



Klaus Schlichte

IN THE SHADOW OF VIOLENCE

The Politics of Armed Groups

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In the Shadow of Violence

Mikropolitik der Gewalt – Micropolitics of Violence
Volume 1

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Contents

Foreword and Acknowledgements.....9

1. Introduction..... 13
Armed groups as figurations 13 • The structure of this book 21 • On methodology 23

2. First Movers: the Formation of Armed Groups 30
Where leaders and staff originate – a statistical overview 32 • From party politics to war: the mechanism of repression 39 • Initiatives of the disappointed: the ad hoc mechanism 42 • Delegated violence: the spin-off mechanism 48 • Conclusion 54

3. The Shadow of Violence 57
The notion of violence: power, immediateness, and trauma 60 • Legitimizing violence in war 65 • Delegitimization through violence 72 • Why violence derails 76 • Conclusion 82

4. Basic Legitimacy and Charismatic Cycles 85
Traditional legitimacy and its erosion 90 • The mechanism of basic legitimacy 95 • The cycle of the charismatic idea 99 • Selected affinities: the global timing of discourse 107 • Conclusion 113

5. Finance and Reproduction	116
<i>Conceptions and statistics 118 • Economy in war and war economies 123 • Statization, stagnation, and disconnection 131 • Conclusion 142</i>	
6. Hierarchy and Organization.....	144
<i>Ways to rule and roads to decay 146 • Centrifugal forces and centripetal techniques 154 • The mechanism of patrimonialization 168 • The mecha- nism of formalization 172 • Conclusion 176</i>	
7. Conclusions: Armed Groups as State-Builders.....	178
<i>The politics of armed groups 180 • Armed groups as state-builders in his- torical perspective 187 • The politics of armed groups and world politics 194</i>	
8. Notes.....	203
9. Appendix: List of War Actors in Data Base.....	227
10. List of Tables	231
11. Bibliography	232

“It is true that within a group of robbers traits of a human community may develop. But this possibility indicates a fault of the society in which this group develops. In a totally unjust society criminals do not need to be necessarily of less human value, in a totally just one, they would necessarily be inhuman. Single judgements on human affairs only achieve the right meaning in contexts.”

Max Horkheimer

Foreword and Acknowledgements

The attacks of 11 September 2001 brought a great deal of attention to political developments that had earlier escaped the consideration of many scholars. Suddenly, states seemed no longer to be what they had been, and warfare seemed to have changed. In public discourse and also among academics who had not worked on non-Western regions, state failure, new wars, organized crime, and transnational terrorism were meshed together into a legitimizing discourse for a new wave of securitization and militarization. This further wave of militarization, as this book will show, will not heal the wounds but will create further problems.

It is a standard mystification in social sciences to do as if results have been reached by lonesome reflection and individual brilliance. I want to stress on the very first page that this book is truly the result of collective action. A somewhat steered, slightly uncontrollable social process of negotiation and debate about single findings and general ideas has shaped this research process from the very beginning. This applies to the content of this book and to its history.

My original interest in armed conflict developed out of the pragmatic decision to bend my philosophical interest in the question of causality into an investigation of the causes of the civil war in Liberia that had just begun when I was still a student in 1989. I stumbled over a group of scholars at the University of Hamburg whose theoretical approach was based on German sociological classics ranging from Karl Marx to Norbert Elias. That approach fits nicely with my inclinations for the philosophy of idealism, but also turned out to be decisive for my later work. It has an undeniable imprint on this book too.

It was only in 2000, that I formed an idea of using a leftover from earlier times itself into a research proposal for the Volkswagen-Foundation: to study the internal politics of non-state war actors. At that time, virtually no systematic knowledge based on comparative research existed on this topic.

When this proposal, entitled “The micropolitics of armed groups” was approved in June 2001, nobody could predict how drastically important this issue would become in just a few months.

However, this is not a book about terrorism. Considering the term “terrorism” as name for certain strategic uses of violence rather than a scientific categorization of actors, I neither intended it to become the focus of this project, nor could I skip the original idea: to study the inner political structures of non-state war actors. Recent events seemed much harder to study than the already challenging subject. The group that began its work in fall 2001 ended up with a sample of cases that can be seen as usual actors in contemporary civil wars, all of them denounced, rightly or wrongly, as “terrorists” by their opponents at times.

