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Paramilitarism’s Long Twentieth Century

Introduction: A Long Prehistory

How did paramilitarism develop in the modern age? The twentieth century has seen forms of paramilitarism ranging from the Freikorps in Germany early on in the century, to the Sudanese Janjaweed militias a century later, and a myriad of examples and episodes in between. Although these militias all originated under differing conditions and in different societies, their functions, logics, and dynamics demonstrate compelling similarities and instructive differences. This chapter traces the historical context of modern paramilitarism by developing an explicitly global review of these scenarios. As such, the chapter rejects culturalist explanations that paramilitarism is a phenomenon limited to exotic, inherently violent regions such as “the Balkans,” “the Caucasus,” or “Latin America.” On the contrary, it is a truly global phenomenon. Even if no justice can be done to each and every single case of pro-state paramilitarism in the modern age, this chapter will offer a panoramic view of the major cases in the long twentieth century. It will also illustrate how paramilitarism changed from case to case and across time, illuminating key similar issues in different historical contexts.

Modern paramilitarism has a long prehistory. From the oldest cases of state formation to the Islamic State, state-building always required monopolies of violence and taxation. These monopolies of violence were never unchallenged but fluctuated over time and shifted shape. As argued by Charles Tilly in several of his works on the state and warfare, irregular armed forces were necessary to the consolidation of the early modern European state, which used irregular forces for the sake of military conscription, inter-state war, and later even citizenship. As an
(unintended) consequence, the nascent nation states expanded their institutions and capacities. Before we move on to the rise of modern paramilitarism in the twentieth century and beyond, it is useful to take a glance at premodern paramilitaries.

The “Night Watch” (*De Nachtwacht*) is an imposing 1642 painting by the famous Dutch Golden Age painter Rembrandt van Rijn (1606–1669), prominently displayed in the Rijksmuseum in Amsterdam. It depicts Amsterdam’s *Kloveniers* or *schutterij*, the local civic militia guard or town watch consisting of volunteer citizens, tasked to protect and defend their town or village in the event of an external attack and to maintain order in the event of revolt, fire, or prominent visit. Captain Frans Banning Cocq (1605–1655), mayor of Amsterdam, lawyer, lord of castle, and head of the *Kloveniers*, commissioned the *Nachtwacht* around 1639. In the painting, Cocq stands in the center foreground of the company with a walking stick and orders the seventeen members of his company to march. Whereas the painting might look and feel majestic, the militia members initially were discontented about Rembrandt’s portrayal of the group milling about randomly, instead of appearing as a tightly disciplined regiment. But Rembrandt’s sharp eye had seen it well: the elements of the *schutterij* depicted in the *Nachtwacht* are typical for paramilitary self-portrayal. The painting depicts bold masculinity (the only woman is a mascot girl), weapons are brandished, a coat of arms and flag is prominently visible, and all of this accompanied by bombastic music. In a way, the *Nachtwacht* is the original paramilitary selfie, the likes of which we have seen many more times from around the world. Indeed, the *schutterij* is an excellent example of an early modern “paramilitary” vigilante group: it provided a military support system for the local civic authorities, was based on prominent volunteers, was sectarian (as only Dutch Reformed were allowed to join), and gradually gained a sociopolitical dimension. The meeting halls of the *schutterij* also came to be used by its members to discuss and decide on matters of local politics, as well as to organize relief for needy and sick members. The *schutterij* was abolished by decree on 1901, appropriately and symbolically as the

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1 The official name of the painting is “De compagnie van kapitein Frans Banninck Cocq en luitenant Willem van Ruytenburgh maakt zich gereed om uit te marcheren” (“The company of Captain Frans Banninck Cocq and Lieutenant Willem van Ruytenburgh gets ready to march out”).
Netherlands entered the twentieth century. Nowadays, the men of the Night Watch proudly stand as a set of brass statues on Rembrandt Square in central Amsterdam.

The emergence of civil militias was in no way unique for the Netherlands in the early modern period. As the Italian city states of the Renaissance, Venice, Florence, and Genoa, experienced economic growth in the fourteenth century, the need for defense and security increased, and the ruling notables hired mercenaries for the job. The military-service terms and conditions were specified in a “contract” (*condotta*) for the enlisted men, whose captain became the *condottiere*. The *condottieri* were foreign to the land and fought mostly for financial gain (although they also had group loyalties and other motives) through the terms of the contract.\(^2\) The *condottieri* have had a reputation as a brutal, rapacious, and unprincipled mercenary force that were no more than guns for hire, largely due to the influential contemporaneous works of Nicolo Machiavelli, who excoriated them as more a liability than an asset to their Florentine employers.\(^3\) But more critical historical research depicts them as no inferior to armies in terms of their style of warfare and economic and political motives. After all, the word soldier derives from the Latin *soldarius* (“one having pay”). Furthermore, by the late fifteenth century, *condottieri* gradually transformed into permanent forces, much like standing armies, as their *condotti* increasingly acquired permanence and they settled down on land, inhabited palaces, acquired citizenship, and in a way became citizens of their city state.\(^4\) As a political and cultural phenomenon of the Renaissance, “outsourcing” violence to mercenaries can be seen as an early, primitive form of paramilitarism.

Further east, the Florentine mercenaries had their Ottoman counterparts. From the *Akıncılar* to the *Serdengeçti*, irregular warfare was an important aspect of Ottoman military history. In nearly all wars irregulars fought on the battlefield and played political roles on the home front.\(^5\) The symbol par excellence of Ottoman warfare were the Janissaries, the


elite infantry units of the Ottoman army and bodyguards of the Sultan, manned by converted Christian boys who had been taken from the Balkans and trained in Anatolia to fight for the empire. By 1400, they were less than 1,000 men, but they grew steadily and by the early eighteenth century they numbered almost 70,000. Their stereotypes of oriental brutality formed a source of both terror and admiration in the West. But the Janissaries shared with the *condottieri* the characteristic that they could also pose a liability, in this case for their Ottoman rulers. Two aspects of the development of the Janissaries echo some of the later paramilitaries. First, as they gained prestige and power, the Janissaries began capturing significant parts of the Ottoman state, hindering, mutinying, and dictating their will on it, including attempting palace coups. Second, they began to gain influence in non-military areas of Ottoman society, such as landholding and trade. They had become “an independent public corporation.” By the early nineteenth century, the Janissaries had become a serious threat to the Ottoman order: militarily inconsequential, resistant to reform, and a bloated membership caused a downward spiral. In 1826, Sultan Mahmud II violently abolished the Janissary Corps in a large massacre in Istanbul, and began establishing a European-style conscript army, which laid the foundations for the modern Turkish army as we now know it.

The Ottoman experience is relevant for the fact that both an insurgent, incipient state (such as Greece), and the incumbent (the Ottoman government) used irregular forces, especially in the nineteenth century. As the nascent and expanding Greek state struggled with pacifying the country and monopolizing violence in a sustained way, it attempted to bring under its control the manifold gangs that engaged in local brigandage and peasant forms of social justice. However, for decades the state was not able to carry this out even in a patchy way, and at the beginning of the twentieth century gangs still roamed the countryside. Therefore, rather than repression, it adopted a strategy of incorporation and cooptation, which proved more fruitful in establishing internal security, but reinforced the political power base of the irregular fighting

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groups (see Chapter 3). The Ottoman case is also relevant for its portrayal in Western political and public discourse, the empire’s reputation, and shifting international norms of legitimate violence. During the “Bulgarian Horrors” (the Ottomans’ counterinsurgency in subduing the 1876 Bulgarian rebellion), Western media Otherized the Ottoman Empire as a rogue state using irregular militia violence (bashibozouks) against civilians, urging for military intervention.

It was no coincidence that much violence, including property crimes, were committed in the Greek–Ottoman borderlands, an inherently unstable and porous area where Greek irredentists staged uprisings in an effort to encroach upon Ottoman land. On the other side of the Ottoman Empire, Sultan Abdulhamid II established the Hamidiye Corps, an irregular Kurdish tribal militia named after the Sultan himself. These regiments were supposedly tasked to patrol the Russo-Ottoman frontier, but they ended up as a violent counterinsurgency force against Armenians in the eastern borderlands. In both cases, the use of irregular forces was formative to state-building and expanding the range and depth of state power. In both cases, the states were unable to prevail over organized violence outside its own monopoly, and therefore coopted and funneled that repository of violence into two useful channels: irredentist activity to project externally, and the formation of paramilitary units for use internally. Both were utilitarian and legitimizing moves. A similar argument, then again, can be made for the Russian Empire, in which irregular fighting forces were highly influential in the conquest of borderland regions as pro-state militias, as well as in the emergence of new states as insurgent groups. For example, “a specific feature of the Caucasus front was the extensive use of irregular troops to support the main army,” such as the Terek-Mountaineer Irregular Horse Regiment’s Ossetian division. At the same time, it was the irregular military culture of the Cossacks within the Russian Empire that impacted Ukrainian nationalism.

