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ROBERT SCHUMAN CENTRE FOR ADVANCED STUDIES

MANAGING EUROPEAN CONFLICTS THROUGH DEVOLUTION:  
LESSONS FROM THE LEAGUE OF NATIONS

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*Managing European Conflicts through Devolution:  
Lessons from the League of Nations*

**ERIN K. JENNE**

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## **Abstract**

This paper conducts comparative historical analysis on three cases of devolution in interwar Europe (Aland Islands, Danzig and Memel) to identify the conditions under which devolving autonomy to minority regions is most likely to mitigate internal tensions. The analysis indicates that both advocates and detractors of devolution overstate the effects of this technique on ethnic tensions on the ground. This is because internal conflict is less responsive to domestic institutions than it is the wider geopolitical environment. While institutions can have an effect on the long-term tendency to engage in separatism, nested security on the regional and hegemonic levels may be a determining factor in whether autonomous institutions have an inhibiting or exacerbating effect on separatist conflict.

## **Keywords**

Conflict management, autonomy, minorities, devolution, interwar Europe, League of Nations, Danzig, Aland Islands, Memel





## Introduction

Many scholars and practitioners advocate regional autonomy is a solution to separatist conflicts. Autonomous institutions are believed to resolve such conflicts because they split the difference between the minority's separatist demands and the state government's centralizing tendencies.<sup>1</sup> They are designed to undermine separatist movements in two ways. First, they satisfy preferences for self-rule by permitting the minority broad autonomy in spheres of education, language and culture.<sup>2</sup> At the same time, regional autonomy offers protection from depredations by the center. Following a similar logic, consociationalism aims to contain separatism by ameliorating minority fears of discrimination and providing the minority with a degree of self-rule. Consociationalism also promotes centripetalism by giving the minority a stake in the central government through institutionalized power-sharing and minority vetoes.<sup>3</sup>

Governments have long used regional autonomy to prevent state fragmentation. Nineteenth century Habsburg rulers established a "dual" monarchy in 1867 to appeal to the secessionist Hungarians, whom they hoped would come to their aid against a rising Prussia. The Hungarians in turn granted autonomy to the Croats and the Austrians to the Czechs as a means of buying their loyalty to the center. The Bolsheviks took this principle to a new level with the Soviet Nationalities Policies, which conferred a hierarchy of statuses upon minorities—ranging from union republics to autonomous republics to autonomous oblasts—according to their perceived importance and power vis-à-vis the government. After World War II, the governments of Czechoslovakia and Yugoslavia also devolved substantial powers to their constituent regions. China has likewise conferred autonomy upon numerous minority regions, notably the Tibetans, Uighurs, and Mongolians. Other examples include the Mindanao in the Philippines, the Atlantic Coast in Nicaragua, Catalonia and the Basque Region in Spain, and South Tyrol in Italy.

External mediators play a critical role in this mediation technique when governments prove unwilling to devolve power to the regions. Under a strategy termed *induced devolution*, mediators use moral or normative suasion to convince government leaders to devolve powers from the center to the region. Mediators can also use selective incentives—such as promised aid or membership in valued international organizations—to persuade governments to decentralize. Minorities may be granted anything from limited cultural or educational autonomy within the existing state to a loose confederation. In this way, external mediators can help forestall separatist conflict by inducing governments to offer a compromise that falls short of independence.

Critics of this approach counter that, far from undermining secessionism, national institutions actually *cultivate* or facilitate them. This is because state-like institutions—such as internal borders, parliaments, flags, and so on—foster corresponding national identities that paradoxically fuel separatist movements. Suny characterized the collapse of the Soviet Union as a kind of "revenge of the past," in that the national institutions used to mollify minorities decades earlier gave rise to the movements that ultimately destroyed the federation. National institutions tend not only to enable such movements, but may actually inculcate popular preferences for independence. Nationalizing elites play a key role in this process, but their ability to mobilize national movements is critically limited by

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<sup>1</sup> Hannum, *Autonomy, Sovereignty, and Self-determination*.

<sup>2</sup> Lapidoth, *Autonomy: Flexible Solutions to Ethnic Conflicts*; Nordquist, "Autonomy as a Conflict-Solving Mechanism"; Ghai, *Autonomy and Ethnicity*.

<sup>3</sup> McGarry and O'Leary, *The Politics of Ethnic Conflict Regulation*; Horowitz, *Ethnic Groups in Conflict*; Lijphart, *Democracy in Plural Societies*.

the resources and identities conferred upon them by their institutional environment.<sup>4</sup> The clear implication is that secessionist identities and movements for independence are more likely to emerge in regions that possess national institutions than in those that do not.<sup>5</sup>

The argument in this paper is that both sides of the debate overstate the effects of regional autonomy. I posit that the primary determinant of internal conflict is regional de(stabilization), which itself is affected by hegemonic tipping/leveling. While institutions can have an effect on the long-term tendency to engage in separatism or challenge the center, the presence of *nested security* plays a critical role in whether autonomous institutions have an inhibiting or exacerbating effect on separatist conflicts.

To test this theory, I examine the record of League of Nations conflict mediation in interwar Europe. I have chosen to conduct historical case analysis for two reasons. First, the League of Nations regime represents one of the most sustained efforts of external conflict management in history. Since the League actively managed conflicts in the region Central and Eastern Europe (CEE) for nearly two decades, with fluctuating degrees of success both across cases and over time, these cases may be fruitfully mined to identify the causes of shifting mediation success throughout the interwar period. Second, since much of the work on the League of Nations is disconnected from the international relations (IR) literature on conflict resolution, which focuses primarily on contemporary interventions to resolve violent conflicts, it is my intention to mine the scholarship on the League in order to contribute to the IR literature. League conflict management is still routinely dismissed as a “failure” by IR scholars because it failed to check German expansion in the late 1930s, creating the conditions that led to the Second World War. By disaggregating the League regime into multiple smaller interventions that are examined over time, I hope to contribute a more nuanced assessment of the successes and failures of the League regime to this scholarship.<sup>6</sup>

That these three cases constitute induced devolution can be easily demonstrated. In each case, the League of Nations prevailed upon the state government to devolve a degree of autonomy to restive minority regions. This over-time analysis shows that these interventions had a very mixed record in conflict management. The Åland Islands conflict was de-escalated almost immediately after the League intervention. However, the League had relatively less success in Memel and Danzig. What accounts for this variable success across cases and over time? I undertake comparative historical analysis to show that short-term shifts in domestic conflict are largely driven by the geopolitics of the wider neighborhood.

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<sup>4</sup> See, for example, Cornell, “Autonomy as a source of conflict”; Suny, *The Revenge of the Past*; Slezkine, “The USSR as a Communal Apartment, or How a Socialist State Promoted Ethnic Particularism”; Roeder, “Soviet Federalism and Ethnic Mobilization”; Bunce, *Subversive Institutions*; Hale, “The Parade of Sovereignties.”

<sup>5</sup> By contrast, the “thin” constructivist thesis focuses less on national identification and more on the causes of secession. Here, the emphasis on the agency of elites, where elites utilize such institutions as mobilizational resources. For example, flags and other national symbols can serve as focal points around which separatist movements can be organized. Indeed, data analysis has shown that minorities are actually *more* likely to pursue secession if they have a history of territorial autonomy than if they do not (Fearon and Laitin, “Ethnicity, Insurgency, and Civil War”; Jenne, Saideman, and Lowe, “Separatism as a Bargaining Posture”; Treisman, “Russia's " Ethnic Revival"”; Saideman and Ayres, “Determining the Causes of Irredentism.”). There is also evidence that autonomy solutions to conflict are *more* likely to lead to the reemergence of violence than the suppression of the separatist movement or partition (Chapman, Thomas and Roeder, “Partition as a Solution to Wars of Nationalism.”). Although many, if not most, institutionalist theories of nationalism include both “thin” and “thick” mechanisms, they represent very different causal stories and should properly be distinguished from one another.

