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INTRODUCTORY ARTICLE

The spatiality of violence in post-war cities

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ABSTRACT

The world is urbanising rapidly and cities are increasingly held as the most important arenas for sustainable development. Cities emerging from war are no exception, but across the globe, many post-war cities are ravaged by residual or renewed violence, which threatens progress towards peace and stability. This collection of articles addresses why such violence happens, where and how it manifests, and how it can be prevented. It includes contributions that are informed by both post-war logics and urban particularities, that take intra-city dynamics into account, and that adopt a spatial analysis of the city. By bringing together contributions from different disciplinary backgrounds, all addressing the single issue of post-war violence in cities from a spatial perspective, the articles make a threefold contribution to the research agenda on violence in post-war cities. First, the articles nuance our understanding of the causes and forms of the uneven spatial distribution of violence, insecurities, and trauma within and across post-war cities. Second, the articles demonstrate how urban planning and the built environment shape and generate different forms of violence in post-war cities. Third, the articles explore the challenges, opportunities, and potential unintended consequences of conflict resolution in violent urban settings.

Introduction

Across the globe, post-war cities constitute volatile flashpoints for renewed war and are frequent stumbling blocks in societies seeking to transition from war to peace. Beirut (Lebanon), Medellín (Colombia), and Monrovia (Liberia) are examples of such cities which have experienced war, no longer do, but still remain divided and contested. In addition to posing challenges in the transition from war to peace, post-war cities often function poorly as cities and constitute dangerous sites for people to live in. One central reason for the problems facing these cities is the high prevalence of post-war violence, which not only concentrates to post-war cities but also take urban forms and is unevenly distributed within them.

This collection of articles addresses the spatiality of violence in post-war cities. At the centre of attention is the intersection of urban and post-war dynamics which has implications for why, where, and how violence plays out. The articles are grounded in the recognition that post-war logics, urban particularities, and intra-city dynamics are all
key dimensions that need to be accounted for in order to advance knowledge on the
spatiality of violence in post-war cities. Post-war cities and urban violence have been
subjects of study across disciplines such as peace and conflict research, urban studies,
criminology, planning, geography, economics, and social anthropology. Yet these fields
have largely remained separate and conducted research without insights from each other.
To bridge this gap, we bring together contributions from a range of disciplines which
approach the study of violence in post-war cities from different vantage points. The merits
of this approach are multifaceted since the different fields have complementary foci.
Peace research, for example, has in recent years improved our understanding of the
micro-dynamics of conflict-related violence and the everyday experiences of those
exposed to such violence. Urban studies, in turn, have extensively theorised violence in
the city, generating an in-depth understanding of its urban dynamics, its spatial distribu-
tion, and its effect on different political outcomes. Social anthropologists and criminol-
gists have provided detailed accounts of the individual- and group-level dynamics and
incentive structures that affect participation in different forms of urban violence.

Bringing together contributions from these and other relevant disciplines, addressing
the single issue of violence in post-war cities from a spatial perspective, this collection of
articles: 1) nuances our understanding of the causes and forms of the uneven spatial
distribution of violence, insecurities, and trauma within and across post-war cities; 2)
demonstrates how urban planning and the built environment shape and generate
different forms of violence and insecurities in post-war cities; and 3) explores the chal-
lenges, opportunities, and potential unintended consequences of conflict resolution in
violent urban settings.

This introductory article is structured as follows. It first lays out the theoretical depar-
ture points for this collection. It then presents the individual contributions, summarises
the three main ways in which they jointly advance theory and empirical knowledge, as
well as elaborates on how this collection of articles moves the research agenda on
violence in post-war cities forward. It concludes by exploring some important avenues
for future research.

Setting the stage: the post-war city, violence, and space

The spatiality of violence in post-war cities is of critical importance to understand how
violence can be prevented, for peacebuilding in post-war cities, and for understanding
how the violence-exposed people living in them are affected. A growing literature
emphasises that cities are becoming increasingly central in armed conflict. The situation
on the ground in contemporary armed conflicts – with Aleppo (Syria), Mogadishu
(Somalia) and Donetsk (Ukraine) all cities subjected to large-scale violence and warfare –
resonates with such claims. Because cities are densely populated and hold significant
political, economic, and social but also symbolic value, the impact of urban warfare is
often particularly high there. In turn, violence reduction strategies required will also be
different in cities than in non-urban sites, since cities tend to be more diverse in their
demographic set-up and because urban spaces are characterised by intimate contact.

