Warfare, political identities, and displacement in Spain and Colombia

Laia Balcells [a,*], Abbey Steele [b,1]

[a] *Duke University, 140 Science Drive, Durham, NC 27708, USA*
[b] *University of Amsterdam, Amsterdam, The Netherlands*

ARTICLE INFO

ABSTRACT

This paper explores the causes of displacement during civil wars. Recent scholarship has shown that conventional civil wars – those in which forces are relatively balanced – and irregular civil wars – those in which one side is substantially stronger than the other – exhibit different patterns of violence. We hypothesize that, while the mode of violence differs, the form of displacement should be consistent across the wars: displacement is a tactic of war that armed groups use to conquer new territories. By expelling civilians associated with rivals, armed groups improve their odds of gaining control of contested territory. This implies that members of a group are targeted for displacement because of their identity and presumed loyalties. We test the theory using two fine-grained datasets on individuals displaced during a conventional civil war, in Spain (1936–1939), and an irregular civil war, in Colombia (1964–). In both cases, the war cleavage was ideological and reflected in national elections: the locations where political parties received support indicated which populations were sympathetic to rivals. In both civil wars, we observe higher levels of displacement in locations where more sympathizers of rival armed groups reside. The article is the first comparison to our knowledge of the sub-national dynamics of displacement within two different civil wars and it shows that the microfoundations of displacement are similar across types. Finally, the article explains macro-level differences with a coherent micro-level framework.

© 2016 Elsevier Ltd. All rights reserved.

Introduction

Since WWII, tens of millions of people have left their homes, regions, and countries during war. The United Nations High Commission for Refugees (UNHCR) recently estimated that nearly 60 million people are currently displaced – more than any other time in history (UNHCR, 2015). Displacement – civilian migration during war that is provoked, directly or indirectly, by the actions of one or several armed groups (Steele, 2010) – is a serious humanitarian and political challenge for countries undergoing conflict, as well as for their neighbors (Salehyan & Gleditsch, 2006). Understandably, media and advocacy groups tend to focus on how many people flee violence, and potential interventions to address the problem – often leaving the underlying causes of displacement unexplored. Refugees are perceived as victims of violence, but unrelated to it. For example, Azam and Hoeffler argue that the displaced population "can be regarded as the natural fall-out of the damage inflicted by each army to the opposing group" (2002, p. 473). Yet, refugees are also political actors, whose identities and loyalties, we argue, are crucial to their displacement.

The existing refugee literature has tended to focus on factors that lead civilians to leave their homes, ranging from violence to household characteristics.[1] However, recent sub-national studies of ethnic cleansing have explored the conditions under which armed groups seek to expel members of rival ethnic groups and have found substantial variation in the timing and location of cleansing (Bulutgil, 2009; Ron, 2003; Weidmann, 2011). Variation in armed group behavior in non-ethnic civil wars has received comparatively little attention. However, armed groups target civilians associated with their rivals based on ethnic group, sect, tribe, profession, or political affiliation – whatever indicates loyalties to one side or the other engaged in fighting. Abbey Steele (2009) has called this "collective targeting".[2] Collective targeting should account for an important component of overall displacement, even in non-ethnic civil wars.

This paper advances the literature by testing the hypothesis that displacement follows collective targeting even in non-ethnic civil wars. To do so, we use local-level electoral results from two very different civil wars and exploit intra-country variation in combination with a small-n comparison of the cases: Spain (1936–1939) and Colombia (1964–). This approach allows us to capture the micro-foundations of displacement across two wars that display distinct characteristics, but that are similar in that they are both non-ethnic civil wars and both present important levels of displacement. The Spanish Civil War was possibly the first contemporary civil war

---

witnessing mass displacement as a war tactic (Prada, 2010). Historians have estimated that over 440,000 people left Spain during the conflict and right after its end (Marrus, 2002). The decades-long irregular civil war in Colombia has produced one of the largest populations of internally displaced people (IDPs) in the world, estimated at roughly 6 million (IDMC, 2014). Importantly, elections were held in both cases that indicated civilians' political loyalties.

While both wars involve political loyalties rather than ethnic identities, they display different forms of warfare, or "technologies of rebellion" (Kalyvas & Balcells, 2010). Scholars have found that lethal violence follows different patterns depending on war type (Balcells, 2010; Kalyvas, 2006); we expect, in contrast, that displacement across these wars will share similarities. In addition, while the micro-foundations of displacement are consistent across war types, we reason that warfare type influences the timing and location of displacement, leading to different expectations in irregular and conventional civil wars. We argue that in irregular civil wars such as the Colombian one, characterized by fluid frontlines and fragmented military control, displacement will be provoked by armed groups (and, mostly, incumbents) anywhere that contestation takes place, and where "rival" civilians are identified. In conventional civil wars such as the Spanish one, displacement will instead be related to changes in the frontline, where fully controlled areas become contested ones. In conventional wars, frontlines are overall more stable and less fluid than in irregular one: for this reason, we expect displacement to be more territorially and temporally concentrated in areas and phases of conquest. We argue that in both cases, cleansing territories of suspected enemies will be instrumental for groups attempting to conquer them. The study of the Spanish and Colombian civil wars allows us to show that dynamics of cleansing are not restricted to ethnic conflicts, but also take place in the context of civil wars fought along ideological lines.

