LSE Research Online

THE LONDON SCHOOL OF ECONOMICS AND POLITICAL SCIENCE ∎

McDoom, Omar Shahabudin

The psychology of threat in intergroup conflict: emotions, rationality, and opportunity in the Rwandan genocide

Article (Accepted version)
(Refereed)

http://eprints.lse.ac.uk

The Psychology of Threat in Intergroup Conflict: Emotions, Rationality, and Opportunity in the Rwandan Genocide

Omar Shahabudin McDoom[†]

Keywords

Abstract

What explains the well-known ability of security threats to mobilize social groups against each other? This article argues that the power of such threats lies in the power of group emotions, notably the primary emotion of fear. Fear works by activating psychological processes at the group level that leads to the polarization of attitudes between groups. To illustrate the effect of fear on intergroup relations, the article analyzes survey data, radio broadcasts, and interviews from Rwanda's civil war and genocide of 1990-94 to provide evidence of four psychosocial mechanisms at work in group polarization: boundary activation, outgroup derogation, outgroup homogenization, and ingroup cohesion. The article further argues that the debates between emotions and material opportunities, and emotions and rationality in explanations of ethnic conflicts represent false theoretical choices. Emotions and material opportunities both matter, and rationality and emotion are not incompatible. It proposes two simple refinements to extant theoretical and empirical approaches. First, it calls for a distinction between attitudes and violence in ethnic conflicts and argues that emotions matter for the polarization of attitudes, but it is material and structural opportunities that mediate their expression as violence. Second, it asks that scholars recognize extensive research in social psychology that shows that both emotion and reason interact in individual judgment and decisionmaking.

[†] Lecturer in Comparative Politics, London School of Economics and Political Science. He may be contacted at o.s.mcdoom@lse.ac.uk.

The power of security threats to mobilize social groups against each other is well-known.[†] Distrust and fear characterize relations between large segments of identity groups that have engaged in ethnic conflicts in diverse regions of the world: Sinhalese and Tamils in Sri Lanka; Serbs and Bosniaks in the former Yugoslavia; Arabs and Jews in Palestine; Hutu and Tutsi in Rwanda. But why are security threats so powerful? How exactly do they work to polarize societies? And when do they lead to intergroup violence? This article argues that the power of security threats lies in the power of group emotions, notably the core emotion of fear. Emotions work by activating psychological processes at the group level that lead to the polarization of intergroup attitudes. They produce violence when presented with material or structural opportunities within societies that enable or constrain their expression. To illustrate how group emotions work, the article draws on the case of Rwanda's civil war of 1990-94, culminating in a genocide that represented one of the deadliest cases of ethnic violence in world history. In little over one hundred days between 507,000 and 850,0000 Rwandans lost their lives.[1] The perpetrators were drawn overwhelmingly from Rwanda's ethnic Hutu majority, and the victims primarily from its ethnic Tutsi minority. The case identifies and illustrates the operation of four psychosocial mechanisms that measure the effect of one emotion, fear, on intergroup polarization.

Emotions, in particular a subset of negative emotions - fear, anger, resentment, and hatred - lie at the heart of two broader debates in scholarly explanations of intergroup conflict.[2] The first debate pits these emotions against the relative importance of structural or material opportunities in explaining ethnic conflict. The second weighs the influence of these emotions against the preeminence of individual rationality. Proponents of "emotions" in the first debate have pointed, *inter alia*, to anxiety-laden perceptions, grievances, ethnic prejudices, ethnic fears, and hostilities embedded in hate narratives.[3] Proponents of structural or materialist opportunity

---

[1] For the lower figure, see Alison Des Forges, *Leave None to Tell the Story : Genocide in Rwanda* (New York: Human Rights Watch, 1999), pp. 15-16. For the higher figure, see Gérard Prunier, *The Rwanda Crisis: History of a Genocide* (London: Hurst, 1998), p. 265.
[2] These debates are exemplified in this journal. See the exchange between Arman Grigorian and Stuart J. Kaufman, "Correspondence: Hate narratives and ethnic conflict," *International Security* Vol. 31, no. 4 (Spring 2007), pp. 180-191.
[3] For intergroup anxieties, see Donald L. Horowitz, *Ethnic Groups in Conflict* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000), p. 179. For grievances, see Ted Robert Gurr, *Why Men Rebel* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1970), p. 25. For an assessment of ethnic prejudice, see D.P. Green and R.L. Seher, "What Role Does Prejudice Play in Ethnic Conflict?" *Annual Review of Political Science* Vol. 6 (2003), p. 525. For ethnic fears, see Stuart J. Kaufman, *Modern Hatreds: The Symbolic Politics of Ethnic War*, Cornell Studies in Security Affairs (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 2001), p. 31. For hostility, see Marc Howard Ross,

have instead emphasized, *inter alia*, the means to finance conflict, the capacity of the state or other actors to repress conflict, the physical geography favorable to conflict, strong political institutions to mediate conflict, the demographic over-supply of young men to be recruited for conflict, and the transition from autocracy to democracy allowing ethnic entrepreneurs to mobilize for conflict.[4] In the second debate between emotion and rationality – a debate that is related to but should not be conflated with the first – many of the "emotion" advocates cited above stress identities, loyalties, symbols, and myths. Defenders of rationality or reason, however, point to interests, strategy, logic, elite calculation and elite manipulation in fomenting conflict. These debates are not merely theoretical. If widespread grievances, deep-seated fears, or latent hostility can lead to conflict, then policies that redress injustices, promote intergroup cooperation, and educate each group about the other may be most effective in preventing ethnic conflict. If, however, demographic imbalance, over-dependence on extractable natural resources, or a weak security apparatus is responsible, then policy-makers should instead create youth employment, diversify economies, and invest in their militaries.

In this article, I argue that the dichotomies created by these two debates represent a false theoretical choice. Both emotion and opportunity matter, and rationality and emotion are not incompatible. The debates arise from four weaknesses in existing theory and evidence. First, the precise causal role emotions play in intergroup conflicts is unclear. Are resentment, fear, and hatred a cause, an effect, or both of conflict? Are they necessary or unnecessary antecedent conditions? Second, it is unclear how, if at all, extant theory recognizes that group emotions vary in intensity and extent across time. While grievances, distrust, and prejudices may exist between groups in almost all societies, how deeply and how widely they are felt are not constants. Third, a preference for macroanalysis may obscure important microvariation in how individuals think and act within groups. For example, the conventional wisdom that elite group leaders respond rationally and ordinary members emotionally toward other groups cannot be strongly supported if the unit of analysis is a unitary ethnic group or an ethnic conflict event. Fourth, a bias toward privileging elite decisions may underestimate the role of nonelite, mass behavior in intergroup

Cultural Contestation in Ethnic Conflict, Cambridge Studies in Comparative Politics (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), pp. 42-43.

[4] For financing opportunities including lootable natural resources, diaspora remittances, and state sponsorship see Paul Collier and Anke Hoeffler, "Greed and Grievance in Civil War," *Oxford Economic Papers,* Vol. 56, No. 4 (August 2004). For physical geography and weak state capacity, see J.D. Fearon and D.D. Laitin, "Ethnicity, Insurgency, and Civil War," *American Political Science Review* 97, no. 1 (February 2003): p. 76. For political institutions, specifically democratic regimes see Havard Hegre, T Ellingsen, and Scott Gates, "Toward a Democratic Civil Peace? Democracy, Political Change, and Civil War, 1816-1992," *American Political Science Review* 95 (2001). For demographic "youth bulges," see Henrik Urdal, "A Clash of Generations? Youth Bulges and Political Violence," *International Studies Quarterly* Vol. 50, No. 3 (September 2006), pp. 607-629. For political transition, see Jack L. Snyder, *From Voting to Violence : Democratization and Nationalist Conflict*, Norton Series in World Politics (New York: W.W. Norton, 2000), p. 31.

conflict. While group elites may strategically manipulate mass emotions, they may also be constrained by and react to them.

To address these issues I propose three simple but fundamental refinements to extant theoretical and empirical approaches. First, we should disaggregate the dependent variable to distinguish analytically between sentiment and violence in intergroup conflicts. Although a basic point in social psychology, the distinction between intergroup attitudes and intergroup behavior is not always clearly made in political science theorization of intergroup conflict. I argue that the two are conceptually distinct components of ethnic conflict and should be treated as separate explananda or dependent variables. In this article, I term the attitudinal component of ethnic conflict "group polarization" and define the behavioral component as group violence. The distinction can be seen in societies where resentment, fear, or hostility between groups is widespread, that is groups are polarized, but violence does not occur: Flemish and Walloons in present-day Belgium; Blacks and Afrikaners in postapartheid South Africa; Chinese and Malays in contemporary Malaysia. I argue that while group emotions lead to polarized attitudes, it is material or structural opportunities that mediate whether these emotions are expressed as violence. The persistent ambiguity over the causal role of emotions is partly attributable to endogeneity. Violence may itself produce resentment, fears, and hostilities, thereby polarizing societies in which such group emotions were not previously widely or deeply felt. Emotions then appear mere epiphenomena. Second, we should soften the stark dichotomy in rational choice-oriented political science that sees rationality and emotion as opposing forces, overcome the bias that sees emotions as inferior to and subversive of reason, and accept twenty-five years of research in social and political psychology that recognizes the interaction of both "affect" and "cognition" in individual judgment and decisionmaking. [5] Third, we should be willing to question implicit assumptions regarding ethnic groups as unitary actors and group elites as rational actors by examining the growing store of microevidence on intergroup conflict. Such evidence may reveal important intragroup heterogeneity in preferences as well as elite susceptibility to emotions that may better predict outcomes of intergroup interactions.