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The Rise of Modern Paramilitaries, 1900–1945

In many ways, paramilitarism experienced its heyday in the first half of the twentieth century. From the Balkan Wars to World War I, and its immediate aftermath, paramilitary forces were active across Europe in different national settings and revolutionary convulsions. The interwar period also saw several significant moments of paramilitarism both in Europe and the colonies, whereas the rise of Nazism catapulted paramilitaries, old and young, to the helm of global power. This violent epoch also saw a movement of paramilitarism from the periphery to the center, both geographically and politically: what had (wrongly) been perceived as a uniquely Balkans or Southeast European phenomenon now marched through the high streets of Vienna, and what had been brushed off as mountain brigands ascended to the corridors of power. Paramilitarism would leave an indelible mark on the politics and culture of the societies that experienced the phenomenon most intensely. Two societies have been studied particularly well for their paramilitary movements: Germany and the Southern Balkans.

The entanglement of banditry, politics, and paramilitarism has too often been reduced to a Balkan Sonderweg. The Orientalist image of “rough” bands committing “wild” violence without purpose or ideological direction has been influential up to and including the Yugoslav wars of dissolution. But paramilitarism in the former lands of the great land empires (Romanov, Habsburg, and Osman) was a product of the erosion of imperial authority and legitimacy, and the rise of modern ideologies like nationalism and communism in these multi-ethnic lands. At the same time, paramilitarism could also be a product of modernizing states’ attempts to assert their authority over particular populations and regions. Greece in this period is an instructive example of how these processes functioned. On the one hand, when the state weakened due to overreach during the Greco-Turkish war, paramilitaries filled the power vacuum and operated freely by taxing peasants and providing security to the countryside. On the other hand, paramilitary gangs in the northern borderlands also went through a process by which they were

transformed to statesmen and played an important role in the Greek nation-building process.13

These processes and structures were in place well before a decade of war and conflict struck the land empires. The Balkan Wars of 1912–13 were as much paramilitary wars as they were regular, state-on-state wars between standing armies. Both Serbia and Bulgaria used paramilitaries as auxiliaries who could provide local intelligence and pursue the states’ nationalist agendas of homogenizing populations and territories by expelling and assaulting minority populations.14 For example, on November 10, 1912, Bulgarian komitadjis destroyed the Muslim villages of Maden, Topuklu, and Davud, killing most inhabitants within earshot of the Bulgarian military authorities. The violence then became more participatory, as the paramilitaries forced Bulgarian civilians to participate in the killing of their neighbors. The Bulgarian authorities then announced that Muslim properties, including farmland, would be distributed among the Bulgarians.15 But these paramilitaries were not simply buttons to push or guns for hire. They were deeply concerned with pursuing their own agendas and were in conflict with other, similar gangs, and, importantly, even with the official state authorities that provided them cover. These conflicts, not atypical for paramilitarism elsewhere, would drag on well after the Ottoman defeat in the Balkan Wars.

The Serbo-Croatian word for “gang,” četa (from which the word “Chetnik” is derived) was the same word as its Turkish equivalent çete. Indeed, on the other side of the border, the Turkish-nationalist leaders of the Committee for Union and Progress (CUP) were establishing their own paramilitary infrastructure. The loss of the 1912–13 Balkan Wars and the CUP coup d'état of January 23, 1913 marked a critical shift in the nature of paramilitary violence in this period as political violence became commonplace. The CUP carried out assassinations of its political opponents through its paramilitary gangsters loyal to factions

around Talaat Pasha and especially Enver Pasha. His *fedayis*, assassins who were to literally “sacrifice” (*feda*) themselves for the cause, rose to state power. Their experiences of paramilitary warfare in the Balkans countryside were transplanted into the offices of the Ottoman government under the auspices of the “Special Organization” (*Teşkilât-ı Mahsusa*). This was initially an intelligence service that sought to foment insurrection in enemy territory and conduct espionage, counter-espionage, and counter-insurgency tasks. In 1914, it absorbed all other paramilitary groups under its wing and would be the CUP’s key agency in perpetrating the Armenian Genocide of 1915. It was given clear tasks and widespread impunity to carry out massacres, arson, and plunder against the Ottoman Armenian communities, even if some individual members were reined in by the central authorities for excesses.

Germany, too, saw deeply influential paramilitary movements in the immediate aftermath of the Great War. These were mostly pro-state or pro-status quo volunteer forces, in which many Germans saw the use of paramilitary force to pursue political objectives. Described as *Selbstschutz* (self-defense), *Selbsthilfe* (self-help), or *Gegengewerkschaften* (counter-unions), they were a type of state-condoned vigilantism against social change. In a way, paramilitary activity was born of necessity to fill the gaps in interior security that Germany experienced in the aftermath of the war and the 1918 revolution. There were three types of volunteer forces: The *Freikorps* (Free Corps), the *Zeitfreiwilligenverbände* (Auxiliary Volunteer Forces), and the *Einwohnerwehren* (Civil Guards). The *Zeitfreiwilligenverbände* were not continually under arms and as mobile as the *Freikorps*, but only became functional in emergencies; they received monthly training and were part-time (therefore popular with adventurous students), and were attached to a *Freikorps*, which in turn was made up of former army officers. The *Einwohnerwehren* were

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19 Andreas Wirsching, *Vom Weltkrieg zum Bürgerkrieg? Politischer Extremismus in Deutschland und Frankreich 1918–1933/39* (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 1999), 234.
strictly relegated to their neighborhoods, had police rather than military functions, and included broader segments of society including non-draftable civilians and members of rifle clubs. Their nature and precise operational tasks differed, but all three shared one characteristic: they were anti-Republican. By creating them, or allowing them to be created, the German government took a risk. When it failed to control them, the government lost the “monopoly of armed force and sowed the seeds for the later paramilitary activity that was to plague the Republic.”

These groups illustrate the mutually beneficial way in which states and paramilitaries have colluded: the state thought they were useful in case of a foreign attack and provided cover, and the paramilitaries used this cover to pursue their political goals with extraparliamentary, violent means.

From west to east, World War I was indeed the major watershed that gave birth to a veritable paramilitary moment in its immediate aftermath. In Ireland, the Auxiliary Division and the Black and Tans were conducting a broad counterinsurgency operation against the IRA, killing civilians suspected of ties with the insurgents and even burning Cork city (December 11–12, 1920). At the same time, Kemal Atatürk’s paramilitary gangs, under the leadership of his ruthless commander Nureddin Pasha, were razing the villages of the Koçgiri Kurds in Eastern Turkey before they moved on to burn Smyrna to the ground not much later. As Robert Gerwarth argues in The Vanquished, the violent tremors of the post-World War I period bore little resemblance to the strictly inter-state military warfare that occurred between 1914 and 1918. The aim here was not a military defeat of the enemy to force him to terms, but existential violence that was an attack on (or by) the new political establishments that attempted territorial change and nation-state building in multi-ethnic territories. Regardless of their

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particularities and national differences, these groups had several attributes in common. First were their nebulous identities (even if they were official): whether they were dressed in civilian or military gear (or a blend), they were often war veterans who were disillusioned or unemployed. But they were not apolitical, drunk fighting bands who were in it for the glorification of violence or the camaraderie only; on the contrary, there were clear political goals. Paramilitaries longed for “order” in what they perceived as a hostile world of democratic egalitarianism, upcoming feminism, and communist internationalism. They were also deeply authoritarian milieus that desired a definitive “cleansing” of the nation—politically, religiously, and ethnically. Their most important characteristic may well have been their commission of brutal forms of violence against civilians. Hence it was no coincidence that those tasked with carrying out orders for massacre and expulsion were paramilitary groups.25

The violent actors of the postwar period presided over a new cycle of violence when they seized power in the right-wing dictatorships in the 1930s. From the prominent Freikorps paramilitaries who first fought communists and then rose in the Nazi bureaucracy, to the Hungarian Arrow Cross leaders, who first persecuted and then helped exterminate Hungarian Jews, to the Turkish deportation bosses who expelled the Thracian Jews in 1934 and then destroyed the Dersim Kurds in 1938—wartime and interwar paramilitarism was their formative political experience.26 This paramilitary culture shaped the intellectual and political environment from which radical right-wing movements and political parties were able to grow. In World War II, paramilitarism was elevated to a wholly different level, so much so that in Ukraine, for example, the Ukrainian Insurgent Army (UPA), strictly a non-state rebel group, bore strong resemblances to the pro-state paramilitary units that roamed elsewhere in Europe and refused to disarm and demobilize. Finally, Nazi Germany was a veritable paramilitary state: the SS was a crucial agency of security, surveillance, and terror, relatively autonomous from both army and police, and most importantly, it did not primarily have a military function, but the targeting of civilians for political or ethnic reasons.

26 Gerwarth, The Vanquished, 257.
Interwar paramilitarism was not a strictly European matter either. In China, weak central government control meant that provincial governors and three major warlord groups fought over the country for most of the interwar period: the Anhui, Zhili, and Fengtian cliques were successful in building up fiscal and military strength and controlling large parts of China. Each of these groups was “a confederation of warlords who were loosely brought together by their personal loyalty to the clique leader.”

