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What drives violence against civilians in civil war? Evidence from Guatemala's conflict archives

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Abstract

Dominant theories of mass violence hold that strategic concerns in civil war drive the deliberate targeting of civilians. However, the causal mechanisms that link strategic objectives to large-scale violence against civilians remain underspecified, and as such the causal logics that underpin each remain blurred. In this article, we identify and explicate four plausible mechanisms that explain why armed groups would target, for strategic purposes, civilians in war. We then turn to the peak period of violence during the Guatemalan armed conflict to assess which mechanisms were most prevalent. Specifically, we leverage unique archival data: 359 pages of military files from Operation Sofía, a month-long counterinsurgent campaign waged in the northwestern Ixil region. Through process tracing of real-time internal communications, we find that state actors most commonly described the civilian population as loyal to rebel forces; violence against civilians was a means to weaken the insurgency. Troops on the ground also depicted the Ixil population as 'winnable', which suggests that security forces used violence in this period to shape civilian behavior. These findings are most consistent with the idea that mass violence in this case and period was a coercive instrument to defeat insurgents by punishing civilians for collaboration. The evidence from this period is less consistent with a logic of genocide, in which the purpose of violence would be to destroy 'unwinnable' civilian groups. Our analysis illustrates how a mechanism-centered approach based on process tracing of conflict archives can help uncover logics underlying civilian killing.

Keywords

civil war, Guatemala, mass violence, process tracing

What drives large-scale killing of civilians? A large empirical literature finds that mass violence against civilians happens typically in war (Straus, 2015; Valentino, 2014). The dominant theoretical account, in Political Science and related disciplines, emphasizes that such mass killing is strategic. In effect, mass violence is a measure to defeat opponents. Summarizing the consensus, Benjamin Valentino calls such violence 'war by other means' (Valentino, 2014: 94).

There are many questions related to the strategic approach to mass violence. One is whether such violence works: do military actors advance their strategic interests through the use of mass violence or does such violence backfire, prompting increased resolve and recruitment for wartime opponents (Souleimanov & Siroky, 2016; Toft & Zhukov, 2012)? Another line of inquiry concerns the conditions that facilitate large-scale violence, such as resource endowments, deep social cleavages, and dependence on local or foreign support (Kuper, 1981; Salehyan, Siroky & Wood, 2014; Weinstein, 2006; Zhukov, 2017).

In this article, we elaborate the causal mechanisms that explain why perpetrators would consider killing unarmed civilians as a strategic choice in wartime. We contend that the theoretical link between military objectives and mass violence remains underspecified within

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conflict scholarship. Under the heading of 'strategic', scholars often lump together distinctive causal logics, each with different implications. Moreover, empirical tests most often rely on correlational analysis using aggregate measures of violence against civilians, which further complicates any isolation of causal mechanisms and obscures the logics driving mass killing. We concur with Jason Lyall (2015: 186) who argues that moving beyond correlational analysis will allow researchers to deepen their understanding of conflict dynamics and improve 'causal inference about why (and how) outcomes are produced in civil war settings'.

Toward this aim, we develop a mechanism-based approach for examining the relationship between wartime strategy and mass killing and then illustrate this approach empirically in the context of the Guatemalan civil war. First, we draw on existing literature to specify four principal causal mechanisms that explain why perpetrators would target civilians on a large scale to advance their strategic interests. While we derive our claims from existing work, our synthesis and attention to competing logics of violence mark a contribution to the literature on violence in civil war. We then apply this framework through process tracing of archival documents from a military operation conducted at the height of the Guatemalan civil war, known as Operation Sofía.

We focus on the civil war in Guatemala (1960–96), which has remained relatively underexamined within political violence and genocide scholarship, for several reasons. First, violence against civilians took place on a large scale. In 1999, the UN-sponsored Historical Clarification Commission (CEH) estimated that 200,000 civilians had been killed or disappeared, and the state committed 'acts of genocide'. Both the elevated civilian deaths and the genocide claim make this case important for the study of wartime violence against civilians. That the genocide classification remains contested provides an impetus to dissect the causal logics driving the violence. Second, the Guatemalan conflict demonstrates clear periods of escalation and de-escalation in violence against civilians, allowing us to ask what drove changes in civilian targeting within the same war. Third, unique data in the form of 359 pages of military plans and communications from Operation Sofía, a month-long campaign to 'exterminate' the insurgency in the Ixil highlands, provide insights into patterns of violence. The material from Operation Sofía provides real-time, intramilitary evidence on how armed actors understood, framed, and represented their wartime enemy, offering a unique window into why perpetrators engaged in violence.

Through process tracing, we find support for two mechanisms operating together. First, state actors considered civilians part and parcel of the insurgency. By this logic, civilians were loyal to the insurgency, and the violence targeting civilians was equivalent to a military effort to defeat the insurgency. This finding is consistent with both a coercive and a genocidal logic of mass killing. Yet, secondly, state actors used violence to deter civilians from future collaboration with the insurgency. Violence here served a communicative function; it sought to 'teach a lesson'. In other words, while military patrollers in Operation Sofía depicted the Ixil population as dedicated to the insurgency, they did not consider them beyond recovery. Civilian groups were 'winnable', and violence was a means of persuading them to abandon the guerillas. We thus conclude that a coercive, rather than genocidal, logic animated the violence, at least in this period based on the available evidence; perpetrators targeted civilians in order to break their putative loyalties to the insurgency. By contrast, a genocidal logic would depict civilians as unbreakably oppositional, as 'unwinnable' (Straus, 2015). Because 'genocide' is often a controversial and politicized label, we hasten to add that (a) we do not generalize this claim to the entire Guatemalan conflict but rather to the evidence and period before us, and (b) our arguments pertain to 'genocide' as a social scientific concept rather than a legal one. Our purpose is to leverage a unique data source and, through process tracing, isolate causal logics that are often obscured in correlational analysis.

