



Teresa Koloma Beck

# THE NORMALITY OF CIVIL WAR

*Armed Groups and Everyday Life in Angola*

campus



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# 1. Introduction

“The conditions in the Central Highlands were very complex. Especially in the villages it happened, for example, that at night it knocked on the door of a father. And his son, who was fighting on the other side, stood there, asking for money. Money for medicine, money for food. ‘Father, we are dying out there!’ he would say. What would this man do in such a situation? Would he act as one from the other side? Or as a father?” (Interview, 2005m)

The sound of shooting, the flickering of muzzle flash, burning houses and vehicles, people fleeing from the scenes of violence, corpses left behind—such or similar are the images that come to our mind thinking about war. Popular as well as academic discourse have cultivated an image of war as a state of emergency, as a temporary deviation from the “normal” course of affairs, a deviation that is marked by destructive and disruptive forces. But civil wars are not fought in one day; many of them last several years, some decades. In Sudan and Chad, Sierra Leone and Liberia, Angola and Mozambique, in Peru, Columbia and Nicaragua, in the Palestinian areas of Israel and the Kurdish territories of Turkey and Iraq, in Lebanon, as well as in East-Timor, Myanmar and Vietnam violent conflicts have been going on for ten to thirty years.<sup>1</sup> Given the time horizons of existential human activities such as cultivating fields or raising children, this seems to be a rather long period to be experienced as a transitory state of emergency. Moreover, as psychological research shows, a persistent experience of crisis quickly leads to a breakdown (Schauer, Elbert and Neuner, 2005). Therefore, a “state of emergency”-perspective on wars might be useful in the reconstruction of political and legal problems. Yet, its contribution to the understanding of the social processes in war situations can only be limited. This observation, however, raises a fundamental epistemological question: if not as a state of emer-

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<sup>1</sup> The data is drawn from the online database of AKUF (Arbeitsgemeinschaft Kriegsursachenforschung, Research Group Causes of War) at Hamburg University, Germany (AKUF, 2012).

gency, how can war situations otherwise be conceived? The aim of this book is to propose an answer to this question. In the spirit of qualitative empirical research, the discussion develops around a case study on civil war in Angola.

The account cited at the beginning vividly illustrates the limitations of an state of emergency-perspective on violent conflict. Collected during field research in Angola, it describes a situation, which, according to the interviewee, was typical for the civil war period: a father finds himself in a dilemma to choose between, on the one hand, loyalty to the armed group that is ruling the area he lives in, and, on the other hand, loyalty to his combatant son who is “from the other side”. The confrontation takes place at his very doorstep, and the decision he is confronted with affects him in a rather personal and emotional way. Fatherly loyalty would be the obvious choice; yet, it would also bring him into perilous conflict with the armed actors ruling the territory. The story shows how, in a civil war situation, the civilian and the combatant milieu come to meet in a contentious everyday life. Moreover, the wording of the interviewee suggests that, to his experience, the scene was all but exceptional. This story, thus, defies the notion of war as a state of emergency; moreover, it contradicts the commonly assumed distance between the realm of the combatants and the non-combatants. While putting common implicit presumptions about violent conflict into question, it also serves to reveal the very same presuppositions: in the common epistemology of war, the latter appears, firstly, as crisis suspending “normality”. And secondly, it is assumed that this crisis is driven by a particular constellation of agents, by the violent confrontation between at least two armed groups, fighting at the expense of an innocuous civilian population. The distinction between those who are waging war and those who fall prey to it is supposed to be identifiable and clear cut as well as the distinction between the armed opponents themselves.

Tacitly orienting research and analysis, these implicit presumptions have major implications for the study of wars in academia and beyond. Systematically, they draw the researcher’s attention, on the one hand, to events indicative or emblematic for a state of emergency; and on the other, to the protagonists of war situations: armies and armed groups. Invariably, the warring parties and the so-called civilian population appear as mutually exclusive and intrinsically contradicting spheres, touching each other but episodically, typically in moments of violence and destruction.

