Critical Dialogue

Violent Resistance: Militia Formation and Civil War in Mozambique. By Corinna Jentzsch. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2022. 300p. $99.99 cloth.
doi:10.1017/S1537592722003693

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In the late 1980s, after a decade of civil war, civilians in Mozambique had had enough. Yet their choice of resistance to the enduring violence took a unique form. Manuel Antonío, a traditional healer claiming to be in possession of a vaccine that turned enemies' bullets into water, organized civilians into a new militia called *Naparama.* The militia received little to no support from either the state or foreign actors. Rather, it was initiated and sustained by local civilians exasperated after years of predatory violence.

Naparama fighters eschewed the use of guns in favor of *armas brancas*: spears, arrows, machetes, or knives. They advanced on rebel forces marching openly in a line, singing songs as they proceeded into combat. The Renamo rebels were so shocked by these tactics that they sometimes fled before engaging in combat, perhaps taking Naparama's brazenness as evidence that the rumors of their supernatural powers must be true (pp. 80-81).

Why did Naparama emerge *when* it did within Mozambique's lengthy civil war? Why did it spread *where* it did across Zambezia and Nampula provinces? And *how* did it recruit civilians to engage in such daring and dangerous action?

These are the questions taken up by Corinna Jentzsch in *Violent Resistance: Militia Formation and Civil War in Mozambique.* The book conceptualizes Naparama as an example of a broader phenomenon of "community-initiated militias" in the context of civil war. These militias are distinct from other armed combatants in that they emerge specifically as "countermovements" against insurgents (p. 2) and are formed by members of the community, not by the state. Having identified this unique type of armed actor, Jentzsch highlights three factors that are crucial to understanding their emergence and growth: patterns of territorial contestation, the unity of local elites, and the resonance of militia repertoires with local traditions.

The book takes aim at a common oversimplification in which civil wars are seen as dyadic, involving only rebels and regime. It advances a research agenda on "third actors" that have too often been overlooked in the study of armed conflict. When scholars do examine militias, they frequently emphasize the influence of the state or of foreign sponsors. *Violent Resistance* offers an important corrective here, showing how militia formation can be a grassroots process by civilians seeking to protect themselves in the midst of civil war. In this way, the book also makes a contribution to an emerging literature on civilian agency in war. But while prior studies have largely focused on nonviolent strategies, this book shows how civilians can take up arms and form their own militia for protection.

The first two chapters follow a standard pattern of introduction and theory. They introduce the concept of citizen-initiated militias, the puzzle of their origins and trajectories, the key explanatory variables, and a qualitative research design that leverages controlled comparison and process-tracing within Mozambique's civil war.

Chapter 3 marks a significant departure, as the author steps back to reflect on the challenges of fieldwork in post-conflict settings. In it, we learn that while the civil war had ended, Jentszch's research was conducted amidst ongoing tensions as former Naparama members lobbied for demobilization benefits. In fact, days after her first series of interviews in one village, four villagers were arrested, an event the village secretary attributes to her presence (p. 31). The chapter offers an in-depth discussion of both the ethical dilemmas of the research, as well as the methodological challenges that come from interview subjects using the research process to advance personal agendas. Jentzsch concludes that "what communities ask for is not that researchers stay away from them, but that they are aware of the political nature of their work" (p. 43). While a wave of recent articles and books have called for conflict scholars to engage in greater reflexivity, far fewer works have actually put this into practice, and when they do, it is often consigned to an appendix. Jentzsch's engagement with these difficult questions is substantial and placed prominently in the book. The chapter stands well on its own and is a must-read for all scholars engaging in conflict-related field research.

After an overview of Mozambique's civil war in Chapter 4, Chapters 5–7 sequentially address the three main questions of the book: when, where, and how the Naparama militia emerged and spread. Chapter 5 argues that it

was a military stalemate that made the emergence of Naparama possible. Specifically, it was a stalemate that involved contested territorial control with high levels of violence as each side's forces advanced and retreated. The resulting brutality inflicted on civilians created an impetus for them to take up arms on their own, while the inability of the state to maintain territorial control on its own made it willing to accept the arrival of a new armed force.

Chapter 6 traces the spread of Naparama, arguing that diffusion of the group occurred through processes of learning and migration between districts with common ethnic, ideological, cultural, and historic bonds (p. 113). Crucially, it argues that local elites must be unified in order to build trust in the militia and prevent its co-optation for personal gain.

