

# War and Social Movements

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## Abstract

In his scientific production, Charles Tilly broke new ground in two major areas: the study of war and state-building and the study of contentious politics and social movements. Many scholars followed him and elaborated on each of these strands, but few—including Tilly—attempted to link them together. Both in the historical war and state-building and in recent “new wars,” social movements—and contentious politics in general—play a vigorous but a poorly understood role. Drawing on Tilly’s insights, this essay sets out five general hypotheses relating contention to war making and illustrates them with evidence from three historical episodes from French, American, and Italian history, and from the recent experience of the “global war on terror.”

## INTRODUCTION

In his vast body of social scientific work, Charles Tilly made two fundamental contributions to our understanding of the development of the modern state:

- These states—rather than developing naturally out of collective life or as the result of constitution-making—grew out of war making.
- These states developed through the processes of contentious politics—at a minimum through debates in the public sphere and at a maximum through revolutions.

The first part of Tilly’s work is best known in political science, particularly in international relations and the study of the state, while the second is best known in sociology, in particular, in the study of social movements and contentious politics. However, Tilly never attempted to bring the two major strands of his work together. As a result, we have a large literature on the relationships between war and state-building and a separate literature on the relations between states and social movements. Beginning to bridge the gap between these two strands of theory and research about war, states, and contention is the goal of this essay.<sup>1</sup>

1. The essay is a synthesis of a larger historical and comparative study in preparation called *War, States, and Contention*, which combines an analysis of historical war–state-movement interactions with an extended analysis of the United States from the Civil War to the War on Terror, to be published by Cornell University Press. For an early product of the research, see Tarrow, 2013.

## FOUNDATIONAL RESEARCH

In his first body of work, Tilly argued forcefully that war and preparations for war were at the origin of the modern European state (1975, 1985, 1990). Rulers who wanted to make war needed resources, and this resulted in the growth of extraction; they also needed an administrative structure that would turn these resources into war-making capacity, and this led to state-building. This process created an intimate connection between war making and state-building: “States,” as Tilly famously wrote, “make war, but war makes states” (1975:42).

The entire process—granted, over a long period and with fits and starts along the way—gave citizens political leverage, which made it possible for them to organize into movements and other forms of what Tilly came to call “contentious politics” (Tilly, 1984; Mcadam, Tarrow, & Tilly, 2001). To Tilly’s aphorism that “war made states and states make war,” we might add the corollary that war and states *make movements, and movements both help states to form and to go to war*. This was as close as Tilly came to linking his work on war and state-building to his contributions to the study of contentious politics.

Tilly’s work on war and state-making inspired a generation of scholars who extended, criticized, and reinforced his work. However, these scholars mainly focused on major revolutions and on wars of national liberation and seldom considered the contributions of social movements that do not rise to the level of revolution. Moreover, they gave little attention to the mechanisms that drive the relationships among political contention, war, and state-building—mechanisms such as the mobilization of mass publics, resistance to paying the taxes and providing the conscripts to fight wars, or the formation of social movements that support or oppose war. And they gave little attention to the role of movements in *war making* or on the restructuring of states at war’s end.

At the same time, the second body of Tilly’s work (1978, 1986, 1995) was influencing another group of scholars, who were more interested in the organization, the framing, and the repertoires of social movements in brief historical episodes—usually in the present. Since the 1960s, they no longer saw movements as irrational or antipolitical, as they had been seen in the past. And in contrast to the first group of scholars, who mainly used historical methods, these scholars employed the empirical methods that had grown up in the study of political parties and public opinion. Particularly important was the importation of statistical time-series methods from industrial relations research, applied to episodes of contentious politics, to which Tilly also made significant contributions (Tilly, 1995; also see Olzak, 1989 and Tarrow, 2008).

However, there was a little attempt to bring together the “top-down” tradition that Tilly had pioneered in his work on war and state-building and

his “bottom-up” work on contentious politics. The closest social movement scholars came to linking movements to state development was with the concept of “political opportunity structure,” which they most often specified as the relationship between particular movements and state institutions within particular episodes of contention. They gave less attention to how states provide opportunities and exercise constraints on movements over time, which would have forced them to consider the role of movements in the construction of modern states and, from there, to examine the role of war in creating both capacities and constraints of contentious politics.

### CUTTING-EDGE HYPOTHESES

In attempting to bridge these two strands of research, my theses can be simply stated as follows:

*Hypothesis 1.* Political contention often leads to war, especially when contending actors go to war with one another.

*Hypothesis 2.* Movements, and contentious politics in general, play a key role in mobilization for war, sometimes working to prevent war but more often enticing states to go to war.

