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Conflict to Co-Workers: Consociationalism and Conflict Resolution in Northern Ireland and Bosnia and Herzegovina

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"I took back my hand and I showed him the door No dollar of mine would I part with this day For fueling the engine of bloody cruel war In my forefather's land far away…"[1]

Introduction

The Troubles, an implacable, convoluted ethno-religious conflict between primarily Catholic Irish nationalists and Protestant British unionists in Northern Ireland, links back to both centuries-old and, in the 20th century, very contemporary grievances.[2] The conflict had been simmering for decades following the partition of Ireland in the 1920s, which left Northern Ireland in the United Kingdom, before it boiled over in the late 1960s.[3] It started alongside the Northern Irish Catholic civil rights movement, a response to gerrymandered voting districts in Northern Ireland, and the response to that movement.[4] Its ending, however, is clear: in the spring of 1998, with The Belfast Agreement, better known as The Good Friday Agreement.[5] Within the decade before the end of the Troubles, the Bosnian War broke out in 1992 and ended three years later in 1995, "with the thirty-fifth cease-fire since" it started.[6] The Bosnian War traces back to how ethnicity in Yugoslavia, especially near the state's end, began to be arbitrarily defined by various groups vying for power.[7] The desire by various actors to create "ethnically pure" Yugoslavia successor states based on these arbitrary definitions, in a region so religiously and ethnically diverse, is the key cause of the Bosnian War and the atrocities that it consisted of.[8] The agreement that ended the Bosnian War, The Dayton Agreement,

[1] Stanley Rogers, "The House of Orange," track 10 on From Fresh Water, Fogarty's Cove Music, 1984. Born and raised in Hamilton, Ontario, Stan Rogers wrote this song, during the middle of the Troubles, about wanting to leave the conflict in Northern Ireland behind.
[2] Máirtín Ó Catháin, "Overview of the Troubles," in The Routledge Handbook of the Northern Ireland Conflict and Peace, eds. Laura McAtackney and Máirtín Ó Catháin (London and New York: Routledge, 2024).
[3] Ibid.
[4] Ibid.
[5] Hannes Mueller and Dominic Rohner, "Can power-sharing foster peace? Evidence from Northern Ireland," Economic Policy 33, no. 95 (2018): 452.
[6] Leon Hartwell, "Conflict Resolution: Lessons from the Dayton Peace Process," Negotiation Journal 35, no. 4 (2019): 444.
[7] Ibid.
[8] Ibid., 446.

and the Good Friday Agreement both implemented a form of political power-sharing known as consociationalism.[9] In both cases, the levels of violence since the peace agreements and power-sharing systems were created have dramatically decreased.[10] This potential to foster peace makes understanding consociationalism critical to alleviating other conflicts. This paper will examine the following question: What role does consociationalism power-sharing play in resolving conflict and fostering peace among conflicting groups? To explore this question, we will use the comparative Method of Agreement, further elaborated on in the methodology section of this paper. The methodology section will also briefly examine current research on the topic. Consociationalism is our independent variable. While explaining this paper's methodology, it will be highlighted and examined. Next, consociationalism will be discussed and reviewed in the cases of Northern Ireland and Bosnia and Herzegovina. Finally, this paper will argue that consociationalism helps foster peace between conflicting groups.

Methodology

The Comparison

This paper will use a Method of Agreement comparison. This is a comparative design where the outcome of two phenomena is similar, and the variables are essentially different, except for one, which is the variable to which causality is inferred.[11] So, if E, F, and X = Y, and A, B, and X = Y, there is evidence to suggest X causes Y. While The Troubles and the Bosnian War share some similarities, these are not substantial enough to ruin the comparison. Historically, both Ireland and the Balkans were manipulated by "Europe's great powers[,]"[12] and "[t]he consociational structures created for Bosnia and … Northern Ireland have broad structural similarities[;]"[13] the latter of which is the variable we will look at. While both conflicts are ethno-religious,[14] We know that not all ethno-religious conflicts have successful and long-lasting conflict resolutions.[15]

[9] Sherrill Stroschein, "Consociational Settlements and Reconstruction: Bosnia in Comparative Perspectives," Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science 656 (2014): 97-98, https://www.jstor.org/stable/24541765.

[10] Mueller and Rohner, "Can power-sharing foster peace?," 452; Hartwell, "Conflict Resolution," 466.

[11] Payam Ghalehdar, "Mill's Method of Agreement and Method of Difference as Methods of Analysis in International Relations," Oxford Research Encyclopedia of International Studies (2022), https://doi.org/10.1093/acrefore/9780190846626.013.701.

[12] Éamonn Ó Ciardha, "Introduction," in Politics of Identity in Post-Conflict States: The Bosnian and Irish experience, eds. Éamonn Ó Ciardha and Gabriela Voivoda (London and New York: Routledge, 2016), 1.

[13] Stroschein, "Consociational Settlements and Reconstruction," 106.