Astrid Nissen, Jago Salmon, and Katrin Radtke were these first three PhD-candidates and colleagues I had the pleasure to work with. There is not a single category in this book that has not either fought its way through their challenging criticism with them or was developed jointly in these discussions. I gained from them countless insights on the intricacies of field research under sometimes extremely difficult circumstances, and also the experience of true solidarity that accompanies constructive criticism. This book would not have been possible without not only their written work, stories and assessments. It was their field research in Sri Lanka, Eritrea, Canada, Sudan, Lebanon, Nicaragua and El Salvador that formed the basis of a three-year long discussion in comparative politics. My own research in Serbia, Senegal and Mali would have been much less telling without that contrast.

Teresa Koloma Beck, Daria Isachenko, and Alex Veit joined the group as the so-called “second generation” in 2004 and have commented on every single page of this text. Stefan Malthaner did the same, and laid another foundation for it by editing portraits of eighty armed groups and turning these accounts into a data base. I profited greatly from their expertise and field experiences in the DR Congo, Angola, Moldova, Cyprus, and Lebanon. The “second generation” created a challenge insofar its members represent the combination of post-modern sophistication, historiographical exactitude, the abstract reasoning of social system theory, and the precision of well-founded political science research. Forced to defend my arguments against these four furies I could not but learn and also never felt alone.

Given this background, more than one school of thought comes into play in this book, and more than one methodology has been applied for

the research in which it is grounded. In addition to a database, comparative studies and single case studies have been undertaken to minimize blind spots that stem from narrow methodological choices. What is presented in this book is based on field research in 15 countries¹, on interviews with war participants, local experts, and representatives of local populations as well as the analysis of a dataset of 80 cases. The conviction supporting this mixed approach is that neither quantitative factor analysis nor single-case phenomenology suffices in coming to terms with the complexity of armed violence.

Although this book is based on a collective effort, I accept full responsibility of what is said and asserted in it. All errors are mine, I am fully aware of its sometimes brittle basis. My only excuse is that the negligence that political science has shown towards non-state actors for such a long period could not be overcome in a comparatively short period of time. This and my conviction that an adventurous thought is better than none have induced me to say a few more things than high standards would have allowed. But most, if not all books are like this.

My and our greatest debt is to all those who were willing to talk about experiences that were not easy to live through nor to remember. Personally I also want to thank Dejan, Mira and Branka in Belgrad for hosting and aiding me in my regards. Apart from the groups' members mentioned above, Peter Waldmann, Joel S. Migdal, Tom Lewis, Jutta Bakonyi, Daniel Chirot, Kristin Bakke, and Dietrich Jung read parts or the entire manuscript and were not hesitating to contradict. Furthermore I owe a lot to Olawale Ismail and Natalija Basic for discussions and sharing insights that are rarely presented in published texts.

During two conferences in Berlin we gathered critical comments from colleagues. Stathis Kalyvas, Roland Marchal, Marie-Joelle Zahar, Alpa Shah, Marial Debos, Marina Blagojevic, and P enelope Larzilli ere had a fresh view on what might at times have looked like an esoteric endeavor. Thank you for the refreshing comments!

During talks at the University of Copenhagen, Zurich, Oxford, Bordeaux, Seattle and several Universities in Germany students and colleagues were supportive and critical as well, a good blend that made me work harder in order to refine the argument and to overcome where necessary the narrow boundaries of political science.

In the same way the working group "Orders of violence" in the German Political Science Association was a constantly stimulating intellectual

environment as well. I am extremely grateful to Antje Holinski, Barbara Lemberger, Lisa Tschörner and Meike Westerkamp, Sevda Simsek and Manuel Winkelkotte for their help as student assistants and Tim Wise and Anja Löbert for proofreading the entire text. If it still looks foreign to native speakers, it is certainly not their fault.

