

New Wars and Failed States

A state is a human community that (successfully) claims the monopoly of the legitimate use of physical force within a given territory.

MAX WEBER, Politics as a Vocation, December 1918¹

We noted in [Chapter 5](#) the aftershocks of the First World War as old states suffered upheavals and new states were created. Something similar happened after the Second World War, in some cases with the same countries. A civil war in Greece continued until 1947. Yugoslavia only held together amid severe factional fighting, which combined elements of both ideology and ethnicity.² The most substantial and enduring upheavals took place in the overseas empires of European powers. After 1945 there was little that they could do to hold on to their colonies. Their early military failures against Germany and Japan had robbed them of their aura of irresistible power. They lacked the energy and resources to hold back popular movements. Some tried more than others, taking and inflicting many casualties in doing so. The French fought bloody wars in their efforts to hold on to Indochina and Algeria. Eventually they gave up. It took just about thirty years to complete the decolonisation process. Portugal fought on the longest, until the strain of its colonial wars brought down its autocratic regime in 1974.

The end of empire meant that there were many more states. The United Nations grew from its 51 original members to the current 193. Of these

new states, some fought with each other, but many more suffered conflict inside their borders.³ Thus side by side with the Cold War, marked by ever-closer relations among the Western democracies, there was another process—decolonisation, of which arguably the implosion of European communism was the culmination.

A NUMBER OF THE NEW STATES SUFFERED FROM CHRONIC instability and consequential violence. By the mid-1990s this violence seemed to be unusually intense and widespread and was attracting attention. Though the risk of great-power war had eased, other types of war now dominated the news. The good news, as a retired US Marine general told Congress in 1999, was that: ‘the days of armed conflict between nation-states are ending’.⁴ The bad news was that this was combined with a sudden upsurge of unusually nasty and vicious conflicts. One study claimed that 92 out of 108 armed conflicts identified during the 1990s involved organised communal groups, fighting each other or the government.⁵ From the 1980s on there were between 15 and 25 countries suffering from civil war at any single point in time.⁶

Mary Kaldor announced the arrival of what she prosaically described as ‘New Wars’ by contrasting them with the old wars that had gone before by reference to their goals and financing. The new wars arose out of ‘national, clan, religious or linguistic’ conflicts, made possible because of the ‘disintegration or erosion of modern state structures’,⁷ and were fought with the methods of guerrilla warfare and insurgency. Others also noted the changes, even if they expressed it differently. Kalevi Holsti referred to ‘Peoples’ Wars’, fought by ‘loosely knit groups of regulars, irregulars, cells, and not infrequently by locally-based warlords under little or no central authority’, to be contrasted with ‘organised armed forces of two or more states’. Former NATO Commander Sir Rupert Smith declared that ‘war no longer exists’ when understood as ‘battle in a field between men and machinery’; and as ‘a massive deciding event in a dispute in international affairs’. Instead there had been a shift to ‘war among the people’, often involving non-state actors and apparently never-ending.⁸ Martin van Creveld wrote of a ‘new form of armed conflict developing’, marked by ‘much smaller, less powerful and, in many ways, more

primitive political entities similar to those existing before 1648'.⁹

There were reasons to question the novelty. Many past conflicts took place largely within divided or fragile states, saw vulnerable groups set upon to the point of mass murder, created opportunities for criminals and adventurers as well as political activists, and involved unconventional military methods.¹⁰ In addition, many that were prominent in the 1990s had their origins well before the end of the Cold War and reflected weaknesses left over from the post-1945 decolonisation.¹¹

Nor was it the case, as Kaldor claimed, that these wars were unique in their viciousness. 'At the turn of the twentieth century', she reported, 'the ratio of military to civilian casualties in wars was 8:1. Today, this has been almost exactly reversed; in the wars of the 1990s, the ratio of military to civilian casualties is approximately 1:8.'¹² The claim that past wars barely touched civilians was without foundation. For current wars others made similar claims. In 1996 the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) reported: 'In the later decades of this century the proportion of civilian victims has been rising steadily; in World War II it was two-thirds and by the end of the 1980s it was almost 90 percent.'¹³ This was a statistic with a powerful political impact but also without sources.¹⁴

