

Democracy, Internal War, and State-Sponsored Mass Murder

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As the bloodiest century in human history comes to a close,¹ we have finally begun to recognize patterns in the use of state-sponsored mass murder. Evidence suggests that these large scale killings often occur in the presence or aftermath of internal wars. Moreover, some research suggests that democratic practices also play a role in reducing the likelihood of such atrocities. The interconnection between democracy, internal war, and state-sponsored mass murder is potentially one of the keys to understanding and preventing future state-directed slaughter. If we are to do so, we must first understand the crucial difference between internal wars and state-sponsored mass murder.

Definitions

Internal wars pit two or more opposing sides within the same political and geographic unit in large-scale armed conflict over the future of the state structure. Revolutions and civil wars are subsets of this larger concept of internal wars.² In a revolution, each side (government and opposition) fights to control or alter the existing state structure. *Revolutions from below*, such as the “classic” revolutions in France, Russia, and China, attempt to create more centralized, bureaucratic states, as well as to instigate radical changes in the economy and social structure.³ *Revolutions from above*, including those in Egypt in 1952 and Peru in 1968, attempt mostly social and economic changes, and only minor political reorganization.⁴ *Civil wars* can be understood loosely as armed conflicts in which the aim is primarily political reorganization. *Separatist conflicts* are a subset of civil wars in which one side wishes to rule the state from a unified center, while another side seeks to split the state, and rule the remainder from a second center of power. Both the U.S. Civil War and the Biafran War exemplify separatist conflicts that escalate to a full-scale internal war.⁵ In all of these cases, multiple claims to sovereignty exist throughout the duration of the internal war.⁶

State-sponsored mass murder is a lethal policy carried out by the state against its own people.⁷ This includes the more widely used term genocide as well as

the more recent term *politicide*. *Genocides* are mass killings in which the victims are defined by association with a particular communal group. *Politicides* are mass killings in which victims are defined primarily in terms of their hierarchical position or political opposition to the regime and dominant groups.⁸ The latter term distinguishes cases of primarily politically-motivated killings and disappearances, such as those in Chile, Argentina, El Salvador, and Guatemala,⁹ from the slaughter primarily based on religion or ethnic identity in the Holocaust or the Armenian Genocide in Turkey.¹⁰

Many instances of mass killing are some mix of the two types, in which some groups are targeted based on political affiliation or activity, and some based on communal identity. For example, The Khmer Rouge killed Buddhist Monks and ethnic Chams, but also eradicated Cambodians living on the eastern border with Vietnam for fear that spies had infiltrated the region.¹¹ In Uganda, Idi Amin targeted political opponents, but also killed Karamojong, Acholi, Lango, and members of the Catholic clergy. And in Indonesia in the 1960s, both ethnic Chinese and members of the Communist party were slaughtered.¹² Regardless of target type, in cases of genocide or politicide there is intent on the part of the aggressor to destroy the target group "in whole or in part."¹³

There are significant differences between internal wars and state sponsored mass murder. The former are large-scale conflicts with two or more actively participating sides. The latter is a policy used by one side (usually the state) against a target group.¹⁴ The goal of an internal war is to capture the state and manipulate it to serve the victor's aims. The goal of state-sponsored mass murder is to eliminate the opposition from existence. Both can occur simultaneously, but need not. There have been internal wars absent state-sponsored mass murder, such as the 1952 Bolivian Revolution¹⁵ or the American Civil War.¹⁶ There have also been genocides or politicides in the absence of internal war, such as a large portion of the mass killings in Stalin's Soviet Union¹⁷ or the eradication of the Ache in Paraguay.¹⁸ Nevertheless, there is a unique and deadly link between internal wars and state-sponsored mass murder, perhaps seen most clearly in recent instances in Bosnia, Rwanda, Sudan, and Kosovo. What follows is a review of the empirical findings to date, along with some speculations as to how the evidence from these studies fit together to help explain this relationship.

