

Université de Montréal

# **Extreme atrocities in armed conflict**

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*Cette thèse intitulée*

**Extreme atrocities in armed conflict**

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## Résumé

La violence en temps de guerre prend parfois des formes extrêmes. Non seulement les belligérants tuent fréquemment un grand nombre de civils, mais leurs atrocités vont parfois au-delà du seul meurtre pour inclure des actes de cruauté tels que la mutilation, le viol, la torture publique ou encore les abus des corps humains. Si des cas individuels de ce type de violence se produisent probablement dans presque tous les conflits et peuvent s'expliquer par la psychopathie, le sadisme, ou un processus de « barbarisation » inhérent à la guerre, ni la psychologie individuelle ni les conditions propres à la lutte armée ne peuvent expliquer pourquoi l'ampleur de ce type d'actes spécifiques varie d'une organisation sociale à une autre. Dans certains groupes armés, les atrocités extrêmes demeurent des cas isolés. Dans d'autres, cependant, nombre de combattants font de telles pratiques une part intégrante de leur « répertoire de violence ».

Comment expliquer cette variation ? Dans cette thèse, je propose une série d'arguments théoriques permettant d'expliquer, au moins en partie, pourquoi la violence en temps de guerre prend parfois la forme d'atrocités extrêmes. Je définis les « atrocités extrêmes » comme des actes de violence caractérisés par une cruauté manifeste et publique. Je soutiens que ces types d'actes émergent souvent dans un contexte de guerre irrégulière ; des conflits caractérisés par une importante asymétrie des capacités militaires, l'utilisation de tactique de guérilla, et, par voie de conséquence, un contrôle territorial hautement fragmenté.

Dans ce contexte, je montre que les atrocités extrêmes découlent souvent de deux processus alternatifs. Le premier processus implique un modèle de prise de décision « du haut vers le bas, » via lequel des dirigeants organisationnels adoptent des tactiques centrées sur la violence extrême à des fins stratégiques. L'objectif premier est souvent de dissuader les civils de collaborer avec l'ennemi dans les territoires contestés. Le deuxième processus implique l'émergence d'atrocités extrêmes en tant que « pratique de guerre ». Ici, les techniques de cruauté émergent au niveau des unités militaires, sans découler d'ordres venus d'en haut. Je soutiens qu'une telle émergence est plus probable dans les unités militaires présentant tant un niveau élevé de cohésion sociale qu'une faible discipline. Dans des conditions de guerre irrégulière, ces unités peu-

vent développer des normes informelles légitimant la violence extrême comme moyen de venger les pertes au combat.

Ces arguments sont développés et testés dans ma thèse à l'aide d'une variété de matériaux empiriques disséminés dans trois articles qui ont été ou seront bientôt soumis pour publication. Le premier article (chapitre 2) définit le concept d'atrocité extrême et utilise des données venant de quatre guerres civiles pour vérifier la plausibilité d'une série d'explications tirées de la littérature sur la violence envers les civils. Le deuxième article (chapitre 3) analyse l'utilisation des décapitations par les groupes djihadistes. Je montre que seule une minorité de ces groupes utilise ce type de violence de manière récurrente et que la variation peut être expliquée par le contexte stratégique dans lequel les organisations mènent leurs opérations et par la nature de leurs liens transnationaux. Le troisième article (chapitre 4) se concentre sur l'émergence des atrocités extrêmes en tant que « pratique » au sein des forces de sécurité étatiques, en utilisant l'exemple des mutilations commises par les soldats américains au cours de la guerre du Vietnam. Ce cas démontre spécifiquement comment les atrocités extrêmes peuvent se généraliser malgré leur interdiction au niveau du commandement. Enfin, le chapitre 5 montre que les idées théoriques développées dans mes articles ont une application plus large, en utilisant une base de données originale sur les atrocités extrêmes perpétrées dans les guerres civiles entre 1980 et 2011.

**Mots-clés** : atrocité extrême, guerre irrégulière, conflit armé

## Abstract

Wartime violence sometimes takes particularly extreme forms. Not only do belligerents frequently kill large numbers of civilians, but violent atrocities sometimes go beyond killing to include acts of overt cruelty such as mutilation, rape, public torture, and the abuse of human remains. While individual instances of such violence likely occur in almost all wars, and might be explained by a certain prevalence of psychopathy or sadism among combatants, or by a process of “barbarization” inherent in war, neither individual psychology nor universal wartime conditions can explain why armed actors seem to *vary* in the extent to which they perpetrate such violence. In some armed groups, episodes of extreme atrocity remain isolated cases. In others, in contrast, large numbers of combatants appear to adopt such practices as an established part of their “repertoire of violence.”

What explains such variation? In this dissertation, I develop and test a series of explanations that help account for variation in the occurrence of “extreme atrocities” within and across conflicts. I define extreme atrocities as acts of physical violence characterized by the public display of overt cruelty, and argue that the occurrence of such violence is closely connected to the context of *irregular warfare*, that is, of warfare characterized by pronounced asymmetry in military capabilities and fragmented territorial control. Within this context, I show that there are two common pathways towards extreme atrocity. The first involves a process of “top down” decision making, whereby organizational leaders adopt extreme forms of violence for strategic ends. Among the most important of these is the imperative to deter civilian collaboration with the enemy in contested territories. Because of the terror they inspire, extreme atrocities can usefully serve this purpose, at least under certain conditions. A second pathway involves the “bottom up” emergence of extreme atrocities among rank-and-file combatants as an unordered “practice of war.” Such emergence, I argue, is more likely in military units with high levels of social cohesion but low levels of discipline. Under conditions of irregular warfare, such units can develop informal norms that endorse extreme violence as a means of avenging combat losses.

These arguments are developed and tested in my dissertation using a variety of different empirical material, most of which is presented in three articles that have been or are soon to be submitted for publication. The first article (Chapter 2) defines the concept of “extreme atrocity” and uses violence data from four civil wars to probe the plausibility of a series of explanations of such violence derived from the literature on civilian victimization. The second article (Chapter 3) further develops the idea that irregular warfare creates strategic incentives for the top-down adoption of extreme violence, focusing specifically on the use of beheadings by jihadist groups. I show that variation in the use of beheadings among jihadist groups can be explained by a combination of local strategic context and transnational ties. The third article (Chapter 4) focuses on the emergence of extreme atrocity as a “practice” among state security forces, using the example of mutilations perpetrated by American soldiers during the Vietnam war to show how extreme forms of violence can become widespread despite being unambiguously prohibited by military policy. Finally, Chapter 5 shows that the theoretical ideas developed in my articles have broader application. Using original data on extreme atrocities perpetrated in civil wars between 1980 and 2011, I show that the patterns in perpetration of such violence by state security forces and rebel groups are consistent with the theories of top-down adoption and bottom-up emergence of extreme atrocity described above.

This thesis contributes to our understanding of wartime violence by explicitly theorizing a hitherto neglected dimension of violence, and developing and testing explanations that can account for variation in its occurrence at multiple different levels.

**Keywords** : extreme atrocity, irregular war, armed conflict

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## List of abbreviations

ACLED - Armed Conflict Location and Event Dataset

AFRC - Armed Forces Revolutionary Council

AQC - Al Qaida Central

AQI - Al Qaida in Iraq

CDF - Civil Defence Forces

GTD - Global Terrorism Database

INPFL - Independent National Patriotic Front of Liberia

IS - Islamic State

LPC - Liberian Peace Council

LRA - Lord's Resistance Army

LURD - Liberians United For Reconciliation and Democracy

MODEL - Movement for Democracy in Liberia

NPFL - National Patriotic Front of Liberia

PAC - *Patrullas de Autodefensa Civil* (Civil Defence Patrols)

RENAMO - *Resistência Nacional Moçambicana* (Mozambican National Resistance)

RUF - Revolutionary United Front

SLA - Sierra Leone Army

TRC - Truth and Reconciliation Commission

ULIMO - United Liberation Movement of Liberia

URNG - *Unidad Revolucionaria Nacional Guatemalteca*, Guatemalan National Revolutionary Unity

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# 1

## Introduction

### 1.1 The Puzzle of Extreme Atrocity

Wartime violence sometimes takes particularly extreme forms. Not only do belligerents frequently kill large numbers of civilians, but violent atrocities sometimes go beyond killing to include various forms of deliberately cruel treatment such as mutilation, torture, rape, and the abuse of human remains. Perpetrators of such violence sometimes seek to ensure its public visibility, intentionally “staging” acts of shocking cruelty for a variety of audiences (Fujii 2021). Perhaps the most notorious recent examples of such behaviour come from Iraq and Syria, where the Islamic State (IS) group became infamous in 2014-2017 for spectacular acts of public atrocity, many of them filmed and widely disseminated on the internet (Friis 2018). In some IS films, victims were beheaded, burned alive, drowned in swimming pools, or thrown off buildings (Tinnes 2016). Public displays of “crucified” bodies and severed heads were routine in territories under IS control. So shocking, and so public, was IS’s violence, that some observers suggested it represented a qualitatively “new style of violence,” one that was “not only mass-mediated but massively transgressive, where the point [was] not just to intimidate and provoke for strategic purposes, but also to horrify and scandalize for non-strategic punitive ends” (Cottee 2019, xiii).

Yet IS’s use of spectacular cruelty is hardly unique, even if its success in using the internet to disseminate its brutality was unprecedented. Other insurgent groups, of various ideological stripes, have made systematic use of public cruelty. In Mozambique in the 1980s, RENAMO in-

surgents became known for “bizarre mutilations of the living or dead,” and for “obliging members of a family group to kill each other (slowly) in turn” (Wilson 1992, 533, 531). Though such acts were not filmed, Wilson notes that a “characteristic feature of this kind of violence [was] that it [was] always witnessed, and a survivor [was] always released to tell the horrific tale... attention [was] always paid to visual impact” (1992, 531-3). In Peru in the 1990s, Maoist Shining Path guerrillas frequently used public torture to terrorize civilians suspected of disloyalty (Comisión para la Verdad y Reconciliación 2003, 187-188). According to Leiby (2009, 82), a “common tactic employed by the Shining Path to punish men suspected of betraying the revolution was to forcibly strip them in public and remove their testicles and/or penis.” In Sierra Leone, rebels in the Revolutionary United Front (RUF) frequently amputated the hands or arms of civilians, as well as subjecting them to gang rape, often in full view of others (Mitton 2015; Cohen 2016).

Comparable atrocities have been perpetrated by state and para-state forces. Atrocities perpetrated by the Guatemalan army during the country’s civil war included “the amputation of limbs; the impaling of victims; the killing of persons by covering them in petrol and burning them alive; the extraction, in the presence of others, of the viscera of victims who were still alive;...the opening of the wombs of pregnant women, and other similarly atrocious acts” (Commission for Historical Clarification 1999, 34). Victims of the Rwandan genocide were frequently “burned alive, thrown dead or dying into latrines, finished off slowly by machetes, leading some to pay their killers to be shot” (Reyntjens 2017, 66); others were impaled, castrated, or forced to perform incest (Taylor 1999, 140-141). In Colombia, counterinsurgent paramilitaries repeatedly used brutal forms of violence including “throat slitting, quartering, decapitation, gutting, burning, castrating, impalement, and burns using acids or blowtorches” (Grupo de Memoria Histórica 2016, 60).

Such excesses of violence are puzzling. While armed actors have numerous strategic incentives to kill or harm civilians (Valentino 2014), it is not clear why their violence should take such qualitatively extreme forms. If the goal is to eliminate perceived opponents or enemies, why resort to “overkill,” using violence “in excess of that required to kill, including performative gruesome acts” (Hoover Green 2018, 3)? If the goal is to inflict injury and pain short of death,

why do so in a public manner? Why increase the physical and psychological anguish of rape by performing the act in front of family and community-members, or even forcing family and community-members themselves to participate? Implementing such violence requires “extra time and effort” (Fujii 2013, 410). While such time and effort might be explained by a strategic rationale—for example, as an attempt to increase the coercive effect of violence (Kalyvas 1999, 270)—there are also reasons to believe that overtly cruel forms of violence can be strategically counterproductive, undermining the credibility of perpetrators (Abrahms 2013). Overtly transgressive violence is likely to provoke moral outrage, fuelling resistance and retaliation rather than compliance.<sup>1</sup> Not only do such atrocities violate widely agreed-upon international legal norms, but they do so in a manner that is more overt and less ambiguous than other forms of violence. Armed groups that kill civilians can try to justify their actions as legally-permissible “collateral damage” (Cronin 2018). Such justifications cannot work when victims are mutilated before (or after) death, or subjected to rape and other acts of deliberate cruelty.

These kinds of atrocities are also puzzling because they are committed in an intimate, “face-to-face” manner. A considerable body of research suggests that face-to-face violence is generally difficult for most people to perpetrate and that physical distance significantly moderates this difficulty (Marshall 1947; Grossman 1995; Collins 2008). Direct participation in atrocities is deeply traumatic for the perpetrators themselves (Grossman 1995; MacNair 2002). Cases in which large numbers of combatants commit acts of extreme cruelty while “face-to-face with their victims, literally getting blood on their hands and registering pleas for mercy and screams of pain” (Mitton 2015, 74) are therefore particularly perplexing.

## 1.2 Conceptualizing Extreme Violence

Despite their puzzling nature, such extreme forms of violence remain relatively neglected in the study of armed conflict and political violence. Much existing research focuses on explain-

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<sup>1</sup> Moral outrage is a powerful motive for collective action in the face of violent repression (Aytaç and Stokes 2019, 103-127) and fuels desires to punish the perpetrators of violence (Pfattheicher, Sassenrath and Keller 2019); more transgressive violence (such as mutilation) may increase the severity of desired punishments (Hendrick and Shaffer 1975).

ing why armed groups vary in terms of their use of violence against civilians (Kalyvas 2006; Weinstein 2007; Downes 2008). Often, such violence is conceptualized in terms of a one-dimensional dichotomy or continuum between “terror” and “restraint” (Gutiérrez-Sanín and Wood 2017, 23), with the scale of lethal violence against civilians used by a given group serving as the primary empirical indicator of where that group falls between these two extremes. A wealth of research using standard cross-national datasets on “one-sided violence” (Eck and Hultman 2007) or “terrorism” (LaFree and Dugan 2007) has provided important insights into the factors that shape variation in the scale of civilian targeting (see e.g. Wood 2010; Wood 2014; Fjelde and Hultman 2014; Salehyan, Siroky, and Wood 2014; Ottmann 2017; Stewart and Liou 2017; Fortna, Lotito, and Rubin 2018; Fortna 2022). Other researchers have focused specifically on explaining relatively rare, quantitatively enormous episodes of mass civilian killing (Valentino 2004; Straus 2015; Leader Maynard 2022).

This dissertation differs from existing research by focusing specifically on the *qualitative* dimension of violence. I ask why perpetrators sometimes choose techniques of violence designed to increase the intensity of suffering experienced by their victims, or to inflict additional indignities upon them that seem superfluous to the act of killing, and do so, moreover, in a manner that deliberately displays their violence to an audience. In order to explain such behaviour, I propose a new concept—“extreme atrocity”—that can facilitate systematic, comparative study of exceptionally brutal forms of violence across diverse contexts.

My approach starts from the distinction proposed by Jacques Sémelin between *quantitatively* extreme violence—that is, violence involving the “mass destruction of civilian populations” (2002, 429)—and *qualitatively* extreme violence—that is, violence involving “acts of cruelty and atrocities to the body, before and after death” (Sémelin 2007, 224). These two dimensions are obviously related empirically: armed actors that deliberately target civilians on a large scale are also more likely to transgress norms against overt cruelty. Yet the connection between the two dimensions of violence should not be assumed to be automatic. Architects of mass killing are sometimes averse to qualitatively extreme forms of violence, preferring a “clean” and “efficient” process of killing without individual “excesses.” Heinrich Himmler, for instance, was reportedly opposed to overt “sadism” among the SS (Taylor 2009, 59), and even adopted policies

that criminalized the killing of Jews out of “self-seeking, sadistic or sexual motives” (Klee, Dressen, and Riess 1991, 205). Ingrao (2013, 531) argues that commanders of the German *Einsatzgruppen* developed a “powerful taboo” around “cruelty”—understood as “violence inflicted just for its own sake, and giving the killers a certain pleasure”—even as they engaged in the mass killing of defenceless civilians. Thus even perpetrators of large-scale killing can seek consciously to limit the presence of overt acts of brutality in their violence; indeed, as Horowitz (2001, 122) argues, perpetrators of genocidal violence “usually achieve better results for themselves by more efficient mass killing... Mutilations are labor intensive; they take time, and they reduce the death toll. The more methodical genocides tend to proceed with a lower ratio of atrocities to deaths and to homogenize areas more completely.” Conversely, it is possible for actors who engage in relatively low levels of civilian targeting to nonetheless make use of deliberately and overtly cruel techniques of violence. Some jihadist groups, for instance, have killed relatively few civilians, yet have adopted beheading as part of their repertoire of violence (see Chapter 3). Indeed, qualitatively extreme violence can, in principle, be used by groups that primarily or exclusively target enemy combatants, for example in the form of postmortem mutilation of the bodies of enemy fighters.

Several authors have analyzed qualitatively extreme forms of violence under different labels. Writing about the experiences of prisoners in Nazi death camps, Primo Levi analyzed what he termed “useless violence,” violent practices implemented by camp guards that seemed to serve no practical purpose other than inflicting suffering and degradation on victims. These included forced nudity, the performance of absurd drills and rituals, and “practically useless” labour duties (Levi 1989, 121). Levi contrasted the apparently gratuitous nature of these practices with the generally strategic nature of most wartime violence. Wars, however detestable, wrote Levi, “cannot be called useless: they aim at a goal, although it may be wicked or perverse”; suffering in war, however “anguishing [and] unjust,” was not the *purpose* of military action, but only its “by-product” (ibid., 105). Violence under Nazi rule, however, went beyond the instrumental logic of war: it was characterized also by “widespread useless violence, [violence] as an end in itself, with the sole purpose of inflicting pain, occasionally having [another] purpose, yet always redundant, always disproportionate to the purpose itself” (ibid., 106).

Following Levi, other scholars have characterized certain wartime atrocities as “gratuitous” (Goldhagen 1996, 259), “irrational” (Mitton 2015), or “non-instrumental” (McDoom 2020, 140). Yet the apparently non-instrumental character of some atrocities cannot be considered the defining characteristic of qualitatively extreme violence as a whole. This is because such violence often *can be* instrumental, helping perpetrators to achieve key objectives. Even Levi argued that apparently “useless” violence in the camps served in part to socialize and “harden” the perpetrators and make them capable of carrying out their tasks (Levi 1989, 125). Even purely “sadistic” violence serves a clear purpose: to produce pleasure for the perpetrator (see Chester, DeWall, and Enjaian 2019). Strictly “gratuitous” violence—that is, violence performed without *any* practical or expressive purpose—is likely extremely rare (Bruce 2010). Indeed, what is striking about extreme atrocities is the *variety* of purposes, whether military, political, organizational, or emotional, that such acts can serve (see especially Mitton 2015).

Rather than focusing on “gratuitous” violence, then, most scholars who have analyzed extreme forms of atrocity have emphasized their cruelty and/or transgressive character. As noted above, Sémelin (2007) characterizes the qualitative dimension of extreme violence primarily in terms its “cruelty.” Goldhagen’s (1996) work on Nazi perpetrators focuses in part on their routine and unordered cruelty. And Taylor (1999, 29) has analyzed the cultural context of the specific “techniques of cruelty” used by perpetrators of the Rwandan genocide. Yet “cruelty”—defined as “the deliberate infliction of physical or psychological pain” (Nell 2006, 211)—is a broad concept. Indeed, by this definition, *most* wartime violence is arguably cruel: belligerents regularly aim to kill and maim enemy soldiers (and often civilians as well), thereby deliberately inflicting profound physical and psychological pain on them and their loved-ones. As Keegan (1976, 30) suggests, “the infliction of human suffering through violence” is almost the essence of what armies do in wartime. Thus distinguishing the kinds of atrocities described at the outset of this chapter from most other kinds of wartime violence requires further conceptual refinement.

Some scholars suggest that what sets qualitatively extreme atrocities apart is their “excessive,” “exaggerated,” or “surplus” cruelty (see Goldhagen 1996, 17; Nahoum-Grappe 2002, 549; Weisband 2018, 15). Such violence is overtly transgressive, surpassing the limits of “normal” wartime violence. This dimension of violence is emphasized in particular in Fujii’s (2013) analy-

sis of “extra-lethal violence,” which she defines as violence that “transgresses shared norms and beliefs about appropriate treatment of the living as well as the dead” (411). As Fujii notes, her emphasis on transgression makes the concept of extra-lethal violence inherently context-dependent, rooted in intersubjective understandings of what constitutes transgressive behaviour in a particular time and place. This feature of her definition also makes it problematic for the purpose of comparison across different contexts. While it may be safe to assume that certain forms of violence will nearly always be viewed by a majority of participants in armed conflict as “extreme” or “excessive” (i.e. as lying beyond the bounds of violence understood to constitute a “normal” part of war), there may be contexts in which violence becomes so intense and pervasive that practices considered “extreme” elsewhere become normalized.<sup>2</sup>

As discussed in greater detail in Chapter 2, in this dissertation I use a definition of extreme atrocity that foregrounds the perpetrator’s choice of techniques of violence. I define “extreme atrocities” as *acts of physical violence characterized by the public display of overt cruelty, that is to say, by the choice of techniques that maximize the physical or psychological suffering of victims*. This definition thus excludes forms of violence in which the degree of suffering caused to victims, even if very substantial, is largely incidental to the perpetrator’s choice of techniques, which is dictated instead by tactical or other considerations. Thus, for example, mass killing through aerial bombardment, or even close-quarters massacre using firearms, in most cases will *not* fall under this definition of “extreme atrocity.” This is not because such methods of killing are not cruel or transgressive (they are), but because, in most cases, their perpetrators’ choice of particular techniques of violence (aerial bombardment or shootings) is likely to be dictated primarily by practical concerns, rather than by a desire to deliberately maximize victims’ suffering. A perpetrator who intends to carry out a massacre *and* wants to maximize victims’ suffering can do so by killing in ways that prolong or intensify the physical and/or psychological suffering of victims (using edged weapons or live immolation, for example), or by inflicting additional indignities on the victims before or after their deaths (mutilation or rape, for example). An advantage of this conceptualization is that it provides a kind of “objective” conceptual core

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<sup>2</sup> An example of this phenomenon might be practices of rape in eastern Democratic Republic of Congo, where some observers distinguish a new category of “rape with extreme violence” (combining rape with torture and mutilation), implying the normalization of more “ordinary” forms of sexual violence (see Mukwege and Nangini, 2009).

for comparison across diverse contexts. If we accept that some techniques of violence *do* cause more physical or psychological suffering than others,<sup>3</sup> then cases in which such techniques are repeatedly and deliberately selected by perpetrators can be grouped in a common category, regardless of how transgressive they appear to any particular audience.

### 1.3 Existing Explanations

As noted above, the qualitative dimension of extreme violence has so far been relatively neglected in research on armed conflict and political violence. While there are a number of valuable studies of extreme atrocities perpetrated in particular conflicts (Ellis 1999; Keen 2005; Mitton 2015; Suárez 2008; Taylor 1999; Wilson 1992), few have explicitly examined variation in such violence across armed actors, conflicts, or time and space (but cf. Cohen 2016). Nonetheless, existing literature does suggest several explanations for such violence. These generally focus on atrocities perpetrated in particular contexts (*e.g.* “low-tech” warfare, genocide, or irregular war), and focus mostly on a single explanatory logic, whether “top-down,” strategic adoption, or “bottom-up” emergence among rank-and-file combatants (but see Sémelin 2007; Mitton 2015).

#### 1.3.1 “Low-tech” war and the banality of atrocity

To begin with, some observers have suggested that the perceived brutality of certain conflicts may be simply a function of the primitive technological means used to fight them. As Kalyvas (2006, 53) writes,

perceptions of cruelty may just be an artifact of the prevalence of civil wars in poor countries. Wealthy countries have the ability to fight what Trinquier (1964: 113) calls “modern war,” which is more impersonal in that it allows “the military to kill more and more of the enemy at

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<sup>3</sup> Sémelin (2007, 236) cites evidence that victims themselves distinguish between more or less appalling forms of killing: “Faced with the prospect of an appalling death, these people sometimes implored their murderers to kill them as quickly as possible, and would even pay them to do so. The historian José Kagabo reported that people referred to a luxurious death, when the victim handed over money in order to be shot rather than hacked to death with a machete.”



greater and greater distances,” thus reducing the “cruel and brutal physical contact with the enemy.” In contrast, civil wars are low-tech wars with “rugged contact of physical suffering and death individually given and received” — hence they are perceived as more cruel.

Rather than reflecting a meaningful analytical distinction, some authors argue that this perception is merely the product of a historically-conditioned normative bias. As Mann (2005, 34) writes: “We moderns prefer indirect, callous killing at a distance. We bomb from a safe height but are appalled by butchery with axes and swords.” As a result, observers may be particularly appalled by killings perpetrated using agricultural implements or other primitive weapons (machetes, hoes, shovels, axes, etc.), while forgetting the socio-technical context of their use. Thus, for example, the widespread use of machetes during the Rwandan genocide, explained in large part by the level of popular participation in the killing and by an inadequate supply of firearms and bullets (Verwimp 2006, 7), has sometimes been seen as a sign of the genocide’s exceptional brutality: according to Prunier (1995, 140), “journalists [during the genocide] always insisted that the victims were killed with machetes, as if the use of cold steel rather than a bullet made the killing worse. Nobody ever thought of blaming the Roman army or European medieval knights for their use of the sword, any more than journalists were able to realise that using machetes reflected a certain level of economic functioning rather than cultural barbarity.” Richards (1996, xx) makes a similar point regarding the use of edged weapons during the civil war in Sierra Leone: “[t]here is little if any analytical value...in distinguishing between cheap war based on killing with knives and cutlasses, and expensive wars in which civilians are maimed or destroyed with sophisticated laser-guided weapons.... It makes no sense to call one kind of war ‘barbaric’ when all that is meant is that it is cheap.”

While such warnings are a useful reminder of the need to check our own normative biases when analyzing violence, the general explanation for extreme atrocities that they imply—that such atrocities are merely an artifact of relative poverty and primitive technology—does not stand up to scrutiny. For one thing, it cannot account for the use of extreme atrocities by technologically-advanced militaries. Research on colonial violence has revealed a number of cases in which advanced European militaries resorted to extreme forms of violence in an effort to control

colonial populations or counter “low-tech” opponents, from the widespread use of amputations in the Belgian Congo (Hochschild 1998, 164) to the mutilation of enemy bodies by British forces during the Mau Mau rebellion in Kenya (Bennett 2006). These can be seen as part of a broader tradition, described by Harrison (2012), in which Western militaries have engaged in mutilation and “human trophy taking” when fighting against enemies they defined as culturally or racially “other.” In a post-colonial context, such practices emerged also among American soldiers in the Pacific theatre of World War II (Dower 1986, 66; Weingartner 1992) and in Vietnam (see Chapter 4), and among Russian forces in Chechnya (Reynolds 2000). Beyond the West, extreme atrocities perpetrated by Japanese soldiers during Japan’s own colonial wars in China are also well documented (Dower 1986, 43-44; Chang 1997). None of these cases can be explained by reference to the perpetrator’s low level of socio-technical development.

More importantly, even within the context of “low-tech” wars fought in low-income countries, the repertoire of extreme atrocities used by perpetrators includes a variety of techniques which cannot conceivably be explained by primitive technology alone. These include elaborate mutilations targeting particular body parts (beheading, castration, the extraction of fetuses from pregnant women), acts of public rape which victims’ family- or community-members are forced to observe, and coerced performances during which victims are forced to engage in deeply transgressive actions including killing, incest, or cannibalism. Such techniques of violence seem obviously to involve an intention on the part of perpetrators to increase the suffering of victims; explaining them requires some account of why these techniques, rather than others, are chosen, and of how large numbers of perpetrators become capable of such horrific, yet highly intimate, forms of violence (Mitton 2015, 75).

### **1.3.2 Genocide and mass killing**

Some of the most extensive work on extreme atrocities has been done by scholars of genocide and mass killing. These scholars study cases in which quantitatively and qualitatively extreme violence coincide, and most have viewed the two dimensions of violence as intimately connected. Some have sought to explain both the quantity and quality of genocidal violence with refer-

ence the same underlying causal factor (e.g. extremist ideology). Others have seen the quantitative dimension of genocide as in some sense the *cause* of qualitatively extreme violence, arguing that large-scale killing creates conditions of license and impunity that are highly conducive to overtly cruel and transgressive acts (Stone 2004).

Perhaps the best known work of the first kind is Daniel Goldhagen's (1996) analysis of the perpetrators of the Nazi Holocaust. While various aspects of his scholarship have been criticized (see especially Browning 1996; Finkelstein and Birn 1998), Goldhagen deserves credit for one of the first social-scientific attempts to grapple with the puzzle of the "excess cruelty" of perpetrators. Goldhagen noted that Holocaust perpetrators who were ordered to kill often had a choice regarding *how* they carried out these orders, and specifically, how much suffering they sought to inflict on their victims: "A killer [could] endeavor to render the deaths of others...more or less painful, both physically and emotionally" (1996, 17). The fact that they so often chose to deliberately *increase* the suffering of victims, without being ordered to do so, was evidence, Goldhagen argued, that many perpetrators were motivated by a "seething hatred" of Jews, and did not kill merely out of obedience, opportunism, or peer pressure (*ibid.*, 369). Controversially, Goldhagen argued that German perpetrators were *uniquely* cruel in their acts of violence towards Jews, a fact explained by their adherence to allegedly unique ideology of "eliminationist anti-semitism" (*ibid.*, 414). This assertion was made, however, on the basis of little actual comparison between German and non-German perpetrators (Waller 2002, 46). Goldhagen's later work has departed from the thesis of German uniqueness, recognizing that "excess cruelty" has been a recurrent feature of other episodes of mass violence (see Goldhagen 2009).

A more complex analysis of the role of cruelty in genocide can be found in the work of Jacques Sémelin. Unlike Goldhagen, Sémelin recognizes multiple pathways leading to qualitatively extreme violence in the midst of genocide. In some cases, he argues, such violence is deployed strategically, for example to encourage the "ferocity" of rank-and-file perpetrators, or to facilitate ethnic cleansing by making future reconciliation and co-existence between communities more difficult (Sémelin 2007, 293-294). In other cases, extreme atrocities can emerge from the "bottom up" among rank-and-file perpetrators, whether as a part of cycle of reprisal and counter-reprisal, or as a result of habituation to killing or "intoxication" with power (*ibid.*,

295-299). In other cases, extreme atrocity is an expression of culturally-specific modes of “meaning-making,” with perpetrators using extreme violence to “stamp... irreversible cultural markers on the victims’ bodies” (ibid., 301; cf. Taylor 1999). Finally, some perpetrators might engage in extreme atrocities because they find them inherently gratifying (Sémelin 2007, 304).

The disturbing possibility that extreme violence is actually enjoyed by many perpetrators has been explored recently by Edward Weisband (2018). Drawing on psychoanalytic theory, Weisband argues that episodes of genocide and mass atrocity unleash widespread but repressed, unconscious desires to humiliate and inflict suffering on victims. Perpetrators use the context of authorized violence to enact an “obscene desire for surplus cruelty” (ibid., 15). Such cruelty often takes the form of a perverse spectacle in which victims themselves are forced to participate in their own abjection, while perpetrators revel in their shame (ibid., 10). Thus not only physical pain but profound humiliation is a key objective of such violence: “Perpetrators want victims to feel shame, suffer humiliation, and recognize that they deserve the humiliation because they are shameful” (ibid., 341). A key audience for such spectacles of humiliation are fellow-perpetrators; public transgressive acts express a desire among perpetrators to bond with each other through “shared self-exhibition” (ibid., 65).

A recent addition to the literature on extreme atrocity in the context of genocide is the work of Omar McDoom (2020). In contrast to Goldhagen and Weisband, McDoom argues that apparently gratuitous acts of violence are caused not by pre-existing, deep-seated hatreds or repressed sadistic desires, but by initial participation in mass killing itself. For many perpetrators, McDoom argues, the extreme attitudes and hatreds that we associate with the perpetration of mass violence arise only *after* they have engaged in initial acts of violence, often under the influence of coercion or peer pressure. Participation in killing can radicalize perpetrators’ attitudes as they retroactively rationalize earlier behaviour by coming to view their victims as culpable and deserving of suffering. Such rationalization can lead to ever more extreme forms of violence, as perpetrators assured of impunity “feel emboldened to explore macabre and perverse desires within themselves” (2020, 141).

### 1.3.3 Strategic rationales

The research on extreme atrocities in the midst of genocide provides important insights into such violence. Yet not all scholars are convinced that extreme violence can be explained primarily with reference to extreme ideology, or to the passions unleashed among rank-and-file perpetrators during episodes of mass killing. Some researchers have emphasized instead the often-strategic nature of seemingly irrational violence. Among the earliest such analyses is Kalyvas's (1999) work on massacres during the Algerian civil war. Arguing against the view that insurgent atrocities in Algeria could be explained exclusively by the ideological radicalism of their perpetrators, Kalyvas proposed instead that such acts followed strategic logic particular to the context of irregular warfare. In irregular wars, insurgents face incumbent forces with markedly superior military capabilities and resort to guerrilla-style tactics that produce a pattern of fragmented territorial control, creating incentives for both incumbents and rebels to use violence selectively to deter suspected enemy collaborators (Kalyvas 2006). In Algeria, Kalyvas argues, insurgents were threatened by growing civilian collaboration with the military and used public displays of extraordinarily cruel violence to convince potential civilian defectors that, "although death at their hands might be less certain than death at the hands of the incumbent, it [would] definitively be more brutal: more painful (through the use of knives and axes), more comprehensive (including entire families), transgressive of taboos (mutilation of dead bodies), etc." (Kalyvas 1999, 270).

Kalyvas' analysis echoes recurrent observations linking acts of extreme violence by insurgents to strategies of coercion vis-a-vis civilian populations. Richards (1996, xvi) described the widespread use of amputations by the RUF in Sierra Leone as a "devilishly well-calculated" strategy to terrorize civilians and deter them from cooperating with the government. Extreme atrocities committed by the Lord's Resistance Army (LRA) in Uganda, including mutilations of hands, feet, ears, and lips, have been described as "extremely effective in promoting fear and deterring cooperation with the government" (Human Rights Watch 2005, 12). In Mozambique, according to Hultman (2009, 831), "[c]reating rumours of their brutality seems to have been an important component of RENAMO's war strategy. Mutilations, for example, were a way of pub-

licly showing both the government and the population what RENAMO was capable of.” In Nepal, Maoist insurgents “resorted to unspeakable brutality to deter informants and to intimidate villagers,” with killings of alleged government collaborators “often [being] accompanied by horrific torture and slow and painful killing methods, making the victim suffer for hours before death” (Human Rights Watch 2004, 54-55). In Somalia, Al Shabaab insurgents “almost invariably carr[ied] out executions, floggings and amputations in public, inviting the local population to watch,” suggesting “an intention...to assert their control over territory through public displays of cruelty and violence aimed at intimidating and instilling fear in the civilian population” (Amnesty International 2009, 2).

Coercive control of civilians, however, is not the only possible strategic rationale for extreme atrocity. Some scholars have suggested that such violence is also strategically useful when the objective is not to control civilians but to force them to flee a given territory. Because of the significant costs of displacement, civilians can be reluctant to leave their homes; extreme forms of violence may be a particularly effective means of convincing them to go, particularly when the forces seeking to provoke displacement have relatively limited capabilities (see *e.g.* Derlugian 2005, 273). Where an armed actor’s policy is “ethnic cleansing,” extreme atrocities have the additional benefit of making future co-existence among different communities appear impossible. As Sémelin (2007, 294) notes:

the deliberate perpetration of atrocities is a reliable method of causing lasting trauma not only in the victims, but also the witnesses and, beyond that, all the members of their entire community. In this sense atrocities are directed at the future since they are part of a deliberate strategy of separating the rival groups for ever. By rendering any prospect of reconciliation impossible for several generations at least, they serve the political goal of segregation and “ethnic cleansing” perfectly.

This logic has been proposed, for example, as an explanation of the widespread use of rape during the Bosnian civil war: as Hayden (2000, 31) argues, “[t]he whole point of the violence [in

Bosnia was] to ensure that there [would] be no continuation of coexistence, and rape seems [to have been] a powerful weapon, even more powerful than murder, to bring about that end.”

### **1.3.4 Social dynamics within perpetrator groups**

A final strand in the literature has emphasized how extreme forms of violence, rather than following top-down strategic logics, can emerge out of social dynamics within perpetrator groups. Not all atrocities in wartime are ordered or authorized as a matter of organizational policy; some emerge instead as an unordered “practice of war,” “driven from ‘below’ and tolerated from ‘above,’ rather than purposely adopted as policy” (Wood 2018, 514).

Fujii’s (2013) analysis of “extra-lethal violence” largely falls in this camp. Fujii emphasizes the performative dimension of extreme violence, noting how perpetrators deliberately “stage” such violence for various audiences. Like Weisband, Fujii argues that fellow-members of the perpetrating group are among the most important audiences for such transgressive performances. Individual perpetrators can enhance their status and power within the perpetrating group by taking a lead role in the “show” (Fujii 2021, 133). Thus the extreme nature of extra-lethal violence emerges precisely because of its performative logic: as “actors put violence on display for others to cheer or gawk,” perpetrators often “try to show off for one another,” adopting ever more extreme methods of violence (Fujii 2013, 420-421).

Other scholars have emphasized how the performance of transgressive violence in front of fellow-perpetrators can play a socializing function within some armed groups. In his analysis of extreme violence within the RUF in Sierra Leone, Mitton (2015) argues that the group used atrocities in part as a means of “systematic brutalization” of new recruits, many of whom were abducted into the group. Mitton describes how the group often forced abductees to commit their first atrocities, often against captured civilians or enemy fighters, in order to desensitize them to violence (Mitton 2015, 235). The group then systematically rewarded subsequent acts of brutality, granting material privileges and social status to particularly brutal fighters (*ibid.*, 243-244). Mitton argues that this system of reinforcement led eventually to many members coming to experience extreme violence itself as “gratifying or enjoyable” (*ibid.*, 241).

An association between forced recruitment and extreme violence is also highlighted by Dara Cohen's (2016) work on wartime rape. Cohen argues that groups that recruit primarily through abduction suffer from low internal cohesion, and therefore use gang rape as a means of fostering stronger bonds among group members. Participation in rape these circumstances allows individual combatants to send costly signals demonstrating their reliability, thereby "creat[ing] bonds of loyalty and esteem from initial circumstances of fear and mistrust" (Cohen 2016, 2). This cohesion-building function of rape, Cohen argues, explains why wartime rape often involves multiple perpetrators, and why, in some groups at least, women and girls are also perpetrators (Cohen 2013).

Mitton's and Cohen's arguments likely have broader application. An association between forced recruitment, brutal methods of initiation and training, and acts of extreme atrocity has been observed among other armed groups, such as the LRA in northern Uganda (Human Right Watch 2004). The fact that many armed groups that engage in forced recruitment rely specifically on the abduction of children may also help explain the extremity of their violence: children inducted into an armed group at a young age can be more thoroughly socialized into violent group norms than older recruits who have greater pre-existing socialization in norms of non-violence prevalent outside of war. Studies of former combatants in the Democratic Republic of Congo and northern Uganda have found that violent socialization among younger recruits produces not only habituation to violence, but also "appetitive aggression," a positive attraction to violence and cruelty (Hecker et al. 2012; Zeller et al. 2020).

## **1.4 Theoretical Framework: Two Pathways to Extreme Atrocity**

As this brief review of the relevant literature shows, existing research contributes important insights into why extreme atrocities occur, without, however, providing a single, well-developed theory to explain variation in such violence. Some existing explanations, moreover, face obvious shortcomings. Extreme atrocities are not unique to "low-tech" conflicts, and are sometimes perpetrated by "high-tech" militaries. Nor do such acts occur only during episodes of genocidal mass killing; they can also occur in conflicts in which civilians are killed on a more modest scale



and for essentially coercive, rather than exterminatory, purposes (for this distinction, see Kalyvas 2006, 29). In this dissertation, I develop and test novel theoretical arguments about the causes of extreme atrocity that build on the third and fourth strands in the literature discussed above. In particular, I seek to specify the conditions under which extreme atrocities emerge, either as an organizational strategy or as an unordered practice.

While extreme atrocities in wartime may occur for a variety of reasons, I argue that there are two common pathways towards such violence (Table 1.1). The first involves a process of “top down” decision making, whereby organizational leaders adopt extreme forms of violence for strategic ends. In general, this is more likely to occur among rebel groups than among regular state militaries. Most of the latter espouse, at least formally, norms of military conduct which make the explicit adoption of extreme atrocity as an organizational policy highly unlikely. Among rebel groups, on the other hand, extreme atrocities are sometimes adopted as policy, and used to achieve strategic goals. This is more likely to occur, I argue, in a context of “irregular warfare” — that is, in conflicts characterized by pronounced asymmetry in military capabilities and fragmented territorial control (Kalyvas 2006). In such conflicts, extreme atrocity can serve two key strategic functions: to deter civilian collaboration with the enemy and to demoralize enemy fighters.<sup>4</sup> Yet use of such violence also has costs: because of their transgressive nature, extreme atrocities can be counterproductive, spurring outrage and a desire for revenge among civilian populations. Relatively weak insurgents, who operate with little or no control over territory, are more vulnerable to these (Berman, Felner, and Shapiro 2018; Lewis 2020), and will therefore generally avoid overtly-transgressive forms of violence that would alienate potential civilian supporters. In contrast, stronger groups, especially those that control significant territories and therefore have an ability to obtain civilian support through coercion, are more likely to ignore civilian attitudes and therefore more likely use extreme violence to deter collaboration or demoralize their enemies. Other conditions that reduce rebel reliance on civilian support, such as significant external support or the recruitment of foreign fighters, should also increase their chance of using extreme violence to control civilian populations.

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<sup>4</sup> These are not the only possible strategic purposes of extreme atrocity. As discussed in Chapter 3, jihadist groups also use extreme atrocity (beheadings) to attract foreign fighters or the support of transnational sponsors.

**Table 1.1** Two pathways to extreme atrocity

|  | EXTREME ATROCITY<br>AS STRATEGY  | EXTREME ATROCITY<br>AS PRACTICE  |
|--|--|--|
| <i>Typical actors</i>                            | Primarily rebel groups   | Primarily regular state forces   |
| <i>Context</i>                                   | Irregular warfare  | Irregular warfare  |
| <i>Function</i>                                  | Deter civilian collaboration<br>and demoralize enemy<br>combatants                       | Revenge<br>(rage at loss of close friends)   |
| <i>Constraints</i>                               | Need to maintain civilian<br>support   | Strong organizational control<br>(discipline, socialization) and<br>informal norms reinforcing<br>organizational policy                  |
| <i>Conditions favouring<br/>extreme atrocity</i> | Significant territorial control;<br>transnational ties<br>limiting reliance on civilians | Weak organizational control<br>(discipline, socialization) and<br>“deviant cohesion”<br>(strong unit cohesion and<br>deviant unit norms) |

A second pathway towards extreme atrocity involves the “bottom up” emergence of extreme atrocities among rank-and-file combatants as an unordered “practice of war” (Wood 2018). This is the most likely way for extreme atrocity to emerge among regular state forces whose military hierarchies usually prohibit extreme atrocity as a matter of policy. As with top-down adoption, bottom-up emergence is more likely under conditions of irregular warfare. Regular soldiers fighting counterinsurgencies will often lack opportunities for directly confronting the enemy, yet

simultaneously have ready access to civilians, whom they may suspect of supporting insurgents; particularly when facing powerful and capable insurgents who inflict significant losses, rank and file soldiers can nurture intense desires for revenge, and may vent their rage on vulnerable civilians or captured enemy combatants. The resultant violence can be extreme for essentially expressive, rather than strategic reasons: soldiers seek to inflict extreme suffering on their targets as an expression of intense emotions of anger (Shay 1994). Military hierarchies may be unable to control the violence of their soldiers due to the fragmented nature of the war-zone and the *de facto* toleration of forbidden practices by some lower-level commanders. Poorly supervised soldiers can develop informal, unit-level norms that deviate from official military policies, endorsing acts of extreme violence that the latter prohibit.

On the whole then, this theoretical framework generates a series of expectations about the conditions under which extreme atrocities will occur, and therefore about how such violence should vary across and within conflicts and conflict actors. In particular, my arguments lead me to expect that extreme atrocities should be particularly frequent in wars fought by means of irregular warfare, as opposed to more “conventional” conflicts (Kalyvas and Balcells 2010; Balcells and Kalyvas 2014). Within such wars, the strategic use of extreme atrocities by rebel groups should increase as a function of their relative military power and control over territory. Among state forces, in turn, extreme atrocities should be particularly frequent when poorly-disciplined troops are deployed in contexts of counterinsurgency that render top-down supervision particularly challenging. And whether or not individual soldiers engage in extreme atrocities should be shaped in large part a combination of combat conditions and informal unit norms.

## 1.5 Roadmap

These arguments are tested throughout my dissertation using a variety of empirical material. The bulk of this material is presented in the form of three articles (Chapters 2-4) that have been or are soon to be submitted for publication, as well as an additional empirical chapter (Chapter 5). These chapters combine qualitative comparison, statistical analysis, and a brief case study, and examine variation in wartime behaviour across several levels of analysis.

Chapter 2 provides a definition of the concept of “extreme atrocity” and conducts a plausibility probe to see how well existing explanations of civilian victimization can account for variation in the use of extreme atrocity across armed groups. Using conflict data from civil wars in Liberia, Sierra Leone, Guatemala, and Colombia, I demonstrate variation in the use of extreme atrocities across actors in each of these conflicts. I then consider whether this variation can be explained by a strategic logic linked to irregular warfare, by an inability of armed groups to control the violence of their recruits, by patterns of coerced recruitment, by the mobilization of ethnic hatred, or by cycles of revenge. I find that none of the proposed explanations can entirely account for the patterns observed in the data, but that some combination of irregular warfare, weak internal control, and revenge provides the most plausible potential explanation for wartime extreme atrocity.

Chapter 3 then develops and tests an argument that focuses on the “top-down,” strategic logic of extreme atrocity. The chapter analyzes one of the most notorious forms of extreme atrocity in recent years: the use of beheadings by jihadist groups. After showing that most jihadist groups perpetrate few or no beheadings, while only a minority adopt such violence as a consistent part of their repertoire of violence, I argue that this variation is explained by a combination of local strategic context and transnational ties. Specifically, I argue that beheadings are strategically useful to jihadists engaged in irregular war as a means for deterring civilian collaboration with the enemy, demoralizing enemy combatants, and attracting foreign recruits. But such violence is also costly for such groups, notably because of its tendency to alienate potential civilian supporters. Whether or not particular jihadist groups use beheadings depends largely on whether they can afford to ignore these costs. Jihadists that control significant territory are less sensitive to civilian attitudes because of their ability to obtain support through coercion, and are therefore more likely to perpetrate beheadings. The use of beheadings is also shaped by transnational ties: organizations seeking formal affiliation with transnational jihadist networks are more likely to calculate that the benefits of using extreme violence to attract transnational support outweigh its costs. I use an original dataset of over 1500 beheading events perpetrated by jihadist organizations between 1998 and 2019 to test this theory.

Chapter 4 then turns to the second, “bottom-up” process by which extreme atrocities can emerge as a wartime “practice” without being adopted by organizational policy. The chapter focuses on practices of mutilation among American soldiers during the Vietnam war. I show that such practices were remarkably widespread, despite being unambiguously prohibited by military policy, and test a series of possible explanations for variation in the use of mutilation using survey data from a representative sample of Vietnam veterans. The data suggests that mutilation in Vietnam is explained by social dynamics within military units, and specifically by a theory of “deviant cohesion.” The data shows that mutilation was motivated primarily by the desire to avenge the deaths of close friends in combat, and was most likely to occur where “primary group cohesion” (the strength of bonds among unit members) was high, but “secondary group cohesion” (identification with the norms of the military as an organization) was low. High cohesion among unit-members provided strong motives to avenge unit losses through extreme violence, while weak identification with organizational norms allowed mutilation to emerge as a unit-level “practice of war.” In addition to providing statistical evidence for this explanation, I use case study evidence to trace the emergence of mutilation at the level of single Army unit.

Chapter 5 provides additional empirical material that complements and extends the findings presented in Chapters 2-4, showing that the arguments developed to explain top-down and bottom-up atrocities apply to the broader universe of rebel groups and state security forces. Using an original cross-national dataset on extreme atrocities perpetrated in 92 civil wars between 1980 and 2011, I begin by providing an estimate of the overall prevalence of extreme atrocity in civil war. I then try to substantiate the claim that many rebel groups adopt extreme atrocities as a matter of policy, whereas official government security forces very rarely do so. I use the data to explore the relationship between the qualitative and quantitative dimensions of extreme violence, showing that extreme atrocity is not merely an epiphenomenon of large-scale killing of civilians. Finally, I use my data to test some macro-level implications of the main theoretical arguments made in previous chapters.

Chapter 6 concludes the dissertation by discussing its contributions and drawing out some implications of my findings for research and policy.

## 2

## Extreme Atrocity in Armed Conflict

### Abstract

Wartime violence sometimes takes particularly extreme forms. Not only do belligerents frequently kill civilians, but violent atrocities sometimes go beyond killing to include acts of overt cruelty such as mutilation, rape, and the abuse of human remains. While individual instances of such violence likely occur in almost all wars, and might be explained by a certain prevalence of psychopathy or sadism among combatants, or by a process of “barbarization” inherent in war, neither individual psychology nor universal wartime conditions can explain why armed groups seem to *vary* in the extent to which they perpetrate such violence. Using conflict data from Liberia, Sierra Leone, Guatemala, and Colombia, I document variation across armed actors in the frequency and prevalence of extreme atrocity, and use this variation to explore the plausibility of five sets of explanations for extreme violence derived from the literature on civilian victimization. I consider whether extreme atrocities are used strategically to deter civilian defection in the context of “irregular” warfare, whether they result from an inability of armed groups to control the violence of their recruits, whether they serve as a means of socializing forcibly-recruited combatants, whether they reflect the mobilization of ethnic hatred, and whether they are motivated by revenge. I find that none of the proposed explanations can entirely account for the patterns observed, suggesting that a multi-causal explanation is required to understand different pathways towards extreme atrocity.

## 2.1 Introduction

Why does wartime violence sometimes take the form of extreme atrocity? Not only do belligerents frequently kill civilians, but violent atrocities sometimes go beyond killing to include acts of overt cruelty including mutilation, public torture, rape, and the abuse of human remains. In recent decades, such violence has been perpetrated on a large scale in a number of armed conflicts. In the civil war in Sierra Leone in the 1990s, rebels in the Revolutionary United Front (RUF) frequently amputated the hands or arms of civilians, mutilated and subjected them to gang rape (Mitton 2015; Cohen 2016). In Colombia, paramilitaries repeatedly used brutal forms of violence including “throat slitting, quartering, decapitation, gutting, burning, castrating, impalement, and burns using acids or blowtorches” (Grupo de Memoria Histórica 2016, 60). And in Iraq and Syria, the self-styled Islamic State became infamous for spectacular acts of extreme violence including public beheadings, crucifixions, live immolation and drowning (Friis 2018).

Individual instances of extreme atrocity likely occur in almost all wars, and might be explained by a certain prevalence of psychopathy or sadism among combatants, or by a process of “barbarization” inherent in war (Kassimeris 2006). Yet neither individual psychology nor universal wartime conditions can explain why armed groups seem to *vary* in the extent to which they perpetrate such violence. In some groups, episodes of extreme atrocity remain isolated cases, often punished as breaches of military discipline. In others, on the contrary, large numbers of combatants appear to adopt such practices as an established part of their “repertoire of violence” (Gutiérrez-Sanín and Wood 2017).

What explains such variation? This article explores patterns of “extreme atrocity”—acts of violence involving the deliberate display of overt cruelty—in four civil wars. Using conflict data from Liberia, Sierra Leone, Guatemala, and Colombia, I document variation across armed actors in the frequency and prevalence of extreme atrocity, and use this variation to probe the plausibility of five sets of explanations for extreme violence derived from the literature on civilian victimization. I consider whether extreme atrocities are used strategically to deter civilian defection in the context of “irregular” warfare (Kalyvas 1999; Kalyvas 2006), whether they result from an inability of armed groups to control the violence of their recruits (Weinstein 2007;

Hoover Green 2018), whether they serve as a means of socializing forcibly-recruited combatants (Cohen 2016), whether they reflect the mobilization of ethnic hatred (Horowitz 2001; Kaufman 2001), and whether they are motivated by revenge.

