

# Decline and Disintegration

Steven Ward

## National Status Loss and Domestic Conflict in Post-Disaster Spain

**D**ecline has long been a central concern of international relations scholarship, and a wave of recent research exploring the foreign policies of rising and falling powers has made this topic especially salient.<sup>1</sup> At the same time, analysts have begun investigating whether international status influences a state's domestic politics. This work applies insights from social psychology to understand how changes in the state's position affect relations between groups within the state.<sup>2</sup>

I harness these social psychological insights to argue that relative decline—conceptualized as eroding national status—can produce disintegrative political dynamics and contribute to domestic conflict. Previous work suggests that eroding national status reduces the attractiveness of the state as a center for collective identification, potentially contributing to conflict between distinct ethnic, political, or other groups within the state.<sup>3</sup> I build on this proposition to develop a theory of decline and domestic conflict. I argue that relative decline can trigger two important social psychological dynamics. First, while for some groups eroding national status reduces the attractiveness of the state as a site for collective identification, for others it incentivizes the restoration of the state's status and the defense of the dominant national identity. These divergent responses produce the conditions for center-periphery conflict, espe-

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*Steven Ward is Assistant Professor in the Department of Politics and International Studies at the University of Cambridge.*

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1. For classic works, see Jack S. Levy, "Declining Power and the Preventive Motivation for War," *World Politics*, Vol. 40, No. 1 (October 1987), pp. 82–107, <https://doi.org/10.2307/2010195>; and Dale C. Copeland, *The Origins of Major War* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 2000). For recent research, see Kyle Haynes, "Decline and Devolution: The Sources of Strategic Military Retrenchment," *International Studies Quarterly*, Vol. 59, No. 3 (September 2015), pp. 490–502, <https://doi.org/10.1111/isqu.12146>; Joshua R. Itzkowitz Shiffrin, *Rising Titans, Falling Giants: How Great Powers Exploit Power Shifts* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 2018); Paul K. MacDonald and Joseph M. Parent, *Twilight of the Titans: Great Power Decline and Retrenchment* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 2018); and Srđjan Vucetic, *Greatness and Decline: National Identity and British Foreign Policy* (Montreal, Quebec: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2021).

2. Nicholas Sambanis, Stergios Skaperdas, and William C. Wohlforth, "Nation-Building through War," *American Political Science Review*, Vol. 109, No. 2 (May 2015), pp. 279–296, <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0003055415000088>; and Cameron Ballard-Rosa, Amalie Jensen, and Kenneth Scheve, "Economic Decline, Social Identity, and Authoritarian Values in the United States," *International Studies Quarterly*, Vol. 66, No. 1 (March 2022), <https://doi.org/10.1093/isq/sqab027>.

3. Sambanis, Skaperdas, and Wohlforth, "Nation-Building through War," p. 284.

cially in multinational states where the strength of groups' attachments to the dominant national identity varies substantially. Second, eroding national status encourages mutual blame attribution. Even when groups do not weaken their attachments to the national identity, they may still face incentives to derogate one another.

These dynamics contribute to conflict between domestic groups via three causal mechanisms. First, when peripherally positioned groups distance from and weaken their attachment to the state, more centrally positioned groups may perceive them as threats to the state's coherence. Second, when centrally positioned groups engage in projects aimed at restoring the state's status or policing the boundaries of the dominant national identity, peripherally positioned groups may perceive them (and the state as a whole) as threats to autonomy and even survival. Third, scapegoating can exacerbate conflict between central and peripheral groups, or between centrally positioned groups.

I illustrate this argument by examining the relationship between domestic conflict and anxieties about decline in Spain, primarily in the years after the 1898 Spanish-American War. I show that the loss of Spain's last colonies in the Americas—and a subsequent failure in Morocco—contributed to both center-periphery conflict (especially between Catalan nationalists and the Spanish army) and intra-military conflict. While I am careful to note that the "Disaster of 1898" (as the military defeat and colonial losses together are commonly known among historians of late-nineteenth-century Spain) did not directly cause the Spanish Civil War three decades later, it did exacerbate tensions that contributed to that war's outbreak.

This article focuses on developing and applying burgeoning insights from social psychological models of intrastate conflict to questions about the relationship between national status and domestic politics. But the analysis has implications for conventional work about how great powers respond to decline as well. One question at the core of this scholarship is about whether domestic political dysfunction obstructs grand strategic adjustment. While some authors claim that domestic obstacles often prevent states from adapting sensibly to worsening circumstances, others contend that decline itself mitigates these obstacles. My analysis suggests that decline may actually exacerbate domestic conflict, making it more difficult for states to adopt appropriate reforms.

The article proceeds as follows. The second section conceptualizes decline as eroding national status. The third section examines existing accounts of the relationship between changes in national status and domestic conflict, and their limitations. The fourth section develops a theoretical framework that links eroding national status and conflict between substate groups. The fifth section

analyzes the influence of foreign policy failures on domestic conflict in Spain during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. The conclusion suggests other empirical contexts in which it might be fruitful to explore the relationship between eroding national status and domestic conflict.

### *Relative Decline as Eroding National Status*

Most research conceives of decline as a reduction in relative material capabilities.<sup>4</sup> While this is reasonable given the typical focus on questions about grand strategic adjustment, it is a poorly suited conceptual definition for fully understanding the domestic politics of decline. The crux of the problem is that decline understood as a relative erosion in material capabilities is often invisible to domestic audiences, and its existence and depth can be difficult even for experts to contemporaneously discern.<sup>5</sup> Moreover, political rhetoric about decline (among, for instance, political commentators and politicians in the United States) often implies a broader understanding of the term encompassing cognate concepts like humiliation and disrespect.<sup>6</sup> The most politically salient claims about relative decline are thus often about more than eroding material power.

Reconceptualizing decline as eroding national status rather than eroding material power helps address these issues. Status refers to a state's position in an international social hierarchy.<sup>7</sup> To hold a particular status requires acquiring, possessing, or competently performing characteristics and practices that are collectively understood as markers of that position. Consensually valued characteristics and practices vary across and within different hierarchies. For states competing within the topmost international hierarchies, such characteristics and practices typically involve some manifestation of material power,

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4. See, among others, MacDonald and Parent, *Twilight of the Titans*, p. 6; Shiffrinson, *Rising Titans, Falling Giants*, p. 13; and Haynes, "Decline and Devolution," p. 494.

5. Aaron L. Friedberg, *The Weary Titan: Britain and the Experience of Relative Decline, 1895–1905* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1988).

6. On decline as lack of willpower, see Robert Kagan, "Not Fade Away: The Myth of American Decline," *New Republic*, January 11, 2012, <https://newrepublic.com/article/99521/america-world-power-declinism>. On decline as a form of humiliation, see Glenn Plaskin, "The Playboy Interview with Donald Trump," *Playboy*, March 1, 1990, <https://www.playboy.com/read/playboy-interview-donald-trump-1990>; and Rebecca Shabad "Donald Trump Goes on Epic Rant about Winning," *CBS News*, June 18, 2016, <https://www.cbsnews.com/news/donald-trump-epic-rant-winning-election-2016/>.

7. For consistent definitions, see Deborah Welch Larson, T. V. Paul, and William C. Wohlforth, "Status and World Order," in T. V. Paul, Deborah Welch Larson, and William C. Wohlforth, eds., *Status in World Politics* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2014), p. 7; and Steven Ward, "Logics of Stratified Identity Management in World Politics," *International Theory*, Vol. 11, No. 2 (July 2019), p. 213, <https://doi.org/10.1017/S175297191800026X>.

though the exact form that these take can change over time.<sup>8</sup> For instance, around the turn of the twentieth century, empire was a marker of great power status. After World War II, empire became a stain on a state's social reputation, and other markers of geopolitical power—like nuclear weapons and space exploration—became symbolically significant.<sup>9</sup> Status also requires recognition by other states.<sup>10</sup> To hold a particular status is to possess resources or competently perform practices that are consensually valued as markers of that status, and to be treated in ways that acknowledge the validity of the status claim.<sup>11</sup>

Decline, understood as status erosion, can thus occur in different ways with different degrees of political visibility and salience. Least visible is the slow erosion of the material foundation of the state's position. This sort of latent decline undermines the state's ability to continue possessing resources or performing symbolically significant practices, and to secure the deference of other states. But, on its own, latent decline is unlikely to be salient as a focus of domestic political debate beyond specialist communities (either within the foreign policy bureaucracy or among other analysts prognosticating long-term trends in relative power).

On the other end of the status erosion spectrum are shocking episodes in which the state fails to possess resources or perform a symbolically significant practice, or is publicly disrespected by another state. As Joslyn Barnhart notes, these forms of status loss are humiliating. They constitute violations of expectations about the state's position in the world, and what that position implies about behavior and treatment.<sup>12</sup> These acute forms of decline are also highly visible and thus more politically salient than latent decline. Compared with the slow, ambiguous erosion of material capabilities, an incompetent perfor-

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8. Daniel H. Nexon and Iver B. Neumann, "Hegemonic-Order Theory: A Field-Theoretic Account," *European Journal of International Relations*, Vol. 24, No. 3 (September 2018), pp. 671–672, <https://doi.org/10.1177/1354066117716524>.

9. On empire, see Eric Hobsbawm, *The Age of Empire: 1875–1914* (New York: Vintage, 1989), pp. 67–68; and Joslyn Barnhart, *The Consequences of Humiliation: Anger and Status in World Politics* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 2020), pp. 108–137. On nuclear weapons, see Barnhart, *The Consequences of Humiliation*, pp. 138–163. On space exploration, see Paul Musgrave and Daniel H. Nexon, "Defending Hierarchy from the Moon to the Indian Ocean: Symbolic Capital and Political Dominance in Early Modern China and the Cold War," *International Organization*, Vol. 72, No. 3 (Summer 2018), pp. 591–626, <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0020818318000139>.

10. As Jonathan Renshon notes, recognition is more significant when it comes from higher status states than from lower status states. Jonathan Renshon, "Status Deficits and War," *International Organization*, Vol. 70, No. 3 (Summer 2016), p. 527, <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0020818316000163>.

11. Steven Ward, "Status, Stratified Rights, and Accommodation in International Relations," *Journal of Global Security Studies*, Vol. 5, No. 1 (January 2020), pp. 160–178, <https://doi.org/10.1093/jogss/ogz014>.

12. Barnhart, *The Consequences of Humiliation*, p. 15.

mance (e.g., a dramatic military defeat) or a failure to secure appropriate deference (e.g., a diplomatic snub) is more likely to make the reality of eroding national status difficult to deny. Acute decline is thus more likely than latent decline to produce widespread anxiety about eroding national status among domestic audiences, and it is therefore especially important for understanding decline's domestic political consequences.

### *Relative Decline and Domestic Politics*

Most research on decline in international relations focuses on how states should, or do, respond to changes in their relative positions.<sup>13</sup> Scholars have primarily studied domestic politics in this context to understand whether it influences the state's ability to effectively adapt to worsening international conditions. A common argument among neoclassical realists (and others) is that various domestic political factors and processes can affect the ways in which states perceive and respond to relative decline.<sup>14</sup> These authors conceptualize domestic political dynamics as intervening variables that can hinder the declining state's ability to adjust to its eroding international position. But they have not investigated the possibility of a causal relationship between decline as an independent variable and domestic conflict as a dependent variable.<sup>15</sup>

A second line of argument is that decline reduces domestic political conflict. According to this hypothesis, as a state's position erodes and it faces greater threats abroad, elites are incentivized to "dampen discord, mobilize masses and extract wealth."<sup>16</sup> Partisan competition and distributional conflict should thus recede within states that face relative decline. This claim, which some authors label an extension of "the logic of neorealism," appears most prominently as a theoretical rejoinder to the neoclassical realist argument that domestic political dysfunction obstructs appropriate strategic responses to

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13. For instance, on declining state foreign policy, see Copeland, *Origins of Major War*; Levy, "Declining Power and the Preventive Motivation for War"; and MacDonald and Parent, *Twilight of the Titans*. On the strategic responses of other powers, see Shiffrinson, *Rising Titans, Falling Giants*.

14. See Steven E. Lobell, *The Challenge of Hegemony: Grand Strategy, Trade, and Domestic Politics* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2003); Mark Brawley, *Afterglow or Adjustment: Domestic Institutions and Responses to Overstretch* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1999); Friedberg, *The Weary Titan*; and Paul Musgrave, "International Hegemony Meets Domestic Politics: Why Liberals Can Be Pessimists," *Security Studies*, Vol. 28, No. 3 (2019), pp. 451–478, <https://doi.org/10.1080/09636412.2019.1604983>.

