Much of the data produced from humanitarian disaster zones chronicle the critical role being played by the intervention force, confirming the need for ongoing foreign assistance. Heathershaw (2007) argues that in authoritarian regimes recovering from civil conflict, social scientists often become complicit in this interpretative exercise. See also Heathershaw (2008, 2009).

	Decisive Military Victory	Stalemate Between Factions
Possibility of Third-Party Monitoring/ Enforcement	[Postmodern] Imperialism	Liberal Interventionism
No Possibility of Third-Party Monitoring/ Enforcement	Realism	Militia Coalition Politics

FIGURE 1.1. Disputed Narratives: What mechanisms keep civil war settled?

military balance between the incumbent and insurgent armies at the time of settlement. The vertical dimension is the assumed ability of foreign powers to monitor and enforce outcomes relevant to the settlement.

In the lower left corner of Figure 1.1 one finds most self-styled "realists." They maintain that the central mechanism that keeps civil wars settled is military hegemony by a sovereign authority within recognized interstate borders. This would have been called "the king's peace" in prior eras. Probably the most famous account of how states emerge from civil war comes from seventeenth century philosopher Thomas Hobbes (1651), who articulates a straightforward case for peace through military conquest by the agents of a sovereign. The social contract, for Hobbes, is imposed. Citizens are made subordinate to the ruler violently, opponents are disarmed, and order emerges.[4] A strong state apparatus is the best inoculation against civil war.[5]

A number of independent research programs – most prominently those of Licklider (1995) and Fearon (2004) – have confirmed that, since 1945, the most stable civil war settlements are those that end with military victory. The military contest often takes a long time – approximately a decade on average.[6] Many "negotiated settlements" are face-saving arrangements that codify the de facto

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[4] This interpretation of Hobbes (1651) draws heavily on the synthesis of the realist canon in Wagner (2007). On pages 126–127, Wagner references the central argument in Fearon and Laitin (1996) to suggest the evolution of the current boundaries of nation-states as "natural" responses to differential comparative advantages in counterinsurgency by different language speakers.

[5] For compelling evidence that state weakness is statistically correlated with the outbreak of large-scale civil violence, see Fearon and Laitin (2003).

[6] Military victory, when it comes, rarely requires comprehensively and decisively defeating a conventional rebel army on the battlefield. Much more common is selective co-optation of insurgent field commanders during the closing phases of asymmetric irregular war. As such, the coalition of social forces that constitutes "the state" changes from the beginning of the conflict to its end.

military balance.[7] Toft (2010) forcefully argues that deterrence – fear of a technologically enabled security sector – is the mechanism that is most likely to be responsible for post–civil war peace.[8] National veterans are the heroic actors, and the story of their *decisive victory* is passed on from one generation to the next in monuments, museums, and military academies.

Though the collapse of the Soviet Union has been described by economist Douglass North as "perhaps the most striking case of internally induced rapid demise in all of human history," even the most disadvantaged states on the Soviet periphery were "born strong" in important respects, inheriting huge institutional advantages compared to the postcolonial states of Africa that achieved independence in the 1960s and 1970s.[9] Although the Eurasian states that joined the United Nations in the early 1990s lagged behind in terms of per capita gross domestic product (GDP) – difficult to measure in states transitioning to market systems – decades of institutional development translated into huge advantages when it came time for post-Soviet populations to improvise the construction of war machines. There can be no doubt that this is part of the explanation for the quick resolution of the post-Soviet wars. The Soviet experience bequeathed to the first generation of post-independence elites a well-organized party network, borders and administrative units, a centralized media distribution system, a secret police apparatus (with transnational linkages to other republics-turned-states), a national language, an official history (institutionalized with maps, censuses, and museums), as well as an educated and largely literate population that anticipated that these institutions would endure.[10]

Completely different assumptions and mechanisms support a more benign "liberal intervention" narrative of civil war termination, located in the top right quadrant of Figure 1.1. Especially since the end of the Cold War, policymakers have sought solutions to military stalemates that do not rely on grinding military attrition. An empirical research agenda demonstrating the efficacy of

7 King (1997), Fearon and Laitin (2007), and McCormick, Horton, Harrison (2007) propose moderate policies based on this insight. Luttwak (1999) is also consistent with this line of reasoning.

