

Framing a Revolution

Rhetorical contests about how to frame a war run alongside many armed conflicts. With the rise of internet access, social media, and cyber operations, these propaganda battles have a wider audience than ever before. Yet, such framing contests have attracted little attention in scholarly literature. What are the effects of gendered and strategic framing in civil war? How do different types of individuals - victims, combatants, women, commanders - utilize the frames created around them and about them? Who benefits from these contests, and who loses? Following the lives of eleven ex-combatants from non-state armed groups and supplemented by over one hundred interviews conducted across Colombia, *Framing a Revolution* opens a window into this crucial part of civil war. Their testimonies demonstrate the importance of these contests for combatants' commitments to their armed groups during fighting and the Colombian peace process, while also drawing implications for the concept of civil war worldwide.

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Framing a Revolution

Narrative Battles in Colombia's Civil War

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*For my beloved father, Rudy Wiebe (1951–2021),
who taught me to live and love with joy.
You are deeply missed.*

I wonder what it's like to be talking of killings day in and day out
for so many years? What does it do to you, to your understanding
of the things in the world?

Michael Taussig, *Law in a Lawless Land: Diary
of a Limpieza in Colombia*

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Preface

When we spend entire careers thinking and writing about war, it can be easy to lose sight of the individual people inside it. As social scientists, we are generally trained to see patterns, to build and test theories, to be rigorous and scientific – objective, even. War studies often focus on nations, borders, organizations, and balances of power, which can reinforce this (false) sense of objectivity. If we do study people, they are called respondents, participants, subjects, or samples.

But feminist and critical security scholars have long challenged these ideas of scientific objectivity, recognizing that who we are and our position in the world inevitably affect how we analyze and interpret events around us. My work builds on these traditions. Feminist and critical security scholars have challenged the mainstream, engaged with it, *and* contributed to it – things that I strive to do with this book. But there is a tension here. To quote Nimmi Gowrinathan: “Where feminist arguments are generally gathered inside sanctioned space for women on bookshelves, the thinking of men on violence is nestled into a political canon.”¹

While this book is based on empirical social science research methods and theoretical analysis, with the aim of building a theory around framing contests, desertion, and reintegration, my other goal is that people’s stories shine through. The book is structured around organizational framing competitions in war, but it is *people* who create and contest these frames. It is people – mothers, fathers, sons, daughters, fighters, peacemakers – who fight and die in these wars, and who try to make sense of them. And the people presented in this book know more about war than I ever will.

¹ Nimmi Gowrinathan, *Radicalizing Her* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2021), 57.

The ex-combatants, civilians, and military officers in this book spoke to me because they wanted me to share their stories. They do not care about framing theory or snowball sampling or literature on desertion patterns. Most do not know or care what the academic research says about Colombia's civil war. None of that matters when you are living through it. What matters is that people see you, that they hear you, and that they might even care enough to help you.

I hope, by sharing their stories, that readers will see and hear at least a few of the people inside Colombia's many intersecting conflicts. It is very easy to consider certain people as evil, lost, beyond hope, undeserving of sympathy – until you sit down and share a meal with them, hear their life stories, meet their children, and understand how they got to where they are now. As Kimberlé Crenshaw has said: “We must contextualize any violence of the resistance in the violence they were resisting.”²

And finally, I hope that the experiences reflected here help us to understand what “post-conflict” life in Colombia – and beyond – really looks like, and what it can teach us about building sustainable peace.

² Gowrinathan, *Radicalizing Her*, 66.

Acknowledgments

I wrote this book amid multiple public health lockdowns, while my two children struggled through more months of online schooling during the pandemic than anywhere else in North America. During all of this, my beloved father passed away suddenly while I was working on the final draft. Needless to say, I would not have completed this book without a village of incredible people to hold me up and keep me going.

I will start with my PhD supervisor, Jean Daudelin, whose clarity and feedback made me a consistently better scholar. Thank you for encouraging me to take calculated risks, for finding the gold in my tsunami-like dissertation chapters, and for pushing me to take the time to write this book. I also owe a great deal of thanks to my two postdoctoral supervisors, Marie Berry at the University of Denver and Theo McLauchlin at the University of Montreal. Thank you both for believing in this project and for your understanding and encouragement as I wrote this book amid an avalanche of personal challenges. Marie stepped in to give me a postdoctoral home at the Josef Korbel School of International Studies after the pandemic derailed my plans, and her grace, humor, and compassion meant so much to me. And to Anastasia Shesterinina, who helped me when she had no reason to do so, and without expecting anything in return – you are truly a gem, and I cannot wait to repay you somehow.

