



The politics of descriptive inference: contested concepts in conflict data

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Abstract

Descriptive research is sometimes understood as simply compiling and presenting objective facts, or ‘telling it like it is.’ We challenge this understanding, arguing that description involves a series of subjective, value-laden decisions that may reflect, reinforce, or alternatively undermine, existing narratives and power structures; accordingly, description is fundamentally, and unavoidably, political. We illustrate this argument with respect to descriptive research on violence against civilians by comparing how three descriptive research outputs—the Uppsala Conflict Data Program’s One-Sided Violence, the Political Instability Task Force’s Genocide and Politicide, and the Targeted Mass Killings datasets—define contested concepts relating to the distinction between combatants and civilians, identification of state actors, and intent. We demonstrate how differences in these definitions manifest in different descriptive inferences about violence in Burundi in 1993, and we discuss how an understanding of description as political relates to researchers’ responsibilities as compilers and users of descriptive data.

Keywords Description · Methodology · Conflict data · Violence · Burundi

Introduction

In October 1993, large-scale ethnic violence erupted in Burundi following the assassination of Melchior Ndadaye, the country’s first Hutu president, by a faction of the Tutsi-dominated armed forces. Supporters of Ndadaye, including some members

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of his party, the *Front pour la Démocratie au Burundi* (FRODEBU), engaged in a wave of retaliatory killings, mostly targeting Tutsi civilians. In response, elements of the armed forces and some Tutsi civilians carried out reprisal killings targeting FRODEBU members and Hutu civilians (Amnesty International 1994; Bundervoet 2009; UN 1996).

This episode of violence is included in multiple datasets widely employed in quantitative research on armed conflict and violence against civilians, including the Uppsala Conflict Data Program's (UCDP) One-Sided Violence (OSV) dataset (Eck and Hultman 2007), the Political Instability Task Force's (PITF) Genocide and Politicide dataset (Marshall et al. 2019), and the Targeted Mass Killings (TMK) dataset (Butcher et al. 2020). These datasets report widely divergent estimates of civilian fatalities in Burundi in 1993, ranging from 2809 deaths in the OSV to between 32,000 and 64,000 in the PITF, and 120,000 in the TMK.¹

Insofar as they identify and detail specific episodes of violence, these and other conflict datasets represent outputs of descriptive research. However, as illustrated by the substantial differences in fatality counts in the Burundi case, quantitative datasets may describe the same episode very differently. This points, in part, to the challenges of collecting reliable data on violence against civilians and other conflict-related phenomena. Previous research has examined some of these challenges, including biases in media reporting and other sources used to compile conflict data (Bond et al. 2022; Dawkins 2021; Weidmann 2016), and proposed various remedies, such as latent variable modeling (Fariss et al. 2020).

Efforts to improve descriptive conflict data by correcting for biases generally proceed from the same ethos of scientific objectivity underlying the collection of these data in the first place. Rooted in positivism, this ethos is perhaps best reflected in Eck and Hultman's (2007: 235) explanation of the rationale for constructing the OSV: 'By employing clear criteria and using a systematic approach to data collection, we can generate more reliable estimates than those which are often cited.'

This ethos aligns with understandings of description as objectively compiling and presenting 'the facts,' or 'telling it like it is,'² with the goal of producing 'accurate' accounts of relevant phenomena.³ Drawing on critical security studies

¹ Unless noted otherwise, all references to UCDP data are to the 'best' estimate in version 23.1 of the respective dataset (Davies et al. 2023); all references to PITF data are to the State Failure Problem Set (which includes the Genocide and Politicide dataset), as revised September 2019 (Marshall et al. 2019); and all references to the TMK are to version 1.1, released in 2021 (Butcher et al. 2020).

² This is reflected in the title of a series of workshops on descriptive research that motivated the articles in this special issue, 'Just Telling It Like It Is,' although organizers and participants consistently emphasized the contested nature of descriptive inferences (Holmes et al. 2023).

³ Exemplifying this understanding of description as applied to conflict data, UCDP's founding director, Peter Wallensteen, explained in a 2009 interview (Pfanner 2009:17): 'I'm told there are groups that will dispute the figures or definitions. They may have their agendas. We have no other agenda than just reporting these armed conflicts, as comparably and reliably as possible, to provide a basis for research on the causes of conflict or on conflict resolution.' Relatedly, UCDP characterizes its definition of armed conflict as 'the global standard of how conflicts are systematically defined and studied' (UCDP 2024). At the same time, UCDP is clear about the limitations of its data collection and coding protocols; for example, the GED codebook notes, '[the] goal of UCDP GED is not to present the most complete and accu-



scholarship on the politics of conceptualization and measurement (e.g., Hyndman 2007; Krause 2017; Rodehau-Noack 2023), this article challenges the idea that description is objective or value-neutral, *even when* it employs clear definitional criteria and systematic data collection methods. Instead, we argue that description necessarily requires researchers to apply subjective, value-laden, and frequently contested criteria to draw inferences that may alternately reflect, reinforce, or challenge existing power structures; in this sense, description is fundamentally—and unavoidably—political.

We illustrate this argument with respect to descriptive research on violence against civilians, which involves a series of particularly contentious and therefore political decisions. Previous research has examined some of the decisions involved in researching violence against civilians, and armed conflict more generally, such as the determination of appropriate fatality thresholds (Fazal 2014). Building upon this research, we examine three further decisions, specifically concerning distinguishing between *civilians* and combatants, classifying actors as *states*, and determining *intent*, that relate to highly contested concepts, but which may be taken for granted by researchers collecting and using descriptive data on violence.

For each decision, we compare how the UCDP, PITF, and TMK define the relevant concepts, and we use the case of violence in Burundi in 1993 to illustrate the implications of these decisions. We focus on these datasets as examples of widely cited descriptive research outputs that each employ clear, carefully specified definitions and data collection protocols but present substantially different descriptions of some episodes of violence. To be clear, our purpose is not to critique these datasets or specific coding decisions involved in their construction, but rather to illustrate how decisions—defensible on their own terms—about how to define contested concepts and categorize specific cases can produce different descriptive accounts of the same violent episode.

The Burundi case provides a particularly stark example of differences in how the UCDP, PITF, and TMK describe the same episode of violence—not only with respect to fatality counts, as noted above, but also the identity of perpetrators and victims and the nature of the violence itself; in turn, these differences reflect highly contentious debates about this case—including, for example, whether killings of either Hutus or Tutsis (or both) in 1993 constituted genocide—that began while violence was ongoing and have continued to shape Burundian (and regional) politics since (Jefremovas 2000).