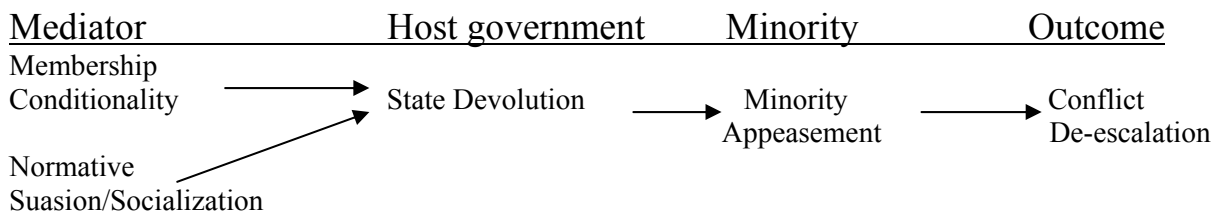
<sup>6</sup> Susan Pederson makes a similar point that the IR literature (mainly coming from the realist tradition) has not yet caught up with the recent historical research on the League, which demonstrates that the League was not a uniform failure, but also achieved notable successes (Pedersen, “Back to the League of Nations”).

## The Debate in the Literature

Scholars have contended that autonomy can be used to appease restive minorities and thereby avert secessionism or violence in divided societies. The principal argument is that autonomous arrangements resolve ethnic tensions because they represent a compromise between the minority's demands for independence and the state's preference for a unitary state.<sup>7</sup> According to this logic, devolving state powers to a minority region satisfies the group's desire for independence by permitting minority self-rule in areas of interest to the group, such as language and cultural policies.<sup>8</sup> Institutions of territorial autonomy may also contribute to a sense of security by providing protection against violations by the state majority. This in turn facilitates ethnic cooperation, paving the way for civic nation-building in the long term.<sup>9</sup>

Along the same lines, consociationalism aims to mollify restive groups by giving them a degree of territorial self-rule as well as a stake in the central government through power-sharing institutions. Examples of consociational systems of include Lebanon, Belgium and Canada. More recently, consociational institutions were applied to postwar Bosnia as a means of preventing sectarian tensions from reigniting violent conflict. Lijphart posits that the minority veto and other structures such as federalism and power-sharing serve as a guarantee of protection at the central level, making minorities less apprehensive about their future in a majority-dominated state. At the local level, "segmental autonomy" is designed to give minority control over policies in the area of the minority's "exclusive concern."<sup>10</sup>

**Figure 1. Devolution as Conflict-Management Mechanism**



Critics counter that devolution or autonomy has the opposite effect. They contend that, far from "appeasing" secessionist minorities, territorial autonomy often serves as a stepping stone (or way-station) to full independence, postponing resolution of the region's status until the group has sufficient resources to mobilize against the center. Indeed, successive data analyses have shown that minorities are actually *more* likely to pursue secession if they have a history of territorial autonomy than if they do not.<sup>11</sup> An additional concern is that majorities generally regard territorial autonomy as an unacceptable loss of control over their state; such plans usually generate intense resistance among elites as well as the public. It therefore *increases* the salience of ethnicity in divided societies, playing into the hands of ethnic extremists on both sides, heightening the probability of internal conflict and minority repression.

In this view, devolving power to separatist regions through asymmetrical federalism or autonomy paradoxically *undermines* state institutions—prolonging ethno-territorial conflict by institutionalizing

<sup>7</sup> Hannum, *Autonomy, Sovereignty, and Self-determination*.

<sup>8</sup> Lapidoth, *Autonomy: Flexible Solutions to Ethnic Conflicts*; Nordquist, "Autonomy as a Conflict-Solving Mechanism"; Ghai, *Autonomy and Ethnicity*.

<sup>9</sup> Burton, *Conflict: Resolution and Prevention*.

<sup>10</sup> McGarry and O'Leary, *The Politics of Ethnic Conflict Regulation*; Horowitz, *Ethnic Groups in Conflict*; Lijphart, *Democracy in Plural Societies*.

<sup>11</sup> Fearon and Laitin, "Ethnicity, Insurgency, and Civil War"; Jenne, Saideman, and Lowe, "Separatism as a Bargaining Posture"; Treisman, "Russia's " Ethnic Revival"; Saideman and Ayres, "Determining the Causes of Irredentism."

it. Like power-sharing, federal or regional autonomies also promote conflict in divided societies. Cornell examined secessionist movements in the Caucasus and concluded that the possession of autonomous institutions increased rather than decreased the likelihood that the minority would pursue full statehood.<sup>12</sup> Many scholars of post-communist Europe have observed that republican status gave titular minorities in the former Soviet Union the resources to launch independence movements against the state center.<sup>13</sup> Autonomous institutions are thus a potent opportunity structure for mobilizing around collective demands.

Consociationalism, too, has been roundly criticized as a conflict-promoting institution. One argument is that ethnic power-sharing leads to divided decision-making. This in turn degrades governance by promoting legislative deadlock, increasing bureaucratic inefficiency, and reducing the ability of governments to adapt to changing social and economic conditions.<sup>14</sup> Zahar offers empirical support for this argument in the case of Lebanon, demonstrating that power-sharing arrangements did little to secure peace in that state and may have actually increased sectarianism by inviting successive foreign interventions by Syria and Israel.<sup>15</sup>

A further concern is that segmented party systems promote ethnic extremism because politicians find themselves competing in ethnically segregated election markets. To win the median voter of the ethnic group, politicians must advocate ever more extremist policies to gain a reputation as a committed champion of the ethnic group's interests. With no counter-incentives to appeal across ethnic lines, this process triggers cycles of "ethnic outbidding," leading to policies of ethnic exclusivism.<sup>16</sup>

Finally, critics charge that consociationalism produces centrifugal, secessionist pressures by conferring mobilizational resources upon national groups, allowing them to radicalize for a greater share of state resources.<sup>17</sup> In response to increased institutional leverage, individuals in ethnic cantons mobilize around politicians who bargain hard for concessions from the center rather than those who seek policy solutions that split the difference between the state and the ethno-territorial unit.<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> Cornell, "Autonomy as a source of conflict."

<sup>13</sup> Breuilly, *Nationalism and the State*; Bunce, *Subversive Institutions*; Hale, "The Parade of Sovereignties"; Slezkine, "The USSR as a Communal Apartment, or How a Socialist State Promoted Ethnic Particularism"; Suny, *The Revenge of the Past*; Roeder, "Soviet Federalism and Ethnic Mobilization"; Roeder, *Where Nation-states Come From*; Treisman, "Russia's " Ethnic Revival"."

<sup>14</sup> Rothchild and Roeder, "Power Sharing as an Impediment to Peace and Democracy."

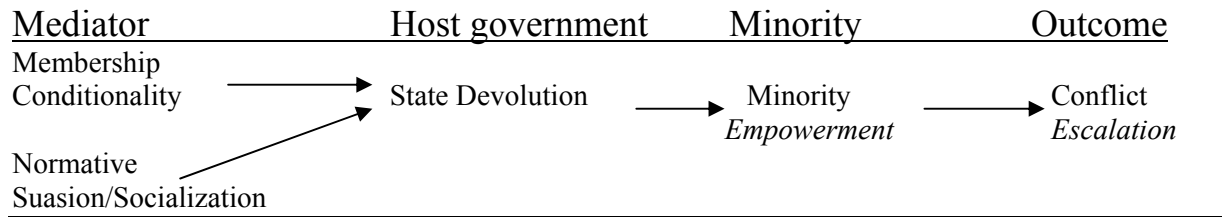
<sup>15</sup> Zahar, "Power sharing in Lebanon."

<sup>16</sup> Nordlinger, *Conflict Regulation in Divided Societies*; Rabushka and Shepsle, *Politics in Plural Societies*; Horowitz, *Ethnic Groups in Conflict*; Harris, Reilly, and Anstey, *Democracy and Deep-Rooted Conflict*.

