

Generating a Violent Insurgency: China's Factional Warfare of 1967–1968¹

Andrew G. Walder
Stanford University

James Chu
Columbia University

The origins of the armed warfare between rebel alliances that spread across China in the late 1960s have long been obscure. This historical puzzle poses two distinct but interrelated questions: first, how and why did rebel factions form, and second, why did armed warfare follow? The authors develop a theory of political orientations as a product of contingent interactions among rebel groups and military units after the collapse of local governments and derive testable implications for the emergence of factional conflict across regions and over time. The authors then extend the theory to link levels of violence to the duration of time that conflicts remained unresolved in localities under military control, implying that violence intensified over time as the anticipated costs of defeat escalated. Both implications are tested with a national data set of 17,319 political events extracted from 2,246 city and county annals.

In the wake of rebel power seizures that disabled local governments across China in early 1967, military units were dispatched to assist rebels in consolidating a new political order. Despite widespread military interventions,

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rebel groups split, and armed factional warfare ensued, making large regions ungovernable for well over a year. By the time collective violence was curtailed near the end of 1968, an estimated quarter million combatants had died in armed clashes between civilian factions, and close to a million more died in military operations against stubborn local insurgencies and subsequent persecution campaigns (Walder 2019, pp. 180–89). These events comprised one of the largest political upheavals of the 20th century.

An early generation of scholarship portrayed these events as a variety of interest group or class conflicts, and the factional warfare that emerged in 1967, as a contest between a rebel movement and a countermovement by forces aligned with the political order (Lee 1978; Chan, Rosen, and Unger 1980; Rosen 1982; Walder 1996; Andreas 2002). This line of research, which we term “structural analyses,” treated political orientation as a direct expression of the stable interests of groups, presumably defined by their positions in social and political categories. The core supposition was that groups favored in the existing order (party and government functionaries, members of the communist party, permanent workers in large state enterprises, or family members of the revolutionary elite) would oppose rebellions by less favored groups (those excluded from the above categories and associated privileges). A further supposition was that military units that intervened in the wake of power seizures would gravitate toward favored groups, who in turn would gravitate toward military units that would quell rebellions and restore order. This was an attempt to explain the political orientations of factions, which typically pitted rebels that supported the imposition of military control against others who opposed it. The groups that supported military control appeared by definition to be “conservative”—favoring the reimposition of order. The groups that fought against military control seemed by definition to be “radical”—they refused to submit to the imposition of order by armed forces. This bred a plausible conjecture that factional warfare pitted groups that benefited from the existing order against those who were disadvantaged. In this view, violent warfare ensued because of the irreconcilable interests of these structurally defined groups.

Research over the past decade has undermined this interpretation. Drawing on new sources, detailed narrative accounts have for the first time reconstructed the processes through which factions formed and reformed over time, how power seizures altered local political alignments, and how military units interacted with rebel forces in the wake of power seizures. The most important finding is that the factions that emerged in the wake of power seizures resulted from splits in rebel movements that initially shared a common aim of overthrowing local authorities—they did not pit prior defenders of local governments against rebel forces (Perry and Li 1997, pp. 119–44; Dong and Walder 2010, 2018; Li 2015, pp. 743–852; Yan 2015; Walder 2019, pp. 108–18). The fluidity of political orientation over time undermines

the logical foundations of structural analyses: sociopolitical positions are fixed, but fixed identities cannot account for shifting orientations and emerging political cleavages. How then do we explain these emerging cleavages?

Narrative accounts have undermined the foundations of structural analyses, but they do not constitute an alternative theory. What is the theory implicit in narrative accounts? And if violent warfare did not express the irreconcilable interests of groups defined by class or political status, what is the alternative explanation? In this article we address these puzzles. We develop a theory about factions as emergent properties of contingent interactions, examine its macrolevel implications with aggregate data, and extend the theory to analyze the properties of violent interactions between armed factions.

THE SETTING AND THE PUZZLE

China in the mid-1960s was an unlikely setting for a political upheaval of this scale. It had a well-organized and highly repressive state, with an unusual capacity to monitor the population and mobilize it for regime-mandated ends (Skocpol 1979; Walder 2015). In June 1966, however, the state's powerful capacity to mobilize was surprisingly deployed against itself by China's supreme leader, Mao Zedong. He initiated a campaign of criticism against intellectuals and officials who allegedly displayed moderate or "revisionist" sympathies. When students formed independent groups known as Red Guards to pursue this agenda, Mao supported them. The state media praised them, and Mao greeted them in a series of highly publicized mass rallies. Intercity train travel was granted to them without required permits and free of charge; they were given equipment and funds to publish their own news sheets (Walder 2009a). In late August, public security agencies and the armed forces were ordered not to interfere, and officials were warned not to resist. When students went off campus to denounce city and national officials, Mao and his radical associates openly supported them. When industrial workers organized rebel groups in November, Mao approved. Rebels invaded and occupied government offices, taking officials hostage and forcing them to confess errors in front of mass rallies. Rebel groups staged rallies and street protests. Ordinary officials in government agencies organized rebel groups and joined in the attacks on their bosses (Walder 2015, pp. 200–229).

By December 1966 several large cities were becoming ungovernable. In response, on January 22, 1967, Maoist authorities in Beijing issued a call for rebels nationwide to seize power from local governments, creating a new political order. This spurred a national wave of power seizures. Over the next nine days, almost half of more than 2,200 local governments were overthrown; by the end of February, 70% (Walder and Lu 2017). Government

buildings were occupied, top officials were seized, and they were denounced and humiliated during mass rallies as rebel coalitions claimed government power. On January 28, only six days after issuing a call for rebels to seize power from local governments, Mao ordered army units to “support the revolutionary left” and consolidate rebel power (Central Military Commission 1967*a*).

At this point the puzzle addressed in this article appears. Rebel groups seemed to share a common political orientation: they confronted local government authorities and pursued their overthrow, often clashing along the way with other groups that sought to defend the existing order. Given Mao’s support for rebel movements, military intervention should have served to consolidate rebel power and stabilize a new order. Yet this instead marked the inception and spread of violent conflict between factions opposed to or supportive of local military units. Why did factions form at this point in time, and what led to violent warfare between them?

POLITICS AS INTERACTION

Theories about contentious politics—an umbrella term for a range of sociological theories about collective action—typically focus on how group mobilization emerges and is sustained. This implicitly treats group interests and motivations as given, before the political processes of interest, rather than treating them as the puzzle to be explained (Walder 2009*b*). At the microlevel, theories about collective action are essentially about one kind of choice: whether to contribute to group activity. At the macrolevel, these theories are focused on the emergence of politically mobilized groups.

Here, by contrast, the puzzle is why factions formed and why violent conflict followed. Theories about contentious politics are poorly suited to address this puzzle. They focus on how group mobilization emerges and take political orientations as given. To explain factions, however, the assumptions must be reversed: the problem is to explain the formation of different orientations among groups that are already mobilized. Given mobilization, what explains political orientation—the opposed stances of antagonistic groups and ultimately armed violence between them? And once group action is underway, what processes lead to the most extreme levels of collective violence?

Theories of contentious politics routinely take political orientations as given because they are assumed to form around structurally determined interests (Tilly 1978; McAdam 1982). These theories implicitly view political orientation as a function of preexisting social positions. One defining feature of sociological theories about collective action is that groups mobilize using existing social networks formed for other purposes (Oberschall 1973; Tilly 1978). Another feature of these theories is that mobilization by aggrieved

parties often provokes countermovements by those with interests tied to the status quo (McCarthy and Zald 1977; Meyer and Staggenborg 1996). As we have seen, an earlier generation of scholarship portrayed the conflicts analyzed here as a movement-counter movement dynamic.

A closer look at the pattern of mobilization described in many recent studies suggests an alternative analysis. These rebellions originated in the summer and fall of 1966 in a distinctive pattern of micromobilization. Somewhat paradoxically, the same organizations that the regime relied on to monitor and mobilize populations at the grass roots provided the social networks through which rebel groups mobilized (Walder 2019, pp. 109–11). Micromobilization refers to the formation of small rebel groups within local social networks—classrooms, work groups, offices, and even Communist Party branches. This pattern facilitated rapid mobilization, but it also ensured that challenges to political authorities were carried out by loose coalitions of smaller groups, and these coalitions were highly vulnerable to fragmentation and competitive rivalry.

Additional findings from recent research further illustrate the contingent and fluid nature of political orientations. One recent discovery is that local government officials, after a delay, actively participated in rebellions against their own superiors and in fact led the national wave of power seizures in smaller cities and rural counties. No other group had larger stakes in the existing order than these officials. Even those who actively organized to defend their superiors eventually turned against them and in some cases initiated their overthrow. These party-state functionaries, moreover, were themselves typically divided into factions and eventually joined opposite sides in the contests over military control (Dong and Walder 2011a; Wu 2014, 134–36; Yang 2015; Walder 2016, 2019, pp. 79–100; Walder and Lu 2017). These findings present two separate logical challenges to structural analyses. First, large proportions of the group that was most privileged in the existing order actively promoted rebellions against their superiors, shifted their orientations over time, and later ended up on opposite sides after rebel forces split. Second, these findings illustrate the divergence of individual from group interests: opposition to beleaguered superiors was a stance adopted to ensure individual survival in an escalating upheaval, a shift in individual orientations that collectively undermined the structures to which this group's interests were closely tied (Walder and Lu 2017).

