Mobilization capacity and violence against local leaders: Anticlerical violence during the Spanish Civil War[*]

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Abstract

Research on civilian victimization usually treats all civilians as a unitary group. But not all civilians are the same, nor are they killed for the same reasons. This study highlights a form of wartime civilian victimization that is little understood, even if pervasive across conflicts: violence against local leaders. We argue that this category of civilians are pre-emptively targeted because of their potential to mobilize support. Local leaders with greater mobilization capacity are more likely to be killed. We test this argument using original data on clergy killings during the Spanish Civil War. Results show that clerics were more likely to be killed in municipalities where their capacity for mobilizing people against the Republic was higher, making themselves a potential threat to local armed actors. This study highlights the need to disaggregate the category of civilians, which has suffered from conceptual and empirical overaggregation.

1 Introduction

Why civilians are killed in conflicts is a core concern of the literature on political violence. There is wide agreement that, in most cases, civilian victimization is the result of strategic considerations by armed groups (Valentino, Huth & Balch-Lindsay, 2004). However, it is far from clear whether there exists an encompassing logic that accounts for the targeting of civilians in general. The category is perhaps too abstract to disentangle the various dynamics of violence in civil conflict. While there has been great progress in the analysis of the macro-, meso- and micro-conditions under which armed groups target civilians (Balcells & Stanton, 2021), we still need to unpack this category. Not all non-combatants are the same. Different types of civilians may be victimized for specific reasons.

In this article, we focus on a particular type of civilian that is targeted for strategic reasons. Specifically, we focus on local leaders, or civilians with the capacity to organize resistance to armed groups. We argue that they are pre-emptively killed precisely because of this potential to mobilize local resistance against the enemy. This is a relatively neglected topic in the literature on civil war.[1]

Local leaders play a significant role in conflicts throughout the world, particularly in organizing collective action. For instance, Sunni tribal leaders rebelled against ISIS in Iraq (Gartenstein-Ross & Joscelyn, 2022), political entrepreneurs shaped whether local communities engaged in violent or non-violent resistance in Colombia and Mozambique (Jentzsch & Masullo, 2022), tribal leaders organized the Fertit militias in South Sudan (Blocq, 2014), and local chiefs were key to explain community collective action during the civil war in the Philippines (Rubin, 2020). Given their role in shaping wartime dynamics, how do we explain violence against this category of civilians?

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[1] Masullo & O'Connor (2020) and Prem et al. (2022) are partial exceptions, but none of these works analyze how local-level factors influence variation in violence against local leaders. Similarly, previous research on journalist killings can also be considered a partial exception, as these victims are often killed because of the threat they pose to elected leaders and local armed groups (Carey & Gohdes, 2021; Dorff, Henry & Ley, 2023), even though it does not apply directly to wartime civilian victimization.

We argue that the motive behind violence against local leaders is to suppress or avoid any form of collective resistance. It follows a logic of pre-emptive violence, aimed at potential challengers (Herreros & Criado, 2009). This contrasts with the informational logic proposed by Kalyvas (2006), which has been hugely influential in the field. According to this logic, civilians are killed because of the risk of denunciation. When employing pre-emptive violence, by contrast, perpetrators seek to hinder any form of collective action that might threaten local authority. Examining episodes of violence against local leaders shows that the traditional distinction between selective and collective violence is insufficiently precise. Targeting depends on a mix of individual and collective considerations: victims are targeted because they belong to a certain group but also because of their capacity to organize local resistance.

In this article, we explore the targeting of local leaders in the context of the Spanish Civil War (1936-1939), where a bloody and systematic pattern of violence against religious local leaders took place. In the early months of the conflict, in the midst of extreme violence deployed by both sides, a wave of anticlerical violence engulfed the areas that did not fall into Nationalist rebels' hands.[2] According to the most accurate estimates, around 6,800 clerics were killed during the war, most in the first few months (Rubio, 2001, 69). This episode is unparalleled. Hilari Raguer (2001, 176) claimed that "in all history of the universal Church there is no single precedent, even if including the Roman prosecutions, of such a bloody sacrifice in little more than a semester."

While a popular interpretation is that anticlerical violence in Spain was the product of deep-seated hatred against the Church, hatred alone cannot explain variation across space and time in clergy killings. Our contention is that local leaders are more likely to be targeted when they have greater mobilization capacity. In 1930s Spain, clerics played an important role as local leaders through their penetration in civil society by multiple means, including the education system. They contributed to create multiple Catholic agrarian unions, had "powerful socialization net-

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[2] The Spanish Civil War was fought between the Nationalist rebels (mostly formed by breakaway factions of the army and other right-wing political groups, and later led by General Franco) and forces loyal to the Spanish Second Republic, which included both loyalist forces in the army and left-wing militias. Each side controlled roughly half the territory of Spain after the July 1936 coup. Although the Nationalist forces were the rebel side, they were more successful than the government in establishing centralized political authority in the territory they controlled, particularly during the first weeks of the conflict.

works", and controlled influential mass media. They were also able to mobilize political support for conservative candidates (Del Rey, 2019, 470).

We claim that their capacity to mobilize was a function of local organizational strength. Therefore, we expect anticlerical violence to be greater in areas where the Right had stronger local organizations. Mobilization potential captures motive, but strategic violence is always a combination of motive and opportunity. Although our analysis is aimed at disentangling the logic of motive, opportunity is obviously important. The whole argument is premised on the presence of left-wing militias with the capacity to kill local enemies. Without militias, the Republican side would not have been able to repress resistance at the local level. During the early months of the conflict, trade unions formed the backbone of leftist militias in Republican areas.

From an empirical point of view, we proxy the potential for resistance using a variable of local employers' associations. These associations work in the analysis as an indicator that conservative elites had formed more cohesive networks and possessed a better structure to organize collective action. Likewise, we use the presence of left-wing unions as a proxy of opportunity.

We test our argument using newly collected data on anticlerical violence during the Spanish Civil War and on many other local-level variables that we have digitized from historical archives. We create an original dataset that covers all municipalities that remained under Republican control after the outbreak of war, which roughly totals 4,000 municipalities across 37 provinces.

Our results confirm both motive and opportunity. On the one hand, anticlerical violence was indeed higher in municipalities where employers' associations were present before the war. On the other, the presence of left-wing militias by itself does not explain violence, but, as expected, it does interact positively with our indicator of mobilization capacity.

We also present complementary evidence consistent with our argument. First, we show that the effect of local employers' associations was stronger at the start of the war, as the argument on the pre-emptive logic of this type of violence implies. Second, we show that the effect of employers' associations was primarily driven by agrarian organizations, where the Church was more influential and, therefore, had more capacity to mobilize. Finally, using an alternative dataset, we

show that the presence of employers' associations is able to explain violence against other local leaders but not violence against the remaining civilians.

We contribute to the literature in two main ways. First, we develop and empirically test an argument that applies to a form of civilian targeting that is likely to be present across most, if not all, civil wars. Religious personnel is one example of local leaders, but so are local businessmen or traditional authorities. Even though these figures are likely to play a key role in local wartime dynamics and become targeted by armed actors, violence against them has been scarcely explored in previous research. This gap in the literature is a consequence of the absence of disaggregated data on the identity of civilians, but also of insufficient attention to internal variation in the concept of non-combatants. This study contributes to the analysis of why and how different types of civilians are targeted in conflict.

Second, we provide what is, to the best of our knowledge, the first statistical analysis of the campaign of anticlerical violence during the Spanish Civil War, which was an event of clear historical importance. Our results help explain why Spain witnessed such an intense episode of anticlerical violence during the Civil War, both compared to other countries and to other periods in Spain. The importance of the Church, and its widespread influence in domestic politics, explains the high incidence of anticlericalism in Spain, but the potential role of the clergy in local wartime mobilization demonstrates why its virulence was so high during the internecine conflict.

2 Mobilization capacity and violence against local leaders

One of the most complex issues in the study of civil wars is the interaction between armed actors and the local population. When an armed group gains control over a certain territory, their most pressing problem is how to manage the relationship with people living in the area. Will local individuals comply with the new rulers, or will they resist? The challenge faced by new rulers is to create a structure of incentives that avoids resistant behavior from the local population. Violence usually plays a central role in this structure.

