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## PART I

## I

## Violence Against Civilians During Civil Wars

## 1.1 PUZZLE AND STATE OF THE ART

Between mid-July 1936 and February 1939, for nearly the entire duration of the Spanish Civil War, La Cerdanya, a region in northern Catalonia bordering France, was under the control of the Republican (also called Loyalist) army. Between July 1936 and May 1937, anarchist militiamen patrolled the area, under the leadership of Antonio Martín, nicknamed *Cojo de Málaga*. In Puigcerdà, the county town, the anarchists executed over 30 individuals, while some kilometers away, in the second largest village of the county, Bellver de Cerdanya, significantly fewer were executed: three. In Das, a tiny village of 200 inhabitants located a few kilometers from Puigcerdà, the militia executed four citizens; over the same period, in Llívia, a village of a similar size, located at a similar distance from Puigcerdà, not a single civilian was assassinated. Why did the anarchist militiamen kill civilians behind the frontlines, and why did they carry out executions in some places and not others? The two most prominent explanations of civil war violence point to factors such as the degree of military contestation and the organizational characteristics of groups. These explanations are insufficient to explain the violence that was carried out by the anarchists in La Cerdanya: during this period there was no combat in this area and the Nationalist (also called Francoist or rebel) army had no presence in this area, so this violence was not the result of military competition between armed forces. At the same time, the militias patrolling this area were all composed of the same men and led by the same person, so the (undisciplined) nature of the armed organization cannot really account for this variation either.

When the Franco-led coup failed and the civil war broke out between rebels and loyalists, anarchists and communists – who were on the loyalist side – were eager to seize the moment and start “the Revolution” in Spain. For some of these left-wing militants, eliminating counterrevolutionaries was a necessary

measure to accomplish the ultimate goal of the revolution. But, most importantly, eliminating them was regarded as a crucial measure in a civil war in which both sides were highly mobilized and right-wingers could easily develop into a military threat. A parallel process, and one that was overall more brutal, took place in territories controlled by the rebels: right-wing militiamen and soldiers persecuted those suspected of supporting the Republican government and/or left-wing (e.g., communist, anarchist) organizations. Leftists in rear-guard territories represented not only a political but also a military threat, and hence it was thought that they had to be eliminated in order to promote the counterrevolutionary cause.

The anarchist militiamen patrolling territories behind the war frontlines sought the elimination of right-wingers. However, they did not kill them all, and they did not kill right-wingers in the same proportion throughout the territory because they found diverging levels of collaboration across localities, which constrained or enhanced their capacity to carry out assassinations. For example, in Puigcerdà, where the anarchists managed to establish political control of the locality at the beginning of the civil war, local political elites and other citizens were cooperative with the militiamen: they informed on the location of the right-wingers and did not try to prevent their execution. Members of the local council even arrested some of these individuals, who were later executed by the militia. In Bellver de Cerdanya, in contrast, the local political authorities confronted the anarchists and they limited the capacity of the militias to undertake violent actions against the inhabitants of this locality. Similar dynamics took place at the other side of the frontline, namely, in rebel-controlled territory: local political elites collaborated to varying degrees with the military and paramilitary forces that patrolled the areas in search of leftists. Local priests, landlords, and members of the Falange, among others, were crucial collaborators of right-wing armed forces in those zones, but their degree of collaboration varied across localities: in some places they were more bloody than in others.

Although the agents of violence were the armed militiamen and soldiers, the actions of local civilians significantly influenced the level of violence exercised across Spanish municipalities during the civil war. I argue that these local actions were highly determined by local political dynamics, which would have an impact on how strongly local political elites would want to see the political enemies in their localities eliminated. In particular, greater levels of political competition between the Left and the Right at the local level led to greater levels of collaboration with the militias, and thus to greater levels of violence. For example, local competition was much greater in Puigcerdà – where the Left had won the national elections held in February 1936 with a narrow margin – than in Bellver de Cerdanya – where the Left was much more hegemonic. In other words, local political elites had more incentives to use violence against political enemies in the former village than in the latter.

## 1.2 Summary of the Argument

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Civil wars are not static phenomena, and endogenous dynamics are likely to emerge during the course of the conflict. In areas that were conquered by an armed group (for example, the Francoists), the actions of local civilians were largely influenced by preceding events and by the rival group's behavior up to then: local civilians were then willing to collaborate with Francoist authorities to settle scores with those having perpetrated violence against their peers. Due to revenge, local collaboration was higher (and thus levels of violence were overall greater) in places where an armed group had been more violent in the recent past. Revenge dynamics played a critical role in non-initial phases of the civil war. In a nutshell, in this book I posit that violence against civilians during internal war can be explained by dynamics of *rivalry* and *revenge*.