Yet another logical foundation of structural analyses is the presumption that military forces had an inherently conservative orientation and gravitated toward groups tied to the existing order. These groups, as indicated above, were represented on both sides of factional divisions.² Moreover,

² This echoes Traugott's (1980) analysis of working-class participation in the street battles in Paris in June 1848, in which political orientation deviated from predictions based

narrative reconstructions of military interventions have demonstrated repeatedly that military units were forced to adjudicate the claims of different rebel groups in their disputes over power seizures or that they fell into conflict with one wing of the rebel movement despite an initial effort to remain neutral. These disputes were ubiquitous: the rebel coalitions that overthrew city and county governments never included all of the rebel groups that confronted local authorities. The excluded rebels often had already seized power themselves in separate government departments, enterprises, universities, and high schools and protested power seizures by rival rebels who claimed power over the entire government jurisdiction (Walder 2019, pp. 108–26). Civilian rebels actively sought military support for their competing claims, and they turned against military forces only after their decisions did not favor them. Rebels whose claims were supported by military units became their staunch defenders.

Even more problematic for structural analyses is the discovery that different branches of regional and local military forces at times supported opposite sides in the warfare between civilian factions (Tanigawa 2007, 2018; Dong and Walder 2011*b*, 2018, in press; Yan 2015). The emerging relationships between military units and different wings of rebel movements were the product of contingent choices made by military units and rebel groups in rapidly shifting local contexts. In short, these alignments can no longer plausibly be said to reflect affinities between relatively privileged groups and military forces.

Explaining Political Orientation

Here we formalize intuitions from these historical accounts and develop a theoretical framework that departs from traditional approaches to contentious politics, even as it borrows some of its familiar concepts. The theory has three main propositions. In settings where small groups mobilize within preexisting local networks before forming broader coalitions, there will be disputes about leadership within coalitions and rivalries that serve to exclude some groups. Faced with discord among these groups, external authorities must adjudicate these disputes, inevitably favoring either the initially dominant coalition or those who are excluded. Finally, groups whose claims are denied by external authorities coalesce into a faction whose aim is to challenge the authorities' decision, while groups whose claims were supported form an opposing faction that seeks to protect their positions. We call this an "interactionist" theory because it treats political orientations as the

on occupational categories. The occupational composition of rebels and opposed militia forces were identical, reflecting a split that had emerged over several months.

product of interactions that involve contingent choices by at least two actors. Moreover, it proposes that available choices shift over time, due both to past local interactions and to shifts in political context introduced by external events.

Our first theoretical proposition—that disagreements about leadership occur when groups mobilize within local networks—casts the pervasive pattern of micromobilization and coalition building documented in recent historical accounts as an extreme version of the familiar phenomenon of “bloc mobilization”: small groups that rely on preexisting local networks to mobilize for new political purposes. As Oberschall (1973, p. 143) observed, this promotes rapid mobilization of larger groups, but it is also singularly prone to fragmentation and division: “A heterogeneous leadership and membership, loosely held together in their pursuit of some common goals, comes into being. . . . Yet, the movement will have little central organization, and the primary loyalties of the members may be to the component groups, leaders, and associations, and not to the overarching movement itself. Each group seeks to have its leaders recognized.” Rivalries and disagreements were endemic in such coalitions, and within a locality, separate rebel coalitions pursued parallel attacks on local officials.

Although they formed broader coalitions for the purposes of seizing power over a local government, power seizures often turned allies into competitors. Power seizures over government jurisdictions spread rapidly, in a top-down fashion, typically carried out by hastily assembled coalitions of rebels. The trigger for a power seizure was a rebel overthrow of the immediately higher level of government (Walder and Lu 2017). These coalitions never included all rebel groups, and those who were excluded typically protested. Moreover, these rapidly assembled coalitions were themselves very loosely integrated, and they were prone to splits when the leaders of the included rebel groups subsequently disagreed about decisions and the allocation of authority.

The process that we are describing is a micro-to-macro problem of the kind identified by Coleman (1986)—in this case, how small rebel groups aggregated into larger coalitions that ultimately comprised two opposed factions. Structural explanations implicitly assume that inherently conservative groups, privileged in the existing order, defended the leaders of their organizations from rebel attack and later formed coalitions with other conservatives to defend local governments from attacks by rebels. When military forces intervened, these conservatives gravitated toward support for military units, which were seen as defending the status quo against rebels. In this scenario, military units joined with them to defend the existing order. This implies a process of aggregation in which smaller groups with similar and fixed orientations combined into larger coalitions. These propositions, as explained above, have proved impossible to square with historical evidence.

We propose an alternative process that translated micromobilization into macrolevel factions. The factional coalitions that grew up in the weeks before a power seizure were formed for the purposes of taking down local officials, but the splits that generated factional violence had not yet appeared. The divisions originated at the point of the power seizures themselves. Power seizures were never carried out by a single coalition that included all local rebels. Instead, they were carried out by a coalition that may or may not have been the largest but acted first. This led excluded rebels to challenge the act, typically by denouncing the power seizure as a sham that harbored conservative intentions. These charges were reciprocated and could lead to hostile confrontations (Walder 2019, pp. 111–16).

Our second proposition is that the intervening external authorities (military units) support the claims of some rebels while denying the claims of others. External authorities were forced to certify a power seizure or to credit the counterclaims of excluded rebels. Rebels whose claims were supported were incorporated into new power structures, while the others were excluded and, if they resisted, suffered repression. These decisions led some rebels to support military units and others to oppose them.

As noted above, rebellion against local power holders was sanctioned and facilitated by actors at the apex of the political hierarchy—the Maoist core of the national leadership. Military intervention was meant to help rebels consolidate their power. They were forced by circumstances to decide which rebels to support. The old civilian hierarchy collapsed, but it was replaced by the national military hierarchy and the party organization within the military. China's civilian state structures were mirrored by military forces that paralleled the hierarchy of civilian government.³ Because this hierarchy was intact, authorities who sought to intervene in the conflict—even if in support of rebels—ultimately had to identify certain groups as legitimate leaders while denying this role to others (Walder 2019, pp. 116–26).

Our third proposition is that the intervention of external authorities crystallized factional identities. This proposition draws on a dynamic version of what Burt (1980) identified as “structural equivalence” in social networks. Network theory has long recognized the distinction between existing patterns of social ties, or “cohesion,” and equivalent positions in social networks by otherwise unconnected individuals. These are different bases for social action, which can emerge either from prior ties of solidarity that bind people together, creating common interests, or from identification with similar others who occupy equivalent positions. Bearman (1993) and Gould (1996) both employed this concept to explain the formation of political orientations,

³ Each province, prefecture, city, and county was also the site of a military district or local garrison, with regular troops or militia forces (Nelsen 1972, 1981). This facilitated rapid and pervasive military intervention.

respectively, in the English Civil War and the Whiskey Rebellion, but in these cases the formation of the structurally equivalent positions was a product of longer-term institutional changes. Here we apply the same concept to rapid shifts formed during the course of ongoing conflicts, in a situation where existing institutions have collapsed. The analysis that we offer here is an illustration of a more general proposition: “While much of the literature on networks treats the topological features of social structure as given quantities, networks do not emerge *ex nihilo*, but are endogenously formed patterns of relationships that are created by individual and institutional forces that constrain and direct everyday interactions” (Centola 2015, p. 1296).

Power seizures and military interventions were a process out of which new networks of political power were being formed. Historical accounts describe the networks associated with existing power structures as disintegrating, dramatically illustrated by the rebellion of government functionaries against their own superiors and their frequent divisions into rival rebel groups. Military intervention crystallized the formation of new categories and networks. Rebel groups that were included in these networks, and those excluded, were moving into structurally equivalent positions. These categories did not exist before power seizures, but they were inadvertently crystallized by the decisions of military commanders.

These emerging categories served as a new foundation for identity building and group formation. Historical accounts describe them as forming more solidary groups as they recognized their shared standing. The initially fragmented character of rebel mobilization began to reverse itself, generating more coherent and disciplined factions that began to articulate more self-conscious and explicit political stances. Conflict between factions enhanced their internal solidarity, and the intervention of armed forces militarized the conflicts.

It is important to emphasize that this theory is not intended to predict which rebel groups end up on which side of factional divisions. Instead, it is designed to predict a specific macrolevel outcome—the formation of opposed rebel factions with different orientations toward the military. This is an example of what Hannan (1992) identified as a “robust” multilevel process, in which a variety of different microlevel interactions lead toward a single outcome at the macrolevel. In other words, it does not matter which rebel groups were included in or excluded from power seizure coalitions, and it does not matter how rebel groups and their leaders come to choose positions either favorable or antagonistic toward the subsequent interventions of military officers. Military intervention itself forces local actors into choices that all lead to a single macrolevel outcome—the formation of factions with opposed stances toward military forces.