Civilian resistance may be individual or collective. Individually, for example, a person may share information with the enemy. In a pioneering study, Kalyvas (2006) examines individual disobedience in detail, focusing on how local factors shape the incentives of potential informants. This form of civilian resistance also shapes patterns of violence at the local level, which in principle take the form of selective targeting, meaning "the killing of an individual because of allegations about her behavior, such as providing support for a rival organization" (Gutiérrez-Sanín & Wood, 2017, 24). If an informant is identified, punishment is selective; the goal is to deter future potential informants.[3] According to this explanation, violence becomes more indiscriminate when information about individual behavior is unavailable or its acquisition becomes too costly. When an entire group or community is targeted, guilt is collectively determined (Kalyvas, 2006, 142). From this perspective, indiscriminate violence is always a second-best.

There are two assumptions behind the informational approach. The first is that all civilians are equal. Each civilian has just two options, either to collaborate with the rulers or to defect and share information with the enemy. The second assumption is that resistance is individual in nature. Denunciation is an action undertaken secretly, which does not require coordination with others. Civil war studies, however, have shown that resistance may be collective and that civilians may play different roles in collective action networks.

While we do not question the importance of individual defection, we argue that civilian collective action is a far more important determinant of conflict dynamics. Even if the problem of collective action seems insurmountable given the risks the local population faces, there are conditions under which civilians cannot afford the luxury of remaining neutral. They either have to take sides (Kalyvas & Kocher, 2007) or protect themselves against violence (Kaplan, 2017).

The literature has explored the relationship between armed groups and local forms of collective action. This relationship is highly context-dependent. In some cases, armed groups exploit existing ideological, social or ethnic networks. In their study on the Italian Resistance, Costalli

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[3]Other authors have argued that the kind of punishment (selective or indiscriminate) employed by armed groups against the local population depends on different factors, such as resources (Weinstein, 2006) or competition between different armed groups (Metelits, 2009).

& Ruggeri ([2015](#)) analyze the formation of armed groups based on the existing Communist networks. Rubin ([2020](#)), in turn, explains how the New People's Army (NPA) in the Philippines mobilized local support through local chiefs, or *datus*, who greatly determined whether a local community would support the NPA or form a self-defense militia against them. In Afghanistan, the Taliban established various forms of allyship with the tribes' chiefs, who had great capacity to mobilize their people (Malkasian, [2021](#)).

On the opposite side of the spectrum, we have cases of armed opposition in which groups are created to oppose other armed actors (Schubiger, [2021](#)). Civilians form local militias against rebel rule, in many cases supported by state authorities (Jentzsch, Kalyvas & Schubiger, [2015](#)). However, violence is not the only available course of action for this kind of resistance. In fact, non-violent resistance is also observed (Jentzsch & Masullo, [2022](#); Kaplan, [2017](#)), ranging from partial opposition against specific forms of wartime rule to fully rejecting local armed authorities. A burgeoning literature on how armed groups establish governance structures in the face of collaboration or resistance from civil society has analyzed this issue in depth (Arjona, Kasfir & Mampilly, [2015](#); Arjona, [2016](#); Huang, [2016](#); Mampilly, [2011](#); Mampilly & Stewart, [2021](#); Loyle et al., [2023](#))

We approach the issue of civil resistance from a different angle, examining the conditions under which armed groups decide to target local leaders to prevent inimical collective action. Given the capacity that local leaders have to mobilize the local population, it is natural to assume that armed actors will have incentives to target them. While there are alternative strategies to violence, such as co-opting these leaders, violent repression is one of the tools that can be employed to avoid collective action or make it more costly. Our argument is that campaigns against local leaders depend on their mobilization capacity. Pre-emptive violence works by 'rooting out' those individuals who could mount and lead serious resistance against rulers.

While we next illustrate the argument with specific examples from the Spanish Civil War, consider here the following example from the Guatemalan Civil War. In 1975, during the initial years of the conflict, the Guerrilla Army of the Poor (EGP) killed José Luis Arenas, a notorious

plantation owner (Garrard-Burnett, 2010). The killing was planned as a symbolic action to redress local grievances by landless peasants, and likely played a coercive role in deterring other local businessmen from collaborating with state authorities. But, more significantly, Arenas, by employing a significant number of local peasants, clearly had the capacity to tilt local sympathies against the guerrilla precisely in an area where they were trying to establish some degree of territorial presence.

Violence was strategically used to undermine the mobilization capacity of the opposition side. This example does not fall under either selective or collective violence. It is not fully selective because there is no specific behavior that can be attributed to the victim. According to our argument, the reason why the person was killed is pre-emptive. Local leaders are targeted *before* they can act, based on the assumption that they can lead local resistance. It is also different from the collective targeting of whole groups, as not anyone within the group has the same probability of being targeted. Even if businesspeople are targeted as a general category, the armed group seeks to neutralize those with the greatest mobilization resources. While there is a degree of collective targeting based on the presumed political allegiances of this category of civilians, local leaders—such as businessmen, clerics, or traditional authorities—are individually targeted when their capacity for mobilization is particularly high.[4]

Following this logic, our argument is that variation in levels of violence against local leaders depends on the potential threat they pose, i.e. on the capacity of those leaders to mobilize local support. When this capacity is higher, armed groups have more incentives to employ violence against them to prevent mobilization. It is this capacity to shift public opinion and mobilize support for the enemy that sets local leaders apart from ordinary civilians.

Our argument is particularly apt for dynamics of violence in conventional civil wars. An important feature of these wars is that territorial control is more firmly established. In irregular

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[4]A similar example on the use of pre-emptive violence can be found in the recent invasion of Ukraine. Yaffa (2022, 35), reporting on the Russian strategy to consolidate control in the southeastern city of Melitopol, states that "the primary targets for arrests and kidnappings have been elected officials, activists, business owners–anyone seen as influential or capable of shaping local opinion." Beyond setting an example to local civilians who might consider revolting against the Russian occupation, these local leaders are targeted precisely because of their capacity to mobilize local support for the Ukrainian cause.

wars, where the logic of rural insurgencies prevails, rebel advance is usually gradual. Before 'liberating' an area, rebels infiltrate the enemy's territory, exploring the terrain and the preferences of the locals. In these contexts, violence against civilians is typically low at the beginning, and only escalates once the rebels gain sufficient territorial control to create governance structures (Lewis, 2020, 44). Most of what we know about the emergence of wartime rebel order and the role that violence plays in this process comes from studies on irregular wars. In these contexts, the most pressing issue at the beginning is to solve the informational problems of locals 'cheating' individually. At a later stage, once the rebels have become established as the new authority, collective resistance may emerge.

In conventional civil wars the evolution of violence is different. These are conflicts where two strong parties fight against each other on well-defined fronts, often using heavy weaponry. These wars usually imply a power vacuum at the beginning of the conflict. The state is challenged by a strong army or militia and, because of the ensuing power vacuum in the short run, there is an explosion of violence against civilians during the initial period (Lewis, 2020, 217). Once segmented monopolies of violence are consolidated, internal order prevails in the rearguard, the identity of the authority becomes clear and, consequently, the killing of civilians is reduced. The bulk of the violence concentrates then on the battle fronts.

In this context, where armed groups move fast to establish local territorial control, each armed group seeks to 'clean' its own area of internal enemies. Because of the pressing concern in cementing territorial control, a pre-emptive logic of violence is more likely to prevail, where armed actors go against individuals who might play a particular role in shaping minds and organizing collective action. We argue that this is the logic that drives violence against local leaders.

Our empirical case, the Spanish Civil War, is a paradigmatic example of conventional civil wars (Herreros & Criado, 2009, 420). In line with the logic above, there was an outburst of civilian victimization in the first months of the conflict, during the initial breakdown of power. After the failed coup of July 18, 1936, the political order collapsed, and the two sides engaged in campaigns of violence against influential local leaders. Two noteworthy illustrations are teachers and clerics.

The Nationalist rebels targeted the former, whereas the Republicans attacked the latter. In the next section we provide some historical context on anticlerical violence and apply our argument about pre-emptive violence to the case of clerics.

3   Catholicism and anticlericalism in Spain

Spain has been a stronghold of Catholicism for centuries. The power of the Church was enormous, from land ownership to control of the educational system. It resisted as much as it could the advance of liberalism and modernity. The Church's stance generated deep resentment, from liberal elites to landless peasants. Eventually, this resentment unleashed various forms of opposition and violence. Around 370 clerics, for example, were killed during the 19th century (Muns i Castellet, 1888; De la Cueva, 2000).