The origins of these preconceptions can be found in the ideal of trinitarian warmaking, described by Carl von Clausewitz against the background of

the state formation-wars in Western Europe (Clausewitz, 2008; see also van Creveld, 1991, 35–41). They are, hence, closely linked to the project of modernity that cultivates an image of society as being peaceful and progressive, and therefore can conceive of war only as of an exceptional event, limited in time and space (Bauman, 1993, 1–30; Spreen, 2008, 30–4; Reemtsma, 2012). Yet, the idea of war taking place contained and controlled at the *outside* of society never captured its social reality. The combatants themselves are always commuters between the realm of battle and the realm of civilian life, bringing war back home, but also bringing elements of “home” to the front. In war “civilian” and “combatant” life are, thus, intimately related, conditioning and informing each other constantly. For the study of contemporary conflict, acknowledging this interdependency becomes crucial. Since the end of World War II the majority of violent conflicts around the globe have been intra-state wars (Schreiber, 2001). The latter systematically abrogate the boundaries separating the realm of combat from the realm of civilian life. In doing so, they introduce an expansion of war into the sphere of everyday life. This observation serves as a starting point for the endeavour undertaken in this book, i.e. to conceive war beyond alleged notions of emergency.

## 1.1 The problem: the expansion of civil war into everyday life

Commonly, violent conflicts within states are called “civil wars”. This terminology emphasises that conflict takes place between people, who belong to the same political entity, who are citizens of the same state. In military strategy, such wars have also been called “low intensity conflicts” to highlight that they are fought for longer periods of time, but with low intensity and frequently in the absence of advanced weapon systems (van Creveld, 1991, 42–52). Looking, however, beyond political and strategic concerns at the social dynamics of such conflicts, their most salient feature consists in their tendency to negate the distinctions considered to be constitutive for inter-state wars.

First and foremost, civil wars blur the boundary between combatants and non-combatants. The reason thereof is plain: the protagonists of intra-state conflicts, beside the state itself, are non-state armed groups. Different from regular armies that institutionally and especially financially are backed by the state, armed groups have to rely on the so-called civilian population in order

to sustain their ranks and to provide for sufficient supplies. This has far reaching consequences: in the perspective of the opponent, any “civilian” under certain conditions might appear as a camouflaged or at least potential combatant, or otherwise as a supporter of the armed group. Therefore, civilians inevitably become a direct target of military operations.

Empirical data on war situations suggests that the line separating combatants from non-combatants is always thinly drawn, even in inter-state conflicts.<sup>2</sup> Yet, in civil wars, spurred by the armed groups’ need for popular support, this line is permanently in flux, converging towards practical dissolution. “The ‘soldier’ of the Small War”, writes the German sociologist Trutz von Trotha, “[is] civilian and soldier in one person. The ‘combatant’ of the Small War is himself the annihilation of the separation belonging to the trinitarian war” (Trotha, 1999, 89, my translation).

Yet, the distinction between combatants and non-combatants is not the only one to be put into question in civil wars. It might also become difficult to distinguish between the armed opponents themselves. With but rudimentary uniforms and the possibilities of long-distance communication being limited, it is not always clear to whom to attribute certain actions. An account of the Polish journalist Ryszard Kapuscinski from the Angolan War of Independence illustrates this problem. He describes how, approaching a roadblock, it was vital, yet often difficult, to identify by which party the latter was manned:

“[W]e must bear in mind, that the armies fighting each other are dressed (or undressed) alike and that large regions of the country are a no-man’s-land into which first one side and then the other penetrates and sets up checkpoints. That is why, at first we don’t know who these people are or what they will do with us” (Kapuscinski, 2001, 44).

The blurring of boundaries between competing sets of agents spurs the collapse of other differences, assumed to be constitutive for war situations: first, the war is spatially no longer confined to its classic theatres, i.e. the battlefield. Instead, places belonging to the sphere of the everyday, such as schools or hospitals, market places or bus stations, farming fields or private homes, turn into theatres of war. Second, beside this dissolution of spatial bounda-

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2 Beginning in World War I, the world’s major armies increasingly relied on so-called ‘civilian soldiers’, i.e. conscripts recruited on a temporal basis. Having been pulled out of civilian life, they seemed to be less inclined towards fighting than the professionals who had been socialised in the army (Bourke, 1999, 77–8).



ries, the temporal limits of conflict are increasingly difficult to define. Official truces or peace agreements are no reliable indicators for an end of war violence. Numerous are the cases—the civil war in Angola being one of them—in which fighting continued despite the negotiation of a peace accord (cf. Richards, 2005).

