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Review of Killing Civilians in Civil War: The Rationale of Indiscriminate Violence

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***Killing Civilians in Civil War: The Rationale of Indiscriminate Violence.* Jürgen Brandsch. Boulder, CO: First Forum Press, 2020, hardcover, 239 pp., ISBN: 978-1-62637-863-6.**

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Killing Civilians in Civil War provides both a comprehensive survey of scholarship on violence against civilians and a plausible theory to help explain why armed actors target civilians with violence and under what circumstances this tactic is likely to achieve the armed actors' larger goals.

Brandsch is head of the Project on Small Arms and Light Weapons Control at the Bonn International Center for Conversion. As he points out in the concluding chapter of *Killing Civilians*, it may seem odd to describe violence that deliberately targets civilians as 'successful' or 'unsuccessful', as he does in the book. But, he argues, "understanding the logic of group-selective violence can and should be used to reduce its terrible consequences" (p. 207). If we are to reduce violence against civilians, we must understand that so-called indiscriminate violence against civilians is often purposeful and can have powerful coercive effects can have clear and concrete benefits for the the perpetrator.

The book takes on the oft-repeated claim that violence against civilians is either an aberration, an accident, or an irrational act. Why would governments deliberately kill their own civilians? Why would armed insurgent groups attack those whose support they may rely on? Even if the rationale were punishment for collaborating with the enemy, or providing a demonstration effect to deter others from doing so, wouldn't the backlash outweigh any positive effects for the perpetrator? Brandsch succeeds in demonstrating that indiscriminate violence is frequently used and needs to be better understood as a deliberate strategy of war. To those who might fear that such an analysis provides an 'instruction manual for perpetrators', he reminds us that indiscriminate and group-focused collective violence "are not rare phenomena and there is no reason to believe that those who are willing to use violence against civilians are unaware of its benefits" (p. 205).

Scholars and students of civil war will appreciate the thorough conceptual and theoretical brush-clearing exercise the book provides. Brandsch methodically traces the use of terms like indiscriminate, arbitrary, or random violence in the extant scholarship on violence against civilians and shows how divergent findings about the outcomes and causes of violence against civilians may be laid partly at the door of conceptual divergence and lack of clarity. He offers a conceptual vocabulary that advances our ability to make sense of conflicting arguments in the literature on violence against civilians. Key conceptual contributions include making explicit about the difference between indiscriminate but intentional violence and arbitrary, unintentional violence. Second, he argues that to understand the utility and logic of violence against civilians, both the intention of the perpetrator, and the perception of those on the receiving end of violence, determine its effectiveness as communication -- a message and as a motivator. Both perspectives must be considered, something not always fully accounted for in existing scholarship on the topic.

The book first lays out what we know from the literature on state on non-state use of indiscriminate violence (Chaps. 2 and 3). Each chapter carefully unpacks existing arguments about the

effectiveness or ineffectiveness of targeting civilians with violence, where 'effectiveness' refers to whether violence advances the goals of the perpetrator. Brandsch's argument that violence is communication -- and violence against civilians is intended to persuade and motivate changes in behavior -- provides an essential foundation for the larger argument of the book. These early chapters (Part 1 of the book) will be a useful primer for students new to the study of violence in civil wars, as well as a resource for scholars and teachers in need of a clear and concise analytical overview of this topic.

I found the book's treatment of coercion especially helpful. Coercion, Brandsch argues, is not simply the use of violence, but the threat of future violence. "...Coercion is the sending of a message that consists of a threat to use force and a demand for a certain behavior" (p. 69). Coercive violence sends a message, but the message must be properly understood by the target audience in order to affect the behavior of that group. Group-selective violence is targeted at a particular group, but within that group the individuals affected have not been targeted per se. There is an extensive discussion of individual-group dynamics that is nuanced and sophisticated, and it helps to tease out some underlying nuances in much of the existing literature. Brandsch also offers an effective and careful discussion of the unintended and sometimes unforeseeable consequences of civilian-targeted violence, summing these up in the concept of provocation -- when the effect is to turn civilians against the perpetrator. In these discussions, even seasoned scholars of this area will find much that is useful.

Chapter 5 lays out the author's theory of group-selective violence. The argument of the book is a rationalist one, and Brandsch sets out to show how, under circumstances that are not uncommon in civil war, violence against civilians 'makes sense'. His focus is on a specific strategy of violence called 'group-selective violence', violence that targets a particular group, but which is indiscriminate in terms of which individuals are affected. After an extensive discussion of the forms that targeted violence against civilians may take, he then identifies two potential outcomes of such violence: provocation, and coercion.¹ When coercive effects outweigh provocative effects, the strategy has been successful. Brandsch's main theoretical contribution is to identify the circumstances under which this will be true.

Chapters 6-8 test the core insights of the theory. Chapter 6 examines the effects of indiscriminate violence by exploring an extensive scholarly literature on the subject. Here again, Brandsch provides a careful unpacking of theoretical claims in the literature, dividing these into findings on the effectiveness of indiscriminate violence at macro-, micro-, and individual levels. He finds support in the empirical studies of others for his theoretical claim that group-selective violence does have coercive effects. Chapter 7 is an engrossing account of indiscriminate violence across history and region. This is an admittedly anecdotal and selective survey that serves mainly to illustrate the use and effectiveness of general group-selective violence as a form of civilian-targeted violence. It serves mostly as a plausibility probe and, together with Chapter 8, which explores the utility of the theory for explaining civilian violence in ethnic wars, provides a bit of a break from the sometimes dry analytical march of the preceding chapters. Chapter 9 provides an effective summary of the findings and offers a brief but persuasive discussion of the implications for policymakers.

Killing Civilians in Civil Wars takes on an important and debate. It is an ambitious and largely successful effort to cut a path through a large and complex body of scholarship. I appreciated the conceptual and analytical rigor and found myself thinking differently about what I thought I knew on this topic.

Endnotes

¹ Of course, he notes, violence also has 'eliminative effects', and though he treats this as a third outcome of violence, it is also a technique for implementing violence, and in my view doesn't fit well as a third outcome. Elimination -- the use of lethal violence against a group of people -- itself can have provocative or coercive effects.

Carrie Manning is a scholar of civil war and post-civil war politics. Her recent work includes Parties, Politics Peace: Electoral Inclusion as Peacebuilding (Routledge, 2023), with Ian Smith and Ozlem Tuncel.