The religious conflict intensified from the last third of the 19th century, when the Church expanded, and both Republican and democratic parties grew and became more belligerent. To counter the attacks of radical liberals and democrats, and to regain some of its diminishing social influence, the Church eventually undertook crucial initiatives, such as the creation of Catholic Action (*Acción Católica*, AC), the National Catholic Association of Propagandists (*Asociación Católica Nacional de Propagandistas*, ACNP), and several other related organizations whose influence in education, mass media, and politics was notorious (Montero, 2007; De la Cueva, 2000; De la Cueva & Montero, 2009).

The Church also contributed to the formation of numerous Catholic cooperatives and "mixed unions"[5] to limit the influence of powerful leftist unions. Many of these unions worked more as employers' associations than as labor unions. Their expansion, with the expected regional variance, was very successful in the agrarian sector, but not so much in the industrial and urban centers, where the socialist union General Workers' Union (*Unión General de Trabajadores*, UGT)

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[5]Mixed unions (*sindicatos mixtos*) refers to organizations of both employers and workers that resemble more the functioning of entrepreneurial associations than labor unions.

and the anarchist Labor National Confederation (*Confederación Nacional del Trabajo*, CNT) were hegemonic.

All these efforts allowed the Church to undertake successful proselytizing activities to recover social prestige and political leverage. Thanks to this coordinated reaction, a conductive breeding ground was created, ready to mobilize support to defend the interests of the Church and its conservative allies.

Tensions peaked during the Second Republic (1931–36). Conservative, monarchical, and a dense conglomerate of Catholic organizations opposed the articles of the 1931 Republican Constitution that established a non-confessional state, ended public funding of the Church, and contemplated the banning of some religious orders. In reaction to these policies, and also those that attempted land and labour reforms, a right-wing coalition was created to defend the interests of the agrarian and Catholic constituencies: the Spanish Confederation of the Autonomous Right (*Confederación Española de Derechas Autónomas*, CEDA). The creation of the first mass Catholic party in Spanish history was an unequivocal demonstration of the mobilizing capacity of conservative forces, this time under the auspices of the Church (Del Rey, 2019, 470).[6] The CEDA was formed as a mass party by "capitalizing Catholicism" (Cabrera, 1983, 19). A number of regional conservative parties, the National Catholic-Agrarian Confederation (*Confederación Nacional Católica Agraria*, CNCA), AC, ACNP, and Catholic agrarian unions were crucial in its constitution and quick success. Many of these associations had religious figures as advisors on their boards—the *consiliarios*—and explicitly declared their submission to the Catholic doctrine and authorities, as the CEDA also did (Montero, 1977; Castillo, 1979, 255–260).[7] Political Catholicism was in motion. The Church was the glue that stuck together a complex conglomerate of cultural, socioeconomic, and political associations, and had representatives in most of them .

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[6] Other Catholic and conservative parties preexisted, and some happened to be crucial in the articulation of the CEDA. But this was only successful enough to govern the country, in coalition, for two years. After winning the 1933 elections, the CEDA was the main partner in the governing coalition.

[7] Some authors, such as Del Rey (2019, 410), have also emphasized dual militancy in the CEDA "and in some of these paralell organizations of clerical inspiration".

Polarization increased during the 1930s as different actors competed to attract supporters. Both the Church and radical anticlerical forces managed to mobilize different sectors. The leading role attributed by the Church itself to local priests made them seem like leaders able to mobilize crucial public support against the reformist attempts of the Republicans.[8] According to Del Rey (2019, 470), "beyond their strictly pastoral work, the leadership of the priests emerged through diverse channels such as supporting different branches of Catholic Action (...), promoting agrarian unions of small and medium-sized landowners, or more explicitly, backing right-wing candidates in electoral campaigns." In due time, "any initiative that had provided them with popularity and visibility placed them in the crosshairs of their adversaries." (Del Rey, 2019, 470).

As a consequence of the 1932 Law of Associations, that attempted to distinguish between 'class unions' and 'mixed unions', "most Catholic unions turned into employers' organizations". Important employers' associations, well integrated into the CEDA, organized "massive gatherings in significant towns and provincial capitals", which blatantly exposed "the collaboration between employer associations and Catholic organizations" (Angelis-Dimakis, 2021, 306). It is also worth mentioning that the CEDA was mainly financed by contributions from employers' associations.

The most dramatic reaction to the conservative forces was the failed revolutionary attempt in October 1934. This event led to around 1,300 deaths, including 34 clerics. Several religious buildings were set on fire. According to Callahan (2000, 322; 360), for the first time "the Church was perceived not simply as an ally or symbol of conservative interests (...), but as a direct agent of counterrevolution and capitalism (...). The revolutionary authorities gave special attention to hunting down priests associated with Catholic political organizations."

The electoral campaign for the 1936 elections showed again the complicity between the economic powers and the Church. The Employers' Bloc (*Bloque Patronal*, BP) was created in January to "tilt the balance of the electoral contest", as well as to "advise and, if necessary, order (...) that all patronal, commercial, and industrial classes in Spain stand up." The BP appealed to "all the eco-

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[8] A whole chapter was devoted in the 1927 Ecclesiastical Yearbook (*Anuario Eclesiástico*) to explain why and how priests should lead the creation of Catholic unions vis-à-vis their socialist and communist competitors. This text represents an instruction manual for the mobilization of the agrarian population under the auspices of the clergy.

nomic entities in Spain to follow us in this crusade we have undertaken," and "managed to link up with the Spanish Employers' Economic Party (*Partido Económico Patronal Español*, PEPE), which had been founded in May 1935, primarily by banking groups" (Montero, 1977, vol.2, 550–551; see also Cabrera, 1983).

In the midst of increasing polarization, the leftist coalition Popular Front (*Frente Popular*, FP) won the February elections. This victory triggered alarm in the Church, the Catholic movement, and conservative forces. Conspiracies began to emerge. A well-known cleric, who eventually became a cardinal, would confess later in his memoirs that "the sacristies and other places where priests gathered were centers of conspiracy. Priests felt compelled to discuss politics and conspire against the secular government", adding that many "conspire against secular government" and "supported right-wing parties without reservation" (Tarancón, 1984, 131, 146).[9]

The military uprising of July 18th, 1936, only succeeded in approximately half of the territory, leading to the Spanish Civil War. According to Cabrera (1983, 65), "the borders of the uprising almost precisely coincided with the regions where agrarian Catholic syndicalism was established." By then, anticlericalism was probably the most important cohesive force of the otherwise very heterogeneous Republican coalition (Ledesma, 2012). In both the Francoist and Republican rearguards, the first months of the war were characterized by extreme levels of violence. In the Republican zone, violence has traditionally been explained in terms of the breakdown of state authority and the success of revolutionary forces. The war provided anticlericalism with the political opportunity for collective action. This set Spain apart from other countries, as without the war and "without the revolutionary process and the atomization of power (...) such massacres would have never taken place" (Ledesma, 2012, 232–233). Whereas Francoist forces managed to create a central power and impose their authority in the territory they controlled, in the Republican rearguard different local militias multiplied in a decentralized fashion. For a period of time, they ran amok outside of state control.

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[9] Tarancón (1984, 143) even recognizes the disappointment of the conservatives and "the vast majority of priests and practicing Catholics", when the leader of the CEDA did not use his position to "promote a military uprising to overthrow the Republic."

Before the Republican government regained command, most killings had already been committed, and the clergy was among those most strongly and cruelly targeted. Anticlerical violence, often sadistic, was not random or irrational violence, but "a consequence of a long tradition of popular anticlericalism and anticlerical populism which had considered the vicious clergy the main cause of the country's ills and had proposed the elimination—either legal or physical—of the former a solution of the latter" (De la Cueva, 1998, 369). Our argument, which we develop in the next section, is that clergy killings were mainly a consequence of the priests' potential capacity to mobilize collective resistance against the Republican forces.

Mobilization capacity and violence during the Spanish Civil War

The armed conflict very soon acquired a religious dimension. Our main expectation is that anticlerical violence was more frequent in areas where the Right was organizationally stronger, conditioned on the presence of left-wing militias. It was in these places where the clergy, given their connection to dense and powerful right-wing local networks, was more influential and could effectively mobilize local resistance against the Republic and was thus perceived as a more urgent threat. We do not deny the existence of widespread hatred against the Church, but we do claim that clerics' capacity to mobilize local right-wing support crucially determined violence against them. Clerics were killed because they potentially endangered war efforts and local territorial control by the Republican forces.