Three dimensions are important for capturing the dynamics of violence in post-war
cities: the concentration of violence to post-war cities, its urban forms, and its spatially
uneven distribution. First, violence tends to continue and sometimes remain high in post-
war societies, regardless of whether the preceding war simply peters out or is formally ended through a peace agreement or ceasefire. Such violence includes both remnants from the preceding war (e.g. violence perpetrated by former warring parties or across conflict lines) and new forms of violence that rise in the aftermath of war due to poor rule of law, political vacuums, and unemployed former soldiers. Such post-war violence tends to concentrate to cities, a fact which is often attributed to the particularities of the urban setting. Cities are dense and heterogeneous; function through mixing and everyday struggles; and constitute important symbolic and actual (political, economic, social) assets in an ever-urbanising world. Such dynamics contribute to violence continuing and concentrating in post-war cities in several ways. Population density makes separation of antagonists impossible in urban contexts and instead forces people to live as ‘intimate enemies’ – thus causing more clashes with ‘the other’ in post-war cities than elsewhere. This is evident in the case of South Africa, where the transition away from apartheid and the political conflict between rival movements ANC and Inkatha, was hampered by violence taking place in large informal settlements surrounding South Africa’s cities that were ‘in conflict with each other, or with more established townships, or in particular, with hostel dwellers over scarce resources such as employment, land and water. Because of the general (and constantly accelerating) centrality of cities, different conflict parties often aim to control key urban areas. The result is that frontlines of macro-conflicts (both during war and after) often come to centre on and run through cities, with more violence usually ensuing. Urban micro-struggles over space inherent to the functioning of cities tend to become intertwined with macro-conflicts, aggravating existing conflict or resulting in renewed violence in post-war cities. The city’s density and constant mixing of people also blurs the distinction between civilians, on the one hand, and security forces or insurgents, on the other hand, thereby exposing civilians in cities to more collateral violence than elsewhere. Finally, the combination of urban anonymity and high streams of illicit revenues (e.g. drug dealing, trafficking, smuggling) tends to attract former fighters who in post-war cities find shelter, funds, and a levelled playing field, as well as opportunities to transform into criminal groups.

Second, urban dynamics do not only lead violence to continue and concentrate in post-war cities; they also generate specifically urban forms of violence, which are either unique to cities or play out differently than in non-urban settings. Due to the centrality of cities, some types of violence, such as riots and terrorist attacks are predominantly urban phenomena, quite uncommon outside of urban areas. Other forms of violence are not urban per se, but tend to manifest differently (in quality and/or quantity) in cities. Urban density, for example, tends to make securitisation and militarisation of space much more all-encompassing, brutally enforced, and difficult to avoid than in border regions or less densely populated areas. The attraction cities have for criminal organisations in turn means that related forms of violence tends to be much more prevalent in cities.

Lastly, violence is distributed unevenly across micro-locations within post-war cities, with certain neighbourhoods, streets, squares, markets, or transport nodes being more vulnerable than others. In Johannesburg (South Africa), certain neighbourhoods are much more prone to violent crime than others; in Mitrovica (Kosovo), certain locations have emerged as hotspots of violent interaction; and in post- (and pre-) war Juba (South Sudan), violence mainly concentrated in the city’s informal settlements where groups made overlapping claims to land. This uneven distribution is shaped by a range of
conditions: from the location of important urban sites and the city’s topography to where ‘our’ and ‘their’ part of the city meet. Thus both material features of the city as well as the nature of social interaction taking place in a particular space shape how prone a certain location is to violence.24 Yet importantly, and as this collection will show, post-war dynamics also matter for how and where violence occurs. Post-War realities are often characterised by segregation and ghettoisation, state neglect of certain areas, socio-economic inequality, and contested reconstruction projects. Such conditions contribute to a patchy distribution of violence across the post-war city in the sense that certain streets or areas (be it for strategic and/or symbolic reasons) become much more violent than other ones.25

Taken together, these three dynamics – the concentration of violence to post-war cities, its urban forms, and its spatially uneven distribution – are critical for understanding violence in the post-war city, and serve as important points of departures for the contributions within this collection.