### 1.2 SUMMARY OF THE ARGUMENT

Why do armed groups kill noncombatants in the rearguard territories like the one described above? In other words, why do groups target civilians in areas that they control militarily, where they do not face direct military threats? From the point of view of military strategy, we would not expect to see violence in these areas of full military control, and yet it very often takes place. Contrary to many explanations of violence, which focus on either military or organizational factors, I argue that *political factors* are crucial in understanding violence against civilians: on the one hand, political mobilization at the national level makes armed groups wary of noncombatants with strong ideological positions, and sparks their persecution. On the other hand, political configurations determine the extent to which there is local collaboration with armed groups in the elimination of these individuals.

Firstly, I argue that the perpetration of violence against civilians follows a process of political mobilization, which I understand as the activation of political identities such that they push individuals to political action. According to Tilly, “‘Mobilization’ conveniently identifies the process by which a group goes from being a passive collection of individuals to an active participant in public life” (1978: 69). I posit that armed groups are likely to perpetrate violence against civilians when there are significant levels of prewar mobilization, which leads to violence based on public identities. When there is political mobilization, supporters of the enemy are perceived as threatening because such active supporters can promote resistance movements, including armed resistance, and they can provide key information to the enemy (i.e., acting as fifth-columnists). Because of mobilization, political identities become a cue for armed groups to detect potential threats in their control areas. By contrast, armed groups do not perceive threats in their areas of control in the context of civil wars where no major political mobilization has occurred during the prewar period. Why is prewar mobilization (and not wartime mobilization) relevant? Once the war starts, mobilization can mostly be undertaken by the armed group militarily

controlling a given territory, so individuals cannot easily grow as supporters of the rival. Also, individuals have rational incentives to behave as if they are supporters of the group that exerts a military controls upon them (and groups know it).<sup>1</sup> In addition, armed groups do not perceive threats if the territory is fully segregated and there are no enemies plausibly residing behind the armed group's frontlines. Since complete segregation is rare, what matters most is whether the rival group has managed to mobilize politically in one's territory before the conflict's outbreak.<sup>2</sup> In short, in this book I argue that significant prewar mobilization is a precondition for violence against civilians in areas of full military control by armed groups in conflict.<sup>3</sup>

Secondly, not everywhere where the locals have been mobilized is there violence: this varies with the distribution of political identities at the local level. I propose a distinction between *indirect* and *direct* violence against civilians, and I argue that the distribution of political identities relates differently with respect to each of these types. These differences emanate from their diverging form of production: indirect violence is perpetrated with heavy weapons (e.g., tanks, fighter planes) and is unilaterally carried out by the armed group, while direct violence is perpetrated with small weapons (e.g., machetes, handguns, rifles) and is produced by armed groups in collaboration with local civilians. Indeed, despite the fact that militiamen or soldiers are the ones inflicting direct violence, local civilians can either constrain or enhance their killing capacity. Direct violence is thus not only driven by the armed group's motives, but also by civilians' motives. By contrast, indirect violence is mostly driven by an armed group's tactical and strategic motives because armed groups do not generally need civilian collaboration to carry out this type of violence.

When a territory is not militarily contested by a rival armed group, I argue that local civilians, and particularly local political elites, tend to think in strategic terms about who is going to have political control over the locality in the future (i.e., after the war) and they promote direct violence in places where killings are going to have an impact on the local balance of power, in a way that benefits them. It follows that civilians push for killings of their local enemies in places where the distribution of support between groups approaches parity. Killing people is accompanied by costs, but in the margin it produces "net benefits" for the local elites in places where the groups are more or less equally supported. This is why we are likely to observe more killings in contexts of

<sup>1</sup> In other words, individuals have incentives to "falsify their preferences" (Kuran 1994).

<sup>2</sup> The existence of potential threats within armed groups' areas of control is one of the main differences between civil wars and interstate wars. The exceptions are countries with non-core groups that enjoy support from an external rival (Mylonas 2012) or foreign nationals in conquered areas, in the context of wars of annexation (Downes 2008).

<sup>3</sup> As I will show in Chapter 7, at the national level, political mobilization accounts for variation in levels of violence between different countries and hence serves to explain why some civil wars are bloodier than others. However, the main focus of the book is the subnational level.