While we focus on Burundi, politicized contestation over fatality counts, the nature of violence, and/or the identity of perpetrators and victims is not unique to this case (Aronson 2013; Hyndman 2007; Rodehau-Noack 2023), nor are differences in how major datasets describe episodes of civilian killings; for instance, the UCDP OSV does not include an entry for the Government of El Salvador in 1989, while the TMK attributes 2400 civilian deaths to the government, and the PITF codes an

Footnote 3 (continued)

rate image of a certain conflict at a certain point in time, but rather be a tool for the global understanding of subnational conflict patterns and trends' (Högbladh 2023: 3).



ongoing genocide/politicide in this country-year. Similarly, the UCDP OSV does not include an entry for the Sri Lankan government in 2009, while the TMK codes a case of genocide/politicide in Sri Lanka in this year, with 40,000 civilian fatalities attributed to the government, and the PITF likewise codes an ongoing genocide/politicide. The Burundi case therefore provides a useful example of a seemingly broader phenomenon whereby differences in definitions and coding protocols, even if consistently and rigorously applied, can produce very different descriptive accounts of violence.

The remainder of this article proceeds as follows: in the next section, we develop our argument that description is unavoidably subjective and political. The following section introduces the UCDP, PITF, and TMK, and describes how these datasets describe violence in Burundi in 1993. The next three sections illustrate our argument by comparing how these datasets address decisions concerning the distinction between civilians and combatants, classifying actors as states, and determining intent, generally and with respect to Burundi. The final section concludes by discussing the implications of our argument.

Description as political

Description is sometimes understood as ‘simply’ collecting and reporting facts, or as Gerring (2012: 273) notes, ‘it is sometimes averred that description is factual in nature, arising directly from the observable features of a case.’ While this simplistic understanding implies that descriptive research is an objective, value-neutral process, description necessarily ‘involves making choices in the categorizing, sense-making, and management of data’ (Holmes et al. 2023: 1). These choices, which include determining what phenomena will be described, defining the conceptual boundaries of these phenomena, and classifying specific cases, *inter alia*, require researchers to draw inferences ‘from the known to the unknown’ (Gerring 2012: 273). Therefore, rather than simply reporting ‘facts,’ description is better understood as a method, or process, involving the interpretation of data to produce inferences relating to ‘*who, what, when, where, and how* questions’ (Holmes et al. 2023: 1). In this sense, the outputs of descriptive research—whether quantitative datasets, narrative accounts, or other forms—can be understood as collections of inferences; because of this, descriptions—even of the same event, episode, or actor—will frequently differ, particularly when applying highly contested concepts (Zaks 2024).

Because it involves making subjective decisions, description is also *political*, in the sense that existing structures of formal and/or informal power necessarily inform and/or constrain these decisions.⁴ This is particularly—though not exclusively—relevant to describing violence against civilians, where there are often substantial power differentials between perpetrators and targets. Especially where they are state authorities, perpetrators typically possess not only material advantages over civilians

⁴ This reflects an expansive concept of ‘politics’ as relating broadly to the exercise of power in society, including through, but not limited to, formal institutions (cf. Leftwich 1983).



relevant to the capacity to cause physical harm, but also tools to obscure and minimize what violence becomes known, such as by limiting access to conflict zones and/or actively propagating disinformation (Bond et al. 2022; Fariss and Lo 2020; Weidmann 2016). However, power may operate more indirectly in shaping descriptive research on violence, as when professional incentives influence whether, and how, journalists cover specific events (Parkinson 2023), and/or reporting focuses principally on violence that conforms to preexisting frames (Dawkins 2021).

This points to how inferences made in descriptive research can reflect and reinforce, or alternatively, challenge, dominant narratives and power structures. While this dynamic and the associated political implications of description are perhaps most relevant for researchers involved in compiling descriptive data, the use of such data also has political implications. This is particularly so when researchers uncritically employ descriptive datasets in ‘desk research’ (Hoover Green and Cohen 2021); while such datasets are important resources, their uncritical usage—without investigating, acknowledging, and correcting for dataset-specific limitations—risks reproducing dominant narratives and, in doing so, reinforcing existing power structures. Such risks may also arise, with potentially more immediate ‘real-world’ consequences, when these datasets are used to evaluate progress toward policy goals and inform policy decisions, as in the case of partnerships between researchers and IGOs (Nygård and Strand 2018).

Having developed the argument that description is unavoidably political, the next section introduces the three datasets examined in this article and explains how these datasets describe the case of violence in Burundi in 1993.

Describing violence against civilians

The ever-growing quantitative literature on armed conflict and related phenomena, including violence against civilians, relies, to a large extent, on ‘off-the-shelf’ datasets compiled from secondary sources (Hoover Green and Cohen 2021). While not typically presented as such, these datasets represent the outputs of descriptive research, as they purport to answer, in quantitative terms, various *who*, *what*, *when*, *where*, and *how* questions about violence. In this sense, the quantitative measures in these datasets, whether fatality counts, indices of conflict severity, or dichotomous indicators of violence type, *inter alia*, can be understood as descriptive inferences, expressed in terms of the specific dataset’s definitions of relevant concepts.

The three datasets examined in this article—the UCDP OSV, PITF Genocide and Politicide, and TMK—exemplify ‘off-the-shelf,’ descriptive data on violence against civilians. These datasets purport to describe, in mostly quantitative terms, similar—though distinct—phenomena relating to violence against civilians. As such, there is considerable overlap between these datasets; for example, all three datasets include violence in Burundi in 1993. However, in part due to differences in how various contested concepts are defined, these datasets present different descriptive accounts of this case. This section introduces these datasets, situating them (where applicable) within their broader data ‘families,’ and compares how these datasets describe the Burundi case.



UCDP

UCDP publishes a ‘family’ of datasets on armed conflict and related phenomena, including three aggregated datasets that report fatality estimates including civilian deaths: the OSV, Battle-Related Deaths (BRD), and Non-State Conflict (NSC) datasets. All three datasets begin in 1989 and are updated annually; each dataset reports three fatality estimates (low, high, and best) that account for the reliability of and conflicting numbers in source reporting (Pettersson 2023b, c, d).⁵ These estimates are based on UCDP’s Georeferenced Event Dataset (GED), which reports individual events of organized violence, sourced from global newswire reporting and secondary sources, including local media, NGO and INGO reports, social media, etc. (Högbladh 2023: 4; Sundberg and Melander 2013). Two of these datasets—the OSV and NSC—include civilian fatalities in Burundi in 1993.

The OSV, which is organized at the “actor-year” level, reports annual estimates of civilian fatalities attributable to actors in “one-sided violence,” which is defined in the dataset codebook as the ‘use of armed force by the government of a state or by a formally organized armed group against civilians which results in at least 25 deaths’ (Pettersson 2023d: 3). Eck and Hultman (2007: 235) further clarify that one-sided violence includes ‘only those fatalities that are caused by the intentional and direct use of violence’ against civilians. As such, the OSV excludes civilians killed ‘in crossfire’ or otherwise where ‘the intention of the conflict parties was to kill each other’ (Eck and Hultman 2007: 235). Such deaths are coded as ‘battle-related’ and included in the BRD or NSC, depending on conflict type. ‘Battle-related deaths’ are defined in the BRD codebook as ‘deaths caused by the warring parties that can be directly related to combat’ (Pettersson 2023b: 4), and similarly in the NSC codebook as ‘deaths related to the use of armed force between the warring groups’ (Pettersson 2023c: 4). The BRD includes ‘battle-related’ fatalities in ‘state-based conflicts’ where at least one party is a state government (Pettersson 2023b), while the NSC includes ‘battle-related’ deaths in ‘non-state conflicts’ where neither party is a state government (Pettersson 2023c; Sundberg et al. 2012). While the total fatality estimates in the BRD and NSC include ‘battle-related’ civilian deaths, version 23.1 of these datasets does not disaggregate combatant and civilian fatalities; however, fatalities can be disaggregated by reviewing the GED.’⁶

⁵ The OSV reports ‘low’, ‘high’, and ‘best’ estimates for civilians killed; the BRD and NSC report ‘low’, ‘high’, and ‘best’, estimates for total fatalities, which include both civilians and combatants. Unless noted otherwise, all references to UCDP fatality counts in this article are to the ‘best’ estimate.