**Advancing the research agenda**

By drawing on contributions with different disciplinary grounding and a diversity in theoretical and methodological approaches, this collection of articles sheds light on several previously unexplored features of violence in post-war cities. The different contributions engage with economic explanations, social movement theory, the micro-sociologies of violence, and infrastructural and material approaches – to mention some theoretical entry-points. These theories are employed and illustrated using a variety of analytical approaches such as ethnography, spatial research (including imagery and photography), qualitative analysis of focus groups and interview materials, and quantitative analyses of subnational and cross-national event data. Empirically, the contributions address violence in post-war cities from across the globe, including cases studies from Africa (Mogadishu, Johannesburg), Latin America (San Salvador, Medellín), and Europe (Belfast, Bihać, Mitrovica), as well as a cross-city dataset consisting of 98 cities from the developing world.

This diversity of contributions brings different understandings and conceptualisations of violence, post-war cities, and space to the fore, emphasising the inherent ambiguity of these often contested concepts and illustrating the need for them to be critically theorised and examined rather than taken for granted. Consequently, the contributions investigate different forms of violence such as direct, structural, and criminal violence as well as the violence of borders, of uneven development, and of transitions from one political and economic system to another. They also focus on post-war cities located in stable democracies, in largely dysfunctional states, and in contested and volatile areas. Lastly, they address the spatiality of a range of phenomena such as buildings, taxi stands, and bridges as well as peacekeeping missions and protests.

Setting the stage for the different case studies, Henry Thompson takes a macro perspective on post-war cities and analyses – through a dataset consisting of 98 cities – whether the risk of urban unrest after war is dependent on the way that the conflict was terminated.26 Azra Hromadžić provides a vastly different but no less intriguing approach when taking departure from the ruin of a never finished socialist-era retirement home in the post-war city of Bihać (Bosnia-Herzegovina) to explore violence against pensioners,
youth, and migrants. Silvia Danielak follows a similar track when zooming in on taxi wars around transport nodes in Johannesburg (South Africa) in order to capture the continuation of violence in the post-Apartheid era. Emma Elfversson, Sara Lindberg Bromley, and Paul Williams, in turn, explore how violence against peacekeepers has affected the ability of peace operations to function in, and deploy across, wartorn Mogadishu (Somalia). Antônio Sampaio, whose analysis centres on Medellín in Colombia, then explores how the composition of city space affects whether violence continues – and how it transforms – in the transition from war to peace. Emma van Santen, in turn, applies a spatio-economic lens in order to analyse how the enduring and accelerating economic inequalities in San Salvador undermined the ceasefire and peace agreement between violent gangs and the El Salvadorian state. Brendan Murtagh, Andrew Grounds, Philip Boland, and Linda Fox-Rogers also build on the distinction between deprived and affluent areas to explore Belfast’s (Northern Ireland) unequal peace dividend as well as what can be done to make peace work for everyone. Lastly, Anna Jarstad and Sandra Segall offer a refreshing contrast to the rather bleak analyses in the other contributions when uncovering how the urban frontiers of post-war Mitrovica (Kosovo) also provide opportunities for contact, cooperation, and reconciliation.

The collection of articles advances the research agenda by offering novel theoretical and empirical insights into three main areas: the causes and forms of violence in post-war cities; how urban planning and the built environment shape urban violence; and the challenges, opportunities, and potential unintended consequences of conflict resolution measures and violence-reduction programmes in urban contexts.

The multifaceted causes and forms of violence in post-war cities

Violence is a multifaceted phenomenon, with multiple causes, layers, and manifestations. What stands clear from the collection of articles is that violence in post-war cities neither has unitary or singular causes, nor affects post-war cities evenly. In addition, urban post-war violence tends to be diverse, fluid, and ambiguous in the forms it takes. The diversity in causes and forms pertains to both direct and structural forms of violence, as well as their interconnections. Understanding these patterns is important, not least since different forms of violence require different forms of policy responses. Failure to grapple with the specific drivers of violence in a given context may lead peacebuilding initiatives to backfire while measures to address one form of violence may cause other forms to emerge.

Speaking to these challenges, several contributions in this collection forward our understanding of the contingent nature of direct violence in post-war cities and how it is shaped by the nature and outcome of the preceding war. Thomson demonstrates that the risk of violent unrest, such as protest and riots, is significantly higher when the incumbent government has been defeated compared to other types of conflict trajectories, such as when armed conflict is concluded by a peace agreement. Sampaio in turn shows how armed actors build local urban-based power during war and the often accompanying state vacuum, with lasting legacies for patterns of criminal violence in the post-war city when the state strives to become more present in the aftermath of war. Control over urban space – particularly poorly-serviced peripheries and slums – remains attractive for non-state armed actors in the post-war era, thus creating incentives for
continued use of coercive strategies and violent competition, even if predominant strategies may change in the face of a new strategic context. Both these contributions emphasise how strategic considerations – including shifting power relations between non-armed actors, the state and armed non-state actors, and an altered playing field due to the transition from war to peace – contribute to explaining variation in violence within and across post-war cities.

