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Militias, States, and the Long Shadows of Violence

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Review of: Uğur Ümit Üngör, *Paramilitarism: Mass Violence in the Shadow of the State* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2020). 224 pages. ISBN 978-0-198-82524-1.

A century ago Max Weber offered his seminal definition of the state as an entity that successfully claims the monopoly over the legitimate use of violence within a given territory. Today, social science and legal scholarship remain tightly tethered to this conceptualization. But it is increasingly evident that this definition needs to be treated as a Platonic ideal, not as an empirical description. Weber himself likely knew that his efforts to define statehood were more abstract than real. He was, after all, writing in a country wrecked by both left and right-wing militia violence in the wake of the First World War. The new German Republic, lacking the military means to suppress the violence, instead sought tactical alliances with various armed factions in order to maintain stability. Michael Mann notes that most actual, existing states have not sought the monopoly over the use of violence, and many have not even claimed it.[1] Instead, they act as oligopolists of force, colluding and competing with various non-state entity.

Uğur Ümit Üngör's theoretically and methodologically ambitious new book pushes us to consider the role of armed non-state militias in the conduct of mass violence. So-called pro-government militias, from the *autodefensas* of Colombia to the *janjaweed* in Sudan or the *interahamwe* in Rwanda, have been implicated in some of the worst atrocities of recent decades. While each case bears significant differences, the similarities are also striking. Killers were generally young, male, and underemployed. They were certainly not trained, equipped, and organized by the central government as professional soldiers. In another, less menacing, circumstance, they might be dismissed as mere thugs or ruffians. Yet in each instance, they enjoyed support from some distant powers-that-be, senior state officials that encouraged and guided their assaults. Moreover, they managed to inflict violence at a scale and intensity which many considered impossible without a strongly bureaucratized state body, like Nazi Germany or Stalinist Russia.

1 Michael Mann, *Sources of Social Power*, 3 vols (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1986), I, 6.

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A number of scholars have approached the proliferation of militias through the lens of rational choice theory, often using cross national datasets that tally the incidences of militias over the last two or three decades.[2] Most explanations derived from principal-agent (P-A) theory, whereby governments, as principals, effectively commission militias, as agents, to carry out attacks. Militia appear primarily under two conditions in this account. The first is when governments lack the means to implement the violence themselves, often in conditions of counterinsurgency where government troops may be unable to enter and patrol certain spaces or communities. The second is when governments wish to maintain a measure of plausible deniability and avoid censure, especially from international bodies. Both scenarios are prone to abuse, as governments can overcommit to violence when they are unafraid of international sanction, or militias themselves may defy instructions and enact more flagrant violence.

Üngör is not content with such narrow temporal and theoretical confines, though. His book seeks a macro-historical account of how states and militias come to collaborate and the impact of this collaboration on mass violence. The agenda, then, is less to account for a specific militia, but to explain a broader pattern of paramilitarism. Üngör defines paramilitarism as 'a system in which a state has a relationship with irregular armed groups that carry out violence.'[3] These relationships are extremely variegated. At one extreme, some militias emerge organically as village or neighborhood self-defense forces that are eventually co-opted within the state. At the other extreme, some paramilitary forces emerge from the top-down as armed wings of ruling parties, networks of off-duty cops, or military veterans. Üngör, somewhat problematically, also includes in his definition special forces, gendarmerie, and other armed groups that are specifically within the state's legal confines, although they are afforded special status formally and informally. Üngör stresses that militias operate in various configurations and assemblages relative to the state. States and paramilitaries are, to use a term Üngör borrows from Jasmin Hristov, interpenetrating. To consider militias is, necessarily, to examine the path-dependent and long-duration trajectories of state formation. Studying paramilitarism

2 Sabine C. Carey and Neil J. Mitchell, 'Progovernment Militias', *Annual Review of Political Science*, 20 (2017), 127–147.

3 Ugur Ümit Üngör, *Paramilitarism: Mass Violence in the Shadow of the State* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2020), p. 6.

is thus the route to engaging the puzzle of why so many states mismatch Weber's standard.

Chapter 2 offers a global exploration of paramilitarism 'in the long twentieth century.'[4] Üngör describes how Cold War geopolitics fostered paramilitarism. US and Soviet military trainers each encouraged their Third World client states to recruit non-state actors as auxiliary forces and helped shield regimes from human rights scrutiny. Paramilitarism in Latin America, Turkey, and Africa and Asia were not in fact isolated and independent, but part of a global isomorphism. This is an important corrective to the functionalist assumptions latent in P-A theories. Paramilitarism on a global scale is not driven by functional or strategic logic alone, but also by imitation and diffusion. Paramilitarism is another symptom of a hierarchical global system in which lesser states are dependent not just economically, but also in terms of security.

Chapter 3 delves into the relationship between militias, states, and organized crime. Here, the book makes its most explicit and direct linkages to historical sociological theory, particularly Eric Hobsbawm's notion of the social bandit. Üngör discusses how many forms of paramilitarism evolved historically in zones where states (or empires) could offer little services or direct protection. Rural, underdeveloped, and marginal or frontier areas were the soil of paramilitarism. Here it was local notables, self-styled Robin Hoods, who stood up to be the protector of their community, often in the name of a distant sovereign. Examining cases like Iran's chivalrous *lutis* (heroes of the wrestling house) and the Mafia of Sicily, Üngör takes seriously the possibility that these groups emerge as a form of primitive self-protection, at least initially. The inexorable rural-urban migration and boom of global shantytowns transplanted these functions into new, urban terrain. But he also notes the cost of such repertoires of violence. These self-professed champions of local community readily devolved into petty despots and covert collaborators with the state.

Chapters 4 and 5 address the contemporary issue of paramilitarism more directly, examining the organization and violent impact of militias. The view shifts from the bottom-up perspective of the villager considering how to preserve himself and his family to the government official, looking down to calculate how to protect himself and his regime from his own people. Here, Üngör traverses a wide range of historical and contemporary cases of paramilitarism. He is able to cite – and often quote from – the leaders of Colombian *autodefensas*, Soviet

4 Üngör, p. 21.

commissars, and Yugoslav warlords, to illustrate the kinds of dirty deals involved in the state's co-optation of the militia impulse. In this respect, Üngör does not so much dispute the P-A version of paramilitarism as much as amplify it. One does not need deductive game theoretical models to explain the calculus of state leaders devolving coercive power to militias. Often the leaders themselves betray their thinking more or less openly.

Among the most remarkable features of this book is its broad use of sourcing, including first-hand witness account, newspapers and NGOs reports, interviews, and social media. While the book is global in scope, it is anchored in a particularly deep historical knowledge of the late Ottoman empire and its successor states, namely Turkey, Syria, and Iraq. This is hardly surprising, considering Üngör's earlier work on mass violence amidst the splintering of the Ottoman empire. Üngör's in-depth analysis of the *shabiha* (apparitions) militia that appeared during the Syrian civil war is especially insightful and likely fodder for a sequel. Standing on its own, however, *Paramilitarism: Mass Violence in the Shadow of the State* is already an important addition to the literature on mass violence and armed non-state actors.

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