

PART I

PUZZLE AND ARGUMENT

I

Overview

According to a family story, in 1859 two Italian brothers arrived in Argentina escaping poverty and conflict. One travel-weary brother stayed in Buenos Aires, while the other decided to make a last effort and continue upriver to Asunción, Paraguay. This neighboring country had been politically stable for decades, was known for its superior security forces and public education system, and flourished economically. In Argentina, on the other hand, the rulers of Buenos Aires refused to accept the constitution and the authority of the capital, Paraná. Tellingly, after the defeat of Buenos Aires in the Battle of Cepeda, the son of the Paraguayan president had arrived to mediate the Argentine conflict. Considering the relative ability of these governments to enforce rules and deliver services – their *state capacity*, in short – it would have seemed the second brother had made a smarter choice by continuing his travels.

By the end of that century, however, Argentina had consolidated a strong state that could exert authority across its expansive territory and population. Buenos Aires, now its capital, received more immigrants than any other port in the Americas besides New York and was the hub of a dense railway network transporting agricultural produce sufficient to generate a per capita product comparable to that of the United Kingdom. Literacy rates in Argentina were now the highest in Latin America and twice as high as in Paraguay, where the state had become weak, plunging the country into poverty and conflict. Because the gap between Argentina and Paraguay persisted, my great-great-grandfather who stayed in Buenos Aires proved lucky, but why?

State capacity is fundamental for development and peace. Capable states able to enforce the rule of law and provide public goods and services can set countries on a stable path toward economic growth and social development. Yet, as the preceding paragraphs illustrate, state capacity varies widely across countries, even within the same world region. What causes these disparities in state capacity? And why do countries – sometimes even neighbors such

as Paraguay and Argentina – switch places, change trajectories, and find themselves on opposing state-building paths?

According to the existing literature, one factor stands out as the most powerful explanation for state building: war (Tilly, 1990). To mobilize armies, states had to concentrate authority, collect tribute, suppress dissidents, and develop efficient administrations. Even public roads, education, and healthcare seem to have originated primarily for the fulfillment of military needs. In the process of fighting wars, states became stronger, and those states that failed to keep up disappeared. This logic is quite compelling, and, indeed, it does not take an encyclopedic knowledge of history to see the pattern. Normative concerns aside, it must be admitted that, intuitively, if violence is not the mother of the state, it must have been at least its midwife. Those who fail to see this should be considered, as Max Weber (1994, 362) put it, political infants.

Yet history is not so linear. Wars are full of examples of aborted mobilization, weaker states resulting victorious, and losers that fail to disappear. In the War of the Triple Alliance (1864–1870), for example, notwithstanding its superior state capacity and greater wartime mobilization, and having almost forced Argentina, Brazil, and Uruguay to surrender after the Battle of Curupaití, Paraguay was finally defeated. However, despite having lost what was arguably the deadliest international war in the entire world from 1815 to 1914, the Paraguayan state did not disappear. What is more, the divergence in state capacity between the contenders did not develop during the war, nor immediately after Paraguay's demographic collapse and occupation, but during the several decades that followed. In short, the most capable state lost the war, the state that lost the war survived, and most of the effects of warfare on the state capacity of both the losers and the winners manifested long after the war. These three observations do not fit our current understanding of how wars make states and require a new theory that emphasizes the contingency of war outcomes and how they affect the state in a postwar period.

In this book, I advance a more complete understanding of how wars make states, which allows me to make sense of cases that seemed hitherto unexplained. I argue that states facing the threat of international war are forced to mobilize large armies and strengthen their bureaucracy to support them, but this is only an initial phase of a longer and more complex process triggered by war. Wartime state building develops in a state of exception, its long-term stability being therefore contingent on the unforeseeable outcome of the war. Winners will typically consolidate and enlarge their wartime political coalitions and see their states strengthen in the postwar era. Losers, on the other hand, will usually see their statist politicians, bureaucrats, and military officers fall into disgrace and, with those actors excluded from power, will experience protracted declines in state capacity.

This logic provides a better explanation for the relative capacity of states across the world today, the rigidity of state-building trajectories, and why historical turns happened when they did. It also illuminates why (re)building

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states after military defeat has been difficult, why defeated states can only be rebuilt in the presence of new external threats, and why the wars of today – where both winners and losers survive – have contradictory effects on state building. Most importantly, however, this book brings war back into our discussions about the state in a world where war itself is back.

