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The History of Secession: An Overview

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The History of Secession: An Overview

Bridget L. Coggins

Introduction

For as long as political communities have existed, discontented minorities within them have attempted to break away. Indeed, the Ionians enlisted Greece to help them escape the Persians as far back as 479 BC (Herodotus 1997: 719–20). They were certainly not the first, and far from the last to make such an attempt. Negative experiences with governance routinely cause people to see themselves as distinct from their rulers; as bound to a common fate with those who share the same ascriptive or socio-cultural traits; and as members of communities better served by self-government than alien domination. Self-determination demands can take various forms including calls for increased civil and cultural rights, local autonomy, condominium, suzerainty, or confederal arrangements. A small fraction of these movements will seek total independence, resolving that their governors can not—or more likely will not—accommodate their desire for self-determination. Since the rise of the modern state, these claims of complete territorial and political independence are manifest in secessionism, wherein a nationalist movement attempts to formally withdraw from an existing state in order to create a new one.¹

¹ The origins of the interstate system date back to the Peace of Westphalia (1648), comprised by the treaties of Osnabrück and Münster, which ended the Thirty Years and Eighty Years Wars in Europe. Contained in those documents are the foundational elements of the modern order: legal equality, domestic authority and non-intervention. However, the principles first glimpsed there were not fully embraced until the middle of the 19th century (Krasner 1999). Consequently, it is fair to say that secessionism, the modern phenomenon, only occurred from that point forward. Closely related though distinct from secessionism is irredentism, wherein a group demands independence from one state because it hopes to join another existing state. Had Ireland not revoked its claim to sovereignty over Northern Ireland, for example, we might argue that the conflict there was an irredentist, rather than a secessionist, conflict.
This chapter provides a brief introduction to the history of the multifaceted phenomenon of secession. Apart from some notable exceptions, existing work on the topic focuses on individual cases, like those of Tibet or Quebec (Bothwell 1998; Goldstein 1999; Shakya 1999; Young 1998), or on a particular historical moment, like the near simultaneous collapses of Yugoslavia and the Soviet Union (Bessinger 2002; Caplan 2005; Walker 2003). Those studies have helped to identify secession’s causes and consequences, its legal and normative characteristics, and potential strategies for conflict resolution. Unfortunately, isolated cases impede our ability to discern larger, long-term patterns or uncover meaningful similarities between seemingly disparate events. Rather than limiting its scope to a historically significant but non-representative sample, this chapter takes a macro-historical approach, tracking changes in secessionism across time. It begins by briefly describing the nature of secession. It then charts historical changes in secessionism and juxtaposes them against its more enduring characteristics. The chapter closes with a discussion of current secessionism and how it might shape world politics in the future.

The Evolution of Nation-States

During the 17th and 18th centuries, the rise of the modern nation-state fundamentally transformed political authority. Sovereignty once held by emperors or legitimated by a divine unimpeachable right was gradually challenged from below. With the modern state’s rise to ubiquity in Europe during the 19th century, sovereignty came to depend on the popular will of the citizenry. Or at least was legitimated on those grounds. Self-determination embodied the new idea that the people should determine the content and course of their government. Nationalism, the normative belief that governmental jurisdictions and the boundaries of national identity should align, also became a major political force. The growing threat of popular nationalist rebellion compelled governments to justify their continued rule and explain why their diverse populations should be governed together within a single polity. Rulers without a compelling national myth were more vulnerable to challenges at home and to predatory annexations along their borders.

By the middle of the 19th century, nationalist uprisings had spread across the continent. Many arose over the very definition of the nation. Opinions about the ideal basis for communal identity, be it history, language, religion or some combination of factors, and therefore about who rightfully belonged within the polity, were often at odds. Some populations believed they had a natural affinity with their neighbors and set about achieving self-government, but most did not. The nations championed by nationalists were rarely fully-formed. At times, a common

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identity had to be constructed wholesale. As d’Azeglio famously exclaimed, “We have made Italy, now we must make Italians!” (Emerson 1960: 95).

Nationalism took on two primary forms: civic and ethnic. Demands predicated upon civic, or liberal, nationalism, as enshrined in the American Declaration of Independence (1776), theoretically allowed individuals to become voluntary and equal members of the nation because the people were united by their ideals. This type of nationalism was not inherently opposed to large multi-national states. Ethnic nationalism though, was more restrictive. It prioritized a single ethnic group as the basis for the nation-state and relegated others to a lesser status. Most secessionist movements espoused this exclusionary, ethnic nationalism, which presented an inherently threatening possibility for any would-be minorities within the new state’s borders. Even the most homogenous communities had some variation within them. As a result, ethnic nationalism fractured multinational empires and the tension between national self-determination and state integrity grew steadily throughout the 20th century.

