

[Gilbert on De La Calle, 'Nationalist Violence in Postwar Europe'](#)

Review published on Saturday, November 11, 2017

Luis De La Calle. *Nationalist Violence in Postwar Europe*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015. 294 pp. \$103.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-1-107-02410-6.

Reviewed by Danielle Gilbert (George Washington University) **Published on** H-Nationalism (November, 2017) **Commissioned by** Cristian Cercel

Printable Version: <http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showpdf.php?id=48555>

Why are some nationalist movements plagued by terror, while others achieve concessions without violence? In *Nationalist Violence in Postwar Europe*, Luis de la Calle provides a novel explanation for this variation, focusing on a heretofore underexamined set of actors: the regional elites who broker information between the central state and activists on the ground. Bridging the literature on nationalism and violence, de la Calle's accomplished examination makes significant contributions to the research agendas on nationalist mobilization and strategies of armed groups, arguing that the behavior of regional elites can create a permissive environment for cycles of separatist terrorism.

This impeccably researched book uses three methodological approaches. First, de la Calle introduces a signaling game, where interactions between statewide leaders, regional elites, and nationalists lead to several possible outcomes. He then provides statistical and Boolean analyses of twenty-nine European conflicts (and includes the Quebecoise for thirty), where he examines the effect of political and institutional autonomy with other predictors of violence, including population size, income, and past history of mobilization. The bulk of the work is dedicated to three paired comparisons: the Basque Country and Catalonia; Northern Ireland and Wales; and two movements combating different states, France's Corsica and Italy's Sardinia. The book boasts an incredible depth of detail on each of these cases, demonstrating the nuanced and masterful consideration of alternative explanations. On occasion, this attention to multicausality may even obscure the author's central thesis.

To wit, the work is strongest in its suggestion that the "combination of institutional unresponsiveness and mobilizational incentives can account for the existence of nationalist violence in Western Europe" (p. 3). De la Calle's argument is both more specific and more complex than such a summary suggests; its premises are essentially twofold. First, when elected officials and representatives do not depend on regional support to maintain their power base, they will have little incentive to accede to concessions for the region. They will therefore underrepresent the strength of the nationalist threat, enticing the state to crack down harshly on any emerging violence. Second, this is compounded when nationalist groups lack peaceful, legal channels for actualizing their demands: state repression serves to motivate and mobilize the population behind sustained violence. Simply, where nationwide parties depend on support in a given region to maintain their seats, they will be responsive to the political demands in that region. When the party in power is not competitive in a potentially separatist region, they must instead rely on local elites to handle and interpret such challenges. These regional elites, however, have incentives to misrepresent any nationalist threat, which would undermine their own

brokered position. This informational asymmetry leads to the state's cracking down on nationalist agitation, which then spirals into violent conflict. The author wisely rejects notions of "ancient hatreds" and carefully parses the occasionally, but not always, related roles of culture and class.

In a sense, de la Calle's focus is whether the structure of the conflict provides permissive conditions for terrorism. Prior theories of nationalist violence still apply—he weaves vivid stories of outbidding, cooptation, and provocation—but the crucial contribution of this work helps predict what kind of movement we will see. The author reminds us that though most such movements feature splits between moderates and hard-liners, we are dealing with a complex, multi-player game. It is not merely the groups advocating civil disobedience versus those planting bombs, each working to captivate public support for its campaign against the state, but also intermediaries who affect the state's willingness to concede or repress when confronted with nationalist demands. De la Calle's argument can help us understand why a violent or peaceful wing of the nationalist movement receives popular support and when it will be expected to achieve political goals. This is clear in the comparison of Northern Ireland and Wales. In the former, the violent Provisional Irish Republican Army received more support than the peaceful Social Democratic and Labour Party; in Wales, Plaid Cymru's embrace of civil disobedience brought policy victories. To be sure, the "nonviolent" cases in this comparison are not entirely without violence; but while Northern Ireland, the Basque Country, and Corsica rely on "the Armalite and the ballot box" (p. 144), the small sparks in Wales, Catalonia, and Sardinia never erupt into flames.

Looking back on these decades of nationalist violence through de la Calle's eyes, the reader is left wondering: how do we know if the state was actually misinformed about the strength of the movement, or if the groups strengthened in response to repression? The position taken in hindsight that early concessions can stave off the worst violence would be strengthened by understanding what the state loses through too much leniency, or by an examination of cases in which the nationalist threat was overestimated, rather than underestimated. De la Calle suggests that this alternative outcome occurred in civil wars in the United States and Yugoslavia; a fuller consideration of this comparison would have bolstered his logic. Accordingly, future research may parse the dividing line between the benefits of accommodation and suppression of nationalist demands.

Nationalist Violence in Postwar Europe represents a significant contribution to the understanding of separatist terrorism and popular mobilization, particularly to the cases of Spain, Italy, France, and the United Kingdom. De la Calle's multi-methodological fluency and theoretical innovation have produced an illuminating take on the deadly political violence that still vexes divided, industrialized states.

Citation: Danielle Gilbert. Review of De La Calle, Luis, *Nationalist Violence in Postwar Europe*. H-Nationalism, H-Net Reviews. November, 2017. **URL:** <http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=48555>

This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial-No Derivative Works 3.0 United States License](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/3.0/).