8 I have located Toft's scholarship in the "realist" camp for the purpose of this chapter because it is clear that she sees herself in opposition to liberal voices (e.g., those in the upper-right quadrant of Figure 1.1). With that said, in my reading Toft is equivocal on the role of foreign governments; she does admit a limited role for foreign governments in promoting "security sector reforms" during the implementation phase of postwar peace processes. She is vexed that U.S. threats to intervene militarily to facilitate decisive victories lack credibility (160–162), so perhaps she would prefer to be identified with the "postmodern imperialists" in the upper-left-hand corner.

9 North (2006), 4. A broader exposition of his views on the dissolution of the Soviet experiment can be found on pages 146–154 of the same volume.

10 For a good introductory overview of the nature and sources of Soviet institutional advantages in producing compliant behaviors in the rural periphery, see Roeder (1993); Jones-Luong (2002), chapter 1; and Brown (2007).

third-party interventions to end conflict has coevolved with the expansion of
United Nations Peacekeeping Operations (UNPKOs) in the last two decades.
Remarkable scientific progress has been made on the question of whether and
how outsiders can assist in ending civil wars. They can, and we know quite a bit
about how they can. Peacekeepers can provide security guarantees that allow
for disarmament (e.g., Walter 1997, 2002), provide neutral monitoring of the
terms of agreement (e.g., Fortna 2008), marginalize holdouts (e.g., Stedman
1997), and gradually establish trust between warring parties via multifaceted
mediation programs (e.g., Doyle 2006). In the quarter-century since the end
of the Cold War, there has been an audience for arguments explaining how
a benign international gendarmerie might help establish order. The United
Nations – assisted by a plethora of international organizations, social scientists,
and private actors – has established many peacekeeping missions. Much of the
foreign aid that reaches post–civil war societies is directed towards paying the
salaries of, and meeting program goals drawn up by, liberal interventionists.
Most of the rotating class of Americans and Western Europeans who staff
embassies and the offices of aid organizations housed in the capital cities of the
post-Soviet republics imagine themselves to be day-by-day peace builders. Their
reports state plainly why they believe their programs are vital to the persistence
of peace.

It is common for realists to caricature the arguments of liberal intervention-
ists as utopian.[11] A few contemporary liberal interventionists have met this
critique head-on, acknowledging that identities and interests do not need to be
fundamentally transformed for a civil war to end. War ends because actors
with the capacity to undermine order-providing institutions with violence
come to believe that it is not in their best interest to sabotage order. But
when locals are stuck in a costly stalemate, neutral foreigners can sometimes
save lives by helping the warring sides extract themselves from pointless
attrition. An influential deductive approach to civil war settlement over the
last decade argues that foreign interveners can shape the postwar institutions
by altering players' strategies without altering their underlying preferences. The
transformation of conflict identities may be important in the long run, but it
is often the work of many generations and is not necessarily relevant to the
contours of war termination.

A more urgent task, as Barbara Walter (1997) has argued, is the creation
of a secure framework to ensure rebel disarmament. Negotiators attempting
to end a civil war grapple with different challenges than diplomats negotiating

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[11]   To the extent that liberals' optimism relies on the gradual transformation of identities or
       the alleviation of deep grievances, these charges are deserved. Much of the programming
       of humanitarian relief agencies has a striking resemblance to missionary work. Most of the
       professional bureaucrats who serve as a rotating middle class, drifting across the world's war
       zones, are motivated by a desire to assist in transnational and transhistorical processes of social
       transformation.

an armistice after interstate war. At the end of an interstate war, both armies remain intact and can retreat behind internationally reified boundaries. Ending a civil war, it is argued, requires that one side or the other formally lay down its arms. The winners – who will then control all the guns – have a very difficult time making their commitments to honor the terms of the ceasefire credible.[12] This approach to the problem of civil war suggests that credible third-party security guarantees, and subsequent monitoring, can help sculpt peace accords that would otherwise crumble under the weight of the security dilemma.

