

Introduction: Paramilitarism as a Catalyst of Perpetration

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An American Prologue

In June 2020, uniformed armed men appeared in the streets of Washington, DC, without name tags, unit insignia, or other identification marks. They refused to identify themselves and explain their chain of command, and roamed the streets to contain and suppress the Black Lives Matter protests. A week later, vigilante militias were patrolling the streets of Philadelphia and in north-west Indiana, sporting informal but militaristic dress, striking intimidating postures. The American public were puzzled: if they were not army soldiers, National Guard, or police officers, who were these men, and what were they doing in the streets of American cities? Trump's casual but persistent flirtations with right-wing militias, such as his exhortation to the Proud Boys to 'stand back and stand by' (29 September 2020), encouraged men to join militias, and encouraged militias to seize public space. The storming of the Capitol on 6 January 2021 by pro-Trump militants was therefore a process of paramilitarization that was long in gestation. The consequences were 5 deaths, hundreds of injuries, extensive damage due to vandalism and theft, and over \$30 million for costs of repairs and security measures.

Of all the footage taken of the Capitol raid by journalists and the militants themselves, there were two snippets that I found most instructive in terms of understanding paramilitarism. Both clips were shot by Luke Mogelson, writer for *The New Yorker*, whose report offered important insights into the raid.¹ In one clip, three rioters gather around the Senate's paperwork, confused what to do with it, when one of the men says: 'I think Cruz would want us to do this.' This interaction was a quintessential aspect of paramilitarism: the militia on the ground does not have a formal command-and-control relationship and never received a direct order to commit those acts; neither does it entertain direct but informal ties with a politician. Nevertheless, it operates based on an implicit expectation that since they are serving

1 Luke Mogelson, 'A Reporter's Footage from Inside the Capitol Siege', *The New Yorker*, <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=270F8s5TEKY>> [accessed 15 March 2021].



a common agenda with that politician, they are most likely to receive impunity. A second clip shows a group of militants yelling at a Capitol police officer: 'You're outnumbered. There's a fucking million of us out there, and we are listening to Trump – your boss!' This second interaction represents the emergence of parallel hierarchies, or para-institutions: the police officer believes he is serving in the official security forces, and that the rioters have no authority whatsoever – in fact they are breaking a few laws. But in paramilitarism, these militiamen can overrule the police or even the army, since they believe they have a direct line with powerful men in the state, and indeed often they do.

The Capitol riot, in essence a fairly simple policing failure, clearly demonstrated that the US itself was not immune to paramilitarization, a process that could pose a serious threat to democracy and the rule of law. This time, it ended with a whimper, not with a bang. But if Trump had doubled down, if the rioters had used firearms and killed elected officials, and if militias across the country had taken to the streets using indiscriminate violence against their targets of collective hatred, the results could have been much uglier. Now, they remained at the level of 'proto-perpetration' and did not escalate into the potentially very realistic prospect of much more extensive bloodletting.

What Is Paramilitarism?

Paramilitaries are synonymous with 'state-sponsored militias' or 'pro-government militias', and various other characterizations used to denote the same phenomenon: pro-state, armed groups. But rather than a binary categorizing of which groups exactly *are* and *are not* paramilitaries, or attempts at precise pinpointing of essential features or exclusive differences, it is more useful to bound the concept by placing two buoys in the conceptual landscape along an axis of state involvement. Paramilitarism can then be conceived of as an umbrella concept that covers a broad continuum, distinguished by levels of state involvement.² At the left end of this spectrum, there are spontaneous, bottom-up initiatives such as local vigilantes, lynch mobs, and self-defense groups, and on the other end of the continuum stand the much more organized, top-down, professional paramilitary units of the state. In

2 For a somewhat similar approach see: Martha Huggins, 'Vigilantism and the State: A Look South and North', in *Vigilantism and the State in Modern Latin America: Essays on Extralegal Violence*, ed. by Martha Huggins (Westport, CT: Praeger, 1991), pp. 1-18.