The claims could be traced to a 1991 paper detailing deaths and refugees in 36 major armed conflicts ongoing in 1988–89, which stated that of 'over five million people... killed in the major armed conflicts' about 4.4 million—or almost 90 per cent—were civilians. The analysis, however, was flawed. It added to those who had died those who had been uprooted by the conflicts. Once this item was excluded then the number of those left dead or injured as civilians was around 60 per cent.¹⁵ A 1989 study had suggested that the proportion of civilian war-related deaths since 1700 had been consistently around 50 per cent.¹⁶ When the International Committee of the Red Cross produced its own estimates in 1999 it reported that between 30 and 65 per cent of conflict casualties were civilian.¹⁷ Studies of the 1992–1996 conflict in Bosnia gave figures for war-related deaths of 97,207, broken down into 39,684 (41 per cent) civilians and 57,523 (59 per cent) soldiers.¹⁸ So while civilian deaths were at terrible levels they had not risen to an unprecedented height.

Yet there were differences between the newer civil wars and those that

had gone before. Past civil wars had often been conducted as if they were interstate wars (as with the American and Spanish Civil Wars) with forces organised on regular lines.¹⁹ Even campaigns starting with volunteer militias relying on ambushes and terrorism sought to graduate at some point to an army sufficiently disciplined and well-equipped to defeat that of a state. Only rarely was there a reluctant peace agreement between the belligerents, brokered by outsiders. Governments were reluctant to accept deals which by definition meant compromises with rebels. They preferred to crush their enemies. Rebels were equally reluctant to prop up illegitimate regimes. On one count, between 1946 and 1989 only twelve civil wars ended in a peace agreement while eighty-two ended in a military victory for either the government or the rebels. Although the shift was not abrupt between 1990 and 2005, twenty-seven wars ended in peace agreements while only twenty ended in a military victory.²⁰ If they ended with agreement that was not normally because of a sudden embrace of reason by the warring parties and a desire to put an end to the bloodshed, but because they were exhausted. The record of agreements holding was poor and violence was often resumed. The distinguishing feature of many of the wars highlighted during the 1990s (and which continue to this day) was their length, the inability of either side to bring them to a conclusion, and the extent to which the international community, with mixed success, tried to do so.²¹

AS INTEREST DEVELOPED QUICKLY IN THE TOPIC, IT BECAME apparent that despite the long history of civil wars, their academic study remained in its infancy. While interstate wars had been subjected to intense theorising the same could not be said about intrastate wars. The essential texts of international relations were preoccupied with great powers, and the databases were geared to interstate wars. As civil wars began to attract attention, the gap in knowledge and understanding became painfully evident. In 1993 the German commentator Hans Magnus Enzensberger observed that there was ‘no useful Theory of Civil War’. Sixteen years later David Armitage reported that these conflicts, though more common than those between states, lasting longer and afflicting more people, were still an ‘impoverished area of inquiry.’²² Bill Kissane described it as ‘a

surprise, and an omission worthy of contemplation’, that civil wars had ‘been ignored by political philosophy’, which he put down to the greater hold of interstate war, the importance of revolutionary theory when looking at tensions within states, and distaste for fratricide.²³ To the extent that there were theories, they went back to the classics on politics and the state, to Hobbes with his Leviathan bringing order out of the state of nature and then on to the democratic theories about how to combine order with continuing consent.

There was little written about internal order as an intractable problem. It was one that it was assumed could normally be solved, whether through coercion or consent, and that cases where it broke down were exceptional. Thus theories of economic development barely mentioned the importance of security. The awkward features of many post-colonial countries, from one-party rule to human rights abuses, were excused on grounds of immaturity or assumed to be a painful early stage on the progressive road to development. The rule was not to interfere but to let states make their own mistakes, recover from them as best they could, and mature in their own time. The American preoccupation with wars of national liberation in the 1960s had prompted some research. This was skewed by Cold War considerations, including the assumption that these wars were externally directed, and fuelled by socialist promises rather than by angry nationalism. This effort fizzled out after the departure from Vietnam in the 1970s, although there were still ongoing conflicts that were vicious in their own terms and were capable of drawing in the major powers. Those who had been sympathetic to the wars of national liberation tended to concentrate on the study of revolutions, which were more heroic though also less frequent than civil wars. Challenges to authority were understood in terms of responses to oppression.²⁴ The Correlates of War Project, having made little effort to gather data on civil wars, though there were five times as many as interstate wars after 1945, belatedly appreciated that this needed to be remedied.²⁵

