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Conflict and Non-Conflict

Studies of nationalism and ethnicity in the former communist space in Eastern Europe concur that either there were about "100" or "120" national and ethnic minorities in the USSR alone, and dozens of others in the Balkans and in Central Europe. The high figure corresponds to an approximation for the upper end of the number of linguistic groups, but for most scholars that equated to national and ethnic categories. A number of puzzles arise from the attempt to quantify identities in this way. Do we take communist-era census and other academically constructed categories of the communist period at face value?

Ethnolinguistic fractionalization indices were founded on major contributions from communist scholarship. In talking about minorities, do we assume the conjuncture of national, ethnic and linguistic identities in a salient political identity? If we do accept these figures, or even substantially lower ones, we are left with the puzzle of why so few of these identities turned antagonistic and developed into violent conflicts at the time of state crisis and collapse in the late 1980s and early 1990s. In Eastern Europe and Eurasia there were less than a dozen significant violent conflicts-- five in the former Yugoslavia and six in the former Soviet Union. Furthermore, the violence in these conflicts was very uneven even when in close proximity. Compare say the conflicts in Slovenia and Bosnia, or Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan. The violent conflicts dominate the attention of policy-makers and academics. National and ethnic minorities that have not rebelled or engaged in civil war, generally receive far less attention than those that do. It seems to confirm the old adage that it is the squeaky wheel that gets the oil. What of the "non-conflicts"? There are conflicts that were expected and did not materialize – Crimea, the Baltic States, and the Volga Muslims, among others. There were many more places with national and ethnic minorities where majority-minority relations were managed peacefully and stably. Has our attention on the conflict cases blinded us to some valuable lessons about peaceful management elsewhere?

How do we understand the causes of conflict?

Violent conflicts in places where there are minorities are generally understood as being driven by the national and ethnic politics of separatism or secession. This frame of reference is informed by several decades of policy practice and academic scholarship surrounding the concepts of nationalism and ethnicity, and their political impact. Theories of nationalism concur that nationalism is a political idea that is historically determined and structured over the *longue durée*, whether by modernity and industrial

order, the power of the state, or beliefs about ethnicity and culture. The question of why nationalism becomes a more persuasive frame of political consciousness and reference at certain historical moments and not others is not well accounted for by the theories. Nationalist political mobilisations are generally held to be epiphenomena that if not quite extraneous to the logic of the metatheories, are considered to be much less important than structural determinants. When one of the leading scholars of nationalism, Ernest Gellner, synthesised his ideas about nationalism he employed literary, botanical and other metaphors to dismiss the primordialist idea that nationalism could be an “old, latent, dormant force” rooted in the “ancient hatreds” of an ethnic pre-history and exhibiting permanent “conflict-potential”. Nationalism, according to Gellner, was the political “crystallisation of units” that were suitable for the conditions of modern industrial society. Most potential nationalisms, he argued, were “determined slumberers” who refused to be awakened, indeed, they went “meekly to their doom” in the dustheap of history through assimilation (Gellner, 1983: pp. 47-9). In a famous statement, lifted from Sherlock Holmes (but which is actually a reversal of Holmes’s deductive thinking), he asserted that most nationalisms do not project themselves violently: “Nevertheless, the clue to the understanding of nationalism is its weakness at least as much as its strength. It was the dog who failed to bark who provided the vital clue for Sherlock Holmes. The numbers of potential nationalisms which failed to bark is far, far larger than those which did, though they have captured all our attention” (Gellner, 1983: p. 43). Gellner showed little interest in explaining this problem. Nor was he much concerned with explaining the dynamics of national and ethnic conflict, other than to attribute it partly to the agency of “nationalist awakeners” and “human carriers”, or to the lack of harmony between political boundaries and high cultures (Gellner, 1983, pp. 48, 51).

