RESEARCH ARTICLE

Between Coercion and Representation: Exploring Variation in Support Relations between Tamil Civilians and the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE)

Larissa Daria Meier

University of Bielefeld

ABSTRACT:

This article explores the multi-faceted, contextual, and ambivalent character of support relations between the LTTE and Tamil civilians. It demonstrates how distinct support patterns emerge from particular power constellations and manifestations of violence in the localities where respondents lived and interacted with the LTTE. The social ties between respondents whose political socialization was shaped by the escalation of the conflict and who, later, lived in government controlled areas were predominately based on a sense of political representation and characterized by subtle notions of socio-spatial distance; by contrast, for interviewees living in militarily contested zones, fear and coercion but also affective connections to LTTE members played a crucial role in their interactions with and orientations towards the LTTE. Lastly, in LTTE controlled areas, notions of support oscillated between perceptions of effective service provision and fear of recruitment.

1. Introduction

Civilians interact with and orient themselves towards armed groups in complex and often highly ambiguous ways. While figuring prominently in the civil war literature, 'popular support' only inadequately captures the diversity and complexity of support relations that connect militants to their constituencies. Scholars have therefore begun to disaggregate the broad category of support into different forms of support ties as well as to

explore under what conditions which compositions of supportive ties are most likely to emerge (Arjona 2016; Malthaner 2011; Petersen 2001; Schlichte and Schneckener 2015a).

Building upon this previous work, the present article explores the micro-dynamics of support relations between the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) and the Tamil community in the context of the Sri Lankan Civil War. It uses narrative accounts with Tamil civilians about their experiences of the armed conflict and their relations to different conflict actors in order to analyze the multi-faceted, contextual and ambivalent nature of support ties between respondents and the LTTE. With regard to the multi-faceted nature of support relations, the analysis of micro-level data demonstrates that there is considerable variation between respondents in how they orient themselves towards the LTTE's armed campaign as well as how they interact with LTTE militants. More concretely, the analysis singles out three distinct support patterns which emerged from respondents' embeddedness in different socio-political contexts. In fact, the article shows that, depending on the dominant power constellations, the manifestations of violence and the socio-economic resources available to individuals at the local level, people experience the conflict and interact with warring actors in different ways, resulting in spatio-temporal variation in support relations. Figure 1 summarizes the support patterns found in the analyzed localities. Finally, the empirical data highlights the ambivalence inherent in social ties that connect civilians to armed actors. Regardless of the degree of compulsion underlying support ties, civilians have to cope with and orient themselves towards the violence targeted against them and/or used in their name.

Table 1 – Summary Patterns of Support Relations

	Pattern I	*Pattern II*	*Pattern III*
Local context	Government controlled; relatively sheltered from physical violence; high socio-economic standing	Contested; high exposure to military violence; low socio-economic standing	LTTE controlled; institutionalized violence through LTTE institutions; low socio-economic standing
Type of supportive ties	Support ties based on political representation and respect or guilt	Support ties based on personal affection and fear	Support ties based on effective service provision (security and order)
Ambivalence	Acceptance of violence due to political necessity	Criticism of violence due to its arbitrariness and unpredictability	Predictability and desirability of effects justify harsh punishments; resentment about recruitment practices

The article proceeds as follows. I start with a discussion of current conceptualizations and empirical works on popular support in order to develop the conceptual lens through which I analyse support relations. The second part discusses the distinct support patterns that emerged in the specific localities where interviewees lived. It analyses in detail how respondents orient themselves towards and interact with militant actors as a means of singling out some of the most relevant beliefs, affects and behaviours underlying support relations as well as highlighting the ambivalences inherent in these ties.

2. Analysing Support Relations between Civilians and Armed Groups

While popular support has long been acknowledged as a key determinant for various civil war phenomena, only recently, have scholars begun to disentangle the overly broad category of support in order to better capture

empirical variation in how armed groups relate to different social groups as well as to explore temporal and spatial shifts in support patterns (Arjona 2017; Malthaner 2015; Petersen 2001). Petersen (2001) was among the first scholars to stress that the options civilians have during armed conflicts go beyond either support or do not support. In line with several other authors, he conceptualizes support on a continuum from basic support or obedience (respecting the status quo, paying taxes etc.) to major forms of cooperation (providing food, shelter, information etc.) (Arjona 2017; Barter 2014; Wood 2003). While these authors tend to focus on behaviour rather than attitudes – an approach favoured by some scholars as attitudes and beliefs are difficult to infer from behaviour, particularly in a civil war context (Kalyvas 2006) – other authors insist that people's beliefs and interpretations about an armed group and their campaign are inextricably linked to their actions and thus need to be explored, even if methodologically challenging (Schlichte 2009; Schlichte and Schneckener 2015). Malthaner (2015) combines both perspectives and conceptualizes support relations as consisting of social ties (based on utilitarian exchange, personal loyalty, communal solidarity, or political mobilization) between armed groups and their constituencies which emerge from repeated interactions as well as patterns of mutual orientations. While they differ in their conceptualizations, all these accounts highlight that support is neither monolithic nor homogenous but that there are different types of ties between warring actors and their constituencies.

The analytical distinction between different support ties, in turn, is highly relevant to empirically capture temporal and spatial shifts in the way local communities orient themselves and interact with militants. In the context of the Sri Lankan civil war, a range of works have pointed to temporal changes in the type of relations that connected the LTTE to the Tamil community, highlighting, in particular, the shift from predominately voluntary to more coercive ties (Lilja 2009; Thiranagama 2011). Particularly relevant to this paper, Lilja (2009) provides empirical evidence on how the LTTE's hegemonic position within the territories they controlled, enabled them to use geographical and social entrapment[1] as a strategy to gain civilian compliance while outside their zones they had to resort to more coercive methods. Her work therefore not only points to spatio-temporal variation in support relations but also suggests that particular forms of support patterns emerge from the specificity of local power constellations. In this way her findings highlight a further significant development in the literature on civilian-armed group interactions: the contextualization of support relations. Several studies note the relevance that the local area people spend their everyday lives in has for their understanding of the conflict and their behaviour towards armed groups (Arjona 2014; Fujii 2008; Lubkemann 2005). Kalyvas (2006: 88) introduced the notion of territorial control as a central determinant of individual action and argues that people generally collaborate with the actor in control of the area where they live, control may thus trump political considerations: "irrespective of their sympathies […] most people prefer to collaborate with the political actor that best guarantees their survival. While recognizing territorial control as an relevant factor which shapes civilian behaviour, scholars working on 'rebel governance' explore the multiple ways armed groups engage in governance, thereby transforming the local context where civilians live (Arjona 2016; Mampilly 2011). In terms of the Sri Lankan civil war, several authors have analysed LTTE governance practices, focusing on the services they provided to local communities (Mampilly 2011; Stokke 2006; Sarvananthan 2007), the multiple ways they mimicked sovereignty (Klem and Maunaguru 2017; Terpstra and Frerks 2018) and their strategies for gaining legitimacy among civilians living under their rule (Terpstra and Frerks 2017). Most of this work, however, focuses on the LTTE and their governance efforts while less attention has been devoted to how these practices are evaluated by the Tamil community. Terpstra and Frerks' work (2017; 2018) on civilian perceptions of the LTTE's legitimation strategies constitutes an important exception in this regard. The authors, based on interview data with Tamil civilians, explore how the latter

