



Organized Violence Between War and Peace

Danielle Gilbert

To cite this article: Danielle Gilbert (2017) Organized Violence Between War and Peace, *Terrorism and Political Violence*, 29:2, 377-383, DOI: [10.1080/09546553.2016.1277663](https://doi.org/10.1080/09546553.2016.1277663)

To link to this article: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/09546553.2016.1277663>



Published online: 16 Feb 2017.



Submit your article to this journal [↗](#)



Article views: 13



View related articles [↗](#)



View Crossmark data [↗](#)

Review Article

Organized Violence Between War and Peace

Sarah Zukerman Daly. *Organized Violence after Civil War: The Geography of Recruitment in Latin America*. New York: Cambridge University Press, 2016. 344 pp., paperback \$99.99. ISBN: 978-1-107-12758-6.

Paul Rexton Kan. *Cartels at War: Mexico's Drug-Fueled Violence and the Threat to U.S. National Security*. Washington, DC: Potomac Books, 2012. 208 pp., hardcover \$32.95. ISBN: 978-1-59797-707-4.

Reviewed by **Danielle Gilbert**
George Washington University
Washington, DC, USA

Why do violent actors silence their guns? How should states combat the chaos produced by violent organizations? And what is the role of organizational structure in transforming group behavior? These are the questions posed by two new books on violent, non-state groups in Latin America. In *Cartels at War* and *Organized Violence after Civil War*, Paul Rexton Kan and Sarah Zukerman Daly explore the state of violence in Mexico and Colombia, respectively. Unlike works on terrorism and insurgency, so often the focus of academic inquiry, these works instead focus on hostilities perpetrated by a different set of actors: cartels and paramilitaries. These violent organizations seek territory, coercive control, and vast financial gain, yet espouse no aim of state capture, ideological change, or political revolution. Without such aims, groups at the heart of these works receive less scholarly attention; yet Kan and Daly forcefully demonstrate the empirical and policy ramifications of examining these organizations and their behavior. In this essay, I review the topics and contributions of *Cartels at War* and *Organized Violence after Civil War*. I then elaborate on several critical insights that emerge from these two works, ripe for discussion in the field of political violence.

Cartels at War: Mexico's Drug-Fueled Violence and the Threat to U.S. National Security

Kan's book, released in 2012, provides an overview of the Mexican cartel war that has simmered south of the border for decades and exploded in violence since 2006. Writing for general readers, Kan provides background on the actors, geography, causes, and consequences of cartel violence. The book features a foreword by Gen. Barry R. McCaffrey, USA (Ret.), the former Director of U.S. National Drug Policy, and aims to evaluate how the U.S. and Mexico can work together to curb the scourge

of killings, kidnappings, and terror related to the drug trade. Kan's work is admirable for its clear understanding and portrayal of the major players, profiling each cartel's genesis, structure, leadership, turf, ideology, and evolution over time. For lay and policy readers, this work is an accessible overview of individuals and intergroup dynamics, as well as the factors that Kan identifies as the causes of war: ratification of NAFTA, the end of a century of PRI one-party rule, and direct confrontation by the assurgent PAN, particularly in the wake of President Calderon's "razor-thin" electoral victory in 2006 (p. 5).

There are two issues that undermine Kan's analysis. First, he draws on the distinction made by Graham Turbiville between "low-intensity conflict" and "high-intensity crime," terms contrasting traditional insurgency with cartel violence, to argue that Mexico must be seen as the latter. While his careful dissection and dismissal of existing terms like "narco-terrorism" and "narco-insurgency" serve as a well-reasoned critique of dominant frames, the high- vs. low-intensity foil is at best a distinction without a difference, and at worst, misleading. In Colombia, the source of many of Kan's comparisons, the violence is hardly "low-intensity," as more than 220,000 people have been killed and 4.7 million displaced as a direct result of the war.¹ Moreover, the presence of violent actors beyond the traditional rebel groups are a key feature of the Colombian conflict—from the Medellín and Cali drug cartels, to the thirty-seven paramilitary organizations that entered the conflict in varying configurations against the rebels, cartels, and the state. Kan's reliance on a handy heuristic weakens the important and valid distinction he wishes to make about violent entrepreneurs without ambitions of state capture; its repetition throughout the book did not serve his argument.