Internal Wars and State-Sponsored Mass Murder

Internal instability, often the result of violent conflict, reformation of national boundaries, or abrupt changes in power within the domestic political structure, creates an environment more conducive to the use of state-sponsored mass murder.¹⁹ In particular, internal wars are the most consistent predictors of the onset of state-sponsored mass murder.²⁰ Genocides and politicides

are almost always a consequence of *state failure* (defined as internal wars, adverse or disruptive regime transitions, or other genocides or politicides).²¹ Countries with at least one previous state failure are twice as likely as other countries to subsequently experience state-sponsored mass murder.²² In most cases, internal wars are the first in a complex series of events, often including other destabilizing events such as war, decolonization, or extra-constitutional changes in leadership.²³ In addition, state failures also help to account for the degree of severity of a given genocide or politicide.²⁴

One reason for this deadly relationship is that internal wars make future large scale conflict in general more likely. Internal wars strengthen the coercive arm of the state.²⁵ This, in turn, reinforces elite political cultures that favor the use of coercion in future situations. Additionally, states that experience internal wars are more likely to engage in future conflicts than other states.²⁶ Finally, states that experience internal wars are very likely to engage in political violence and human rights abuses subsequently.²⁷ In sum, internal wars, themselves violent in nature, yield regimes prone to violent means of conflict resolution, and with the enhanced resources necessary to be able to employ coercion.

For example, post-revolutionary Iran found itself with few resources besides their highly-developed coercive apparatus. The violence of the previous regime, coupled with that of the of the revolution, made future violence in support of revolutionary consolidation that much more legitimate. Adding to this atmosphere of violence was the bloody Iran-Iraq War, thrust upon the new government within the first two years of its reign. Perhaps it is no surprise, then, that the post-revolutionary Iranian regime engaged in brutal policies to suppress the opposition, including the attempted genocide of the Baha'i.²⁸

Internal wars also create the conditions that allow genocidal movements and their leaders to come to power in the first place. Leaders such as the Khmer Rouge's Pol Pot are then able to impose their radical, exclusionary ideology.²⁹ In the process they legitimize mass murder in the eyes of the populace by making it state-sponsored.³⁰ In addition, internal wars provide cover for leaders who wish to engage in genocidal practices. Leaders can espouse state-sponsored killings as part of the war effort against a particular group, in the service of survival of the state or nation. Such practices are common and include well known instances, such as the Cultural Revolution in China,³¹ and lesser-known instances, such as the slaughter perpetrated by the Siad Barre regime in Somalia.³² Intentional targeted killings that take place during an internal war may go unnoticed among the usual casualties of war. And until recently leaders such as the Hutu government in Rwanda and the Milosevic regime in the former Yugoslavia assumed that the international community would be unable or unwilling to justify intervention in an internal war. If state-sponsored mass murder were hidden under cover of a messy internal conflict (perhaps based on the misleading idea of "age-old ethnic hatreds"), it would

be likely that otherwise outraged members of the international community would remain bystanders.³³

The way in which internal wars end may also affect the likelihood of genocide or politicide. Negotiated settlements to internal wars force differing groups to live together and enable them to defend themselves from each other as well. Military victories by definition enable the winner to set the terms of the post-internal war period. This may include the decision to punish the losing side by eradicating them, thereby eliminating the problem of having to live side by side with the enemy in the post-internal war state.³⁴ This was the solution chosen by the Congolese rebels who took control of what would become Zaire in the mid-1960s. In an eerie parallel, Laurent Kabila's regime appears to be doing much the same in what is now the Democratic Republic of Congo.³⁵ Thus, it should be no surprise that military victories in internal wars are more likely to be followed by a genocide or politicide than negotiated settlements. However, negotiated settlements require hard-to-reach compromises on both sides, and frequently break down once implemented. Hence, internal wars are terminated more frequently by military victories than by negotiated settlements, further increasing the odds that an internal war will be followed by state-sponsored mass murder.³⁶

Finally, the need for power consolidation in the aftermath of internal wars makes state-sponsored mass murder more likely. Post-internal war elites can and must reconsolidate power quickly and efficiently. A post-internal war regime that does not eliminate most of its opposition early on faces an increased possibility of ouster.³⁷ Hence, it is likely that during these periods the regime will brutally suppress groups that are perceived to be potential threats.³⁸ Examples of this tactic abound, including Idi Amin's targeting of Milton Obote's supporters in Uganda, or the Iranian killing of Mujahedin-e Khalq, Baha'i, Kurds, and Communists in the post-revolutionary period.³⁹

Post-internal war regimes that successfully oust their opposition early are unlikely to develop democratic institutions or norms. Without significant opposition pressuring them to liberalize the political system, these elites have little incentive to give away power, rights and privileges.⁴⁰ However, the more important link between state-sponsored mass murder, internal wars and democracy lies in the potential for democratic institutions and practices to reduce the probability of both the participation in internal wars and the use of state-sponsored mass murder. I examine these findings in the next section.