15. For a partial exception, see Steven Lobell's "second-image reversed" argument in Lobell, *The Challenge of Hegemony*, pp. 19–42.

16. Joseph Bafumi and Joseph M. Parent, "International Polarization and America's Polarization," *International Politics*, Vol. 49, No. 1 (2012), p. 4, <https://doi.org/10.1057/ip.2011.34>.

decline.<sup>17</sup> If relative decline reduces partisanship, polarization, or other forms of domestic conflict, then concerns about domestic politics hampering efficient responses to decline are misplaced. Yet this hypothesis is not usually fully theorized or empirically assessed.<sup>18</sup>

A third body of research suggests that decline may contribute to domestic conflict. These arguments draw on insights from social psychology to link changes in the state's status with the attitudes and interactions of groups toward one another and the state. Although social psychological frameworks are commonly used to theorize state responses to status concerns, they are arguably better suited to understand how individuals (and substate groups) respond to changes in the state's status.<sup>19</sup> The latter approach has proven fruitful as the centerpiece of a general framework that takes as its starting point the notions that individuals identify simultaneously with multiple groups (including states); that the strength of identification with the state relative to other politically relevant groups influences the strength of the state and the chance of conflict between substate groups; and that the strength of identification with the state versus other groups is influenced by, among other factors, the status of the state.<sup>20</sup>

This model has been applied to a variety of substantive areas relevant to international relations and comparative politics, including as a theoretical explanation for war initiation aimed at bolstering the status and strength of the state.<sup>21</sup> The model also implies that eroding status might weaken the state as a center for common identification, thereby promoting conflict between substate groups. Indeed, Nicholas Sambanis and Moses Shayo note that "ethnic identification coupled with high-intensity conflict is more likely, and national identification coupled with low-intensity conflict is less likely, the weaker

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17. *Ibid.*, p. 3.

18. See MacDonald and Parent, *Twilight of the Titans*, pp. 19–20; Shiffrinson, *Rising Titans, Falling Giants*, pp. 37–38; and David M. Edelstein, *Over the Horizon: Time, Uncertainty, and the Rise of Great Powers* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 2017), p. 16.

19. For Social Identity Theory (SIT) as a model of state status seeking, see Deborah Welch Larson and Alexei Shevchenko, "Shortcut to Greatness: The New Thinking and the Revolution in Soviet Foreign Policy," *International Organization*, Vol. 57, No. 1 (Winter 2003), pp. 77–109, <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0020818303571028>; Deborah Welch Larson and Alexei Shevchenko, "Status Seekers: Chinese and Russian Responses to U.S. Primacy," *International Security*, Vol. 34, No. 4 (Spring 2010), pp. 63–95, <https://doi.org/10.1162/isec.2010.34.4.63>; and Deborah Welch Larson and Alexei Shevchenko, *Quest for Status: Chinese and Russian Foreign Policy* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 2019). For a critique of this application of SIT, see Steven Michael Ward, "Lost in Translation: Social Identity Theory and the Study of Status in World Politics," *International Studies Quarterly*, Vol. 61, No. 4 (December 2017), pp. 821–834, <https://doi.org/10.1093/isq/sqx042>.

20. For an overview of this general model, see Nicholas Sambanis and Moses Shayo, "Social Identification and Ethnic Conflict," *American Political Science Review*, Vol. 107, No. 2 (May 2013), pp. 294–325, <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0003055413000038>.

21. Sambanis, Skaperdas, and Wohlforth, "Nation-Building through War."



are exogenous sources of national status.”<sup>22</sup> Likewise, Sambanis, Stergios Skaperdas, and William Wohlforth suggest that “military defeat can generate centrifugal pressures,” proposing as examples the unraveling of the Austrian and Russian empires after World War I.<sup>23</sup>

These three perspectives offer important insights but point toward a need for further analysis. Neoclassical realist models imply that investigating whether decline influences domestic conflict is key to understanding the scope of the obstacles that declining states might face in attempting to adjust their foreign policies to match new circumstances, but they do not directly explore that relationship. Although other approaches investigate how decline influences domestic conflict, their answers are unsatisfactory. First, they reach opposite conclusions: the neorealist perspective suggests that decline reduces domestic conflict; the social psychological perspective implies the opposite. Second, neither approach has been fully theorized or empirically explored. The neorealist argument is typically articulated only briefly as an adjunct to theories about grand strategic responses to decline. And while proponents cite a positive association between measures of U.S. material power and measures of political polarization, recent evidence undermines the claim that foreign threats reduce partisan animosity.<sup>24</sup>

The social psychological framework is more promising. It is rooted in a theoretically sound and empirically well-supported conception of how individuals relate to groups. But the model requires further development before it can be directly applied to the question of how eroding state status influences domestic politics. A theoretical specification of the processes linking fundamentally social psychological dynamics to the behavior of and interactions between elites and groups within a state that faces relative decline is necessary to guide empirical analysis and to assess the relative merit of the contrasting theoretical perspectives described above.

### *A Theory of Decline and Domestic Conflict*

I argue that eroding national status produces forces that contribute to conflict between substate groups. My account builds on the social psychological model described above in two ways. First, I adapt it to the question of how eroding national status, in particular, affects the dynamics at the core of the more general framework. Second, I develop propositions about the political processes

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22. Sambanis and Shayo, “Social Identification and Ethnic Conflict,” p. 306.

23. Sambanis, Skaperdas, and Wohlforth, “Nation-Building through War,” p. 284.

24. Rachel Myrick, “Do External Threats Unite or Divide? Security Crises, Rivalries, and Polarization in American Foreign Policy,” *International Organization*, Vol. 75, No. 4 (Fall 2021), pp. 921–958, <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0020818321000175>.

that link these dynamics to the manifestation of domestic conflict between actors within declining states. I contend that decline activates two core social psychological dynamics: it prompts differently positioned individuals and groups to respond in ways that widen the differences between them with respect to their attachment to the state; and it incentivizes individuals and groups to cast blame on one another. These dynamics contribute to domestic conflict via three causal mechanisms. First, peripherally positioned groups might distance themselves from the state, thereby threatening centrally positioned groups. Second, centrally positioned groups might seek to defend and restore the state's status, which may threaten peripherally positioned groups. These two mechanisms can contribute to center-periphery conflict. Third, a variety of actors might face incentives to engage in political scapegoating. This mechanism can either intensify center-periphery conflict or contribute to conflict between groups who share similar positions vis-à-vis the state.

#### THE DEPENDENT VARIABLE: DOMESTIC CONFLICT

The theory's dependent variable is domestic conflict. I follow Sambanis and Shayo in defining domestic conflict as "a phase of social life in which members [of a group] shift some of their productive capacities to appropriative struggle against the other group and resources are destroyed."<sup>25</sup> Importantly, this concept accommodates the state as an actor. While domestic conflict can occur between two or more nonstate groups, actors controlling state institutions can and do advance claims against other social groups (such as rival ethnic groups or political parties). Domestic conflict is not necessarily violent—it can range "from demonstrations and strikes to armed combat."<sup>26</sup> Concrete manifestations of domestic conflict range in intensity from public expressions of hostility toward one group by another to civil war. The theory developed below explains how decline can produce increases in domestic conflict, but it does not investigate the conditions under which conflict is likely to become violent or escalate to civil war.

#### THE SOCIAL PSYCHOLOGY OF ERODING NATIONAL STATUS

Social psychologists conceptualize individual social identities as sets of partially overlapping social groups with which people identify.<sup>27</sup> These might in-

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25. Sambanis and Shayo, "Social Identification and Ethnic Conflict," p. 301. See also the concept of "contentious politics" in Charles Tilly, *Contentious Performances* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2008), p. 5.

26. Sambanis and Shayo, "Social Identification and Ethnic Conflict," p. 301.

27. Henri Tajfel, ed., *Differentiation between Social Groups: Studies in the Social Psychology of Intergroup Relations* (London: Academic Press, 1978); Henri Tajfel and John C. Turner, "An Integrative Theory of Intergroup Conflict," in William G. Austin and Stephen Worchel, eds., *The Social Psychology of Intergroup Relations* (Monterey, Calif.: Brooks/Cole, 1979), pp. 33–47; Michael A. Hogg and



clude athletic teams, ethnic groups, and state or national social categories such as British, Chinese, or Egyptian. Prior research has investigated variation in the strength of group identification. For instance, context influences the salience of identities: being at a college football game strengthens an individual's university affiliation; watching the Olympics strengthens national affiliation.<sup>28</sup> Perceived distance from typical group characteristics also influences strength of identification: Individuals identify more strongly with a group when they believe the group's salient attributes closely match their own.<sup>29</sup>

A key factor driving strength of identification is group status. According to Social Identity Theory (SIT), individuals identify more strongly with a group the higher its status.<sup>30</sup> For instance, people bask in the glory of victorious sports teams, but distance themselves after defeats.<sup>31</sup> This is partly because individuals derive self-esteem from identifying with high-status groups.<sup>32</sup> More tangible benefits also flow from group status and affect identification. Identifying with high-status groups such as elite universities and dominant ethnic or political groups improves individuals' life chances. These kinds of calculations might incentivize individuals to identify more strongly with higher status groups. Whether self-esteem or material benefits better explain the tendency to identify more strongly with higher status groups is likely to be quite

Dominic Abrams, *Social Identifications: A Social Psychology of Intergroup Relations and Group Processes* (London: Routledge, 1988); Sonia Roccas and Marilynn B. Brewer, "Social Identity Complexity," *Personality and Social Psychology Review*, Vol. 6, No. 2 (2002), pp. 88–106, [https://doi.org/10.1207/S15327957PSPR0602\\_01](https://doi.org/10.1207/S15327957PSPR0602_01); and Marilynn B. Brewer and Kathleen P. Pierce, "Social Identity Complexity and Outgroup Tolerance," *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin*, Vol. 31, No. 3 (2005), pp. 428–437, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0146167204271710>.

28. Matthew S. Levendusky, "Americans, Not Partisans: Can Priming American National Identity Reduce Affective Polarization?," *Journal of Politics*, Vol. 80, No. 1 (January 2018), pp. 59–70, <https://doi.org/10.1086/693987>.

29. Sambanis and Shayo, "Social Identification and Ethnic Conflict," pp. 301–303.

30. Ann Bettencourt et al., "Status Differences and In-Group Bias: A Meta-Analytic Examination of the Effects of Status Stability, Status Legitimacy, and Group Permeability," *Psychological Bulletin*, Vol. 127, No. 4 (2001), pp. 520–542, <https://doi.org/10.1037/0033-2909.127.4.520>. For applications of this work to questions of interest to political scientists, see Moses Shayo, "A Model of Social Identity with an Application to Political Economy: Nation, Class, and Redistribution," *American Political Science Review*, Vol. 103, No. 2 (2009), pp. 147–174, <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0003055409090194>; Sambanis and Shayo, "Social Identification and Ethnic Conflict"; Sambanis, Skaperdas, and Wohlforth, "Nation-Building through War"; and Gautam Nair and Nicholas Sambanis, "Violence Exposure and Ethnic Identification: Evidence from Kashmir," *International Organization*, Vol. 73, No. 2 (Spring 2019), pp. 329–363, <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0020818318000498>.

31. Robert B. Cialdini et al., "Basking in Reflected Glory: Three (Football) Field Studies," *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, Vol. 34, No. 3 (1976), pp. 366–375, <https://doi.org/10.1037/0022-3514.34.3.366>; and Robert B. Cialdini and Kenneth D. Richardson, "Two Indirect Tactics of Management: Basking and Blasting," *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, Vol. 39, No. 3 (1980), pp. 406–415, <https://doi.org/10.1037/0022-3514.39.3.406>.

32. On status and self-esteem, see Naomi Ellemers, Paulien Kortekaas, and Jaap W. Ouwerkerk, "Self-Categorisation, Commitment to the Group, and Group Self-Esteem as Related but Distinct Aspects of Social Identity," *European Journal of Social Psychology*, Vol. 29, No. 2–3 (1999), pp. 371–389, [https://doi.org/10.1002/\(SICI\)1099-0992\(199903/05\)29:2/3<371::AID-EJSP932>3.0.CO;2-U](https://doi.org/10.1002/(SICI)1099-0992(199903/05)29:2/3<371::AID-EJSP932>3.0.CO;2-U).

difficult to determine in practice. Indeed, as Sambanis and Shayo note, the value of the “material payoffs” associated with membership in different groups is one key dimension along which individuals evaluate the groups’ relative status.<sup>33</sup> Ultimately, what matters is that there are strong (and multiple) theoretical reasons to expect that individuals should identify more strongly with a group the higher its relative status.