Finally, I want to thank Humboldt University at Berlin for hosting the research group between 2001 and 2008, and, of course, Volkswagen-Foundation in Hannover, Germany, for the unique opportunity to work with a young group with means independent from the usual institutional quarrels and for its readiness to allow all deviations and shortcuts in budgeting and research that have been inevitable during the period of the last six years.

Berlin, December 2008

1. Introduction

Armed groups as figurations

“You know, in 1993, in Bosnia, it was a war of everybody against anybody. There were only shaky alliances, like we had only two times. One was near Sarajevo, when we could see from the hills that Muslims and Croats down there would fight each other til the last man would be killed. The Croats asked us whether we would help them and so we did. For eight days I fought together with the Croats although we never trusted each other really. And we had fought against each other for at least a year.

In Bihac, we had an alliance with Fikred Abdic, another militia leader. We were militarily and technically much better, and he had Serbs as officers in his forces. But we were never sure. It was like shooting to one side and looking with the other eye whether the man next to you is still trustworthy. But since we were technically superior, we also rented tanks to the Croats. They paid in coffee, cigarettes, and money, and most importantly in fuel, as we were lacking it because of the sanctions.

Also, at another occasion, Bosniaks and Croats were fighting each other harder than we had ever seen in any war. It was like an extermination. The Croats felt they would be defeated, so they asked us to let them through in order to save their lives. They could only pass through our territory. So we helped them by organizing cars and busses. Later, out of these people, a unit of volunteers was formed in Split. When they were safe and had recovered, they massacred Serbs in an unseen way. Later the unit met in a stadium, about 1,600 men, and the Serbs bombed it with all means we had. It needed to be transmitted through the civilian radio to stop the bombing, as it was no longer possible to do it via the military channels.”

(Interview with Serbian war veteran, Belgrade, October 11, 2005)

This short account of the vagaries of war stands like a paradigmatic example of what led many observers to the conclusion that with the end of the Cold War, an age of new wars had begun.² What had previously been conceived about the reality of war, the image of well-ordered troops led to the battlefield in hierarchical orders, taking care of innocent civilians, and sub-

ordinated to the political will of governments with clear agendas and strategies, no longer seemed to obtain. Instead, rampant opportunism, rapid change of balances, seemingly unlimited violence, and the breakdown of chains of command – all these phenomena which became so evident in the wars of dissolution of the former Yugoslavia apparently indicated the end of an era.

The key explanation that authors of political science, sociology, and other academic fields have offered for this new face of war was that there were now new non-state actors involved in these conflicts who would neither obey the logic of states and routine politics, nor the regulations of warfare.

This book investigates the politics of non-state war actors in wars after 1945. Its focus is on such armed groups' attempts to overcome what I call the "shadow of violence", the de-legitimizing effects of the violence they exert. Converting military power into rule is their ultimate task. The success of armed groups in these attempts differs enormously as two cases already illustrate:

On January 10, 1981, the *Frente Farabundo Martí de Liberación Nacional* (FMLN) launched a general offensive in El Salvador. This alliance of various leftist groups had decided to start a revolutionary civil war after all leftist organizations in that country had suffered severe repression by the state's security apparatus since the mid-1970s. The construction of armed wings had already begun, organized by dissidents of the Communist Party of El Salvador, who no longer believed in the reformist approach of the party which wanted to achieve change through direct participation in elections. In October 1980, five leftist groups founded the alliance, and it was an open secret at the time that Fidel Castro had wielded his influence to coax the groups into this coalition with a unified command.³

The FMLN was led by the *Dirección Revolucionaria Unificada* in which each of the five member groups was represented. And while envy and rivalries within the FMLN continued for the next 10 years of warfare, it was holding together throughout that period and eventually became the body from which the FMLN was transformed into a regular political actor, a political party that since 1992 has been participating in elections on various levels in El Salvador.

This success of the guerilla forces was all the more remarkable since during the years of the war, its opponent, the government of El Salvador,

became the biggest recipient of United States military aid in Latin America, receiving up to 1.5 million US Dollars per day to fight the insurgency. Furthermore, within the rebellion, rivalries were at work not only at the top level but reached regional and local military commanders as well. Within the guerilla fighters the internal structures of allying groups could not be surmounted and melded into a unified command.