<sup>17</sup> Cetinyan, "Ethnic Bargaining in the Shadow of Third-party Intervention"; Jenne, *Ethnic Bargaining: The Paradox of Minority Empowerment*; Jenne, "A Bargaining Theory of Minority Demands: Explaining the Dog that Did not Bite in 1990 s Yugoslavia"; Bunce, *Subversive Institutions*. Proponents of devolution counter that the reason that regional autonomy sometimes leads to secessionism is that the autonomy was inadequately implemented. Others used large-N analysis of internal conflicts to show that devolution in the form of autonomous arrangements has contributed positively to the durability of peace agreements (Hartzell, "Explaining the Stability of Negotiated Settlements to Intrastate Wars"; Hartzell, Hoddie, and Rothchild, "Stabilizing the Peace after Civil War.").

<sup>18</sup> "Ethno-territorial unit" and "minority region" are used to refer to the regional ethnic group whose leaders are challenging the state for control over that region. It is understood that most if not all such territories are made up of multiple groups that may be simultaneously challenging the dominant regional group for local control. For the purposes of conflict management, however, the relationship of concern is that between the state center and the rebelling regional group (whether or not that group constitutes the local ethnic majority).

**Figure 2. Devolution as Conflict-Promoting Mechanism**

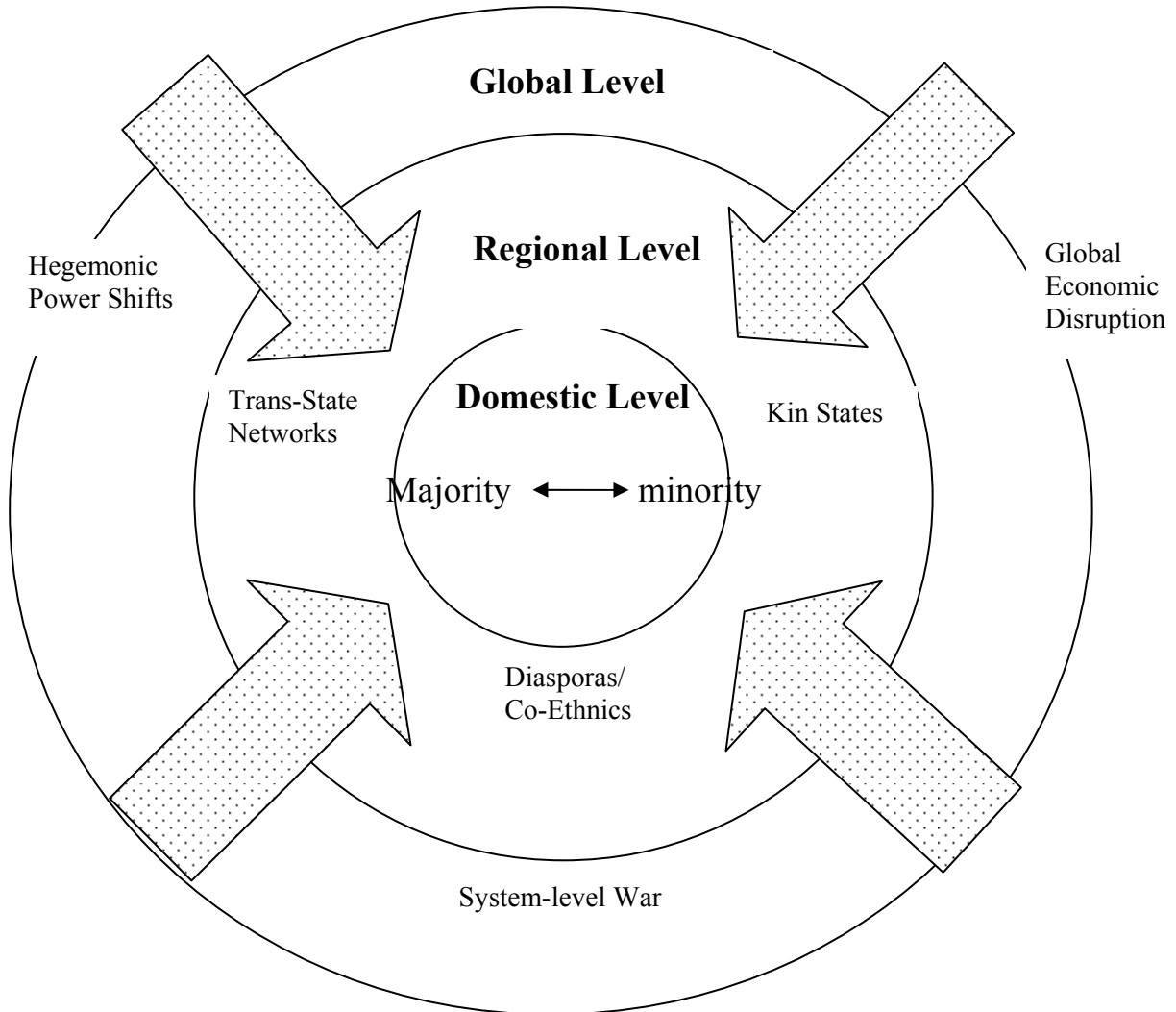


### **Nested Security: “Outside-In” Conflict Management**

This paper argues, in contrast, that induced devolution has indeterminate effects, at least in the short-term. This is because the impact of devolution depends critically upon the geopolitics of the wider neighborhood. The point of departure is that “internal” conflicts are rarely confined to the borders of a single state. Particularly conflicts that are most entrenched tend to be horizontally and vertically embedded in conflicts outside state borders.

This paper makes the argument that induced devolution is unlikely to succeed in the absence of *nested security*, a condition that might be more important than the mediation itself in reducing tensions on the ground. Nested security may be represented as a series of concentric circles—beginning with the domestic level where the minority and state majority interact at the sub-state level. Moving outward, the middle circle represents the vitally important regional level containing kin and other neighboring states as well as cross-border ethnic groups, migrants, guerrilla fighters, activists, and other entities that exert their influence across state lines. Finally, the outermost circle represents the global level, containing diasporas, transnational terrorist networks, and regional and global hegemonic powers, in addition to system-level events such as major power shifts, global financial crises, disease epidemics and world war.

Figure 3. Model of Nested Security



Conflict processes in the outer layers can escalate internal conflict in several ways. First, systemic or regional pressures can escalate internal conflict indirectly, by inadvertently tipping the regional balance of power. The empowered regional player may then intervene in the conflict state to achieve a certain goal. Systemic events such as financial crises, population imbalances, cross-border movements, or global war can also impact the conflict state by generating opportunity structures at the substate level that perpetuate and intensify sub-state conflict. Global powers, too, may escalate conflicts through *hegemonic tipping*, whereby one side is favored over another at the sub-state level. Internal conflict can also be escalated by regional level factors. For example, rival states engaged in a proxy war may intervene to support one or both combatant parties at the sub-state level. These regional conflicts may be cut off from other conflicts or they may be perpetuated by global hegemony who have a vested interest in a given outcome. The transnational diffusion of ideas or tactics of resistance may also intensify internal battles, as rebel movements copy strategies used by their counterparts in neighboring states. This dynamic can escalate and lengthen conflicts—partly by making battles more lethal and partly by providing incentives to escalate resistance. Finally, diasporas or transnational networks can directly fuel domestic conflict by bankrolling the war efforts of rebel movements or by offering cross-border sanctuaries to rebels fleeing government forces.