⁶ The BRD codebook further elaborates the definition of battle-related deaths to include ‘battlefield fighting, guerrilla activities (e.g. hit-and-run attacks/ambushes) and all kinds of bombardments of military bases, cities and villages etc. The target for the attacks is either the military forces or representatives for the parties, though there is often substantial collateral damage in the form of civilians being killed in the crossfire, indiscriminate bombings, etc. All fatalities - military as well as civilian - incurred in such situations are counted as battle-related deaths’ (Pettersson 2023b: 4). The NSC codebook definition of battle-related deaths does not include these additional details but specifies that battle-related deaths in non-state conflicts involving ‘formally organized groups’ (NSC organizational level 1) are ‘recorded according to the criteria for battle-related deaths in the state-based conflict category,’ while battle-related deaths in NSC conflicts involving “informally organized groups” (NSC organizational levels 2 and 3) are ‘recorded according to section 3.2.a of the definition of non-state conflict’ (Pettersson 2023c: 7), as fol-



For Burundi in 1993, the OSV includes two actors involved in one-sided violence: the Government of Burundi (1121 civilian deaths) and FRODEBU (1688 civilian deaths). The NSC additionally records an active non-state conflict in Burundi in 1993 between ‘Hutu’ and ‘Tutsi,’ with 1265 total deaths, including 244 civilians per the GED.

PITF

Sponsored by the US government, the Political Instability Task Force (PITF) was established in 1994 as the ‘State Failure Task Force’ (Lambach and Gamberger 2008: 20). The project subsequently expanded its focus to include other forms of ‘political instability’ and produced the ‘State Failure Problem Set,’ which captures four distinct types of ‘state failure’ events: ethnic war, revolutionary war, adverse regime change, and genocide/politicide. Accordingly, the PITF Genocide and Politicide dataset is embedded within the larger ‘State Failure Problem Set.’ The most recent version of this dataset was released in 2019 and covers 1955–2018 (Marshall et al. 2019). PITF’s Genocide and Politicide dataset includes events involving:

the promotion, execution, and/or implied consent of sustained policies by governing elites or their agents – or in the case of civil war, either of the contending authorities – that result in the deaths of a substantial portion of a communal group or politicized non-communal group. In genocides the victimized groups are defined primarily in terms of their communal (ethnolinguistic, religious) characteristics. In politicides, by contrast, groups are defined primarily in terms of their political opposition to the regime and dominant groups” (Marshall et al. 2019: 14–15).

The Genocide and Politicide dataset is organized at the ‘country-year’ level, with separate entries for each year in which active genocide or politicicide is recorded in the country; for each year, the dataset provides an estimate of the number of fatalities, coded on an 11-point ordinal scale, with values specifying a range of deaths. The dataset also includes brief narratives for each case in the entry for the first episode year. While the dataset reports cases of genocide and politicicide, it does not differentiate between these types of violence, although some research by scholars involved in the construction of the PITF dataset (e.g., Harff 2003) does make this distinction.

The PITF Genocide and Politicide dataset reports an episode in Burundi in 1993, with an estimated 32,000–64,000 fatalities (coded 3.5 on the 11-point scale). The episode narrative describes this case as follows: ‘Disaffected Tutsi military forces revolt, assassinating Hutu president. Armed clashes and massacres occur in three waves: Tutsi soldiers against Hutu civilians, Hutus against Tutsis, and Tutsi against Hutus’ (Marshall et al. 2019).

Footnote 6 (continued)

lows: ‘there is a clear pattern of violent incidents that are connected and in which both groups use armed force against the other’ (Pettersson 2023c: 4).



In addition to genocide and politicide, Burundi is also coded as experiencing active ‘ethnic war’ in 1993 in the PITF State Failure Problem Set.⁷ Ethnic war is defined as ‘episodes of violent conflict between governments and national, ethnic, religious, or other communal minorities (ethnic challengers) in which the challengers seek major changes to their status’ (Marshall et al. 2019: 6), and the entry for Burundi in 1993 is part of an extended episode active from 1988 to 2005. For 1993, PITF reports 5000–10,000 fatalities in ethnic war in Burundi. Per the definition of the relevant variable (MAGFATAL), this count includes ‘annual fatalities directly attributable to fighting, armed attacks, and political protest including rebel fighters and leaders, demonstrators, regime forces and officials, civilians massacred in war zones or caught in cross-fire, and victims of terrorist attacks’; however, this count excludes victims of genocide and politicide, which are coded separately (Marshall et al. 2019: 8).

TMK

First released in 2020, the Targeted Mass Killings (TMK) dataset was developed by a multi-institutional team of researchers as a ‘new resource for the study of genocide and other mass atrocities that target particular ethnic, religious or political groups’ (Butcher et al. 2020: 1524). The research team used the OSV (among other existing datasets) to identify ‘candidate’ cases for inclusion in this dataset, but the TMK, like the PITF Genocide and Politicide dataset, focuses on a narrower set of cases involving violence targeting specific groups. Butcher et al. (2020), however, argue that the TMK improves upon the PITF dataset by clarifying ambiguity around intent, explicitly identifying perpetrators, and incorporating cases of attempted mass killing, *inter alia*. The TMK reports episodes of ‘targeted mass killings,’ defined as:

the direct killing of noncombatant members of a group by a formally organized armed force that results in twenty-five or more deaths in an annual period, with the intent of destroying the group or intimidating the group by creating a perception of an imminent threat to its survival. A targeted group is defined in terms of political and/or ethnic and/or religious identity (Butcher et al. 2020: 1528).

This definition includes, but is not limited to, episodes classified as ‘genocide’ or ‘politicide,’ which is coded as a separate variable based on indicators of episode severity (measured in terms of civilian fatalities) and evidence of organizational planning and/or statements of intent to engage in large-scale killings (Butcher et al. 2020: 1533).

The main version of the TMK dataset is organized at the actor-year level, with each entry indicating the perpetrator actor, estimated fatalities, the targeted group(s),

⁷ The PITF Adverse Regime Change dataset additionally codes Burundi as experiencing ‘complete collapse or near-total failure of state authority’ in 1993 (Marshall et al. 2019). While related to the overall dynamics of violence in Burundi, we do not discuss this category in detail, as it does not directly involve violence against civilians.



indicators of intent, and a dichotomous variable indicating if the event meets the criteria for genocide or politicide, inter alia. For Burundi in 1993, the TMK records two active perpetrator groups: FRODEBU and the ‘Burundian Army.’ For FRODEBU, the TMK reports 60,000 fatalities, with ‘Tutsi’ as the targeted group, and the violence classified as ‘genocide or politicide.’ For the Burundian Army, the TMK also reports 60,000 fatalities, with ‘Hutu’ as the targeted group; this episode is not classified as genocide or politicide.