Theories of large-scale violence against civilians

'Large-scale' or 'mass' violence is systematic, extensive violence against civilians sustained across space and over time. Large-scale violence is sometimes considered synonymous with 'indiscriminate' violence, which implies random killing, and is sometimes pitted against 'selective' violence, which involves the targeting of specific individuals (Kalyvas, 2006; Souleimanov & Siroky, 2016). We dispute that framing, arguing along with others for a conceptualization of violence that is both large-scale and selective, in that it targets a specific category of the population (Gutiérrez-Sanín & Wood, 2017; Steele, 2009; Straus, 2015). Our main interventions are thus with the literatures on mass killing, genocide, and indiscriminate violence. Our discussion privileges murderous violence, which is the focus in these literatures, but we recognize that multiple types of violence are at

work in these cases, including rape, torture, and mutilation.

Theories of large-scale violence vary considerably, pointing in different ways to regime change (Goldsmith et al., 2013; Goldstone et al., 2010), regime type (Harff, 2003; Rummel, 1990), economic decline and resulting social stress (Staub, 1989), social division (Kuper, 1981), and institutional discrimination (Fein, 1990). Yet, within Political Science, an emerging consensus holds that strategic interests motivate the use of large-scale violence against civilians (Valentino, 2014). Indeed, the large-scale killing of civilians typically occurs in wartime, which is consistent with a strategic account (Goldsmith et al., 2013; Straus, 2012; Ulfelder & Valentino, 2008; Valentino, Huth & Balch-Lindsay, 2004). However, while the correlation is well established, the causal mechanisms that link war to large-scale violence are less well developed. Why would armed actors kill large numbers of civilians in wartime? If the purpose of large-scale violence is to advance military interests, what is the rationale for targeting civilians, according to those who commit the violence? We revisit the literature and argue that underneath the umbrella of 'strategic' drivers of large-scale violence lie four main causal mechanisms.

One claim is that perpetrators make little distinction between combatants and civilians because they consider the latter loyal to the former. In this case, civilians provide enemy combatants military and non-military support. Civilians might provide shelter, food, recruits, or information to combatants, or civilians might be the political base that lends moral support and legitimacy to an armed struggle. Killing civilians, then, according to perpetrators, is functionally equivalent to attacking the enemy and weakening its military capacities (Fjelde & Hultman, 2014; Valentino, Huth & Balch-Lindsay, 2004). The main mechanism scholars propose to link combatants to civilians is loyalty, which perpetrators might derive from prewar voting for a particular political party (Balcells, 2011, 2017) or from conjectures made about a particular social identity. If, for example, the membership of an insurgent organization hails from a specific ethnic group, then perpetrators may treat ethnicity as a proxy for support for the insurgency (Fjelde & Hultman, 2014).

Loyalty is consistent with at least two logics of violence. If perpetrators perceive a class of civilians as *implacably* loyal to military opponents, and hence 'unwinnable', then the logic of violence holds that the civilian population should be destroyed to counter a severe threat. The logic of group destruction is the hallmark of genocide (Straus, 2015).[1] But perceived civilian loyalty to the insurgency can also be consistent with a coercive logic if perpetrators do not consider loyalty to be ineluctable; in this case, violence can cause civilians to change their behavior.

Empirically, if the loyalty mechanism were present, the observable implication would be that perpetrators characterize civilians as 'loyal', 'obedient', and generally interwoven with the insurgency. We would expect perpetrators to fold insurgent and civilian categories into their conception of the enemy. Military actors would call the insurgents versions of the civilian group being targeted and vice versa; they would make little distinction between the two categories. By contrast, if this mechanism were not present, civilians would be treated as 'innocent bystanders' or as unfortunate but necessary casualties of war.

A plausibly related, but distinctive, mechanism is that violence serves as a punitive measure to deter present or future collaboration with military opponents. Violence here is a cost, either actual or communicated. Through violence, perpetrators drive a wedge between combatants and civilians. Violence simultaneously punishes and deters collaboration. This mechanism is primarily how Kalyvas (2006) depicts selective violence – as raising the cost of collaboration in a particularly vicious way. Under this mechanism, perpetrators do not claim or assume that civilian loyalty is fixed. Rather, the purpose of violence is to change civilians' calculations about the utility of collaboration; it assumes that civilians would alter their behavior if their cost–benefit ratio changed.

The logic of violence under this mechanism is coercive, not genocidal. If perpetrators see civilians as malleable, and hence not irretrievably committed to supporting the enemy, then the strategic choice would not be to destroy civilian groups entirely but to impose heavy costs on them. The observable implication would be that perpetrators frame large-scale violence as 'punishing' civilians, 'teaching a lesson', or otherwise communicating a cost. Similarly, we would expect perpetrators to frame the civilians as malleable, as 'tricked' or bullied into collaboration. An effort to win the 'hearts and minds' of civilians is similarly consistent with this logic. If this mechanism were not present, we would not expect perpetrators to claim that the violence would have a deterrent effect on civilian collaboration. They might frame civilians as 'caught in the middle' of the violence.

[1] In this latter case, the mechanism is similar to what we lay out below as Mechanism no. 4.

Alternatively, under a more genocidal logic, perpetrators would hold that civilian hearts and minds are forever closed to any means of persuasion.

A third claim is that perpetrators lack the capacity to know who is a combatant and who is a civilian so they target civilians on a large scale because they cannot distinguish soldier from non-soldier. Rather than merging 'civilian' and 'insurgent' categories on the basis of loyalty, as with the first mechanism, here, there is not a collapse of the two categories; the theoretical distinction between civilian and insurgent still exists but military actors lack the means to identify whether communities form part of one or the other. Perpetrators do not have the professional skills or the necessary information to know who is who. In the existing literature, the argument has taken two influential forms. One version is that perpetrators will target civilians en masse because they lack territorial control and therefore lack the information needed to determine who supports or is part of the armed opposition; this is Kalyvas's (2006) theory of indiscriminate violence. A different version is that perpetrators lack the military capability and intelligence to separate combatant from civilian, and with scarce resources they target all (Ulfelder & Valentino, 2008).