The idea that “war made the state and the state made war” (Tilly, 1975, 42), on which I elaborate, has been largely validated by research in fields ranging from anthropology to economic theory. Variations of this approach have been used to explain state formation from prehistory (Carneiro, 1970; Boix, 2015) to modern Europe (Downing, 1993; Ertman, 1997), including the oldest state alive, China, which was born out of a period of “warring states” in the third century BC (Hui, 2005; see also Fukuyama, 2011; Dincecco and Wang, 2018). In regions like Africa (Bates, 2014; Herbst, 2014; Sharman, 2023), Latin America (Centeno, 2002; Thies, 2005), and parts of the Middle East (Lustick, 1997; Jung, 2006) less stringent interstate warfare seems to account for the existence of relatively less capable states (Migdal, 1988, 273; Desch, 1996, 242). No competing explanation of state formation comes even close in empirical breadth and explanatory power.

Nonetheless, this *bellicist theory* of state formation has faced considerable criticism as of late. These objections have been normative, logical, and empirical. Normatively, bellicism has been called into question by scholars who see it as a Trojan horse for social Darwinism and fascist ideas.¹ Logically, it has been criticized for extrapolating from the history of successful states in a functionalistic manner and without paying much attention to agency and contingency.² Perhaps, more importantly, many have convincingly argued that the theory can no longer account for empirical trends in a world where conquest has virtually disappeared (Tir et al., 1998; Zacher, 2001, 218; Atzili, 2011, 24), states rarely die (Lake and O’Mahony, 2004, 703; Fazal, 2011, 29), wars cannot be won anymore (Chowdhury, 2018), and warfare has become infrequent (Taylor and Botea, 2008, 33; Goertz et al., 2016, 92; Lee, 2020, 6–8).

Put together, these normative, logical, and empirical concerns have operated as a strong argument against the theory, facilitating its portrayal

¹ The normative critique often focuses on the political and propagandistic tergiversations of this so-called German school of state formation (Mann, 1988, 2; Hui, 2017, 268). Pieces that seem to suggest the virtues of letting states fight (Herbst, 2004, 316; see also Cohen et al., 1981) continue to give bellicists a bad name.

² Some versions of the paradigm asking “Why did the European states eventually converge on different variants of the national states?” (Tilly, 1990, 5) are arguably guilty of extrapolating back into the past based on the end result of the process. This is exacerbated when the paradigm takes the form of a natural selection argument (Spruyt, 2001) whereby only the states that developed large armies, efficient bureaucracies, and extractive capacities were able to survive. When (unobservable) “dead” states are assumed to have lacked the attributes of the survivors, bellicists incur an *ad hoc ergo propter hoc* fallacy (Spruyt, 2017, 86), which craves to be amended by (re)incorporating contingency – in particular that of the outcomes of war – into the theory.

as “Eurocentric and inapplicable to non-European contexts” (Hui, 2017, 268). For most social scientists nowadays, wars might have formed states in modern Europe, but “state formation and warfare did not go hand in hand in other regions” (Grzymala-Busse, 2023, 1). Such a situation urgently calls for a serious reevaluation of bellicist theory.

In this book I go back to the classics of bellicist theory and extract two main lessons from them, which will hopefully breathe new life into the paradigm: These scholars did not endorse an evolutionary understanding of bellicist theory that requires states to fight to the death (Sharman, 2015, 201) and were mainly concerned with the lingering effects of the outcomes of war in a postwar period. Their more holistic version of the theory integrated pre and postwar dynamics in a way that resolves all three issues highlighted earlier and explains patterns of state formation even in what is considered to be the hardest case for the theory: Latin America.

1.1 THE STATE OF BELLICIST THEORY IN LATIN AMERICA

Latin America has become the poster child of the “antibellicist” camp in the state formation literature. Paradoxically born out of pioneering works exploring the nuances of the European-inspired bellicist paradigm in the region (Centeno, 1997, 2002; López-Alves, 2000; Thies, 2005), more recent studies of Latin America have taken a strong stance against the paradigm, arguing that war could be financed by external substitutes for domestic taxation (Queralt, 2022) and was not frequent or severe enough to have produced state capacity (Kurtz, 2013; Saylor, 2014; Soifer, 2015; Mazzuca, 2021).

In his celebrated work *Latin American State Building in Comparative Perspective*, Marcus Kurtz (2013, 35) set up the foundations of this new anti-bellicist consensus, discarding the “conflict-centric” approach to Latin America on the basis that the region features only “some interstate conflict of a severe character.” Instead he proposes that state building in the nineteenth century depended on the existence of free labor and the elites’ disposition to delegate political authority.