Chapter 7 focuses on the rituals, rites, and symbols Naparama used to build popular support as it spread. Indeed, it is the resonance of Naparama's fantastical and spiritual narrative—the magical vaccine, Antonío's supposed Christ-like resurrection—with local traditions and beliefs that made it a more compelling alternative to state-backed militias that parroted the regime's secular socialist doctrine. The interview-based research at the heart of this chapter is especially compelling, with vivid quotes from civilians who witnessed the arrival of Naparama in their village. It reinforces a unique theoretical argument about the power of narratives, scripts, and repertoires that ought to lay the foundation for conflict scholars to take these more seriously going forward.

The incredible richness of the direct testimony from civilians who were forced to weigh difficult and dangerous options in the midst of civil war is one of the greatest strengths of the book. It is the result not only of the author's own careful research, but also the methodological choice to pursue an in-depth study of a single armed group. Overall, the payoff is largely worth it, especially in the vivid depictions of Naparama's arrival in new districts and civilians' reactions to it. But it does require some inevitable trade-offs.

In evaluating its theoretical claims alongside alternatives, *Violent Resistance* appears limited at times by insufficient internal variation. While the book leverages changes over time, district-level comparisons, and process-tracing to maximize analytic leverage, the evidence is still spread somewhat thin in an effort to tackle what are essentially three distinct causal explanations. The arguments pertaining to the role of elite division appear to be the least developed and most questionable. We only see an example of divided elites in the district of Namarroi in Chapter 6, and the focus is more on the direct relationship between the leaders of Naparama and local Frelimo forces (p. 134). Furthermore, the outcome here seems to be equally well explained by a security environment that was less threatening for both civilians and Frelimo forces (p. 133).

Relatedly, the early battlefield results of Naparama forces appear to play a key part of the story of the militia's emergence and trajectory. Early successes are likely important generally for shaping civilian attitudes about the possibility of protection through violent resistance. This seems especially so in the case of Naparama given their unique spiritual narrative. Throughout the case studies, Naparama's ability to prove itself on the battlefield within the first months of its arrival in a district appears crucial to sustaining local support (e.g., in Namarroi [p. 134], in Mecuburi [p. 143]). The charismatic leadership of Manuel Antonío also appears to play an important role, yet is underexplored, despite the fact that his departure from a district often precipitates disintegration, and the militia as a whole falls apart following his death in December 1991.

Another drawback is a limited ability to assess the degree to which the argument, and even the broader phenomenon of civilian-initiated militias, travels outside of Mozambique. The book provides ample examples of militias in the context of civil war, rightly and effectively highlighting the prevalence of third actors in conflict. But to my count, only three other examples of civilian-initiated militias beyond Naparama are identified (in Peru, Nigeria, and Sierra Leone, p. 2). Is this the extent of the phenomenon? The concluding chapter dedicates a couple of pages specifically to Sierra Leone. But the similarity of the case—down to the same myth of a bullet-melting vaccine (p. 180)—limits our ability to imagine the application of the book's analytical frameworks to a broader set of cases. In particular, I found myself wondering what different kinds of socially resonant repertoires and scripts look like in different social and cultural contexts.

I also wondered about the degree to which the dynamics explored in *Violent Resistance* might apply to third actors beyond "civilian-initiated militias," which appear to be somewhat rare. More common, perhaps, may be groups that exist prior to the war, but that may take on new roles of protection once armed conflict breaks out. The Sadrists in Iraq come to mind as but one example. Can we understand such transitions through the lens of stalemates, repertoires, and diffusion? Or do the pre-existing organizational structures of such groups allow them to take up armed resistance more easily, without all of the necessary conditions required for those starting from scratch in the midst of conflict?

Finally, while the book positions itself primarily within the militia literature, I would have liked to see more engagement with scholarship on civilian agency. Despite the rich interviews with civilians, the book tells the story primarily from the perspective of Naparama emerging and spreading where conditions are ripe. But we don't see from the civilian side the menu of other options available to them. How should we locate the strategy of *Violent Resistance* within other strategies of "autonomy" that have

https://doi.org/10.1017/S1537592722003693 Published online by Cambridge University Press

recently been illuminated by Oliver Kaplan (2017), Jana Krause (2018), and others?

My lingering questions at the end of *Violent Resistance* largely reflect my fascination with the puzzles it presents and opportunities for future research. The book outlines a new research program, offering concepts, puzzles, and explanatory factors that are sure to lay the foundation for numerous studies to follow. And it does so with immersive interviewing, gripping prose, and thoughtful reflection that sets the bar for the qualitative study of civil conflict.