The expectation would be that such violence is indeed truly indiscriminate, in the sense of quasi-random, large-scale killing, as opposed to group-selective. Selection requires the information and the capacity to sort those who are part of the targeted group and those who are not (Straus, 2015). A further observable implication is that perpetrators frame the violence as resulting from a lack of information or incapacity; we would expect armed actor accounts to use language along the lines of perpetrators 'cannot tell friend from foe' or cannot find rebels 'who are melding' into civilian populations. By contrast, detailed identifying information related to the appearance or location of insurgents versus civilians or evidence of successful efforts to extract information would negate the presence of this mechanism.

A fourth plausible mechanism is that perpetrators target civilians because the former see the latter as fundamentally in opposition and implacably committed to wartime armed enemies. This mechanism is most consistent with a logic of genocide because perpetrators consider persuasion ineffective. Where rebels pose a severe threat and civilian commitment to them cannot be deterred, then the logic of violence tends toward group destruction: since persuasion will not work, perpetrators look to destroy the civilian category in order to eliminate an ongoing perceived military danger.

In this case, we would expect to observe language about how the civilians will 'never change', 'cannot be won over', 'are just like previous generations' of enemies, or 'will never deviate'. We would similarly expect perpetrators to frame their overall purpose as fundamentally at odds with the civilians associated with armed enemies. In other words, perpetrators would more likely see civilians as irretrievably oppositional if the civilians are considered intrinsically on a different political side, for ideological or identity reasons. This latter argument resonates with authors who link the determinants of violence to the political principles and orientations of perpetrators (Balcells, 2017; Mann, 2005; Straus, 2015; Scharpf, 2018). Further, we would not expect to find that perpetrators modulated violence in response to updated information; if the targets are considered unwaveringly hostile, the use of violence should remain consistent throughout a campaign of attacks.

We isolate these mechanisms as four distinctive claims about the *strategic* origins of mass violence against civilians. They do not exhaust all the possible reasons why mass violence happens but represent the four principal versions of strategic theory. They do not, for example, encompass emotional or organizational theories of conflict violence (Petersen, 2001; Weinstein, 2006). At the same time, the four specified mechanisms are not necessarily mutually exclusive. Some perpetrators may pursue the same reasons for mass killing at one time; there may be variation among perpetrators in the same case; or the rationales for mass killing may change over time. But each rationale is strategic in the sense that the purpose of violence is to advance the military or political objectives of those who commit the violence.

Throughout, we refer to 'perpetrators' as those who commit the violence, but the term elides complex interactions between national-level actors who order, authorize, or permit large-scale violence and local actors who implement or might even initiate such violence (Scharpf, 2018). We remain agnostic on that question, though such interactional dynamics are crucial to how large-scale violence takes shape.

Conflict archives and process tracing

Beyond theory development and specification, this article also contributes methodologically by illustrating how process tracing of conflict archives can be used to uncover wartime causal processes difficult to examine through other research designs. We follow George & Bennett (2005: 206) in defining process tracing as a 'method [that] attempts to identify the intervening

causal process – the causal chain and causal mechanism – between an independent variable (or variables) and the outcome of the dependent variable'. Process tracing often begins with an established correlation and seeks to develop a more detailed narrative of the causal pathway that accounts for it – either to test existing explanations or develop new ones.

Despite growing discussions on the utility and standards of process tracing (George & Bennett, 2005; Bennett & Checkel, 2015; Collier, 2011), it remains a relatively underutilized methodological technique within studies of political violence. Lyall (2015: 188), for example, finds that, of the 448 articles on civil war published in the top political science journals from 1995 to 2012, only 12 self-consciously undertake process tracing. The reasons for this trend are likely pragmatic (journal word limits, poor or missing data) and ethical (physical danger to informants). The neglect of process tracing in favor of correlational analysis, however, has limited the scope and reach of political violence research. As Lyall (2015: 186) argues, 'without understanding the causal processes that underpin these associations, we foreclose opportunities to advance our theories of civil war and to contribute to policy debates about the efficacy of different policies in violent settings'.

We posit that process tracing techniques using conflict archives not only allow researchers to ask new questions about causal processes in civil war, but hold several advantages over process tracing methods that employ other kinds of data. First, where available, wartime archival documentation may detail events, actions, and perceptions in real time, overcoming some of the challenges posed by retrospective accounts. Rather than relying on the memories of select conflict actors, which may recast events in hindsight, archives can often provide insights into military activities and how actors understood and represented them at the time, thus providing more reliable information on wartime causal processes.

Second, as Balcells & Sullivan (2018) note, archival documentation, when made public, allows researchers to mitigate some of the physical dangers involved in collecting qualitative data through interviews and participant observation in conflict zones. Of course, we do not claim that archival data collection is a risk-free enterprise; in politically fraught contexts and with document leaks, researchers should take great care in securing archives and protecting the confidentiality of those providing them. But overall, archival data collection is often less invasive and can help minimize some of the risks associated with asking sensitive questions of victims and perpetrators or undertaking participant observation in violent areas.

Last, and relatedly, unlike much of the data generated through qualitative research in conflict zones (i.e. interview transcripts and field notes), archival documentation is much more conducive to being shared with others, both to further empirical studies and facilitate transparency. In some cases, archives will already be publicly available. If not, it may be possible to make them available after acquiring necessary permissions and redacting the documents appropriately. This is often not possible with interview and ethnographic data produced in conflict zones due to a variety of ethical concerns (Parkinson & Wood, 2015). While we do not claim that archival data are superior because they more readily facilitate transparency, they do allow consumers of political violence research to assess analytical claims using the same sources as the researcher.