---

[1] Entrapment includes a range of passive coercive mechanisms to ensure civilian compliance, such as restrictions on movement or the conversion of civilian jobs into militant activities.

evaluate LTTE's governance efforts and legitimation practices. Particularly relevant for this article, their data demonstrates that there is considerable variation within the Tamil community in how they perceive different practices. However, as their analysis departs from LTTE practices and how they are perceived by civilians, the authors pay less attention to the themes Tamils themselves consider as most relevant for their orientation and behaviour towards the LTTE as well as to how civilian perceptions are shaped by the different localities where they experience the war.

Building on these previous studies, in this article, I aim to extend the existing literature on support relations by analysing how support patterns emerge from the local socio-political contexts that civilians are embedded in during an armed conflict, thereby constituting spatio-temporal variation in compositions of support ties. Moreover, the analysis aims to capture the subtle and less subtle forms of coercion inherent in all support ties build within a civil war context, highlighting the ambivalent nature of support relations. Departing from these research goals, I focus on three aspects of support relations which constitute the analytical lens with which I conducted the empirical analysis. It is important to note that these aspects are not new but emerged from an iterative process during which I combined analytical reflections steaming form the research discussed above with empirical manifestations emerging from my own data.

Support relations are *multi-faceted* in nature, consisting of and generating cognitive, affective, and behavioural processes. People have opinions and beliefs about armed groups – they might identify with their political goals or reject them; individuals also emotionally orient themselves towards armed groups – they admire rebels for their willingness to sacrifice their lives, have affective ties to members of armed groups or resent the latter for their ruthlessness; lastly, people interact with militant activists, providing them with goods or challenging their practices. While all these facets are relevant to understanding support relations, they do not necessarily have to align. People might live in zones controlled by the enemy and thus lack opportunities to provide goods or they might feel compelled to obey the actors ruling their areas while rejecting their campaign (Schlichte and Schneckener 2015).

Support relations between armed actors and civilians are *locally embedded*, that is, they do not emerge in a vacuum but are built in particular places and times. The context I consider most relevant for understanding the formation of supportive ties is the locality, that is the small units such as villages, neighbourhoods or refugee camps where people live their everyday and interact with conflict actors (Arjona 2017, 20). While the local socio-political context does not determine beliefs and behaviour – there is always variation even within localities – the power constellations, conflict dynamics and the resources available to actors in a specific area shape the options open to them and the beliefs and actions they consider as possible and morally required (Bosi, Ò Dochartaigh, and Pisoiu 2015).

Support relations are inherently *ambivalent:* The particular character of social relations between armed groups and civilians originates in the fact that they are formed and transformed during armed conflicts and violence is therefore an integral part of these ties. This should not necessarily be understood in the sense that support relations need to be based on coercion – (even tough supportive ties are never entirely free of force – but in the sense that violence inevitably leaves its marks on both the individual (as it generates fear and pain) and on societies (as it polarizes, creates mistrust and atomizes communities) and people ultimately have to cope with these effects (Schlichte 2009). While violence does not need to be perceived as illegitimate by those affected by it, there are strong social norms prohibiting force as a means of influence (Collins 2008), and violence thus always requires justification not just by those who commit it but also by those who identify themselves with and provide active support to actors engaged in hostilities.

3. Data and Methodology

This article draws from 20 life history interviews I conducted with Tamil civilians who have been living in the areas affected by the Sri Lankan civil war. The interviews provide an in-depth understanding of how respondents experienced the war in the specific localities where they lived and how they formed beliefs and made choices based on these subjective understandings. While my sample is too small to derive generalizable conclusions, life history data is very valuable in enabling us to explore how people evaluate, make sense of and rationalize behaviors by conflict actors and to uncover some of the fluctuation, contradictions and ambivalences in peoples' beliefs and actions towards armed groups (Blee 2003). Moreover, the data captures social and contextual dynamics that influence orientations and actions that would otherwise be difficult based on a representative survey.

The interviews lasted on average 90 minutes and were conducted either in English or, with the assistance of a translator, in Tamil. I conducted all interviews at the homes of respondents where they felt safest to talk openly about their conflict experiences. Moreover, in order to ensure their anonymity, in the empirical part, I identify respondents' quotes only by numbers and I refrain from mentioning the name of the villages where they live(d).

As I was interested in understanding if and how variation in territorial control shapes support relations, I selected interviewees who lived in different districts[2] in North-Eastern Sri Lanka: six respondents lived in Jaffna and Batticaloa town, areas which were controlled by the Sri Lankan government over large parts of the war[3], six interviewees experienced the conflict in villages in Mullaitivu and Killinochchi, where control (from the 1990s onwards) was controlled by the LTTE, and eight respondents lived in villages in Batticaloa where control was much more fragmented and contested between the government, the LTTE and other militant groups. In terms of their socio-economic profile, the six respondents who lived in Jaffna or Batticaloa town come from middle class, well-off families; all of them went to university. By contrast, the majority of respondents (10 out of 12) who lived in the rural areas in the North-East are from socio-economically disadvantaged families and mostly lived at subsistence level during the war; all except two left school without taking or failing the ordinary exam. Only two respondents who moved from Jaffna to the Vani during the civil war have a middle class background and finished mandatory schooling.