The Democracy Factor

Democracies have killed substantially fewer of their own citizens than have other forms of government.⁴¹ Rummel finds that between 1900 and 1987, democracies killed about 160,000 of their own citizens, whereas non-democratic regimes killed almost 130,000,000 of their own people, of which more than

100,000,000 were killed by Communist regimes.⁴² Rummel's central theoretical explanation for these findings is that "Power kills; absolute Power kills absolutely."⁴³

The more power a government has, the more it can act arbitrarily according to the whims and desires of the elite, and the more it will make war on others and murder its foreign and domestic subjects. The more constrained the power of governments, the more power is diffused, checked, and balanced, the less it will aggress on others and commit democide.⁴⁴

The resulting influential policy prescription, based on these findings, is that democratic states should foster democratic freedoms elsewhere in the world in order to prevent state-sponsored killings. However, outside pressure to democratize is sometimes blamed for yielding genocides and/or politicides. For example:

In Rwanda, outside pressure to democratize a minority dominated system led to majority rule which was highly authoritarian. Efforts to move toward greater minority representation then inflamed militants within the majority camp who were fearful of losing their power. This situation degenerated into genocide directed against the minority. Unfortunately, democratization was not a panacea in Rwanda, but rather a factor contributing to turmoil.⁴⁵

Despite such examples, the power concentration/regime type argument has some intuitive appeal. Previous research has found that, even within democracies, institutions that consolidate power in the hands of a single individual or party tend to be more prone to political violence.⁴⁶

However, a simple regime type or power concentration explanation is too static. It may help explain why state-sponsored mass murder occurs in a given country, but not why it may have occurred at that particular time. At least one study has concluded that while high amounts of power concentration may contribute to an environment in which the use of state-sponsored mass murder is more likely, it alone does not determine when in the history of a given state such practices will be employed. The opportunity must present itself to use murderous policies, even in the most powerful of states.⁴⁷ A more complex, dynamic explanation is required to best explain the role that democracy and power concentration plays in reducing the probability of state-sponsored mass murder.

One such alternative hypothesis is that power diffusion (as found in the most liberal democratic states) reduces the likelihood of state failure, which in turn reduces the probability of onset of state-sponsored mass murder. The discussion above suggests that the second part of this more complex hypothesis has some support. Below I examine the first link between democracies and state failure.

As expected, rich and long-standing *full democracies* are not likely to experience state failures of any kind.⁴⁸ However, *illiberal democracies*⁴⁹—usually poorer, newer democracies, with some liberal characteristics but also some

authoritarian characteristics—are three times more vulnerable to state failure than either full democracies or autocracies.⁵⁰ However, most of the state failures experienced by illiberal democracies were neither state-sponsored mass murder nor internal war, but rather “adverse or disruptive regime transitions,” or rollback of democracy. A recent example is the November 1999 coup in Pakistan, which aborted another failing attempt at democracy, but has not, as of this writing, led to retributive killings.⁵¹ Indeed, democracies are not very likely to kill their own people, nor are they likely to experience internal wars.

This may provide another insight into the interconnections between democracy, internal war, and state-sponsored mass murder. Autocracies experience significantly more years of internal war than their democratic counterparts.⁵² This should in turn lead to both greater opportunity to employ genocidal policies, and greater willingness on the part of the perpetrators. Indeed, the most recent evidence suggests that autocracies are three times as likely as other types of regimes to have state failures that include genocide or politicide.⁵³ So while new, poor, and/or illiberal democracies are prone to rollback (negative transitions), they are able to avoid other types of state failure. Yet even stable autocracies, while perhaps able to avoid regime transitions, are more likely to experience more deadly forms of state failure—internal war and state-sponsored mass murder.

