

JPM718: Presentation Handout

Presenting Student's Name: Elena King

Reading's Title: Does Indiscriminate Violence Incite Insurgent Attacks?

1. Summary of the Reading

What is the reading about? What is the author's main thesis and conclusions?

The author uses statistical methods to investigate whether indiscriminate violence that results in civilian casualties incites insurgent attacks. This study attempts to answer the question of why militaries around the world engage in indiscriminate violence if on the surface it appears that such violence would lead to the escalation of hostilities and be counterproductive. The author puts forward a hypothesis that despite the commonly held belief that indiscriminate violence would lead to the increase in insurgent attacks, it might in fact reduce the number of attacks. In order to test this hypothesis, the author examines the effects of Russian artillery fire on populated settlements during the war in Chechnya between 2000 and 2005. The Chechen war was selected mainly because Russian artillery uses "harassment and interdiction" strategy, according to which artillery fires randomly within its range, causing multiple fatalities among the civilian population. The randomized nature of this attacks means that they are uncorrelated with other common variables that are often used to explain insurgent violence, which improves the internal validity of the study.

The most important finding of the study is that indiscriminate violence does not lead to an increase in insurgent attacks. In fact, it has the opposite effect, reducing the number of insurgent attacks after the artillery shelling of the area. Additionally, the author finds that the common 'triggers' for insurgent violence, such as the lethality and destructiveness of the indiscriminate state violence does not have a statistically significant effect on the number of insurgent attacks. The author also tests whether other explanations for this decrease in insurgent attacks are possible, such as redistribution of violence to the neighbouring villages or attacks happening outside of the 90-day treatment window. The conclusion is that indiscriminate violence did not lead to the redistribution of violence to other populated areas within Chechnya and that most insurgent attacks happened within the 90-day treatment window adopted by the study. Lastly, the author addresses the external validity of the study, concluding that due to the archetypal nature of the Chechen war the results are not case-specific and can be generalized beyond the scope of the present case study.

2. Critical Analysis

What are the strong and weak points of the argument?

While the study uses robust statistical methods to determine whether indiscriminate violence leads to an increase in the insurgent attacks, its key shortcoming is that the scope of the study is limited to Chechnya itself, where insurgent attacks are defined as attacks against the Russian forces within Chechnya. The author tests whether the violence could be redistributed elsewhere but takes into consideration only nearby villages, whereas the insurgents might have adopted a different tactic and instead of confronting the Russian forces directly started relying more on terrorist acts outside the republic, such as taking hostages.

The most notorious act of hostage taking occurred at a school in Beslan, North Ossetia, where in September 2004 terrorists took 1,100 people hostage, most of them children. The efforts to liberate the hostages resulted in 330 deaths, including 186 children. The responsibility for this terrorist act was claimed by Shamil Basayev, one of the leaders of the Chechen insurgents. While many circumstances of this terrorist act remain disputed, multiple sources show that the terrorists demanded the withdrawal

of the Russian forces from Chechnya. There were other terrorist acts carried out by the Chechen separatists, such as taking hostages at the Moscow theatre in 2002, which resulted in 170 deaths, and a number of suicide bombings which resulted in dozens of deaths each. It shows that the article's conclusion that indiscriminate violence decreases the number of insurgent attacks does not account for the change of tactics by the insurgents who increasingly relied on terrorist acts outside Chechnya to further their cause.

3. Relation to the Main Reading

How does the argument relate to, and/or expand the argument of the main reading to which it is linked in the syllabus?

The article by Martínez and Eng similarly addresses the effects of indiscriminate violence - in this case, aerial bombing of civilian objects in Syria - on the operation of insurgent groups. While Jason Lyall attempts to measure how the state's violence affects the frequency of the insurgent attacks, Martínez, and Eng focus on the logic behind the state's violence, arguing that it is a deliberate tactic that allows the state to combat the competing sources of authority within its territory. In Lyall's case study, the destruction of civilian objects is treated as a collateral damage resulting from the randomized nature of Russia's artillery attacks. Martínez and Eng, on the contrary, argue that the Assad regime deliberately targeted healthcare and bread provision infrastructure in rebel-held areas to prevent the rebel forces from 'performing the state' and gaining legitimacy among the civilian population.

Moreover, there are significant methodological and epistemological differences between the two articles. Lyall follows the positivist tradition, treating the state and insurgents as possessing fixed identities and internal coherence. The positivist approach informs the quantitative methodology used in his study, with its reliance on numerical data and statistical methods. Martínez and Eng point to the limitations of the positivist approach, arguing instead that the state and rebel governments are political constructs, and the political authority is performed through various everyday practices, such as providing basic welfare. This study, therefore, is best understood within the 'practice turn' in the study of International Relations that adopts everyday practices as a key category of analysis. Using qualitative methods of analysis, the authors demonstrate that by deliberately preventing the rebel forces from 'performing' symbolically important practices of welfare provision, the Assad regime effectively inhibits the rebels' ability to develop an alternative statehood.