[14] Aaron Edwards, "Northern Ireland: Still a Place Apart?," in The Routledge Handbook of the Northern Ireland Conflict and Peace, eds. Laura McAtackney and Máirtín Ó Catháin (London and New York: Routledge, 2024), 117-118; Hartwell, "Conflict Resolution," 446.

[15] Bumba Mukherjee, "Why Power-Sharing Agreements Led to Enduring Peaceful Resolution of Some Civil Wars, but Not Others?," International Studies Quarterly 50, no. 2 (2006): 481-482, table 1, https://www.jstor.org/stable/3693619. See the table for numerous examples of failed peace resolutions.

However, one can argue that the similarities stop there. The first significant difference is the scale of the two conflicts. The Troubles ended with "[a] collective toll of 3,500 deaths and 47,000 injured" from all sides, both combatants and non-combatants.[16] While the death toll of the Troubles is devastating, it does not compare to the "approximately 100,000 people[,]" mostly Bosniak Muslims, who lost their lives in the three years of the Bosnian War.[17] Another critical difference between the two conflicts is the type of conflict each is. Scholars describe the Bosnian War, as the name suggests, as a war, regardless of whether it was a civil war or some less definable form of war.[18] The Troubles is referred to primarily as just a 'conflict.'[19] The Second World War ravaged Bosnia and Herzegovina, a region which, until Dayton, was never ruled democratically.[20] Northern Ireland, on the other hand, while it experienced German bombings in the Second World War, was far less devastated than the Balkans.[21] Northern Ireland "has had a longer history of democracy" than Bosnia and Herzegovina.[22]

Regardless, both regions have emerged from their conflicts and have not seen levels of violence similar to the recent past.[23] Considering that most phenomena, except the outcome of relative peace, are different, a Method of Agreement comparison is possible.

The Independent Variable

Consociationalism, a form of political power-sharing, is our independent variable. "Power sharing[,]" more generally, Joanne McEvoy writes, "is a form of government recommended for deeply divided territories where majoritarianism is not a fair, realistic option to promote peace. It brings together representatives of groups previously in conflict to govern the country together."[24] Ulrich Schneckener describes consociationalism as "a specific form of consensus democracy, linked to ethnically segmented societies or, rather, to multinational polities, i.e. states or regions in which two or more ethno-national groups live."[25] Mueller and Rohner note that "in a consensual system with power-sharing both

[16] Ó Catháin, "Overview of the Troubles," 7.
[17] Hartwell, "Conflict Resolution," 445.
[18] Stroschein, "Consociational Settlements and Reconstruction," 106; Hartwell, "Conflict Resolution," 445. Stroschein uses the term "civil war" to describe the Bosnian War, while Hartwell says the war "was not a clear-cut civil war[,]" but was certainly still a war.
[19] Mueller and Rohner, "Can power-sharing foster peace?"
[20] Stroschein, "Consociational Settlements and Reconstruction," 106.
[21] Ó Catháin, "Overview of the Troubles," 23.
[22] Stroschein, "Consociational Settlements and Reconstruction," 106.
[23] Mueller and Rohner, "Can power-sharing foster peace?," 452; Stroschein, "Consociational Settlements and Reconstruction," 103; Hartwell, "Conflict Resolution," 466.
[24] Joanne McEvoy, Power-Sharing Executives: Governing in Bosnia, Macedonia, and Northern Ireland (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2015), 3.
[25] Ulrich Schneckener, "Making Power-Sharing Work: Lessons from Successes and Failures in Ethnic Conflict Regulation," Journal of Peace Research 39, no. 2 (2002): 204, https://www.jstor.org/stable/1555299.

the winner and the loser have incentives to stick to electoral politics[,]" which discourages violence, especially from the group that lost.[26] "Consociationalism" also "leaves key decisions affecting different ethnic groups in the hands of community leaders[.]"[27] Consociationalism is unique from other power-sharing systems because both sides can veto various decisions and, in turn, must accept that some of their decisions may be vetoed.[28] To further build on this definition, we can add Laurence Cooley's two forms of consociationalism: corporate and liberal.[29] The groups sharing power in a corporate consociationalism system are "pre-determined" based on "criteria such as ethnicity or religion[,]" while a liberal consociationalism system leaves its groups "instead to emerge from elections."[30] Cooley notes that Bosnia and Herzegovina have a corporate system, while Northern Ireland has a more liberal one.[31] In summary, consociationalism is a system of power-sharing based on consensus and veto rights, especially amongst community leaders of various groups.