## 1.2 Summary of the Argument

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political parity or competition.<sup>4</sup> Conversely, local political elites do not push for killings when their group has overwhelming support (i.e., violence is not necessary to change the already favorable *status quo*) or when their group is in a situation of minority (i.e., violence cannot change the state of affairs without being too costly). In consequence, we are likely to observe less violence in such contexts of non-parity between groups.

Where territory is militarily contested – for example, near the frontlines – the incentives of local civilians are different, though: local supporters of an armed group are more likely to collaborate in the persecution of defectors, regardless of local political configurations. Because they care about the outcome of the civil war, politically mobilized local civilians and political elites collaborate to maximize the odds of securing the territory by the armed group they sympathize with. In other words, when the territory is contested, military considerations trump political strategy.

Indirect violence follows a different logic, again, because civilians are less relevant in the production of this type of violence. And yet politics is still relevant to the understanding of indirect targeting of civilians through bombings and shellings. In addition to being instrumental in diminishing the enemy's military capacity and breaking the will to fight (Pape 1996; Arreguín-Toft 2001; Downes 2008), I argue that airstrikes and artillery shelling are also utilized to eliminate supporters of the enemy. When civilians are mobilized, armed groups tend to “indirectly” target rearguard locations with high concentrations of enemy supporters, with the purpose of eliminating them.<sup>5</sup>

This book puts a lot of weight on civilian agency in explaining wartime violence, and particularly, direct violence against noncombatants.<sup>6</sup> Indeed, while tactical and strategic considerations on the side of the armed group are relevant in explaining violence of all types, strategic considerations on the part of the civilians must also be taken into account when it comes to explaining direct violence, which is perpetrated jointly by armed groups and local civilians. Moreover, I argue that civilian collaboration with armed groups is rooted in factors that are exogenous to the war, namely prewar local political configurations, but that such collaboration is also shaped by events that are endogenous to the war such as denunciations, executions or massacres. These wartime events lead to emotions such as anger, which often lead to a desire for revenge. In other words, as the civil war unfolds, individuals seek to settle scores against those who have victimized their relatives and friends. The latter makes direct violence both more likely and more intense in places where there has been greater victimization in previous periods of the war

<sup>4</sup> Hereafter I will use the terms “parity” and “competition” interchangeably.

<sup>5</sup> Also, in areas of military contestation, groups might use indirect violence in order to cause displacement and carry out cleansing of territories, as this can facilitate their conquest (Downes 2008; Balcells and Steele 2016).

<sup>6</sup> The terms “civilian” and “noncombatant” are used interchangeably in the book.

(i.e., when the rival group had control of the territory) because armed groups find greater levels of collaboration. Revenge also makes indirect violence more likely in places where the enemy has treated one's constituents harshly: armed groups can use bombings as a means to punish these localities. Political strategy motivations are expected to have a greater relevance during the early stages of civil war and revenge motivations to gain more relevance as the war develops.<sup>7</sup>

### Politics in Violence

This book ultimately tries to answer the question of why civilians are victimized during armed conflict. This is an important question that has serious policy implications in a world in which civil wars leave a significant civilian death toll. In Iraq, for example, the Iraq Body Count project estimated between 151,836 and 171,640 civilian deaths from violence from 2003 up to June 2015. In Syria, the Violations Documentation Center estimated over 85,400 civilian deaths from March 2011 up to September 2015, while the Syrian Center for Policy Research has estimated a total of 400,000 deaths from violence (including civilians and combatants) up to February 2016.

The question of civilian victimization has been at the forefront of recent war studies. Although a first generation of scholars, following Clausewitz (1832/1968) and Schmitt (1976), regarded violent conflicts as the result of existing political cleavages and violence as the consequence of these divisions, recent empirical research on conflict has pointed instead to the military incentives of armed groups (Valentino et al. 2004; Kalyvas 2006; Downes 2008), the survival incentives of (self-interested) civilians (Kalyvas 2006; Berman et al. 2011) or the organizational characteristics of the groups (Mkandawire 2002; Humphreys and Weinstein 2006; Weinstein 2007). There has been a tendency to assume that, despite the influence of politics at the outbreak of a conflict, the internal dynamics of war are usually driven by factors that are not inherently political. In other words, the factors that lead to the outbreak of war have been regarded as different from the determinants of violence within war. The latter body of research has de-emphasized political variables despite the fact that civil wars are usually fought over political issues, e.g., demands for self-determination and regime or leadership change.<sup>8</sup>

My theory brings political variables back to the fore to explain violence perpetrated against civilians during conflict. The neglect of political variables has

<sup>7</sup> Note that this framework is consistent with the idea that the dynamics of violence in civil wars of long duration tend to lose much of their ideological bearings over time and that violence is likely to become driven mostly by non-ideological and vengeful motives.