These theoretical propositions imply an interactionist framework that departs from familiar approaches to studying collective action. When group

mobilization is understood to flow from predefined social and political identities, there is no explicit place in the analysis for the actions of other parties or for contingent events that alter choices for actors. The first major feature of the theory we advance here, by contrast, is a process of interaction that involves contingent choices by at least two actors. At each step, each party faces a choice among alternative courses of action, and these choices are partly dependent on choices made by other actors (Walder 2006). There is no essential or fixed characteristic of actors that permits us to predict their political choices at each step without reference to the contexts that shape choices. It is out of these choices that factional identities are constructed in the course of ongoing conflicts; it is also out of these choices that factions decide in different contexts to surrender, seek compromise, or develop and deploy a capacity for armed combat.

The second major feature of the theory is that the choices faced by individuals and groups change over time, in response to both their prior interactions and shifts in political context. Actors do not face the same choices in a repeating fashion—they face evolving choices presented by shifting contexts. Shifts in political context are already familiar in the analysis of contentious politics. The rise and fall of social movements and their level of success have often been explained as a product of the opening up or closing down of political opportunities at the national or local level (McAdam 1982; Tarrow 1989; Koopmans 1993; Meyer and Staggenborg 1996; Meyer and Minkoff 2004). In this case, signals from the apex of national power shaped courses of action chosen by all local actors—civilian authorities, military units, and rebels—and these signals shifted regularly and in observable ways. Within this hierarchy, events at the immediately higher level of government were as important as signals emanating from the apex of national power. Events at the province level altered the choices faced by actors in cities and counties below. When a provincial government was overthrown by a rebel coalition, this altered the choices faced by rebel groups immediately subordinate to that provincial government. Likewise, when a political settlement created a new provincial government sanctioned by authorities in Beijing, this altered the choices faced by military units and rebels at lower levels. Choices also changed over time as violent conflict endured—as we will see, a key determinant of local levels of violence was the escalating costs of exit due to defeat rather than stalemate or victory.

This approach has obvious parallels with game theory, a familiar interactionist approach in the social sciences. Our analysis is a broader type of theory, specifying outcomes as a function of events or encounters in an unfolding historical process. Game theory is a more narrowly framed analysis of strategic interaction: it focuses on endogenous interactions between predefined actors. Here, the players and what they want are in flux, and what we offer is an interactive analysis of the formation of the actors who become

players in a subsequent wave of collective violence. Second, we explicitly analyze shifts in broader contexts that essentially alter the game that is being played. Actors are not interacting in a closed system of repeated interactions—the game has shifting rules that are exogenous to the interactions themselves. Actors outside the local strategic interactions of players alter choices and strategies that are demonstrable across localities and over time. In our view, one shortcoming of much of applied game theory is that analysts pay insufficient attention to the broader and often evolving contexts that define the games being played.

An interactionist approach to theorizing conflict group formation has not generated much interest in the sociological literature on contentious politics. This remains so despite arguments by several originators of influential sociological models of collective action that they should be abandoned in favor of a focus on dynamic transformations during “sustained episodes of contention” (McAdam, Tarrow, and Tilly 2001). Tilly (2003, pp. 29–32), for example, describes a process of “category formation” in collective conflicts—the creation of new political identities around which collective actors mobilize. What we observe in historical accounts is that power seizures and military intervention jointly fostered the creation of new political categories that served subsequently as bases for political mobilization.

One stream of research that informs our theory is on armed insurgencies and civil wars. Even if groups mobilize on the basis of preexisting networks and related identities, these are transformed during the course of sustained conflicts in ways that help to explain why insurgencies succeed and why they fail (Staniland 2014) and why they have different characteristics and social consequences (Wood 2008). One common feature of many such conflicts is that alliances regularly form and break down, groups split into factions that shift their political identities, regardless of the initial bases for group mobilization (Cunningham 2011; Cunningham, Blake, and Seymour 2012; Pearlman and Cunningham 2012). Identity-based narratives of solidarity, whether founded on ethnicity, religion, or social class, are often post hoc representations by the actors themselves that gloss over social and political processes endogenous to the conflicts (Wood 2003; Kalyvas 2006, 2008; Christia 2012; Staniland 2012).

There is a close kinship between recent research on civil wars and the theoretical claims we advance here. First, it emphasizes matters of political orientation as much as standard questions about the problem of mobilization. Insurgencies vary in the levels of violence that they employ and also toward whom it is directed—for example, some insurgencies abuse noncombatants (pillaging, kidnapping, forced recruitment, sexual violence against women) while others abstain (Humphreys and Weinstein 2006; Weinstein 2007). Second, it is attentive to endogenous shifts during the course of insurgencies—alliances with other insurgents, the formation of factions (termed

“fractionalization”), the transformation of social networks over time, and shifts in the identities around which insurgents mobilize. All of this work problematizes the extent to which *ex ante* identities and networks drive subsequent mobilization and why and when these networks and identities are transformed into something different. Third, this work explicitly analyzes insurgencies as interactions between contending parties over time and is particularly sensitive to the impact of violence on these transformations.

In sum, the puzzle of why orientation toward military control became the issue around which opposed rebel factions aligned can be resolved when viewed as a process of interaction. Bloc mobilization and the rapidity of power seizures generated initial disputes among rebel groups because some moved to seize power more quickly than others, leaving rebels excluded from power seizure coalitions in charge of parts of local governments or enterprises. When military units intervened, they needed to decide which rebel groups to support and, in doing so, crystallized factional divisions: those who received military support and those who did not. These were contingent encounters, in that rebel groups initially shared common oppositional stances toward incumbent civilian authorities, but military officers were forced to choose which rebels to support. Because their choices were contingent on local events, whom the military supported cannot be predicted *ex ante*. One important—and testable—implication of this theory is that factional formation is a function of power seizures and military intervention. These newly emerging factions were “endogenous”: generated in response to contingent events like power seizures and interactions with the military rather than based on preexisting (“exogenous”) interests of the different parties. Factional identities did not structure whom the military supported; rather, they were the result of power seizures and interactions with the military, where these identities were defined by a rebel group’s emerging relationship with military units.

Explaining Factional Violence

An interactionist theory also helps to explicate why factions descended into violent conflict. As above, historical descriptions offer an informative starting point. Armed factional conflict began shortly after an early April reversal of the orders under which military units operated. The military’s orders of January 28 authorized troops to suppress “counterrevolutionary” groups, which some units interpreted as any rebels that resisted their decisions. In some regions, mass arrests occurred in February and March, and in rare cases rebels were killed. These reports alarmed Maoist radicals in Beijing, who feared that the army was suppressing an insurgency that the radicals saw as the agent of political transformation. New orders issued in April forbade arrests of rebels, the use of force by military units, and the banning of

rebel organizations. They ordered the army to release any imprisoned rebels and withdraw all charges against them. The orders were reinforced by publicized arrests of regional commanders guilty of the most severe acts of repression (Central Military Commission 1967*b*, 1967*c*).

This reversal lends itself to standard interpretations about political opportunity: a decrease in repression facilitated mobilization of rebel factions that opposed recent decisions by military units. Such an interpretation, however, would fail to account for the simultaneous mobilization of rebel factions who were favored by military commanders and the subsequent upsurge in violent conflict. An interactionist theory of factional conflict suggests that these rebels were defending their own positions as well as military units that had made decisions in their favor. The mobilization of antiarmy rebels was also an attack on rival rebel groups favored by the military. As we will see, the overwhelming majority of insurgent events were conflicts between civilian factions. Military units colluded with supportive rebel factions to provide them with arms, while their rebel opponents invaded military compounds to seize weapons from soldiers now forbidden from resisting with force. In other words, the April orders inadvertently stimulated mobilization by both nascent rebel factions and militarized the resulting conflicts.

This ushered in a rapid escalation of factional warfare during the summer of 1967, but we will see that the largest death tolls from these battles were generated during its second year, in 1968. An explanation derived from theories of contentious politics would view this as a function of increased access to military armaments, improved training of specialized fighting units, an increased capacity to mobilize larger numbers of civilian combatants for factional battles, and a shift in strategy toward the deployment of greater armed force. There is evidence in historical descriptions for such conjectures. The combatants of 1968 were generally better equipped and trained than in 1967, and the battles tended to be larger and of longer duration. And the factions still fighting in 1968 did indeed appear to make a strategic decision to pour resources into a better organized effort to prevail against their opponents—and to bear the costs of such a strategy.

This would be an accurate description of how groups mobilized for violent conflict, but it falls short as a satisfactory explanation of why they did so. It implies an intensified motivation of rebel leaders and combatants to bear the costs necessary to prevail, but describing this as a shift in strategy and an increase in organizational capacity does not address the sources of this motivation. What explains the apparent willingness of factions to bear the heavy costs of these latter conflicts? Once factions formed, why did antiarmy rebels fight to press their claims, and why were their rebel opponents so adamant in defending the armed forces?

Our theory identifies the duration of local conflict as the driver of a process of escalating violence. As violent warfare proceeds, deepening mutual

animosities, the question of how conflict is to end becomes more pressing. As we will see, by 1968 it was apparent that new local governments would be formed by military commanders. This raised a dangerous possibility for rebels opposed to military forces—if the army units against whom they had fought for many months presided over new governments, they would likely engage in severe retribution against their rebel opponents, with the enthusiastic participation of the proarmy rebel faction. In the absence of a credibly neutral third party to adjudicate past factional disputes, defeat or surrender could entail severe consequences for the losing side.