It is important to note that conflict processes on the domestic-level rarely have symmetric effects on conflict processes at the regional and systemic levels. This is because actors at higher levels of political order choose their behaviors based on a wider range of inputs, interests and constraints. Getting involved in a localized conflict is something that regional or global actors may or may not decide is in their interest. This means that a local conflict does not automatically “pull in” outside interveners, no matter how desperate the situation is for the interveners’ kin group. Indeed, quantitative analysis has shown that homeland states are no more likely to intervene on behalf of their ethnic kin when they are repressed than when they are not.<sup>19</sup> For domestic actors, in contrast, the decisions of regional players and global hegemony largely *determine* their geostrategic environment, which, by its very nature, affects the state of play between domestic actors by altering the opportunities and constraints available to them. For these reasons, nested security proceeds from the outside-in rather than the inside-out. The corollary to this is that nested security is generally *disrupted* from the outside-in as well.

In the same way that internal conflict can be escalated through hegemonic tipping, contagion, or diffusion, conflict may likewise be *de-escalated* through hegemonic *levelling*. This outside-in process of conflict management works in the following way. Hegemonic actors can induce regional rivals to reach a pact over a minority or territory at the heart of the conflict, effectively de-triangulating the dispute and making it easier to resolve. Hegemonic actors can also de-escalate conflicts by controlling the borders of the troubled state. If successful, then the region is *exogenously stabilized*, effectively nesting the conflict and making it easier to resolve. Importantly, however, exogenous stabilization is only a temporary fix. The resulting peace is inherently unstable because the pact is externally induced and therefore not self-enforcing. This means that the conflict may re-escalate once external pressures for peace are removed.

Conflict management is more sustainable when the regional rivals recognize a shared interest in normalized relations. In this case, they are likely to broker a deal over the minority that *is* self-enforcing because both sides have a vested interest in maintaining the peace. Such *endogenous regional stabilization* is more likely to lead to permanent de-escalation because the pact is self-enforcing, rendering the peaceful equilibrium more stable. Individuals may mobilize along alternative cleavages under such conditions due to their greater confidence in the future of the regional pact.

The theory of nested security makes three broad predictions relevant to conflict management. First, the regional equilibrium may be *destabilized* at any time as a result of power shifts or events on the

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<sup>19</sup> Davis and Moore, “Ethnicity matters.”

regional or systemic level; this yields a condition known as “unnested conflict.” There are two possible variants of this. Conflict dynamics that generate perceptions of *increased minority leverage* are likely to produce minority radicalization<sup>20</sup> leading the center to offer concessions or confront the minority through violence. Alternatively, perceptions of *increased majority leverage* lead the minority to lie low, permitting the government to repress the minority or build a liberal peace.

Second, the conflict between the relevant regional actors (generally the host state government and minority’s lobby actor) may be *exogenously* stabilized (possibly by events on the systemic level), such that the conflict is held in check by outside inducements or sanctions. In this case, overt conflict between the minority and center is likely to de-escalate, but both sides will remain mobilized and the inter-ethnic cooperation will be minimal, a condition known as “nested ethnic conflict.” Finally, the conflict between the relevant regional actors may be *endogenously* stabilized when they expect significant joint gains from maintaining peace, such as mutually beneficial trade or allying against a common enemy. Here, the domestic conflict is starved of external sources of encouragement, causing the ethnic divide to lose its political salience and permitting the emergence of inter-ethnic cooperation at the domestic level. This condition is termed “nested ethnic peace.”

**Table 1. Predictions of Nested Security**

1) Regional destabilization	—————→	Unnested Conflict
<p>Variant A: <i>If regional destabilization is accompanied by perceptions of increased minority leverage, the minority is likely to mobilize, which may lead to armed conflict.;</i></p> <p>Variant B: <i>If regional destabilization is accompanied by perceptions of increased host state leverage, the minority is likely to remain passive, and the state may engage in minority repression or implement a liberal peace.</i></p>		
2) Exogenous regional stabilization	—————→	Nested Ethnic Conflict <i>(no overt conflict, both sides remain mobilized)</i>
3) Endogenous regional stabilization	—————→	Nested Ethnic Peace <i>(ethnic divide loses political salience; emergence of inter-ethnic cooperation)</i>

Just as the path toward conflict proceeded from the outside-in, so too does the path to peace; this means that domestic stabilization requires first the neutralization of conflict dynamics at the regional and systemic levels.

### **Nested Security and Induced Devolution**

The argument advanced in this paper is that the effects of devolution may be secondary to the effects of the regional environment on minority-majority relations. If true, this means that mediation of internal conflicts is most effective in the context of a stable regional environment. If the regional power configuration is stable and especially if this configuration is supported by—and nested within—

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<sup>20</sup> Jenne, “A Bargaining Theory of Minority Demands: Explaining the Dog that Did not Bite in 1990 s Yugoslavia”; Jenne, *Ethnic Bargaining: The Paradox of Minority Empowerment*; Cetinyan, “Ethnic Bargaining in the Shadow of Third-party Intervention.”



a stable regional environment, then minority-majority relations are likely to improve, whether or not devolution has met the stated goals of the restive minority.

If, on the other hand, the hegemonic environment has become imbalanced—due to conflict spillover from a neighboring state or from a national homeland that supports its ethnic kin over the border—then autonomous institutions are unlikely to prevent an emerging conflict and may paradoxically *exacerbate* it. Moreover, these institutions may serve to empower minorities to press for greater goals, which can accelerate the conflict or provoke a government backlash. The overall effect is intensified conflict.

I test these arguments by examining three cases of induced devolution in interwar Europe that resulted in outcomes ranging from conflict resolution to secession. In doing so, I examine the conditions under which induced devolution is more or less effective in de-escalating internal tensions at the sub-state level.

**Table 2. Competing Theories and Expectations**

<b>THEORY</b>	<b>EMPIRICAL PREDICTIONS</b>
<b>Devolution ameliorates conflict</b>	When the minority has a greater degree of self-rule, it will mollify actors on all sides, undermine separatist tendencies, and lead to overall moderation.
<b>Devolution promotes conflict</b>	When the minority has a greater degree of self-rule, it helps inspire and facilitate movements for secession
<b>Nested Security</b>	When relations between the host and lobby states are destabilized, the internal conflict is likely to escalate; when host and lobby states conclude pacts, the internal conflict is likely to moderate.

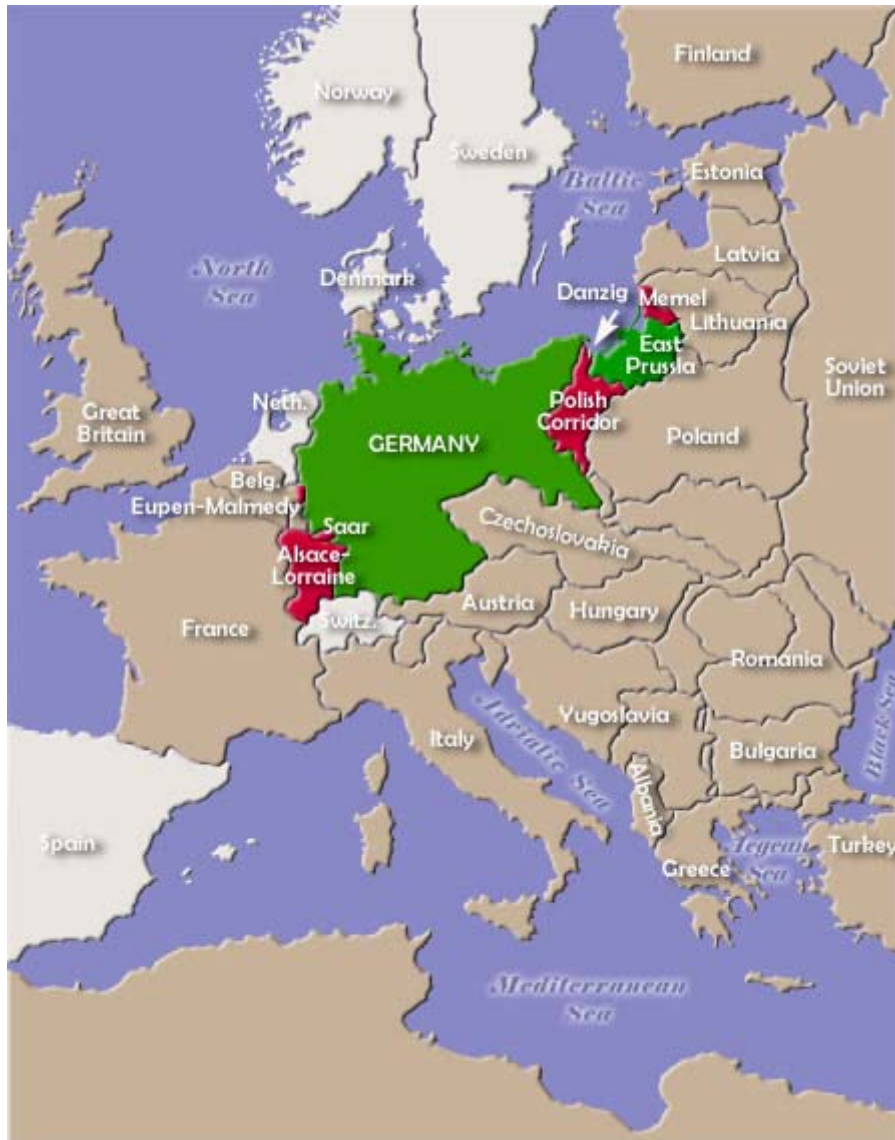
### **Induced Devolution in Interwar Period**