The final victory of the nationalists in 1928 only solidified the rule of the warlords and had a profound impact on Chinese state formation. A typical Chinese warlord (junfa) was Zang Zhiping (1869–1944), who controlled the city of Xiamen by extorting the local banks and offering security in return. In Guangdong, it was the federalist lawyer Chen Jiongming (1878–1933), who ruled the province for much of the 1910s and 1920s and was critical of centralized authoritarian government.

These racketeers-turned-statebuilders profoundly transformed state–society relations in China by developing the country’s public infrastructure, modernizing warfare, and maintaining a fragile balance between the various regions where warlord factions ruled. After 1928, it was first the nationalists, and then the communists, who inherited these developments and put them to their own use.

Latin America saw its first paramilitary structures crystallize in the interwar period, during which fascist movements emerged across the continent. In Argentina, nationalist, xenophobic, and authoritarian armed irregular groups such as the Argentine Civic Legion (LCA: Legión Civica Argentina) bore the hallmarks of paramilitarism. The LCA was initially conceived of as a reserve for the Argentine armed forces, but quickly developed into a violent militia that would foreshadow those that nestled in the state in the 1970s. It committed a plethora of violent acts against its political opponents, covered by the Argentine president and military dictator José Félix Uriburu, who had founded the movement

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and came into power in a 1930 coup d'état. General Uriburu whitewashed the Legión as “an absolutely apolitical organization that pursues the highest objective a corporation can seek, the defense of the Fatherland and of order.” However, it would have been more realistic to portray the LCA as a quintessentially pro-state militia. It, too, consisted of nationalist students and graduates drawn from across social classes. It, too, led noisy marches through the streets of Buenos Aires and other cities, intimidating and assaulting Jews and socialists in ways that were very similar to their German counterparts in that same decade. The comparisons between interwar Latin American dictatorships and contemporaneous European fascism were just as striking as the historical continuities of militia activity within Latin American societies.

The Postwar Era

This section looks at two parallel and mirroring, but antagonistic, paramilitary constructs in the post-World War II period: the Soviet-led paramilitary groups in the new communist regimes in Central and Eastern Europe, and the paramilitary strategies that the US and NATO pursued in Western Europe, such as in Italy and Turkey.

By the end of 1948, the Soviet Union had installed communist rule in all of Central and Eastern Europe, and communism was rapidly consolidating its grip on power in Poland, Czechoslovakia, Romania, Hungary, Bulgaria, and more independently from the USSR, Yugoslavia. One of the major mechanisms of control apart from Moscow’s permanent military and police threat, as well as broad censorship, was the co-opting of parts of the civilian population in these countries. Whereas the school system and the army were time-tested methods of nation-building and forging a community, the creation of paramilitary organizations was a different initiative. Communist regimes set up paramilitary organizations

for teenagers and young adults in every Eastern European country, but on different scales, in different institutional contexts, and with different aims. In a way, they were all based on the Soviet DOSAAF (ДОСААФ), the Volunteer Society for Cooperation with the Army, Aviation, and Navy, a popular defense organization originally established in 1927, renamed in 1951, and abolished in 1991. The objective of DOSAAF was “active cooperation for strengthening the military capability of the country and for preparing workers for the defence of their socialist homeland.” The society aimed to prepare reserves for the Soviet army and its activities ranged from ordinary sports such as running and swimming to outright military training skills such as radio signaling, parachuting, and firing guns. Among Soviet youth it was a source of status and excitement, and they could earn badges and prizes by excelling in the activities.

Organizations similar to DOSAAF sprung up in Eastern European states too. Close descriptions of their establishment and (early) functioning offer useful insights into how they were embedded in state structures, and how they were perceived by ordinary citizens. For example, in Czechoslovakia, workers, pupils, and students were signed up for paramilitary training in the Union for Cooperation with the Army (Svaz pro spolupráci s armádou, Svazarm). Svazarm was a large paramilitary organization, and even though many of its activities resembled that of the Boy Scouts rather than a proper paramilitary group, it instructed teachers to collaborate with officers in recruiting high schools kids, especially for shooting, and twice a week for throwing grenades. However, the Czechoslovakian military saw this training as insufficient and therefore Svazarm members as dilettantish. Factory workers, too, due to an apparent lack of enthusiasm, were urged to enter paramilitary training. On March 26, 1952, a Major Tomek Václav gave a speech at the large Praga factory and urged workers to sacrifice more than the usual

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three hours per week of paramilitary training, and include training in machine guns.\textsuperscript{36} In some cases, there were problems with the skills provided to the trainees. In late November 1951, railway infrastructure near the town was vandalized near the town of Brno. A major security operation revealed that after their paramilitary training program local school kids had “gotten the idea to use their newly acquired skills on the railway platforms.” The security services urged teachers to rein in the youth and admonish them not to vandalize anything.\textsuperscript{37}

Svazarm continued to exist until the end of communism; in fact, it reached its apogee in the 1980s, with both “physical education” remaining the principal ingredient of paramilitary training, as well as profound ideological training. This trend had followed complaints from the state leadership that the army had been gradually weakened due to alcoholism and bullying, but “even worse” due to pacifism and low morale, reduced physical fitness and general disillusionment. The emphasis had therefore shifted to strengthening the paramilitary sector. To that end, special law no.73/1973 was passed, and every citizen was required to take part in paramilitary education. Within years, the ranks of Svazarm swelled, and by 1981, according to one report, “the expansion and intensification of paramilitary training have reached their high point this year...surpassing the 1950s.”\textsuperscript{38} In 1988, Czech academic Zdenek Hronek wrote an article entitled “In Support of the Development of Paramilitary Education in our Schools,” in which he justified the training as crucial to the defense of “homeland” and the “victory of Communism,” and listed its four elements as moral and ideological (hatred of the “class enemy”), specialized technological military preparation, physical readiness, and psychological conditioning. He also complained that the previous decade saw “liberal, pacifist, and...fatalistic opinions on war,” therefore urging a stronger paramilitary concept.\textsuperscript{39}


In the German Democratic Republic, there were several mass organizations, some of which provided (para)military training exercises, such as the Society of Sports and Technical Training (Gesellschaft für Sport und Technik), which had physical fitness training and firing ranges (shooting as sports) and numbered up to 60,000 in the mid 1950s. But the equivalent of DOSAAF and Svažarm were the Combat Groups of the Working Class (Kampfgruppen der Arbeiterklasse, KdA). Established in August 1953, not coincidentally two months after the workers’ uprising, Western intelligence reports noticed their continuity with the Nazi paramilitary organizations the Sturmabteilung or the Werkschutz. The two main reasons that they were perceived as such were their recruitment from “party actives,” but especially the secrecy surrounding their nature. One report notes that their secrecy was “the mark of a terror organization,” since no outsider was to know their details, even their training camps being secret. Training consisted of map reading, marching, compass, shooting, “close combat” (Nahkampf), and political training. A key objective of the KdA was to seize the element of surprise in para-police actions like suppressing demonstrations, house clearings, and defense of factories. After the uprising, they were restructured, but their links with party (district) secretaries and (district) police chiefs remained as close as ever.

In Bulgaria, the Voluntary Organization for Assisting Defense (Доброволна организация за съдействие на отбраната, DOSO) was established in 1947, and was run by General Vladimir Stoitchev. There were committees at provincial, district, town, and village level, and workers at state factories were also inducted. One defector reported in 1955:

Every Tuesday we were assembled for instruction in the use of the ‘Vintovka’ rifle and its spare parts. The course was followed by exercises and drill during which we practiced target shooting by using

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42 Volker Koop, Armee oder Freizeitclub? Die Kampfgruppen der Arbeiterklasse in der DDR (Bonn: Bouvier, 1997).
dummy cartridges. Once we were led to a forest where we underwent training in defensive and offensive operations. The exercises held by this organization are called Pre-Military Training (Predvoeno Obutchenie).43

Shooting classes were obligatory, in both light and heavy machine guns. To become a member of DOSO, the applicant had to produce a certificate of study and behavior from DSNM (the Dimitrov Union of People's Youth), and a personal biography. Since 1951, thousands of civilians had been trained every year to be “ready both to work for and defend their country.” Training was under the auspices of DOSO, which held annual congresses in Sofia. Every Bulgarian town and village had a branch, and the total membership in 1951 was about 700,000.44 Similar to Czechoslovakia, as the ranks of DOSO swelled, its heyday was the 1980s. In 1977, DOSO was abolished, reorganized, and renamed the Organization for Cooperation in Defense (Организация за съдействие на отбраната) as it took on the role of a central umbrella organization. It upheld the same paramilitary training and “military-oriented sports,” and its basic task was “to coordinate Communist education with military training, especially for the youth.” The omission of the adjective “voluntary” clearly implied that membership of the organization could no longer be regarded as such, and that Bulgaria had made paramilitary training obligatory. Importantly, “neither the statutes of the OCD nor various reports on its activities have ever given any indication as of the agency in charge of it,” and apparently the Ministry of Defense only had indirect control of it.45

From the Hungarian Voluntary Defense Association, to the Romanian Direcția Generală a Rezervelor de Muncă (DGRM), the Estonian Всегда готов к работе и обороне (BGTO), and the Service to Poland (Slusba Polsce) and League of Soldiers’ Friends (Liga Przyjaciół Żołnierza) in Poland, paramilitarism blossomed in postwar communist countries.