*Hypothesis 3.* Movements, and contentious politics in general, play a key role in war making, sometimes instilling patriotism in citizen armies and sometimes assuring their defeat by passive or active resistance.

*Hypothesis 4.* Movements, and contention in general, emerge *in war's wake* with strengthened political opportunities, sometimes changing the direction of states and sometimes overrunning them.

*Hypothesis 5.* New wars are more often triggered by transnational social movements than classical wars and cross the boundaries of porous states.

I will use the following three historical examples to illustrate these hypotheses:

- *The French Revolutionary Wars* that were begun by a Republican movement that served as a main recruitment mechanism for the citizen army.
- *The American Civil War*, which grew out of territorial contention over slavery, but increasingly embraced the goals of the abolitionist movement.
- *The Italian Fascist State*, which grew out of the First World War but through highly contentious politics, destroyed the Liberal state.

I will then turn, briefly, to contemporary wars and their relations to the transnational movements that have developed over the last decades.

## KEY ISSUES FOR RESEARCH

## HYPOTHESIS 1: FROM CONTENTION TO WAR

One of the main features of Tilly's perspective on political conflict is that he saw all forms of contention—from the most conventional to the most bellicose—as part of the same universe of contentious politics. This caused no end of grief to scholars working in the social movement tradition, some of whom thought he was simply using another term for movements, while others thought he was taking on too much. Granted, the term *contentious politics* is maddeningly capacious, but it has the virtue of placing different forms of contention in relation to one another and of encouraging the examination of transitions from one to another: for example, the transition from social movements to revolutions (Goldstone, 1998) or from social movements to Civil War (Tarrow, 2015, Chapter 4).

The transition from contentious politics to armed conflict results through a combination of radicalization and escalation. We now know a great deal about the social and economic structures, and the motivations of insurgents, which produce civil strife. However, apart from a few fugitive works (e.g., see Alimi, 2011; Sambanis & Zinn 2003), we know less about the processes of escalation and radicalization that transform civil conflict into internal war. We can see examples of how this happened in all three of our illustrative cases as follows:

Political contention led to civil war in revolutionary France, when the Jacobin faction of the Republican coalition launched a reign of terror and virtue against its political opponents, and fought a civil war against Catholic counter-revolutionaries in the West, where opposition to the nationalization of the church and refusal to serve in the army threatened the revolution.<sup>2</sup>

Contention also escalated into civil war when the American congressional balance rule that had managed the addition of new states to the Union broke down, divided the parties along sectional lines, and produced a new party—the Republicans—which had only a Northern and a Western base (Weingast, 1998).

Finally, in Italy, what had been deep-rooted but still largely pacific contention before the First World War descended into civil war when a new movement—Benito Mussolini's Fascist movement—emerged from the war with a large and well-armed following of former soldiers, nationalists, and former socialists (Farneti, 1978).

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2. It is not without significance that Tilly's first major work was on this Vendée rebellion (1964). However, he resisted characterizing it as a civil war. More recent research by Jean-Clément Martin makes clear that it was a "real" war and not a mere revolt. See *his Contre-Révolution, révolution et nation en France, 1789-1799* (1998).

## HYPOTHESIS 2: MOVEMENTS IN MOBILIZATION FOR WAR

Movements matter in mobilization into war in three major ways:

*First*, movements that take power frequently extend their assault on the state into forays against neighboring or unfriendly states. *Extension* is best illustrated by the French Republicans who took power after the first phase of the revolution. Urged on by the *sans-culottes* of the Paris streets, and convinced that they faced a coalition of external enemies and internal traitors, the Girondin faction led the country to attack superior forces of Prussia and Austria on the battlefield. Their Jacobin opponents, who succeeded the Gironde in power in 1792, executed the King, thereby assuring that the monarchs they faced on the battlefield would continue the conflict. By easy—if not entirely logical—stages, the Republican ideology of universal emancipation was transformed into a mission of foreign conquest.

*Second*, movements can put pressure on states to go to war to achieve their own political objectives. This was evident in the lead-up to the American Civil War, as antislavery advocates both within and outside the Republican party put forward the theory that although slavery was protected by the Constitution in the southern states, freedom was national and the duty of good patriots was to surround the slaveholder by “a wall of anti-slavery fire, so that he may see the condemnation of himself and his system glaring down in letters of light,” as Frederic Douglass put it in a speech in London.

*Third*, states sometimes use movements to defeat internal actors who oppose going to war. This process is shown by the ways in which the Italian government used the Nationalist movement to pressure public opinion and reluctant legislators—to support intervention in World War One (Procacci, 1992). The government never had a majority in favor of war, and the well-organized Socialist opposition opposed it, but Nationalist demonstrations and the support of the country’s major newspaper, *Corriere della Sera*, gave the impression of growing support for intervention on the side of the western allies.