<sup>8</sup> See, for instance, Gurr (1970, 2000); Horowitz (1985); Bates (1999); Hechter (2001); Sambanis (2001); Reynal-Querol (2002); Toft (2003); Montalvo and Reynal-Querol (2005); Cederman et al. (2011); Wimmer (2012).

## 1.2 *Summary of the Argument*

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been partly motivated by the diagnosis of a so-called “political bias” (Kalyvas 2006) in the first wave of violence studies, which conceived violence purely as the continuation of politics by other means. This neglect has been aggravated by economic approaches to conflict, which often interpret violence as the mere byproduct of greedy motivations on the part of combatants (Azam and Hoeffler 2002; Azam 2006; Hegre et al. 2007; Metelits 2010; Dube and Vargas 2013) whose political goals are heavily discounted.<sup>9</sup> This book includes political factors in a rationalist approach to wartime violence, in which civilian agency and the strategic goals of local political elites are crucial for explaining violent outcomes.

### A Local Level Approach

Recent research has made it increasingly clear that, both from a theoretical and an empirical perspective, the study of intentional violence against civilians requires a local-level approach.<sup>10</sup> This approach is the most appropriate to understand the interactions leading to violent outcomes during civil war. Whereas other administrative or judicial levels (e.g., province or region) may be relevant from an institutional perspective, the “intimate” character of violence (Kalyvas 2006) underscores the relevance of the locality, the lowest space of political interaction among individuals.<sup>11</sup> In the context of a local political community, civilians have leverage over the armed groups because they hold relevant information and they have bonds that allow coordinated actions with respect to the armed actors (Petersen 2001; Wood 2003; Arjona 2016).<sup>12</sup>

In addition, at the theoretical level, a local-level approach is consistent with a micro-level explanation of the phenomenon of violence, which takes the locus of agency to be concrete individuals and not abstract entities such as ethnic or political groups.<sup>13</sup> At the empirical level, measurement error and omitted variable bias can be minimized by taking the locality as the unit of analysis.

<sup>9</sup> Referring to African insurgencies, Mkandawire writes: “Regrettably, the recent focus on the means of financing rebel movements and the failure of most movements to coherently articulate, let alone achieve, their proclaimed objectives have encouraged an easy dismissal of the politics of such movements and an inclination towards economic, cultural and militaristic interpretations of the conflicts” (2002: 182–183).

<sup>10</sup> See, for example, Petersen (2001); Wood (2003); Gagnon (2004); Kalyvas (2006); Weinstein (2007); Fujii (2009); Condra and Shapiro (2012); Arjona (2016).

<sup>11</sup> In Rwanda, Jason Stearns argues that the local dimensions to the conflict (as opposed to the national and regional dimensions) resulted in perhaps the greatest bloodshed (2011: 8).

<sup>12</sup> According to Taylor, the community is “a space where there are direct relations between members, where people have many-sided relations, and where there is reciprocity, rough equality of material conditions, and a common set of beliefs and values” (cited in Petersen 2001: 16).

<sup>13</sup> As Lee Ann Fujii puts it, “Examining the social dimensions of genocide also helps to locate agency at the microlevel, rather than assuming it away or assigning it to whole groups of actors, such as ‘the Hutu’ or ‘the masses’ ” (2009: 20).