This suggests that an explanation should focus on the problem of how collective action ends. Theories of contentious politics focus on the opposite problem: how collective action is initiated and sustained. In conflicts characterized by widespread violence and a disruption of the institutions that maintain shared expectations and trust, this may be a focus on the wrong problem. Some analysts have shown that in the violent conflicts of civil wars and counterinsurgency campaigns, the risks and costs of participation may be lower than if one remains uninvolved (Wood 2003; Kalyvas and Roher 2007). At the group level, the leaders of insurgencies may conclude that there is no palatable alternative to continue fighting; they have “no other way out” (Goodwin 2001). Once underway, efforts to end insurgencies are typically blocked by an inability to provide credible commitments for the security of demobilized combatants. In one major naval mutiny, the crucial variable in explaining the solidarity of mutinous crews was whether information about an offered amnesty was withheld (Pfaff, Hechter, and Corcoran 2016). In other words, the problem is not how to induce individuals to engage in high-risk collective action but to understand the risks of exit.

These risks would logically escalate over time. The longer that factional violence persisted, the deeper the mutual animosities and related grievances and the greater the likelihood of severe retribution for the defeated side. This leads us to expect that the larger death tolls during 1968 were an expression of escalating violence in a declining number of localities where the duration of violent factional warfare had persisted the longest. The death tolls were generated by an intensified final push to defeat one’s opponents, or at least fight to a draw, in anticipation of the imminent formation of a new government. For antiarmy rebels, this intensified resistance was a signal to authorities at higher levels in the military hierarchy, or civilian officials at even higher levels, that local commanders had failed in their mission and should be replaced. New army units or commanders transferred in from elsewhere, previously uninvolved in local battles, would presumably be more neutral. This raised the prospect that proarmy rebels would lose their backing, or even that new commanders might side with their rivals. There was an inherent zero-sum quality to factional conflicts over military control,

where factions were compelled to fight to the limits of their ability to avoid losing.⁴

THE EVIDENCE

In line with our emphasis on interactions, the analysis that we develop here is inherently event based. Sequences and timing of events at different levels of a multilevel political hierarchy are at the core of the analysis. We will draw on evidence from a longitudinal data set, coded from local narratives, to test some of these empirical implications. The data set aggregates information from 2,246 county and city annals, representing 97% of all local jurisdictions. The annals contain a range of historical and statistical material, including “chronologies of major events” and accounts of political campaigns. Covering June 1966 to December 1971, it contains information about more than 34,000 political events. The data and the documentary sources are detailed elsewhere (Walder 2014, 2019, pp. 205–16).⁵

We focus on 1967 and 1968, the period when these conflicts occurred. For these two years the data set contains 17,160 local political events. A total of 8,026 are “milestone” events, which by definition can occur only once (see table A1). These events mark shifts in the political contexts relevant to the development of factional conflicts. The first is a rebel power seizure that overthrows regional and local governments, marking the onset of the period of interest. The second is the month that military units intervene to stabilize local power structures. This defines the beginning of army units’ interactions with local rebels, out of which nascent political factions become crystallized. The third is the first report of opposed factional alliances with different stances regarding power seizures and military intervention, which defines the onset of the conflicts that are the subject of our analysis. These are the events described in historical narratives; here we have evidence about their timing across almost the entire range of local political jurisdictions.

⁴ This part of the analysis bears a closer resemblance to familiar varieties of game theory. The factions (players) are now clearly defined, and the payoffs can be assumed to be a desire to avoid being a victim of retribution. For any given period, factions can be understood to be players locked in a prisoner’s dilemma game, a well-known dynamic in which neither side has incentive to cooperate or refrain from violence if it believes the other side will defect or use violence. Game theory captures this aspect of our analysis. What drives our explanation, however, is variation across regions and over time that alters the duration of the game that is being played, and ultimately this is a product of actors and events that are not part of the local interactions.

⁵ The data set is publicly available. See China Political Events Dataset, 1966–71 (<https://stanford.app.box.com/s/1p228gwy2pjd3817ksq9kd4d6cz3jy8>).

Finally, there is the formation of provincial and local “revolutionary committees”—marking the end of Beijing-sanctioned rebel insurgencies.

In addition to these milestone events, the data set includes 9,074 actions by rebels or authorities and their associated casualties, whose spread and timing are analyzed in relation to the milestone events. These actions can occur more than once in any month or locality. By counting these actions, we trace the formation, evolution, and impact of factional insurgencies and responses by authorities. Most of the reported conflicts during the two years under examination were instigated by civilian rebel groups: there were 3,943 reported armed battles between factions, 1,566 actions by rebels against military installations, 596 rebel actions against government offices, and an additional 581 insurgent actions that did not fit into these categories. In addition, there are 2,388 reported actions by authorities to curtail rebel activity or otherwise consolidate political order—military operations against mobilized rebels or political campaigns conducted to consolidate order after the suppression of rebels (table A1).

Databases of political events are rarely probability samples. The question of the validity and bias of such data has long been a major preoccupation. Most studies of this type rely heavily on coding material from news sources, whether print or online. Not all relevant events are reported, and biases in coverage can affect conclusions. The most common concerns are about regional biases of news coverage toward major media markets or editorial biases in what is treated as newsworthy (McCarthy, McPhail, and Smith 1996; Oliver and Myers 1999; Oliver and Maney 2000; Earl et al. 2004; Wang, Rao, and Soule 2019, p. 446). This data set is culled from locally published histories, each of which provided accounts of local events. The problem of regional coverage is greatly reduced, but there are other potential problems—in particular underreporting due to editorial decisions or variation in resources devoted to compiling local annals.

The primary conundrum is whether the absence of a reported event means that there was in fact no such event or whether events went unreported. This is essentially a problem of sample selection bias. No source provides a complete enumeration of all relevant events. Fortunately, the milestone events, which by definition can occur only once, are very widely reported. The dates of local power seizures and the formation of factions are known for 81% of localities, 93% of military interventions, and 99.7% of revolutionary committees. The dates of all 29 provincial power seizures, the imposition of military control, and the formation of provincial revolutionary committees are also known. If such an important event is not reported, we can be reasonably certain that it did not occur. This permits us to define shifting political contexts and the relationship of events at different levels of the national hierarchy.

Our concern is primarily about the repeatable events: the reporting of armed clashes, rebel attacks on government or military installations, actions

by military units, or information about scale and casualties. Local annals vary widely in the amount of information they provide, for two reasons. First, localities vary greatly in the resources they devote to compiling their historical chronicles. This is evident in the level of detail that they provide about the local economy, population, and other matters. It is also evident in the length and detail of the general “chronologies of major events”—listings of all noteworthy events, political or otherwise. Some annals are multivolume publications, printed on high-quality paper with extensive statistical materials and colored maps. At the other extreme are relatively simple, even crude single volumes that reflect the poverty of a region.

Second, all annals, even the more detailed ones, differ greatly in the amount of information that they provide about relevant political events. In such cases this may be a function of deliberate censorship of controversial or sensitive topics. One frequently encounters general chronologies that are long and detailed for the years immediately before 1966 but that are very short and cryptic for the years examined here. One also encounters broad general language about severe political disorders that is not specific enough to permit the coding of events. Two-thirds of the annals provide separate historical sections that are devoted to political events, but the others do not. This represents the potential censoring of data, because of either varied levels of resources devoted to the annals or editorial decisions about what to cover and how much detail to provide.

ANALYTIC APPROACH

We employ these data to examine two types of outcomes. The first is the rate at which factions formed in relation to the timing of power seizures and military intervention. The second are events that represent insurgent activity, as well as the number of casualties from these events. Our strategy will be to test implications from our theory by relating these outcomes to (a) the timing of milestone events such as power seizures, military intervention, and the establishment of revolutionary committees and (b) the duration of time between milestone events.

Our first analysis models the rate at which factions form as a function of power seizures and military intervention. There were indeed factions that emerged within workplaces, schools, and cities during 1966, and they did divide groups who were (temporarily) loyal to the authorities against those who rebelled. The factions at issue here emerged from splits among rebel forces related to power seizures over the entire city or county government, which subsequently drove the factional warfare of 1967 and 1968. The formation of factions is defined as the first explicit mention of opposed rebel coalitions across a city or county with opposed stances toward power seizures or military intervention or, absent such a report, the first recorded

violent clash between rebel factions so defined.⁶ In the 1,825 localities where such factions were reported, 20.1% occurred before a power seizure, indicating the formation of rival rebel coalitions. Factions were reported in 31.5% of localities before military intervention. In only 7.6% of cases did factions appear before both.

From this definition we construct a dependent variable that is the amount of time before rebel factions are reported and employ an event history model to examine whether power seizures and military interventions accelerate their formation. Given a random time variable T and observed survival time t (where survival time is duration before a reported faction),

$$F(t) = \Pr(T \geq t) = 1 - \int_0^t f(t) dt.$$

That is, $F(t)$ is the cumulative distribution function of time t , and $f(t)$ is the survival rate at time t . Function $F(t)$ is also known as a Kaplan-Meier failure function. We then use a Cox proportional hazards model to examine whether these differences in aggregate trends are statistically significant.