The existence of these organizations is often reduced to either Soviet militarization of society or linked to their particular national prehistories of paramilitarism. But there was a specific global Cold War context to the emergence of these organizations. The impossibilities of nuclear exchanges and mutual fears of invasion drove both the Soviets and the West to establish a veritable paramilitary infrastructure culture on either side of the Iron Curtain. These groups were expected to withstand an invasion or fight as stay-behind forces. At the same time, their internal dynamic produced a certain collective identity and forged specific networks of men (and women) bonding in paramilitary training.

The Soviet Union was by no means the only global power that established covert and secretive paramilitary groups in countries on the fronts of the Cold War. The United States of America created, developed, or supported paramilitary infrastructures throughout the world: from Cuba to Turkey to Vietnam and Southern Africa, its Cold War strategy was clearly felt this way. Whether Truman, Kennedy, or Nixon, US presidents were all involved in (support for) covert operations through the country’s main intelligence agency, the CIA. After all, the CIA’s main objectives in the Cold War were to promote American influence and interests and combat communism globally, including in covert action operations.46 These movements appeared simultaneously to the liberation of Europe in the 1940s and the emergence and expansion of NATO. Some of these were nebulous “stay-behind armies,” while others were existing rural or urban gangs or even organized crime circles given empowerment and legitimization. As such, the post-World War II period shared similarities with the post-World War I period in terms of contractions and expansions of state power as the primary opportunity structures for paramilitary violence.

Italy is a good example of the paramilitarization of the security sector, especially in Sicily. Before the American army even landed on Sicily, it is well known that US Naval Intelligence was in prolonged contact with noted New York mobster Lucky Luciano, a liaison literally called Operation Underworld. Even though it was unclear to what extent those contacts were productive, the Allied occupation gave the Mafia more

freedom to operate and grow, for example by appointing several prominent Mafiosi as mayors of Sicilian towns for the Christian Democratic Party. With the communists posing a formidable threat to Allied, Christian Democrat, and Mafia power in Sicily, US authorities saw the need to reinforce anti-communist, pro-American elements, and the Mafia decided to back young bandits like Salvatore Giuliano against the common enemy. Giuliano was for years profoundly violent in a series of killings, kidnappings, and robberies, and purported to defend the poor—as did the communists, ironically. During the period that this vertical nexus was functional, Giuliano’s gang violence took on a specific character and dimension: it focused on communist civilians. The US pressured Sicilian politicians, who in turn either directly enabled or indirectly and tacitly condoned Giuliano in committing violence against the communist movement. This entanglement was beneficial at all levels: the US fought global communism, the Christian Democrats seized control of a key constituency, the Mafia gained political protection, and Giuliano gained fame and power. As the Mafia and Christian Democrats consolidated their power bases in Sicily, this relationship in principle continued to keep men like Giuliano “on a retainer.”

An equally durable and murky influence on Italian politics was the emergence of GLADIO, a NATO plan that foresaw the set-up of “stay-behind” networks operating behind enemy lines in case of a possible Soviet invasion of Western Europe. This transnational resistance movement would support national and local formations in counter-intelligence and counter-insurgency before the communist takeover, and sabotage and assassinations after the takeover. In many ways GLADIO would resemble the European resistance against Nazi occupation. As the Soviet invasion never materialized, but politically strong communist parties threatened the democracies of Europe, this covert paramilitary network purportedly fought a secret war against the political left in every


48 Timothy Newark, *The Mafia at War: Allied Collusion with the Mob* (Philadelphia, PA: Casemate Publishers, 2012), 275. In fairly typical fashion, the virtually untouchable Giuliano was found assassinated in 1950, most likely “cleaned up” by the Mafia after his services were no longer needed and he became a thorn in their side by drawing carabinieri to Sicily. The parallels with earlier and later bandits are noteworthy.
were involved in a whole series of terrorist operations and human rights violations…and ranged from bomb massacres in trains and market squares (Italy), the use of systematic torture of opponents of the regime (Turkey), the support for right-wing coup d’êtats (Greece and Turkey), to the smashing of opposition groups (Portugal and Spain). 

The extant documentation demonstrates that World War II loomed large in the imagination of the architects of GLADIO. The gloom-and-doom scenario of a Soviet takeover of Europe seems to be equated with the horrific past of the brutal Nazi occupation of the same lands. For example, the earliest reference to “Gladio” we have is a US National Security Council document dated March 15, 1954, which quite explicitly mentions the necessity “to develop underground resistance and facilitate covert and guerrilla operations” in Europe.

In Italy specifically, General Giovanni De Lorenzo signed a formal agreement, kept secret from parliament and civilian oversight, the first of many secret paramilitary operations. In all cases, these paramilitary groups were trained by the British intelligence service, funded by the CIA, authorized by elements of the Italian state, and staffed by operatives who were disproportionately drawn from ex-fascists. A recent source-based cross-cultural examination of GLADIO argued that “the most controversial and difficult question historians have to deal with is the possibility that the networks were involved not only in clandestine but also in illegal activities, ranging from political espionage against ‘domestic’

50 Daniele Ganser, NATO’s Secret Armies: Operation GLADIO and Terrorism in Western Europe (London: Routledge, 2005). This is the only real monograph on GLADIO, but it portrays GLADIO as a uniform, well-oiled conspiracy without glitches or contingencies, and jumps to conclusions using a too narrow source base, too much conjecture, and untenable assumptions.
The burden of evidence is high for these types of events, but it suffices to say that the Italian GLADIO launched a “strategy of tension,” a purposeful violent strategy intended to shift Italy’s political center of gravity to the right. As such, GLADIO was responsible for at least part of a string of explosions, from the bombing of a Milan bank in 1969 (killing sixteen people) to the Bologna train station massacre of August 2, 1980 (eighty-five killed, 200 wounded). GLADIO networks might not have been this violent in Norway or the Netherlands, but in Italy and Turkey, where a communist takeover was entirely plausible in the 1970s, they operated through the ballot and bullet, respectively.

GLADIO did not only exist in Italy. Another important theater of operation was the Republic of Turkey. Turkey not only bordered on the Soviet Union but also had a viable communist movement throughout the Cold War. Furthermore, Turkey had a strong paramilitary prehistory that had successfully served various purposes, including resolving ethnic and political security threats. From the 1950s on, GLADIO geared into these paramilitary organizations and strengthened the violent potential of the Turkish state. The scholarship on these entanglements is shrouded in myth and conspiracy theory, but there is a clear set of established facts. Turkey joined the Western bloc after World War II and NATO in 1952, and its military began liaising intensively with US army and intelligence forces, especially through the Joint United States Military Mission for Aid to Turkey (JUSMMAT). JUSMMAT provided equipment, training, and education to the Turkish army and its officers, including sixteen officers who received training in the US, one of the areas being counter-insurgency warfare. It was within this dense cooperative network that the paramilitary industry flourished.

The first organization to be formally set up was the Mobilization Research Council (Seferberlik Tetkik Kurulu, STK) in September 1952; it was later renamed the Special Warfare Department (Özel Harp Dairesi,


ÖHD) in 1967, Special Forces Command (Özel Kuvvetler Komutanlığı, ÖKK) in 1991, and finally Special Forces (Özel Kuvvetler, ÖK) from 1994. These were funded annually to the tune of US$1 million and housed in the same building as the headquarters of JUSMMAT in Ankara. Whereas the expressed objective of the Special Warfare Department was to combat communism and to protect Turkey against the Soviet communist threat, successive Turkish governments did not restrict its use to communism only. They appear to have employed the ÖHD against a range of political and social movements in Turkey, and the Kurdish, Alevi, Assyrian, and Armenian communities more broadly. One of the most prominent members of the ÖHD was Captain Alparslan Türkeş (1917–1997), later chairman of the extreme right-wing Nationalist Action Party (Milliyetçi Hareket Partisi, MHP) in the 1960s. Another member, Colonel Daniş Karabelen (1898–1983), served in the Korean War (1950–3) as commander of Turkish troops and returned to become the first commander of the ÖHD. The commander of the ÖHD between 1967 and 1974 was Kemal Yamak (1924–2009), who argued in a voluminous and informative but apologetic memoir that the ÖHD was an operation modeled on NATO’s concept of “covert operation,” and that Turkey’s geostrategic location necessitated such an organization.