Concluding Remarks

On the basis of this evidence, should we then consider Rummel’s policy prescription of fostering democracy abroad if we wish to reduce state-sponsored killings?⁵⁴ The answer is yes, but only where more than *de jure* democracy is achievable, and where it is accompanied by quality of life increases. Indicators of overall quality of life have been shown to have strong effects on the risk of state failure in democracies.⁵⁵ Democratic institutions that diffuse power are not sufficient. Democratic practices must also take hold, and must be able to provide sufficient benefits to the populace and the elites that neither wish to overturn the system. Rollback in new, poor, or illiberal democracies is far too common, and the consequences of these negative transitions can be deadly. The Rwandan example discussed earlier is but one of many. Nazi Germany rose from the ashes of the Weimar democracy. The Pinochet regime’s reign of terror began soon after the overthrow of Chile’s democratically elected Allende government. If democracy is to be espoused as a possible direct avenue to a reduction in state-sponsored killings, every care must be taken to insure that the benefits of democracy enjoyed by those in its most successful incarnations are also enjoyed by its new adherents. To not do so would be irresponsibly inviting disaster.

Democracy may have a direct negative effect on state-sponsored killings, but only when rollback can be avoided. Democracy also has an indirect im-

pact, via its effect on the likelihood of internal war participation. Democracies experience fewer internal wars, which leads to fewer instances of genocide or politicide. Perhaps Rummel is correct that "Power kills; absolute Power kills absolutely."⁵⁶ Add to that this set of propositions: *Internal wars are lethal twice over—in the actual bloody conflict, and in the enhanced potential for state-sponsored mass murder subsequently. Democratic states are therefore lucky twice over—they stand a better chance of avoiding internal wars, and thus stand a better chance of avoiding their potentially deadly consequences.*

Notes

1. R. J. Rummel. *Democide: Nazi Genocide and Mass Murder* (New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction Publishers, 1992).
2. This definition is but one interpretation. Many who study these cases call all such internal conflicts *civil wars*. See for instance: Roy Licklider, "The Consequences of Negotiated Settlements In Civil Wars, 1945-1993," *American Political Science Review*, 89:3 (1995): 681-690; J. David Singer and Melvin Small, "Correlates of War Project: International and Civil War Data, 1815-1992". \Computer file\ . (Ann Arbor, Michigan: Inter-university Consortium for Political and Social Research, 1994). However, as Licklider later notes, definitions of these phenomena vary considerably (Roy Licklider, "Early Returns: Results of the First Wave of Statistical Studies of Civil War Termination," *Civil Wars*, 1:3 (1998):121-132). I choose the term *internal war* because it is descriptively accurate, and is not associated with a particular conflict or type of conflict (i.e. - the American Civil War).
3. Theda Skocpol, *States and Social Revolutions: A Comparative Analysis of France, Russia, and China*. (Cambridge, MA: Cambridge University Press, 1979).
4. Ellen Kay Trimberger, *Revolution From Above: Military Bureaucrats and Development in Japan, Turkey, Egypt, and Peru*. (New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction Books, 1978).
5. See for instance: Stephen John Stedman, "The End of the American Civil War," in *Stopping the Killing: How Civil Wars End*, ed. Roy Licklider. (New York, NY: New York University Press, 1993), 164-188; James O'Connell, "The Ending of the Nigerian Civil War: Victory, Defeat, and the Changing of Coalitions," ed. Roy Licklider, *Stopping The Killing: How Civil Wars End* (New York, NY: New York University Press, 1993), 189-204. Of course, not all separatist conflicts reach a level of escalation that would qualify them as civil wars. Recent examples include the as yet unsuccessful efforts of the Quebecois and the negotiated settlement between the Inuit and the Canadian government creating the new territory Nunavut.
6. According to Charles Tilly, *multiple sovereignty* is when the population of a particular area obeys more than one institution or controlling authority. For a further discussion of this key concept, see: Charles Tilly. *From Mobilization to Revolution* (New York, NY: McGraw-Hill, 1978), 192.
7. Matthew Krain, "State-Sponsored Mass Murder: The Onset and Severity of Genocides and Politicides," *The Journal of Conflict Resolution*, 41:3 (1997): 331-360.
8. Barbara Harff "Recognizing Genocides and Politicides," in *Genocide Watch*, ed. Helen Fein (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1992), 28; Barbara Harff and Ted Robert Gurr, "Toward an Empirical Theory of Genocides and Politicides: Identification and Measurement of Cases Since 1945," *International Studies Quarterly*, 32 (1988): 360.
9. See for instance: P. Timothy Bushnell, Vladimir Shlapentokh, Christopher K. Vanderpool, and Jeyaratnam Sundram, eds. *State Organized Terror : The Case Of Violent Internal Repression*, (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1991); Ervin Staub, *The Roots of Evil: The Origins of Genocide and Other Group Violence* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989). Chapter 14.
10. Robert Melson, *Revolution and Genocide* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1992).
11. Ben Kiernan, *The Pol Pot Regime: Race, Power, and Genocide in Cambodia Under the Khmer Rouge, 1975-79* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1996).

