

A World of Civil Wars

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Abstract

David Armitage's recent book, *Civil Wars: A History in Ideas*, traces some of the major questions that have accompanied civil wars throughout history. His scrutiny of civil wars delves into their origin and development; the problems involved in defining them; the different treatment given them by historians and social scientists; and the extraordinary scarcity of comparative studies. In this article, I pay attention to Armitage's key ideas and dedicate the final part to examining in what way his work serves to confirm or question interpretations of the Spanish Civil War, the historical case to which I have devoted some of my main research.

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The history of civil wars is full of myths and multiple explanations. Some of these are very simple and direct: behind those conflicts there are always “ancestral hatreds,” of a class, ethnic, or religious nature. Other explanations prefer to go into deeper waters and try to identify the factors that make some societies more prone to violence than others.

Beyond those explanations, however, there is always the same reality: civil wars are cruel, bloody, surgical operations that result in thousands of killings, rapes, large-scale exiles, and—in the most extreme cases—genocides.

Such purifying violence has crossed time periods and borders, from the United States to Rwanda, from Russia to Spain. Far from becoming a relic of previous ages, civil wars tainted the twentieth century and persist with force well into the third millennium. Colonial empires disintegrated, Fascism and Communism fell, cultural and technological revolutions like mass consumption and the digital era came along, and yet still civil wars are being fought, complicating more optimistic outlooks about the global triumph of liberalism and the market economy.

But history teaches us more things: civil wars are intractable conflicts that are very difficult to bring to an end. A minority of civil wars reached their conclusion by means of negotiations and with apparent conciliation. But more typically, civil wars have ended with the complete military victory of one faction over the other. Such is the irony of history: when the warring factions have signed peace agreements, either by themselves or with the help of external mediators, the negotiations have produced more unstable arrangements than those that have followed complete victories of one of the factions.¹ A decisive mili-

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¹ Put another way, a negotiated agreement and the subsequent transition to peace is a tortuous process that does not necessarily stop the violence; Colombia (1948-58), El Salvador (1979-82), Nicaragua (1981-89) and Mozambique (1980-92) constitute good contemporary examples. See Charles King, *Ending Civil Wars* 11-28 (1997).

tary victory of one single faction has almost always brought with it “peace”—accompanied by assassinations, atrocities, and incessant abuses of human rights.²

David Armitage’s recent book, *Civil Wars: A History in Ideas*,³ traces some of the major questions that have accompanied civil wars throughout history. Armitage’s scrutiny of civil wars delves into their origin and development; the problems involved in defining them; the different treatment given by historians and social scientists; and the extraordinary scarcity of comparative studies.

I will refer to all of these in the pages that follow and will dedicate the final part to examining in what way Armitage’s work serves to confirm or question interpretations of the Spanish Civil War, the historical case which to I have dedicated some of my main research.

I. Ideas and Concepts of Civil War

The starting point of Armitage’s book is very clear: since 1945, Europe, North America, and other rich countries, such as Australia and Japan, have experienced “the most enduring in modern history,” referred to as the “Long Peace,” while intrastate wars have increased considerably in the poorest countries. Civil war “has gradually become the most widespread, the most destructive, and the most characteristic form of organized human violence” (5), with roughly twenty-five million “total battle deaths”—about half the military casualties of World War II. But, despite this carnage, intrastate wars have been subject to much less scholarly study. Armitage, on the other hand, demonstrates the significance of this research topic by asserting that ours “is a world of civil war” (8).

Armitage’s journey is ambitious—it is that of someone who prefers the telescope to the microscope, the *longue durée* to the short term.⁴ He selects and surveys three significant periods in the evolution of civil wars through history: Ancient Rome, the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries in Europe, and the contemporary global order. He then scrutinizes their genesis, their transformations, and their applications to the present-day world, in what he terms “the first attempt to portray [civil war’s] metamorphosis over two millennia” (22).

The Romans, according to Armitage, were the first to experience internal conflict as civil war. It was they who introduced two elements “that would create a family resemblance among later conceptions”: first, that war took place “within the boundaries of a single political community” and second, that “there should be at least two contending parties in a civil war, one with a legitimate claim of authority over that community” (57). The Romans bequeathed to posterity the very concept of civil war as well as responses to great questions about this type of conflict and lessons which would be taught and repeated in the centuries since.