Contested concepts

Having provided a general overview of the OSV, PITF, and TMK, this section examines how these datasets treat three inferences that researchers must make around politically contested concepts when describing violence against civilians: distinguishing between civilians and combatants, classifying actors as state or non-state actors, and determining intent. For each inference, we outline the political stakes, discuss how each dataset defines (or does not define) the relevant concept, and examine the implications of these inferences for how these datasets describe violence in Burundi in 1993.

Distinguishing civilians and combatants

The protection of civilians is a central concern of ethical, legal, and policy frameworks concerning the conduct of armed conflict and human rights more generally. Discussions of the ethics of war typically start from the assumption that civilians must, to the extent possible, be shielded from the horrors of war (Zehfuss 2012). Ethical principles concerning the protection of civilians are further reflected in international law, including the Geneva Conventions and various instruments of human rights and refugee law; norms such as the ‘responsibility to protect’; and various policy frameworks for civilian protection (Willmot et al. 2016).

The concept of civilian protection is based on the principle of distinction, which requires belligerents to distinguish between civilian and military objectives and refrain from intentionally targeting civilians. While this principle implies a clear dichotomy between ‘civilian’ and ‘military’ targets, distinction is often complicated in practice, particularly in cases of ‘asymmetric’ conflict where belligerents employ guerrilla warfare strategies that involve blending into the civilian population, or “communal” violence where civilians are involved as both perpetrators and targets (Crawford 2015).

The widespread acceptance of international norms concerning the inviolability and protection of civilians, coupled with the ambiguities of distinction in practice, mean that the question of ‘who is a civilian?’ is often deeply contested, as the classification of targets as ‘civilian’ or ‘military’ has important implications for assessing the legitimacy and legality of any attack; in this sense, distinguishing between civilians and combatants is a fundamentally *political* act (Zehfuss 2018). Accordingly,



the definitions used to compile descriptive data on violence against civilians are also necessarily *political*, even if they are clearly specified and rigorously applied.

Of the three datasets examined in this study, UCDP specifies the most detailed definition of ‘civilian,’ as follows: ‘unarmed people who are not active members of the security forces of the state, or members of an organized armed militia or opposition group.’ Notably, this definition explicitly excludes ‘government officials, such as members of parliament, governors, and councilors,’ who are ‘instead seen as representatives of the government of a state’ (Pettersson 2023d: 3).

In contrast to UCDP, the most recent publicly available version of the PITF codebook does not specifically define ‘civilian,’ although it notes that ‘civilian populations are, by definition, essentially unprotected individuals’ (Marshall et al. 2019: 14). The PITF codebook also repeatedly uses the modifier ‘unarmed’ in connection with ‘civilians,’ and it implicitly contrasts ‘unarmed civilians’ and ‘combatants’ in specifying the ‘victims to be counted’ (Marshall et al. 2019: 15).

Like PITF, ‘civilian’ is not specifically defined in publicly available documentation for the TMK (Butcher et al. 2019, 2020), and the term ‘civilian’ is not included in the formal definition of ‘targeted mass killings,’ which rather references ‘noncombatant members’ of a designated group. However, Butcher et al. (2020) repeatedly refers to ‘civilians,’ including in the coding criteria for TMK onset, which specifies the requirements of 25 ‘civilians’ killed and ‘civilians’ being ‘deliberately targeted.’ On this basis, it may be inferred that the TMK defines ‘civilian’ as synonymous with ‘noncombatant.’

The specific dynamics of violence in Burundi in 1993 point to the challenges of distinguishing between civilians and combatants. Multiple actors were involved in this episode of violence, both as perpetrators and targets; for some actors, such as elements of the Burundian armed forces, it is relatively straightforward to determine their status. As uniformed members of national armed forces, these actors are excluded from most standard definitions of ‘civilian,’ including UCDP’s. Instead, per UCDP protocols, such actors are identified as associated with the relevant government; accordingly, the OSV lists the ‘Government of Burundi’ as active in 1993. Similarly, the TMK, which implicitly distinguishes ‘civilians’ from ‘combatants’ by defining the target of mass killings as ‘noncombatants’ and the perpetrators as ‘a formally organized armed force,’ includes an entry for the ‘Burundian Army’ as an actor responsible for the targeted killings of 60,000 Hutus in 1993. The PITF similarly notes the role of the Burundian military in its brief case narrative, referencing ‘Tutsi soldiers against Hutu civilians’ as one of ‘three waves’ of ‘armed clashes and massacres’ (Marshall et al. 2019).

While determining that the Burundian military is not a civilian actor is relatively straightforward, classifying other actors is somewhat more complicated because of the nature and dynamics of violence in Burundi, in which ‘civilians’ were involved as both perpetrators and victims. The report of the 1996 UN commission of inquiry for Burundi, which is extensively cited in the UCDP GED as a source for individual events, describes the involvement of both ‘members of the Hutu population’ in ‘acts carried out against Tutsis and some UPRONA Hutus,’ and ‘Tutsi civilians’ (in addition to the military) in violence targeting Hutus (UN 1996: 39). Similarly, Amnesty International’s (1994) annual report for Burundi covering 1993, which is also used



as a source for the GED, notes that ‘Hutu attacked Tutsis and Hutu supporters of UPRONA to avenge the killing of Hutu leaders by Tutsi soldiers,’ while ‘Tutsi civilians killed Hutu in either self-defense or in revenge attacks for the killing of Tutsi.’

For some events, these reports identify members of established organizations as perpetrators; for example, the UN report identifies ‘FRODEBU Hutus’ as the perpetrators of killings of Tutsis in Mukoro on October 22, 1993 (UN 1996: 45). For other events, however, reports note the involvement of co-ethnics specifically identified as civilians, with only tenuous links to established organizations; for example, Amnesty International (1994) describes members of the security forces providing arms to ‘Tutsi civilians’ and cites a specific case where ‘Tutsi students from a local secondary school, who had been armed by a Gendarmerie commander, attacked Hutu civilians at Ruyigi bishopric, killing about 70.’

This type of communal violence, where groups identified as ‘civilians’ are involved as both perpetrators and targets, poses challenges for distinguishing between combatants and civilians. The UCDP, PITF, and TMK datasets address this issue in different ways, producing different descriptive accounts of violence in Burundi. The episode narrative in the PITF dataset references ‘armed clashes and massacres’ occurring in three waves, two of which, ‘Hutus against Tutsis’ and ‘Tutsis against Hutus,’ seemingly describe communal violence. Notably, however, the PITF description of communal violence refers only to the relevant ethnic groups and does not specifically distinguish between ‘civilians’ and combatants (unlike in the description of the wave of violence involving ‘Tutsi soldiers against Hutu civilians’). Furthermore, the PITF description does not mention the involvement of specific political organizations, e.g., FRODEBU, and the PITF estimate of 32,000 to 64,000 total deaths is not disaggregated by perpetrator or target group.