The fieldwork for this book was made possible by generous funding from the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada (SSHRC) and the IDRC (International Development Research Centre), as well as the Norman Paterson School of International Affairs at Carleton University. I also received postdoctoral funding to finish this book from SSHRC and the University of Montreal.

At Cambridge University Press, Sara Duskow was the first to see potential in my work, and I will always be grateful that. She then passed the reins to Rachel Blaifeder, who patiently walked me through the editing process and tolerated my endless questions. Thank you to all the staff at Cambridge University Press who worked to make this happen. I am also in debt to the anonymous peer reviewers who read my book and provided so much thoughtful feedback – this book is undoubtedly better because of both of you.

In Colombia, there are far too many people to list, but I am very grateful to all the ex-combatants from the FARC, ELN, and AUC who opened their homes, drank coffee and “vino colombiano” with me, and shared their stories, laughter, and tears. Special thanks are due to Cliver, Jorge, and Yina. Thank you to Nancy Amos and Delaney Turner for opening their home to me in Bogotá on my first round of interviews (and for tolerating a surprise visit from the Colombian military at 4.30 am!). I also owe a great deal of thanks to Natalia Herrera and the staff of the two Ministry of Defense safe houses for facilitating my access to these sites, which were the jumping-off points for this work. I am indebted to my hard-working transcribers, Alejandro Reverend and Jorge Soto (without whom I would likely still be transcribing), and to my beloved Spanish teacher, Mauricio Hoyos, and his family, who not only taught me much-needed Colombian slang but also provided a place to rest in the midst of intense fieldwork. And I do not even know how to adequately thank Alejandro Carlosama, who worked beyond all expectations as my research assistant, fixer, and confidante. *Alejo, estoy muy agradecida por lo que has hecho y siempre te tendré a ti y a tu familia en mi corazón.*

Many wonderful friends kept me sane during this process and held me up through a very difficult two years, especially Julie Stonehouse, Maya Dafinova, Gaëlle Rivard Piché, Kailey Zollinger, and my runner girl gang. My dear children, Jesse and Calia, showed incredible courage and tenacity throughout this long process, happily accepted the adventure of going to Colombia, and endured many weekends of my absence while I escaped to finish this manuscript in 2021–2. This all would have been impossible without Jon Schmidt, my husband of nearly twenty years, whose unfailing loyalty, flexibility, and encouragement – even when I made *highly* questionable decisions – allowed all of this to happen. Thank you for being a rock when I was the storm.

This last part is hard to write. My parents, Hilda and Rudy Wiebe, were wonderfully brave enough to homeschool me and my siblings, and they fostered an insatiable curiosity, a love of learning and adventure,

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and the freedom to be who I am. Without them, I probably never would have been brave enough to do the fieldwork that I did. But on February 5, 2021, while I was working on the final draft of this book, my beloved father died suddenly and unexpectedly at age sixty-nine. This loss ripped a hole in my heart for which I was completely unprepared. I am truly thankful to have had him as a wonderful father for as long as I did. He and my mom came to Colombia to visit while I was doing fieldwork, and he read the first draft of this manuscript. Both of my parents provided so much support for this work, including flying across the country to help care for my children while I finished my PhD. I am so proud of my mom for her resilience and strength, and I cannot wait to hand her the first copy of this book.

Finally, I owe my life to someone whose name I only learned while finalizing this book. In 2012, a young man anonymously donated his bone marrow so that I could survive an aggressive form of acute myeloid leukemia. He gave me back to my family. None of this would have happened if not for him.

Thank you, Helge Garrels. I cannot wait to meet you.

Abbreviations

ACCU	Campesino Self-defense Forces of Córdoba and Urabá
ACR	Colombian Reintegration Agency
ARN	Agency for Reincorporation and Normalization
AUC	United Self-defense Forces of Colombia
BACRIM	emerging criminal group (generally refers to paramilitary successor organizations)
COL\$	Colombian peso
DDR	disarmament, disengagement, and reintegration
ELN	National Liberation Army
EPL	Popular Liberation Army
ETCR	Territorial Spaces for Training and Reincorporation
FARC	Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia
GAHD	Group for Humanitarian Attention to the Demobilized
IDP	internally displaced person
JEP	Special Jurisdiction for Peace
LGBTQ+	lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, plus
M-19	April 19th Movement
NGO	nongovernmental organization
PRVC	Reincorporation Program into Civilian Life
UNHCR	United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees
UP	Patriotic Union