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The state of the field and debates on ethnic cleansing[†]

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This review article outlines the progress that the literature on the causes of ethnic cleansing has made in the last 10–15 years. The article specifically focuses on two lines of research that have expanded our understanding of ethnic cleansing: (a) the studies that focus on the role of wars (this literature can in turn be divided into those works that treat "wars as strategic environments" and those that treat "wars as transformational forces"); (b) the studies that focus on the pre-war domestic or international conditions that hinder or promote ethnic cleansing. The last section of the article suggests several future avenues of research that could further refine the study of ethnic cleansing and its relationship to other types of mass violence.

Keywords: ethnic cleansing; mass violence; genocide; ethnic conflict; expulsion

Why do states target ethnic groups with mass deportations and killings? Why do certain groups rather than others become targets of this type of violence? What is the relationship between wars and ethnic cleansing campaigns? What, if any, are the institutional, societal, and political obstacles that can prevent ethnic cleansing from occurring? For a long time, the study of mass ethnic violence answered these questions by focusing on deep cultural differences, prejudice, and historical grievances between ethnic groups (Fein 1979; Staub 1990; Goldhagen 1996). Next arrived two types of approaches that diverged from this earlier one. One set of studies argued that ethnic cleansing is a natural extension of the homogenizing tendencies of modern states (Naimark 2001; Rae 2002).[1] Another set of studies combined factors such as security concerns and pressures of democratization with some form of pre-existing ethnic antagonism or rivalry as a background factor (Kaufman 2001; Mann 2005). These scholars attributed the origins of pre-existing ethnic antagonism or rivalry to specific historical conditions such as the existence of "old ethnic groups that compete over territory" or "myth-symbol complexes" that justify ethnic hostility (Kaufman 2001; Mann 2005, 5, 6).

[†]The term "ethnic cleansing" refers to deportations or killings conducted by a state, or a non-state actor that controls territory, that victimize a substantial segment of an ethnic group on the state's or non-state actor's territory (for more detail on this definition, see Bulutgil 2016). According to this definition, "genocide" is a subcategory of ethnic cleansing in which the victimization primarily takes the form of killings rather than deportations. I use the terms "ethnic cleansing" and "mass ethnic violence" interchangeably throughout the article.
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While valuable in their contributions, this second wave of literature left a number of critical questions unanswered. Why do some modern states with the goal and capacity to homogenize their populations engage in ethnic cleansing and others don't? What constitutes a "myth-symbol complex" that justifies ethnic hostility or "old" groups that compete over territory? How do we identify them when we see them? More importantly, how do we know when they do not exist? These questions remain crucial if we are to understand the roots of ethnic cleansing without just retrospectively identifying a proclivity for inter-ethnic hostility, or a tendency to relentlessly homogenize, in cases where we happen to observe this phenomenon.

The studies that followed these earlier waves tackle these questions from two broad perspectives. The first perspective refines and builds on the security-based arguments by specifically focusing on the role of wars and their impact on mass ethnic violence. In particular, these studies can be divided into two types.[2] One type includes studies that treat "wars as strategic environments" in which state leaders make decisions based on the ultimate aim of winning wars and attaining territorial goals (Valentino 2004; Straus 2006; Downes 2008). The other type treats "wars as transformational forces" with the potential to shape inter-group perceptions as well as the state leaders' understanding of what constitutes a security threat (Petersen 2002; Midlarsky 2005; Bulutgil 2016).

The second perspective outlines the ways in which the pre-war socio-political conditions at the domestic or international level might impact the likelihood of ethnic cleansing. The studies that focus on the domestic level conditions argue that factors such as socio-economic cleavages that divide ethnic groups or foundational narratives that get locked-in at the beginning of state formation periods can serve as barriers against ethnic cleansing (Straus 2012, 2015; Bulutgil 2016, 2017).[3] Theoretically, these studies make two main contributions. First, they demonstrate that aspects of the pre-war domestic socio-political environment other than interethnic hostility might contribute to or prevent ethnic cleansing. Second, they also show that interethnic hostility or rivalry often varies over time and across different contexts depending on these other socio-political factors.