The ideology of nationalism spread globally in the late 19th and 20th centuries as colonial peoples adopted European beliefs about self-determination, particularly self-determination achieved via independence. Although the United Nations and imperial states did not condone it, the strong conviction that nations ought to be endowed with states, not merely granted rights within those that already existed, provoked opposition to various forms of “foreign” rule. Colonial borders became strong organizational focal points for nationalists, but rebellions also arose among traditional social groups that sometimes claimed territory within or across colonies, like the Kingdom of Buganda or the Pan-African movement. In these cases, secessionists tried to undo the colonial borders that had been erected in the 19th century to disrupt traditional settlement patterns so that Europeans could assert control.

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3 In practice, the Americans fell short of the civic ideal, restricting African Americans, Native Americans and women the full practice of citizenship.

4 It should also be noted, however, that civic nationalism is not always sufficient when it comes to deterring secessionist demands. The attempted secession of the Confederate States of America (CSA) (see Chapter 5 below) shows that no government is entirely immune.

5 Sensitive to the negative consequences of ethno-national secession, powerful external actors sometimes create legislative protections for minorities remaining within the newly independent state. At Versailles, statesmen attempted to ensure that recognition of any successor states would hinge on their protection of minorities (Fink 2000). More recently, the European Economic Community (now European Union) outlined requirements including minority protections for states emerging from the former Soviet Union and former Yugoslavia. Still, outsiders have found it difficult to enforce these protections once a new state is endowed with sovereignty because they have committed to non-intervention in its domestic affairs.

6 Not all Pan-Africanists aspired to unified independence, sometimes preferring a loose coalition of independent states.
By the middle of the 20th century, nationalists demanded that national identity be the presumptive basis for self-determination, sovereignty and membership in the international society of states. As with any ideology though, the nationalist vision is difficult to realize given the political reality. Jennings describes the crux of the problem well. “On the surface [self-determination] seemed reasonable: let the people decide. It was in fact ridiculous because the people cannot decide until somebody decides who the people are” (1956). Worldwide there is substantial disagreement over “who the people are.” The boundaries of national identity and the borders of states have never perfectly aligned. And, in the few places where they have, they have often not remained that way for very long.

**Changes in Demands and Outcomes**

In the latter half of the 18th century, the American colonies’ declaration of independence was a harbinger of secessionist demands to come.\(^7\) Both its spirit and the document itself served as templates for scores of movements to follow (Armitage 2007). But as pivotal as the American Revolution was to advancing ideals like the rights of man and self-determination, its influence was not instantaneous. Independence was a relatively uncommon demand and an infrequent source of new states until the turn of the century. Reliable records of secessionist demands during this period do not exist, however the pattern of state emergence during the 19th century provides some insight.

In 1816, there were 25 states in the international system (Correlates of War 2008).\(^8\) One hundred years later, as World War One raged, there were still less than 50 states (see Figure 2.1).\(^9\) Secession was rare over the course of the century, taking place principally in conjunction with anti-colonialism in the Americas. Even so, it was responsible for most new states and its cumulative effects sometimes proved significant enough to change even powerful states’ fortunes. The Spanish case is illustrative. Early in the 19th century, Mexican Indians and mestizos, led by Miguel Hidalgo y Castilla, revolted against Spain (1810).

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7 Many scholars reasonably argue that anti-colonial movements are not properly termed secessionist. Yet excluding anti-colonial movements from this project would be anachronous. Most imperial powers considered their own anti-colonial movements to be secessionist. Though it is certainly the case that anti-colonial secessions and non-colonial secessions had different inherent characteristics and conflict dynamics, both types ultimately sought to separate from an existing state in order to create a new one. Therefore, I consider them secessionist (see also the Introduction).

8 The most comprehensive and systematic data on system membership comes from the Correlates of War Project. Unfortunately, that data begins in 1816, not 1800.