The mobilization capacity of the Church could—and did—affect how the war was fought. Tarancón (1984, 215, 253) explains that "[the Francoist rebels] were convinced that the Church was their strongest base of support. And since they also saw that priests maintained the sacred flame of religious patriotism that mobilized most of the people, it was logical for them to treat us [clerics] as allies." The campaign was very successful: "hundreds of young people enlisted as volunteers". Religious organizations, mainly AC, played a key role, as "they managed to create many centers of Catholic Action on the war fronts (...) Like most priests and Christians, they sincerely believed that the most interesting object (...) at that time was to win the war (...) Everything was

subordinated to this" (Tarancón, 1984, 227–228). Ugarte (1998, 120–123, 160) also explains the role played by the clergy in the military conscription, particularly in certain regions. Many of them went "from town to town encouraging men to join the war effort. They would ring the bells of the town church to congregate the population and instill a religious duty in them (...). The war was soon framed as a 'crusade' and this powerful symbol, carefully cultivated by the Church and the military rebels, had a great mobilizing impact".

Although it is difficult to find direct evidence of motives behind killings, there is anecdotal evidence showing both that clerics were killed because of their potential role in political mobilization and that some of them were spared because they were not perceived as political or threatening. For instance, Domingo Villegas was a priest in Ciudad Real, killed by leftist militias in August 1936. Villegas had been very active in AC activities among the youth in his parish, but also had direct political involvement as a Secretary of a local rightist party that later merged into CEDA (Del Rey, 2019, 473). Interestingly, months after being murdered he was summoned to court, as officially he was still "disappeared." Archival documents of the process show further evidence of how his political connections were related to his killing. The priest was considered amongst the most "dangerous" of those summoned. According to some testimonies, "he was a very meddlesome priest with the most prominent figures on the right, being one of the most politically involved on the right, and one of the most skillful, due to his profession."[10] Relatedly, in a different judicial process against another priest that had been imprisoned, it was noted that "[t]he reason for his arrest was his refusal to surrender the weapons he had, his contact with right-wing individuals, and his perceived danger due to his economic standing, which is good and allows him to mobilize people for riots and conflicts." He was sentenced to "compulsory labor with deprivation of liberty for two years, and loss of political rights."[11]

Naturally, not all clerics showed the same bellicose zeal nor had the same level of involvement in political activities before the war. Moreover, not all of them had strong local networks to mobilize support, which explains variation in anticlerical violence. Republican forces had less

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[10] Domingo Villegas Muñoz case. *Archivo Histórico de Ciudad Real*, record no. 257.
[11] Luis Martínez Milla case. *Archivo Histórico Provincial de Albacete*, AHPAB28766-5.

incentives to kill those that were less threatening. There are also examples that illustrate this. For instance, Leira Castiñeira (2022) tells the remarkable story of Cándido Rial, a priest from the Saint Francis the Great church in downtown Madrid. In July 1936, leftist militias searched the sacristy and found evidence of a connection with a leading rightist politician. Many clerics fled, but were later detained, including Fray Cándido. The militias decided to kill most of the clerics after interrogating them, but Fray Cándido was absolved. Writing about the episode later in his unpublished memoir, he recalls an exchange during his interrogation in which a militia man explained that Republicans did not target clerics in general, but only "those involved in politics" (Leira Castiñeira, 2022, 147). Fray Cándido was able to persuade his interrogators of his lack of political partisanship loyalties. This example not only shows how strategic considerations about priests' potential to mobilize were key in targeting decisions, but also how some priests were spared because they were not seen as a political threat.

Our claim is that clerics were more likely to be killed when leftist armed actors perceived them to be a potential threat, capable of swaying local support. While the cues used by local militias to gain knowledge about this potential threat might be many—including searches, as in the example above,—we argue that in those areas where the Right was organizationally stronger, clerics could play a key role mobilizing social support and acting as a link between conservative elites and local communities. A measure of this organizational strength was the presence of employers' associations. As explained below, we expect such presence to be an indicator of stronger and better organized rightist networks, which increased the incentives to kill clerics that could spark local countermobilization.

Were these strategic incentives enough for anticlerical violence to take place? While the argument above explains violence as a function of incentives to pre-emptively kill local clerics that could mobilize local resistance (motive), it is obvious that violence also needs the presence of armed actors to take place (opportunity). In the Republican rearguard, violence during the early months of the Spanish Civil War took place in a context of collapsed centralized authority. A large part was committed by leftist militias, which often emerged from prewar leftist organizations.

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Indeed, the presence of militias linked to the main prewar trade unions, CNT and UGT, have been linked to the incidence of anticlerical violence (Ledesma, 2012, 234). The role of socialist and—specifically—anarchist militias has been crucial in hatred-based arguments, which attribute anticlerical violence to the presence of radicalized armed militias filled with a deep contempt for the Church.

We do not deny the importance of these militias to explain violence, but we argue that their presence was insufficient on their own to explain it. While armed actors are a necessary condition, strategic incentives determined whether clerics were killed or spared. Accordingly, we expect to observe greater violence both where militias were present and where there were incentives to kill local clerics. That is, in areas that, before the war, hosted both trade unions and strong rightist networks. In the quantitative analyses below we provide evidence supporting our argument.

4 Empirics

We test our argument using a new local-level dataset coded from multiple historical and archival sources that have not previously been analyzed in quantitative research.[12] We limit our dataset to municipalities that remained at least one day under Republican control after the July 1936 coup,[13] covering more than 4,000 municipalities across 34 provinces.[14]

Our main outcome is the intensity of local anticlerical violence, which we operationalize as the logged number of clerics killed in each municipality. We regress this outcome on an indicator of the local presence of employers' associations, which measures the mobilization capacity of the Right, as well as on other indicators of the local presence of left-wing trade unions. We discuss the details of our variables below.[15]

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[12] Replication materials can be found at Aguilar et al. (2024).

[13] Religious violence was virtually non-existent in areas that fell under the control of the Francoist forces, as left-wing forces did not have any presence there.

[14] Asturias, Ávila, Cantabria, Balearic Islands, León, Madrid, Murcia, Navarra, and all provinces in Andalusia, the Basque Country, Castilla-La Mancha, Catalonia, Extremadura, and the Valencian Community.

[15] We show summary statistics in Appendix C.

Data and variables

Anticlerical violence

We code our dependent variable on anticlerical violence from Montero Moreno (1961). This source, compiled by a Spanish priest and part-time historian, includes personal information on each individual cleric victimized during the Civil War, along with information on where they lived, where they were killed, and the date of the killing. This is the most complete source on anticlerical violence during the Spanish Civil War, registering more than 6,000 killings. We aggregate this data at the local level by the municipality each cleric lived in.[16] After removing duplicate cases and deaths that did not take place during the Civil War, our data registers 6,028 killings. We show the geographical distribution of anticlerical violence in our sample in Figure 1.
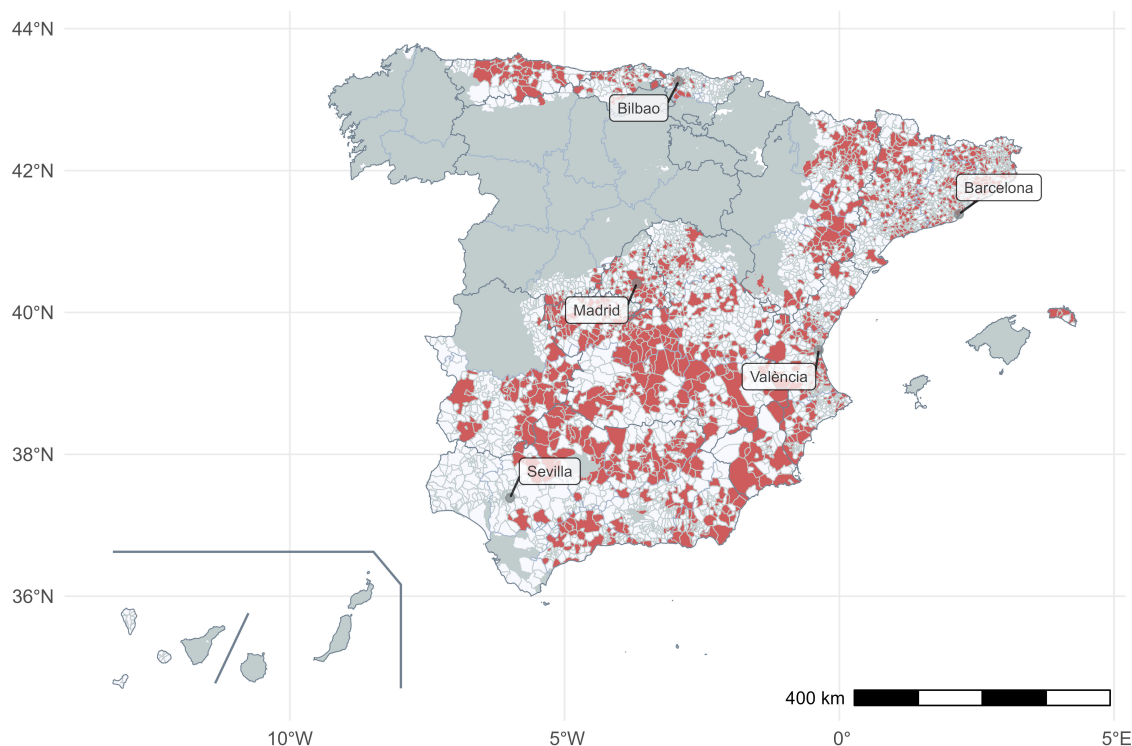
Figure 1: Geographical distribution of anticlerical violence, in red. Gray areas mark territory controlled by the Nationalist forces at the outset of the war.