The 1990s saw ‘a boom in the study of civil war’.²⁶ But the sudden interest and the past neglect meant that there was no dominant single, established disciplinary approach or model that could claim to encompass the causes, conduct, and consequences of all civil wars. There was nothing

to compare with realist theories of the state system or idealist proposals about how to reform it. The sheer variety of ways in which internal order might break down challenged those attempting to construct a universal theory. The databases improved, but these were conflicts in which the military, civilian and criminal spheres often merged, and in which the notion of ‘battle deaths’ was ambiguous. Engagements were often localised and small-scale. Fighters spent much of their time as civilians. The questions of what should be measured and what could be measured were difficult, especially in volatile situations in which data gathering could be hazardous and unreliable. Though civil wars shared a number of features, there were often many distinctive aspects which limited their comparability, including the interaction with neighbouring states, which often had their own conflicts. A mass of material came through but the analytical findings were often partial and contradictory, varying according to the weight placed on structural or domestic factors. Some theorists saw the issue largely in terms of which states were more or less prone to internal violence; others wanted to dig deeper into the motivations and character of those causing the violence. Depending on the studies consulted, the degree of ethnic heterogeneity or of democratic reform could be aggravating or mitigating factors.²⁷

The early post-1990 scholarship was influenced by the established state-centric approach of international relations, that is instead of looking up from the level of the state to the wider system they looked down to conflict below, and often did so with a similar conceptual framework.²⁸ It took time before serious investigations began on sub-state actors in their own right.²⁹ Over time the best studies were those that kept the statistical work on tap rather than put it on top, combining it with field work and archival research. As a result their conclusions were often less clear-cut, but they were more reliable.

IT WAS THE SUPERFICIAL FEATURES OF THE NEW WARS—THEIR savagery, ethnic polarisation, and links with criminal activity—that initially attracted most comment. This led to a focus on the factors that led to states falling apart. In June 1992 UN Secretary-General Boutros Boutros-Ghali produced a report, *An Agenda for Peace*, which among many issues

addressed the problems of ‘post-conflict peace-building’, seeking ‘action to identify and support structures which will tend to strengthen and solidify peace in order to avoid a relapse into conflict.’³⁰ The next year, in arguing for new forms of UN trusteeship to support states that clearly could not cope, Gerald Helman and Steven Ratner opened their article with a dramatic warning:

From Haiti in the Western Hemisphere to the remnants of Yugoslavia in Europe, from Somalia, Sudan, and Liberia in Africa to Cambodia in Southeast Asia, a disturbing new phenomenon is emerging: the failed nation-state, utterly incapable of sustaining itself as a member of the international community.... As those states descend into violence and anarchy—imperiling their own citizens and threatening their neighbors through refugee flows, political instability, and random warfare—it is becoming clear that something must be done.... Although alleviating the developing world’s suffering has long been a major task, saving failed states will prove a new—and in many ways different—challenge.³¹

Others came to write of ‘collapsed states’,³² ‘troubled states’, ‘fragile states’, ‘states-at-risk’, or just ‘weak states’. Fine distinctions might be made between these conditions, but the basic idea remained that some states were a danger to themselves and their neighbours and needed to be put into an international equivalent of intensive care. By 2002 US National Security Strategy, in the aftermath of the terrorist attacks of 11 September 2001, was observing that ‘America is now threatened less by conquering states than by failing ones’.³³

What did it mean to say that a state was failing? The German sociologist Max Weber’s definition of statehood pointed to the importance of being able to monopolise violence and exercise authority over a defined territory. The monopoly of legitimate force could be lost without a fight, as the result of a military coup or because the army refused to suppress non-violent protests such as food riots or strikes. Whenever a regime faced trouble because of popular unrest, an outright rebellion, an attempted coup, or a secessionist movement, the loyalty of the armed forces could soon come to the fore as a key issue. Should violent challenges to the state reach a point where the main mission of government forces lay in beating

them off then it was a civil war. Either the rebellions prospered or were suppressed.