To test the implications of the theory, we use microlevel data on displacement and electoral results within the Spanish and Colombian civil wars and integrate qualitative evidence as well. The quantitative analyses account for spatial dependence among units within the cases and indicate strong support for our hypothesis: displacement was higher in scale where electoral results indicated higher proportions of political rivals at the municipal level.

The next section of the paper presents the theoretical framework and our main hypothesis. We then present the cases and test the hypothesis using novel sub-national data from Spain and Colombia. The following section discusses the results and their implications for the timing and scale of wartime displacement. The last section concludes.

Theory

The timing and scale of civilian displacement varies within and across wars. What explains the patterns? The literature on displacement has focused on macro-level factors that influence refugee flows cross-nationally. Despite its relevance, a drawback of the existing literature is that violence is an exogenous factor, with the main conclusion being that more violence leads to higher levels of displacement (e.g., Davenport, Moore, & Poe, 2003; Moore & Shellman, 2006; Schmeidl, 1997; Weiner, 1998). Moving the analyses to the micro level, Ibáñez (2008) and Adhikari (2012) consider how households' characteristics within Colombia and Nepal, respectively, produce variation in displacement; Lozano-Garcia, Piras, Ibáñez, and Hewings (2010) also analyze displacement in Colombia and argue that violence is the main determinant of what they call the *journey to safety*. Although the theoretical conclusions are consistent with the earlier cross-national analyses, the micro-level approach constitutes an advance in the precision of the analyses.

The literature on ethnic cleansing has considered an additional type of variation: not just the timing and scale, but also what types

of civilians are displaced. It differs from the displacement literature because elites' and armed groups' behavior, rather than civilians', is the focus of explanation. Some works emphasize the conditions under which ethnic cleansing can emerge (Bulutgil, 2015; Mann, 2005). Others such as Ron (2003), Bulutgil (2009) and Weidmann (2011)focus on variation within the Balkan wars and find that community-level and political factors shape the likelihood that the targeted ethnic group will in fact be cleansed. The focus on within-war variation in targeting constitutes an important analytical and empirical advance.

Bridging the literatures on displacement and ethnic cleansing, we argue that armed groups use violence to expel civilians they perceive to be disloyal in order to conquer a territory.[3] Like ascriptive traits such as those associated with ethnic groups, we argue that political identities can also be used to infer where people's loyalties lie. Most people hold multiple identities, but during conflict some identities become more salient than others; the identities corresponding to the macro-cleavage of the war are those that become relevant for armed groups' identification of potential threats. People may collaborate with an armed group because of their political beliefs, or they may do so because it is safer given their association with a political party, group, or identity (Kalyvas & Kocher, 2007). Either way, armed groups and fellow civilians often infer who is going to collaborate with whom based on group identities like political affiliation. And targeting follows these identities.

When armed groups target members of the disloyal group, the safety of individuals who share a targeted trait depends on everyone else similarly targeted (Steele, 2009). Given sustained violence directed at their group, individuals have strong incentives to leave, which only increase if others begin to do so: that is, it creates a cascade effect. Importantly, the violence and accompanying group dynamic can trigger a range of individual-level mechanisms leading people to leave their homes. Some individuals will fear the possibility of violence more than others, and opt to leave before shots are even fired. Others may wait for a more immediate threat to their safety, or leave only when they have made arrangements to stay with relatives elsewhere. We do not aim to parse these possible mechanisms among individuals. Instead, we assume that armed groups anticipate that segments of a targeted group are likely to leave given threats and violence, and will implement collective targeting to generate displacement of a subset of the community for a strategic advantage. The tactics that armed groups employ range from lethal violence directed at members of a group to threats of lethal violence if people do not leave, such as graffiti warnings and leaflet distribution.

Given the tactics of collective targeting, we argue that violence is often employed in order to produce displacement, rather than independent of it. The logic applies to irregular civil wars because insurgents depend on civilians for survival, and targeting them is an effective way to target insurgents (Kalyvas, 2006; Valentino, Huth, & Balch-Lindsay, 2004). At the same time, the logic also applies to non-irregular wars, but only when territory is militarily contested. In this context civilians can be particularly helpful to their group (they can provide much-needed intelligence, and run interference with the rival armed group), and thus we can expect cleansing dynamics to emerge. When the territory is not militarily contested, that is in rearguard territories of conventional civil wars, individuals are unlikely to be targeted for short-term tactical reasons because they are not integral to which armed group wins. Furthermore, when an armed group has full control of a territory, it can selectively kill supporters of the enemy, which is safer than displacing because an expelled person could provide valuable intelligence to the enemy.

But, in a context of military contestation, why would groups resort to displacement instead of mass killing? We argue that given the goal of the armed group to gain territorial control, strategic