In addition to these works, some studies also suggest that international norms on human rights and state legitimacy have a significant impact on the occurrence of ethnic cleansing campaigns. The argument starts by observing that in the early twentieth century a set of international norms that legitimized forced population exchange agreements as a means to preserve international peace began to emergence. These norms then contributed to ethnic cleansing campaigns by shaping the thinking of great power leaders who influenced the policies of smaller states (Ther 2014).[4] The studies that concentrate on this international dimension are potentially useful in understanding the macro-periodical and macro-regional variation in patterns of ethnic cleansing.

The rest of this article is divided into three sections. The first two sections are devoted to the two broad perspectives that I have outlined above. The last section concludes by identifying key research areas in the study of ethnic cleansing that require further attention.

Understanding the role of war

As discussed above, the studies that seek to understand the link between wars and ethnic cleansing can be divided between those that focus on strategic factors during wars and those that consider the ways in which wars transform interethnic relations as well as interpretations of what constitutes a security threat.

The studies that fall in the former category tend to start with the implicit or explicit assumption that states target an ethnic group if it interferes with the strategic goals of

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fulfilling territorial objectives and increasing the state's relative power in the international system (Valentino 2004; Valentino, Huth, and Balch-Lindsay 2004; Downes 2006, 2008; Mylonas 2013). Critical to this decision is the question of whether the leaders have sufficient resources (including time) to select out individual members or small sections of ethnic groups that could endanger their strategic goals. If they have the resources to go through the selection process, wholesale targeting of ethnic groups becomes unlikely; in cases in which they lack the resources, ethnic cleansing becomes a likely outcome.

The scholars who focus on strategic goals identify several conditions that restrict the extent to which state leaders might have the resources to go through the selection process. The most obvious factor is the existence of a war, either international or civil, which significantly decreases the amount of time that leaders have to invest in the selection process. Yet, most minority ethnic groups do not face mass violence even under conditions of war. Hence, the relevant literature concentrates on two strategic factors that might explain variation within wars: (i) the type of war that is being fought. (ii) the behavior of the ethnic minority in question.

In terms of the type of war, a number of factors might limit the extent to which leaders can invest time and resources in a selection process. These include the existence of a multi-front war in which states have to divide their military and logistical resources; the existence of a war of attrition that continues for extended periods and drains the state's resources, as well as the expectation that the rival state would receive additional resources (such as aid from third parties) that might shift the balance of power during the war (Valentino 2004; Downes 2006, 2008).

The actions of the ethnic group in question can also influence whether state leaders would invest in a selection process. In particular, to the extent that an ethnic group is seen as likely to contribute to the war effort of the rival state, it would be more likely to become the victim of ethnic cleansing. According to this argument, the ethnic groups that rebel (or are prone to rebellion) during a war and ethnic groups that militarily collaborate with a rival state during a war (or a rival military actor during a civil war) become the main targets of ethnic cleansing (Valentino 2004; Valentino, Huth, and Balch-Lindsay 2004).

The studies that highlight these types of strategic concerns have made a major contribution to the study of mass ethnic violence. They have shown that, at least in principle, it is possible to account for this type of phenomenon without presuming long-standing interethnic hostility. After all, conditions that relate to the structure of wars such as the number of fronts or the duration of the war are mostly independent of interethnic relations. Even group-level factors such as whether or not the members of an ethnic group successfully launch a rebellion or collaborate with a rival state might depend on conditions other than interethnic hostility such as whether the group is located close to the border or on a terrain that is conducive to rebellion.