Response to Ches Thurber's Review of *Violent Resistance: Militia Formation and Civil War in Mozambique*

doi:10.1017/S153759272200370X

— Corinna Jentzsch

I thank Ches Thurber for a careful reading of my book *Violent Resistance* and a thoughtful discussion of its approach and arguments. I consider my book, as Thurber suggests himself, as articulating a research program on community-initiated militias, in which concepts are carefully developed, the breadth of the phenomenon analyzed, and links to existing research agendas established. I appreciate Thurber's recognition that approaching a new research area through theoretical reflection on the basis of in-depth, immersive fieldwork and careful qualitative analysis is particularly valuable. The militias research program is important because such third actors are common phenomena across civil wars on different continents, and often contribute immensely to how wars evolve, but theories of civil war often overlook them, remaining attached to a dichotomous understanding of actors in conflicts.

I would like to engage with four questions for further discussion. First, what role did early success stories play in the formation and evolution of the Naparama militias in Mozambique? As I argue in Chapter 6 on diffusion, Naparama's battlefield victories against the insurgents helped spread the idea of forming a militia, but did not help to establish militias in a sustained, long-term manner. The charismatic leadership of Manuel António played a role in convincing civilians to join as it made the militia's power credible and the idea of forming militias within communities resonate. But what facilitated the militia to form long-term was unity and trust among community elites.

Second, can the argument apply to pre-existing organizations that take on the role of militias in civil war? I contend that even pre-existing groups—though they might have a start-up advantage in terms of organizational and human resources—need to remobilize and innovate to bring hope to people and attract their support, which means that the way they approach the war needs to resonate with the community. They might also be re-activated through wartime local stalemates; in that sense, the theory could apply to pre-existing groups, as their character and purpose needs to be adapted to the current wartime conditions.

Third, more generally, what is the universe of cases of the book's theory? I define the scope conditions as applying to community-initiated militias in irregular civil wars. The fact that governments or political elites quickly co-opt militias that arise from bottom-up initiatives can make it difficult to recognize specific instances of community-initiated militias, but we have examples from across continents and social contexts, from Colombia to Nigeria to the Philippines and beyond. Probing to what extent the stalemate argument can account for the emergence of militias beyond Mozambique would be a promising project, as would analyzing the social foundations and conventions upon which these groups build.

Lastly, Thurber is right in pointing out that some of the most interesting questions that follow from the focus on violent civilian resistance are to explain what form civilian agency takes, under what conditions it takes a violent form, and when it remains non-violent. In forthcoming work, I engage with these questions more directly and consider community-initiated militias as "armed forms of civilian self-protection," to be included in a spectrum of non-violent and violent forms of self-protection that communities engage in collectively, from the non-violent to the violent. Studying violence and non-violence alongside each other is a promising area of future research to understand the trajectories of civilian collective action in civil wars and beyond.

Between Mao and Gandhi: The Social Roots of Civil Resistance. By Ches Thurber. New York: Cambridge University Press, 2021. 260p. $99.99 cloth.

doi:10.1017/S1537592722003942

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In his frequent discussions of how the nonviolent resistance campaign in Serbia was able to succeed, student movement leader Srđa Popović emphasizes the need for unity and the fact that toppling the dictator Slobodan Milošević took him and his fellow activists ten years of coalition building. In Ches Thurber's theoretical framework, as developed in *Between Mao and Gandhi: The Social Roots of Civil Resistance*, this would mean ten years of actively forging social ties and organizing broad-based support for a common, maximalist goal—that of overthrowing a dictator. Thurber argues that activists can only mount a viable nonviolent campaign with such ties linking them to the grassroots as well as to elites. If movements do

not have the luxury of such ties, he argues, then they need to start organizing and build them if they want to make their civil resistance campaign viable—sometimes over the course of a decade.

Thurber's book develops an intriguing and elegant argument, making an important contribution to the scholarship on the causes and consequences of civil (or nonviolent) resistance. It explores the decision to initiate a nonviolent campaign, rather than explain whether nonviolent campaigns succeed or fail, which has been at the core of recent work. The central argument of the book builds on classical sociology to highlight the social rather than state structures constraining political challengers. On this account, movements need links to the grassroots to mobilize sufficient support for their campaigns, and links to the regime to convince potential defectors from the security forces to join them. If challengers have ties to both, the grassroots and the regime, they are "integrated" and adopt nonviolent campaigns. If they do not have or cannot obtain such ties, they either resort to mixed campaigns or, as "insular" challengers without any ties, to outright insurgency.