Our second set of dependent variables are counts of insurgent-initiated events as well as the counts of deaths or casualties attributable to these actions, and the units of analysis here are events and locality-months. As noted above, we face the problem of sample selection bias. To address this problem, we assume that the likelihood of reporting events varies across localities, because of differences in the quality and editorial standards of the publications. However, we assume that this likelihood does not vary over time within the period of interest. One of our primary purposes in analyzing these events is their distribution over time. We assume that aggregate data, which summarize information contained in all local annals, will adequately represent fluctuations over time in the same types of events. Problems arise, however, in applying statistical models to the event data. In this case we need to adopt techniques that are designed to adjust for sample selection bias.

The level of detail provided in these annals is directly measurable as the number of words devoted to sections that describe these events. All but 21 of the 2,246 annals contain a general "chronology of major events." Additional material was gathered from separate chapters in 1,450 annals (65% of the total). In a small number of localities (102), additional material was gathered

⁶ This definition excludes reports of prior city- or county-wide factional disputes among Red Guard and rebel groups during 1966, which usually pitted defenders of the authorities against rebels. By the end of the year, factional splits of this type were reported in 11% of all jurisdictions, primarily large cities where political mobilization was most advanced. The factions between rival rebel coalitions that fueled the violence after the wave of power seizures emerged more slowly, beginning only in January 1967 and reaching two-thirds of all localities only in August of that year. These were the factions that drove the violent conflicts that continued into 1968 (Walder 2019, pp. 27–50).

from separate publications or internal government reports. As a result, there is wide variation in the length and detail of the materials that contributed events to the data set. They range from 170 to 88,487 Chinese characters (less than half a page to 180 pp., with 500 characters comprising a page), with an average of 5,780 (11.6 pp.) and a median of 3,808 characters (7.6 pp.).

Longer accounts are more likely to report events, while shorter accounts are more likely not to report them or not to report them in detail. To adjust for potential sample selection bias, the variable “length” lends itself to standard two-stage estimation procedures that adjust coefficients in a second equation on the basis of the results of an initial estimation of the impact of account length on the likelihood of a report of zero activity. Heckman two-stage regression estimators are a familiar technique, but for the count data that we analyze later in this article, zero-inflated negative binomial regression is more appropriate (Harris, Hilbe, and Hardin 2014).

We use negative binomial regression because a key assumption in the Poisson model (the base model for dependent variables that are integers limited in range) is that the variance and mean are identical (equidispersed). We test this assumption using a Pearson goodness-of-fit test. The test results reject the null hypothesis that the variance and mean are identical. Thus, we relax the equidispersion assumption by using a negative binomial model. This model is then further adjusted to account for structural zeros. In a zero-inflated model, the cases in which the dependent variable is zero are modeled separately from nonzeros. The first-stage equation predicts the likelihood that a locality will report no insurgent activity and is similar to a Heckman selection model in that it predicts “structural zeros,” in our case the localities that report 0 because records for that month are missing or events were unreported. In all of the first-stage models we include the variable “length,” the number of Chinese characters that a local history devotes to events of this period. Longer accounts are more likely to report events and are also more likely to provide detail about casualties. Length is a measure of resources devoted to compiling local histories and also editorial decisions about how much detail to provide. By adjusting our first-stage equation for length, our model better accounts for differences in reporting.

The second equation estimates coefficients that are reweighted and adjusted for the results of the first-stage model. It allows us to more accurately model the intensity of factional conflict as a function of conflict duration. We define the onset of a duration as the month of power seizure and the endpoint as the month that a new government has been established at both the provincial and local level. We also include covariates for the total population and whether the locality was a city or rural county. These covariates are necessary because the dependent variables (counts of deaths or events that occur in a locality) are directly related to the number and density of people living in a locality.

THE GENERATION OF FACTIONS: TEMPORAL PATTERNS

The idea that factions emerged out of contingent interactions among rebel groups and army units is based on highly detailed narratives from a relatively small number of localities. Our theory is about microlevel interactions during a crucial period of time, and it therefore has implications for the timing of the first appearance of rebel factions and ensuing conflicts relative to power seizures and military intervention. The crucial period of January through March 1967 was one when power seizures spread rapidly, along with military intervention, and out of the local interactions during this period, new political factions began to form. As noted earlier, narrative accounts suggest that factions originated in rebel disputes over power seizures and that military intervention served to harden these nascent divisions and transform the axis of conflict into opposed stances toward military control. Factions should be more likely to develop, and develop more rapidly, in localities where government-level power seizures and military interventions occurred during this crucial early period.

What was the statistical impact of power seizures and military intervention on how quickly factions formed? Table 1 reports the results of Cox regression models that predict the rate of factional formation, conditional on the occurrence of power seizures or military intervention during the crucial first three months of 1967. Most localities (59%) experienced both power seizures and military intervention during this early period. Another 18% eventually experienced a power seizure but not (yet) military intervention. Of the 23% of localities that did not experience a power seizure during this period, most of them (18%) did experience military intervention. Table 1 shows that the rate of factional formation was highest for localities that experienced both military intervention and power seizures, with a hazard ratio of 1.52 relative

TABLE 1
COX PROPORTIONAL HAZARD ESTIMATES FOR FORMATION OF FACTIONS

	Coefficient	SE
Events during January–March 1967 (relative to neither event occurring):		
Military intervention only	1.07	.12
Power seizure only	1.30**	.12
Both power seizure and military intervention	1.52***	.18
Control variables:		
Total population of locality (millions)	1.26*	.12
Urban locality	1.51***	.14
Total analysis time at risk and under observation (locality-months)	36,255	

NOTE.—Coefficients (in hazard ratios) and SEs adjusted for clustering at province level. Number of localities = 2,224, nested in 28 provinces. Two-tailed significance tests.

- * $P < .05$.
- ** $P < .01$.
- *** $P < .001$.

to localities where neither event had occurred ($P < .001$). It is second highest for localities experiencing only power seizures, with a hazard ratio of 1.30 ($P = .006$). The difference between these estimates is not statistically significant. Localities that experienced military intervention during this early period without a power seizure did not form factions at a rate that was significantly different from localities where neither event had occurred ($P = .569$). Factions, in other words, originated as disputes over power seizures; military intervention hardened these disputes and transformed them into divisions over military control itself. Military intervention alone, however, did not increase the rate that factions formed.

As further evidence for this claim, figure 1 displays the Kaplan-Meier function estimates for the formation of factions. Although Cox models describe the rate by which factions form, figure 1 reveals that localities had different overall likelihoods of factional formation. For instance, 88% of localities that experienced both military intervention and power seizures by March 1967 eventually reported factions. By contrast, only 60% of localities that experienced neither eventually reported factions. As such, figure 1 shows that power seizures and military intervention during this early period increased the overall likelihood that factions would eventually form, and they also increased the speed with which they did so. Factions were more likely to form, and to form earlier, in localities that had experienced power

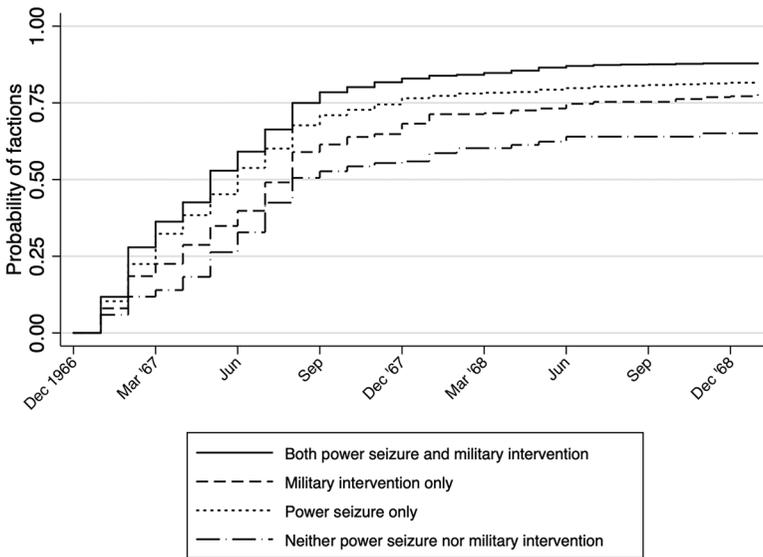


FIG. 1.—Kaplan-Meier probability estimates of factional formation, conditional on power seizures and military intervention by March 1967.