But once the possibility of third-party intervention to sculpt war outcomes is considered, it also becomes necessary to consider the upper left corner of Figure 1.1. The threat of transnational mass-casualty terrorism changed the conversation about involvement in other people's civil wars. Certain weak states, once peripheral to American interests, are now treated by great powers as potential security concerns, rather than just troubling manmade humanitarian disasters. The situation is new, and its implications poorly understood, but Western governments grasp that stabilizing weak states is not simply about the humanitarian mission of saving lives – it is also about self-protection. And in this new world, the same constituencies who would balk at their tax dollars ending up in unsavory pockets can be blackmailed into tolerating autocratic corruption. Violence against human dignity is weighed against the risk of ideologically hostile regimes emerging from pockets of anarchy in the Middle East and Central Asia. For certain autocrats, the claim to be "too weak" to control one's territory can, perversely, bring more foreign aid in the service of decisively defeating terrorists. Much of this extortion dynamic depends on variables that are imagined or kinds of intelligence that are intrinsically suspect.[13]

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[12] This commitment problem complicates the diplomatic resolution of civil wars through many mechanisms. It is thought to render stable postwar power sharing extremely difficult. Fearon and Laitin summarize the core of this asymmetric commitment problem: "Rebel groups aim at regime change because they could not trust the government to implement the policies they desire even if the government formally agreed to do so. After the rebel group disbands, or after the central government regains strength, or because of monitoring problems arising from the nature of the policy aims (for example, redistribution), the central government would renege on policy concessions it made to end a war. Thus rebel groups must often fight for 'all or nothing.'" Fearon and Laitin (2007), 2. For a review of theoretical and formal literature on commitment problems in civil war, see Blattman and Miguel (2009) and Walter (2009).

[13] The word "imagined" is perhaps too provocative, giving the impression that national interests are *completely* constructed. States are constructed as strategic allies partially as a product of their geographic location vis-à-vis perceived enemies, partially based on objective characteristics of a country (e.g., the presence of oil, democratic institutions, nuclear weapons, military bases, diaspora linkages, or density of ideologically radical subpopulations), and partially a figment of political practice. See Gourevitch (1978). During the Cold War, post-revolutionary leaders could install Communist Party Structures (*Single Party Regimes*) and count on some aid from the USSR. Today there is little doubt that democracies in strategically important neighborhoods – Israel, the Philippines, Taiwan, and most recently, Georgia – have been able to attract bilateral aid from the United States by a similar logic.

Direct military interventions into other states' civil wars to shape the contours of settlement, facilitating decisive victory for one faction or another, will be familiar to students of imperial history. The mechanisms tend to emphasize sinister kinds of meddling: sharing signals intelligence and military satellite information, providing sophisticated weapons, liquidating potential spoilers, picking winners, picking losers. The end of the Cold War; the demonstrated ability of weak actors to cause great damage to the interests of strong states; the spread of new technology; and the growing consensus by elites in Russia, China, the United States, France, and Great Britain – the permanent five members of the UN Security Council – that their security interests are tied up in the outcomes of civil wars fought in weak or failed states are combining to facilitate the emergence of a new kind of "Post-modern Imperialism," according to Fearon and Laitin (2004).[14] These behaviors are distinguished from classical imperialism in that the intervener acts on behalf of the entire state system, and does not want to stay in the territory – the intervention force wants to go home as soon as possible, but to do so it must leave a stable partner government in charge of the territory. The kinds of policies that result are not always compatible with the idealized prescriptions championed by the liberal interventionists. But great powers do, if only rarely, find it is in their national interest to guarantee decisive victory for one side or the other in someone else's civil war.

Consider the two maps in Figures 1.2 and 1.3. If one doubts that Russian military power was decisive in shaping the contours of military settlements in the early 1990s, one has only to notice the persistence of breakaway regions in Georgia, in clear contrast to the territorially intact map of Tajikistan. The "frozen conflicts" inside territory claimed by Georgia pit the national government in Tbilisi against Russian-backed secessionist statelets in Abkhazia and South Ossetia. To the question "Why was the map redrawn in the South Caucasus and left intact in Central Asia?" one can do worse than answer with the crude observation that "Political elites in Russia just wanted it that way." As discussed at length in the chapters that follow, Russian peacekeeping – or "peacemaking" as the word *mirotvorchestvo* is more accurately translated – was never meant to facilitate general disarmament. Russian troops – sometimes still in familiar Soviet uniforms, and sometimes wearing black ski masks – and paramilitary units from neighboring republics (the North Caucasus) and states (Uzbekistan) rallied across new interstate borders.[15] In Georgia, borders

