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Predicting violence within genocide: A model of elite competition and ethnic segregation from Rwanda

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ABSTRACT

Can we predict when and where violence will likely break out within cases of genocide? I present a theoretical model to help identify areas susceptible and resistant to violence during genocide. The model conceptualizes violence onset as a function of elite competition for control of the state from above and the ethnic segregation of society from below. First, in areas where extremist elite control is weak, violence is delayed or averted because a contest for control between pro-violence elites and anti-violence moderates arises and the competition takes time to resolve. Where control is strong, violence is immediate or early because extremists face little competition and can rapidly deploy the state's coercive resources against targeted groups. Second, in areas where the integration of ethnic groups is high, violence is delayed because it takes time to break existing interethnic bonds and destroy bridging social capital. Cohesive communities resist elite attempts to divide them through interethnic trust and cooperation. I test the model by examining sub-national variation in genocide onset across Rwanda's 145 communes using new data and duration analysis. I additionally explore causal mechanisms by within-case analyses comparing early and late onset in two communes. The findings have implications for international policy makers as they respond to genocides and strategically prioritize limited intervention resources.

Within cases of genocide, can we predict when and where violence is likely to break out? State-organized violence targeting ethnic and political groups has claimed the lives of somewhere between 12 and 22 million non-combatants in the latter half of the twentieth century alone (Harff, 2003).[1] Events in Darfur and in Syria today already indicate that the twenty-first century will not see an end to such killing. The strong international norm to prevent these enormous losses of life has motivated several systematic macro-level studies in the last two decades to identify risk factors predisposing countries to such violence (Harff, 2003; Krain, 1997; Rummel, 1995; B. Valentino, Huth, & Balch-Lindsay, 2004; Wayman & Tago, 2010). Today, as a result of this important work, we better understand the forces behind the tragedies that befell Bosnia, Rwanda, and Darfur and we can more readily identify those countries vulnerable to such violence in the future.

Yet genocides frequently involve multiple episodes of violence whose occurrence varies in time and space (King, 2004). In contrast with the cross-national research, we know considerably less about the systematic determinants of such sub-national violence. Why did Prijedor municipality become the site of one the largest massacres during the war in Bosnia–Herzegovina, but Livno municipality escape virtually untouched? In Rwanda, why did the killing begin immediately in Ruhengeri and Gisenyi prefectures, but not until several weeks later in Butare and Gitarama? In Sudan, why did 'Janjaweed' raids on villages initially concentrate in North Darfur state and not escalate in South Darfur until several months later? Is this temporal and spatial variation in violence predictable? If so, what predicts it?

I contend that the onset of such violence is predictable. When and where violence occurs is neither altogether random nor wholly idiosyncratic. I present a non-formal model, comprising two theoretical constructs, to conceptualize the risk of intra-genocide violence: extremist elite control of the state from above and the segregation of society from below. The model predicts that in places where the extremists' control is weak and the social integration of ethnic groups is strong, resistance is high and violence will be delayed or averted. The causal logic is twofold. First, an inter-elite contest for control between pro-violence extremists and anti-violence moderates will arise in weakly-controlled areas and it will take time for this power struggle to resolve. Second, well-integrated communities are more socially cohesive and resist extremist attempts to divide them, and thus require time to overcome interethnic bonds of trust and to destroy social capital.

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Conversely, in places where extremist elite control is strong and social integration is weak, susceptibility is high and violence will occur early on. The causal logic here is first that the absence of any challenge to their control permits extremists to deploy the state's formidable power against the targeted group rapidly and without constraint. Second, extremist entrepreneurs in segregated societies may exploit existing interethnic distrust and readily mobilize communities against targeted groups. Finally, in areas where extremist elite control and social integration are either simultaneously strong or simultaneously weak, the model predicts an intermediate onset of violence. Table 1 summarizes these predictions.

I develop this model and its constituent constructs from extant theoretical and empirical research on comparative genocide and test it with the case of Rwanda's genocide by examining sub-national variation in the onset of violence across the country's 145 administrative communes in 1994. I draw on new meso-level data to do so. Genocidal violence targeting primarily the country's ethnic Tutsi minority began on 6th April 1994, following the assassination of Rwanda's Hutu president, and lasted just over 100 days. Some communes experienced violence almost immediately, but others experienced violence several weeks later. The time until onset was indicative of a community's susceptibility or resistance to violence.