When working with interview data, scholars are necessarily confronted with questions of reliability, as respondents might reinterpret and post-rationalize their motives and actions – strategic or unself-conscious. Moreover, interviews might elicit political statements – official statements authorized by conflict actors – rather than their own beliefs and interpretations (Auyero 1999; Wood 2003). I tried to address these challenges in several ways. When I encountered elements of the official LTTE narrative in my respondents' accounts, I marked them as such in order to assess what elements of the official narratives are repeatedly used or neglected, and what kind of respondents resort to these statements This can reveal interesting dimensions about the relations between the LTTE and civilians (while, of course, hiding others). Furthermore, mentioned beliefs that resemble the LTTE discourse do not automatically have to be "false statements"; it is equally possible that respondents adopted certain interpretations, be it strategically or sub-consciously (due to the permanent exposure to a particular narrative, attempts to reduce cognitive dissonance etc.). Many of my respondents were quite open in labeling something they thought during the war as "something the LTTE made them believe" or as "something everyone thought during the war" and critically reflected on how these beliefs affected their behavior. This, in turn, is of high interest with regards to the aim of this paper, which is not to establish historical facts but to uncover how civilians made sense of the conflict and how these interpretations shaped their behavior. Lastly, the article aims to single out the most relevant patterns of interactions and dominant

---

[2] Districts are the second level administrative units in Sri Lanka that incorporate a number of towns and villages.

[3] Batticaloa town remained under government control during the whole war while the LTTE partly controlled some areas of the Jaffna peninsula at the early phases of the conflict.

themes of interpretation that were constitutive for the different supportive ties between Tamil civilians and the LTTE rather than to present highly particularistic beliefs and actions by one single respondent (Fujii 2008).

4. Patterns of Support Relations between Tamil Civilians and the LTTE

After a brief synopsis of the Sri Lankan civil war, the following sections discuss the distinct support patterns found in different localities during the armed conflict. As the analysis will show in detail, each of these patterns emerges from and is shaped by the power constellations, prevalent forms of violence and socio-economic conditions in the specific local contexts where respondents live(d) and experienced the war. There was, of course, variation in conflict experiences among those respondents in similar localities and I will highlight several of these differences; the central focus, however, is on singling out some of the common orientations and interactions that result in context-specific compositions of support ties.

4.1 Synopsis of the Sri Lankan Civil War

The political conflict between the Sri Lankan government and Tamil representatives began shortly after Sri Lanka gained independence from British colonial rule. In attempts to right colonial preferential treatment of the Tamil community as well as to mobilize their own power base, successive Sinhalese governments adopted a series of policies and constitutional changes which reduced Tamils' access to education, land and employment. These changes were perceived by the Tamil community as signs of increasing Sinhalisation of the country and as evidence of the growing cultural and political exclusion of minorities.

Table 2 – Territorial Control during the Sri Lankan Civil War
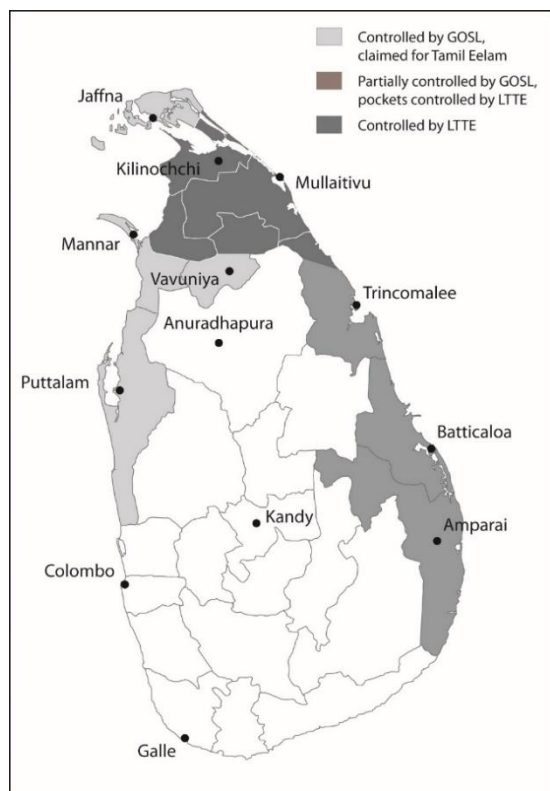
Source: Map published in Stokke 2006, reprinted with permission of the author

Initially, Tamils voiced their dissent through non-violent protest, however, the increasing frustration among Tamil students who saw their professional opportunities blocked and felt that the established Tamil parties were ineffective in safeguarding their rights through democratic means, led to the formation of multiple militant groups in the 1970s. Yet, it was only in the 1980s, after massive anti-Tamil riots in July 1983 during which thousands of Tamils were killed, that recruitment to and support for militant activism exploded and the political conflict eventually turned into a large-scale armed conflict. The LTTE, that was founded in 1972 by Vellupillai Prabhakaran, grew from a tiny guerrilla movement into a professional army with an estimated 8000 to 10,000 recruits. In a bloody internal conflict, the LTTE wiped out all rival militant groups, declaring themselves the only representative of the Tamil community.

From 1990 onwards, after having gained territorial control over parts of the Jaffna peninsula and an area called the Vanni[4], the LTTE started to experiment with institution building and set up its own administrative structures, such as a police force, courts, banks, tax collection etc., while controlling the distribution of services which continued to be provided by the Sri Lankan government. By contrast, in the Eastern part, territorial control was much more fragmented and remained contested over the course of the conflict. In many areas the state security forces were dominant, but the LTTE had a strong presence and influence. For the population living in these areas this meant that levels of security and insecurity were constantly changing as front lines shifted back and forth (Fuglerud 1999).

The Sri Lankan civil war ended in 2008, after an internal split had considerably weakened the LTTE, and the Sri Lankan government was able to regain military control over the whole North-Eastern territory, leading to the total military defeat of the LTTE in May 2009.

4.2 Pattern I: Political Representation and Social Distance

Aian was born 1966 in Batticaloa town – the main city in the Eastern district Batticaloa. He first felt personally affected by the conflict in 1983, when the victims from the July riots arrived in the town. Together with other students, he brought the injured and their families food and clothes and listened to their stories:

> *For the first time we realized that normal people can be killed in this country. In a young mind it was a trauma. Although you did not experience it yourself you would not sleep for 4 to 5 days. During the nights you start to cry. At that age, the hatred feeling emerged, and we were thinking why are people treated like animals? We should not allow that to happen. And also, we realized that it was our community who was suffering.*

In the following years, Aian observed how the conflict escalated further and further and small incidences of violence turned into increasingly brutal spirals of attacks and counter-attacks:

> *Then in 1984 and 1985, the violence was growing, the number of boys[5] increased and also the number of soldiers. But you didn't know who the groups where because, one day, one came and told you I am from this group then the other day another came and said I am from this group, so people were confused but they treated all of them as their boys. [...] All people supported them at that time, giving food and money.*

---

[4] The LTTE governed Jaffna from 1990 till 1995 when the army drove them out and forced them to retreat to the South into the Vanni where their military and political headquarters were located till the end of the conflict (Terpstra and Frerks 2017).