Violence is also shaped by structural conditions and constraints. Danielak demonstrates how some forms of post-apartheid cityscapes – themselves a form of structural violence – enforce contact between antagonists and thereby increase risks of direct violence such as assault and murder. Hromadžić focuses on structural forms of violence and shows how flawed economic reforms undermine the socioeconomic future of people and nurture kleptocracies. Murtagh et al. add to these insights by demonstrating how the unequal distribution of peace dividends results in violence continuing to strike unevenly, with paramilitaries (either for ideological reasons or for refocused criminal ones) still using violence to exert influence, recruit unemployed youth, and engage in criminal enterprises.

Taken together, these contributions emphasise the continuities of violence after the formal ending of war, but also point to how a range of post-war transformations reshape the causes and patterns of violence in significant ways: from clashes between armed organised actors to more fluid actor constellations, from politically-driven violence to criminal or economically-motivated coercion, and from overt contestation to more structural forms of violence. In many post-war cities, different forms of violence coexist, making efforts to address them challenging.

The inescapable influence of urban planning and the built environment

Previous research has demonstrated how the built environment and street- and cityscapes form the rise and trajectory of conflict. The articles here advance insight on how urban planning and the physical features of urban space shape and generate different forms of violence and insecurities in post-war cities specifically. Danielak uses the term ‘infrastructural violence’ to capture the continuation of identity-based conflict in Johannesburg as well as to uncover how its post-war transport infrastructure and the architecture of individual train stations along the Gautrain route produce, concentrate, and relocate violence and generate safe/unsafe spaces. As such, she demonstrates how violence can be apprehended and mediated through the built environment. Elfverson, Lindberg-Bromley and Williams’ analysis of violence against peacekeepers in Mogadishu underscores how militant groups with intimate knowledge of the urban terrain can gain comparative advantage vis-à-vis intervening forces. Hromadžić in turn explores how an empty building – ‘the ruin’ – becomes co-constitutive of the transformation from war to post-war by both symbolising loss (emotional as well as socioeconomic) for some marginalised groups, while providing material security for other marginalised groups in both the local and global periphery. Murtagh et al. and van Santen both poignantly demonstrate how residential segregation and spatial insularity generate (continued) economic marginalisation, undermine peace processes, and distribute the peace dividend unevenly. Danielak, however, contrastingly shows that centres of economic activity (such as shopping malls, business areas, hotels etc.) also often become high-risk areas. Sampaio, in turn,
illustrates how the architecture and layout of different urban neighbourhoods is central in whether they stimulate or undermine the transformation of conflict-related violence into criminal violence.

These insights suggest that how post-war cities are (re)built and (re)constructed in the aftermath of war are not endeavours to be undertaken lightly or without serious reflection. They occur in politically contested situations where each and every decision regarding what streets, buildings, walls to create or destroy, as well as how this is done, can have unexpected consequences. In this way, the material features of the post-war city acquire agency of their own and become co-producers in post-war transformations.

The challenges and opportunities of building peace in urban settings

The articles lastly uncover the challenges and opportunities – but also unintended consequences – of strategies aimed at promoting peace in volatile and potentially violent urban settings. Given the contested nature of post-war cities, such strategies are rarely uniformly accepted by urban constituents, thus generating legitimacy problems and potentially violent resistance. van Santen shows how the lack of transparency and inclusion of those ‘outside’ the target area can severely undermine and ultimately bring down locally-mediated peace agreements. Focusing on peacekeeping in a highly contested context, Elfversson, Lindberg-Bromley and Williams explore how attacks on AMISOM in Mogadishu affected the mission’s ability to operate, and find that such attacks made it more difficult for peacekeepers to spread out in and patrol the city, with adverse consequences for civil-military interactions.

While these contributions illustrate, on the one hand, that high-level peace interventions can become highly contested, Jarstad and Segall, on the other hand, show how everyday interactions can provide opportunities to move towards reconciliation. Their study of how the post-war city allows people to meet and transcend differences, demonstrates that the urban space is able to rise above rather than merely generate conflict and violence. While not downplaying the still ongoing and highly potent tensions between Mitrovica’s Albanian and Serb inhabitants, they show that the contact opportunities provided (and sometimes enforced) by cities lead people to, in isolated segments, return to a shared everyday. Murtagh et al. continue along the same lines and indicate how progressive, grounded, and context-sensitive local politics that invest in the least well-off communities can remedy the continuation of spatially concentrated conflict-related violence by raising living standards and enabling communities to resist paramilitaries, as well as transform segregated and socio-economically excluded city spaces into self-sufficient communities that are reconnected with the rest of the city.