The second puzzling element of Kan's work is the chapter devoted to what he deems the six possible outcomes of the violence in Mexico. Rather than a prediction of where the state of violence is headed, "The Harbingers" is an exercise in envisioning the range of alternative directions in which the conflict may go. This creative approach could have been bolstered with a list of guideposts we would recognize on the way to each outcome and a list of specific prescriptions for dealing with each in turn. Instead, he calls for the difficult-to-imagine implementation of "high intensity law enforcement" (p. 145) and describes three possible approaches to curbing the violence: the "mosaic countercartel strategy," which targets all cartels simultaneously, if in different ways; the "heartland strategy," which aims to mitigate violence first in the most deadly districts; and the "Zeta first" strategy, modeled loosely on Colombia's targeting of Pablo Escobar's Medellín cartel, to focus on dismantling the largest source of violence first. None of these strategies prepare for what has occurred since the book's publication: as the Sinaloa cartel was systematically weakened, an assurgent Jalisco New Generation Cartel (CJNG) has vied for territory and started a new blood feud with the Guzmán clan. Like nature, violence abhors a vacuum. Ultimately, this chapter of "may" and "could" falls short on explanation or prediction.

Organized Violence after Civil War: The Geography of Recruitment in Latin America

Daly provides an impressive and important work of political science in *Organized Violence after Civil War*. Drawn like so many researchers to Colombia's fascinating field laboratory with its multiplicity of violent actors (the state, left-wing rebel

organizations, drug cartels, and paramilitary groups), Daly began her decade-long investigation into the heretofore unexplored variation in paramilitary forces: why do some groups “silence” their guns, while others return to killing? Specifically, why did some paramilitaries demobilize and remain non-violent after signing peace agreements with the Uribe government, while others remobilized and resumed violence? The study of wars’ end is critical to academics and policymakers alike, and Daly breathes new life into this endeavor in important ways. First, she focuses on a period often missed by studies of war—the violence that occurs after the formal end of hostilities, but that which falls short of quantitative minima for coding a new round of conflict. Second, she breaks away from the predominant approach of studying peace at the country level to examine the significant variation *within* the Colombian case. Through her remarkable multi-method research, which includes large-n regression, analysis of eleven surveys (six conducted by the author), and hundreds of interviews with former paramilitaries, local experts, and psychologists, Daly makes a careful and compelling case that the geography of group recruitment is central in shaping the paramilitaries’ post-war trajectories. Her theory builds on the bargaining model of international war, which posits that information asymmetries may lead to failure in renegotiation of peace terms. Daly, however, extends this to information problems within domestic groups in intrastate conflict. She argues that groups that recruit and deploy locally will retain tight networks, checks, and feedback about group cohesion after demobilization, such that leaders will have an accurate sense of their relative capabilities after conflict. Groups that recruit and deploy non-locally, on the other hand, are far more likely to scatter after the cessation of hostilities. Officers retain a messy or weak sense of their subordinates’ willingness to remobilize, and their optimistic appraisal, pegged to their strength at the time of demobilization, will lead them to overestimate their capabilities. When challenged, non-local paramilitaries are unable to reliably commit to peace terms, and thus remobilize weakly, generating a new wave of violence after the war. Daly demonstrates how the configurations of groups’ recruitment patterns within a given territory strongly predict post-peace violence: highest where local and non-local groups encounter one another; intermediate where all non-local groups remobilize; and the lowest recurrence of violence, maintaining peace, where only local groups encounter the state. In doing so, her work problematizes established predictors of violence, especially the country-level measurements of rough or mountainous terrain² and the relationship of resource wealth to violence and recruitment.³ Daly demonstrates no meaningful difference among Colombia’s varying terrain, or in the motivations or resources of groups with divergent behavior.