[5] 'Boys' is an effective term with which the Tamil community referred to the youngsters who joined one of the militant groups at the initial stages of the civil war.

Together with other students, Aian participated in the different events organized by the militant groups where they discussed the discrimination Tamils were facing and the necessary action against it. However, when I inquired if he had ever considered joining, he denied:

> *Actually, not at all. I was like most of my friends from middle class families, we were able to see the good and the bad things of the struggle. Although we were affected, we were more rational. This was because we were fortunate. We were more intellectually oriented than on fighting. And also, the movements at that time did not follow our way of thinking. They said: 'I say, you do'. That did not fit with us. So we said: 'If we cannot question anything we will not come'. […] But the majority was not like that, we were a select crowd. Till the end of the struggle none of my friends got involved.*

Another reason that neither Aian nor one of his friends joined any armed group was that Batticaloa town came under full government control once the conflict had turned into a civil war. For Aian this meant that he was relatively sheltered from open hostilities and there were few interactions with militant groups – "I wasn't affected much anymore". However, he continued to support the LTTE financially. Once he had started to work as a teacher, every month 10 percent of his salary was deducted as an LTTE tax:

> *R. Every month, I paid 10% of my salary. I mean, I didn`t pay, it was gone. When we got the salary, we had to give it to schools and they had a mechanism, maybe there is a person who collected the money, I don't know.*
>
> *I: What did you think about that?*
>
> *R: To be honest after some time I did not even realize anymore that I gave money because it is a small portion of my salary and after that I can say, okay I paid so I was free. And also, sometimes I felt inside that for my people I contributed this feeling also came. So nobody could point a finger at me and say you did not contribute. All these mixed feelings were there.*

The perception that he led a more or less normal and comfortable life while the militants were sacrificing themselves on behalf of the Tamil community sometimes provoked feelings of guilt – mixed with the admiration for the bravery of militants: "I did not lose anyone from my family but still when I see pictures of a hero celebration in TV I get emotionally involved. Thousands of my people died, I have a responsibility towards them. I should respect them".

While, of course, highly subjective, Aian's narrative points to several themes I encountered in multiple accounts of similarly positioned interviewees, that is respondents who had experienced the escalation of the conflict and who, once territorial control became fragmented, lived in Jaffna or Batticaloa town, areas which, for the large part of the conflict, had been controlled by the government. The majority of the interviewees were studying in the 1980s when the different militant groups established themselves as political and military actors and the political conflict became increasingly violent. Except for one, all interviewees participated in student associations affiliated to armed groups and/or regularly joined more informal gatherings where militants discussed the conflict and informed on their campaign. Their political socialization was thus marked by the escalating conflict:

> *As a student I was active in LTTE's student association where they explained the mobilization of the people. It was a political explanation, the changes in the university recruitment and the quota system and that Tamil students are ignored and lost work*

opportunities, all those things they explained. That is why we felt that we were not free, that we were the minority and that they didn't give the equal rights to us (16).

Moreover, similar to Aian, all respondents mention the 1983 riots as a crucial transformative event that hit them deeply emotionally and convinced them that Tamils will never be accepted as equal citizens in Sri Lanka. Moreover, the government's brutal counterinsurgency campaign made them see violence as a necessary and legitimate means of self-defense against an oppressive and increasingly brutal regime. Support ties between this group of respondents and the LTTE were thus based on a sense of political representation – the LTTE was accepted as the one who took up the legitimate grievances of the Tamil community and fought for their political aspirations.

The belief in the righteousness of the origin of the armed campaign remained relevant over the course of the conflict and shaped respondents' orientation towards the LTTE, in particular, their reaction to the group's increasing ruthlessness. Although some interviewees report ambiguous feelings about the LTTE's increasingly authoritarian behavior and the brutality with which they murdered all sorts of dissenting voices, they still remained the only one fighting for their political aspirations:

> *The killings were a big problem because these were all Tamil people not Sinhalese or Muslims. Not only were the parents concerned, so were the young people . But they were fighting for us, we all accepted that there was no doubt about that. And they had a cause. We did not like the killings, but we wanted to have a separate state or at least self-determination (17).*

For other interviewees the brutality of the Sri Lankan Amy (SLA) and the perceived necessity of a violent response justified all sorts of killings even if directed against civilians:

> *R: I was very angry against the state and the military. I thought that they were oppressing us because we are Tamils. And then when they killed Sinhalese, even civilians, I heard about it, but I did not feel bad. I thought, they are killing our people, so we fight back.*

As has been mentioned already, the majority of respondents supported the LTTE through different forms of political engagement at the early stages of the conflict. This changed in later phases when they came to live under government control. While most of them (except for one) continued to provide support despite the highly constrained circumstances, assistance was then given in the form of monetary contributions or other goods. Living in government controlled territory, therefore, did not mean that respondents were protected from LTTE demands. By contrast, several interviewees stressed how difficult it was to navigate two authorities:

> *They had their eyes everywhere. And they influenced through the radio. If they expected the shops to shut down their activities, shop owners in Jaffna would feel obliged to comply although they might suffer consequences from the military (18).*

One respondent came to completely reject the LTTE as their arbitrary demands for money and goods threatened his business:

> *I was working in the middle East and the problem was that they were checking everything you brought so we could not bring anything. […] I had a house here [in Batticaloa town] and came back from the middle East regularly. Then the LTTE called, or they sent a letter: you come to the other side. So I had to pass the checkpoints and tell the army that I have*

> *to go because they sent me a letter. Then they will ask me for money. [...] So many problems*
> *I had, the army on the one side and the LTTE on the other side (20).*

Another characteristic that unites the group of respondents who lived in Batticaloa and Jaffna town is their middle class or even higher socio-economic standing. Most of them come from relatively well-off families, have a university degree and a well-paid job. Needless to say that these resources allowed them to better cope with many of the constraints and dangers a war generates. However, their relatively high socio-economic standing also manifested in and shaped their support relations with the LTTE. The majority of them explicitly rejected the idea of joining any militant group as they considered militant activism as something for 'the poor and the uneducated' or as something 'only those from difficult family backgrounds' do:

> *When you look at the background of most of those who joined LTTE they are from a poor*
> *background with no education, and they are from rural places. I am from Batticaloa town*
> *and nobody in my family joined any armed group. Those who joined were powerless people*
> *without loving parents (17).*

Their understanding of who the militants were thus functioned to separate them – the educated and privileged – from those pushed towards militancy by their socioeconomic and personal circumstances. While class was less relevant to distinguish between those who joined militant groups and those who did not at the initial phase of the war, where youngsters from all socio-economic strata engaged in militancy (Sivakumar 1989), at later stages, LTTE fighters were predominately recruited from the poor farming and fishing villages in the North-East (Harendra de Silva 2013; Thiranagama 2011).The perceived social distance between respondents and militants thus reflect actual changes in recruitment dynamics from the 1990s onwards. Moreover, the distance also manifested in the absence of personal ties to militant groups: except for one respondent who had a brother who joined the LTTE, all the others had no close relatives or friends who were or had been members of an armed group. There were thus subtle feelings of contempt towards militants, even if, on a military and even political level, the LTTE was accepted as the Tamil representative. At the same time, the slight contempt often went hand in hand with feelings of guilt and admiration. Similar to Aian's reaction to the heroes' day screening, several respondents expressed a certain uneasiness about their privileged and protected everyday lives that contrasted sharply with those of militant activists who had to risk their lives time and again and who were fighting on behalf of the Tamil community. Despite the social distance, the fact that respondents accepted the LTTE as their representative put a certain moral pressure on them to recognize their sacrifice and to respect their commitment.

4.3 Pattern II: Fear and the Relevance of Affective Ties

Darshika was born 1965 in a village in the rural parts of Batticaloa. She first encountered the armed conflict personally when several political murders occurred in her area:

> *R: Close to here, in the main road, the LTTE hanged a lady. They hanged her from the*
> *lamppost and they gave an explanation that she gave information to the military. [...]*
> *In1986 three people from my village were shot dead and hanged from the lamppost.*
>
> *I: And what did you think about that?*
>
> *R: The impression I had was that the LTTE was against the Sinhala military but why did*
> *they kill our people?*

At the same time, violent clashes between the different militant groups and the SLA multiplied in her neighborhood. One incidence she remembers in detail as she got injured:

> *R: In 1986, when I took my son to school, I got injured. At that time, militant group threw bombs in marketplaces, bus stops or other crowded places.*
>
> *I: Why in these places?*
>
> *R: The army used to go to the market to buy vegetables and when they come in crowds the LTTE strategy was to injure several of them. But then 19 civilians were injured and only 5 army personnel. I was so mad: Why did they do it in the market? I suffered two years and I still have problems with my leg. But people were so scared that there was no allegation brought up against anyone. Because, if we say that the bomb was thrown by the LTTE they would come and attack us, when we say it was done by the army, they would harass us. So, we did not open our mouths. And during this time, they started to arrest everybody. It was a dangerous period. There was tension all the time and fear.*

As Darshika lived in a contested area, LTTE militants rarely interacted with civilians directly. They, however, had their local collaborators who collected information and money: "Every month, every household had to give 1000 Rupies, and poor people 300 per month. They set a particular date, for example, every month they would come after the 25th. So, we had to keep the money ready". For Darshika, whose husband worked in the Middle East but only unregularly sent money, it was a monthly struggle to collect the necessary amount to pay the "voluntary contributions". Moreover, the permanent suspicion by the military constituted another burden that made life difficult. Due to the visibility of her injuries, the SLA expected her to be a militant and arrested her several times for inquires. During her imprisonment, Darshika learnt some Sinhala that helped with the military but led to new problems with the LTTE:

> *When I was detained, I had learned some Sinhala and they [the LTTE] heard about that and thought that I would have connections to the police. So, they sent a letter and asked me to come for inquiries. The first time, I did not go but then they sent another letter where they wrote that they would take action if I didn't come, so I went with an elder man. There they asked me to keep some arms because they thought that the army would not come to my place as I was close to them. But I said no, I could not do that. Then later the one who made the inquiries was shot dead because this fellow was suspected of taking some money for him.*

Darshika was lucky and escaped LTTE demands this time. However, she was so scared of future requests and violent attacks that she decided to go to Singapore: "I was so frustrated and scared about everyone. The LTTE made inquiries asking why I was close to the police. The army also suspected me because of my injuries. I really suffered from all sides. So, I went to Singapore. And I came back only after the Tsunami".

All eight respondents in this group experienced the war in rural villages in Batticaloa where control was contested between the SLA, the LTTE and different militant groups. There was therefore no dominant political and military authority in these areas; rather, influence and control shifted constantly. As a result, respondents' everyday lives were market by personal loss and suffering as well as constant insecurity and unpredictability. Similar to Darshika most interviewees were very aware that the LTTE willingly accepted and sometimes deliberately provoked violent reprisal against civilians: "In the 1987 period there were permanent round-ups and the LTTE was coming and running away. In between, the civilians suffered a lot. We were the ones who

got arrested on suspicion. So many problems we faced" (1). Fear of violence and experiences of pain and loss were thus crucial elements that structured relations between respondents and all warring actors, including the LTTE. However, despite their fear of all parties, most respondents clearly differentiated between the LTTE who was "part of them" and the SLA, as the following quote highlights: "Both had arms, so we were scared about both, about the military and the LTTE. But the LTTE meant our children, so we were less afraid about them; when the army came, we were much more scared" (2). As a result of the hegemonic LTTE discourse that constructed the war as a conflict between the Tamil community and the oppressive Sinhala regime as well as its empirical manifestation in repeated acts of brutal repression by the SLA (Brun 2008; Terpstra and Frerks 2017), respondents tend to interpret conflict events against the background of this deeply internalized polarization. This manifests most explicitly when respondents talk about the Sinhalese who had been living in their areas but were then expelled by the LTTE:

> *R: At the beginning there were some Sinhala people here but then the LTTE chased them out. Then they informed the army and they killed five Tamils. One of my relatives was among the victims. They went fishing and then the military came and whoever they met they killed because of the Sinhala going to the army.*
>
> *I: But wasn't it also the LTTE's mistake because they chased them out?*
>
> *R: Right but if they had not chased them out, they would have captured all these places and killed all of us (3).*

Inter-community polarization thus led to the perception of LTTE violence as situational or reactive and therefore as more justified than the (violent) actions and reactions of the SLA or the Sinhalese community.

