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The Myth of Ethnic Warfare

Understanding Conflict in the Post-Cold War World

Charles King

Modern Hatreds: The Symbolic Politics of Ethnic War. BY STUART J. KAUFMAN. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2001, 288 pp. \$19.95.

The deadly clashes that erupted between Russians and ethnic Tatars in the early 1990s were utterly predictable. Having invaded the Russian steppes alongside the Mongols in the thirteenth century, the Tatars were seen by medieval Russian chroniclers as the epitome of Oriental barbarism. Although the power of the Tatars eventually waned, the Russians did not forget their misery at the hands of these Muslim invaders. In the sixteenth century, Ivan the Terrible razed the Tatar capital. Two centuries later, Tatar nomads were brutally driven as far as China. And during the Second World War, Stalin deported thousands of Tatar

families to Central Asia. Once the Soviet Union began to falter, Tatars in several regions began to call for greater rights and eventual independence. Those demands set off a spiral of fear and loathing that drew fuel from the memory of bloodshed on both sides.

The only problem with this story is that there were no such deadly clashes in the 1990s. Russia devolved sovereignty to Tatarstan, one of the federation's constituent republics, without any violence. So successful was the process, in fact, that the "Tatar model" is now touted as a template for how Russia's relations with its other ethnic minorities should work.

Had modern Tatar autonomy not come about so painlessly, it would have been easy to read the bloodshed as yet another case of the inevitable clash of civilizations. Just such an impulse explains why Russia's

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ongoing war against Chechnya still sends observers scrambling for their Lermontov and Tolstoy: to search for historical allusions to Moscow's long-standing entanglement in the same zone. But as Stuart J. Kaufman shows in his ambitious new book, *Modern Hatreds*, explaining contemporary wars with reference to ancient troubles is not only a terrible cliché—it is also fundamentally wrong.

THE SEEDS OF CONFLICT

In years to come, what looks today like a disconnected string of small, brutish wars across southeastern Europe and Eurasia—five in the former Yugoslavia and six in the former Soviet Union—is more likely to be considered by historians to be part of one process: the wars of communist succession. Most of these battles pitted newly independent governments against territorial separatists, but all sprang from a range of disparate causes: the collapse of federations, the end of authoritarianism, the reemergence of old quarrels, the meddling of outside powers, political demagoguery, and—a major catalyst of organized violence everywhere—plain old thuggery.

The puzzle is not why there were so many recent wars in this region, but why there were not more. Given the fact that every ethnic group in the area has been hard done by at some point in its history, why have only some of the aggrieved become aggressors? Kaufman assays four possible explanations. One is the ancient hatreds view, the idea that some of these ethnic groups have been at each other's throats for centuries and thus conflicts between them are likely to continue. A second answer is based on the power of unscrupulous and manipulative politicians

who profit from communal rivalries. A third looks to economics, arguing that contests over resources can quickly turn poor communities against perceived exploiters and rich ones against freeloaders. And a fourth answer is based on what scholars call a security dilemma. With no overarching institutions left in the region to ensure law and order, survival became a self-help game. But one group's effort to increase its own security—by stockpiling Kalashnikovs, say—automatically reduces the security of its rivals, thereby setting off a spiral toward war.

Yet as Kaufman shows, each of these explanations for why war occurred is insufficient on its own. People do feel strongly about their ethnicity, but very few convinced nationalists actually go so far as to exterminate their neighbors. Maniacal leaders clearly play an important role in civil wars, but simply saying so does not explain why some end up as powerful demagogues while others simply rant in obscurity. Economic grievances and security dilemmas can also push groups toward violence, but such explanations predict far more conflict than actually occurs in the world.

Kaufman's solution to this conundrum is to focus on what he calls the "symbolic politics" of conflicts—that is, how existing beliefs about neighboring ethnic groups are used to justify violence, and how these beliefs then seem to be confirmed once violence breaks out. Kaufman focuses on several wars that broke out during the collapse of communism: in the Dniester region of Moldova, in Georgia's South Ossetia and Abkhazia, in the Nagorno-Karabakh enclave inside Azerbaijan, and in the former Yugoslavia. These conflicts all raged from the early to the mid-1990s

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and left hundreds of thousands dead and millions displaced.

In a series of lucidly written case studies, Kaufman argues that each of these wars displayed three conditions essential for communal violence. First, in each case politicians used a preexisting reservoir of myths about rival ethnic populations to mobilize the public along cultural lines. Second, in every instance particular ethnic groups feared being swamped—economically, politically, and demographically—by other groups. And third, in each of these wars the communities involved had plenty of time to mobilize and shore up their own security before their neighbors got the upper hand. Without any one of these ingredients, Kaufman says, these postcommunist conflicts would never have occurred.