This article focuses on the specific emotion of fear to engage with these broader debates on emotions, opportunity, and rationality in intergroup conflict. Fear is the emotion at the core of a set of threat-centric theories of intergroup conflict that exemplify several of the issues described above. The article uses microevidence from Rwanda's civil of 1990-94 to illustrate how security threats work to polarize societies. Specifically, it measures the effect of variation in the intensity

---

[5] See Daniel Todd Gilbert, Susan T. Fiske, and Gardner Lindzey, *The Handbook of Social Psychology*, 5th ed., 2 vols. (Hoboken, N.J.: John Wiley and Sons, 2010), p. 335.

of fear on attitudes among elite and nonelite actors. In doing so, it identifies and demonstrates four psychosocial mechanisms at work in group polarization. The first mechanism is "boundary-activation": as the threat grows, the more important the group identities distinguishing ingroup from outgroup become. The threat is framed or rationalized increasingly within society as part of a conflict between two readily identifiable social groups, such as those defined along ethnic, sectarian, or racial lines. In Rwanda, the civil war would be narrated as an "ethnic" conflict, one between the Hutu majority ingroup and Tutsi minority outgroup. It was not framed as simply a conflict between the government and rebels. The second mechanism is "outgroup negativity": the greater the threat, the greater the references that denigrate the outgroup. Often the threat is framed to resonate against negative historical and cultural beliefs – myths or narratives - that exist within the ingroup about the outgroup. In Rwanda, historical references to Hutu oppression at the hands of the Tutsi increased as the threat itself increased. The third mechanism is "outgroup homogenization": the greater the threat, the greater the de-individualization of outgroup members. The threat is perceived as one posed not only by those bearing arms, but by all members of the outgroup. In Rwanda as the threat peaked, more and more Hutu would see all Tutsi civilians as the enemy. It was not just rebel combatants who represented the threat. The final mechanism is "ingroup solidarity": the greater the threat, the stronger the demand for ingroup loyalty. Countering the threat is framed as a test of loyalty. In Rwanda, accusations of Hutu disloyalty increased in response to the growing threat, and those disloyal were seen as the enemy or else as the enemy's collaborators. Together, these four psychosocial effects of threat amount to what I term group polarization.

The article also shows that while fear leads to attitudinal polarization, it does not by itself lead to violence. Nearly two-thirds of the Rwandan Hutu whom I surveyed did not commit any violence during the genocide. Yet many of them framed the war in ethnic terms, saw Tutsi as the enemy, thought negatively of past Tutsi wrongs, and recognized inaction as disloyalty i.e. they held attitudes indicative of "polarization" in 1994. "Polarization" and violence then I argue should be seen as analytically distinct components of ethnic conflict. Security fears created by the civil war explain why Rwandan society polarized, but they do not explain why genocidal violence occurred or why individuals participated in it. It is material opportunity that enables or constrains the expression of fear as violence. I show separately that it was the move to democratize and the assassination of Rwanda's long-standing, autocratic president that ultimately

created the macrostructural opportunity for violence. Ethnic extremists used this opportunity to capture the state and use its apparatus for genocide.[6]

The article is organized as follows. In the first section I present the theoretical framework and my proposals for refining extant theoretical and empirical approaches. In the second section I introduce the choice of case study: Rwanda's civil war. In the third section I present the data and methods used in the project. The fourth section lays out the evidence to support each of the four psychosocial mechanisms that operated to polarize the Rwandan Hutu ethnic group.

Theoretical Framework

This article draws on theoretical insights from social psychology to address a long-standing question in security studies: How do threats affect relations between ethnic groups, or to frame it in terms of emotions, what role does fear play in ethnic conflicts? I begin by summarizing how scholars treat threat, and the underpinning emotion of fear, in existing theories of ethnic warfare, and continue by identifying ambiguities in these theories which I argue the psychosocial literature helps to clarify.

THREAT-BASED THEORIES OF ETHNIC CONFLICTS

Broadly, threat-centric explanations of ethnic warfare divide into "rationalist" theories – often associated with structuralist and materialist explanations - and "affective" camps – which are closely allied with culturalist and psychological theories. The simplest rationalist explanations emphasize elite calculations. When ruling elites sense a threat to their power, they may make a strategic decision to engage in ethnic violence to preserve their position. Benjamin Valentino is a strong proponent of this quintessentially instrumentalist argument. In his view, Rwanda's genocide was the product of such a calculation. He states, "Hutu extremists arrived at the decision to launch a systematic genocide only after they had concluded that less violent options for dealing with the Tutsi threat had failed and that other potential solutions would be impractical or insufficient."[7] Valentino also stresses the role of structural and material factors behind mass killings. "Ethnic mass killing" he writes, "is more likely the greater the physical capabilities for mass killing possessed by the racist or nationalist regime."[8] Emotions play little or no causal role in this explanation of such violence.

---

[6] See Omar S. McDoom, "The Micro-Politics of Mass Violence: Authority, Opportunity, and Security in Rwanda's Genocide" Ph.D thesis, London School of Economics, 2009.
[7] Benjamin A. Valentino, *Final Solutions: Mass Killing and Genocide in the Twentieth Century*, (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 2004), p. 184.
[8] Ibid., p. 76.

Barry Posen's "ethnic security dilemma" offers a more contingent rationalist and structuralist explanation of ethnic conflict. Confronted with structural collapse, such as the dissolution of the former Yugoslavia, one ethnic group cannot distinguish defensive from offensive security measures taken by the other group to protect itself in the "emerging anarchy."[9] Faced with this dilemma, the first group has a strong incentive to take preemptive military action to eliminate the threat before it is realized, shifting the balance of power in the first group's favor. Fear is ether incidental to or consequential of the anarchic structural opportunity caused by the collapsing states. Lake and Rothchild point to two factors that intensify this existential threat in rationalist theory: (1) information failures – when the intentions and capabilities of the other side cannot be known; and (2) credible commitments – when neither side can trust the promise of peace by the other.[10]

A third rationalist explanation asserts that fear is rational and that both leaders and followers make strategic calculations concerning ethnic violence. Rui de Figuereido and Barry Weingast argue that leaders, when their power is gravely threatened, "gamble for resurrection" by undertaking extraordinary action, such as ethnic violence, to maintain their position.[11] Applying this argument to Rwanda, they argue that Hutu extremist leaders calculated that (1) genocide would eliminate the Tutsi support base of the rebel RPF should it take power; and (2) ordinary Hutu forced to commit atrocities against Tutsi, would then fear Tutsi reprisals. They further argue that ordinary Hutu committed violence (1) out of fear of being targeted for nonparticipation, and (2) out of fear arising from the uncertainty over how an incoming Tutsi government would treat them. Faced with a choice between a Hutu government and an uncertain Tutsi government, ordinary Hutu calculated that the former was the better choice and thus participated in violence.

In contrast, affective theories, with which culturalist and psychological explanations are closely associated, emphasize emotional rather than rational responses to threats in ethnic warfare. For Donald Horowitz the emotion of "anxiety" of the other lies at the heart of ethnic conflict. Group anxiety is the inevitable consequence of comparisons made between groups. Anxiety claims Horowitz, "limits and modifies perceptions, producing extreme reactions to modest threats."[12] Fear of extinction is one such extreme emotional reaction to threat. Yet the threat

---

[9] Barry R. Posen, "The Security Dilemma and Ethnic Conflict," *Survival*, Vol. 35 No.1, p. 27.

[10] David Lake and Donald Rothchild, "Containing Fear: The Origins and Management of Ethnic Conflict," in, eds. Michael Brown, Owen Cote, Sean-Lynn Jones, *Nationalism and Ethnic Conflict* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press 1997), pp. 102-104.

[11] Rui de Figueiredo and Barry Weingast, "The Rationality of Fear: Political Opportunism and Ethnic Conflict," in eds. Barbara Walter and Jack Snyder, *Civil Wars, Insecurity, and Intervention*, (New York: Columbia University Press, 1999).

[12] Horowitz, *Ethnic Groups in Conflict*, p. 179.

need not be an existential one. The threat can be to the group's cultural identity, its demographic survival, or to its self-worth. Ethnic conflict is the result of anxiety over one group's status relative to another.

The "symbolic politics" theory of ethnic conflict combines emotional and materialist factors. Kaufman argues that three preconditions are necessary for ethnic warfare: (1) symbols and myths justifying hostility toward an ethnic group; (2) an opportunity to mobilize politically against a group; and (3) ethnic fears.[13] The second condition – the opportunity to mobilize represents a structural factor whereas the third condition – ethnic fears – represents the emotional factor. For Kaufman it is primarily emotion, not reason that drives groups to violence. He states, "The symbolic politics theory would suggest an explanation based less on logical than on psychological factors."[14] The role of emotion has been given similar prominence in another psychocultural theory of ethnic conflict. Marc Ross argues that psychocultural narratives embedded within groups can cause, intensify, and mitigate ethnic conflict, and that such narratives have tremendous emotional power. These narratives often provide the historical link between existing and past threats. According to Ross, "In bitter conflicts, among the strongest feelings people express are fears about physical attacks on their group, and on symbolic attacks on its identity.…Both fears involve feelings of vulnerability, denigration, and humiliation that link past losses to present dangers."[15]

All of these explanations represent variations on a theme. What they share is the belief that threats polarize groups. Many also have suggested that threat accounts not only for ethnic warfare, but for genocide as well. Thus Valentino and de Figueireido and Weingast explicitly apply their theory to Rwanda's genocide. Posen draws largely on the case of Yugoslavia in the 1990s and argues that, in a security dilemma, "the drive for security in one group is so great that it produces near-genocidal behavior toward neighboring groups."[16] Lake and Rothchild have argued that theories of ethnic conflict can apply to "selective genocides" – and include the Rwandan genocide as one of the "highly destructive outcomes" possible.[17] Kaufman also sees genocide as a case of "extreme violence" in ethnic warfare and has extended his symbolic politics argument to Rwanda in detail.[18]

---

[13] Kaufman, *Modern Hatreds*, pp. 30-33.
[14] Ibid., p. 38.
[15] Ross, *Cultural Contestation in Ethnic Conflict*, p. 37.
[16] Posen, "The Security Dilemma and Ethnic Conflict," p. 30.
[17] David A. Lake and Donald S. Rothchild, eds., *The International Spread of Ethnic Conflict: Fear, Diffusion, and Escalation* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1998), p. 21.
[18] Stuart J. Kaufman, "Symbolic Politics or Rational Choice? Testing Theories of Extreme Ethnic Violence," *International Security,* Vol. 30, No.4 (Spring 2006), pp. 45-86.

Yet, as I have suggested, the distinctions between emotion and structural opportunity and between emotion and rationality are not so stark upon closer examination of these theories. To begin with, almost all structuralist/materialist theories acknowledge that fear has some role to play and that emotion is implicitly compatible with structural or material factors. The principal ambiguity in the structuralist-emotion division, however, is over the specific role fear plays in ethnic conflict. Is fear an incidental by-product of changes in structural and material opportunities, an epiphenomenon, or does it have independent causal significance? In Posen's security dilemma, fear is the consequence of a structural condition, notably an emerging anarchy created by the implosion of a multiethnic state. In contrast, in Kaufman's symbolic politics theory ethnic fears are a necessary precondition, that is they are a distinct and antecedent causal factor in ethnic conflict. The symbolic politics theory is also the most explicit in acknowledging possible endogeneity. Kaufman relaxes the unitary actor assumption behind ethnic groups to differentiate between elite and mass-led mobilization. In mass-led conflict, the fears are antecedent and drive the conflict. In elite-led conflict, it is the elites themselves who "provoke" and magnify the fears.[19] Fear, in other words, can be both a cause and consequence of ethnic conflict.