The tendency to interpret actions by warring parties through the lens of inter-group bias was further reinforced through affective ties between respondents and the LTTE. Seven out of the eight respondents who lived in the contested areas in rural Batticaloa had at least one close relative who was a member of the LTTE and thereby an inescapable social bond with the group that generally trumped critical orientations and beliefs:

> *I was against all the killings and the conscription of children, but we all had family members within the LTTE. For example, my brother joined, so my parents were in favour of them. And this was true for most parents. My parents once openly told my brother: 'your leader made a mistake', but their son was there. So, what should they have done? (13)*

Another theme that emerged in the majority of respondents' narratives was the economic burden LTTE demands for money or other material goods constituted to interviewees. The villages in rural Batticaloa, where respondents experienced the conflict, are historically among the poorest and most neglected areas in Sri Lanka (Miriyagalla 2014). Moreover, decades of violence had further impoverished the region and destroyed the livelihoods of many families (ibid.). All of my respondents report about continuous difficulties to sustain themselves and their families. Against this background, LTTE taxes weighed heavily on respondents and constituted a repeated cause for complaints and resentment: "During the war we could not build a house or buy a car. We could not even have a celebration as they came immediately and asked for money. Because it is a sign when I repair my house that I have some money, then they will come" (10). Interviewees' reluctance to meet LTTE demands for money and other goods, however, did not mean that they would not have helped LTTE militants when they felt that they were in need. Several respondents report about incidences where they took considerable risks to protect LTTE fighters on the run from the military:

> *My house was some kind of a transit point. I hid many LTTEer. One time, six LTTEers came to purchase things, we had a grocery shop, and then somebody informed. So, the army came, and three boys ran away and three got stuck. I took all the rifles and grenades and hid them and the boys in the back room. When the army came, I told them, they came to purchase things but then ran away (2).*

As long as respondents did not have to respond to LTTE demands that they considered as arbitrary or too risky but could decide themselves if and how they wanted to provide support, they took considerable risks to help.

4.4 Pattern III: Security and (forceful) Recruitment

Mahintan lived in a village in the Jaffna peninsula where he worked as a fisherman when the conflict escalated in the 1980s: "After 1983 the burning of houses by the military started, it was really bad. And we could not go fishing because of the navy. They were attacking us when we went fishing and bombing us when we were at land". The situation improved only once the LTTE got control of the area:

> *After 1986 the LTTE captured the area, and they kept the army within the camps. We felt so free. And then, after the IPKF left we saw LTTE in uniform, before they were dressed normally, jeans and T-shirt etc. When we saw them with uniform this was a very happy moment for us: We had our own military to protect us.*

Mahintan's everyday life improved remarkably. He could again pursue his usual work and his family was safe. But then, in 1994, the army was about to recapture Jaffna and the LTTE had to withdraw to the Vanni. Fearing renewed repression by the SLA, Mahintan and his family, together with half of their village, obeyed the LTTE's call to follow them in what was later called "the Exodus" and moved to the Vanni.[6]

Although it was difficult to start from scratch and Mahintan was very concerned about how to sustain his family, they managed well:

> *R: We settled in no man's land.[7] The TRO [Tamils Rehabilitation Organization, an LTTE affiliated NGO] gave the lands and the material to build a house.*
>
> *I: And how did you get a job?*
>
> *R: They always gave me something. Whatever was there, carpentry, mason and gardening, I did everything.*

Most important to him, however, was that he and his family were safe, and that they did not have to fear the military anymore: "Everything in the Vanni was very isolated, there were kilometers between the houses but nevertheless we could leave the house and go wherever we wanted. It had never been like this with the military".

---

[6] As the army approached Jaffna, the LTTE announced that the entire Jaffna population had to leave the peninsula. While some people followed them to the Vanni, many others resisted despite the LTTE's often forceful attempts to convince them to leave (Thiranagama 2011).

[7] He refers to the fact that the Vanni is a very sparsely populated area where there are often kilometres of jungle between the houses of families.

All respondents in this group lived in the Vanni in villages which were controlled by the LTTE from the early 90s till the end of the war in 2008. Some interviewees grew up in these villages, while others, as Mahintan's story illustrates, moved there when the Jaffna peninsula was recaptured by the military. A central element that characterizes support relations between this group of interviewees and the LTTE is the relevance governance structures and the provision of goods have as a basis for the establishment of support ties. Especially for those respondents who, like Mahintan, had experienced brutal state repression before they came to live under LTTE control, security, stability and order played a dominant role in their narratives and provided the basis on which support ties were built. Moreover, the significance of service provision was further reinforced by the fact that respondents depended on the LTTE to provide them with housing and employment once they arrived in the Vanni and had to start from scratch. In comparison, those who were born at later stages of the war and grew up in the Vanni, the LTTE was the normal political authority; it was the administrative and security institutions established and/or co-opted by the LTTE that regulated their everyday life and with which they routinely interacted. Common to all respondents, however, is that once the LTTE had established itself as the de-facto state in their area, support ties became quite formalized and channeled through political and administrative institutions, such as the police, courts, tax offices, banks etc.

The institutionalization of LTTE's rule did not mean that respondents' lives were entirely unaffected by the ongoing war. While most of them recalled their everyday live as quite normal, narratives reveal the high degree of militarization of public and private spaces, even if this was sometimes not perceived as unusual by interviewees. Several respondents report about the LTTE practice of publicly displaying the corpses of so-called traitors by hanging them from lampposts. Moreover, LTTE's security institutions were known for their harsh punishments (Terpstra and Frerks 2018). However, most respondent did not perceive the killings and the public displays thereof as threatening. Several stressed that this only happened to those who "did something against LTTE or some crime" (19) and it could not happen to you "if you didn't do any mistake" (11). The perceived selectivity of killings thus made them more acceptable for respondents as they felt they could escape punishment if they behaved correctly.[8] Moreover, other interviewees empathize the need for harsh punishments in order to guarantee security – an argument which closely resembles the official LTTE discourse: "There were harsh punishments but due to the severity of punishments and the fact that they worked as examples people would not commit these crimes anymore" (19). It is impossible to assess if respondents repeat the LTTE narrative here or express their own views; probably, it is a mixture of both as it is not uncommon that, in a war context where brutal repression is widespread, stability and order become highly valued goods, even when enforced through harsh punishments (Arjona 2017):