The parallel biographies of these men span irregular war experiences during the late Ottoman Empire in the Special Organization, counter-insurgency against the Kurdish uprisings in the interwar period, and the anti-communist and anti-minority repression of the 1970s and beyond. The ÖHD institution was a great opportunity for these “autocratic cliques” in the Turkish military to run their own nationalist agendas as a state within a state, a parallel state, or “deep state,” as it became known in Turkish culture. Whereas Turkish elected officials from the left, center, and right all acknowledged that the ÖHD was responsible for many unsolved murders in the post-1950s, they also claimed to have been powerless in counteracting or curbing its activities. The existence of a stay-behind network was publicly disclosed by Turkish Prime Minister

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58 Ecevit Kılıç, *Özel Harp Dairesi* (Istanbul: Timas, 2010), 22–47.
60 Söyler, *The Turkish Deep State*.
Bülent Ecevit in 1973—and later by Italian Prime Minister Giulio Andreotti in August 1990. In both cases, the revelations opened a veritable Pandora’s Box of speculations and allegations. For example, the September 6–7, 1955 pogrom against non-Muslims in Istanbul was carried out for a large part by nationalist masses mobilized most likely by the ÖHD. In the pogrom, Turkish-nationalist mobs ransacked and destroyed Christian and Jewish businesses and houses, raped women, and murdered an Armenian priest. In the 1978 massacre of Alevis in the southeastern city Kahramanmaraş, the ÖHD was heavily implicated by contemporary activists, politicians, and journalists, although no conclusive evidence ever emerged of its involvement in the instigation of the massacre. Finally, when the guerrilla war between the Kurdistan Workers’ Party (PKK) and the Turkish state radicalized in the 1990s, the ÖHD and its paramilitaries really came to the forefront: death squads, disappearances, village burnings, torture, and extrajudicial executions occurred on a massive, unprecedented scale in postwar Turkey. All in all, both in Italy and in Turkey, these groups bore important characteristics of paramilitary groups: covertness and secrecy, plausible deniability, and outsourcing of violence.

As a brainchild of NATO, GLADIO was deeply nurtured as part of US foreign policy. In hindsight, this was hardly surprising, since successive American governments were directly active in fostering paramilitary groups. The CIA organized a covert action department called the Paramilitary Staff Section (PSS) which inserted paramilitary teams into Tibet in October 1950, sponsored irregular Korean groups in the Korean War, and most unsuccessfully attempted to invade southern Cuba to topple the Castro regime in April 1961. Cuba figures as an early, and in any case a prime example, of this trend. The declassification of CIA documents about the Bay of Pigs invasion has offered an improved look into the paramilitary activities of the PSS. Its reports are all stamped “secret” and its founding policy paper heralds “the development of an adequate paramilitary force outside of Cuba, together with the mechanisms for the necessary logistic support of covert military operations on the Island.” After screening, trainers will prepare cadres “at secure locations outside of the US” for six to eight months, all of it “under deep cover as a commercial operation in another country.”

Paramilitary operations of any appreciable size cannot be conducted on a completely covert basis, and the requirement for non-attributability introduces tremendous complications in the accomplishment of what would otherwise be simple tasks. Since paramilitary operations on an increasing scale will probably be required as we face years of cold war in the future, the United States should be prepared to operate more boldly and overtly in this field.63

The failure of the Bay of Pigs invasion taught the US this valuable lesson, one that it would draw on as the Cold War spread to the Global South.

The Cold War in the Global South

Paramilitarism really came to fruition in the Global South during and after the Cold War. From countries as disparate as Argentina and Uganda to Indonesia, paramilitary groups wreaked havoc and irreversibly changed political landscapes. Much of this was related to postcolonial state formation. The postcolonial state typically was unable and, in many cases, unwilling to successfully consolidate its monopoly of violence through sustained centripetal efforts, despite expanding bureaucracies and general centralization. Research on the security structures and cultures of postcolonial states demonstrates the limitations of these new states, but also the “inheritance” of security apparatuses.64 But external involvement was as relevant. On February 17, 1970, US President Richard Nixon signed one of the most prominent documents on paramilitarism ever. He authorized covert actions to undermine communism globally: “By covert action operations I mean those activities which, although designed to further official US programs and policies abroad, are so planned and executed that the hand of the US Government is not apparent.

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63 Ibid., 46–7, emphasis added.
to unauthorized persons… Covert action operations shall include any type of activity necessary to carry out approved purposes except that they will not include armed conflict by regular military forces.”\textsuperscript{65} The two key elements in this document are secrecy and concealment on the one hand, and unconventional warfare on the other hand. This broad authorization would generate paramilitarism in the Americas and beyond, in Asia and Africa, among which the most destructive to human lives were the genocides in Guatemala and Indonesia. Yes, these were culturally and politically very different societies, but both saw similar anti-left campaigns of collective violence, both enjoyed direct US support, and both were carried out by paramilitaries.

Paramilitarism is a sociopolitical process that has become synonymous with Latin America, much like “organized crime” has left an indelible impression on Sicily, or “sectarianism” has become the stereotypical characterization of Lebanon. Throughout the twentieth century, paramilitary and para-police forces have been involved in a series of regional conflicts that have wrought major changes to politics, society, and culture. Therefore, any analysis of the concept should begin with a brief discussion of the main issues relating to Latin American paramilitarism. The paramilitarization of Latin America in the 1970s was a confluence of internal ideological and political polarization and external US support for authoritarianism. Decades of research now convincingly demonstrate that Latin American regimes and political elites deployed paramilitaries in similar ways, not only because of path-dependent trajectories dating back to the 1930s (e.g. Colombia and Mexico), but significantly because of American influence. The United States covertly launched “Operation Condor,” a (para-)military network created in the 1970s to destroy communism in Latin America by eliminating communists collectively and individually. The anticommunist dictatorships in Chile, Argentina, Uruguay, Bolivia, Paraguay, Brazil, Peru, and Ecuador were in principle different states and societies, but strong US coordination through Operation Condor resulted in isomorph paramilitary structures and similarly violent results. Operation Condor was not simply an extension of GLADIO, but a specifically Latin

American project in which the US was much deeper involved at the levels of preparation and instigation, logistical support, and direct operational involvement.66

Both comparative syntheses on the whole region and detailed case studies of particular countries converge on what has driven authoritarian regimes and political elites to employ paramilitaries.67 Four important concerns seem to stand out. First, increasing the number of armed men in a counter-insurgency for the numerical upper hand. This could be significant: for example, out of a total population of 9 million, the Guatemalan army enlisted 900,000 men in paramilitary units during the civil war.68 Second, institutionalizing and consolidating a self-sustaining system. The pro-government Autodefensas Unidas de Colombia, for example, over time became a veritable state within a state in Colombia, controlling the economy in the regions they invigilated, and even infiltrating high politics—a process called parapolítica in Spanish.69 María Ramírez’s research on Colombian paramilitaries suggests that they were not interested per se in taking over the political center, but certainly had a strong interest in controlling territories that the army was unable or unwilling to control.70

Third, not necessarily related to the violence but certainly to winning “hearts and minds,” paramilitarism in Latin America has also assisted certain development plans, services, and infrastructure. Paramilitarism is seen as an “emergency strategy” of regimes allied with the United


67 The literature is too vast to review in any meaningful way. For a typology of paramilitary groups in Latin America, see Kees Koonings and Dirk Kruijt (eds), Societies of Fear: The Legacy of Civil War, Violence and Terror in Latin America (London: Zed Books, 1999), 14–5.


69 León Valencia (ed.), Parapolítica: la ruta de la expansión paramilitar y los acuerdos políticos (Bogotá: Intermedio, 2007).

States government and engaged in a civil war. In a 1996 report, Human Rights Watch called it “a sophisticated mechanism, in part supported by years of advice, training, weaponry, and official silence by the United States, that allows the Colombian military to fight a dirty war and Colombian officialdom to deny it.”71 Indeed, international coverage by the United States government was pivotal in setting up and adapting this system in all aspects of its functioning.72 The system caused a profound disruption of societies: permanent ruptures of social ties between perpetrator groups and victim groups, terror and trauma in victim communities, insecurity caused by impunity, local economic damage resulting from mass displacement, and the criminalization of societies.73 Another important finding that appears in the literature is the notion that a state maintaining a paramilitary structure is a state that is potentially genocidal, because the type of violence that paramilitaries are tasked to carry out, is often exclusively mass violence against civilians. Comparative research on cases of massacre and genocide in Latin America has convincingly demonstrated the central role of paramilitary units in the mass killings. This may not have been the case in all instances of state repression, as in Argentina or Chile for example, but it was certainly so in ethnicity- and class-based massacres in Guatemala and Colombia.74

Fourth, and most importantly for our comparative purposes, is deniability. In a most lucid treatment of paramilitarism in Colombia, Winifred Tate conceptualizes it as “contemporary state practices of privatized and extrastate forms of political violence operating alongside public denial and strategies of concealment” and concludes:

Government security officers supported brutal paramilitary counterinsurgency operations not in spite of their claims to be transparent, accountable, and professional, but because of the contradictory demands

of their local military mission and other international entanglements that required transparency, and accountability, and professionalism.\textsuperscript{75}

McSherry’s comprehensive examinations of Operation Condor also emphasizes the importance of deniability, as “Military rulers could attribute the waves of torture, disappearance, and assassination throughout the region to ‘out-of-control death squads’ or internal disputes within the left,” thereby maintaining even if partially, “an appearance of moderation and legitimacy.”\textsuperscript{76} Green, too, argues that “[p]aramilitaries provide distance and degrees of deniability, even though they inhabit legal frameworks of occasional legality and legitimacy.”\textsuperscript{77} From the incredible to the laughable, deniability has remained one of the most constitutive issues of paramilitarism, whether in the 1970s or in the 2010s.