In *State Building in Boom Times*, Ryan Saylor (2014, 52) also argues that “outside of Europe the relative lack of warfare has severed a chief pathway to new state capacity.” He observes that Latin America “features little warfare” and did not develop extractive capacity because states “could generally fund their activities with foreign aid and loans” and “depended on customs duties for revenue.” He alternatively suggests that states are born out of commodity booms and specific patterns of elite competition.

Hillel Soifer also dismisses the “bellic approach” in *State Building in Latin America*, concluding that “in trying to understand variation among Latin American states in the nineteenth century the overall absence of war in the region cannot be helpful” (Soifer, 2015, 18). Since “war did not make states in Latin America” (Soifer, 2015, 202) and “is better seen as a crucible that tests

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the state rather than as a forge that *makes* the state” (Soifer, 2015, 235),³ he proposes that liberal elites in countries with a single urban hub consolidated states when the deployment of central bureaucrats to the peripheries was possible.

In his groundbreaking work *Latecomer State Formation*, Sebastián Mazzuca (2021, 38) writes that “Kurtz, Saylor, and Soifer rightly dismiss the war-led path.” For him, while “western European leaders of state formation were war-makers, their Latin American counterparts should be considered market-makers” (Mazzuca, 2021, 8). Since the *Pax Britannica* eliminated international anarchy, a key scope condition of bellicist theory, to understand “trade-led” state building, Mazzuca points instead to the preferences and strategies of commercial elites, *caudillos*, and political parties.

Finally, in *Pauned States*, Didac Queralt (2022) builds strongly on evidence from nineteenth-century Latin America to conclude that war did not make states in world peripheries during the nineteenth century. Although he differentiates himself by admitting that “war in the nineteenth century in the global periphery was bigger, longer, and more frequent than usually understood” (Queralt, 2022, 2), he reproduces the antibellicist argument according to which “it did not translate into stronger states because it was disproportionally financed with external capital” (Queralt, 2022, 13).

These authors illustrate a new consensus (Thies, 2022) that has been highly influential on those who discard the value of bellicist theory beyond Europe (Hui, 2017; Grzymala-Busse, 2023) but does little justice to studies of Latin America, the findings of which align with the theory (Thies, 2005; Cardenas, 2010) and suggest that we should give war a chance.

One problem of the current antibellicist consensus is that it builds strongly on the *argumentum ab auctoritate*, according to which “[Miguel] Centeno has shown that this [bellicist] argument does not apply to Latin America” (Soifer, 2015, 204; see also Kurtz, 2013, 22; Saylor, 2014, 52; Mazzuca, 2021, 36; Queralt, 2022, 5). Indeed, Centeno (2002) popularized the idea that the current relative weakness of Latin American states can be explained by the absence of total warfare in the region and the use of custom tariffs and external financial assistance – instead of income taxes – to fight limited wars (see also Rouquié, 1987, 61; Centeno, 1997). Yet his reference to total warfare and income taxes suggests Centeno wrote mostly with the twentieth century in mind. In fact, he explicitly recognizes the importance of war in explaining intraregional variation in state capacity during the nineteenth century.⁴ Put differently, Centeno focused on a broad regional comparison with Europe across two centuries, but he never discarded war as an important factor

³ Emphases present in the original.

⁴ For example, he admits that “war did have some of the expected results in Latin America. As in Europe, it often led to the destruction of the losing side. At least in three cases (Peru in the 1880s, Mexico in the 1850s, and Paraguay after 1870) war led to the practical elimination of the state as an entity. Among winners (Argentina and Brazil in the 1870s) war led to an increase in the

driving differences *within* Latin America, particularly during the nineteenth century.

This observation gains greater significance when considering that the entire body of academic literature on state formation in Latin America uniformly identifies the late nineteenth century as the pivotal period for the emergence and consolidation of national states in this region (Oszlak, 1981, 19). This historical turn was pioneered by James Mahoney (2003, 2010), who noted that the ranking of social and economic development in Latin America changed notably in the late nineteenth century and rigidified afterward. Indeed, the authors of the recent Latin American antibellicist consensus start with the observation that “the hierarchies of political development” in the region have “remained strikingly stable over long periods of time” (Kurtz, 2013, 16–17) and refer to the nineteenth century as a critical juncture that set states onto path-dependent trajectories (see also Soifer, 2015, 15; Mazzuca, 2021, 40).