The focus on this initial decision about how to challenge the state allows Thurber to bridge research agendas that have evolved largely independently—those on insurgency and on civil resistance—and move the study of civil resistance forward in several important regards. First, the book's main contribution lies in answering the crucial question of why political challengers to regimes sometimes conduct nonviolent and at other times violent campaigns to achieve their goals. Much of recent work, such as that by Donatella della Porta and Wendy Pearlman, has explained the adoption of violence from a process perspective, as a consequence of repression, fragmentation, and escalation. Thurber, in contrast, sets the record straight by showing that the decision to adopt nonviolent or violent modes of contention often takes place much earlier, at the beginning of mobilization. Second, another notable contribution is the counterpoint to the emphasis on normative commitments in recent work. As the book shows, in the case study of Nepal in particular, movements were exposed to ideologies of nonviolent and violent change. Thurber demonstrates that relevance of normative commitments depends on the availability of resources, in particular social ties.

Third, the book employs an ambitious and rigorous multi-method research design with cases from around the world, and with much attention to alternative explanations. It first analyzes and compares different movement campaigns in qualitative case studies from two separate countries, Nepal and Syria (the latter with comparisons to Tunisia, Libya, and Egypt), and then tests an implication of the argument statistically with a cross-national sample, *and* conducts out-of-sample tests analyzing campaigns in Apartheid South Africa and India. The book's focus on the case of Nepal is an excellent choice, due to the variation in social ties and campaign types of movements across the latter half of the twentieth century, which include a return to civil resistance after an attempt at armed insurgency. The two chapters on Nepal are in fact the most compelling and original, as they fit well the empirical puzzle set out in the introduction and build on fieldwork, including interviews with movement leaders and original documents. The other chapters present a convincing case for the broader applicability of the argument.

The book also raises some generative questions, both empirically and conceptually, that are worthy of further research. One question concerns the precise "content" or quality of social ties. Do any kinds of ties—weak, strong, kinship, friendship, etc.—count, or are there qualitative differences that affect how such ties help or hinder the necessary support challengers need to mount a campaign? The case study on Nepal provides some interesting evidence on the isolated character of the Nepali Congress, which pushed its members to adopt a violent campaign in the 1950s. In the discussion on how they subsequently forged ties to overcome their isolation, Thurber emphasizes what basically amounts to organizing work—forming associations among different types of target groups and creating an information network. But what precisely did these new ties look like, what did this new connection mean? Were people formally connected by signing up for an organization or did it affect their daily life, drawing them closer into a political community that made them more politically conscious and emotionally connected, thereby providing a basis for the mutual acceptance of risk to engage in a nonviolent campaign? And similarly, with respect to regime ties, how did the Nepalese movements create the necessary coalitions to form ties to the regime? What did these ties precisely look like and what did they do for the movement? The analysis of how the Marxist-Leninists forged ties is much more specific here and highlights the role of encouraging new recruits to become teachers to work in rural areas to educate and mobilize supporters, which is a fascinating account of how to organize political education and build a movement over the long term. A question for future research would be to consider under what conditions movements are able to forge such new ties, and what kinds of social cleavages can be overcome through organizing work, and which cannot.

The question about the quality of social ties is not only relevant for the empirical, but also for the theoretical discussion. Social movement research has long recognized the importance of social ties for movement participation (see, for example, Doug McAdam and Ronnelle Paulsen, "Specifying the Relationship between Social Ties and Activism," *American Journal of Sociology* 99: 640-67, 1993). But at times, Thurber's analysis seems to equate grassroots ties with popular support, in particular when providing evidence for social ties in the chapters on Nepal. How do social ties and popular support relate, and when do

https://doi.org/10.1017/S1537592722003693 Published online by Cambridge University Press

social ties result in popular support? How do I need to be connected to someone in order to feel compelled to support their political mission? This is relevant to specify, as some researchers have suggested, that certain social ties might inhibit participation (see, for example, James Kitts, "Mobilizing in Black Boxes: Social Networks and Participation in Social Movement Organizations," *Mobilization: An International Quarterly* 5: 241-57, 2000). A particularly vital question for the theory is, then, what social ties precisely transmit. Is it information about the risks and benefits of participating, a feeling of solidarity undergirding a collective identity, or even a socialization process turning potential supporters into activists? The book points to several of these possibilities, but future research should outline the precise causal path from forging social ties to trusting that a nonviolent campaign can rely on sufficient support.