In the first year of the war, these rivalries impeded military success as the groups did not even loan weapons to each other. Only after its retreat to rural areas, the FMLN gained strength and facilitated local self-administration, schools, and education camps. With an overall number of 3,500 troops operating in battalions of 500 men, the FMLN was able to drive government forces out of huge areas, thus controlling up to a quarter of El Salvador's territory.

The FMLN was unable to decide the war militarily, however, even given huge external support. But it was able to attract more and more international support. Financially, it could thus not only draw on assets gained from kidnap ransoms and on taxes levied on coffee-production in areas it controlled, it also benefited from money provided by solidarity groups in Canada and West European countries. Cuba and Nicaragua supported the guerilla groups, and about 1,000 fighters received training in socialist countries.

As government forces were incapable of enforcing a military victory, it resorted to a strategy of counter-insurgency that not only cost thousands of lives but alienated the rural population as well. Given the military stalemate, both parties turned to the United Nations for mediation of the conflict. After successful negotiations in Geneva, several accords were reached from 1990 onwards, and in 1992 the FMLN declared itself a political party that would henceforth compete for power within the framework of regular politics.

As the war in El Salvador drew to a close in 1990, another war was in the making in Yugoslavia. In 1991 the Federation of Yugoslavia dissolved, and with it the question arose of what to do with its military apparatus. In Krajina, Slavonia, and Bosnia, multiple armed forces emerged, partly self-declared local defense units, partly parastatal forces that would later become state armies as in the case of Bosnia-Herzegovina or Croatia. It was a time of conquering political power by violent means. Also within the Serbian camp there was competition for state offices. Zeljko Raznatovic was

one of the competitors. Renowned under his nickname Arkan, he was the son of an air force officer and allegedly already a problematic child. His father had reportedly approached the secret services to assume care of his son, and so Arkan became a child of these agencies. In his twenties, he operated mostly abroad on behalf of the secret service. He escaped several times from prison, thus acquiring the heroic status known in the Yugoslav underworld as *strabopostovanje* – respect out of fear.

Shortly before the wars in Slavonia and Bosnia began, Arkan organized a militia comprised of hooligans from Belgrad's soccer club Red Star. While this was undertaken on behalf of the Ministry of the Interior, this group, calling itself *Srpska Dobrovoljačka Garda*, Serbian Volunteer Guard, soon developed its own agenda. It became independent of the state's command, largely by looting and spoils from black markets that blossomed during the war under conditions of sanctions against Serbia. Arkan was more and more drawn into deals for illegally imported gasoline and he tried to diversify his position. He became the owner of a shipping-company, a radio-station, and a casino. Also, he married Ceca, a singer who had become famous in the early 1990s with a new popular music style known as "turbo folk" that blended traditional romantic lyrics and accelerated beats.

Arkan founded his own political party, but he failed to win elections. Then he fortified his house in central Belgrade, because he never felt safe. And with good reason, as events showed, since in January 2000, he was shot by two men in the lobby of Belgrade's Hotel Intercontinental. Prior to that, following the treaty of Dayton in 1995, his volunteer force, once reportedly numbering between 3,000 and 10,000 men, had withered away. With a pending indictment against him by the International Criminal Court in The Hague, he could not leave the country. Within Serbia, in growing competition with Milosevic's son Marco, Arkan had lost more and more ground in the criminal markets that emerged around the sanctioned regime.

Why are the trajectories of armed groups like the FMLN and the Serbian Volunteers so different? Why do some succeed in establishing territorial control quickly, in building clear internal structures, military capacity, and stable sources of income while others crumble away after brief periods or stagnate for years? This is the central question of this book.