My analysis finds partial support for several of the proposed explanations, but also concludes that none can entirely account for the patterns observed. A strategic logic based on imperative of deterring civilian defection in the context of irregular warfare provides a plausible explanation for at least some extreme atrocities, but cannot account for why some actors in irregular war avoid such violence, nor for why extreme atrocities occur outside the context of irregular war. I also find that extreme atrocities are often associated with weak disciplinary control, though some reputedly well-disciplined forces also use such violence in a strategic manner. There is also suggestive evidence that a desire for revenge motivates a substantial proportion of recruits within groups that are relatively “specialized” in extreme forms of violence. Finally, the data suggests that ethnic hostility and forced recruitment play a relatively limited role in explaining variation in extreme atrocities within these four conflicts.

The remainder of this article proceeds in four parts. After defining the concept of “extreme atrocity” in the first section, the second section presents data from the civil wars in Liberia, Sierra Leone, Guatemala and Colombia to illustrate variation across groups in the frequency and prevalence of extreme atrocity. The third section then focuses on “outliers,” armed groups that perpetrated extreme atrocity with a high frequency and/or prevalence, and examines to what extent the explanations listed above can account for their use of extreme violence. The fourth section concludes by proposing a framework for integrating “top-down” and “bottom-up” explanations of extreme atrocity.

## 2.2 Definition

I define “extreme atrocities” as acts of physical violence characterized by the public display of overt cruelty, that is to say, by the selection of techniques calculated to maximize the physical or psychological suffering of victims. While most wartime violence results in profound suffering, much of which is deliberately caused and therefore cruel in some sense, I focus here on acts of



“overt cruelty,” that is, acts of violence in which the perpetrator’s choice of methods or techniques of violence suggests that increasing or maximizing the suffering of victims is central to their intentions. The definition thus excludes forms of violence in which the degree of suffering caused to victims is largely incidental to the perpetrator’s choice of techniques, which is dictated instead by tactical or other considerations. In terms of Collins’s (1974) typology of cruelty, extreme atrocities correspond to “ferociousness”—violence characterized by “overt brutality,” in which the suffering of victims is the desired outcome—rather than “callousness”—violence characterized by indifference to the victim’s pain.

I conceptualize overt cruelty as operating through two modes. The first consists of physical assaults on the body, usually involving acts that “inflict gratuitous and shocking forms of injury” (Winter 2018, 28), notably by mutilating or dismembering the body, or by methods of killing that “combin[e] an excess of pain with the debasement of the person and the desecration of his body” (Garland 2005, 814). Though this type of cruelty operates mainly through the physical suffering it inflicts on its primary victim, it also inflicts severe psychological suffering on those forced to witness it. In some cases, the latter form of victimization can be perpetrated even after the death of the primary victim, through postmortem desecration and the display of mutilated bodies (Beck and Tolnay 2019). The second mode of overt cruelty involves deliberate attacks on social bonds, especially those most central to a victim’s sense of self. This includes, notably, attacks on family bonds involved in acts such as public rape, coerced killing among family members, or forced incest (see von Joeden-Forgey 2010). In practice, acts of physical cruelty, when perpetrated in public, and especially in front of community- or family-members, simultaneously attack bodily integrity and social bonds, victimizing both the primary target of violence and those observing it.

Techniques of extreme atrocity include: mutilations of the human body (amputation of body parts, dismemberment); the use of intensely painful means of killing (deliberate live immolation or interment, dragging and throwing deaths, the deliberate use of primitive or edged weapons); the coerced performance of traumatic actions (forced incest, forced cannibalism, forced ingestion of “taboo” items); various acts of sexual violence (gang rape, sexual mutilation); and the abuse of human remains (postmortem mutilation and the display of body parts). The spe-

cific techniques chosen by perpetrators vary across conflicts, and may be determined in part by unique historical and cultural contexts (see Taylor 1999; Ellis 1999). Yet all such techniques share a common feature (the intentional infliction of extreme suffering) which makes comparison across diverse contexts possible.

As defined above, the concept of “extreme atrocity” includes only *public* forms of violence. This helps distinguish the concept from closely related phenomena such as torture and rape, both of which are characterized by deliberate cruelty, but neither of which is *necessarily* public. Torture in places of detention, particularly for purposes of interrogation, occurs frequently in armed conflict. Yet such violence usually remains hidden and officially denied given the opprobrium it attracts. While public torture has been common in different historical periods (Foucault 1977; Spierenberg 1984), in recent times spectacular torture has been replaced by “torture as a secret practice... [conducted] behind the scenes, in locations closed off to the public” (Di Cesare 2018, 11); as Celermajer (2019, 30) argues, “secrecy or concealment is one of the distinguishing features of modern torture; its commission is almost always shielded from public view.” Extreme atrocities, in contrast, are deliberately “staged” for a more or less extensive audience (Fujii 2017).

As with torture, rape too may occur in more or less public spaces. Much wartime rape is deliberately concealed by perpetrators: this is explicitly recognized by the rules of procedure of international criminal tribunals which generally do not require the corroboration of victims’ testimony in cases of sexual violence because such violence “often takes place with no witnesses or only witnesses acting in collaboration with the perpetrator.”<sup>5</sup> At least some rape is public, however, deliberately staged as a means of inflicting additional suffering on the victim and on those witnessing it. The concept of extreme atrocity includes those cases of torture or rape that involve such public displays of violence.

Extreme atrocity has so far received insufficient attention in the scholarly literature on armed conflict and political violence. While there are a number of valuable studies of such atrocities committed in individual conflicts (Ellis 1999; Fujii 2009; Keen 2005; Mitton 2015; Suárez

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<sup>5</sup> United Nations, International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia, “Innovative Procedures,” (no date) <https://www.icty.org/en/features/ Crimes-sexual-violence/innovative-procedures>

2008; Taylor 1999; Wilson 1992), few have systematically examined variation in extreme atrocity across armed actors (but see Sémelin 2007; Cohen 2016). In what follows, I explicitly address such variation and focus in particular on cases in which extreme atrocities become an established part of an armed group’s “repertoire of violence.” Following Hoover Green (2018, 5), I define a repertoire of violence as “the forms of violence frequently used by an actor, and their relative proportions.” Existing literature distinguishes between repertoires that are “narrow”—including only a few, tightly controlled forms of violence—or “broad”—comprising many forms of violence, both ordered and unordered (Gutiérrez-Sanín and Wood 2017, 24; Hoover Green 2018, 7). In principle, extreme atrocity can become an established part of either type of repertoire. I consider extreme atrocity to be an established part of an armed group’s repertoire of violence when combatants from that group perpetrate extreme atrocity with a high *frequency* (i.e. a high rate of repetition over a period of time) or a high *prevalence* (i.e. extreme atrocities make up a large proportion of a group’s overall violence).

### 2.3 Variation Across Groups: Evidence from Four Civil Wars

Systematic, cross-national data on extreme atrocity in wartime is not currently available. I turn therefore to data gathered after civil wars in Liberia, Sierra Leone, Guatemala, and Colombia. All of these conflicts featured high levels of extreme atrocity, while exhibiting significant variation in repertoires of violence across armed actors. Actors in these conflicts also varied on a number of dimensions plausibly related to the occurrence of extreme violence, including warfare, ethnicity, organization, and recruitment. All four conflicts have produced rich datasets on wartime violence. For the Liberian and Sierra Leonean wars, I use data derived from eyewitness statements provided to the countries’ post-war Truth and Reconciliation Commissions (TRCs) (Cibelli et al. 2009a; Gohdes and Ball 2010). Data on Guatemala and Colombia come from datasets produced by nongovernmental organizations on the basis of victim and media reports (Ball 1999; Grupo de Memoria Histórica 2016). Table 2.1 summarizes the main features of the four datasets. Importantly, direct comparisons *across* the datasets is complicated by the fact that they employ differ-

ent units of analysis and document different types of violence. All of the datasets, moreover, draw on “convenience samples” (mostly victim self-reports) collected without the use probability-based sampling methods and are therefore likely subject to a variety of reporting biases.<sup>6</sup> For this reason, I do not use the data for quantitative analysis of fine-grained variations in violence across space or time, but only to describe broad differences in the role that extreme atrocities play in the repertoires of different groups.

**Table 2.1 Data on extreme atrocities in four civil wars**

| Data source                 | <b>TRC of Liberia</b>                                    | <b>TRC of Sierra Leone</b>                    | <b>Centro Internacional para Investigaciones en Derechos Humanos (Guatemala)</b> | <b>Grupo de Memoria Histórica (Colombia)</b>               |
|-----------------------------|--|---|--|--|
| Years                       | 1989-2003  | 1990-2000                                     | 1980-1995  | 1980-2012  |
| Unit of analysis            | individual violations (lethal and non-lethal)            | individual violations (lethal and non-lethal) | individual killings  | lethal events (“selective assassinations” and “massacres”) |
| Measure of extreme atrocity | amputation, forced cannibalism, ingestion of taboo items | amputation, forced cannibalism                | “overkill”   | “excessive abuse”  |

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<sup>6</sup> The organization that makes the datasets from Guatemala, Sierra Leone, and Liberia publicly available requests that those using the data include the following disclaimer emphasizing this fact: “These are convenience sample data, and as such they are not a statistically representative sample of events in this conflict. These data do not support conclusions about patterns, trends, or other substantive comparisons (such as over time, space, ethnicity, age, etc.).” See <https://hrdag.org/data-publication/> See also Price and Ball 2015.

Each dataset documents forms of violence that fit my definition of extreme atrocity. In the data from Liberia and Sierra Leone, I code as acts of extreme atrocity all reported cases of amputation, forced cannibalism, and (for Liberia) forced ingestion of “taboo items.”<sup>7</sup> These cases are reported in the data as separate “violations” (individual acts of violence). In contrast, the datasets from Guatemala and Colombia measure atrocity not as a separate type of violation, but as a characteristic of certain lethal events—as “overkill” in the case of Guatemala, and as “excessive abuse” in the case of Colombia.<sup>8</sup> Because of these differences, it is not possible to compare the frequency and prevalence of extreme atrocity across the four conflicts. I focus instead on variation across armed groups *within* each conflict, identifying actors in each war who appear to have perpetrated extreme atrocity with a particularly high frequency or prevalence. In all four conflicts, *frequency* is measured as the average number of reported cases of extreme atrocity perpetrated by a group per year of armed activity.<sup>9</sup> *Prevalence* measures reported cases of extreme atrocity as a proportion of lethal violence. For Liberia and Sierra Leone, this means the number of reported cases of amputation or forced consumption per 100 reported cases of killing; for Guatemala and Colombia, it means the percentage of killings characterized by “overkill” or “excessive abuse.”

Figures 2.1.a to 2.1.d plot the frequency and prevalence of extreme atrocity perpetrated by armed groups in each conflict.<sup>10</sup> The plots suggest considerable variation in repertoires of violence across groups: while all groups perpetrated at least some extreme atrocity, the frequency with which they did so, and the prevalence of such violence in their repertoires, varied. This

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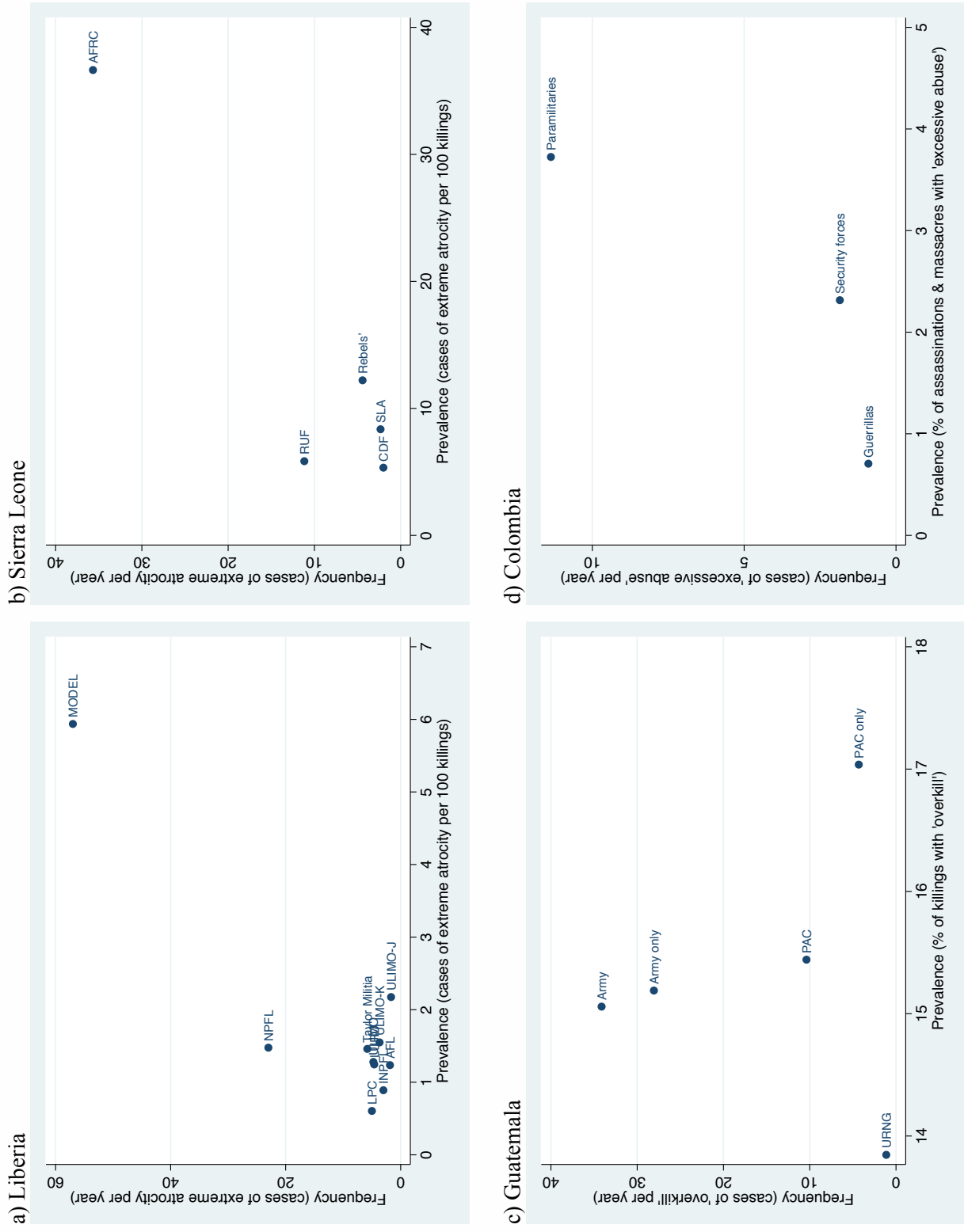
<sup>7</sup> These violations are defined in Cibelli et al. 2009b, 54-61. To ensure that this particular operationalization is not driving my results, Figure I.1 in Appendix I documents variation in extreme atrocity using alternative coding that includes torture or rape. In most cases, observed patterns are consistent across the different operationalizations.

<sup>8</sup> “Overkill” is defined as “the practice of committing additional indignities on someone who is either in the process of being killed or who is already dead,” including “burning or mutilating a corpse, decapitating a corpse after death, shooting bullets into a body already killed by stabbing, raping a victim before killing her, or torturing a victim to death” (Ball, Kobrak, and Spierer 1999, 71). “Excessive abuse” (*sevicia*) is defined as violence causing injuries “beyond [those] needed to kill,” and is characterized by “excessive violence and cruelty that is taken to the extreme of mutilating and quartering the body of the victim” (Grupo de Memoria Histórica 2016, 60).

<sup>9</sup> Years of armed activity were established based on secondary sources. In the TRC datasets, witnesses sometimes attribute violations to groups for years in which, according to secondary sources, these groups did not exist. These are considered misattributions and dropped from the analysis.

<sup>10</sup> For Liberia and Sierra Leone, I exclude actors responsible for less than 1% of reported violations.

**Figure 2.1** Variation in frequency and prevalence of extreme atrocity



confirms the pertinence of the question asked at the outset of this article: what accounts for variation in the extent to which armed groups resort to extreme atrocity? The plots suggest that such variation is not determined exclusively by whether actors are rebel groups or state forces (both can be found committing high levels of extreme atrocity), nor purely by how violent actors are in general: some groups kill civilians on a large scale but use extreme atrocity only rarely.<sup>11</sup> Finally, the plots show that the use of extreme atrocity in these conflicts was generally asymmetric: one “side” in the conflict (counterinsurgents in Guatemala and Colombia, rebels in Liberia and Sierra Leone) used such violence with a considerably higher frequency or prevalence than the other.

The data from Liberia reveals a particularly interesting pattern of “clustering” in which most actors perpetrated extreme atrocity with a broadly similar frequency and prevalence, suggesting a certain “normal” or “standard” level of atrocity against which more extreme groups can usefully be compared. One such group—Charles Taylor’s National Patriotic Front of Liberia (NPFL)—committed extreme atrocities with a higher frequency than most, while another—the Movement for Democracy in Liberia (MODEL)—did so with a higher frequency and prevalence. A similar pattern, though with fewer groups, can be found in Sierra Leone where two groups—the Sierra Leone Army (SLA) and Civil Defense Forces (CDF)—appear to have perpetrated extreme atrocity with a relatively low frequency and prevalence, one group—the RUF—perpetrated such violence with significantly higher frequency, and another group—the Armed Forces Revolutionary Council (AFRC)—perpetrated extreme atrocity with particularly high frequency and prevalence.<sup>12</sup>

In Guatemala, the data shows that extreme atrocity was perpetrated relatively rarely by insurgents (the National Revolutionary Union of Guatemala, or URNG) and by the Guatemalan police, and to a much greater extent by the army and Civil Defense Patrols (PAC). Extreme atrocity (“overkill”) perpetrated by the army was particularly frequent compared to that of other

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<sup>11</sup> According to the Grupo de Memoria Histórica (2016, 42, 49, 61), Colombian guerrillas perpetrated over 4000 assassinations and massacres between 1980 and 2012, but only 30 of these featured “excessive abuse.”

<sup>12</sup> The Sierra Leone dataset also includes the perpetrator category “rebels” in cases where violations could not be specifically attributed to the RUF or AFRC. If “rebel” extreme atrocities are coded as RUF atrocities, this would move the RUF towards the “high frequency, high prevalence” category alongside the AFRC. Figure I.1 in Appendix I shows that the inclusion of torture in the definition of extreme atrocity moves the CDF into the “low frequency, high prevalence” category.

actors. Determining the frequency or prevalence of extreme atrocity perpetrated by the PAC is complicated by the fact that civil patrollers most often engaged in killings alongside the army. Taking into account only killings in which the PAC is reported to have acted alone, its extreme atrocity was of a frequency comparable to that of rebels or the police, but more prevalent—indeed, more prevalent even than that of the army.<sup>13</sup> Finally, the data for Colombia shows clear variation in terms of both the frequency and prevalence of extreme atrocity across three broad categories of combatants: Colombian guerrillas appear to have perpetrated extreme atrocity only rarely; extreme atrocity by state forces (the army and police) was both more frequent and more prevalent than that of rebels; and anti-insurgent paramilitaries were in a league of their own in terms of both the frequency and prevalence of extreme atrocities.<sup>14</sup>

The patterns observed in the data suggest several distinct “profiles” of actors (Table 2.2). Most actors in the four conflicts appear to have perpetrated extreme atrocity relatively infrequently, with such violence constituting only a relatively small proportion of their repertoire of violence. On the other hand, a small number of “outliers” in all four conflicts perpetrated extreme atrocity with particularly high frequency, prevalence, or both. Groups in the “high prevalence” categories are particularly interesting: whereas the high frequency of extreme atrocity perpetrated by some armed groups may simply reflect their high overall levels of violence against civilians, a high prevalence of extreme atrocity indicates a degree of “specialization” in extreme atrocity.

It must be stressed again that these data come from non-random “convenience samples.” To guard against the possibility that the patterns observed reflect unmeasured reporting biases in the data rather than real differences between groups, I compare the patterns observed above to other quantitative or qualitative data. In the case of Sierra Leone, the basic patterns observed here are confirmed in the results of randomized surveys of households and of ex-combatants conducted in the years following the end of the war. For example, data from the Sierra Leone

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<sup>13</sup> Bateson (2013, 210) argues that the “overkill” variable in the CIIDH data underreports extreme atrocities. This poses a problem for my analysis only if the rate of underreporting is large and systematic enough to alter my evaluation of the PAC and the military as the main perpetrators of such violence. This seems unlikely in light of qualitative accounts of violence in Guatemala.

<sup>14</sup> The available data does not permit disaggregating patterns of violence committed by the different groups that made up these broad categories.



**Table 2.2 Different profiles of actors**

|                               |      | Prevalence of extreme atrocity  |   |
|-------------------------------|------|---|---|
|                               |      | Low   | High  |
| Frequency of extreme atrocity | High | <i>High violence, low specialization</i> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• NPFL</li> <li>• RUF</li> <li>• Guatemalan army</li> </ul>   | <i>High violence, high specialization</i> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• MODEL</li> <li>• AFRC</li> <li>• Colombian paramilitaries</li> </ul> |
|                               | Low  | <i>Low violence, low specialization</i> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• AFL, ULIMO, ULIMO-J, ULIMO-K, LURD, LPC, INPFL, Taylor Militia</li> <li>• SLA, CDF</li> <li>• URNG, Guatemalan police</li> <li>• Colombian guerrillas</li> </ul> | <i>Low violence, high specialization</i> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• PAC</li> <li>• Colombian state forces</li> </ul>                      |

War Crimes Documentation survey, a randomized survey of Sierra Leoneans conducted in the early 2000s, confirms the overwhelming responsibility of the RUF and AFRC for amputations perpetrated during all phases of the conflict, while attributing much lower levels of amputation to the SLA and CDF (see Guberek et al. 2006, 26).<sup>15</sup> Data from a survey of Sierra Leonean ex-combatants (Humphreys and Weinstein 2004) reveals far higher tolerance for the practice of amputating civilians in the RUF and AFRC than in other groups: asked how likely members of their armed units were to be punished for such behaviour, 61% of former members of the AFRC and 48% of former members of the RUF responded that such behaviour was “almost never” or only “sometimes” punished; in comparison, 26% of former SLA soldiers, and only 4.7% of former CDF members indicated such tolerance.

Confirming the patterns observed in the raw data from Liberia, Guatemala and Colombia

<sup>15</sup> The widespread use of amputations by the RUF and AFRC is also confirmed by a survey conducted by Médecins Sans Frontières among IDPs from Freetown several months after the RUF-AFRC attack on the city: a remarkably high proportion of respondents reported witnessing extreme atrocities committed during the attack, including torture, amputations, live immolation, and public rape (see de Jong, Mulhern, and van der Kam 2000, 11-12).

is more difficult. Survey data on ex-combatants in Liberia comparable to that from Sierra Leone exists (see Pugel 2007) but is not publicly available. However, human rights reports and scholarship on the Liberian conflict generally confirm the view that extreme atrocities by the NPFL were common (Africa Watch 1991; Human Rights Watch 1994; Ellis 1999). The unusual frequency and prevalence of such violence attributed to MODEL in the data is more difficult to confirm: the group participated in the conflict for only one year (2003), and is sometimes credited with more restrained violence than other groups (Republic of Liberia 2009, 135). The Liberian TRC's data shows that the majority of reported cases of extreme atrocity attributed to MODEL took the form of the forced ingestion of "taboo items"; this "milder" form of atrocity (at least compared to amputations or forced cannibalism) might account for MODEL's generally better reputation. Yet such acts, presumably calculated to inflict intense physical or psychological suffering, still fit the definition of extreme atrocity; indeed they may reveal a form of atrocity used by combatants prohibited by their superiors from using more severe forms of violence.<sup>16</sup>

Qualitative descriptions of violence also confirm the characterization of Guatemalan state forces and Colombian paramilitaries as actors primarily responsible for extreme atrocity. In the case of Guatemala, multiple sources confirm the widespread use of extreme atrocities by the Guatemalan military (Falla 1994; Recovery of Historical Memory Project 1999; Commission for Historical Clarification 1999), while Bateson (2013, 215) confirms that "symbolic, demonstrative violence," including public torture, was a prominent part of PAC violence. The use of extreme atrocities by Colombian paramilitaries is also well documented (Grupo de Memoria Histórica 2016, 60; Suárez 2008).

## 2.4 Explaining the Outliers

What explains the patterns observed above? Why do some groups appear to adopt extreme atrocity as an established part of their repertoire of violence, perpetrating such violence with a far

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<sup>16</sup> On the other hand, the TRC data indicates that MODEL was also responsible for frequent torture. MODEL's status as an "outlier" is not affected by alternative operationalizations of extra-lethal violence that include torture or rape. See Appendix I.

higher frequency and/or prevalence than other groups? In this section I consider several possible explanations of extreme atrocity derived from the literature on civilian victimization.

### **2.4.1 Irregular warfare**

Armed groups might resort to extreme atrocity as part of a strategy designed to coerce civilian populations into compliance in the context of “irregular” warfare, that is, in conflicts characterized by profound asymmetries of military capability in which insurgents make widespread use guerrilla tactics, producing patterns of overlapping, fragmented territorial control. Both insurgents and incumbents in such conflicts have incentive to use violence selectively to target suspected enemy collaborators, especially civilians thought to be providing information to the enemy (Kalyvas 2006). With both sides vying to shape civilian behaviour in this manner, either side may decide to escalate to qualitatively more extreme practices in order to counter the coercive efforts of its opponent. In the case of insurgents, the resort to extreme atrocities is likely to be shaped by their relative military weakness compared to incumbents: such atrocities can signal to civilians “that although death at their hands might be less certain than death at the hands of the army, it will definitively be more brutal: more painful (through the use of knives and axes), more comprehensive (including entire families), transgressive of taboos (mutilation of dead bodies), etc.” (Kalyvas 1999, 270). State or para-state forces may also resort to extreme atrocities, targeting civilians perceived to be sympathetic to insurgents, especially in areas in which a strong rebel presence and weaker state control limits the state’s “infrastructural power” (Mann 1984), making its violence less discriminating (Kalyvas 2006) and more brutal (Ron 2003). Where locals are perceived to be highly loyal to insurgents, counterinsurgent forces may calculate that public displays of highly brutal violence are needed to shock civilians into compliance.

The occurrence of extreme atrocities in the civil wars in Guatemala and Colombia, both of which involved guerrilla warfare and fragmented territorial control, provides some evidence for a connection between extreme atrocity and irregular warfare. In Guatemala, extreme atrocities were perpetrated primarily by the army and PAC in the context of a brutal counterinsurgency campaign against rebels who used the favourable “geographical and social terrain” of Guatemala’s western highlands to wage guerrilla warfare against much stronger state forces (Stoll

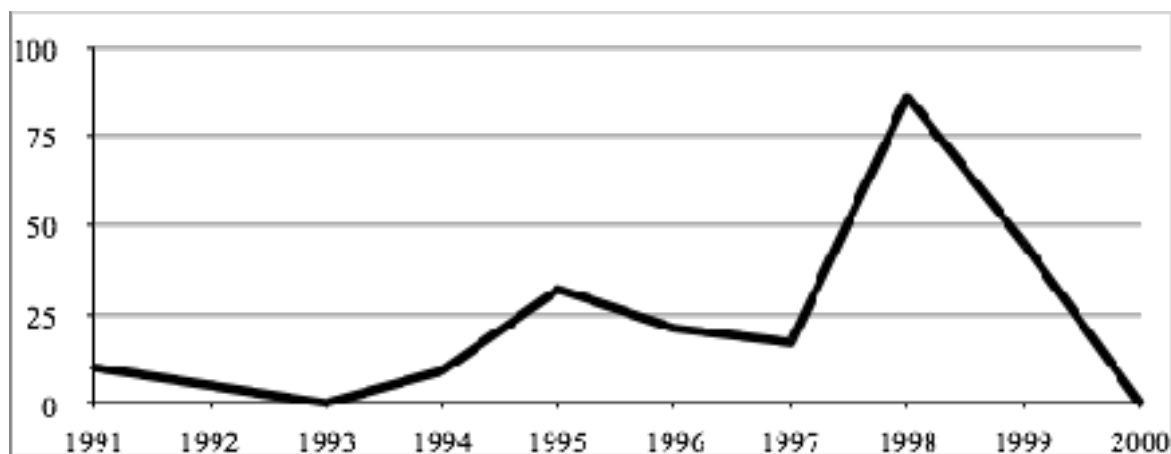
1993, 15). In response to insurgents' mobilization among the region's indigenous Mayan population, the Guatemalan army adopted a policy of "beans and bullets," rewarding loyal Mayan civilians with material goods while subjecting villages perceived as supportive of insurgents to indiscriminate massacre (Garrard-Burnett 2010, 86). Such massacres, often accompanied by public displays of cruelty, were particularly frequent in zones in which the army presence was weakest (Sullivan 2012). Here "entire villages... were massacred by being tortured, raped, garrotted, killed with a machete, hacked or bashed to death, shot or burned alive" (Schirmer 1998, 55). Documentary evidence and testimony by former soldiers suggests that army commanders came to view civilians in such areas as "completely loyal to the insurgents" (Schwartz and Straus 2017, 230) and therefore as enemies: Vela Castañeda (2016, 233) cites one officer stating that army commanders often "saw the civilian population as an enemy. Because they were collaborating with the guerrilla they were against the army, against the country." There is evidence that commanders sometimes directly dictated the specific methods of violence to be used in particular locations, as one soldier recalled: "The commander has his group of killers, and he tells them how they have to kill. Today they are going to behead or hang them, today they are going to rape all the women..." (cited in Leiby 2009, 459). Though it is not possible to establish how high up the military hierarchy such decisions about ordering extreme atrocity went, the existence of such orders supports the view that the army's "extreme cruelty was a resource used intentionally to produce and maintain a climate of terror" (Commission for Historical Clarification 1999, 26).

There is also evidence that extreme atrocity was used strategically by paramilitaries in the context of counterinsurgency warfare in Colombia. Gutiérrez-Sanín (2019, 137) describes Colombian paramilitaries as "counterinsurgencies oriented towards preventing violently any civilian collaboration with guerrillas." In areas in which guerrillas and paramilitaries contested territorial control, "the incorporation of extreme cruelty into the repertoire of paramilitary violence helped them to build up a terrifying reputation... and show people their willingness to take violence to extremes in order to fulfill the aim of territorial dominance" (Grupo de Memoria Histórica 2016, 62). Suárez's (2008) analysis of paramilitary atrocities in the Urabá region finds that they were most frequent during periods of more intense conflict between paramilitaries and guerrillas, and were used especially in "enemy" territory against men suspected of supporting the

insurgency. Ethnographic research among paramilitary leaders suggests that they explicitly understood their use of extreme violence as “a sort of counterterrorism aimed at the minds of the people [which] are filled with the terror of the guerrilla” (quoted in Civico 2016, 115).

Irregular warfare might also partially explain the use of extreme atrocities in Sierra Leone. The rebel RUF, which began the war in 1991 by seizing portions of territory on the country’s border with Liberia, was forced in late 1993 by a concerted government counter-offensive backed by Nigerian and Guinean troops to retreat to inaccessible jungle hide-outs and resort increasingly to tactics of guerrilla warfare (Sierra Leone Truth & Reconciliation Commission 2004, 180; Richards 1999). Soon after this, the emergence of counterinsurgent communal militias (the CDF) “resulted in an increase in atrocities committed by the RUF as a means to deter popular support for the militias, and to punish those seen as in collusion with the enemy” (Mitton 2015, 64). Figure 2.2, which plots annual cases of extreme atrocity by the RUF and AFRC reported in the Sierra Leone TRC data, shows that the number of RUF atrocities began to increase at this time. Peters (2011, 149) cites RUF fighters who confirm the connection between this rise of the CDF and a strategy of using amputations used to terrify suspected enemy collaborators: “If a specific area caused a threat to the RUF area or a base, the commander can decide to make the area ‘fearful’ by amputating some people.”

**Figure 2.2 RUF and AFRC extreme atrocity in Sierra Leone**



Source: Gohdes and Ball 2010

In sum, there is evidence for a connection between the dynamics of irregular warfare and at least some instances of extreme atrocity across three of the four conflicts. Yet the data also shows that irregular warfare *alone* cannot account for the variation observed in the data. In Guatemala and Colombia, the data shows that extreme atrocities were used primarily by state and para-state actors rather than insurgents: in Guatemala, the URNG is recorded as having killed relatively few civilians, and the frequency and prevalence of its use of “overkill” was below that of other actors; in Colombia, where rebels sometimes used considerable violence against civilians, such violence only rarely took the form of extreme atrocity. Such relative restraint indicates that factors beyond the irregular nature of conflict played a role in shaping insurgents’ repertoires of violence in these conflicts. In the case of Sierra Leone too, irregular warfare alone cannot explain the use of extreme atrocities. As indicated in Figure 2.2, the worst period for extreme atrocity by rebels occurred *after* the end of the RUF’s phase of guerrilla warfare, when the group was allied with the AFRC, a faction of the military which overthrew the government in Freetown in a coup in 1997. After being expelled from the city in March 1998, the AFRC and RUF staged a largely conventional advance on and battle over Freetown in late 1998 and early 1999 during which they “unleashed on the city a staggering scale and intensity of cruel violence” (Mitton 2015, 267; Human Rights Watch 1999). Similarly, in Liberia, where armed factions engaged in a more or less “conventional” (if low-tech) war (Duyvesteyn 2005), fighting over relatively well-defined territories (see Lidow 2016, 99, 104, 106, 110), extreme atrocities cannot be explained by irregular warfare.

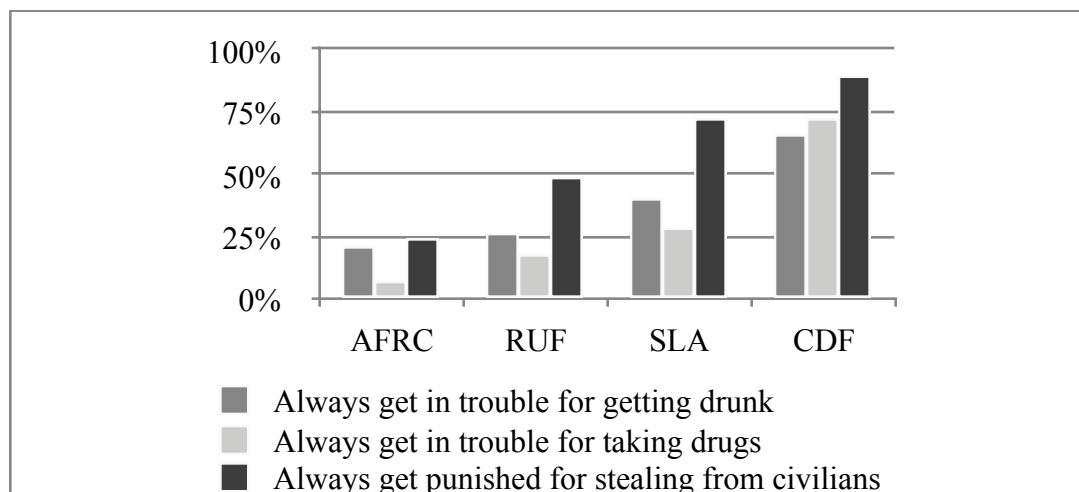
Indeed, there is evidence from both Liberia and Sierra Leone that much violence against civilians was a reflection of armed groups’ weak mechanisms of internal control (Ellis 1999; Peters 2011; Lidow 2016; Humphreys and Weinstein 2006), rather than top-down strategies. As Humphreys and Weinstein (2006, 445) write with regard to Sierra Leone: “Rather than being orchestrated by well-oiled machines capable of committing systematic acts of violence... abuse of civilians in Sierra Leone was more likely when organizations had relatively chaotic, disorganized internal structures that permitted misbehavior both within and outside units.” This suggests a need to move beyond strategic explanations and consider the possibility that extreme atrocities can emerge “from the bottom up,” as widespread but unordered “practices of war” (Wood 2018).

### 2.4.2 Internal control

A second set of possible explanations of extreme atrocity focuses on the (in)ability of armed groups to control the behaviour of group members. Research on wartime sexual violence has shown that whether or not combatants rape civilians is at least partly shaped by armed groups' practices and institutions for shaping combatant behaviour (Wood 2009; Hoover Green 2018). The frequency and prevalence of extreme atrocity might similarly be determined by the degree to which armed groups are willing and able to shape and police the violence of rank-and-file combatants through mechanisms of internal discipline and/or efforts at political education.

Analysis of patterns of extreme atrocity in Sierra Leone and Colombia provides strong evidence for an association between weak discipline and extreme violence. In Sierra Leone, as Humphreys and Weinstein (2006) have shown, ex-combatants who reported generally lax disciplinary standards within their military units also reported considerably greater tolerance for abusive treatment of civilians. A comparison of their data with the TRC data on extreme atrocity shows a clear association between weak discipline (low likelihood of punishment for undisciplined behaviour) and reported use of extreme atrocity (Figure 2.3). Members of the RUF and AFRC, the two groups that perpetrated the most widespread extreme atrocity according to the TRC data, reported the weakest disciplinary standards on average, while members of the CDF, which perpetrated fewer atrocities, reported the strongest.

An association between weak discipline and extreme violence can also be seen in the Colombian case. Gutiérrez-Sanín has contrasted the role of discipline among Colombian guerrillas and paramilitaries: the former, he argues, adhere to strict “verticalism [and] a clear line of command,” in which “any act of insubordination can be punished with death” (Gutiérrez-Sanín 2008, 13); among the latter, in contrast, “discipline, monitoring and socialization mechanisms were weak,” resulting in “pervasive opportunistic violence” (Gutiérrez-Sanín 2019, 232, 138). Surveys among Colombian ex-combatants similarly reveal higher rates of reported indiscipline among paramilitaries than among guerrillas (Arjona 2016, 127). As noted above, violence data from Colombia indicates that paramilitaries engaged in high levels of extreme atrocity while extreme atrocity by guerrillas has been rare.

**Figure 2.3 Discipline in Sierra Leone**

Source: Humphreys and Weinstein 2004

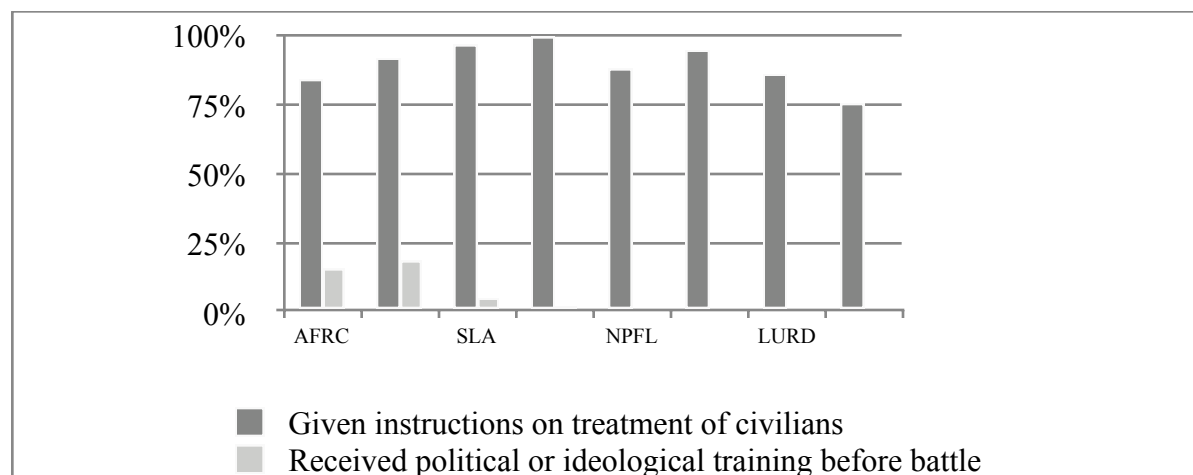
The relationship between indiscipline and extreme violence is less clear in the cases of Liberia and Guatemala. In Liberia, nearly *all* of the armed groups involved in that country’s conflict have been described as organizationally-weak and generally incapable of implementing “coercive discipline” (Käihkö 2015). Yet, as seen above, the frequency and prevalence of extreme atrocity appears to have varied across these groups, suggesting that weak discipline alone cannot account for such violence. In the case of Guatemala, as noted above, there is evidence that at least some extreme atrocity was ordered by commanders, rather than emerging “from the bottom up.” The Guatemalan army, the main perpetrator of extreme atrocity, has been described as a well-organized force, “maintained through strict military discipline and hierarchization of rank” (Schirmer 1998, 47). Such discipline could translate into restraint when the army had an interest in limiting violence: “Violence against civilians considered ‘friendly’ ... was severely punished” (Recovery of Historical Memory Project 1999, 171). During its campaign of massacres, in contrast, military discipline could be used to compel compliance and participation in acts of extreme violence (Recovery of Historical Memory Project 1999, 129).

Evidence for a restraining effect of political education (Hoover Green 2018) is also mixed. In Colombia, such an effect might plausibly account for some of the variation in extreme atrocity between guerrillas and paramilitaries: according to Gutiérrez-Sanín (2008, 26), becom-



ing a guerrilla in Colombia entailed intense indoctrination and the “learning [of] new preferences”; among the paramilitaries, in contrast, group cohesion relied less on preference-change and more on selective incentives. More broadly, the low levels of insurgent extreme atrocity in Colombia might be related to a broader tendency of leftist or Marxist rebels to invest more in political education (Hoover Green 2016) compared to counterinsurgents. This contrast seems to hold also in Guatemala: while the URNG is generally seen as a highly ideological organization, there is little evidence of political education within the army or civil patrols.<sup>17</sup>

**Figure 2.4 Political education in Sierra Leone and Liberia**



Source: Humphreys and Weinstein 2004, Pugel 2007.

As shown in Figure 2.4, there is not much evidence for an association between political education and patterns of extreme atrocity in Liberia and Sierra Leone. Data from surveys of ex-combatants shows that large majorities of respondents from all armed groups in these conflicts reported receiving instructions on how they were supposed to treat civilians. Though such instructions were reportedly more common in some of the more restrained groups (e.g. the CDF in Sierra Leone), the fact that many combatants in highly abusive groups (the AFRC, RUF, NPFL, and MODEL) reported having received instructions on the treatment of civilians suggests that

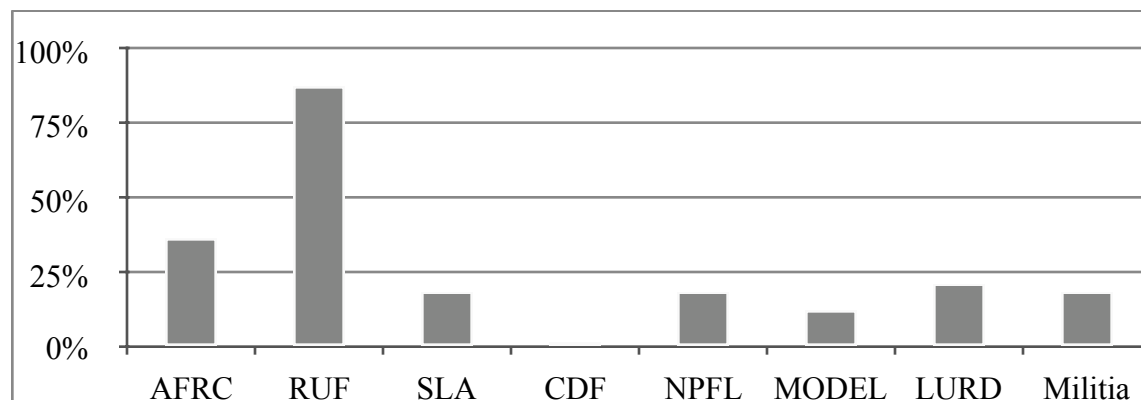
<sup>17</sup> Vela Castañeda’s (2016) study of rank-and-file perpetrators in Guatemala suggests that army troops were exposed only “a low level of indoctrination” (225). Bateson’s (2017) analysis of the PAC finds that the army “neither designed nor implemented any meaningful program of socialization” for patrollers (638).

such instructions alone were ineffective at preventing extreme violence. For armed groups in Sierra Leone, we also have data on whether group members reported receiving “political or ideological training.” Generally, such training was rare, though, counterintuitively, the organizations in which it was more common (the RUF and AFRC) were *more*, not less, abusive. Accounts of training in the RUF suggest that the goal of much its indoctrination efforts may have been designed to produce *more violent*, rather than more restrained, combatants (Mitton 2015).

### 2.4.3 Abduction and combatant socialization

In some groups, extreme violence itself may serve as a means of socializing recruits. Cohen (2016) argues that gang rape is used as a means of building social cohesion within armed groups that recruit combatants by means of abduction, and whose recruits therefore have low levels of commitment to the group. Individuals who participate in rape in such groups send costly signals to other group members regarding their reliability, fostering greater group cohesion and increasing the chances of survival for all group members. Cohen’s hypothesis might extend to extreme atrocities: perpetration of such atrocities is certainly personally costly, and can serve both to forcibly sever ties between an abductee and his/her community, and to forge ties of complicity among combatants (Mitton 2015, 136). One might expect, then, that groups that forcibly recruit combatants will be more likely to use extreme atrocity as part of their repertoire of violence.

As Figure 2.5 shows, data from ex-combatant surveys in Sierra Leone generally supports this argument: the most abusive groups—the RUF and AFRC—also appear to have drawn most heavily on abducted recruits. But the same appears *not* to be true for Liberia. Here groups that perpetrated *less* extreme atrocity (e.g. the Liberians United for Reconciliation and Democracy [LURD]) seem to have relied *more* on forced recruitment. In contrast, the Liberian group most “specialized” in extreme atrocity—MODEL—appears to have relied least on abducted recruits. According to data collected by Pugel (2007, 34), not only did MODEL have the lowest reported proportion of forced recruits of any Liberian group, but a full third of former MODEL members surveyed indicated having actively *sought out* the faction, a far higher proportion than for any other Liberian group.

**Figure 2.5 Proportion of ex-combatants reporting abduction**

Source: Humphreys and Weinstein 2004; Pugel 2007.

In Colombia and Guatemala, forced recruitment also does not appear to explain variation in extreme atrocity. Surveys of Colombian ex-combatants suggest that rates of forced recruitment were relatively low for both insurgents (10% of demobilized FARC soldiers and 3% of demobilized ELN soldiers reported being forcibly recruited) and paramilitaries (11% of demobilized paramilitaries reported forcible recruitment) (Arjona and Kalyvas 2011, 155). Ex-combatant surveys also suggest that a majority of paramilitaries entered their groups through prewar social networks and thus do not fit the profile of “strangers” with low cohesion described in Cohen’s theory (Daly 2016, 80). In Guatemala, in contrast, forcible recruitment was common in both the army and the PAC, that is, in the two forces that perpetrated the most widespread extreme atrocity. Yet, in the PAC at least, forcible recruitment did not necessarily result in low group cohesion in the manner theorized by Cohen. Rather than being groups of strangers thrown together by abduction, PAC members were usually recruited en masse from the same village, resulting in fairly cohesive, “neighborhood-based units” (Bateson 2013, 172).

That being said, there *is* some evidence for the use of extreme violence as a means of combatant socialization in groups responsible for high levels of extreme atrocity in both Guatemala and Colombia, but in neither case is there a clear connection between such practices and forcible recruitment. In Guatemala, evidence for violent socialization comes especially from more “elite” military units, notably the “*Kaibiles*” commando forces: according to Bateson, the

Guatemalan army designed “intensive programs of socialization” for these forces, which included “hazing, remote jungle survival training, collective punishment (or rewards), and grotesque, transgressive acts, such as drinking animals’ blood and raising a puppy and then killing it” (Bateson 2017, 638). According to the Commission for Historical Clarification (1999, 26), “[t]he extreme cruelty of these training methods... was then put into practice in a range of operations,” including through acts of extreme atrocity, such as the mutilation of fetuses during the Dos Erres massacre in December 1982 (Jones 2012). In Colombia, testimony by former paramilitaries describes the use of extreme violence during training given to paramilitary combatants at sites sometimes referred to as “dismemberment schools” (Suárez 2008, 72; Grupo de Memoria Histórica 2016, 55). It seems plausible that such training had a brutalizing effect on recruits which then manifested itself in extreme violence against civilians. However, as these examples suggest, such a process need not have been connected to practices of forcible recruitment or to low cohesion among recruits.

#### **2.4.4 Ethnic Hatred**

Another possible explanation of extreme atrocity is that it results from the mobilization of hatred against ethnic out-groups. Armed groups espousing ethnic chauvinist ideologies may perpetrate extreme forms of violence not so much as a means of controlling civilians, but as an expression of widespread hatred among rank-and-file perpetrators (Goldhagen 1996). Such hatred may reflect long-standing grievances and resentments (Petersen 2002), or may be actively primed and manipulated by war-time leaders. As Kaufman (2001, 38) argues, when elites use “ethnic symbolism” to mobilize supporters, “some proportion of people will react strongly to the aggressive symbolism and express it in extreme ways.” Where armed groups espousing ethnic hatred recruit large numbers of civilians with little or no military training or discipline, the resultant violence may resemble the “deadly ethnic riots” analyzed by Horowitz (2001). Horowitz argues that hate-fuelled atrocities are pervasive in such riots, something which analyses of European pogroms and American lynching tend to confirm (Gross 2001, 88; Kopstein and Wittenberg 2018, 2; Garland 2005; Beck and Tolnay 2019).

Among the four conflicts analyzed above, ethnic hatred seems plausible *prima facie* as an explanation of extreme atrocities only in the Guatemalan and Liberian cases. In Guatemala, according to the Commission for Historical Clarification, government counterinsurgency policy was informed by a racist ideology that viewed Mayans as “distinct, inferior, a little less than human,” and which thus “removed [them] from the moral universe of the perpetrators, making their elimination less problematic” (quoted in Grandin 2011, 66). The Commission also argued that such racism was an “important factor in the explanation of many of the excessive acts of violence committed during...the armed conflict” (quoted in Grandin 2011, 93). In the case of Liberia, Ellis argues that much of the conflict’s atrociousness was the result of the prewar “ethnification” of Liberian politics, and of resentments created by severe state repression. In this context, Ellis argues, the NPFL’s incursion into Liberia in late 1989, and its rapid growth and poor control over new recruits, unleashed an “ethnic pogrom” against members of tribal groups identified with the ruling regime (primarily Mandingo and Krahn), one characterized by extreme, revenge-fuelled atrocity (Ellis 1999, 78). In response, anti-Taylor groups in both the first and second Liberian wars (ULIMO, the LPC, LURD, and MODEL) mobilized primarily along ethnic lines. MODEL in particular was “an openly Krahn organization” representing the interests of Krahns persecuted and exiled under the Taylor regime after 1997 (Käihkö 2018, 135). The high prevalence of extreme atrocity in MODEL’s repertoire of violence may well have been motivated in part by hostility towards ethnic groups seen as pro-Taylor.

Yet the view that extreme atrocity in Guatemala and Liberia was motivated by ethnic hostility is substantially weakened by what we know about the ethnicity of perpetrators and victims in the two conflicts. In Guatemala, a large proportion of the direct perpetrators of violence, both army recruits and members of the PAC, were themselves Mayans recruited locally by the army.<sup>18</sup> With regards to the PAC, while much of their violence was perpetrated under army coercion, not all of it was: as figure 2.1c) above shows, the prevalence of extreme atrocity among the overwhelmingly indigenous civil patrollers was actually *higher* when patrollers killed on their own than when they were accompanied by the army. In the Liberian case, data from the Liberian TRC

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<sup>18</sup> According to Garrard-Burnett (2010, 107), “the *majority* of low-ranking soldiers in the Guatemalan army were themselves Mayan conscripts, as indigenous as [their victims]”. Cf. Schirmer (1998, 108).

does not reveal a consistent pattern of ethnic targeting in reported cases of extreme atrocity. For example, while the data identifies about 17% of reported victims of extreme atrocity perpetrated by the NPFL as Krahn or Mandingo, a larger proportion (28%) are identified as members of the Kpelle and Bassa tribes, groups that made up a large proportion of NPFL recruits (see Pugel 2007, 28). Similarly, extreme atrocity by MODEL does not appear to have been primarily ethnically-targeted: according to the TRC data, a majority (57%) of victims of MODEL extreme atrocities were themselves Krahn.

