

Book Review

Stathis N. Kalyvas, Yale University

Rape during Civil War. By Dara Kay Cohen. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2016.

Students of civil wars have devoted a considerable amount of effort trying to understand the dynamics of their violence. A number of theories have been proposed to make sense of the variation in levels of lethal violence. Recently, research has moved on to nonlethal forms of violence, most notably the mass displacement of civilian populations. Dara Kay Cohen extends this agenda further, seeking to explain the occurrence of rape in civil war. Her book is the most effective, comprehensive, and systematic account of this type of violence.

In a nutshell, Cohen argues that rape is an externality of forced recruitment rather than, as is commonly asserted, the result of opportunism or ethnic hatred. Rebel groups that abduct civilians to turn them into fighters and state forces that rely on press-ganging (i.e., forcible enlistment) are much more likely to engage in rape compared to rebel groups and states that do not. Cohen combines a cross-national analysis that establishes the presence of significant variation in the incidence of rape with theoretical and empirical evidence that specifies a causal link connecting forced recruitment and gang rape, namely, the most commonly reported form of rape in civil war: group cohesion via socialization. She also provides illustrative evidence through case studies of two civil wars, those of Sierra Leone (1991–2002) and Timor-Leste (1975–99). A third, less in-depth, case study of the civil war in El Salvador (1980–92) considers the limitations of the argument. Cohen argues that the ideology of armed actors and the pressure exercised on them by foreign sponsors may upend the connection between forced recruitment and the incidence of mass rape.

Rape during Civil War is clearly written and extensively researched, and it avoids overreaching. One of Cohen's important contributions is to challenge the widely shared perception that rape in civil war is primarily the outcome of ethnic

hatred, particularly via a hierarchical, top-down process. Theoretically, the book contributes to two burgeoning research agendas: the dynamics of civil wars—as opposed to static correlations between overaggregated variables of interest—and the “meso” level (i.e., the practices of armed groups)—as opposed to both the macro level (the study of country-level processes) and the micro level (the study of individual behavior and incidents). Methodologically, the book is exemplary in Cohen's combination of different methods and the attention she devotes to the theoretical specification and empirical support of the key causal mechanism. The three case studies that stand alongside her cross-national statistical analysis draw on the best available subnational statistical reports on each war, and, crucially, her own interviews with civilians and ex-combatants. The latter, Cohen reminds us, are important, but too often omitted, interlocutors in the study of wartime rape; their accounts help explain the motivations behind armed group and individual behavior.

Like every good study charting new territory, this one exhibits a few weaknesses. On the theoretical front, it makes a convincing case that gang rape may foster cohesion among groups composed of members that have been abducted. However, it is unclear whether gang rape is a means explicitly deployed to generate cohesion or an unintended externality of forced abduction. The distinction is important theoretically but also from a policy and legal perspective. It is also hard to see how groups of abductees going on a rape binge could perform with a minimum of military efficiency. The fact that the chain of command turns out to be a rather irrelevant factor underscores this point, as does the observation that mass rape is bound to alienate the civilian population, whose support is generally valuable for most armed groups, most of the time. As much as cohesion is important, military effectiveness is a central goal in most civil wars, and it is hard to see how pervasive and systematic gang rape could be functional from an organizational perspective. More generally, there is a mismatch in the book between the emphasis on insurgent groups such as the Revolutionary United Front

(RUF), in Sierra Leone, and the higher likelihood of rape among states (76% of all state militaries appear to engage in rape vs. 56% of all insurgent groups).

On the empirical front, the book places perhaps more weight on the cross-national analysis than it should have. Although rape is notoriously hard to measure, recruitment could have been specified and measured better. The use of US State Department reports to code a three-scale measure of recruitment by insurgent groups and state militaries does not do justice to this critically important military practice that varies in a much more nuanced way. As a result, one ends placing in the same basket groups such as the Lord's Resistance Army (LRA) in Uganda and the RUF in Sierra Leone, on the one hand, with the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK; *Partiya Karkerên Kurdistanê*) in Turkey or the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC; *Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia*), on the other hand. All these groups abducted civilians at some point, but the ways in which they deployed and managed forced recruitment were vastly different. The case studies underscore some of these issues. For example, the Indonesian case provides less than strong support for the argument. On the one hand, the evidence on the recruiting methods of the pro-Indonesian militias that engaged in rape is rather thin and, on the other hand, the Indonesian military appears to have engaged in rape even though it did not rely on press-ganging.

A more general issue with the claims based on the cross-national analysis is that, although this is a good way for

figuring out general patterns and for establishing empirically based, theoretical intuitions, it remains a rough tool. Because such analysis tends to privilege a dominant explanatory independent variable, it tends to gloss over the likely presence of multiple paths to the outcome, which, though less prevalent, could still be relevant, particularly given the limited time series used (1980–2012). Likewise, it may be simultaneously true that abduction makes rape more likely across all groups and that groups that come to rape through a different path (e.g., by seeking demographic homogeneity) are more consistent in its use. The presence of considerable rates of false positives and negatives in the data (e.g., 51% of insurgent groups that did not abduct raped, 25% of insurgent groups that did abduct did not rape, 71% of states that did not press-gang raped) should have justified more attention to outliers as a means to uncover other, less common but nevertheless relevant, paths. In short, the book ends up being less a theory of rape in civil war than a theory of socialization via abduction in low-cohesion armed groups in civil war.

Overall, *Rape during Civil War* does an excellent job in identifying an important pathway to rape in civil war contexts. This finding raises a further question: Under what conditions is the pathway likely to emerge? These conditions are not specified in the book but could be deduced from it as follows: rape is perhaps more likely in conflicts that place a low premium on civilian support, group discipline, chain of command operation, and overall military performance, that is, in conflicts where weak insurgents face off against weak governments.