9 Interestingly, the event that catalyzed World War One was Austrian Archduke Franz Ferdinand’s assassination at the hands of the Bosnian Serb nationalist and irredentist group “Young Bosnia.”
The rebels were slaughtered at Guanajuato by loyalists at first, but their cause inspired a larger movement that ultimately led to a successful war of independence. The new state, the Mexican Empire, joined the interstate system in 1821.\textsuperscript{10} Perhaps more important, Mexico’s example provoked other secessionist demands as Spanish control in the hemisphere weakened. Argentina, New Granada (now Colombia), Chile, Peru and Upper Peru (now Bolivia), Paraguay, Uruguay and Venezuela were all among them. In total, Spain lost 18 of its colonies in less than 100 years and its international stature declined precipitously. Although the most notorious case of secessionism during that time was the Confederate States of America’s (CSA) failed attempt to separate from the United States of America (1861–65), it was anomalous (see Chapter 5). Elsewhere, anti-colonial movements and their successes would be more influential to the future course of secessionism than the Confederacy’s non-colonial defeat.

In contrast, the 20th century saw a dramatic rise in secession as a source of new states. Figure 2.2 shows that between 1816 and 1916, secession was responsible for approximately 63 percent (26) of the new states entering the system. The remaining 15 emerged due to other processes like state consolidation, unilateral decolonization, or the mutual dissolution of unions.\textsuperscript{11}

\textsuperscript{10} The Mexican Empire was replaced by the Republic of Mexico in 1823.
\textsuperscript{11} Unilateral decolonization is distinct from secession. Unilateral decolonization occurred where there were not local aspirations to independence. Instead, the push toward independence was initiated by the colonial power.
In the 20th century, far more members entered the interstate system and a greater percentage of those states emerged as a result of secession. The number of states nearly quadrupled, growing to 194 by 2008 (see Figure 2.1). During that time, the percentage born as a result of secession approached 70 percent. In the last 50 years it grew to 73 percent, making secession an increasingly common cause of state birth. Moreover, the 20th century saw secessionism transform from a sporadic, regional phenomenon into a common event worldwide.

Demands for secession in the 20th century came primarily from the second wave of anti-colonial movements in Africa and Asia. However, secessionism also saw a marked increase within the established states of Europe. In the colonies, exposure to ideas like self-determination and nationalism spurred rebellion against the imperial powers. Colonial peoples’ widespread dissatisfaction with the order caught some of their host states by surprise, as did discontent among European minorities closer to home. Emerson explains, “[Early in the century] self-determination … had been proclaimed as a dogma of universal application, but in practice it was not intended … to reach significantly beyond the confines of Europe or, even there, to penetrate into the territory of the victors [of World War One]” (Emerson 1960: 3–4). President Woodrow Wilson’s famous “Fourteen Points” speech and the later success of the UN’s decolonization efforts catalyzed the striking increase in secessionism (see Figure 2.3).
What we demand … is nothing peculiar to ourselves. It is that the world be made fit and safe to live in; and particularly that it be made safe for every peace-loving nation which, like our own, wishes to live its own life, determine its own institutions, be assured of justice and fair dealing by the other peoples of the world as against force and selfish aggression. All the peoples of the world are in effect partners in this interest, and for our own part we see very clearly that unless justice be done to others it will not be done to us. The programme of the world’s peace, therefore, is our programme … (Wilson 1918)

President Wilson’s intention was not to foment nationalist rebellions, but to reinstate or create national independence for a limited number of peoples affected by World War One. And as planned, after the war, a number of states became independent within new borders including Austria, Hungary, and Poland. Some of Wilson’s contemporaries were concerned about the long-term implications of what might be interpreted as unqualified support for self-determination, however. Robert Lansing, his Secretary of State, predicted that it would “raise hopes that can never be realized … cost thousands of lives … [and was] bound to be discredited, to be called the dream of an idealist who failed to realize the danger until [it was] too late to check those who attempt to put the principle in force” (1921: 97–8). Though perhaps a less unmitigated disaster than Lansing imagined, self-determination’s appeal was also more potent than Wilson had anticipated (see also Chapter 13).
In Europe, the Irish raised demands for home rule beginning in the 1880s and waged a small war of independence against Britain, eventually securing control over 26 of its 32 counties on the heels of World War One. Unfortunately, the peace resulting from the agreement granting Ireland a dominion status was short lived. Conflict reignited between Catholics and Protestants in the North and continued for decades before reaching a promising settlement in 2005. A number of European secessionist movements emerged around the same time or a few years later. They included the Basque Country, Scotland, Flanders, and Alto Adige/South Tyrol. Further to the east, separatists had been or became active in Chechnya, Croatia, Cyprus, Kosovo, and Ukraine. Many have seen popular support wax and wane over the years, and have undergone ideological and strategic transformations. Still many remain active, and without independent states, to date.