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[16] We use each cleric's place of residence because it better reflects their mobilization capacity compared to where they were killed. This is because their residence represents where they had invested the majority of their time and engaged in their primary prewar activities and networks. We also show in Appendix E results using an alternative coding based on place of death.

By far most of the killings took place during the first few months of the war: 70 per cent of all fatalities occurred between July 17 and September 30, 1936. Figure 2 shows the temporal distribution of killings, both over the whole conflict and during the first few months.

(a) Monthly violence during the whole war

(b) Weekly violence during 1936
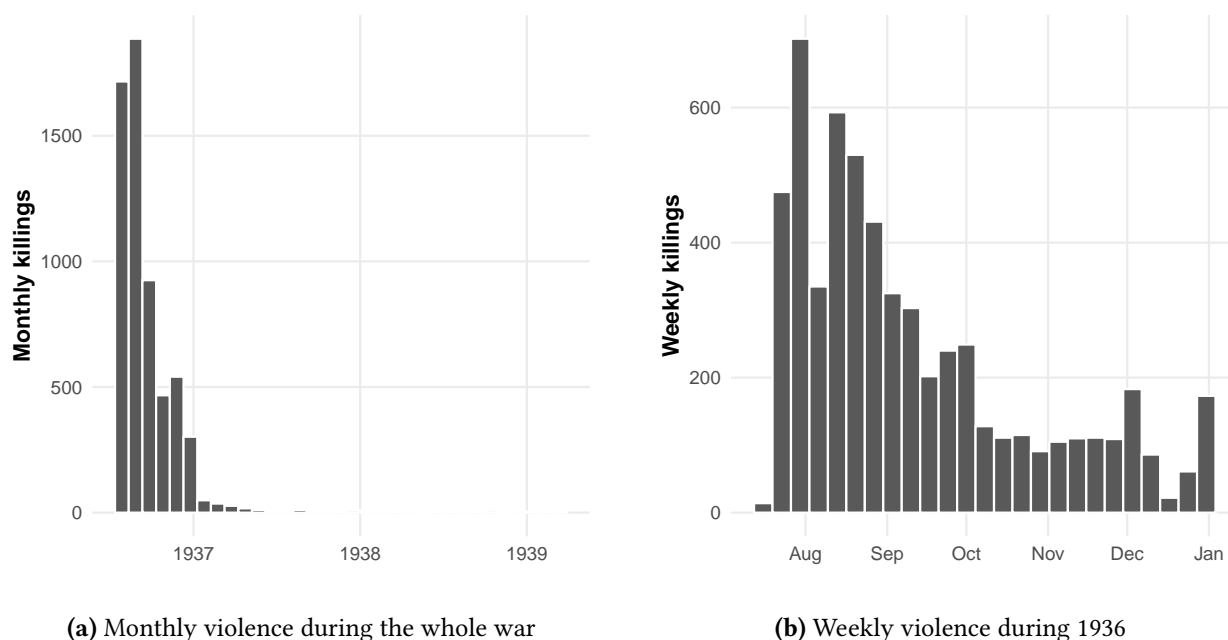
Figure 2: Anticlerical violence over time.

In the Appendix, we also include results differentiating by clergy type. Namely, we distinguish between secular and regular clergy (Appendix D)[17] and show results limiting our dependent variable to the killing of nuns, or female clerics (Appendix I). Interestingly, although nuns made up around 60% of all clerics in Spain in the 1930s, they were much less victimized: less than 5% of the victims were women. This gap is explained by the strategic nature of violence. Nuns could be targeted out of hatred and for ideological reasons, but they were rarely seen as threatening local elites with their capacity to mobilize local support. This idea is coherent with our argument and would explain the low levels of lethal violence against nuns if compared with male clerics.

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[17] In the Catholic church, regular clerics are those who follow a Monastic rule and often form part of religious orders. Secular clerics are priests linked to a diocese. As we explain in Appendix D, existing explanations of anticlerical violence in Spain highlight this difference because regular clerics, or monks, were the main object of social criticism. We do not find significant differences in our key variables measuring rightist mobilization capacity, but we do find some differences with regards to the effect of the anarchist union CNT, coherent with previous research.

Mobilization capacity

As said, our argument is that clerics were more likely to be targeted when they had more capacity to mobilize local rightist support, as this made them potentially more threatening to Republican forces. Unfortunately, to the best of our knowledge, it seems there is no data, at the municipal level for all Spain, to directly measure this capacity (such as membership in lay Catholic associations -AC or ACNP-, membership in relevant Catholic parties such as CEDA, nor subscriptions to *El Debate* newspaper. In order to proxy for this capacity, we look at the existence of employers' organizations at the local level. These, particularly if belonging to the agrarian sector, were key institutions that indicated the presence of a strong and organized local Right, intimately connected with the clergy and with Catholic associations. The National Catholic-Agrarian Confederation (CNCA), for instance, was the main employers' agrarian association, even before the arrival of the Republic. This association undertook a great "propagandistic effort" to create, together with other sociopolitical forces, a mass movement able to "unite under the same doctrine the interests of small and big land owners" by emphasizing the defense of religion, property, order, and family (Cabrera, 1983, 65). Its mobilization capacity was demonstrated when the Right gained power in 1933. Subsequently, in 1934, the Spanish Catholic Employers' Association (*Asociación Patronal Católica de España*, APCE) was formed. This association supported the "formation of a employers' conscience in accordance with the doctrines of the Church" (Gil Pecharromán, 2002, 195).

In areas where conservative networks and religious associations were more integrated and better organized, local clerics could more effectively act as both triggers of counter-mobilization and links between rightist elites and local civilians.[18] Their role as advisors (*consiliarios*) on the board of directors of many Catholic associations—most importantly the CNCA, which immediately supported the rebels in the Civil War (Montero, 1977, 557)—should not be underestimated. We therefore assume that left-wing forces were more likely to kill the clerics in areas where the

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[18] The collusion of interests was obvious: e.g.: the main Catholic mass media, *El Debate*, "was the best forum of expression for employers' associations" (Montero, 1977).

latter could activate a stronger conservative network that could jeopardize local leftist control. Killing the clergy was a way of leaving many critical associations partially leaderless.

We measure the presence of employers' associations from the 1933 Social Electoral Census (*Censo Electoral Social*), a document collected and published at the time by the Ministry of Labor, which lists all employers' associations by industrial sector, showing in which municipality they are based, as well as their number of members (Ministerio de Trabajo, 1933). Using this source, we create a binary indicator on whether there was an employers' association in a given municipality.In Appendix A, we show sample pages from the original archives. In Appendix F, we include results using two alternative versions of this variable: the logged number of members in all local employers' associations, and the logged number of members per 1,000 inhabitants.

Left-wing armed groups

Left-wing militias were a key factor in the organization of violence during the first few months of the war. To measure the presence of these armed groups, we code the existence of left-wing unions—the anarchist CNT and the socialist UGT—before the war, which formed the backbone of these militias. We retrieve this data for CNT by combining information on local chapters existing in the 1930s from Calero (2009) and Cuco-Giner (1970). Regarding the UGT, we use the organization's internal documents listing all local chapters (UGT, 1931).[19] We create two binary indicators of the presence of each of these two organizations.[20]

Control variables

We include a number of control variables that are likely to affect both patterns of violence at the local level and socioeconomic dynamics.