After World War I, the victorious Allied Powers redrew the map of Central and Eastern Europe to replace the moribund Habsburg Empire with national states. Despite efforts to rationalize political and national borders, many ethnic minorities were left outside the borders of their national states. In cases where large minorities were assigned to states for strategic or economic reasons, the states in question were compelled to sign minority treaties to guarantee the rights of these groups. Thus, the new or enlarged states of Central and Eastern Europe as well as others in South-eastern Europe were made to sign such agreements, which ultimately gave the disgruntled minorities and their patrons the right to petition for redress against their governments. In other cases of disputed territories, popular plebiscites were held to determine the final boundaries.

A third set of cases presented no easy solution to the League architects. These were territories deemed geostrategically vital to two or more states with competing claims on the land. Most of these conflicts were addressed through ad hoc arrangements under which the territory was internationally administered or where the host state was induced to devolve significant autonomy to the region in question. Here, we examine the latter approach. In Europe, these cases were three: Danzig, Memel and the Åland Islands. Unlike Saarland—internationally administered for 15 years, after which the people

were given a choice whether to join France or Germany—the League arranged for these other territories to be given autonomy within their host states. Of the three cases, the Åland Islands is the only arrangement that remains to the present day. Memel and Danzig only lasted until the late 1930s. Each of these conflicts was nested in a wider regional conflict. Memel was a port city claimed by Poland, Lithuania, and Germany. Danzig, claimed by Germany and Poland, was also a port city with considerable value for commerce. Finally, the Åland Islands, disputed by Finland and Sweden, contained key maritime bases in the Baltic Sea. The following analysis demonstrates that shifts in each of these conflicts over time are very well accounted for by shifts in bilateral relations between their host and lobby states.

**Map 1. Map of German Territorial Losses after WWI**



Source: U-S-History, <http://www.u-s-history.com/pages/h1350.html>.

\* White regions indicate states that were neutral throughout the war; red indicates German territorial losses after the war.

## **Åland Islands**

The Åland Islands, along with nearby Finland, had been controlled by the Kingdom of Sweden for centuries when Russia annexed the islands together with Finland in 1809. Under the 1856 treaty, the islands were demilitarized in accordance with the interests of Sweden and other European countries, which feared that Russia would fortify the islands to launch military campaigns against the west. Indeed, Russia had done exactly that during World War I. Although still officially at war with Russia at the end of the war, Finland obtained both independence and control of the Åland Islands. However, the Ålanders—who spoke Swedish and identified as Swedes—wanted desperately to belong to Sweden. Swedish public opinion, too, was overwhelmingly in favor of annexing the islands and openly spoke of using force if necessary. Finland objected to this strongly, arguing that the islands were part of its sovereign territory and that Sweden had no say over its internal affairs.

**Map 2. Åland Islands**



Source: [napoleonistyka.atspace.com/aland\\_islands.gif](http://napoleonistyka.atspace.com/aland_islands.gif)

### *Regional Conflict—Sweden makes demands on Finnish territory*

On August 20, 1917, separatist representatives organized a meeting in the town of Finström, where a consensus was reached that they would ask for unification with Sweden. A proclamation to this effect was delivered to the Sweden High Command in October, and an embassy was formed to represent the islands in negotiations with Sweden. In December 29, 1917, over 7,000 Ålanders signed a petition calling for returning the islands to Sweden; the resolution was introduced to the King of Sweden, Gustav V, in February of the following year. In a plebiscite at the end of the year, 95 percent of the population called for reunification. Thus began a low-level separatist movement on the islands. The leaders of the movement warned that the newly sovereign Finland would sublimate and assimilate the Swedish-speaking Ålanders who would lose their cultural and linguistic identity. These warnings were given credence by the elevation of the Finnish language under the new constitution and by the fact that the Finnish-speaking community on the islands had grown rapidly over the past few decades.

However, these motives are unlikely to have led to rebellion in the absence of pressures that tipped the regional balance of power between the minority's host and lobby states. Indeed, the revolution in Russia and civil conflict in newly independent Finnish state between conservative (White) and socialist (Red) factions on the mainland had opened a political opportunity structure, permitting the Ålanders to campaign for independence against a weak independent state and a collapsing Russian Empire.<sup>21</sup> In February 1918, the King of Sweden received a delegation of Ålanders who communicated their wish for annexation. The Swedish public also began to favor annexing the islands with the publication of articles decrying the oppression of Ålanders by the Finnish government.

<sup>21</sup> Williams, "Excluding to Protect." 92-93.

Accordingly, the Swedish government sent a contingent of soldiers to secure the liberation of the islands from Russian troops, disrupting communications between the islands and the Finnish government in the process. Having invaded the islands without permission from the Helsinki and compelling both the Russians and Finnish forces to withdraw, the Swedish troops also withdrew, but the government maintained close connections with the islands' irredentist leaders.<sup>22</sup>

These events heightened the power advantage of Sweden, the minority's lobby state, which offered material and diplomatic support to the movement, thereby signaling their interest in the islands. As the model predicts, the relative empowerment of an irredentist Swedish state relative to a weakened Finnish state encouraged the radicalization of the islanders, which had been utterly quiescent for the previous 60 years. Regional destabilization effectively unnested ethnic relations at the domestic level, leading to minority mobilization.

With the Swedish public and the Ålanders overwhelmingly in favor of unification, the government in Stockholm approached the Finnish government on behalf of the islanders. On the heels of private negotiations, the Swedes formally requested a popular plebiscite to allow the islands residents to determine their own political fate; it was understood that a plebiscite would legitimize Sweden's claims. Helsinki refused the demand on the grounds that the Peace Conference Powers had resolved other territorial conflicts by placing the "economic and military security of the nation" over the wishes of the concerned minority population.<sup>23</sup>

#### *Exogenous Regional Peace—Hegemonic Leveling and the Åland Agreement*

Britain intervened to quell the conflict as tensions escalated between the two governments. The British government proposed submitting the issue to the nascent League Council, which had been established to handle just such disputes. One scholar observed that "from the moment that the dispute had been laid before the League, it was evident that the danger of war had receded."<sup>24</sup> This is because Britain had persuaded the regional players to accept external mediation of the conflict. As a result of hegemonic levelling, the Åland conflict became a nested conflict and therefore easier to manage. Finland consented to placing the question before the League and a special meeting was held in London on June 19, 1920 where two governments were invited to argue their cases before the Council. Presenting the Swedish side was Socialist Prime Minister Hjalmar Branting together with two delegates from the Åland Islands; they sought a popular plebiscite to determine the fate of the islands. The Finns objected that the question of the islands was purely a sovereign affair and that Finland had sole jurisdiction over the territory, regardless of the ethnic make-up of its population.<sup>25</sup>

The League Council established an International Commission of three jurists to study the conflict and provide the Council with an advisory opinion on the matter. The jurists returned the opinion on September 5, 1920 that the Åland Island question was not simply an internal affair, as it "originated in the separatist movement among the inhabitants, who invoked the principle of national self-determination, and certain military events which accompanied and followed the separation of Finland from the Russian Empire."<sup>26</sup> The Commission thus acknowledged the inter-state character of the dispute and concluded that "a solution in the nature of a *compromise*, based on an extensive grant of liberty to minorities, may appear necessary according to international legal conception and may even be dictated by the interests of peace."<sup>27</sup>

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<sup>22</sup> Brown, "The Aaland Islands Question." 268-269.