The Cases
Northern Ireland and the Troubles

Having established consociationalism as our independent variable, we can apply it to two key case studies: Northern Ireland and Bosnia and Herzegovina. Starting with the case of Northern Ireland, Mueller and Rohner argue that, empirically, "the presence of power-sharing has … a strong and robust violence-reducing effect" on each group involved in the Troubles.[32] In the discussion section of Mueller and Rohner's article, Francesco Drago agrees with the two authors. Drago gives two reasons why power-sharing and conflict will have a relationship: "[C]onflict before the election may induce the ruling party to make 'concessions' in terms of power sharing" and "power-sharing leads to less conflict from the non-sectarian party with a lower seat share because the opportunity cost of bombs is higher than that of participating to the executive power."[33] The Good Friday Agreement and the Northern Irish power-sharing system achieve consociationalism by implementing consensus-based democratic safeguards.[34]

[26] Mueller and Rohner, "Can power-sharing foster peace?," 455.
[27] Melani Cammett and Edmund Malesky, "Power Sharing in Postconflict Societies: Implications for Peace and Governance," Journal of Conflict Resolution 56, no. 6 (2012): 986, https://www.jstor.org/stable/23414729.
[28] Ibid., 109; Schneckener, "Making Power-Sharing Work," 205.
[29] Laurence Cooley, "Consociationalism and the politics of the census in Bosnia and Herzegovina and Northern Ireland," Political Geography 82 (2020): 1, https://doi.org/10.1016/j.polgeo.2020.102248.
[30] Ibid., 1.
[31] Cooley, "Consociationalism and the politics of the census," 2.
[32] Mueller and Rohner, "Can power-sharing foster peace?," 472.
[33] Francesco Drago, "Discussion," in "Can power-sharing foster peace? Evidence from Northern Ireland," Hannes Mueller and Dominic Rohner, Economic Policy 33, no. 95 (2018): 473. Emphasis on "before" in the original.
[34] "The Belfast Agreement: An Agreement Reached at the Multi-Party Talks on Northern Ireland," Presented to parliament: April 1998, The Northern Ireland Office, 5, https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/1034123/The_Belfast_Agreement_An_Agreement_Reached_at_the_Multi-Party_Talks_on_Northern_Ireland.pdf.

These safeguards "ensure that all sections of the community can participate and work together successfully in the operation of … institutions[.]"[35] Through this system, the Good Friday agreement concluded the violence in Northern Ireland.

Bosnia and Herzegovina and the Bosnian War

The Bosnian power-sharing system is less celebrated than the Northern Irish one. Nikolaos Tzifakis claims, "[I]t is conventional wisdom that the local power-sharing Arrangements [set up by Dayton] have failed to work."[36] However, Tzifakis does not offer any sources for this argument. According to Tzifakis, "the ambiguity of the Accords was intended to facilitate consensus-building among the warring parties during the negotiations, but in practice, it represented a major obstacle in the peace implementation process."[37] Hartwell, on the contrary, writing 25 years since Dayton, notes that, while "it is clear that while [Bosnia and Herzegovina] continues to deal with serious ethnic divisions, the Dayton process ended the Bosnian War."[38] Tzifakis writes, "Perhaps it is no exaggeration to paraphrase Clausewitz and claim that all three Bosnian ethnic groups viewed the peace process as a continuation of war by other means[.]"[39] However, if this is indeed the case, any means of political conflict is still better than a military conflict that left 100,000 dead in three years.[40] In "War and division in the golden valley: Sarajevo's twentieth century," Cathie Carmichael writes, "There has been very little urban violence in Sarajevo since 1996 and certainly no more than one would expect in a large city of almost 400,000 inhabitants. To have created peace by essentially dividing communities is a very high price to have paid, but perhaps the edifice of a state created at Dayton should suffice."[41] Dayton's consociationalism system is far from perfect. However, it has saved countless lives and created a flawed but genuine peace.

Conclusion

Using a Method of Agreement comparison, this paper has demonstrated how consociationalism power-sharing systems positively affect the length and sustainability of peace. In both cases, Northern Ireland and Bosnia and Herzegovina, a sustained peace has existed for over two decades. Regardless of the flaws in the Dayton agreement or the length of the Troubles in Northern Ireland, violence has been limited

[35] The Belfast Agreement," The Northern Ireland Office, 5.
[36] Nikolaos Tzifakis, "The Bosnian Peace Process: The Power-Sharing Approach Revisited," Perspectives 28 (2007): 86, https://www.jstor.org/stable/23616212.
[37] Ibid., 89.
[38] Hartwell, "Conflict Resolution," 444-445.
[39] Tzifakis, "The Bosnian Peace Process," 98.
[40] Hartwell, "Conflict Resolution," 445.
[41] Cathie Carmichael, "War and division in the golden Valley: Sarajevo's twentieth century," in Politics of Identity in Post-Conflict States: The Bosnian and Irish experience, eds. Éamonn Ó Ciardha and Gabriela Voivoda (London and New York: Routledge, 2016), 47.

drastically compared to the height of both conflicts. We have shown a causal link between this peace and consociationalism power-sharing. Future research could expand the comparison to more countries that utilize this type of peace-sharing following conflicts, such as Lebanon.

"… For I've given my heart to the place I was born
 And forgiven the whole House of Orange
 King Billy and the whole House of Orange."[42]

[42] Rogers, "The House of Orange."

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