This logic leads Sambanis, Skaperdas, and Wohlforth to argue that victory in war (which should increase a state’s status) strengthens individual attachments to the state and weakens individual attachments to other identity categories, potentially explaining some cases in which states provoke conflicts to bolster national identity.<sup>34</sup> But what happens when a state’s status erodes? These authors suggest that the result may be to weaken the state as a collective identity, thereby increasing “local nationalism.”<sup>35</sup> Building on this insight, I argue that status erosion induces two distinct social psychological dynamics. First, it prompts divergent responses by groups positioned differently relative to the state. Second, it incentivizes competitions over apportioning blame.

STATUS EROSION AND DIFFERENTIAL DISIDENTIFICATION. While group status influences the strength of an individual’s identification with a group, this masks important variation. A central insight from SIT is that the tendency (or ability) to disidentify—to weaken one’s attachment to an in-group (a group with which one identifies) as a response to inadequate group status—is variable. Disidentification is harder, less attractive, and less likely the more central the in-group is for the individual’s identity. As Henri Tajfel notes, disidentifying is not feasible if it conflicts “with important values that are themselves a part of [one’s] acceptable self image.”<sup>36</sup> It is likely that national identities are significant parts of many individuals’ self-images, which implies that national decline will not weaken all individuals’ attachments to the state. Indeed, some might strengthen their commitment to the collective national in-group and its status under such circumstances. These divergent responses may increase hostility among different groups when a state’s status erodes.

In the context of the theory that I develop below, disidentification refers to the weakening of an individual’s attachment and commitment to a common national in-group relative to a substate or nonstate in-group. Sambanis and Shayo note that identification with a group implies that an individual (1) cares about the group’s relative status, and (2) seeks “to resemble other members of

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33. Sambanis and Shayo, “Social Identification and Ethnic Conflict,” p. 302.

34. Sambanis, Skaperdas, and Wohlforth, “Nation-Building through War.”

35. *Ibid.*, p. 284.

36. Henri Tajfel, “Social Categorization, Social Identity, and Social Comparison,” in Tajfel, ed., *Differentiation between Social Groups*, p. 64.

that group."<sup>37</sup> By extension, reductions in identification imply lower levels of concern about both the group's status and similarity between the individual and the group. This means that disidentification as a response to national status erosion decreases investments in the state's status, or it increases resistance to central, homogenizing national symbols (like national languages) and narratives, or both. An example might be the rise of "local" or substate nationalisms in Austria-Hungary and Russia after World War I.<sup>38</sup>

Much like not all sports fans abandon a team after defeat, however, not everyone is likely to reduce the degree to which they care about a state's status or the centrality of its dominant national identity when the state's status erodes. Before I examine the specific conditions that facilitate disidentification in the next section, it is worth noting two general factors. Individuals will likely be more prone to disidentification if they have weaker prior attachments to the state, or if they have significant alternative identity categories available to them. These conditions facilitate what Tajfel and other social psychologists call "mobility," or the transfer of identification from one social identity category to another in order to compensate for unsatisfactory group status.<sup>39</sup>

When disidentification is unavailable or unattractive, individuals may respond to national status erosion by committing themselves to defending or restoring the state's status. As Tajfel and others note, when "mobility" is impossible, another option is to work to improve the group's status.<sup>40</sup> This will likely involve a commitment to advancing an eroding state's position along dimensions of comparison that actors collectively judge to be significant as status markers. Barnhart, for instance, notes that leaders and significant parts of the public within "humiliated" states (states that have experienced instances of acute status erosion) often support aggressive foreign policies aimed

37. Sambanis and Shayo, "Social Identification and Ethnic Conflict," p. 303.

38. Sambanis, Skaperdas, and Wohlforth, "Nation-Building through War," p. 284.

39. Henri Tajfel, "Interindividual Behaviour and Intergroup Behaviour," in Tajfel, ed., *Differentiation between Social Groups*, pp. 46–48; Tajfel and Turner, "An Integrative Theory of Intergroup Conflict," p. 43; and Hogg and Abrams, *Social Identifications*, pp. 54–56.

40. Tajfel and Turner, "An Integrative Theory of Intergroup Conflict," pp. 43–44. See also Martijn van Zomeren, Colin Wayne Leach, and Russell Spears, "Does Group Efficacy Increase Group Identification? Resolving Their Paradoxical Relationship," *Journal of Experimental Social Psychology*, Vol. 46, No. 6 (November 2010), pp. 1055–1060, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jesp.2010.05.006>; Naomi Ellemers, Russell Spears, and Bertjan Doosje, "Sticking Together or Falling Apart: In-Group Identification as a Psychological Determinant of Group Commitment versus Individual Mobility," *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, Vol. 72, No. 3 (1997), pp. 617–626, <https://doi.org/10.1037/0022-3514.72.3.617>; Russell Spears, Bertjan Doosje, and Naomi Ellemers, "Self-Stereotyping in the Face of Threats to Group Status and Distinctiveness: The Role of Group Identification," *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin*, Vol. 23, No. 5 (1997), pp. 538–553, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0146167297235009>; and Bertjan Doosje, Russell Spears, and Naomi Ellemers, "Social Identity as Both Cause and Effect: The Development of Group Identification in Response to Anticipated and Actual Changes in the Intergroup Status Hierarchy," *British Journal of Social Psychology*, Vol. 41, No. 1 (2002), pp. 57–76, <https://doi.org/10.1348/014466602165054>.

at reestablishing the bases of claims to high status. In the late nineteenth-century great power system, she shows, this involved asserting imperial control over territory in Africa.<sup>41</sup>

A commitment to restoring or maintaining a declining state's status will also likely involve a heightened concern with defending the state's dominant conception of national identity, understood as the norms, values, narratives, and symbols that are "expressed and embodied" in the state's "institutional center."<sup>42</sup> Maintaining sufficient levels of loyalty to the state—and thus suppressing alternative sites of identification—may be a prerequisite for reestablishing its status. Moreover, scholarship rooted in social psychology and related fields suggests that individuals tend to compensate for low or eroding group status by rigorously policing the boundaries of the identity category in question. For instance, Joseph Abramo, David Lundgren, and Dodd Bogart find that group "status threat" leads members to adopt more "dogmatic beliefs."<sup>43</sup> Similarly, Cameron Ballard-Rosa, Amalie Jensen, and Kenneth Scheve argue that eroding group status leads some members to compensate by placing greater value on in-group homogeneity and enforcing conformity with group norms.<sup>44</sup>

BLAME ATTRIBUTION AND COMPENSATORY DEROGATION. Eroding national status may also incentivize individuals and groups to cast blame as a way of defending themselves from the consequences of collective failure. Social psychologists find that individuals compensate for lost or threatened group-based self-esteem by derogating salient out-groups (groups with which they do not identify). The out-group targeted for derogation does not have to be the source of a status threat; it could be any group against which positive comparisons are plausible.<sup>45</sup> National status erosion might thus drive members of substate

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41. Barnhart, *The Consequences of Humiliation*, pp. 36–78.

42. Liah Greenfeld and Michel Martin, "The Idea of the 'Center': An Introduction," in Liah Greenfeld and Michel Martin, eds., *Center: Ideas and Institutions* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1988), p. x.

43. Joseph L. Abramo, David C. Lundgren, and Dodd H. Bogart, "Status Threat and Group Dogmatism," *Human Relations*, Vol. 31, No. 8 (1978), pp. 745–752, <https://doi.org/10.1177/001872677803100806>.

44. Ballard-Rosa, Jensen, and Scheve, "Economic Decline, Social Identity, and Authoritarian Values in the United States." For a similar perspective implying that increasing group distinctiveness has compensatory value, see Marilyn B. Brewer, Jorge M. Manzi, and John S. Shaw, "In-Group Identification as a Function of Depersonalization, Distinctiveness, and Status," *Psychological Science*, Vol. 4, No. 2 (1993), pp. 88–92, <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-9280.1993.tb00466.x>.

45. Nyla R. Branscombe and Daniel L. Wann, "Collective Self-Esteem Consequences of Outgroup Derogation When a Valued Social Identity Is on Trial," *European Journal of Social Psychology*, Vol. 24, No. 6 (November/December 1994), pp. 641–657, <https://doi.org/10.1002/ejsp.2420240603>; Mara Cadinu and Cinzia Reggiori, "Discrimination of a Low-Status Outgroup: The Role of Ingroup Threat," *European Journal of Social Psychology*, Vol. 32, No. 4 (July/August 2002), pp. 501–515, <https://doi.org/10.1002/ejsp.105>; and Colin Wayne Leach et al., "Malicious Pleasure: Schadenfreude at the Suffering of Another Group," *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, Vol. 84, No. 5 (2003), pp. 932–943, <https://doi.org/10.1037/0022-3514.84.5.932>.

groups to disparage other substate groups in order to bolster their own group-based self-esteem.

This compensatory derogation might also have domestic political benefits for substate groups. Blaming a conational group (an out-group within the same state such as a rival political party) may be politically useful even if a group itself does not care about the state's status. Deflecting blame for decline onto a conational out-group can protect one's own group (e.g., a political party, an ethnic group, or an organization with responsibility for formulating and executing foreign policy) from being punished for the state's failure. Engaging in the politics of blame in the context of concerns about eroding national status may also help groups pursue their own policy objectives in contests with rival groups.<sup>46</sup>

#### FROM SOCIAL PSYCHOLOGICAL DYNAMICS TO DOMESTIC CONFLICT

Though the discussion so far suggests that eroding national status might trigger social psychological responses that foster conflict within declining states, three issues require clarification. First, what kinds of actors are likely to react, and in what ways? Second, how do these reactions arise, and what behaviors do they produce? Third, how do these behaviors produce conflict?

To address these issues, this section develops a set of three causal mechanisms explaining how the individual-level social psychological dynamics described above operate in the context of a state facing relative decline, and how they contribute to domestic conflict.<sup>47</sup> I label these "distancing," "status defense," and "scapegoating." In the discussion that follows, I specify (1) what groups are most likely to engage in the behaviors described by each of the three mechanisms; (2) the processes by which the social psychological dynamics described above may be triggered, and the roles they play in driving the behaviors described by each mechanism; and (3) how each mechanism may contribute to heightened domestic conflict.

**DISTANCING.** Distancing occurs when substate groups weaken support for a state, including its institutions and the symbols and narratives that constitute it as a site for collective identification. The term denotes two related phenomena: first, a reduced willingness to invest in the state's status; and second, an

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46. On the social psychology of scapegoating, see Peter Glick, "Choice of Scapegoats," in John F. Dovidio, Peter Glick, and Laurie A. Rudman, eds., *On the Nature of Prejudice: Fifty Years after Allport* (Malden, Mass.: Blackwell, 2005), pp. 244–261.

47. Peter Hedström and Richard Swedberg call these "transformational mechanisms" that explain "how . . . individual actions are transformed into some kind of collective outcome, be it intended or unintended." Peter Hedström and Richard Swedberg, "Social Mechanisms: An Introductory Essay," in Peter Hedström and Richard Swedberg, eds., *Social Mechanisms: An Analytical Approach to Social Theory* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), p. 23.

increased investment in or enthusiasm for symbols and narratives that differentiate the group from the state.

The actors who are most likely to engage in distancing are those with relatively weak prior attachments to the state. For these groups, the state does not form a central part of members' social identities. The existence of a well-developed alternative to the state as a significant identity category also favors distancing. Together, these factors suggest that substate national identity groups are very likely to engage in distancing in response to eroding state status. These groups are typically positioned peripherally with respect to the state within which they develop, and often oppose dominant official or hegemonic national symbols and narratives. Moreover, they offer a politically significant alternative to state-based national identity. Other kinds of groups may approximate some of these conditions. Ethnic minority groups are often peripherally positioned vis-à-vis the state, and certain religious groups may offer attractive alternatives to the state as a social identity. But substate national identity groups constitute an especially favorable set of conditions for the emergence of distancing as a response to eroding national status.