<sup>23</sup> *Official Journal, League of Nations*, Special Supplement No. 1, August 1920, 5, in Brown, 269.

<sup>24</sup> Walters, *A History of the League of Nations.*, 104.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, 103-4.

<sup>26</sup> *Official Journal, League of Nations*, Special Supplement, No. 3, October 1920, 14, point 2.

<sup>27</sup> Emphasis mine. *Official Journal, League of Nations*, Special Supplement, No. 3, October, 1920, 6.

In light of the inter-state character of the dispute, the Commission focused on resolving the territorial conflict *between Sweden and Finland*, not between Finland and the Ålanders. The satisfaction of the Ålanders was never a major consideration in these deliberations. This is because it was understood that the regional conflict drove the internal conflict, rather than vice versa. The Swedish-Finnish conflict had incited the separatist conflict, and the restoration of Swedish-Finnish peace would in turn marginalize separatism, even if the Ålanders were not wholly satisfied with the outcome. The Council accepted the opinion of the jurists and sent an expert commission to the region for a final opinion before issuing its decision..

The expert commission sought to split the difference between Swedish and Finnish claims by recommending that the islands remain in Finnish hands, but be given broad territorial autonomy to protect their Swedish character. They thus recommended establishing broad autonomy with the proviso that the islands could not be fortified militarily—a concern shared by all states in the region.

Helsinki objected to League interference in what it considered a domestic matter. Nonetheless, it passed its first Autonomy Act in 1920 in order to “guarantee Ålanders the possibility to take care of their affairs in as free a manner as is possible for a region that is not an independent state.”<sup>28</sup> The Act aimed to broaden provisions for autonomy for the islands from what was provided under the 1919 Finnish constitution. Although it provided for the establishment of a local assembly with legislative authority, the Ålanders rejected the Act, claiming it did not meet their demands. Undaunted, the League hammered out an agreement between Sweden and Finland that had very similar provisions. The most contentious issues in negotiations involved the militarization of the islands, the exact inter-state boundary and extent of the territorial waters, as well as the status of the islands in case of war. The questions surrounding autonomy and the status of the islanders themselves were of secondary importance. According to one scholar, “Both the Swedish and the Finnish representatives evidenced a conciliatory attitude toward each other and toward the problem as a whole, thus considerably facilitating the work of the conference.”<sup>29</sup> The Åland Agreement resolved the inter-state dispute, and was signed by the principals in October 1921 over the objections of the Ålanders who were compelled to make their peace with the agreement. Consistent with the expectations of nested security, exogenous regional stabilization served to nest the internal conflict, and the islanders henceforth abandoned their irredentist demands.

#### *Endogenous Regional Peace—Sweden and Finland Find Common Ground*

A noted historian of the League wrote that “life in the Åland Islands was happy and peaceful until the menace of the Second World War began to throw its ominous shadows over the Baltic.”<sup>30</sup> Despite the peaceful atmosphere, significant grievances remained among the Ålanders themselves. These mainly revolved around the growing presence of Finns on the islands as well as land reforms that led to the net land transfer of property from Swedish- to Finnish-speakers.<sup>31</sup> In the context of the bilateral pact, however, separatism among the islanders remained latent.

In the late 1930s, the Swedish-Finnish pact deepened into an alliance as the two governments sought to defend against German and Russian expansion. In 1939, Sweden and Finland brought the issue of militarizing the Åland Islands before the League Council. Over the objections of the Ålanders, who were greatly aggrieved by Helsinki and Stockholm’s collusion to militarize their lands, the two governments launched a campaign to abrogate the 1921 settlement in order to fortify the islands. The

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<sup>28</sup> Proposition for the first Autonomy Act, *Ålands lagsamling* (Mariehamn: Ålands landskapsstyrelse, 2001), 741, translation by Rhodri Williams, in Williams, “Excluding to Protect.” 94.

<sup>29</sup> Padelford and Andersson, “The Åland Islands Question.” 477.

<sup>30</sup> Walters, 105.

<sup>31</sup> Pekka Kalevi Hämäläinen, *Nationalitetskampen och språkstriden i Finland, 1917-1939* (Helsingfors:Hofer Schildts Förlag, 1968), 34, as cited in Williams, “Excluding to Protect.” 93.

main concern was that the islands would fall into the hands of an aggressor such as Germany or Russia, which would threaten the industrial and military might of both countries. They therefore requested the consent of all the original signatories of the 1921 Convention to permit joint militarization the islands. All the signatories except Russia ultimately gave their permission, and Finland went forward with fortification plans.

These events marked another shift in the domestic relations between the Ålanders and Finland. This is because the islanders had become further alienated from their lobby state, Sweden, which they felt had betrayed its ethnic kin in pursuit of its sovereign interests. Meanwhile, a consolidated regional peace ushered in a new phase of peaceful co-existence between Finland and Ålanders, who became utterly reconciled to remaining in the Finnish state. In the postwar period, the Ålanders no longer saw themselves as an occupied Finnish possession, but rather an integral yet autonomous part of Finland. Consolidation of peace at the domestic level thus followed the consolidation of peace at the regional level.

### *Memel*

The Memel region (Klaipėda region in Lithuanian; Memelland in German) was predominantly Lithuanian in the hinterland, while the port town of Memel was ethnically German inhabited by roughly 70,000 Germans; the Allies had stripped the town and its hinterland from postwar Germany.<sup>32</sup> (see Maps 1 and 3) The territory was claimed by Lithuania, which desperately sought an outlet to the Baltic Sea to achieve greater control over its imports and exports. Poland was interested in the territory for similar reasons, and the territory was also contested by Germany on the basis of its ethnic composition. Until a determination of its status could be made, the Versailles Treaty placed the region under control of the League and the League's enforcers, the Council of Ambassadors. In 1920, the area north of the Nieman River was thus made into the Memel Territory, protected by a contingent of French soldiers. At this point, the predominantly German population of Memel region favored annexation by Germany or, failing that, a free Memelland. A much smaller group of Lithuanian activists sought unification with their mother country, and set forth their claims in the 1918 Act of Tilsit.

### *Regional Destabilization—Lithuanian Invasion and the Klaipėda Revolt*

In the early 1920s, France and Poland began to advocate in favor of creating a free port administered by the League along the lines of what was agreed in Danzig. Sensing that it would never obtain sovereign control over Memel and fearing that it would be deprived of an important port city, the Lithuanian government planned a takeover of Memel in January 1923, with the tacit support of Germany. In a matter of days, a little over 1,000 Lithuanian soldiers, officers and marksmen crossed the border, overcame a small French occupation force and asserted sovereign control over the territory. They justified their invasion on the basis of the Tilsit Act, which they claimed demonstrated local support for annexation. The Allies protested this move vigorously but failed to move against the tiny state. The Council of Ambassadors put forward a plan for joint Polish-Lithuanian administration of Memel, but Lithuania turned this down. The Council then washed their hands of the dispute and turned the matter over to the League. With Lithuania unchecked by the Allies, the regional balance of power tilted decisively in favor of Lithuania, effectively unnesting internal relations between Lithuanians and Germans in Memel and encouraging the Lithuanian minority to radicalize.