The case for ethnic hostility as an explanation of extreme atrocity is even weaker in the cases of Sierra Leone and Colombia, conflicts in which ethnicity played a far more limited role than in Liberia or Guatemala. In Sierra Leone, there is evidence that violence was associated in part with the *multi-ethnic* make-up of armed units (Humphreys and Weinstein 2006); notably, the armed group most closely associated with such atrocities—the RUF—recruited from a variety of different ethnic groups and had no evident “ethnic” agenda. An overtly “ethnic” agenda is also lacking in the Colombian case, where paramilitary recruitment cut across ethnic lines.<sup>19</sup> In sum, evidence that ethnic hostility is the driving force of wartime extreme atrocity is, at least in these four cases, decidedly weak.

### 2.4.5 Revenge

Finally, extreme atrocity may emerge from a cycle of violence that gives rise to strong desires for revenge. Individuals or communities victimized by atrocity may use further atrocity as means of “getting even,” and of reasserting lost dignity and power (Bergholz 2016, 167). Although revenge can be understood in rationalist terms, as a policy of “tit for tat” (Axelrod 1984) by which actors seek to affect enemy preferences by proportional responses to past harms, there are also reasons to think that vengeful violence, once unleashed, has a built-in tendency towards escalation. Research has found that perpetrators and victims of acts of vengeance tend to have different perception of what constitutes “equitable” retaliation for past harms, with parties on the receiving end of vengeance likely to view their punishment as excessive, fuelling an “escalating cycle of

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<sup>19</sup> By one estimate, paramilitaries in the predominantly Afro-Colombian coastal regions of Colombia draw up to 40% of their recruits from the Afro-Colombian community (Minority Rights Group nd.)

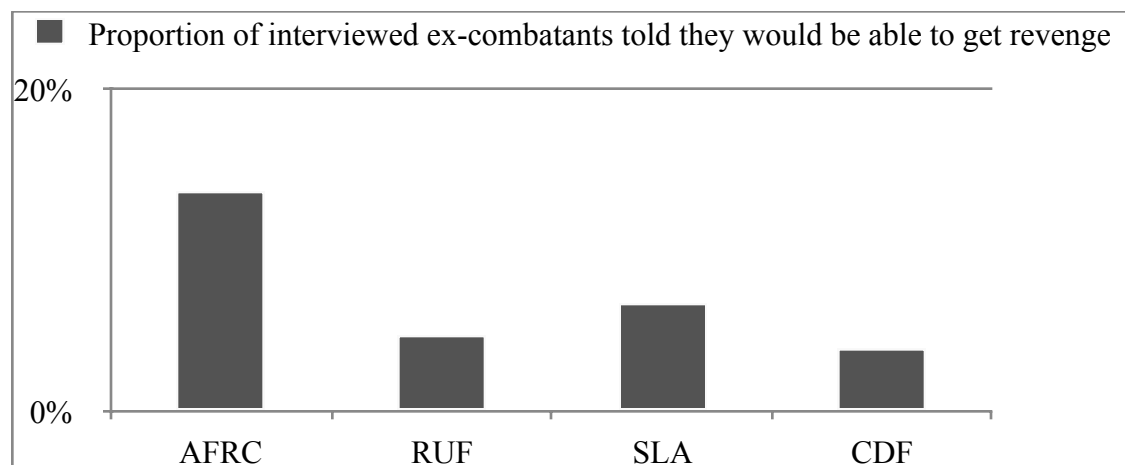
revenge, stemming from ongoing and spiralling attempts to restore equity” (Stillwell, Baumeister, and Del Priore 2008, 253). Moreover, there is also evidence that humans derive intrinsic emotional satisfaction from revenge. Such satisfaction may have evolved as a way of making threats of retaliation credible even when retaliation is likely to be ruinous for all parties (McDermott, Lopez, and Hatemi 2017). Thus McDermott et al. propose a distinction between “negative reciprocity”—proportional retaliation “aimed at recalibrating enemy preferences”—and revenge proper, which is inherently “disproportional to the initial harm, often triggered by hatred, and functions to inflict harm on the enemy for the sheer pleasure of extracting vengeance” (2017, 77). The inherently escalatory dynamics of revenge, and their crucial emotional components, could help account for the initial emergence of extreme atrocities in war-time as a disproportionate response to earlier, less extreme forms of violence.

There is some evidence, at least in the cases of Sierra Leone, Liberia and Colombia, that desires for revenge were associated with a higher prevalence of extreme atrocity. In all three conflicts, revenge appears to have been a more prominent motivation among combatants in armed groups that adopted extreme atrocity as a major part of their repertoire of violence. Data from ex-combatant surveys in Sierra Leone (Figure 2.6) shows that armed groups there varied in the degree to which they used revenge as a means of attracting recruits: the proportion of respondents who reported being offered the opportunity for revenge as an incentive to join their group was highest by far among veterans of the AFRC, the group that perpetrated extreme atrocity with the highest prevalence. Pugel’s survey of ex-combatants in Liberia suggests a similar finding: the proportion of respondents that reported being offered an opportunity for revenge was far higher among former members of MODEL—the group with the highest prevalence of extreme atrocity in that conflict—than among recruits from any other group (Pugel 2007, 36).

A similar association between extreme violence and revenge can be found in the Colombian context: in a survey of demobilized combatants in Colombia, 14% of demobilized paramilitaries—the most violent combatants in Colombia—reported revenge as a motivation for joining, while only 7% of former FARC fighters did so (Arjona and Kalyvas 2011, 155). It is not clear from the survey results precisely *what* these combatants wanted to avenge, but Gutiérrez-Sanín (2019, 205) suggests that many Colombian paramilitaries were former soldiers or policemen who

had personal or familial experiences of guerrilla violence, and joined the paramilitaries after finding that state forces “did not offer a good enough outlet to vent their anger.” It is possible that such highly-personal desires for vengeance, combined with the paramilitaries’ generally looser approach to internal discipline discussed above, created conditions favourable for particularly extreme forms of violence. The possible parallel here to the Liberian and Sierra Leonean cases—both MODEL and the AFRC were groups made up predominantly of former soldiers—deserves further consideration.

**Figure 2.6 Revenge as an incentive for recruitment in Sierra Leone**



Source: Humphreys and Weinstein 2004.

## 2.5 Conclusion

This article has documented variation in extreme atrocity across armed actors in four civil wars and explored the plausibility of a series of possible explanations for such variation derived from the literature on civilian victimization. On the whole, the findings suggest that no single factor can account for the patterns found in the data, but also that some explanations are more plausible than others, and therefore deserve further theoretical elaboration and testing. Table 2.3 summarizes the overall “fit” between each explanation and patterns of atrocity seen in each of the four conflicts. This “fit” is described as *strong* where the variation in the use of extreme atrocities between groups tracks closely that which would be expected from a given explanation, *partial*



where the explanation seems to accurately account for the behaviour of some actors but not others, and *weak* where the patterns observed are largely inconsistent with the proposed explanation.

**Table 2.3 “Fit” between proposed explanations and observed variation**

|  | LIBERIA | SIERRA LEONE | GUATEMALA      | COLOMBIA |
|--|---------|--------------|----------------|----------|
| <i>Irregular war</i>                           | Weak    | Partial      | Partial        | Partial  |
| <i>Group discipline</i>                        | Partial | Strong       | Weak           | Strong   |
| <i>Political education</i>                     | Weak    | Weak         | Strong         | Strong   |
| <i>Abduction &amp; combatant socialization</i> | Weak    | Strong       | Weak           | Weak     |
| <i>Ethnic hatred</i>                           | Partial | Weak         | Partial        | Weak     |
| <i>Revenge</i>                                 | Partial | Partial      | <i>no data</i> | Strong   |

Two findings are notable. First, ethnic hostility and forced recruitment appear to play a relatively limited role in explaining variation in extreme atrocities within these four conflicts. As the cases of Sierra Leone and Colombia demonstrate, extreme atrocity can be widespread in conflicts in which belligerents lack a clear “ethnic” agenda. Even in conflicts fought in part along “ethnic” lines, as in Liberia and Guatemala, ethnicity alone does not reliably predict who commits atrocities against whom. Recruitment through abduction appears to be clearly associated with extreme atrocity only in the case of Sierra Leone, whereas several groups in other conflicts—paramilitaries in Colombia, for instance—made widespread use of such violence while relying largely on voluntary recruitment. Of course, this is not to say that either ethnic hostility or forced recruitment might not play a larger role in a broader array of conflicts.

Second, irregular warfare, weak internal control, and revenge provide the most plausible potential explanations for wartime extreme atrocity across the four cases. The strategic impera-

tive of deterring civilian defection in a context of irregular warfare provides a plausible explanation for extreme atrocities perpetrated by counterinsurgent forces in Guatemala and Colombia, and for some atrocities perpetrated by rebels in Sierra Leone. At the same time, the data shows that irregular warfare is neither a necessary nor a sufficient condition for the emergence of such violence: insurgents in Guatemala and Colombia generally avoided extreme atrocity despite using guerrilla tactics, while extreme atrocity in Liberia and Sierra Leone became widespread even in the absence of the kind of territorial fragmentation characteristic of irregular war. The explanation of extreme atrocity as a consequence of weak internal control is consistent with patterns observed in Sierra Leone and Colombia in particular, in which relatively better-disciplined organizations (counterinsurgent militias in Sierra Leone, Marxist insurgents in Colombia) perpetrated extreme atrocities less frequently than poorly-disciplined groups (the RUF and AFRC, and Colombian paramilitaries). At the same time, variation in the extent of extreme atrocities perpetrated by generally ill-disciplined forces in Liberia suggests that other factors beyond discipline contribute to the occurrence of extreme violence. And the perpetration of extreme atrocity by reputedly well-disciplined forces in Guatemala suggests that such violence at least sometimes follows a strategic logic, rather than being the product of weak discipline. Finally, there is preliminary evidence (in three of conflicts for which the relevant data is available) that a desire for revenge motivates a substantial proportion of recruits within organizations that are relatively “specialized” in extreme forms of violence.

On the whole, these findings suggest the need for a multi-causal explanation to understand different pathways towards extreme atrocity. Wood’s (2018) work on wartime rape provides a useful template for thinking about how different explanations of extreme violence might be integrated into a coherent theoretical framework. Wood distinguishes between rape committed as part of an explicit *policy* adopted by an organization for either military-strategic or other purposes, and rape committed as a widespread *practice* tolerated but not ordered by group or unit commanders. She argues that the nature of war-time rape—whether rape is adopted as policy, emerges as a practice, or is largely absent—depends on the interaction of “top-down” and “bottom-up” influences: on the one hand, the decisions and actions of commanders at different levels of the military hierarchy, as well as their ability to enforce policy among the rank-and-file; on the

other hand, the preferences of individual combatants and the social dynamics that emerge within military units. (cf. Wood 2018, Figure 2).

An analogous framework may usefully be applied to wartime extreme atrocity. As summarized in Figure 2.7, this framework conceptualizes an armed group's repertoire of violence as being shaped by the interaction of *organizational policies*—rules about acceptable violence adopted by group leaders and conveyed to and enforced among rank-and-file combatants by unit-level commanders—and *informal norms* that emerge among combatants themselves and are enforced primarily by peer pressure. Organizational policies can either prohibit extreme atrocities, or authorize or order them. Similarly, informal norms can either prohibit or endorse such violence. When organizational policies and combatant norms prohibit extreme atrocity, such violence should be rare. When organizational policies authorize or order such violence, and combatant norms strongly endorse it, organizations are likely to adopt extreme atrocity as group strategy. When organizational policies and informal norms are mismatched, the extent of extreme atrocity will depend on the control (surveillance and discipline) that commanders exercise over their troops. When organizational policies prohibit extreme atrocity but informal combatant norms endorse them, extreme atrocity can emerge as an unordered “practice” if internal control is weak. When organizational policies order extreme atrocity but combatant norms are opposed to it, strong internal control will be required to coerce reluctant perpetrators into executing the group's strategy of atrocity.

Framing extreme atrocity in this manner opens up a series of questions for future research. First, what factors shift organizational policies towards the adoption of extreme atrocity as a group-level policy? This article's findings suggest that strategic incentives linked to the coercion of civilians in irregular war provide one plausible explanation for such escalation. They also show, however, that not all actors in irregular wars act on these incentives. Further theorization is required to determine what countervailing incentives exist that push actors in irregular war in the opposite direction, that is, towards a policy of restraint. Second, what factors shift informal combatant norms towards an endorsement of extreme atrocities? This article's findings suggest that revenge may be an important “bottom-up” motive for extreme violence. Further theoretical elaboration is required to specify when and how this motive arises and becomes an important

part of informal combatant norms, as well as the conditions under which such norms become powerful enough determinants of combatant behaviour to override organizational policies prohibiting extreme atrocity

**Figure 3.7** “Top-down” and “bottom-up” factors

|                       |                             | <i>Organizational policy</i>  |  |
|-----------------------|-----------------------------|---|--|
|                       |                             | Prohibits extreme atrocity  | Authorizes or orders extreme atrocity  |
| <i>Informal norms</i> | Prohibit extreme atrocities | Extreme atrocity is rare  | Extent of extreme atrocity depends on internal control; used as a <i>strategy</i> where internal control is high |
|                       | Endorse extreme atrocities  | Extent of extreme atrocity depends on internal control; emerges as a <i>practice</i> where control is low | Extreme atrocity as a <i>strategy</i>  |

### 3

## **Extreme Atrocity as Strategy: A Theory of Jihadist Beheadings**

### **Abstract**

Why do some jihadist organizations engage in beheadings while others do not? In this article I argue that use of beheadings by jihadists is shaped by a combination of local strategic context and transnational ties. Beheadings are strategically useful to jihadists engaged in insurgency as a means for deterring civilian collaboration with the enemy, demoralizing enemy combatants, and attracting foreign recruits. But the use of beheadings is also costly for such groups, notably because of its tendency to alienate potential civilian supporters. Whether or not particular jihadist groups use beheadings depends largely on whether they can afford to ignore these costs. Jihadists that control significant territory are less sensitive to civilian attitudes because of their ability to obtain support through coercion, and are therefore more likely to perpetrate beheadings. The use of beheadings is also shaped by transnational ties: organizations seeking formal affiliation with transnational jihadist networks are more likely to calculate that the benefits of using extreme violence to attract transnational support outweigh its costs. The theory is tested using an original dataset of over 1500 beheading events perpetrated by jihadist organizations between 1998 and 2019.

### 3.1 Introduction

Executions by beheading have become a signature tactic of many jihadist groups. While beheadings are also perpetrated by other types of armed groups, sometimes on a large scale (see UNHRC, 2018), they remain closely associated in public discourse with global jihadism (Taylor, 2014). Yet, as I show below, jihadist organizations actually vary in their use of beheadings: most perpetrate few or no beheadings, and only a minority adopt beheading as a consistent part of their repertoire of violence. This article seeks to explain this variation.

Jihadist beheadings are arguably among the most horrifying and puzzling forms of contemporary political violence, combining overt brutality and deliberate public display in a manner that appears anomalous (Fujii, 2013). Most direct conflict deaths today are caused by small arms or explosive weapons; such killings can be characterized by callous indifference to the suffering of victims, but do not usually involve deliberate, calculated cruelty. More overtly cruel forms of violence, such as torture, are usually hidden from public view. Jihadist beheadings, in contrast, are an overtly transgressive form of violence that is often deliberately publicized by the perpetrator. Some beheadings have been filmed and disseminated to a global audience of millions (Redmond et al., 2019). As this article shows, the frequency of jihadist beheadings has grown significantly in recent years. And there is evidence that the use of beheadings has spread beyond the jihadist movement (Grillo 2008; Koch, 2018).

Existing research provides few explanations for why the prevalence of beheadings varies across jihadist groups. Scholars have studied why non-state armed groups use particular forms of violence such as suicide bombing (Pape 2003; Bloom 2004; Horowitz 2010), sexual violence (Cohen 2016; Revkin and Wood, 2021), and attacks on children and schools (Ahmad 2019; Biberman and Zahid 2019), but few have systematically studied the practice of beheadings. Much recent work has focused on beheadings perpetrated by the Islamic State (IS) group, and especially on its use of videos and the internet to disseminate its violence internationally (Friis 2015; Friis 2018; Zech and Kelly 2015; Tinnes 2016; Cottee 2019). A number of observers have

emphasized the religious and ideological dimensions of beheadings, including their roots in Islamic theology and history (Furnish 2005; Campbell 2007; Nanninga 2017). Yet variation in the use of beheading among ideologically-similar “Salafi-Jihadist” groups suggests that ideology alone cannot explain why such violence occurs. Others have argued that beheadings serve multiple strategic goals, including deterrence or provocation (Zech and Kelly 2015), extortion (Lentini and Bakashmar 2007), group bonding (Quiggle 2015), and recruitment (Katz 2014). Given its multiple uses, however, it remains unclear why most jihadist organizations *avoid* the practice of beheading.

This article argues that variation in the use of beheadings among jihadist groups is explained by a combination of local strategic context and transnational ties. While ideology plays an important role in legitimating the practice of beheading, whether or not particular jihadist groups adopt beheading depends mainly on how they perceive the balance between its strategic usefulness and the costs of employing it. Jihadist groups that engage primarily in *clandestine terrorism* have relatively few incentives to use beheadings, and generally avoid them. For jihadists involved in *insurgency*, on the other hand, beheadings are strategically useful as a means of deterring civilian collaboration with the enemy, demoralizing enemy fighters, and attracting foreign recruits. But the use of beheadings is also costly for such groups, notably because of its tendency to alienate potential civilian supporters. Whether or not particular groups use beheadings depends largely on whether they can afford to ignore these costs. Jihadist insurgents that control significant territory are less sensitive to civilian attitudes because of their ability to obtain support through coercion, and are therefore more likely to perpetrate beheadings. And organizations that prioritize transnational ties, seeking formal affiliation with transnational jihadist networks, are more likely to calculate that the benefits of using extreme violence to attract transnational support outweigh its costs.

I test these arguments using an original dataset of over 1500 beheading events perpetrated by jihadist groups between 1998 and 2019. The findings provide strong evidence that strategy, territorial control, and transnational ties are major determinants of jihadists’ use of beheading. I

conclude by discussing the implications of my findings for how we understand jihadist violence and the growing role of jihadist insurgents in contemporary civil wars.

### 3.2 Variation in the Use of Beheadings

The modern practice of jihadist beheadings emerged in the 1980s during the Afghan-Soviet war. Afghan insurgents sometimes used beheadings to execute captured Soviet soldiers and other prisoners (Helsinki Watch 1985, 93; Amnesty International 1987, 216; Helsinki Watch 1988, 68). Foreign fighters, thousands of whom traveled to Afghanistan to participate in the war, also engaged in such violence (Hafez 2009, 79). After the war, the use of beheading spread along with these veterans of the Afghan *jihad* to other theatres of conflict, including Bosnia (Kohlmann 2004, 130, 136), Chechnya (Tishkov 2003, 117), Algeria (Amnesty International 1996b, 23), and Kashmir (Amnesty International 1996c, 13). In 2002, the first filmed beheading of an American citizen, the journalist Daniel Pearl, was broadcast on the internet by Al-Qaida-linked militants in Pakistan. In 2004, following the U.S.-led invasion of Iraq, filmed beheadings of foreign hostages became a recurrent tactic of insurgents, especially the future Al-Qaida affiliate in the country (Jones 2005). From Iraq, the tactic of beheading spread to new conflict zones, including Afghanistan (Bergen 2008, 112) and southern Thailand (Andre 2015).

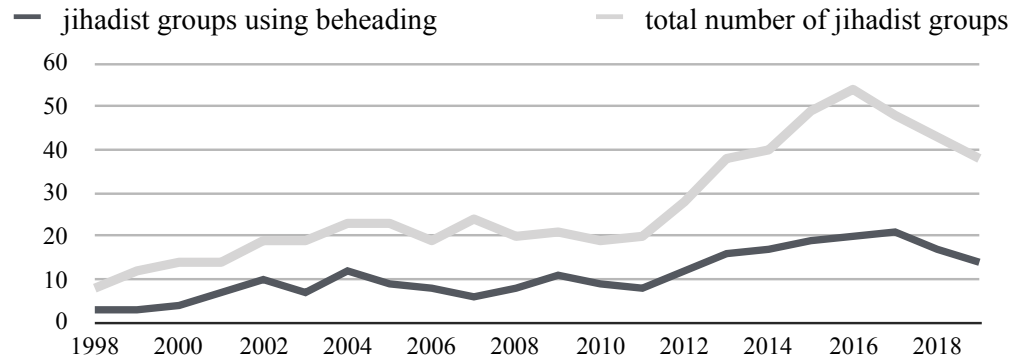
Using newly-collected data, Figure 3.1 charts the diffusion of beheading among jihadist groups since the late 1990s. Figure 3.1.a depicts the number of jihadist groups perpetrating at least one beheading in every year from 1998 to 2019. It shows that number of groups using the tactic has grown considerably since 2001, and has been particularly high since 2013. The graph also shows, however, that this increase largely reflects growth in the total number of active jihadist groups; indeed, in recent years the proliferation of new jihadist groups has considerably outpaced the increase in groups using beheadings. A growing proportion of jihadist groups, in other words, has *avoided* beheadings.



**Figure 3.1 Diffusion of beheading across jihadist groups**

a)

*Number of jihadist groups using beheading*



b)

*Number of annual beheading events by perpetrator*

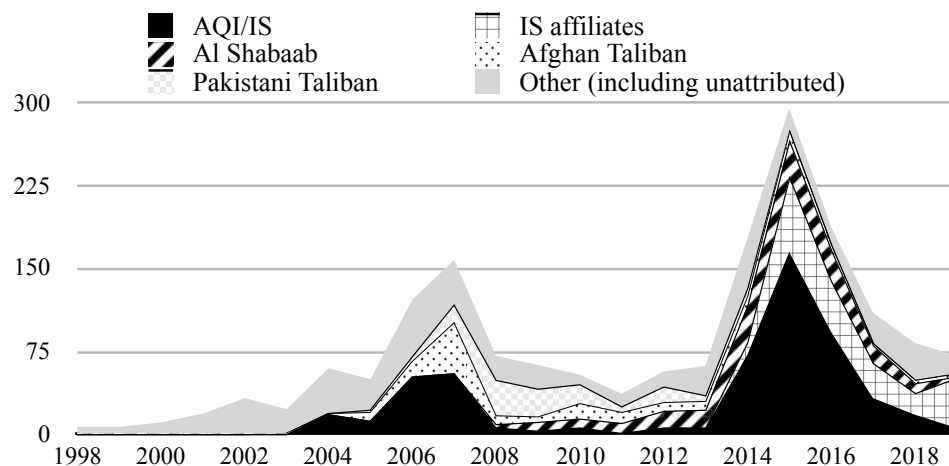


Figure 3.1.b depicts the annual number of beheading events reported during the same period. The graph also disaggregates beheading events by actor for the leading perpetrators of such violence. The graph shows that Al-Qaida in Iraq/IS, along with IS's various regional affiliates, have been by far the leading perpetrators of beheadings. The graph also shows, however, that other jihadist organizations, notably Al-Shabaab in Somalia, and the Afghan and Pakistani

**Table 3.1 Variation in the use of beheadings among jihadist organizations**

|  |  |
|--|--|
| <i>Groups that made consistent use of beheadings:</i>                      | Islamic State Khorasan Province (SJ)               |
| Abu Sayyaf Group (SJ)  | Islamic State Libya (SJ)                           |
| Al-Qai'da in Iraq/Islamic State (SJ)                                       | Islamic State Somalia (SJ)                         |
| Al-Qa'ida in the Arabian Peninsula (SJ)                                    | Islamic State West Africa Province (SJ)            |
| Al-Qa'ida in the Islamic Maghreb (SJ)                                      | Islamic State in Yemen (SJ)                        |
| Al-Shabaab (SJ)  | Jabhat al-Nusra/Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham (SJ)         |
| Allied Democratic Forces (SJ)  | Jaish al-Muhajireen wal-Ansar (SJ)                 |
| Ansar al-Islam/Ansar al-Sunna (SJ)   | Jund al-Khilafa in Tunisia (SJ)                    |
| Ansar al-Sunna/Islamic State East Africa (SJ)                              | Khaled Ibn al-Walid Army (SJ)                      |
| Ansar Bayt al-Maqdis/IS Sinai Province (SJ)                                | Lashkar-e-Islam (D)                                |
| Armed Islamic Group (SJ)   | Lashkar-e-Taiba (SJ)                               |
| Benghazi Revolutionaries Shura Council (SJ)                                | Maute Group (SJ)                                   |
| Boko Haram (SJ)  | Mujahidin Indonesia Timur (SJ)                     |
| Islamic State Bangladesh (SJ)  | Taliban (D)  |
| Islamic State East Asia (SJ)   | Tehrik-i-Taliban Pakistan (D)                      |
| Islamic State in the Greater Sahara (SJ)                                   |  |
| <i>Groups that perpetrated beheadings in isolated cases:</i>               | Chechen Republic of Ichkeria (Basayev) (SJ)        |
| Ahrar al-Sham (SN)   | Harakat ul-Mujahidin (D)                           |
| Ahrar al-Sharqiya (SN)   | Harakatul Jihad-e-Islami (D)                       |
| Ajnad al-Sham (SN)   | Hizbul al-Islam (SJ)                               |
| Al-Gama'a al-Islamiyya (SJ)  | Islamic Army in Iraq (SN)                          |
| Al-Mulathamun Battalion (SJ)   | Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (SJ)                |
| Al-Qaida Central (SJ)  | Jaish-e-Mohammad (D)                               |
| Al-Qaida in Saudi Arabia (SJ)  | Jamaat Nusrat al-Islam wal Muslimin (SJ)           |
| Ansar al-Dine (SJ)   | Jemaah Islamiya (SJ)                               |
| Ansaroul Islam (SJ)  | Jund al-Khilafa/Algeria Province of IS (SJ)        |
| Ansarullah Bangla Team (SJ)  | Jundallah in Iran (SJ)                             |
| Bangsamoro Islamic Freedom Movement (SJ)                                   | Jundallah in Pakistan (SJ)                         |
| Benghazi Defense Brigades (SN)   | Lashkar-e-Jhangvi (D)                              |
| Caucasus Emirate (SJ)  | Okba Ibn Nafaa Brigade (SJ)                        |
|  | Special Purpose Islamic Regiment (SJ)              |
| <i>Groups with no reported beheadings:</i>                                 | Islamic Jihad Union (SJ)                           |
| Abdullah Azzam Brigades in Egypt (SJ)                                      | Islamic State Caucasus Province (SJ)               |
| Abdullah Azzam Brigades in Lebanon (SJ)                                    | Islamic State Saudi Arabia (SJ)                    |
| Al-Murabitun (SJ)  | Jaish al-Adl (D)                                   |
| Al-Qaida in the Indian Subcontinent (SJ)                                   | Jaish-e-Islam (D)                                  |
| Ansar al-Din Front (SJ)  | Jama'atul Mujahideen Bangladesh (SJ)               |
| Ansar al-Sharia in Libya (SJ)  | Jamaah Ansharut Daulah (SJ)                        |
| Ansar al-Sharia in Pakistan (SJ)   | Jamaat-ul-Ahrar (SJ)                               |
| Ansar al-Sharia in Tunisia (SJ)  | Jamiat ul-Mujahedin (D)                            |
| Ansar al-Tawhid (SJ)   | Jaysh al-Islam (SN)                                |
| Ansaru (SJ)  | Jund al-Aqsa (SJ)                                  |
| Derna Mujahideen Shura Council (SN)  | Jund al-Sham for Tawhid and Jihad (SJ)             |
| East Turkestan Islamic Movement (SJ)                                       | Macina Liberation Front (SJ)                       |
| Hizb-ul-Ahrar (D)  | Movement for Oneness and Jihad in West Africa (SJ) |
| Hurras al-Din (SJ)   | Mujahideen Ansar (SJ)                              |
| Indian Mujahideen (SJ)   | Riyadus-Salikhin Reconnaissance and Sabotage       |
| Islambouli Brigades of al-Qaida (SJ)                                       | Battalion of Chechen Martyrs (SJ)                  |
| Islamic International Peacekeeping Brigade (SJ)                            | Salafia Jihadia (SJ)                               |
|  | Tehrik-e-Khilafat (SJ)                             |
| <i>Note:</i> SJ = Salafi-Jihadist; D = Deobandi; SN = Salafist-Nationalist |  |

Taliban, have made routine use of beheading. Overall, the data reveals that a relatively small number of jihadist organizations account for the bulk of beheadings.

In contrast, as shown in Table 3.1, most jihadist groups have perpetrated few or no beheadings. The table reports which organizations in my dataset have used beheadings, and to what extent. I find that nearly two-thirds of groups (58 of 93) perpetrated at least one beheading. Among these, however, nearly half (28 of 58) used beheading only in individual or isolated instances. In other words, two-thirds of groups (62 of 93) perpetrated few or no beheadings, and only a minority have used beheadings as a consistent part of their repertoire of violence. Table 3.1 also reports the ideological orientation of each group in my dataset, distinguishing between Salafi-Jihadist, Deobandi, and Salafist-Nationalist groups. Groups in the latter category, which seek to implement *salafi* Islamic governance within the limits of the nation-state (Gade et al. 2019, 2083), appear not to make systematic use of beheadings, suggesting that ideology does play a role in shaping jihadist repertoires. At the same time, the table shows that most Salafi-Jihadist groups have *also* not made consistent use of beheadings. This suggests that broad ideological categories alone cannot explain variation in the use of beheadings.

### 3.3 Explaining Jihadist Beheadings

The variation revealed in Table 3.1 confirms the pertinence of the question posed at the outset of this article: why do some jihadist groups make consistent use of beheadings while most do not? In this section I argue that this variation is explained by a combination of local strategic context and transnational ties. While ideology plays an important role in legitimating the practice of beheading, whether or not particular jihadist groups adopt beheading depends mainly on how they perceive the balance between its strategic usefulness and the costs of employing it.

#### 3.3.1 The role of ideology

Jihadist organizations, perhaps uniquely among contemporary armed groups, frequently provide formal, religious-legal justifications for their use of violence (Ahmad 2019, 81). “For every act

of violence,” Maher (2016, 17) notes, jihadist groups “will offer some form of reference to scriptural sources—however tenuous, esoteric or contested—to explain their actions.” With regard to beheading, the key scriptural references are two Qur’anic verses (47:4 and 8:12) that urge the faithful to “strike at the neck” of enemies in war. While these passages are subject to various interpretations, even within the milieu of radical Islamic scholars (Wagemakers 2014), they have been read literally by some jihadist ideologues as a warrant for beheading. For example, the radical Egyptian cleric Abu Abdullah al-Muhajir, in his influential text on the *Jurisprudence of Jihad*, uses these passages to provide an explicit defence of beheadings. “God,” Muhajir argues, “did not only say ‘kill the infidels,’ because the phrase ‘strike the necks’ implies cruelty and severity that the word kill does not denote by itself. The killing was portrayed to be performed in the most dreadful way, namely beheading.” As a consequence, according to Muhajir, “[b]eheading was intended and even favored by God and his Prophet, whether objectors like this or not” (quoted in Al-Zaatari 2012). Another defence of beheading can be found in *The Management of Savagery*, an Al-Qaida strategy document published in 2004 under the pseudonym of Abu Bakr Naji. Emphasizing the need for “rough violence” as a means of terrifying and deterring enemies, Naji invoked the example of Islam’s first caliph, Abu Bakr Al-Siddiq, whose orders, according to Naji, emphasized “severing the neck without clemency or slowness” (Naji 2006, 75).

Such interpretations of Islamic scripture and tradition are, of course, wholly rejected by mainstream Islamic scholars (Townsend 2018). Yet they appear to have been quite influential (Winter and Al-Saud 2016), effectively making the practice of beheading “available” as a legitimate tactic within the “general repertoire” of the jihadist movement (Tilly 1986, 4). An analogy can be drawn here to suicide bombing, another key tactic in the jihadist repertoire. Though scholars have argued that the use of suicide attacks is explained in large part by strategic and organizational factors (Pape 2003; Horowitz 2010), Moghadam (2011) has shown that ideological arguments justifying “martyrdom” in religious terms have played a crucial role in the tactic’s diffusion across jihadist groups. Given jihadists’ concern for religious legitimation noted above, it is

difficult to imagine controversial practices like suicide bombing or beheading spreading among jihadist groups to the degree that they have without the availability of such justifications.

And yet, as shown above, most jihadist organizations have *not* adopted beheading as a consistent practice, despite the availability of arguments justifying its use. Ideology alone cannot explain this variation. While some ideological strands within the jihadist movement may be more amenable to the practice of beheading than others, it is also the case that jihadist groups with quite distinct ideologies (*e.g.* IS and the Afghan Taliban) have made systematic use of beheadings. More broadly, it is a mistake to see ideology as rigidly determining tactics, even among jihadist organizations. As Kalyvas (2018, 39) notes, “[i]deology is a flexible political tool even for jihadi groups, and it is common for them to tailor their ideological messages to the particular circumstances they find themselves in.” While debates among jihadists about the legitimacy of different tactics are “[o]ften framed theologically, they rarely stray far from the strategic: arguments over what Islam permits track closely what works on the ground” (International Crisis Group 2016, 26). Below I argue that jihadists’ perceptions of whether or not beheading “works on the ground” are shaped by the strategies they adopt, and by the extent to which they control territory and/or prioritize transnational ties.

### 3.3.2 Strategy and territorial control

Jihadist organizations vary in terms of the strategies they adopt. Some engage primarily in *clandestine terrorism*, operating through networks of small, secretive cells in areas of strong state control (Hansen, 2019, 18-19). Such groups are too weak to seek control over territory, and rely instead on spectacular acts of violence to try to coerce or provoke a desired government response (Duyvesteyn and Fumerton 2009, 28; de la Calle and Sánchez-Cuenca 2011, 453). Other jihadist groups opt for a strategy of *insurgency*, seeking to acquire the military power required to actively contest state control over territory and civilian populations (Duyvesteyn and Fumerton 2009, 28). Most such groups achieve only a *semi-territorial* presence (Hansen 2019, 25), temporarily dominating relatively small rural areas in the absence of state security forces, without being able to

entirely exclude enemy ground forces from them. Some jihadist insurgents, however, succeed in amassing sufficient military power to establish a fully-territorial *proto-state* (Lia 2015), seizing and ruling over significant territories with substantial civilian populations.<sup>20</sup>

**Table 3.2 Incentives and constraints on the use of beheading**

| Type                       | Strategy   | Incentives to use beheading  | Territorial control | Constraints imposed by civilian attitudes | Probability of adopting beheading as a tactic |
|----------------------------|------------|--|---------------------|---|---|
| <i>Clandestine network</i> | Terrorism  | Limited  | None                | Weak                                      | Low   |
| <i>Semi-territorial</i>    | Insurgency | More extensive:<br><ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• deter civilian defection</li> <li>• demoralize enemy combatants</li> <li>• attract foreign fighters</li> </ul> | Weak                | Stronger                                  | Medium  |
| <i>Proto-state</i>         |            |  | Strong              | Weaker                                    | High  |

Groups that embody these three ideal-types face different sets of incentives and constraints on the use of beheading. As summarized in Table 3.2, the key difference, in terms of incentives, is between groups that engage in insurgency and those that rely exclusively on a strategy of terrorism. Jihadist insurgents have a greater range of incentives to use beheadings than do purely-clandestine terrorist groups. Specifically, insurgent groups can use beheadings to achieve three key strategic objectives:

1. *Deterring civilian collaboration with the enemy*: Unlike purely clandestine groups, which effectively hide from both state security forces and most civilians, insurgent groups often

<sup>20</sup> Of course, individual jihadist groups can embody more than one of these ideal-types in different regions of a conflict zone.

rely on civilian collaboration to ensure their survival against militarily superior counterinsurgent forces. Such collaboration can be obtained through positive incentives (the provision of services or protection) or through coercion, including the selective killing of civilians suspected of collaborating with the enemy. Such killings are often deliberately publicized in order to deter others from “defecting” (Kalyvas 2006). Many jihadist beheadings can be understood as precisely this kind of exemplary punishment, with their exceedingly gruesome nature helping to amplify their message of deterrence (Kalyvas 1999, 270). Often, the bodies or heads of victims in such cases have been left public places accompanied by notes accusing victims of serving as informers for the enemy.

2. *Demoralizing enemy combatants*: Jihadists can also use beheadings as form of psychological warfare targeting the enemy’s rank-and-file combatants. Jihadist insurgents from Syria to Nigeria to Libya have sought to “deter military confrontations by releasing videos of captured troops being decapitated” (McGroarty 2014). One such video, produced in Libya in 2014, featured the victim urging his comrades to “go back to their houses or they will face the same destiny: beheading” (Trew 2014). At a tactical level, such beheadings are a form of coercion targeting individual fighters in order to persuade them to flee rather than fight; at an operational level, such coercion forms part of broader military strategy aimed at undermining enemy cohesion and securing territory (cf. Schelling 1966, 8). Research on desertion shows that soldiers’ commitment to fighting depends in large part on trust in their comrades’ willingness to fight (McLauchlin 2020). Beheadings of captured soldiers can undermine such trust, sparking chain-reactions of desertion (Lehmann and Zhukov 2017).

3. *Attracting ideologically-committed recruits*: Finally, highly publicized beheadings can be used by jihadist organizations to appeal to an international audience of militants, and thereby attract new, ideologically-committed recruits from abroad. Though there is no direct evidence that beheadings *alone* attract jihadist foreign fighters, the tactic does form part of a larger repertoire of extreme violence that many ideologically-committed foreign recruits find attractive (Katz 2014). Close observers of IS suggest that its displays of extreme violence played a role in

attracting at least some of its many foreign recruits; according to Lister (2015, 298), “[t]he publication of gruesome beheadings, mass executions and suicide bombings...aroused particularly intense levels of excitement—almost a frenzy—within IS’s online support community, some of whom were known to have later travelled to join the group’s fight in Syria and Iraq.”

Importantly, jihadist groups that operate exclusively as clandestine networks generally do not have these same incentives to use beheadings. Because of their overriding need to maintain secrecy, such groups generally function in relative isolation from the surrounding civilian population, and are therefore less vulnerable than insurgent groups to civilian defection. Because they primarily employ attacks on “soft” targets and avoid military engagements, fully-clandestine groups also have less use for beheading as a means of demoralizing enemy soldiers. Finally, while some clandestine groups may seek to attract ideologically-committed foreign fighters, such groups usually have a limited capacity to absorb new members—perhaps especially foreigners—without compromising secrecy. To be sure, clandestine groups may have other reasons to use beheadings, for example, to extort ransom payments for hostages (Lentini and Bakashmar 2007) or to signal resolve to their opponents (Kydd and Walter 2006). But these reasons alone are unlikely to lead them to use beheadings in a systematic manner: simple threats of murder against hostages will generally be sufficient to obtain ransom payments; and while beheadings may signal resolve to opponents, they are less effective as a signal of capability given their simplicity and low lethality (Lentini and Bakashmar 2007, 302).

Jihadist groups vary not only in terms of the incentives they have to use beheadings, but also in terms of incentives to *refrain* from such use. The main incentive for restraint, I hypothesize, has to do with the attitudes of civilians, most of whom are likely to view beheadings as an unacceptably transgressive form of violence, even when used against enemies or alleged collaborators. There is significant evidence that jihadists who use beheadings face a public backlash. Some groups have adopted rules prohibiting the practice (Clark 2011, 9), while others have expelled commanders known to use it (Associated Press 2014). In Iraq in 2004-2008, the frequent use of beheadings by IS’s predecessor organization, AQI, reportedly undermined support for the



group even among Iraqis otherwise supportive of the insurgency (Amnesty International 2005, 17), and contributed directly to tribal uprisings against the group (Hashim 2018 105; Hein 2018, 114). This backlash was severe enough that Al-Qaida's leadership eventually called on the group to curtail its use of beheadings in order to avoid losing the "hearts and minds" of ordinary Muslims (Zawahiri's Letter 2005). Beheading has been repeatedly condemned by mainstream Islamic scholars (Stammer 2004; Open Letter 2014). Public opinion polling shows that IS, the most prolific perpetrator of beheadings, is extremely unpopular among ordinary people across the Arab world, and that the proportion of respondents expressing disagreement with IS's "methods" of violence is consistently larger than those agreeing with its objectives (Tessler, Robbins, and Jamal 2020), suggesting that even a proportion of individuals that might otherwise be swayed by IS's ultimate goals are alienated by the extremity of its violence, including beheadings.

Yet not all jihadist organizations are equally constrained by civilian attitudes. Fully clandestine groups, which actively hide from state security forces *and* from most civilians, should be relatively impervious to civilian discontent. Semi-territorial insurgent groups, on the other hand, are more vulnerable to the loss of civilian support. Such groups seek to avoid detection by government forces primarily by basing themselves in remote rural areas in which they engage in activities (recruitment, training, and stockpiling of arms and supplies) that are at least partially visible to local civilians (Lewis 2020, 38). They therefore rely to a greater extent on civilians to withhold information from counterinsurgent forces (Berman, Felter, and Shapiro 2018) and to provide them with supplies. Given their weak territorial control, the ability of semi-territorial insurgents to obtain civilian collaboration through coercion is limited. Continued government access to the regions in which these groups operate creates opportunities for civilians alienated by insurgent excesses to act against them, whether by supplying information to counterinsurgents or enlisting in counterinsurgent-organized militias. Knowing this, semi-territorial insurgents should generally refrain from overtly transgressive behaviour like beheadings in an effort to maintain civilian support.

Crucially, however, this constraint on beheadings should weaken as jihadists' control over territory becomes stronger. Organizations that exercise more extensive territorial control should be generally less concerned about civilian "attitudinal" support given their ability to generate "behavioral" support by means of coercion (Kalyvas 2006). Civilians living under jihadist control may still be outraged by the use of beheadings, but will have fewer opportunities to act on that outrage. At the limit, complete jihadist control would eliminate the prospect of civilian defection entirely, making beheadings of civilian defectors unnecessary (though the use of beheadings to demoralize enemy combatants and attract foreign supporters might continue). In practice, however, jihadist territorial control is rarely if ever complete, and jihadist "proto-states" typically attract external intervention (Lia 2015). Such intervention often involves the use of drones and other remote capabilities that rely on networks of local informers for targeting information (Ackerman 2010). Thus, even jihadists with significant territorial control will have incentives to use beheadings to deter civilian collaboration with their enemies, while being simultaneously less restrained in doing so than insurgents with a more tenuous territorial presence.

**H<sub>1</sub>:** Jihadist groups that operate as clandestine networks will be least likely to use beheadings, while jihadist insurgent groups that exercise substantial territorial control will be most likely to do so.

### **3.3.4 Transnational ties**

Jihadists' responsiveness to civilian attitudes may also be influenced by the extent to which they prioritize transnational ties. While jihadist groups are often thought of as part of a larger "global jihadist movement," not all jihadist groups are equally oriented towards a global agenda. Many, in fact, prioritize local ties (Thurston 2020). All else being equal, jihadists with a more local focus are likely to be more responsive to civilian attitudes, and therefore more constrained by civilian disapproval of beheadings. More "transnationalized" groups, in contrast, should be less concerned with civilian attitudes given their ability to mobilize support from abroad.

Jihadist “transnationalization” can take various forms, from reliance on foreign funding and the recruitment of foreign fighters to the adoption of transnational ideological frames (Harpviken 2012). One indicator of a given jihadist group’s prioritization of transnational ties is its decision to seek formal affiliation with a transnational “parent” organization, whether Al-Qaida Central (AQC) or IS. Groups that formally pledge allegiance (*bay’ah*) to a transnational patron can, if their pledge is accepted by the latter, obtain a variety of benefits, including access to resources, personnel, expertise, and publicity (Moghadam 2017, 20-25). If these benefits are substantial enough, the decision to seek transnational affiliation can orient an organization increasingly towards behaviour calculated to win and maintain the favour of that patron, even at the cost of alienating locals.

When the transnational patron group itself uses or endorses beheadings, groups seeking affiliation will have an incentive to adopt beheading as a means of signalling their commitment to the new alliance. The clearest examples of such behavior come from groups that have joined IS’s global “caliphate” since 2014. Many such groups, in Algeria, Egypt, Mozambique and elsewhere, began perpetrating highly-publicized beheadings at precisely the same time as they began to seek affiliation with IS (Georgy 2014; BBC 2014). Some would-be IS affiliates have reportedly filmed and sent recordings of their atrocities directly to IS in order to demonstrate “accountability” (Jadoon, Jahanbani, and Willis 2020, 37). Yet IS is not the only transnational jihadist group that has promoted beheadings. In the years following the 9/11 attacks, beheadings were very much identified with Al-Qaida’s global “brand.” High-level AQC officials personally participated in filmed beheadings (MacAskill 2007), and the organization readily accepted pledges of allegiance from jihadist organizations known to use such violence. Though, as noted above, AQC leaders eventually criticized the highly-publicized beheadings of foreign hostages in Iraq, AQC itself produced at least one beheading video in Pakistan as late as 2008 (Jackson 2015, 55). It was only in 2009 that AQC officially adopted a policy against filmed beheadings (Kendall 2016, 106), and only in 2013, following the group’s split with IS, that it condemned beheadings as a whole (Callimachi 2014). For organizations seeking affiliation with AQC prior to 2013, as for

groups seeking to join IS's "caliphate" since 2014, the use of beheadings could serve as a means of signalling their commitment to the global jihadist cause.

**H<sub>2a</sub>:** Jihadist groups pledging allegiance to IS will be more likely than other jihadist groups to perpetrate beheadings.

**H<sub>2b</sub>:** Jihadist groups pledging allegiance to AQC before its split from IS in 2013 will be more likely than other jihadist groups to perpetrate beheadings.

## 3.4 Empirical Analysis

### 3.4.1 Data

In order to test my hypotheses, I collected original data on jihadist beheadings perpetrated between 1998 and 2019. My dataset includes all jihadist groups in the Global Terrorism Database (GTD) that reached a minimal threshold of armed activity.<sup>21</sup> Data on beheadings was collected using a variety of sources, including existing cross-national and conflict-specific event datasets; governmental, inter-governmental, and non-governmental human rights reports; press reports; secondary literature; and other sources.

The resulting database contains information on 93 jihadist organizations active in 566 group-years, and records 1758 distinct beheading events resulting in at least 4423 individual victims. Just over two hundred of the events reported in the dataset cannot be reliably attributed to a specific group, though there are good reasons to believe that they were perpetrated by jihadist

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<sup>21</sup> I define jihadist groups as Sunni Islamist organizations that combine a political programme seeking to revive a "pure" form of Islam based on a literalist reading of Islamic scripture with a commitment to armed struggle. I include only groups that were responsible for a minimum of ten fatalities according to GTD; for groups that met this threshold, I coded all years in which they perpetrated at least one attack resulting in civilian or military fatalities according to information drawn from the GTD, the Uppsala Conflict Data Program (UCDP), the Armed Conflict Location Event Dataset (ACLED), and secondary sources. In some cases, my coding of groups differs from that of the GTD. Detailed discussion of coding criteria and individual coding decisions, as well as sources, can be found in the online coding document.

groups.<sup>22</sup> Excluding these leaves over 1500 beheading events that can be reliably attributed to specific perpetrators. Below, I use these to explore patterns in victimization and to systematically test my theoretical expectations about the relationship between beheading, strategy, territorial control, and transnational ties.

### 3.4.2 Patterns of victimization

As a first step in assessing my theory, I use my data to examine patterns in targeting at the level of individual victims. I first categorized all beheading victims as either “locals” (nationals or long-term residents of the countries in which their killers were based) or “foreigners” (individuals killed after travelling to another country). As shown in Figure 3.2.a, I find that an overwhelming majority (over 90%) of beheading victims since 1998 have been “locals.” While this finding confirms a broader pattern whereby the majority of victims of jihadist violence are fellow Muslims, it contrasts sharply with the overwhelming focus in Western news media coverage on the beheadings of foreign hostages.

Second, I further disaggregated the category of local victims according to their status as combatants or civilians. As Figure 3.2.b shows, I find that civilians have been the primary targets of jihadist beheadings, accounting for over 60 per cent of all local victims. Yet I also find that nearly a third of victims are combatants. This relatively frequent targeting of combatants is consistent with the argument that beheadings are used in part as a means of demoralizing enemy fighters.

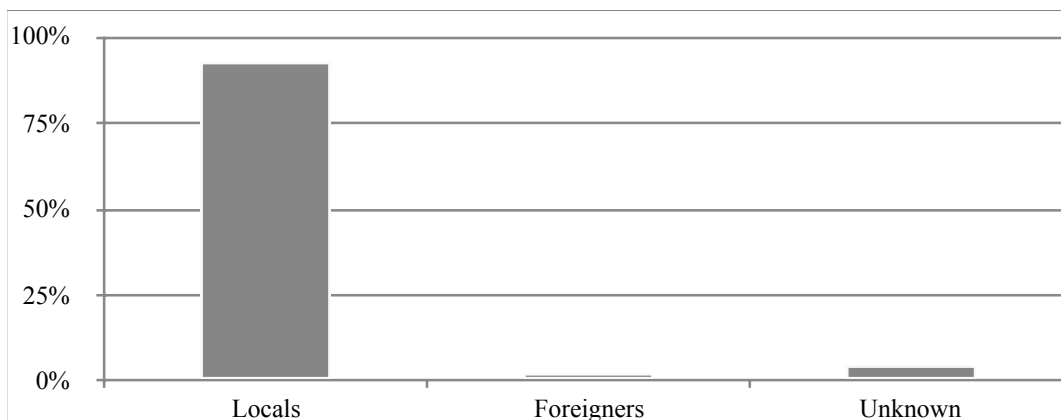
Finally, I categorized local civilian victims according to the rationale for their murder, distinguishing between those accused of espionage or other forms of collaboration with the enemy, those working as government officials or employees, those accused of “moral” transgressions (*e.g.* blasphemy or sorcery), those targeted on the basis of ethno-sectarian identity, and those beheaded in the context of hostage-taking. As Figure 3.2.c shows, the largest category of victims by

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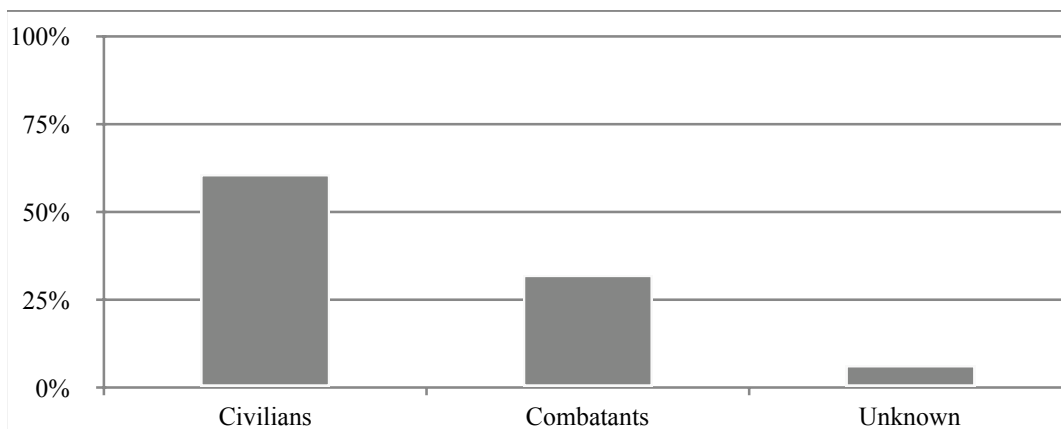
<sup>22</sup> These “unattributed” events are discussed in detail in the online coding document. In order to minimize potential bias arising from miscoding, I use an outcome variable in my main statistical analyses that is not dependent on a precisely accurate count of the number of beheadings perpetrated by each organization.