## Warfare and Violence in Civil Wars

Since Fearon and Laitin's influential article (2003), the literature on civil wars has tended to equate all civil wars with insurgencies or guerrilla wars fought between a weak rebel group and a strong state. To cite some examples of this common view, Jeremy Weinstein argues that rebel groups "tend to employ guerrilla warfare as a strategy against government forces" (Weinstein 2007: 203); Lisa Hultman argues that "internal conflicts are characterized by asymmetry: the rebels are the weak contenders that challenge the central power" (2007: 208); Jean-Paul Azam states that "regimented wars are an image of the past" (2006: 53). This understanding of civil war has recently been questioned, as it has been shown that irregular wars are not the only type of contemporary civil war. If we distinguish civil wars by their "Technologies of Rebellion," we can identify three types: conventional, irregular, and symmetric non-conventional (thereafter, also SNC). Conventional civil wars have clear frontlines, attacks are waged mostly from barricades and stable positions, and major battles occur that usually determine the final outcome.<sup>14</sup> Irregular (or guerrilla) civil wars are wars in which the state army faces guerrilla forces that typically avoid direct confrontation and hide among the civilian population; there are no clear frontlines in an irregular war, which is generally characterized by military asymmetry between the two sides. Symmetric non-conventional civil wars are wars in which two irregular armies face each other across a frontline equivalent and they consist primarily of raids (Kalyvas 2005; Kalyvas and Balcells 2010). Although a majority (53%) of civil wars between 1944 and 2004 were irregular, a significant number of civil wars (33%) were fought conventionally, including civil wars such as those that began in Nigeria and Congo in 1967, Lebanon in 1975, and Angola in 1975. In the post-Cold War period (i.e., 1991–2004), almost 48 percent of civil wars were conventional; this includes wars such as those that began in Bosnia, Croatia, and Georgia in 1992, and Côte d'Ivoire in 2002 (Kalyvas and Balcells 2010).<sup>15</sup>

In conventional civil wars, there is military symmetry between the two sides and there is unopposed control in the areas behind the frontlines; except for zones that are extremely close to the frontline, control over the population by

<sup>14</sup> In an "ideal" case of conventional war, two armies go to battle in a front manner, but sometimes it is the case that one of the sides is not organized as an army for the total duration of the conflict.

<sup>15</sup> According to Duyvesteyn, "The concept of conventional war has without much consideration been marginalized and sometimes even neglected as a concept for analysis, in particular in wars occurring in collapsed states" (2005: 65). Duyvesteyn continues, "there seems to be strong biases toward regarding conventional war as a form of war that is Western, modern, uses high-technology weapons, and is relatively clean. There are strong prejudices at work in the preferred way of seeing this kind of war. Such prejudice does injustice to some striking conventional features of wars in the developing world that hitherto have been categorized as guerrilla struggles" (2005: 79).

### 1.3 *Theoretical Strategy*

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armed groups is overwhelming in all the localities in their zone. By contrast, in irregular civil wars, areas of total control are much scarcer, smaller, and less stable. In irregular wars, violence against civilians is more often the result of the warfare and the competition to take territory (Mao Zedong 1978; Valentino et al. 2004; Kalyvas 2006; Vargas 2009) than in conventional wars, where this violence cannot be so connected to the military struggle and it often takes place in areas far from the battlefield. Theories of civilian victimization should take into consideration such differences between wars, and they should be careful when applying explanations that have been inspired primarily by one particular type (i.e., irregular) to all civil war settings.

This book focuses on conventional civil wars, but the implications are broader in scope. In a way, I use conventional civil wars as a theoretical device to explore the choices made by armed groups and civilians under the structure of incentives sharpened by this type of warfare. Yet, this incentive structure may also be found in the context of non-conventional civil wars, for example, in areas of civil wars where armed groups find no military contestation, where violence against civilians cannot really be explained by military strategy types of factors.

### 1.3 THEORETICAL STRATEGY

The research in this book is grounded on rationalist principles and methodological individualism. The theory builds on the assumption of self-interested individuals who hold rational beliefs and try to maximize their utility in carrying out a given set of actions (Elster 2007: 191–213). However, I do not consider individuals as seeking only wealth or power; the influence of emotions on human behavior will also be taken into account. As factors, emotion and reason are not necessarily divorced, given that emotions can be instrumentalized (Frank 1988). I will pay special attention to emotions such as anger, which are often a consequence of violent actions and conducive to a desire for revenge (Petersen 2011). Thus, I consider that experiences during conflict (and corresponding emotions) have an impact on individual preferences for violence and, consequently, on civil war dynamics.

While relying on a rationalist framework, I do not constrain myself to a narrow rational-choice explanation of the phenomenon under study for a number of reasons. First, pure rational-choice explanations tend to be less successful with regard to situations involving extremely high levels of stress (Maoz 1990) or when an agent's options are not fixed vis-à-vis the possible actions of others (Elster 1986: 19–2); both of these conditions are very plausible during wartime. As Roger Petersen explains, emotions, which are mechanisms that heighten the salience of a particular concern, challenge the assumption of stable preferences (Petersen 2011: 25). Second, in any social science, relying on analytic conditions that are too strict, carries the risk of generating misleading explanations (Green and Shapiro 1996; Elster 2007). Third,