Not all war making is driven by movement support—and indeed, many countries go to war in the face of substantial opposition—as the United States did in 1917. However, the support of nationalist or other movements can put countries over the edge in the decision to go to war. It can also help assure civilian support for war making and can have major effects on the state in war’s wake.

## HYPOTHESIS 3: MOVEMENTS IN WAR MAKING

The support of a mass movement can endow governments that go to war with a military capacity that they would lack if they depended only on mercenary or conscript armies alone:

The French *levée en masse* of 1792 was launched with the first of many campaigns to convince volunteers that they were fighting for *la patrie*, instead of expanding the power of a distant government. It is probably exaggerated to claim, as some have done, that French recruits fought with copies of the Declaration of the Rights of Man on their bayonets, but their government made use of the printing press to flood newly recruited battalions with republican propaganda.

In the United States, at least part of the success of the Union armies was due to the support of the abolitionist movement, as well as to the enlistment of 180,000 ex-slaves who had fled from the South (Goodheart, 2011). Lincoln's Emancipation Proclamation came too late in the Civil War to change many minds, but in embracing the Abolitionists' program, it helped advance the idea that the war had been fought to end slavery, a goal that had been ambiguous at the start of the war (Oakes, 2012).

As for the Italians, their shabby performance until the military disaster of Caporetto was at least in part due to the lack of enthusiasm of peasant and worker conscripts. Mobilization depended almost entirely on repression of both the recruits and the civilian population (Kier, 2010). It was only after the Austrian armies swept south into the Veneto that patriotic associations began to form to encourage civilian support for the war and bolster the army's military prowess. At that stage, the government even promised land to the peasants at war's end, a promise that it was unable to keep, thereby helping to radicalize many peasant ex-soldiers.

## HYPOTHESIS 4: MOVEMENTS IN WAR'S WAKE

Tilly popularized the idea that war making strengthens the state and ultimately expands participation. Citizens and states, he reasoned,

- first bargained over the means of war;
- then bargained over enforceable claims that would serve their interests outside the area of war;
- that in turn helped to enlarge states' obligations to their citizens—what Tilly, somewhat unusually, called *protection*;
- bargaining and protection helped to produce citizens' rights, and eventually, representation;
- We can infer from this that social movements are one of the products of war making.

In Tilly's reading, this was a long-term process. However, students of individual wars have seen citizenship expand too. Our three cases offer evidence of this linkage: The French mass army was a *citizen* army, which, as historian Eugen Weber argued, helped turn peasants into Frenchmen (Weber, 1976). The American Civil War, by freeing the slaves, led to the passage of the Thirteenth Amendment and, with much delay, to citizenship for African-Americans (Ackerman, 1998); it also led to the germ of America's welfare state with the according of pensions to widows and veterans (Skocpol, 1992). Italy's participation in World War One led to the expansion of the electorate to full male suffrage with proportional representation. The same war also led to the success of a long-term goal of the woman's movement in many countries—the passage of female suffrage.

These examples fit well with Tilly's counter-intuitive notion of war leading to reform, but wars have less salutary results when we look beyond reformism:

First, war creates bitter internecine conflicts that often survive in war's wake. The Vendée and other regional rebellions in France led to regional/cultural cleavages that survived in the electoral bases of political parties for decades, not to mention the regional split in American voting behavior that divided North and South after the Civil War (Key, 1949). However, it was in Italy that war had the most dramatic effect on social and political conflict: The social ravages of the war, added to the resentments of ex-combatants, led to a radicalization of Italian nationalism and to the creation of the Fascist movement that overthrew the Liberal State.

Second, wars almost inevitably lead to emergency legislation and rule by decree, constricting civil liberties and repressing opposition. These changes frequently become normalized, leading to a ratchet effect that can be applied to opponents even after the emergency is over. In revolutionary France, the state of siege, which was originally intended to govern frontier fortress towns in times of war, was extended across the country to cities and departments and used whenever cities or regions threatened Parisian control (Le Gal, 2012). In America, the Civil War use of military commissions was extended to the Indian Wars in later decades and was revived from World War Two to the War on Terror. And in Italy, although the most oppressive forms of military control were quickly liquidated, the military retained its sense of legal autonomy and failed to act to stem the Fascist threat at war's end (Mondini, 2006).