Current scholarship has missed three important implications of this historical insight, all of which point to war as a key variable explaining state formation. First, the weaker states of today might be the result of the conspicuous absence of international wars during the twentieth century (Mares, 2001; Kacowicz, 2005; Schenoni et al., 2023), a period when the regional state capacity ranking effectively froze. Second, state formation took place precisely during the nineteenth century – in particular its second half – when we know the most severe wars were waged.⁵ Third, this scholarship fails to explain the fundamental inversion of the state capacity ranking that sent colonial centers to the bottom and peripheries to the top. Mahoney (2010, 190) himself suggested that to completely resolve this puzzle, “attention in the search for causes must gravitate toward interstate warfare.” Following this advice, one cannot help but notice that the victorious and defeated states of nineteenth-century wars are those at the top and bottom of the current state capacity ranking, respectively.

These macroscopic observations indicate that war may have played a crucial role in the emergence of the Latin American state.

size of government” (Centeno, 1997, 1571). Centeno then adds Chile in the 1880s as another example of victory leading to state formation.

⁵ Some scholars seem to consider that “Latin American wars were more frequent in the first decades after independence than in the second half of the nineteenth century, which was the key period of state formation in the region” (Mazzuca, 2021, 37), but this is wrong. Two-thirds of the wars and militarized interstate disputes in the region concentrate on the second half of the century. Then “one sees patterns of peace and war, intervention, territorial predation, alliances, arms-racing, and power-balancing quite similar to those found in eighteenth-century Europe” (Holsti, 1996, 153). Severe episodes like the Franco-Mexican War (1862–1867), the Paraguayan War (1864–1870), and the War of the Pacific (1879–1884) demonstrate the collapse of the *Pax Britannica* precisely during the key period of state formation in the region.

1.2 *Bellicist Theory Redux*

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1.2 BELLICIST THEORY REDUX

Many authors have noted that the reason why the bellicist approach seems unfit to explain Latin America and most of the world beyond modern Europe has to stem from an underspecification of its causal mechanisms (Spruyt, 2017, 89) and scope conditions (Vu, 2010, 153; Hui, 2017, 272).

In the social sciences, two distinct interpretations of bellicist theory are prevalent. The first one suggests that international wars lead to the expansion of armies and bureaucracies. In this view, “*preparation for war* has been the great state building activity” (Tilly, 1975, 42).⁶ The second interpretation proposes that “the mechanism of state formation resides solely in the selection of the weaker actor” (Kurtz, 2013, 32; Saylor, 2014, 200; Soifer, 2015, 233; Spruyt, 2017, 78), suggesting an evolutionist interpretation of state formation.

In short, current understandings of the theory focus on a *prewar phase* and see the outcomes of war as mere selection mechanisms. This has naturally narrowed the scope of the theory to very competitive international environments characterized by mass mobilization and frequent state death. It has also concealed how defeat and victory might have lingering effects well into the *postwar phase* by virtue of mechanisms other than selection – for example, mechanisms of adaptation and reproduction. In other words, both interpretations miss the importance of the long-term, enduring effects of the outcomes of international war. This has become a significant blind spot in the literature.

Moreover, scholars who see international war as a mechanism for killing weak states assume that war outcomes are determined by previous state capacity. This belief is wrong. Not only do major theories of war agree that “in the whole range of human activities, war most closely resembles a game of cards” (Clausewitz, 1984, 86; see Waltz, 1979, 61; Fearon, 1995, 387) but in light of empirical evidence it seems clear that state capacity does not define the outcomes of international wars (see Reiter and Stam, 2002, 58–83; Arreguin-Toft, 2005, 1–18; Biddle, 2006, 20–25; Henderson and Bayer, 2013). The fact that weak states frequently win wars simultaneously deals a fatal blow to the evolutionary understanding of bellicist theory and hints at a possible solution to the infinite regress in Tilly’s famous aphorism, “Which came first, states or wars?” (Centeno, 2002, 106). While the “War made the state and the state made war” dictum is explicitly circular, the exogeneity of war outcomes is an aspect of warfare that can be leveraged in research design.

Incorporating this insight, I propose that international wars have a compound effect on state formation. In a prewar phase and when hostilities are taking place, mobilization boosts state building by triggering the extraction–coercion cycle and the development of some wartime institutions – in particular

⁶ The emphasis is mine. Note that bellicist theory is about international wars and not civil wars (Slater, 2010, 37; Schwartz, 2023, 10). This distinction is fundamentally about the type and range of mobilization they produce and is elaborated on further in Section 2.2.

those necessary to support a standing army – but the institutionalization of state building does not take place during such a state of exception, in which the law is put on hold and institutionalization remains rather thin.

Only the contingent outcomes of war can determine whether those temporary policies become institutionalized after the critical juncture and reverberate in the postwar phase. While victory consolidates the wartime political coalitions and allows these actors to continue building the state, defeat delegitimizes them, leading to the demise of wartime institutions and setting losers on a path of state weakening.