Nevertheless, these studies face two challenges. First, recent studies that analyze contexts as diverse as Sub-Saharan Africa in the 1990s and 2000s and multi-national empires in Central-Eastern Europe during World War I suggest that states that deal with comparable strategic challenges still diverge in their policies toward ethnic minorities (Straus 2012, 2015; Suny 2015, 231–232; Bulutgil 2017). These studies show that, while in principle it might be possible to explain mass ethnic violence based solely on security-related factors, in practice, this approach is inadequate on its own. Specifically, we need a better understanding of why states that face similar types of wars and ethnic group behavior during wars adopt different policies. Second, the literature that emphasizes security-related factors during wars also needs to better specify the strategic alternatives to ethnic cleansing during wars and the conditions under which leaders prefer these

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alternatives to ethnic cleansing. For example, under what conditions do state leaders decide to divert military resources from the war effort and use them to carry out ethnic cleansing campaigns? To what extent is there an agreement among the state leaders about the trade-offs between different wartime policies? How do those leaders who oppose ethnic cleansing as a strategic wartime policy get sidelined by those who favor such a policy?

The second type of war-related explanation for ethnic cleansing treats wars as social phenomena that can shape the relations between ethnic groups as well as the state leaders' perceptions about what constitutes a security threat (Petersen 2002; Midlarsky 2005, 2011; Bulutgil 2016). The studies that adopt this approach highlight two broad causal mechanisms, one that emphasizes retribution, the other pessimism. The first argues that wars, especially when they involve shifting frontlines and temporary military occupations, lead to ethnic cleansing campaigns that are aimed at retribution or revenge. This type of outcome becomes likely during wars and military occupations for a number of reasons. For one thing, states that annex or incorporate new territories often reorganize the "political hierarchy" between ethnic groups, generating feelings of resentment among the formerly dominant groups (Petersen 2002; Midlarsky 2005; Bulutgil 2016). For another, states that are trying to control newly annexed territories during wartime often use members of minority (or formerly non-dominant) ethnic groups to police the territory and target potential resisters, which often leads to direct violence between the members of ethnic groups (Midlarsky 2005; Bulutgil 2016). If and when the military situation changes and the occupier retreats from the territory, the ethnic groups that were favored by its wartime policies in one or both of these ways then become the main targets of ethnic cleansing.

The second causal mechanism that highlights the transformational role of wars focuses on increasing pessimism about interethnic relations and changing perceptions on whether ethnic minorities present long-term security threats. The starting point is the finding from behavioral economics that individuals, rather than weighing their experiences equally and rationally, tend to prioritize their most recent experiences when making decisions (Tversky and Kahneman 1973). As a result, in post-war environments, ethnic groups and their leaders discount earlier experiences of cooperation and exaggerate their recent experiences that relate to wartime. Especially when these experiences involve direct violence between groups, wars might lead to the pessimistic assessment that peaceful coexistence between groups is no longer possible and that certain ethnic minorities constitute a substantial threat not only during wars but also in the long run, during peacetime (Bulutgil 2015).

The studies that focus on the transformational role of wars differ from those that focus on strategic/security-related factors in two respects. First, the former expect state leaders to decide to use ethnic cleansing not based on the timing of wartime security challenges but based on their group's experiences of direct or indirect violence during the war. Second, unlike the strategic approach that predicts ethnic cleansing cases primarily during wartime, the transformational approach predicts ethnic cleansing to occur in the couple of years that follow the end of wars as well as in the aftermath of territorial shifts during wars. In this respect, the transformational approaches have an empirical advantage over studies that purely focus on security-related factors when it comes to explaining the large number of ethnic cleansing cases that occur after wars such as the forced population movements after World War II.

The studies that treat wars as transformational factors have made significant contributions to the study of ethnic cleansing by highlighting how interethnic hostility might result from the dynamics within wars rather than preceding them. Like the studies that treat wars as strategic environments, they also leave some important questions unanswered.