## HYPOTHESIS 5: NEW WARS, POROUS STATES, AND TRANSNATIONAL MOVEMENTS

The wars that illustrated the theses above were all conflicts *between states*, or—in the American case—between the national state and a breakaway regional state. All of these were what Mary Kaldor classifies as “old wars”: constructions of the centralized, “rationalized,” hierarchically ordered, territorialized modern state (2006, p 17). However, beginning after World War Two, wars became less formal, they more frequently involved social movement actors and they have dragged on for years—often for decades (Hironaka, 2005; Kaldor, 2006). At the same time, spurred by globalization, states were becoming more porous (Katzenstein, 2005). And partly dependent on these two trends, movements were becoming more transnational, both in their capacity to diffuse their messages across borders (Givan, Roberts, & Soule, 2010) and in the more fundamental sense of organizing across states (della Porta & Tarrow 2005).

Social scientists have been aware of the growth of transnational movements since the 1990s. However, these were mostly “good” movements: Human rights and women’s rights groups, environmental groups, and peace movements that organize in and around international organizations and used mainly conventional lobbying and educational tactics. They gave rise to a broad literature on transnational organizing that extended the meaning of the term *movement* toward the conventional pole of Tilly’s broad concept of “contentious politics.”

The phenomenon of transnational movement organizing could be seen soon after World War Two in the formation of the United World Federalists (Mazower, 2012, pp. 233–236), and in the 1960s to the 1980s in a succession of transnational peace and environmental movements. However, with the end of the Cold War, a new generation of more militant and often violent movements began to appear, both in the Global North and the Global South. Sometimes dismissed as nothing more than the product of private “greed” (Collier, 2000), nonstate transnational movements, often empowered by fundamentalist religious ideologies, began making war on states in the 1990s and especially in the first decade of the new century.

Movements such as Al-Qaeda are transnationally organized, use network forms of organization, and depend on diverse sources of funding and recruitment, and this has made them extremely flexible and difficult to suppress. Not only that, faced by unseen and highly ruthless opponents, states have found it opportune to ignore the rules of war that developed from the nineteenth century on, even while paying lip service to the Geneva Conventions, the United Nations, and the defense of freedom.

Consider the United States in the years since the September 11, 2001 massacres. In one sense, it adds positive evidence to Tilly’s teachings about the effects of war on state-building while in other ways it questions his teaching.



On the one hand, the wars since 9/11 have increased the growth of the state. The civilian state—and especially of the national security state—has grown enormously. Both military contractors and intelligence firms and technicians have inflated the size of what has emerged as a vast para-state sector (Priest & Arkin, 2011). Growing up in quasi-secrecy in the suburbs of Washington DC and elsewhere since 9/11, this para-state sector carries out tasks that were once reserved for civil servants; it obeys a logic of profit, rather than a logic of public service; and it has become difficult to control, as the government discovered in 2013 in the Snowden affair.

The American state since 9/11 has also grown less sensitive to the values of its traditional liberal creed, although some observers date this decline to before the bombings of the World Trade Center and the Pentagon (Katzenstein, Ibrahim, & Rubin, 2010, Margulies 2013). Although the first years after 9/11 brought grisly news of traditional forms of abuse like torture, the war on Al Qaeda and its affiliates has also produced a “new war” spinoff: The use of technologically advanced weapons to assassinate opponents and whoever happens to be in their vicinity. In such a long-distance war against transnational enemies, in which a few technicians far from the battlefield substitute for “boots on the ground,” is Tilly’s equation that war leads to state expansion still valid?

A final change is still too tentative to warrant more than a brief note. Social movements have long been rooted on territory, based on organizations, and used a well-hewn repertoire of contention, such as petitions, strikes, demonstrations, and—at the outside—political violence. They have also used legal mobilization to rein the excess of states making war. However, the most dramatic forms of contention responding to the growth of the American national security state have been new forms of electronic communication responding to the new forms of electronic surveillance developed in the War on Terror by the United States and its allies.

There is a final irony here: Just as the state’s electronic surveillance effortlessly transgresses national boundaries, a journalist in Brazil, a documentary filmmaker in Berlin, and media sources in Washington, London, and Frankfurt have helped a former NSA electronic technician in Hawaii expose the results of the state’s transnational electronic spying. The dispersion of state power across territory in the name of war has produced a dispersion of social movement activity against it in the name of freedom.

These five hypotheses will, of course, need to be specified more precisely, their scope conditions investigated, and tested against more rigorous evidence, and on a broader range of cases than the illustrative materials drawn on here. What I hope to have accomplished here is to contribute to an “emerging trend” of research on the relations among war, state-building, and contentious movements.

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- Domestic Political Institutions and Alliance Politics (*Political Science*), Michaela Mattes
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