**Figure 3.2 Patterns of victimization**

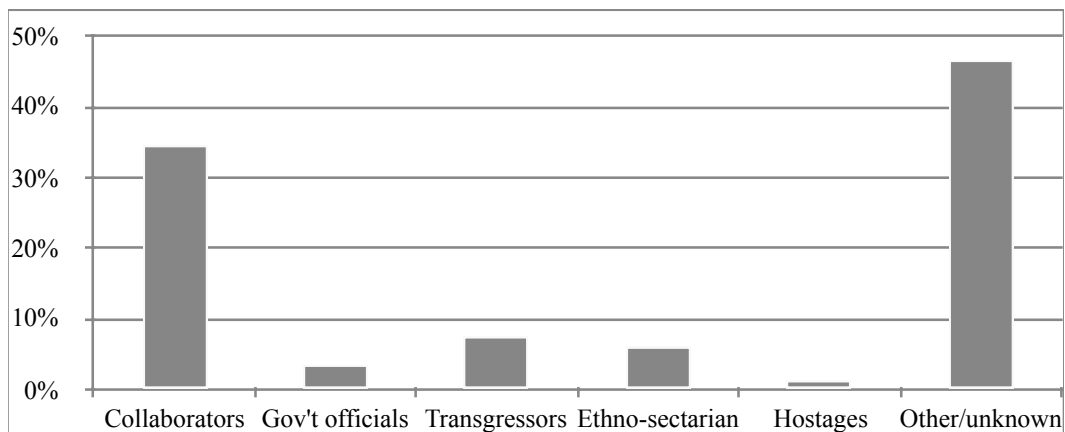
a) *Locals vs. foreigners*



b) *Civilians vs. combatants*



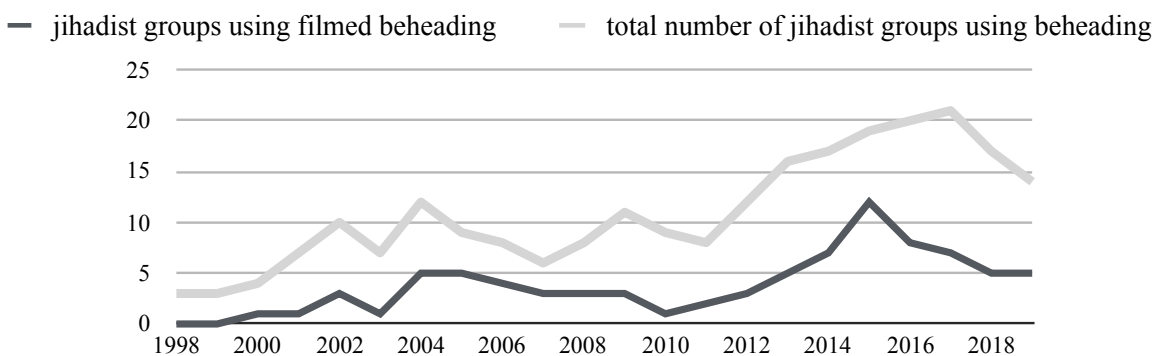
c) *Targeting rationale*



far among those for whom a targeting rationale is known consists of civilians accused of collaborating with the enemy. This is consistent with the argument that jihadists use beheadings in large part to deter civilian defection in the context of insurgency.

Taken together, the patterns in Figure 3.2 suggest that jihadist beheadings should be understood primarily as a tactic of intimidation targeting local enemies and their perceived collaborators. At the same time, even “local” beheadings can have a transnational dimension. Figure 3.3 charts the annual number of jihadist groups that have filmed or photographed beheadings and disseminated them on the internet. This number has grown substantially since 2010, indicating that a growing number of jihadist groups aim to make their violence visible beyond a strictly local audience. This is consistent with the argument that jihadist beheadings serve in part to advertise the perpetrator group to potential transnational supporters.

**Figure 3.3 Filmed or photographed beheadings**



### 3.4.3 Statistical analysis: variables and measurement

In order to more rigorously test my hypotheses, I now examine patterns in the use of beheading at the level of the group-year. My main dependent variable measures whether or not a given jihadist group adopted *beheading* as a consistent part of its repertoire of violence in a given year. I consider beheadings to be a consistent part of a group’s repertoire when two conditions are met: 1) the organization perpetrates multiple beheadings in a given year, and 2) it publicly acknowl-

edges using beheadings through an official statement or media release. I assume that recurrent and acknowledged use of beheading indicates that a group has adopted the practice of beheading as a matter of organizational policy. In contrast, isolated or unclaimed beheadings may occur even in the absence of such a policy, either because leaders exercise weak control over rank-and-file combatants, or because they authorize a single case of beheading before reconsidering. In total, 18.6 percent of group-years in my dataset feature recurrent and claimed beheadings.

For my first set of independent variables, I adopt Hansen's (2019) typology of territorial presence, distinguishing between four types of jihadist groups. I code as *clandestine networks* groups that function entirely "underground," organized in small cells that operate primarily in urban areas and engage in classic "terrorist" tactics (bombings, assassinations, hostage-taking) requiring only small numbers of attackers (de la Calle and Sanchez-Cuenca 2011, 455). I code as *semi-territorial* insurgents groups that establish a presence in rural areas and engage in attacks on state security forces using classic "guerrilla" tactics (ambushes, raids, etc.) but exercising only limited territorial control (Hansen 2019, 25). I code as jihadist *proto-states* groups that control substantial amounts of territory and actively rule over significant numbers of civilians. Finally, I code some groups as having what Hansen (2019, 23) calls an *accepted presence*. These are groups operating openly on territory controlled by another entity that tolerates or promotes their activities.<sup>23</sup> Because individual jihadist groups sometimes combine several forms of territorial presence simultaneously, I code each group's *dominant* form of territorial presence in a given year.

In order to test for the effects of transnational ties, I code which jihadist groups pledged allegiance to AQC or IS and when. I code a group as having pledged allegiance to AQC or IS beginning in the first year in which its leaders are known to have made *bay'ah* to either organization, regardless of whether the pledge was official recognized or not by the "parent" organization. I hypothesize that even unrecognized pledges reflect a more transnational orientation and are likely to impact a group's repertoire of violence. For pledges of allegiance of AQC, I distin-

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<sup>23</sup> Hansen applies this category primarily to jihadist groups tolerated by governments. I extend it to jihadist groups that operate openly on territories entirely controlled by other jihadist groups.



guish between groups that pledged allegiance prior to Al-Qaida's split from IS (*AQC pre-2013*) and those with a pledge after this split (*AQC pledge post-2013*). Once a group has pledged allegiance to either AQC or IS, I code it as continuously "pledged" unless it formally disaffiliates itself from its transnational patron (e.g. ISIS in 2013 and Hayat Tahrir al-Sham in 2016).

I also code a number of variables to control for potential confounders. First, I measure the *number of jihadist groups* operating in a given conflict-zone in a given year.<sup>24</sup> Rivalry among jihadists may lead to recurrent beheadings through a dynamic of "outbidding" as organizations adopt more radical tactics to differentiate themselves from competing groups (Conrad and Greene 2015). Rivalry may also push groups to attempt to seize territory in order "to increase [their] influence and weight vis-à-vis competitors" (Lia 2015, 36). Second, I code whether or not a jihadist organization fought against predominantly *non-Muslim* military forces in a given year. Groups perceived as resisting occupation by non-Muslims may be more attractive as affiliates to both Al-Qaida and IS, and may also be more likely to use beheadings if they take literally the Qur'anic injunction to "strike at the neck" when meeting "unbelievers" in battle. Third, I code whether a jihadist group was active in a country that experienced *regime change* in the previous five years. Changes of regime, whether provoked by foreign intervention, coups d'états, or popular uprisings, can weaken state control over territory, thus facilitating jihadist insurgency and state-building. Regime change can also incentivize the use of beheadings to disrupt the stabilization of a new government (Lentini and Bakashmar 2007, 316). Fourth, I code *organizational age*, which may be positively correlated with the ability to seize territory, but may inhibit the adoption of innovative tactics, such as beheading (Horowitz 2010). Finally, I code an ordinal variable indicating approximate *group size*. Larger groups may be more likely to perpetrate recurrent beheadings (if the sheer number of fighters in an organization undermines its ability to control them), more likely to seize control of territory, and more likely to attract transnational allies.

Summary statistics for all variables are provided in the Appendix II (Table II.1).

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<sup>24</sup> Because many jihadist groups operate across state boundaries, I consider the "conflict-zone" rather than the country as the relevant theatre for intra-jihadist competition.

### 3.4.4 Statistical results

Table 3.3 presents the results of a series of logistic regression models estimating the effect of my predictors on beheading. Because Salafist-Nationalist groups appear not to make consistent use of beheading, these groups are excluded from all analyses.<sup>25</sup> Models 1 through 6 pool observations from all remaining group-years in the data set, while Models 7 through 9 use information from only those groups that made consistent use of beheading in at least one year and include group fixed effects to control for unobserved confounders. All models are estimated with group-clustered standard errors to account for intra-group dependence among observations. Pooled models account for time dependence using cubic polynomial time terms (Carter and Signorino 2010).

Model 1 in Table 3.3 includes only my measures of territorial presence. Because *accepted presence* perfectly predicts non-use of beheadings, group-years with this form of territorial presence are automatically dropped from this and all subsequent models.<sup>26</sup> Coefficients associated with *clandestine network* and *proto-state* represent the estimated effect of these forms of territorial presence relative to *semi-territorial* presence, which is the reference category. The results are consistent with Hypothesis 1: the coefficient for *clandestine network* is negative and statistically significant at conventional levels, while that for *proto-state* is statistically significant and positive, suggesting that fully clandestine jihadist groups are less likely to use beheading than semi-territorial groups, while fully-territorial groups are more likely to do so.

Model 2 then adds all control variables to this basic specification, with the exception of *group size*, which is not available for all groups. The direction and statistical significance of the coefficients for *clandestine network* and *proto-state* remain largely unchanged. In Model 3, I add the variable for *group size*. While the results for *clandestine network* remain largely unchanged

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<sup>25</sup> I re-estimate my models with these groups included in robustness checks.

<sup>26</sup> I re-estimate my models with these groups included in the reference category in robustness checks.

**Table 3.3 Correlates of beheading**

|                                  | POOLED MODELS        |                      |                      |                                     |                      |                      | GROUP FIXED EFFECTS                     |   |   |
|----------------------------------|----------------------|----------------------|----------------------|-------------------------------------|----------------------|----------------------|---|---|---|
|                                  | (1)<br>All<br>groups | (2)<br>All<br>groups | (3)<br>All<br>groups | (4)<br>Excluding<br>small<br>groups | (5)<br>All<br>groups | (6)<br>All<br>groups | (7)<br>All groups<br>using<br>beheading | (8)<br>All groups<br>using<br>beheading | (9)<br>All groups<br>using<br>beheading |
| <i>Clandestine network</i>       | -2.00**<br>(0.46)    | -1.84**<br>(0.50)    | -1.90**<br>(0.51)    | -2.70**<br>(0.94)                   | -1.84**<br>(0.51)    | -1.91**<br>(0.51)    | -3.65**<br>(0.52)                       | -3.67**<br>(0.57)                       | -4.51**<br>(0.40)                       |
| <i>Proto-state</i>               | 1.30**<br>(0.29)     | 1.38**<br>(0.32)     | 0.60<br>(0.40)       | 1.14*<br>(0.50)                     | 1.41**<br>(0.29)     | 1.47**<br>(0.29)     | 1.65**<br>(0.56)                        | 1.50**<br>(0.56)                        | 1.68**<br>(0.61)                        |
| <i>IS pledge</i>                 |                      |                      |                      |                                     | 1.33**<br>(0.42)     | 1.38**<br>(0.44)     | 2.23**<br>(0.46)                        | 4.28**<br>(0.69)                        |   |
| <i>AQC pledge</i>                |                      |                      |                      |                                     | 0.88+<br>(0.49)      |                      | 1.28*<br>(0.65)                         | 2.10*<br>(0.77)                         |   |
| <i>AQC pre-2013</i>              |                      |                      |                      |                                     |                      | 1.52*<br>(0.61)      |   |   |   |
| <i>AQC post-2013</i>             |                      |                      |                      |                                     |                      | 0.20<br>(0.42)       |   |   |   |
| <i>Number of jihadist groups</i> |                      | -0.03<br>(0.07)      | -0.07<br>(0.08)      | -0.06<br>(0.10)                     | 0.00<br>(0.08)       | 0.02<br>(0.09)       |   |   | 0.12<br>(0.14)                          |
| <i>Non-Muslim enemy</i>          |                      | 0.27<br>(0.45)       | 0.23<br>(0.43)       | 0.64<br>(0.55)                      | 0.30<br>(0.50)       | 0.33<br>(0.51)       |   |   | 3.32**<br>(0.97)                        |
| <i>Regime change</i>             |                      | -0.17<br>(0.43)      | -0.17<br>(0.44)      | -1.17*<br>(0.56)                    | -0.22<br>(0.41)      | -0.16<br>(0.41)      |   |   | -0.61<br>(0.69)                         |
| <i>Age</i>                       |                      | 0.03<br>(0.02)       | 0.01<br>(0.03)       | -0.01<br>(0.05)                     | 0.05*<br>(0.02)      | 0.05*<br>(0.02)      |   |   | -0.19**<br>(0.05)                       |
| <i>Group size</i>                |                      |                      | 0.75**<br>(0.20)     | -0.45<br>(0.55)                     |                      |                      |   |   | 1.49*<br>(0.58)                         |
| <i>Constant</i>                  | 1.27+<br>(0.66)      | 0.93<br>(0.79)       | 0.25<br>(0.76)       | 3.72*<br>(1.52)                     | 0.32<br>(0.98)       | 0.14<br>(1.05)       |   |   |   |
| <i>N</i>                         | 516                  | 516                  | 502                  | 159                                 | 516                  | 516                  | 251                                     | 251                                     | 250                                     |

Group-clustered standard errors in parentheses. +  $p < 0.10$ , \*  $p < 0.05$ , \*\*  $p < 0.01$   
 Note: accepted presence perfectly predicts non-use of beheadings.

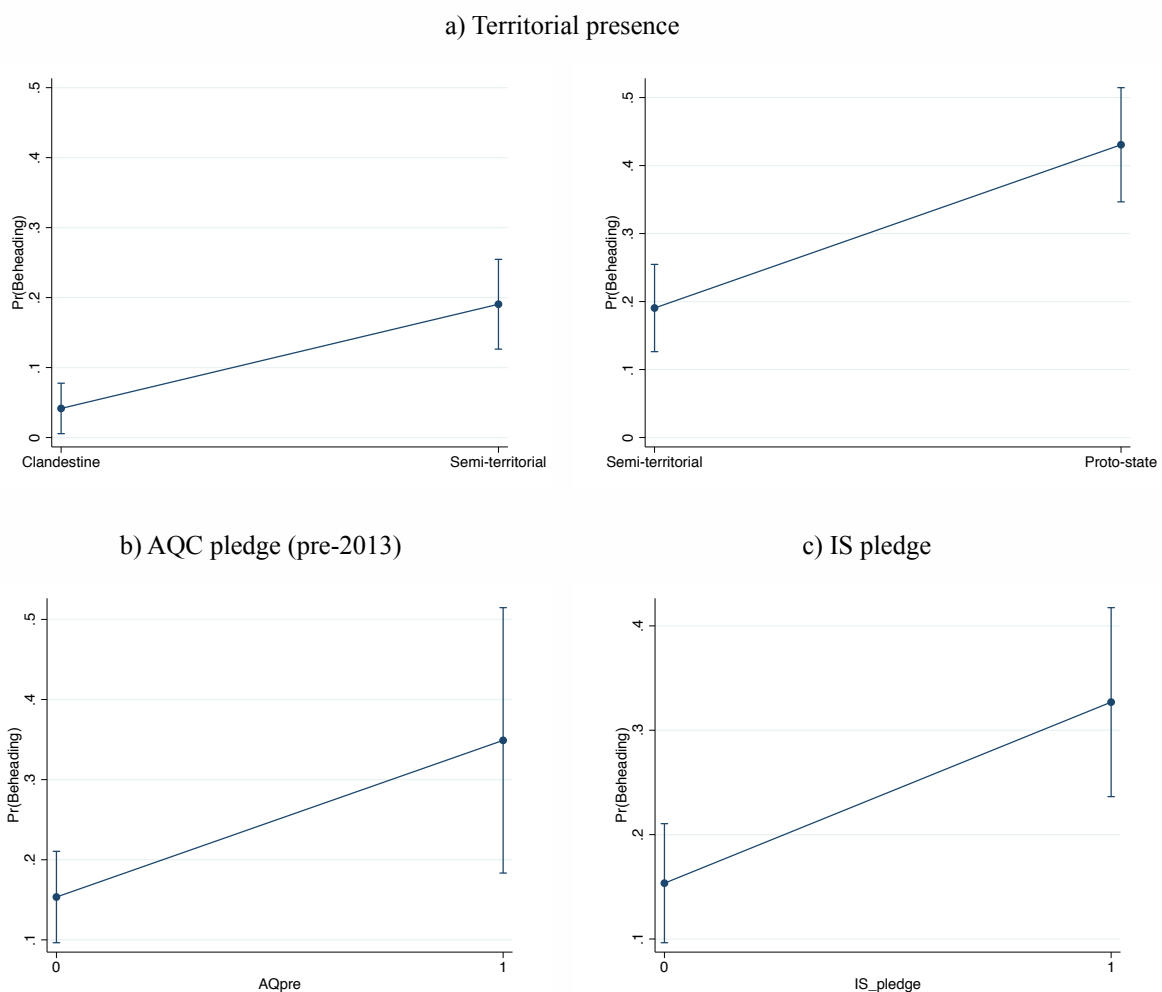
in this model, the coefficient for *proto-state* is no longer statistically significant. This is not entirely surprising given that group size and territorial control are highly correlated (small groups almost never control substantial territories). In order to separate out the effects of these two variables, Model 4 drops all small groups (under a thousand members) from the analysis and again estimates the effects of territorial presence on beheading. Here the coefficient for *proto-state* is positive and statistically significant, while that for *group size* is no longer statistically significant. This suggests that the effect of territorial control on beheading is not simply a function of groups size: among jihadist group large enough to control substantial amounts of territory, actually exercising territorial control increases the probability of beheadings. Given that group size is likely to be partly endogenous to territorial control (groups controlling territory have a greater ability to recruit fighters), I omit this variable from the remaining pooled models to avoid post-treatment bias.

Model 5 adds variables measuring pledges of allegiance to IS and AQC to the specification used in Model 2. As expected in Hypothesis 2a, the coefficient for *IS pledge* is positive and statistically significant, indicating that groups that have pledged allegiance to IS have a higher probability of using beheading. The coefficient for *AQC pledge* is positive, but falls below conventional levels of statistical significance. In model 6, I disaggregate pledges of allegiance to AQC by time period, distinguishing between AQC-pledged groups before and after 2013. Here the coefficient for *AQC pre-2013* is positive and statistically significant, while that for *AQC post-2013* is not statistically significant, suggesting, consistent with Hypothesis 2b, that pledges of allegiance to AQC are associated with a higher probability of beheading only prior to that organization's official condemnation of beheading in 2013.

Figure 3.4 uses the results of Model 6 to estimate changes in predicted probability of beheading given different values of my main predictors. Figure 3.4.a compares the predicted probability of beheading for different types of territorial presence, holding all other covariates at their mean values. It shows that the probability of beheading increases from 4.1% among *clandestine networks*, to 19.0% among *semi-territorial* insurgent group, to 43.0% among *proto-states*. Fig-

ures 3.4.b and 3.4.c depict changes in the predicted probability of beheading when comparing groups that pledged and did not pledge allegiance to Al-Qaida before 2013 or to IS. In both cases, I find that a pledge of allegiance to a transnational “patron” more than doubles the probability of a jihadist group making consistent use of beheadings. On the whole, these estimates suggest that my predictors have a substantively significant effect on the use of beheading.

**Figure 3.4 Changes in predicted probability of beheading (predictive margins with 95% confidence intervals)**



The models examined so far do not control for unobserved group-level characteristics that might simultaneously affect jihadist groups’ use of beheadings and territorial presence or

transnational ties. Models 7 through 9 therefore use group-level fixed effects to control for time-invariant, group-specific confounders while estimating the effects of my predictor variables on over-time variation in the use of beheadings. The results provide further support for my hypotheses. Coefficients for *clandestine network* are consistently negative and statistically significant, while those for *proto-state* are consistently positive and statistically significant, suggesting, consistent with Hypothesis 1, that groups that make systematic use of beheadings are least likely to do so when operating as clandestine networks, and most likely to do so when ruling over substantial territory. Variables measuring transnational ties also have the expected positive effect, suggesting that groups that make systematic use of beheading are more likely to do so after having pledged their allegiance to either AQC or IS.

### 3.4.5 Robustness checks and additional analyses

Appendix II includes several robustness checks and additional analyses. First, I re-estimate the models presented in Table 3.3 while excluding all observations for IS, arguably an extreme case (high on territorial control and beheadings) (Table II.2). Second, to address the possibility that beheadings are a *cause* of territorial control, rather than its consequence, I re-estimate the models while omitting observations corresponding to the first year in which jihadist groups exercised full territorial control (Table II.3).<sup>27</sup> Third, to ensure that my findings are not biased by missing information, I replicate the analyses while dropping observations from groups active in countries and years in which my data reports a large number of “unattributed” beheading events (Tables II. 4-6). Fourth, I re-estimate the models with Salafist-Nationalist groups included in the analysis (Table II.7). Fifth, I re-estimate the models with groups coded as having an *accepted presence* included in the reference category for the variables measuring territorial presence (Table II.8).

Finally, I examine out-of-sample predictive power using the results of Model 6 to conduct a four-fold cross-validation exercise (Ward et al., 2010). The findings indicate that inclusion of

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<sup>27</sup> I assume that whatever causal effect beheadings have on the acquisition of territorial control exists only in the first year in which such control is exercised.

information on territorial presence and transnational ties significantly improves the ability of the model to predict jihadist beheadings (see Table II.9 in Appendix II).

### 3.5 Conclusion

Though beheadings have become a signature tactic of the global jihadist movement, most jihadist groups perpetrate few or no beheadings. Only a minority of jihadists adopt beheading as a consistent part of their repertoire of violence. Their decision to do so, I argue, is shaped by local strategic context and transnational ties. For jihadists involved in insurgency, beheadings are strategically useful as a means of intimidating enemies and suspected collaborators. In the words of a 2011 manual issued by the Haqqani network in Afghanistan: “The easy way to kill infidels and their spies is beheading. The human breath is quickly discharged from the body, and [beheading] has a psychologically terrifying effect on our enemies” (Roggio 2011). Beheadings, particularly those filmed and distributed over the internet, can also be used to attract foreign recruits. Yet jihadist groups must weigh the potential strategic benefits of beheading against the tendency of extreme violence to alienate potential civilian supporters. How they balance these costs and benefits is shaped by the extent to which they control territory and seek support from transnational allies.

These findings have several implications for how we understand jihadist groups. First, they significantly qualify interpretations of jihadist violence that foreground its ideological or religious character (Wood 2015). Religious ideology may provide a template or “legitimizing script” (Cottee 2017) for certain forms of violence, but the repertoires of particular jihadist groups appear to be shaped primarily by strategic calculations. Second, my findings suggest that, for many jihadist groups, the relevant strategic context is that of insurgency, rather than terrorism (Kalyvas, 2018). Theories developed to explain jihadists’ behaviour in one context may not apply automatically in the other. Thus, for example, transnational terrorism is often theorized as a form of costly signalling by relatively weak groups vis-a-vis far more powerful states (Kydd and Wal-

ter, 2006). Yet states do *not* appear to be the main audience for jihadist beheadings. Instead, these are used primarily to influence the behaviour of *individuals* (local civilians, enemy soldiers, and potential foreign recruits) whose decisions are crucial to insurgent success. Finally, my article highlights how jihadist violence addresses both local and transnational audiences, and suggests that this dual orientation creates contradictory pressures on jihadist groups: violent techniques like beheading that appeal to potential transnational supporters can severely alienate locals. How jihadist groups navigate this trade-off, and why some seek to build local legitimacy while others prioritize transnational connections, is a promising topic for future research.



## 4

## **Extreme Atrocity as a Practice of War: Evidence from the American War in Vietnam**

### **Abstract**

Why do soldiers engage in unauthorized forms of extreme violence? This article explores this question by analyzing practices of mutilation among American soldiers during the Vietnam war. I show that such practices were remarkably widespread, despite being unambiguously prohibited by military policy. I then test a series of possible explanations for variation in the use of mutilation using survey data from a representative sample of Vietnam veterans. The data suggests that mutilation in Vietnam was motivated primarily by the desire to avenge the deaths of close friends in combat. Such violence emerged where “primary group cohesion” (the strength of bonds among unit members) was high, but “secondary group cohesion” (identification with the norms of the military as an organization) was low. High cohesion among unit-members provided strong motives to avenge unit losses through extreme violence, while weak identification with organizational norms allowed mutilation to emerge as a unit-level “practice of war.” In addition to providing statistical evidence for this explanation, I use case study evidence to trace the emergence of mutilation as a practice at the level of single Army unit.

## 4.1 Introduction

Why do soldiers engage in unauthorized forms of extreme violence? While many atrocities in wartime are ordered or authorized by military hierarchies, and can therefore be understood as “crimes of obedience” (Kelman and Hamilton 1989), others occur without being ordered. Wood (2018, 514) refers to such violence as a *practice*, “a form of violence that is driven from ‘below’ and tolerated from ‘above,’ rather than purposely adopted as policy.” Explaining such bottom-up forms of violence requires consideration of both the stance of organizational leaders—the “principals” who establish policy—and the motivations of rank-and-file combatants—“agents” whose preferences for violence may diverge from those of the organization they serve (Mitchell 2004; Weinstein 2005). Divergence in preferences between leaders and combatants can lead soldiers to adopt a broader repertoire of violence than that approved by organizational policy (Hoover Green 2018), including overtly cruel practices that violate widely-shared “norms about the proper treatment of persons and bodies” (Fujii 2013, 410).

This article explores one such practice, prevalent during the American war in Vietnam: postmortem mutilation. This practice involved American soldiers severing body parts—mostly ears and fingers, sometimes scalps and heads—from the corpses of dead enemy fighters or civilians. These body parts were sometimes collected and deliberately displayed as trophies. Despite being in clear violation of official military policy, postmortem mutilation became a relatively widespread practice: as discussed below, survey data collected among American Vietnam war veterans in the 1980s suggests that at least one in ten American combat soldiers either participated directly in such behavior or served in units in which such acts occurred. Given the size of American combat forces in Vietnam, this likely translates to tens of thousands of individual perpetrators.

Such widespread participation in postmortem mutilation is puzzling. Not only does the desecration of bodies violate the laws of war,<sup>28</sup> it also has significant negative consequences for both military organizations and individual soldiers. As Harrison writes, acts of postmortem muti-

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<sup>28</sup> Article 15 of the First Geneva Convention of 1949 prohibits the “despoiling” of enemy dead. The mutilation of dead bodies is also prohibited under customary international humanitarian law (Henckaerts and Doswald-Beck 2005, 409).

lation are regarded by military authorities “as not only wrong but counterproductive in almost all circumstances, because they undermine support for the war effort at home, strengthen the determination of the enemy, and put their own side at risk of reprisals” (Harrison 2012, 1). As the *U.S. Army Combat Stress Control Handbook* argues: “Mutilating the dead must be prohibited, since it dehumanizes both those who do it and those who condone it. It tends to provoke reprisals, alienate world and home front opinion, and contribute to guilt and post-traumatic stress symptoms when the soldier returns home” (Department of the Army 1994, 51). For individual soldiers, participation in the mutilation of corpses can be highly costly, leaving them at higher risk of post-traumatic stress (Green et al., 1990, 35; Hiley-Young et al., 1995, 135) and suicide (Hiley-Young et al., 1995, 137).

In this article, I examine several possible explanations for the practice of postmortem mutilation among American troops in Vietnam. The first attributes unauthorized atrocities to a subset of soldiers with atypical predispositions to violence—the proverbial “bad apples.” The second explanation emphasizes the impact of racism and hunting culture, viewing mutilations in Vietnam as the continuation of a long-standing American tradition of extreme violence against racialized and dehumanized “others.” A third explanation focuses on dynamics endogenous to warfare itself, and in particular on the role of revenge as a motive for violence. Mutilation, in this view, occurs where strong bonds among soldiers create intense desires to avenge fallen comrades and informal unit norms come to endorse such practices

Drawing on diverse sources, I argue that the last of these explanations—the theory of *deviant cohesion*—is the most compelling. Archival sources and soldiers’ personal testimonies often highlight intense desires to avenge the death of close friends as the primary motivation for individuals’ participation in mutilation. Survey research confirms that soldiers who witnessed frequent deaths among close friends from their military unit were more likely than others to perpetrate mutilation. I also find that the perpetration of mutilation was shaped by interpersonal bonds and unit-level norms: such behavior was most likely where strong bonds among unit members (primary group cohesion) provided powerful motives to avenge unit losses through extreme violence, while divergence between unit-level norms and organizational rules weakened the enforcement of official policies prohibiting such violence.

Evidence for this theory comes from several types of sources. First, I use data from the National Survey of the Vietnam Generation (NSVG), the largest-ever survey of Vietnam veterans (Kulka et al., 1988b), both to estimate the prevalence of mutilation among American troops in Vietnam, and to test the different explanations of this practice. Second, I use archival materials from the Vietnam War Crimes Working Group (VWCWG), a U.S. Department of Defense task-force established to investigate American war crimes in the wake of the public revelations about the My Lai massacre (see Nelson 2008; Turse 2013). Third, I use a selection of veterans' memoirs and oral histories. Finally, I draw on secondary sources, including psychological or psychiatric studies of veterans, and scholarly and journalistic accounts. Among the latter, I draw especially on Sallah and Weiss's (2006) detailed account of the "Tiger Force," a U.S. Army long-range reconnaissance unit infamous for atrocities committed in northern South Vietnam in 1967. A case study of the "Tiger Force" allows me to trace the process by which unauthorized extreme violence can emerge as a unit-level practice.

## 4.2 Mutilation During the Vietnam War

American atrocities during the Vietnam war are well-documented.<sup>29</sup> Such atrocities were widely publicized beginning in the late 1960s following the exposure of the My Lai massacre (Hersh 1970). Subsequent investigations, by government bodies (Peers 1979), civil society organizations (Melman 1968; Duffett 1970), and journalists (e.g. Lang 1969) have produced a wealth of information concerning the victimization of civilians by U.S. forces. Scholars have disagreed about whether My Lai should be seen as an isolated incident (Allison 2007, 93; Solis 2017, 121), or, on the contrary, as symptomatic of a general climate of brutality that characterized much of American conduct during the war (Greiner 2009; Turse 2013). Less attention has been paid, however, to the specific phenomenon of postmortem mutilation. To the extent that mutilation in Vietnam has been studied in a systematic way, it has been by psychologists seeking to identify the impact of such behavior on veterans' post-deployment psychological problems (Green et al. 1990; Hiley-Young et al. 1995; Beckham, Feldman, and Kirby 1998; Currier et al., 2014; Dennis et al.

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<sup>29</sup> For an evaluation of Vietnamese Communist atrocities see Berni 2019.

2017). Far less attention has been paid to explaining why American soldiers used mutilation in the first place. In this section, I show that mutilation was explicitly prohibited by U.S. military policy in Vietnam, and therefore cannot be understood as a “crime of obedience” (Kelman and Hamilton 1989). I also show that, despite this prohibition, such behaviour became quite common among American forces, suggesting widespread unofficial toleration by lower-level commanders.

#### 4.2.1 Organizational Policy

Mutilation of the living and dead was explicitly and unambiguously prohibited by American military policy in Vietnam. Rules of conduct for U.S. forces, enshrined in the Department of the Army’s 1956 *Law of Land Warfare Field Manual*, prohibited both the “physical mutilation” of prisoners and the “maltreatment of dead bodies” (Department of the Army 1956, 36, 180). Despite not recognizing the insurgency in South Vietnam as an international conflict, the U.S. decided early on in the war that captured Viet Cong guerrillas would be entitled to the full protections of the 1949 Geneva Conventions (Prugh 1991, 66). U.S. military authorities in Vietnam issued directives that required all military personnel who witnessed war crimes to report such acts to their commanding officer for investigation. These regulations explicitly listed “the maltreatment of dead bodies” as a war crime.<sup>30</sup> Other regulations established rules for the disposal of enemy dead that required that they be “handled in a respectful and reverent manner”.<sup>31</sup>

In addition to being formally prohibited by policy, practices of mutilation were repeatedly and publicly condemned by the highest levels of the U.S. military hierarchy. In October 1967, in response to news reports about American soldiers cutting ears off enemy dead, U.S. Army Chief of Staff Harold K. Johnson issued a letter to the commander of U.S. forces in Vietnam, General William Westmorland, which described the mutilation of corpses as “alien to all civilized practice and the traditional attitudes shown by American soldiers,” and ordered that U.S. comman-

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<sup>30</sup> Headquarters, United States Military Assistance Command, Vietnam, “Inspections and Investigations: War Crimes,” Directive Number 20-4, 18 May 1968. National Archives and Records Administration (NARA), Record Group 319, UD 1019, Box 14, Case 98 (Campbell Incident), Document id. 59169453, page 35.

<sup>31</sup> Headquarters, United States Military Assistance Command, Vietnam, Regulation No. 638-30, 4 Jan. 1969. NARA, Record Group 319, UD 1019, Box 14, Case 98 (Campbell Incident), Document id. 59169453, page 40.

ders ensure that “no incidents of this nature are permitted or condoned by any U.S. Army officer or soldier.”<sup>32</sup> Westmorland duly issued a message to all U.S. commanders in Vietnam in which he described the practice of cutting ears and fingers off corpses as “subhuman” and “contrary to all policy and below the minimum standards of human decency” (quoted in Lewy 1978, 329). Public condemnations of mutilation were repeated in subsequent years: in late 1970, the commander of the Army’s XXIV Corps in Vietnam, Lieutenant General James W. Sutherland, issued a letter on the subject in which he deplored “a general lack of understanding of what constitutes ‘maltreatment’,” and listed acts, including “defiling or ridiculing the dead,” that were specifically prohibited by military policy.<sup>33</sup>

In addition to promulgating rules that prohibited mutilation, attempts were made to communicate these to soldiers arriving in theatre: all U.S. troops arriving in Vietnam received “Geneva Conventions orientation” and were given a card outlining rules for the treatment of enemy soldiers. The card, entitled *The Enemy in Your Hands*, included the specific requirement that captives “must not be tortured, killed, *mutilated*, or degraded” (cited in Pugh 1991, 144). While scholars have criticized the limited nature of instruction received by U.S. soldiers concerning war crimes (see Parks 1976, 19; Allison 2007, 92), the fact that such instruction existed at all shows clearly that mutilation was not authorized by organizational policy.

#### 4.2.2 Prevalence

The very fact that American military leaders had to repeatedly condemn mutilation is evidence that such violence was recurrent among American forces. Yet scholars disagree on how common it was. Lewy (1978, 317), who argues that accounts of American atrocities in Vietnam have been frequently exaggerated, acknowledges that “incidents” of unauthorized violence occurred: “We know that hamlets were destroyed, prisoners tortured, and corpses mutilated.” Bourke (1999, 387), in contrast, suggests that mutilation was common, claiming that “[n]early every diary, se-

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<sup>32</sup> Letter from Harold K. Johnson to William Westmoreland, 10 Oct. 1967. NARA, Record Group 319, UD 1019, Box 14, Case 199 (CBS News Allegation), Document id. 59169466, page 30.

<sup>33</sup> Department of the Army, Headquarters XXIV Corps, “Treatment of Enemy Dead,” 6 Nov. 1970. NARA, Record Group 319, UD 1019, Box 15, Case 153 (Smith Incident), Document id. 59169506, page 36.

ries of letters, or autobiography from the Vietnam war contains examples” of such behaviour. Milam (2009, 115) calls the severing of ears and fingers a “somewhat common practice of many troops.” Hastings (2018, 401) claims that “the practice of mutilating enemy dead was widespread”.

More systematic evidence on the prevalence of mutilation can be found in survey research done on Vietnam veterans. Studies of veterans seeking clinical treatment for PTSD have found that a majority reported witnessing acts of mutilation by American soldiers in Vietnam, and about a third reported having directly participated in such behavior (Hiley et al. 1995, 132; Beckham, Feldman, and Kirby 1998, 780; Dennis et al. 2017, 7). Clearly, such estimates suffer from selection bias because soldiers who perpetrated mutilation and other atrocities were more likely to suffer from PTSD (Green et al., 1990, 35; Hiley-Young et al., 1995, 135). Fortunately, less biased estimates of the prevalence of mutilation among American forces can be found in data from the National Survey of the Vietnam Generation (NSVG). Carried out in the mid-1980s as part of a Congressionally-mandated study of PTSD among Vietnam-era veterans, the NSVG was the largest-ever survey of Vietnam war veterans. Drawing on a sampling frame assembled from military personnel records that included all surviving veterans of the conflict (Kulka et al. 1988b, 9), the NSVG provided “the most representative sample of all Vietnam era veterans studied to date,” and thus “the best available basis for inferences about the entire population of Vietnam veterans” (Kulka et al. 1988a, 28).<sup>34</sup>

Among the risk factors for PTSD that the investigators studied was exposure to wartime atrocities, including mutilation. Veterans were asked to rate their exposure to the “mutilation of bodies of the enemy or civilians” by American soldiers on a six-point scale, ranging from non-exposure (“Not at all”), through minimal exposure (“Knew/Heard About It”), to higher levels of exposure involving witnessing mutilation first-hand (“Saw It”), unit-level participation (“Unit participated”), and individual-level participation (“I participated” or “I was responsible”). Table

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<sup>34</sup> In addition to Vietnam theatre veterans, the study also sampled Vietnam-era veterans who had not served in the Vietnam theatre, and civilians matched by age, sex and race to Vietnam theatre veterans. “Vietnam theatre veterans” were divided into those who served in Vietnam itself, and those whose service was related to the Vietnam war but who were not deployed directly within the country (e.g. forces deployed in neighboring countries, or naval personnel deployed exclusively in the waters off Vietnam). In what follows, I use only data from soldiers stationed in Vietnam itself.

4.1 reports the distribution of responses to this question (excluding the small number of respondents who refused to answer the question or answered that they “didn’t know”). At the bottom of the table, I aggregate the answers indicating *individual participation* in mutilation (“I participated” or “I was responsible”) as well as those indicating *unit or individual participation* (individual participation plus reported participation by the unit).

**Table 4.1 Reported exposure to mutilation**

|  | I. All Vietnam veterans | II. Veterans who served mainly or completely in combat roles |
|--|-------------------------|--|
| 1) Not at all  | 66.76%                  | 47.87%   |
| 2) Knew/heard about it                                 | 21.27%                  | 22.87%   |
| 3) Saw it  | 8.45%                   | 18.88%   |
| 4) Unit participated                                   | 1.69%                   | 4.79%  |
| 5) I participated                                      | 0.99%                   | 3.19%  |
| 6) I was responsible                                   | 0.85%                   | 2.39%  |
| <i>Individual participation</i><br>(5 + 6)             | 1.84%                   | 5.58%  |
| <i>Unit or individual participation</i><br>(4 + 5 + 6) | 3.53%                   | 10.37%   |
| <i>Number of observations</i>                          | 1420                    | 376  |

Source: National Survey of the Vietnam Generation



Column I in Table 4.1 presents the distribution of answers for all Vietnam veterans surveyed. Overall, the survey found that two-thirds of Vietnam veterans interviewed reported no exposure at all to mutilation, while about a fifth knew or heard about the practice, and about 8 percent personally witnessed it; only a small proportion (under 2 percent) admitted that members of their unit perpetrated mutilation, and an even smaller proportion indicated having personally participated in or been responsible for such actions.

At first glance, these responses seem to support the view that mutilation was extremely rare among American forces. Three things should be kept in mind, however. First, the NSVG necessarily relied on self-reported participation in violence, which raises obvious concerns about underreporting due to social desirability bias (Saunders 1991). Given the highly transgressive nature of postmortem mutilation, some NSVG respondents who participated directly in such acts may have been unwilling to admit this to interviewers, and may instead have reported only lower levels of exposure.

Second, the figures presented in Column I include a large proportion of soldiers who had only minimal involvement in actual combat. War-time estimates suggest that about 70 per cent of American soldiers in Vietnam served exclusively as “rear echelon” support forces. Such individuals “[could] not be considered combat soldiers except by the loosest of definitions” (Moskos 1970, 139), and would have had little or no opportunity to engage in the postmortem mutilation of enemy fighters. Column II in Table 4.1 therefore presents rates of exposure to mutilation for only those respondents (27 per cent of the total) who reported having served “mainly” or “completely” in combat roles. These figures suggest that mutilation was not as marginal an activity as it first appears: nearly 6 percent of the combat soldiers surveyed admitted to individual participation in mutilation, and another 5 percent reported unit-level participation.

Finally, even these reported rates of participation likely underestimate the prevalence of mutilation among American combat soldiers because of survivor bias. The NSVG’s sample necessarily excluded soldiers killed in action and veterans who had died before the survey was implemented. Previous research has shown that participation in mutilation in Vietnam was strongly associated with combat exposure (Hiley-Young et al. 1995). Logically, those exposed to more intense combat were more likely to be killed. Among survivors, more combat-exposed veterans

may also have had a higher post-service mortality rate (see Centers for Disease Control 1987). As a result, the combat veterans surveyed in the NSVG were likely less exposed to combat, on average, and therefore less likely to have perpetrated atrocities, than those who died before the survey was conducted.

Overall, the figures depicted in Table 4.1 suggest that a significant number of American soldiers in Vietnam participated in mutilation. Applying the NSVG's reported rate of individual participation for all Vietnam veterans (1.84 per cent) to the total estimated population of Americans who served within the borders of Vietnam (about 2.7 million) yields an estimate of about 48,000 individual perpetrators. Alternatively, applying the reported rate of participation among combat soldiers (5.58 per cent) to an estimate of the number of soldiers who served "mainly or completely" in combat (about 730,000, or 27 per cent of 2.7 million), yields an estimate of about 40,000 perpetrators. Both estimates, which ignore the likely underreporting of mutilation due to social desirability bias and selection bias, suggest widespread perpetration.

### **4.2.3 Punishment and Toleration**

How was it possible for mutilation to become this widespread despite being officially prohibited by policy? Wood argues that unauthorized violence can become frequent when commanders "either will not or cannot effectively prohibit" it (Wood 2018, 521). One indicator of effective prohibition of a particular form of violence is the frequency with which it is punished. In the context of the U.S. military in Vietnam, such punishment could take the form of a judicial process (court martial) or of non-judicial punishment imposed directly by commanders. Though we know that the latter was far more common than the former (Allison 2007, 71), there is unfortunately no comprehensive record of either form of punishment in Vietnam (Solis 2017, 122), and thus no way of precisely estimating how often mutilation was punished and in what manner. Two partial databases of judicial punishments in Vietnam, provided by Parks (1976) and Lewy (1978), suggest that mutilation was rarely punished through court martial: Parks' summary of court-martials in Vietnam from 1965 to 1973 reports only three convictions for mutilation (out of a total of

259) (Parks 1976, 18), while Lewy (1978, 348, 456) reports five court-martial convictions for mutilation in the U.S. Army and one in the Marine Corps.

These are clearly incomplete records, however. The files of the Vietnam War Crimes Working Group (VWCWG), a Pentagon task-force established to investigate American war crimes, reveal numerous additional cases in which mutilation was investigated and sometimes punished through special or general court martial (see Table 4.2). In total, the VWCWG investigated 38 cases in which American soldiers had allegedly engaged in mutilation (each “case” could involve numerous individual allegations). Of these, the group found that suspects were charged in twelve cases, and convictions and punishments were decreed in nine. Those punished were typically fined (from \$100 to \$500) and given grade reductions. These figures clearly show that the military as an institution attempted to enforce the prohibition on mutilation. They also reveal, however, that such enforcement was relatively few in number, at least relative to the likely scale of the phenomenon, discussed above. In a majority of cases (24 of 38 cases), allegations of mutilation did *not* give rise to official military investigations or trials, and only came to the attention of DoD investigators because of allegations made by ex-servicemen after their return to the United States, or because body parts sent by mail from Vietnam to the U.S. were intercepted by U.S. Customs. In almost all of these cases, it was not possible for the VWCWG to substantiate the alleged acts of mutilation (because veterans making the allegations refused to collaborate with investigators, for example, or because it was impossible to prove that intercepted body parts were acquired through the desecration of a corpse), and no charges were therefore brought.

**Table 4.2: Mutilations investigated by the Crimes Working Group**

|                                       |   |       |           |
|---------------------------------------|---|-------|-----------|
| Number of cases...                    | involving allegations of mutilation: 38                         |       |           |
|                                       | in which allegations of mutilation could be “substantiated”: 14 |       |           |
|                                       | in which suspect(s) were charged: 12                            |       |           |
|                                       | in which suspect(s) convicted and punished: 9                   |       |           |
| Sources of allegations of mutilation: | “substantiated” cases   | tried | convicted |
| Internal to military:                 | 13 cases  | 10    | 9         |
| U.S. Customs:                         | 12 cases  | 1     | 1         |
| Ex-servicemen:                        | 10 cases  | 1     | 0         |
| Press reports:                        | 3 cases   | 2     | 2         |

If mutilation was rarely tried by court-martial, this leaves the possibility that such violations were usually dealt with by means of non-judicial punishment. This, in and of itself, would indicate that such violence was not perceived as a particularly serious offence; non-judicial punishments are specifically intended to allow commanders to “resolve allegations of *minor* misconduct against a soldier without resorting to higher forms of discipline, such as a court-martial,” and involve lesser forms of punishment than those imposed by judicial proceedings (Zurick 2010, 301, emphasis added). There is no way of estimating how common non-judicial punishment of mutilation was in Vietnam. Milam (2009), in his study of junior officers in Vietnam, argues that “most units discouraged [mutilation] and punished the perpetrators” (135). Yet he also remarks that such acts “were often considered *nuisances* by junior officers who were expected to keep such things from happening” (emphasis added). When unit members perpetrated mutilation, “[j]unior officers had to decide if this kind of violation was serious enough to warrant discipline, because some men who participated in such atrocious behaviour were very good infantry soldiers who performed well in combat situations” (136).

In fact, the evidence suggests that punishment of mutilation was inconsistent across units. While some unit commanders clearly took exception to the practice and warned their soldiers against it (see e.g. Caputo 2017, 124; Marlantes 2011, 112), others adopted a more tolerant attitude and effectively “‘turned a blind eye’ to such antics” (Bourke 1999, 41). Greiner (2009, 131) notes testimony from Vietnam veterans who “speak of superiors...who tolerate[d] mutilation of corpses in every conceivable way.” Some unit-level commanders may even have encouraged the practice (see Baker 1982, 50). The VWCWG files reveal at least one case in which a master sergeant directly ordered a soldier to decapitate a body and then kept the skull as a trophy,<sup>35</sup> and another in which a sergeant actively encouraged one of his subordinates to mutilate a corpse in order “prove himself a man.”<sup>36</sup>

In sum, it appears clear that mutilation was rarely punished as a serious offence in Vietnam, leaving enforcement largely in the hands of unit commanders, at least some of whom tolerated the practice.

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<sup>35</sup> See NARA, Record Group 319, UD 1019, Box 15, Case 129 (Ashbaugh Incident).

<sup>36</sup> See NARA, Record Group 319, UD 1019, Box 15, Case 136 (Ulysses Williams Incident).

### 4.3 Possible Explanations

Top-down toleration alone, however, cannot explain why the practice of mutilation became widespread. Explaining the emergence of a wartime practice requires consideration of the preferences and motivations of rank-and-file combatants. These may be shaped by diverse pre-deployment factors and by wartime experiences (cf. Wood 2018). Here I present three possible explanations for mutilation as a practice that imply distinct patterns of variation in individual-level participation in such violence.

#### 4.3.1 Bad apples

The first explanation focuses on the role of soldiers with atypical predispositions to violence—the proverbial “bad apples.” In a large enough military force, some proportion of recruits is bound to have atypical “preferences and talents for violence” (Mitchell 2004, 46), either because of abnormal psychology (e.g. sadism or “empathy deficit” - see Baron-Cohen 2011; Grossman 1995, 183), or because of prior habituation to violence. Particularly violent individuals may actively self-select into military service (Mueller 2004, 9-10) and go on to perpetrate a disproportionate number of atrocities. While the vast majority of soldiers find the experience of combat deeply traumatizing, research suggests that a small proportion of “abnormal” recruits may actually enjoy it (Swank and Marchand 1946, 44; Grossman 1995). In the permissive conditions of war, such combatants may become what Mann (2000, 332) calls “disturbed killers”: men “whose hatreds, fed by disturbed personalities, [result] in sadistic behavior.”

Existing scholarship mostly rejects the “bad apples” theory as a general explanation for wartime atrocity, arguing that the number of sadistic or otherwise abnormal perpetrators is generally small (Baumeister 1997, 252; Waller 2002, 75; Smeulers 2019, 14), and emphasizing instead the capacity of “ordinary men” to perpetrate extraordinary violence (Browning 1992; Waller 2002). Research on atrocity in Vietnam has similarly emphasized the “average” nature of most perpetrators (Kelman and Hamilton 1989, 2). Yet perpetrator research has only rarely fo-

cused specifically on acts like mutilation, involving grotesque or “excessive” violence (but see Mitton 2015; Weisband 2017). It is possible that, while “ordinary men” can become reliable killers, it is a relatively small number of “abnormal” individuals who perpetrate the bulk of unauthorized extreme violence (cf. Valentino 2004, 54).

One implication of the “bad apples” theory is that perpetrators of mutilation should differ systematically from non-perpetrators in terms of some (set of) risk factor(s) associated with aggression and violence. Research in public health, psychology, and criminology has revealed a range of such potential factors, including childhood domestic abuse (Currie and Tekin 2006; Fitton, Yu, and Fazel 2020), parental mental illness (Tehrani et al. 1998; Dean et al. 2012), and parental criminality (Tzoumakis et al. 2017; Sivertsson, Carlsson, and Hoherz 2021). To the extent that these factors influence individual predispositions to violence, individual soldiers who experience one or more of them should be more likely to perpetrate violence not authorized by military policy, including mutilation.

**H<sub>1</sub>:** Soldiers exposed to risk-factors associated with violence prior to deployment should be more likely to participate in mutilation.

### **4.3.2 Racism and hunting culture**

A second argument focuses not on individual pathology, but on broader “cultural” factors affecting individual attitudes towards particular forms of violence. Harrison (2012) has argued that practices of war-time mutilation and human trophy-taking are linked, on the one hand, to traditions of racialized violence, and, on the other, to hunting culture. “A striking feature of military trophy-taking,” Harrison writes, “is that it has been carried out, at least among European and North American military personnel, almost exclusively against enemies whom they have represented as belonging to ‘races’ other than their own. Among these personnel, it has almost always occurred as a specifically racialized form of violence, and could arguably be considered a type of racially motivated hate crime specific to military personnel in wartime” (ibid., 4). In the American case, such violence can be traced back to the practice of “scalping” during the colonial peri-

od (Abler 1992), as well as the use of postmortem mutilation during lynchings of African Americans in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries (Garland 2005; Beck and Tolnay 2019). In the twentieth century, practices of mutilation and trophy-taking were associated in particular with the conduct of American troops in the war against Japan during World War II (Dower 1986, 66; Weingartner 1992). Several authors have noted the contrast between the prevalence of mutilation and trophy-hunting in the Pacific war and their relative rarity in Europe, and have explained this difference in terms of the overtly racist attitudes of many U.S. troops towards the Japanese (Dower 1986, 33; Weingartner 1992, 67; Harrison 2012, 131).

Mutilations in Vietnam can be seen as a continuation of this long tradition. Bourke (1999, 38) argues that the prevalence of “gruesome trophy-hunting” among American forces in Vietnam was due in part to a distinct “national narrative tradition” through which “Americans placed more emphasis on ‘scalping’ their enemies ‘like the Indians’.” Harrison argues that the practice of mutilation in Vietnam “had its roots in strongly racialized attitudes towards the Vietnamese” (2012, 166). Such attitudes could in part have reflected the geographical background of many American recruits, a disproportionate number of whom came from the South (Fry 2015, 148). At least some white southern soldiers in Vietnam identified openly with traditions of white racist violence, “donning Ku Klux Klan robes and the Confederate flag” (Gurman 2017). Given the pervasiveness of racial prejudice in the South during the Vietnam war, amply documented in public opinion research from that era (see Firebaugh and Davis 1988 for a summary), it is plausible that such identification could have been relatively widespread among white southern soldiers. If practices of mutilation in Vietnam were a manifestation of a long-standing tradition of white supremacist violence, we should expect that southern whites would be more likely to perpetrate such violence than other soldiers.

**H<sub>2</sub>:** White soldiers from the South should be more likely to perpetrate mutilation.

In contrast, identification with an American tradition of white supremacist violence should have been absent among Black soldiers. Not only were African Americans among the main historical victims of such violence, but many Black soldiers in Vietnam exhibited a height-

ened racial consciousness sparked by civil rights struggles in the U.S. and by experiences of racial discrimination within the military (Moskos 1970, 128). If mutilation was primarily a manifestation of a long tradition of American racism, then black soldiers should have been less likely to perpetrate it.