Nevertheless, several questions remain from Daly’s work. First, how representative are paramilitaries among the panoply of violent organizations that may follow this logic? While her regressions control for rebel and cartel presence in Colombian municipalities, they are not dynamic actors in her model of the *bloques*, so we may wonder if this explanation likewise applies to their recruitment patterns. Second, such an argument may lend itself to future network analysis. Daly masters multiple research tools; given the centrality of networks to the argument, it may be even more illuminating to see this phenomenon mapped in future work. Third, the sample size is necessarily small. Though she takes some measurements at the individual fighter level and records violent incidents by municipality, the bulk of the analysis is at the group level (37 paramilitary organizations), or at their combined regional (*bloque*) level. These latter configurations

cordon paramilitary groups into their all local, all non-local, or mixed variants, and Daly never emphasizes how many configurations emerge to compare. In an effort to apply her theory to other cases, Daly investigates similar cases in Nicaragua, Guatemala, Peru, Uganda, Indonesia, Sierra Leone, Mozambique, and Angola, though compiling the micro-level data she acquired for Colombia is impossible for one researcher in a cross-national study. In future work, it would be helpful to see this logic extended to a larger group of cases, by scholars of different regions. Ultimately, this work is a vital and engaging read for students and scholars of civil war, Colombia, and the behavior of violent organizations. Daly's vigorous, original research, clever application of theory, and innovative empirical insights represent a truly significant contribution to the field of political science and the study of intrastate conflict.

Support for Former Findings

There are several well-established social science concepts that find significant support in Kan's and Daly's books. First of all, decapitation of group leaders causes an increase, not a decrease, in violence, through competition for leadership, failure of command and control, and proliferation of splinter groups. For Daly, this is explicit: when the commander of Bloque Córdoba abdicated his leadership position and entered legal politics, the balance among local groups was disturbed and became violent (p. 207). Though Kan is reluctant to acknowledge the devastating and well-documented results of cartel decapitation by the PAN,⁴ he does note that a "kingpin" strategy can create "increased succession issues" (p. 28), which has led to the dramatic escalation of deaths in Mexico over the last decade. Ironically, he writes, "violence might even be seen as a sign of government success" (p. 105). Considering recent actions by the CJNG, this certainly depends on what we deem the measure of success to be.

Second, the books lend detailed empirical support for theories of violence related to territorial competition and loyalty among non-combatant populations.⁵ From Kan's attention to "geocriminality" and Daly's primacy on the geography of recruitment, these works support a highly specific politics of place for the violent non-state actors of Latin America. This has far less to do with access to resources or land in and of itself, but for the land's human, social geography: violence is most likely where groups overlap and contest turf, and the local civilian population is most often the collateral damage. In one particularly illuminating example, Daly writes of a roadblock set up by Catatumbo paramilitaries, disguised as FARC rebels. Civilians stuck at the roadblock were called on to collaborate with these "FARC" soldiers, or condemn the *paras*, and only those who opted to protect their local Catatumbo forces escaped the scene alive (p. 176).

Third, both works highlight the transitory and temporary nature of alliances. International relations literature has long taken an interest in the nature of alliances, and under what conditions they can be expected to hold.⁶ In both of these works, cooperation or neutrality in one period does not seem to condition restraint in subsequent periods. Daly demonstrates that past alliances, neutrality, or competition between groups was not a better predictor of post-war violence than the configuration of recruitment (p. 118); Kan traces the shifting movements and rivalries of the Sinaloa, Tijuana, Gulf, and Zeta cartels as they cooperate, compete, and kill.