Consistent with the model's expectations, hundreds of Lithuanian Memellanders joined in the takeover, and at the end of the successful campaign, the Supreme Salvation Committee of Lithuania Minor asserted interim control over the region, established a local assembly, and voted unanimously for Lithuanian annexation. Among other things, they declared their intention to dissolve the French

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<sup>32</sup> Although the port city was German-speaking, the hinterland was Lithuanian-speaking.

Directory, free political prisoners, elevate the status of the Lithuanian language, and declare martial law.

*Exogenous Regional Stabilization—Hegemonic Leveling and the Memel Convention*

As noted above, the Allies had failed to counter the *fait accompli* by Lithuania. With the simultaneous French occupation of the Ruhr, the Council of Ambassadors had been spread too thin to deal effectively with the crisis in Memel. The Council therefore induced the Lithuanian government to devolve extensive powers to Memel. The agreement mandated that German and Lithuanian be made official languages on equal level. Memel would also have its own legislative assembly, tax authority, judicial system, social security, citizenship, and control over its natural resources. At the same time, Lithuania was given sovereign control over Memel as well as year-round access to the port, which was to be externally supervised by a neutral member of the Harbour Board under the League Transit Committee. In March 1924, these terms were accepted by the Lithuanian government, which had succeeded in its military aims of annexing the territory and gaining access to the port city. Poland decried the agreement, but did not actively oppose it.

Poland's acceptance of this unfavorable solution was largely due to perceptions among Polish statesmen that postwar Poland was essentially a client state of the Allies and that it would not do to displease them. For these reasons, as Walters writes, "the wisest Polish Foreign Ministers...showed a patience and moderation which was not usually characteristic of the national temperament."<sup>33</sup>

As a result of hegemonic leveling, the region was exogenously stabilized, leading us to expect a moderation of internal tensions. Indeed, although Lithuanian leaders periodically attempted to "Lithuanize" the region in order to dilute its strongly German character, the international statutes governing the region ensured that the region's inhabitants remained relatively unmolested, even after the authoritarian Lithuanian leader Antanas Smetona came to power in a 1926 coup. For the most part, the region remained democratic and tolerant of diversity and political dissent through most of the interwar period.

*Regional Destabilization—Rise of the Reich and Rebellion of German Memellanders*

The rise of the Reich began to foster a new regional conflict—this time between Lithuania and Germany. Having obtained a permanent seat on the League Council in 1926, Berlin routinely seized the Council to deliberate complaints from its co-ethnics, including ethnic Germans in Memel. In response, Lithuania attempted to crack down on German nationalists in the Memel Territory. In this way, tensions gradually escalated between the state governments.

The growing regional conflict effectively unnested the Memel conflict, leading German Memellanders to accelerate their demands against Lithuania. With Nazi Germany at their back, German Memellanders put forward far more extreme demands than they had earlier, when their position had been far more vulnerable. Predictably, petitions from ethnic Germans multiplied with the rise of Germany and its attendant lobbying on behalf of kin abroad. The German minority continually made complaints of discrimination and repression by the government, despite the fact that they were economically and politically advantaged relative to other groups in the region. As one scholar put it, "the German Memellanders (they had half the population but all the power) were high-handed and provocative."<sup>34</sup> The escalation of tensions between Lithuanians and Germans on the ground had everything to do with the actions of the German government. Walters again writes, "The Germans might accuse the Lithuanians of violating their engagements. But their real purpose was not to ensure that the Statute was respected, but to hasten the day when Memel should once more lie within the

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<sup>33</sup> Walters, *A History of the League of Nations*. 304.

<sup>34</sup> Walters, 449-450.

frontiers of Germany.”<sup>35</sup> A parallel Nazi movement emerged in Memel that grew increasingly emboldened, and in March 1939, Germany reoccupied Memel without resistance from either the Lithuanian government or the Allied Powers.

### Danzig

Established by the Poles centuries earlier, the port city of Danzig (Gdańsk in Polish) was invaluable to the Polish state as its only outlet to the sea. German rulers had coveted it for centuries and launched military campaigns to capture the city as early as the 14<sup>th</sup> century. That Poland was economically dependent on the city was recognized by Frederick the Great who famously said “whosoever possesses the mouth of the Vistula and the city of Danzig will be more master of Poland than the King who reigns there.” Due to the commercial value of the port, the Allied Powers originally intended to strip this important city from Germany and cede it to the new Polish state. A “Polish Corridor” that contained the city had already been carved out of former German territory to give Poland access to the sea. However, the city was ethnically German, so Germany—which also valued the city—had a strong case for retaining it.

Map 3. Map of Memelland and Danzig



Source: [www.en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Klaipėda\\_Region](http://www.en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Klaipėda_Region)

<sup>35</sup> Walters, 305.



*Exogenous Regional Stabilization—Establishing the Free City of Danzig*

In view of this dilemma, the League determined that the city would remain under Polish sovereign power, but induced Warsaw to devolve extensive powers to the region. Under this arrangement, Danzig became a Free City with a League-appointed supervisor. The city would have broad self-government in internal affairs—including a local parliament, executive body, judicial system and currency; German was established as the sole official language—but would be subordinated to Poland in foreign relations. Poland also gained free use of the city's railways, waterways, docks, and so on. The Germans accepted this arrangement because they had no bargaining leverage whatsoever. Poland, meanwhile, depended on security guarantees from the West to defend its newly independent status. It therefore had every incentive to curry the favor of the League and proved very amenable to the agreement in Council meetings. Accordingly, in the Paris Convention of November 1920 and the Warsaw Agreement of October 1921, Poland vowed "to protect the interests of the Free City of Danzig so far as possible," and to "promote [Danzig's] competitive possibilities with respect to other harbors."<sup>36</sup>

From the mid-1920s to the early-1930s, an uneasy peace developed between the German Danzigers and the Polish government. For the most part, the Poles and Germans managed to get along—both within the city and between the city and Warsaw. However, the High Commissioner of Danzig was compelled to adjudicate scores of disputes between the two groups. Most of these cases amounted to complaints by German Danzigers that the Poles were attempting to subvert their autonomy. For their part, the Poles argued that the Danzigers sought to restrict Poland's privileges in the region. Although the Commissioner's mediations were sometimes successful, the majority of cases were appealed to the Permanent Court of International Justice.

As the model expects, the domestic conflict between German Danzigers and the Polish government improved once bilateral relations between Germany and Poland had stabilized. Thus, the 1934 Non-Aggression Pact between Germany and Poland led to a significant thaw in Danzig-Polish relations. Hitler had personally warned the Nazi government in Danzig to refrain from persecuting the Polish minority in the city. Meanwhile, Warsaw discouraged anti-Nazi campaigns by the Polish minority in Danzig. The Polish Ambassador to Germany even told Hermann Göring in a meeting that "a National Socialist [Nazi] Senate in Danzig is also most desirable from our point of view, since it brought about a rapprochement between the Free City and Poland." Göring responded that "the Chancellor is taking a firm stand that the Danzig problem should under no circumstances create difficulties in Polish-German relations."<sup>37</sup>

*Regional Destabilization—Rise of Nazi Germany and Mobilization of Danzigers*

By the late 1930s, Nazi Germany had assumed an expansionist foreign policy toward its neighbors. This new regional conflict unnested the conflict between the Danzigers and the Poles, as the empowered German kin began to radicalize for a greater share of state resources. Walters noted that "the Free City usually reflected in miniature the political complexion of the Reich. For the past three years a left-centre coalition had been in power; and, in spite of the unchangeable dislike and suspicion which Poles and Danzigers cherished for one another, their official differences had been dealt with in a reasonably accommodating temper."<sup>38</sup> Danzig's local elections were held after Germany's elections, yielding the same nationalistic leadership as emerged victorious in Germany's elections. In fact, the Nazis in Danzig managed to win a majority of seats in the local legislature just months after Hitler had assumed power. The Danzig Nationalist government now depended upon the support of the Nazi

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<sup>36</sup> Karl Halfar, *Danzig und Gdingen*, *Erde und Wirtschaft* 5(1931), as cited by van Cleef, "Danzig and Gdynia." 103.