> *If a rape happened, the investigative unit would find the right perpetrator and they would shoot him. Because of that, nobody made any mistake and we could go everywhere without fear. In [the village where she lived before moving to the Vanni] when we had to go out, we were so afraid of being shot by the military. In the Vanni it was such a relief, no fear (6).*

Furthermore, the war was also evident in respondents' everyday lives through LTTE recruitment campaigns. In fact, while public killings were generally not discussed controversially, the recruitment and conscription of children emerged as a highly conflictual theme. As Boyden (2007, 26) has empathized, LTTE recruitment rendered childhood a "highly politicized and contested social space", in particular, in the territories they

---

[8] It is doubtful whether LTTE authorities were indeed selective in whom they targeted; rather, evidence points to the high arbitrariness of their rule (Sarvananthan 2007). However, as long as respondents perceived the use of violence as selective, it is this perception that motivated their judgment (Kalyvas 2006, 200).

controlled. For respondents who studied at the time the LTTE recruited in their areas or who had siblings or children in the right age, this meant that they had to resist the pressure exerted by LTTE recruiters and/or to cope with the fear that their siblings or children could be recruited:

> *My school was in an LTTE controlled area so they would come and ask principals permission to talk to the children. [...] By the time LTTE was growing, I left school and only my brother and sister listened to their messages in school. I was so scared that they might join. So, when they were late after school my father used to go there and to bring them home. The LTTE used to come with their vehicle and if somebody agreed to join, they would take them immediately (9).*

Ultimately, parents were often unable to prevent their children from joining, although they would do everything possible to avoid it. This, of course, fueled resentment among respondents. However, as Lilja (2009) notes, once a close relative had joined, the social bond had been created and parents inevitably had to accept their social role as an LTTE family. Relations between the LTTE and respondents were thus imbued with contradictions and fear even in LTTE controlled zones where interviewees were relatively sheltered from state repression.

5. Discussion and Conclusion

Going beyond the binary understanding of popular support as being either absent or present, this article highlighted the multi-faceted nature of support relations by looking at their behavioral, cognitive and affective manifestations. The analysis has shown that these dimensions are inextricably linked to each other. Respondents interacted with the LTTE based on their interpretation of the conflict as well as their affective connections to LTTE members. Focusing on actions alone would deprive us of a crucial facet of support relations: the meaning people attach to actors and events. For instance, we can only understand why respondents continued to support the LTTE despite their increasing brutality and hostility if we consider the beliefs and affects that composed support relations and upheld them regardless of the LTTE's ruthlessness.

The analysis also demonstrated that it was the everyday conflict experiences in the localities where they lived that had a crucial bearing on the type of support ties that interviewees built with the LTTE. In particular, local power constellations and the degree and forms of violence made some support patterns more likely in some contexts than in others. Obviously, respondents who flew to or grew up in LTTE controlled territory and mainly interacted with the LTTE's political and administrative institutions were more likely to establish support ties based on service provision than respondents who lived in contested areas and experienced the LTTE mainly as an armed actor engaged in military attacks which affected interviewees in a personal and direct manner. Analyzing the influence of local conflict dynamics on support ties is therefore crucial to explain spatio-temporal variation in support patterns.

Support relations between armed groups and their constituencies are also often classified as being either voluntary or coerced. However, it would be very difficult to describe any of the support ties between my respondents and the LTTE as solely coerced or as entirely free of force. Even those who politically supported the LTTE and/or felt emotionally attached to them had to position themselves towards the violence exerted on their behalf. Instead of classifying support as either voluntary or not, it is more fruitful to explore how civilians cope with and react to this ambivalence. As the empirical evidence has demonstrated, depending on the type of force and the group targeted, violence was perceived as more or less justified. For instance, the deep polarization between the Tamil and the Sinhalese communities that emerged and deepened as a consequence of the war, led respondents to accept violence against Sinhalese civilians as "necessary" while violence against

Tamils needed justification and provoked criticism. Still the perception that the LTTE is their only political representative or their only protector – also a result of respondents' deep distrust of the Sinhalese government – made many interviewees accept even these internal killings. On the other hand, the degree to which violence was predictable is also highly relevant to understanding respondents' reaction to LTTE violence. If punishments were brutal but perceived as selectively targeted at those violating public order and security, they were often considered acceptable or even desirable. By contrast, unpredictable violence, for example in the form of military clashes in which civilians got caught up or in the form of arbitrary and coercive LTTE demands, led to criticism as – due to its unpredictability – respondents felt unable to cope with this type of force. Future research could thus benefit from singling out in more detail how civilians deal with the ambiguities support ties to militant actors entail.

Beyond these three crucial aspects the empirical analysis can illuminate our understanding of two other facets relevant for the analysis of support relations. First, the notion of territorial control has become particularly influential in the civil war literature to explain civilian action. While my empirical work confirms some of the most important expectations of Kalyvas's (2006) control-collaboration model – territorial control indeed allowed the LTTE to use violence selectively and to engage in a range of activities to foster support among the local population, while in contested areas military considerations dominated LTTE behavior, even if it had detrimental impacts for Tamil civilians living in these localities – it extends the model in at least two aspects. On the one hand, the Sri Lankan civil war was built on an ethno-historic understanding of belonging. For all respondents, the deep polarization between the Tamil and the Sinhalese communities acted as a frame of reference that clearly structured the way they thought about the conflict and evaluated the actions of different conflict parties. Despite the brutality with which the LTTE silenced critical Tamil voices, they were still fighting for Tamils while the SLA and the Sri Lankan government were the enemy. This understanding did not change even when respondents lived under government control. Of course, interviewees collaborated with the military to secure their survival, but control did not trump preferences; rather, respondents continued to support the LTTE, politically but also through concrete actions. This, in turn, highlights another relevant aspect with regard to the control-collaboration model: control and influence were more fluid than one would expect. Due to their extensive surveillance network as well as the multiple social ties to the Tamil community, the LTTE exerted influence into government-controlled zones and respondents thus had to navigate two political authorities instead of "just" the government.