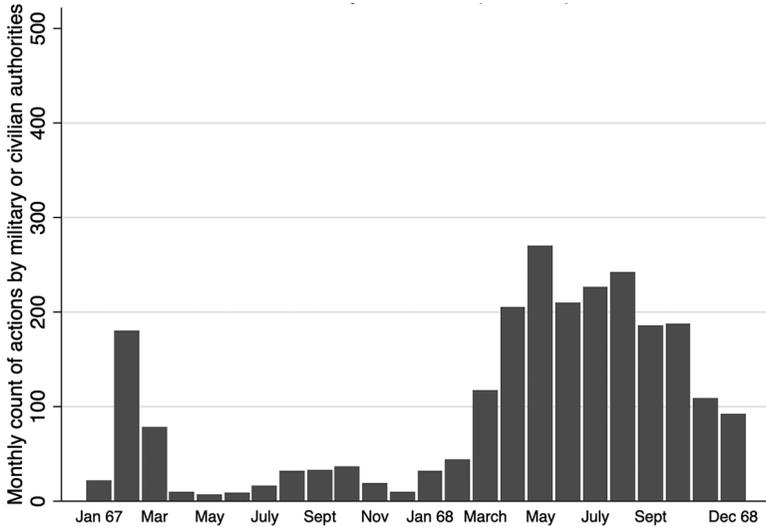


FIG. 2.—Monthly counts of actions by authorities, 1967–68 ($N = 2,388$)

seizures (and especially power seizures and military intervention) by March 1967.⁷

GENERATING COLLECTIVE VIOLENCE

Figures 2 and 3 present comparisons of reported activity by authorities (both military and civilian) and by rebel insurgents during 1967 and 1968. Figure 2 tracks monthly counts of actions by military or civilian authorities to suppress rebel groups or to otherwise consolidate political order. The repression applied by military units in early 1967 is evident, but after that point actions by authorities drop to negligible levels, clearly indicating the impact of the April 1967 prohibition of the use of force against insurgents. It would be more than a year before levels of repression returned to and surpassed levels reported during the first three months of 1967. Figure 3 tracks reported insurgent activity—clashes between rebel factions or rebel actions initiated against government installations or military compounds.⁸ The highest levels

⁷ The eventual formation of factions in localities without a power seizure or military intervention should not be puzzling. There were many localities that had rebel movements that developed too slowly to form coalitions and seize power from the local government during this early period. In many cases rebel groups had already seized power over individual government departments, enterprises, or schools. Rebel factions could develop later, in reaction to the same kinds of decisions by military units or because of the influence of conflicts in adjacent regions, especially in jurisdictions immediately above.

⁸ Attacks on government compounds were primarily efforts to seize and hold buildings as bases for rebel operations; attacks on military compounds were primarily for the purpose of seizing military weaponry.

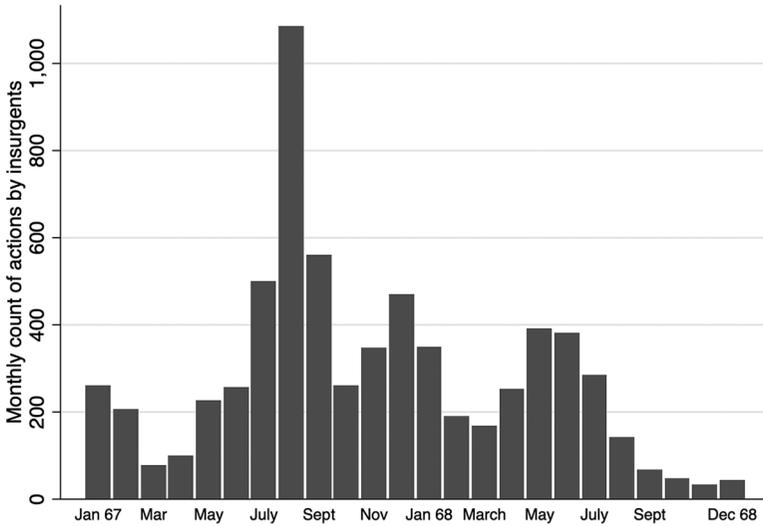


FIG. 3.—Monthly counts of actions by insurgents, 1967–68 ($N = 6,686$)

of insurgent activity, not surprisingly, were during the long period that levels of repression were low. As discussed above, this was not a standard story of political opportunity—insurgent activity represented mobilization by both sides to factional conflicts.

The large spike in rebel activity in the summer of 1967 indicates the extreme sensitivity of local actors to signals emanating from Beijing. In July the commander of a military region in central China was purged and denounced for continuing to repress rebel forces in defiance of orders. This led radicals in Beijing, suspicious of the motives of the army, to issue calls for local rebels to “drag out” recalcitrant military commanders. Antiarmy factions seized on this to gain the upper hand against local military units and their allies. This, in turn, pushed rebel factions supportive of the military to accelerate their mobilization in response. The result was intensified combat between opposed rebel factions.

The rapid drop in rebel activity from its August 1967 peak also showed sensitivity to signals from Beijing. Taken aback by the upsurge of factional violence—with both sides claiming to represent Beijing-inspired rebellion—Mao Zedong backtracked, purged a prominent group of radicals in the national leadership, and denounced them for “wrecking the Cultural Revolution.” In early September 1967 he ordered weapons to be returned to army units and signaled his support for besieged military commanders (Walder 2019, pp. 140–51).

Figure 4 indicates that factional warfare intensified over time. It traces the monthly distribution of deaths connected to the reports of insurgent activity

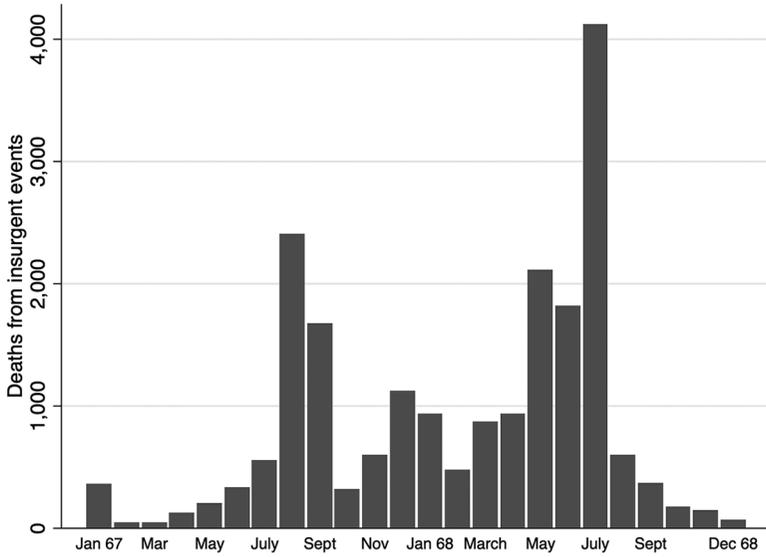


FIG. 4.—Monthly count of deaths due to insurgent events, 1967–68 ($N = 20,394$)

during 1967 and 1968. A large spike in deaths is evident during the upsurge of rebel activity during August 1967. But despite the greatly diminished levels of insurgent activity shown in figure 3 during 1968, death tolls rose to their highest observed levels. During the high tide of July to September 1967, there were 2,050 insurgent events, which generated a total of 4,207 reported deaths—2.1 deaths per event. During the high tide of May to July 1968, there were 967 insurgent events, which generated a reported 7,690 deaths—8.0 deaths per event. These numbers are deceptively low because the majority of event reports do not include figures for casualties (coded 0 in the data set). During 1968 almost twice as many event reports (46%) provide numbers for deaths than in 1967 (25%), which itself suggests that fatalities were more common. Among events for which deaths were reported, the average deaths per event for the July–September period in 1967 is 7.9, while the comparable figure for the May–July 1968 period is 16.3. In short, factional violence intensified even as insurgent activity (the number of insurgent events) declined. These findings frame our puzzle: what explains this escalation of violence?

Conflict Duration

The interactionist theory we developed above, which focuses on the problem of exit from ongoing collective action, links violence to the duration of conflict. Local conflicts shorter in duration will be less violent than longer

ones, and longer conflicts will become more violent over time until they end in compromise, stalemate, or the defeat of one side. To test this proposition, we need to identify the onset and endpoint of conflict for each of the localities in our sample. This is a major issue in cross-national analyses of civil wars and antistate insurgencies (Fearon and Laitin 2003; Fearon 2004; Sambanis 2004), and identifying the starting point is generally more problematic than identifying the end. This is also true for this study, although our data are more detailed than is typical in cross-national research.

Because these insurgencies were initiated and sustained by political actors at the apex of the state hierarchy, events at different levels permit us to define the endpoint of conflict duration. We define the endpoint as the month that revolutionary committees are established at both the province and local level. A revolutionary committee was a hybrid civilian-military government. After a provincial committee was established, rebel challenges to provincial authorities were no longer sanctioned by Beijing. When, in turn, a revolutionary committee was established in a city or county, local insurgencies were defined as counterrevolutionary and treated as such. The first provincial revolutionary committee was established in January 1967, and the last in September 1968. Provincial committees were established before local ones in the vast majority of cases. When this occurred, local fighting would intensify in anticipation of a final settlement. In only 22.7% of localities was a local committee established before the province. In these cases, rebels often pushed to challenge newly established local committees, because a provincial committee had yet to receive Beijing's sanction.

Defining the onset of conflict duration is more difficult, not because of a lack of data but because there are too many plausible definitions, none of them ideal, and most of them clustered in the first three months of 1967. The months of a local power seizure, of military intervention, or of the first report of factional divisions are all defensible starting points, but each of them includes a different subsample of localities (those without such events are treated as missing). Another plausible approach would be to define the onset of an "at risk" period as a specific month early in 1967, whether or not a locality showed evidence of factional conflict. In the analyses to follow, we designate a local power seizure as the onset of a duration. As we indicate below, the results are robust to different definitions of duration onset.