between, from left to right we can place vigilantes, such as neighborhood patrols well-known in gated communities – tacitly condoned but not necessarily actively organized by the state. Moving right, we would see off-duty police/army paid by businessmen or politicians – not institutionally supported but ‘connected’. Next up would be covertly organized and supported armed groups whose affiliation with the state is denied and concealed in various degrees – such as death squads and proxy militias that are ‘astroturfed’ – surreptitiously supported but made to appear autonomous and grassroots. Another step right we can find officially sanctioned civil defense forces, irregular forces, and civil militias that function, e.g., as auxiliaries in violent conflicts. Finally, at the very right of the spectrum are the paramilitary armies of a state: special operations forces of police or army, of which virtually every state disposes. The latter group operates explicitly in name of the state and is generally accountable to the government and (democratic) oversight, but nevertheless enjoys special status. The continuum mostly pertains to the key issue of levels of state involvement, but also levels of organization, professionalism, mobility, and firepower – all in all, their capacity. All of these groups are taken as different expressions of the same analytical category, and are thus under examination in this special issue.

The major distinction between paramilitarism and militias is that the former contains the prefix ‘para’, which means ‘beside’ as well as ‘on behalf of’ or ‘beyond’, and suggests its dynamic and relational proximity to the state. The suffix ‘-ism’ denotes wider societal and political implications, but not an ideology. The insular term ‘militias’ focuses myopically on the armed group of men in relative isolation, and also includes those armed groups that fight for decidedly non-state groups, such as rebel groups in general, but also political parties or unions in democracies, neighborhood vigilantes in societies with the right to bear arms, and others, without the ties to the state. Therefore, this special issue centers not only on paramilitaries or pro-government militias per se, but on their changing assemblages and evolving constellations with the state. It departs from the assumption that ambiguity is part and parcel of defining paramilitarism both analytically and descriptively. Whereas it accepts this ambiguity, there are two problems in defining paramilitarism: excessive definitionalism, and over-ambitious theorizing.

First and foremost, defining ‘paramilitarism’ requires a dual strategy: on the one hand avoiding excessive hair-splitting and a drive for absolute precision, and on the other hand adopting a modest working definition and running with it. The argument that research

on militias ‘suffers from the politics of naming, leading to a proliferation of different terms to describe similar activities and functions³ is not a problem per se. Conceptual proliferation simply attests to the fact that paramilitarism can emerge in different political and cultural contexts. These concepts should reflect the processual nature of the phenomenon rather than just sketching structures. On the other hand, descriptive definitions veer too close to emic notions of paramilitarism (such as ‘Freikorps’, ‘Black and Tans’, ‘JĪTEM’, ‘Triple A’, ‘Četniks’, ‘Kamajor’, ‘Basij’, ‘Rondas Campesinas’, etc.). Second, theories of paramilitarism that are too ambitious and maximalist run the risk that the model overtakes the empirics. Too many studies (especially journal articles) draw on a single case and hastily theorize from a narrow empirical basis. Paramilitarism must be recognized as a broad umbrella phenomenon that cannot be captured in the confines of one theoretical approach or single-case exemplification. However, despite the variety and diversity of the phenomenon, the key point is that it cannot be understood without the state, as the state precedes both anti-state groups and pro-state groups.

The diversity of approaches to paramilitarism and paramilitaries is evidenced by the very different countries and contexts they emerge in. This special issue foregrounds paramilitarism in four different periods and countries. Despite differences in regime type, political culture, and dissimilar historical, cultural, and sociological developments, there is one key dimension that these four paramilitary experiences have in common with each other: collusion with the state.