Finally, the empirical analysis highlighted another aspect that can contribute to our understanding of support relations: the bearing social status and respondents' socio-economic standing had on the formation of support ties. The analysis has shown that interviewees understanding of the war and the options available to them to react to the multiple constraints the latter imposes, was clearly shaped by their resources, thereby also affecting the type of support ties that connected them to the LTTE. Those respondents who came from well-off families and went to university generally accepted and respected the LTTE as the only one fighting for their rights and political goal but, at the same time, separated themselves from militancy both intellectually and spatially (most lived sheltered in government-controlled areas). By contrast, the ties between those interviewees who lived in the poorer areas were far less politicized but based on personal ties to LTTE members as well as – in particular in the case of those interviewees who lived under LTTE control – on goods the LTTE could provide to them (security, employment etc.). The latter ties thus entailed more intimate everyday interactions and/or affective connections. On the other hand, in the Sri Lankan case at least, variation in territorial control largely overlaps with socio-economic differences. LTTE controlled and contested zones were predominately located in the poorer areas while the Sri Lankan government controlled the more affluent urban territories. Territorial control therefore has a socio-economic dimension which need to be taken into account when analyzing the effect of control on civilian behavior. One could at least argue that the support patterns I analyzed in the different

locations are as much shaped by socio-economic factors as by who is in control – certainly a promising avenue for future research.

References

Arjona, A. (2014), "Wartime Institutions: A Research Agenda", *Journal of Conflict Resolution,* 58 (8): 1360–89.

Arjona, A. (2016), *Rebelocracy: Social Order in the Colombian Civil War*, Cambridge: University Press.

Arjona, A. (2017), "Civilian Cooperation and Non-Cooperation with Non-State Armed Groups: The Centrality of Obedience and Resistance", *Small Wars & Insurgencies,* 28 (4–5): 755–78.

Auyero, J. (1999), "Re-Membering Peronism: An Ethnographic Account of the Relational Character of Political Memory", *Qualitative Sociology,* 22 (4): 331–51.

Barter, S. J. (2014), *Civilian Strategy in Civil War: Insights from Indonesia, Thailand, and the Philippines*, New York: Palgrave Macmillan.

Blee, K. M. (2003), *Inside Organized Racism: Women in the Hate Movement*, Berkeley: University of California Press.

Boyden, J. (2007), "Of *Tigers*, *Ghosts* and Snakes: Children's Social Cognition in the Context of Conflict in Eastern Sri Lanka", Oxford: Queen Elizabeth House Working Papers.

Bosi, L., N. Ò Dochartaigh, and D. Pisoiu (2015), *Political Violence in Context: Time, Space and Milieu*, Colchester: ECPR Press.

Brun, C. (2008), "BIRDS OF FREEDOM: Young People, the LTTE, and Representations of Gender, Nationalism, and Governance in Northern Sri Lanka", *Critical Asian Studies,* 40 (3): 399–422.

Collins, R. (2008), *Violence: A Micro-Sociological Theory*, Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.

Fujii, L. A. (2008), "The Power of Local Ties: Popular Participation in the Rwandan Genocide", *Security Studies,* 17 (3): 568–97.

Harendra de Silva, D. G. (2013), "The Use of Child Soldiers in War with Special Reference to Sri Lanka", *Paediatrics and International Child Health,* 33 (4): 273–80.

Kalyvas, S. N. (2006), *The Logic of Violence in Civil War*, Cambridge: University Press.

Klem, B., and S. Maunaguru (2017), "Insurgent Rule as Sovereign Mimicry and Mutation: Governance, Kingship, and Violence in Civil Wars", *Comparative Studies in Society and History,* 59 (3): 629–56.

Lilja, J. (2009), "Trapping Constituents or Winning Hearts and Minds? Rebel Strategies to Attain Constituent Support in Sri Lanka", *Terrorism and Political Violence,* 21 (2): 306–26.

Lubkemann, S. C. (2005), "Migratory Coping in Wartime Mozambique: An Anthropology of Violence and Displacement in 'Fragmented Wars'", *Journal of Peace Research,* 42 (4): 493–508.

Malthaner, S. (2011), *Mobilizing the Faithful: Militant Islamist Groups and Their Constituencies*, Frankfurt am Main: Campus-Verlag.

Malthaner, S. (2015), "Violence, Legitimacy, and Control: The Microdynamics of Support Relationships between Militant Groups and Their Social Environment", *Civil Wars,* 17 (4): 425–45.

Mampilly, Z. C. (2011), *Rebel Rulers*, Cornell: University Press.

Miriyagalla, D. (2014), "Socio-Economic Reintegration of Former LTTE Combatants in Sri Lanka: Self-Employment, Sustainable Incomes and Long-Term Peace", *Global Change, Peace & Security,* 26 (3): 251–62.

Petersen, R. D. (2001), *Resistance and Rebellion: Lessons from Eastern Europe*, Cambridge: University Press.

Sarvananthan, M. (2007), "In Pursuit of a Mythical State of Tamil Eelam: A Rejoinder to Kristian Stokke", *Third World Quarterly,* 28 (6): 1185–95.

Schlichte, K. (2009), *In the Shadow of Violence: The Politics of Armed Groups*, Frankfurt am Main: Campus-Verlag.

Schlichte, K. and U. Schneckener (2015), "Armed Groups and the Politics of Legitimacy", *Civil Wars,* 17 (4): 409–24.

Sivakumar, C. (1989), "Social Origins of the Sri Lankan Tamils' Militant Movement", *Sociological Bulletin,* 38 (1): 119–39.

Stokke, K. (2006), "Building the Tamil Eelam State: Emerging State Institutions and Forms of Governance in LTTE-Controlled Areas in Sri Lanka", *Third World Quarterly,* 27 (6): 1021–40.

Terpstra, N. and G. Frerks (2017), "Rebel Governance and Legitimacy: Understanding the Impact of Rebel Legitimation on Civilian Compliance with the LTTE Rule", *Civil Wars,* 19 (3): 279–307.

Terpstra, N. and G. Frerks (2018), "Governance Practices and Symbolism: De Facto Sovereignty and Public Authority in 'Tigerland'", *Modern Asian Studies,* 52 (3): 1001–42.

Thiranagama, S. (2011), *In My Mother's House: Civil War in Sri Lanka*, Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press.

Wood, E. J. (2003), *Insurgent Collective Action and Civil War in El Salvador*, Cambridge: University Press.

Aurhor's Information:

Larissa Meier is a postdoctoral researcher at the Institute of Sociology at the University of Bielefeld where she works on a comparative project on protest dynamics and societal cohesion in different German cities. Her research focuses on contentious politics with a specific focus on different forms of political violence, radicalization, the role of emotions in mobilization and on the conditions and effects of contentious action more generally.