TRIBAL WARFARE AND "ETHNIC" CONFLICT

By R. Brian Ferguson

Anthropologists who study warfare disagree about how much war there is, how far back it goes, and why it happens. Certainly there is a lot of war in the ethnographic record, though it is far from universal. Dozens of peoples never sent out groups of men with the intent to kill others. Many have sophisticated value and institutional systems that prevent organized violence. Still, well over 90 percent of known peoples have made war, some frequently and quite brutally. Among some peoples it is not rare for 25 percent of adult men to end their lives in combat.

The existence of so many warlike peoples has fed speculation about human nature for centuries. But archaeology tells a different story. At the end of prehistory—before ancient states arose and began to write, or before literate explorers arrived among non-state peoples—signs of war were plentiful. Yet in the early archaeological record of many regions, there are no traces of war, even in places where we have good recovery of the skeletons and settlements that would have revealed war if it had occurred. In later archaeological remains, signs of war appear, spread, and over time become much more common.

Humanity's peaceable deep past contradicts the common notion that war is the result of human nature or an evolved impulse to bond with our own kind and kill members of other groups. Ethnography further undermines this position. Of course in war there must be a division between "us" and "them," otherwise one would not know whom to shoot. But it is not group loyalty that makes the conflict. Rather it is conflict that makes group loyalties. Cases, such as hostilities between Australian tribes or New Guinea clans, reveal that divides between "us" and "them" are flexible and fluid until forged by death, and sometimes not even then. Inbred xenophobia and other biological explanations do not explain why war happens.

So what does explain the advent of war? Archeological explanations include larger regional populations that increased competition; more anchored living that prevented people from moving away from conflict; social structures such as clans that provided flexible frameworks for splitting into "us" and "them"; the emergence of a distinct political elite with its own interests; trade in goods that provided something to fight over; and ecological reverses such as droughts or large-game extinction. As these factors became more common around the world, so did war. War was frequent across Anatolia by around 5,500 B.C., central Europe by 4,300 B.C., and northern China by 2,500 B.C. Ancient states encouraged more militarism along their "barbarian" boundaries and trade routes. European colonial expansion from 1500 A.D. forward generated much more war—not just resistance to colonial powers, but between peoples as they were pushed onto others' lands, enlisted in colonial rivalries, sent out as slave raiders, or given new goods to fight over or weapons with which to fight. This explains why the indigenous peoples of later prehistory, and those indigenous peoples observed from the time of Columbus to today, have lived through much more war than their distant ancestors.

The experiences of the Yanomami peoples in Venezuela illustrate some of these points. While the Yanomami have not been investigated archaeologically, in Venezuela the first signs of war appear around 550 A.D. in chiefdoms in densely settled river lands along major trade routes (about 500 kilometers from ancestral Yanomami lands). Over the next thousand years archaeological evidence shows war spreading and intensifying through the Orinoco area. By the time of European contact, chiefs could field armies in the thousands. Those militaristic chiefdoms were soon wiped out by disease and warfare, but before expiring they took slaving for the Europeans deep into the Yanomami highlands. The Yanomami's on-off reputation for ferocity began with tales told by slavers, and was reinforced when the Yanomami began to attack other Native Americans who were better supplied with steel tools. In the 20th century, most Yanomami war has been the outgrowth of antagonisms over unequally distributed trade goods, especially steel.

In deciding to fight, Yanomami leaders appealed to bellicose values to persuade others and to justify self-interests. With time and war, such values became so elaborate and powerful that they made future violence more likely. Even today, Yanomami in the remote Parima highlands kill each other with shotguns in fights started by theft of Western goods, though they talk about it in terms of reciprocity, revenge, and witchcraft.

The moral of this story is that war by even the most isolated indigenous peoples is not "traditional." While the decision to go to war is made by local actors, the fights are in response to changes coming from the outside world. The same goes for the recent large-scale "tribal" and "ethnic" violence in Africa, Central Asia, the former Yugoslavia, and elsewhere. In all of these cases conflict has been shaped by outside global processes, from colonial policies that froze formerly fluid ethnic groups and then used artificial borders to divide them, to crashing international commodity markets that made poor nations poorer, to well-meaning non-governmental organizations that provided aid that was misappropriated by men with guns. At the same time, the violence has been local, involving the control of valuable resources, existing social divisions, and local political institutions and leaders. Commentary that blames contemporary large-scale violence on "weak" or "failed" states misses the critical point that the fighting is about who controls the state, and who and what the state controls. Simply pouring resources into a

contested state government, without dealing with the inequalities in how regimes operate, only makes control of government a more valuable prize for contenders.