We are left with a considerable puzzle in theories of nationalism as to why there might be a sudden transformation of slumberers. What makes sleeping dogs rise and bark? Ted Gurr tried to explain “Why Men Rebel?” through matching core premises of sociology and psychology – relative deprivation, the perception of unfulfilled expectations, and the linkage between frustration and aggression and the organisation of violence (Gurr, 1970). These notions, subsumed within the broad category of “grievances”, have informed much of the scholarship on violent conflict since and in particular since the fall of communism. However, history shows that actual relative deprivation and the perception of it can persist for long periods, decades even, before there is violent upheaval. This is also not a satisfactory explanation for why nationalist, ethnic or other groups rebel when they do. Alternative perspectives on national and ethnic conflict have come from scholars who formerly worked in the field of US-Soviet strategic studies (Posen, Snyder, Evangelista and others). Looking beyond the classic studies of nationalism and ethnicity to explain variance they have extracted from game theoretical approaches to International Relations key concepts such as escalation, anarchic “security dilemmas”, worst case

scenarios, advantages of offense superiority, opportunities, preventive wars and so forth and applied these to explaining the domestic mobilizational power of nationalism and ethnicity (Posen, 1993). Studies of nationalism and ethnicity have by now settled into a kind of academic trench warfare over the relative explanatory power of history, culture, interests, and emotions.

Might some violent conflicts be better analyzed by examining their dynamics, where the ugly head (as Gellner would put it) of one nationalism evokes or provokes another through a sequence of action and reaction, and where violence may become part of the dynamic of this relationship. Linkages of this kind require us to focus on the micro foundations for a nationalist mobilization and micro means of managing minorities. A closer attention to the interaction of agency, structure and contingency is required to give us a better purchase on an explanation for why the nationalist or ethnic “moment” occurs when it does, and how this powerful transformative political force is managed. For nationalist and ethnic “moments” such as those of the late 1980s- early 1990s contributing to the fall of communism are nearly always interacting with crises of the state. Beissinger has employed a tidal metaphor to demonstrate persuasively that the state crisis that enveloped the Soviet leadership of this period had an unstoppable momentum of spillover, demonstration and learning effects. Communist liberalization, the end of the “Brezhnev Doctrine”, perceptions about falling behind the West, the zeitgeist of nation –state reconstitution, the drive for democracy and the “return to Europe”, were cumulative impulses to state crisis out of which came nationalist mobilization. A different perspective on state institutional crisis is provided by Brubaker and Bunce who have argued that the communist arrangements for managing minorities - “institutionalized multinationality” and a variable geometry of power in forms of asymmetric federalism - were themselves destabilizing or “subversive” (Brubaker, 1996; Bunce, 2000). The idea here being that institutionalising national and ethnic differences in the state structure provided resources for anti-state mobilisation. However, these explanations cannot account for why communist multinational federations disintegrated when they did in the 1980s and not earlier. These federal arrangements, after all, persisted for decades without being destabilising. Other explanations for why communist systems for managing nationalism and ethnic identity collapsed, and why only some cases turned violent, have focused on changes of institutional status and power during and after the collapse of the USSR (Hughes & Sasse, 2001; Zürcher and Koehler, 2003). These accounts hold that it was the attempts by newly hegemonic “titular” post-communist nations to “deinstitutionalize” the Soviet legacy of autonomy status for national and ethnic minorities, often through violence, that provoked a chain reaction of violent conflict.

Post-Soviet conflicts must also be understood within changing Western frames for analysing violent conflict. During the Cold War violent national and ethnic conflicts were nearly always framed within an East-West ideological meta-conflict. In the post Cold War era, in the 1990s, that meta-conflict frame lost

its analytical purchase, however, many such conflicts remained, and indeed new ones emerged in the post-communist space. An influential new paradigm that came out of the post Cold War context was the criminalization of national and ethnic warfare. Most obviously, this frame is associated with Kaldor's work on "new and old wars", and Collier and Hoeffler's economic studies (Kaldor, 1999; Collier and Hoeffler, 1998 and 2004). For Collier and Hoeffler the study of conflict is essentially de-ideologised to economic motives, and a law enforcement issue akin to extortion and "murder detection". Charles King is, perhaps, the most trenchant critic of post-Soviet conflicts through the criminalizing lens. The critique is that violent post-communist conflicts are driven by elite conflicts, power grabs, and money-grubbing materialist factors, or just, as King puts it, "plain old thuggery" (King, 2001). The thesis is that "ethnic war" is "a condition in which essentially a mass of mild, ordinary people can unwillingly...come under the vicious and arbitrary control of small groups of armed thugs" (Mueller, 2000). The inherent problem with this critique is not only that it demonizes some elites and reifies society but that it rests on a very shallow evidential base. Asserting criminal intention to leaderships of national and ethnic movements is one thing, proving or even plausibly demonstrating such intent, let alone behavior or activity is another thing altogether. A further complication is distinguishing resource accumulation for sustaining war, from private profit. Furthermore, the logic in such explanations is to demonize whole peoples, for how else would they account for the immense popular support that is given to parties that arose from the most active participants in post-communist conflicts, notably in Bosnia, from where Kaldor's "new war" thesis was born...