12. Harff, "Recognizing Genocides and Politicides," 32-36.
13. This is the terminology used in Article II of the Convention on Genocide (1948) to define the crime. The phrase "in whole or in part" identifies intentionality, rather than success, as an indicator that state-sponsored mass murder has been attempted. In other words, failure to eradicate a group does not mean that one has not committed the crime.
14. Frank Chalk, "Definitions of Genocide and their Implications for Prediction and Protection," *Holocaust and Genocide Studies*, 4:2 (1989): 151.
15. Matthew Krain, *Repression and Accommodation in Post-Revolutionary States*, (New York, NY: St. Martin's Press, forthcoming); Robert J. Alexander, *The Bolivian National Revolution*, (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1958).
16. Stedman, "The End of the American Civil War," 1993.
17. R. J. Rummel, *Lethal Politics: Soviet Genocide and Mass Murder Since 1900* (New Brunswick, NJ: Transactions Publishers, 1991).
18. Richard Arens, ed. *Genocide in Paraguay* (Philadelphia, PA: Temple University Press, 1976).
19. Helen Fein. *Accounting for Genocide: National Responses and Jewish Victimization During the Holocaust* (New York, NY: Free Press, 1979); Barbara Harff, "Genocide as State Terrorism," in *Government Violence and Repression: An Agenda for Research*, ed. Michael Stohl and George Lopez (New York, NY: Greenwood Press, 1986), 165-188; Florence Mazian. *Why Genocide?* (Iowa: Iowa State University Press, 1990).
20. Krain, "State-Sponsored Mass Murder," 355.
21. Daniel C. Esty, Jack A. Golstone, Ted Robert Gurr, Barbara Harff, Marc Levy, Geoffrey D. Dabelko, Pamela T. Surko, and Alan N. Unger, *State Failure Task Force Report: Phase II Findings* (McLean, VA: Science Applications International Corporation, July 31, 1998), 5.
22. Barbara Harff and Ted Robert Gurr, "Preconditions of Genocide and Politicide: 1956-1996." (Paper prepared for the State Failure Task Force, McLean, VA, November 1998), 6.
23. Esty, et. al., "State Failure Task Force," 5; Krain, "State-Sponsored Mass Murder," 355.
24. Krain, "State-Sponsored Mass Murder," 351-355.
25. Jonathan R. Adelman. *Revolution, Armies, and War: A Political History* (Boulder, CO: Lynne Rienner Publishers, 1985); Ted Robert Gurr, "War, Revolution, and the Growth of the Coercive State," *Comparative Political Studies*, 21:1 (1988): 45-65.
26. Zeev Maoz, "Joining the Club of Nations: Political Development and International Conflicts, 1816-1976," *International Studies Quarterly*, 33 (1989): 199-231; Stephen M. Walt, "Revolution and War," *World Politics*, 44:3 (1992): 321-368.
27. Conway Henderson, "Military Regimes and Human Rights in Developing Countries: A Comparative Perspective," *Human Rights Quarterly*, 4 (1992): 110-123; Steven C. Poe and C. Neal Tate, "Repression of Human Rights to Personal Integrity in the 1980's: A Global Analysis," *American Political Science Review*, 88:4 (1994): 853-872; Andrew D. McNitt, "Government Coercion: An Exploratory Analysis," *The Social Science Journal*, 32:2 (1995): 195-205.
28. See, for instance: Krain, *Repression and Accommodation*. ; Katherine R. Bigelow, "A Campaign to Deter Genocide: The Baha'i Experience," in *Genocide Watch*, Helen Fein, ed. (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1992), 189-196.
29. Harff and Gurr note that states in which the ruling elites "adhere to an exclusionary ideology are three times as likely to have state failures that include genocide or politicide." See Harff and Gurr, "Preconditions of Genocide and Politicide," 6.
30. Melson. *Revolution and Genocide*, 1992.
31. Hong Yung Lee, *The Politics Of The Chinese Cultural Revolution* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1978).
32. Pat Lauderdale and Pietro Toggia, "An Indigenous View of the New World Order: Somalia and the Ostensible Rule of Law," *Journal of Asian and African Studies*, 34:2 (1999): 168-169; Terrence Lyons and Ahmed I. Samatar, *Somalia: State Collapse, Multilateral Intervention, and Strategies for Political Reconstruction*. (Washington, DC: The Brookings Institution, 1995).
33. For more on reasons why states remain bystanders during instances of state-sponsored mass murder, see: Jean-Paul Sartre, *On Genocide* (Boston, MA: Beacon Press, 1968); Michael Stohl, "Outside a Small Circle of Friends: States, Genocide, Mass Killing and the Role of Bystanders." *Journal of Peace Research*. 24 (1987):151-166.
34. Roy Licklider, ed., *Stopping the Killing: How Civil Wars End* (New York, NY: New York University Press, 1993).