Current academic discourse on these actors has not yet developed an answer. Three arguments can be discerned in that writing. First of all there

is the viewpoint that asserts a new wave of disorder, of chaos and anarchy, in which ecological crises, unemployed youth, and increased criminality were causal factors in the new outburst of brutal and apolitical violence.⁴ A second position, formed around rationalist utilitarian arguments, states that civil wars were largely to be explained by the greed of actors who want to gain control of state resources. “Rebellion is large-scale predation of productive economic activity” as Paul Collier, one of the main proponents of this position, expressed it. Finally, a third position argues that in the 1990s we were witnessing entirely new wars. Martin van Creveld (1991) and Mary Kaldor (1998), for example, believed that they observed a growing brutalization of warfare and a depoliticization of its ends.

As stimulating as this thesis is for the debate on contemporary warfare, it cannot as such explain why the politics of these groups differ so enormously. While these suggestions triggered interesting debates and stirred public interest in the subject, they did not delve deeply into explaining divergent trajectories of war actors.⁵ As a result, the politics of armed groups, the intriguing interaction of violence and political structures of which insurgents are agents and objects, was overlooked. This was also due to the lack of a theory with which such a task could have been approached. Political sociology, I argue, offers such a theoretical perspective. Using this vocabulary I want to show that it is the de-legitimizing and legitimizing effects of violence that are at the core of the dynamics which decide about an armed group’s fate.

In this book, armed groups are conceived as figurations, that is smaller social settings, groups and less structured collectives, and as ensembles of interdependent individuals. These individuals are linked by asymmetric power balances, as they exchange favors or commodities, as they maintain emotional ties, and even as they fight. Many things can thus be sources of power in these relations that become balances. But these precarious balances are not equilibria. They constantly shift and are almost never truly balanced, due to the persistent action of actors and due to acts of contestation and acts of consent.⁶

This understanding does not intend to reduce the political to either intentional actions of individuals or to the structure of societies or systems, but to stress the relations between individuals as the forming element which constitutes the subject of sociology. Norbert Elias started his study of figurations in his work on the royal court in European history (1983) in

which he showed that the figuration of a royal court society was reducible neither to the king's decision, nor to abstract structures of absolutist societies. The architecture of Versailles, the rules of life at the court, and the habits of its officials – all this, Elias found, was part of the court society as a figuration. Kings' rule did not differentiate between private and political issues, and all members of court society felt obliged to the ruling dynasty by personal ties. And although the figuration of the court does not yet know the many distinctions between codes and spheres which characterize modern political systems, absolutism already achieved the monopolization of taxes and of the legitimate use of violence, at least in its external relations. Even more remarkably, the politics of courts surpassed the logic of personal relations insofar as the death of one incumbent did not necessarily entail the crumbling of the figuration. As shaky as the succession might often have been, dynastic principles remained largely unaffected.⁷

Elias' main point in his analysis of court society as a figuration was the argument that this system cannot be understood in terms of modern political language and conceptions. The symbolic world of the court, its economic basis, the royals' "ethos of status consumption", as well as its ceremonies and etiquette were all part of a pattern of interdependencies between the court societies' members. This totality can only be understood through the study of these particular interdependencies.

Armed groups can be studied in a similar vein. They also crystallize around nodal points and consist of interdependent individuals linked by asymmetric power balances. Like a royal court society, they produce their own symbolic world and work as socializing institutions for their members. By focusing on relations and interdependencies, the concept of figuration allows us to abstract from individual peculiarities and idiosyncrasies without losing sight of them. What matters are the relations, the unstable power balances. Using the noun "balance", Elias' intention was not to maintain that these relations are equal or even just in a normative sense. On the contrary, he stressed the continuing struggle in these relations and the never ending game between those involved in finding the "balance". The expression "balance" strikes the right note in view of the fact that power relations are never exclusively dominated by one side.⁸ Of course, the relations that constitute figurations are not among equals. There is a difference in the ability to exert power, as those more powerful dispose of more means or resources than the less powerful in this relation. But power is never total or absolute. It is always limited in space and time and also in

its social reach. This applies to armed groups as well as any other set of social relations.

Another reason to perceive armed groups in this way is the fuzziness of their boundaries. It is almost always impossible to draw a clear line between members and non-members of insurgencies as forms of participation differ appreciably. Contrary to terms like organization or group, the concept of figuration does not presuppose such clear boundaries, rendering the concept more appropriate than any other for the study of armed groups.