Paramilitarism was by no means an exclusively Latin American phenomenon. In Asia, the Cold War period saw profound political changes and shake-ups due to paramilitary violence. During the Korean War, for example, the US involvement fostered collaborative relationships between the Rightists paramilitary youth squads, the Korean National Police, and the United States Army Military Government in Korea. The main right-wing youth band was the Northwest Young Men’s Association, admirers of Hitlerjugend and the SS, and often led by retired or active criminals. They were continuously active in forced evictions, labor suppression, political murders, and in several cases in massacres during the Cheju Insurgency.\textsuperscript{78} US involvement was even more influential in Vietnam. The Phoenix Program, a covert CIA campaign to eliminate the Vietcong, similar to Condor or GLADIO, included the Provincial Reconnaissance Units (PRU), heavily armed paramilitaries who were authorized to kill, torture, and detain suspected communists. Most of the PRU’s members were former Vietnamese soldiers who were

\textsuperscript{75} Winifred Tate, \textit{Drugs, Thugs, and Diplomats: U.S. Policymaking in Colombia} (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2015), 85, 86.

\textsuperscript{76} McSherry, \textit{Predatory States}, 244.


\textsuperscript{78} Jonson Porteux, “Police, Paramilitaries, Nationalists and Gangsters: The Processes of State Building in Korea” (PhD dissertation, Department of Political Science, University of Michigan, 2013), 70–85.
motivated by revenge against the Vietcong. In both cases, American anti-communism was the driving force behind the creation of these forces, and in both cases the paramilitaries were empowered, armed, and could act with impunity.

Indonesia had had a long history of pro-state paramilitarism, but the 1965–6 genocide must have been the zenith of paramilitary activity: the army mobilized several different paramilitary groups, from pre-existing ones like Kap-Gestapu, to those who were mobilized after the failed coup like Pemuda Pancasila, Hansip, and Hanra. Whether political party youth or petty criminal gangs, mobilizing pre-existing structures and re-purposing them for mass violence must have been more efficient than spawning them from zero amid the conflict. Melvin’s research on Indonesian military documents seems to have resolved debates on the relationship between the militias and the army, and a consensus has emerged that the army had superior control and outsourced massacres to the paramilitaries. Manufacturing ambiguity was often a stated objective during and after the commission of the violence, even though we can infer from the patterns of violence who the likely perpetrators must have been. The Indonesian army made the genocide appear spontaneous by noting in their documentation that a victim had been slain by “killer unknown.” This fits well in the global history of paramilitarism, as this type of framing and distancing device furthers the notion that killings and massacres are inter-ethnic rivalries, criminal score-settling, and so on, but are in any case spontaneous outbreaks of violence and certainly not of the government’s making. Interestingly, two decades after the 1965 genocide, Indonesia would experience a similar wave of government-sponsored assassinations of suspected criminals. These “mysterious shootings” (penembakan misterius) were later convincingly argued to have been organized by the state, more specifically the army.

The continuities and discontinuities between these two processes of mass violence remain poorly understood.

Right about the time of the Indonesian anti-communist genocide, in China a pro-communist mirror image developed in the Cultural Revolution. From 1966 to 1968, with the personal encouragement of Chairman Mao and his entourage, a generation of students began forming the Red Guards, a mass paramilitary mobilization which grew increasingly violent and targeted “bourgeois” culture and “revisionist” people, in order to restore “true Communism.” The Red Guards persecuted millions of people, who suffered a wide range of abuses from public humiliation to imprisonment and torture, to hard labor and dispossession of property, and outright execution; between 500,000 and 3 million people (and possibly more) died over a span of two years. Frequent clashes broke out between the Red Guards and police officers and the army, sowing confusion and creating chaos. But Mao consistently threw his support behind the Red Guards, an organization that became a veritable state within a state, or a parallel authority. In 1968, the People’s Liberation Army suppressed the Red Guard movement violently through arrests and mass executions. The Red Guards fit seamlessly within the global history of paramilitarism for three reasons: they were an authoritarian creation that relied on personal ties with Chairman Mao, they committed very public violence against real and imagined enemies of the state, and were discontinued when they were no longer needed or their impunity had become a liability to the state itself.

Post-Cold War Europe

By the end of the Cold War, paramilitarism was seen as inherent to weak post-colonial states in the Global South. But in the late 1970s and especially early 1990s, paramilitary units appeared also on the European continent,

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wreaking havoc in several conflicts from Northern Ireland to Yugoslavia, Kurdistan, and Chechnya. The conduct of the counter-insurgencies and organization of the violence by the (respectively British, Serbian, Turkish, and Russian) states bear relevance beyond the immediate country context and are reflective of broader theoretical as well as empirical concerns. Although Latin American paramilitarism operated in a different international, political, historical, and ideological context than the European counter-insurgencies and civil wars of the late twentieth century, there are both structural and phenomenological similarities and dissimilarities. First and foremost, external and internal pressures became more pressing. As the global human rights movement gained strength, external pressure on these states mounted and more intelligent and sophisticated diversions were required to distance paramilitary violence from the state. Internally, too, democratic pressures and curious journalists brought to the forefront the key issue of accountability and responsibility inside the societies.

Paramilitaries became the illustrious fighters identified with the Northern Irish conflict, which straddled the transition period from the Cold War to its aftermath. Both Catholic and Protestant militias were dubbed “paramilitaries,” even though they were anti-state and pro-state, respectively. Paramilitarism became such a prominent part of the fabric of Northern Irish society, and with research being fairly manageable in terms of risks, a rich body of knowledge developed on especially the heavily armed, secretive loyalist paramilitary groups such as the Ulster Volunteer Force (UVF) and the Ulster Defence Association (UDA). Whereas the Irish Republican Army (IRA) targeted mostly British security personnel, the majority of UDA and UVF killings were of ordinary Catholic civilians, the vast majority having no connection with the IRA. This vast and complex literature cannot be done justice in this chapter, but three elements relevant to the broader scholarship stand out: the security dilemma between identity communities, collusion with the state, and criminal infighting after the war. First, the Northern Ireland conflict, as an ethno-religious (or “sectarian”) conflict, in essence is about the coexistence of two collective identity groups. The long history of relations between Protestants and Catholics, and Unionists and Republicans, developed into a security dilemma in the 1970s when riots erupted in 1969 and the violence escalated rapidly thereafter into a
low-intensity conflict in which series of sectarian tit-for-tat bloodshed occurred. As militias armed and mobilized, gaining membership in loyalist paramilitary groups and committing violence for them was admired by young Protestant boys. Having entered the paramilitary world, they rarely foresaw the consequences of their actions. Thus, loyalist paramilitaries were not secretly spawned by the British government but enjoyed significant grassroots support and a community “Umfeld.”

Second, collusion, the secret coordination between two groups for an illegal or deceitful purpose, is a hot topic in the historiography of the Northern Ireland conflict. Unionist public opinion was ambivalent toward the paramilitaries:

Most Unionists remained of the opinion that if one wanted to participate in the armed defence of the Union, the proper course of action was to join the security forces...The loyalist paramilitaries...were confronted continuously by the presence of armed men doing the same work which they felt called upon to perform...the only raison d'être for loyalist violence which made any sense to Unionists was the need to defend Protestant communities from republican attacks.

So, too, the relationship between the British state and the loyalists was a contradictory one: on the one hand, it was distanced and conflictive, and “the front line security forces treated loyalist paramilitaries with the same disdain they felt towards the IRA.” Nevertheless, there is strong evidence for collusion between loyalist paramilitaries and powerful individuals in, and elements of, British state institutions in Northern Ireland. Collusion comprises such actions as passing on security information, diverting law enforcement away from loyalist crimes, failing to

provide protection to threatened persons, failing to investigate loyalist killings, and providing firearms to loyalists. All of these instances happened in the course of various assassinations in Northern Ireland. The fact that conclusive evidence of the killings was never produced is testimony to the effectiveness of collusion: it was designed not to be found out.

Finally, after the Good Friday peace accords, feuding and criminalization became a major part of postwar paramilitary life. Even though the UVF and UDA attempted to change, and set up veterans’ associations, skill-building organizations, and community development, that is, non-violent politics and civic involvement, these possibilities were limited. As the polarization of the conflict receded somewhat, the levels of consensus within loyalist paramilitary groups fragmented and conflicts simmering within them began to burst. For example, Johnny “Mad Dog” Adair, veteran criminal and the UDA’s most notorious paramilitary and leader of the Shankill Road “C Company,” tried to reinvent himself as a politician and peacebuilder. After serving part of a sixteen-year sentence for directing “terrorism,” he was released from jail in 1999, but reincarcerated in 2002 for starting a vendetta with the rival UVF, which resulted in seven people losing their lives. A police source said: “To portray any of these paramilitaries as having some deep-seated ideology is total rubbish. This is about drugs, money, territory and power.” If the history of Northern Irish paramilitarism teaches us anything, it is the relevance of collective identity cleavages, the difficulty of proving collusion, and the volatile afterlife of paramilitaries. Seen from this perspective, and with the benefit of hindsight, the developments in the following cases were not surprising.