Of course, process tracing of conflict archives also presents certain challenges and limitations. The first has to do with access. Archives related to armed group activities and practices, especially those detailing human rights violations, may be incomplete or beyond the reach of researchers, either because they remain state secrets or were destroyed to thwart future criminal prosecutions. Second, when wartime documentation is available, it may exhibit selection bias, having been made public because it does not detail incriminating actions or it otherwise advances the political goals of those releasing it (Hassan & O'Mealia, 2018). Finally, process tracing of conflict archives may also face internal validity issues due to the type of information possibly omitted from available documents. The observable implications of certain theoretical propositions may be unlikely to appear in archives, biasing findings in favor of alternative explanations. For example, armed groups that explicitly proscribe the targeting of civilians may be less likely to report that violence was used to eliminate civilian groups rather than punish the 'enemy'.

Combined, these challenges often make for less-than-ideal research designs. Importantly, they may preclude researchers from identifying control observations that would facilitate a key process tracing 'best practice': counterfactual analysis (Lyall, 2015: 191). The nature of archival documentation may leave researchers without the possibility of examining similar empirical materials had the unit under observation been assigned to a different treatment. We argue, however, that process tracing of potentially rich conflict archives that advance core political violence questions should not simply be discarded for this reason. Instead, researchers can specify

the observable implications of distinct theoretical propositions and engage in counterfactual thinking to assess what kind of evidence would have likely been present under an alternative treatment assignment.[2] Through this type of counterfactual argumentation, scholars can more rigorously probe empirical findings while still taking advantage of unique opportunities to uncover conflict processes impossible to discern through other research designs.

Strategic origins of large-scale violence in Guatemala

The empirical focus in the remainder of the article is Guatemala. Guatemala's civil war began in 1960, six years after a US-backed coup overthrew democratically elected president Jacobo Árbenz. The war ended in 1996, with a UN-sponsored peace process between the Guatemalan military and the insurgent Guatemalan National Revolutionary Unity (URNG). In 1999, the CEH determined that an estimated 200,000 civilians had been killed or disappeared, and between 500,000 and 1.5 million had been displaced. State and paramilitary forces were deemed responsible for 93% of all abuses (CEH, 1999: 20).

The bulk of violence targeted Mayan communities in the western highlands. The CEH concluded that the Guatemalan state committed 'acts of genocide' against five Mayan ethnolinguistic groups: the Q'anjob'al and Chuj in Huehuetenango, the Ixil in central Quiché, the K'ich'e in southern Quiché, and the Achi in Baja Verapaz (CEH, 1999: 317). Mayan civilians were 99.3%, 97.8%, 98.4%, and 98.8% of total victims in these areas, respectively – proportions well above their overall population shares (CEH, 1999: 418). The case is thus clearly one of large-scale, group-selective violence.

But why did state and state-backed forces kill civilians on such a large scale? In terms of structural determinants, scholars have pointed to a history of racial subordination and violence (Perera, 1993; Brett, 2016), anti-communist ideologies (Garrard-Burnett, 2010), and intramilitary instability (Schirmer, 1998). While some of these arguments coincide with the mechanisms we outline, there are few systematic efforts to link the violence to specific causal mechanisms.

One exception is Sullivan (2012), who examines the strategic incentives that prompted state actors to use massacres over other forms of violence. Sullivan (2012: 377–380) argues that the state massacred civilians in response to insurgent attacks and where it lacked control over the population – findings consistent with some of the mechanisms identified above, namely that large-scale civilian targeting weakened the insurgency by destroying those loyal to it (Mechanism no. 1) and occurred when and where the state lacked control and information (Mechanism no. 3). Yet Sullivan is only able to infer underlying mechanisms indirectly from correlations between massacres, insurgent attacks, state presence, and other factors. By contrast, our empirical focus is on assessing the underlying mechanisms more directly.

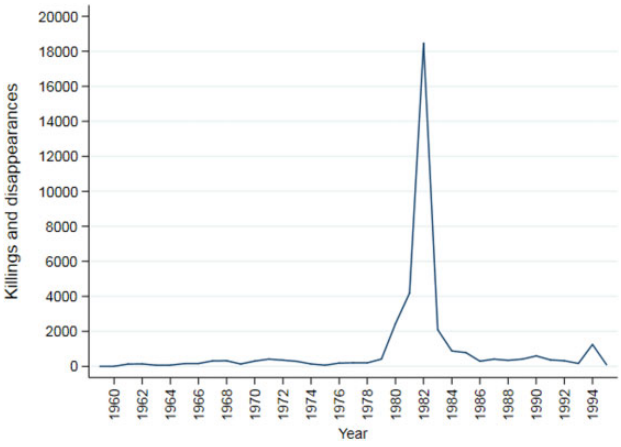

Figure 1. Total reported killings and disappearances by year, 1959–95

Consistent with the existing literature on large-scale violence, we argue that mass killing in Guatemala had strategic origins. The strategic nature of the violence is evident in the temporal patterns of violence. While the war lasted for over three decades, roughly 81% of human rights violations occurred in the three years from 1981 to 1983. Some 48% of abuses registered by the CEH took place in 1982 alone, during which time an estimated 18,461 people were killed or disappeared (see Figure 1).[3]

[2] Such an exercise mirrors the intuition underlying Bayesian process tracing approaches (Fairfield & Charman, 2017; Humphreys & Jacobs, 2013).

[3] Quantitative data on killings and disappearances are from the International Center for Human Rights Investigations (CIIDH) (see Ball, 1999). We follow the statisticians in urging caution in drawing firm conclusions from the data because of the underreporting of violence. They state, '[t]hese are convenience sample data, and as such they are not a statistically representative sample of events in this conflict. These data do not support conclusions about patterns, trends, or other substantive comparisons.' Yet, as the most complete quantitative evidence of atrocities from the Guatemalan armed conflict, we use these to approximate levels of violence.