² This was the path taken by the revolutions which came out of civil wars in China (1946-49) and Cuba (1958-59); and the counterrevolutions which emerged triumphant in Finland (1918), Greece (1944-49) and Spain (1936-39). I have addressed the latter three cases. Julián Casanova, *Civil Wars, Revolutions and Counterrevolutions in Finland, Spain and Greece (1918-1949): A Comparative Analysis*, 13 *Int’l J. Pol. Cult. & Soc’y* 515 (2000).

³ David Armitage, *Civil Wars: A History in Ideas* (2017).

⁴ The *longue durée* and “deep history,” as opposed to the tyranny of the present and the short term, has previously been defended. Jo Guldi & David Armitage, *The History Manifesto* (2014).

Armitage concludes, in that detailed approach to the first major period in which the idea and concept of civil war was born, that the Roman canon—from Caesar to Augustine—gave rise to three types of enduring and influential narratives. The first, a republican one, identified Ancient Rome as not “civilized” at all, but instead as a bellicose state with a propensity for civil war. In the second, the imperial one, civil war was “a persistent disease of the body politic” and the only memory was “the restoration of monarchy or the exaltation of an emperor.” Lastly, there was a Christian narrative, “in which civil war was the besetting sin of a city or Commonwealth dedicated to the things of this world rather than to the glory of God.” These three narratives were applied to later sequences of political disturbances and were active in Europe until well into the eighteenth century (88-89).

The memory of civil wars in Rome served as an inspiration for political and literary thought at the dawn of the modern age in Europe—from Niccoló Machiavelli to Samuel Daniel, by way of Michel de Montaigne—and helped to shape perceptions of conflict beyond Europe in the Spanish conquest of the Americas. In the eighteenth century, the subject of civil wars entered into the realm of legal and political philosophy and, once again, the perspectives originating in Ancient Rome set the terms of the debate.

A new narrative emerged in the late eighteenth century, at a moment in which the American and French Revolutions were establishing the bases of modern emancipation. From that moment on, over two centuries through to the fall of communism in 1989, revolutions were seen as something transformative and constructive. This view contrasted with the destructive memories of civil wars, casting revolutions as essential moments in the progressive liberation of humanity, an idea that had already emerged with the Enlightenment.

Thus the idea that revolutions and civil wars were distinct took root, especially in the clear distinction between the disasters and profound divisions brought about by civil wars on the one hand and the hopes and egalitarian dreams of revolutions on the other.⁵

The fact that there was no entry for the concept of *guerre civiles* in Diderot and d’Alembert’s *Encyclopédie*, the great work of Enlightenment thought, constitutes a “significant indication of how successful the *philosophes* thought their age had been at eradicating the problem” (123-24). Yet, in spite of those optimistic visions and unshakable beliefs in progress, civil wars neither ended nor disappeared from history. On the contrary, “the age of revolutions was also to be an age of civil wars” (120).

Around that time, in the eighteenth century, contemporary European thinkers distinguished three types of civil war: “successionist” ones, which emerged out of disputes surrounding dynastic successions that had plagued monarchical regimes since medieval times; “supersessionist” ones, in which opposing parties “battled for authority over a sin-

⁵ Armitage adds that “since at least the collapse of Communism, however, it has been much harder to view revolutions without an acute awareness of the violence and human devastation that attend them too. As a result, after 1989, the comparative study of that noble creature, revolution, declined rapidly even as the study of that rough beast, civil war, boomed.” Armitage, *supra* note 3, at 122; see also Reinhart Koselleck, *Historical Criteria of the Modern Concept of Revolution*, in *Futures Past: On the Semantics of Historical Time* 43 (Keith Tribe trans., 2004).

gle territory”; and “secessionist” ones, a relatively recent type, in which one part of the political community breaks with and affirms its independence from existing political authority. The consummate example of that form, which would be imitated all over the contemporary world, was the War of Independence fought by what would become the United States against Great Britain in 1776; another notable precedent was the Dutch Revolt against the Spanish Monarchy in the 1580s (126-28).

If we owe the original concept of civil war to the Romans, the origins of the modern take on revolution lie in Revolutionary France. Before 1789, a “year zero” of sorts for the contemporary world, revolutions were described as inevitable natural phenomena that were repeated in cyclical form. After 1789, “revolutions in the plural became revolution in singular” (148), and were transformed from phenomena beyond human control into voluntary and calculated acts.

Not everyone, however, thought this was a valid characterization. Edmund Burke, who had already conceptualized the seventeenth-century Glorious Revolution in England as a civil war, repudiated the notion of revolution for the French case. In his *Reflections on the Revolution in France*, Burke argued that France at the time was a nation divided and mired in a state of civil war—two nations, one of which acted in the name of the king and the other of which acted under the banner of the people, laying claim to a single sovereignty.