It was not until World War Two that anti-colonial secessionism exploded. The movements were more successful at securing independence than their European peers. All the same, the imperial powers only grudgingly accepted the colonies’ secessions. Spruyt (2005) observes that long-term, system-wide changes helped to secure the secessionists’ success. By that time, control over land had significantly decreased in value and the global spread of nationalism had increased the costs of holding on to far flung territories. For the first time, the powers were also facing secessionism in many colonies at once. Moreover, at the end of the war, the allies had explicitly tasked the United Nations (UN) with decolonization (UN Charter 1945: Chapters XI–XII; UN 1960). The only remaining question was when—not whether—colonial secession would occur. Not all states acquiesced to the UN’s new authority though, so the pace and shape of independence proved quite variable. For instance, Portugal insisted that it would not submit to the liquidation of its “overseas territories” including Angola, Mozambique, and Portuguese Guinea. And for many years its intransigence was rewarded because the United States and Britain consistently sided with the status quo. Even so, 67 successful anti-colonial secessions occurred between 1945 and 2002. In fact, the United Nations’ Special Committee on Decolonization was so successful that today it has nearly run out of work. According to the UN, only 16 non-self-governing territories remain as of 2009. Only one, the Western Sahara, has an active anti-colonial secessionist movement (UN 2009).
and generally became independent by the mid-1960s. There was a noticeable dip in the number of secessionist projects shortly thereafter, but by 1976 the number was back up to 65 and remained relatively high through the end of the study period. The number of non-colonial secessionist demands was increasing. New post-colonial states that threatened their minorities prompted secessionist rebellions in Uganda, Nigeria, India, Burma, Indonesia, Ethiopia, and the Sudan (see Part VI), to name only a handful, replacing the movements that had recently secured the host states’ independence. More new attempts at secession were made in China and Southeast Asia (see Part VI), which were framed within the ideological oppositions of the Cold War, and elsewhere among relatively small indigenous groups and island nations as in Bougainville, Puerto Rico, Anjouan, Corsica, and Vanuatu. These non-colonial secessionist demands were both less likely to be resolved quickly and less likely to result in statehood. Major international institutions and their member states were only willing to accept newcomers within a narrow set of parameters. Formal colonialism was often justification enough for independence, but anything else, typically, was not (see Chapters 13 and 15).

![Figure 2.4 Annual success rates (1931–2002)](image-url)
The dramatic rise in secessionism in the 20th century did not translate into a dramatic rise in the probability of success. The most comprehensive data (1931–2002) shows spikes in the likelihood of independence occurred as a result of decolonization in Africa in the early 1960s, the late independences of the Portuguese colonies and Bangladesh (formerly East Pakistan) in the 1970s, and the collapses of the Soviet Union and Yugoslavia beginning in 1991 (see Chapter 8 and Part VI) (see Figure 2.4). So while just over one out of every three secessionist movements (37 percent) ultimately secured an independent state, the deck was stacked in favor of anti-colonial movements and those emerging from a disintegrating host state. Anti-colonial movements’ success rate was around 75 percent; the success rate for others was less than one in five (18.5 percent). In a given year, the chance of an average secessionist movement’s securing independence was only about 2 percent (see also Chapter 15).

Changes in Methods and Means

Most secessionist conflicts do not become full-scale wars, but the overwhelming majority of them do experience violence. Of the 275 most recent cases of secessionism, 195 had incidents of mortal violence. In total, secessionist conflicts (including anti-colonial secessionism) killed more than 5 million combatants in the 20th century, and likely killed and displaced far more non-combatants. The conflict between the Sudanese government and secessionists in the South alone caused approximately 250,000 battle deaths (Lacina and Gleditsch 2005) and over a million civilian casualties (see also Part VI).

Secessionist conflicts are predisposed to violence. Secessionism can have disastrous consequences for host states. When formal separation occurs, the loss of people and territory means reduced manpower, tax revenue, natural resources, and infrastructure. In some cases, the deficit is so severe that it imperils the host state’s continued viability. Secessionist conflicts themselves are also usually costly and violent because the parties do not bargain well. Statesmen tend to view their country’s territory as an indivisible whole. And research suggests that this belief spurs and prolongs violence because leaders insist that a negotiated compromise cannot be reached with their secessionists. They refuse to even contemplate the destruction of what they believe to be inviolable. Therefore, the psychological stakes in secessionist conflicts may be high even where the objective value of the people and territory seceding appears low (Toft 2003). Furthermore, the government’s refusal to negotiate means that secessionist conflicts are more

15 Only one party had to employ violence in order for a conflict to be characterized as violent, though both usually did so. Only in a small minority of cases did only the secessionists (6) or only the host state (13) use violence. Notably, in none of the conflicts where the government employed violence alone did the secessionists ultimately become independent (Coggins 2006).
destructive than they need to be. If bargaining is not a credible option, violent repression or total war are the only alternatives to remove the secessionist threat (Walter 1997).