Aristotle saw the study of politics as the master science because politics affected all, but its hegemony rested on terminological precision. Social scientists, however, rarely define the terms "ethnic identity" or "ethnic conflict" before using them. Snyder uses "national" and "ethnic" as synonyms. Horowitz encapsulates a mainstream view of the issue when he observes that ethnicity is a concept, like 'culture', that is not easily fixed into an independent variable, precisely because it is mutable over time and context. The main ascriptive markers are language, race, and religion, but it may also include 'tribes' 'nationalities,' and 'castes' (Horowitz 1985: 53). Indeed the post-Cold War revival of neo-imperialism has seen a rehabilitation of imperialist and premodern anthropological terms in explaining violent conflict – such as "warlords", "gangs", "thugs", "tribes", "elders", etc. Most scholarship accepts that ethnicity is an ascriptive label but there is no agreement on what the content is, how it differs from "national" or even linguistic/cultural identity, and there is disagreement as to just how mutable "ethnicity" is in practice – some markers are obviously more easily dissoluble than others.

Ethnicity, like nationalism, is understood as a mobilizing platform in political power games whether to address grievances, or capture and distribute political and economic resources. Ethnosymbolists of the

Smyth School stress the symbolic content and use of ethnic and cultural identity and how it invests magical content into the formation of a political community and nation-state building through the construction of political narratives and rituals. Such politics cannot be resolved by rational appeals alone, but requires “symbolic” concessions to particular manifestations of national and ethnic identities. From this perspective Kaufman's work on post-communist conflicts has elaborated the instrumental use of ethnic and national identity in the political realm to fuel violence. He views three factors as being preeminently important. First, in each conflict political leaders used a preexisting reservoir of hostile myths (“hate narratives”) about rival ethnic populations to mobilize the public along ethnic and cultural lines. Second, each conflict was characterised by fears of one or more ethnic groups about their respective demographic position, and the perceived threat of being “swamped” and over-powered by other groups. Third, each conflict exhibited an escalating spiral effect of mobilization and counter-mobilization - akin to the security dilemma of the madness of the Arms Race noted earlier (Kaufman, 2001). However, we are still left with the puzzle as to why these factors caused a violent spiral to conflict in some cases and not others. National, and especially ethnic, identity may be too unrefined and imprecise to provide the causal explanation that Kaufman and others seek in these concepts. It is not surprising that some security studies scholars have become more defensive of their use of the term “ethnic”, arguing that “ethnic conflict refers to the appearance the conflict takes, not to its causes. To say that ethnic conflict arises because there are distinct ethnic groups is, at best, tautological” (Carment, James and Taydas, 2009).

In sum, we have a set of implicit conundrums at the heart of our understanding of the management of national and ethnic minority relations. Theory is unsatisfactory in distinguishing key makers such as “national” and “ethnic”. Theory is also unsatisfactory in explaining why such majority-minority relations turn violent, and why they turn violent when they do. I will now turn to two dimensions of the puzzle that are much neglected in the scholarship on causality, and in essence here we are dealing with the incentivization of elites and groups to engage in violence.

First, why do the conflicts occur when they do, and why are the conflicts so much more intense and bitterly fought in some places compared with others. The impact of the conflict spiral, the dynamics of a conflict and how it is fought, are much neglected areas of research, in particular with regards to how these elements may structure and transform the conflict itself. Do violent dynamics give potential conflicts a national and ethnic or other form? Some studies suggest that national and ethnic identity is strengthened as a result of violent dynamics – much of the work on the civil wars in Former Yugoslavia would confirm this thesis, though with differing emphasis on the relevant “causative” factors in reshaping identity. Petersen suggests “resentment” at perceived injustices (a reworking of the relative deprivation thesis) offers the best explanation, over fears, hatreds, or rage (Petersen, 2002). Much of the turn towards the

"micro-foundations" of violent conflicts over the last decade is focused on rationalising motivations, and is primarily interested in individuals rather than groups. Who joins?, who participates?, who kills? And why? These are questions informing one key trend in scholarship, and often involves field surveys in the aftermath of violent conflict, and sometimes long after the conflict. Perhaps it would not be stretching this idea too far to say that violent conflict creates suitable conditions for ethnogenesis, or at the very least rebirth. After all, national and ethnic identities are cognitive phenomena, and as such are shaped by individual and group experience. The nature of grievances may be legion, but it is the perception of threats, group solidarity, and the lived experience of hostile action in a violent conflict, that must foster cognitive developments in this regard. This is the arena sought by ethnic entrepreneurs, those elites who would seek to shape the management of political interests by making "ethnic" identity salient. If the context shifts from peace to conflict and individuals and groups are being targeted for violence, and experience it, because of perceptions about identity then this may explain why a reinforcing spiral of ethnogenesis occurs, and why ethnic entrepreneurs come to the fore.