**H<sub>3</sub>:** Black soldiers should be less likely to perpetrate mutilation.

To this argument about the role of racism, Harrison (2012) adds a distinct claim about the influence of hunting culture, pointing to analogies between human trophy-taking in modern war and similar practices in small-scale societies in South America and Southeast Asia. In the latter, he argues, mutilation and trophy-taking occur “when certain categories of enemies are strongly dehumanized or depersonalized, and represented as animal quarry, not merely to be killed but also, in some sense, consumed” (ibid., 6). Harrison suggests that the mutilation of enemy dead by modern militaries is “motivated by very similar symbolic associations...between enemies and quarry” and occurs when “the cognized boundaries between humans and animals, expressed in the activity of hunting, are shifted into the domain of human relations, and made to serve there as a model for violence between social groups” (2012, 10). The use of hunting metaphors to describe colonial violence against Native Americans (“scalp-hunting”), lynching of African Americans (Chamayou 2012, 99-108), and warfare against the Japanese in the Pacific (Weingartner 1992, 55) is consistent with Harrison’s theory. Harrison speculates that the conceptual shift towards viewing enemies as quarry to be hunted and dismembered is “more likely to be made by men for whom hunting represents an important component of their social identity” (2012, 10). If this is right, we should expect mutilation in Vietnam to be more common among soldiers from a rural background.

**H<sub>4</sub>:** Soldiers from a rural background are more likely to perpetrate mutilation.



### 4.3.3 Revenge and deviant cohesion

A final explanation of mutilation in Vietnam focuses not on atypical individuals or long-standing practices, but on the brutalizing effects of combat itself. In particular, this explanation highlights the role of revenge as key motive for atrocity: soldiers who experience the death of comrades in battle sometimes have a strong desire to avenge that loss using violence which exceeds that permitted by organizational policy. Whether such desires arise and are acted on depends on both the strength of organizational discipline and on social dynamics within the military unit, especially the strength of its social cohesion and the degree to which informal, unit-level norms reinforce or deviate from official military policy. “Deviant cohesion” arises when “subgroup solidarities overturn organizational goals” (Vennesson 2015, 235) and tight-knit groups of soldiers develop norms that endorse prohibited practices (Rielly 2001; cf. Finnegan 2021).

In Vietnam, combat losses among American forces occurred in the context of an irregular war against an elusive enemy that rarely confronted American forces in open battle and relied instead on classic guerrilla warfare tactics, including systematic concealment, intermingling with the civilian population, and use of ambushes and booby traps (Biddle 2021, 275-284). American forces were generally poorly-prepared for this kind of war (Krepinevich 1988). Wartime and postwar interviews with veterans conducted by psychiatrists (Gault 1971; Langner 1971; Lifton 1973; Fox 1974; Shay 1994; Kubany 1997) reveal just how profoundly disorienting many found the experience of counterinsurgency operations in Vietnam. As Lifton (1971, 45) describes:

The average Vietnam GI is thrust into a strange, faraway, and very alien place... Finding himself in the middle of a guerrilla war in the which the guerrillas have intimate contact with ordinary people, the environment to him is not only dangerous and unpredictable but devoid of landmarks that might warn of danger or help him identify the enemy. He experiences a combination of profound inner confusion, helplessness, and terror. Then he sees his buddies killed and mutilated. He may experience the soldier-survivor's impulse toward revenge, toward overcoming his own emotional conflicts and giving meaning to his buddies' sacrifices by getting back at the enemy. And in an ordinary war there is a structure and ritual for doing just that —battle lines and established methods for contacting the enemy and carrying out individual

and group battle tasks with aggressiveness and courage. But in Vietnam there is none of that—the enemy is everyone and no one, never still, rarely visible, and usually indistinguishable from the ordinary peasant. The GI is therefore denied the minimal psychological satisfaction of war, and, as a result, his fear, rage, and frustration mount.

Lifton described how mounting feelings of anger could eventually be vented on available “scape-goats”, whether civilians, prisoners, or the bodies of dead enemy fighters. Mutilation often occurred in this context, as indicated by Dubberly (2011): “Most U.S. atrocities occurred because of the nature of the American response to guerrilla tactics... Small units patrolled the countryside in pursuit of the VC, who left mines and *punji* pits [booby traps consisting of holes with sharpened sticks] in their wake. Viciously efficient, these booby traps killed or maimed many GIs and left their frightened and angry comrades with no means for revenge... Retribution, or payback as it was known to GIs took several forms. *Mutilation was by far the most prevalent*” (279, emphasis added). Soldiers’ testimonies provide evidence that mutilation was often used to avenge the loss of fellow unit-members (see Box 1). The files of the VWCWG confirm that revenge was a frequent motive for acts of mutilation: in the fourteen cases in which the VWCWG was able to substantiate allegations of mutilation, revenge was the most common motive cited, appearing in six cases. Perpetrator’s descriptions of their acts highlight the emotional intensity of their experience of anger and a visceral need to “get back” at the enemy. Shay (1994) calls this “beserker rage,” a state of frenzied anger in which soldiers become obsessed with avenging personal losses (cf. Fox 1974). The emotional intensity of this experience can help explain the extreme nature and apparent irrationality of the resulting violence (attacking the bodies of enemies who are already dead).

**H<sub>5</sub>:** Soldiers reporting more frequent combat losses among close friends from their units should be more likely to perpetrate mutilation.

If revenge is a powerful motive for the use of mutilation, then participation in mutilation should vary in accordance with the strength of that motive. In general, soldiers with stronger bonds with other members of their units should be more likely to experience intense desires to

### **Box 1 Perpetrators' descriptions of mutilation**

“I cut the clothes off and then took my knife and cut both ears off the dead man. I did this because a close friend of mine, like a brother, had been KIA in Vietnam” (quoted in Milam 2009, 135).

“out came the knife, and I started mutilating. It was... this overwhelming sense of, ‘I’ve got to. You’re gonna pay... I guess my justification was revenge’” (quoted in Appy 1993, 263).

“I had been ‘out in the bush’ for three days and nights. I couldn’t sleep ... and I kept thinking of all my buddies that had been killed and the hate just kept building up inside me...I got this knife from someone in the billets and went outside to where the dead VC was. I cut off both of his ears with a knife” (Statement by Accused or Suspect Person, Criminal Investigations Department Office, Camp Evans, Thua Thien Province, RVN, 13 Aug. 1970. NARA, Record Group 319, UD 1019, Box 7, Case 54 [De Franco Allegation], Document id. 59169364)

“We cut left ears off and wore them around our necks to show we were warriors, and we knew how to get revenge.” (cited in “Desecration of the Dead” 2012)

“Every fucking one that died, I say ‘ \_\_\_\_\_, here’s one for you, baby. I’ll take this motherfucker out and I’m going to cut his fucking heart out for you.” (cited in Shay 1994: 413-4)

exact revenge when their comrades are killed in battle (Vaughn and Schum 2001: 12). At the same time, whether they act on that desire should depend on the degree to which the organizational prohibition on such acts is enforced within their unit. Thus, as summarized in Table 4.3, the probability of mutilation should be shaped by both “primary group cohesion”—the strength of inter-personal bonds among rank-and-file soldiers—and by what some have called “secondary group cohesion,” viz. the strength of bonds connecting individual soldiers to the military as an institution (Siebolt 2007).

Primary group cohesion has long been recognized as an important source of combat motivation (Shils and Janowitz 1948; Henderson 1985), particularly in conditions of modern combat in which the dispersal of infantry troops often limits the military’s capacity for centralized

**Table 4.3 Group cohesion and mutilation**

|                          |        | Primary group cohesion   |  |
|--------------------------|--------|--|--|
|                          |        | Weak   | Strong   |
| Secondary group cohesion | Strong | <b>Mutilation rare:</b> weak bonds among group members create fewer intense desires for vengeance; mutilation by individuals may occur | <b>Mutilation rare:</b> strong bonds create intense desires for vengeance, but strong unit norms reinforce official prohibition on the practice                                    |
|                          | Weak   |  | <b>Mutilation more likely:</b> strong bonds create intense desires for vengeance; strong unit norms diverge from official policy; emergence of mutilation as a unit-level practice |

supervision and coercive control (Marshall 1947). Such cohesion arises especially in small units (squads or platoons) whose members share in the daily deprivations and dangers of combat. While some scholars have downplayed the emotional dimension of cohesion, emphasizing instead the instrumental advantages of strong group bonds (Moskos 1970), the importance of common goals (Kier 1998; MacCoun, Kier, and Belkin 2006), or the capacity of soldiers to act in a coordinated fashion (King 2013), soldiers' own accounts of their war-time experience often testify to the importance of affective bonds among unit-members. Logically, soldiers with more and closer friendships within their units would experienced desires to avenge lost comrades more often and more intensely than those with few or weak bonds with other unit-members.

The role of primary group cohesion in shaping the behaviour of American soldiers in Vietnam has been debated by scholars. Several observers have argued that primary group cohesion in Vietnam was undermined by combat replacement policies that rotated individual soldiers in and out of units on set, twelve-month tours (Moskos 1970, 142; Milam 2009, 140). Some go so far as to argue that primary group cohesion was “destroyed” by these policies, creating “units of strangers” with weak bonds, low morale, and little discipline (Savage and Gabriel 1976, 372). Others, in contrast, have argued that the primary group in Vietnam was strained but hardly destroyed, and that the true source of discipline problems was not weak cohesion but, on the contrary, strong primary cohesion that became “disarticulated” from formal military organization (Faris 1977). As numerous scholars have noted, strong primary group cohesion, divorced from “secondary cohesion”—identification with the military as an institution—can actively subvert organizational policies, promoting behaviour seen as deviant from the perspective of the military as an institution (Moskos 1975, 35; Henderson 1985, 4; Winslow 1999; King 2013, 31-32; McLauchlin 2020). In the case of Vietnam, such behaviour included drug use, “fraggings” (assassination of officers), mutiny, and desertion, all of which were perpetrated mainly by *groups* of soldiers, rather than by isolated individuals (Faris 1977, 260-262).

One manifestation of the “disarticulation” of primary and secondary cohesion is divergence between informal norms of behaviour endorsed by members of the unit and the official policies of the larger military organization (Anonymous 1946). In highly cohesive primary groups, informal, unit-level norms provide “strong rules of behavior and expectations about individual conduct” and are often “the immediate determinant of the soldier’s behavior” on the battlefield (Henderson 1985, 5). When unit-level norms are congruent with those promoted by the military as an institution, they should reinforce official prohibitions and restrain soldiers from engaging in unauthorized violence. On the other hand, when such norms diverge from organizational rules, they can actively promote unauthorized practices (Rielly 2001). Soldiers in such units face considerable pressures to participate in such practices as a means of conforming to group norms (Yager 1975, 261). This explains why soldiers in Vietnam who perpetrated mutilation usually also reported having witnessed such violence used by others in their unit (Hiley-Young et al. 1995, 132). It can also help explain why the use of mutilation varied across units: as

noted by Appy (1993), while “mutilation was not universally practiced by American infantrymen... *in some units it was commonplace*” (265, emphasis added).

**H<sub>6</sub>:** Soldiers with stronger bonds with unit members should be more likely to perpetrate mutilation, but only in units in which organizational rules are weakly enforced.

## 4.4 Testing the Explanations

In this section I test the explanations of mutilation proposed above. I first describe the data used and the operationalization of variables. I then conduct a statistical analysis to assess how well each hypothesis can account for the patterns of participation in mutilation revealed in the data.

### 4.4.1 Data and measurement

My main source of data is the NSVG. As described above, this survey used a representative sample of Vietnam veterans to gather information on a variety of prewar, wartime, and postwar experiences (Kulka et al. 1988). The focus of the study was on estimating the prevalence of PTSD among American veterans and explaining the etiology of that disorder.

#### *Outcome variable*

As noted above, NSVG respondents were asked to rate their exposure to the “mutilation of bodies of the enemy or civilians” on a six point scale, with the last two levels denoting individual-level participation (“I participated” or “I was responsible”).<sup>37</sup> As noted above, some respondents may have been unwilling to admit personal responsibility for mutilation and may have provided answers implying lower levels of exposure instead. I therefore use an alternative operationalization in robustness checks, measuring whether or not respondents reported individual or group

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<sup>37</sup> Survey questions used to operationalize all variables are included in Appendix II, Table III.1.

participation in mutilation. In total, as noted above, 1.84% of respondents are coded as having participated in mutilation, and an additional 1.69% reported unit-level participation. Less than 1 per cent of respondents refused to answer this question, and are dropped from the analysis.

### *Explanatory variables*

If mutilation in Vietnam can be attributed primarily to atypical “bad apples,” perpetrators of mutilation should differ systematically from non-perpetrators in terms of “risk factors” associated with violent behaviour. Public health, psychology, and criminology research has revealed a range of such factors. The NSVG allows me to measure four of these. *Childhood domestic abuse* measures the frequency with which respondents faced serious domestic physical violence between the ages of six and sixteen. *Family mental illness* measures whether or not respondents had family members who were hospitalized for mental illness or substance abuse when they were growing up. *Family criminality* measures whether or not respondents had family members incarcerated for criminal activity. *Parental death* measures whether or not a respondent experienced the death of one or both parents before the age of sixteen.

Assessing the connection between wartime mutilation and traditions of racialized violence is complicated by the difficulty of directly measuring attitudes towards race among the NSVG respondents. I therefore opt for indirect tests, using racial identity and geographic region as rough proxies for a soldier’s likely identification with the “narrative tradition” of white racist violence (Bourke 1999). If mutilation was associated with a tradition of white racist violence stretching back to the colonial period, we should expect *white southerners* to be more likely to perpetrate mutilation in Vietnam than soldiers from other backgrounds. Conversely, assuming that black soldiers were especially *unlikely* to identify with the tradition of white racist violence, we should expect *black soldiers* to be especially unlikely to perpetrate mutilation.

In order to assess Harrison’s argument about the influence of hunting practices on wartime mutilation, I measure whether respondents came from a *rural background*. Respondents were asked whether they were raised primarily in a rural area, small town or city, suburban area or large city. I code respondents as “rural” when they said they were raised in a “rural or country area.”

Finally, in order to assess the role of revenge as a motive for mutilation, I measure the frequency with which respondents reported seeing *close friends killed* within their unit. In order to test the predicted interaction effect of primary and secondary group cohesion, I measure two variables. *Unit cohesion* is measured using a question that asked respondents to indicate how “close or tight” they had felt with other members of their unit. Measuring secondary cohesion is more challenging; no question in the NSVG directly measures the congruence of unit-level norms with organizational rules. Instead, I use a question that asked respondents about whether they experienced a “decreased emphasis in the field on military discipline and bearing” within their military unit. The original purpose of this question was to measure how “satisfying” respondents found such a decline in discipline. But respondents were also given the option of indicating that they “did not experience” any such a decline. I use these responses to code a binary variable measuring whether or not respondents experienced a *decline in discipline*. Because “discipline” bears directly on the following of organizational rules, while “military bearing” refers to “conducting oneself in a professional manner...uphold[ing] standards, and doing the hard right over the easy wrong in both good and bad situations” (Grimmett 2018: 2), this variable provides a basic measure of the degree to which the norms of the military as an institution were emphasized within a respondent’s military unit.

### ***Control variables***

Finally, I code a series of variables to measure likely confounders. *Combat exposure* measures the intensity of combat which a given respondent reported being exposed to while in Vietnam. Controlling for combat exposure is important because such exposure likely increases the probability of mutilation directly (more combat provides more opportunity to engage mutilation of enemy dead) and because it is likely to be correlated with a range of other predictors of mutilation. For example, black soldiers in Vietnam are thought to have been more exposed to combat on average than white soldiers (Moskos 1970, 139). Combat exposure is also likely associated with decline in discipline (maintaining organizational norms becomes more difficult in intense com-



bat) and with unit cohesion (cohesion will tend to increase as members of a unit face danger together).

Aside from combat exposure, I also control for *deployment duration*. Longer deployments not only provide more opportunity for the perpetration of mutilation, but may also affect unit cohesion (longer time spent with unit members will tend to reinforce mutual bonds) and discipline (longer deployments are associated with a greater tendency to disregard rules [Manekin 2013]). Finally, I control for respondent *age*. In general, younger men are more prone to violence than older men, and age may also influence other explanatory variables.

Table III.2 in the Appendix III presents summary statistics for all variables.

#### 4.4.2 Statistical analysis

##### *Bad apples*

I begin by assessing whether mutilations in Vietnam can be explained as the actions of “bad apples.” Figure 4.1 depicts coefficient plots with 95% confidence intervals for a series of logistic regressions, with the binary measure of individual participation in mutilations as the dependent variable, and four individual-level risk factors associated with violence as explanatory variables.<sup>38</sup> I first estimate the effect of each factor individually, and then estimate the effect of each while controlling for the effects of the others. Each column in Figure 4.1 includes four models, two estimated using responses from all Vietnam veterans surveyed by the NSVG (with and without control variables) and two estimated using only responses from soldiers who reported having served “mainly” or “completely” in combat (with and without control variables).

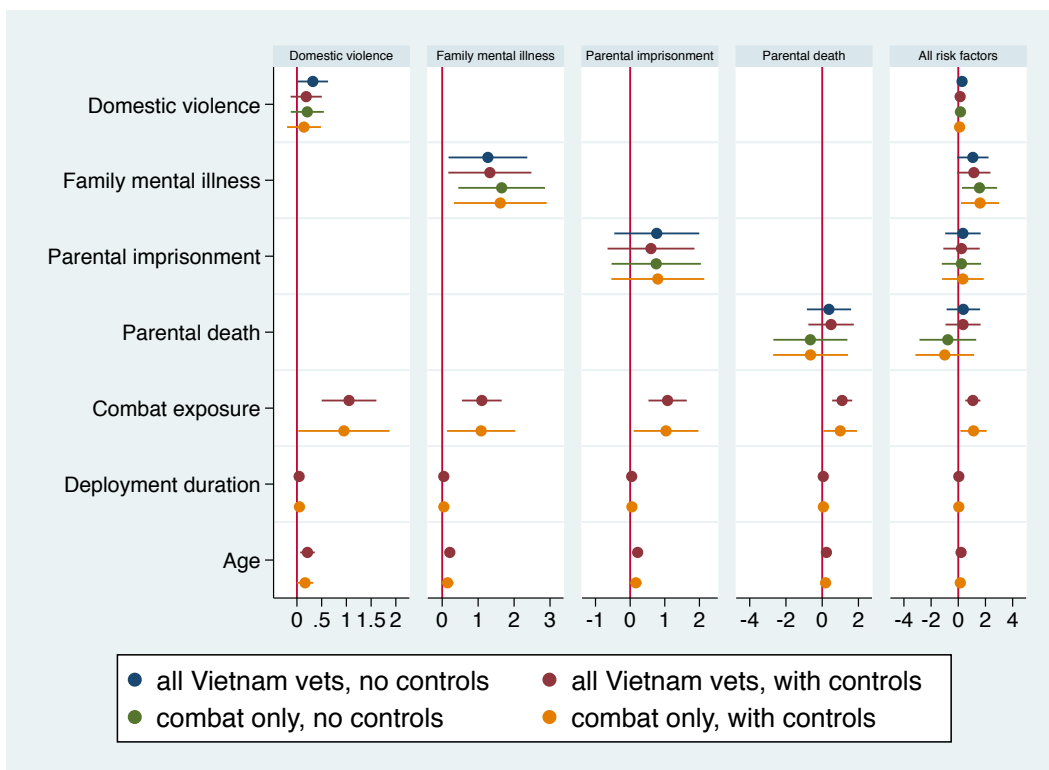
Of the four risk factors examined, only *family mental illness* has coefficients that are statistically significant at conventional levels in all models. These coefficients are positive, suggesting that soldiers with a family history of severe mental illness were more likely to perpetrate mutilation than soldiers without such a history. The coefficient for *domestic violence* is positive and statistically significant only in a model which takes no account of respondents’s involvement in

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<sup>38</sup> Complete regression tables are included in Appendix III.

combat. The remaining factors—*parental imprisonment* and *parental death*—have no apparent association with the perpetration of mutilation.

**Figure 4.1 Individual risk factors and participation in mutilation**



The finding that soldiers with a family history of mental illness were more likely to perpetrate mutilation is broadly consistent with my first hypothesis, in that such individuals may have atypical predispositions to violence compared to more “ordinary” recruits. Yet, as shown in Table 4.4, these soldiers account for only a minority (16 percent) of respondents who reported perpetrating mutilation.<sup>39</sup> Thus, while a family history of mental illness may be a significant predictor of mutilation, most perpetrators did *not* have had this kind of history. To the extent that these four risk factors provide a sufficiently comprehensive measure of the factors likely to predispose individuals to violence, these results suggest that the “bad apples” argument alone cannot account for mutilation in Vietnam.

<sup>39</sup> The individual cell count for soldiers with a family history of mental illness who participated in mutilation is very low. In Table III.6 in Appendix III presents the same pattern using my alternative dependent variable.

|  |  | Family history of mental illness |      | Proportion with family mental illness |
|--|--|----------------------------------|------|---------------------------------------|
|  |  | No                               | Yes  |                                       |
| Individual participation in mutilation | No                                     | 1311                             | 70   | 5%                                    |
|  | Yes                                    | 21                               | 4    | 16%                                   |
|  | Proportion participating in mutilation | 1.6%                             | 5.4% |                                       |

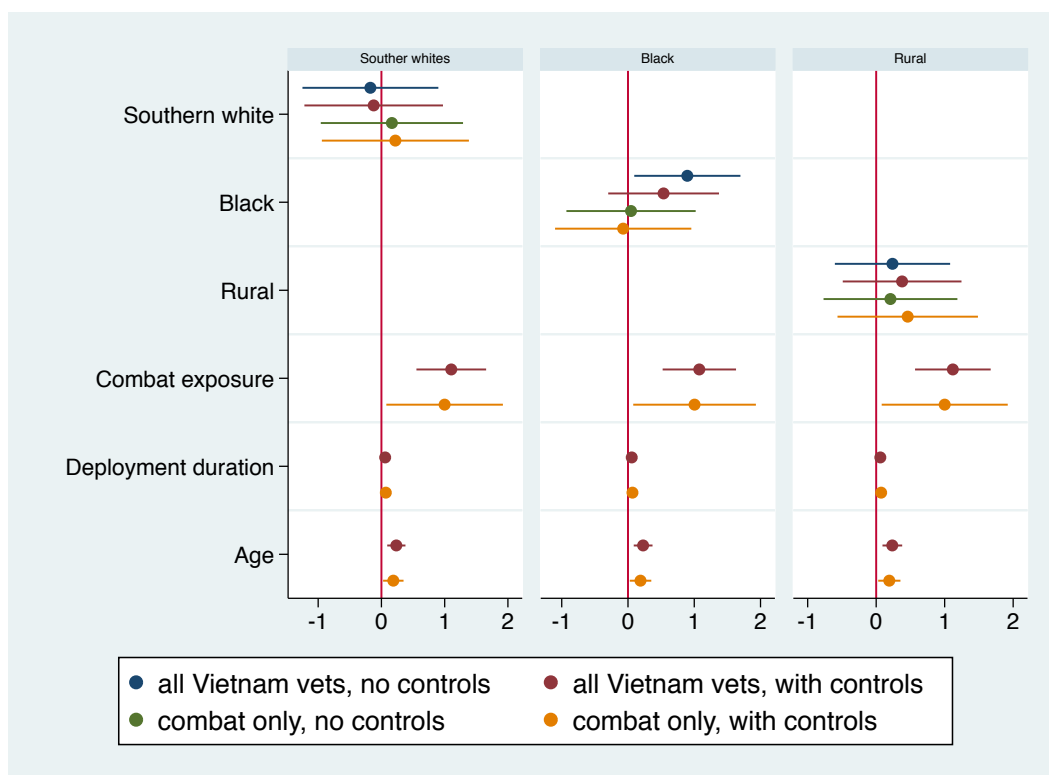
### ***Racism and hunting culture***

I now assess the arguments linking wartime mutilation to traditions of racialized violence and hunting culture. Figure 4.2 presents coefficient plots for a second series of logistic regressions with individual perpetration of mutilation as the dependent variable. Once again, I present models estimated using responses from all Vietnam veteran and from combat soldiers only, with and without control variables.

The results provide no evidence for any of the hypotheses associated with this explanation of mutilation. Coefficients for *Southern whites* are not statistically significant in any specification. To the extent that this variable is a fair proxy for identification with the tradition of white supremacist violence, the results do not support the view that such identification was a significant predictor of mutilation in Vietnam. Moreover, contrary to expectations, there is also no evidence that *black* soldiers—*i.e.* those least likely to identify with the tradition of white supremacist violence—were any less likely to use mutilations. Indeed, in a model estimated using responses from all Vietnam veterans without control variables, the coefficient for black soldiers is positive and statistically significant. As the other models show, however, this estimated effect

is no longer statistically significant once confounders are controlled for, or in models estimated using only responses from combat soldiers. This suggests a spurious correlation driven by black soldiers' greater involvement in combat.<sup>40</sup> Coefficients for *rural* background are positive but not statistically significant in any specification, providing no evidence that soldiers from a rural background were any more or less likely to perpetrate mutilations compared to those from other backgrounds.

**Figure 4.2 Racial and geographic background and participation in mutilation**



In sum, I find no evidence that mutilations in Vietnam were a direct continuation of traditions of white supremacist violence or connected directly to hunting culture. To be sure, it is possible that my proxies are insufficiently precise and more accurate measures would allow for better tests. It also seems likely that, even if racial identity does not directly explain the perpetration of mutilation, a tradition of racist violence nonetheless provided American soldiers with some of

<sup>40</sup> According to the NSVG data, whereas 48% of white respondents reported having been exposed to “moderate” or “heavy” combat in Vietnam, the corresponding proportion for black soldiers was 65%.

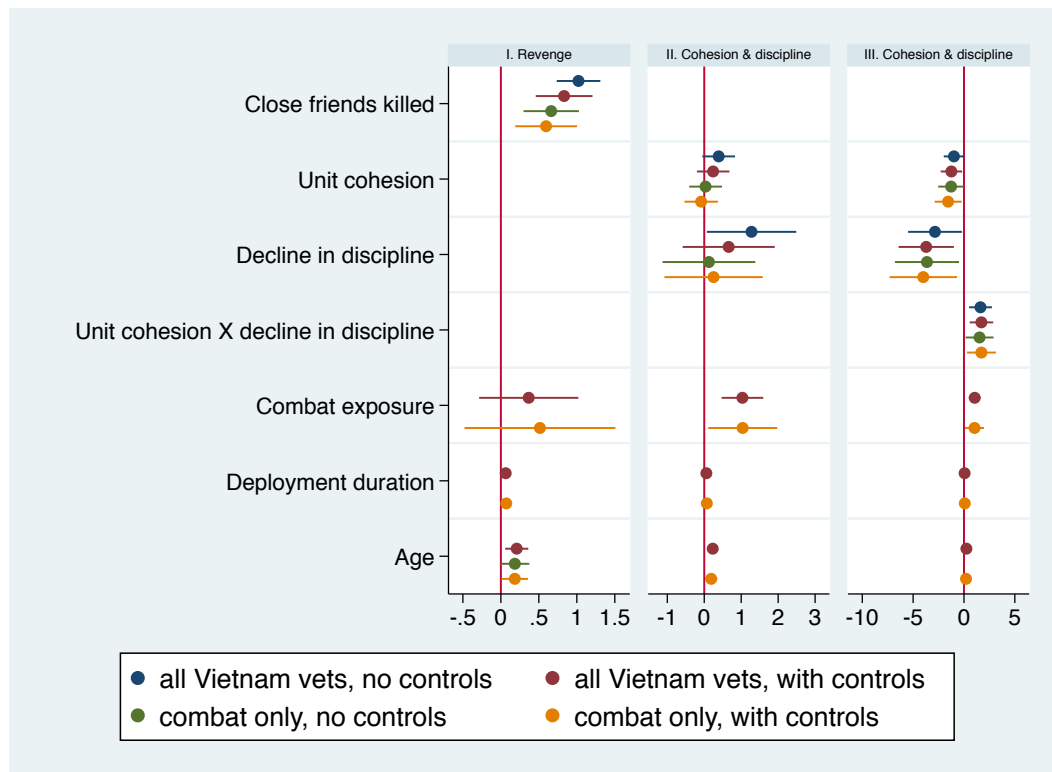
the specific techniques of violence used in Vietnam (e.g. scalping). It is striking, nonetheless, that these techniques were used by both black and white soldiers, as testimonies by African American veterans make clear (see e.g. Terry 1984, 293).

### *Revenge and deviant cohesion*

Finally, I assess the argument that explains mutilations in Vietnam as a form of revenge, and emphasizes the role of group cohesion and unit norms in shaping the use of such violence. Figure 4.3 presents coefficient plots for logistic regressions estimating the effect of the relevant independent variables on individual participation in mutilation. The results of models presented in the first column provide strong support for the view that mutilation was a form of revenge. Consistent with Hypothesis 5, the frequency with which soldiers reported having seen *close friends killed* in Vietnam is a positive and statistically significant predictor of mutilation across all specifications. Importantly, this effect is statistically significant even when controlling for a general measure of *combat exposure*, suggesting that this variable is not simply a proxy for the intensity of combat. Indeed, while *combat exposure* is a robust predictor of mutilation in all models examined so far, coefficients for this variable are no longer significant when the death of close friends is controlled for, suggesting that much of the “brutalizing” effect of combat is in fact caused by the experience of losing friends.

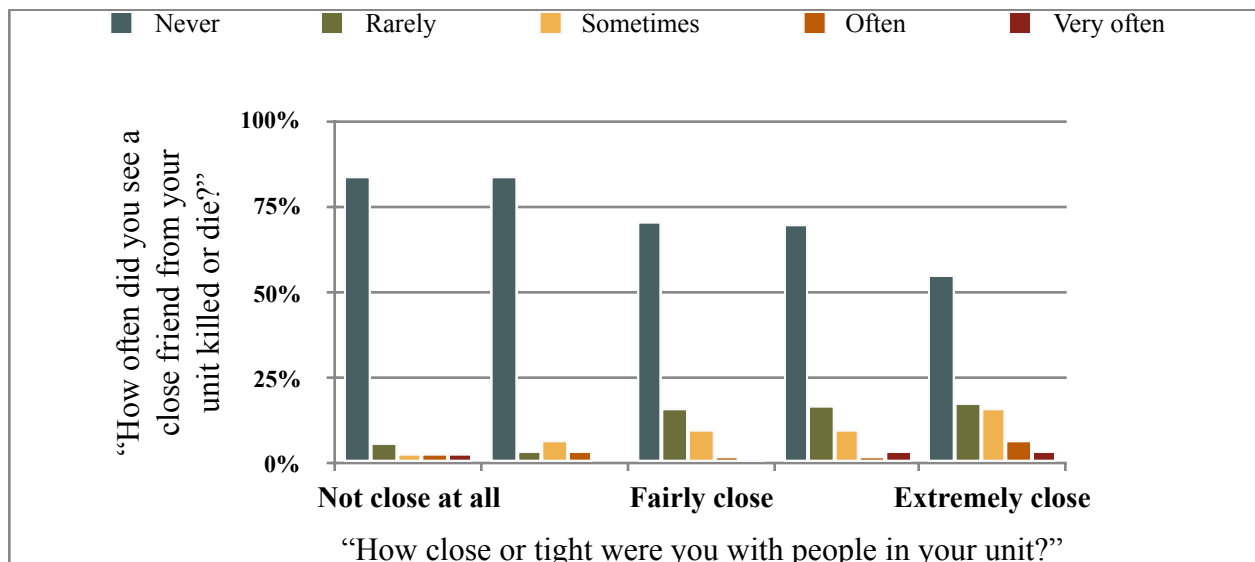
As argued above, the strength of the revenge motive should be related to the strength of primary group cohesion. Desires for revenge should be more (less) common and more (less) intense for soldiers who have more (fewer) “close friends” within their units. This intuition is borne out empirically, as shown in Figure 4.4, which presents variation in the frequency with which respondents reported having seen “close friends from [their] unit killed or die” as a function of the reported “closeness” of their bonds with other unit-members. The graph shows that respondents with weak ties to other unit members rarely saw close friends killed, while those with stronger bonds experienced such losses more frequently. If the loss of close friends generates motives for revenge, we should expect such motives to be more prevalent among soldiers reporting stronger bonds within their units.

**Figure 4.3 Revenge, group cohesion, and individual participation in mutilation**



At the same time, as argued above, whether motives for revenge are acted upon or not is likely to depend on the relationship between unit-level norms and organizational policies. Thus Table 4.3 above predicted a pattern of perpetration in which mutilation should be particularly prevalent in units with high primary group cohesion but low secondary group cohesion. Table 4.5 uses the responses from all Vietnam veterans in the NSVG to show that patterns in the data closely correspond to these expectations. Here congruence between unit-norms and organizational policies is measured in terms of reported decline in “discipline and military bearing.”

The correspondence between the theoretical expectations summarized in Table 4.3 and the empirical patterns shown in Table 4.5 is striking. As expected, individuals reporting weaker primary group cohesion only rarely report having perpetrated mutilation. This is consistent with the view that motivations for revenge are weaker in units in which soldiers have weaker bonds. In contrast, among respondents reporting stronger bonds with other unit members, participation in mutilation appears to have depended on the influence of organizational norms. Soldiers

**Figure 4.4 Primary group cohesion and combat losses among close friends****Table 4.5 Prevalence of mutilation as a function of unit cohesion and reported decline in discipline**

|   |     | “How close or tight were you with the people in your unit?” |              |              |                |
|---|-----|---|--------------|--------------|----------------|
|   |     | “not at all” or “not very”                                  | “fairly”     | “very”       | “extremely”    |
| Respondent experienced “decreased emphasis in the field on military discipline and bearing” | No  | 3.3% (1/30)   | 0.7% (1/140) | 0.6% (1/175) | 0% (0/97)      |
|   | Yes | 1.1% (1/90)   | 1.3% (4/307) | 1.7% (6/347) | 5.36% (12/224) |

reporting “extremely” high cohesion and no decline in discipline and military bearing *never* reported perpetrating mutilation. As expected, the highest rate of perpetration was reported by individuals who reported extremely high unit cohesion accompanied by a decline in discipline.<sup>41</sup>

These patterns are confirmed in the multivariate analyses in Figure 4.3. The results in Column II suggest that primary and secondary group cohesion *alone* do not predict the perpetration of mutilation. The coefficients for *unit cohesion* are not statistically significant at conventional levels, and their sign changes in different specifications. The coefficient for *decline in discipline* is positive and statistically significant only in a model that uses the responses of all Vietnam veterans in the NSVG and does not include control variables. The introduction of control variables, or the restriction of the sample to combat soldiers alone renders the coefficient no longer statistically significant. This suggests that, while decline in discipline is associated with a greater probability of mutilation, this is largely explained by the fact that such a decline is correlated with greater exposure to combat, which is itself a strong predictor of mutilation.

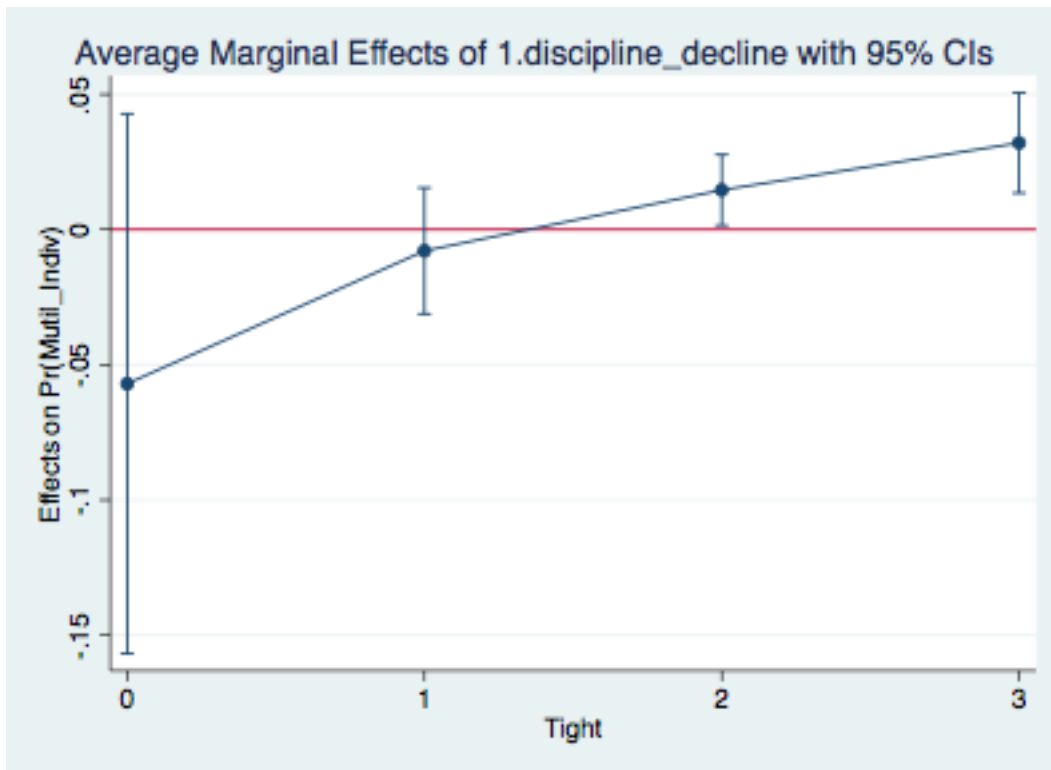
In contrast, as Column III shows, the estimated effect of *unit cohesion* on mutilation depends on whether respondents report a decline in military discipline. Coefficients associated with this interaction term (*Unit cohesion X Decline in discipline*) are positive and statistically significant across all specifications. This interaction effect is illustrated in Figure 4.5, which uses results from a model estimated on responses from all Vietnam veterans and including control variables to graph average marginal effects of *decline in discipline* at different levels of *unit cohesion*. The figure suggests that decline in discipline has a statistically significant effect on participation in mutilation only at higher levels of unit cohesion. This is consistent with Hypothesis 6: when bonds among unit members are weak, mutilation should be rare, regardless of the level of discipline; as cohesion increases, however, whether or not mutilation occurs depends on whether discipline and military bearing are maintained.

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<sup>41</sup> Because the individual cell counts are low in this table, Table III.7 in Appendix III includes a table looking at the same pattern using my alternative dependent variable. The same patterns recurs there, as discussed below.



**Figure 4.5 Effect of decline in discipline on mutilation depends on unit cohesion**



***Robustness and reverse causation***

As noted above, respondents' willingness to report personal participation in mutilation is likely shaped by social desirability bias; some proportion of respondents who participated in mutilation may have been unwilling to admit this in the survey, and may instead have indicated only a lower level of "exposure" to mutilation. Appendix III therefore replicates the above analyses using an alternative operationalization of the dependent variable, coded as 1 if the respondent reported individual- or *unit*-level participation in mutilation (Tables III.8-10). The findings are substantively similar to those reported above, with the difference that the precision of estimates for the effect of the interaction term between decline in discipline and unit social cohesion is reduced, falling just below conventional levels of statistical significance. Given the impossibility of precisely estimating the size of the reporting bias affecting my main dependent variable (i.e. what proportion of perpetrators refused to admit direct participation in mutilation), this discrep-

ancy does not warrant rejecting my key finding, particularly in light of the case study evidence presented below.

Finally, it is worth considering the potential for reverse causation. Cohen (2016) argues that armed groups that suffer from low cohesion (because of a reliance on recruitment through abduction) use gang rape as a means of strengthening bonds among combatants. She draws on research showing that participation in violent or transgressive rituals in other contexts (e.g. gang-rape at college fraternities) is associated with tighter group bonds. It may therefore be that what has been presented above as an effect of high unit cohesion on participation in mutilation is in fact the reverse: soldiers who engage in mutilation develop tighter group bonds *through* their participation in atrocity. While a lack of temporally disaggregated data does not permit me to definitively exclude this possibility, it seems unlikely, for two reasons.

First, if Cohen's argument applies to mutilation in Vietnam, we might expect to see more participation in mutilation by draftees than by soldiers in voluntary service. The draft, while clearly not a perfect analogue to the kinds of recruitment practices discussed by Cohen, is clearly similar in some respects. Particularly in the context of rapid personnel turnover discussed above, draftees would have had weaker bonds and lower levels of trust with other members than volunteers, and would therefore have had particular incentives to participate in mutilation in order to send a "costly signal" of their loyalty to the group. Yet, as Table III.11 in Appendix III shows, the association between being a draftee and individual participation in mutilation is negative and not statistically significant.

Second, as shown above, soldier's testimonies usually explain their participation in mutilation as revenge for the loss of close friends. Logically, this must mean that tight bonds among soldiers *preceded* their participation in mutilation. Among low cohesion groups, in which members are more or less strangers to each other, it seems unlikely that combat losses among unit members would provoke the same kind of visceral desire for revenge described by clinicians who have worked with Vietnam veterans (Lifton 1971; Fox 1974; Shay 1994). Of course, it is likely that the causal relationship between cohesion and transgressive violence actually runs both ways: units which developed a habit of perpetrating mutilations may also have engaged in *other* prior forms of violence (killings of civilians or rape, for example) that helped them forge tight

bonds. Still, the evidence presented so far, and the case study below, suggest that high cohesion and a strong desire to avenge lost buddies were key factors pushing soldiers across the threshold towards extreme violence.

## **4.5 Case Study Evidence: Mutilations in the “Tiger Force”**

The quantitative analysis above provides evidence largely consistent with the theory of deviant cohesion: strong ties among soldiers increase their probability of participating in mutilation, but only when accompanied by a decline in unit discipline. In this section I use case study evidence to illustrate the proposed mechanism, tracing the emergence of mutilation as a practice at the level of a single Army unit. I draw on Sallah and Weiss’s (2006) account of the “Tiger Force,” a long-range reconnaissance unit which perpetrated numerous atrocities in Vietnam in 1967, including mutilations. The case provides three insights consistent with the findings described above. First, while “bad apples” played an important role in introducing mutilation into this unit, atypical predispositions to violence were neither a necessary nor sufficient condition for individual participation in this practice. Second, top-down toleration of mutilation went hand-in-hand with a precipitous decline in unit discipline; yet declining discipline alone was not sufficient for the emergence of mutilation as a unit-level practice. Third, the key turning point in this process of emergence was a series of combat losses which provoked a strong desire for revenge among unit-members.

### **4.5.1 The role of ‘bad apples’**

According to Sallah and Weiss, the first member of the Tiger Force to practice mutilation was a 22-year-old private by the name of Sam Ybarra. They paint a picture of Ybarra as a profoundly troubled young man, deeply affected by the loss of his father (killed in a bar fight when Ybarra was five) and by racism directed towards his Native American and Mexican heritage. As a teenager, Ybarra was “quick to pick fights,” drank heavily, and was arrested several times for

“disorderly conduct” (Sallah and Weiss 2006, 11). Ybarra enlisted in the Army in 1966 and was soon deployed to Vietnam. Once there, he quickly developed a reputation as a “surly” soldier, prone to “frequent outbursts mostly over minor problems” (ibid., 61). After serving briefly in a signals unit, Ybarra asked to be transferred into the Tiger Force, in part because of its reputation for looser discipline: Sallah and Weiss report that Ybarra “hated the structure of the line companies—the chain of command, the rules, the officers. The Tigers were different, part Green Beret part line company. They would break into small teams, two or three men at a time, creep deep into the jungles ‘and do whatever the hell you wanted to do’” (ibid., 14). Once in the unit, Ybarra was initially viewed by many other Tigers as “crazy,” in part because of his habit of cutting ears off corpses (ibid., 64).

The figure of Ybarra clearly fits the profile of a “bad apple” whose preexisting disposition to violence was exacerbated by the context of combat. Yet Sallah and Weiss’s account makes clear that having such a predisposition was neither a necessary nor a sufficient condition for participation in mutilation in the Tiger Force. Ybarra’s closest friend in the unit, Private Kenneth Green, was equally prone to violence, “known for his temper” and for “getting into fights almost weekly” (ibid., 10). Yet, despite this, and despite his friendship with Ybarra, Green appears *not* to have engaged in mutilation. In fact, Sallah and Weiss’s account suggests that Ybarra may have been the only member of the Tiger Force to engage in mutilation until Green’s death in an ambush in late September 1967. It was only after that event that Ybarra’s habit of mutilation began to spread to other members of the unit. Among these was Private Terrence Kerrigan. Unlike Ybarra and Green, Kerrigan did not fit the profile of the “bad apple”: an avid surfer from southern California, Kerrigan was described by his friends as “a beach kid...who never talked about fighting” (ibid., 31). Within the Tiger Force, Kerrigan befriended both Ybarra and Green. After Green’s death, Kerrigan became one of the first members of the Tiger Force to join Ybarra in mutilating bodies (ibid., 200). Sallah and Weiss describe how eventually *most* of the unit adopted Ybarra’s practices: “just about everyone was carrying shrivelled lumps of flesh in ration bags, openly and proudly” (ibid., 211). Clearly, mutilation in Tiger Force was more than a case of a few “bad apples”; the fact that unit members engaged in such behaviour “openly and proudly” indicates that mutilation became an accepted practice endorsed by unit norms.

#### 4.5.2 Emergence of deviant norms

As a long-range reconnaissance and commando unit, the Tiger Force was designed to operate with relative autonomy from its battalion's chain of command. Its core mission was to operate in small teams deep in enemy territory, "blend[ing] into the jungle terrain" in order to "outguerrilla the guerrillas" (ibid., 13). Unit-members were expected to stay in field for long periods of time, maintaining only a weak link to battalion headquarters, and taking orders almost exclusively from their team leaders or the platoon commander (ibid., 52). As a result, lower-level leaders—commanders of individual fire teams—played a crucial role in shaping the discipline and norms of the unit. These leaders, however, had differing views on the limits of permissible behavior: some remained committed to respecting the Army's official rules of engagement, while others advocated more radical forms of violence, notably with respect to the treatment of civilians. Sallah and Weiss describe how the latter group slowly came to dominate the unit, as more restrained leaders were either removed by injury or transferred out of the unit. A key turning point in this process was the appointment of a new platoon commander in July of 1967. The new commander, Lieutenant James Hawkins, had little authority over the Tigers (many of who thought him incompetent), and sided openly with those unit-members advocating less restrained violence (ibid., 109).

In this context, Ybarra's mutilation of corpses, though not yet imitated by others, was effectively tolerated by unit commanders. According to Sallah and Weiss, Ybarra's first commander, Lieutenant Stephen Naughton, knew about Ybarra's behavior but chose not to punish him (ibid., 128), in part, it appears, because of admiration for Ybarra's willingness to take on dangerous assignments. When a team leader complained to him, Naughton admitted that Ybarra as "crazy" but also described him as "one of the best point men he had ever worked beside" (ibid., 86). Once Hawkins took over the platoon, any hope of reigning Ybarra in was lost. Yet top down toleration alone was not a sufficient condition for the emergence of mutilation as a unit-wide practice. This occurred only after the unit suffered a series of combat losses in September 1967.

### 4.5.3 Unit cohesion and combat losses

Despite its internal divisions, the Tiger Force was described by outsiders as having an unusually high level of social cohesion, “a real bond” in the words of one soldier cited by Sallah and Weiss (ibid., 170). Combat losses within the unit therefore gave rise to powerful desires for vengeance. Sallah and Weiss are explicit in linking the unit’s descent into extreme violence to the tight bonds that existed among its members: “the bonding among combat soldiers is deep and pervasive—and the Tigers were no exception...For civilians, it’s difficult to understand the bonding among soldiers, but it’s deep and visceral. When a fellow soldier is killed, anger and a sense of revenge take over” (ibid., 195).

Several men in the unit had particularly strong ties. Ybarra and Green had been friends since high-school, and had enlisted together in 1966 as part of the Army’s “buddy system.” Ybarra considered Green to be his “best friend,” and Green agreed to extend his terms in the Tiger’s at Ybarra’s insistence. Unsurprisingly, Green’s death in an ambush on September 27, 1967, sent Ybarra into a fit of rage (ibid., 190). But it also had a profound effect on other unit members, coming as it did, after a series of other losses in the unit. Sallah and Weiss describe how many members of the unit, observing Ybarra’s reaction to Green’s death, now joined in a collective vow to avenge the deaths of their comrades. Only after this point did mutilation become a generalized practice within the unit (ibid., 198). Within days of Green’s death, “Kerrigan, Ybarra, and several others were openly wearing necklaces of ears, and others were carrying severed ears in pouches.” (ibid., 202-203). Their primary motive, according to Sallah and Weiss, was not the collection of souvenirs, however: “they were mutilating bodies to deal with the rage” (ibid., 203).

This diffusion of mutilation throughout the unit was effectively tolerated by the platoon’s new commander, Captain Harold McGaha, who replaced Hawkins in November 1967. Arriving to join the unit for the first time, McGaha witnessed unit members openly wearing necklaces of ears, yet took no action to punish them (ibid., 206). McGaha instructed his team leaders to “keep their eyes on Ybarra, but [also made clear that] they should not hold him back” (ibid., 207). When Ybarra disappeared one night and returned carrying a scalp, McGaha criticized him for leaving camp without permission, but not for the mutilation: “I don’t care what you’re carrying,”

he reportedly told Ybarra, “I don’t give a shit who you kill” (ibid., 207). Soon mutilation became so widespread that the unit’s medic had to hide his surgical blades to prevent their theft (ibid., 211). Eventually, “just about everyone [in the unit] was carrying shrivelled lumps of flesh in ration bags, openly and proudly” (ibid.). Ybarra himself progressed towards increasingly extreme forms of violence, culminating in the decapitation of an infant (ibid., 213).

## 4.6 Conclusion

The experience of the Tiger Force illustrates how extreme forms of violence can emerge as a un-ordered practice. Units with high levels of social cohesion in which lower-level commanders fail to systematically enforce organizational policies can develop norms that endorse unauthorized extreme atrocities like postmortem mutilation. The data surveyed in this article suggests that the experience of the Tiger Force was hardly exceptional. I showed that postmortem mutilation was in fact widespread among American soldiers in Vietnam, despite being explicitly and unambiguously prohibited by military policy. Lax enforcement of this prohibition by unit-level commanders was a necessary condition for such “bottom-up” emergence of extreme violence. Yet toleration alone cannot explain why some soldiers engaged in mutilation while others did not. I have argued that such variation is best explained unit-level social dynamics: in units with a high level of social cohesion (i.e. strong emotional bonds among soldiers), combat losses gave rise to intense desires for revenge. In a context of irregular war, in which soldiers lacked an immediate means of retaliating against the enemy in battle, frustration and rage mounted (Lifton 1971; Shay 1994). Where informal, unit-level norms remained congruent with organizational policies, this rage was mostly held in check, and unauthorized practices remained rare. Where informal norms deviated from organizational policies, however, highly cohesive groups could end up endorsing unauthorized atrocities as an acceptable practice.

To what extent can this explanation of unauthorized extreme violence be applied beyond the context of America’s war in Vietnam? There is at least anecdotal evidence for a connection between group cohesion, revenge, and the emergence of practices of extreme violence in other contexts. For example, postmortem mutilation, among other forms of atrocity, occurred during

the Russian counterinsurgency campaign in Chechnya. As in the American case, such atrocities were not likely to have been ordered from above: Russian servicemen (including perpetrators who would have had an interest in blaming their chain of command) claimed instead that such atrocities resulted “from a Russian military culture that glorifies ardor in battle, portrays the enemy as inhuman and has no effective system of accountability” (Reynolds 2000). Yet the prevalence of atrocities reportedly varied significantly between military units: mutilation of corpses, in particular, was “common in a number of units,” but absent in others. Soldiers interviewed about such behaviour associated it in particular with Russian special forces—i.e. with highly-trained and cohesive units—and explained it as a “revenge ritual.” As one commander interviewed by Reynolds (2000) explained: “It’s an old tradition among the special forces—you cut off the ears of the enemy in order to lay them on the tombstone of your friend who was killed in the war... It’s not a manifestation of barbarism. It’s just our way of telling our deceased mate: Rest in peace. You have been avenged.”

Nor have mutilations of enemy corpses been absent from recent Western military deployments in counterinsurgency warfare. As Crawford and Pert (2020, 142) summarize: “The wars in Iraq and Afghanistan have been marked by numerous examples of troops mistreating the dead. Australian troops came under investigation for cutting the hands off suspected insurgents in Zabul province in Afghanistan in April 2013; a ‘rogue’ group of US soldiers were charged with, among other charges, taking the body parts of Afghan civilians as trophies; UK troops were investigated for allegedly mutilating the corpses of Iraqis following the ‘Battle of Danny Boy’.” Yet, despite Crawford and Pert’s reference to “numerous examples,” these cases in fact appear to be relatively exceptional. Certainly, there is no evidence that practices of mutilation have been anywhere near as widespread in recent Western counterinsurgencies as they were in Vietnam, despite the fact that misconduct in these conflicts (e.g. the torture and abuse of prisoners by American forces at Abu Ghraib prison in Iraq) has been widely reported on. What accounts for this change? Why, in particular, has the practice of postmortem mutilation largely disappeared from the repertoire of American forces?