It is easy to envision hypothetical circumstances where secession would leave a host state better-off. The region may be a net recipient of government funds, leaving the state more financially secure ex post. The territory might be difficult or expensive to control, leaving the state more geo-strategically secure. Or, the secessionist population might be seen as a liability, leaving the nation more homogenous and harmonious once it has departed.\footnote{This kind of reasoning motivated apartheid era South Africa’s failed attempt (at least insofar as external recognition and legitimacy was concerned) to unilaterally grant independence to the African Bantustans (see Chapter 15).} But leaders of host states rarely see secession’s potential benefits.

Even when they might otherwise be willing to permit a particular group’s independence, host state leaders may oppose letting go for fear of setting a precedent that would encourage additional challengers to emerge (Walter 2006). For example, the USSR and Yugoslavia’s collapses in the early 1990s stoked the longstanding fear that a single secession might initiate an irreversible, domino-like process of state dissolution (see Chapter 8). Governments with a number of discontented minorities may understandably fear this kind of demonstration effect (Horowitz 1985; Lake and Rothschild 1998). In short, once a movement for secession begins, host states almost universally believe they have much to lose and nothing to gain. As a consequence, they are often willing to take extraordinary steps to ensure that their state remains intact.

Secessionists face similarly high stakes but, unlike the host, they may ultimately secure gains. Secessionist demands rest upon the complaint that host states are impeding national self-determination. However, it is not usually groups’ first or preferred strategy to demand independence. Before they seek secession, most have exhausted the potential domestic political remedies to their problems. In other words, they try to achieve sanctioned self-determination within the host state (see Chapter 21). For all of the aforementioned reasons though, statesmen generally crack down on the groups instead of conceding or compromising. This reaction, predictably, only intensifies the separatist nation’s grievances against the host state. Further, the demands for self-determination brand the entire nation an internal enemy in the eyes of the state, so the whole population, including those not actively involved, is at risk. In sum, secessionists typically begin from a position of weakness and only become weaker as the conflict escalates; all the while their grievances against the host state become more acute. At the extreme end of the spectrum, secessionists may literally be fighting against their nation’s extinction. Some groups have institutional leverage, like autonomous local governments, or have active diasporas abroad to provide monetary and ideological support.\footnote{It is reasonable to believe that movements that choose to attempt secession do so, at least in part, because they are advantaged relative to other similarly aggrieved groups.}
But, these advantages rarely make up for the significant economic and political repression visited upon separatist communities. While potential loses accrue to the secessionist community as a whole, not all of the potential benefits of independence do. For a secessionist movement’s leaders, independence holds the possibility of acquiring high-profile political positions in the new state. Those political positions often imply wealth, prestige, power, and lifestyle upgrades. Outside of domestic politics, statehood also carries valuable status for individuals including benefits like legal immunity, sovereign power, and control over the new state’s diplomatic affairs (UN 1970). Some have observed that the individual incentives for power and prestige can corrupt the bargaining process on the secessionists’ side as nationalist leaders become increasingly dedicated to independence at all costs rather than seeking a more optimal bargain that assures security and well-being for their nation.

Different benefits accrue to the national group in the seceded state. First, grievances against the host state are rectified. For example, civil and political rights are granted, access to education restored, natural resource wealth secured, and cultural life revived. Second, the national group’s standing in international affairs is raised significantly. States are the only actors with legal personality, which grants them a right to self-defense, empowers them to make treaties and negotiate trade, and permits access to important international governmental organizations. Of course, the most significant prize is the nation’s ability to determine its own political destiny. Still, secessionists often mistakenly believe independence is a panacea. Especially when success follows a costly war, material conditions in the new state may not be better than they were in the host state. Nor are new governments necessarily more participatory or less corrupt. Even within relatively wealthy, successful post-secessionist states, nostalgia for the old days is not uncommon (Standen 2006).