Every figuration has a history. Armed groups also emerge in a broader given social context, and they bear traces of earlier phases of this context. And as much as new forms and practices may emerge in figurations, they are always a combination of the new and the old. They do not differ in all regards from their environment.

Furthermore, as the two entry stories have shown, armed groups are dynamic. The interdependencies that constitute them change when any of the other relations is changing, for example when new resources become available, when somebody involved in a figuration loses a capacity, or when new agents enter a figuration. Figurations continue when their constituting power relations can evolve into forms of domination, but they can also be weakened, erode to mere power relations, and eventually dissolve altogether. This happens to armed groups as readily as any other figuration.

In this regard, armed groups differ little from other social organizations. Their main quality, however, stems from the physical violence they employ. Violence casts a cloud on social relations that is due to the short timeframe it introduces and its psycho-physic effects. Violence cuts short, it interrupts, it inflicts pain, and it has lasting effects. This “shadow of violence” falls on each single organizational aspect of armed groups.

Moreover, violence is power. Insurgents need to turn this power into more stable relations and ultimately into domination. Max Weber’s distinction between power as “the probability that one actor within a social relationship will be in a position to carry out his own will despite resistance”, and domination as “the probability that a command with a given specific content will be obeyed by a given group of persons”⁹, is the second foundational theoretical distinction of this book. The politics of armed groups oscillate between mere power and its institutionalized form, domination. Armed groups need to gain legitimacy in order to turn the power of violence into legitimate rule. However, the power of violence remains

ambivalent: it almost always legitimizes and de-legitimizes political actions and actors. In the chapters that follow, I will discern mechanisms at work within and around armed groups that either favor or impede legitimization of power positions that armed groups acquired using force. The “shadow of violence” is key in all of them, as violence can legitimate power, but it can also have de-legitimizing effects.

Violence, power, and domination are core concepts of political science. By using them as the key variables at work in figurations, I want to develop a theoretical viewpoint that surpasses the reductionism of economic approaches and the murkiness of culturalist essentialism. My central argument why some armed groups succeed in their quest for political domination while so many others fail concerns the politics of armed groups. The key variable that explains this issue is legitimacy. Only those groups that achieve a minimum of legitimacy among their ranks, in their community, and in the international community are able to establish and maintain political domination.

There are, of course, countless reasons why armed groups fail. Most are related to the inability to meet simple organizational requirements that emerge in organizing armed violence and territorial control. Armed groups differ from other organizations by the fact that physical violence is an integral part of their mode of operation. And as the exertion of violence always has both legitimizing and de-legitimizing effects, it is particularly hard for armed groups to succeed. Being de-legitimized by violence is the main danger on the way to domination. This “shadow of violence” is cast on all relations armed groups maintain or want to establish.

With this argument, I offer an alternative to prevailing explanations built on a *homo economicus* model, especially on the role of resources in civil wars. By bringing back a truly political theory of insurgency, I argue that it is the “shadow of violence” and the ensuing dynamics of legitimacy that largely explain the particularities of the politics of armed groups.

The structure of this book

The aim of this book is not an all-encompassing theory of violence or war but to reintroduce political sociology into the debate on contemporary warfare. This shall allow us to go beyond an understanding that limits itself to utilitarian rationalism. The claim connected to this reintroduced perspective is that it is able to explain more features and varieties in the life of armed groups in a theoretically coherent manner. At the same time, I do not claim to explain every aspect of the politics of these figurations. The proclaimed task of this study is rather to reveal the most fundamental mechanisms of these politics.

In the second chapter, three mechanisms of how armed groups come into being will be distinguished. It is a thesis running through this book that the context from which armed groups evolve plays an important role for their trajectories. This can be seen first in the three mechanisms distinguished here. Insurgent groups are formed either as a result of violent repression, as ad-hoc groups formed by excluded members of the political class, or they spin off from authorized state violence. In any event, state agencies play an important role in the production of armed groups, as will also be shown by a statistical overview of biographies of leaders and staff members. In these biographies, the shadow of violence can already be observed in the sheer number of previous experiences of violence.