IMAGINED COMMUNITIES

It is difficult to argue with any of Kaufman's claims. He is certainly right that each of the individual explanations for conflict he describes is, on its own, inadequate. And no one would deny that all civil conflicts have a volatile mix at their core: myths that can be mustered into service, politicians willing to use those myths, and a state apparatus too weak to ensure basic civil order.

The problem with Kaufman's explanation, however, is determining whether a thing called "ethnic war" even exists. Of course, there are such things as ethnic groups, and they do occasionally come into conflict—although as Kaufman rightly points out, they do so far less often than we normally think. But it is worth asking whether talking about a distinct category of violence called "ethnic war" is as useful as Kaufman (and many others) think.

How we label an armed conflict often has very little to do with anything intrinsic to the conflict itself. Think, for example, about how rare it is today to hear anyone talk of "insurgencies." Yet this term was once the standard way of referring to many civil wars around the world, especially those in which the so-called insurgents were supported by the Soviet Union. The idea of "ethnic war" may be similarly contingent, the product of a particular time and place—the time being the end of the Cold War and the place being Europe. After all, the upsurge in writing on ethnicity and violence in the last decade is a direct result of the fact that the wars in the Balkans interested Western policymakers. That does not necessarily mean, however, that communal violence is a new phenomenon, or that there is more of it now than in the past (in fact, there is less), or that the types of conflicts that arose in the 1990s are significantly different from those that have long raged in many other parts of the world. Indeed, on the scale of human misery, the postcommunist wars barely register: they involved relatively few deaths, they lasted for only a short time, and crucially, they attracted the attention of the great powers, in particular the United States.

The "ethnic conflict" label is fine as an easy shorthand for wars in which the belligerents define themselves, in part, along cultural lines. But viewing such conflicts as essentially different from any other instances of large-scale violence within a single state can be misleading, in two senses. First, hatred does not need much scaffolding. In some cases, the cultural myths that Kaufman identifies as essential to violence are long-standing—as between Armenians and Azerbaijani

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“Turks,” for example. But in plenty of others the myths were manufactured in relatively short order, and usually after violence had already started. There was little in Georgian or Abkhaz national mythology to explain the depth of hatred that arose during the conflict there. And in Moldova, one would have had to be very creative to forge a coherent narrative of oppression on either side. Most civil wars—whether involving ethnic groups, ideological factions, or any other social category—have a way of manufacturing their own inevitability.

Second, the “ethnic conflict” label can encourage analysts and potential peacemakers to conflate two distinct issues—the pathologies of individual belief and the rational motivations for group mobilization—or, in other words, to mistake the causes of hatred for the causes of violence. The former is about precisely the “symbolic politics” that Kaufman identifies, the narratives of national suffering that can be useful in whipping up the masses. The latter is about getting armies into the field, and for that no amount of symbol-manipulating will get anywhere without a leadership and a state bureaucracy intent on perpetrating violence. Why people hate each other ought to concern psychologists and marriage counselors. Why they kill en masse is the purview of social scientists and statesmen.

Kaufman courageously offers what he calls “a systematic general theory” of ethnic conflict: myths of oppression and revenge create dividing lines between social groups; real fears for communal survival create an incentive for mobilization; a faltering state, a strong leader, or an outside power provides the spark that

ignites all-out violence. Take away any one of the three elements and the violence fizzles. It is easy enough to do this kind of analysis after a conflict has already broken out, as Kaufman has done. But probably the best that pundits or theorists can do is point out what countries and peoples are most at risk. We cannot know for certain why large-scale violence, of whatever type, breaks out. Even if we could, the factors involved would probably be disappointingly banal: clashing economic interests, politicians’ attempts to oust opponents, lots of young men with nothing to do and easy access to guns. The rest is, to use a technical term, history.

All this is particularly relevant to the post-Soviet cases on which Kaufman bases his argument. After reading this book, one might come away with the idea that Georgia, Moldova, and Azerbaijan remain embroiled in internal disputes largely because of the myths, fears, and opportunities that originally sparked the wars. But in all these cases, the issues that first brought the various sides to blows are very different from the dynamics that have perpetuated the quarrels.