One possible answer has to do with a greater commitment on the part of Western military hierarchies to the investigation and punishment of misconduct by rank-and-file soldiers. Partly as



a result of the experience of Vietnam, the American military in particular has been engaged in as an effort to “humanitarianize” the use of force (Moyn 2021). The result, as Kahl (2007) argues has been greater respect for norms of non-combatant immunity in recent American counterinsurgencies. While American wars still claim large numbers of civilian victims, mostly due to the use of explosive weapons in urban areas (Cronin 2018), overtly-transgressive, face-to-face atrocity of the kind explored in this article, is less likely to be tolerated than it was in Vietnam. It is notable that all of the cases of postmortem mutilation cited above resulted in investigations and prosecutions, providing evidence “of the seriousness with which such allegations are treated by States and...the importance many States place on the need to repress violations of international humanitarian law” (Crawford and Pert 2020, 142).

Yet a top-down commitment to enforcing organizational policies against atrocity is likely insufficient to explain the recent absence of mutilation in recent conflicts. As this article has shown, a similar commitment to prohibiting mutilation existed at the highest levels of the U.S. military hierarchy in Vietnam. Yet this did not prevent *de facto* toleration of the practice at lower levels of the chain of command. Here a second relevant difference may be the *ability* of higher-level commanders to supervise the behaviour of military units in the field. Such supervision was rendered extremely difficult in Vietnam because of the dispersion of units across difficult terrain. As Milam writes: “Because the war was fought on a squad, platoon, and company level, the responsibility for the day-to-day behavior of the troops was most often [exercised by junior commanders] without senior officer review” (2009, 139). The challenge of supervision was made worse by the incredibly difficult, jungle terrain in which many units were deployed. The challenge posed by “rough terrain” was probably less severe difficult in Iraq, in which U.S. forces operated mainly in flat, if often urbanized, terrain (though terrain in Afghanistan was mountainous). Developments in communications technology since Vietnam may also have facilitated top-down supervision.

Finally, a key change explaining the decline of postmortem mutilation in the U.S. military after Vietnam may have to do with military professionalization and associated changes in the ways in which soldiers generate unit cohesion. As King (2013) argues, there is a profound difference between the cohesion of conscript armies and those of professional forces. Whereas the

former rely on the forging of tight emotional bonds among soldiers to motivate them to fight, military professionals build cohesion based on a common commitment to the skilled execution of tactical maneuvers. If the argument presented above about the central role of revenge in explaining extreme violence and its connection to affective bonds among soldiers is correct, then the transformation of cohesion described by King may have also transformed the way soldiers deal with the loss of comrades. Among military professionals, such losses may be less likely to provoke the kinds visceral, enraged responses that produced mutilation in Vietnam.

These suggestions are largely speculation, of course, and future research should more systematically examine their implications. Are unauthorized atrocities less likely among counterinsurgent forces made up of professional soldiers than those made up of conscripts? Is the occurrence of such atrocities more likely when counterinsurgency is fought in “rough terrain” in which it is difficult for military leaders to directly supervise their units? Answers to these questions could provide us with clues as to what policy interventions can help reduce the prevalence of certain forms of extreme violence.

## 4

## **Extreme Atrocity as a Practice of War: Evidence from the American War in Vietnam**

### **Abstract**

Why do soldiers engage in unauthorized forms of extreme violence? This article explores this question by analyzing practices of mutilation among American soldiers during the Vietnam war. I show that such practices were remarkably widespread, despite being unambiguously prohibited by military policy. I then test a series of possible explanations for variation in the use of mutilation using survey data from a representative sample of Vietnam veterans. The data suggests that mutilation in Vietnam was motivated primarily by the desire to avenge the deaths of close friends in combat. Such violence emerged where “primary group cohesion” (the strength of bonds among unit members) was high, but “secondary group cohesion” (identification with the norms of the military as an organization) was low. High cohesion among unit-members provided strong motives to avenge unit losses through extreme violence, while weak identification with organizational norms allowed mutilation to emerge as a unit-level “practice of war.” In addition to providing statistical evidence for this explanation, I use case study evidence to trace the emergence of mutilation as a practice at the level of single Army unit.

macro-level variation in the use of extreme atrocities by both rebel groups and state militaries.

In what follows I first, introduce my dataset, and then use it to provide an estimate of the overall prevalence of extreme atrocity in civil war, as well as basic descriptive statistics on how this prevalence varies across different types of actors, time periods, and geographic regions. Second, I use the data to explore the relationship between the qualitative and quantitative dimensions of extreme violence introduced in Chapter 1, and show that extreme atrocity is not merely an epiphenomenon of large-scale killing of civilians. Third, I try to substantiate the claim that many rebel groups adopt extreme atrocities as a matter of policy, whereas official government security forces very rarely do so. Finally, I use the data to test some macro-level implications of the main theoretical arguments made in previous chapters.

## 5.1 Data

In order to gather systematic data on extreme atrocity, I began with a list of civil wars drawn from Kalyvas and Balcells's "technologies of rebellion" dataset (Kalyvas and Balcells 2010; Balcells and Kalyvas 2014). Their data updates Sambanis's (2004) list of civil wars and covers the 1945 to 2011 period. Given the more limited availability of source material on wartime violence for earlier decades, I focus only on civil wars that ended after 1980.<sup>42</sup> This leaves a list of 92 civil wars.<sup>43</sup> For each of these, I coded whether or not extreme atrocities were perpetrated by official state security forces, pro-government militias, or rebel groups.<sup>44</sup> In order to do so, I read through a wide range of sources, including governmental and non-governmental human rights reports, documents from the United Nations and other intergovernmental organizations, various

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<sup>42</sup> For wars that began before 1980 and ended after, I code only variables that reflect the post-1980 period.

<sup>43</sup> The list of civil wars in the dataset is included Appendix IV.

<sup>44</sup> I define official state security forces as a country's official armed forces, police, or security agencies. I exclude para-state "death squads" or state-organized communal militias, which I collectively refer to as pro-government militias. Cf. Carey and Mitchell 2017. For the Soviet war in Afghanistan and US-led counterinsurgencies in Afghanistan and Iraq, I coded Soviet and US forces respectively as the main state forces.

event datasets, as well as press and scholarly sources.<sup>45</sup> Using these sources, I systematically recorded references to five types of acts:

- *mutilations of the human body*, including amputations, beheading, dismemberment, castration, breast oblation and other forms of sexual mutilation.
- *intensely painful means of killing*, including deliberate live immolation, live interment or drowning, impalement, stoning, dragging and throwing deaths, live flaying or scalding, or public executions using edged or primitive weapons
- *public rape and “rape with extreme violence”* - viz. rape accompanied by deliberate torture or mutilation (Mukwege and Nangini 2009)
- *coerced performance of traumatic actions*, including the forced killing of family members, forced incest, and forced cannibalism or ingestion of other “taboo” items
- *abuse of human remains*, including postmortem mutilation, the public display of mutilated or tortured bodies or body parts, and cannibalism

As discussed in Chapter 2, I define extreme atrocities as a *public* form of violence, and therefore excluded torture and rape in places of detention. Torture in detention is common in situations of armed conflict. Yet most such violence—like most wartime rape—is actively hidden from public view (Di Cesare 2018, 11; Celermajer 2019, 30). Perpetrators of extreme atrocity, in contrast, deliberately publicize their acts, whether by performing them in front of an audience (Fujii 2021), recording and disseminating them through audiovisual media (Friis 2015), or deliberately displaying the bodies of victims in a public place.

Individual instances of extreme atrocity likely occur in many, if not all, conflicts. Because I am interested in explaining cases in which such violence goes beyond individual or isolated instances, and becomes instead an established part of an actor’s repertoire of violence, I pay close attention in my coding to whether a given actor perpetrated extreme atrocity in a *recurrent* manner. This does not require that the scale of perpetration be very large, only that it exhibit a pattern of persistence across time or space. Thus, when my sources provide evidence that ex-

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<sup>45</sup> More information on my sources can be found in Appendix V.

treme atrocities were recurrent over a period of months or years, I coded the outcome variable as 1. I coded the outcome variable as 0 when the sources did not report any of the above acts being perpetrated, or when the cases reported appeared to be isolated instances, showing no sign of recurrence over time (for example, when individual events were separated by years).<sup>46</sup>

## 5.2 Prevalence

Overall, my data indicates that about two thirds of civil wars (62 of 92) between 1980 and 2011 featured at least one actor (government security force, pro-government militia, or rebel group) using extreme atrocity in a recurrent manner (see Figure 5.1). This is a shockingly high proportion, and amply confirms the “perceived association [of civil war] with excessive violence and atrocity” (Kalyvas 2006, 52). Most of the wars in which my data reports recurrent use of extreme atrocity (Bosnia, the Democratic Republic of Congo, Rwanda or Sierra Leone for example) are well-known, even notorious; others perhaps less so (Bangladesh, Nepal, Papua New Guinea). Overall, the data provide a salient reminder that civil wars regularly unleash the very worst that human beings are capable of.

Still, the data also reveals significant variation. Most of the time when it occurs (in 44 cases out of 62), extreme atrocity is perpetrated in a recurrent manner by only one side in a conflict. As a result, once we disaggregate the data by type of actor, we find that the prevalence of extreme atrocity among any one type of actor is somewhat lower than overall prevalence in the sample. In total, about half of the wars in the sample featured extreme atrocities perpetrated by incumbents, and about 40 per cent featured use of such violence by at least one rebel group. The category of incumbents includes both official state security forces and pro-government militias; once we distinguish between these two types of actors, we find that rebel and government security forces were about equally as likely to use extreme atrocities. (The reported prevalence for pro-government militias reflects the proportion of civil wars in which extreme atrocity by such actors was reported, not the percentage of pro-government militias that used such violence. No all civil

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<sup>46</sup> Coding decisions are documented in an online coding document.

wars feature pro-government militias). Type of actor, alone, in other words, cannot explain why extreme atrocities occur: in some conflicts it is rebels that use extreme atrocity, in some it is government security forces, in some it is both, in some it is only militias, and in some there are no actors that use such violence in a recurrent manner.

**Figure 5.1 Prevalence of extreme atrocity by type of actor**

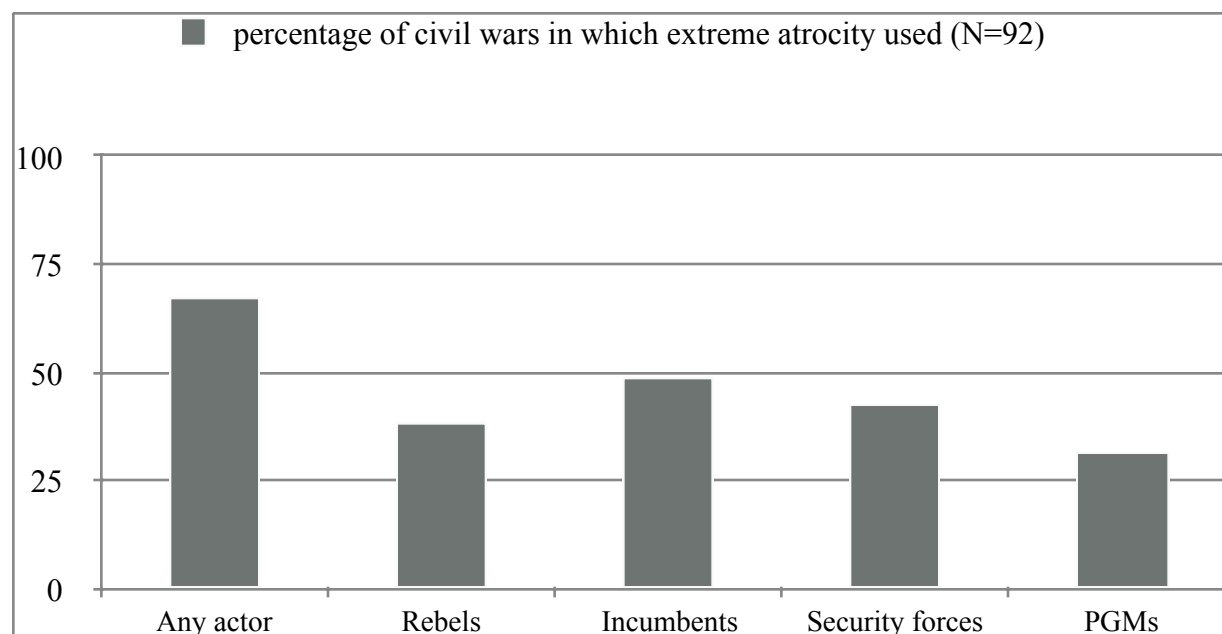


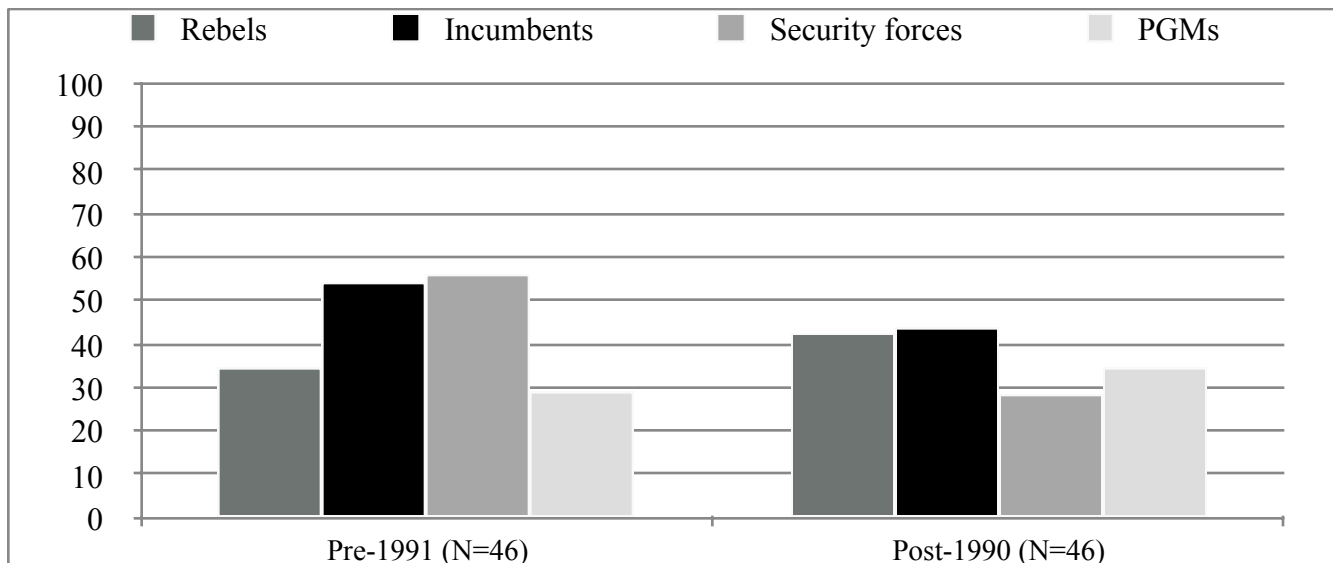
Figure 5.2 further disaggregates the data temporally and by region. Figure 5.2.a, divides the sample into wars that began before and after 1990. The graph reveals that substantial proportions of civil wars in both periods featured extreme atrocity. In general, the prevalence of extreme atrocities perpetrated by rebel groups appears to have increased somewhat in the post-Cold War period, while incumbent extreme atrocity has declined. The prevalence of extreme atrocity perpetrated by official government security forces in particular has decreased quite significantly: while over half of civil wars before 1991 featured recurrent extreme atrocity perpetrated by government security forces, this proportion fell to below 30 percent for wars that began after 1990. Finally, the percentage of wars featuring the recurrent use of extreme atrocities by pro-government militias appears to have increased somewhat. On the whole, these figures provide suggestive preliminary evidence that governments fighting civil wars have become less atrocity-prone

over time, though some may have turned to “outsourcing” their extreme violence to militias as a means of evading accountability.

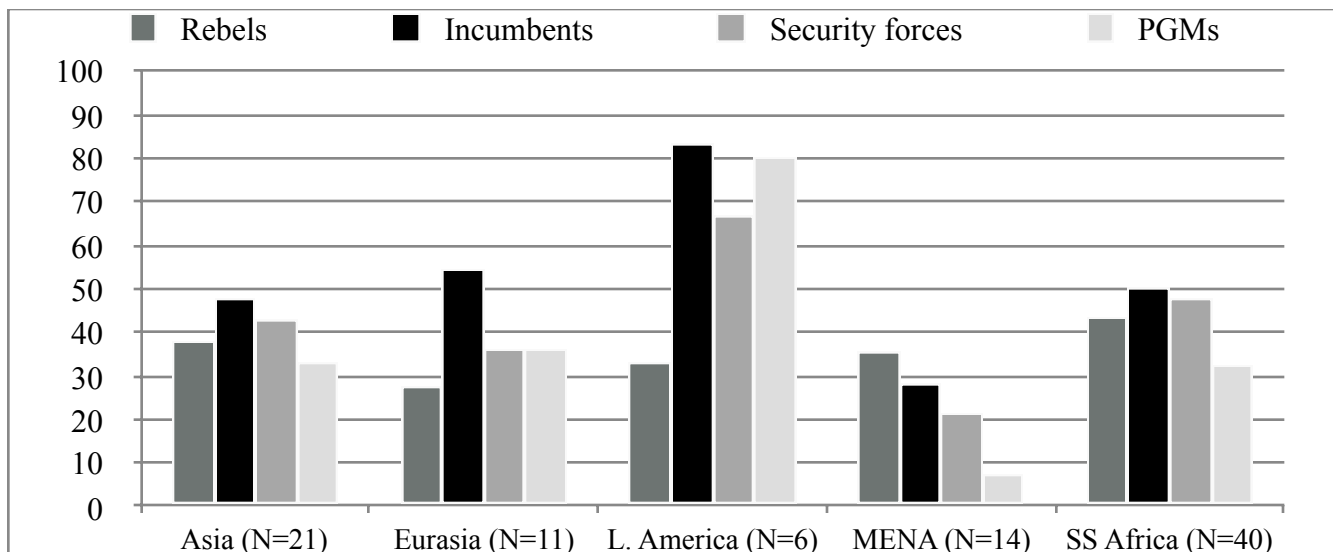
**Figure 5.2 Prevalence of extreme atrocity across time periods and regions**

*Percentage of civil wars in which extreme atrocity used:*

a) *pre- and post-1990*



c) *by region*





Finally, Figure 5.2.b disaggregates the data by region. The prevalence of extreme atrocities perpetrated by rebels appears to vary relatively little across regions, though such violence may be somewhat more prevalent in sub-Saharan Africa than elsewhere. Extreme atrocities perpetrated by incumbents appear to be more prevalent in Latin American civil wars; however, the small total number of wars in that region prevents any firm conclusions. Overall, the data clearly shows that extreme atrocities are not unique to any one region.

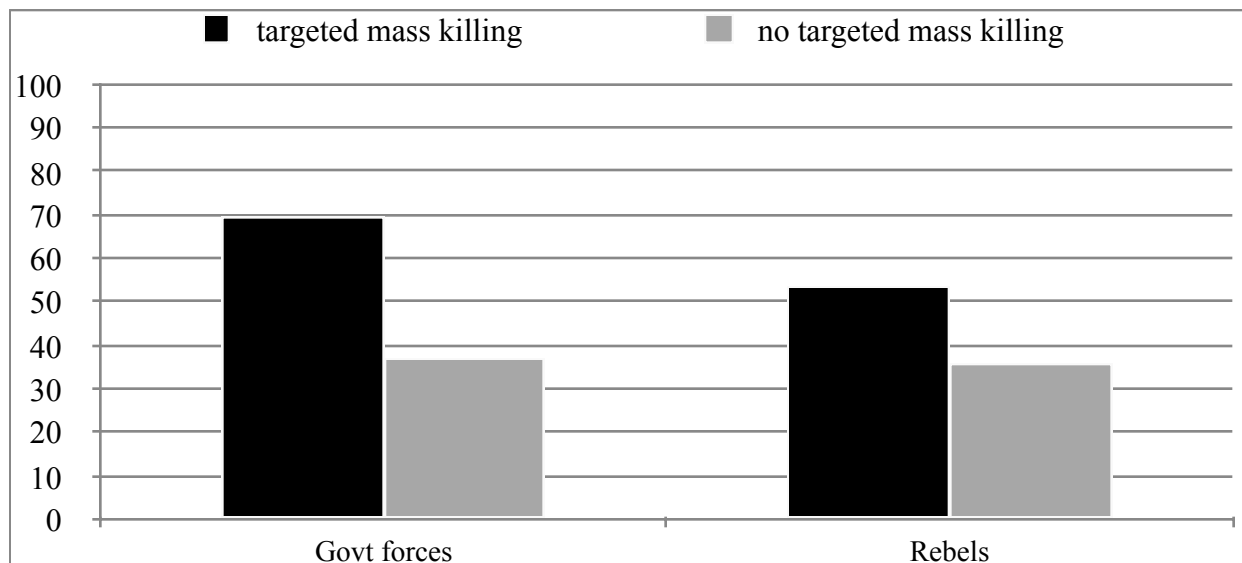
### 5.3 Quantity vs. Quality

My data also allows me to explore the relationship between the qualitative and quantitative dimension of violence introduced in Chapter 1. As proposed by Sémelin (2002), this distinction, has to do with the difference between the deliberate, large-scale killing of civilians and violence involving “acts of cruelty and atrocities to the body, before and after death” (Sémelin 2007, 224), whether perpetrated on a large or small scale. I argued in Chapter 1 these two dimensions are very likely related empirically, yet are also conceptually distinct. It is possible, at least in theory, for perpetrators to kill large numbers of civilians without making recurrent use of extreme atrocity, and, conversely, for actors who kill civilians in relatively small numbers to nonetheless use extreme atrocity. Here I test this intuition using data on “targeted mass killing” provided by Butcher et al. (2020). They define targeted mass killing as any campaign of deliberate killing in which an organized armed actor kills 25 or more civilians in a year, while disproportionately targeting one (or more) political, ethnic, or religious group(s) “in order to substantially reduce its numbers, expel, or affect the political activity of that specific group” (Butcher et al. 2020, 1531).

Figure 5.3 depicts the proportion of civil wars that featured incumbent or rebel extreme atrocity, disaggregated according to whether or not Butcher et al. (2020) code the onset of a mass killing episode during the war. The graph clearly shows that the two dimensions of violence are closely linked: civil wars in which targeted mass killing occurs are considerably more likely to feature recurrent use of extreme atrocity than conflicts without mass killing. Still, the data also reveals variation within each category. Not *all* perpetrators of mass killing (whether governments

or rebels) adopt extreme atrocities as part of their repertoire of violence. Among rebels, nearly half of conflicts in which rebels are reported to have engaged in targeted mass killing did not feature rebel extreme atrocity. Conversely, a significant proportion of armed actors make recurrent use of extreme atrocity *without* resorting to the large-scale killing of civilians. In the statistical analyses that follow in the next section, I use variables measuring government- and rebel-perpetrated targeted mass killing as statistical controls. These variables have powerful effects on the likelihood of state and rebel extreme atrocity, but do not explain all of its variation across conflicts. To the extent that the two datasets used here accurately measure both the quantitative and qualitative dimensions of extreme violence, they confirm one of the central conceptual arguments in my dissertation concerning the need to conceptualize and explain these two dimensions of violence as distinct, if often-interconnected, phenomena.

### 5.3 Prevalence of extreme atrocity and targeted mass killing



### 5.4 Policy vs. Practice

I have argued above that rebel groups are more likely to adopt extreme atrocity as an organizational policy, while extreme atrocity by security forces is more likely to emerge as an unordered practice. Directly testing this argument is difficult. We are, in most cases, not privy to the inner

workings of government or rebel decision-making, and therefore have no way of knowing for sure how high up the organizational hierarchy decisions about the selection of specific techniques of violence are made. Wood (2018, 525) proposes using patterns of punishment to determine whether a given form of violence is a policy or a practice. If a particular method of violence is consistently punished we can conclude that it is not policy; its continued occurrence despite punishment indicates the existence of a practice. If, on the other hand, combatants are punished for *not* engaging in a particular form of violence, we can safely conclude that such violence *is* policy. In Chapter 4, I used information on punishment of mutilation in the American military in Vietnam to show that such violence is best understood as a practice. Unfortunately, comparable data is unavailable for most conflict actors. Here I turn instead to a different indicator: public claims of responsibility.

Conflict actors that publicly claim a particular act of violence can safely be assumed to officially endorse the methods used in that act. The reverse, however, is not necessarily true: given the highly transgressive nature of extreme atrocity, it is possible that such violence is sometimes ordered but *not* claimed. Perpetrators may have an interest in concealing and denying policies that authorize extreme forms of violence. Still, it is worth looking at public claims as a basic indicator of *open* adoption of extreme atrocity. Doing so reveals a clear pattern: rebel groups that perpetrate extreme atrocity frequently publicly claim their violence, while comparable claims by government security forces are extremely rare.

Rebel groups publicly claim their acts of extreme atrocities in a variety of ways. As discussed in Chapter 3, jihadist groups sometimes film their beheadings and disseminate them on the internet. The data used in that chapter indicates that more than a quarter jihadist groups (25 of 92) have issued at least one beheading video, and some have issued dozens. Such “official” media releases are clear and unambiguous evidence that extreme atrocity is an organizational policy. Filmed extreme atrocities by other types of rebel groups are rare, but not unheard of. One example is the filmed mutilation of former Liberian president Samuel Doe in 1990 by the leader of the Independent National Patriotic Front of Liberia (INPFL), Prince Johnson (Ellis 1999, 9-10). In this case, direct participation in extreme atrocity by a rebel leader clearly shows that such violence was group policy.

In other cases, rebel groups claim their atrocities in public statements. During the anti-Soviet insurgency in Afghanistan, *mujahideen* officials publicly acknowledged beheading enemy fighters and stoning them to death (Amnesty International 1987, 216; Helsinki Watch 1984, 93). Beheadings by the Taliban during its insurgency against the US-led coalition in Afghanistan were often publicly claimed in statements by official Taliban spokespersons (see e.g. Amnesty International 2007, 33). In other cases, claims of responsibility have been made in notes left on mutilated bodies. This practice has been observed in Sri Lanka (Amnesty International 1990, 10), India (South Asia Terrorism Portal nd.), Afghanistan (Agence France-Presse 2007), and Pakistan (Amnesty International 2006, 3). Rebel groups have also made explicit, public threats to use extreme atrocity. Hutu insurgents in Rwanda in the late 1990s “distributed leaflets stating that all who opposed them would be beheaded” (U.S. State Department 1998). In 1999, Maoist insurgents in India “threatened to amputate the hands of persons who voted” in the country’s national elections (U.S. State Department 1999). In Algeria, the Armed Islamic Group (GIA) issued several communiqués explicitly threatening beheading against supporters of the regime (Hafez 2003, 52; Martinez 2001, 54); in 2002, the group’s leader publicly warned opponents the group it would “continue to destroy their harvests, take their goods, rape their women, [and] decapitate them in the cities, the villages and the deserts” (Agence France-Presse 2003).

Finally, rebels have sometimes publicly staged extreme atrocities in a manner that leaves little doubt about their status as “official” policy. Maoist insurgents in Nepal have staged public “trials” during which enemies and alleged collaborators have been subjected to public torture and mutilation (Human Rights Watch 2004, 55). In Afghanistan in the mid-1990s, the Taliban organized public amputations and stonings of alleged thieves and adulterers, often encouraging large audiences to observe them (e.g. Amnesty International 1996a, 23). Upon seizing Kabul in 1996, Taliban fighters captured and castrated the former Afghan president Mohammad Najibullah, and then dragged his body behind a truck through the streets of the city, before hanging it from a pole (Al Jazeera English 2012). In none of these cases did organizational leaders disavow such tactics, providing clear evidence that such atrocities were official group policy.

Strikingly, however, similar public claims of responsibility for extreme atrocities by government or military officials are extremely rare. The nearest example I have found are the public

justifications provided by the Taliban regime of the late 1990s for continued use amputations and stoning (Amnesty International 1999, 2). Even this case is ambiguous, however. Amputations and stoning were used exclusively as a form of judicial punishment, and not in the context of military operations against anti-Taliban rebels. When reports appeared of Taliban fighters using mutilation in the context of military operations, these were explicitly denied by Taliban officials (Amnesty International 1997, 2).

The Taliban itself, of course, was essentially a rebel group that had successfully seized power. Explicit claims of responsibility for extreme atrocity by more established (and internationally recognized) governments are basically non-existent, at least in the data that I have collected. In some cases, governments may be seen as *implicitly* claiming acts of extreme atrocity, for example when mutilated torture victims are deliberately returned to their families. This practice was reportedly common in Saddam Hussein's Iraq, and may have reflected a deliberate policy of terrorizing opponents of the regime, including suspected supporters of Kurdish or Shia insurgents. As a Human Rights Watch report noted: "Governments that engage in torture often go to great lengths to hide what they have done by burying or destroying the bodies of those tortured to death. A government so savage as to flaunt its crimes obviously wants to strike terror in the hearts of its citizens and to inflict gratuitous pain on the families of the victims" (Korn 1990, 62-63).

Yet even such implicit claims of responsibility are rare. More often, security forces that choose to publicly display tortured and mutilated bodies do so by dumping them anonymously in public places. This practice of deliberate "body dumping," which was used extensively during conflicts in El Salvador (Amnesty International 1983), Sri Lanka (Amnesty International 1990, 13), Indonesia (Amnesty International 1993, 16) and elsewhere, allows security forces to publicize extremely brutal violence while retaining an ability to plausibly deny responsibility. Without access to "inside" information, it is effectively impossible to say for sure whether the methods used in such killings are a matter of government policy, or whether the government is merely unwilling or unable to prohibit them. Such ambiguity may be deliberate, in at least some cases. As Amnesty International noted with regards to El Salvador: "By leaving the decapitated, muti-

lated, disfigured corpses open to public view, a clear signal [was] given to the community that the authorities lack[ed] the political will to stop the killings or punish those responsible” (Amnesty International 1983, 16).

In a number of cases, however, it seems clear that extreme atrocities are perpetrated by state forces acting in *violation* of official military policies. In Afghanistan during the 1980s, the Soviet army adopted formal rules of conducts and disciplinary procedures to curb unauthorized violence, and hundreds of soldiers were prosecuted for crimes including murder (Braithewaite 2011, 226-7). Yet recurrent acts of extreme atrocity were still perpetrated by Soviet soldiers, including mutilation, deliberate live immolation and abuse of remains (Amnesty International 1988; Feifer 2010, 129; Laber and Rubin 1988, 25, 30, 32, 52; Helsinki Watch 1984; Helsinki Watch 1985). These were likely an expression of the “anger, frustration, lack of discipline” of Soviet soldiers, rather than a reflection of deliberate government policy (Laber and Rubin 1988, 39). A similar dynamic likely explains many of the acts of extreme atrocity perpetrated by regular security forces in Chechnya (Reynolds 2000) and Kosovo.<sup>47</sup>

On the whole, then, there is little evidence that government security forces deliberately adopt extreme atrocities as a matter of organizational policy. In many cases, it seems plausible that such violence emerges at the initiative of lower-level actors in the military hierarchy. Rebel extreme atrocity, in contrast, is often explicitly claimed, providing strong evidence of top-down adoption. Below I explore whether there are recurrent conditions that make either top-down or bottom-up emergence of extreme atrocities more likely.

## 5.5 Extreme Atrocity and Irregular Warfare

In previous chapters, I have argued that irregular warfare is particularly conducive to extreme atrocity, both as a top-down policy adopted by rebel groups, and as an unordered practice among

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<sup>47</sup> In the Đorđević case at the International Criminal Tribunal for Yugoslavia, judges found the Serb assistant minister of internal affairs Vlastimir Đorđević criminally responsible for mass deportation and murder in Kosovo. Yet, although his forces repeatedly mutilated the bodies of civilians, the prosecution did not accuse Đorđević of directly ordering such violence. See ICTY 2011. [https://www.icty.org/x/cases/djordjevic/tjug/en/110223\\_djordjevic\\_-\\_judgt\\_en.pdf](https://www.icty.org/x/cases/djordjevic/tjug/en/110223_djordjevic_-_judgt_en.pdf)

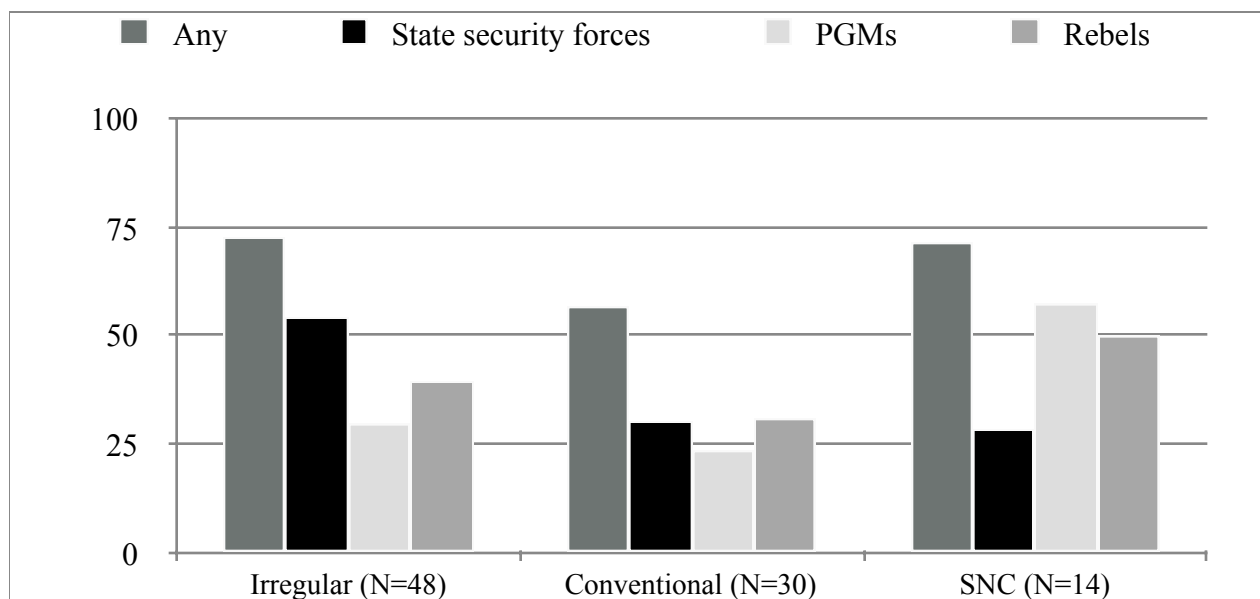
state security forces. One implication of this view is that the prevalence of extreme atrocity should be particularly high in civil wars fought primarily by means of irregular warfare. To evaluate this, I compare the prevalence of extreme atrocity across different types of conflicts. As Kalyvas and Balcells (2010) argue, civil wars can be categorized according to their predominant “technology of rebellion.” Some are *irregular wars*, featuring militarily inferior rebels that challenge state forces primarily using tactics of guerrilla warfare and generally avoid open engagements. Other wars are much more symmetric contests, either between belligerents possessing relatively high military-technological capacities (*conventional civil wars*) or between belligerents whose military capacities are low (*symmetric nonconventional*, or “SNC” wars).

The most relevant contrast for the purposes of assessing my arguments is that between irregular and conventional conflicts. Unlike irregular wars, which are characterized by fragmented territorial control, conventional wars produce a *segmentation* of territory, with government and rebel forces each exercising full control over distinct territories separated by a relatively clear front line (Kalyvas 2006, 88-89; Balcells 2010). As a result, armed actors in such wars should have fewer incentives to adopt extreme forms of violence to deter civilian collaborators, and rank-and-file soldiers should face fewer of the kinds of uncertainties and frustrations that generate atrocity in irregular war. All else being equal, then, we should expect extreme atrocities to be more common in irregular wars than in conventional ones.

Figure 5.3 divides the civil wars in my dataset according to their technology of rebellion (as coded by Balcells and Kalyvas 2014) and indicates the proportion of civil wars of each type that featured recurrent use of extreme atrocities. As expected, extreme atrocities appear to be more prevalent in irregular wars than in conventional ones: nearly three quarters of irregular wars featured at least one actor making recurrent use of extreme atrocities, compared to 57 percent of conventional wars. The difference between the two kinds of conflicts is particularly significant when it comes to extreme atrocities perpetrated by official state security forces: over half of irregular civil wars in the dataset featured such atrocities, compared to only 30 percent of conventional civil wars. The difference for rebel-perpetrated extreme atrocity is less marked, but still in the expected direction: nearly 40 percent of irregular wars featured at least one rebel group that used extreme atrocity in a recurrent manner, while the proportion for conventional

wars was 30 per cent. Interestingly, the data shows that SNC wars are also highly atrocity-prone, although the profile of actors that use extreme atrocity in these conflicts appears to differ from that in irregular wars. In particular, such wars feature less extreme atrocity perpetrated by official state security forces and far more by pro-government militias. This is logical given that such wars are, by and large, fought mainly by informal militia forces rather than by regular armies (Kalyvas 2005, 92).

**Figure 5.4 Prevalence of extreme atrocity and technologies of rebellion**



On the whole, then, the patterns shown here correspond with those we would expect to see if the dynamics of irregular warfare are a key driver of extreme atrocity. In the following two sections, I derive and test more precise hypotheses about variation in the prevalence of extreme atrocity across conflict and within types.

### 5.5.1 Extreme atrocity by state security forces

I look first at extreme atrocities perpetrated by official government security forces. In Chapter 4 I argued that the emergence of extreme atrocities as an unordered practice among such forces can



be explained in part by a theory of deviant cohesion: in conditions of irregular warfare in which insurgents avoid open engagements and resort instead to ambushes and booby traps, casualties among government forces can give rise to intense desires for vengeance; military units with high levels of social cohesion but low levels of discipline can develop informal norms that endorse extreme violence as a means of avenging combat losses. So far, I have shown that this theory can account for individual-level variation in the use of extreme atrocities. Here I extrapolate from the argument and derive two hypotheses about variation in extreme atrocity at a more macro level.

The first hypothesis concerns the impact of military professionalism. As noted in Chapter 4, King (2013) argues that there is a fundamental difference in the form that group cohesion takes among professional soldiers compared to conscripts. Because conscript armies are generally poorly trained, they tend to rely heavily on the creation of tight emotional bonds among combatants in order to motivate them to fight. In contrast, professional armies use intense and realistic training to generate coordinated action in combat, and thus do not require the same intensity of emotional connection between soldiers. In such forces, a shared ethos of professionalism and joint commitment to the achievement of tactical objectives (task cohesion) can thus substitute for high social cohesion in the primary group (Kier 1998; MacCoun, Kier, and Belkin 2006). If the argument presented above about the central role of revenge in explaining extreme violence and its connection to intense emotional bonds among soldiers is correct, then the transformation of cohesion described by King has direct implications for the occurrence of extreme atrocity as a practice. Because professional forces rely less on bonds of friendship among combatants, combat losses in such forces may be less likely to provoke the kinds visceral, enraged responses that produced mutilation in Vietnam. In addition, professional soldiers are more likely than conscripts to be socialized in the rules and norms of the military as an institution (i.e. “secondary cohesion”). Military professionals are likely to be exposed to such rules and norms during the course of repeated peace-time training, whereas conscripts may receive only rushed and perfunctory training once war begins. On average, then, conscripts should have lower “secondary cohesion” than professionals and should be more likely to abandon organizational norms under intense conditions of counterinsurgency combat.

**H<sub>1</sub>:** State security forces made up primarily of conscripts should be more likely to make recurrent use of extreme atrocity in irregular war than forces made up primarily of professional soldiers.

A second hypothesis concerns the ability of higher-level commanders to supervise their forces. In most armed forces, immediate responsibility for enforcement of discipline and organizational policies lies in the hands of mid- and lower-level commanders. Political and military leaders rely on such commanders to ensure that troops behave in accordance with policy (Lidow 2016), and are often unable to directly supervise their performance in the field. In irregular wars, such lack of top-down supervision is likely to be affected, among other factors, by the typically-rugged terrain in which such warfare occurs. In Vietnam, for instance, direct supervision of infantry units by senior officers was rendered very difficult by the dense jungle terrain in which these units often operated as they hunted for Viet Cong guerrillas. Existing research has found that “rough terrain” is particularly conducive both to the onset of insurgency (Fearon and Laitin 2003; Hendrix 2011) and to desertion by individual soldiers (McLauchlin 2014). Here I examine whether rough terrain also facilitates the evasion of military discipline, enabling soldiers to “hide” unauthorized forms of violence from their own military hierarchy. This effect, if it exists, should be particularly marked among conscripts; highly-trained professional soldiers may have sufficient “secondary cohesion” to continue to abide by organizational rules even when “lost in the jungle” (or mountains). In contrast, a combination of counterinsurgency, conscripted soldiers, and rough terrain may be particularly conducive to the emergence of extreme forms of violence.

**H<sub>2</sub>:** Rough terrain makes extreme atrocities by conscript counterinsurgents more likely.

I test these hypotheses using the dataset described above. My dependent variable is a simple dichotomous measure indicating whether or not official government security forces perpetrated extreme atrocities in a recurrent manner in a given civil war. My main independent variables are, first, a dichotomous variable indicating whether or not government security forces

were recruited through *conscription* during the war,<sup>48</sup> and second, the standard (logged) measure of “rough terrain,” defined as the proportion of a country’s territory that is mountainous (Fearon and Latin 2003). In addition, I code several control variables: *democracy* (lagged one year before the onset of war, from Fearon and Laitin 2003), *ethnic war* (from Balcells and Kalyvas 2014), *rebel extreme atrocity*, *government mass killing* (from Butcher et al. 2020), and *GDP per capita* (in the first year of war, logged, from Gleditsch 2002). Summary statistics for all variables are provided in Appendix V.

Table 5.1 presents the results of a series of linear probability models estimating the effect of my main independent variables on the recurrent use of extreme atrocities by government security forces. The results are consistent with the theoretical arguments made above. Models 1 and 2 confirm the pattern seen in Figure 5.3 above: recurrent extreme atrocity by government security forces is significantly more like in *irregular wars* than in *conventional* ones (the base category in these models). The size of the coefficient in model 1 suggests that state security forces in irregular wars are about 25 per cent more likely than those in conventional wars to use extreme atrocity. As model 2 shows, the size and direction of this association remains largely unchanged when introducing controls.

Next I look at the relationship between extreme atrocity, irregular warfare, and conscription. Figure 5.4 graphs the bivariate relationship between conscription and extreme atrocity across the three types of wars. The pattern observed is consistent with Hypothesis 1: the prevalence of government-perpetrated atrocity is higher among conscript armies than non-conscript armies, but only in irregular wars. Among conventional and SNC wars, the prevalence of extreme atrocities actually declines with conscription, although the small number of observations in each case (non-conscription armies in conventional civil wars are particularly rare) indicate the need for caution in interpretation. Models 3 to 5 in Table 5.1 examine the same relationships. Model 3 includes only the variables for *irregular warfare* and *conscription*, while model 4 introduces the interaction term (*conscription X irregular warfare*), and model 5 adds control variables. The coefficient on the interaction term in both models 4 and 5 is positive, although falling just below conventional levels of statistical significance. While hardly definitive, these

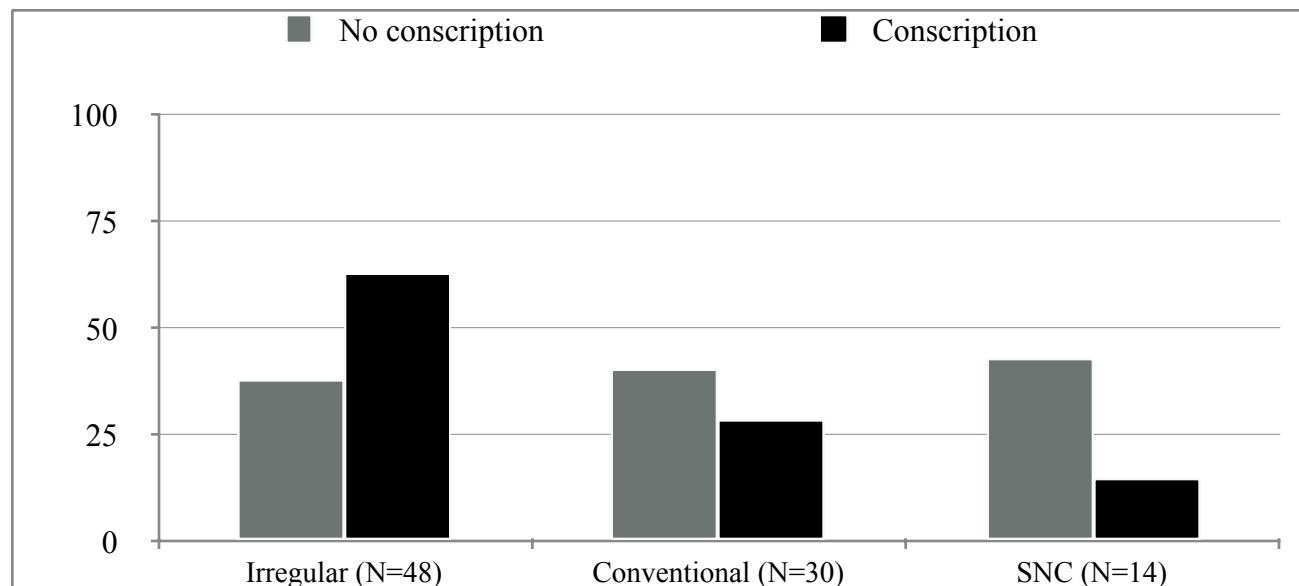
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<sup>48</sup> This measure is from Cohen (2016).

**Table 5.1 Correlates of extreme atrocity by state security forces**

|   | All wars         |                  |                 |                  |                   |                  | Irregular         |                  | Symmetric        |                  |                 |
|---|------------------|------------------|-----------------|------------------|-------------------|------------------|-------------------|------------------|------------------|------------------|-----------------|
|   | (1)              | (2)              | (3)             | (4)              | (5)               | (6)              | (7)               | (8)              | (9)              | (10)             | (11)            |
| <i>Irregular warfare</i>                | 0.24*<br>(0.11)  | 0.28**<br>(0.10) | 0.25*<br>(0.10) | -0.04<br>(0.19)  | 0.01<br>(0.17)    |                  |                   |                  |                  |                  |                 |
| <i>SNC war</i>                          | -0.01<br>(0.15)  | -0.03<br>(0.16)  |                 |                  |                   |                  |                   |                  |                  |                  |                 |
| <i>Conscription X Irregular warfare</i> |                  |                  |                 | 0.42+<br>(0.22)  | 0.39+<br>(0.20)   |                  |                   |                  |                  |                  |                 |
| <i>Conscription X Rough terrain</i>     |                  |                  |                 |                  |                   |                  | 0.12**<br>(0.03)  | 0.14**<br>(0.03) | 0.10**<br>(0.04) | 0.16<br>(0.10)   | 0.11<br>(0.11)  |
| <i>Conscription</i>                     |                  |                  | 0.06<br>(0.11)  | -0.17<br>(0.17)  | -0.15<br>(0.16)   | 0.05<br>(0.12)   | -0.19<br>(0.11)   | -0.07<br>(0.14)  | -0.03<br>(0.12)  | -0.43<br>(0.27)  | -0.30<br>(0.29) |
| <i>Rough terrain (logged)</i>           |                  |                  |                 |                  |                   | 0.02<br>(0.02)   | -0.07**<br>(0.03) | -0.06*<br>(0.02) | -0.03<br>(0.03)  | -0.14<br>(0.10)  | -0.12<br>(0.10) |
| <i>Democracy</i>                        |                  | -0.12<br>(0.13)  |                 |                  | -0.06<br>(0.12)   |                  |                   |                  | -0.10<br>(0.17)  |                  | 0.004<br>(0.17) |
| <i>Ethnic war</i>                       |                  | -0.03<br>(0.11)  |                 |                  | -0.02<br>(0.10)   |                  |                   |                  | -0.16<br>(0.14)  |                  | 0.20<br>(0.17)  |
| <i>Rebel extreme atrocity</i>           |                  | 0.12<br>(0.09)   |                 |                  | 0.14<br>(0.09)    |                  |                   |                  | 0.01<br>(0.13)   |                  | 0.24<br>(0.19)  |
| <i>Gov't mass killing</i>               |                  | 0.35**<br>(0.10) |                 |                  | 0.36**<br>(0.10)  |                  |                   |                  | 0.43**<br>(0.14) |                  | 0.16<br>(0.15)  |
| <i>GDP per capital (logged)</i>         |                  | -0.12*<br>(0.04) |                 |                  | -0.12**<br>(0.04) |                  |                   |                  | -0.11*<br>(0.05) |                  | -0.07<br>(0.08) |
| <i>Constant</i>                         | 0.30**<br>(0.07) | 1.07**<br>(0.37) | 0.25*<br>(0.12) | 0.42**<br>(0.15) | 1.09**<br>(0.33)  | 0.35**<br>(0.11) | 0.54**<br>(0.10)  | 0.50*<br>(0.11)  | 1.29**<br>(0.43) | 1.29**<br>(0.43) | 0.77<br>(0.67)  |
| <i>N</i>                                | 92               | 92               | 92              | 92               | 92                | 92               | 92                | 48               | 48               | 44               | 44              |

Robust standard errors in parentheses. +  $p < 0.10$ , \*  $p < 0.05$ , \*\*  $p < 0.01$

**Figure 5.5** Conscription and extreme atrocity

results nonetheless provide suggestive evidence in favour of the hypothesis that conscript armies deployed in irregular wars are more atrocity-prone than professional ones.

Finally, Models 6 through 11 in Table 5.1 look at the impact of terrain. Model 6 shows that rough terrain alone (controlling for conscription) has little identifiable effect on extreme atrocity by government forces. Model 7 introduces the interaction term (*conscription X rough terrain*). The coefficient for this term is positive and statistically significant at conventional levels, suggesting that conscript armies are more likely to perpetrate recurrent extreme atrocities in more mountainous countries. Models 8 and 9 then restrict the data to the subset of irregular wars. The coefficient for the interaction term remains positive and statistically significant, even after the inclusion of control variables in model 9. This result is consistent with my second hypothesis: rough terrain makes conscript counterinsurgent forces more atrocity-prone. Finally, models 10 and 11 replicate the analyses from models 8 and 9, but now on the sub-sample of symmetric (conventional and SNC) wars. Though the coefficients associated with the interaction term are again positive, standard errors are considerably larger than in models 8 and 9, indicating far greater uncertainty about the estimates. While this may be a function of the relatively small number of observations, the fact that the results are so clear in the subsample of irregular wars

suggest that there is an actual difference in the associations between the variables across different types of civil wars. At the very least, we can conclude that the tendency of rough terrain to increase the probability of extreme atrocity among conscripts is much stronger among irregular wars than among symmetric ones.

In sum, variation in the use of extreme atrocities by government security forces across civil wars is largely consistent with what we would expect to see if such violence was driven largely by bottom-up dynamics among poorly-disciplined soldiers deployed in conditions that make top-down supervision of their conduct more difficult.

### **5.5.2 Extreme atrocities by rebel groups**

I turn next to extreme atrocities perpetrated by rebel groups. As shown above in Figure 5.1, nearly 40 percent of the civil wars in my dataset featured at least one rebel group making recurrent use of extreme atrocities. Many civil wars, however, have multiple rebel groups. In order to arrive at a more accurate estimate of the propensity of rebels to use extreme atrocity, and to permit testing of explanations for inter-group variation, I further disaggregate a subset of my data into observations at the level of individual rebel group (or “rebel group-wars” for groups that were active in more than one war). Specifically, I take all civil wars that were active after 1989 and code new observations for all active rebel groups reported in those wars in the Non-State Actor (NSA) dataset (Cunningham, Gleditsch, and Salehyan 2013). This creates a sample of 155 rebel groups active in 71 civil wars. For each of these, I then code whether or not the group made recurrent use of extreme atrocity during its participation in a given war.<sup>49</sup> Overall, over a third of the groups (56 of 155) made recurrent use of extreme atrocity. This figure is somewhat lower than the conflict-level prevalence of rebel extreme atrocity cited above; this is because, in a number of multi-party civil wars in which rebels used extreme atrocity, only one or two groups actually did so.

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<sup>49</sup> For certain rebel groups, I maintain an aggregate “actor” coding (e.g. Afghan *mujahideen*, Kashmir insurgents, Sikh insurgents) given the difficulty of attributing particular acts of violence to specific groups.

