
Reviewed by Victoria Canning

When *The War Against Civilians* was being written, it is hard to imagine that the author—Vasja Badalič—could have foreseen the relevance of its timing. Published in 2019, it presents the too often overlooked experiences and perspectives of civilians in Afghanistan and Pakistan, concentrating empirically in parts of the Durand Line. Badalič goes to painstaking lengths to evidence the limitations of international laws of war and the Geneva Convention in practice; the deliberate broadening of criteria around targeting civilians and suspects; and, at times, the complete disregard for human rights by factions of the US military and its allies.

But before we get there, back to the timing, because the timing of this book is profound. As anyone reading this will likely know, not long after its publication, the then US President, Donald Trump, had negotiated a withdrawal from Afghanistan in February 2020. By 31 August 2021, with the region still dealing with the impacts of an unforeseen pandemic, the military stealthily withdrew (literally leaving some Afghan military counterparts in the night in some instances) and the rest, as they say, has become history.

I read *The War Against Civilians* shortly after its release, and reread it after the military withdrawal. Whilst there is no denying the contemporary (and ever expanding) brutality of the current Taliban regime, the timing of Badalič’s text does what critical scholarship should do, and which is becoming rarer in contemporary academia: it muddies the water on who has been on the “right side of history” and exposes to a degree how and why political situations across both Pakistan and Afghanistan have come to be from all sides. It does this by doing what critical criminologists have long advocated—centralizing the voices and accounts of survivors, whilst systematically evidencing the structural-level decisions and actions taken which facilitated transgressions of international law, and the devastating consequences this has had in the regions.

The text is segregated into three key sections. Part I focuses on introducing the US Military, Afghan Security Forces, and Afghan Paramilitary Groups. This section should be of key interest to anyone coming to the study of war afresh, since it is through this that Badalič gives an overview of criteria for determining military targets, defining torture, as well as outlining rules of war more broadly.
To say some of the accounts of civilian survivors are devastating is an understatement. Even as someone who comes to this subject with knowledge on state crime, I still found the exposure of endemic rights violations and the brutality by which some targeting was undertaken somewhat breath-taking in its deliberateness. Whilst methods of torture have been well-documented elsewhere (for example in the Senate Intelligence Committee Report on Torture 2014; and the Open Society Justice Initiative 2013), part I really unpacks what Badalič terms a “reign of terror”, in what he highlights as “deliberate, indiscriminate killings of civilians” (p. 228).

Part II shifts our focus to the Pakistani Security Forces, where the text centralizes more fully the role of multifarious actors in war, as well as the use of arbitrary detention and its human consequences. The focus on routine practices of enforced disappearances not only facilitates insight into such violence in the Pakistan region itself, but will be of note for anyone working on this often overlooked form of torture and execution, one which has been recurring in many Southern and Central American conflicts and regimes, Northern African regions, in Northern Ireland historically, and which is increasing in practice in contemporary Myanmar. The consequences, as he shows, are devastating, not only for victims, but for families and whole communities.

In Part III, the overall richness and depth of political perspective comes into play as Badalič moves to evidence the role of the Afghan Taliban. Again, the significance of this text’s timing comes to play here, since anyone interested in the current mechanisms of Taliban insurgencies or civilian-directed violence can gain glimpses of its inflections in the final three chapters. These highlight forms of bodily abuses such as lashings and executions, but also addresses the killing of civilian contractors—an issue which came to fore when the withdrawal of US troops led to a scramble to rescue civilian contractors as well as Afghan interpreters, who would likely become Taliban enemy number one (and which was undertaken with varying degrees of success and devastating failure). Importantly, the latter part of the text—as with the rest of the book—creates an antithesis to state denial (Cohen 2001). In reading of the actions of the Taliban in this section, there is no means to deny knowledge of its violence against civilians.

It is this section also which draws my interest in relation to refugee rights. Badalič addresses the limitations of international laws on refugee rights, and the abject failure of the Refugee Convention 1951 to translate into safety for those forced to flee Afghanistan and Pakistan. Agreements on non-refoulement are not met. Post-9/11 sentiments reduce public sympathy or support (p. 192). To go further than the text itself, refugees from Pakistan and Afghanistan are routinely undermined in their experiences of violence and conflict, and routinely subject to disproportionate detentions and deportations, often on shady charter flights. Even
though the British government promised to resettle Afghans who risked their lives working with them, by December 2022 it was exposed that nobody had been accepted under the resettlement scheme (Bulman and Kelly 2022). In short, even after what has been endured in the region itself, civilians from Afghanistan and Pakistan are often exempt from safety and security, even in seeking sanctuary.

There are few limitations to this book, although likely this reflects my own research positionality regarding state crime and conflict. Indeed, it would be easy to imagine that many more administrative criminologists or pro-military scholars might be quicker to critique the overall themes and conclusions. The one aspect which I felt could develop, however, is information around methodology. There is very little in the text to address or understand how the empirical work was undertaken. Researching state crime, war and conflict, and indeed civilian deaths is no easy feat, and yet some of the strongest scholarship is arguably found in this area. If we are to evidence and subsequently challenge state—and state/corporate—power and violence, we need to share further on how to do this and what tools we can build to do so effectively. This is an inherent aspect of much feminist writings, and one which could be utilized more fully in state crime and victimology scholarship (see e.g. Scheper-Hughes 2012).

*The War Against Civilians* is a timely intervention in recurrent dominant narratives which reiterate Western forces as liberators, and civilians as colluders. Moreover, and most importantly, it is a reminder of the limitations of internationalized justice models. As Badalič states, “the West cannot continue pretending that we respect some of the key norms of international humanitarian law and human rights law” (p. 17). And yet that is exactly what continues.

That the Western orchestrators of such litanies of state and military atrocity not only remain without criminal indictment, but with honours and even (for Tony Blair) status as Middle East peace envoy until 2015, is the epitome of a neocolonial mindset. Successive presidents—including the Obama administration, much lauded in liberal circles—have failed to adequately address legal transgressions. In some instances, they even increased the use of drone strikes, including in civilian areas (indeed, at some periods, strikes increased by threefold—see Zenko 2017).

Alongside its rigorous scholarship, it is these real-life impacts which set this book up as essential reading. It is difficult to read in places (as research on brutality always is), but *The War Against Civilians* is vital for state crime scholars and activists who prefer to centralize the experiences of civilians and—as Badalič vehemently does throughout—refuse to allow the memory of those most affected by atrocity to slip out of social consciousness.
References