A similar ambiguity persists in the emotion-rationality debate. Emotion in fact features in rationalist theories of ethnic conflict. De Figuereido and Weingast go so far as to even describe fear itself as rational. The main disagreement once again, however, is over the role of emotion in ethnic conflict. Lake and Rothchild, for example, see emotions as simply the product of elite strategic calculus to manipulate them to their own advantage. "Ethnic activists and political entrepreneurs" they write, "build upon these fears of insecurity and polarize society. Political memories and emotions also magnify these anxieties, driving groups further apart."[20] Emotion then is used instrumentally and as an intensifier. In contrast, Kaufman sees emotions as integral to, and not merely consequential of the judgment and decisionmaking process - a type of heuristic. In Kaufman's words, "[E]motional appeals short-circuit the complicated problem of making tradeoff decisions because they encourage people to put ethnic issues ahead of other concerns."[21]

To address these ambiguities I propose three basic but important refinements to extant theoretical and empirical approaches. First, I argue researchers should parse the dependent variable -- ethnic conflict -- to distinguish attitudes – what I term group polarization – from behavior – group violence. While scholarship has already made an analytical distinction for the

---

[19] Kaufman, *Modern Hatreds,* p. 35.
[20] Lake and Rothchild, "Containing Fear," p. 97.
[21] Kaufman, *Modern Hatreds*, p. 30.

role of violence in civil wars, they have yet to do so with regard to polarization.[22] I argue that polarization and violence are distinct components of intergroup conflict and as such have distinct causes. Emotions drive polarization, but it is opportunity that mediates whether these emotions are expressed as violence. Feelings of fear, hatred, resentment, and anger are likely to exist among groups in all societies to different degrees at different times. Yet only sometimes are such group feelings expressed as violence. It is shifts in structural and material opportunities that determine when they are articulated as violence. The Flemish and Walloon are polarized in Belgium, but the conflict is not violent because strong political institutions, notably a democratic system, exist to mediate the expression of polarized attitudes. Bosniaks and Serbs remain polarized in post-Dayton Bosnia-Herzegovina, but violence is constrained by the presence of an international security force and civilian administration that enforces interethnic coexistence. Endogeneity likely obfuscates this distinction between attitude and violence in intergroup conflicts. Violence itself may also produce fear, resentment, and hostility. In this way the violent actions of a minority can polarize the attitudes of the majority. Second, research needs to recognize that emotion and rationality are not opposing alternatives, but rather coexist and interact in individual judgment and decisionmaking. Roger Petersen has made the most systematic attempt to explain the significance of emotions, notably fear, hatred, and resentment,in ethnic violence. For him an emotion is a mechanism that "[R]aises the saliency of one desire/choice over others...and heightens both cognitive and physical capabilities necessary to respond to the situational challenge."[23] Emotions, in other words, are not exclusive of rationality and structural opportunities, but are instead integral to both decisionmaking and action, a point long acknowledged in social psychology. Third, research needs to be sensitive to microvariation within groups. The bias toward macro analysis in ethnic conflict where the ethnic group is usually treated as a unitary actor obscures intragroup differences that may be important for predicting outcomes of intergroup interactions. At best scholarship makes a distinction between the group's leadership and followership and sees elites as rational actors strategically manipulating the emotions of the masses. This view, however, excludes the possibility that elites are themselves susceptible to emotions and that the attitudes of ordinary group members may also constrain or encourage their response.

PSYCHOSOCIAL THEORY ON INTERGROUP RELATIONS

---

[22] Stathis N. Kalyvas, *The Logic of Violence in Civil War*, (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2006), p. 20.
[23] Roger Dale Petersen, *Understanding Ethnic Violence: Fear, Hatred, and Resentment in Twentieth-Century Eastern Europe*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), p. 17.

Social psychology, in particular the specialized subfield of intergroup relations, offers potentially rich theoretical insights into scholars' understanding of real-world ethnic conflict. As a field, it overcomes the two of the weaknesses identified above in existing scholarly explanations, first, by clearly distinguishing between attitude and behavior in intergroup relations, and second, by being unconstrained by the view that emotionality and rationality are opposing alternatives. In contrast, in mainstream political science today, rational choice remains the dominant paradigm for explaining political phenomena. Technically, as an approach, rational choice assumes that preferences are reflexive, complete, and transitive. "Thick" rationalist explanations usually comprise a model that assumes actors will act strategically in their self-interest to maximize their utility as defined by those preferences. "Thin" rationalist accounts are simpler and refer to the approach whereby actors use the best means to achieve a particular end: states maximize power, firms maximize profits, politicians maximize votes.[24] Scholars see emotions, sometimes described as passions or visceral reactions in the political science literature, as a subversion of rationality and an inferior form of judgment and decisionmaking.[25] As such, rational choice proponents hotly contest their causal importance.[26] Yet in social psychology, the consensus, based on over twenty-five years of empirical research, is that instead of being opposing alternatives, rationality and emotion work together when an individual makes a choice or takes action.

In summing up this psychosocial research, Dascher Keltner and Jennifer Lerner state in the standard reference work for the field, "[T]he study of emotion and reason reveals that almost every cognitive process – attention, evaluative judgments, probability estimates, perceptions of risk, outgroup biases, and moral judgment – is shaped by momentary emotions in systematic and profound ways."[27] Thus research has shown that fear causes individuals to be more selectively attentive and thus sensitive to the possibility of threats when in a state of anxiety.[28] Other research has shown that momentary emotions – moods – influence individuals as they make positive or negative evaluative judgments.[29] Fear also affects individuals' perceptions of risks,

---

[24] Donald P. Green and Ian Shapiro, *Pathologies of Rational Choice Theory: A Critique of Applications in Political Science* (New Haven, Conn.:Yale University Press, 1996).

[25] Martha Craven Nussbaum, *Upheavals of Thought: The Intelligence of Emotions* (New York, Cambridge University Press, 2003).

[26] Grigorian and Kaufman, "Hate Narratives and Ethnic Conflict."

[27] Dascher Keltner and Jennifer Lerner, "Emotions", in eds. Gilbert, Fiske, and Lindzey, *The Handbook of Social Psychology*, p. 335.

[28] Andrew Mathews and Fred Klug, "Emotionality and interference with color-naming in anxiety," *Behavior Research and Therapy* Vol. 31, No. 1 (January 1993), pp. 57-62.

[29] Norbert Schwarz and Gerald L. Clore, "Mood, Misattribution, and Judgments of Well-being: Informative and Directive Functions of Affective States," *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* Vol. 45, No. 3 (September 1983), pp. 513-523.

increasing the expectation of pessimistic outcomes.[30] Fear, triggered by perceptions of outgroups as strong, also provokes ingroup bias or prejudice against the threatening outgroup.[31] Even the highly mathematical field of judgment and decisionmaking has recognized the multiple influences of affect, particularly on probability assessments.[32] Yet these findings have only entered into a small subset of political science theorization on ethnic conflict. This is partly because scholars lack microlevel data to see the operation of these emotional influences, thereby forcing them to make inferences from highly aggregated phenomena. The case for testing theoretical insights from social psychology with real-world ethnic conflict data is therefore strong.

Research on intergroup relations has shown that ingroups and outgroups can form through the mere categorization or creation of groups (the minimal group paradigm).[33] It is an insight that scholarship has recognized in ethnic conflict.[34] Moreover, loyalty and preferences, even within groups without recognizable commonalities, can form very quickly, in less than a day. It is unsurprising, then, that ethnicity is a particularly powerful and easily activated group identity, given the possibility of commonalities such as shared cultures, phenotype, histories, languages, ancestry, religions, origin myths, and worldviews which have often been developed over centuries. Implicit in most psychosocial theories of identity then is the understanding that social identities are malleable and their salience is context specific, a view consistent with the dominant constructivist paradigm in identity politics.[35] Research has indeed indicated that "the introduction of meaningful differences between groups in resources, status, or power" alter the degree of group identification.[36]

Competition is one widely recognized external context that activates group boundaries. Realistic group conflict theory posits that in a conflict for scarce material resources, an individual will choose to identify with his ingroup so as to maximize his chances of sharing in the resource.[37] Social identity theory, in contrast, claims that the underlying mechanism is not the rational

[30] Jennifer S. Lerner , Roxana Gonzales, Deborah Small, Baruch Fischhoff., "Effects of Fear and Anger on Perceived Risks of Terrorism," *Psychological Science* Vol. 14, No. 2 (March 1, 2003): 144 -150.

[31] Diane M. Mackie, Thierry Devos, and Eliot R. Smith, "Intergroup Emotions: Explaining Offensive Action Tendencies in an Intergroup Context," *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* Vol. 79, No. 4 (October 2000), pp. 602-616.

[32] Gilbert, Fiske, and Lindzey, *The Handbook of Social Psychology*, p. 559.

[33] Henri Tajfel, M.G. Billig, R.P. Bundy, Claude Flament, "Social Categorization and Intergroup Behavior," *European Journal of Social Psychology* Vol 1, No. 2 (April 1971): 149-178.

[34] Horowitz, *Ethnic Groups in Conflict*, p. 144.

[35] J.D. Fearon and D.D. Laitin, "Violence and the Social Construction of Ethnic Identity," *International Organization* Vol. 54, No. 4 (2000).

[36] Marilynn B. Brewer and Norman Miller, *Intergroup Relations* (Open University Press, 1996), p. 61.

[37] Muzafer Sherif, *The Robbers Cave Experiment: Intergroup Conflict and Cooperation* (Middletown, Wesleyan University Press, 1988).

pursuit of individual gain, but the maintenance of self-esteem that drives individuals to identify with the ingroup.[38] Whether it is status or material resources, implicit in the finding that competition is a context that activates group identification is the importance of intergroup threat. When a threat to the group materializes, group members identify more strongly with the group. The role of threat as a moderator of ingroup identification has been a subject of extensive research in social psychology.[39] This research has recognized that such threats may be symbolic as well as realistic. Realistic threats are those to wealth, power, influence, and security, whereas symbolic threats are to values, beliefs, status, and norms of the group.[40] Miles Hewstone, Mark Rubin, and Hazel Willis write, "Threat can be perceived in terms of the ingroup's social identity, its goals and values, its position in the hierarchy, even its existence."[41] Security threats, the subject of ethnic conflict in this article, represent a threat to a group's existence.