Leaders, of course, are key. They make the decisions that lead to war. Whether they are pursuing political power or pure plunder, they are the main potential beneficiaries of violence. Whether they do so out of greed or out of a sense of being wronged, they play up grievances and call on local values, symbols, and historic victimization to mobilize followers to join their warring enterprise. Followers, in turn, are led to expect tangible and symbolic benefits and sometimes push leaders onward. Because no self-interest is more fundamental than self-preservation, leaders manufacture or exaggerate threats and provoke violence to force people to choose sides and follow their command. Often, leaders favor war because war favors leaders.

A good, if horrifying, example is the Rwandan genocide. The opposition of Tutsis and Hutus was constructed, shaped, and used by successive colonial administrators, and hostility between them heated up in the passage to independence. Hutu and Tutsi are culturally identical, not distinct ethnic groups. Never were they two organized tribes. They are political categories that were constantly reworked before, during, and after the colonial era. This artificially generated fault line became more tense and unstable in the years before the genocide, as the market for Rwanda's main export (coffee) collapsed, foreign military aid poured in, regional tensions increased, and international agencies took greater control. Negotiated power sharing arrangements between Tutsi and Hutu were on the verge of cutting out the northern Hutu clans that had previously been the main beneficiaries of state power. Hutu leaders unleashed a ferocious propaganda campaign blaming Tutsi for everything. In doing so, they tapped deep cultural themes and symbols, and created panic over an imagined Tutsi plot to kill and enslave the Hutu. When the killing began, the army and militia were given orders, but many other Hutu were recruited with a mix of threats, bribes, and propaganda. The Rwandan genocide was not simply a matter of Hutu killing Tutsi. Many Hutu (especially southern) were also targeted for death. Many Hutu would not kill, and shielded Tutsi.

To call this tragedy "tribal" or "ethnic" violence makes it more difficult to understand. The same is true in many other conflicts around the world labeled religious, tribal, clan, or ethnic. These labels suggest that the fighting is between long-standing groups over long-standing grievances. They also imply that the fighting is "irrational" (as compared to "civilized war"). Such suggestions obscure the calculated interests that are at stake. And they leave no appropriate way of talking about the worldwide array of such deadly quarrels. Thus "ethnic conflict" has become a catch-all phrase, applied even to conflicts where there is little or no cultural difference, such as in Northern Ireland or parts of the former Yugoslavia.

It is imperative to move beyond these misleading labels. If we are to find solutions to large-scale violence, we must understand its genesis. Doing so begins by recognizing that there are many different bases of identity. Geographic region, social class, and place on the continuum from urban capital to country village all affect how people gain or lose as a result of government policies and national trends. So can religion, ethnicity, race, or language, though these also provide broad and symbolically laden bases for calling people together. Castes, clans, and tribes have their own structures and lead-

ers. Gender and generation are major filters through which broader social trends are translated into lived experience. These different factors come together in kaleidoscopic combinations. And in those different combinations, identity and interest are not separated, but are fused together. Who you are largely determines how you are doing, and how you are doing largely determines your receptivity to leaders' calls for violent action.

Going beyond simple labels reveals core groups of dedicated militarists, and secondary rings of followers that are cobbled together by political entrepreneurs seeking their own advantage. I call these politically mobilized factions "identerest groups," a term which directs attention to key facts that are often ignored by the public and policy makers. First, there are many different kinds of identity involved in recent conflicts around the world. Second, different kinds of identities come together in group and individual composites. Third, groups taking the lead in conflict are not ancient holdovers, but recent creations. Fourth, these groups exist not just because of interaction with other groups, but through a process of interaction between leaders and followers, who may have distinct interests in any situation. Fifth, identity gets its power in these situations because identity is closely linked with experience and practical interests.

New terminology helps bring these facts to light, in place of common-language terms that suggest age-old loyalties and antagonisms. With a better idea of the complex process by which identerest groups are put together, we can better imagine the alternatives. Because killing is much harder to stop once it gets started, a better understanding of how identerest violence is brought about might strengthen our capacity to prevent it.

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