The Dynamics of Escalation

When factional disputes were still new, the costs of losing were relatively modest—essentially gains forgone. As disputes proceeded over time and became more violent, the anticipated costs of losing escalated, making more essential the enforcement of equitable agreements by a credibly neutral third party. Without such a solution, losing would likely have harsh consequences

for factions opposed to military control, spurring them to fight at least to a draw and compelling proarmy factions to defend their position. Our theory predicts that it is precisely in localities where military control persisted the longest that violence between factions became most pronounced.

The prospect that military officers, after prolonged conflicts, would preside over a revolutionary committee was a strong motivator for violent resistance by antiarmy rebels. This prospect rose over time, and conflicts of longer durations were much more likely to end with military officials in charge of new local governments. An initial group of six provinces rapidly created revolutionary committees by April 1967, while the remaining 23 provinces were placed under military control for an extended period that ranged from 7 to 20 months (Walder 2019, p. 157). The revolutionary committees in the first group of provinces were all headed by civilian officials who were appointed because of their early public expressions of sympathy for the rebel cause. In the second group, by contrast, every one of the new provincial governments was headed by military officers (p. 162). This pattern was repeated in subordinate jurisdictions. In Jiangsu Province, which established a revolutionary committee in March 1968, the heads of every prefecture-level jurisdiction and 88% of county-level jurisdictions were military officers (Dong and Walder 2012, p. 901). In Guangxi Province, which established a revolutionary committee in September 1968, military officers headed the new governments in 87% of the 67 counties and cities where this information is available.⁹ The growing realization that military officers would head new governments intensified the urgency of replacing military commanders who had been a party to local conflicts. The mean duration of local conflict in the second group of provinces was more than twice as long as in the first (16.8 vs. 8.0 months). Almost all of the violent factional conflict during these years took place in the provinces placed under prolonged military control—90% of reported insurgent events and 97% of the related deaths.

Our theory about the escalation of factional warfare implies that the intensity of violence will be lower overall in short durations than in long ones and that, in longer ones, the intensity of violence will rise over time. Table 2 provides a simple descriptive analysis of variation in conflict intensity both by the overall length of a duration and over time within durations. Earlier, we noted evidence of increasing intensity of conflict in the aggregate data. There were far fewer insurgent events in 1968 than in 1967 but more deaths. This suggests that reported deaths per event is one plausible indicator of the intensity of conflict. In table 2 we examine conflict intensity, as indicated by

⁹ This number was tabulated by the authors from 67 county and city-level “Organizational Histories of the Chinese Communist Party” from Guangxi Province. Details are available from the corresponding author.

TABLE 2
MEAN DEATHS PER INSURGENT EVENT, BY DURATION LENGTH AND WITHIN
DURATION TIME PERIOD

DURATION OF CONFLICT	MEDIAN DURATION (months)	TIME PERIOD			AVERAGE
		Early	Middle	Late	
Short	14	.8	1.3	1.5	1.2
Medium	18	1.6	2.9	6.5	3.9
Long	21	2.2	2.9	10.1	5.0
Overall	18	1.5	2.4	6.0	3.2

NOTE.—Time periods are defined as time sequences within categories, not calendar month of the reported event. The onset of duration is defined as the month of a local power seizure. Number of localities = 1,846.

deaths per event, and how this varies across durations of different overall length and within durations over time.

The starting point of the duration is set at the month of a power seizure, which means that localities without a power seizure are treated as missing. Table 2 examines 4,613 events that occurred within 1,825 durations. The rows divide durations into three groups of roughly equal size, by the length of duration. The columns divide the events within each group into three time periods of roughly equal length, on the basis of the relative timing of the event within a duration. The short durations have a median length of 14 months; the medium group, 18 months; and the long durations, 21 months. There are large differences in the mean number of deaths per event across durations of different length, with more than four times as many reported deaths per event in the long durations than the short. There is no evidence of escalation within short durations, but there is clear evidence of escalation in durations of medium length, with events in the late period generating four times as many deaths as in the early period. Escalation is most pronounced in the long durations, with a reported 10.1 deaths per event in the late period. Looking across the diagonal of the table, events during the late period of the long durations are almost 13 times as deadly as those in the early period of the short durations. The descriptive data provide clear support for the idea that short durations were less violent and that violence increased in intensity over time in longer durations.¹⁰

We next test statistically whether the intensity of violence increased with the duration of conflict using a zero-inflated negative binomial model. In these models the dependent variable is deaths per locality-month rather

¹⁰ The overall pattern is highly robust to differences in the definition of a duration's starting point. The overall patterns in table 2 are the same when we set the starting point at February 1967, which includes all 2,246 localities; the date of military intervention; or the first report of local factions.

TABLE 3
 ZERO-INFLATED NEGATIVE BINOMIAL MODELS PREDICTING NUMBER OF DEATHS PER MONTH
 DUE TO INSURGENT ACTIVITY (Incidence Rate Ratios)

	(1)	(2)
Months in conflict	1.16*** (.05)	1.52*** (.14)
Months in conflict ² . . . . .		.99*** (.003)
Total population of locality (in millions)	3.60** (1.45)	3.47** (1.40)
Urban jurisdiction	2.80*** (.87)	3.24** (1.17)
Constant . . . . .	.11*** (.059)	.034*** (.02)
Structural zero process Pr(y = 0):		
Length . . . . .	.98*** (.006)	.98*** (.007)
Constant	3.07* (1.51)	2.88* (1.38)
ln(α)	37.1*** (13.3)	37.2*** (13.1)

NOTE.—Onset of duration is set at the month of a reported local power seizure. Number of locality-months = 27,056. SEs, displayed in parentheses, are adjusted for clustering at the province level. Two-tailed significance tests.

- * $P < .05$.
- ** $P < .01$.
- *** $P < .001$.

than deaths per event. The results in table 3 reveal that the number of deaths due to insurgent activity increases by 1.16 times with each additional month of conflict duration ($P < .001$). To illustrate the size of this effect, the predicted number of deaths per locality-month increases from 0.05 in the first month of conflict to 0.62 in the tenth month of conflict, when all other variables are held at the mean. We further include a squared term for conflict duration (col. 2) to examine whether the results are robust to different specifications of functional form. The results imply a concave function with an intuitive interpretation: increasing exit costs generate intensified violence over time, but it eventually tapers off as the endpoint approaches. Figure 5 helps to visualize this by plotting the predicted margins from the model estimated in column 2. Local death rates rise steadily with duration length, reaching a maximum at 16 months, after which they begin to decline. At 16 months, the predicted number of deaths per month is seven times larger than at four months (1.75 vs. 0.25).

An alternative interpretation of these findings is that they demonstrate that the duration of conflict is a product of the severity of violence—that

Violent Insurgency

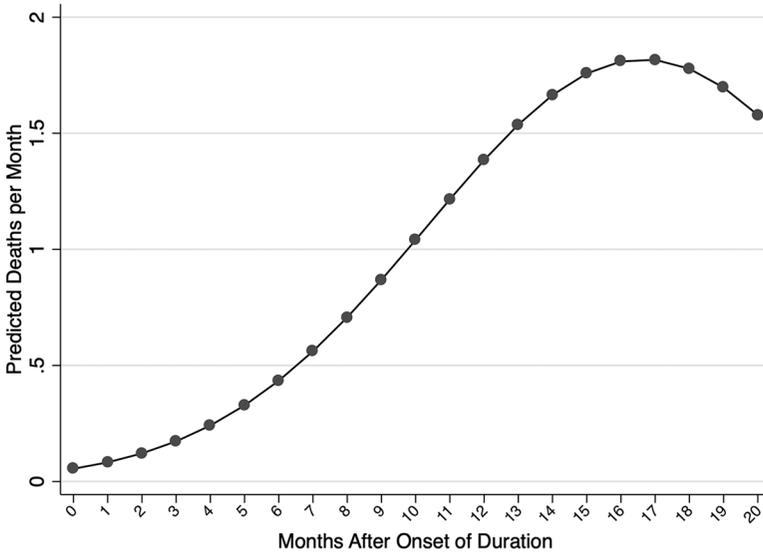


FIG. 5.—Predicted deaths per month based on quadratic model estimates

it was more difficult to bring an end to conflicts that were more violent. There are two reasons for rejecting such an interpretation. The first is that the endpoint is defined as the establishment of a revolutionary committee at both the province and the local level. This event at the province level did not depend on levels of violence at the local level (there was an average of 77 local jurisdictions in a province). More importantly, the evidence from our descriptive analysis of deaths per event showed that the most severe violence was concentrated in the latter phases of longer durations, and the functional form of the increase in violence over time portrayed in figure 5 similarly demonstrated an escalation of violence over time within a duration. If longer durations were an expression of cross-locality differences in overall levels of violence, we would not expect violence to be concentrated near the end of longer durations.