Collusion with the State

Perhaps the most vital aspect of the broad palette of topics germane to paramilitarism is that of the relationship of the militiamen to the state. Researching these relationships has clear limits. How can we study something that does not want to be studied, in fact, was hatched in order never to be studied? Paramilitarism is set up, through organizational ambiguity and plausible deniability, not to leave any political, physical, and legal traces in the state apparatus, neither in the present, and nor in the future. Studying the iceberg while only looking at the tip will reproduce the confusion, silence, and intrigue that is widespread in public perceptions and discussions on paramilitarism. It is common-

3 Clionadh Raleigh, ‘Pragmatic and Promiscuous: Explaining the Rise of Competitive Political Militias across Africa’, *Journal of Conflict Resolution*, 60.2 (2016), 283-310 (p. 287).

sensical that strolling into, say, the Russian government's offices and demanding a full disclosure of its murky dealings with paramilitaries in Ukraine would not yield any meaningful results. Scheper-Hughes therefore makes the compelling argument that research on secretive phenomena that are deliberately obfuscated and hidden by powerful actors requires unusual ethnographic methods, including 'undercover' modes of approaching and interviewing respondents.⁴ Studies like Huggins' impressive examination of Brazilian death squads rely on works of immersive (and risky) journalism, government investigations, Freedom of Information Act requests, and careful interviews with perpetrators and survivors.⁵ Adapting intelligent ethnographic methods to examine paramilitarism requires a separate discussion, but suffice it to state here that triangulating and inferring are complementary techniques to unearth possible links and hidden collusion.⁶

Collusion is an often misunderstood or oversimplified case. For example, a lively, activist literature accuses the British government of secretly spawning the loyalist paramilitaries in Northern Ireland as a cold and calculated campaign. But the relations between the state and pro-state paramilitaries was never that straightforward – neither in Northern Ireland, nor in other examples. Surely, there is strong evidence for collusion between loyalist paramilitaries and powerful individuals in, and elements of, British state institutions in Northern Ireland. But collusion was more insidious, and included such actions as passing on security information, diverting law enforcement away from loyalist crimes, failing to provide protection to threatened persons, failing to investigate loyalist killings, and providing firearms to loyalists. All of these events happened in the course of various unsolved assassinations in Northern Ireland. The fact that conclusive evidence of the killings was never produced is testimony to the effectiveness of collusion: it was designed not to be found out. The articles in this special issue reject facile conclusions and suggestive associations, and instead deploy a range of innovative methods to expose the paramilitary penetration of political institutions. Tsoutsoumpis read the archival record 'against the grain', Işık interviewed eyewitnesses and family members of the disappeared,

4 Nancy Scheper-Hughes, 'Parts Unknown: Undercover Ethnography of the Organs-trafficking Underworld', *Ethnography*, 5.1 (2004), 29–73.

5 Martha Huggins, 'Modernity and Devolution: The Making of Police Death Squads in Modern Brazil', in *Death Squads in Global Perspective*, ed. by Bruce Campbell & Arthur Brenner (New York: Palgrave, 2000), pp. 203–28.

6 I will deal with this problem in a separate book: *Shabbiha: Assad's Paramilitaries and Mass Violence in Syria* (forthcoming).

Vukušić examined the wealth of material in the vast archives of the International Criminal Tribunal for the Former Yugoslavia (ICTY), and Aljaseem used leaked files and even managed to interview paramilitaries during their emergence. Hunt, whose work on Colombian paramilitaries was exemplary in looking at paramilitarism through the prism of the relationship between state and civil society, offers an epilogue that facilitates a contextualization of the specific cases collected in this special issue.

Paramilitarism is key to understanding perpetration. Many studies of civil wars, counterinsurgencies, and genocides have demonstrated the central role of paramilitaries in the perpetration of violence against civilians. The organization of paramilitarism, from the top liaisons at the helm of the state, down to the killers who commit the violence is a crucial nexus to be examined. Mass violence is often carried out according to clear divisions of labor: between the civil and military wings of the state, but also crucially between military and paramilitary groups. The examples of paramilitarism in this special issue are in many ways unique, but also have similarities to paramilitarism in other countries. Deliberately building or tacitly condoning parallel, informal institutions of violence without oversight mechanisms is a deeply risky business. Empowering young men with weapons and offering them impunity outside of the regular security forces is a recipe for disaster. This is well-known in Greece, Serbia, Turkey, Syria, and other countries that suffered from paramilitarism. To what extent those boys in the streets of American cities or the instigator in the White House are aware of this, remains to be seen.

Works Cited

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