Doing interviews with veterans forces one to acknowledge that the experience of organized violence made enormous difference in their lives. The experience of violence, having both exerted it and been afflicted by it, becomes pivotal in the biography. As well, the organizational life of armed groups is heavily influenced by the practices of violence the group exerts. These practices, their explanation, and their outcomes are the subject of chapter three. The relation between violence and legitimacy is complex, but three elements seem to be essential. First, organized violence by armed groups needs to be legitimated. How this is done is dealt with in the first part of this chapter. Second, violence can legitimize outcomes as well as actions and it has the tendency to lead to further legitimizations of violence. And the third aspect is de-legitimization through violence. The wounds and the scars, the suffering and the traumata, both of perpetrators and victims have long lasting effects on social and political orders and their possible justification. The organization of armed groups is closely linked to these effects of violence. Already, the mode in which armed groups are

formed has an impact on the types of violence they practice. Moreover, violence derails quite often, threatening the legitimacy of a group both within its ranks as well as in its environment. This chapter thus investigates the causes and effects of derailing use of force, based on a concept of violence that tries to explain its contradictory effect of being able to legitimize as well as de-legitimize actors and political structures.

The fourth chapter, on discourses and ideas, deals with the workings of legitimacy in a wider perspective. The de-legitimizing effects of violence threaten the success of insurgencies. But there are countervailing forces to this threat. First, armed groups can benefit from forms of basic legitimacy that can accrue to them if they achieve the ending of open violence. If they are also able to maintain an acceptable degree of order, the momentum of ordinary life may help to restore normalcy which in turn stabilizes their position. In order to bolster these crude forms of acceptance and turn them into legitimacy, armed groups deploy political programs and narratives that put their political project and their rule into a series of political necessities. Any of these programs, as I will show, is bound by the cycle of charismatic ideas.

It is through these policies that armed groups can also alter their sources of income. In an economic environment that is increasingly marked by the shadow of violence, capital stock will devalue, and armed groups must develop strategies to deal with that challenge too. These strategies, with their limits as well as their consequences for the organization of armed groups, will be the subject of the fifth chapter. Armed groups can either stagnate or be disconnected from their social environment, or their economic strategy can lead to para-states in which insurgent groups act like governments. Many armed groups, however, discover new sources of funding, albeit not always by strategical decision but in an iterative manner. This chapter will show what the conditions of these strategies are and what factors limit or allow their use.

Conditions necessary to create legitimacy and limitations on developing means to fund their war are the main structuring elements in the organizational life of armed groups. Both in turn can be explained by contexts and structures in which armed groups move. However, there is room for maneuver, and as will be shown in the sixth chapter, some armed groups are more apt to deal with the endless challenges their violent politics create. As far as I can see there are two main pathways to institutionalization by which the power of arms can first turn the armed group into domination

within the figuration and then within its social environment. One is the way of patrimonialization, marked by central redistribution and clientelist structures. The other one, formalization, is more difficult to achieve. But there are also armed groups that develop bureaucratic features. How this comes into being and is maintained, depending again on the structures, the composition of the group, and the habitus of leaders will be seen. The central argument includes centrifugal tendencies within the groups and their centripetal techniques that determine the outcome.

The last, conclusive chapter again assesses the theoretical concepts of this book and connects the politics of armed groups with larger debates on world politics and the formation of states. The shadow of violence, finally, is also cast on state policies that include violent means. Armed groups maintain dynamic interactions with these states. The last question addressed in that chapter is whether the politics of armed groups can be seen as processes of state formation.

On methodology

The methodology of this book is first and foremost comparative in nature. Using the terminology of political sociology, comparisons were made with a small sample of groups, including semi-structured interviews with war actors, close observers, bystanders, and political office-holders in the respective countries. Large-N sample statistics were only marginally employed on the basis of a database of 80 group descriptions that contain narrative sections as well as coded organizational features (cf. Malthaner 2007).

The main research on which this book is based is the collective discussion of a group of seven PhD-candidates and the author as its supervisor. Each of the candidates spent at least six months of field research in the years between 2001 and 2007. My own research during this period was carried out in Serbia, but I also draw on earlier field research in Uganda, Mali, Senegal and Liberia. These different experiences and cumulative reading were the fruitful background of comparative discussions of cases concerning all the general issues evoked in this book.