The territorial side of the equation, and whether wars were between or within states, depended on how borders were drawn. Those that were 'not drawn along previously existing internal or external administrative frontiers' were particularly likely to lead to disputes, along with 'borders that lack standing under international law'. As Toft observed, because people identified with territory, and cared more about their homeland than other sorts of land, 'wars over territory tend to last longer and be more difficult to resolve than wars fought over other issues'.³⁴ For this reason much of the explanation for the 'new wars' lay in the way that borders had been set and states had been formed after 1945.

The basic principle adopted by the UN was that borders should be fixed and the new states resulting from decolonisation should stick with inherited colonial borders. Certainly when attempts were made to divide up countries to accommodate distinctive communities or ideologies, the results were not encouraging. For example there were two acts of decolonisation in 1947 for which Britain was responsible and which left questions of borders unresolved. The partitioning of the Indian Raj between India and Pakistan and of Palestine between Israel and the Arabs caused immediate conflict and led to a series of wars that may not yet be concluded. The ideological divisions of Germany and Korea between pro-Western and pro-Soviet regimes provided the most dangerous issue in Cold War Europe and a vicious war in East Asia, also not yet settled, well over sixty years after a ceasefire. In these cases the tensions between communities turned into interstate wars. When the tensions had to be accommodated within established borders then the risk was of a civil war.

THE INTERACTION BETWEEN STATE CAPACITY, FIXED BORDERS, and political tensions could be seen most sharply in Africa. The continent experienced rapid decolonisation from the 1950s, and a series of wars that tended to be large, enduring, and complex. From the 1960s to the end of the Cold War, while there were ten civil wars there were still eight interstate wars. Since 1960 at any time as many as a third of all African states were experiencing a degree of internal conflict. During the early 1990s the continent's

conflicts were regularly counted as the most destructive of the ‘new wars’. On some estimates by the end of the decade Africa accounted for as many as 80 per cent of the world’s conflict deaths.

The principles that shaped decolonisation followed the UN Charter, and so stayed with established borders and deflected demands for self-determination. In 1960, as the process gathered pace with thirty-seven new states having come into existence in Asia, Africa, and the Middle East, the UN General Assembly issued its landmark declaration ‘on the Granting of Independence to Colonial Countries and Peoples’. This confirmed that self-determination was about introducing self-government to colonies on the basis of existing borders and not about accepting the territorial claims of distinctive nationalities. There was to be no support for secession.

What was missing too often was state capacity. During colonial times these countries were occupied, exploited, and administered by foreigners. Until late in the day the authorities tended to suppress demands for independence rather than prepare the people for government. The leaders and bureaucrats of the newly independent states rarely had much experience, their previous careers spent in either minor roles in colonial governments or political agitation. These deficiencies might have been remedied by a longer and more careful transition to self-government, but this was rejected as patronising and an argument for delaying independence. In its 1960 declaration the General Assembly insisted that the capacity for self-government should not be a decisive criterion (although that had been the position in the UN Charter). Instead: ‘inadequacy of political, economic, social or educational preparedness should never serve as a pretext for delaying independence.’³⁵ At any rate, once it was clear that independence was coming there was no incentive for the coloniser to stay.

Just as the great powers ‘scrambled’ to colonise Africa in the nineteenth century, during the 1950s they began to ‘unscramble’ in haste. One striking feature of the period from scrambling to unscrambling was how little the borders of Africa’s fifty-five countries changed.³⁶ This was despite their arbitrariness. Colonial authorities had drawn them with scant respect for ethnography or geography, and an exaggerated appreciation for straight lines. In describing the process, Lord Salisbury noted:

We have been engaged in drawing lines upon maps where no white man's foot ever trod. We have been giving away mountains and rivers and lakes to each other, only hindered by the small impediment that we never knew exactly where the mountains and rivers and lakes were.³⁷

Yet these borders were confirmed in the early twentieth century in order to manage the competing claims of Great Britain, France, Belgium, and Germany, and then again in 1963 by the Organization of African Unity (OAU). The members of the OAU pledged 'to respect the frontiers existing on their achievement of national independence.'