That period corresponds to the growing strength of the insurgency and intensified recruiting efforts in the Mayan highlands. Following a series of defeats, rebel groups decided to abandon a vanguard-led approach and instead incorporate popular opposition groups directly, opening two new fronts in rural, predominantly Mayan regions – the Revolutionary Organization of People in Arms (ORPA) in the westernmost highlands and coastal lowlands and the Guerrilla Army of the Poor (EGP) in the northwestern jungles along the Mexican border (Falla, 1994: 6; Perera, 1993: 68–69). These new insurgent organizations increasingly deployed guerrilla units to rural communities to carry out training, launch attacks, and prepare civilians for eventual uprising (Brett, 2007: 34–35). The new strategy also implied an important ideological shift. Rather than cling to class-based models, insurgent groups sought to incorporate indigenous communities as such, recognizing long-standing patterns of exclusion and exploitation (Garrard-Burnett, 2010: 36–37; Perera, 1993: 69–70).

In response to the insurgent reorientation and rural repression, peasants and popular organizations increasingly channeled their activities toward the armed struggle (Arias, 1990). According to Schirmer (1998: 41), the EGP had grown tremendously by early 1982, with an estimated 4,000 to 6,000 regular fighters, 10,000 members of local irregular forces (FIL), 60,000 collaborators from the local clandestine committees (CCL), which provided food and supplies, and 260,000 people living in guerrilla-controlled territory. Rosada-Granados (1999: 154) suggests that at the end of 1981, the insurgent movement had a presence in 16 of 22 departments of the country, and 'in at least 50 municipalities, public buildings had been destroyed as a way of anticipating the process of revolutionary reconstruction that would happen after [the insurgency's] imminent victory'.

Guerrilla expansion constituted a greater danger in Guatemala's highland provinces because of *who* was joining the guerrilla ranks. Mayan cultural identities and territorial claims had long been perceived by the Guatemalan state as a challenge to national integrity (Perera, 1993: 48). Growing indigenous collaboration with the insurgency gave rise to perceptions of increased internal threat to government rule, prompting greater mass, group-selective violence under military presidents Fernando Romeo Lucas García (July 1978–March 1982) and José Efraín Ríos Montt (March 1982–August 1983). Under the Ríos Montt regime, in particular, such practices occurred while the state emphasized '*una nacionalidad guatemalteca*' ['a Guatemalan nationality'] (Garrard-Burnett, 2010: 71). In sum, we argue that the macro-evidence from Guatemala is consistent with a strategic theory of mass, group-selective violence. As the insurgency grew in strength and recruited from indigenous populations considered outside the core of the national community, the state escalated violence against civilian Mayan populations.

From wartime strategy to civilian killing: Evidence from Operation Sofía

The question remains as to why changes in the armed conflict led to large-scale killing. In most cases, this question is difficult to parse due to the dearth of information on operational plans and communications from violent campaigns produced by state military organizations themselves. But in the Guatemalan case, we have a unique source of data that allows us to assess the mechanisms that underpin civilian targeting: Operation Sofía, 359 pages of internal military records detailing counterinsurgent operations in Guatemala's Ixil region between 16 July and 19 August 1982.[4] In the remaining sections, we provide background on the Operation Sofía files and use them to examine the mechanisms underlying large-scale violence.

Data and limitations

The Operation Sofía records were released by the National Security Archive (NSA) in 2009, after an informant anonymously turned them over to NSA senior analyst Kate Doyle (Villagrán & Lainfiesta, 2012). Despite court orders to release the plans, military officials had claimed that they could not be located. In the absence of military cooperation, archivists conducted their own authentication process by comparing letterheads and signatures with those on other available records (NSA, 2009) – procedures used on other leaked documents, such as the intelligence log of disappeared citizens known as the 'Military Diary' [*Diario Militar*] (NSA, 1999).

Amid continued state intransigence on the question of declassification, anonymously leaked military documents have provided tremendous insight into the dynamics of violence during the conflict years. Operation Sofía, however, stands out for the remarkably comprehensive way in which it details a state military campaign in the Guatemalan countryside at the height of the war, providing plans and intelligence reports across the different phases

[4] The Operation Sofía files are available online through the NSA at http://nsarchive.gwu.edu/NSAEBB/NSAEBB297/Operation_Sofia_hi.pdf. All direct quotes have been translated from Spanish by the authors.

and between levels of command. The files correspond to the operations of the First Battalion of Paratroopers 'General Felipe Cruz', which was sent from its southern coastal base in Puerto San José, Escuintla to the western highland province of Huehuetenango. From there, the First Battalion supported Task Force Gumarcaj, charged with carrying out 'counterinsurgent and psychological operations' to 'eliminate subversive elements in the area' (Doyle, 2009: 1). The records reveal that the planning of Operation Sofía reached the highest levels, including then-military chief of staff Héctor Mario López Fuentes who authorized the operation (Doyle, 2009: 18).

Operation Sofía consisted of three phases: 16–31 July, 3–7 August, and 9–19 August 1982. There are four types of documents. The first is the initial plan, which details the mission, phases of operation, and instructions for different companies of the First Battalion. Second, Operation Sofía's three phases each have a corresponding 'Summary of Intelligence', known as 'Annex A'. These briefs contain information on the movements and state of the enemy and perceived support among the civilian population. The third type of document is the 'Periodic Report on Operations' sent from the commander of the First Battalion up the chain of command. These reports detail the areas of operation for each unit and report contact with guerrilla forces and civilians. Finally, there are individual 'Patrol Reports' sent from each patrol chief to the First Battalion commander, which detail patrol operations and recommendations.[5]

Within the broader trajectory of the Guatemalan armed conflict, Operation Sofía corresponds to the period and location in which 'acts of genocide' were found to have occurred, thus making this document a critical piece of evidence to assess the mechanisms central to this article. Operation Sofía formed part of Plan Victoria 82,[6] Ríos Montt's broader security program 'to reorganize, expand, and advance the military sweep of the highlands' (Garrard-Burnett, 2010: 88). Within the narrower context of the Ixil region, the Operation Sofía period reflects a moment of transition in the state's military campaign. The Guatemalan military launched its most violent assault on the area in June 1982, after Ríos Montt's 30-day amnesty offer expired (Brett, 2007: 98).[7] Yet, as our analysis will suggest, the success of previous state campaigns in curbing guerrilla expansion in the first half of 1982 was incomplete. Operation Sofía is a response to these mixed results.