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[19] We relied on the organization's own Social Electoral Census and its monthly bulletins, covering issues 34 to 49 (UGT, 1931-1933). In Appendix F, we show results using continuous versions of these two variables.

[20] In Appendix H we show results controlling for competition between employers' associations and trade unions. Note, however, that our theory does not rule out that some of the reasons why militias were more likely to kill clerics in areas with the presence of employers' associations were due to organizational competition. Killing clerics was a way to avoid mobilization and thus be able to secure local control.

First, using data from the 1930 census, we control for local population and the local share of illiterate population. Anticlerical violence should be related to population levels and socioeconomic development, as the clergy were often concentrated in economic centers close to wealthy clienteles (Callahan, 2000). Del Rey (2019) has in fact shown that anticlericalism in Ciudad Real was particularly violent in urban centers.

Second, we control for prewar political preferences, as local political affinities should be related to both anticlerical violence and our key independent variables. We include the share of leftist support in the February 1936 elections.[21] In order to collect this variable, we carried out an exhaustive digital retrieval process, consolidating various historical archives such as the Official Provincial Gazettes, regional newspapers and the Spanish Congress Archive. These sources provide access to official voting records at the local level, complemented with data extracted from previous research (Balcells, 2010; Villamil, 2021). Following our theoretical argument, we should expect a negative effect of this variable on anticlerical violence: violence should be greater in more rightist municipalities where clerics had more potential supporters to mobilize.

Third, we consider the total duration of Republican control in each municipality, restricting the sample to those municipalities that remained under Republican control at least one day, to capture the spatial and temporal dynamics of the conflict. Our method to obtain this variable involved integrating the Francoist and Republican war reports of the time (Servicio Histórico Militar, 1977) with historical references, such as the political map of the Spanish Civil War (Moltó, 1938) and works from Martínez Bande (1980, 1988).

Finally, we also control for the baseline number of clerics in each municipality. Using historical archives (IGCE, 1900; Pérez Belloso, 1904), we include a logged measure of the number of clerics around 1900.[22]

All models include province fixed effects to control for potential regional dynamics and the fact that some of the variables come from different sources depending on the region.

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[21] In Appendix H we show results controlling for electoral competition between leftist and rightist parties instead.
[22] We add the number of regular clerics (monks and nuns) in 1900 and the number of secular clerics (priests) in 1904. To the best of our knowledge, these are the only available sources with local-level information during the first half of the 20th Century and prior to the war.

Complementary analyses

We also carry out a series of additional analyses to test further implications of the argument and increase the validity of the results. In particular, 1) we compare the effect of employers' associations depending on industry type, 2) we probe how the effect of employers' associations varied over time, and 3) we test whether our argument can explain violence against other local leaders but not against civilians without positions of local leadership.

Agrarian and non-agrarian employers' associations

We explain above that the Church was particularly effective mobilizing support in the countryside, where clerics, in collusion with conservative local elites—that also resisted the agrarian and labor reforms—, took an active role rooting out left-wing labor activity and in the creation of Catholic unions to compete with class unions. We should thus observe stronger results when using agrarian sector employers' associations as an indicator of the mobilization capacity of the clergy. It was in these rural areas where organized rightist networks made local clerics particularly threatening as triggers of mobilization. To test this expectation, we exploit the fact that the original source on employers' associations lists the industry type for each association. We classify them as agrarian or non-agrarian,[23] and repeat the main model for each of this these two alternative variables.

Time-varying effects

According to out argument, in conventional wars, violence as a result of leaders' mobilization capacity should be more prevalent during the early weeks of the war and decrease afterwards, when territorial control is firmly established or when local threats are observed to be unimportant. In order to explore this, we disaggregate the original dataset and build a municipality-week dataset covering all weeks from the start of the war, until December 31, 1936. We include a vari-

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[23] We code as agrarian those associations listed as 'agricultural and forestry industries', and the rest as non-agrarian, which include categories such as 'retail', 'construction industry', and 'banking, insurance and bureaus'.

able that indicates how many weeks have passed since the start of the war, and limit this sample to municipalities that were at least one week under Republican control. We drop municipalities from the sample once they fall under Nationalist control. We run the same models as in the main analyses but interacting the organizational variables with the number of weeks that passed since the start of the war.

Clerics as local leaders

Violence against clerics should be different from general violence against civilians. Although we focus on the clergy, as said, our argument should also applies to other local leaders that can also mobilize locally. However, data on Republican (or Francoist) violence is generally aggregated at the local level and does not provide individual-level information, which makes it difficult to test these two implications.

To overcome this limitation, we exploit an original source of Republican violence in Catalonia that includes information about the occupation of each individual killed. We have re-digitized the original source on rearguard violence in Catalonia by Solé i Sabaté & Villarroya (1989), that has also been used to build datasets on Republican violence used in previous studies (Balcells, 2010). This source includes, among other things, information on the occupation of each of the more than 8,000 individual victims.

We split the victims in four groups by occupation. First, we identify all civilians that can be considered as local leaders. We select occupations that put civilians in a position of being particularly capable of mobilizing support at the local level, either because of their local influence or because of their political or economic power. In the context of Catalonia in the 1930s, and considering we mostly deal with small, rural municipalities, these local leaders were predominantly landowners, industrial employers, lawyers, or doctors.[24] We code a total of 1,080 local leaders, or 13% of all the victims. Second, we identify all victims who belonged to the clergy, which amounts

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[24] We show the full list in Appendix B.

to 1,998 victims, or 24% of the victims.[25] Third, we identify all members of the security forces (mostly from the army and the police) and we exclude them from the sample (425, or 5.1%). The remaining victims include all civilians that do not belong to the clergy and cannot be considered local leaders (4,818, or 57.9% of the victims).

We run three separate models for each of the three relevant categories of civilian killings: clergy, other local leaders, and the rest. We use Ordinary Least Squares (OLS) models on the logged number of killings and include the same control variables plus a measure of the total (logged) number of civilians killed in each municipality, in order to probe the effect of the independent variables on relative targeting patterns in each municipality, independent of the absolute number of killings. We expect that the presence of employers' associations should be positively correlated with the killing of both local leaders and clerics, but not with the killing of other civilians.

We include an additional test of this implication in Appendix L, where we run models on all Republican violence to test whether the killing of clerics responds to different dynamics than general violence against civilians. Focusing on provinces where we have available data, we get an imperfect measure of non-clergy victims by subtracting the number of clerics killed to the total number of Republican killings and use this as alternative dependent variable.

5 Results

Table 1 shows the results for the main models. The first column shows the base models with all variables included in linear form. In the second and third columns, we include an interaction between the employers' association variable and each of the trade unions, to test the combined effect of incentives and the presence of local armed groups.

The results show initial support for our argument. The presence of employers' associations is positively correlated with levels of anticlerical violence. Interestingly, in the base linear model

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[25] For comparison, in our dataset for the whole of Spain, which codes anticlerical violence from the original source of Montero Moreno (1961), there are 2,126 clerics killed in Catalonia.

**Table 1:** Linear models on anticlerical violence (logged)

	(1)	(2)	(3)
Employers' association	0.266***	0.130*	0.099
	(0.057)	(0.056)	(0.091)
CNT union	0.066	-0.036	0.066
	(0.044)	(0.050)	(0.044)
UGT union	0.032	0.029	0.008
	(0.025)	(0.024)	(0.023)
Employer × CNT union		0.399**	
		(0.132)	
Employer × UGT union			0.272*
			(0.113)
Population (log)	0.122***	0.124***	0.122***
	(0.015)	(0.016)	(0.015)
Leftist support 1936	-0.108**	-0.112**	-0.108**
	(0.039)	(0.039)	(0.040)
Days of Republican control (log)	0.070***	0.070***	0.069***
	(0.019)	(0.020)	(0.020)
Illiteracy 1930	-0.422***	-0.409***	-0.408***
	(0.089)	(0.088)	(0.090)
Number of clerics (log)	0.258***	0.255***	0.256***
	(0.029)	(0.029)	(0.028)
n	3948	3948	3948
R^2	0.44	0.44	0.44
Adj. R^2	0.43	0.44	0.43
Province FE	Yes	Yes	Yes

Note: + $p < 0.1$, * $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$, *** $p < 0.001$. Province FE not shown, clustered SE (province). Only municipalities that were at least one day under Republican control.

there are no robust effects of the trade unions, which suggests that the presence of armed groups alone does not explain violence against the clergy in particular. Regarding the control variables, they all show effects in the expected direction. Violence against clerics was greater in municipalities that had a larger population, had voted for rightist candidates in the last elections, were under Republican control for longer, were more economically developed, and in those with more clerics during the early 1900s.