Victorious states will no doubt demilitarize once the war is over. The size of their armies is likely to shrink, and rulers will find it difficult to impose new taxes now the foreign threat has receded. However, having demonstrated their capacity to protect their citizens and property, winning states will quickly consolidate their treasuries, establish the authority of their armed forces, and widen the ranks of the state-building party, which will have overwhelming popular support. Such states will thus continue on a trajectory characterized by the provision of new services, bureaucratic expansion, and centralization.

Defeated states, on the other hand, will be severely impaired and weakened. Immediately after a war, defeated states that survive can suffer from destruction, pillaging, territorial loss, and foreign occupation. Yet once they have reached rock bottom and the storm has cleared, their capacity to enforce rules and deliver services could be restored if it was not for the collapse of state authority and the mechanisms that reproduce it. Citizens will distrust the inefficient state that could not protect them and make the military and bureaucracy responsible for their misfortune, siding instead with those who opposed the war effort and state building in the first place. Unless a new threat arises, making the state an absolute necessity again, defeated states will thus shrink and decentralize.

Notably, this story should hold in environments where states systematically survive and in those where they are more likely to die, explaining the divergent evolution of Latin American states while continuing to fit the modern European experience.

My understanding of these mechanisms is very much aligned with the process that the forefathers of bellicist theory had in mind. Pioneers of this paradigm such as Max Weber (1978) and Otto Hintze (1975) hardly mention selection mechanisms while putting a strong emphasis on military success and how victory made the state. Although the emphasis on the outcomes of war declined in his later works, Charles Tilly (1975, 42) himself ended the paragraph featuring his famous dictum by mentioning “*success in war*” as an important mechanism of state formation (see also Lemke and Carter, 2016, 501). Because the focus on postwar dynamics is particularly prominent in these classical works, I refer to my interpretation of the theory as *classical bellicist theory*.

Intuitive as it is, classical bellicist theory – in particular the idea that states lose capacity after defeat – faced the challenge of two apparent outliers in the

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postwar era: Germany and Japan. However, under the magnifying glass it is clear that such historical anomalies – and a few others such as Prussia after Jena–Auerstedt – can be explained by the effects of subsequent mobilization. Like Prussia in 1806, the German and Japanese states collapsed in 1945 and only regenerated years later with the support of the victor, because a new conflict found them on the frontline. Most states, however, rarely have the opportunity to rise from the ashes of devastating defeats via immediate post-war mobilization and are more commonly set onto declining, state-weakening trajectories – if they survive at all.

The long-term institutional effects of war outcomes that classical bellicists were interested in are far more consequential for the state than the short-term, material consequences of war. While defeat can be immediately devastating for a country, Germany and Japan illustrate how the rapid regeneration of a pro-state coalition can prevent the dismantling of key state institutions and set a country back onto a trajectory of state building and development. Yet when defeat not only entails human and material loss but the discrediting of the state as an ideal, together with the dissolution of the political coalition that supports it, the dismantling of state institutions is likely to take place, leading to a rigid trajectory of state weakening and the development problems associated with this.

When understood in this holistic form, the theory sheds new light on how international wars of the past can explain path-dependent state-building trajectories now, affecting economic development, democracy, and other relevant outcomes (Mahoney, 2010). Because wars can both strengthen and weaken the state depending on their highly contingent outcomes, this interpretation of the theory provides a solid response to normative and functionalist critiques. Normatively, it sees war as a double-edged sword, both creating and destroying states. Logically, it does not assume that states strengthened because they performed a specific function (Spruyt, 2017) and points to agency and contingency as key forces determining both the shape of state institutions and their success. As Michael Mann (1993, 55) puts it, classical bellicist theory provides “an institutional, not a functional definition of the state,” which is very much in line with historical institutionalism.

Moreover, the incorporation of postwar trends *can* “explain the development of states in a world in which war to the death is not the state of nature” (Kurtz, 2013, 35) by focusing on the effect of minor shocks such as those produced by militarized interstate disputes short of war, or providing some insights into the marginal mutations that take place when competitive pressure is milder, as in the case of rivalries (Thies, 2005). When such nuances are incorporated, classical bellicist theory improves our understanding of state formation in nineteenth-century Latin America in at least three ways.

To begin with, the focus on the outcomes of war easily satisfies the “Occam’s razor” criterion, as it offers the most parsimonious explanation for the diversity in state capacity trajectories. In contrast, other competing explanations rely