<sup>37</sup> Jedrzejewicz, *Diplomat in Berlin*, 214, cited by Prazmowska, "The Role of Danzig in Polish-German Relations on the Eve of the Second World War." 80-81.

<sup>38</sup> Walters, *A History of the League of Nations.*, 453-454.

party, and right-wing German unionists became more outspoken in their views that Danzig rightfully belonged to Germany. Conflict in the city escalated as the Warsaw-backed Polish minority responded by calling for Polish annexation. This led to personal retaliations and street battles. Things got so bad that the Polish diplomatic representative in Danzig resigned on the grounds that he could guarantee the safety of neither the Polish minority nor their property.

The Danzig High Commissioner, Count Manfred Gravina, declined to call in the Polish army given the dangerous escalation of tensions that might result and instead sent a report to the Council explaining the status of ethnic relations in the city and asking for intervention. That the rapporteur for Danzig affairs was British “had a restraining influence upon the disputing parties,” and neither side chose to escalate the conflict at that point given their unwillingness to provoke Great Powers on the League Council. Indeed, the nationalist president of Danzig, Hermann Rauschning, shrank from persecuting the City’s intellectuals and Jews largely because Danzig still relied on the League’s guarantee against a Polish takeover. This restraint continued “so long as they still had that minimum of defence which the League could afford them.”<sup>39</sup> The defense consisted primarily of the Council’s threat that the League would remove their guarantee of Danzig’s status as a free city, making them vulnerable to Polish intrigues.

By the late 1930s, Danzig’s constitution was essentially a dead letter, and the High Commissioner’s status in the Free City a fiction. Although the Free City was no longer, the League appointed a new supervisor in 1937. Danzig’s Nazi leaders then began to dismantle democratic institutions in the city—disbanding opposition parties, arresting leaders of the democratic opposition, and abolishing the opposition press. At the same time, the Nazi leadership worked with their patrons in Berlin to achieve a two-thirds majority in the city’s *Volksstag*. At this point, League mediation went underground, and the High Commissioner communicated secretly with the Allies over developments in Danzig. The Allies attempted to work through diplomatic channels in Berlin to moderate its support of Danzig radicals. It was through this quiet mediation that Burckhardt managed to convince the Nazis in Germany and Danzig to postpone implementation of anti-Jewish Nuremberg laws in Danzig three times in 1937-8. Nonetheless, on the very day that the Molotov-Ribbentrop Treaty was signed in 1939, the Danzig constitution was dissolved and a local Nazi leader was declared the direct ruler of the city. He turned up at the residence of the High Commissioner to relieve him of his duties. In the end, Poland’s refusal to surrender Danzig and the rest of the Polish Corridor led to the Nazi invasion and the beginning of World War II.

## Conclusion and Summary Evaluation

This paper develops and tests a model to explain the variable effectiveness of regional autonomies in resolving domestic conflict. The basic argument is that the wider neighborhood, particularly relations between the major regional players, often explains the success of autonomous arrangements better than the institutions themselves. Where domestic conflicts are generated or perpetuated by events in the regional environment, conflict management must proceed from the outside-in as well. Peace mediators should therefore first aim to manage regional instabilities—either by controlling the borders of the conflict state to prevent the influx of refugees, guerrilla fighters, weapons, or by rectifying regional power imbalances through hegemonic levelling.

Comparative analysis of three cases of interwar devolution confirms these predictions. While all three regions received extensive autonomy under their respective host states, neither the degree nor the timing of devolution explains the most important shifts in tensions on the ground. In the case of the Åland Islands, the devolution agreement worked out by the League in 1921 offered little more than what was contained in the Finland’s devolution Act a year earlier, which the islanders had rebuffed.

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<sup>39</sup> Ibid., 618.

Yet, the island representatives accepted the 1921 deal, because their lobby state, Sweden, had thrown in with the agreement and was no longer at their back. We see the opposite trend in the cases of Danzig and Memel. In the case of Memel, the autonomy arrangement the German Memellanders had accepted in the 1920s were no longer satisfactory in the 1930s—they increasingly lodged complaints against the Lithuanian government and demanded ever greater autonomy and ultimately German annexation. In Danzig, too, the institutional structures used by both sides to resolve their disputes in the 1920s were no longer acceptable to the majority of German Danzigers in the 1930s, in view of the rise of Nazi Germany.

Neither does the evidence suggest that autonomy *increased* the likelihood of conflict. All three regions obtained autonomy agreements, yet only two of them led to conflict. Autonomy in the Åland Islands was quite extensive, and yet the separatist movement was quickly subverted and later died out completely. In Memel and Danzig, too, autonomy failed to generate secessionist impulses around a Memel or Danzig national identity, but instead yielded a long period of non-mobilization, followed by movements for annexation by their mother countries. It *is* possible that, had these autonomies been in place longer, they might have generated the kind of national identities capable of mobilizing secessionist movements. However, the Åland Islands autonomy is already 90 years old and shows little sign of generating secessionism.

Conflict in each case was instead driven by the level of conflict between the host and lobby states on the regional or bilateral level. Thus, the separatist movement in the Åland Islands extended from 1917 to 1921—exactly the period of conflict between the war-weary Finnish state and irredentist Swedish government. This effectively unnested relations between the Ålanders and Finns, laying the groundwork for a low-level irredentist movement on the islands. Ethnic relations were put back on track soon after both governments had agreed to submit their dispute to the League for third-party mediation. When Sweden and Finland deepened their alliance in the late 1930s, relations between the Ålanders and Finnish government were cemented still further; henceforth, the Ålanders no longer thought seriously of a separate existence outside the Finnish state.

In Memel, too, Lithuania's conquest of the Memel Region in 1923 de-stabilized the regional environment, which unnested ethnic relations within the Memel region. The Lithuanian invasion transformed the once tiny Greater Lithuania movement into a revolt of the Lithuanian minority against the French administration and in favour of annexation. Ethnic relations within Memel were stabilized after the League induced the government to agree to an autonomy arrangement under the Memel Convention. The conflict worsened once more with the rise of Nazi Germany in the 1930s. This time, the German Memellanders rebelled with encouragement from the Nazi German government..

Danzig followed a very similar pattern. Danzig's autonomous arrangements appeared to have resolved the domestic conflict only until relations between Poland and Germany worsened in the late 1920s. Later, the German-Polish non-aggression pact of 1934 re-stabilized relations between Warsaw and Berlin, ushering in a period of ethnic harmony in Danzig. In the 1930s, however, Nazi Germany signalled its intent to expand to the east, and ethnic relations in Danzig worsened yet again. Meanwhile, a parallel Nazi movement emerged in Danzig, paving the way for German invasion and occupation.

This analysis is not meant to suggest that induced devolution plays no useful role in conflict management. To the contrary, autonomous arrangements often serve to resolve the dispute between the lobby and host governments, which can stabilize the regional environment. The cases of Danzig and Memel are good illustrations of this, as the autonomy arrangements split the difference between the competing claims of regional disputants. The most important lesson is that regional (and thus domestic) stabilization is an ongoing process, driven by wider geopolitical pressures that tip the regional balance of power, unnesting internal conflicts once thought resolved. Exploiting these insights means committing to ongoing rather than one-off mediations, whereby conflict-management institutions are continually recalibrated in response to geopolitical shifts in the wider neighborhood.

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