The TMK, in contrast, includes specific entries for ‘FRODEBU,’ with ‘Tutsi’ listed as the targeted group, and the ‘Burundian Army,’ with ‘Hutu’ as the targeted group; the TMK reports 60,000 estimated fatalities for each entry. However, the TMK largely overlooks the reported role of ‘civilians’ in communal violence in Burundi in 1993, instead seemingly implying that *all* reported deaths were attributable to FRODEBU or the ‘Burundian Army’ as distinct organizations.

The OSV also includes entries for established organizations involved in violence against civilians in Burundi in 1993, respectively, FRODEBU and the ‘Government of Burundi.’ Based on the GED, it appears that civilian deaths where source reports linked perpetrators directly to the respective organization were included in these counts; for instance, killings of Tutsi civilians at Mukoro, which the UN (1996: 45) commission described as perpetrated by ‘FRODEBU Hutus,’ are coded as one-sided violence attributable to FRODEBU (GED ID 417987). In contrast, events where source reports do not indicate that perpetrators were members of established organizations appear to be included in the NSC dataset under the ‘Hutu-Tutsi’ dyad active in Burundi in 1993. For example, the incident at Ruyigi bishopric reported by Amnesty International, where Tutsi students killed approximately 70 Hutus, is included in the NSC under this dyad (GED ID 418404). The inclusion of a ‘Hutu-Tutsi’ dyad in the NSC is significant because it effectively categorizes ‘Hutu’ and ‘Tutsi’ as ‘armed groups,’ per the UCDP definition of non-state conflict, which specifically requires the involvement of ‘organized armed groups’ (Pettersson 2023c:



4); indeed, the ‘Hutu-Tutsi’ dyad is coded in the NSC as a case of conflict between ‘informally organized groups,’ (NSC organizational level 3), defined as ‘groups that share a common identification along ethnic, clan, religious, national or tribal lines’ (Pettersson 2023c: 7).

The classification of ‘Hutu’ and ‘Tutsi’ as ‘informally organized groups’ active in a non-state conflict has important implications for how violence in Burundi in 1993 is described in the UCDP family of datasets. First, the UCDP definition of one-sided violence includes *only* ‘the use of armed force by the government of a state or by a formally organized group’ (Pettersson 2023d: 3). Because UCDP classifies ‘Hutu’ and ‘Tutsi’ as ‘informally organized groups,’ civilian deaths resulting from violence involving these groups are *definitionally* excluded from the OSV. Instead, such deaths are coded as ‘battle-related’ and included in the NSC, even when source reporting specifically indicates that ‘civilians’ were targeted. For instance, the deaths of Hutus at Ruyigi bishopric referenced above are coded as ‘battle-related,’ despite the source report (Amnesty International 1994) specifically stating that Tutsis had ‘attacked Hutu civilians.’

The NSC reports 1265 battle-related deaths in the ‘Hutu-Tutsi’ dyad for Burundi in 1993. The GED indicates that this total includes 118 Hutu, 893 Tutsi, 244 civilians, and 10 ‘unknown’ fatalities. The NSC therefore captures at least some civilian fatalities in communal violence in Burundi in 1993. In some cases, however, deaths specifically described as ‘civilian’ fatalities in source reporting are assigned to a warring party (‘Hutu’ or ‘Tutsi’) rather than the ‘civilian’ category. For instance, the deaths at the Ruyigi bishopric described above are assigned to the ‘Hutu’ conflict actor category, despite the source reporting identifying the victims as ‘Hutu civilians.’ In other cases, however, deaths not specifically identified as ‘civilians’ in source reporting are assigned to the ‘civilian’ category in the Hutu-Tutsi dyad. For example, the UN commission describes an incident at Mutoyi parish where 150 adult men were killed and ‘Hutus said they had been instructed to kill Tutsis by the authorities of the commune’ (UN 1996: 45); these deaths are classified as ‘civilians’ in the ‘Hutu-Tutsi’ dyad (GED ID 417985). While it is perhaps reasonable to assume that the victims were civilians, it is unclear how this incident is meaningfully different from the killings at the Ruyigi bishopric, where the deaths were classified as ‘Hutu’ rather than ‘civilian’ (despite source reporting specifically referencing ‘civilians’).

The complexities of classifying these and other specific incidents, and the actors involved in violence in Burundi in 1993 more generally, point to the challenges of differentiating between ‘civilians’ and ‘combatants.’ The next section explores similar challenges associated with determining whether participants in violence should be classified as ‘state’ actors.

Classifying state actors

In the modern international system, which is organized around sovereign, territorial states (Krasner 2001), perhaps no question is more *political* than ‘who is a state?’ or, relatedly, whether a specific entity represents the legitimate



government of a state. Statehood confers both formal rights under international law, as well as a strong presumption—rooted in understandings of the state as possessing a monopoly on the legitimate use of violence within its territory—that state-perpetrated violence is legitimate (Krasner 2001; Weber 1965).

Because violence against civilians often occurs in the context of conflict over the control (or existence) of states (Valentino 2014), determining whether perpetrators (or other entities) are state actors for the purposes of describing violence is ultimately a *political* question, the answer to which depends on how the ‘state’ and/or ‘government’ are defined. However, only one of the three datasets examined in this article, UCDP, specifically defines ‘state’ or ‘government,’ at least in publicly available documentation. The TMK includes dichotomous variables indicating if the relevant actor was a government actor or a non-government actor ‘connected to the state.’ However, neither the article introducing the TMK (Butcher et al. 2020) or codebook (Butcher et al. 2019) define ‘government’ or ‘state.’ Similarly, the PITF codebook (Marshall et al. 2019) does not define ‘state’ or ‘government,’ although this dataset does not include variables for actor type.

While neither the TMK nor PITF explicitly define ‘state’ or ‘government,’ UCDP treats these terms as effectively synonymous, defining the state as

an internationally recognized sovereign government controlling a specific territory or an internationally unrecognized government controlling a specified territory whose sovereignty is not disputed by another internationally recognized sovereign government previously controlling the same territory. (Pettersson 2023a: 4).

Particularly relevant to situations involving conflicts over state control is the further provision that the party “controlling the capital of the state is regarded as the government” (Pettersson 2023a: 4).

The Burundi case illustrates the complexities of classifying actors in such situations. The proximate trigger for large-scale violence was the assassination of Melchior Ndadaye, the democratically elected president, in an attempted coup by elements of the armed forces, on October 21, 1993; violence in Burundi thus began with members of the state military forces challenging the duly elected government for control of the state. The military coup leaders initially formed a crisis committee and declared a member of the National Assembly, who was not in the constitutional line of succession, as the new president. However, following pressure from international actors and domestic protests, the committee dissolved itself and power was returned to civilian authorities, effective October 24, 1993, with Ndadaye’s prime minister subsequently assuming office as acting president (UN 1996: 21–22).