However, the intensity of violence varies substantially from case to case and some secessionist conflicts remain non-violent for their entirety. Concerning trends, secessionist violence has grown as a portion of global violence and greater numbers of secessions become violent, but the average level of violence in those conflicts has declined. The Correlates of War dataset, cataloguing all civil wars between 1816 and 1997, shows that a majority of the wars between states and non-state actors after 1900 were secessionist (2008). Before then, wars were mostly wars of conquest or rebellions unrelated to an independence demand. Data on civil violence since 1945 show that 113 of 275 major internal conflicts were caused by secession or separatism (Gates and Strand 2004).18 Over the same time period, approximately 17 extra-territorial secessionist wars, between an imperial power and a non-contiguous non-state actor, were fought (Correlates of

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18 According to the stated aims of the rebel organization identified by PRIO-CSCW. In cases where more than one rebel organization was named in a conflict, any individual organization making a demand for independence was coded as a demand for all of the organizations on that side of the conflict.
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War 2008). Altogether, secessionist conflicts constituted nearly half of the major violence between states and non-state actors in the 20th century. As compared to international wars, civil and extra-territorial wars do not kill as many people as quickly. But, ultimately, they kill more people because they are more frequent and tend to last much longer than interstate wars (Correlates of War 2008) (see also Chapter 12).

The balance of power between host states and secessionists means violence favors the host. Governments have a number of advantages relative to challengers including organized militaries, police forces and the ability to legally raise funds via increased taxation. That expectation is borne out historically. Secessionists are unlikely to win wars against their host states. Between 1931 and 2002, only 15 wars ended decisively in secessionists' favor whereas 26 wars favored host states or ended in a draw that favored the host. When secessionists succeeded militarily, the group usually went on to secure political independence (13/15), though far more often than not, the outcome favored the government.

Though host states have more material capacity, secessionists do have some strategic advantages. First, secessionist nations are geographically concentrated and often inhabit so-called hinterlands where the coercive reach of the state is weak and the secessionist population is indigenous to the area. As a result, secessionist combatants are more familiar with the terrain, geography, and population than are government troops. Second, guerrillas can literally blend into the civilian population to avoid capture or perpetrate surprise attacks. Finally, even when secessionist leaders do not believe they can prevail militarily, they often believe that their desire to achieve independence will outlast their host state's will to maintain control. Therefore, they pursue the host state's attrition rather than a conventional victory. In general, when secessionist wars take the form of guerrilla combat, it can expose governments' inflexibility and militaries' discomfort with unconventional war. Secessionists can occasionally exploit these seams and secure victory despite the odds against it. Still, these wars tend to be very long. For example, Eritrea's conflict with Ethiopia lasted 30 years (see Part VI) and Namibia's conflict with South Africa lasted 13.

Figure 2.5 shows that, over the course of the last seven decades, a majority of ongoing secessionist conflicts experienced violence. And that, as a proportion of ongoing secessions, violent conflicts have increased since the 1960s. In the 20th century, a number of major, very violent secessionist conflicts occurred in places like Vietnam, Algeria, the Sudan, Sri Lanka, Angola, Ethiopia, and the Philippines. Two periods witnessed particularly violent secessionism: the early 1950s during the Franco-Vietnamese and Korean Wars and the early 1960s through the middle 1970s due to anti-colonial wars.

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19 The Extra-Systemic War Dataset only formally extends to 1997. The data were extended by surveying extra-systemic wars between 1997 and 2006.
The rise in violence as a proportion of secessionist conflicts masks the notable downward trend in the intensity of violence within those conflicts (see Figure 2.6). Emotionally, in 1990 and 1992, there were 27 violent secessionist conflicts, but those conflicts averaged less than 1,000 battle deaths each year. In fact, in only one year since 1980 has an average of 1,000 battle deaths per conflict been exceeded. Between 2000 and 2009, the average secessionist conflict only caused around 300 battle deaths each year. In contrast, 50 years earlier (between 1950 and 1959), when there were approximately 13 ongoing secessions, the average was around 8,000 casualties per year.

The “frozen conflicts” in Moldova and the Caucasus (Abkhazia, South Ossetia, and Nagorno-Karabakh, and Transdniestria, see further Part VI) illustrate the general trend in violence. Each was a relatively small war that killed thousands, but not tens of thousands before reaching a stalemate. The gradual decline in violence was also partially due to the decline in the great power rivalry between the United States and the Soviet Union (and the eventual dissolution of the latter), who funneled resources to the parties in Vietnam, Korea, Ethiopia, Angola, and Namibia. Lastly, some conflicts, particularly European attempts at secession involving terrorism, killed small numbers of people in most years. But many of these secessionists have shifted toward mainstream politics, and away from extra-political violence, as a means to self-determination.

