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## **Dynamics of Violence**

**Processes of Escalation and De-Escalation  
in Violent Group Conflicts**

Edited by

Georg Elwert

Stephan Feuchtwang

Dieter Neubert



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Herausgegeben von / Edited by  
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A book like this is always a collective project. In this case the publication is based on two conferences held in Berlin and Mainz in 1995 and 1996 with the title “Feud, war and genocide”. During these conferences around 40 papers were presented. This book is a selection with a focus on the “dynamics of violence”. However, conference papers dealing with other subjects inspired the outline of the book and the papers presented here. Therefore, we would like to thank all participants for their contributions and those who participated in the planning and organisation of the conferences. We want particularly to name Dr. Artur Bogner who was an active and stimulating member of the working group that prepared the conferences and who influenced the development of the project’s central idea.

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Berlin, London, and Mainz

*Georg Elwert  
Stephan Feuchtwang  
Dieter Neubert*



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## **The Dynamics of Collective Violence – An Introduction**

By Georg Elwert, Stephan Feuchtwang, and Dieter Neubert

“Collective violence” is part of social reality all over the world. This is reflected in social science. Recent debates in social sciences on ethnicity, or social movements, or democratisation, or the transition from Communism, all must also deal with violent conflict. However, in these debates violent group conflicts are seen as phases or elements of other social processes. Even in peace and conflict research, collective violence is analysed in terms of its causes and consequences and not as a social phenomenon as such (against this kind of sociology see von Trotha 1997 and Nedelmann 1997). Collective violence is still a neglected subject in sociological and anthropological research in its own right.

Engagement in violence is not a regression to atavistic instincts as is so often held in over-convenient analyses. It is rather a narrowing of the available forms of action and at the same time it is a strategic choice. Once we understand violence to be an everyday possibility of the implementation of will, we can go on to analyse its social channels. Violence is always channelled. Particular targets, victims, weapons, battlefields, and times can be fixed beforehand, other targets and forms of battle can be excluded. The concepts of social channels of violence imply that violence is to the same extent also constrained (cf. Sieferle 1998, Althoff 1998). In feuding, which is the most severely channelled form of violence, weapons, the potential victim, the place of combat (in New Guinea often just the one fighting ground), and the time can be prescribed. Even the procedures to end hostilities are culturally defined norms. The end of the battle is part of the program. Research into such containers of violence, such ‘inhibitors’, can help to implement peace projects.

Hopes that the end of the cold war would bring peace to the world have been deeply disappointed. The contrary has been true. Of the former Soviet bloc only the countries of East-Middle-Europe have undergone a mainly peaceful transition. At the southern fringe of the former empire a multitude of violent local conflicts have been the heritage of Soviet supremacy. Africa, even during the cold war, was burdened by numerous violent conflicts. With the end of the cold war, international military support for the conflicting parties has diminished, but wars have not ceased. The civil wars in Somalia, Liberia, Sierra Leone,

Tajikistan, Rwanda and Congo/Zaire, to name but a few, started after the end of the cold war.

To know why violent group conflicts are such an important element of our world we must try to understand the conflicts themselves as social phenomena. Then the analysis of collective violence can be integrated into more general analyses of society. The objective we follow here is to understand potential conflict situations, to see what are the processes of their escalation and what are the regulating structures and mechanisms of violent conflict. In short, our objective is to deal with a sociology and a social anthropology of collective violence. In one sense this book is a battle against psychologisation and culturalisation. A crucial sector for the understanding of "collective violence" are processes of escalation and de-escalation. Escalation as a topic includes analysis of phases of collective violence once it has been initiated, whether towards greater violence or just towards endemic violence. Escalation can be understood as a distinction between more and less regulated violence practised by the same people but in different circumstances. Escalation is a move, for instance, from feuding between descent groups to treating them as strangers and raiding them. It can also be conceived on an historical scale, as a shift in the kind of wars waged, in particular, from wars of mercantile and agrarian empires to the wars of modern states and their civil wars.

De-escalation means the reverse processes of limiting collective violence. Completely successful de-escalation leads to reconciliation and long-lasting peace. But de-escalation also includes reduction of collective violence to a lower level, or to the establishment of greater control of violence.

### 1. Types of Collective Violence

We look at different forms of collective violence and at clearly defined cases. They deal with a diversity of forms and modes of collective violence that vary also in historical terms. The examples stretch from feud, raid, civil war, war of colonial pacification, war between nation states up to genocide. Every case has its peculiarities. Therefore, the analysis of every case of collective violence has to start in an historical context, though some of the characteristics of war suggested by von Trotha and some of the economics of violence outlined by Elwert may be applicable in a great range of historical contexts.

None of the cases discussed in this book include the two world wars in our century. They would not be good cases for our study because they are, from an anthropological perspective, a cluster of composite wars with quite differentiated characters (compare, for example, the Finish with the Yugoslav war). They would have to include different forms of collective violence, extend over different parts of the world following different developments and political and military objectives. They would be complex social events and, to take them as a whole would hinder a systematic understanding of collective violence.

Something else we have not done is provide a typology of wars and violent conflicts because this would not render the transformative or sliding potential of each of such a "type". But some distinctions are nevertheless helpful. One is the crucial distinction between collective violence or war as a normal state of affairs, namely the regular and endemic exertion of force not only for protection and survival but also as an economy, and war as an exceptional state of affairs, in which the normal economy includes readiness to wage war but not warring itself. Examples of collective violence as a normal state of affairs included here are cases of recurring raids, feuding or warlordism or long lasting civil wars (Waldmann, Elwert, Helbling, Alber, Schwandner-Sievers, and Strecker). In these cases we see recurring escalation and de-escalation. They follow a typical pattern of alternating appeasement and violence. The level of violence oscillates between outbreaks of violence and phases of controlled violence influenced by social forces that strengthen the oscillation. Therefore we will refer to them here as cases of "oscillating violence". We use also the word 'warre' for normal as distinct from exceptional war, borrowing from the seventeenth-century English spelling of Hobbes and following the example of Marshall Sahlins (1968, chapter 1).

Typical examples of violence as an exceptional state of affairs, or "war-catastrophes" in a systemic (not a normative) sense, are wars between nation states or a civil war that leads to an end, either by victory or peace negotiations. Local conflicts might also follow this pattern. Escalation and de-escalation are single processes that come to an end with the end of the war or conflict. We will name such cases "exceptional collective violence", "exceptional violence" or "war-catastrophe". On a theoretical and comparative level von Trotha deals with exceptional violence in total wars and colonial wars of pacification. An extreme case of exceptional violence is the Rwandan genocide (Neubert).

Beside the crucial distinction between "oscillating violence" or "warring" and "exceptional violence" or "war-catastrophes" Allen's paper reminds us of the distinction between external and internal collective violence. External collective violence points to "wars between internationally recognised nation states". Internal collective violence refers to conflicts "occurring within a social grouping". Civil wars are a special case of internal collective violence where the objective of the conflict is the control of the national government. Other types of internal conflicts take place without government involvement and without the objective of control of the government. Examples are raiding, feuding or fighting on a limited local level in a nation state (Schwandner-Sievers, Strecker). External war has effects on the internal situation and produces internal war conditions. The occupations of France, Italy and Norway by Nazi-led forces of Germany produced Quisling and partisan divisions, not to mention the warring divisions of resistance themselves as they did in China under Japanese occupation.