With his conflation of revolution and civil war, Burke was, in Armitage’s estimation, looking to “undermine the legitimacy of the revolution” (156), an interpretation embraced later by historians who believe all modern revolutions can be considered at the same time civil wars. The Bolshevik Revolution in October 1917, now celebrating its hundredth anniversary, would be another major example. In light of these contributions, Armitage suggests considering seriously “the hypothesis that a civil war was the genus of which revolution was only a species” (158).

In the almost century-and-a-half between the French and Russian Revolutions, there were more wars between states and civilians than revolutions; and, during the middle decades of the nineteenth century, there was a global explosion of violence that accompanied the consolidation of capitalism and the construction of national states.⁶ From the American Revolution onwards, secessions often led to civil wars, to the point that secessionist conflicts “constituted more than a fifth of all wars in the past two centuries accounting for a substantial portion of the civil wars in that period” (170).

And from the beginning of that global era of civil wars and revolutions came the paradox that the European powers tried to control and regulate their conflicts—to subject them to the law—whilst they demonstrated intense brutality in their treatment and subjugation of non-European peoples, who were not even considered human. That dissonance between supposed civilization and barbarism has been revised in recent years by histori-

⁶ Charles Tilly was one of those authors who argued most forcefully for the connection between political violence and the construction of the nation-state. See Charles Tilly, *War Making and State Making as Organized Crime*, in *Bringing the State Back In* 169 (Peter B. Evans et al. eds., 1985).

ans who have attempted to explain the age of extremes into which Europe fell between 1914 and 1945.⁷

Following that era of “moral atrocity,” as Charles Maier describes it,⁸ the second half of the twentieth century would witness “the globalization of civil war” (199). This globalization introduced new components to the conceptualization of civil war, such as that civil wars gradually came under the jurisdiction of international institutions; they replaced wars between states as the most typical and extensive form of organized violence; and the scenarios in which civil wars took place were extended, with the idea of a “European civil war” giving way to a “global civil war” (200).⁹

That “globalization of civil war” also coincided with a growing interest in the topic on the part of the social sciences, especially in the United States. This was inspired by the Cold War and the wars of decolonization, out of which sprung a surge in efforts to find definitions, interpretations, and theories, a pursuit aided by the empirical research of historians based on primary materials. The result has been a lack of consensus on how to define a civil war as well as how to differentiate it from other types of wars and conflagrations of armed violence. This is what Armitage reveals in his conclusion, “Civil Wars of Words.”

What is the historian to do in the face of so much terminological and interpretative discord? The answer: comb through the complexity and seek out different meanings, an approach that has been taken ever since the Romans first coined the term. The task of the historian, concludes Armitage, is not to search for the best definition of civil war, but rather to study its provenance and historical meaning for those who experienced those wars. Armitage postulates that “[c]ivil war is, first and foremost, a category of experience . . . refracted through language and memory . . . an experience framed by the conceptual heritage of civil war” (238-39).

Armitage’s argument of understanding civil wars “in the realm of ideas that are both inherited and contested” (239) is consistent in his journey through two millennia of history. In order to offer that *longue durée* perspective, his research is based on dozens of sources, handled expertly and with a profound knowledge.

Nevertheless, Armitage poses certain questions that can be debated or complemented from the light shed on the matter by other recent research.

⁷ Eric Hobsbawm, *The Age of Extremes: The Short Twentieth Century, 1914-1991* (1994); see also Ian Kershaw, *To Hell and Back: Europe 1914-1949* (2015); Ian Kershaw, *War and Political Violence in Twentieth-Century Europe*, 14 *Contemp. Eur. Hist.* 107 (2005); Robert Gerwarth, *The Vanquished: Why the First World War Failed to End, 1917-1923* (2016).

⁸ Charles Maier, *Consigning the Twentieth Century to History: Alternative Narratives for the Modern Era*, 105 *Am. Hist. Rev.* 807, 812 (2002).

⁹ Voltaire’s argument that “all Europeans wars are civil wars” was followed by various authors throughout the next two centuries, before the concept of a “European civil war” was applied to the period between 1914 and 1945. In this regard, Ernst Nolte’s work, published first in Germany—and for which there is no English translation—was very influential and controversial. Ernst Nolte, *Der europäische Bürgerkrieg: Nationalsozialismus und Bolschewismus* (1987). Enzo Traverso addressed that European civil war in more detail, with a very different interpretation. Enzo Traverso, *A feu et a sang: De la guerre civile européenne 1914-1945* (2007); see also my approach in Julián Casanova, *Europa contra Europa: 1914-1945* (2011).