In light of the data limitations associated with studies of mass violence, the Operation Sofía documentation provides a rare portrait of the life-cycle of a military offensive and allows us to assess local military perceptions of the insurgency and civilian population within real-time communications. Yet, while highly unique and an improvement over other data, it is important to note what these documents *do not* allow us to say. First, the Operation Sofía reports do not allow us to ascertain the precise level of violence committed by troops during this offensive or more generally. Though patrol leaders discuss the killings of civilians and insurgents within the operation, these instances should not be taken as an accurate reflection of the magnitude of state-perpetrated atrocities. We would anticipate that civilian killings in particular would be vastly underreported to protect the state's embattled image. Additionally, the code of conduct in Operation Sofía mandates that troops 'should respect the lives of women and children, to the extent possible' (6, 128, 135), further suggesting that patrols would have been averse to disclosing civilian killings. We do not find within the documents reports of large-scale massacres, such as those identified by the CEH, nor would we expect to.

Second, and relatedly, it is possible that the type of information conveyed by the Operation Sofía archives biases findings in favor of some mechanisms over others. For example, we might be more likely to find indications that violence was meant to 'win over' Ixil civilians rather than exterminate them, given the code of conduct in place. The Operation Sofía data may also be biased against the lack of information mechanism (no. 3) if troops are averse to admitting they are unable to locate and combat the insurgency. Yet, as we will show in our analysis, there are pejorative, racialized references to Ixil civilians within the Operation Sofía documents as well as

[5] The individual, hand-written patrol reports sometimes contain information beyond that replicated in aggregate reports at the company or battalion level, so we utilize these where available. The documentation is intact for each of the operational phases, with a few exceptions. Individual patrol reports are missing for the First Company's second and third patrols during the first phase of the operation (16–31 July 1982). We thus rely on the summaries found in the aggregate patrol report for Phase 1 (149–164) in these cases.

[6] Though Plan Victoria 82 remains classified, it is believed to detail the planning of the most violent military actions of the conflict, which sought to 'pacify' the countryside and eliminate guerrilla support (Schirmer, 1998: 23).

[7] The CEH registered four massacres in the Ixil region during July and August 1982. Yet, it also estimates that 70% to 90% of Ixil communities were wiped out completely (345), suggesting that massacres during any given month are likely underreported.

admissions that patrols lack necessary information. This indicates that archival representations of group-destructive violence[8] and military incapacity were not entirely unthinkable.

Finally, the documentation does not allow us to definitively determine the intentions of the armed actors involved in Operation Sofía. Instead what we have is a novel, detailed account of how they represented and communicated their actions to peers and superiors during the operation. The Operation Sofía documentation thus provides a unique window into the rationales for violence and gives us important analytical leverage in evaluating the complex logics underlying civilian targeting in civil war.

Process tracing analysis

Operation Sofía is consistent with a strategic account of mass killing. Despite a successful campaign to debilitate the insurgency in the Ixil region, military officials at the time believed the EGP had entered a period of resurgence in mid-1982, with the 'subversive groups' operating in the Quiché region, and the Ixil area specifically, having 'intensified their activities' by opening 'two new fronts' (9). This escalation came after a previous period of military success, indicating the insurgents' capacity to rebound following defeat.

Amid a context of perceived guerrilla renewal, the First Battalion's objective, as defined by military leadership, was the enemy's annihilation. Troops are instructed to 'initiate offensive, anti-subversive and psychological operations in the area of Gumarcaj, in coordination with the [already present] Task Force, to give greater momentum to said operations and exterminate the subversive elements in the area' (3). But why exactly would this military objective result in large-scale violence against the Ixil civilian population?

Our analysis points primarily to two mechanisms.[9] As per the first, military patrollers understood the civilian population to be loyal to and thus functionally equivalent to the insurgency. As per the second, local military actors represented violence as a means to communicate the costs of collaboration and thereby reshape behavior. In other words, troops saw Ixil communities as possessing deep allegiances to the guerrillas, but those ties were breakable and the civilian population was 'winnable'. The logic of violence was thus coercive. While state actors used violence to weaken the insurgency, they considered it possible to convince civilians not to support the insurgency. Violence was therefore a means to impose costs to break bonds of loyalty with the insurgents.

Regarding the first mechanism, the Operation Sofía documentation illustrates a consistent and fairly widespread understanding among local troops that the Ixil population was completely loyal to the insurgency; civilians were folded into the category of 'internal enemy' (Kinsella, 2011). The perception of loyalty is found both in reports from the First Battalion commanders and the military patrols carrying out the offensive on the ground. For example, the first 'Annex A' intelligence brief describes how Ixil civilians flee to clandestine shelters when they see military units because 'all of the inhabitants of the area have been heavily indoctrinated [*bien concientizados*] by the subversion' (10). This idea is repeated in the first Periodic Report of Operations: 'During more than ten years, the subversive groups that have operated in the Ixil Triangle managed to carry out a complete job of ideological consciousness-raising [*concientización ideológica*] among the entire population, having achieved one hundred percent support' (122–123).

Members of military patrols engaged in offensive actions on the ground expressed a similar rationale. For example, the First Company's fourth patrol chief reports at the end of July that, 'the general area of operations is where the guerrillas reside since they have won over [*tiene ganada*] all of the people' (158). Similarly, the First Company's third patrol indicates that, 'the populations of the area, in general, have adopted the motto of the guerrillas, to abandon their houses and flee to the mountains when they see military patrols nearby' (157).

There is also evidence that local-level state actors believed deeper historical processes were responsible for civilian loyalties to the insurgency. As the First Company's fourth patrol chief asserts, 'All of the people that live in this area are totally convinced that the guerrilla struggle is good due to the false promises they've received [. . .] We are combatting a plague that we had to have started long ago, which is why the population knows us less and fears us' (173). Strikingly, this individual recognizes how state actions may have contributed to the alienation of local communities and increasing insurgent support; yet, he understands Ixil civilians as completely 'lost' ideologically. Rather than being seen as 'innocent bystanders' or unfortunate but necessary casualties of

[8] Indeed, Doyle has argued that, 'the documents record the military's genocidal assault against indigenous populations in Guatemala' (NSA, 2009). We use our mechanism-centered approach to examine this claim.