In each of these regions, a tense cease-fire has been in place since the mid-1990s, but no progress has been made toward a final peace accord. Today, much of these states’ territories is controlled by unrecognized but fully functional quasi states: the so-called republics of Abkhazia and South Ossetia (in Georgia), the Dniester Moldovan republic (in Moldova), and the republic of Nagorno-Karabakh (in Azerbaijan). None of these statelets has a seat at the United Nations. None is recognized by any sovereign country. But each possesses the basic desiderata of statehood—a population,

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a territory, a government, an army, an economy—and functions about as well as (and in some cases, better than) the flaccid countries of which each is still supposedly a part.

The Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe and the U.N. have spent the better part of a decade “mediating” these various disputes, and the organizations’ main strategy has been to address precisely those beliefs and insecurities that Kaufman identifies. That approach has led nowhere, however, and for one simple reason: Ethnic myths and fears have become largely irrelevant to most of the actors in these dramas. In fact, the current status quo—no fighting but no final peace accord, either—suits most folks just fine. The separatists get a de facto country. Corrupt officials in the central governments get a transit route for illegal commerce. Foreign governments get relative peace and, therefore, no Christiane Amanpour on the scene to raise concerns at home. International organizations get multiple rounds of “negotiations” and willing recipients for their good offices.

In the long run, however, everyone ends up a loser. The unresolved disputes have had cancerous effects on the regions where they occurred, feeding corruption, weakening governance, and gnawing away at what little democracy exists in Georgia, Moldova, and Azerbaijan. They have created havens for international criminals and conduits for the smuggling of drugs, weapons, and people into Europe and beyond. None of that, incidentally, has much to do with ethnicity.

THE WAY TO WAR

What does all of this mean for policy? Kaufman rightly calls on outside powers

to pay greater attention to potential conflict areas before war erupts. Some of his recommendations are supremely reasonable: to focus on pre-crisis peacebuilding rather than post-crisis peacekeeping, to encourage historians to write less tentatively, to name and shame politicians who trot out ethnic stereotypes in political campaigns. Others—such as the idea that national epics glorifying war should be “banned” (by whom? on whose reading?)—cannot possibly be meant seriously. And no form of outside intervention, however early, can guarantee success. After all, it would be difficult to find a more concerted recent effort at peacebuilding than occurred in Macedonia, a case that Kaufman cites approvingly. (The book was published too early to take full account of the recent violence there between the government and Albanian guerrillas.) Long before the shooting started, school curricula were reformed under the eyes of the U.N. and major nongovernmental organizations. Internationally mediated talks were held. There was even a Macedonian version of *Sesame Street*, created and funded by foreigners, that featured cast members from all of Macedonia’s ethnic groups living in harmony. The show became wildly popular with local children. But as for the results, consult CNN.

The real lesson to be learned from the postcommunist conflicts, including the latest one in Macedonia, is probably different from the one Kaufman intended. Myths, fears, and opportunities might be a good recipe for a pogrom, but they rarely lead to large-scale, sustained violence. For that, you need the same kinds of forces that sustain any war, whether “ethnic” or otherwise: entrepreneurs who

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benefit from the violence, arms supplied by foreign powers, charismatic leadership, and plenty of bored young men. And these are the same factors that external governments and international organizations are most useful at counteracting—that is, in the rare instances when they have both the will and the wherewithal to get involved. Outsiders can, as Kaufman recommends, try to ban books, shut down radio transmissions, rewrite school curricula, and enforce an internationally acceptable standard of ethnic correctness on historians and teachers. But silencing every bigot in the world would require a monumental effort—one for which afflicted states do not have the cash, nor Western governments the fortitude.

Besides, the attempt would probably yield only spotty results and violate the principle of state sovereignty in the process. Kaufman's symbolic politics account offers an intriguing analysis of communal violence, but the policy recommendations that flow from it are, to say the least, disconcerting.

Still, Kaufman's chief insight is that the obstacles to violence are usually pretty high. Hence the large number of disputes across the postcommunist world that could have descended into war but never did: between Romanians and Hungarians, Estonians and Russians, Bulgarians and Turks, even Russians and Tatars. Being mad as hell at one's neighbor is rarely enough to make people take up arms. When they do, it is usually only to defend something they stand to lose (their home) rather than to gamble on getting something they lack (their ancient homeland). *Modern Hatreds* presents a powerful critique of some of the currently popular but simplistic modes of understanding

how conflicts start and describes how, in some rare cases, the obstacles to war were overcome with devastating results. This is a useful contribution to a larger process: trying to figure out why some chauvinists become Milošević while others are content to write bad poetry. 🌐