As noted above, the month of a power seizure is only one plausible definition of conflict onset. To ensure that the results are robust, we reestimated the model using five alternative definitions, including the month of military intervention, the month when both power seizures and military intervention have occurred, the first reported factional divisions, and the first reported insurgent conflict. The fifth approach defines onset uniformly as February 1967. Our reestimated results are remarkably consistent across these alternative definitions (see table A2). The incidence rate ratios are all greater than 1, which is consistent with table 3. Moreover, of the five alternative definitions

analyzed, one result is statistically significant at the .05 level, and three at the .001 level. The only result that is not statistically significant is when onset is defined as the first insurgent event.¹¹

Taken together, these results support our claim that the perceived costs of failing to prevail in local conflicts over military control drove escalating violence in regions where political settlements were long delayed. In a broad sense fears about the risks of defeat seem validated by aggregate reports of casualties in the data set. The vast majority of deaths reported during this period were the result of actions by civilian or military authorities as they suppressed rebellion and consolidated revolutionary committees—almost six times more deaths than those generated by factional warfare (see table A1). Is there any evidence that the costs of exit were in fact more severe for groups that were defeated? Tanigawa (2007) found indirect evidence from his examination of county-level revolutionary committees in one particularly violent province with very late endpoints (Shaanxi, where the median was August 1968). In 80% of the counties where rebels were able to avoid defeat until after new army units were transferred into the province in July 1968, both rebel factions were represented on local revolutionary committees. In every one of the committees formed before that date, only one faction had representatives, indicating the defeat of the other side. More than twice as many deaths were generated in subsequent campaigns to consolidate political order where one faction dominated the outcome (pp. 278–79). The evidence does not specify the percentage of these deaths suffered by the losing faction, but it is not unreasonable to presume that they suffered disproportionately. In Guangxi Province, which had some of the highest death tolls and where one faction decisively defeated another, active members and relatives of the losing faction accounted for the overwhelming majority of deaths in the consolidation of revolutionary committees, and the winning faction escaped almost entirely (Yan 2012).¹²

CONCLUSION

In order to explain why regional factions formed and engaged in increasingly violent conflict during the Cultural Revolution, we have been forced to modify, and in some respects reverse, the emphases of familiar theories about contentious politics. Despite their wide variety, all these theories are essentially sociological solutions to collective action problems. Because these theories

¹¹ This is likely because on average the first recorded event occurs considerably later than the other definitions of onset, shortening durations overall.

¹² Members of historically “reactionary” and “exploiter” households were also targeted in indiscriminate killings. In one county cited by Yan (2012, p. 15), out of 1,262 deaths, 33% were members of reactionary households, and 67% were connected with the losing rebel faction. Only four individuals from the victorious rebel faction died.

assume that interests are formed before processes of mobilization (otherwise there is no “collective action problem”) and tend to assume that these preferences are stable throughout the course of conflicts, they are not designed to address the puzzles presented by many sustained insurgencies. We have turned the perennial preoccupation of these theories aside, asking instead, given mobilization, what shapes political orientation and levels of violence?

At the core of our explanation is an event-based theory about contingent interactions among contending parties in shifting contexts. These evolving contexts shape the choices of actors, and the outcomes (factions, escalating violence) are the joint product of actions of more than one actor. Political orientations form out of these interactions, and social networks are transformed in ways that create new identities. In applying this framework to the processes that lead to escalation of collective violence, we have also departed from a widespread assumption about “high-risk” collective action—that the greatest risks are borne by participating rather than abstaining. Instead, we argue that, after a point, the risks of exit from collective action in such a violent setting may in fact be as high as, or higher than, the risks of continuing in high-risk insurgencies and that the relative risks shift over time. Finally, we have offered systematic evidence that supports the implications of this theoretical framework.

The generic theoretical questions raised by this case are by no means unique or idiosyncratic. Many of the same issues with which we have grappled—shifts in political identities, transformations of social networks, the formation of political orientations, and the generation of entrenched violence—are central to recent work on violent insurgencies and civil wars. The disruption of state structures—in this case because of elite-encouraged power seizures that inadvertently destroyed the civilian state—has analogs in other settings when national states break down because of attempted coups or foreign invasions. The militarization of civil strife and the transformation of conflicts by counterinsurgency forces also has parallels with the unanticipated consequences of military intervention in the present case. The historical settings are very different, but the generic sociological processes are not. We have argued that the impact of events over time can usefully be analyzed as changing contexts for ongoing local interactions that can transform local solidarities and political orientations.

While our approach departs from and in some respects reverses the emphases of sociological theories about contentious politics, we have nonetheless adapted concepts from these theories for new purposes. For example, we have employed familiar ideas about bloc mobilization to understand the sources of fragmentation in rebel movements: it was a pronounced form of bloc mobilization that led to the ubiquitous splits that occurred at the time of power seizures. We have also redeployed the familiar concept of political opportunity structure, turning it to the question of choices among

alternative courses of action by both individuals and groups. And we have linked this to a dynamic conception of shifting contexts that define and re-define choices for individuals and groups—where the choice in question is not whether to act but what course of action to take. Finally, we have used a familiar concept from network theory—structural equivalence—to analyze the way that social networks are transformed in the course of sustained conflicts, creating new foundations for group identities. This introduces a dynamic element to network explanations of collective action that frequently rely on static conceptions of preexisting networks of social ties.

The interactionist model of politics that we advance here places actors and events at the center of the analysis. To be sure, there are static features of social structure, groups, and political settings that facilitate mobilization, and moreover shifts in political opportunities and patterns of repression do affect the rise and fall of group mobilization. Ethnic, national, religious, and class identities often generate collective action and coherent political orientations—but not always. And it is challenging to understand why these identities and orientations shift in prolonged conflicts. Familiar approaches to contentious politics, focused on problems of mobilization, seek answers to very different questions than the ones that are raised by the present historical case and by many other sustained and violent insurgencies.

We have portrayed political conflict as a process of interaction involving choices of more than one actor, with outcomes that are the joint product of these choices. And we have introduced several distinct dimensions of contingency into the analysis. The contingency comes not solely from choices by actors in local political interactions but also from events at the immediately higher level of the political hierarchy and signals from the apex of the political system, both of which can be viewed as “exogenous shocks” to ongoing local interactions (Wood 2007). These shocks alter the choices faced by all local actors, and their impact is felt relatively quickly, as demonstrated in aggregate patterns drawn from local annals. But the contingent interactions at the local level transform choices more gradually—first, when power seizures divided rebels who were included in them from those who were excluded; second, when military officers intervened and picked winners and losers; and third, when prolonged durations of violent interactions raised the anticipated costs of exit from collective action and drove local parties into escalating violence.

In developing these ideas, we have provided an explicit theory that formalizes insights from detailed historical descriptions of these events, and we have offered systematic evidence from a data set of political events that subjects major implications of the theoretical arguments to evidentiary tests. In so doing, we have offered a solution to the puzzle of factional warfare in the Cultural Revolution. We suspect that these general propositions may contribute to efforts to address parallel puzzles in violent insurgencies and civil wars elsewhere in the world.

APPENDIX

TABLE A1
DESCRIPTIVE STATISTICS, VARIABLES EMPLOYED IN THE ANALYSIS

	Median Month	No. of Events	% of Localities	Deaths
Milestone event:				
Power seizure	January 1967	1,825	81.6	
Military intervention	March 1967	2,085	93.2	
Formation of rebel factions	May 1967	1,880	84.1	
Revolutionary committee	April 1968	2,236	100.0	
Total		8,026		
Repeated event: ^a				
Armed clashes	November 1967	3,943		18,036
Attacks on military	September 1967	1,566		554
Attacks on government offices	September 1967	596		169
Other rebel actions	August 1967	581		1,635
Actions by authorities	June 1968	2,388		118,944
Total	October 1967	9,074		139,338

^a Only events during 1967 and 1968 are included in the analysis.

TABLE A2
ZERO-INFLATED NEGATIVE BINOMIAL MODELS PREDICTING NUMBER OF DEATHS
PER MONTH DUE TO INSURGENT EVENTS: ALTERNATIVE DEFINITIONS
OF DURATION ONSET (Incidence Rate Ratios)

	Military Intervention	Military Intervention and Power Seizure	Factions Reported	First Insurgent Event	February 1, 1967
Months in conflict	1.14*** (.04)	1.14*** (.04)	1.07* (.03)	1.03 (.02)	1.15*** (.05)
Total population of locality (in millions)	4.73*** (2.12)	5.10*** (2.44)	3.44** (1.60)	2.56** (.92)	5.13*** (2.25)
Urban jurisdiction	3.19*** (1.02)	3.33*** (1.05)	3.13* (1.48)	2.43 (1.13)	3.23*** (.96)
Constant . . . . .	.13*** (.06)	.12*** (.06)	.37*** (.10)	.62* (.14)	.11*** (.05)
Structural zero process Pr(y = 0):					
Length . . . . .	.98*** (.01)	.97*** (.01)	.98*** (.01)	.98*** (.01)	.98*** (.1)
Constant	3.13* (1.51)	3.55** (1.53)	3.08* (1.48)	2.45* (1.09)	3.54** (1.55)

TABLE A2 (Continued)

	Military Intervention	Military Intervention and Power Seizure	Factions Reported	First Insurgent Event	February 1, 1967
ln(α)	33.2*** (11.8)	35.1*** (12.3)	31.4*** (11.0)	36.9*** (10.7)	35.1*** (12.2)
N . . .	28,023	32,000	22,295	23,664	33,131

NOTE.—SEs, displayed in parentheses, are adjusted for clustering at the province level. Two-tailed significance tests.

- * $P < .05$.
- ** $P < .01$.
- *** $P < .001$.

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