There was thus a short interval in late October 1993 during which, as the UN commission of inquiry observed, ‘the civilian Government was de facto deprived of the exercise of power’ and ‘[e]ffective power was assumed by a committee’ (UN 1996: 38). Significantly, the most intense violence occurred during this brief period and shortly afterward; the GED lists October 21–31 as the start date for 158 of the 179 violent events recorded in Burundi in 1993 (Davies et al. 2023). Even after this interval, however, some reported coup leaders remained in high-ranking military



positions while violence continued (UN 1996: 38), further complicating the classification of actors in this case.

The role of members and supporters of the ruling political party, FRODEBU, including government officials and party-affiliated militia, also complicates classifying actors involved in violence in Burundi. In the June 1993 presidential election, Ndadaye, FRODEBU's leader, won over two-thirds of the vote; in subsequent parliamentary elections, FRODEBU obtained over 80% of the seats, and Ndadaye appointed a majority FRODEBU cabinet (Des Forges 1994; Reyntjens 1993). Furthermore, as noted by the UN (1996: 21), '[a]t the commune and colline level, the takeover by new FRODEBU authorities was almost total throughout the country.' This complicates distinguishing between FRODEBU and the government as separate actors, particularly in cases where FRODEBU members in government positions were involved in violence. For example, in an event reported by the UN (1996: 58–62) in Rutegama commune on October 21–22, 1993, over 1000 civilians were killed by members of a FRODEBU-affiliated militia and other armed Hutus, on the apparent orders of local government officials.

Against this backdrop of contestation over control of the state and the involvement of members of the ruling party in violence, the UCDP, PITF, and TMK present somewhat different descriptions of the perpetrators of violence with respect to their status as state or non-state actors. The PITF case description does not specifically attribute violence against civilians to the Burundian state, although it notes the role of 'Tutsi soldiers' in violence targeting Hutu civilians; the PITF description also notes divisions within the armed forces, referencing the role of 'disaffected Tutsi military forces' in Ndadaye's assassination. However, the PITF narrative focuses mostly on the ethnic elements of the violence, noting the ethnic affiliations of the perpetrators and targets (e.g., 'Hutus against Tutsis' and 'Tutsis against Hutus'), rather than their status as state or non-state actors.

While the PITF does not include a specific variable for actor name, the TMK is organized at the actor-year level and, as such, identifies specific actors as perpetrators. In Burundi in 1993, the TMK lists two actors as perpetrators: the Burundian Army and FRODEBU. Neither actor is coded as a government actor in the TMK, although both are coded as non-government actors 'connected' to the government.⁸ It is particularly notable that the 'Burundian Army' is not coded as a government actor, given that the armed forces traditionally constitute the core of the state security apparatus; this decision presumably reflects a judgment that the elements of the armed forces which committed large-scale violence against civilians, mostly

⁸ Our analysis is based on the TMK, version 1.1, 'events' data file, in which the 'Burundian Army' and 'FRODEBU' are coded 1 on the variable 'is.non.gov.actor.connected.to.gov.' However, the version 1.1 Appendix indicates "NO" for both actors for the question "Is Non-Government Actor Connected to the Government?" (Butcher et al. 2020). We use the data file coding, as we expect that most researchers will employ the data file for empirical analyses. We also note that version 1.2 of the TMK, released in March 2024, does not include the variable 'is.non.gov.actor.connected.to.gov', because of 'inconsistencies in the coding that require a thorough review' (Butcher et al. 2024: 1). We argue that such inconsistencies illustrate the difficulty – and subjectivity – of describing relationships between actors and the state, consistent with our broader argument.



targeting Hutus, were either affiliated with the faction involved in the October 21 coup or were otherwise opposed to the constitutionally legitimate government. At the same time, the coding of the 'Burundian Army' as 'connected' to the government partially captures the complex role of the members of the military in Burundi in 1993, as both instigators of the coup attempt but also in positions of power after the restoration of civilian government.

While the TMK codes the 'Burundian Army' as a non-government actor, albeit connected with the government, the OSV attributes civilian killings committed by the military to the 'Government of Burundi.' For example, the OSV codes an event (GED ID 418263) reported by the UN commission of inquiry, in which 'soldiers killed 18 Hutus on Colline Nyagasebeyi' on October 23, 1993 (UN 1996: 70), as attributable to the 'Government of Burundi.' The TMK and OSV thus present subtly different descriptive accounts of the role of the military in violence against civilians in Burundi in 1993—the TMK describes the military as distinct from, but connected to, the government, while the OSV's coding effectively classifies the military as an agent of the state.

The TMK and OSV also differ in their classification of FRODEBU. While both datasets include FRODEBU as a distinct, non-governmental actor, the TMK codes FRODEBU as 'connected with the government,' while the OSV includes no such variable. The TMK coding thus captures the close linkages between FRODEBU and the Burundian government after the 1993 elections; even so, treating the government and FRODEBU as distinct actors might obscure the role of FRODEBU members acting as government officials—and thus agents of the Burundian state—in ordering and organizing violence in 1993. Similarly, the OSV coding of FRODEBU as a non-government actor—particularly in contrast to its treatment of the military as a government actor—may obscure elements of the civilian government's responsibility; for example, despite the UN commission of inquiry citing reports indicating that the provincial governor issued instructions to the perpetrators of the massacre of over 1000 Tutsis at Rutegama on October 21–22, 1993 (UN 1996: 58–59), these deaths are included in the OSV as attributable to FRODEBU, rather than the Burundian government (GED ID 418116).

Determining intent

Normative frameworks relevant to violence against civilians typically focus on intent, distinguishing between harm resulting from deliberate attacks against civilians and 'collateral damage' where civilians are unintentionally killed, maimed, or displaced; these frameworks accept that civilians may be harmed during armed conflict, but hold that such harm is permissible only if it occurs as an unintended side effect, or 'collateral damage,' resulting from otherwise legitimate military operations (Zehfuss 2018). These principles are reflected in international humanitarian law, most notably in rules on proportionality as relevant to the protection of civilians; however, there is often significant ambiguity and political contestation around the application of these principles, especially insofar as perpetrators have incentives to frame harm to civilians as unintentional (Cronin 2013).



There is also frequently political contestation over intent in determining whether specific identity groups were targeted. This is particularly relevant for classifying violence as genocide, which is defined per the Genocide Convention of 1948 as certain acts ‘committed with intent to destroy, in whole or in part, a national, ethnical, racial or religious group’ (UN 1948). Insofar as genocide is widely perceived to be uniquely horrific, and/or provisions of the Genocide Convention are understood to require intervention, victims (or potential victims) have potentially strong incentives to invoke the ‘g-word’ to generate awareness and rally support, while perpetrators may have equally strong incentives to avoid broadcasting genocidal intent (Purdaková 2019).

