

War and Rights

The Impact of War on Political and Civil Rights

Warfare in Europe contributed to the development of the modern state. In response to external conflict, state leaders raised armies and defended borders. The centralization of power, the development of bureaucracies, and the integration of economies all maximized revenue to support war. But how does a persistent external threat affect the development of a strong state? The “Garrison State” hypothesis argues that states that face a severe security threat will become autocracies. Conversely, the “Extraction School,” argues that warfare indirectly promotes the development of democratic institutions.

Execution of large-scale war, requires the mobilization of resource and usually reluctant populations. In most cases, leaders must extend economic or political rights in exchange for resolving the crisis. Large-scale warfare thus expands political participation in the long run. The authors use empirical statistical modeling to show that war decreases rights in the short term, but the longer and bigger a war gets, the rights of the citizenry expand with the conflict. The authors test this argument through historical case studies—Imperial Russia, Austro-Hungarian Dual Monarchy, African Americans in World War I and II, and the Tirailleurs Senegalese in World War I—through the use of large N statistical studies—Europe 1900–50 and Global 1893–2011—and survey data. The results identify when, where, and how war can lead to the expansion of political rights.

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“Rousseau argues that international conflict may lead to short-term retrenchments in civil and political rights, especially for minority groups, but that conflict accompanied by mass mobilization generates pressures for expanding rights, long-term. Rousseau admirably combines various historical and recent case studies, methodological approaches, and types of data to assess the validity and general applicability of this ‘J-curve argument.’”

—*Carl Henrik Knutsen, University of Oslo*

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