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First, the idea that wars transform the "relations between ethnic groups" or "minority-related security perceptions" also brings to mind the question of what form these conditions took before the war. Put differently, to understand the transformational power of war, we also need an understanding of the type of society that preceded it. Second, given the extent to which these arguments rely on the existence of collaboration and status reversal during wars, they would also benefit from a better understanding of these events. For example, why do certain ethnic minorities (but not others) become beneficiaries or participants in these processes?[5] Why and under what conditions do military occupiers choose ethnic minorities (rather than other marginalized ideological groups) as partners in these policies?[6]

Understanding the role of pre-war conditions

The theories that focus on pre-war conditions are primarily concerned with the background factors that might explain the differences in states' treatment of ethnic groups under comparable war-related conditions. Recent literature articulates three such arguments, two that focus on the pre-war domestic socio-political context, and one that emphasizes the role of international norms.

On the domestic side, the first argument starts with the idea of a "founding narrative," which refers to the dominant state-level ideology that determines the "core population" or "primary national category" in whose name the state serves (Straus 2015, 57, 63). Historically, these founding narratives are formulated by political elites at critical junctures such as independence, transition from a repressive regime, and, potentially, the loss of a major war. According to Straus (2015), these ideologies are a result of both structural and random factors. On the structural side, they reflect the socio-political conditions that exist at the time of the critical juncture (i.e. independence from colonial rule). On the random side, they reflect the individual characteristics and ideological inclinations of the leaders who happen to be at the right place and time to formulate the foundational ideology (Straus 2015, 63–65).

The founding narrative can in turn take two general forms. First, it can introduce an exclusionary and hierarchical ideology that distinguishes a primary national group that is the main recipient of state benefits (such as jobs in the public sector, education, social security, protection, etc.) and other groups that are either excluded from these benefits or considered second-class citizens. Second, the "founding narrative" by contrast can be built upon the idea of a population of mixed ethnic groups or a pluralistic-multi-ethnic society, which does not construct an implicit or explicit hierarchy between ethnic groups.

The type of dominant founding narrative is relevant for ethnic cleansing as it determines the extent to which the members of the state elite consider ethnic-others as a security threat as well as the extent to which radical policies such as ethnic cleansing gain legitimacy within the governing circles (Straus 2015). Specifically, under conditions of war, the elites who are immersed in a non-hierarchical and pluralistic founding narrative are inclined to select out the armed opposition among ethnic-others rather than targeting the group as a whole; whereas the elites who operate in the context of a hierarchical and exclusionary narrative tend to consider the whole group as a security threat without considering more selective policies. Empirically, Straus (2015) uses a number of structured comparisons between African states that faced civil wars that were equally threatening to the state leaders. The comparative analysis shows how the founding narratives that were formulated at the time of independence shaped the elites' perceptions of threat and, ultimately, their choice of wholesale or selective violence against ethnic groups that were affiliated with the rebellion.

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The second argument that focuses on the pre-war domestic factors relies on the long-existing literature in comparative politics that studies the relationship between ethnicity and other types of cleavages (e.g. social class or secular-religious cleavages) (Bulutgil 2016).[7] The argument begins with two complementary ideas. First, even in contexts with historically salient ethnic cleavages, there tends to exist significant non-ethnic cleavages that generate divisions within the politically dominant ethnic groups. Second, the depth and salience of these non-ethnic cleavages vary from context to context.

The existence of salient non-ethnic cleavages within the politically dominant ethnic group is important as these cleavages generate variation in how the members of this group interact with and perceive the non-dominant ethnic groups (Bulutgil 2016, 23–29).[8] The members of dominant groups that are divided along a politically salient non-ethnic cleavage have a variety of incentives to cooperate with the non-dominant groups. First, they can form political alliances with their ideological counterparts in the non-dominant groups (e.g. cooperation between socialists within two ethnic groups). Second, the members of the dominant group who are repressed by their co-ethnics on another political dimension (for example, the poor members of the ethnic group) might cooperate with the nationalists within the non-dominant ethnic group in return for their support for achieving socio-economic goals.[9] This type of cooperation can take the form of political alliances between left-wing parties that appeal to the poor members of the dominant group and nationalist parties that appeal to the non-dominant group.[10]

Under conditions of war, the political factions that cooperate with the non-dominant groups during peacetime are more likely to use selective rather than wholesale violence for two reasons. First, due to the possibility of future cooperation, the leaders in the cooperative faction prefer to select out specific members of the non-dominant group rather than victimizing the group as a whole. Second, based on their past experiences, the individuals in the cooperative faction are less likely to hold negative perceptions about the non-dominant group or consider the group as a whole a security threat. Given their more positive ideological priors, these leaders are also more likely to consider selective alternatives to mass violence against the group.