Once threat activates the boundaries between groups and group identities become more salient, one important and well-established consequence is intergroup bias. Intergroup bias signifies favoritism or positivity toward ingroups and derogation of or negativity toward outgroups. Ingroup positivity may be expressed as pride, loyalty, and perceived superiority, whereas outgroup negativity may appear as stereotyping, discrimination, and prejudice.[42] Ingroup positivity may lie at the heart of ethnonationalism, whereas outgroup negativity may lie at the root of historical narratives or myths that denigrate the other group as the enemy.

Threat then can intensify intergroup bias, though the mere act of social categorization can also create bias.[43] This bias may express itself in two ways in addition to ingroup favoritism and outgroup negativity. The first effect is ingroup cohesion. As William Sumner puts it, "The relationship of comradeship and peace in the we-group, and that of hostility and war toward other-groups, are correlative to each other. The exigencies of war with outsiders are what make peace inside."[44] The second effect is outgroup homogenization. People are more likely to see variation among individuals within their own group, than within a group to which they do not

---

[38] Henri Tajfel and John Turner, "An Integrative Theory of Intergroup Conflict," in eds. William G. Austin and Stephen Worchel, *The Social Psychology of Intergroup Relations*, (St. Paul, Minn.: Brooks/Cole, 1979).
[39] For a review of this literature, see David O. Sears, Leonie Huddy, and Robert Jervis, *Oxford Handbook of Political Psychology* (Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2003), pp.539-542.
[40] Blake M. Riek, Eric W. Mania, and Samuel L. Gaertner, "Intergroup Threat and Outgroup Attitudes: A Meta-Analytic Review," *Personality and Social Psychology Review* Vol. 10, No. 4 (November 2006), pp. 336 -353.
[41] Miles Hewstone, Mark Rubin, and Hazel Willis, "Intergroup Bias," *Annual Review of Psychology* 53 (February 2002): p. 586.
[42] Gilbert, Fiske, and Lindzey, *The Handbook of Social Psychology*, p. 1086.
[43] Anne Maass, Roberta Ceccarelli, and Samantha Rudin, "Linguistic Intergroup Bias," *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* Vol. 71, No. 3 (September 1996), pp. 512-526.
[44] William Graham Sumner, *Folkways: A Study of Mores, Manners, Customs and Morals* (New York, Cosimo, 2007), p. 12.

belong.[45] Thus an ethnic ingroup member can see the distinctiveness in the character and behavior of his fellow coethnic, but he is more likely to generalize the threatening behavior of an ethnic outgroup member to all other outgroup members. As a result, all ethnic outgroup members appear threatening.

Yet despite its intuitive appeal for understanding civil wars and ethnic conflicts, much of the psychosocial research on intergroup relations comprises experiments conducted in either laboratories or constructed field settings. Few studies have tested these insights using data from actual social conflicts. Clearly there are practical limitations, especially in the case of violent conflict. Nonetheless, the shortage of real-world testing remains, and it is a deficit that needs to be addressed.

Choice of Case Study

I draw on data from Rwanda's civil war of 1990-94 to illustrate the relationship between security threats and group polarization. Rwanda's genocide, the culmination of the war, has attracted considerable scholarly attention and has become a key case in studies of genocide. I start with a brief description of the well-known events leading up to the genocide and then examine in more detail the key issues of the security threat and group polarization.

In 1994 a government-sponsored campaign of genocide targeted Rwanda's Tutsi minority for extermination. Over the course of little more than 100 days, between 507,000 and 850,000 Tutsi would be killed alongside about 30,000 members of Rwanda's Hutu majority.[46] The genocide was the culmination of a civil war fought between a mainly Tutsi rebel army and a Hutu-controlled government. The roots of this war lay in a revolution just prior to independence from colonial Belgium in 1962 that overthrew the ruling Tutsi monarchy and installed a Hutu republic in its place. The revolution sent tens of thousands of Tutsi into exile who made several attempts to return to Rwanda by force of arms in the 1960s. The Tutsi who remained in Rwanda endured two successive Hutu-controlled republics (1962-73 and 1973-94) that excluded them from political life. The civil war, initiated in October 1990, was a renewed attempt by the descendants of the Tutsi exiles to break the Hutu monopoly on power and to return to Rwanda. In 1991, the international community intervened in the war to broker a peace deal and to encourage Rwanda to democratize. In August 1993, a transitional power-sharing agreement was finally signed between the Hutu-controlled government, the new opposition parties, and the Tutsi rebel

---

[45] David M. Messick and Diane M. Mackie, "Intergroup Relations," *Annual Review of Psychology* Vol. 40, No. 1 (February 1989),pp. 45-81.

[46] The Tutsi rebel army also stands accused of killing Hutu civilians during and following the civil war but in much smaller numbers. See P. Verwimp, "Testing the Double-Genocide Thesis for Central and Southern Rwanda," *Journal of Conflict Resolution* Vol. 47, No. 4 (August 2003).

movement, the RPF. The deal, however, proved unpopular with Hutu hard-liners inside Rwanda. On April 6,1994 Rwanda's Hutu president, Juvénal Habyarimana, who signed the agreement, was killed when his plane was shot down by assassins still unknown. In the ensuing power vacuum, Hutu hardliners quickly seized power and mobilized the state's civilian and military machinery as well as the Hutu civilian population in a bid to eliminate the Tutsi minority, win the civil war, and maintain Hutu control of the state. The international community failed to intervene. Only when the rebel Tutsi army defeated the Hutu extremist government some 100 days later did the slaughter finally stop.

The considerable scholarship on Rwanda's genocide has pointed to a panoply of contributing factors to explain it: the ongoing civil war; the political transition from an authoritarian to multiparty system, a Malthusian trap of rapid demographic growth against fixed land availability, a racist ideology, extreme poverty, a colonial legacy of an ethnically divided population, an International Monetary Fund structural adjustment program, a remarkably powerful state, a culturally conformist population, and a bipolar ethnic social structure, among others.[47] Scholars have emphasized one or a combination of these factors in accounting for the genocide. Notwithstanding this diversity of opinion, a consensus has emerged that, while several structural and historical factors may have predisposed Rwanda to ethnic violence and several shorter-term factors precipitated it, the genocide was the strategy of a small elite who saw their political survival in the extermination of the Tutsi minority. As Alison Des Forges succinctly put it "This genocide resulted from the deliberate choice of a modern elite to foster hatred and fear to keep itself in power." Their intent was "to sacrifice the Tutsi in hopes of uniting all Hutu behind them."[48] The consensus is clear then that the genocide "cannot be attributed to a spontaneous outburst of mutual antagonisms between ethnic or racial groups."[49] The aim of this article, however, is not to offer a new explanation of Rwanda's genocide. Rather its purpose is to explain how social groups "polarize." Group "polarization", I argue, is distinct from group

---

[47] On the war and state power, see Scott Straus, *The Order of Genocide : Race, Power, and War in Rwanda* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2006). On political transition, see both Snyder, *From Voting to Violence : Democratization and Nationalist Conflict*, Michael Mann, *The Dark Side of Democracy : Explaining Ethnic Cleansing* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005). On ecological scarcity, see C. Andre and J. P. Platteau, "Land Relations under Unbearable Stress: Rwanda Caught in the Malthusian Trap," *Journal of Economic Behavior & Organization* Vol. 34, No. 1 (June 1998). On racism and poverty see Peter Uvin, *Aiding Violence : The Development Enterprise in Rwanda* (West Hartford, Conn.: Kumarian Press, 1998). On the colonial legacy, see Mahmood Mamdani, *When Victims Become Killers : Colonialism, Nativism and the Genocide in Rwanda* (Oxford, James Currey, 2001). On structural adjustment, see Michel Chossudovsky, "Economic Genocide in Rwanda," *Economic and Political Weekly* Vol. 31, No. 15 (April 1996). On cultural obedience, see Prunier, *The Rwanda Crisis : History of a Genocide*. On the bipolar social structure, see Filip Reyntjens, "Rwanda: Genocide and Beyond," *Journal of Refugee Studies* Vol. 9, No. 3 (1996).
[48] Des Forges, *Leave None to Tell the Story*, pp. 1,49.
[49] Helen M. Hintjens, "Explaining the 1994 Genocide in Rwanda," *Journal of Modern African Studies* Vol. 32, No. 2 (June 1999): p. 248.

violence. While polarization may lead to violence and violence may also lead to polarization, they are distinct components of group conflict. This article aims to explain threat-induced polarization, not participation in genocidal violence.

The importance of threat, insecurity, and fear has been widely acknowledged in the scholarship on Rwanda's genocide. At the elite level, the new opposition political parties posed the threat from within and the rebel military the threat from without. Rwanda's ruling elite feared they would have to share or, worse, give up power. As Reyntjens put it, "For this political-military-mercantile network, the democratization process and the redistribution of the cards as a result of the Arusha peace accord constituted a vital threat to the interests and activities of a mafia-like nature."[50] Threat also affected ordinary Rwandans. The civil war, reinforced by the assassination of Burundi's first Hutu president, Ndadaye, by Tutsi soldiers in October 1993, created a climate of fear and insecurity. Straus, having surveyed 250 Rwandans, concluded: "Many ordinary Rwandans participated in genocide because they feared for their safety in war and because they calculated that committing violence would be less costly than disobeying. The desire for self-protection was not fabricated out of thin air. A war was in progress."[51] Mahmood Mamdani concurs. "This is what one needs to recognize that it was not greed – not even hatred – but fear which was the reason why the multitude responded to the call of Hutu Power the closer the war came to home."[52] Catherine Newbury identifies the same impact of the war: "Fear and insecurity intensified, as generalized hardship, hunger, and everyday violence became increasingly common experiences for ordinary citizens."[53] Numerous other Rwanda scholars point to the effect of Rwanda's civil war and the assassination of Burundi's Hutu president on Rwandans.[54] A substantial body of scholarly opinion then recognizes the role of threat, insecurity, and fear in the genocide.[55]

---

[50] Reyntjens, *Rwanda,* p. 243.

[51] Straus, *The Order of Genocide*, p. 227

[52] Mamdani, *When Victims Become Killers*, p. 191.

[53] Catharine Newbury, "Background to Genocide: Rwanda," *Issue: A Journal of Opinion* Vol. 23, No. 2, (1995): p. 14.

[54] See Hintjens, "Explaining the 1994 Genocide in Rwanda," p. 262, Des Forges, *Leave None to Tell the Story : Genocide in Rwanda*, pp. 88, 135, Prunier, *The Rwanda Crisis : History of a Genocide*, p. 200, Uvin, *Aiding Violence*, p. 66, Lee Ann Fujii, "Transforming the Moral Landscape: The Diffusion of a Genocidal Norm in Rwanda," *Journal of Genocide Research* Vol. 6, No. 1 (May 2004): p. 100, Bert Ingelaere, "Peasants, Power and Ethnicity: A Bottom-up Perspective on Rwanda's Political Transition," *African Affairs* 109, no. 435 (February 2010): pp. 275 & 287.

