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[Review of: O. Kaplan (2017) *Resisting War: How Communities Protect Themselves*]

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DOI

[10.1093/isr/viz043](https://doi.org/10.1093/isr/viz043)

Publication date

2019

Document Version

Final published version

Published in

International Studies Review

License

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[Link to publication](#)

Citation for published version (APA):

Steele, A. (2019). The Strength of the Weapons of the Weak: [Review of: O. Kaplan (2017) *Resisting War: How Communities Protect Themselves*]. *International Studies Review*, 21(4), 722-723. <https://doi.org/10.1093/isr/viz043>

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BOOK REVIEW

The Strength of the Weapons of the Weak

REVIEW BY ABBEY STEELE

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Oliver Kaplan. *Resisting War: How Communities Protect Themselves*. New York: Cambridge University Press, 2017. 374 pp., \$32.99 paperback (ISBN: 978-1316612446).

There are more refugees today than at any other time in history. These tens of millions of people receive the bulk of humanitarian and political attention. By comparison, the *hundreds* of millions of civilians who stay in their communities during ongoing wars are often overlooked. Oliver Kaplan's *Resisting War: How Communities Protect Themselves* shows that this oversight limits our understanding of civil wars. Kaplan argues that, through cooperation, communities can effectively exercise enough influence over armed groups to curb their violence—what he calls the “civilian autonomy theory.” He then illustrates and tests this argument in Colombia, where communities in some regions have been plagued by competing armed groups for decades. Peace communities are one set of effective, albeit embattled, resisters within Colombia, which have long attracted the attention of Colombian scholars. Kaplan widens the study to communities that may reduce violence without reaching the organized status of peace communities.

Kaplan first provides an overview of civilian decision-making in civil war, ultimately arguing that civilians can establish some autonomy even from coercive actors (chapters 1 and 2). A history chapter next gives an overview of Colombia's long civil war (chapter 3), and the subsequent chapter discusses fieldwork in conflict settings, drawing out the trade-offs between a clean research design and researcher and subject safety (chapter 4). Chapter 5 then tests a key claim of the book: that civilian organization can reduce the level of violence perpetrated by armed groups. It is a difficult counterfactual to test, but Kaplan approaches it systematically with a large-N analysis that compares violence across municipalities with fewer or more community action councils (Juntas de Acción Comunal; JACs). To assess whether JACs exist in areas less likely to attract violence to begin with, Kaplan also provides an overview of their emergence and finds that the creation and survival of JACs was largely independent of the later violence (chapter 6).

The highlight of the book is chapter 7, about a peace community called La India. Shifting from a causal effects associational analysis to a description of the mechanisms that account for *how* organizations mitigate violence, Kaplan accesses the community's own archives to analyze their internal process of negotiating with armed groups and investigating community members under threat. In some cases, the community could correct a rumor and convince armed groups to drop the threat against one of its members. In others, the community confirmed infractions of its own members and gave them an opportunity to leave rather than face lethal violence from the armed groups. It is a fascinating and rich account of how the formal institution of the community was able to alter the behavior of armed groups.

In chapter 8, Kaplan returns to the associational analysis to probe the validity of the quantitative analysis with carefully selected case studies. He finds that three neighboring municipalities that had a differing JAC presence did indeed handle the arrival of armed groups in different ways and experienced different levels of both interference in their lives and violence perpetrated by the armed groups. The final empirical chapter collects examples of civilian resistance from other civil wars, most extensively from the Philippines but also from Syria and Afghanistan.

The book's most compelling aspects are its descriptions of how civilians collectively influence armed actors, even in civil war settings, and its illustrations of these efforts in several Colombian communities. These are contributions to our understanding of civil wars and civilians in general and to the history of the Colombian civil war in particular. Kaplan also constructs a rigorous research design that relies on extensive fieldwork. His reflections on case selection and the cases themselves convey the care he takes not only in the social science of his research but also toward the people and communities who were the subjects of his work.

Kaplan points future research in new, fruitful directions too. Perhaps the most tantalizing is what *does* explain where and when communities organize collectively to resist armed groups? One ironic element of civilian collective action in Colombia seems to be the importance of the state as a first mover. As Kaplan describes, the JACs were created by the Colombian government, but only some persist. Many JACs never achieved autonomy but were either co-opted by armed actors or weakened by clientelism (which Kaplan also notes in chapter 8). Why were JACs resilient to these incursions in some cases and not others? The book suggests that civilian autonomy from the state and its competitors stems as much from chance as anything else. This could indeed be the most reasonable conclusion to reach, but further testing would shed greater light on the balance between fostering collective action, community autonomy from the state and armed actors, and cooptation.

Finally, Kaplan's work speaks more broadly to the literatures on nonviolent resistance movements and rebel governance. It would be interesting to compare local efforts at collective resistance with regional- or national-level social movements for peace. How are these two levels of organization connected or not? Are local-level efforts bolstered by connections with larger movements, or are they more effective if they are firmly grounded in a specific community? In terms of rebel governance, armed groups could conceivably welcome civilian organization to the extent that civilians provide reliable information. At what point does civilian organization amount to resistance to armed groups, as opposed to the facilitation of their goals?

Kaplan's book will be a cornerstone from which to tackle these questions in the future for a broader and deeper understanding of civilians' lives during civil wars. He should be applauded for asking big, important research questions that resist clean answers. Delving into civil war settings in a thoughtful way to provide rich description of how civilians experience and influence civil wars will form a lasting contribution to our knowledge about civil wars.