Like the argument on founding narratives, the argument on non-ethnic cleavages is designed to complement rather than replace the approaches that focus on wars. In particular, the argument theoretically complements the war-related approaches in two ways. First, it provides an explanation for why states that face similar types of wars as well as similar types of behavior from ethnic minorities during wars nevertheless treat the groups in question differently. Second, the argument also provides a better understanding of how wars relate to ethnic cleansing. If non-ethnic ideological cleavages that divide ethnic groups are common even in societies with deep ethnic divisions, then we need to think of the dominant ethnic groups and their leadership as decentralized units with competing factions rather than monolithic wholes. In this formulation, war-related factors, such as collaboration between non-dominant ethnic groups and rival states, become relevant because they shift the political power within the dominant ethnic groups from the factions that cooperate with ethnic-others to the factions that do not.

Taken together the two arguments that focus on pre-war domestic politics both make contributions to the study of ethnic cleansing and raise new questions. Unlike previous explanations that retrospectively identify and privilege interethnic hostility, these more recent works first treat ethnicity as part of the larger political and economic context in a country and then outline the processes that generate (or hinder) antagonism. The findings of these studies also naturally introduce a new research question on whether and how "founding narratives" and "non-ethnic cleavages" relate to each other. For example, are

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leaders who operate in contexts with significant non-ethnic cleavages more likely to formulate inclusive founding narratives at critical junctures? Or is it the case that non-ethnic cleavages become more visible and organized only when the founding narrative emphasizes cross-ethnic cooperation? Alternatively, the two factors might represent two causal paths that tend to dominate in different contexts. For example, the founding narrative argument might be more relevant in contexts such as post-colonial sub-Saharan Africa, where such narratives were both formulated relatively recently and are relatively easy to identify. In contrast, the non-ethnic cleavages argument might be more relevant for contexts such as Europe in which social cleavages such as class or clerical-anti-clerical divisions were historically salient and, due to a long history of major wars and regime changes, founding narratives and critical junctures are harder to identify a priori.

Beyond the studies that focus on the domestic level, a third type of argument considers the influence of pre-war factors at the international level (Ther 2014; Martin 1998). The main argument is that ethnic cleansing becomes more likely when the prevalent international norms and practices confer legitimacy on this type of policy. Specifically, the international normative system that emerged after World War I legitimized the movement of whole ethnic groups, often organized as voluntary or compulsory exchange agreements, as an acceptable means of generating a stable international order (Ther 2014). Particularly important in this process was the compulsory exchange of populations between Greece and Turkey in 1923, which set a precedent for similar agreements in the future and was for a long time hailed as successful in generating the desired "peaceful" outcome (Ther 2014, 57–64).

The studies that focus on international norms convincingly show that representatives of great powers, including not only the Soviet Union but also liberal democracies such as Britain and the United States, sanctioned mass ethnic deportations until after the Potsdam Agreement, which endorsed the ethnic cleansing of Germans from Central and Eastern Europe. At the same time, while being potentially fruitful, this line of research still needs to tackle a number of empirical and theoretical questions. First, can we find cases in which international norms caused ethnic cleansing in the absence of pre-existing domestic actors who already wanted to use this policy?[11] Second, are there cases in which international actors motivated by norms against ethnic cleansing successfully halt domestic leaders who are planning to undertake an ethnic cleansing campaign? Cases such as Bosnia (1992–1995), Rwanda (1994), and Kosovo (1998–9) raise questions about whether international norms can play this type of role. However, more detailed and systematic analysis of contexts that come back from the brink of ethnic cleansing campaigns might still show international norms to be influential at least under some conditions.