Another interesting question concerns the precise considerations that convince movement leaders to pursue a violent or nonviolent strategy. Thurber argues that leaders, as rational actors, consider social ties when deciding about the viability of nonviolent campaigns, which gives the argument a strong strategic orientation. But the book also shows that some challengers experimented with different options to reveal information about the group's strengths, implying a learning process. How did leaders deal with information gained from experimentation, where did they see the problems and where the solutions? How was this related to the social ties that the movements lacked or could benefit from? The author conducted a considerable number of interviews with campaign leaders in Nepal that could potentially shed light on these questions; more discussion of the insights from these interviews would greatly contribute to the understanding of these leaders' considerations.

A last question concerns the relation between nonviolent resistance and armed insurgency. Thurber is careful to keep the focus on explaining why challengers adopt nonviolent campaigns. In the conceptualization of the outcome variable, the case comparisons, and the cross-national analysis, however, nonviolent campaigns are compared with insurgencies. This raises the question of whether civil resistance and insurgency are true equivalents. Do all insurgencies result from social movements? The statistical analysis of the implication that politically excluded ethnic groups are unlikely to mount civil resistance campaigns shows that the theory explains the onset of nonviolent campaigns well, but not so much the onset of violent campaigns. The book's conclusion is correct in stating that more research is needed to analyze the relation between civil resistance and civil war, not only with a focus on escalation, but also with respect to strategic decision-making of leaders in the beginning stages of struggle, to what extent leaders really consider violent *and* nonviolent strategies, and how these considerations intersect with other factors shaping the onset of insurgencies.

The book's methodological rigor and analytical breadth will without doubt move the research agenda on civil resistance forward and will shape the debate on the choice between violent and nonviolent modes of contention for years to come.

Response to Corinna Jentzsch's Review of *Between Mao and Gandhi: The Social Roots of Civil Resistance*

doi:10.1017/S1537592722003954

— Ches Thurber

Corinna Jentzsch's generous review eloquently captures the core arguments of my book. More importantly, she shines a light down several pathways for future research that will advance the study of social relationships and civil conflicts. I fully agree with her assessment that these were not fully explored in the book and represent important next steps. I will use this response as an opportunity to reflect on what initial ideas the book offers in these areas and where scholarship might go next.

Jentzsch rightly notes that not all social ties are created equal. While the book emphasizes the quantity of social ties, it spends relatively little time assessing their quality. We might wish to think about the "strength" of social ties: presumably stronger ties would be more powerful in galvanizing high-risk collective action. But as Granovetter famously observed, the strength of social ties often comes at the expense of their breadth. For a movement considering a strategy based on mass participation, breadth might be more important than strength. Another way of thinking about the "quality" of ties might be to further differentiate among ties to different types of groups. The book starts this by differentiating between what it calls "grassroots" versus "regime" ties. But each of these types can and should be disaggregated further. In several of the case studies in the book, especially those from Syria, ties to members of security forces prove especially important. And given the centrality of mass protests in capital cities, social connections to populations that live in these cities might be especially crucial (I am indebted to Janet Lewis for this observation).

In thinking about the strategic decision-making of dissident organizations, I imagined the idea of rebel leaders sitting around a table debating their options. This was meant as a theoretical construct, and the types of strategic calculations I envisioned could happen in both implicit as well as explicit ways. I was surprised to find in my research how often these meetings actually occurred: a secret meeting between Druze leaders and Damascus-based nationalists in Syria in 1925; an actual vote by the Nepali Congress in the basement of a Calcutta cinema hall in 1949; and a summit of Nepal's Maoists in the village of Chunbang in 2005, among others. Leaders at these

meetings did not explicitly discuss social ties per se. Rather, they looked back at the outcomes of recent contentious events—outcomes that I argue were shaped by their social ties—to try to anticipate the consequences of future actions. The language used by leaders I interviewed was often along the lines of "We tried something like that, and it showed us it could (not) work."

One of my goals for the project was to try to bridge the study of civil resistance and civil war to highlight how these two forms of conflict interact, sometimes as alternatives and sometimes as precipitants to each other. Several of the case studies feature groups that take up arms after considering and rejecting nonviolent tactics. But violence is far from the only option for groups that lack the social ties needed for a strategy of civil resistance. Some give up and accept the status quo. Most interestingly, others engage in movement-building in the hopes of being better prepared for resistance in the future. I think that when and how this kind of movement-building is possible is one of the most important avenues for future research that Jentzsch raises. I hope the case studies on South Africa and India near the end of the book offer a springboard for this inquiry. My aim with the book was not simply to identify a structural constraint on the ability of socially isolated groups to engage in nonviolent resistance, but to suggest that we need to think about an alternative set of strategies of organization and mobilization for these groups, distinct from what has been set forth as a standard "playbook" for mass nonviolent action.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S1537592722003693 Published online by Cambridge University Press