Regarding the interactive effects, we expect that the presence of both employers' associations and leftist unions reinforce each other. Also, the effects of each organizations' variable should be weaker when the other organization is not present. In other words, even if lefitst militias are present, there are no incentives to kill clerics who do not pose a real threat. Similarly, even if local clerics are threatening, there will not be violence when no armed actors are present. This is so even when, as in this last case, there is also the possibility that armed groups travel from other areas or that other groups independent from left-wing unions employ violence.

The results from columns 2 and 3 also support these expectations, which are more clearly shown in Figure 3. Anticlerical violence is considerably higher when there is the presence of both employers' associations and any of the trade unions. This seems particularly true for the anarchist CNT, which is coherent with previous historiography that links the anarchist union to anticlerical violence (e.g. Ledesma, 2012). However, trade unions alone are not linked to higher rates of violence against clerics. The presence of armed actors without the incentives to kill local leaders does not lead to violence.
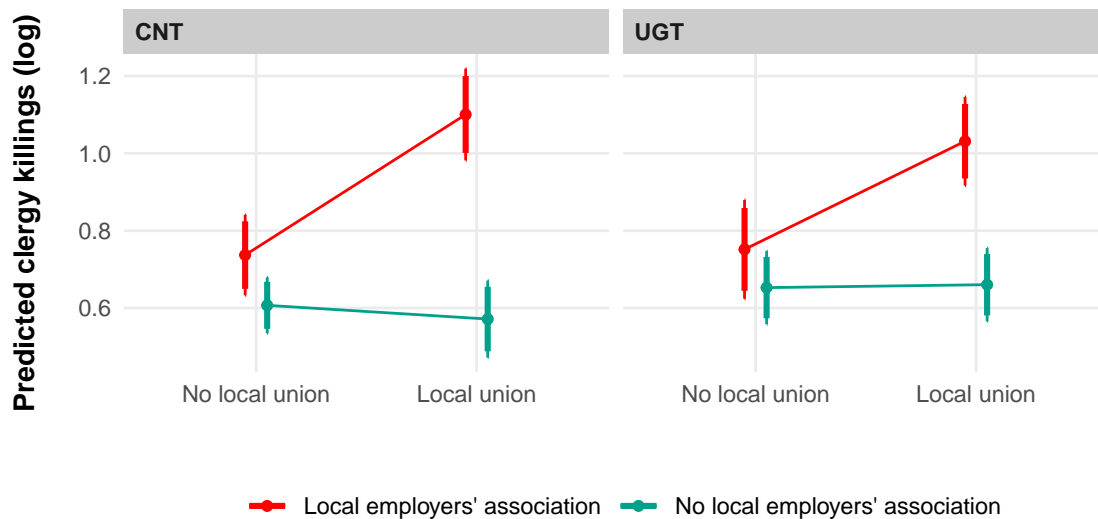
Figure 3: Combined effect of employers' associations and trade unions on anticlerical violence.

One additional concern with these results is that they could be the product of historical anticlerical traditions at the local level, which could also have produced mobilization on the right.

To account for this, we include analyses in Appendix M where we test the robustness of the main variables, including of different measures of prior anticlericalism, using three sources from both the 19th and 20th centuries. Our main results do not change. In addition, we also show in Appendix G that the results do not change significantly when limiting the sample to small municipalities.

Agrarian employers' associations

One of our assumptions is that the presence of employers' associations is a valid indicator of clerics' mobilization capacity, as it is linked to local strong rightist and Catholic networks that the clergy could rely on and activate. We explained above that this was particularly true in rural areas, where the Church had been very successful in establishing institutions of local influence in collusion with conservative elites. One implication of this assumption is that the link between employers' associations and anticlerical violence should be stronger in the case of agrarian associations, as left-wing armed groups would identify these areas as being particularly threatening should a cleric use his capacity to mobilize the local population against Republican forces.

To test this, we run the base model, but using an indicator that includes only agrarian employers' associations or only non-agrarian organizations. Figure 4 shows the coefficient estimate in these models, compared to the base model from Table 1 above.[26]

Coherent with our argument, it shows that the effect is predominantly driven by agrarian employers' associations, whose particularities, vis a vis other associations, have been established in the literature (Cabrera, 1983). When limiting the variable to non-agrarian associations, the effect decreases substantially, although it still remains significant.

The effect of mobilization capacity over time

Our argument about how mobilization capacity drives violence against local leaders is a dynamic one. The incentives to use pre-emptive violence to avoid the mobilization of the opposition will

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[26] We show the full results in Appendix J.
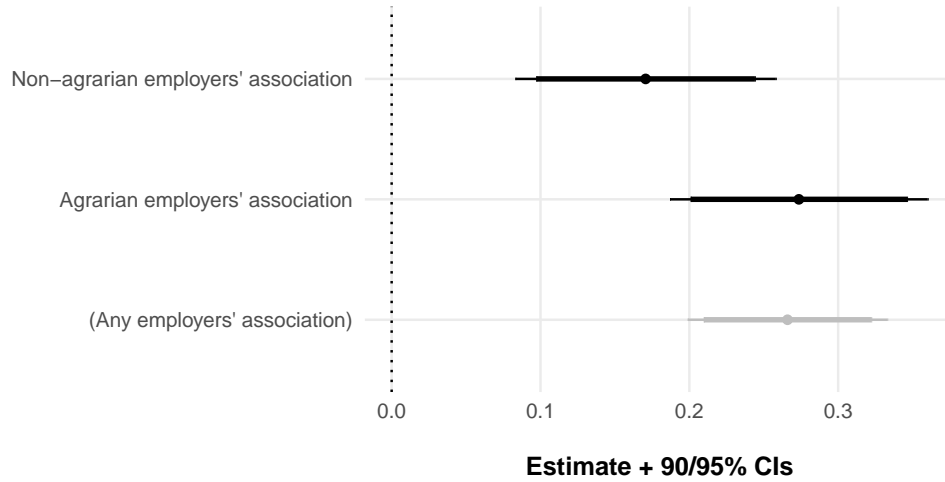
Figure 4: Effect of employers' associations depending on industry type.

be stronger when territorial control is not yet fully consolidated. If the link between the presence of employers' association and anticlerical violence is due to the clerics' capacity to mobilize local rightist support, their effect should be stronger when armed actors are in the process of establishing local control or when there is a military threat to that control.

We test this expectation using municipality-week data from the start of the war to the moment in which each municipality fell under Francoist control, or December 31, 1936, whichever happened first. Table 2 shows results for a base model controlling for the number of weeks into the war and models including an interaction term with each of the organizational variables. Figure 5 shows the main result from model 2, how the effect of the presence of employers' associations evolved over time.

The results support our expectations. The effect of employers' associations remains significant across all specifications and, at the start of the war, is larger than any of the other two organizations. It also decreases over time. In line with our argument, the presence of employers' associations is positively associated with anticlerical violence, but mainly at the start of the war, when leftist armed groups had more incentives to secure local control.

Table 2: Linear models on weekly anticlerical violence (logged), all clergy

	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)
(Intercept)	-0.128***	-0.136***	-0.135***	-0.136***
	(0.038)	(0.040)	(0.039)	(0.040)
Weeks since war start	-0.002***	-0.001***	-0.001***	-0.001***
	(0.000)	(0.000)	(0.000)	(0.000)
Employers' association	0.054***	0.143***	0.054***	0.053***
	(0.012)	(0.034)	(0.012)	(0.012)
CNT union	0.014	0.014	0.014	0.091***
	(0.012)	(0.011)	(0.011)	(0.019)
UGT union	0.005	0.005	0.026*	0.005
	(0.005)	(0.005)	(0.011)	(0.005)
Weeks × Employers' assoc		-0.007***		
		(0.002)		
Weeks × CNT union			-0.002**	
			(0.001)	
Weeks × UGT union				-0.006***
				(0.001)
n	84824	84824	84824	84824
R^2	0.11	0.12	0.11	0.12
Adj. R^2	0.11	0.12	0.11	0.12
Province FE	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes

Note: $+ p < 0.1$, $* p < 0.05$, $** p < 0.01$, $*** p < 0.001$. Municipality-week data, from July 17, 1936 to December 30, 1936. Control variables not shown: population 1930 (log), leftist share 1936, days of Republican control, illiteracy 1930, number of regular clerics (log), and number of secular priests (log). Province FE not shown. Only municipalities that were at least two weeks under Republican control.