II. The Central Role of the State

Beyond the characterization of civil war as an extreme, violent act, the main approach taken in this recent research underscores the close relationship between civil war and the break with sole sovereignty or internal state order. Taking this argument into account, one can trace a clear division between civil wars in Antiquity and the Middle Ages, and those that took place in modern states.¹⁰ The definition of civil war derived from this context implies a break with sovereignty and the state's monopoly on violence. Contemporary invocation of the term "civil war" therefore "refers to an armed conflict primarily within the boundaries of an internationally recognized state."¹¹

The definition put forward by Stathis N. Kalyvas, one of the authors who has extensively examined the methodological and interpretative problems of civil wars, highlights that same close relationship between the politics and the nature of the state: "[A]rmed combat taking place within the boundaries of a recognized sovereign entity between parties subject to a common authority at the outset of the hostilities." According to that definition, a civil war comprises a militarized conflict of at least "two competing sides" and involves a challenge "directed against the authority of the current holders of sovereign authority."¹²

That definition also helps establish two distinct types of civil wars that have occurred over the last three centuries: conventional civil wars and irregular or non-conventional asymmetrical wars. The conventional war—which, according to Kalyvas, "entails face-to-face confrontation between regular armies across clear frontlines"—emerged out of either failed military coups, like the Spanish Civil War of 1936-39, or secession attempts by federal or quasi-federal states, such as the American Civil War of 1861.

There is a plentitude of irregular, or "guerrilla," civil wars throughout modern history, and one could say that irregular civil war is the most common type nowadays.¹³ Modern civil wars are not simply the result of a politico-military rivalry between two opposing factions. In most cases, there was (or is) a clash of different visions of the social order and its central tenets—as well as ideas about how to shore this order up or bring it down—at ex-

¹⁰ The definition here ascribed to the term "state" is that proffered by Max Weber:

an administrative and legal order subject to change by legislation, to which the organized activities of the administrative staff, which are also controlled by regulations, are oriented. This system of order claims binding authority, not only over the members of the state, the citizens . . . but also to a very large extent over all action taking place in the area of its jurisdiction. It is thus a compulsory organization with a territorial basis. Furthermore, today, the use of force is regarded as legitimate only so far as it is either permitted by the state or prescribed by it.

Max Weber, *Economy and Society* 56 (Guenther Roth & Claus Wittich eds., 1968).

¹¹ Edward Newman, *Understanding Civil Wars: Continuity and Change in Intrastate Conflict* 59 (2014).

¹² Stathis N. Kalyvas, *Civil Wars*, in *The Oxford Handbook of Comparative Politics* 417 (Carles Boix & Susan C. Stokes eds., 2007).

¹³ Id. at 427; see also Eduardo González Calleja, *Las guerras civiles: Perspectiva de análisis desde las ciencias sociales* 64-65 (2013).

traordinarily convulsive moments. It is a question, above all, of a profound social crisis with clear features of class conflict, national integration, and religious or ethnic divisions.¹⁴

The Spanish Civil War is an exemplary case study for reviewing some of the main themes in Armitage's book: the definition of this type of armed conflict, its causes and consequences, the tremendous violence it unleashed, internationalism, and the tensions between history and memory.

III. Spain Split in Half

The Civil War is undoubtedly the central event in twentieth-century Spanish history.¹⁵ The military coup against the Second Republic, in July of 1936, was unable to bring about a rapid seizure of power. The uprising engendered a deep divide in the army and security forces, weakening the republican state and setting the stage for armed struggle, military rebellion, and popular revolution wherever the rebels failed to meet their objectives. Spain was split in two and remained riven over the thousand days that the war lasted.

The Civil War came about because the military coup d'état failed to achieve its basic objective at the outset—which was to seize power and overthrow the republican regime—and because, unlike the events in other republics of the time, there was comprehensive resistance, both military and civil, to counter any attempt at imposing an authoritarian system. The breakdown of public order facilitated the rise of non-state military actors and the recruitment of militias. Had it not been for this combination of coup d'état, division of the armed forces, and comprehensive resistance, there would likely never have been a civil war.

Despite all that has been said about the violence that preceded the Civil War, in an attempt to explain its outbreak, it is clear that the coup d'état of July, 1936, marked a watershed in twentieth-century Spanish history. Furthermore, for at least two decades after the end of the Civil War in 1939, there was no positive reconstruction, such as had occurred in other countries in Western Europe after 1945.