This approach has its basis in certain peculiarities of this field of research. Wars and armed conflicts since 1945 have so far not been docu-

mented to a degree which makes sound quantitative analysis possible. Some wars and smaller armed conflicts have not even become the subject of thorough descriptions. And for those cases in which good and dense descriptions are available, the authors have used a wide variety of theoretical orientations, focusing on various issues. As a consequence, these studies are not cumulative but often need synthesis from further theoretical viewpoints.

Within the academic debate there is not even an established understanding of what the term “armed group” includes and excludes. The operational definition of armed groups in this book refers to non-state actors active after 1945. It is evident that the empirical record of this is vast. Using the database of wars after World War II that the “Study Group on Causes of War” at the University of Hamburg established, there have been 206 wars in the period between 1945 and 2000.¹⁰ Given the fact that most groups in wars often show dynamics of fractionalization and splintering, it is plausible to assume that the number of non-state actors in these wars will amount to almost 1,000. The number of groups which might have begun with low levels of violence and withered away after first encountering repressive action is unknown. They, of course, never documented any war statistics. Finer scrutiny began only recently. The “Military Balance”, issued annually by the London based International Institute for Strategic Studies, lists 332 armed groups in 2005 which were active in 28 armed conflicts. India alone, according to this list, had 49 groups fighting within its borders, whereas in Iraq for that same year 26 were listed. These numbers lead to the assumption that in the period after 1945 several thousand groups might have been active. Only of a few of them we have consolidated knowledge. The data that is available and used here for comparative discussion is restricted to cases that are comparatively well documented. This results, of course, in a selection bias which relativizes inferences from this data set. However, with the current state of knowledge on this subject, I do not see a viable alternative to this combination of methodical approaches.

It is always a difficult task to delineate armed groups from mere criminal gangs and also from one another, since one of the early insights we derived from our study of armed groups is their extreme volatility. There are always kernels around which armed groups crystallize and almost always certain centers of authority and forms of hierarchy. But to delineate membership is a tricky task. People, mostly men, join armed groups not

only for different reasons, but also in different forms and functions often for very short periods. Seasonal war-participation, loose collaboration, and permanent shifts of allegiance render it extremely difficult if not impossible to establish a sound empirical register of armed groups. The sheer informality of armed groups makes it too difficult and too intricate an endeavor to attempt such a record, since the result will always be unreliable. As a consequence, there is no all-encompassing list of these groups as most records either do not include all conflicts or indicate boundaries between groups that could be contested with good reasons. A complete register of armed groups is not available, and it is doubtful whether one will ever be compiled, given the low level of documentation of post-colonial states, especially in their early phases.

There are further reasons why it is dubious and unsatisfactory to base an inquiry on armed groups merely on a statistical approach. They involve the quality of the data. The most important reason data on wars are chronically disputable is that these numbers and the information on which they are coded are themselves political. Apart from the usual problems of reliability associated with any data on social life, this political factor renders data on wars problematic, as the case of numbers on war victims might most clearly show (cf. Leitenberg 2006). Numbers on wars are always contested and often construed not least because violence is a subject intricately bound up with morality, and this has the consequence that many aspects of war violence are hidden by secrets and taboos by those involved. Individuals and organizations alike often do not want to give accurate accounts due to feelings of guilt, shame, or fear.

Secondly, the record of wars and armed conflict in that period is incomplete. Many wars are not documented at all, so even the number of conflicts and actors involved is contested in academic debate. This incompleteness is even more dramatic when it comes to information on persons involved and on the interactions within and between warring parties. As a consequence rumors abound and are often taken as reality. Furthermore, media coverage is selective, following other imperatives than to give a thorough account of global events. The peaks and lulls of certain political events and crises also influence the volume and intensity of reporting. While some subjects attract international journalists for long periods of time, others go almost unnoticed.

Thirdly, available information is scattered in archives, books, reports, and not least crucially in memories, in different languages, and in different