Emerging Insights in the Study of Political Violence

Beyond their support—both explicit and implicit—for well-established arguments, there are four important ways in which these two books speak to each other, providing emerging insight into violence, power, and group behavior; each of these topics deserves more scholarly attention. First, these works provide critical insight into violent non-state groups beyond those that typically capture our attention and analysis. Though foundational ideas of social science, from Tilly's "protection racket"⁷ to Olson's "stationary bandit,"⁸ analogize political power to criminal behavior, violence and crime have long been treated as separate analytical categories, with little to say to one another. With some notable exceptions,⁹ focus on group type has siloed research behind disciplinary boundaries: insurgent and terrorist organizations to political science, profit-seeking groups to sociology and economics. One significant downside of this specialization has been a dearth of research on the groups that blur the boundaries, with goals and behavior that confound our assumptions. A focus on cartels and paramilitaries stretches our disciplinary confines to an extremely productive end. These organizations, obvious fodder for an interdisciplinary approach to political violence, may not be seen as adequately criminal or political for traditional departmental attention. Yet an engaged focus on these actors not only expands our understanding of these phenomena, or provides novel insight on regions of particular interest, but may also lend a critical lens to broad, fundamental questions of human behavior. We must continue exploring how these groups and categories speak to, and draw on, one another, particularly as definitions and realities on the ground continue to challenge the foundational assumptions of our fields.

One such fundamental challenge, shared by Kan's and Daly's works, urges a new understanding of the "monopoly on the legitimate use of force."¹⁰ While neither Mexico nor Colombia approaches the qualities of a failed state, there are obvious compromises on the control of power and force over their territorial boundaries. From the current "zones of contested authority" (p. 19) that characterize the drug war to the hypothesized "Pax Narcotica" (p. 120), Kan takes for granted that the current situation as well as its solution leaves the Mexican state short of full control, ceding land to actors more intent on "turf" than sovereignty. Likewise, Daly notes that this empirical reality adds to new theorizing of this age-old question: "It deepens our understanding of governance by 'incomplete' states where sovereignty is fragmented.... It joins an emerging literature that does not presume that state formation constitutes a natural progression toward a monopoly over the means of coercion, arguing instead that the lack of such a monopoly may also constitute an equilibrium, one that serves the interests of certain stakeholders" (p. 7). This literature recognizes an important and growing reality and a fertile source for new concepts and analysis of such sub-optimal equilibria, presently visible throughout the world. Research on these zones and the actors who control them breaks away from a teleological path toward "legitimacy" and instead illuminates the multiplicity of realities on contested ground.

Relatedly, Kan and Daly offer a window into making policy choices that seek to curb violence, without restoring state monopolies. This is an important innovation at both the strategic and tactical levels. At the strategic level, this requires clarifying the goal of demobilization. In both the Mexican and Colombian cases, the state appears willing to allow the perpetuation of illicit activities—drug flows, money laundering, extortion, and other forms of coercive control—in exchange for the cessation of

violence. Such policy prescriptions refuse to let the perfect be the enemy of the good. In each of Kan's three proposals, picking some favorites among the cartels allows illicit drug trafficking to continue, while tackling directly the proliferation of violence spurred by competition and the proclivities of some cartels in particular. Daly, likewise, is emphatic in stressing that the "silencing" of paramilitaries' guns does not mean the end of unsavory or undesirable behavior: "[Demilitarization] resembles 'negative peace,' an absence of large-scale organized violence, but it does not mean an end to structural violence—terror, extortion, and rampant criminality" (p. 170). She is also clear that "there may exist potential dangers and unanticipated negative side effects of an approach that seeks to break up all organizations and networks uniformly," as this is likely to spark shifts in power and lead to further violence (p. 9). The authors both identify positive consequences in the control provided by non-state organizations, especially in conditions where state power is weak, corrupt, or incomplete.

Unfortunately, there is no clear consensus on how—even between these two works—how the singular peace in Medellín was achieved. In fact, Kan and Daly have divergent interpretations of the "Miracle of Medellín," illuminating an observational equivalence that may confound policymakers on how to reduce the most prolific violence. For Kan, Medellín recommends a kingpin strategy, targeting the leadership of the most violent organization—an Escobar—to drive down killing. For Daly, the retention of locally recruited paramilitary forces in a balance of power after the war provides the peaceful infrastructure of a recovering city. This highlights an intellectually important and politically consequential debate: is the "Miracle of Medellín" owe to targeting the most violent actors, leaving the others in place, or some combination of the two?