Conclusion

The study of mass ethnic violence has come a long way in the last decade. Both theoretically and empirically, the literature on this topic now provides a better understanding of the role that wars play in the process that results in ethnic cleansing as well as a sounder analysis of how pre-war socio-political conditions might constrain or aid the actors who desire to use this policy. As the discussion showed, the existing literature also opens a number of research avenues that require further attention.

The first avenue relates to the study of the role of wars. The most recent studies that test the war-related argument tend to use statistical analysis. Given the nature of their analysis, these studies only consider the indirect predictions of the existing arguments on the geographical location, target, and timing of mass ethnic violence. Additionally, this literature more typically tests the strategic/security-related argument and ignores the possibility that

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wars actually transform the way leaders conceptualize security as well as ethnic-others (see, for example, Hagerdal 2017).

Future research can make more headway towards understanding the role of war by more consistently taking into account both versions of the war-related argument and by directly studying the leadership structure of states or non-state actors during wars. Such studies could make use of archival material, memoirs, and, where possible, interviews with former leaders to better understand whether and how the interpretation of what counts as a security threat changes during wars as well as how leaders decide between different policies that might contribute to the war effort.

The second research avenue pertains to how the "founding narrative" and "non-ethnic cleavages" arguments relate to each other. This line of research would be relevant for both the study of ethnic cleansing and the study of ethnicity and nationalism. The studies that tackle this question could follow two strategies. First, they could focus on the critical periods in which the foundational narratives emerge and study whether the preexistence of salient divisions within ethnic groups results in more inclusive narratives. Preferably, such studies would compare contexts that share critical characteristics such as colonial history and the type of ethnic groups in question but differ in the type of foundational narrative that emerges. Second, future research can also concentrate on the question of whether and how foundational narratives might influence the emergence of salient non-ethnic cleavages and the organizations that represent such cleavages.

A final potentially productive line of research relates to whether the causes of mass violence against ethnic and other types of groups (i.e. classes, urban groups) are similar. There is a tradition in the field of genocide studies for grouping the cases of mass violence in which the main target is an ethnic group with cases in which the main targets are non-ethnic groups (see, for example, Kiernan 2009). There is also an emerging literature that specifically focuses on the targeting of non-ethnic political groups during civil wars (Balcells and Steele 2016). These studies identify mechanisms such as elections that might turn certain political groups into targets of violence (Balcells and Steele 2016). The natural next step would be identifying whether the findings from these studies and the recent literature on ethnic cleansing are comparable to each other or whether there is something fundamentally different about mass violence against ethnic groups.

Notes

1. Also, see Wimmer (2006) for a similar point.
2. For an empirical evaluation of these two types of causal story, see Bulutgil (2015).
3. For a pioneering study that takes into account domestic institutional factors, see Rummel (1995).
4. For an earlier study that makes a similar point, see Martin (1998).
5. For a potential explanation that focuses on pre-war educational policies of multi-national empires, see Darden forthcoming.
6. For a potential explanation that focuses on the specific territorial characteristics of ethnicity, see Bulutgil (2016).
7. For examples on the broader literature on non-ethnic and ethnic cleavages, see Lipset and Rokkan ([1967] 1990), Rothschild (1974), Lijphart (1977), and Chandra (2005).
8. For a study that provides micro-level evidence from Bosnia during WWII, see Bergholz (2016, 191–196).
9. One example for this type of set-up was inter-war Czechoslovakia up to mid-1930s (Luza 1964).
10. One example was the relationship between the left-wing parties and minorities in inter-war Poland (Groth 1968).
11. A potentially relevant case is the ethnic cleansing of Germans in Hungary after World War II, which took place despite significant resistance from domestic Hungarian institutions and under Soviet pressure, see Angi (2003).

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