

The International Spread of Ethnic Conflict

FEAR, DIFFUSION, AND ESCALATION

David A. Lake and Donald Rothchild, EDITORS

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PRINCETON UNIVERSITY PRESS

PRINCETON, NEW JERSEY

Copyright © 1998 by Princeton University Press
Published by Princeton University Press, 41 William Street, Princeton, New Jersey 08540
In the United Kingdom: Princeton University Press, Chichester, West Sussex
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Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

The international spread of ethnic conflict: fear, diffusion, and
escalation / David A. Lake and Donald S. Rothchild, editors.
p. cm.

Includes bibliographical references and index.

ISBN 0-691-01691-7 (cloth : alk. paper).—ISBN 0-691-01690-9
(pbk. : alk. paper)

1. Ethnic relations. 2. International relations. 3. Conflict
management. 4. World politics—1989— I. Lake, David A., 1956—
II. Rothchild, Donald S.
GN496.L595 1998 97-15031 305.8—dc21 CIP

The publisher would like to acknowledge IGCC for providing the
camera-ready copy from which this book was printed

This book has been composed in Berkeley

Princeton University Press books are printed on acid-free paper and meet the guidelines for
permanence and durability of the Committee on Production Guidelines for Book
Publishing of the Council on Library Resources

<http://pup.princeton.edu>

Printed in the United States of America

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10

(pbk.)

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ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

THIS VOLUME is the product of a multi-year research project sponsored by the University of California's Institute on Global Conflict and Cooperation and funded by the Pew Charitable Trusts. We are grateful to IGCC's Director, Susan Shirk, for her support. We are also indebted to the Pew Charitable Trusts, and especially Stephen Del Rosso, for their generous assistance. Without IGCC and the Pew Charitable Trusts this project could not have been undertaken.

All of the chapters in this volume were discussed at one or more meetings of the IGCC Working Group on the International Spread and Management of Ethnic Conflict, composed of approximately sixty-five west-coast academics who attended six meetings over eighteen months. We are grateful to the many participants for their insightful comments and probing questions. We would also like to thank the many guests from Washington, Moscow, several East European capitals, the United Nations, and elsewhere for helping bring scholars closer to the real world. The collaboration involved in these meetings extends far beyond the group of authors published in this volume and is reflected in the quality of the essays.

The first drafts of our chapters were discussed at the sixth and final meeting of the working group. We would like to thank Miles Kahler, Charles Kupchan, William Maynes, and Barnett Rubin for formal comments, and other participants for a lively and helpful discussion. Our chapters were also presented at the Pacific Council on International Affairs in Los Angeles, the World Affairs Council of San Francisco, an IGCC Policy Briefing in Washington, D.C., and an IGCC Teaching Seminar at the University of California, Davis. We thank the participants in these meetings, as well as Arnold Kanter, Timothy D. Sisk, Stephen John Stedman, and John Steinbruner, for their helpful comments.

An earlier and abridged version of Chapters One and Nine appeared as "Containing Fear: The Origins and Management of Ethnic Conflict," *International Security* 21, no. 2 (Fall 1996): 41-75. The expanded chapters are published here with permission of the President and Fellows of Harvard College and the Massachusetts Institute of Technology.

We are deeply grateful to IGCC's staff and acknowledge here our great debt to them for countless tasks large and small. Barbara Butterton organized six conferences from start to finish with great skill, kept track of what seemed an endless series of papers, and kept us within budget. Barbara was the "workhorse" of the project and deserves much of the credit for its successful conclusion. Fred Wehling, IGCC's academic coordinator for policy research, organized and chaired the policy panel at each meeting of the workshop; he was a vital link in the project. Kathleen Hancock served as an essential (and able) rapporteur. Ron Bee managed the grant and the policy briefings. Bettina Halvorsen, from IGCC, and Martha Rehrman, from the Institute on Governmental Affairs at UC Davis, orga-

nized the teaching seminar. Jennifer Pournelle, IGCC's senior editor, oversaw the preparation of the manuscript and its transformation into printed pages by Stacy Moser-Simpson and Lynne Bush from The Page Group, who prepared the working typescript; Matt Baum and Richard Seroter who were tireless reference chasers and fact-checkers; and Lynn Edwards and Randy Stevens of Bookmark Media, who saw the proofs to press. Without the assistance of all, this project might have been started but it could never have been completed.

Don Rothchild also acknowledges the generous assistance of the Department of Political Science at the University of California, Davis, and the United States Institute of Peace during the period he worked on this project.

We are deeply grateful to Malcolm Litchfield at Princeton University Press, who recognized the unique nature and potential value of this book and gave us wise counsel on difficult issues. We are indebted to him and his staff for all their assistance in producing this volume.

Finally, we are grateful to our families for their encouragement and understanding while we tried to unravel the mysteries of the international spread and management of ethnic conflict.