[55] One exception is Fujii's later work which dismisses ethnic fear as a factor in killing. See Fujii, *Killing Neighbors: Webs of Violence in Rwanda* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 2009). She argues for the importance of "local ties" instead. It is important to recognize, however, that Fujii is addressing the micro-question of why only certain individuals committed violence and others not, and not the bigger macro-question of why the violence began in the first place. Individual participation in violence is a different dependent variable to the onset of genocide.

As previously discussed, theory and evidence in social psychology have long recognized threat's adverse effects on intergroup relations. Group identities change in the face of threat. Group identities also clearly mattered in some way in Rwanda's genocide. The fact remains that it was a genocide whose victims were overwhelmingly Tutsi and whose perpetrators were overwhelmingly Hutu. The precise role that group or ethnic identity played, however, needs to be carefully articulated. To argue ethnicity mattered is not to make an argument for primordial hatreds. More nuance is required. Ethnicity is a particular form of group identity with special properties that distinguish it from identities based on class, region, or ideology. Ethnic attributes cannot easily be changed ("stickiness"), and they make individuals readily identifiable ("visibility"). [56] A consensus has emerged among scholars on three aspects of ethnicity's role in Rwanda's history. First, scholars agree ethnic identity was constructed in Rwanda. They have categorically rejected primordial explanations of identity's meaning as "fixed" since time immemorial.[57] As Bert Ingelaere put it, "A constructivist understanding of ethnicity in Rwanda argues that the crystallization of ethnic identities was the result of sociopolitical transformations starting before the advent of colonialism, under the reign of King Rwabugiri (1865–95), and further rigidified under colonial rule. A Tutsi identity was shaped in relation to the wealth and power associated with royal and later government status and institutions, while a Hutu awareness developed in relation to this other identity group and as a result of a situation of subordination."[58] Second, scholars agree ethnicity has been an instrumental force in Rwanda. Rwanda's ruling elite used ethnicity for political purposes and to violent effect on several occasions in Rwanda's past.[59] In describing the period leading up to the genocide, Peter Uvin writes: "The regime was under attack from all sides, and its most radical factions took recourse in the usual, time-tested solution: the revival of ethnicity. Ethnicity could serve to unite the large majority of the population around the government, take the momentum away from the opposition, combat the RPF, and render elections impossible. Ethnicity was to be the tool of the elite, as it had been for the past thirty years."[60] Newer microevidence suggests ordinary Rwandan also used ethnicity "strategically and pragmatically."[61] An important implication then is

---

[56] See Kanchan Chandra, "What Is Ethnic Identity and Does It Matter?," *Annual Review of Political Science* Vol. 9 (June 2006).

[57] Catharine Newbury, *The Cohesion of Oppression: Clientship and Ethnicity in Rwanda, 1860-1960* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1988), p. 14, Mamdani, *When Victims Become Killers*, pp. 101-02, Fujii, *Killing Neighbors*, p. 45.

[58] Ingelaere, "Peasants, Power and Ethnicity*",* p. 283.

[59] Prunier, *The Rwanda Crisis*, p. 141, Villia Jefremovas, "Treacherous Waters: The Politics of History and the Politics of Genocide in Rwanda and Burundi," *Africa: Journal of the International African Institute* Vol. 70, No. 2 (May 2000), p. 304, Newbury, "Background to Genocide*",* p. 13.

[60] Uvin, *Aiding Violence,* p. 63.

[61] Fujii, *Killing Neighbors,* p. 126.

that scholars recognize that the salience of ethnic identities varied across time in Rwanda. I argue here that threat is one moderator of identity salience. Third, although ethnicity played some part, it did not by itself cause the genocide. Scholars roundly reject this monocausal and deterministic argument.[62] As Helen Hintjens writes, "Such identities may be printed on people's papers, or may dominate people's perceptions of a conflict situation, but they cannot in and of themselves be the root cause of such conflict or violence."[63]

Ethnic identity then mattered, but scholars must exercise care in specifying the role it played. I argue ethnic identity – through threat and the underlying emotion of fear - mattered for group polarization but not for individual participation in violence. Ethnicity does not explain why some individuals killed and others not. Rwandans did frame, narrate, and rationalize the violence in ethnic terms, however. Polarization followed ethnic boundaries – a view shared by many other scholars. Straus analyzes the responses of 171 Rwandans and finds the most common rationale given by far was the need to "kill the Tutsis before they kill the Hutus." He writes, "What the evidence suggests is that acute insecurity and orders from above ignited a categorical logic of race and ethnicity.…Ethnicity and race were central political idioms in Rwanda…but the switch that led many ordinary Rwandans with little preexisting hatred to categorize Tutsis as dangerous "enemies" happened only in war and only after the state made that claim."[64] Ingelaere, drawing on 400 Rwandan life histories, corroborates Straus, and quotes René Lemarchand on ethnic violence in Burundi. "In a time of crisis, Hutu and Tutsi emerge as the only relevant defining characteristics of group identities, reducing all other social roles to phenomena of marginal social significance."[65] Lee Ann Fujii, in a careful textual analysis of interviews with 82 Rwandans, writes: "As the accounts above show, people often described the violence in ethnic terms. "Hutu were going after Tutsi." "[E]thnicity figured prominently in people's narration of the civil war and genocide."[66] Ethnicity then was the overarching rationale, meta-narrative, or hegemonic frame for group polarization. This distinction between polarization and violence becomes most apparent when one moves from macro to microlevel analysis. The growing body of micro-evidence points to nonethnic motives for killing in group violence. In a separate study, I find that micro-situational opportunities such as spatial proximity to other killers' homes mattered.[67] Straus points to intragroup coercion and obedience to

---

[62] Straus, *The Order of Genocide*, p. 224, Newbury, "Background to Genocide", p. 13.
[63] Hintjens, "Explaining the 1994 Genocide in Rwanda", p. 251.
[64] Straus, *The Order of Genocide*, pp. 155,173, & 225.
[65] Ingelaere, "Peasants, Power and Ethnicity", p. 287.
[66] Fujii, *Killing Neighbors*, pp. 89, 103.
[67] Omar McDoom, "Who Kills? Social Influence, Spatial Opportunity, and Participation in Intergroup Violence," in *Political Science and Political Economy Working Paper Series* (London School of Economics, 2011).

authority.[68] Fujii identifies social ties, jealousy, greed, group conformism, and coercion by the state.[69] While many Rwandans framed the violence as, or "polarized" along, ethnic lines, only a few killed and did so for reasons other than ethnicity. In this study, I find that many nonparticipants in the violence "polarized" attitudinally. Ethnicity, through fear, was important then for polarization, but nonethnic factors mattered for differential selection into the violence. Fujii describes the killers as "performing a script" – an idea comparable to a narrative or a frame – which, importantly, she recognizes the killers may or may not have believed.[70] As Ingelaere put it "[T]he master narratives of the 1994 genocide and other periods of violence and war in Rwandan history were always structured along ethnic lines."[71] This is the careful articulation that is needed in specifying the role ethnicity played in Rwanda's violence. Ethnicity was constructed, instrumental, variable in salience, and the meta-rationale for group mobilization, but ethnicity does not by itself explain why some committed violence in Rwanda's genocide and others not. This article provides evidence of the relationship between security and ethnicity. As the security threat intensified, fear increased, and group identities grew more salient. Group members increasingly rationalized, framed, and narrated violence in ethnic terms (i.e. they "polarized" along ethnic boundaries). To be clear neither threat, fear, or identity by themselves explains Rwanda's genocide. I argue, however, they do explain how Hutu in Rwanda "polarized." In the next section, I provide the evidence of how this polarization occurred.

Research Design, Methods, and Data

I illustrate the relationship between wartime threat and group polarization through two comparisons. The first, across time, is between the pregenocide and genocidal phases of the war. In the pregenocide phase (October 1, 1990 – April 5, 1994), the threat was relatively minor: the war affected a small part of the country to the north; there were long periods of cease-fire while a peace deal was negotiated; and combat comprised mainly hit-and-run guerrilla activities. In the genocidal phase (April 6, 1994 – July 17, 1994) the threat intensified. President Habyarimana of seventeen years standing had been assassinated; senior politicians were being killed; the power-sharing deal had collapsed; and a battle to the end for outright control of the state had begun, and this time it involved combat in the capital. The second comparison, across space, is between the north and the south of the country. In the north, located on the war's frontlines, the threat was clear. Northerners suffered civilian casualties; they were displaced by the fighting; and they

---

[68] Straus, *The Order of Genocide*, p. 136.
[69] Fujii, *Killing Neighbors*, p. 101.
[70] Ibid., pp. 104, 23.
[71] Ingelaere, "Peasants, Power and Ethnicity", p. 275.

generally experienced the sights and sounds of war firsthand.[72] In the south, where the war by contrast was distant, the threat was minor. Southerners were not the victims of wartime violence; they did not have to flee their communities; and generally they relied on the radio and second-hand sources for news of the war. In short, these two comparisons were selected to capture variation in the level of threat to or fear within Rwanda's Hutu population.

I draw on three main kinds of evidence to make these intertemporal and interregional comparisons. First, I analyze radio broadcasts from Rwanda's, Radio-Télévision Libre des Mille Collines (RTLM) from before and during the genocide. These broadcasts provide evidence of how Rwanda's extremist elite narrated, framed, and saw the war from above. Second, I use survey data collected from ordinary Rwandans from the north and south of the country who lived through the war. These data provide individual-level evidence of how the war was understood and framed from below. Third, I enrich both sources with more indepth interviews with Rwandans from four communities, again from the north and south of the country. Together, all three data sources point to the operation of the four psychosocial mechanisms.