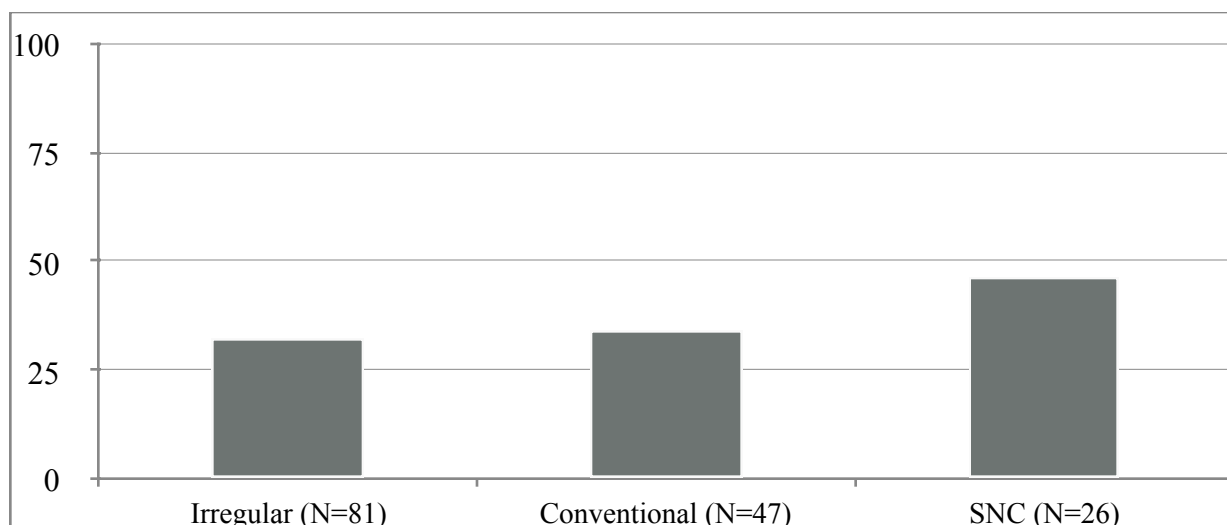
What factors shape variation in rebel groups' use of extreme atrocity? In Chapter 3 I argued that whether or not jihadist groups use beheadings depends on a combination of local strategic context and transnational ties. Groups that operate mainly as clandestine networks, hiding from both state forces and civilians, mostly avoid beheading given their limited need to deter civilian defection. In contrast, groups that adopt a strategy of insurgency, organizing and accumulating military capabilities in rural areas in order to progressively undermine state control, have greater incentives to use extreme violence to coerce civilians. Yet use of such violence also imposes significant costs on such groups, notably because of its tendency to alienate potential civilian supporters. Whether or not jihadist groups use beheadings depends on whether they can afford to ignore these costs. In Chapter 3 I showed that jihadist insurgents that control significant amounts of territory are more likely to use beheadings, and argued that this is because they can extract civilian support by force in areas they control. Beheadings by such groups might alienate public opinion, but the extent of their power locally largely prevents civilians from acting against them. In contrast, jihadist insurgents that operate without a secure territorial base are far more vulnerable to shifts in civilian attitudes. Such groups operate exclusively in contested zones in which civilians can act on their outrage over transgressive violence by increasing their collaboration with the enemy. Insurgent calculations about the costs and benefits of extreme violence are also affected by transnational ties: jihadists that hope to gain significant advantages from affiliation with a transnational network might calculate that the benefits of using extreme violence to attract foreign allies outweighs its costs.

These theoretical arguments can be adapted and extended to the broader universe of rebel groups. The dichotomy between strategies of clandestine terrorism and insurgency applies more broadly (Duyvesteyn and Fumerton, 2009; de la Calle and Sánchez-Cuenca, 2011). Both of these types of rebellion are highly asymmetric, pitting relatively weak rebels against militarily stronger state opponents. Yet, as discussed above, the broader set of rebel groups also includes some that fight in more *symmetric* contests, whether of the conventional or SNC variety. As Balcells and Kalyvas (2014, 1393) argue, such conflicts are quite distinct from irregular insurgencies, in part because civilian loyalties and behaviour are less central to them. Conventional civil wars in particular produce patterns of territorial control that are segmented into relatively clearly demarcated-

ed zones of control. This absence of territorial fragmentation should tend to weaken rebel incentives to use extreme atrocity to deter civilian defection to the enemy.

This does not necessarily mean that rebel extreme atrocity will be more *rare* in symmetric wars than in irregular ones, however. To the extent that the imperative of obtaining civilian support restrains some insurgents from adopting extreme violence, the lesser importance of “popular support” in symmetric wars may actually *increase* extreme atrocity: with strong control over their respective territory, belligerents may have little fear of civilian reactions should they use particularly transgressive violence. As seen in Figure 5.3 above, the difference in the prevalence of rebel extreme atrocity between irregular and conventional civil wars is relatively small, and the level of rebel-perpetrated extreme atrocity in SNC wars is actually *higher* than in either of these categories. My rebel group-level data confirms this picture: Figure 5.5 graphs the prevalence of extreme atrocity among rebel groups active across the three technologies of rebellion. The graph reveals almost no difference in the propensity of rebel groups to use extreme atrocity in irregular *vs.* conventional civil wars. It also suggests that rebel groups in SNC wars are markedly more atrocity-prone.

**Figure 5.6 Prevalence of extreme atrocity at the level of rebel groups**





If rebels in irregular wars do not appear to be more atrocity-prone in general, the fact that their use of extreme atrocity is driven by a unique strategic logic (corresponding to the centrality of civilian behaviour in such wars) should lead us expect that patterns of extreme atrocity *within* this category of conflict will differ from those in more symmetric wars. In irregular wars, rebel use of extreme atrocities should be closely connected to the relative balance of military power between rebels and incumbents. In general, the weaker rebel groups are relative to the state, the less likely they should be to use extreme atrocities, either because they fear adverse civilian reactions to such violence that could impede their efforts to organize an insurgency (Lewis 2020), or—for *very* weak groups—because they are forced to operate in an entirely clandestine manner, and therefore are far less concerned about civilian defection. In contrast, militarily stronger rebel groups should be less concerned about the effects that their violence has on civilian attitudes, as long as it successfully deters their active collaboration with the enemy. Importantly, this general relationship between military strength and extreme atrocity need not hold in more symmetric conflicts: because rebel groups in such conflicts enjoy near-complete control over their territories, differences in relative military power vis-a-vis the state should have much less effect on how such groups perceive the costs and benefits of using extreme violence. In irregular wars, even very strong rebels operate in part in zones of fragmented control in which they have an incentive to use extreme forms of violence against suspected enemy informers. In contrast, even relatively weak rebels in symmetric conflicts operate almost exclusively in zones of near-complete control in which civilian defection is extremely risky.

**H<sub>3</sub>:** The probability of rebels in irregular wars using extreme atrocity should increase with their relative strength; this connection should be weaker in symmetric wars.

Concerns about civilian attitudes may also vary as a function of external support. In the case of jihadist groups, this argument is tied specificity to the role of beheading as a practice sanctioned by jihadist ideology and endorsed by transnational jihadist “patrons.” Obviously, the same argument cannot be extended to extreme atrocity perpetrated by non-jihadist groups. Yet an analogous logic may still apply to rebel groups that *already* have external support. Existing re-

search suggests such groups tend to be less dependent on local civilian support, and therefore less restrained in their behaviour towards civilians (Salehyan, Siroky, and Wood 2014). For rebels involved in irregular warfare, then, external support could have a similar effect, freeing them from the restraints imposed by concerns about civilian attitudes, and making them more likely to use extreme atrocity as a means of achieving strategic objectives.

**H4:** The probability of rebels in irregular wars using extreme atrocity should increase if they receive external support.

In order to test these expectations, I combine my rebel-group-level data with variables from the NSA dataset on the relative strength of rebel groups, and on whether or not they receive external support. My first independent variable, *relative rebel strength* is an ordinal measure of rebel manpower relative to the size of government forces. The variable takes a value of 0 if the NSA dataset codes a group as “much weaker” than the government, a value of 1 if the group is coded as being merely “weaker,” a value of 2 if the group is coded as having achieved “parity” with the government, and a value of 3 if it is coded as “stronger” or “much stronger” than the incumbent. Rebel troop strength is a plausible proxy for overall rebel military capability, and, as discussed in Chapter 3, is likely correlated with an ability to seize and hold significant amounts of territory.<sup>50</sup> It also varies considerably across both irregular and symmetric wars, though obviously rebels in irregular wars are weaker on average than those in symmetric ones. In order to test for transnational ties, I use a variable measuring whether a given rebel group “received support or foreign fighters from external non-state actors” (Cunningham, Gleditsch, and Salehyan 2013, 524).<sup>51</sup> Finally, I code several control variables, measuring whether or not a group espoused a *jihadist* or *Marxist* ideology, whether or not the group fought in an *ethnic war*, whether or not the conflict featured *incumbent extreme atrocity*, whether the rebel group engaged in *tar-*

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<sup>50</sup> The NSA also contains a variable measuring territorial control. However, this variable does not distinguish between groups with quite minimal territorial control and those that controlled large portions of a country’s territory.

<sup>51</sup> The NSA distinguishes between “alleged,” “minor” and “major” support. I code a dichotomous variable, with groups receiving “minor” or “major” support coded as 1 and groups with no support or only alleged support coded as 0.

*geted mass killing*, and (logged) *GDP per capita*. Summary statistics for all variables are provided in Appendix V.

Table 5.2 presents the results of a set of linear probability models. Models 1 and 2 use all rebel groups in the dataset and estimate the effect of *relative rebel strength* on rebel use of extreme atrocities. The coefficient for rebel strength is positive and statistically significant even after the inclusion of controls, suggesting that as the relative strength of rebel groups increases, so does their tendency to use extreme atrocities. Models 3 and 4 then repeat these analyses using only the subset of rebel groups that were involved in irregular wars. Here the effect of *relative rebel strength* is considerably stronger, and once again statistically significant, even after the inclusion of control variables. Finally, Models 5 and 6 repeat the same analyses using only the subset of rebel groups that were involved in *symmetric* wars. The coefficients on *relative rebel strength* are once again positive, yet far smaller than in models 3 and 4, and are estimated with a far higher level of uncertainty. While this may be a function of the relatively small number of observations involved, the fact that clear results are seen in the similarly small subsample of irregular wars suggests that the results reflect an actual difference in patterns between the two categories of conflict. On the whole then, these findings support Hypothesis 3: the strength of rebel groups relative to incumbents appears to be positively associated with rebel extreme atrocity in irregular wars; there is little evidence for a comparable association in symmetric wars.

Models 7 through 12 examine the relationship between external support and rebel extreme atrocity. Model 7 includes the measure of *transnational non-state support* while controlling only for relative rebel strength. The coefficient is positive and statistically significant, suggesting that rebels that receive external non-state supporter are about 30 per cent more likely to use extreme atrocity than those that have no such support. The direction of the association and statistical significance remains when controls are introduced in Model 8. This includes the variable for *jihadists*, suggesting that the atrocity-promoting effect of transnational support is not restricted that particular type of rebel group. As with the analysis of rebel strength, I then divide the data into two sub-groups. rebel groups active in irregular wars (models 9 and 10) and those active in symmetric wars (models 11 and 2). Once again, I find that the effect of the independent variable of interest (transnational support) increases in size and remains statistically significant

**Table 5.2 Correlates of extreme atrocity by rebel groups**

|  | All wars         |                  | Irregular        |                  | Symmetric        |                 | All wars         |                  | Irregular        |                  | Symmetric       |                  |
|--|------------------|------------------|------------------|------------------|------------------|-----------------|------------------|------------------|------------------|------------------|-----------------|------------------|
|  | (1)              | (2)              | (3)              | (4)              | (5)              | (6)             | (7)              | (8)              | (9)              | (10)             | (11)            | (12)             |
| <i>Relative rebel strength</i>         | 0.13*<br>(0.05)  | 0.13*<br>(0.05)  | 0.24**<br>(0.09) | 0.31**<br>(0.09) | 0.09<br>(0.07)   | 0.08<br>(0.07)  | 0.12*<br>(0.05)  | 0.13*<br>(0.05)  | 0.21*<br>(0.09)  | 0.27**<br>(0.10) | 0.10<br>(0.08)  | 0.08<br>(0.08)   |
| <i>Transnational non-state support</i> |                  |                  |                  |                  |                  |                 | 0.31**<br>(0.10) | 0.28**<br>(0.10) | 0.41**<br>(0.15) | 0.32*<br>(0.16)  | 0.23<br>(0.14)  | 0.20+<br>(0.14)  |
| <i>Jihadists</i>                       |                  | 0.42*<br>(0.18)  |                  | 0.49*<br>(0.24)  |                  | 0.12<br>(0.36)  |                  | 0.52**<br>(0.19) |                  | 0.40<br>(0.25)   |                 | 0.58*<br>(0.24)  |
| <i>Marxists</i>                        |                  | -0.10<br>(0.12)  |                  | -0.08<br>(0.25)  |                  | -0.21<br>(0.18) |                  | -0.07<br>(0.12)  |                  | -0.13<br>(0.28)  |                 | -0.18<br>(0.17)  |
| <i>Ethnic war</i>                      |                  | -0.25*<br>(0.12) |                  | -0.29<br>(0.29)  |                  | -0.20<br>(0.15) |                  | -0.21+<br>(0.13) |                  | -0.26<br>(0.32)  |                 | -0.19<br>(0.15)  |
| <i>Incumbent extreme atrocity</i>      |                  | 0.09<br>(0.08)   |                  | -0.06<br>(0.10)  |                  | 0.18<br>(0.12)  |                  | 0.08<br>(0.08)   |                  | -0.01<br>(0.11)  |                 | 0.11<br>(0.12)   |
| <i>Rebel mass killing</i>              |                  | 0.13<br>(0.11)   |                  | 0.19<br>(0.15)   |                  | 0.16<br>(0.16)  |                  | 0.15<br>(0.10)   |                  | 0.24<br>(0.15)   |                 | 0.19<br>(0.17)   |
| <i>GDP per capital (logged)</i>        |                  | -0.02<br>(0.05)  |                  | -0.01<br>(0.07)  |                  | -0.07<br>(0.06) |                  | -0.06<br>(0.05)  |                  | -0.00<br>(0.07)  |                 | -0.14*<br>(0.06) |
| <i>Constant</i>                        | 0.25**<br>(0.05) | 0.51<br>(0.36)   | 0.20**<br>(0.06) | 0.43<br>(0.63)   | 0.29**<br>(0.10) | 0.84+<br>(0.48) | 0.19**<br>(0.05) | 0.73*<br>(0.37)  | 0.16*<br>(0.06)  | 0.30<br>(0.62)   | 0.21*<br>(0.11) | 1.35**<br>(0.47) |
| <i>N</i>                               | 155              | 155              | 80               | 80               | 75               | 75              | 147              | 147              | 78               | 78               | 69              | 69               |

*Robust standard errors in parentheses. +  $p < 0.10$ , \*  $p < 0.05$ , \*\*  $p < 0.01$*

for rebel groups involved in irregular wars. For rebels in symmetric wars, there is no apparent effect in a model without control variables, but the effect approaches conventional levels of statistical significance once controls are introduced. On the whole, the results are consistent with Hypothesis 4: transnational support makes rebels in irregular wars particularly likely to adopt extreme atrocities.

## 5.4 Conclusion

This chapter has tried to show that theoretical ideas developed in earlier chapters to explain patterns in jihadist beheadings and postmortem mutilation in Vietnam are more broadly applicable. Neither jihadist beheadings nor mutilations by American soldiers are *sui generis*. Both can be seen as instances of the broader phenomenon of extreme atrocity, the prevalence of which can be mapped across conflicts and armed groups. Here I have done this for all civil wars between 1980 and 2011, and for individual rebel groups active in civil wars from 1989 to 2011. I show that extreme atrocity is shockingly prevalent in civil war, but not universal. It is more common in irregular wars than in more symmetric ones. Among state security forces, extreme atrocity is particularly likely when armies of conscripts are deployed on counterinsurgency operations in conditions that make top-down supervision difficult. Among rebel groups, variation in extreme atrocity within irregular wars is closely related to the relative power of insurgent organizations vis-à-vis the state, and to whether or not they receive support from external non-state actors. All of these macro-level relationships are consistent with the main theoretical framework introduced in Chapter 1.

## 6

### Conclusion

This dissertation has tried to explain an extremely disturbing, but all-too-common phenomenon: the deliberate use of overtly cruel forms of violence in wartime. As discussed in chapter 1, war is cruel almost by definition; “the infliction of human suffering through violence,” as Keegan (1976, 30) writes, is almost the essence of what armies do in wartime. In light of the sheer scale of this suffering, it may seem misguided to focus on a small range of specific techniques of violence and to label them as “extreme.” In doing so one runs the risk of being seen as somehow exculpating other forms of violence (aerial bombardment, face-to-face killings using firearms, man-made famine, landmines etc.) that do not fit the definition of “extreme atrocities,” yet do unimaginable harm to civilians (and, indeed, to soldiers). To be clear, then, the label of “extreme atrocity,” as used in this dissertation, is intended exclusively as an analytical category, and not a normative one. Moreover, this category is *not* based on a distinction between violence that is “more cruel” or “less cruel.” Instead, I focus on the choice of specific techniques of violence, and on the extent to which that choice is shaped by a desire to increase the suffering of victims or desecrate their bodies or social ties. The relevant distinction, then, is that made by Collins (1974) between “callous” and “ferocious” cruelty. In the former, the amount of suffering endured by the victim can be enormous, but is largely immaterial to the perpetrator’s selection of techniques, which are dictated instead by tactical or other concerns. In the latter, in contrast, de-

liberately increasing the suffering of victims, whether those directly targeted or those who witness the violence or its aftermath, is precisely the point.

As preceding chapters have shown, paying attention to this qualitative dimension of violence yields significant insights. In this chapter I conclude by highlighting the main contributions of the dissertation and considering the implications of my findings for future research and policy.

## 6.1 Contributions

### 6.1.1 Conceptual

Extreme atrocities are a recurrent part of armed conflict, yet are rarely studied as a distinct phenomenon. This is in part, I would argue, because we have lacked an adequate conceptualization of such violence, one that could facilitate systematic, comparative study across a variety of contexts. As discussed in Chapter 1, scholars have conceptualized extreme violence in terms of its “gratuitous” or “irrational” character, or else in terms of its “excessive” or “transgressive” nature. The first approach does not sufficiently take into account the extent to which such violence often *can be* instrumental and strategic. The second approach leads to a concept of extreme violence that is inherently context-dependent, making comparison *across* contexts difficult.

My concept of extreme atrocity, in contrast, makes no assumptions about *motives* (which can be strategic, normative, emotional, etc.), and focuses instead on *intent*, specifically, on the intent to make victims and witnesses suffer. The key question, in the study of extreme atrocity, is that posed by Goldhagen: if “[a] killer can endeavor to render the deaths of others...more or less painful, both physically and emotionally” (1996, 17), why would he or she choose techniques that increase suffering? Focusing on intent in this way facilitates comparisons across diverse contexts. The specific techniques of extreme atrocity used in different times and places will vary; some perpetrators will prefer beheadings or amputations, while others engage in public rape or coerced performances. In many cases, the choice of specific technique will reflect local histories and cultural repertoires. Taylor (1999), for instance, has argued that the specific “techniques of

cruelty” used during the Rwandan genocide (impalement, castration, breast oblation, coerced incest) must be understood in terms of a symbolic logic rooted in conceptions of the body prevalent in Rwandan popular medicine. Similarly, Ellis (1999) explains practices of cannibalism during the Liberian civil war with reference to the wartime transformation of prewar religious rituals. Both authors argue forcefully for an understanding of the historical-cultural context of atrocities (cf. Ellis 2003). While recognizing that particular cultural beliefs and practices may provide the interpretive schemes according to which perpetrators in particular contexts choose specific techniques of violence, this dissertation shows that it is important also to focus on what these techniques have in common, namely, a specific intent to make victims suffer, and to desecrate their bodies or social ties in a way that is visible to witnesses.

Preceding chapters have shown that this kind of focus can yield important insights. Clearly, the choice of beheading by jihadist groups is influenced at least in part by ideology, and by a particular radical religious subculture within contemporary Islam. Yet, as I showed in Chapter 3, ideology alone cannot explain why jihadist groups *vary* in their use of such violence. Focusing on the strategic functions of beheadings as an overtly cruel form of violence (i.e. as extreme atrocity) helps make sense of this variation. It also shows to what extent jihadist violence resembles that used by rebel groups espousing quite different ideological visions (e.g. Maoists in Nepal, or Hutu insurgents in eastern Congo) but operating in a similar strategic context (i.e. that of irregular warfare).

Similarly, the use of mutilations by American soldiers in Vietnam was doubtlessly influenced by the long history American (and more broadly Western) violence against racialized “others” (Harrison 2012). Yet this history alone cannot explain patterns of variation in the use of mutilation across individual soldiers. Focusing on mutilation as an act of overt cruelty through which soldiers expressed their intense rage at the loss of close friends helps us understand how such violence emerged despite being official prohibited. It also suggests parallels to other cases in which poorly-trained conscripts have been sent into intense counterinsurgency with insufficient top-down supervision, and ended up perpetrating atrocities.

In short, focusing on the intent of the perpetrator provides a solid basis for comparison, and thus for explanation. Of course, actually operationalizing the concept of extreme atrocity in



empirical research can be difficult. Techniques of violence which seem *prima facie* to demonstrate an intent to inflict extreme suffering, may sometimes be explained by other, more practical concerns. The clearest example of this is the use of edged or primitive weapons (machetes, axes, hoes etc.) as a means of killing. Though such weapons undoubtedly cause excruciating pain to victims, the rationale for using them may at times have little to do with the amount of suffering they cause, and may be motivated instead by an insufficient supply of firearms or ammunition (Verwimp 2006, 7), or by tactical advantages linked to the ability to operate quietly and maintain an element of surprise.<sup>52</sup>

In my own coding of extreme atrocities for the dataset used in Chapter 5, I have found that, in most cases, discerning an intent to increase the suffering of victims is relatively unproblematic. Indeed, it is difficult to explain behaviour such as the deliberate severing of specific body parts (head, genitals, etc.), or the piece-meal dismemberment of live persons, or publicly-staged rape, as anything *other* than a way of maximizing the suffering on victims. Despite occasional difficulties in interpretation and operationalization, then, I hope that the results of the research presented in previous chapters show the value in thinking of qualitatively extreme forms of violence as a conceptually distinct phenomenon.

### 6.1.2 Theoretical

A second contribution of this dissertation is theoretical. In Chapter 2 I suggested that no single causal logic could entirely account for variation in the occurrence of extreme atrocity. Instead, such violence was likely to be produced by multiple causal processes. This conclusion is very much in keeping with current research on civilian victimization, which explicitly recognizes that “multiple theoretical explanations [for violence] can coexist—often at different levels of analysis” (Balcells and Stanton 2021, 46). Borrowing from Wood’s (2018) analysis of wartime rape, I argued that explaining variation in extreme atrocity requires considering both “top down,” strategic adoption of such violence, and its “bottom-up” emergence as a unordered practice.

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<sup>52</sup> One report on killings by the Allied Democratic Forces (ADF) in eastern DRC in 2014 finds that most of the group’s victims “were killed by machetes, axes and hammers *in order to avoid making noise*” (MONUSCO/OHCHR 2015, 10, *emphasis added*).

In order to explain the adoption of extreme atrocity as a strategy, I drew in particular Kalyvas's (2006) seminal study of the logic of violence against civilians in irregular wars. But whereas Kalyvas's theory focuses primarily on explaining subnational variation in civilian targeting, I have adapted his arguments to explain variations at a more macro-level. Instead of emphasizing variation in territorial control across different regions in a single conflict-zone, my theory emphasizes variation between rebel groups, pointing out that some groups operate almost exclusively in contested zones and have no significant areas of "dominant control" to fall back on. Such insurgents, like the incipient rebellions analyzed by Lewis (2020), generally avoid transgressive forms of violence that would cost them civilian support. More powerful insurgents, who operate both in areas of "dominant control" in which they rule over a subject civilian population, and in zones of contested control which they infiltrate in order to attack government targets, are more likely to discount civilian attitudes, and therefore more likely to use extreme atrocities.

I have contributed a novel theory explaining more "bottom-up," unauthorized atrocities. As numerous scholars have recognized, not all wartime violence is straight-forwardly strategic. At least some is basically "expressive," that is to say, motivated by powerful emotions rather than cool calculation. As Kopstein (2018, 753) suggests, while much wartime violence may be *initially* strategic, "once the carnage begins...violence [often] takes on a life of its own." In particular, as war goes on, the risk of "emotionally driven revenge killings" rises. The role of revenge as a motive for violence has garnered increasing attention from scholars (Souleimanov and Aliyev 2015; Balcells 2017; Stein 2019). Yet systematic study of revenge as a motive for atrocity specifically is relatively rare (but see Petersen 2002, Keen 2005, Mitton 2015). The theory of "deviant cohesion" proposed in Chapter 4 is an attempt to more thoroughly theorize the conditions under which powerful desires for revenge are likely to arise and be acted upon. I argue that revenge-fuelled atrocity is a particularly likely pathway towards extreme atrocity within forces that formally prohibit such violence, as most government security forces do. Future research may consider whether this theory may also be more broadly applicable to other kinds of unauthorized practices, from rape to drug use.

### 6.1.3 Empirical

Finally, this dissertation had provided an array of original data with which to test theoretical ideas about the causes of extreme violence. This data also provides us, often for the first time, with a clearer sense of the prevalence of certain forms of violence.

The data used in Chapter 3 reveals the sheer scale of the use of beheadings by jihadist groups. I catalogue 1758 distinct beheading events resulting in at least 4423 individual victims. Over 1500 of these events that can be reliably attributed to a specific perpetrator. While beheadings are frequent, then, I also find that most are perpetrated by a relatively small number of jihadist groups. Most jihadist groups, in other words, perpetrate few or no beheadings. The fact that such variation exists among ideologically like-minded groups suggests that ideology alone cannot explain the occurrence of beheadings. The fact that most of the leading perpetrators of beheadings are insurgent groups that control significant amounts of territory, suggests that understanding such violence in terms of “terrorism” (the most common way of framing jihadist violence) is inadequate (cf. Kalyvas 2018).

The data used in Chapter 4 to examine patterns in mutilation among American forces is also revealing. This data, gathered by researchers studying the prevalence of PTSD among American Vietnam veteran (Kulka et al. 1988b), has so far remained completely “untapped” by scholars of conflict, despite the fact that several studies have shown the usefulness of ex-combatant surveys in other contexts (e.g. Humphreys and Weinstein 2006; Arjona and Kalyvas 2011; Daly 2016). The NSVG provides valuable individual-level information on a number of aspects of warfare and soldiering that could inform theoretical debates in the study of conflict. Among other things, it reveals just how widespread certain forms of violence can become among soldiers, even if they are explicitly and unambiguously prohibited by policy. This finding reinforces the importance of studying how violence can emerge as a practice without being ordered by commanders (Eriksson Baaz and Stern 2009; Cohen 2016; Wood 2018; Hoover Green 2018).

Finally, I also provide cross-national data on extreme atrocities perpetrated in all civil wars from 1980 to 2011. This data enables me to provide a first estimate of the overall prevalence of extreme atrocity, at least across conflicts that have reached a certain level of intensity. I

show that such violence is shockingly common, occurring in about two thirds of civil wars in my sample. But I also show that its prevalence varies. Roughly four in ten civil wars in my sample featured recurrent extreme atrocity perpetrated by government security forces. Among rebel organizations, about a third of groups active in wars between 1989 and 2011 made recurrent use of extreme atrocities. In other words, a majority of security forces and rebel groups have avoided such violence. While I have argued that patterns of extreme atrocity can be explained in large part by the strategic context of irregular warfare, my data will allow other researchers to test other explanations for such violence, and thereby contribute to the larger field of conflict studies.

## 6.2 Implications for Research and Policy

My findings have several implications for research on the wartime violence. First, my analysis supports the argument made by Gutiérrez-Sanín and Wood (2017) that researchers should broaden their conception of what constitutes a “pattern of violence” in armed conflict, moving beyond an exclusive focus on lethal violence and beyond a dichotomous understanding of civilian victimization in terms of “terror” and “restraint.” My findings provide further evidence that lethal violence is not always an adequate proxy for overall patterns of violence (Gutiérrez-Sanín and Wood 2017, 22; Hoover Green 2018, 5). While groups that kill large numbers of civilians are also more likely to perpetrate extreme atrocities, the connection between the two forms of violence is far from automatic. As Hoover Green argues: “While repertoires of violence are linked to overall levels of violence, understanding the types of violence against civilians that armed groups encourage, tolerate, and/or prohibit is a separate analytical problem” (2018, 204).

Second, my findings on the use of mutilation in the Vietnam war in particular provide further evidence for the importance of understanding the “bottom-up” dynamics of violence. In particular, my analysis of the Vietnam case suggests that social dynamics within military units deserve particularly close study as a determinant of atrocity (cf. Wood 2018). Informal, unit-level norms can have a determining effect (for better or worse) on the behaviour of individual combat-

ants (Rielly 2001). If this is true, we should expect to see much unit-level variation in the character of violence. Such variation is rarely studied systematically (but see Humphreys and Weinstein 2006), but may hold a key to understanding the emergence of unauthorized violent practices.

Finally, my findings may also have implications for policy. To be sure, any “policy recommendations” made on the basis of this kind of an observational study of a complex phenomenon, using imperfect data, should be treated with caution. Social reality is complex, and apparently sound interventions can easily lead to unexpected and counterproductive outcomes. Still, my analysis does suggest certain general guidelines, both for cases in which extreme atrocities are ordered from the top-down, and for cases in which they emerge from the bottom.

For those wishing to diminish the prevalence of particularly brutal forms of violence used by rebel groups, the key would appear to be keeping such groups weak, isolated from external supporters, and highly dependent on local civilians. Insurgents that can be prevented from acquiring a territorial safe haven within which to rule over civilians, or whose external support can be successfully interdicted, should generally be less likely to use overtly transgressive forms of violence. If they do use such violence, actively publicizing it as a means of undermining their popular support might help change their strategic calculus. In contrast, once insurgent groups have become strong to control significant territory, counting on their fear of adverse civilian reactions to convince them to temper their violence is unlikely to work: strong insurgents can generate enough “behavioural support” among civilians to discount their “attitudinal support.” Trying actively to deprive these groups of territorial control is likely to make them escalate their violence. For example, attacks on jihadist-held territories using remote capabilities (e.g. drones) while relying on local informers for the provision of targeting information is likely to provoke *more* beheadings of suspected spies. Governments using locals as sources of information in such contexts should exercise extreme caution.

As for extreme atrocity by state forces, here the key lesson concerns the importance of top-down supervision and discipline. Those hoping to prevent extreme atrocity as a practice should should pay particularly close attention to situations in which poorly-trained conscripts are deployed against capable irregular adversaries. Where top-down supervision is difficult, the key factors preventing the emergence of extreme atrocity are likely to be the attitudes and authority

of unit-level commanders. Greater attention to the training and socialization of these leaders is likely to have a large pay-off in terms of reducing unauthorized violence. Unit commanders that are attentive to the early signs of unauthorized violence might be able stop the emergence of deviant norms. Karl Marlantes's testimony from his time as a junior officer in Vietnam nicely sums up this point. Marlantes recounts how he disciplined some of his men for ear-cutting, not because he found the practice particularly objectionable, but because he understood the importance of unit-level norms:

After all the horror I'd seen already, this particular act [postmortem mutilation] actually didn't bother me at all. I could easily have let it go [but] I pretended to be angry... [M]oral standards are not ideas; they exist in the form of observable measurable behavior. What one sees, hears, and feels every day, by observing how people around one behave, inculcates such standards of behavior. (2011, 112).

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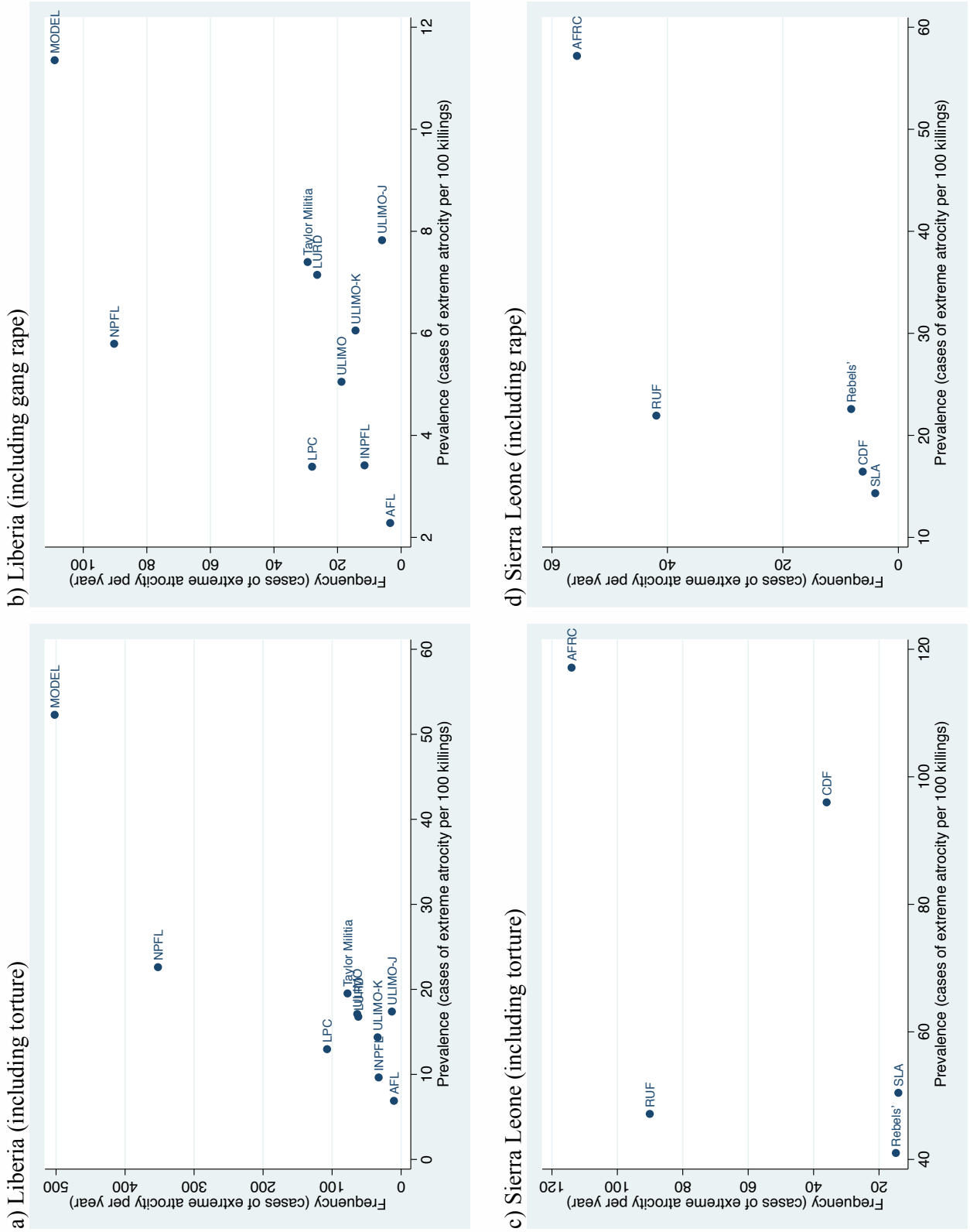
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# Appendix I

**Figure I.1 Variation in frequency and prevalence of extreme atrocity (alternative operationalization)**



## Appendix II

**Table II.1 Summary statistics for analysis in Chapter 3**

| Variable                         | N   | Mean | SD   | Min | Max |
|----------------------------------|-----|------|------|-----|-----|
| <i>Beheading</i>                 | 566 | 0.19 | 0.39 | 0   | 1   |
| <i>Clandestine network</i>       | 566 | 0.23 | 0.42 | 0   | 1   |
| <i>Proto-state</i>               | 566 | 0.17 | 0.38 | 0   | 1   |
| <i>Accepted presence</i>         | 566 | 0.04 | 0.21 | 0   | 1   |
| <i>Islamic State pledge</i>      | 566 | 0.17 | 0.38 | 0   | 1   |
| <i>Al-Qaida pledge</i>           | 566 | 0.14 | 0.35 | 0   | 1   |
| <i>Al-Qaida pre-2013</i>         | 566 | 0.07 | 0.25 | 0   | 1   |
| <i>Al-Qaida post-2013</i>        | 566 | 0.07 | 0.26 | 0   | 1   |
| <i>Number of jihadist groups</i> | 566 | 3.67 | 2.67 | 1   | 11  |
| <i>Non-Muslim enemy</i>          | 566 | 0.49 | 0.50 | 0   | 1   |
| <i>Regime change</i>             | 566 | 0.21 | 0.41 | 0   | 1   |
| <i>Age</i>                       | 566 | 8.40 | 7.33 | 0   | 36  |
| <i>Group size</i>                | 552 | 1.31 | 0.80 | 0   | 3   |

**Table II.2 Replication of models in table 3.3 excluding IS**

|                                  | POOLED MODELS        |                      |                      |                                     |                      |                      | GROUP FIXED EFFECTS                        |  |  |
|----------------------------------|----------------------|----------------------|----------------------|-------------------------------------|----------------------|----------------------|--|--|--|
|                                  | (1)<br>All<br>groups | (2)<br>All<br>groups | (3)<br>All<br>groups | (4)<br>Excluding<br>small<br>groups | (5)<br>All<br>groups | (6)<br>All<br>groups | (7)<br>All<br>groups<br>using<br>beheading | (8)<br>All<br>groups<br>using<br>beheading | (9)<br>All<br>groups<br>using<br>beheading |
| <i>Clandestine network</i>       | -1.96**<br>(0.47)    | -1.84**<br>(0.49)    | -1.89**<br>(0.50)    | -2.70**<br>(0.97)                   | -1.83**<br>(0.51)    | -1.91**<br>(0.51)    | -3.40**<br>(0.62)                          | -2.97**<br>(0.68)                          | -4.02**<br>(0.49)                          |
| <i>Proto-state</i>               | 1.18**<br>(0.32)     | 1.29**<br>(0.34)     | 0.58<br>(0.42)       | 1.19*<br>(0.52)                     | 1.35**<br>(0.31)     | 1.40**<br>(0.31)     | 1.63**<br>(0.56)                           | 1.38*<br>(0.57)                            | 1.59**<br>(0.57)                           |
| <i>Islamic State pledge</i>      |                      |                      |                      |                                     | 1.31**<br>(0.43)     | 1.36**<br>(0.44)     |  | 2.24**<br>(0.47)                           | 4.28**<br>(0.68)                           |
| <i>Al-Qaida pledge</i>           |                      |                      |                      |                                     | 0.83+<br>(0.49)      |                      |  | 1.86*<br>(0.82)                            | 2.38**<br>(0.83)                           |
| <i>Al-Qaida pre-2013</i>         |                      |                      |                      |                                     |                      | 1.49*<br>(0.61)      |  |  |  |
| <i>Al-Qaida post-2013</i>        |                      |                      |                      |                                     |                      | 0.10<br>(0.46)       |  |  |  |
| <i>Number of jihadist groups</i> |                      | -0.05<br>(0.08)      | -0.08<br>(0.08)      | -0.09<br>(0.11)                     | -0.02<br>(0.08)      | 0.00<br>(0.08)       |  |  | 0.10<br>(0.16)                             |
| <i>Non-Muslim enemies</i>        |                      | 0.29<br>(0.45)       | 0.25<br>(0.43)       | 0.57<br>(0.60)                      | 0.31<br>(0.50)       | 0.35<br>(0.51)       |  |  | 3.28**<br>(0.97)                           |
| <i>Regime change</i>             |                      | -0.17<br>(0.43)      | -0.17<br>(0.44)      | -1.22*<br>(0.55)                    | -0.20<br>(0.41)      | -0.14<br>(0.42)      |  |  | -0.58<br>(0.70)                            |
| <i>Age</i>                       |                      | 0.03<br>(0.02)       | 0.01<br>(0.02)       | -0.02<br>(0.04)                     | 0.04+<br>(0.02)      | 0.04+<br>(0.02)      |  |  | -0.19**<br>(0.05)                          |
| <i>Group size</i>                |                      |                      | 0.67**<br>(0.19)     | -0.60<br>(0.65)                     |                      |                      |  |  | 1.41*<br>(0.58)                            |
| <i>Constant</i>                  | 1.19+<br>(0.68)      | 0.97<br>(0.76)       | 0.37<br>(0.71)       | 4.30*<br>(1.51)                     | 0.38<br>(0.96)       | 0.21<br>(1.02)       |  |  |  |
| <i>N</i>                         | 493                  | 493                  | 479                  | 152                                 | 493                  | 493                  | 244  | 244  | 243  |

Group-clustered standard errors in parentheses. +  $p < 0.10$ , \*  $p < 0.05$ , \*\*  $p < 0.01$



**Table II.3 Replication of models in table 3.3 excluding first year of territorial control**

|                                  | POOLED MODELS        |                      |                      |                                     |                      | GROUP FIXED EFFECTS  |   |   |   |
|----------------------------------|----------------------|----------------------|----------------------|-------------------------------------|----------------------|----------------------|---|---|---|
|                                  | (1)<br>All<br>groups | (2)<br>All<br>groups | (3)<br>All<br>groups | (4)<br>Excluding<br>small<br>groups | (5)<br>All<br>groups | (6)<br>All<br>groups | (7)<br>All groups<br>using<br>beheading | (8)<br>All groups<br>using<br>beheading | (9)<br>All groups<br>using<br>beheading |
| <i>Clandestine network</i>       | -2.01**<br>(0.46)    | -1.86**<br>(0.50)    | -1.91**<br>(0.51)    | -2.79**<br>(0.95)                   | -1.81**<br>(0.52)    | -1.91**<br>(0.52)    | -3.61**<br>(0.52)                       | -3.52**<br>(0.50)                       | -4.11**<br>(0.34)                       |
| <i>Proto-state</i>               | 1.53**<br>(0.35)     | 1.62**<br>(0.41)     | 0.84+<br>(0.51)      | 1.13+<br>(0.64)                     | 1.73**<br>(0.39)     | 1.88**<br>(0.44)     | 2.19**<br>(0.60)                        | 2.04**<br>(0.61)                        | 2.03**<br>(0.70)                        |
| <i>Islamic State pledge</i>      |                      |                      |                      |                                     | 1.45**<br>(0.41)     | 1.54**<br>(0.44)     |   | 2.23**<br>(0.46)                        | 4.13**<br>(0.67)                        |
| <i>Al-Qaida pledge</i>           |                      |                      |                      |                                     | 0.69<br>(0.52)       |                      |   | 0.99<br>(0.62)                          | 1.78*<br>(0.76)                         |
| <i>Al-Qaida pre-2013</i>         |                      |                      |                      |                                     |                      | 1.64*<br>(0.66)      |   |   |   |
| <i>Al-Qaida post-2013</i>        |                      |                      |                      |                                     |                      | -0.34<br>(0.50)      |   |   |   |
| <i>Number of jihadist groups</i> |                      | -0.06<br>(0.08)      | -0.08<br>(0.08)      | -0.04<br>(0.11)                     | -0.02<br>(0.09)      | 0.01<br>(0.09)       |   |   | 0.16<br>(0.15)                          |
| <i>Non-Muslim enemies</i>        |                      | 0.17<br>(0.46)       | 0.16<br>(0.44)       | 0.81<br>(0.58)                      | 0.21<br>(0.51)       | 0.27<br>(0.53)       |   |   | 2.95**<br>(1.09)                        |
| <i>Regime change</i>             |                      | 0.09<br>(0.42)       | 0.03<br>(0.44)       | -1.03+<br>(0.55)                    | 0.10<br>(0.39)       | 0.23<br>(0.41)       |   |   | -0.43<br>(0.68)                         |
| <i>Age</i>                       |                      | 0.03<br>(0.03)       | 0.01<br>(0.03)       | -0.03<br>(0.05)                     | 0.05*<br>(0.02)      | 0.05*<br>(0.02)      |   |   | -0.19**<br>(0.05)                       |
| <i>Group size</i>                |                      |                      | 0.66**<br>(0.21)     | -0.35<br>(0.62)                     |                      |                      |   |   | 1.31*<br>(0.53)                         |
| <i>Constant</i>                  | 1.43*<br>(0.68)      | 1.21<br>(0.75)       | 0.56<br>(0.73)       | 3.87**<br>(1.53)                    | 0.54<br>(1.00)       | 0.35<br>(1.11)       |   |   |   |
| <i>N</i>                         | 497                  | 497                  | 483                  | 146                                 | 497                  | 497                  | 237                                     | 237                                     | 236                                     |

Group-clustered standard errors in parentheses. +  $p < 0.10$ , \*  $p < 0.05$ , \*\*  $p < 0.01$

**Table II.4 Replication of models in Table 3.3 excluding Iraq 2004-2008**

|                                  | POOLED MODELS        |                      |                      |                                     |                      | GROUP FIXED EFFECTS  |   |   |   |
|----------------------------------|----------------------|----------------------|----------------------|-------------------------------------|----------------------|----------------------|---|---|---|
|                                  | (1)<br>All<br>groups | (2)<br>All<br>groups | (3)<br>All<br>groups | (4)<br>Excluding<br>small<br>groups | (5)<br>All<br>groups | (6)<br>All<br>groups | (7)<br>All groups<br>using<br>beheading | (8)<br>All groups<br>using<br>beheading | (9)<br>All groups<br>using<br>beheading |
| <i>Clandestine network</i>       | -1.89**<br>(0.49)    | -1.77**<br>(0.53)    | -1.81**<br>(0.53)    | -2.63**<br>(1.01)                   | -1.74**<br>(0.54)    | -1.78**<br>(0.53)    | -3.08**<br>(0.77)                       | -3.12**<br>(0.84)                       | -3.86**<br>(0.54)                       |
| <i>Proto-state</i>               | 1.42**<br>(0.31)     | 1.52**<br>(0.34)     | 0.75+<br>(0.40)      | 1.22*<br>(0.49)                     | 1.65**<br>(0.27)     | 1.65**<br>(0.27)     | 2.18**<br>(0.54)                        | 2.01**<br>(0.60)                        | 1.85**<br>(0.64)                        |
| <i>Islamic State pledge</i>      |                      |                      |                      |                                     | 1.45**<br>(0.44)     | 1.47**<br>(0.44)     |   | 2.23**<br>(0.46)                        | 4.08**<br>(0.65)                        |
| <i>Al-Qaida pledge</i>           |                      |                      |                      |                                     | 0.59<br>(0.41)       |                      |   | 0.96<br>(0.84)                          | 1.90*<br>(0.81)                         |
| <i>Al-Qaida pre-2013</i>         |                      |                      |                      |                                     |                      | 0.99*<br>(0.46)      |   |   |   |
| <i>Al-Qaida post-2013</i>        |                      |                      |                      |                                     |                      | 0.25<br>(0.43)       |   |   |   |
| <i>Number of jihadist groups</i> |                      | -0.04<br>(0.07)      | -0.08<br>(0.08)      | -0.06<br>(0.10)                     | -0.02<br>(0.08)      | -0.01<br>(0.08)      |   |   | 0.11<br>(0.14)                          |
| <i>Non-Muslim enemies</i>        |                      | 0.10<br>(0.45)       | 0.06<br>(0.43)       | 0.56<br>(0.56)                      | 0.08<br>(0.49)       | 0.10<br>(0.50)       |   |   | 2.89**<br>(0.86)                        |
| <i>Regime change</i>             |                      | -0.50<br>(0.487)     | -0.50<br>(0.48)      | -1.32*<br>(0.56)                    | -0.51<br>(0.44)      | -0.47<br>(0.44)      |   |   | -0.84<br>(0.67)                         |
| <i>Age</i>                       |                      | 0.04<br>(0.03)       | 0.01<br>(0.03)       | -0.01<br>(0.05)                     | 0.06*<br>(0.02)      | 0.06*<br>(0.02)      |   |   | -0.17**<br>(0.05)                       |
| <i>Group size</i>                |                      |                      | 0.74**<br>(0.20)     | -0.42<br>(0.57)                     |                      |                      |   |   | 1.51*<br>(0.62)                         |
| <i>Constant</i>                  | 1.15<br>(0.71)       | 0.96<br>(0.81)       | 0.30<br>(0.77)       | 3.61*<br>(1.60)                     | 0.40<br>(1.00)       | 0.31<br>(1.03)       |   |   |   |
| <i>N</i>                         | 506                  | 506                  | 492                  | 157                                 | 506                  | 506                  | 236                                     | 236                                     | 235                                     |

Group-clustered standard errors in parentheses. +  $p < 0.10$ , \*  $p < 0.05$ , \*\*  $p < 0.01$

**Table II.5 Replication of models in Table 3.3 excluding India 2001-2007**

|                                  | POOLED MODELS        |                      |                      |                                     |                      | GROUP FIXED EFFECTS  |  |  |   |
|----------------------------------|----------------------|----------------------|----------------------|-------------------------------------|----------------------|----------------------|--|--|---|
|                                  | (1)<br>All<br>groups | (2)<br>All<br>groups | (3)<br>All<br>groups | (4)<br>Excluding<br>small<br>groups | (5)<br>All<br>groups | (6)<br>All<br>groups | (7)<br>All<br>groups<br>using<br>beheading | (8)<br>All<br>groups<br>using<br>beheading | (9)<br>All groups<br>using<br>beheading |
| <i>Clandestine network</i>       | -2.04**<br>(0.46)    | -1.88**<br>(0.50)    | -1.87**<br>(0.50)    | -2.45**<br>(0.86)                   | -1.86**<br>(0.50)    | -1.92**<br>(0.50)    | -3.65**<br>(0.52)                          | -3.67**<br>(0.57)                          | -4.60**<br>(0.42)                       |
| <i>Proto-state</i>               | 1.24**<br>(0.28)     | 1.28**<br>(0.32)     | 0.57<br>(0.40)       | 1.13*<br>(0.50)                     | 1.33**<br>(0.28)     | 1.38**<br>(0.29)     | 1.65**<br>(0.56)                           | 1.50**<br>(0.56)                           | 1.65**<br>(0.62)                        |
| <i>Islamic State pledge</i>      |                      |                      |                      |                                     | 1.25**<br>(0.42)     | 1.29**<br>(0.43)     | 2.23**<br>(0.46)                           | 4.37**<br>(0.76)                           |   |
| <i>Al-Qaida pledge</i>           |                      |                      |                      |                                     | 0.78<br>(0.48)       |                      | 1.28*<br>(0.65)                            | 2.20**<br>(0.80)                           |   |
| <i>Al-Qaida pre-2013</i>         |                      |                      |                      |                                     |                      | 1.45*<br>(0.60)      |  |  |   |
| <i>Al-Qaida post-2013</i>        |                      |                      |                      |                                     |                      | 0.09<br>(0.43)       |  |  |   |
| <i>Number of jihadist groups</i> |                      | -0.01<br>(0.07)      | -0.04<br>(0.08)      | -0.05<br>(0.11)                     | 0.02<br>(0.08)       | 0.04<br>(0.08)       |  |  | 0.09<br>(0.16)                          |
| <i>Non-Muslim enemies</i>        |                      | 0.36<br>(0.45)       | 0.31<br>(0.43)       | 0.67<br>(0.56)                      | 0.37<br>(0.49)       | 0.40<br>(0.50)       |  |  | 3.43**<br>(0.98)                        |
| <i>Regime change</i>             |                      | -0.22<br>(0.44)      | -0.21<br>(0.44)      | -1.17*<br>(0.56)                    | -0.25<br>(0.42)      | -0.18<br>(0.42)      |  |  | -0.62<br>(0.71)                         |
| <i>Age</i>                       |                      | 0.04<br>(0.02)       | 0.01<br>(0.02)       | -0.01<br>(0.05)                     | 0.05*<br>(0.02)      | 0.05*<br>(0.02)      |  |  | -0.19**<br>(0.05)                       |
| <i>Group size</i>                |                      |                      | 0.68**<br>(0.20)     | -0.46<br>(0.55)                     |                      |                      |  |  | 1.74**<br>(0.64)                        |
| <i>Constant</i>                  | 1.73*<br>(0.68)      | 1.25<br>(0.83)       | 0.63<br>(0.81)       | 3.71*<br>(1.53)                     | 0.67<br>(1.00)       | 0.49<br>(1.08)       |  |  |   |
| <i>N</i>                         | 481                  | 481                  | 467                  | 156                                 | 481                  | 481                  | 229  | 229  | 228                                     |

Group-clustered standard errors in parentheses. +  $p < 0.10$ , \*  $p < 0.05$ , \*\*  $p < 0.01$

