

Review – Paramilitarism: Mass Violence in the Shadow of the State

Written by John Paul Newman

This PDF is auto-generated for reference only. As such, it may contain some conversion errors and/or missing information. For all formal use please refer to the official version on the website, as linked below.

Review – Paramilitarism: Mass Violence in the Shadow of the State

<https://www.e-ir.info/2021/04/30/review-paramilitarism-mass-violence-in-the-shadow-of-the-state/>

JOHN PAUL NEWMAN, APR 30 2021

Paramilitarism: Mass Violence in the Shadow of the State

By Uğur Ümit Üngör

Oxford University Press, 2020

Paramilitarism is both a continuous and insufficiently understood presence in world history. Those two qualities are connected: because of the ubiquity of paramilitarism in such a wide-range of historical and geographical settings, it has been hard to formulate a common language and set of principles through which scholars of different backgrounds might communicate its common features. Additional problems of interpretation have to do with a tendency to condescend to paramilitarism as a peripheral or residual mode of violence in comparison to state institutions such as regular armed or security forces. And there is the tendency to romanticize paramilitary traditions and actors, often a process conducted first and foremost by former or present paramilitaries themselves, who are wont to exaggerate their own roles in national-liberation struggles and (importantly) exaggerate their appeal to the societies and states from which they emerged. These inter-connected problems have made the study of paramilitarism more difficult at virtually every level of analysis, local, national, regional, and of course global. Uğur Ümit Üngör's impressive synthesis does much to confront and overcome these problems. The author has conducted a considerable amount of research into paramilitarism in its many guises across space and time, and he has distilled his work into this remarkably compressed and insightful short study. Anyone who has worked on paramilitarism in any context will want to read this, and future scholars wishing to broach this topic would be unwise to ignore its insights and its ideas.

The author takes an historical-sociological perspective, combining empirical observation of paramilitary case studies with existing theoretical reflection. The emphasis here is on the former, or rather, Üngör's theoretical and analytical insights derive from his impressive survey of paramilitarism across the globe in the modern period. This account is the most comprehensive that I have read on the topic, encompassing all the relevant case studies and their historiographies with impressive linguistic scope. The sections that deal with ex-Yugoslavia and the contemporary Middle East (especially Iraq and Syria, the latter to be a topic of a forthcoming book by the same author) are particularly detailed. Üngör concludes that the most important relationship for paramilitaries is that with the state. This relationship is not understood in the traditional sense of an asymmetrical hierarchy in which paramilitaries feature as an appendage to a more powerful and better-organised state and its institutions (although this is surely sometimes the case). The relationship is rather dynamic, paramilitarism is often present and active at the birth of state projects (e.g., in modern Turkey, the Balkan national states of the nineteenth century) and remains entangled in its institutions and leadership (Üngör's examples here are contemporary Kosovo and Northern Ireland). Paramilitaries can provide states with additional resources of military power, or they can expand their capacities for violence beyond legal and moral strictures by offering 'plausible deniability' to civilian leaders or regular military forces (sections on ex-Yugoslavia and the difficulties of overcoming the burden of proof against perpetrators of violence there highlight this phenomenon).

The second key relationship that Üngör highlights is between paramilitarism and crime, a realm in which paramilitaries are often per force most adept and comfortable. Paramilitary violence typically transgresses the legal

Review – Paramilitarism: Mass Violence in the Shadow of the State

Written by John Paul Newman

and moral rules of the society in which its perpetrators operate, it is almost a natural and necessary environment for paramilitary actors, one in which violence and coercion are at a premium and in which the economic, cultural, and political pay offs can be disproportionately lucrative. Üngör's examples abound, amongst the most conspicuous of which are Ulster loyalist Johnny 'Mad Dog' Adair, Serbian mobster turned warlord Željko 'Arkan' Ražnatović, and Indonesian death squad leader (and 'star' of Joshua Oppenheimer's stunning 2012 documentary *The Act of Killing*) Anwar Kongo. These are all men who also demonstrate the authors point that petty criminality is also a fertile recruitment ground for paramilitary actors.

The book is organised into four chapters. Üngör's introduction sets up the problem of studying paramilitarism, reviews the literature, and defines the historical-sociological approach and the central relationships between paramilitarism, the state, and crime. The second chapter provides an historical overview of paramilitarism in the 'long twentieth century'. In the third chapter, Üngör delves deeper into the nature of the relationship between organised crime, the state, and paramilitarism. Chapter four addresses the organisation of paramilitarism, again taking the state as a starting point and concluding that paramilitarism is "a praxiological phenomenon that is a consequence of para-institutional constellations" (p.169). The final concluding chapter restates many of the main findings of the book and points towards the author's upcoming study of Iraq and Syria, which will surely be of considerable interest to many of this present work's readership.

There is much to take note of in this book. The author's emphasis on empirical observation and analysis means that he typically eschews abstracted 'ideal types' of his objects of study in favour of judging by their actions, that is, their 'praxis'. It means that many of the stereotypes about 'weak states' and other phenomena are skilfully avoided. Chapter four includes a fascinating discussion on the now notorious 'trophy video' of the Serbian state paramilitary units 'the Scorpions' massacring Bosniak civilians during the genocide at Srebrenica, 1995. It made me wonder if there was not a longer conversation to be had about the performative nature of paramilitary violence, and violence as a means of kinship bonding and achieving cultural prestige. Prestige features, too, in the often folkish memory of paramilitarism in the societies from which they came, and I would like to read more studies of the role of memory both in securing social privilege for paramilitaries, but also as a force of recruitment for future generations (Üngör broaches the matter of paramilitary traditions in his final chapter – it brought to my mind Serbian paramilitaries of the 1990s imagining a connection between themselves and the Chetniks of the Second World War, or even of the anti-Ottoman national-liberation struggle). Relations between paramilitaries and non-state actors, civilians, are also surely important, a discussion that has in large part been taken up by Stathis Kalyvas. Üngör's excellent book will become the point of departure for much new study of the phenomenon of paramilitarism in the modern period.

About the author:

John Paul Newman is Associate Professor in Twentieth-century European History at Maynooth University, Ireland. He is interested in the modern history of the Balkans and East-Central Europe, with a particular focus on Yugoslavia, Bulgaria, Macedonia, and Czechoslovakia. He has been working on a study of the Croatian General Josip Jelačić and the intersections of national and imperial identities in nineteenth-century Central Europe, and a book-length study of irregular warfare and paramilitary violence in the Balkans, provisionally titled 'Freedom or Death: A History of Guerrilla Warfare in the Balkans'.