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[14] The authors identify four general challenges for peacekeeping missions sent after humanitarian disasters break out in badly governed parts of the world: 1) recruitment ("who sends troops?"), 2) coordination ("who acts as the 'lead state,' taking responsibility for critical tasks of coordination?"), 3) accountability ("what happens if peacekeepers are not neutral?"), and 4) exit ("at what point can the intervention terminate?"). As we shall see, these questions had unusually clear answers in the post-Soviet wars: 1) the CIS 2) Russia 3) nothing 4) maybe never. Locals were not tempted to try to "wait out" the Russian military force.

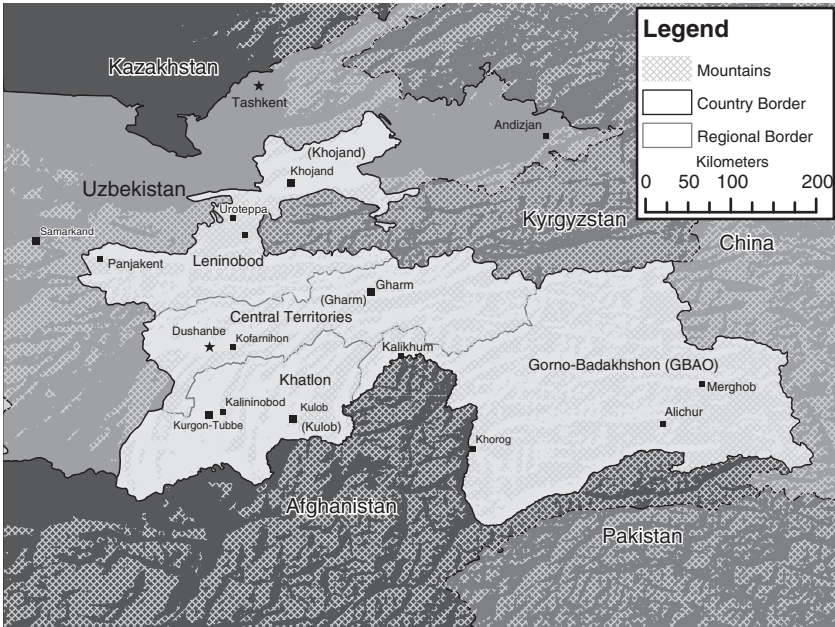[15] King (2000) and Derluguian (2005), 262–273.
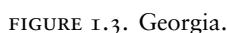
FIGURE 1.2. Tajikistan.

were essentially redrawn by Russia to coerce elites in Tbilisi to join the
new Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS). In Tajikistan, after initial
lukewarm support for Khojandi secessionists, it was decided in Moscow that
Tajikistan would stay intact as a buffer state to shield the rest of inner Asia
from chaos in Afghanistan. It was difficult to misinterpret Boris Yeltsin's 1993
statement that the Tajik–Afghan border was "in effect, Russia's."[16]

These mechanisms hint at another partial explanation for the unusually
short length of the post-Soviet wars. These wars did not develop into "proxy
wars," with different regional powers backing different clients. The violence
of the post-Soviet wars occurred in the periphery of the USSR, and against
a backdrop of total state failure that was no less revolutionary for being
largely nonviolent.[17] Other great powers calibrated their foreign policies to
give Russia, a stumbling nuclear superpower, a wide berth. Potential external

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[16]   On Tajikistan, Fearon and Laitin report: "Russian peacekeepers were able and willing to (in
the words of several informants) 'liquidate' spoilers. They were able, as in Tajikistan, to pick
a warlord favorable to them and provide him the military support necessary to compel other
pretenders into negotiations." Fearon and Laitin (2004), 27. Footnote 56 is informative as
well.

[17]   Our social science theories are simply not up to the task of task of explaining the contingencies
of revolutionary politics, even when the stakes are very high. No one can state with confidence
why it was that Boris Yeltsin emerged standing on top of the tank instead of an aggressive
military populist.