Understanding why and how distancing arises among peripherally positioned groups as a response to national status erosion requires theorizing the interaction between the social psychology of decline and the attitudes of and political incentives facing elites within these kinds of groups. The social psychological tendency for peripherally positioned individuals to disidentify as a response to the erosion of the state's status may have two kinds of effects. First, it may directly influence the beliefs and preferences of some elites within peripherally positioned groups. These elites may respond to the erosion of the state's status by committing themselves to strengthening a substate national group. They might then work to persuade audiences and other elites to either oppose further investment in improving the state's status or support greater autonomy for the group. Second, the erosion of the state's status changes the political environment within which elites operate by altering the beliefs and preferences of relevant audiences. This might produce rhetorical and political advantages for those elites who are already committed to strengthening substate national groups. In either case, the result is the strengthening of elites or positions that oppose investment in the state's status and support further developing the substate national group as an alternative political force. Though it is difficult to distinguish between these top-down and bottom-up processes, together they explain the emergence of distancing among peripheral groups as a response to eroding state status.<sup>48</sup>

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48. Similar to prior research on status and foreign policy, my approach here is open to both top-



In principle, there is no reason that distancing must produce domestic conflict. It does not have to involve demands for secession, and thus does not necessarily imply a threat to the state. Though demands for secession prompting opposition constitute one extreme pathway through which distancing might theoretically produce domestic conflict, a more likely pathway involves a subtler process. Distancing constitutes opposition to investment in the state's status and support for alternative symbols and narratives that differentiate the substate group from the state. More centrally positioned actors may consider such moves as undermining state integrity, which may be particularly threatening when the same context pushes these groups to aim to restore the state's status and defend its national symbols and narratives. This mechanism is thus especially likely to contribute to center-periphery conflict within states facing status erosion.

**STATUS DEFENSE.** Status defense occurs when substate groups work to defend or restore the state's status. The term denotes two related phenomena: first, an increased commitment to investment in improving the state's status in the world; second, an increased concern with defending the symbols and narratives that comprise the state's official or dominant conception of national identity. Concretely, policies aimed at status defense may involve strengthening state capacity (e.g., raising taxes, or centralizing state institutions), acquiring new status markers (e.g., by conducting costly new foreign policy adventures), or policing the boundaries of the dominant conception of national identity (e.g., cracking down on expressions of alternative identities). The actors who are most likely to support status defense are those who favor, value, or benefit from high state status.<sup>49</sup> These are often centrally positioned groups—those with relatively strong prior attachments to the state, either because they hold positions of influence within or have strong ties to the state's "authoritative institutions," or because they identify strongly with the state as a social identity category.<sup>50</sup> Such groups are likely to include parts of the

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down and bottom-up processes connecting changes in national status to outcomes. See Steven Ward, *Status and the Challenge of Rising Powers* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017), p. 55; and Barnhart, *The Consequences of Humiliation*, pp. 60–62.

49. Liah Greenfeld, for instance, notes that Russian nobles of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries (whose identities and self-esteem had become strongly tied to Russia's status) initially experienced "ressentiment" or "existential envy" toward the West, and that this "first took the form of hostility towards those numerous Russians who were not as yet affected by it and persisted in their unashamed admiration of the West." Liah Greenfeld, "The Formation of the Russian National Identity: The Role of Status Insecurity and Ressentiment," *Comparative Studies in Society and History*, Vol. 32, No. 3 (July 1990), p. 579, <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0010417500016625>.

50. On this conception of the "center," see Greenfeld and Martin, "The Idea of the 'Center,'" pp. viii–xxii. Ethnic groups with stronger institutional ties to a state's centers of power tend to express greater levels of pride in the state as a social identity. See Andreas Wimmer, "Power and

state's government, especially those that function as symbols of the state (e.g., the military); dominant ethnic groups in multiethnic states; other groups whose values are "expressed and embodied in the institutional center"; and other strong national identifiers.<sup>51</sup> A related dimension along which groups may vary involves the degree to which they value status. Research on "social dominance orientation" suggests that men, members of ethnic and religious majority groups, and politically conservative or right-wing groups are likely to care more about status than women, minority groups, and politically left-wing groups.<sup>52</sup> Right-wing elites, political parties, and movements should thus be more likely to support status defense as a response to national decline than left-wing elites, political parties, and social movements are, even if right- and left-wing groups are both positioned centrally relative to the state.

Explaining why and how decline prompts centrally positioned groups to pursue status defense again involves theorizing the interaction between social psychological dynamics and the attitudes and political incentives facing centrally positioned elites. The process by which social psychological changes contribute to the pursuit of status defense can take one or both of two forms. First, elites within centrally positioned groups may believe that the declining state's status or its dominant national identity must be defended or restored. After all, the theory suggests that these kinds of elites should be more concerned about the state's status than elites within peripherally positioned groups. Some centrally positioned elites might thus act on these genuine concerns and promote reforms aimed at strengthening the state or policies aimed at restoring its position in the world.

The second process by which social psychological changes contribute to the pursuit of status defense is that status erosion might alter the political environment and incentives facing centrally positioned elites. These elites (and centrally positioned groups more generally) may calculate that national status erosion threatens their advantaged positions. Pressure for policies aimed at status defense may, for example, emerge from within the ranks of groups on which leaders depend to maintain power. Even elites who do not themselves care about the state's status may therefore still face incentives to support projects aimed at status defense. This could lead to the adoption of such policies,

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Pride: National Identity and Ethnopolitical Inequality around the World," *World Politics*, Vol. 69, No. 4 (October 2017), pp. 605–639, <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0043887117000120>.

51. Greenfeld and Martin, "The Idea of the 'Center,'" p. x.

52. See Jim Sidanius and Felicia Pratto, *Social Dominance: An Intergroup Theory of Social Hierarchy and Oppression* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999); and Marc Stewart Wilson and Chris G. Sibley, "Social Dominance Orientation and Right-Wing Authoritarianism: Additive and Interactive Effects on Political Conservatism," *Political Psychology*, Vol. 34, No. 2 (April 2013), pp. 277–284, <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-9221.2012.00929.x>.

or to the political success of alternative elites who are more committed to status defense.

Like distancing, status defense does not have to produce domestic conflict. If all substate groups cared equally about defending or restoring the state's position in the world, policies aimed at doing so would be uncontroversial. Rather, status defense should most likely contribute to conflict when other groups engage in distancing. The pursuit of policies aimed at strengthening state capacity, restoring the state's position in the world, or policing the boundaries of the dominant conception of national identity is likely to generate opposition from peripherally positioned groups, especially when the same context may be driving these groups to oppose further investments in the state's status or promote alternative identity symbols and narratives. Status defense is thus likely to contribute to center-periphery conflict in declining states with significant differences between centrally and peripherally positioned groups (such as a multinational state).

**SCAPEGOATING.** Scapegoating refers to publicly attributing blame to particular groups or individuals within a state, often as a way of protecting oneself against the costs of foreign policy failures. Groups may express hostility or derogate one another, or they may promote narratives about the causes of foreign policy failures that implicate the incompetence, insufficient loyalty, or other deficiencies of rival groups within the same state.

Scapegoating may be especially attractive to actors who stand to lose power, prestige, or collective self-esteem as a result of foreign policy failure. It may thus be common among centrally positioned actors, especially leaders, groups with responsibility for the conduct of foreign policy (like the military or foreign policy bureaucracy), and groups for whom accepting the reality of national status loss might be politically or psychologically difficult. But scapegoating may also be attractive to other kinds of groups that can use it opportunistically to advance political objectives regardless of their exposure to potential political fallout from foreign policy failure.

Political elites may engage in scapegoating either because they genuinely believe another group is at fault for a foreign policy failure, or because they think that blame attribution is politically useful, or both. The same calculations may influence target selection. Jaroslav Tir and Michael Jasinski argue that leaders facing domestic political crises often scapegoat "disliked and relatively powerless groups" within the state because doing so mobilizes support among members of majority ethnic groups.<sup>53</sup> Similarly, groups may choose targets for scapegoating on the basis of prior political commitments and objectives. Ad-

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53. Jaroslav Tir and Michael Jasinski, "Domestic-Level Diversionary Theory of War: Targeting

herents of one political party may scapegoat the rival party, whereas elites committed to strengthening substate national groups may derogate centrally positioned groups. Yet groups may also be targeted for scapegoating because of genuine beliefs about fault for a failure abroad. These processes are likely to be difficult to distinguish empirically. Again, what matters most is that a wide range of substate groups may respond to the erosion of the state's status by casting blame on one another.<sup>54</sup>

There are two ways that scapegoating can contribute to domestic conflict. First, it might exacerbate center-periphery hostility triggered by the combination of the status defense and distancing mechanisms. For instance, leaders or other elites within centrally positioned groups might find it politically useful to blame the insufficient loyalty of peripherally positioned groups for a foreign policy failure. This might intensify the fears of other centrally positioned actors about internal threats to national unity, while prompting peripherally positioned groups to perceive the state as an increasingly significant threat to them. But the incentive to scapegoat can also exacerbate conflict between groups independent of center-periphery dynamics. Rival political parties, military branches, or foreign policy organizations may find it politically useful to blame one another for a foreign policy failure, especially when it might otherwise be attributed to their own shortcomings. Thus, while scapegoating can interact with the first two mechanisms to exacerbate center-periphery conflict, it can also contribute to conflict even when status erosion does not trigger differential disidentification.

#### SCOPE CONDITIONS AND CAUSAL SEQUENCES

The three mechanisms of distancing, status defense, and scapegoating may combine and operate differently in different contexts. This section defines the conditions under which each mechanism should be triggered, and it discusses some of the ways in which they might combine. All three mechanisms are likely to fully operate under three conditions: (1) following instances of acute, undeniable status erosion; (2) when the state constitutes a significant site for collective identification and source of collective self-esteem; and (3) where

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Ethnic Minorities," *Journal of Conflict Resolution*, Vol. 52, No. 5 (October 2008), pp. 641–664, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0022002708318565>.

54. Political competition over credit for foreign policy success is unlikely to be so intense. According to Matthew Flinders, research on blame avoidance suggests that "politicians are primarily motivated by avoiding blame for failure rather than trying to claim credit for success for the simple reason that the public possess a strong 'negativity bias.' Praise will be as fickle as it is short-lived, whereas vitriol will be as strong as it will be long-lived." Matthew Flinders, "Democracy and the Politics of Coronavirus: Trust, Blame, and Understanding," *Parliamentary Affairs*, Vol. 74, No. 2 (April 2021), p. 491, <https://doi.org/10.1093/pa/gsaa013>.

there are relatively wide differences between centrally and peripherally positioned groups in terms of strength of identification with the state. First, the significance and visibility of status erosion influences the social psychological and political salience of the state's decline. High visibility and salience are necessary for the distancing and scapegoating mechanisms to function. Accordingly, acutely humiliating episodes—such as military defeats—should trigger these mechanisms more than latent decline. Episodes of acute status erosion that are difficult to deny or interpret as flukes or illegitimate changes in the status hierarchy will more strongly trigger distancing and scapegoating than trends or events of debatable significance. Repeated episodes of status erosion, and those that occur where narratives about the state's decline are commonplace, should be especially potent.<sup>55</sup> Acute, undeniable status erosion also facilitates the status defense mechanism, but it is not necessary. Actors within some centrally positioned groups (e.g., within the government) could plausibly become aware of a trend toward latent status erosion and take steps to strengthen the state to reverse that trend in the absence of a visible, salient instance of foreign policy humiliation.

The second scope condition is the presence of a strong, institutionalized national identity that is a center for collective identification. This condition matters most for the full operation of the distancing and status defense mechanisms, which rely on the notion that the state constitutes a significant part of an individual's social identity. The social psychological significance of the state's dominant national identity is a precondition for the existence of differential responses to the erosion of the state's status, and for the capacity of these divergent responses to produce conflict. By contrast, while the scapegoating mechanism is strengthened by this condition, it does not depend on it. Foreign policy failures may still be sources of political vulnerability (as, for instance, indicators of incompetence) and thus incentivize casting blame, even if the state is neither a central part of social identity nor a source of collective self-esteem.

The third scope condition is the existence of significant differences in the strength of identification with the state between substate groups. The varying strength of centrally and peripherally positioned groups' attachments to the state is important because it affects the operation of the distancing and status defense mechanisms. The distancing mechanism may not operate in states where a single conception of national identity is dominant, and where no other significant substate or local national identities exist. Although some groups may engage in status defense, such activities should not contrib-

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55. See Barnhart, *The Consequences of Humiliation*, p. 47, for a similar argument.

ute to center-periphery conflict. The distancing and status defense mechanisms may only fully function when there are substantial differences in how substate groups are positioned relative to the state (e.g., in multinational states). By contrast, the scapegoating mechanism does not depend on this condition. Acute status erosion may still incentivize substate groups to cast blame in contexts without significant center-periphery divides.

These scope conditions suggest some tentative propositions about how the mechanisms might combine and operate together over time. First, status defense may be triggered earlier than the other two mechanisms. Long periods of latent decline might often precede visible, salient episodes of acute decline. Eroding status might thus initially contribute to domestic conflict because centrally positioned groups attempt to strengthen the state, prompting opposition from peripherally positioned groups. Second, if center-periphery divides exist, then instances of acute decline may trigger iterative cycles of status defense and distancing that contribute to intensifying center-periphery conflict over time. These cycles may begin in the center, or on the periphery, or simultaneously, and they may reinforce one another. Distancing in the periphery, for instance, may prompt centrally positioned groups to adopt increasingly authoritarian approaches to how national identity is defined and policed; at the same time, efforts to reestablish the state's status may intensify support for distancing in the periphery, especially if these attempts yield further foreign policy failures.