In some recent conflicts the dynamics have caused the national and ethnic forms to be transcended, as in the jihadization of conflicts in the North Caucasus, notably in Chechnya. We can trace the development of a conflict such as that in Chechnya from nationalist separatism, to a more jihadist orientation. In part that may be reflecting changes in zeitgeist during the 1990s, given the rise of Al Qaeda, as well as the impact of factors such as international funding and the influx of foreign change-agents, but it may also be better explained as a particular reaction to the brutal violent dynamics and Russian framing of that conflict as a Huntingtonian 'civilizational' war (Hughes, 2007). It may also better explain the spread of violent conflict across other parts of the North Caucasus, which previously seemed resistant to nationalist war – even in Chechnya's "twin" republic of Ingushetia.

Secondly, there remains the fact that violence is the exception and peaceful management of relations between groups is the norm – though this might not always conform to the paradigm of a norm of "cooperation" as proposed by Fearon and Laitin (Fearon and Laitin 1996/2003). Non-violence in the management of interethnic relations is obviously not a synonym for cooperation. However, interethnic violence is a rarity globally, and that is also the case in the post-communist space. For every one thousand pairs of ethnic groups in a state, Fearon and Laitin found fewer than three incidents of violent conflict, and there has been no "rise" in this number due to the collapse of communism. Their explanations for the variation between cooperation and violence pivot on state capacity and geography (weak central governments, opportunities to rebel, favourable terrain). A problem with this explanation is that it does not account for variation within states. Why did Chechnya rebel, but not Ingushetia or Tatarstan? Why Kosovo but not Subotica? Why has there not been a violent rebellion in Crimea or Komárno or Narva?

Capacity for violence (in terms of military materiel), and geography, were certainly factors in these cases, but so also was agency and elite /society willingness to engage politically rather than turn to violence (Hughes, 2007). Sasse's study of Crimea, a place where conflict was widely expected, and which exhibited all the requisite national and ethnic factors, yet remained at peace, suggests that political processes that engaged the Crimean elites in Ukrainian politics were critical, rather than the superficial form of autonomy that was granted (Sasse, 2007). Large N studies reveal patterns but it is the case study at the micro-level that uncovers the dynamics that bring us closer to plausible understanding and accurate explanations. Case studies can help us to understand why in places with similar conditions violence occurs, when it does, but also why it does not occur.

Almost all case studies in the post-communist space are of cases that turn violent. The challenge is to focus more of our attention on the cases where violent conflict was/is expected but has not occurred. This is all the more important given that non-conflict is much more prevalent. For in so doing we should be able to better predict what makes for peaceful management of national and ethnic relations and what drives those relations to break down and violence. Therein lies the major puzzle of temporality in conflict studies. In the post-Soviet conflicts scholarship is concerned mostly with the factors that caused the conflicts in the early 1990s, how conflict dynamics changed over time, and whether windows for peacemaking have come and gone in the “frozen conflicts”. We are much less concerned with how conflict potential may be developing or being averted in some of the non-conflict cases. For example, there is no doubt that the process of expanding citizenship in Estonia and Latvia, accompanied by a Russophone political mobilization, has helped to divert conflict potential into peaceful politics in these cases. However, conflict potential remains as these are segregated and divided societies, where politics is structured along ethnic majority versus ethnic minority cleavages, and ethnic blocs are formed to keep minorities out of power. Experience suggests that such a configuration of politics, in the absence of power-sharing or repressive hegemonic control, is likely to lead to the accumulation of grievances, a rejection of democratic politics, and eventually to violent conflict. Scholarship should pay more attention to political leadership, the political skills and processes of anticipation, cooperation, bargaining, and compromise, institutionalised dialogue and power-sharing that stop conflict potential from developing – precisely the kind of work that the ECMI promotes.

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