The radio was the most effective tool for direct mass communication in Rwanda. Nearly 30 percent of all Rwandan households owned a radio in 1991.[73] . While Rwanda's print media was remarkably diverse, it had only a marginal and indirect impact on the majority of Rwandans' lives. In 1991 only 56.2 percent of the population older than 7 knew how to read and write and only 6.5 percent of the population aged 15 to 24 had more than a primary-school education.[74] During the war Rwandans, reception permitting, had a choice of three radio stations. The first was Radio Rwanda, the national radio station that had been broadcasting from before the start of the war. It was effectively the voice of the government up until 1992 when opposition parties demanded and received more moderation and less partisanship. The second was RTLM, a private radio station that began its transmissions on July 8, 1993 and stopped reporting 361 days later on July 3, 1994 when the RPF captured Kigali. Infamously known as Radio Machete during the genocide, RTLM had strong ties to elements of both Rwanda's ruling elite and hard-liners. Of its fifty shareholders, forty came from the north, the region of president Habyarimana's birth and thirty-nine belonged to Habyarimana's ruling party, the National Republicatn Movement for Democracy and Development. A third radio station, Radio Muhubura, based in Uganda, broadcast on behalf of the rebel RPF from July 1992. Its discourse emphasized national unity

---

[72] The north had historically been the location of several autonomous Hutu principalities and Hutu pride reputedly remained strong in the region. It is possible then that some of the anti-Tutsi attitudes expressed by northerners in the survey predated the civil war and the security threat it created.
[73] Commission Nationale de Récensement, "General Census of the Population in August 1991: Final Results," (Kigali, Rwanda: Ministère du Plan, 1994).
[74] Ibid.

over ethnic differences, but its signal did not extend far into Rwanda.[75] The radio with the most radical content during the war then was clearly RTLM. Despite the stigma associated with RTLM in postgenocide Rwanda, a surprisingly high number of Rwandans, 61.3 percent of my survey respondents, admitted listening to it. Given its remarkable power of outreach, RTLM's broadcasts represent a rich source of data on how Rwanda's extremist elite narrated, framed, and viewed the war.

The RTLM radio transcripts came from the International Monitor Institute, a nonprofit organization commissioned by the International Criminal Tribunal for Rwanda to translate its broadcasts from Kinyarwanda, Rwanda's principal official language, into English and French for use as evidence in trials. The translated transcripts covered 55 days, or 15.3 percent of RTLM's 361 days of broadcasting: 16 days from the pregenocide phase, and 39 days from the genocidal phase. Altogether, the transcripts contained 410,067 words, and they have been the subject of two quantitative analyses that tested hypotheses different to those in this study.[76]

I conducted the content analysis of the broadcasts in two stages. In the first stage, I compiled a list of words that I believed would be indicative of the four psychosocial mechanisms that I was testing. I then counted the occurrence of each of these selected words in each day's broadcast. The second stage involved more intensive human judgment. I checked the wider context of each word. I rejected those words used in contexts that did not illustrate the psychosocial mechanism being tested. Finally, I calculated the occurrence of the remaining words as a proportion of all words used in each day's broadcast. This allowed me to compare the relative concentration of the frames across time. Table 1 reports the findings in two ways: first, the relative frequencies of each relevant term as a proportion of all words in the database (statistic A), and second the relative frequencies of each relevant term in the pregenocide and genocide time periods as a proportion of all appearances of the term in the two time periods combined (statistic B).

[Table 1 here]

I also conducted a stratified two-stage cluster survey of 294 individual Rwandans in 2003. The survey instrument comprised 223 questions relating to attitudes and beliefs about Rwandan history, the genocide and interethnic relations, as well as demographic and socioeconomic

---

[75] Des Forges writes "Although it [Radio Muhubura] glorified the RPF, it did so in a nationalist rather than an ethnic context, consistent with the general RPF emphasis on minimizing ethnic differences between Hutu and Tutsi." Des Forges, *Leave None to Tell the Story*, p. 68.

[76] Hege Gulseth, "The Use of Propaganda in the Rwandan Genocide: A Study of R.T.L.M", Masters thesis, University of Oslo, 2004; and Scott Straus, "What Is the Relationship between Hate Radio and Violence? Rethinking Rwanda's "Radio Machete"," *Politics Society* Vol. 35, No. 4 (December 2007), pp. 609-637.

characteristics of the respondents. I stratified the survey first regionally, and second by perpetrator status. As a result, the first stratum comprised 151 northern respondents and 143 southern respondents.[77] This stratification captured the differential impact of the war in Rwanda: wartime threat was high in the north and low in the south. The second stratum comprised 190 nonperpetrators and 104 perpetrators (defined as an individual who had committed at least one act of violence). I identified perpetrators in a community by comparing a list of individuals convicted through Rwanda's *gacaca* courts against a second list of individuals identified by self-confessed prison inmates.[78] Only if an individual appeared on both lists did I consider the person a perpetrator. I personally administered the questionnaire to the perpetrators in prison with the assistance of an interpreter, and hired and trained a team of enumerators to administer the survey for the nonperpetrators living in rural communities. Two hundred seventy-three respondents identified themselves as Hutu, and 21 as Tutsi. The frequencies reported in the article take into account the survey's design effects

Third, I selected four communities or *cellules*, the smallest administrative unit in Rwanda, in which to conduct indepth interviews. On average, a cellule was home to 200 households. I chose two communities from the north, where the war was close and two from the south where the war was distant, again to capture variation in the level of security threat. I personally interviewed a cross section of individuals from each community with an interpreter and using a semistructured questionnaire designed to complement the structured questionnaire in the survey. Finally, the caution needed in interpreting survey and interview data in the context of postgenocide Rwanda should be acknowledged. The difficulty of recollecting events several years ago, the fear of self-incrimination, and the likelihood of self-censorship in an authoritarian regime widely perceived as pro-Tutsi are three major issues that all field research on the genocide confronts. I relied on several techniques to address these challenges. First, I triangulated responses. I drew on testimony not only from Hutu participants in the violence, but also Hutu nonparticipants and Tutsi survivors and report these views too. Second, I recognized the credibility of "statements-against-interest." A Hutu who tells me the Tutsi historically had oppressed the Hutu is giving a politically unfavorable answer in postgenocide Rwanda and their answer should be given credence. Third, I asked the same question but made a grammatical switch from the second to the third person. Instead of asking "What do you think?" or "What did you do?", I also asked "What did others think?" or "What did others do?" Finally, in the

---

[77] I selected Ruhengeri Prefecture from the north and Butare Prefecture from the south. In 1994 Rwanda's territorial administration comprised 11 prefectures, 145 communes, 1545 sectors, and approximately 9000 cells.
[78] Gacaca refers to a system of local courts created in 2001 to promote truth, justice, and reconciliation within Rwandan communities following the genocide.

survey I also report the numbers of those unwilling or unable to answer sensitive questions. Rather than a nonresponse, these answers may indicate a reluctance to give a politically unfavorable response. As such, they may be a barometer of the level of self-censorship in postgenocide Rwanda. I analyze and report the survey data with and without these responses. While none of these methods is foolproof, I believe they increase somewhat the confidence in the answers reported here.

Hypotheses

In the next four subsections, I test for the operation of the four psychosocial mechanisms in Rwanda's civil war, evidenced in the framing of the conflict in the radio broadcasts, survey data, and interview testimony.

HYPOTHESIS I. BOUNDARY ACTIVATION

The first indicator of group polarization is the framing of the war as ethnic. The war is not between a government and a rebel group, but between two ethnic groups. In hypothetical terms, the greater the threat, the more the conflict is rationalized as ethnic. The primary psychosocial mechanism here is "boundary activation": threat brings to the foreground of society ethnic differences that had previously existed in the background.[79] As the threat increases, so too does the salience of the social identity.

RTLM broadcasts reflect this higher salience of ethnicity in Rwandan society. Its broadcasters increasingly framed the conflict in ethnic terms as the war escalated. In the pregenocide stage of the war, when the threat was minor, RTLM broadcasters used the nonethnic identifiers "RPF" or "rebels" to define the enemy. In the genocidal phase, however, when the threat had grown more acute, one sees a decline in the use of the neutral descriptors, and a rise instead of ethnic identifiers to define the enemy. Table 1 shows that the terms *inkotanyi* and *inyenzi* rose significantly in frequency in the second, genocidal phase of the war. *Inkotanyi*, or "fierce warriors" is a historical reference to a regiment in the army of the Tutsi king of old; *inyenzi*, or cockroaches, refers to Tutsi invaders of the 1960s, so named because they often attacked at night. Rwandans understood both terms to refer to Tutsi.

This activation of ethnic identities is also evident in how ordinary Rwandans framed intergroup tensions in their society. The distance is not between supporters of the rebels and supporters of the government, but between individuals of one ethnic group and individuals of the other. As

---

[79] Charles Tilly, "Social Boundary Mechanisms," *Philosophy of the Social Sciences* Vol 34, No. 2 (June 2004), pp. 211 -236.

the threat intensifies, members of the ethnic ingroup increasingly suspect members of the ethnic outgroup of supporting the enemy.

An intertemporal comparison of the survey data reveals this increased ethnic distrust. I asked Rwandans, in open-ended questions, to describe the changes in their communities following (1) the outbreak of the war in 1990 (pregenocide phase) and (2) the president's assassination in 1994 (genocidal phase). Table 2 summarizes the three main impacts that emerged after coding their responses. In the pregenocide phase, ethnic distancing was the most common answer (48.8 percent), followed by insecurity (27.1 percent), and lastly economic hardship (26.3 percent).[80] The outbreak of war then clearly made ordinary Rwandans think in ethnic terms. In addition, in the second genocidal phase when the threat intensified, respondents reported the same three effects but in greater numbers: 66.5 percent of respondents for example reported ethnic distancing following the president's assassination.

[Table 2 here]

An interregional comparison between the northern and southern communities also demonstrates this increased ethnic distrust. In the northern community of Mutovu, located within the zone of combat, the threat was most acute. Distrust was growing between the two ethnic groups, as the following juxtaposition from a Hutu and a Tutsi in one of the northern communities exemplifies.

What happened in your community after the RPF attacked in 1990? There was distrust between the Tutsi and the Hutu. Almost everyone was demoralized, as it was the first time for many people that they heard of an attack or a war against Rwanda. In the evenings and in the mornings, the Tutsi liked to stick together in groups. We were always afraid of these groups, as it was being said that they were making a plan to kill us. We were afraid of each other. Then when Habyarimana died, the fear became generalized. We did not do anything and we did not go anywhere. We stayed in our homes as was ordered. The killers led by the councillor [a local state official] started their work to kill the Tutsi on the same day we heard of the president's death.
--Donatelle, Hutu farmer, aged 35, Mutovu cellule, northern Rwanda, July 2003

What happened in your community after the RPF attacked in 1990? When the RPF attacked the country the trust between us and the Hutu was broken. They [Hutu] began to say that it was us [Tutsi] who had started the war against Rwanda and that we were making them suffer for it. The Hutu began to control all our activities. They said that we were sending our children to fight at the front but it was not true. It was just an excuse to threaten and to attack us. It is thanks to God that before 1994 we did not suffer any human losses, if I remember rightly. But when the plane came down it was another thing. We were hunted like wild animals. My wife and children

---

[80] In coding ethnic distance I looked for references to distrust, misunderstandings, disagreements, poor cooperation, and hate between ethnic groups. Northern respondents additionally mentioned arrests, harassment, and violence that targeted Tutsi.

were killed in these operations. I had fled and hid myself in the bushes. It was by the grace of God they did not find me.