The asymmetry of the strength of ties to state institutions between centrally and peripherally positioned groups implies that these cycles may repeat themselves and intensify over time. Even after a foreign policy failure, it is probable that centrally positioned actors will retain or regain control over foreign policy. States that have suffered humiliations are, as a result, likely to eventually attempt to reassert their positions through costly new foreign policy initiatives.<sup>56</sup> One possible pattern thus involves repeated foreign policy failures, which intensify conflict between centrally and peripherally positioned groups that increasingly see each other as threats.

Third, scapegoating can exacerbate these center-periphery conflict spirals, but it can also contribute to conflict between centrally positioned groups. These dynamics may also build on one another over time. For instance, if center-periphery conflict spirals increase the tendency for substate groups to perceive one another as threats, this might increase the appeal of or perceived need to engage in scapegoating if further instances of acute status erosion occur.

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56. *Ibid.*, especially pp. 36–46, 78–107.



Finally, the theory implies that the processes leading from status erosion to domestic conflict will be protracted. Distancing, status defense, and scapegoating should not be expected to spontaneously follow an episode of acute decline or immediately intensify domestic tensions. Each mechanism involves interactions between groups and elites for whom the erosion of state status may alter preferences and affect the political environment within which they operate. These changes are likely to evolve in subsequent months or years rather than just the days after an instance of foreign policy failure. The iterative nature of these dynamics also means that the mechanisms, once triggered, may continue to operate long after a precipitating event.

AN ALTERNATIVE EXPLANATION: MATERIAL DECLINE AND STATE CAPACITY

The erosion of national status and the deterioration of the state's material capacity are related in ways that complicate the task of empirically investigating the theory laid out above. It is difficult (and likely unproductive) to separate factors that affect the state's status from factors that affect its physical administrative capacity (e.g., to maintain armed forces or to suppress domestic unrest). Material capabilities undergird national status by facilitating the achievement of status markers such as empire. Moreover, material factors such as economic productivity or the possession of certain weapons may themselves be symbols of status.<sup>57</sup> Indeed, Sambanis and Shayo explicitly identify "material payoffs" as one factor influencing status comparisons between (and thereby the strength of identification with) different groups.<sup>58</sup>

But it is possible—and necessary—to distinguish between different kinds of mechanisms that lead from decline to domestic conflict. The three mechanisms developed in this article induce intergroup conflict by strengthening social psychological and political incentives that lead groups to become increasingly hostile to one another. This account contrasts with an alternative explanation that is rooted in the material consequences of a decline in state capacity. If national status erosion occurs alongside a reduction in the state's physical ability to enforce order within its borders, then domestic conflict might result from a dynamic akin to state failure or collapse. As the state's material ability to deter or respond to challenges from within its borders deteriorates, substate groups may act opportunistically to advance claims against one another or the state itself. Importantly, this mechanism does not hinge on the ways in which decline produces hostility between groups within the state; rather, the

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57. Liah Greenfeld, *The Spirit of Capitalism: Nationalism and Economic Growth* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2001).

58. Sambanis and Shayo, "Social Identification and Ethnic Conflict," p. 302.

key factor is the material strength of the state itself, which influences how substate groups calculate the costs and benefits of openly opposing the state or one another.

The social psychological account developed in this article is not incompatible with this alternative mechanism. A state could plausibly suffer a severe material reduction in its ability to subdue domestic unrest at the same time as the social psychological and political forces stemming from acute status loss exacerbate domestic divisions. Or the distancing mechanism, for instance, could over time reduce the resources available to the state, degrading its ability to enforce order and further contributing to conflict between substate groups.

Still, distinguishing analytically between these two accounts is important because they suggest different implications about what kinds of status erosion should produce conflict. Whereas the social psychological mechanisms suggest that instances of acute status erosion that are politically visible and salient should trigger domestic conflict, the state capacity mechanism implies that decline should only produce domestic conflict when it leads to serious, relatively persistent reductions in the material resources available to the state. Moreover, empirically investigating the social psychological account requires that it be distinguished from the state capacity mechanism. While decline and domestic conflict may coincide in any particular case, it is plausible that this could be solely because of the erosion of the state's material capacity to enforce order.<sup>59</sup> Establishing that the social psychological mechanisms at the heart of the theory were significant in any particular historical setting thus requires not only searching for evidence that decline triggers distancing, status defense, and scapegoating but also considering whether the evidence supports this most likely alternative account.

### *Spain's Foreign Policy Disasters and Domestic Conflict after 1898*

I illustrate the theory by showing how Spanish foreign policy failures helped intensify domestic conflict in Spain leading up to the Spanish Civil War. Although not a definitive test of the theory, my aim is to establish its plausibility by demonstrating that its mechanisms produced or exacerbated conflict between groups within a declining state. Spain in the decades after 1898 is useful for this purpose because it represents a "pathway" or "typical" case, in which the independent variable (status erosion) and dependent variable (domestic

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59. Nicholas Sambanis, Stergios Skaperdas, and William Wohlforth also highlight this possibility. Sambanis, Skaperdas, and Wohlforth, "Nation-Building through War," p. 284.

conflict) coincide in the manner predicted by the theory.<sup>60</sup> The case also has “contextual features” that favor the operations of the three mechanisms of distancing, status defense, and scapegoating.<sup>61</sup>

In 1898, Spain suffered a dramatic military defeat to the United States and was forced to relinquish the last vestiges of its American empire (Cuba and Puerto Rico) in addition to the Philippines and Guam. A subsequent attempt to establish an imperial sphere in Morocco eventually led to a second humiliating defeat during the Battle of Annual in 1921. These episodes of status loss coincided with a period of intensifying domestic conflict. From the 1890s through the 1930s, Spain experienced labor strikes, protests against taxation and military service, center-periphery conflict, civil-military conflict, intra-military conflict, two military coups, and, ultimately, a civil war.<sup>62</sup>

The post-1898 Spanish case also fits all three of the theory’s scope conditions. First, defeat in the Spanish-American War constitutes an instance of acute, undeniable status erosion. Moreover, the resulting imperial losses took place at the height of what Eric Hobsbawm calls the “age of empire,” a period during which imperial possessions were politically salient symbols of national status.<sup>63</sup> Indeed, throughout the nineteenth century, empire played a central role in the development of narratives about “Spanish” national identity.<sup>64</sup> Although the theory is not limited in scope to military defeats or losses of territory, Spain’s defeat in 1898 constitutes an especially clear episode of visible, politically salient status loss.

Second, though it was late to develop compared with some of its European neighbors, a Spanish national identity had emerged by the second half of the nineteenth century, characterized by the proliferation of national symbols, narratives, and institutions that encouraged the Iberian Peninsula’s diverse groups to understand themselves as Spaniards.<sup>65</sup> That Spain by this point constituted a salient national in-group is evident from domestic reactions to a suc-

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60. John Gerring and Lee Cococar, “Selecting Cases for Intensive Analysis: A Diversity of Goals and Methods,” *Sociological Methods & Research*, Vol. 45, No. 3 (2016), p. 405, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0049124116631692>.

61. Ryan Saylor, “Why Causal Mechanisms and Process Tracing Should Alter Case Selection Guidance,” *Sociological Research & Methods*, Vol. 49, No. 4 (2020), p. 984, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0049124118769109>.

62. For overviews of this history, see James H. Rial, *Revolution from Above: The Primo de Rivera Dictatorship in Spain, 1923–1930* (Fairfax, Va.: George Mason University Press, 1986), pp. 17–44; and Francisco J. Romero Salvadó, *The Foundations of Civil War: Revolution, Social Conflict, and Reaction in Liberal Spain, 1916–1923* (New York: Routledge, 2008).

63. Eric Hobsbawm, *The Age of Empire: 1875–1914* (New York: Vintage, 1987), pp. 67–68.

64. Christopher Schmidt-Nowara, *The Conquest of History: Spanish Colonialism and National Histories in the Nineteenth Century* (Pittsburgh, Pa.: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2006), p. 3.

65. See especially *ibid.*, which stresses the significance of the colonies for this nation-building project.

cessful Spanish military intervention in Morocco from 1859 to 1860. Victory was met with celebrations that emphasized Spanish national symbols and stressed the significance of Spain as a national identity category. Even among Catalonians—a peripherally positioned group with its own developing national identity—festivities involved prominent displays of the Spanish flag, its colors, and the Castilian language, as well as explicit attempts by elites to position themselves as Spanish patriots.<sup>66</sup>

Importantly, though, the Spanish national identity was only weakly institutionalized, even in the late nineteenth century. This is partly why the case conforms to the third scope condition: the existence of significant peripherally positioned groups (such as substate national groups). In Spain, Basque and Catalan national identities had become well-developed by 1898, in part—as Laia Balcells and others note—because of the delayed and inconsistent Spanish nation-building project.<sup>67</sup>

The 1898 Disaster was not the first time that Spain had experienced colonial losses. During the 1810s and 1820s, Spain lost most of its American empire. Although I do not ignore this period, it is not the focus of my analysis because it does not fully meet the theory's scope conditions. First, as Martin Blinkhorn notes, the earlier losses occurred before empire was clearly constituted as a status symbol: “the modern ‘age of imperialism’ and great power rivalry lay in the future.”<sup>68</sup> Moreover, the earlier losses were seen as the result of a “family quarrel” that might be reversible rather than defeat by a foreign power.<sup>69</sup> These losses are thus less clearly episodes of undeniable acute status erosion than the 1898 military defeat and colonial dismemberment. Second, the Spanish national identity was much less fully developed in the 1810s and 1820s than it was in 1898. Indeed, as José Alvarez Junco notes, Spain did not have a national flag before 1843.<sup>70</sup> As Xosé-Manoel Núñez observes, “Spanish liberals and traditionalists alike did not complain very much about the loss of the

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66. Angel Smith, *The Origins of Catalan Nationalism, 1770–1898* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014), p. 66. For a contemporary account of this victory celebration, see Victor Balaguer, *Reseña de los festejos celebrados en Barcelona en los primeros días de mayo de 1860* [Account of the celebrations in Barcelona in the first days of May 1860] (Barcelona/Madrid: Librería Española/D.I. Lopez Bernasogi, 1860).

67. Laia Balcells, “Mass Schooling and Catalan Nationalism,” *Nationalism and Ethnic Politics*, Vol. 19, No. 4 (2013), pp. 467–486, <https://doi.org/10.1080/13537113.2013.847602>.

68. Martin Blinkhorn, “Spain: The ‘Spanish Problem’ and the Imperial Myth,” *Journal of Contemporary History*, Vol. 15, No. 1 (January 1980), p. 6, <https://doi.org/10.1177/002200948001500102>. See also Javier Krauel, *Imperial Emotions: Cultural Responses to Myths of Empire in Fin-de-Siècle Spain* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2013), p. 7.

69. Blinkhorn, “Spain: The ‘Spanish Problem’ and the Imperial Myth,” p. 6.

70. José Alvarez Junco, “The Nation-Building Process in Nineteenth-Century Spain,” in Clare Mar-Molinero and Angel Smith, eds., *Nationalism and the Nation in the Iberian Peninsula: Competing and Conflicting Identities* (Washington, D.C.: Berg, 1996), p. 100.

greatest part of the American empire. It was interpreted that the king had lost his overseas possessions," not that a significant national in-group had suffered a status loss.<sup>71</sup> Similarly, Blinkhorn notes that in the earlier period, "the Spanish empire was officially regarded in terms of royal patrimony rather than of national destiny;" in 1898, "the honour of the *patria* (or nation), constantly invoked by the country's governing elite, had become both a political issue and an intellectual preoccupation," one consequence of which was that now "'empire' was a public as well as a royal and a governmental concern."<sup>72</sup> Although the status defense mechanism was partially triggered by these earlier losses, conditions most favorable to the full operation of the theory did not prevail in Spain until the later nineteenth century.

#### OBSERVABLE IMPLICATIONS

Three kinds of evidence support the theory's operation in this case. First, Catalan and Basque actors should engage in distancing from the center as a response to acute status loss. This might involve reduced support for investment in efforts to restore Spain's status; increased support for investment in peripherally positioned groups as alternative political forces and sites for collective identification; or the promotion of narratives and symbols establishing the substate group's distinctiveness from the Spanish national identity. That these behaviors prompt conflict with groups committed to Spain's status and the Spanish national identity should also be evident.