**Table II.6 Replication of models in Table 3.3 excluding Pakistan 2006-2011**

|                                  | POOLED MODELS        |                      |                      |                                     |                      | GROUP FIXED EFFECTS  |  |  |   |
|----------------------------------|----------------------|----------------------|----------------------|-------------------------------------|----------------------|----------------------|--|--|---|
|                                  | (1)<br>All<br>groups | (2)<br>All<br>groups | (3)<br>All<br>groups | (4)<br>Excluding<br>small<br>groups | (5)<br>All<br>groups | (6)<br>All<br>groups | (7)<br>All<br>groups<br>using<br>beheading | (8)<br>All<br>groups<br>using<br>beheading | (9)<br>All groups<br>using<br>beheading |
| <i>Clandestine network</i>       | -1.95**<br>(0.45)    | -1.76**<br>(0.49)    | -1.89**<br>(0.51)    | -2.71**<br>(0.99)                   | -1.74**<br>(0.50)    | -1.82**<br>(0.50)    | -3.68**<br>(0.52)                          | -3.74**<br>(0.59)                          | -4.39**<br>(0.45)                       |
| <i>Proto-state</i>               | 1.26**<br>(0.31)     | 1.33**<br>(0.35)     | 0.50<br>(0.44)       | 0.93+<br>(0.56)                     | 1.33**<br>(0.31)     | 1.38**<br>(0.31)     | 1.46**<br>(0.53)                           | 1.29*<br>(0.53)                            | 1.42*<br>(0.66)                         |
| <i>Islamic State pledge</i>      |                      |                      |                      |                                     | 1.45**<br>(0.43)     | 1.50**<br>(0.45)     | 2.22**<br>(0.46)                           | 4.22**<br>(0.69)                           |   |
| <i>Al-Qaida pledge</i>           |                      |                      |                      |                                     | 1.00*<br>(0.47)      |                      | 1.34*<br>(0.65)                            | 2.25**<br>(0.75)                           |   |
| <i>Al-Qaida pre-2013</i>         |                      |                      |                      |                                     |                      | 1.65**<br>(0.60)     |  |  |   |
| <i>Al-Qaida post-2013</i>        |                      |                      |                      |                                     |                      | 0.33<br>(0.41)       |  |  |   |
| <i>Number of jihadist groups</i> |                      | -0.04<br>(0.07)      | -0.07<br>(0.07)      | -0.07<br>(0.10)                     | -0.01<br>(0.08)      | 0.02<br>(0.09)       |  |  | 0.17<br>(0.17)                          |
| <i>Non-Muslim enemies</i>        |                      | 0.37<br>(0.44)       | 0.29<br>(0.41)       | 0.77<br>(0.57)                      | 0.47<br>(0.49)       | 0.50<br>(0.50)       |  |  | 3.08**<br>(1.02)                        |
| <i>Regime change</i>             |                      | -0.12<br>(0.42)      | -0.15<br>(0.44)      | -1.12+<br>(0.62)                    | -0.14<br>(0.42)      | -0.07<br>(0.41)      |  |  | -0.58<br>(0.68)                         |
| <i>Age</i>                       |                      | 0.03<br>(0.02)       | 0.01<br>(0.03)       | -0.01<br>(0.05)                     | 0.05*<br>(0.02)      | 0.05*<br>(0.02)      |  |  | -0.19**<br>(0.05)                       |
| <i>Group size</i>                |                      |                      | 0.81**<br>(0.20)     | -0.09<br>(0.56)                     |                      |                      |  |  | 1.56**<br>(0.60)                        |
| <i>Constant</i>                  | 1.01<br>(0.67)       | 0.60<br>(0.81)       | -0.13<br>(0.78)      | 2.59+<br>(1.38)                     | -0.15<br>(1.03)      | -0.35<br>(1.11)      |  |  |   |
| <i>N</i>                         | 493                  | 493                  | 481                  | 148                                 | 493                  | 493                  | 240  | 240  | 239                                     |

Group-clustered standard errors in parentheses. +  $p < 0.10$ , \*  $p < 0.05$ , \*\*  $p < 0.01$

**Table II.7 Replication of models in Table 3.3 including Salafist-Nationalist groups**

|                                  | POOLED MODELS        |                      |                      |                                     |                      | GROUP FIXED EFFECTS  |  |  |   |
|----------------------------------|----------------------|----------------------|----------------------|-------------------------------------|----------------------|----------------------|--|--|---|
|                                  | (1)<br>All<br>groups | (2)<br>All<br>groups | (3)<br>All<br>groups | (4)<br>Excluding<br>small<br>groups | (5)<br>All<br>groups | (6)<br>All<br>groups | (7)<br>All<br>groups<br>using<br>beheading | (8)<br>All<br>groups<br>using<br>beheading | (9)<br>All groups<br>using<br>beheading |
| <i>Clandestine network</i>       | -1.98**<br>(0.46)    | -1.77**<br>(0.50)    | -1.79**<br>(0.50)    | -2.49**<br>(0.81)                   | -1.79**<br>(0.51)    | -1.87**<br>(0.52)    | -3.65**<br>(0.52)                          | -3.67**<br>(0.57)                          | -4.51**<br>(0.40)                       |
| <i>Proto-state</i>               | 0.98**<br>(0.32)     | 1.16**<br>(0.34)     | 0.52<br>(0.41)       | 1.12*<br>(0.50)                     | 1.24**<br>(0.30)     | 1.29**<br>(0.31)     | 1.65**<br>(0.56)                           | 1.50**<br>(0.56)                           | 1.68**<br>(0.61)                        |
| <i>Islamic State pledge</i>      |                      |                      |                      |                                     | 1.48**<br>(0.43)     | 1.53**<br>(0.44)     |  | 2.23**<br>(0.46)                           | 4.28**<br>(0.69)                        |
| <i>Al-Qaida pledge</i>           |                      |                      |                      |                                     | 1.02*<br>(0.47)      |                      |  | 1.28*<br>(0.65)                            | 2.10**<br>(0.75)                        |
| <i>Al-Qaida pre-2013</i>         |                      |                      |                      |                                     |                      | 1.65**<br>(0.58)     |  |  |   |
| <i>Al-Qaida post-2013</i>        |                      |                      |                      |                                     |                      | 0.37<br>(0.43)       |  |  |   |
| <i>Number of jihadist groups</i> |                      | -0.05<br>(0.07)      | -0.08<br>(0.08)      | -0.04<br>(0.10)                     | -0.01<br>(0.08)      | 0.01<br>(0.08)       |  |  | 0.12<br>(0.14)                          |
| <i>Non-Muslim enemies</i>        |                      | 0.35<br>(0.46)       | 0.31<br>(0.44)       | 0.79<br>(0.53)                      | 0.38<br>(0.51)       | 0.41<br>(0.52)       |  |  | 3.32**<br>(0.97)                        |
| <i>Regime change</i>             |                      | -0.10<br>(0.41)      | -0.10<br>(0.41)      | -1.06*<br>(0.52)                    | -0.18<br>(0.40)      | -0.12<br>(0.40)      |  |  | -0.61<br>(0.69)                         |
| <i>Age</i>                       |                      | 0.04+<br>(0.02)      | 0.03<br>(0.02)       | 0.04<br>(0.05)                      | 0.06*<br>(0.02)      | 0.06*<br>(0.02)      |  |  | -0.19**<br>(0.05)                       |
| <i>Group size</i>                |                      |                      | 0.59**<br>(0.19)     | -0.96<br>(0.61)                     |                      |                      |  |  | 1.49*<br>(0.58)                         |
| <i>Constant</i>                  | 1.35*<br>(0.64)      | 0.89<br>(0.78)       | 0.34<br>(0.74)       | 4.11**<br>(1.58)                    | 0.21<br>(1.00)       | 0.02<br>(1.07)       |  |  |   |
| <i>N</i>                         | 541                  | 541                  | 527                  | 181                                 | 541                  | 541                  | 251  | 251  | 250                                     |

Group-clustered standard errors in parentheses. +  $p < 0.10$ , \*  $p < 0.05$ , \*\*  $p < 0.01$

**Table II.8 Replication of models in Table 3.3 with accepted presence included in reference category**

|                                  | POOLED MODELS        |                      |                      |                                     |                      | GROUP FIXED EFFECTS  |   |   |   |
|----------------------------------|----------------------|----------------------|----------------------|-------------------------------------|----------------------|----------------------|---|---|---|
|                                  | (1)<br>All<br>groups | (2)<br>All<br>groups | (3)<br>All<br>groups | (4)<br>Excluding<br>small<br>groups | (5)<br>All<br>groups | (6)<br>All<br>groups | (7)<br>All groups<br>using<br>beheading | (8)<br>All groups<br>using<br>beheading | (9)<br>All groups<br>using<br>beheading |
| <i>Clandestine network</i>       | -1.91**<br>(0.46)    | -1.76**<br>(0.49)    | -1.80**<br>(0.50)    | -2.56**<br>(0.88)                   | -1.75**<br>(0.49)    | -1.84**<br>(0.50)    | -3.65**<br>(0.52)                       | -3.67**<br>(0.57)                       | -4.51**<br>(0.40)                       |
| <i>Proto-state</i>               | 1.40**<br>(0.29)     | 1.53**<br>(0.30)     | 0.79*<br>(0.37)      | 1.38**<br>(0.47)                    | 1.56**<br>(0.27)     | 1.61**<br>(0.28)     | 1.65**<br>(0.56)                        | 1.50**<br>(0.56)                        | 1.68**<br>(0.61)                        |
| <i>Islamic State pledge</i>      |                      |                      |                      |                                     | 1.40**<br>(0.43)     | 1.45**<br>(0.44)     |   | 2.23**<br>(0.46)                        | 4.28**<br>(0.69)                        |
| <i>Al-Qaida pledge</i>           |                      |                      |                      |                                     | 0.88+<br>(0.49)      |                      |   | 1.28*<br>(0.65)                         | 2.10**<br>(0.75)                        |
| <i>Al-Qaida pre-2013</i>         |                      |                      |                      |                                     |                      | 1.57*<br>(0.62)      |   |   |   |
| <i>Al-Qaida post-2013</i>        |                      |                      |                      |                                     |                      | 0.18<br>(0.41)       |   |   |   |
| <i>Number of jihadist groups</i> |                      | -0.06<br>(0.07)      | -0.10<br>(0.08)      | -0.10<br>(0.10)                     | -0.03<br>(0.08)      | 0.00<br>(0.09)       |   |   | 0.11<br>(0.14)                          |
| <i>Non-Muslim enemies</i>        |                      | 0.40<br>(0.45)       | 0.36<br>(0.43)       | 0.68<br>(0.56)                      | 0.42<br>(0.50)       | 0.45<br>(0.50)       |   |   | 3.32**<br>(0.97)                        |
| <i>Regime change</i>             |                      | -0.17<br>(0.44)      | -0.16<br>(0.45)      | -1.16*<br>(0.54)                    | -0.20<br>(0.42)      | -0.15<br>(0.42)      |   |   | -0.61<br>(0.69)                         |
| <i>Age</i>                       |                      | 0.03<br>(0.02)       | 0.01<br>(0.02)       | 0.00<br>(0.04)                      | 0.04*<br>(0.02)      | 0.05*<br>(0.02)      |   |   | -0.19**<br>(0.05)                       |
| <i>Group size</i>                |                      |                      | 0.73**<br>(0.20)     | -0.39<br>(0.51)                     |                      |                      |   |   | 1.49*<br>(0.58)                         |
| <i>Constant</i>                  | 1.19+<br>(0.66)      | 0.90<br>(0.80)       | 0.24<br>(0.76)       | 3.67*<br>(1.54)                     | 0.28<br>(1.00)       | 0.10<br>(1.07)       |   |   |   |
| <i>N</i>                         | 535                  | 535                  | 521                  | 169                                 | 535                  | 535                  | 251                                     | 251                                     | 250                                     |

Group-clustered standard errors in parentheses. +  $p < 0.10$ , \*  $p < 0.05$ , \*\*  $p < 0.01$

**Table II.9 Four-fold cross validation for model 6 in Table 3.3**

|                    | Model 6 | without territorial presence | without pledges to AQ or IS |
|--------------------|---------|------------------------------|-----------------------------|
| 1st run            | 0.8018  | 0.7740                       | 0.7953                      |
| 2nd run            | 0.8044  | 0.7578                       | 0.7959                      |
| 3rd run            | 0.8236  | 0.7560                       | 0.7946                      |
| 4th run            | 0.8103  | 0.7686                       | 0.8026                      |
| 5th run            | 0.8200  | 0.7726                       | 0.8058                      |
| 6th run            | 0.8305  | 0.7667                       | 0.7982                      |
| 7th run            | 0.8163  | 0.7675                       | 0.7949                      |
| 8th run            | 0.8213  | 0.7687                       | 0.8004                      |
| 9th run            | 0.8162  | 0.7813                       | 0.7992                      |
| 10th run           | 0.8299  | 0.7632                       | 0.8049                      |
| Average ROC values | 0.8174  | 0.7676                       | 0.7991                      |

## Appendix III

**Table III.1 NSVG survey questions used to operationalize variables**

| Variable                     | Survey question(s)   |
|------------------------------|--|
| <i>Mutilation</i>            | [J66]...here is a similar list of actions to the one I just asked you about for the enemy. Sometimes these things were also done by <i>our</i> side. Please look at this list again, and after each action, circle the number which best describes the extent to which you were exposed to this type of thing during your tour(s) that directly involved Vietnam... E. Mutilation of bodies of the enemy or civilians? |
| <i>Domestic abuse</i>        | [G48] Did anyone in your family or household ever spank or hit you hard enough that you had marks or bruises, had to stay in bed, or see a doctor? Do not count childhood fights between siblings<br>[G48b] Overall, about how often did that happen—would you say very often, fairly often, sometimes, or hardly ever?  |
| <i>Family mental illness</i> | [G46] While you were growing up, was anyone in your family or household (not including yourself) admitted to a (mental or psychiatric) hospital because of mental or emotional problems or problems with drinking or taking drugs?   |
| <i>Family criminality</i>    | [G47] While you were growing up, was anyone in your family or household (not including yourself) ever arrested and charged with anything other than traffic violations?<br>[G47b] Did (they/anyone) ever serve a jail sentence?  |
| <i>Parental death</i>        | [G5b] What happened to prevent you from living with both [parents] until you were 16? ... Father died ... Mother died ... Both parents died.   |
| <i>White southerner</i>      | [A2] Please look at this card and tell me the letter of the group that best describes your racial background... f. White<br>[G1] ...where did you live mostly while you were growing up? [the following regions are considered part of the South: South Atlantic, East South Central, West South Central (see Batts et al. 1989: I-2)  |
| <i>Black</i>                 | [A2] Please look at this card and tell me the letter of the group that best describes your racial background... e. Black   |



|                              |  |
|------------------------------|--|
| <i>Rural</i>                 | [G1] ...where did you live mostly while you were growing up?<br>[G2] Was that in a rural or country area, a small town, a small city, a suburb of a large city, or in a large city?  |
| <i>Close friends killed</i>  | [J47f] How often did you see a close friend from your unit(s) killed or die?   |
| <i>Unit cohesion</i>         | [J23] ...how close or tight were you with the people in your unit—would you say extremely close, very close, fairly close, not very close, or not close at all?  |
| <i>Decline in discipline</i> | [J16] For each of these experiences, please describe how satisfying it was to you personally—very satisfying, somewhat satisfying, not too satisfying, or not at all satisfying? Or, if you never had that experience, please tell me... A. Decreased emphasis in the field on military discipline and bearing?            |
| <i>Combat exposure</i>       | [J34] ...how would you generally describe your own exposure to combat during the time(s) you were in or around Vietnam—light, moderate, or heavy?  |
| <i>Deployment duration</i>   | [J5] In all, how many months did you serve in or around Vietnam?   |
| <i>Age</i>                   | [A2] ...what is your date of birth?  |
| <i>Combat duty</i>           | [J9] Overall, during the time(s) you were there, how would you describe your duty in or around Vietnam? Would you say mainly combat (served in a line unit in combat), mainly combat support (served in a unit directly supporting a combat unit in combat), or mainly service support (served in noncombat related duty)? |

**Table III.2 Summary statistics for analysis in Chapter 4**

| <b>Variable</b>              | <b>N</b> | <b>Mean</b> | <b>SD</b> | <b>Range</b> |
|------------------------------|----------|-------------|-----------|--------------|
| <i>Mutilation</i>            | 1420     | 0.018       | 0.134     | 0 - 1        |
| <i>Domestic abuse</i>        | 1402     | 0.407       | 0.94      | 0 - 4        |
| <i>Family mental illness</i> | 1406     | 0.053       | 0.223     | 0 - 1        |
| <i>Family criminality</i>    | 1404     | 0.061       | 0.239     | 0 - 1        |
| <i>Parental death</i>        | 1410     | 0.083       | 0.276     | 0 - 1        |
| <i>White southerner</i>      | 1420     | 0.177       | 0.382     | 0 - 1        |
| <i>Black</i>                 | 1413     | 0.207       | 0.405     | 0 - 1        |
| <i>Rural</i>                 | 1418     | 0.260       | 0.439     | 0 - 1        |
| <i>Close friends killed</i>  | 1418     | 0.546       | 0.935     | 0 - 4        |
| <i>Unit cohesion</i>         | 1419     | 2.717       | 0.960     | 0 - 4        |
| <i>Decline in discipline</i> | 1411     | 0.687       | 0.464     | 0 - 1        |
| <i>Combat exposure</i>       | 1420     | 1.610       | 0.899     | 0 - 3        |
| <i>Deployment duration</i>   | 1391     | 12.722      | 5.503     | 0 - 50       |
| <i>Age</i>                   | 1420     | 43.616      | 6.573     | 13 - 55      |
| <i>Combat duty</i>           | 1450     | 0.268       | 0.443     | 0 - 1        |

Table III.3 Results for Figure 4.1

|                              | All respondents   | Combat only        | All respondents   | Combat only        | All respondents   | Combat only        | All respondents   | Combat only        | All respondents   | Combat only        |                   |                    |
|------------------------------|-------------------|--------------------|-------------------|--------------------|-------------------|--------------------|-------------------|--------------------|-------------------|--------------------|-------------------|--------------------|
|                              | (1)               | (2)                | (3)               | (4)                | (5)               | (6)                | (7)               | (8)                | (9)               | (10)               | (11)              | (12)               |
| <i>Domestic violence</i>     | 0.32*<br>(0.16)   | 0.19<br>(0.16)     | 0.21<br>(0.17)    | 0.14<br>(0.17)     |                   |                    |                   |                    |                   |                    |                   |                    |
| <i>Family mental illness</i> |                   |                    | 1.27*<br>(0.56)   | 1.33*<br>(0.59)    | 1.66**<br>(0.61)  | 1.62*<br>(0.66)    |                   |                    |                   |                    |                   |                    |
| <i>Parental imprisonment</i> |                   |                    |                   |                    | 0.77<br>(0.63)    | 0.60<br>(0.64)     | 0.75<br>(0.66)    | 0.80<br>(0.68)     |                   |                    |                   |                    |
| <i>Parental death</i>        |                   |                    |                   |                    |                   |                    |                   |                    |                   |                    |                   |                    |
| <i>Combat exposure</i>       |                   | 1.05**<br>(0.28)   | 0.95*<br>(0.47)   | 1.10**<br>(0.28)   | 1.08*<br>(0.48)   | 1.08**<br>(0.28)   | 1.04*<br>(0.48)   |                    |                   |                    |                   |                    |
| <i>Deployment duration</i>   |                   | 0.04<br>(0.03)     | 0.05<br>(0.04)    | 0.05<br>(0.03)     | 0.05<br>(0.04)    | 0.05<br>(0.03)     | 0.05<br>(0.04)    |                    |                   |                    |                   |                    |
| <i>Age</i>                   |                   | 0.21**<br>(0.07)   | 0.17+<br>(0.08)   | 0.21**<br>(0.07)   | 0.15+<br>(0.08)   | 0.22**<br>(0.07)   | 0.17+<br>(0.09)   |                    |                   |                    |                   |                    |
| <i>Constant</i>              | -4.19**<br>(0.24) | -16.68**<br>(3.68) | -3.00**<br>(0.27) | -13.79**<br>(4.34) | -4.13**<br>(0.22) | -16.70**<br>(3.65) | -3.04**<br>(0.26) | -13.45**<br>(4.34) | -4.08**<br>(0.22) | -16.91**<br>(3.68) | -2.95**<br>(0.25) | -14.08**<br>(4.40) |
| <i>N</i>                     | 1402              | 1373               | 369               | 365                | 1406              | 1377               | 371               | 367                | 1404              | 1375               | 372               | 368                |

Standard errors in parentheses; +  $p < 0.10$ , \*  $p < 0.05$ , \*\*  $p < 0.01$

Table III.3 Results for Figure 4.1 cont.

|                              | All respondents   |                    | Combat only       |                    | All respondents             |                             | Combat only       |                             |
|------------------------------|-------------------|--------------------|-------------------|--------------------|-----------------------------|-----------------------------|-------------------|-----------------------------|
|                              | (13)              | (14)               | (15)              | (16)               | (17)                        | (18)                        | (19)              | (20)                        |
| <i>Domestic violence</i>     |                   |                    |                   |                    | 0.28 <sup>+</sup><br>(0.16) | 0.14<br>(0.16)              | 0.16<br>(0.18)    | 0.10<br>(0.18)              |
| <i>Family mental illness</i> |                   |                    |                   |                    | 1.07 <sup>+</sup><br>(0.59) | 1.15 <sup>+</sup><br>(0.62) | 1.56*<br>(0.66)   | 1.60*<br>(0.72)             |
| <i>Parental imprisonment</i> |                   |                    |                   |                    | 0.34<br>(0.67)              | 0.24<br>(0.68)              | 0.23<br>(0.74)    | 0.34<br>(0.78)              |
| <i>Parental death</i>        | 0.37<br>(0.62)    | 0.49<br>(0.64)     | -0.65<br>(1.04)   | -0.64<br>(1.05)    | 0.37<br>(0.63)              | 0.35<br>(0.66)              | -0.77<br>(1.06)   | -1.00<br>(1.10)             |
| <i>Combat exposure</i>       |                   | 1.10**<br>(0.28)   |                   | 1.00*<br>(0.47)    |                             | 1.07**<br>(0.28)            |                   | 1.13*<br>(0.49)             |
| <i>Deployment duration</i>   |                   | 0.06*<br>(0.03)    |                   | 0.07*<br>(0.03)    |                             | 0.04<br>(0.03)              |                   | 0.04<br>(0.04)              |
| <i>Age</i>                   |                   | 0.23**<br>(0.07)   |                   | 0.19*<br>(0.08)    |                             | 0.21**<br>(0.07)            |                   | 0.15 <sup>+</sup><br>(0.09) |
| <i>Constant</i>              | -4.01**<br>(0.21) | -17.90**<br>(3.57) | -2.78**<br>(0.23) | -15.09**<br>(4.24) | -4.33**<br>(0.26)           | -16.52**<br>(3.64)          | -3.10**<br>(0.29) | -13.53**<br>(4.48)          |
| <i>N</i>                     | 1410              | 1381               | 375               | 371                | 1384                        | 1355                        | 365               | 361                         |

Standard errors in parentheses; +  $p < 0.10$ , \*  $p < 0.05$ , \*\*  $p < 0.01$

Table III.4 Results for Figure 4.2

|                            | All respondents   |                    | Combat only       |                    | All respondents   |                    | Combat only       |                    | All respondents   |                    | Combat only       |                    |
|----------------------------|-------------------|--------------------|-------------------|--------------------|-------------------|--------------------|-------------------|--------------------|-------------------|--------------------|-------------------|--------------------|
|                            | (1)               | (2)                | (3)               | (4)                | (5)               | (6)                | (7)               | (8)                | (9)               | (10)               | (11)              | (12)               |
| <i>Southern white</i>      | -0.17<br>(0.55)   | -0.12<br>(0.56)    | 0.17<br>(0.57)    | 0.22<br>(0.59)     |                   |                    |                   |                    |                   |                    |                   |                    |
| <i>Black</i>               |                   |                    |                   |                    | 0.90*<br>(0.41)   | 0.54<br>(0.43)     | 0.05<br>(0.50)    | -0.07<br>(0.52)    |                   |                    |                   |                    |
| <i>Rural</i>               |                   |                    |                   |                    |                   |                    |                   |                    | 0.24<br>(0.43)    | 0.38<br>(0.44)     | 0.21<br>(0.50)    | 0.46<br>(0.52)     |
| <i>Combat exposure</i>     |                   | 1.10**<br>(0.28)   |                   | 1.00*<br>(0.47)    |                   | 1.08**<br>(0.28)   |                   | 1.00*<br>(0.47)    |                   | 1.12**<br>(0.28)   |                   | 1.00*<br>(0.47)    |
| <i>Deployment duration</i> |                   | 0.06*<br>(0.03)    |                   | 0.07*<br>(0.03)    |                   | 0.06*<br>(0.03)    |                   | 0.07*<br>(0.03)    |                   | 0.06*<br>(0.03)    |                   | 0.07*<br>(0.03)    |
| <i>Age</i>                 |                   | 0.24**<br>(0.07)   |                   | 0.19*<br>(0.08)    |                   | 0.25**<br>(0.07)   |                   | 0.19*<br>(0.08)    |                   | 0.24**<br>(0.07)   |                   | 0.19*<br>(0.08)    |
| <i>Constant</i>            | -3.95**<br>(0.22) | -17.90**<br>(3.60) | -2.86**<br>(0.25) | -15.17**<br>(4.19) | -4.24**<br>(0.25) | -17.62**<br>(3.55) | -2.83**<br>(0.27) | -15.13**<br>(4.20) | -4.05**<br>(0.24) | -18.08**<br>(3.61) | -2.88**<br>(0.27) | -15.48**<br>(4.22) |
| <i>N</i>                   | 1420              | 1391               | 376               | 372                | 1413              | 1384               | 372               | 368                | 1418              | 1389               | 376               | 372                |

Standard errors in parentheses <sup>+</sup>  $p < 0.10$ , \*  $p < 0.05$ , \*\*  $p < 0.01$

Table III.5 Results for Figure 4.3

|  | All respondents   |                    | Combat only       |                    | All respondents   |                    | Combat only       |                    | All respondents   |                    | Combat only      |                    |
|--|-------------------|--------------------|-------------------|--------------------|-------------------|--------------------|-------------------|--------------------|-------------------|--------------------|------------------|--------------------|
|  | (1)               | (2)                | (3)               | (4)                | (5)               | (6)                | (7)               | (8)                | (9)               | (10)               | (11)             | (12)               |
| <i>Close friends killed</i>                      | 1.02**<br>(0.15)  | 0.83**<br>(0.19)   | 0.69**<br>(0.18)  | 0.60**<br>(0.21)   |                   |                    |                   |                    |                   |                    |                  |                    |
| <i>Unit cohesion</i>                             |                   |                    |                   |                    | 0.39+<br>(0.23)   | 0.24<br>(0.22)     | 0.04<br>(0.23)    | -0.08<br>(0.23)    | -0.98+<br>(0.51)  | -1.23*<br>(0.54)   | -1.26+<br>(0.65) | -1.55*<br>(0.67)   |
| <i>Decline in discipline</i>                     |                   |                    |                   |                    | 1.28*<br>(0.62)   | 0.66<br>(0.64)     | 0.13<br>(0.64)    | 0.25<br>(0.68)     | -2.85*<br>(1.35)  | -3.71**<br>(1.39)  | -3.64*<br>(1.61) | -4.00*<br>(1.69)   |
| <i>Unit cohesion X<br/>Decline in discipline</i> |                   |                    |                   |                    |                   |                    |                   |                    | 1.63**<br>(0.57)  | 1.72**<br>(0.59)   | 1.54*<br>(0.70)  | 1.72*<br>(0.72)    |
| <i>Combat exposure</i>                           |                   | 0.37<br>(0.33)     |                   | 0.51<br>(0.51)     |                   | 1.03**<br>(0.29)   |                   | 1.04*<br>(0.48)    |                   | 1.06**<br>(0.29)   |                  | 1.04*<br>(0.48)    |
| <i>Deployment duration</i>                       |                   | 0.06*<br>(0.03)    |                   | 0.07*<br>(0.03)    |                   | 0.06*<br>(0.03)    |                   | 0.07*<br>(0.03)    |                   | 0.07*<br>(0.03)    |                  | 0.08*<br>(0.03)    |
| <i>Age</i>                                       |                   | 0.21**<br>(0.08)   |                   | 0.18*<br>(0.09)    |                   | 0.23**<br>(0.07)   |                   | 0.19*<br>(0.08)    |                   | 0.25**<br>(0.08)   |                  | 0.21*<br>(0.09)    |
| <i>Constant</i>                                  | -5.20**<br>(0.36) | -16.27**<br>(3.78) | -4.62**<br>(0.47) | -14.74**<br>(4.46) | -6.12**<br>(0.90) | -18.74**<br>(3.68) | -3.03**<br>(0.89) | -15.24**<br>(4.29) | -2.78**<br>(1.05) | -15.98**<br>(3.72) | 0.01<br>(1.36)   | -12.92**<br>(4.51) |
| <i>N</i>   | 1418              | 1389               | 376               | 372                | 1410              | 1382               | 373               | 369                | 1410              | 1382               | 373              | 369                |

Standard errors in parentheses; +  $p < 0.10$ , \*  $p < 0.05$ , \*\*  $p < 0.01$

**Table III.6 Family mental illness and participation in mutilation  
(alternative dependent variable)**

|  |  | Family history of mental illness |     | Proportion with family mental illness |
|--|--|----------------------------------|-----|---------------------------------------|
|  |  | No                               | Yes |                                       |
| Individual or unit participation in mutilation | No                                     | 1289                             | 43  | 3.3%                                  |
|  | Yes                                    | 68                               | 6   | 8.8%                                  |
|  | Proportion participating in mutilation | 5.3%                             | 14% |                                       |

**Table III.7 Prevalence of mutilation as a function of unit cohesion and reported decline in discipline (alternative operationalization)**

|   |     | “How close or tight were you with the people in your unit?” |                  |                   |                   |
|---|-----|---|------------------|-------------------|-------------------|
|   |     | “not at all” or “not very”                                  | “fairly”         | “very”            | “extremely”       |
| Respondent experienced “decreased emphasis in the field on military discipline and bearing” | No  | 3.3%<br>(1/30)  | 2.14%<br>(3/140) | 1.71%<br>(3/175)  | 2.06%<br>(2/97)   |
|   | Yes | 4.44%<br>(4/90)   | 1.95%<br>(6/307) | 2.88%<br>(10/347) | 8.93%<br>(20/224) |

**Table III.8 Replication of models in Figure 4.1 with alternative dependent variable**

|                              | All respondents<br>(1) | (2)                | Combat only<br>(3) | (4)               | All respondents<br>(5) | (6)                | Combat only<br>(7) | (8)               | All respondents<br>(9) | (10)               | Combat only<br>(11) | (12)              |
|------------------------------|------------------------|--------------------|--------------------|-------------------|------------------------|--------------------|--------------------|-------------------|------------------------|--------------------|---------------------|-------------------|
| <i>Domestic violence</i>     | 0.32**<br>(0.12)       | 0.21+<br>(0.12)    | 0.22+<br>(0.13)    | 0.19<br>(0.13)    |                        |                    |                    |                   |                        |                    |                     |                   |
| <i>Family mental illness</i> |                        |                    |                    |                   | 0.97*<br>(0.45)        | 1.17*<br>(0.49)    | 1.45**<br>(0.52)   | 1.69**<br>(0.57)  |                        |                    |                     |                   |
| <i>Parental imprisonment</i> |                        |                    |                    |                   |                        |                    |                    |                   | 0.59<br>(0.49)         | 0.46<br>(0.50)     | 0.63<br>(0.52)      | 0.82<br>(0.55)    |
| <i>Parental death</i>        |                        |                    |                    |                   |                        |                    |                    |                   |                        |                    |                     |                   |
| <i>Combat exposure</i>       |                        | 1.33**<br>(0.22)   |                    | 1.12**<br>(0.36)  |                        | 1.35**<br>(0.22)   |                    | 1.26**<br>(0.38)  |                        | 1.33**<br>(0.22)   |                     | 1.20**<br>(0.37)  |
| <i>Deployment duration</i>   |                        | 0.02<br>(0.03)     |                    | 0.01<br>(0.03)    |                        | 0.01<br>(0.03)     |                    | 0.01<br>(0.03)    |                        | 0.01<br>(0.03)     |                     | 0.02<br>(0.03)    |
| <i>Age</i>                   |                        | 0.13**<br>(0.04)   |                    | 0.07<br>(0.05)    |                        | 0.13**<br>(0.04)   |                    | 0.06<br>(0.05)    |                        | 0.13**<br>(0.04)   |                     | 0.07<br>(0.05)    |
| <i>Constant</i>              | -3.52**<br>(0.17)      | -12.17**<br>(2.25) | -2.31**<br>(0.20)  | -8.52**<br>(2.63) | -3.40**<br>(0.16)      | -12.16**<br>(2.23) | -2.30**<br>(0.19)  | -8.36**<br>(2.62) | -3.37**<br>(0.15)      | -12.25**<br>(2.25) | -2.24**<br>(0.18)   | -8.78**<br>(2.66) |
| <i>N</i>                     | 1402                   | 1373               | 369                | 365               | 1406                   | 1377               | 371                | 367               | 1404                   | 1375               | 372                 | 368               |

Standard errors in parentheses ; +  $p < 0.10$ , \*  $p < 0.05$ , \*\*  $p < 0.01$



Table III.8 Replication of models in Figure 4.1 with alternative dependent variable cont.

|                              | All respondents   |                    | Combat only       |                   | All respondents   |                    | Combat only       |                   |
|------------------------------|-------------------|--------------------|-------------------|-------------------|-------------------|--------------------|-------------------|-------------------|
|                              | (13)              | (14)               | (15)              | (16)              | (17)              | (18)               | (19)              | (20)              |
| <i>Domestic violence</i>     |                   |                    |                   |                   | 0.29*<br>(0.12)   | 0.18<br>(0.12)     | 0.19<br>(0.13)    | 0.16<br>(0.14)    |
| <i>Family mental illness</i> |                   |                    |                   |                   | 0.82+<br>(0.48)   | 1.07*<br>(0.52)    | 1.42*<br>(0.56)   | 1.73**<br>(0.62)  |
| <i>Parental imprisonment</i> |                   |                    |                   |                   | 0.30<br>(0.52)    | 0.22<br>(0.53)     | 0.18<br>(0.59)    | 0.44<br>(0.62)    |
| <i>Parental death</i>        | -0.04<br>(0.53)   | 0.03<br>(0.55)     | -1.35<br>(1.03)   | -1.38<br>(1.04)   | -0.36<br>(0.61)   | -0.43<br>(0.64)    | -1.50<br>(1.05)   | -1.81+<br>(1.10)  |
| <i>Combat exposure</i>       |                   | 1.34**<br>(0.22)   |                   | 1.18**<br>(0.36)  |                   | 1.36**<br>(0.23)   |                   | 1.34**<br>(0.39)  |
| <i>Deployment duration</i>   |                   | 0.03<br>(0.02)     |                   | 0.03<br>(0.03)    |                   | 0.02<br>(0.03)     |                   | 0.00<br>(0.03)    |
| <i>Age</i>                   |                   | 0.14**<br>(0.04)   |                   | 0.09+<br>(0.05)   |                   | 0.12**<br>(0.05)   |                   | 0.05<br>(0.05)    |
| <i>Constant</i>              | -3.30**<br>(0.15) | -12.90**<br>(2.23) | -2.08**<br>(0.17) | -9.51**<br>(2.63) | -3.56**<br>(0.18) | -12.08**<br>(2.25) | -2.34**<br>(0.21) | -8.29**<br>(2.68) |
| <i>N</i>                     | 1410              | 1381               | 375               | 371               | 1384              | 1355               | 365               | 361               |

Standard errors in parentheses ; +  $p < 0.10$ , \*  $p < 0.05$ , \*\*  $p < 0.01$

Table III.9 Replication of models in Figure 4.2 with alternative dependent variable

|                            | All respondents<br>(1) | All respondents<br>(2) | Combat only<br>(3) | Combat only<br>(4) | All respondents<br>(5) | All respondents<br>(6) | Combat only<br>(7) | Combat only<br>(8) | All respondents<br>(9) | All respondents<br>(10) | Combat only<br>(11) | Combat only<br>(12) |
|----------------------------|------------------------|------------------------|--------------------|--------------------|------------------------|------------------------|--------------------|--------------------|------------------------|-------------------------|---------------------|---------------------|
| <i>Southern white</i>      | 0.02<br>(0.37)         | 0.11<br>(0.39)         | 0.28<br>(0.42)     | 0.30<br>(0.44)     |                        |                        |                    |                    |                        |                         |                     |                     |
| <i>Black</i>               |                        |                        |                    |                    | 0.31<br>(0.33)         | -0.01<br>(0.35)        | -0.27<br>(0.40)    | -0.31<br>(0.41)    |                        |                         |                     |                     |
| <i>Rural</i>               |                        |                        |                    |                    |                        |                        |                    |                    | 0.10<br>(0.32)         | 0.24<br>(0.34)          | 0.20<br>(0.38)      | 0.35<br>(0.40)      |
| <i>Combat exposure</i>     |                        | 1.35**<br>(0.22)       |                    | 1.16**<br>(0.36)   |                        | 1.35**<br>(0.22)       |                    | 1.19**<br>(0.37)   |                        | 1.35**<br>(0.22)        |                     | 1.16**<br>(0.36)    |
| <i>Deployment duration</i> |                        | 0.03<br>(0.02)         |                    | 0.03<br>(0.03)     |                        | 0.03<br>(0.02)         |                    | 0.03<br>(0.03)     |                        | 0.03<br>(0.02)          |                     | 0.04<br>(0.03)      |
| <i>Age</i>                 |                        | 0.14**<br>(0.04)       |                    | 0.09+<br>(0.05)    |                        | 0.14**<br>(0.04)       |                    | 0.09+<br>(0.05)    |                        | 0.14**<br>(0.04)        |                     | 0.09+<br>(0.05)     |
| <i>Constant</i>            | -3.31**<br>(0.16)      | -12.94**<br>(2.23)     | -2.21**<br>(0.19)  | -9.70**<br>(2.60)  | -3.38**<br>(0.17)      | -12.92**<br>(2.23)     | -2.08**<br>(0.19)  | -9.67**<br>(2.61)  | -3.34**<br>(0.17)      | -13.01**<br>(2.23)      | -2.21**<br>(0.20)   | -9.93**<br>(2.62)   |
| <i>N</i>                   | 1420                   | 1391                   | 376                | 372                | 1413                   | 1384                   | 372                | 368                | 1418                   | 1389                    | 376                 | 372                 |

Standard errors in parentheses; +  $p < 0.10$ , \*  $p < 0.05$ , \*\*  $p < 0.01$

Table III.10 Replication of models in Figure 4.3 with alternative dependent variable

|  | All respondents   |                    | Combat only       |                   | All respondents   |                    | Combat only       |                   | All respondents   |                    | Combat only      |                   |
|--|-------------------|--------------------|-------------------|-------------------|-------------------|--------------------|-------------------|-------------------|-------------------|--------------------|------------------|-------------------|
|  | (1)               | (2)                | (3)               | (4)               | (5)               | (6)                | (7)               | (8)               | (9)               | (10)               | (11)             | (12)              |
| <i>Close friends killed</i>                  | 0.96**<br>(0.11)  | 0.60**<br>(0.14)   | 0.61**<br>(0.14)  | 0.44**<br>(0.15)  |                   |                    |                   |                   |                   |                    |                  |                   |
| <i>Unit cohesion</i>                         |                   |                    |                   |                   | 0.37*<br>(0.16)   | 0.22<br>(0.16)     | 0.12<br>(0.18)    | 0.04<br>(0.18)    | -0.20<br>(0.34)   | -0.37<br>(0.34)    | -0.51<br>(0.40)  | -0.62<br>(0.41)   |
| <i>Decline in discipline</i>                 |                   |                    |                   |                   | 0.74*<br>(0.37)   | 0.02<br>(0.39)     | -0.21<br>(0.45)   | -0.21<br>(0.46)   | -1.33<br>(1.12)   | -2.07+<br>(1.12)   | -2.38+<br>(1.27) | -2.46+<br>(1.31)  |
| <i>Unit cohesion X Decline in discipline</i> |                   |                    |                   |                   |                   |                    |                   |                   | 0.72+<br>(0.39)   | 0.73+<br>(0.39)    | 0.78+<br>(0.45)  | 0.80+<br>(0.46)   |
| <i>Combat exposure</i>                       |                   | 0.86**<br>(0.25)   |                   | 0.84*<br>(0.38)   |                   | 1.28**<br>(0.22)   |                   | 1.12**<br>(0.37)  |                   | 1.29**<br>(0.22)   |                  | 1.10**<br>(0.37)  |
| <i>Deployment duration</i>                   |                   | 0.03<br>(0.02)     |                   | 0.03<br>(0.03)    |                   | 0.03<br>(0.02)     |                   | 0.03<br>(0.03)    |                   | 0.03<br>(0.02)     |                  | 0.04<br>(0.03)    |
| <i>Age</i>                                   |                   | 0.11*<br>(0.05)    |                   | 0.07<br>(0.05)    |                   | 0.14**<br>(0.05)   |                   | 0.09+<br>(0.05)   |                   | 0.15**<br>(0.05)   |                  | 0.09+<br>(0.05)   |
| <i>Constant</i>                              | -4.35**<br>(0.24) | -11.22**<br>(2.27) | -3.15**<br>(0.33) | -8.83**<br>(2.67) | -4.95**<br>(0.60) | -13.46**<br>(2.28) | -2.35**<br>(0.66) | -9.53**<br>(2.67) | -3.33**<br>(0.94) | -12.00**<br>(2.36) | -0.63<br>(1.08)  | -8.01**<br>(2.78) |
| <i>N</i>                                     | 1418              | 1389               | 376               | 372               | 1410              | 1382               | 373               | 369               | 1410              | 1382               | 373              | 369               |

Standard errors in parentheses; +  $p < 0.10$ , \*  $p < 0.05$ , \*\*  $p < 0.01$

**Table III.11 Draftees and mutilation**

|                            | All respondents   |                    | Combat only       |                    |
|----------------------------|-------------------|--------------------|-------------------|--------------------|
|                            | (1)               | (2)                | (3)               | (4)                |
| <i>Draftees</i>            | -0.30<br>(0.50)   | -0.49<br>(0.52)    | -0.57<br>(0.52)   | -0.35<br>(0.55)    |
| <i>Combat exposure</i>     |                   | 1.12**<br>(0.28)   |                   | 1.01*<br>(0.47)    |
| <i>Deployment duration</i> |                   | 0.05+<br>(0.03)    |                   | 0.06*<br>(0.03)    |
| <i>Age</i>                 |                   | 0.23**<br>(0.07)   |                   | 0.18*<br>(0.08)    |
| <i>Constant</i>            | -3.91**<br>(0.22) | -17.39**<br>(3.54) | -2.66**<br>(0.26) | -14.63**<br>(4.18) |
| <i>N</i>                   | 1417              | 1388               | 376               | 372                |

Standard errors in parentheses; +  $p < 0.10$ , \*  $p < 0.05$ , \*\*  $p < 0.01$

## Appendix IV

### List of civil wars included in cross-national dataset

**Afghanistan:** Soviet-Mujahideen War 1978-1992  
**Afghanistan:** Civil war 1992-1996  
**Afghanistan:** Taliban gov't vs. UIFSA 1996-2001  
**Afghanistan:** US-led counterinsurgency 2001-  
**Algeria:** Islamists 1992-  
**Angola:** UNITA 1975-1991  
**Angola:** UNITA 1992-1994  
**Angola:** UNITA 1997-2002  
**Angola:** Cabinda 1994-1999  
**Azerbaijan:** Nagorno-Karabakh 1991-1994  
**Bangladesh:** Chittagong Hills 1974-1997  
**Bosnia:** Civil war 1992-1995  
**Burundi:** Massacres 1988-1988  
**Burundi:** Hutu insurgency 1991-  
**Cambodia:** post-Khmer Rouge war 1975-1991  
**Central African Republic:** Factional fighting 1996-1997  
**Chad:** Habré v. rebels 1982-1991  
**Chad:** Deby v. rebels: 1991-1997  
**Chad:** MDJT 2003-  
**Colombia:** FARC, ELN 1978-  
**Congo Brazzaville:** Lissouba v. opposition 1993-1997  
**Congo Brazzaville:** Cobras v. Ninjas 1998-1999  
**Congo-Zaire:** First Congo War 1996-1997  
**Congo-Zaire:** Second Congo War 1998-2001  
**Croatia:** Serbs 1992-1995

**Djibouti:** FRUD 1991-1994  
**Egypt:** Islamists 1994-1997  
**El Salvador:** FMLN 1979-1992  
**Ethiopia:** Eritrea independence war 1974-1991  
**Ethiopia:** Ogaden 1976-1988  
**Ethiopia:** Ideological/Tigrean 1978-1991  
**Georgia:** South Ossetia 1991-1992  
**Georgia:** Abkhazia 1992-1994  
**Guatemala:** Civil war 1978-1994  
**Guinea-Bissau:** Vieira v. Mane mutiny 1998-1999  
**Haiti:** Cedras v. Aristide 1991-1995  
**India:** Sikh insurgents 1984-1993  
**India:** Kashmir insurgents 1989-  
**India:** Naxalites 1989-  
**India:** Northeast insurgents 1990-  
**Indonesia:** East Timor 1975-1999  
**Indonesia:** Aceh I 1990-1991  
**Indonesia:** Aceh II 1999-2002  
**Iran:** Kurds 1979-1984  
**Iraq:** Kurds 1985-1996  
**Iraq:** Shiite uprising 1991-1993  
**Iraq:** US-led counterinsurgency 2003-2011  
**Ivory Coast:** Coup & civil war 2002-2005  
**Kenya:** Rift valley violence 1991-1993  
**Lebanon:** Civil war 1975-1991  
**Liberia:** Doe v. rebels 1989-1990  
**Liberia:** NPLF vs. ULIMO etc. 1992-1997  
**Liberia:** anti-Taylor rebellion 1999-2003

**Mali:** Tuareg insurgents 1990-1995  
**Moldova:** Transdnestrria 1991-1992  
**Morocco:** Polisario 1975-1991  
**Mozambique:** RENAMO 1976-1992  
**Myanmar:** CPB 1948-1988  
**Myanmar:** ethnic insurgents 1960-1995  
**Namibia:** SWAPO 1973-1989  
**Nepal:** Maoists 1996-2006  
**Nicaragua:** Contras 1981-1990  
**Nigeria:** Maitatsine rebellion 1980-1985  
**Papua New Guinea:** Bougainville conflict 1988-1998  
**Peru:** Sendero Luminoso 1980-1996  
**Philippines:** Moro insurgents 1971-  
**Philippines:** NPA 1972-1992  
**Russia:** First Chechen war 1994-1996  
**Russia:** Second Chechen war 1999-2009  
**Rwanda:** RPF war 1990-1994  
**Rwanda:** RPF & genocide 1994  
**Senegal:** Casamance conflict 1989-1999  
**Sierra Leone:** Civil war 1991-1996  
**Somalia:** anti-Barre insurgency 1988-1991  
**Somalia:** post-Barre war 1991-  
**Sri Lanka:** JVP II 1987-1989  
**Sri Lanka:** LTTE 1983-2002  
**Sri Lanka:** LTTE 2003-2009  
**Sudan:** Southern civil war 1983-2002  
**Sudan:** Darfur 2003-2011  
**Tajikistan:** UTO 1992-1997

**Thailand:** CPT 1966-1982

**Thailand:** Pattani insurgents 2004-

**Turkey:** PKK, 1984-1999

**Uganda:** NRA insurgency 1981-1987

**Uganda:** Acholiland insurgency 1990-1992

**Uganda:** LRA, West Nile, ADF 1995-2006

**Yemen:** South Yemen 1994

**Yemen PR:** Factional conflict 1986

**Yugoslavia:** Croatian 1991-1991

**Yugoslavia/Serbia:** Kosovo 1998-1999

**Zimbabwe:** Ndebele guerillas 1983-1987



## Appendix V

### Information on sources used to code extreme atrocity

In order to gather data on which conflict actors made recurrent use of extreme atrocity in my sample of civil wars, I consulted eight categories of sources:

1) US State Department reports: I used all the State Department Country Reports on Human Rights for countries and years in which groups included in my dataset were active between 1998 and 2019, as well as the State Department Patterns of Global Terrorism reports for 2000 to 2003 and the Country Reports on Terrorism from 2004 to 2019.

2) International human rights NGO reports: I used all annual and periodic reports by Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch concerning countries and years in which groups included in the my dataset were active; I also consulted reports by International Federation of Human Rights and African Rights.

3) Domestic human rights organizations: where available, I consulted reports by national human rights organizations. These included, for example, the Afghanistan Independent Human Rights Commission, the Informal Sector Service Centre (Nepal), the Karen Human Rights Group (Burma) and others.

5) Event datasets: these included the Global Terrorism Dataset (GTD) (LaFree and Dugan, 2007), the Armed Conflict Location Event Dataset (ACLED) (Raleigh et al. 2010), the Political Instability Task Force Worldwide Atrocity Dataset (Schrodt and Ulfelder, 2016), the RAND Database of Worldwide Terrorism Incidents, and the South Asia Terrorism Portal. I also made some use of conflict-specific datasets including Iraq Body Count and Algeria Watch's chronology of massacres during the Algerian civil war.

6) United Nations reports: I consulted UN reports, including reports from the UN Office of

the High Commissioner for Human Rights, groups of experts advising the UN Security Council, reports of special rapporteurs to the Secretary General, and UN peacekeeping and observer missions (e.g. the United Nations Assistance Mission in Afghanistan, the United Nations Multidimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission in Mali, etc.)

7) international tribunals and post-conflict truth and reconciliation commission reports: I consulted the indictments and judgements of the International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia, the International Criminal Tribunal for Rwanda, and the International Criminal Court, and the reports of TRCs from Liberia, Sierra Leone, and Guatemala.

8) Press reports: for each conflict I searched the Factiva database as well as the French-language Eureka database using a series of keywords indicating acts of extreme atrocity

9) Secondary sources: I sought to read widely in the secondary literature on the conflicts included in my dataset.

**Table V.1 Summary statistics for Chapter 5 (conflict-level)**

| Variable                           | N  | Mean | SD   | Min   | Max   |
|------------------------------------|----|------|------|-------|-------|
| <i>Government extreme atrocity</i> | 92 | 0.42 | 0.50 | 0     | 1     |
| <i>Irregular war</i>               | 92 | 0.52 | 0.50 | 0     | 1     |
| <i>SNC war</i>                     | 92 | 0.15 | 0.36 | 0     | 1     |
| <i>Conscription</i>                | 92 | 0.69 | 0.46 | 0     | 1     |
| <i>Rough terrain (logged)</i>      | 92 | 2.23 | 1.75 | -2.30 | 4.40  |
| <i>Democracy</i>                   | 92 | 0.17 | 0.38 | 0     | 1     |
| <i>Ethnic war</i>                  | 92 | 0.73 | 0.45 | 0     | 1     |
| <i>Rebel extreme atrocity</i>      | 92 | 0.39 | 0.49 | 0     | 1     |
| <i>Gov't mass killing</i>          | 92 | 0.39 | 0.49 | 0     | 1     |
| <i>GDP per capita (logged)</i>     | 92 | 7.61 | 1.02 | 5.58  | 10.59 |

**Table V.2 Summary statistics for Chapter 5 (rebel group-level)**

| Variable                               | N   | Mean | SD   | Min  | Max   |
|--|-----|------|------|------|-------|
| <i>Rebel extreme atrocity</i>          | 155 | 0.36 | 0.48 | 0    | 1     |
| <i>Irregular war</i>                   | 155 | 0.52 | 0.50 | 0    | 1     |
| <i>Relative rebel strength</i>         | 155 | 0.86 | 0.77 | 0    | 3     |
| <i>Transnational non-state support</i> | 147 | 0.20 | 0.40 | 0    | 1     |
| <i>Jihadists</i>                       | 155 | 0.09 | 0.29 | 0    | 1     |
| <i>Marxist</i>                         | 155 | 0.15 | 0.36 | 0    | 1     |
| <i>Ethnic war</i>                      | 155 | 0.81 | 0.40 | 0    | 1     |
| <i>Incumbent extreme atrocity</i>      | 155 | 0.52 | 0.50 | 0    | 1     |
| <i>Rebel mass killing</i>              | 155 | 0.13 | 0.34 | 0    | 1     |
| <i>GDP per capita (logged)</i>         | 155 | 7.52 | 1.03 | 5.58 | 10.59 |