--Constantin, Tutsi farmer, aged 44, Mutovu cellule, northern Rwanda, July 2003

In contrast, in the south where the threat was weaker, the distrust was less pronounced following the start of the war. There were no arrests, no harassment, no violence and no other highly visible forms of ethnic distancing within these communities. The suspicions, if any, were latent as Véronique, a genocide survivor describes.

> *What happened in your community after the war started in 1990?* For those who had radios, they were afraid but for those who did not, they were not concerned. *Who exactly was afraid?* It was everyone who was afraid – not just the Hutu but also the Tutsi as they had both heard there was war. But there were no problems between Hutu and Tutsi as a result here. There was nothing bad said about the Tutsi at the time. Perhaps people said it in their huts, but they did not say it to me.

--Véronique, Hutu woman married to Tutsi farmer, aged 31, Tamba cellule, southern Rwanda

In the south, then, ethnic distance was much more muted, reflecting a lower threat-level. In short, the evidence suggests that wartime threats first serve to activate boundaries between ethnic groups. Consistent with psychosocial theory, as threat or fear increases, so too does the salience of social identities.

HYPOTHESIS 2. OUTGROUP NEGATIVITY

The second indicator of group polarization is outgroup negativity. The threat is framed to resonate against existing negative beliefs that the threatened ingroup possesses of the threatening outgroup: the greater the threat, the greater the negativity. In psychosocial theory, outgroup negativity is an expression of intergroup bias, and the converse of ingroup favoritism.[81] Negativity toward the outgroup can be expressed in both behavior (discrimination) and attitude (prejudice). Several theories of ethnic warfare have also recognized negative sentiment toward the outgroup as important in conflict. It has alternately been described as ethnic prejudice, ethnic antagonism, hatred, social cleavages, myths and narratives of hostility, and in extreme cases dehumanization.[82] A key point in psychosocial theory, however, is that the intensity of these negative sentiments is variable. It recognizes that outgroup negativity is dependent on various moderators, including threat.[83] Thus, as the conflict escalates (i.e. the threat intensifies), one would expect to see more negative references to the outgroup. These negative references

---

[81] Hewstone, Rubin, and Willis, "Intergroup Bias."
[82] For an assessment of prejudice, see Green and Seher, "What Role Does Prejudice Play in Ethnic Conflict?" For ethnic antagonism, see Horowitz, *Ethnic Groups in Conflict*. For hatred, see Petersen, *Understanding Ethnic Violence*. For social cleavages and dehumanization, see Valentino's critique, *Final Solutions*. For myths of hostility, see Kaufman, *Modern Hatreds*.
[83] Hewstone, Rubin, and Willis, "Intergroup Bias."

need not be untrue. They may simply increase in frequency as the threat intensifies. The threat thus resonates more strongly against existing negative beliefs that the ingroup hold of the outgroup. As Kaufman described it, "[H]ostile narratives provided a symbolic vocabulary that the leaders used as tools to mobilize support."[84]

In Rwanda, an anti-Tutsi narrative pervaded its society. It has its roots in a specific Hutu interpretation of Rwanda's history. The derogatory narrative comprised at least two core beliefs: (1) the Tutsi were alien invaders. According to this belief, Hutu had settled in Rwanda first as farmers, and Tutsi had arrived subsequently as herders, and by implication had a weaker link to the country; and (2) the Tutsi had oppressed the Hutu. According to this belief, the Tutsi king had sat at the apex of a system that had subjugated Hutu until the Hutu revolution of 1959-62, which overthrew the monarchy.

RTLM radio broadcasts illustrate how outgroup negativity increased as the threat intensified. Its broadcasters sought to link the ongoing civil war with the anti-Tutsi narrative of Rwanda's history described above. As the war escalated, RTLM increasingly framed it as an attempt to reverse the outcome of the 1959 Hutu revolution and to reinstate the oppressive prerevolutionary order. Table 1 shows that such negative references to the Tutsi outgroup more than doubled as the threat intensified, a statistically significant increase. RTLM broadcasts emphasized two points in propagating this injustice frame. First, the RPF rebels were the descendants of the generation of Tutsi exiled following the Hutu revolution. It was not an unfounded allegation. While the RPF had attracted some disaffected Hutu, its core leadership and rank-and-file was indeed Tutsi. Here is how Ferdinand Nahimana, a renowned Hutu ideologue, described the relationship on RTLM.

> There is no difference between the RPF [rebels] and the *Inyenzi* [lit. cockroaches] because the *Inyenzi* are refugees who fled Rwanda after the mass majority Revolution of 1959, the fall of the monarchy and the establishment of a democratic Republic. Those who denied the Republic and democracy went into self-imposed exile. Not long after, between 1962 and 1967, those refugees tried to replace the new Republic with the former monarchy. They launched attacks that killed people.
> *--Interview with Ferdinand Nahimana, RTLM broadcast, November 20, 1993*

RTLM's second point was that these Tutsi exiles did not just want to come home; they wanted to reverse the gains or "*les acquis*" of the Hutu revolution and to reinstate the former sociopolitical order in which a Tutsi elite had monopolized power and had subjugated Hutu. Here is how Froduald Karamira, a leader of the extremist faction of the Democratic Republican

---

[84] Kaufman, "Symbolic Politics or Rational Choice?", p. 48.

Movement (MDR) party, responds to the question of what the difference is between the political contests of 1959 and the 1990s.

> *Froduald Karamira*: At the beginning of the war, we thought it was a matter of refugees who wanted to come back to their country. Is it now still the case? Before, the RPF said it wanted Habyarimana. We wonder what they are fighting for now that have they killed him. They are fighting for the power they had in 1959 and think they can get it back. War has clearly shown their intentions, and Rwandans have realized it. That is why if they hope that the people and political parties will go on quarreling, they are wrong because it is no longer possible. Now they are aware of the hidden meaning of the war.
> *--Interview on RTLM radio station with Vice-president of MDR Party, Froduald Karimira,*
> *April 22, 1994, 18 days into the genocide*

Table 1 shows that RTLM references to this particular period in Rwanda's history increased significantly in the genocidal phase when the threat intensified. The repeated references to the monarchy and its feudal system, and to the revolution that ended them served to keep this memory of Hutu subjugation uppermost in their listeners' minds. RTLM used these references with greater frequency to stimulate greater hostility toward the Tutsi outgroup associated with the prerevolutionary oppressive sociopolitical order.

These negative references resonated against a very strong ingroup collective memory – that is a set of shared anti-Tutsi beliefs, or myths or narratives about the Tutsi outgroup. As table 3 shows, first, the majority did not see Tutsi as indigenous to Rwanda. 58.6 percent believed Tutsi originated outside of the country, rising to an astounding 96.4 percent if one assumes those respondents who claimed they "did not know" were in fact disguising their true beliefs. Second, the majority recalled the prerevolutionary era as a period of subjugation. 75.4 percent saw *ubuhake*, an institution associated with monarchic rule, as unfair. *Ubuhake*, an outlawed form of feudal clientship, involved the exchange of a cow from a patron or master (*shebuja*) against a lifetime of service from the client or servant (*mugaragu*). Slightly more than 80 percent of respondents believed that Tutsi were usually the masters and Hutu usually the servants. Third, the majority also remembered the prerevolutionary era as a period of Tutsi privilege. Just over 70 percent believed that the Tutsi monarch had favored Tutsi over Hutu. Lastly, it is worth mentioning that in hypothesis I the use of the ethnic identifier *inyenzi*, a pejorative term for Tutsi, also increased in radio broadcasts. It too then suggests an increase in outgroup negativity.

[Table 3 here]

The data then corroborate the psychosocial theory first that outgroup negativity is variable and second that it varies with outgroup threat: the greater the threat, the greater the negativity.

HYPOTHESIS 3. OUTGROUP HOMOGENIZATION

The third indicator of group polarization is outgroup homogenization. In psychosocial theory, the unwillingness to distinguish between individuals is greater for groups to which a subject does not belong.[85] In intergroup conflicts, this de-individualization of the outgroup can be seen in the framing of the enemy. As the threat increases, the definition of the enemy outgroup enlarges. The enemy is framed no longer only as rebel combatants, but extends to include civilians. If psychosocial theory is correct, then when the threat is most acute, the enemy outgroup should ultimately form a single homogeneous group. At this extreme point, all group members represent a threat to be eliminated: the basis for genocide. Straus describes this mechanism as "collective ethnic categorization" when Rwandans switched from "seeing people of another ethnicity or racial category as neighbors to seeing then as "enemies" who must be killed."[86]

RTLM broadcasts reflected the process of homogenization in their characterization of the enemy or threat. As described earlier, the term *inyenzi* was the pejorative, ethnic identifier used to describe the enemy. Sometimes, RTLM used the term to refer only to Tutsi combatants and sometimes to all Tutsi – including Tutsi civilian men, women, and children. Table 1 shows that broadcast statements explicitly equating *inyenzi* with all Tutsi increased as the threat intensified across the pregenocide and genocide periods. Similarly, statements that left it unclear in the listeners' minds as to the distinction between all Tutsi and *inyenzi* also significantly increased. The data, however, are not unequivocal. Statements that did explicitly distinguish all Tutsi from *inyenzi* also increased across the two time periods.

An interregional comparison between northern and southern communities clarifies the relationship between threat and outgroup homogenization. Northerners identified Tutsi as the enemy from early on in the war. In the two northern communities, Tutsi faced intimidation, arrest, detention, and violence, especially when the rebels advanced. Northerners saw them as enemy collaborators at best. One northerner explains the mental equation between the rebel RPF and his Tutsi neighbors thus:

> *What happened in your community after the war broke out in October 1990?* In October 1990, when we learned on the radio that the country had been attacked by the RPF, who were mostly Tutsi and the brothers of our neighbors, we told ourselves that if they [our neighbors] were not accomplices they would have told us that the country was going to be attacked. If they did not inform us of the danger, then they must be the enemy. Some Tutsi families secretly began to send their own sons to the front to fight for the RPF, saying that their children were going to study. This aggravated the distrust between the two ethnic groups because a neighbor was now becoming the enemy.
> --*Jean-Marie, Hutu shopkeeper, aged 39, Mutovu cellule, northern Rwanda*

---

[85] Messick and Mackie, "Intergroup Relations."
[86] Straus, *The Order of Genocide*, p. 225.