Second, centrally positioned groups (especially right-wing actors or members of the military who for other reasons might find national status particularly valuable) should respond to acute status erosion by supporting efforts to restore the state's position and defending the dominance of the collective Spanish identity. Such actors should support state-strengthening reforms, new foreign policy interventions aimed at rebuilding Spain's empire, and they should promote Spanish national symbols and homogenizing narratives. These kinds of behaviors should prompt conflict with Catalan and Basque actors.

Third, elites and substate groups should cast blame on one another after foreign policy failures. This should be especially prominent among groups (such as the military, when the failure involves the use of force) that are plausibly responsible for executing foreign policy. Evidence of scapegoating includes pub-

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71. Xosé-Manoel Núñez, "Nation-Building and Regional Integration: The Case of the Spanish Empire, 1700–1914," in Stefan Berger and Alexei Miller, eds., *Nationalizing Empires* (Budapest: Central European University Press, 2015), p. 197.

72. Blinkhorn, "Spain: The 'Spanish Problem' and the Imperial Myth," pp. 6, 10.

lic expressions of hostility and derogation, and it should occur in ways that reflect preexisting conflicts of interest or rivalries between substate groups.

The most likely alternative explanation is that the state's material capacity to enforce order erodes, leading to conflict between substate groups that perceive a power vacuum at the center. This explanation implies that acute status erosion either leads to or occurs alongside a severe and persistent reduction in the state's economic base; this economic erosion should substantially weaken the state's ability to deter or forcibly confront challenges from substate groups.

#### ERODING NATIONAL STATUS, IDENTIFICATION, AND SCAPEGOATING

This section examines how the three social psychological mechanisms operated in Spain, especially during the period after 1898.<sup>73</sup> I argue that the erosion of Spain's status after 1898 contributed to two specific forms of domestic conflict. First, it fostered center-periphery conflict, in particular between Catalan groups and the military. This contributed to the radicalization of the military and its increasing tendency to intervene in Spain's politics. Second, the continued erosion of Spain's status during the first decades of the twentieth century exacerbated conflict between groups within the military. These two dynamics were integral to the process that led to the Spanish Civil War, although they do not tell its full story.

DECLINE, THE DISASTER OF 1898, AND CENTER-PERIPHERY CONFLICT. Late nineteenth-century Spain's two most significant substate national groups, the Basques and the Catalonians, originated well before 1898. Both were constituted linguistically and culturally, emerging from regional histories stretching back centuries.<sup>74</sup> The processes by which these groups' identities developed as distinct and became politically significant involved much more than changes in the status of the Spanish state. Catalonia and the Basque region were Spain's wealthiest during the late nineteenth century. Balcells argues that this left "the Catalans with a feeling of superiority which prompted them to rebel against their political subservience and cultural dependence on Castilian,

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73. I do not argue that the 1898 Disaster was the primary cause of the Spanish Civil War; it erupted decades after 1898 and involved a variety of dynamics that were independent of the outcome of the Spanish-American War (e.g., conflicts over land inequality, the role of the Catholic Church, and between capital and labor). For accounts focusing on these dynamics, see Paul Preston, *The Coming of the Spanish Civil War: Reform, Reaction, and Revolution in the Second Republic* (London: Routledge, 1994); and Hilari Raguier, *Gunpowder and Incense: The Catholic Church and the Spanish Civil War*, trans. Gerald Howson (London: Routledge, 2006).

74. Juan Díez Medrano, *Divided Nations: Class, Politics, and Nationalism in the Basque Country and Catalonia* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1995), pp. 21–28; Daniele Conversi, *The Basques, the Catalans and Spain: Alternative Routes to Nationalist Mobilization* (Reno: University of Nevada Press, 1997), pp. 11–79; Smith, *The Origins of Catalan Nationalism*; and André Lecours, *Basque Nationalism and the Spanish State* (Reno: University of Nevada Press, 2007).



or Castilianized, Spain.”<sup>75</sup> Spain’s relatively weak national institutions also contributed to the relative strength of these substate identities.

Still, Spain’s declining position abroad unquestionably strengthened peripheral nationalism in Catalonia and the Basque Country. Some processes linking status loss and center-periphery conflict operated prior to 1898, though (consistent with the theory’s expectations) these were limited. During the first half of the nineteenth century, Spain’s material weakness (as evidenced, in part, by colonial losses in the 1810s and 1820s) prompted the central government to extract greater resources from wealthier regions, which both Basques and Catalonians resisted. In the former region, for instance, Spain’s abolishment of the *fueros*, special legal institutions that granted the Basques substantial privileges, “became a rallying cry” uniting diverse political factions in the region against the center.<sup>76</sup> In Catalonia, similar moves “were widely resented by the regionally oriented . . . bourgeoisie and intelligentsia,” and “laid the groundwork for [regional] nationalist thinking.”<sup>77</sup> The Spanish case thus illustrates how centrally positioned actors’ efforts to mitigate latent decline can contribute to conflict with peripherally positioned groups, even if status loss is not especially salient politically.

The Disaster of 1898 was, though, a politically salient, undeniable episode of acute status loss, and it had significant consequences for center-periphery relations. While victory in the 1859–1860 Moroccan War had incentivized Catalanian elites to strengthen their association with the Spanish state and the symbols of Spanish national identity, 1898 had the opposite effect. Although the loss of the remaining empire in 1898 did not have serious or long-lasting negative economic consequences, it did reduce the material payoffs associated with supporting the center for some key Catalanian elites. Catalanian textile producers, in particular, relied on trade with protected markets in the colonies.<sup>78</sup> From 1895 through 1898, commercial interests had driven elites in Barcelona to support the government’s calls for “young Spaniards to lay down their lives in the defence of the colonies.”<sup>79</sup> When the colonies were lost in 1898, “the industrial bourgeoisie of Catalonia . . . severed its links with the parties of the monarchy and threw in its lot with Catalan nationalism.”<sup>80</sup> As Balcells notes, the disappearance of the empire took with it one of the obsta-

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75. Albert Balcells, *Catalan Nationalism: Past and Present* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 1996), p. 21.

76. Medrano, *Divided Nations*, p. 70.

77. *Ibid.*, pp. 90, 107; and Smith, *The Origins of Catalan Nationalism*, pp. 98–128.

78. Joseph Harrison, “The Regenerationist Movement in Spain after the Disaster of 1898,” *European Studies Review*, Vol. 9, No. 1 (1979), p. 5, <https://doi.org/10.1177/026569147900900102>; and Sebastian Balfour, *The End of the Spanish Empire, 1898–1923* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1997), p. 140.

79. Harrison, “The Regenerationist Movement in Spain after the Disaster of 1898,” p. 7.

80. *Ibid.* See also Romero Salvadó, *The Foundations of Civil War*, pp. 16–17.

cles to a Catalan autonomy movement.<sup>81</sup> Consistent with the distancing mechanism—and Sambanis and Shayo's hypothesis about how changes in the relative value of different groups affect identification—the acute erosion of Spain's status abroad dissolved certain important factors that had incentivized some key Catalan actors to favor the center. After 1898, this change facilitated the formation of the first Catalan regionalist party, the Lliga Regionalista.<sup>82</sup>

There were other examples of distancing by Catalan and Basque actors in the wake of 1898. Sebastian Balfour notes that “the Disaster . . . reinforced the feeling among many Catalans that they had a separate national identity and a different historical destiny and that these were incompatible with those of Castile.”<sup>83</sup> This influenced how they spoke and wrote about themselves and their relationship to Spain. According to Balfour, the term “nation” became an increasingly common replacement for “region” when describing Catalonia. Catalonians also engaged in rhetorical distancing from the center. The discourse of Catalan “regenerationism,” about how to respond to the Spanish malaise of the late twentieth century, “was filled with references to the cultural and racial superiority of the Anglo-Saxons and Germans, with whom Catalanists tended to identify.”<sup>84</sup> Catalan identity narratives now associated Castilians and Andalusians with negative “[S]emitic,” “Muslim,” and “African” characteristics that had allegedly contributed to Spain's failure abroad.<sup>85</sup> Javier Krauel cites the example of essayist Pompeu Gener, who during the early twentieth century promoted the idea that Catalonia was distinct from racially “Latin” Spain: “Catalonia is the result of the fusion of Aryan races.”<sup>86</sup> Catalan physician Bartomeu Robert provides another trenchant example of this sort of distancing. Robert had become an active political regionalist partially as a response to the 1898 defeat, and he was appointed mayor of Barcelona in 1899.<sup>87</sup> Shortly afterward, Robert spoke at a scientific conference where he discussed hypotheses on racial distinctions between different groups (including Catalonians) inhabiting the Iberian Peninsula. As Smith notes, Robert's comments were recounted in media reports to have been based on an

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81. Balcells, *Catalan Nationalism*, p. 43.

82. Charles E. Ehrlich, “The Lliga Regionalista and the Catalan Industrial Bourgeoisie,” *Journal of Contemporary History*, Vol. 33, No. 3 (July 1998), p. 401, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/261123>.

83. Balfour, *The End of the Spanish Empire*, p. 137.

84. *Ibid.*

85. *Ibid.*

86. Krauel, *Imperial Emotions*, p. 165.

87. Santiago Izquierdo Ballester, “Bartomeu Robert I Yazábal (1842–1902): Medicina I Compromís Cívic,” [Bartomeu Robert I Yazábal (1842–1902): Medicine and civic engagement], Ph.D. dissertation, Universitat Pompeu Fabra, 2003, pp. 118–119.

analysis of skull shapes, though this was likely a mischaracterization of what he actually said.<sup>88</sup> News of Robert's comments reached Madrid, where they prompted attacks on the incumbent regime for allowing the articulation of "an arrogant hymn to Independence."<sup>89</sup>

In some cases, including apparently that of Robert and of Barcelona's textile merchants, Spain's decline seems to have contributed to distancing because it changed the ideas and preferences of influential elites. But 1898 also advantaged those already committed to strengthening regional nationalism by changing the political environment within which they operated. It is important to note that these actors were not committed to secession—many, like the politician and writer Enric Prat de la Riba, imagined futures that would restore Spain's status as a "world power," albeit as an "imperial Iberian Federation led by Catalonia."<sup>90</sup> Krauel notes that the 1898 Disaster facilitated these types of arguments about Catalonia's positive distinctiveness and claim to leadership: "Spain's resounding defeat in 1898 and the dynamism of Catalan society led more than one commentator to view Catalonia's accomplishments as something extraordinary, especially when compared with the rest of Spain."<sup>91</sup> Francesc Cambó, a founder of the Lliga Regionalista, similarly observed that Spain's acute decline had created an opportunity for Catalanism by changing the attractiveness of the center relative to the substate national identity: "The loss of the colonies, after a series of disasters, provoked an immense loss of prestige for the state, for its representative institutions, and for the parties that ruled Spain. Catalonia's rapid enrichment, favored by the great amount of capital that was being repatriated from the lost colonies, gave Catalans that pride, which is typical of new wealth, and left them prone to welcome our program, which sought to erode the Spanish state and to glorify the past, present, and future virtues and merits of Catalonia."<sup>92</sup>

There is also evidence that some Basques engaged in peripheral distancing as a response to Spain's eroding status. Sabino Arana, the leader of a "traditionalist," "anticapitalist and fundamentalist Catholic" faction of Basque nationalists described a more moderate rival faction (led by Ramón de la Sota y Llano) in terms that unmistakably linked the attitudes of the latter faction to Spanish decline: "What about the pro-Spanish Basque nationalists

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88. Smith, *The Origins of Catalan Nationalism*, pp. 201, 261, n. 92.

89. Izquierdo, "Bartomeu Robert I Yarzabal," p. 163 (quotation translated from Spanish by the author).

90. Krauel, *Imperial Emotions*, p. 148.

91. *Ibid.*, p. 163.

92. Quoted in Medrano, *Divided Nations*, p. 105. See also Jesús Pabón, *Cambó: 1876–1918* (Barcelona: Editorial Alpha, 1952), pp. 193–194.