The determination of intent, whether relating to the targeting of civilians in general, or of specific groups, is therefore not only an *operational*, but also a *political*, question. In the UCDP dataset family, intent is critical in determining whether civilian fatalities are included in the OSV (and therefore attributed to specific actors), or in the BRD or NSC as ‘battle-related’ deaths. The OSV includes only fatalities resulting from *intentional* and *direct* violence against civilians, with *intentional killings* defined as ‘any action that is taken to deliberately kill civilians’; as such, the OSV excludes *unintentional killings*, defined as ‘deaths that result inadvertently from conflict, for example, civilians caught in crossfire’ (Eck and Hultman 2007: 235), which are instead counted as ‘battle-related’ (Pettersson 2023b: 4). Intent is thus core to the concept of one-sided violence. However, as Eck and Hultman (2007: 235) note, intent is frequently difficult to determine in practice; in such cases, UCDP codes violence ‘based on the stated intention of the parties,’ unless a ‘highly disproportionate ratio of military to civilian fatalities’ suggests otherwise; in the absence of a stated intention, UCDP consults regional experts.

While UCDP focuses on intent with respect to the targeting of civilians in general, the PITF and TMK focus on intent to target specific groups. The definition of genocide and politicide in the most recent version of the PITF codebook (Marshall et al. 2019: 14) does not specifically reference intent, instead requiring the deaths of a ‘substantial portion’ of the targeted group; elsewhere, however, the codebook notes that ‘genocides and politicides involve the intentional targeting of civilian populations’ (Marshall et al. 2019: 14), and previous research by scholars involved in the PITF project has included intent in the definition of genocide and politicide (e.g., Harff 2003: 58). Moreover, while the codebook does not explicitly include intent in the definition of genocide and politicide, it specifies operational criteria for identifying episodes of genocide and politicide plausibly relevant to intent (though not specifically framed as such), including the complicity of authorities as evidenced by a ‘persistent, coherent pattern of action’ that brings about ‘the destruction of a people’s existence, in whole or in part’; duration of at least six months, as ‘the physical destruction of a people requires time to accomplish’; and the systematic targeting of civilian group members (Marshall et al. 2019: 15).⁹

⁹ In an analysis using an earlier version of the PITF, Harff (2003 : 59) identifies four criteria for determining intent: participation of state agents or contending authorities, hate propaganda targeting ethnic or political opponents, disproportionate responses to opposition attacks or other activities, and ignoring killings and abuse of targeted group members.



These criteria are also relevant for distinguishing genocide and politicide from ethnic war in the broader PITF State Failure Problem Set. In contrast to genocide and politicide, which involve ‘authorities’ (whether state or non-state) targeting specific groups, ethnic war involves conflict between a government and ‘ethnic challengers’ pursuing ‘major changes in their status,’ such as independence or regional autonomy (Marshall et al. 2019: 6). The PITF includes civilian deaths—including those ‘massacred in war zones or caught in cross-fire’—in its estimate of total fatalities ‘related to fighting’ (Marshall et al. 2019: 8); notably, the PITF codebook indicates that civilians killed in ‘campaigns of genocide or politicide’ should be excluded from this total.

In contrast to PITF, the TMK definition of ‘targeted mass killings’ explicitly incorporates intent, specifically ‘intent of destroying the group or intimidating the group by creating a perception of imminent threat to its survival’ (Butcher et al. 2020: 1528). To identify episodes of violence for inclusion in the TMK, intent is disaggregated into five items, requiring evidence that (1) civilians were deliberately targeted, (2) one group was disproportionately targeted, (3) the group was targeted to reduce its numbers, terrorize, expel, or otherwise affect the group’s political activity, (4a) planning for large-scale killing of the group, (4b) statements of intent to engage in large-scale killing of the group, and (5) both (4a) and (4b) (Butcher et al. 2019: 2). To qualify as a ‘targeted mass killing,’ an episode must fulfill the first three categories (in addition to the 25 annual death threshold). The TMK also codes each case on separate dichotomous variables for items 4a and 4b, and it combines these variables with measures of civilian fatalities to produce an ordinal variable, with values ranging from 1 to 8. TMK codes an episode as genocide or politicide if the value of this variable is 4 or greater; this value indicates that there is evidence of organizational planning OR stated intent for mass killing, with greater than 1000 reported fatalities; for all higher values, there must be evidence of BOTH organizational planning and stated intent.

The case of Burundi in 1993, where there has been considerable contestation over the nature of violence, illustrates the implications of differences in definitions and coding rules for intent between the UCDP, PITF, and TMK. There have been extensive, and highly politicized, debates over whether violence in Burundi in 1993 should be classified as *genocide* and, if so, the identity of the targets and perpetrators. On October 23, 1993, during the most intense period of violence, Jean Minani, a FRODEBU member of Ndadaye’s cabinet, publicly accused the Burundian army of genocide against Hutus in a radio broadcast (Klinghoffer 1998: 4). Representatives of UPRONA, the predominantly Tutsi former ruling party, disputed this accusation, instead claiming that FRODEBU had used Ndadaye’s assassination as a pretext for a carefully planned ‘genocide against the Tutsis,’ and that broadcasts by Minani and other FRODEBU ministers were a signal to launch the violence (UN 1995: 22). More broadly, as Reyntjens (1996: 239) argues, the army and opposition groups attempted to discredit and delegitimize FRODEBU ‘by claiming that it was guilty of a planned genocide against the Tutsi.’ However, a preliminary UN fact-finding mission established in 1994 concluded that ‘these massacres were not brought about by any premeditated plan for the extermination of the Tutsi ethnic group by the Hutu’ (UN 1995: 33). However, a subsequent UN commission of inquiry concluded that



‘evidence is sufficient to establish that *acts of genocide* [emphasis added] against the Tutsi minority took place in Burundi on ‘21 October 1993,’ and the days following, with the participation of certain Hutu FRODEBU functionaries and leaders up to the commune level’ (UN 1996: 74). This commission also noted killings of Hutus ‘by members of the Burundian Army and Gendarmerie, and by Tutsi civilians,’ but concluded that there was ‘no evidence... to indicate that the repression was centrally planned or ordered’ (UN 1996: 74). Beyond these initial competing claims and conclusions, contestation over the nature of violence in 1993 (and previous episodes) remained a salient feature of Burundian politics during the ensuing civil conflict from 1993 to 2005 (Jefremovas 2000), the subsequent ‘post-conflict’ transitional period (Bilali et al. 2012), and with the outbreak of renewed violence in the mid-2010s (Schwartz 2019).

Against this backdrop of ongoing contestation over the nature of violence in Burundi in 1993, the UCDP, PITF, and TMK present different descriptive inferences about intent. The inclusion of the Government of Burundi and FRODEBU in the OSV reflects a determination that these organizations intentionally targeted civilians, per UCDP’s definition of ‘one-sided violence.’ However, as this definition does not address whether the perpetrators targeted specific groups, and the OSV does not include information about the ethnic identity of targets, the OSV does not provide insight into whether the perpetrators acted with genocidal intent or otherwise targeted specific ethnic groups.¹⁰ Within the broader family of UCDP datasets, however, the ‘Hutu-Tutsi’ dyad in the NSC captures the interethnic aspects of violence in Burundi in 1993, and the 244 civilian deaths recorded in this dyad reflect (in part) the effects of this violence on civilians. However, the civilian deaths included in the NSC are coded as ‘battle-related,’ rather than intentional, deliberate attacks.