In contrast, the story in the south differed markedly. Hutu and Tutsi initially collaborated, participating in night patrols and manning roadblocks together. They were uncertain as to what was happening and what to do. Here is one young man's description of how residents in his community came to realize that the Tutsi were the target.

> *Tell me what happened in your community right after Habyarimana died:* After a few days we started to see smoke of burning houses coming from Gigonkoro [a neighboring prefecture]. Then everyone was afraid – both Hutu and Tutsi. We wondered who was burning the houses? People said those who were doing the burning had covered themselves in banana leaves so you could not see who it was. But when we found out that it was Tutsi houses burning, the fear of Hutu decreased while the fear of the Tutsi increased as they now knew who was the enemy. After a few days it was evident that there were two groups – those being hunted and those who hunted. Then people became greedy and started killing and eating people's cows. After it was clear that there were some people [Tutsi] who were the enemy, some people said that "we are used to this because of history." Then those hiding people told the people to flee rather than dying where they were hiding.
> *--Leopold, secretary of the Gacaca committee, aged 32, April 2003, Mwendo cellule, southern Rwanda*

As Leopold states, the war eventually reduced the community into two groups: the Tutsi, who were the enemy and to be hunted, and the Hutu, their opponents who hunted them. This perception of the Tutsi as the enemy, however, happened late - *after* the president's assassination. This delay reflects the war's initially lesser impact in the south.

The events in these four communities are typical. Table 4 shows that in most southern communities Hutu and Tutsi participated together in night patrols even *after* the president's assassination. Eighty percent of Tutsi respondents corroborated this. Southern Hutu then did not identify Tutsi with the enemy even on the eve of the genocide. This changed, however, during the violence. When asked whom people thought were the enemy *during* the genocide, 70.5 percent responded that it was all Tutsi. An additional 20.6 percent concurred, but went on to say the enemy also included others such as Hutu collaborators. The micro evidence suggests then that outgroup homogenization was a third psychosocial effect of threat.

[Table 4 here]

HYPOTHESIS 4. INGROUP SOLIDARITY

The fourth indicator of group polarization is ingroup cohesion. Action to counter the threat is framed as a test of an individual's loyalty to the group. In psychosocial theory, feelings of group

29

solidarity are a natural corollary of threats.[87] Applying this to intergroup conflicts, as the enemy threat grows, pressure for group solidarity should also grow: the greater the threat, the greater the demand for ingroup loyalty. The need to distinguish friend from foe, or patriots from traitors, becomes stronger. As the threat intensifies, individuals must choose sides. Eventually, the zero-sum mind-set of "either you are with us or you are against us" prevails. Des Forges writes: "Any who trusted in the Tutsi rather than their fellow Hutu would suffer the consequences…The propagandists…railed against any Hutu who would dare to break ranks."[88]

In Rwanda, ingroup cohesion was expressed in ever-more demands for loyalty, as well as in ever-more accusations of disloyalty during the war. The negative accusation of disloyalty proved more powerful in strengthening ingroup cohesion than positive appeals to patriotism or nationalism.

RTLM frequently broadcast appeals for unity during the war. As table 1 shows, in the pregenocide phase of the war, some of these broadcasts called for unity between Hutu and Tutsi, whereas a smaller number explicitly appealed for solidarity among Hutu. The majority of these appeals, however, did not specify who should unite. It was a general plea for unity. Moreover, appeals for unity – of any kind - did not increase significantly in the genocidal phase of the war.

Instead, RTLM relied more on accusations of disloyalty to enforce group solidarity. In the pregenocide phase, charges of complicity with the enemy were relatively limited in number. When made, RTLM leveled these accusations mainly at Tutsi and at moderate Hutu politicians who favored peace through negotiation with the RPF. In the genocidal phase, however, there was an enormous spike in RTLM allegations of Hutu complicity with the enemy, compared with only a moderate increase in allegations of Tutsi collaboration. Now any Hutu was vulnerable to the charge of collaborator [*ibyitso*]. RTLM's list of activities deemed disloyal was extensive: advocating dialogue with the rebels, desertion from the Rwandan army, looting or other opportunistic crime, and fleeing the capital instead of staying to confront the rebels. Disloyalty led to exclusion from the ingroup, and reclassification as a member of the outgroup. In the following passage the broadcaster uses the infamous enemy label of "cockroach" [*inyenzi*] to describe *Hutu* who fled instead of fighting.

> The worst kind of *inyenzi*, I don't mean just Tutsi who are all *inyenzi*, for me the worst kind of *inyenzi* is a Hutu *inyenzi*. A Hutu who plots with other Hutu telling them: "Get up, run away" when the *inyenzi* are not even there yet.
> *--Valerie Bemeriki, RTLM journalist, RTLM broadcast, June 14, 1994*

---

[87] Arthur A. Stein, "Conflict and Cohesion: A Review of the Literature," *Journal of Conflict Resolution* Vol. 20, No. 1 (March 1976): pp. 143-172.

[88] Des Forges, *Leave None to Tell the Story*.

Ordinary Rwandans also reported hearing the charge of enemy collaboration used to enforce group cohesion in their communities. Table 5 shows that when I asked survey respondents in an open-ended question who was called an enemy accomplice or *ibyitso*, the answer was not only the Tutsi.[89] Many Hutu were also accused of disloyalty. Moreover, the accusation was more common in the north than in the south, again reflecting the differential impact of the war on these regions. Thus, twice as many respondents saw Hutu who belonged to the opposition parties as enemy collaborators in the north than in the south. The demand of loyalty was strongest where the threat was greatest.

[Table 5 here]

Conclusion

The article has sought to show how security threats work in intergroup conflict. I have tested and shown the operation of four micromechanisms, recognized in psychosocial theory on intergroup relations, in the polarization of social groups. Evidence of boundary activation, outgroup derogation, outgroup homogenization, and ingroup cohesion in Rwanda exists in how its extremist elite framed the war from above in radio broadcasts and also in how ordinary Rwandans understood it from below in the survey data. I termed the aggregated effect of these four mechanisms "group polarization" and found that emotion, fear in this case, is a driver of polarization: the greater the fear, the higher the polarization.

I introduced the concept of group polarization, a composite measure of group attitudes, to distinguish it from group violence, a distinct behavioral component of group conflict, as I believe the conflation of the two has contributed to the ambiguity in the larger emotion-opportunity debate. This distinction becomes clearer when ethnic conflict is studied at the microlevel. I found that while many of my respondents polarized, only a few committed violence. I argue separately that the reason why some killed and others did not had to do with microsituational opportunities and microstructural factors.[90] Local geography mattered – how isolated one's home was; local demography – whether members of the other ethnic group were present in one's community; local sociology – whether one's social network included other killers - among other local factors.[91] At the macrolevel, the security fears created by Rwanda's civil war led to group polarization. It was not until the macropolitical opportunity created by the assassination of Rwanda's president in April 1994, however, that ethnic extremists captured the

---

[89] Although about two-thirds of respondents in both the south and north indicated that Tutsi were called *ibyitso*, I suspect the figure was lower for the south before the genocide. This particular survey question did not clearly distinguish between the pregenocide and genocide periods of the war.

[90] McDoom, "Who Kills?"

[91] See also Fujii, *Killing Neighbors*.

state and massive genocidal violence began. In short, many societies may experience high levels of group polarization – a "mass" phenomenon where emotions such as resentment, fear, and hostility between groups run high - but there may be little or no violence if there is no structural or material opportunity to act on these sentiments. Weak security capacity to enforce law and order, lootable natural resources to finance rebellion, surfeits of unemployed young men to mobilize for fighting, weak political institutions to mediate intergroup disagreements, and terrain favorable for insurgency are all examples in the extant literature of structural and material factors that enable or constrain the expression of group sentiments as violence.

On the second debate – between emotion and rationality – I argued the distinction has been overstated. Again, this becomes more apparent at the microlevel. The data from Rwanda show that while there were strong psychosocial effects resulting from insecurity, polarization was not universal. Thus not all of my respondents framed the war in ethnic terms, perceived all Tutsi as the enemy, thought negatively of them, and saw inaction as disloyalty to their Hutu brethren. This variation in attitudes confirms the basic but important point that there is heterogeneity in how ordinary people respond to threats, a fact obscured in meso or macrolevel analysis where ethnic groups are treated as unitary actors. Some react more emotionally, and others more rationally. Moreover, it is a widely accepted point in social psychology that both cognition and affect influence individual decision and judgment-making. Reason and emotion are not alternatives, but rather interact as an individual forms opinions and makes choices. Furthermore, it is reductionist to suggest that elites only respond rationally while the masses react emotionally to threat situations. The content analysis of Rwanda's RTLM radio, owned by members of the ruling and extremist elite, suggested its broadcasters also reacted emotionally to the increased threat. The language employed was indicative of an attitudinal shift.

Finally, I highlight some of the limitations to my findings. First, this research focused on a single emotion – fear. Yet explanations of ethnic conflict have also involved resentment (related to grievance), and, to a lesser extent, anger and hostility. I cannot say with certainty that these other emotions lead to polarization in the way that fear did in this case. Indeed some emotions may work in tandem, such as fear and anger, but this project did not examine such combinations. Moreover, these emotions are themselves only a small subset of the broad panoply of emotions that engage social psychologists. Rarely does political science consider other negative emotions such as guilt, jealousy, sadness, shame, envy, embarrassment, and disgust. Second, the article articulated only one causal pathway to intergroup conflict. Polarized societies in which group emotions run high encounter structural or material opportunities that lead to violence. Yet the converse is also possible. Societies may experience violence even in the absence of widespread,

mass polarization. In such cases violence often results from the actions of a minority. It may for example be engineered by a small number of elite entrepreneurs.[92] This violence though may not, at least initially, merit the epithet "ethnic" as the majority of ingroup and outgroup members, who were not polarized, would not see it as such. However, as mentioned violence can itself have a polarizing effect. Through reverse causation minority violence can influence majority attitudes and societies can become widely polarized. Fear then can be a consequence of violence. Notwithstanding this alternate causal pathway, societies that are already polarized more readily succumb to violence when a material opportunity arises precisely because group elites can draw on activated group boundaries, narratives that denigrate the other, a willingness to stereotype outgroup members, and strong ethnic loyalties. Moreover, as mentioned, one should not assume that these group elites are immune to group emotions. As Rwanda's radio broadcasts suggest, they too may share the attitudes and beliefs that characterize polarized societies.

---

[92] See Valentino, *Final Solutions*, p. 35.