ABBREVIATIONS

ANC	African National Congress
CGO	chief governmental officer
CNN	Cable News Network
COPDAB	Conflict and Peace Database
CPC	Confederation of Peoples of the Caucasus
CSCE/OSCE	Conference on/Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe
ECOMOG	ECOWAS Cease-fire Monitoring Group
ECOWAS	Economic Community of West African States
IGCC	Institute on Global Conflict and Cooperation
JNA	Yugoslav National Army
NGO	nongovernmental organization
NPFL	National Patriotic Front of Liberia
OAU	Organization of African Unity
PM	political mobilization
PRIE	Politically Relevant International Environment
RC	rational choice
RFE/RL	Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty
RMO	regional multilateral organization
RPF	Rwanda Patriotic Front
TPC	Tatar Public Center
UNAMIR	United Nations Assistance Mission in Rwanda
UNHCR	United Nations High Commission for Refugees
UNOSOM	United Nations Operation in Somalia
UNPROFOR	United Nations Protection Force
UNTAC	United Nations

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PART ONE

Introduction

CHAPTER ONE

Spreading Fear: The Genesis of Transnational Ethnic Conflict

DAVID A. LAKE AND DONALD ROTHCHILD

BOSNIA. CHECHNYA. RWANDA. The early 1990s have witnessed a wave of ethnic conflict sweep across parts of Eastern Europe, the former Soviet Union, and Africa. Localities, states, and sometimes whole regions have been engulfed in convulsive fits of ethnic insecurity and violence. The early optimism that the end of the Cold War might usher in a new world order has been quickly shattered. Even before fears of nuclear Armageddon could fully fade, new fears of state meltdown and ethnic cleansing have rippled across the international community.

In this "new world disorder," many worry that ethnic conflict is contagious, that conflict in one locale can stimulate conflict elsewhere, and that initial outbreaks in the Balkans, the former Soviet Union, and Africa, if not quarantined, could set off an epidemic of catastrophic proportions. Analysts also fear that internal conflicts will escalate by drawing in neighbors and outside opportunists. Reflecting these concerns, James B. Steinberg wrote in 1993, "The war in the former Yugoslavia continues, and there remains a risk that it will spread, not only to other parts of Yugoslavia, but to its neighbors, as well" (27). In attempting to persuade the American people to support the deployment of U.S. troops to Bosnia under NATO command, President Clinton echoed this point. "Without us," he stated, "the hard-won peace would be lost, the war would resume, the slaughter of innocents would begin again, and the conflict that already has claimed so many people could spread like poison throughout the entire region" (Kempster and Pine 1995, A16, emphasis added). Almost daily reports of ethnic violence from around the world lend credence to these fears.

In this volume, we ask two central questions. First, how, why, and when do ethnic conflicts spread across national borders? Second, how can such transnational ethnic conflicts be best managed? In this and the following chapters, we sketch preliminary answers to these pressing questions.

The authors of the various chapters in this volume do not reach uniform conclusions about the causes of ethnic conflict, the propensity for ethnic conflicts to spread, or the management of conflict. As this is one of the first attempts to address the question of the international spread of ethnic conflict, we regard this diversity of views as a strength; it would not be helpful or appropriate to reach premature closure on this important topic. The essays in Part Two tend to draw relatively pessimistic assessments: the authors conclude that ethnic conflicts can

and do spread across borders. The chapters in Part Three offer more optimistic judgments; without disputing that conflict can spread, they argue that ethnic conflict today is primarily a local phenomenon that is breaking out in many places simultaneously for similar but largely independent reasons. The essays in Part Four focus on the management of transnational ethnic conflicts.

In this chapter, we provide an intellectual foundation upon which the remainder of the volume builds. The other authors do not necessarily agree with all of our analysis, and their individual chapters do not necessarily depend upon all parts of it, but it serves, we believe, as a unifying framework for the study of transnational ethnic conflict.

We begin with a brief review of the concepts of ethnicity and ethnic groups. We take a middle ground in the relevant debates and emphasize, as many scholars now do, the socially constructed but persistent nature of ethnic identity groups. Their origins may be mythical, but they can nevertheless attract powerful loyalties and commitments as political elites mobilize ethnic kin for action.

① We next examine the causes of ethnic conflict. We argue that ethnic conflict is not caused directly by intergroup differences, "ancient hatreds" and centuries-old feuds, or the stresses of modern life within a global economy. Nor were ethnic passions, long bottled up by repressive communist regimes, simply uncorked by the end of the Cold War. Instead, we maintain that ethnic conflict is most commonly caused by collective fears of the future. As groups begin to fear for their physical safety, a series of dangerous and difficult-to-resolve strategic dilemmas arise that contain within them the potential for tremendous violence. As information failures, problems of credible commitment, and the security dilemma take hold, the state is weakened, groups become fearful, and conflict becomes likely. Ethnic activists and political entrepreneurs, operating within groups, reinforce these fears of physical insecurity and cultural domination and polarize society. Political memories, myths, and emotions also magnify these fears, driving groups further apart. Together, these between-group and within-group strategic interactions produce a toxic brew of distrust and suspicion that can explode into murderous violence, even the systematic slaughter of one people by another.

Finally, we turn to the question of the international spread of ethnic conflict.

② In the last section of this chapter, we distinguish between diffusion, which occurs when conflict in one area alters the likelihood of conflict elsewhere, and escalation, which occurs when additional, foreign participants enter an otherwise "internal" conflict. Building upon the strategic dilemmas in the previous section, we then examine the principal causal routes by which ethnic conflicts can diffuse or escalate. Diffusion occurs largely through information flows that condition the beliefs of ethnic groups in other societies. Escalation is driven by alliances between transnational kin groups as well as by intentional or unintentional spillovers, irredentist demands, attempts to divert attention from domestic problems, or by predatory states that seek to take advantage of the internal weaknesses of others. In outlining the various causal paths, we identify differences between several of the chapters in Parts Two and Three. Our concluding chapter below draws more general analytic and policy lessons.