The empirical findings support the theoretical model, deepening our understanding of Rwanda's genocide specifically and yielding several implications for genocides more generally. First, previous research on Rwanda's genocide explained local variation in violence onset primarily in terms of the time needed to mount either an internal challenge or an external incursion for control of the locality by civilian or military forces (Straus, 2006). This paper suggests this explanation is incomplete. It overlooks the deeper social forces from below that bound communities together and accounted for resistance to efforts to divide them. Second, linked to this, the findings suggest the distinction between two competing perspectives in explanations of genocides – elite agency and social structure – should be softened. Forces from above and below can and do operate together to produce violence. Third, the findings reveal dynamic determinants of violence reinforcing the emerging consensus that genocide is better conceptualized as a continuous process than as a discrete event. Both the passage of time and spatial contagion proved dynamic accelerators of this process. Finally, the findings have implications for policy-makers confronted with impending or ongoing genocides but constrained by weak political will. Knowing when and where violence is most and least likely to break out is valuable information for strategically prioritizing limited intervention resources.

The paper proceeds as follows. Section two situates the paper theoretically, setting out the model and additional hypotheses from the extant literature and their operationalization. Section three describes the research design, case selection, and the techniques used. Section four presents the results of both the quantitative and qualitative analyses, and section five elaborates further on the above-mentioned theoretical and policy implications of the findings.

Theoretical framework and hypotheses

The comparative study of genocide has advanced considerably since the first generation of research in the 1970s and 1980s (Straus, 2007). Much of what we know today comes from two methodologically distinct literatures. The first, older body of literature draws predominantly on comparative historical analysis to trace the origins and causes of genocides (Fein, 1993; Horowitz, 1976; Kuper, 1982; Mann, 2005; Melson, 1992; Midlarsky, 2005; Sémelin, 2005). The second corpus of literature, cited previously, relies primarily on quantitative, cross-national analysis to identify predictors of genocide onset or severity. Together, the two approaches have generated a rich set of ideas for how and why genocides occur that present opportunities for systematic hypothesis testing. Broadly, these ideas may be categorized as relating to (i) state development and regime type; (ii) elite survival strategies; (iii) social divisions and cultural differences; (iv) radical ideologies; (v) economic crises causing hardship and deprivation; (vi) political upheavals resulting from civil wars, coups, and revolutions; and (vii) past violence and atrocities.

Yet comparative research on genocide, when focused at the macro level, faces limitations. First, genocide is a rare event. The universe of cases is small and inferences require caution. Second, comparisons across studies are restricted by unit heterogeneity. There is no consensus on the definition of genocide among researchers. In addition, studies have examined overlapping but distinct phenomena such as politicides (Harff, 2003), democides (Rummel, 1995), state-sponsored mass murders (Krain, 1997), and mass killing events (B. Valentino et al., 2004). Third, in the case of quantitative cross-national analyses, exact causal mechanisms are difficult to discern. While correlates of genocide are known with some confidence, why and how they matter is less certain. Fourth, in the case of comparative historical analyses, few vary the dependent variable. Studies of cases where genocide occurred are vulnerable to selection bias because of their exclusion of negative cases.

One promising approach to addressing some of these limitations is through disaggregation. By moving from macro- to meso- or micro-level analysis, a potentially larger set of units to compare becomes available. These units enjoy greater homogeneity and consequently have fewer differences for which to control. Importantly, disaggregation also usually involves variation in the outcome of interest. The last decade has seen the study of social violence take a 'micropolitical turn' (King, 2004) and the call for further disaggregation has been well-sounded (O'Loughlin & Raleigh, 2008). Disaggregation has been especially pronounced in the study of civil wars where spatial analysis has provided valuable insights into the determinants and dynamics of such sub-national violence (Buhaug & Lujala, 2005; Buhaug & Rød, 2006; Raleigh & Hegre, 2009). This paper extends the sub-national approach to the study of genocidal violence and adds to the small but growing body of work in this area (Finkel & Straus, 2012). The sub-national focus minimizes the difficulties in defining genocide that affect cross-national analysis. Micro-level research into genocidal violence, whose unit of analysis is typically the individual, has expanded. This research has provided rich insights into the Rwandan genocide for example (Fujii, 2009; McDoom, 2013b; Verwimp, 2005). To a lesser extent, meso-level research, where the unit of analysis typically comprises places, events, and institutions at the sub-national level, is also increasing. It includes several comparative studies of Holocaust violence (Dumitru & Johnson, 2011; Kopstein & Wittenberg, 2011).

I synthesize theoretical insights from these two methodologically distinct literatures to develop a parsimonious model of intra-genocide violence and to test additional hypotheses on the determinants of genocidal violence at the meso-level. While meso-analysis offers the advantages outlined above, it too has limitations. Notably, it clearly cannot tell us why and under what conditions genocides occur in the first place. As meso-analysis

Table 1
Modelling genocidal violence onset at the sub-national level.

		Extremist elite control	
		Strong	Weak
Social integration	High	Intermediate onset	Late or no onset
	Low	Early onset	Intermediate onset