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20 According to Lacina and Gleditsch (2005), the most intense conflict of the four, in terms of battle deaths, was the Nagorno-Karabakh-Azerbaijan conflict. Between 1992 and 1994, the estimates for that war range from 4,200 deaths to approximately 13,500.
So while the conflicts in Northern Ireland, the Basque Country, and Iraqi Kurdistan (see Part VI) were violent, they were significantly less so as the 21st century began.

Few states throughout history have included legal provisions for secession within their constitutions, and only a slightly larger number explicitly outlaw secession. A large-scale survey of 89 historical and contemporary constitutions found only seven countries with explicit legal contingencies for secession (Monahan 1996). They are/were Austria, Ethiopia, France (for overseas territories only), Saint Christopher and Nevis, Singapore, the USSR, and Czechoslovakia. More recently, the State Union of Serbia and Montenegro, formed in 2003, contained a legal clause for secession, and dissolved peaceably following a referendum on Montenegro’s independence in 2006 (see Chapter 7). Additionally, though the process and standards remain unclear, many legal scholars suggest that Canada now permits legal secession (see Chapters 7 and 18). Most states leave its legality ambiguous. Nevertheless, the absence of a prescribed, formal procedure does not mean that separation cannot sometimes occur without large scale violence. In fact, over 60 percent of non-violent secessionist conflicts ended in independence; a much higher success rate than violent conflicts.22

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21 The People’s Republic of China is a recent exception with its 2005 Anti-Secession Law (Xinhua 2005). Most laws do not expressly outlaw secession. Instead, governments extend existing laws against treason, subversion or terrorism.

22 This might be an effect rather than a cause. Host states might not respond violently to
In states without provisions for secession in place, nationalists have still found legal means of advocating for their independence. One common tactic is forming a political party with a secessionist platform. Independence parties have become common in Europe and North America. Some contemporary examples include the Parti Québécois (PQ) in Canada, the Liga Nord in Italy, the Scottish National Party (SNP) in the UK, and Flemish Interest (VB: Vlaams Belang) in Belgium. Other parties, that have alternated between normal politics and insurrection, include Sinn Féin in Northern Ireland, Batasuna in Spain, the Front for the Liberation of the Enclave of Cabinda (FLEC) in Angola, and the Ogaden National Liberation Front (ONLF) in Ethiopia. These parties enjoy less domestic legitimacy, however, and are sometimes outlawed by the government as a result of their supposed or demonstrated support for terrorism and other forms of political violence.

Of course, not all states allow citizens to participate freely in politics, and this leaves groups with no options other than those outside the scope of permitted political action. In some cases, secessionists choose violence. In others, they form international campaigns for independence, advocating for change from the outside. And others still pursue some combination of the two. One example is the Tibetan Youth Congress, an international organization made up largely of the Tibetan diaspora, dedicated to Tibet’s complete political independence from China (see Part VI). As Connelly observes in the Algerian case, international advocacy of this sort can have a pivotal effect on secessionist outcomes (2002). Though the Algerian National Liberation Front (FLN) could not defeat French forces on the battlefield, their diplomatic efforts persuaded foreign capitals to grant them formal recognition, which they successfully leveraged into independence in 1962.

Enduring Characteristics of Secession

Despite rather dramatic changes in the frequency, character, and outcomes of secessionism over time, some features have remained relatively constant. First, although many scholars have foretold the fall of the nation-state and sovereignty’s diminution (Rosecrance 1999; Kaplan 1994; Huntington 1993; Schreuer 1993), statehood remains a valuable commodity. The continuous stream of new secessions across time is a testament to the resilience of the state as an institution and the nation’s centrality to it. No alternative has arisen as a credible challenge to its dominance.

Second, third-party states and international institutions have consistently played an influential role in secessionist conflicts. When a group demands an independent state of its own, self-government is only a part of what it seeks. Secessionists are also requesting recognition as rightful and legitimate members of the society of states, a highly exclusive and beneficent club. So while secessionist conflicts often secessions that imply lower stakes or costs. And secessionists in this situation would not need to employ violence to achieve independence.
stay within the physical territory of a single state, they are rarely only domestic affairs. Statesmen sometimes defer to the host state as a sign of respect for its sovereignty. However, it is difficult for countries not to become involved when leaders believe their interests are at stake; either in support of or contrary to the status quo. For strong states with extensive interests and a global reach, intervention of some sort is the norm.