In a nutshell, civil wars show a tendency towards a three-dimensional decomposition of boundaries: first, in the social dimension, obliterating the distinction between combatants and non-combatants; second, in the spatial dimension, annihilating the boundaries of battlefields; and, third, in the temporal dimension, blurring the distinction between times of war and times of peace. Under such circumstances, war is no longer a mere state of emergency fought out between two armed parties with non-combatants being but collaterally involved. Instead, combatants and non-combatants are living together. The theatre of war shifts from the front into everyday life. In the words of von Trotha, “[t]he Small War is [...] the war in the sphere of everyday social life” (Trotha, 1999, 89, my translation).

Empirically, such dynamics have been frequently described, especially by anthropologists<sup>3</sup>, but also by historians<sup>4</sup>. Even more than in social science research the importance of the everyday in war situations surfaces in autobiographies or novels written by persons who lived through them.<sup>5</sup> In these accounts, normal everyday experiences appear as crucial in the social dynamics of (civil) war, yet in a double and ambivalent sense. Two distinct but interrelated dynamics can be observed: on the one hand, the accounts show the *destabilising* effects brought about by the collapse of familiar everyday structures, an aspect that resonates well with state of emergency-thinking on violent conflict. Yet, on the other hand, these accounts disclose a *stabilising* function of experiences of “normality”. Moreover, they reveal that the reproduction and transformation of normality in war situations can serve very different functions: on the individual level, for example, perceptions or actions, which appear as normal or familiar, are anchor points of orientation and sources of resilience; in armed groups (state and non-state alike) the habitualisation or normalisation of violent action is vital, if not an operational condition; in violent action, the attack on physical or social structures of the everyday can become a strategic objective. State of emergency-think-

3 See for example Nordstrom, 1997; Nordstrom, 2004; Maček, 2001; Maček, 2007; Lubkemann, 2008.

4 See for example Harneit-Sievers, 1995; Bourke, 1999.

5 See for example Guevara, 2000; Malaparte, 1952; Kapuscinski, 2001; Drakulić, 1993.

ing on violent conflict is closely related to images of war as a breakdown of normality. The considerations presented, however, suggest that such an understanding fails to capture the importance of “normality” or everyday life as analytical categories, whose examination might contribute to a better understanding of the social processes evolving in civil war situations.

In the research on contemporary violent conflicts, we can observe a growing awareness for the social dynamics of everyday life. However, the impact of the insights gained so far on theory-building has been limited. Theorising violent intra-state conflicts based on these insights demands nothing less than an epistemological revolution. On the one hand, state of emergency-thinking has to be overcome: conceding that civil wars unfold in the sphere of everyday life suggests to conceive them theoretically in terms of a condition of the everyday, as a particular mode of normality, which raises questions about the emergence, reproduction and change of the latter. On the other hand, the problem of internal and external boundaries of civil war situations has to be addressed: theories would need to recognize the changing relations between the combatant and non-combatant world. Theorising the empirically observable expansion of civil wars into the sphere of normal everyday life, thus, creates two interrelated challenges: first, conceptualising the everyday, and, second, conceptualising the continuous expansion of war into it. Obviously, the second challenge cannot be addressed before answering the first. The following sub-section sketches, to what extent recent theoretical contributions to the study of violent conflict respond to these demands.

## 1.2 The challenge: thinking the everyday

The end of the Cold War brought about a renewed interest in the study of violent conflict. The world appearing behind the falling Iron Curtain was not the peaceful paradise peace activists had hoped for. Instead, the number of violent conflicts increased (Gleditsch, Wallensteen, Eriksson, Sollenberg and Strand, 2002; Schreiber, 2001). What is more, these conflicts did not only occur in faraway places of the Global South. With the violent collapse of Yugoslavia war instead came back to Europe, i.e. to a region of the world believed to have learned the lessons from its violent past. The attacks of September 11, 2001 and the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq further contributed to the impression of an increase in political violence around the globe (Harbom