[9] We draw similar findings from a quantitative text analysis also used to assess the different mechanisms within Operation Sofía. It is presented in the Online appendix.

war, local civilians are framed as part and parcel of the insurgency.

Military perceptions of civilian loyalty to the insurgency help explain why the state's strategic considerations translated into violence against civilians. This logic of violence is also consistent with the CEH claims that the state perpetrated group-destructive violence. Given the military objective to annihilate subversives, the belief that the guerillas had completely won over Ixil communities could prompt genocidal violence: if local civilians were not persuadable, then exterminating them would be a strategic approach to defeating the enemy. The documentation suggests that troops perceived Ixil loyalty as cultivated through persuasion; however, they may have still seen the civilian population as beyond recovery due to the intensity of insurgent indoctrination over time. Yet, the Operation Sofia evidence points instead to a second mechanism, which constrains the group-destructive potential of the first. Military actors conceived of violence as a means to punish, and thereby win over, the civilians; in this framing, violence was coercive – a tool to shape group behavior, rather than destroy a group.

The coercive logic of violence surfaces in patrol instructions and reports. For example, initial operational instructions note that the First Company's third patrol 'will gather, organize, and register the population of Acul on July 27 at 0500 hours to try to convince them that they have been tricked by the subversion and to win them over to our advantage [*ganarlos a nuestro favor*]' (150). Here, transforming civilian allegiances is the explicit aim of the patrol.

In another instance following on-the-ground operations, the First Company's fourth patrol suggests that, 'after having burned the houses and destroyed the shelters and the guerrillas and their collaborators, [the people] must be talked to and made to understand why they were victims of all of this abuse [*atropello*]' (162). Similarly, the Second Company's fifth patrol chief recommends, 'that [the people] are punished and combatted militarily but that later they are given a better kind of life that, as brothers, they deserve' (163). In each of these statements, military actors combine violence with persuasion, suggesting that violence is part of a communicative strategy to turn the civilians away from the insurgents.

Additional reports of encounters with suspected insurgent collaborators corroborate the coercive function of state-perpetrated violence during Operation Sofía. For example, an 11 August patrol report describes how, following a military raid that turned up EGP documents, 'the house was burned and the crops were killed' (287–288). Yet, two days later, the patrol reports that 'the family of Diego Cobo [captured in the raid] was let go to head to Nebaj; [the family] promised to leave, but before doing so, to organize its village (Cantón Tzijulché) so that it turns itself in to the Army' (287–288). Here, violence deployed to destroy homes and apprehend civilians served to shift the balance of local support. Rather than eliminate the Ixil villagers suspected of holding guerrilla sympathies, local military patrols compelled them to back state counterinsurgent efforts and mobilize their community to do the same. These instances of force thus point to the coercive and communicative function of violence during Operation Sofía.

Finally, a similar logic underlies many of the patrol recommendations, which largely advocate nonviolent mechanisms of control alongside violent assaults to win over the population. The numerous suggestions that the military ramp up nonviolent activities, particularly 'psychological operations', reinforce the perception that the Ixil population was 'winnable'. By the end of the operation, the commander of the Second Company writes that, 'It is necessary to carry out psychological operations at a higher level than what the Army patrols are capable of to again win over civilians and convince them that they have been tricked by the guerrillas and allow them to return to a normal life like they had before joining the subversion' (214). Additional patrol suggestions found within the files implore the military to maintain a presence in the area to 'prevent the guerrillas from again reappearing' (146) and to 'not lose what has, up until now, been won with respect to the population' (147). These instances further suggest that local troops saw their objective as reshaping and retaining Ixil loyalties to defeat the guerrillas.

While the Operation Sofía documentation supports our first two hypothesized mechanisms linking wartime strategy and civilian targeting, we find scant support for the remaining two: the lack of capacity to distinguish between combatants and civilians and the idea that the civilians were immutably, through identity or indoctrination, pro-rebel and anti-government.

For example, had our third mechanism, the lack of capacity to distinguish between combatants and civilians, underpinned civilian targeting, we would expect the Operation Sofía archives to include references to ignorance or informational deficits. Troops may have reported that they are unable to locate the enemy or distinguish 'friend from foe'. They may describe the insurgency as blending into the Ixil population. We

would not expect to find detailed information on the locations of insurgent-allied communities or instances of extracting information from civilians.

Though some reported killings of individual civilians suggest moments of ambiguity, the bulk of communications indicate that the military had substantial information for identifying guerrilla combatants, challenging the lack of capacity narrative. On the one hand, the first intelligence brief from early July notes that, 'the subversive groups [. . .] have adopted a passive tactic of dispersing themselves in the entire area, confusing themselves with the civilian population' (138), thus implying the difficulties in properly targeting offensive actions. Yet, on the other hand, the documentation frequently indicates that troops did possess sufficient information to distinguish between combatant and civilian.

For example, the first intelligence brief outlines the different uniforms of EGP operatives, making them easier to identify: 'It is known that the third platoon uses a blue cloth on the left arm as identification, while the fourth platoon uses orange and the fifth white' (138). Similar references to the military's ability to distinguish between insurgents and non-insurgents are found in the local patrol reports. The Second Company's second patrol, for instance, claims that, 'in certain areas or populations the harvests were destroyed, where it was calculated that [they] belonged to the enemy' (190). Here, the patrol leader implies that his troops possessed information to identify 'enemy' groups and direct offensive actions accordingly.