The Yugoslav wars of succession saw the formation of several paramilitary units under the regime of Slobodan Milošević through the offices of the Interior Ministry, the Socialist Party of Serbia (SPS), and

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90 Human Rights Watch, To Serve Without Favor: Policing, Human Rights, and Accountability in Northern Ireland (New York: Human Rights Watch, 1997), ch. 6. This definition is fairly broad. A narrower definition would be that there has to be a proven record of sustained collaboration between powerful elements or individuals in formal state positions and the paramilitaries themselves.


92 Rosie Cowan, “From UDA hero to traitor in five months, the violent rise and fall of Johnny Adair,” The Guardian, September 28, 2002.
personal ties with political and paramilitary actors in Croatia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, and Kosovo. These armed groups, often named after predatory animals like Tigers, Eagles, or Scorpions, appeared in Croatia and Bosnia in the 1990s and were responsible for widespread violations of human rights.93 Preliminary investigation of these paramilitary units revealed two puzzling patterns: they maintained close links with political elites including heads of state, and they were largely drawn from the social milieu of organized crime.94 Deeper research on the Serbian case demonstrates a close interplay between organized crime, politics, and state institutions across Serb-controlled territories (see Chapter 3). The wartime violence that the Serb paramilitaries committed against civilians is also important to examine from the perspective of (plausible) deniability.95 It appears that the war provided a unique opportunity to these groups to accumulate economic capital, and Serb paramilitaries in Bosnia were accused of joining the war primarily for material gain rather than ideology.96

An important open question is to what extent Milošević controlled them and how exactly his “parallel structures” and chain of command functioned.97 Indeed, the question of command and control bears importance beyond just the Serbian case and must take a central position in any discussion on paramilitarism. The end of the Bosnian war in 1995 saw the dissolution or legalization of the paramilitary units and in most cases the return of the paramilitaries to Serbia proper, where some became active in politics and others demobilized and disappeared back into their criminal networks, especially in Belgrade.98 Some reappeared

in Kosovo in 1999.\textsuperscript{99} The symbiosis between the state and organized crime nurtured by Milošević has outlasted the wars and the regime, increased crime in society (violence, black markets), and undermined public trust in the rule of law.\textsuperscript{100} The relevance of Serbia’s paramilitary history increased when on May 30, 2013, the ICTY acquitted two former heads of the State Security Service of crimes against humanity, absolving Serbia of responsibility for atrocities committed by its covert network of paramilitary units trained, paid, and supervised by the secret police.\textsuperscript{101} What the Serbian case demonstrates most of all is how the Milošević regime spun an intricate web of politics, business, and administration, which produced a very focused and particular violence.

The picture of paramilitarism in the Turkish–Kurdish war (1984–99) appears to be somewhat similar to the Serbian case, but has its own peculiarities. “Serbian-style” paramilitary units sprouted when the regular army’s strategy proved unable to combat the Kurdistan Workers’ Party (PKK). In 1987, the Turkish government led by President Kenan Evren therefore set up the secret Gendarmerie Intelligence Organization (JİTEM), which became strongly affiliated with organized crime networks as well as far-right youth groups.\textsuperscript{102} The current state of scholarship leaves no doubt about the fact that these groups collaborated in the military and paramilitary effort against the PKK. For example, the Turkish government argued consistently that the murders of prominent Kurdish individuals in the 1990s was carried out not by these death squads, but “unknown assailants” (\textit{faili meçhul}).\textsuperscript{103} But how exactly these configurations (the “deep state”) interlocked and developed in terms of command and control, patronage networks, access to economic resources, and political parties is not fully clear yet. One key difference with the Serbian case was that Kurds were also involved in the paramilitary effort against the PKK. Kurdish “village guards” were involved in


counter-insurgency operations against the PKK, including targeted assassinations, massacres of civilians, and material and environmental destruction. In arming and mobilizing anti-PKK Kurds, the Turkish government “Kurdified” the conflict and fomented a veritable civil war among the Kurds.

As long as they combated Kurdish nationalism, the Turkish government sanctioned the paramilitaries to engage in creative ways to fund themselves. Some smuggled drugs, others traded arms, laundered political contributions, and pursued vendettas between tribes. Indeed, paramilitarism undermined democratization and the rule of law in Turkey as it profoundly weakened the civic and judicial structures of Southeast Turkey. Well-meaning officers or lawyers would find themselves first undermined, and if they went too far, threatened by shady individuals with “connections.” Consequently, the Turkish government, parliament, judiciary, and police were unable to discontinue JİTEM even after the war ended. Stathis Kalyvas’ discussion of how cleavage in civil wars runs through families and sets tribes against each other is best exemplified in the Chechen and Kurdish cases: when one tribe went over to the rebels for ideological or pragmatic reasons, a rival tribe often saw opportunities in or no other option than resorting to the state—or vice versa. The authorities’ use and deployment of paramilitarism then strengthened tribal ties and gave the civil wars much more locally diffuse dimensions.

The Azeri–Armenian war in the Nagorno-Karabakh Autonomous Oblast (NKAO) was a low-intensity conflict that broke out when influential Armenian political groups in Karabakh declared their intention to secede from Azerbaijan in 1988. As political structures such as the Karabakh Committee emerged and expanded, so did military and paramilitary ones. In September 1989, so-called Armenian self-defense


Paramilitarism groups sprung up in villages and cities in Karabakh and began battling armed Azeri groups for territorial control. The conflict went through a rapid process of mobilization, radicalization, and sustained large-scale violence including warfare, mass expulsions, executions, plunder, and destruction of villages. Armenian paramilitaries fought battles against the Azerbaijani army, but also engaged in violence against civilians. Cities such as Shusha and Agdam were severely damaged and destroyed in this process, and massacres occurred in towns such as Khojali and Malibeyli. Neighboring countries like Russia, Turkey, and Iran disagreed on the causes of and solutions to the conflict, and several international efforts to resolve the conflict failed. Meanwhile, one million Azeris fled to Azerbaijan and became one of the largest internally displaced person (IDP) communities in the world.

The state of “frozen conflict” or “no war, no peace” between Azerbaijan and Armenia offered a window of opportunity to examine violence and its consequences in Karabakh. Much of this new research was carried out in Yerevan and Stepanakert on chronicles and diaries of the war, as well as interviews with former combatants and eyewitnesses. Papazian’s research suggests that Armenian paramilitarism seemed to stand out from other cases. The units seem to have been loosely organized from the bottom up, and the Armenian state appears to have become more and more involved in supporting and controlling them. Souleimanov argues that then Armenian President Levon Ter-Petrosyan, pragmatically managed “to take control of some of the more unruly paramilitary groups, . . . sprung up during the clashes in Karabakh and along the border with Azerbaijan.” In other words, Armenian paramilitaries gradually became centralized and unified throughout the war. To what extent Yerevan actually controlled them at various moments in the war,

remains an open question. Furthermore, the international context is an important dimension to be taken into account: inter-state conflict between Armenia and Azerbaijan, pogroms and massacres against Armenians in Azerbaijan, Armenian diaspora support for Karabakh, (post-)Soviet military and political intervention in the region, all influenced the emergence and shapes taken by paramilitarism. The cessation of armed activity in Karabakh in 1994 saw the unification and legalization of the paramilitary units into the standing army of Artsakh (“Karabakh” in Armenian). In some cases, paramilitary leaders became military commanders, whereas others demobilized and became active in politics.

Chechnya saw widespread paramilitary activity during both of its post-Soviet era wars. The Second Chechen War of 1999–2009 differed from the first (1994–6) as it saw the formation of several loyalist paramilitary units under the regime of the Interior Ministry’s security services. These covert networks of paramilitary units were trained, paid for, and supervised by the Federal Security Services, and included Russian “contract soldiers” (kontraktniki) and Chechen “warriors” (boyeviki), both of whom committed various forms of mass violence against Chechen civilians. Understanding the interplay between the Russian state and the militias requires an examination of paramilitary violence against civilians from the perspective of deniability. The war provided a unique opportunity to these groups to accumulate economic capital, and pro-Russian paramilitaries in Chechnya reportedly joined the war primarily for material gain rather than ideology or even defense of the status quo. In 2009, the Russian government declared victory in the second Chechen war and established itself firmly in Chechnya through its local strongman, Ramzan Kadyrov. According to human rights reports, repression and violence against civilians continued in more furtive forms.