In contrast to the UCDP family of datasets, the inclusion of the Burundi case in the PITF Genocide and Politicide dataset implies that operational criteria plausibly relevant to intent to target a specific identity group—including a ‘persistent, coherent pattern of action’ bringing about the group’s destruction, ‘in whole or part’—were met in Burundi in 1993 (Marshall et al. 2019: 15). The narrative description of this case, which refers to multiple ‘waves’ of ‘armed clashes and massacres’ between Hutus and Tutsis, suggests that both groups perpetrated, and were victims of, genocide. However, the PITF Genocide and Politicide dataset does not provide further detail about the breakdown of civilian deaths between Hutus and Tutsis (as perpetrators or victims), noting only that there were between 32,000 and 64,000 total fatalities in the episode. While the inclusion of these deaths in the PITF Genocide and Politicide dataset implies that they were the result of intentional attacks against civilians, the PITF State Failure Problem Set also codes an ‘ethnic war’ as active in Burundi in 1993, with 5,000–10,000 additional deaths (including civilians). Like

¹⁰ The Ethnic One-Sided Violence (EOSV) Dataset (Fjelde et al. 2021) includes information about the ethnicity of targeted groups, based on OSV version 1.4-2014. However, because this OSV version does not include entries for FRODEBU or the Burundian government (or any actor in Burundi) in 1993 (Pettersson 2012), the EOSV does not include information about the ethnicity of groups targeted for violence in Burundi in 1993.



the ‘Hutu-Tutsi’ dyad in the UCDP NSC, this coding captures some of the interethnic aspects of violence in Burundi; it also implies that some civilian deaths were linked to fighting in the ethnic war, rather than the result of intentional, genocidal attacks. However, because PITF does not differentiate between civilian and combatant deaths in cases of ethnic war in the State Failure Problem Set, it is not possible to determine the number of civilian fatalities linked specifically to fighting between belligerents.

Of the three datasets examined in this study, the TMK provides the most descriptive detail about the intent of violence against civilians. The TMK reports that two actors in Burundi in 1993—FRODEBU and the Burundian Army—engaged in ‘targeted mass killings,’ which definitionally require evidence of ‘intent of destroying the group or intimidating the group by creating a perception of imminent threat to its survival’ (Butcher et al. 2020: 1528). According to the TMK, FRODEBU targeted ‘Tutsis,’ while the Burundian Army targeted ‘Hutus,’ with these campaigns of violence resulting in an approximately equal number of civilian fatalities (60,000 each). For FRODEBU, the TMK reports that there is evidence of intent of ‘logistical or organizational plans for large-scale killing’ of Tutsis (although no evidence of specific statements of intent) and codes this event as ‘4’ on its 8-point ordinal scale measuring the intention and severity of violence (‘Stated OR Organizational Intent’ AND > 1000 deaths); as this value exceeds the TMK’s threshold for defining an event as genocide or politicide, FRODEBU’s targeting of Tutsis is coded as genocide or politicide in the TMK. Conversely, in the case of the ‘Burundian Army,’ the TMK indicates that there is no evidence of organizational planning or stated intent for mass killings of Hutus and codes this event as ‘2’ on the 8-point ordinal scale (‘NO Stated or Organizational Intent’ and > 1000 deaths); consequently, the Burundian Army’s killings of Hutu civilians do not fulfill TMK’s definitional requirement for genocide or politicide (Butcher et al. 2019, 2020).

Conclusion

Descriptive research is sometimes understood as simply or ‘merely’ reporting the ‘facts’ (Gerring 2012), particularly in contrast to causal analysis. This article has challenged this understanding, arguing instead that descriptive research necessarily involves a series of inferences that require researchers to apply frequently contested criteria to ‘facts’ that are themselves often disputed. In making these decisions, descriptive researchers may—even if unintentionally—reflect and reinforce (or alternatively challenge) dominant narratives and understandings; in this respect, descriptive research is a fundamentally *political* act, even if it employs clear definitions and follows systematic data collection and coding protocols.

The subjectivity and political implications of description are particularly apparent in differences in how three prominent conflict datasets—UCDP, PITF, and TMK—describe violence against civilians in Burundi in 1993. Beyond substantial differences in the number of civilian fatalities in this case reported in these datasets, with



estimates ranging from approximately 2800 in the UCDP OSV to 120,000 in the TMK,¹¹ we document how these datasets apply different definitions and criteria relevant to distinguishing civilians from combatants, identifying state actors, and determining intent and, in doing so, produce different descriptions of this case. While these differences are analytically important for conflict researchers, they are also politically relevant in that these datasets reflect and/or reproduce contested narratives about the Burundi case, to varying degrees. For instance, the TMK's coding of FRODEBU-perpetrated violence as genocide against Tutsis, while not coding killings of Hutus by the Burundian army as genocide, echoes claims made by the Burundian military and opposition parties during and immediately after the violence (Reyntjens 1996).

This does not imply, of course, that the claims of interested actors should be accepted uncritically, or that the descriptions in the TMK (and other datasets) are necessarily inaccurate. This does, however, reinforce that the descriptions in these datasets are necessarily *inferences* that require researchers to adjudicate between competing claims, using contested criteria. It also points to the potential risks, especially relevant in quantitative description, of creating a false sense of precision or accuracy in descriptive research (Dawkins 2021).

These risks, and the broader political implications of description, further point to the responsibilities of researchers in both compiling and using descriptive data. Because compiling descriptive data necessarily involves making inferences about the application of frequently contested concepts, it is imperative for researchers to be as transparent as possible about the rationale for these decisions, particularly—though not exclusively—in ‘borderline’ cases or where there are disputes about the nature of a phenomenon, such as the type of violence in Burundi in 1993. Such transparency allows users of descriptive data—particularly ‘off-the-shelf’ datasets—to evaluate the inferences in these datasets. However, users of these data also have responsibilities to critically interrogate these inferences, such as by reviewing ‘off-the-shelf’ datasets for missingness or to identify how these inferences may reflect or reinforce existing power structures. This, in turn, points to broader ethical considerations relating to the dual roles of researchers as users of data and producers of knowledge. (Hoover Green and Cohen 2021). At the same time, returning to the politics of *compiling* descriptive data, this article also raises larger questions about *who* is involved in description; for the most part, the datasets reviewed in this article were compiled by researchers at institutions based in the global North and describe violence occurring mostly (though not exclusively) in the global South. This, in turn, points to the potential importance of researcher positionality in shaping the process and outputs of descriptive research and, more broadly, how description relates to existing structures of power, even when researchers employ systematic definitions and protocols.

¹¹ The differences in civilian death numbers are likely due, in part, to differences in the underlying source data, e.g., UCDP's use of newswire reporting and secondary sources to identify individual events of violence for inclusion in the GED, which is then aggregated to construct the OSV, versus TMK, which cites academic research (Bundervoet 2009) as its fatality estimate source.



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Declarations

Conflict of interest On behalf of all authors, the corresponding author declares that there are no conflicts of interest.

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