35. "What Kabila is Hiding," *Human Rights Watch Report*, 9, 5 (October 1997).
36. Licklider, "The Consequences..." 686-687.
37. Krain, *Repression and Accommodation*, 226.
38. Harff and Gurr, "Toward an Empirical Theory of Genocides and Politicides"
39. See, for instance: David Gwyn, *Idi Amin : Death-Light Of Africa* (Boston, MA: Little, Brown, 1977); Krain, *Repression and Accommodation*.
40. Krain, *Repression and Accommodation*, 196.
41. Rummel employs the term *democide* to describe any instance in which the state kills its own citizens, ranging from a large scale genocide to a single political execution. As such, the phenomenon examined by Rummel is similar to state-sponsored mass murder in intentions to kill by the state, but different in that the goal does not have to be to eradicate, in whole or in part, a particular group.
42. R. J. Rummel, "Democracy, Power, Genocide, and Mass Murder," *Journal of Conflict Resolution*, 39:1 (1995): 3-26; R. J. Rummel, *Death By Government*. (New Brunswick, NJ: Transactions Publishers, 1994).
43. R. J. Rummel, "Power, Genocide and Mass Murder," *Journal of Peace Research*, 31:1 (1994): 8.
44. Rummel, *Death By Government*, 1-2.
45. Arthur Jay Klinghoffer, "Democratization and Genocide: A Rwandan Case Study," (Paper presented at the Conference on Democratization and Human Rights, Binghamton University, Binghamton, NY, September 1998).
46. G. Bingham Powell, *Contemporary Democracies: Participation, Stability, and Violence* (Washington, DC: Congressional Quarterly Press, 1982); Matthew Krain, "Contemporary Democracies Revisited: Democracy, Political Violence, and Event Count Models," *Comparative Political Studies*, 31:2 (1998): 139-164.
47. Krain, "State-Sponsored Mass Murder," 355.
48. Esty, et. al., "State Failure Task Force," 29-30.
49. Fareed Zakaria, "The Rise of Illiberal Democracy," *Foreign Affairs*, 76:6 (1997): 22-44.
50. Esty, et. al. "State Failure Task Force Report," 9.
51. Ahmed Rashid, "Pakistan's Coup: Planting the Seeds of Democracy?" *Current History*, 98:632 (1999): 409-414.
52. Matthew Krain and Marissa Myers, "Democracy and Civil War: A Note on the Democratic Peace Proposition," *International Interactions*, 23:1 (1997): 109-118.
53. Harff and Gurr, "Preconditions," 6
54. Rummel, *Death By Government*, 27.
55. Esty, et. al. "State Failure Task Force Report," 2-3.
56. Rummel, *Death By Government*, 1.