Much of this violence was committed by the *kadyrovtsy*, the militias loyal to Chechen president Ramzan Kadyrov. Recent research on the conduct of these pro-state paramilitaries in the war strongly suggests that concerns for their physical survival, promises of family and clan protection, as well as rampant unemployment drove many young Chechens (including former insurgents) into the arms of the *kadyrovtsy*. The “Chechenization” of the conflict through the elevation of one clan (Kadyrov) over the other ones, alienated and re-tribalized Chechen society, as other pro-Russian clans such as the Baysarov and Yamadayev felt a strong sense of relative deprivation.\(^{118}\) After every phase of fighting, the dissolution or legalization of the paramilitary units saw their transformation, as some leaders became active in politics and administration, whereas others demobilized and disappeared back into their prewar occupations, private security firms, or into organized crime; some reappeared in Ukraine in 2014.\(^ {119}\)

Beyond postcolonialism in the Global South and Europe after the Cold War, paramilitarism really came into being in the twenty-first-century Global South, with the Philippines and India as prominent and brutal examples. The populist Filipino politician Rodrigo Duterte was mayor of Davao City in the southern province of Mindanao, where he ran the Davao Death Squad, which according to human rights groups committed over 1,400 killings of mainly drug users, petty criminals, and street children between 1998 and May 2016.\(^ {120}\) When Duterte won the 2016 presidential elections and assumed office, it was not surprising that he expanded his local paramilitary fiefdom to the national level. He immediately launched a war on drugs with profanity-laden speeches exhorting not just the police force, but ordinary Filipinos to commit extrajudicial killings of drug users and sellers. As a result, police officers, vigilantes, and militias killed over 12,000 people within three years.


\(^{119}\) Anne Le Huérou, “State Violence against Civilians in Post-War Chechen Republic,” in Anne Le Huérou et al. (eds), *Chechnya at War and Beyond* (London: Routledge, 2014), 152–75.

As long as the victims were among those groups that the president had marked as targets, the killings were allowed and encouraged.\textsuperscript{121} The story of Narendra Modi is similar, as he too went from a local government position where he presided over a violent parastate to becoming head of state. In February 2002, Modi, Chief Minister of Gujarat at the time, was responsible for initiating and condoning a large-scale massacre against Gujarati Muslims in which Hindu-nationalist militias of the Bajrang Dal, Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh, and Vishva Hindu Parishad organizations killed approximately 2,000 people.\textsuperscript{122} The massacre emanated from a classical parastate construction: armed militias connected to Modi’s Hindu-nationalist Bharatiya Janata Party were secretly provided with addresses of Muslims civilians and businesses, massacred the victims in broad daylight while police were watching, and were either provided with immunity through Gujarat’s corrupt legal system, or portrayed as low-level, spontaneous actors who were unconnected to Modi.\textsuperscript{123} When Modi became prime minister of India in May 2014, similar to Duterte, many feared that he would carry his nationalist paramilitarism to the much bigger platform of national politics. Under his presidency, Hindu vigilantes have attacked and killed cattle traders, and the police often “stalled investigations, ignored procedures, or even played a complicit role in the killings and cover-up of crimes.”\textsuperscript{124}

Both countries have long prehistories of paramilitarism: the Philippines has a history of vigilantism and “bossism,” and India’s militias have wreaked havoc during ethnic riots in inner cities ever since independence. Duterte and Modi inherited these legacies of paramilitarism, which offered them real advantages to accumulate leverage, polarize ethnic and religious relations, and entrench their formerly provincial parastate into the highest office.\textsuperscript{125}

\textsuperscript{122} Human Rights Watch, We Have No Orders To Save You: State Participation and Complicity in Communal Violence in Gujarat (New York: Human Rights Watch, 2002).
\textsuperscript{125} For similar examples from the Middle East and Central Africa, see Geraint Hughes, “Militias in Internal Warfare: From the Colonial Era to the Contemporary Middle East,” Small
Conclusions

With the onset of the twenty-first century, paramilitarism seemed a relic from the past. But in February 2003, the conflict between the Sudanese government and the Darfur insurgency escalated and paramilitaries reappeared with a vengeance. That simmering conflict flared up as the Sudanese army suffered a sensitive military defeat in the provincial capital, prompting the government to adopt a new counter-insurgency strategy. Instead of merely fighting rebel groups in Darfur, the government deployed a special paramilitary organization, the Janjaweed, to attack civilians and thereby undermine the support base of the rebels. The Janjaweed perpetrated massive human rights violations including massacres, destruction of villages, expulsions, sexual violence, torture, and property crimes. According to reliable estimates, at least 200,000 civilians were killed in the following three years. How exactly these networks were embedded in the Sudanese state during the conflict, and how exactly and why they were recruited are questions exceptionally difficult to research due to the levels of repression and censorship in Sudan (prior to the 2019 revolution), but close ethnographic research leaves no doubt about it that the state was prime in mobilizing, organizing, composing, structuring, and covering the Janjaweed. Their patterns of violence and motives of involvement are strikingly similar to the cases preceding the Darfur genocide, described in this chapter. Indeed, as the first twenty-first-century case, Sudan demonstrates that twentieth-century paramilitarism was not a spent force, and every single element of modern pro-state paramilitarism was present in the Darfur genocide.

The Janjaweed appeared on the scene in Darfur in 2003, but in fact had a clear prehistory as the pan-Arabist paramilitary legions set up by


Muammar Gaddafi in 1987. Throughout the 1990s, these groups were mostly militants who pursued local and criminal agendas such as smuggling contraband and controlling access to grazing territory.\(^{129}\) The main leaders of the Janjaweed, such as Mohammed Hamdan Dagalo (a.k.a. Hemedti), Musa Hilal, and Ali Kushayb, maintained close personal ties with the Sudanese Interior Minister and middleman Ahmed Haroun, who reported directly to President Omar al-Bashir.\(^{130}\) The paramilitaries were mostly drawn from loyalist Arab tribes who competed with other tribes for control of arable land. Their involvement in the militias seemed to be informed by a mix of ideological, Arab-nationalist/racist convictions and pragmatic concerns for economic and criminal interests.\(^{131}\) The years 2004 and 2005 saw much international attention on Darfur as the International Criminal Court (ICC) opened an investigation and indicted the president and six senior Janjaweed members for crimes against humanity. For example, the ICC indicted Ahmad Haroun and Ali Kushayb formally for a long list of well-documented crimes, including massacre, torture, sexual violence, plunder, and expulsion.\(^{132}\) But the increased attention affected the Sudanese government's conduct of the paramilitary groups in profound ways. There are strong suggestions that the Sudanese government became ever more surreptitious, duplicitous, and denialist in the face of overwhelming evidence of the Janjaweed’s crimes. In Musa Hilal’s own words: “I don’t have a relation or link by which they can talk to me personally.”\(^{133}\) But leaked and stolen Sudanese government documents, as well as eyewitness testimony, places Hilal at the helm of scorched-earth campaigns against the


Fur population. And so Darfur became a textbook case of a typical paramilitary infrastructure, hidden in plain sight, plausibly denied, and institutionalized in the state apparatus of violence through personal connections.

A diachronic comparison across these cases demonstrates that the two key issues in understanding paramilitarism are the state, and violence. First and foremost, paramilitarism was a phase of state building, both in the broader European area and in the postwar and postcolonial contexts. As it was a phase of state formation, it could always be reversed and take a different shape and direction. Certainly not all states were the same, from Florence to the Ottomans, from Mao to Milosevic, but generally monopolization was beneficial to the state in times of peace, but during internal conflicts, challenges, and contestation, a certain “decoupling” of the monopoly of violence and hybrid forms of security could substitute or supplement the state’s apparatus of violence. Changing relationships between the state and its paramilitary groups resemble the attraction between a planet and satellites, respectively. Sometimes paramilitary groups “fly ahead” of the state and develop as an organic, bottom-up, community-driven phenomenon, and sometimes they are created by the state and have to be continuously propelled forward. Some paramilitary groups are more ideological than others, but they all share the characteristic of politics in the demi-monde. Alfred McCoy has argued that the Cold War was a “historic high tide for covert action,” with secret services wielding unprecedented power and projecting a “netherworld” onto Third World states, thereby “fraying their borders, compromising capacities, and enmeshing them in international economic circuits of corruption and illegality.”

The second central issue in paramilitarism is violence. The long-term view of paramilitary violence demonstrates that paramilitaries emerged as states’ autonomous tactic of outsourcing illegal and illegitimate violence. At the same time, the comparative global perspective shows the relevance of transnational transfers. Transnational transfer can occur between neighboring countries in continental contexts, but transfers can also occur across time and space, without direct cultural or

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It remains to be seen whether political elites really learned from each other (e.g. whether Milošević was actively drawing lessons from the Indonesian example), but one thing is certain: it was the superpower interventions that subverted democracies (e.g. through GLADIO), brutalized political culture in those countries, deepened existing left–right polarizations, empowered bandits and thugs to operate with widespread impunity, and produced victims who could never hope for any form of justice and therefore turned to more radical measures. Hannah Arendt’s critically appraised argument that World War II was the violent homecoming of colonialism could perhaps be extended: was the European paramilitary experience after 1990 a similar process, as paramilitary violence boomeranged back to Europe from the Global South? In any case, the forms of violence in comparable settings of political contestation were strikingly similar. In this way, the Global South was ahead of Europe: Suharto had understood very well the benefits of outsourcing mass violence against civilians. They included making use of local knowledge, implicating broader sections of society in the killings, and generating plausible deniability. In very, very few of these cases were there profound, official investigations, nor did there appear incontrovertible evidence and crystal-clear primary sources on the phenomenon. The paramilitary secret is so dirty and incriminating that it is dangerous to probe into it during the violence, or even after the violence, and it is deeply demoralizing for a society to realize how their leaders have conspired for the purpose of such transgressive forms of brutality.