The Spanish Civil War is largely remembered for the way it dehumanized its adversaries and for the horrific violence that it generated; summary executions and ruthless massacres eliminated enemies, real or presumed, on both sides. If we go by the meticulous research carried out in the last few years by a new generation of historians, there were at least 150,000 victims who paid with their lives for the political violence of the war (with close to 100,000 of those coming in the zone controlled by the military rebels and somewhat fewer than 60,000 in the Republican zone).

The Spanish Civil War represented a violent, politically charged battle over the basic principles around which society and the State were supposed to organize themselves. As far as the Spanish people are concerned, it has gone down in history for the

¹⁴ I previously addressed these conflicting visions and their armed manifestations, with special emphasis on the consequences, for three cases in twentieth-century Europe. See Casanova, *supra* note 2.

¹⁵ Julián Casanova, *The Spanish Republic and Civil War* (2010); Julián Casanova, *A Short History of the Spanish Civil War* (2013); Julián Casanova, *Twentieth-Century Spain: A History* (2014).

appalling violence it generated. But however bloody and destructive it might have been, the Spanish Civil War should also be seen in the light of its international impact, namely the interest and mobilization it caused in other countries.

The war in Spain reinforced the Manichaean outlook of its time: the belief, as Piers Brendon put it, “that the World was the scene of a cosmic duel between good and evil.”¹⁶ The international scene, which had been upended by the ascendancy of Communism and Fascism, regarded Spain as something of a marginal, second-class country before July, 1936—an outlook that changed dramatically as a result of that month’s military uprising. In just a few weeks, the Spanish conflict occupied center stage in the concerns of the main powers, deeply dividing and inflaming public opinion. The country became the flashpoint of the struggle between Fascism, Communism, and democracy.

After the First World War and the triumph of the revolution in Russia, no civil war could be said to be solely internal any more. When the Spanish Civil War began, the democratic powers were trying at all costs to appease the Fascist powers, especially Nazi Germany, instead of opposing those who were threatening the global balance of power. The Spanish Republic therefore found itself at an enormous disadvantage, having to wage war against military rebels who benefitted greatly from an international situation that was favorable to their interests. Dictatorships dominated by authoritarian governments of a single man and a single party were at that time replacing democratically elected governments in many European countries and except for the Soviet Union, all of these dictatorships were based on the ideas of order and authority endemic to the extreme right.

From April 1939 onwards, Spain experienced the heavy-handed peace heralded by Franco’s victory, along with the causes and consequences of the war. Spain was left divided between the victors and the vanquished. Even before the war had ended, Spanish churches were filled with plaques commemorating those who had “fallen in the service of God and the Fatherland,” referring to Franco’s troops—while on the other hand, thousands of Spaniards killed by those troops were not memorialized by so much as a tombstone, and their families are still searching for their remains today.

The Spanish Civil War thus resembles the type of war addressed by Armitage as “supersessionist,” in which “opposing parties battle for authority over a single territory” (126). It also constitutes a paradigmatic example of the connection Armitage establishes between revolution and civil war; a civil war accompanied by a social revolution (an anarchist one, in this case) as intense as the Spanish one did not take place anywhere else in twentieth-century Europe.¹⁷ The history and memory of the Spanish Civil War have also sparked debate over the paradox of terming “civil” a war that involved so much violence, bloodshed, and death.

¹⁶ Piers Brendon, *The Dark Valley: A Panorama of the 1930s*, at 354 (2002).

¹⁷ Julián Casanova, *Anarchism, the Republic and Civil War in Spain: 1931-1939* (2005). For Armitage’s previous interesting reflections on that connection, see David Armitage, *Every Great Revolution Is a Civil War*, in *Scripting Revolution: A Historical Approach to the Comparative Study of Revolutions* 57 (Keith Michael Baker & Dan Edelstein eds., 2015).

The final question in Armitage's book asks what historians can do in the face of so much confusion about the term "civil war." This question is also a pertinent one to ask in the context of that crucial period in Spanish history, the historiography of which has, in recent years, seen much controversy, disagreement, and clashing of opinions over the nature of the Republican regime, the roots of the violence, and especially the violence of the military rebels: whether it was part of a premeditated plan to exterminate those groups considered "out of control" or whether it was inimical to the kind of traditional, hierarchized society they wished to impose.

I conclude with the statement that introduced this discussion: the history of civil war is full of myths and multiple explanations. Armitage's book is an excellent tool to confront these with understanding and rigor, which is the best form the historian has to enquire into the most hidden and traumatic parts of the past.