FIGURE 1.3. Georgia.

interveners – Iran, Turkey, the United States, or China – might have been able
to find security, economic, or humanitarian justifications to expand their role
in the South Caucasus or Central Asia, setting off a competitive scramble to
affect outcomes. Proxy war dynamics might have ensued. This did not happen,
however, in large part because possible gains were weighed against the risk that
perceived interference into Russia's traditional zone of control would empower
hard-liners in Moscow. Nothing in Georgia, Tajikistan, or Chechnya could be
worth trading Boris Yeltsin for Alexander Lebed. Georgians and Tajiks under-
stood that foreign governments would be second-guessing Moscow's prefer-
ences while improvising policy in Russia's traditional sphere of influence.[18]

By the late 1990s, when Russia was more of a "normal country," the
impulse for Western governments to tinker with institutions under the aegis of
democracy promotion and meddle in the security affairs of post-Soviet states

[18] MacFarlane (1999) provides a sympathetic summary of how Russia's geopolitical predicament
was viewed at the time. The message that the United States' central foreign policy priority
vis-à-vis Russia was stable control of nuclear materials by a friendly government in Moscow –
and that every other interest would be subordinated to that goal – was signaled clearly,
early, and often. See Allison and Blackwill (1991), 90–91; Nunn (1991); Kennan (1997);
and Kubicek (1999–2000), 548–549, and the retrospective summary of Cornell (2001), 367.
Despite some pressure from Congress, the only thing that pushed the Clinton Administration
to even entertain discussion of military intervention in Russia's war in Chechnya was the (false)
claim that Dzhokhar Dudayev had acquired a nuclear bomb. See Goldgeier and McFaul (2003),
139–149.

reasserted itself.[19] The results are particularly visible in contemporary Georgia. But one can safely generalize that it was not simply a strong outside intervener tipping the military balance that cauterized the wars that broke out as the USSR collapsed – it was the *absence* of *multiple competing* interveners. So if one is tempted to fall back on the crude realist observation that "Russia just wanted it that way," for completeness one should add "and it matters quite a bit that *just Russia* wanted it that way."

All three of the perspectives sketched earlier – the realist, the liberal interventionist, and the postmodern imperialist perspective – contain important insights into the stable settlement patterns of the post-Soviet wars. A realist approach emphasizes the Soviet institutional legacy – clearly visible in the de facto and de jure borders of the recognized and unrecognized states of the region. New leaders inherited unusually strong coercive machinery, facilitating the rapid creation of sovereign domestic authority structures.[20] A liberal, apologetic for Russia's CIS interventions into its periphery, would emphasize Russia's role in protecting embattled minorities and trying to assist as a third-party peace mediator in a humanitarian capacity. It is a political necessity that any document that passes through the Security Council of the United Nations be calibrated to reflect that narrative.[21] Many harbor conspiracy theories – very difficult to falsify – that Russia's true role was more sinister: strengthening security forces in some places and sabotaging them in others, sharing signals intelligence and military satellite information selectively with clients, and targeting certain individuals for assassination. The provocative phrasing "postmodern imperialism" is meant to emphasize that Russia was not driven by desire for imperial glory, but was executing the will of many foreign actors, all colluding to ensure a decisive outcome in the name of international security.

But my book sustains a different narrative, emphasizing processes in the lower right corner of Figure 1.1. I provide evidence that in Georgia and Tajikistan local militias never disarmed, and that local elites never really followed through on the liberal development script. They instead improvised creative solutions that were self-enforcing. "The state" described here is analogous to a semipermeable membrane for violence entrepreneurs – "warlords" – who weigh their life opportunities as social bandits against their life opportunities as agents of an internationally recognized sovereign. The utility of such an approach would be measured by its ability to generate predictions about when warlords are likely to yoke themselves to the governing coalition and when they are likely to resist consolidation. But if it is the case that incumbent and insurgent militia commanders were potentially interchangeable candidates for

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[19] I borrow this phrasing from Shleifer (2005).
[20] Roeder (2007) suggests that some aspects of this machinery generate momentum of their own, creating demands for sovereignty that ended the federal experiment of the USSR.
[21] For an outstanding overview to the arguments made by the Russian state to justify its interventions, see O'Prey (1996).