These insights stress the undeniable and unavoidable need to adapt strategies and methods aimed at promoting peace to urban settings if they are to be effective in rebuilding, reconnecting, and regenerating the post-war city. Yet they also point to how post-war cities stand able to overcome the divisions and contestations they often are viewed to exacerbate, if utilised and approached in constructive ways.
Looking ahead

With urbanisation projected to continue – in many parts of the world at a dramatic rate – research to uncover the causes, effects, and prevention of violence in post-war cities will remain a critical research and policy topic in the foreseeable future. The increasing importance of cities in addressing a broad set of challenges is reflected in the UN Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) committing to make cities inclusive, safe, resilient, and sustainable. The implications for peacebuilding and development are significant: if post-war cities can be transformed into well-functioning and safe urban sites, they have the potential to play central roles in wider transitions from war to peace in conflict-ravaged societies – for instance, by becoming drivers of social and economic development and incubators of coexistence and mutual tolerance.

The cross-disciplinary approach applied in this collection has contributed to shedding light to the challenges of post-war cities and potential solutions to them by generating important insights into the nature of violence in post-war cities and its spatial dimensions. It has also opened up several new avenues for research. Generally, as the contributions reflect, most research on urban dynamics and conflict are city specific studies, prompted by the need for fine-grained analyses. A cross-city and cross-country perspective, however, could offer important insights by generating more contextualised generalisations.

Future research also needs to investigate further how the processes through which the war came to a formal end shape the conditions for urban peacebuilding. While we now know more about how different war endings influence the prospect of urban violence, the strategic setting is likely to be influenced by the broader process of conflict termination, including the involvement of actors external to the conflict. A fruitful avenue for future research would also be to learn more about the intersection between legacies from the war period, in terms of the cityscape, actor constellations, and power dynamics in the city, and how the interplay provides conditions for peaceful or violent encounters. As many contributions of the collection have suggested, perceived and actual violence is very localised. An additional important topic impelled by the contributions is how legacies of structural violence can be addressed without causing new conflict – or new forms of violence – and instead promote spatial justice and reconciliation. While urbanisation trajectories are not easily altered, a post-war situation can offer new opportunities for the transformation of actors and space, with consequences for security and insecurity. Future research could continue to advance knowledge regarding under what conditions such transformations can come about and promote constructive outcomes.

Notes


2. For instance, see Björkdahl et al., Peacebuilding and Friction; Deglow, “Localized Legacies”; Mac Ginty, No War, No Peace; Nussio, “Ex-Combatants and Violence”; Pouligny, Peace Operations; Richmond, A Post-Liberal Peace; Themnér, “Commanding Abuse”; and van Baalen and Höglund, “So, the Killings Continued.”
14. Björkdahl and Mannergren Selimovic, “A Tale of Three Bridges”; Boal, “Integration and Division”; and Cunningham and Byrne, “Peacebuilding in Belfast.”
17. Gusic, *Contesting Peace*; see also Elfversson and Höglund, “Violence in the City.”
27. Hromadžić, “Uninvited Citizens.”
29. Elfversson, Lindberg Bromley and Williams, “Urban Peacekeeping under Siege.”
31. van Santen, “Inclusive Peace Mediation.”
32. Murtagh et al., “Urban Restructuring.”
34. Berdal, “Reflections”; and Steenkamp, “In the Shadows.”
36. UN estimates suggest that by 2050, 68 percent of the world’s population will live in urban areas (UN-DESA, *World Urbanisation Prospects*). This means that more and more people will reside in and be affected by conflict-ridden and violent post-war cities. The effects are observable not only in the urbanisation of war and violence, but also in terms of refugee streams, exposure to climate change, and many other social issues of our time (Brenner, *Implosions/Explosions*; Brown and Ahmed, “Local Government Dissolution,” 880–881. See
Nogueira, ‘From Failed States’, for a critical assessment of the discursive and policy shifts associated with these trends).

37. See e.g. Hodson, Sekulic, and Massey, “National Tolerance,” 1535–1536; and Sassen, “Cities as one Site,” 576.

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