Not only do these works challenge a uniform approach to all violent organizations, but they also pose a challenge to the focus on blocking financial flows as a key tool to disrupting violent group behavior. A primary focus on curbing violence—rather than organizational function—would mark a significant departure from the attention to financial sanctions against non-state actors that characterizes current anti-terror policy. Kan is explicit: "No insurgent or terrorist group . . . has ever been dismantled by rolling up its financial networks. Insurgent and terrorist groups can support their armed struggles in a number of ways," including sponsorship by sympathetic states, organizations, or other armed groups (p. 9). He is less critical of financial sanctions' ability to derail profit-seeking organizations; nevertheless, this interpretation undermines both the goal and the efficacy of a finances first approach. Either way, these works are incumbent on the policy community to make difficult decisions, and may very well encourage the tacit approval of illicit networks, so long as they maintain a cap on violent activity.

Last, these works uncover downstream consequences of formal military training on non-state actors' capabilities: the groups with formal military training prove the most deadly. Among the Mexican cartels, the Zetas' military training, access to military-grade arsenals of weapons, and genesis as a gang for the Gulf cartel have forged what is by far the most violent organization. Among non-local Colombian paramilitaries, links to and recruitment by former military colleagues serve as the basis for growth. While significant work on military coup proofing has investigated how leaders mitigate the risk posed by official armed actors, less work has focused on the threat those actors may pose after they are de-commissioned. At the same time, studies have demonstrated the positive side of military experience, as military

ethos and experience has served as a discipline and creativity boon to the U.S. and Israel.¹¹ The dark side of militarization warrants further investigation.¹² Understanding the negative trajectory of military training may have significant implications for career incentives within the military, retention, and veteran resources.

Kan and Daly have written important works that urge consideration of and investigation into non-traditional violent actors in Latin America. By pushing the boundaries of terror and crime, territorial ambitions, and organizational motivations, these books urge future research on the violence that transpires between war and peace.

Notes

1. Sarah Zukerman Daly, *Organized Violence after Civil War: The Geography of Recruitment in Latin America* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2016), 1.

2. Most notably, James D. Fearon and David Laitin, "Ethnicity, Insurgency, and Civil War," *American Political Science Review* 97, no. 1 (2003): 75–90.

3. See Jeremy Weinstein, *Inside Rebellion: The Politics of Insurgent Violence* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2007) and Elisabeth Jean Wood, *Insurgent Collective Action and Civil War in El Salvador* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2003) on "consumer" and "investor" recruit-types.

4. See, for example, Melissa Dell, "Trafficking Networks and the Mexican Drug War," *The American Economic Review* 105, no. 6 (2015): 1738–79.

5. Stathis N. Kalyvas, *The Logic of Violence in Civil War* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2006).

6. Bruce Bueno de Mesquita and J. David Singer, "Alliances, Capabilities, and War: A Review and Synthesis," *Political Science Annual: An International Review* 4 (1973): 237–80.

7. Charles Tilly, "War Making and State Making as Organized Crime," *Violence: A Reader* (1985).

8. Mancur Olson, "Dictatorship, Democracy, and Development," *American Political Science Review* 87, no. 03 (1993): 567–76.

9. See special edition of *Journal of Conflict Resolution*, "Drug Violence in Mexico," David Shirk and Joel Wallman, eds.; David Shirk and Joel Wallman, "Understanding Mexico's Drug Violence," *Journal of Conflict Resolution* 59, no. 8 (2015, December): 1348–76; Stathis Kalyvas, "How Civil Wars Help Explain Organized Crime—and How They Do Not," *Journal of Conflict Resolution* 59, no. 8 (2015, December): 1517–40; Paul Collier, "Rebellion as a Quasi-criminal Activity," *Journal of Conflict Resolution* 44, no. 6 (2000): 839–53.

10. Max Weber, "Politics as a Vocation," *From Max Weber: Essays in Sociology*, edited by H. H. Gerth and C. Wright Mills, 77–78. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1948).

11. See, for example, Dan Senor and Saul Singer, *Start-up Nation: The Story of Israel's Economic Miracle* (Toronto: McClelland & Stewart, 2009).

12. But see work by Horowitz and Stam, for example, Michael C. Horowitz and Allan C. Stam, "How Prior Military Experience Influences the Future Militarized Behavior of Leaders," *International Organization* 68, no. 03 (2014): 527–59.