In addition, the intelligence briefs and periodic reports are full of descriptions of guerrilla units located in particular communities and of groups of villagers attempting to turn themselves in to the military (116, 121, 130, 138). In some instances, patrols report the successful capture of Ixil civilians for intelligence and recovery purposes: the Second Company's fourth patrol reported 'capturing an elderly individual [*de edad avanzada*] with his family, making him accompany us to the village Xeipum, where he was set free to return and organize his village to turn themselves into to the Army' (285). Here, local military actors demonstrate their capacity to extract information from civilians and convince them to bring their communities to the state's side. Even when military leaders report that civilians were in hiding, making it difficult to elicit information, they tended know the relative location of hideouts: 'in caves and/or shelters, which are located 500 or 600 meters from the villages, normally camouflaged among the corn stalks [. . .] and on the banks of rivers' (10). Thus, while there are sparse, isolated references to difficulties in drawing civilian–combatant distinctions, there is no evidence of a systematic lack of capacity or knowledge; instead, state troops more often reported possessing critical intelligence on the enemy and success in eliciting information as Operation Sofía progressed. If deficient information or military capabilities indeed drove indiscriminate violence against civilians, we should not find such abundant references to the precise locations of communities fleeing the military or to the successful extraction of information from civilians.

Had our fourth mechanism underpinned civilian targeting during Operation Sofía, observationally, we might expect to find references to civilian identities as inherently oppositional to the government and its political project. One observable implication of this mechanism would be troops referring to themselves as fundamentally different from those they targeted. Specifically, troops might have depicted their actions as those of 'ladinos' fighting '*indígenas*' [indigenous peoples]. Yet we find little evidence of these kinds of characterizations in the Operation Sofia documentation.[10] To be sure, the Operation Sofía files are not completely devoid of racialized references to Ixil civilians. One example present in the communications is the description of civilian killings by the Second Company's fourth patrol, which details the 'elimination' of two Ixil children, referred to pejoratively as '*chocolates*' (155); this reference implies potential unspoken assumptions about the ethnic stakes of the conflict.

But beliefs of ethnic inferiority do not necessarily signify that perpetrators understood Ixil civilians as beyond recovery on the basis of their ethnic identities. Indeed, such prejudices can still be consistent with a coercive logic if the objective of violence is to prevent and deter future insurgent collaboration among the ethnic 'others'. While perceptions of Ixil inferiority do surface within Operation Sofía, there is no indication that Ixil identification was seen as a proxy for *fixed* and *irretrievable* opposition to the Guatemalan nation.

Had state military actors believed certain civilian identities were inherently and immutably in opposition to their political project, we should not find evidence that they modulated violence over time according to perceived military gains; yet, we do find such a pattern. Some of the patrol reports suggest that nonviolent, coercive tactics were enhanced over the course of the

[10] These findings contrast with Vela Castañeda (2016: 233–234), which finds that discourses of ethnic inferiority were a prominent feature of military training and socialization.

operation as local patrols increasingly gained territory from rebels. For instance, during the beginning of the first phase, the Second Company's third patrol did not partake in any 'psychological operations' to win back the population, according to reports; however, in the second part, the patrol chief states that, 'the captured FIL [local irregular forces] were not eliminated, but [. . .] forgiven and evacuated as refugees'. By the final part of this phase, the same practices were carried out and 'additionally, the harvests were no longer destroyed' (197). These excerpts suggest that violence was calibrated over time based on perceived military advances. Had Ixil identity been understood as unwaveringly wedded to the insurgency, we would not expect to find archival references to the replacement of violent tactics with nonviolent tactics; the perceived 'unwinnability' of the Ixil civilians instead would have necessitated continued violence to eliminate the population.

While the Operation Sofía documentation largely disconfirms this fourth mechanism, we cannot rule out the hypothesis that beliefs of ethnic superiority or of the ladino nature of the state underpinned group-destructive logics of violence in other moments during the Guatemalan armed conflict, including in the Ixil region just months before Operation Sofía when the Ríos Montt regime launched its fiercest counterinsurgent offensive.

Implications

Building on strategic theories of violence in civil war, this article develops a mechanism-centered approach to examine the link between war and mass violence and applies it empirically through process tracing of Guatemalan military archives from one counterinsurgent operation. The fine-grained evidence from Operation Sofía suggests that the large-scale, group-selective violence was coercive. Even amid perceptions that the Ixil population was deeply loyal to the insurgency, targeting civilians was designed to break those loyalties and to bring them to the state's side.

While our empirical findings are confined to a particular region at a distinct moment within the Guatemalan armed conflict, they speak to conflict scholarship more broadly. First, we add to research that calls into question a binary distinction between (limited) selective and (mass) indiscriminate violence; instead, we conceptualize large-scale, group-selective violence as a distinct category. Second, our research shows that the coercive logics of violence primarily thought to apply to limited selective violence also hold for mass, group-selective violence. Third, we push scholars not to limit themselves to the assertion that violence is 'strategic', but to develop arguments about why perpetrators consider attacking civilians to be strategic. Lastly, we engage debates about how, from a social science perspective, to distinguish genocidal violence from other forms of violence.

Beyond these specific implications, our article contributes to a growing literature that seeks to refine causal processes related to political violence through process tracing. Our approach constitutes an indispensable complement to dominant approaches in the field, which rely on statistical correlations to make inferences about the causal dynamics of violence. Focusing on causal mechanisms is particularly critical in cases like Guatemala, where logics of violence are multiple, ambiguous, and vary over time. Indeed, the application of 'genocide' to the Guatemalan case has been the subject of intense debate, particularly with landmark genocide prosecutions such as the Ríos Montt trial in 2013. Our approach can help uncover causal processes that are consistent with genocide, or not. Such an approach is useful not only for being precise about why violence against civilians occurs but also for analyzing cases that sit uncomfortably between the political violence and genocide literatures, such as Cambodia under the Khmer Rouge, Darfur (Sudan), and Biafra (Nigeria) (Prunier, 2005; Straus, 2015). While each armed conflict reflects distinct dynamics, disaggregating mechanisms provides a useful approach for analyzing conflict processes and understanding why large-scale violence takes place.

Replication data

The declassified Operation Sofía documents and Online appendix can be found at http://www.prio.org/jpr/datasets.

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