The OAU also set a clear norm that any attempt to break up these states must be discouraged. When the first serious test came—as Biafra sought to break away from Nigeria in the late 1960s—the OAU swung its weight behind the central government in Lagos. Despite the hardships caused by the war, the OAU in 1967 condemned all attempts at secession. In this way the logic of self-determination was contained. Governments resisted demands from disgruntled minorities for greater autonomy and even secession. Statehood took precedence over nationhood.

As countries kept their territorial formation, economic weaknesses and social tensions developed and struggled to find political resolution. This created what Robert Jackson described as an unparalleled situation in which states, however chaotic internally, could still assume that they would not face external aggression or even lesser forms of intervention. They were 'quasi-states', able to enjoy 'the possibility of international legal existence as a sovereign entity (juridical statehood) in the absence of internal socio-political existence as an effective state (empirical statehood)'.³⁸ Their statehood was not underpinned by a robust and collective sense of nationhood.

No state followed the same political path, but certain pathologies soon became evident. Because they neither inherited nor were able to construct the foundations for effective state institutions, those in leadership positions, usually those who had led the campaigns for independence, could not feel secure. In the first instance, the prestige of charismatic leaders and pride in independence allowed little space for credible opposition parties. Warnings about the dangers of factions in the face of

the big challenges of development helped rationalise one-party rule. With entrenched power came the associated risks of patronage and corruption, used to enrich the elite and buy off opponents. Other obvious, and some not-so-obvious, rivals for power who could not be co-opted were taken out of local politics using exile, assassination, and imprisonment.

Many of the first generation of leaders managed this effectively and those that succeeded often had decades in power.³⁹ For others any sense of security produced by such measures was temporary. Africa's armed forces were largely organised on traditional European lines, at first often officered by Europeans, but small and ill-equipped. As the politicians sought to reform them and sometimes to suppress opponents, civil-military relations could become tense. With no alternative political outlets, military leaders began to take matters into their own hands. There were thirty-eight successful coups in Africa between 1963 and 1978.⁴⁰ Though these would be presented as saving the country, other motives were usually present, from personal ambition to fear of an imminent purge. Because of this risk, loyalty as opposed to competence was the key criterion when governments chose military chiefs. This did little for the operational effectiveness of the armies, as unity of command was discouraged and elite units were held back to protect the government.

Grievances were left unaddressed. Minority tribal groups could feel excluded, lacking representation in central government and experiencing discrimination in allocation of revenues. As a result regions could become disaffected and occasionally in open revolt: with their limited capacities and political distractions, armies were not always effective in putting them down and in their efforts to try could make matters worse. None of this was helpful to a country's economic development. Unaccountable power and the need to look after supporters encouraged corruption. When the Cold War ended only five sub-Saharan states were considered partially democratic.

In such unpromising settings, the demands of political survival shaped the policies of leaders. At a minimum it was necessary to keep control over the capital city. A rebellion in a distant region might be ignored, but once a government was ousted from the most iconic state buildings, and unable to broadcast directly to the population, it was lost. The next priority

after the capital was revenue-generating regions even if that meant starving other areas of funds. The location of natural resources, whether oil fields, diamond mines, or other commodities, was a key factor in setting priorities for territorial control. Should all these measures prove to be insufficient then it was necessary to get external support. Rotten regimes could be kept going by external finance, supplies of military hardware, and training, and, in extremis, foreign troops. But then rebels might also get external support. Through 'transnational alliances', neighbouring leaders might see an opportunity to gain influence over an adjacent region or access to some key resources. They might support groups with whom they had some affinity while denying sanctuary to their own rebel groups. In earlier times they might have conquered relevant territory, but this was now precluded by the norms of fixed borders and non-aggression.⁴¹ In many cases it was therefore more appropriate to talk of 'regional war zones' than of civil wars, as groups and action moved without regard for national boundaries. Borders had become progressively less relevant.⁴²