Clerics as local leaders

A main concern about the previous analyses is that they might explain civilian victimization in general. To rule this out, we use disaggregated data from Catalonia that allows us to create three categories of civilian killings: clerics, other local leaders, and the remaining civilians. If our argument is correct, we should observe that the local presence of employers' associations is able to explain both violence against clerics and against other local leaders, but not against the remaining civilians.
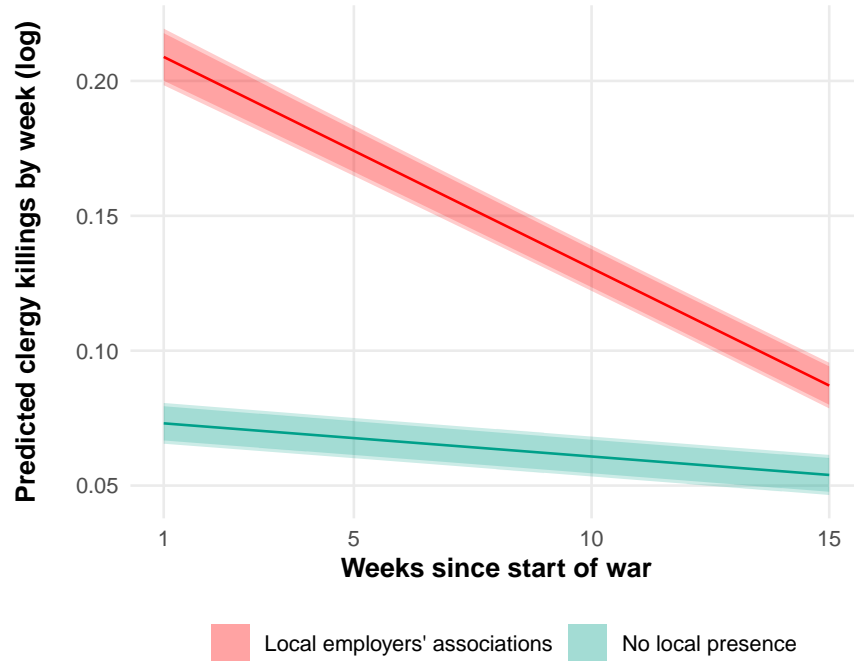
Figure 5: Anticlerical violence over time depending on local employers' associations.

In Figure 6 we show the coefficient for the local presence of employers' associations for each category of civilians.[27] The results suggest that the local mobilization capacity of the right is linked to the killing of both clerics and other local leaders, but it does not explain civilian victimization in general.

We also show additional analyses in Appendix L, where we compare the base results with a similar model where the outcome is the total number of Republican killings minus the number of killings of clerics, in those provinces where we have data on Republican violence. The results show that the local presence of employers' associations is positively correlated with anticlerical violence also in the reduced sample, but not with the number of Republican killings of all non-clerical civilians.

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[27] We show the full results in Appendix K.
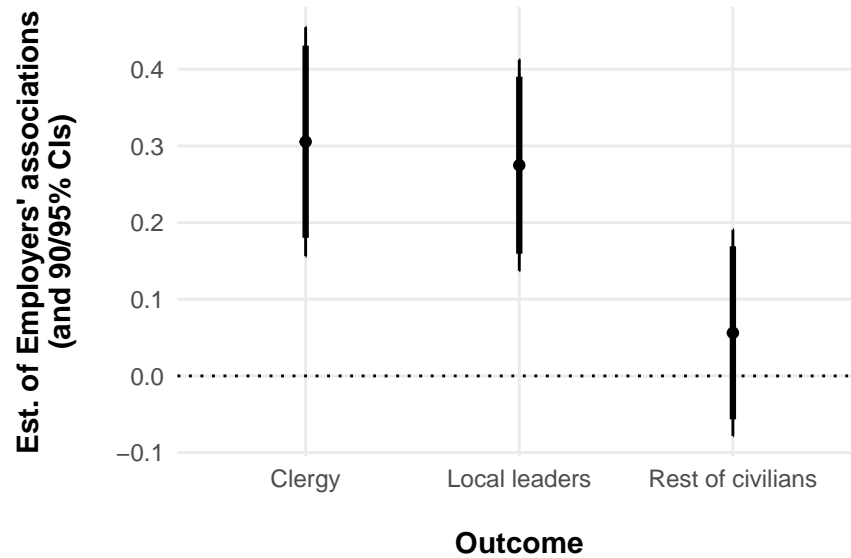
Figure 6: Effect of local presence of employers' associations on each type of civilian killings.

6 Conclusion

Previous research on civilian victimization has paid insufficient attention to the fact that not all civilians are equal and not all killings are carried out for the same strategic reasons. In this study, we draw attention to violence against local leaders, civilians who have the potential capacity to mobilize local support and/or organize collective resistance against armed groups. These types of civilians are present in virtually all conflicts and play a critical role in many.

Our argument is that the killing of local leaders hinges upon their mobilizing capacity. Armed groups kill them following a pre-emptive logic, where violence, rather than a coercive instrument to deter defection, is a means to decapitate collective action efforts. Therefore, local leaders are more likely to be killed when they present a more serious potential threat to local armed actors.

We focus on violence against clerics during the Spanish Civil War. In Spain, the Church had long exercised clear opposition to liberal politics and demonstrated its competitive proselytizing capacity. The successful collusion of interests between conservative forces, economic interests, and the Church had been abundantly demonstrated before the war. During the conflict, local clerics were thus seen as having the capacity to act as political entrepreneurs at the local level,

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which could be of critical importance to leftist armed groups trying to secure territorial control and avoid local resistance. In the Republican rearguard, anticlerical violence was greater in areas where clerics could threaten armed groups' control. Perpetrators targeted the clergy to prevent them from organizing resistance against their rule; had they not done so, such mobilization would likely have occurred.

Using an original dataset collected from both primary and secondary sources, we show results coherent with our argument. Anticlerical violence was more abundant in municipalities where the Right was organizationally stronger and thus the potential threat of local clerics rallying support for the Nationalist side and activating collective action was higher. While previous explanations have focused on deep-seated hatred against the Church and the presence of leftist militias, we show that the former is not enough to account for violence and the latter is only correlated with anticlerical violence where there were strategic incentives based on clerics' mobilization capacity. Since there is no direct data at the municipal level regarding the mobilization capacity of the clergy, we have relied on the number of local entrepreneurial associations for reasons explained above in detail. Although this is an indirect proxy, it has probed its capacity to explain violence against the clergy in various model specifications and in comparison to alternative explanations. Future analyses should test the validity of this proxy in different scenarios.

This study highlights the importance of unpacking the category of civilians, both conceptually and empirically. The information-based logic that permeates many explanations of civilian victimization is unlikely to explain violence in general. As previous research on civilian agency during conflict shows, some civilians play critical roles during wartime. This capacity determines patterns of violence against them. Although still restricted to the Spanish conflict, we have provided some preliminary evidence showing that our argument can be applied to a broader category of local leaders (it is not only the clergy).

Regarding scope conditions, our argument fits well into the context of conventional civil wars, though the logic should work in all civil wars at a sufficiently high level of abstraction. In conventional civil wars, territorial control switches rapidly, generating clear battlefronts and segmented

territorial control. In the early moments of a conflict, the parties seek to clear the areas under their control, eliminating potential enemies. In irregular wars, by contrast, consolidation of territorial control usually takes longer and civilians may have greater incentives to defect individually. Our study also speaks to the need to take this into account when explaining patterns of civilian victimization.

Finally, our argument also helps put the Spanish case in context. Generally speaking, anticlerical violence during the Spanish Civil War was much higher and more prevalent than in other conflicts. In the 1930s the Spanish church played a significant role in shaping political and social influence at the local level. When the war started, the clerics were an obvious target to prevent the formation of resistance against the Republican authorities and militias.

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