Foreign intervention in secession takes various forms. Governments sometimes intervene militarily in order to secure their preferred outcome, as when India fought Pakistan to secure the independence of Bangladesh (East Pakistan) in 1971. Or as India and Pakistan now fight over the future status of Kashmir. At other times they assist covertly as when the United States helped Croatia to retake Serb controlled territory in 1995’s Operation Storm (for these cases see Part VI). More often, states provide material or diplomatic support to the parties. For instance, the United States and much of Europe unilaterally recognized Kosovo’s independence early in 2008. For Kosovo, legitimacy within this powerful minority of states has already translated into membership in the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and World Bank, and has yielded significant financial and developmental resources. Russia disagreed with the Kosovo decision and, when given the opportunity, counter-recognized the independences of Abkhazia and South Ossetia (see Part VI). Since then, Russia has worked to secure legitimacy for its two new allies. In both cases, states lent their support to the parties to help make their independences a reality and to secure their international recognition.

Third, the tendency for international politics to seep into conflicts has stalled constructive normative or legal developments regarding secessionism. Despite a great deal of discussion, little has changed in the UN’s approach to secessionism in the last 60 years. The UN has consistently maintained that the right to self-determination does not imply a right to secession. Apart from the United Nations, international law and the practice of states have each reaffirmed it. However, the absence of a right of secession does not elucidate the conditions under which secession might be deemed acceptable or justified. It seems that just as statesmen are hesitant to outline the steps to legitimate secession within their constitutions, so the UN is hesitant to outline consistent standards for external legitimacy; or its members simply cannot agree. As a result, nations, host states and jurists are left to interpret precedents as ongoing secessionist conflicts continue to unfold (see Chapter 17).

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23 This does not mean that strong arguments are not currently being made for a qualified right of secession or that practice has not occasionally appeared to support secession in cases of justified grievance. For discussions of normative approaches see Part V.
Conclusion

Secessionism has transformed over the course of the last 200 years. In the 19th and early 20th centuries, anti-colonial secession was the most common source of new states, but remained relatively infrequent. By mid-century, secessionism rapidly spread to Africa and Asia as empires were replaced by sovereign states. Colonial independence did not create an enduring equilibrium or stability for the society of states though. Instead, the desire for independence and sovereignty rose to fill and surpass the vacuum left in the wake of the growth in membership. Violence accompanied secessionism far more often than not and became an increasingly common means of pursuing independence over time. Still, in the last 50 years, as violent secessionism proliferated, the level of violence within secessionist conflicts has been on a steady decline.

Though much has changed, some aspects of secession remain constant. The nation-state is still a powerful prize for those political communities without one. And, despite their significant influence over secessionist conflicts, outside states have not yet reached a consensus on norms or practice when it comes to non-colonial secession. Recent international responses to the secessions of Kosovo, Abkhazia, and South Ossetia seem to suggest states’ positions on secession are diverging. Yet South Sudan’s recent referendum on independence, if followed by widespread legitimacy and the successful implementation of the Comprehensive Peace Agreement (CPA), will demonstrate that the international community can serve as a guarantor to limit violence when acting in concert (see Part VI).

Together the dynamic and static characteristics outlined in this chapter suggest an uncertain future for secessionism. Historically, secessionist conflicts were resolved most quickly when there was broad agreement about the type of members interstate society was willing to accept. Notably, anti-colonial secessionism succeeded when powerful states colluded to pressure host states to concede. The contemporary politics of secession are less straightforward. Of late, secessionists that have created relatively stable and independent enclaves, including Abkhazia, Somaliland, and South Ossetia, have not been recognized as independent by their host states or the wider community of states and international institutions (see Part VI and Chapters 14 and 15). Conversely, secessionist movements that have not achieved stable authority or widespread domestic legitimacy, like Bosnia and Herzegovina, East Timor, and Kosovo, have nevertheless become states (see Chapters 8 and 9). Some that used terrorism and political violence were successful, some were not. Some that created participatory, democratic institutions were successful, some were not. There are victorious and failed exemplars of nearly every type. If the past is any indication of the future then, violent secessionism will continue to proliferate. But without an international consensus regarding secessionist norms, most conflicts will drag on or reach stalemates only to reignite because foreign capitals will not unanimously ratify battlefield outcomes or compel negotiated compromises between the parties.
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