[Euskerianos españoles] who claim to despise Spain? Why do they despise it? Ask them. Because Spain, in economic terms, is at the level of Greece and Italy, and in civilization, at the depths of Morocco and Turkey; because it lacks agriculture, industry, and commerce; because its army has fled the Moroccans, and even in diplomacy do Moroccans surpass Spaniards. In a word, [they despise Spain] because they would like to see it big and powerful, and instead they see it humiliated and emaciated.”<sup>93</sup> Arana himself despised Spain because he saw Spanish values and society as threats to the Basque way of life.<sup>94</sup> Thus, for Arana, the result of the Spanish-American War was not a reason to distance from Spain, but rather an opportunity to, in Payne’s words, “diminish . . . Spain and prais[e] . . . stronger powers who had bested it in overseas competition.”<sup>95</sup> In 1898, the groups led by Arana and Sota combined under the auspices of the Basque Nationalist Party.<sup>96</sup>

As 1898 prompted distancing among regional nationalists, some influential centrally positioned groups simultaneously reacted to the defeat and colonial dismemberment by committing themselves to defending and strengthening Spain’s status and the Spanish national identity. Of course, not all centrally positioned actors reacted in ways that threatened peripherally positioned groups. Some elites in Madrid—such as prime ministers Francisco Silvela and later Antonio Maura—responded to the 1898 Disaster by promoting decentralizing reforms.<sup>97</sup>

But some centrally positioned groups committed themselves to defending Spain’s status in ways that contributed to center-periphery conflict. Especially important were Spanish military officers. The military was directly threatened and humiliated by the outcome of the 1898 Spanish-American War. Moreover, as members of a central institution within the Spanish social order, military officers had been socialized and educated to understand themselves as defenders of Spain’s integrity, as well as the norms, narratives, and symbols of Spanish national identity. As Balfour puts it, the military had “throughout the nineteenth century . . . fought to create a united and centralized nation against

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93. Quoted in Medrano, *Divided Nations*, p. 81.

94. *Ibid.*, p. 79.

95. Stanley G. Payne, *Basque Nationalism* (Reno: University of Nevada Press, 1975), p. 79.

96. Medrano, *Divided Nations*, p. 81. Juan Díez Medrano notes that Arana’s “traditionalist” form of nationalism (which opposed Spain for reasons unrelated to its status) was dominant in the Basque country from before 1898 until the Spanish Civil War. This may help account for the Disaster’s more visible effects on Catalan than on Basque nationalism. See Juan Díez Medrano, “Patterns of Development and Nationalism: Basque and Catalan Nationalism Before the Spanish Civil War,” *Theory and Society*, Vol. 23, No. 4 (August 1994), p. 547, <https://doi.org/10.1007/BF00992827>.

97. These reforms failed in part because they did not go far enough for some Catalan regionalists, and in part because they prompted opposition from Spanish nationalists. See Robert W. Kern, *Liberals, Reformers, and Caciques in Restoration Spain, 1875–1909* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1974), pp. 111–112, 114.

the centrifugal forces of Carlism, federalism, and cantonalism. Their function was the defence of sovereignty and their identity was on a concept of national integrity rooted in a traditional reading of history which valued unity and Empire under Castilian hegemony.<sup>98</sup> According to Carolyn Boyd, officers “increasingly saw themselves as the defenders of a nation endangered by the divisive effects of regionalism and class conflict. As the ‘guardian of all the values and historical constants of the people,’ the army was a national institution uniquely qualified to protect the unity of the Fatherland.”<sup>99</sup>

Many Spanish military officers responded to 1898 by committing themselves to restoring Spain’s place in the world.<sup>100</sup> This would involve, in part, a re-assertion of Spain’s position as an imperial power. Military officers were therefore broadly supportive of the 1909 invasion of Morocco’s Rif region, because they saw a colonial campaign in Morocco as an opportunity to restore both Spain’s status as an imperial power and their own pride.<sup>101</sup> Yet restoring Spain’s status would also require policing the state’s integrity. Many military elites after 1898 sought to enforce a restrictive conception of Spanish national identity, one that was aligned with what Miguel de Unamuno called “casticismo” and what would eventually mutate into the fascist ideology of National Catholicism, which emphasized a renewed commitment to traditional Catholic and Castilian values and symbols.<sup>102</sup> This heightened sensitivity to the prospect of national disunity set the stage for an intensification of conflict between military elites and regional autonomy movements, especially the one in Catalonia.<sup>103</sup> The army was “obsessed by the apparent dangers posed by Catalanism,” in part because of fears that it would accelerate a “process of disintegration.”<sup>104</sup>

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98. Balfour, *The End of the Spanish Empire*, p. 177.

99. Carolyn P. Boyd, *Praetorian Politics in Liberal Spain* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1979), p. 10.

100. Balfour, *The End of the Spanish Empire*, pp. 184–185.

101. Sebastian Balfour, *Deadly Embrace: Morocco and the Road to the Spanish Civil War* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002), pp. 10–11; and Boyd, *Praetorian Politics in Liberal Spain*, p. 24.

102. Miguel de Unamuno, *En Torno al Casticismo* [Return to love of purity] (Madrid: Editorial Biblioteca Nueva, 1996); Ibon Izurieta, “Unamuno’s ‘En Torno al Casticismo’ as Nation-Making,” *Hispanic Journal*, Vol. 24, No. 1/2 (Spring/Fall 2003), pp. 91–101, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/44284760>; Christopher Britt Arredondo, *Quixotism: The Imaginative Denial of Spain’s Loss of Empire* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2005), pp. 106–129; Carolyn P. Boyd, *Historia Patria: Politics, History, and National Identity in Spain, 1875–1975* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1997), pp. 165–193; and Mikel Aizpuru, “Sobre la Astenia del Nacionalismo Español a Finales del Siglo XIX y Comienzo del XX” [On the weakness of Spanish nationalism at the end of the 19th century and beginning of the 20th], *Historia Contemporánea* [Contemporary History], No. 23 (2001), p. 845, <https://ojs.ehu.es/index.php/HC/article/view/15798>.

103. Romero Salvadó, *The Foundations of Civil War*, p. 18.

104. Balfour, *The End of the Spanish Empire*, p. 176. Jorge Antonio Montesdeoca Pérez notes that similar dynamics led to paranoia about the prospect of independence movements in the Canary Islands. See Jorge Antonio Montesdeoca Pérez, “La Concepción Política del Archipiélago en Islas Atlánticas Bajo la Era del Nacionalismo” [The political conception of the archipelago in Atlantic is-

Spain's humiliation in 1898 had generated propitious conditions for distancing, but it also fostered incentives and opportunities for Catalan groups to openly derogate the military for political advantage.<sup>105</sup> In 1905, the distancing and status defense mechanisms were exacerbated by the scapegoating dynamic to produce a significant episode of center-periphery conflict. Throughout that year, the Barcelona-based satirical (and regionalist) magazine *Cu-Cut!* ran a series of cartoons mocking Spanish military officers. Many "contained derogatory references to the defeat of 1898, implying that the military lost the war through incompetence or cowardice."<sup>106</sup> On November 23, 1905, *Cu-Cut!* published a cartoon (see figure 1) depicting Catalan regionalists celebrating recent electoral victories. A soldier asks a bystander (in Castilian): "what is being celebrated here, that there are so many people?" The bystander responds (in Catalan): "a victory banquet." The soldier replies (in Castilian): "a victory? Ah, they must be civilians."<sup>107</sup>

Two days later, locally garrisoned soldiers attacked the offices of *Cu-Cut!* and the daily newspaper *La Veu de Catalunya*, causing injuries and serious property damage.<sup>108</sup> The incident had significant consequences for civil-military relations in Spain. The headline of the November 27 edition of *La Correspondencia Militar*, a daily pro-military newspaper, read "The Army in Defense of the Nation." The paper described the events as punishing "catalanism . . . a criminal sect that feeds on the hatred of Spain and the integrity of the nation."<sup>109</sup> Though the attack in Barcelona constituted a serious instance of insubordination, senior military leaders sought to assuage enraged junior officers by demanding greater authority to censor and prosecute insults from civilians.<sup>110</sup> King Alfonso XIII supported these demands, and the result

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lands under the era of nationalism], Ph.D. dissertation, Universidad de las Palmas de Gran Canaria, 2021, pp. 47–107.

105. The *Cu-Cut!* affair was not the first time the military had responded violently to negative press. A similar response occurred in March 1895. See José Varela Ortega, "Aftermath of Splendid Disaster: Spanish Politics Before and After the Spanish American War of 1898," *Journal of Contemporary History*, Vol. 15, No. 2 (1980), pp. 317–318, <https://doi.org/10.1177/002200948001500206>. The 1905 episode is significant for its consequences, and because it demonstrates how episodes of acute decline can prompt cycles of hostility.

106. Balfour, *The End of the Spanish Empire*, p. 176.

107. Joan Junceda, "Al Frontón Condal" [At the Frontón Condal], cartoon, *¡Cu-Cut!* No. 204, November 23, 1905, p. 742, Biblioteca de Catalunya [National Library of Catalonia], [https://arca.bnc.cat/arcabib\\_pro/en/catalogo\\_imagenes/grupo.do?path=1353611](https://arca.bnc.cat/arcabib_pro/en/catalogo_imagenes/grupo.do?path=1353611). For a fuller analysis of the cartoon, see Rhiannon McGlade, *Catalan Cartoons: A Cultural and Political History* (Cardiff, UK: University of Wales Press, 2016), pp. 30–34. Translation by the author.

108. Robert Justin Goldstein, "The Persecution and Jailing of Political Caricaturists in Nineteenth-Century Europe," *Media History*, Vol. 9, No. 1 (2003), p. 37, <https://doi.org/10.1080/136888003200059962>.

109. *La Correspondencia Militar* [Military Correspondence], Monday, November 27, 1905, <http://hemerotecadigital.bne.es/issue.vm?id=0001910285>.

110. Goldstein, "The Persecution and Jailing of Political Caricaturists in Nineteenth-Century Europe," p. 38; and Joaquín Romero-Maura, "The Spanish Army and Catalonia: The 'Cu-Cut!' Inci-



Figure 1. The Cartoon That Prompted the *Cu-Cut!* Affair



SOURCE: Joan Junceda, "Al Frontón Condal," cartoon, *¡Cu-Cut!*, No. 204, November 23, 1905, p. 742, Biblioteca de Catalunya.

was the "Law of Jurisdiction," which "was repeatedly used during the next 25 years to 'stifle civilian criticism of the military not only in Catalonia but wherever it occurred.'"<sup>111</sup> This was, Boyd notes, the "first major intrusion of the army into civilian politics in the twentieth century," and marked "a return to the pronunciamiento politics of the early nineteenth century."<sup>112</sup> More im-

dent' and the Law of Jurisdictions, 1905–1906," *Sage Research Papers in the Social Sciences (Contemporary European Studies)*, Vol. 5, No. 90-003, (1976), pp. 21–28.

111. Goldstein, "The Persecution and Jailing of Political Caricaturists in Nineteenth-Century Europe," p. 38.

112. Boyd, *Praetorian Politics in Liberal Spain*, pp. 11, 9.

portantly, according to Robert Goldstein, “the *Cu-Cut!* incident and its aftermath widened the divide between Spanish society and the military, further inflamed Catalan regionalism and helped grease the skids towards the military takeover of 1923 and the Franco uprising of 1936.”<sup>113</sup> Alejandro Quiroga similarly notes that the *Cu-Cut!* affair produced an “action-reaction spiral” in which “the military gained even more control of the state apparatus and regionalism gained more social support.”<sup>114</sup> The episode highlights the ways in which the mutual operation of the status defense and distancing mechanisms can contribute, over time, to intensifying conflict between centrally and peripherally positioned groups.

SCAPEGOATING AND INTRAMILITARY CONFLICT. In 1909, Spain invaded the Rif region of Morocco. This move was deeply unpopular among workers and left-wing groups in Catalonia, and led to riots, a general strike, and civil-military violence in Barcelona when reservists were mobilized for deployment in Africa.<sup>115</sup> As noted earlier, though, military officers saw the Rif war as an opportunity to repair their pride and Spain’s position in the world. The episode thus exemplifies how conflict can deepen between substate groups when the state implements policies that reassert lost status. Over time, the intervention also led to renewed failures that triggered scapegoating dynamics and ultimately conflict within the military between two groups positioned similarly vis-à-vis the state.

The 1909 invasion led to an eighteen-year-long occupation and counter-insurgency that was punctuated by a second military disaster. In late July and early August 1921, near the town of Annual, a Spanish offensive turned into a rout for Rifian forces: 8,000–12,000 Spanish soldiers were killed in two and a half weeks.<sup>116</sup> What became known as the “Disaster of Annual” was “a national tragedy on a much greater scale than any other military defeat suffered by Spain, including the war of 1898.”<sup>117</sup> This constituted another instance of acute status erosion—Spain had again failed to adequately perform the role of a colonial power.

The immediate domestic political consequences of the 1921 catastrophe at Annual illustrate some of the same dynamics that operated in the wake of the

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113. Goldstein, “The Persecution and Jailing of Political Caricaturists in Nineteenth-Century Europe,” p. 38.

114. Alejandro Quiroga, *Making Spaniards: Primo de Rivera and the Nationalization of the Masses, 1923–30* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007), p. 19.

115. Francisco J. Romero Salvadó, *Twentieth-Century Spain: Politics and Society in Spain, 1898–1998* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 1999), pp. 28–29; Balfour, *The End of the Spanish Empire*, pp. 200–201; and Balfour, *Deadly Embrace*, p. 19.

116. Balfour, *Deadly Embrace*, p. 70.

117. *Ibid.*

1898 Disaster, though the scapegoating mechanism was especially prominent. The defeat at Annual “radically changed the political climate in Spain;” it led to “anger against those responsible for the disaster and a spirit of revenge against the enemy.”<sup>118</sup> The government of Manuel Allendesalazar fell, and its successor (led by Antonio Maura) was confronted by a “clamour for retribution, justice, and clarity.”<sup>119</sup> The official inquiry into the events at Annual was predictably limited in scope and colored by the political incentives of senior colonial military officers—who had the support of King Alfonso XIII—to avoid taking responsibility. A royal decree, for instance, ruled out the High Command in Morocco as the inquiry’s target, which meant that the initial investigation functioned primarily as an effort to scapegoat low-level officers.<sup>120</sup>

In response, the Supreme Council of the Army and Navy, made up of a group of generals who opposed the military’s colonial leadership, began its own inquiry. They suggested prosecuting thirty-nine officers, including Dámaso Berenguer, the High Commissioner of Spanish Morocco, and requested support from the Spanish Senate. This effort threatened and angered other military officers, many of whom felt that “the army’s honor demanded a reversal of timid and defensive policies.”<sup>121</sup> Their desire to end the process of blame attribution, along with concerns about the civilian government’s ability to successfully prosecute the Moroccan War, and what Boyd calls “indignation” in light of new “separatist manifestations” among Catalan and Basque nationalists, prompted General Miguel Primo de Rivera’s 1923 coup.<sup>122</sup>

But the consequences of the defeat at Annual extended beyond the coup itself. Balfour writes that it “branded the minds of colonial officers with failure . . . From then on, revenge and reaffirmation became obsessive goals. The Spanish state was viewed with intensified resentment.”<sup>123</sup> This radicalization exemplifies the operation of the scapegoating mechanism. Colonial officers blamed the regime for failing to supply adequate resources for the occupation. They also resented its unwillingness to stop the “liberal and left-wing press” from attacking colonial officers themselves for alleged “incompetence and corruption.”<sup>124</sup> Taken together with the apparent threat posed by regionalists, this

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118. *Ibid.*, p. 75.

119. *Ibid.*

120. *Ibid.*, pp. 76–77.

121. Rial, *Revolution from Above*, p. 38.

122. Boyd, *Praetorian Politics in Liberal Spain*, p. 266; Balfour, *Deadly Embrace*, pp. 79, 93; Angel Smith, “The Catalan Counter-Revolutionary Coalition and the Primo de Rivera Coup, 1917–23,” *European History Quarterly*, Vol. 37, No. 1 (2007), p. 27, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0265691407071800>.

123. Balfour, *Deadly Embrace*, p. 82.

124. *Ibid.*, p. 93.

highlighted to military officers the “‘decadence’ of Spanish society.”<sup>125</sup> The 1921 defeat and its political aftermath worsened civil-military relations in much the same way that the 1898 defeat and colonial losses had.

Defeat at Annual also caused conflict within the army via the scapegoating mechanism. The most significant rift initially formed because officers stationed in the metropole (the *Juntero* faction) and those fighting in Morocco (the *Africanist* faction) disagreed about military promotion.<sup>126</sup> Annual and its aftermath turned these differences into “profound antipathy” as each faction attempted to blame the other for the defeat.<sup>127</sup> The *Africanists* ultimately viewed the *Junteros* as “part of the problem,” standing in the way of a “renovated Spain.”<sup>128</sup> This cleavage between factions within the Spanish military proved consequential. An attempted coup led by radicalized *Africanists* launched the Spanish Civil War in 1936.

#### MATERIAL DECLINE AND STATE CAPACITY

Is it possible that the erosion of Spain’s status contributed to domestic conflict primarily because it reduced the state’s material capacity to enforce order? The evidence does not support this interpretation. The military defeats of 1898 and 1921 did not seriously undermine the state’s ability to deploy force internally. In 1898, military losses were relatively small and mostly incurred during naval engagements. According to José Varela Ortega, the Spanish government’s dilemma after the Battle of Manila Bay “was to make an army that had not been in action against the American enemy accept surrender without a shot fired.”<sup>129</sup> Moreover, withdrawal from Cuba after a decades-long counterinsurgency can only have strengthened the state’s material position. And, although military losses suffered at Annual in 1921 were larger than those suffered in 1898, defeat at Annual was followed by another decade and a half of war and occupation, not by the collapse of the Spanish army.<sup>130</sup> Although the links between status loss and domestic conflict implicate the military, the evidence shows that the most important dynamics involved radicalization, civil-military relations, and factional rivalry, rather than material collapse.

A plausible counterargument might be that the loss of Cuba, Puerto Rico, and the Philippines seriously harmed the Spanish economy and led, in the

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125. *Ibid.*, p. 93. See also Quiroga, *Making Spaniards*, p. 20.

126. Sebastian Balfour and Pablo La Porte, “Spanish Military Cultures and the Moroccan Wars, 1909–36,” *European History Quarterly*, Vol. 30, No. 3 (2000), p. 310, <https://doi.org/10.1177/026569140003000302>.

127. Balfour, *Deadly Embrace*, p. 167.

128. *Ibid.*, pp. 168–169.

129. Ortega, “Aftermath of Splendid Disaster,” p. 325.

130. Balfour, *Deadly Embrace*, pp. 83–120.

long run, to state failure. But the economic consequences of the Disaster of 1898 were limited. While the loss of the colonies harmed sectors that benefited heavily from captive colonial markets, this was temporary. Pedro Fraile and Alvaro Escribano note that Catalan textile producers “fared much better in the new open market” than Castilian wheat and flour producers.<sup>131</sup> Within two decades after 1898, increased textile exports to Europe and the Americas compensated for the loss of exports to Cuba.<sup>132</sup> Apart from these short-term sectoral adjustments, the economic consequences of losing the last vestiges of the empire were muted. As Martín-Aceña and Roldán de Montaud point out, 1898 did not lead to the “collapse of the economy or to the financial bankruptcy of the State” but rather was followed by a successful “programme of financial reconstruction.”<sup>133</sup> Spain cut military spending because it was no longer fighting a counterinsurgency in Cuba, and it took effective steps to address debt and inflation.<sup>134</sup> The result was that “the Spanish economy grew faster after 1900, and the gap between Spain and the most developed regions of the European continent did not widen as it had in the second half of the nineteenth century.”<sup>135</sup>

This does not mean that material factors were irrelevant. Indeed, Spain’s long-term material decline and relative military weakness contributed to defeat in the Spanish-American War of 1898, and again at Annual in 1921. But the evidence presented above suggests that the social psychological and political consequences of these episodes of acute status loss had the greatest influence on the subsequent intensification of domestic conflict.

### *Conclusion*

This article has developed a theory linking the erosion of a state’s status to social psychological and political dynamics that can intensify domestic conflict within a declining state. Evidence from Spain’s experience, especially in the years after the Disaster of 1898, suggests that the mechanisms of distancing,

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131. Pedro Fraile and Alvaro Escribano, “The Spanish 1898 Disaster: The Drift towards National Protectionism,” *Revista de Historia Económica—Journal of Iberian and Latin American Economic History*, Vol. 16, No. 1 (March 1998), p. 278, <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0212610900007126>.

132. Carles Sudria, “La Exportación en el Desarrollo de la Industria Algodonera Española, 1875–1920” [Exports and the development of the Spanish cotton industry, 1875–1920], *Revista de Historia Económica* [Review of Historical Economics], Vol. 1, No. 2 (September 1983), pp. 384–386, <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0212610900012842>.

133. Pablo Martín-Aceña and Inés Roldán de Montaud, “1898: The ‘Fin de Siècle’ Crisis,” in Concha Betrán and María A. Pons, eds., *Historical Turning Points in Spanish Economic Growth and Development, 1808–2008* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2020), pp. 55–56.

134. *Ibid.*

135. *Ibid.*, p. 56.

status defense, and scapegoating fostered center-periphery, civil-military, and intra-military conflict in Spain during the first decades of the twentieth century. In contrast to some neorealist models of strategic adjustment, which suggest that decline reduces domestic political dysfunction, I find that decline can drive substate groups apart and incentivize hostility between them.<sup>136</sup>

Although the Spanish case demonstrates the plausibility of the theory developed in this article, there is much more to learn about the generalizability of its mechanisms. There are other cases in which military defeat or imperial loss has coincided with the intensification of center-periphery conflict in multinational states, suggesting that there may be a systematic relationship between these phenomena. These cases include the fragmentation of Austria-Hungary and the Russian Empire after World War I, the disintegration of the Soviet Union in the wake of defeat in Afghanistan, and the weakening of the British national identity and strengthening of Scottish nationalism that followed the decline of the British Empire.<sup>137</sup>

It is possible, though, that the mechanisms at the center of the theory might operate in other types of cases. It is clear that multinational states often feature significant differences between substate groups' positions vis-à-vis the state and its central institutions, but similar patterns might exist wherever some ethnic, racial, or ideological groups identify more strongly with (or care more about the status of) the state than others. It may be worth investigating, for instance, the ways in which different groups of U.S. citizens reacted to defeat in Vietnam, and whether distancing, status defense, and scapegoating might have contributed to the intensification of domestic conflict in the United States during and after that period.<sup>138</sup>

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136. Bafumi and Parent, "International Polarity and America's Polarization"; and MacDonald and Parent, *Twilight of the Titans*, pp. 19–20.

137. On Russia and Austria-Hungary, see Sambanis, Skaperdas, and Wohlforth, "Nation-Building through War," p. 284. On the Afghanistan war and the disintegration of the Soviet Union, see Rafael Reuveny and Aseem Prakash, "The Afghanistan War and the Breakdown of the Soviet Union," *Review of International Studies*, Vol. 25, No. 4 (October 1999), pp. 693–708, <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0260210599006932>. On the British empire, British identity, and Scottish nationalism, see Tom Nairn, *The Break-Up of Britain: Crisis and Neo-Nationalism* (London: NLB, 1977); Hugh Seton-Watson, "Aftermaths of Empire," *Journal of Contemporary History*, Vol. 15, No. 1 (January 1980), pp. 197–208, <https://doi.org/10.1177/002200948001500113>; David McCrone, "Unmasking Britannia: The Rise and Fall of British National Identity," *Nations and Nationalism*, Vol. 3, No. 4 (1997), pp. 592–594, <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1354-5078.1997.00579.x>; Jimmi Østergaard Nielsen and Stuart Ward, "Three Referenda and a By-Election: The Shadow of Empire in Devolutionary Politics," in Bryan S. Glass and John M. MacKenzie, eds., *Scotland, Empire, and Decolonisation in the Twentieth Century* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2015), pp. 200–222; and Ben Jackson, *The Case for Scottish Independence: A History of Nationalist Political Thought in Modern Scotland* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2020), pp. 61–89.

138. Kathleen Belew, for instance, demonstrates that Vietnam radicalized some U.S. veterans in ways that at least superficially resemble the evolution of some elements of the Spanish Army after



Another potentially fruitful area for future investigation involves reactions to different instantiations of acute status loss. Military defeat and imperial loss (especially around the turn of the twentieth century) constitute politically salient episodes of status erosion. But other kinds of status-reducing crises could also trigger these mechanisms. Dominic Abrams, Fanny Lalot, and Michael Hogg, for instance, have recently suggested that the COVID-19 pandemic (and the apparent failure of some governments to respond competently) has prompted individuals to identify more strongly with more exclusionary groups and incentivized intergroup scapegoating, possibly intensifying various forms of political conflict.<sup>139</sup>

If decline does activate disintegrative political dynamics, then effectively managing latent decline is a critical policy implication. Avoiding or mitigating the disintegrative effects of military defeat or abrupt demotion requires that leaders accurately perceive and adjust to the reality of eroding material capabilities. This adjustment may involve accommodating the status claims of rising powers and developing new ways to publicly narrate the state's role in the international hierarchy. As challenging as these adaptations are, the alternative could be worse.

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1898. See Kathleen Belew, *Bring the War Home: The White Power Movement and Paramilitary America* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2018).

139. Dominic Abrams, Fanny Lalot, and Michael A. Hogg, "Intergroup and Intragroup Dimensions of COVID-19: A Social Identity Perspective on Social Fragmentation and Unity," *Group Processes & Intergroup Relations*, Vol. 24, No. 2 (2021), pp. 201–209, <https://doi.org/10.1177/1368430220983440>.