[11]

Counting the Dead

History counts its skeletons in round numbers.
A thousand and one remains a thousand,
as though the one had never existed:
an imaginary embryo, an empty cradle,
an ABC never read,
air that laughs, cries, grows,
emptiness running down steps toward the garden,
nobody's place in the line.

WISLAWA SZYMBORSKA, 'Hunger Camp at Jaslo', 1993[1]

Death tolls are the simplest measure of the scale of wars, the purest description of cost and the strongest indicator of sacrifice. Their detail allows martyrs to be mourned, monuments to be erected, history books written and national myths sustained. The symbolic nature of the death toll means that it can easily acquire political baggage. Casualties can be minimised to sustain morale or exaggerated to arouse anger, used to highlight the bravery of those prepared to die for a noble cause or the burden of a foolish military adventure. Those inflicting casualties may play the numbers up, to depress the enemy, yet might also want to play them down to show that they care about the Geneva conventions. The death tolls of the past are thrown back at former enemies to recall their crimes and as a demand for contrition. The Chinese government still

regularly reminds their people of the atrocities committed by the Japanese after the 1937 invasion; the Russian government invokes the hardships of the early 1940s when explaining how harsh international conditions can be endured again; more positively, the German government atones for past Nazi atrocities. The importance of these memories and myths means that there can be anger against those who try to disturb them, suggesting that the sacrifices were pointless or that they have been exaggerated to sway popular consciousness.[2]

During the First World War the Turkish government wished to rid themselves of Christian Armenians living in the Ottoman Empire, believing them to be supporters of Russia. Their effort to do so lasted until after the war's conclusion. It left, according to some estimates, up to 1.5 million Armenians dead and others expelled. Other estimates put the number much lower, around half that amount. The question of how many died depends on what is believed to have been the Armenian population prior to the massacre, those still living in the country at its conclusion, and the numbers that escaped. The most contentious issue, however, is whether this constituted genocide, a term not in use at the time. Turkey complains bitterly whenever any reference is made to these events as genocide. They accept many Armenians died, if not in the numbers claimed, but do deny that this was deliberate and systematic, and point to Muslims killed by Armenians at the same time. One consequence of the determination with which Turkey pursues this issue is that attempts to sort out the evidence soon get caught in the crossfire.[3]

Many of the problems of counting were explored in a book published in 1923 by the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, an organisation established in 1910 to promote the abolition of war. 'Perhaps', observed one of its authors, 'when people come to appreciate what glory, pillage, and the desire for conquest really cost they will find the price too high: and then peace will reign forever.'[4] This book consisted of a rather sketchy, 'preliminary' account of the losses incurred during the recent war, preceded by a substantial analysis of all available sources on the human cost of war up to that point, including, unlike COW, both the Seven Years' War and the Napoleonic Wars. The estimate of up to 11 million military deaths for the Napoleonic Wars remains close to numbers in current use.

Samuel Dumas, a French professor, in discussing these previous wars acknowledged the problems of scanty and often unreliable evidence, and the extent to which the numbers were often subject to deliberate deception. He also stressed just how much greater the military losses were from disease than from battle. This was also true with civilians. One measure used in the analysis was declining birth rates.

Death tolls, especially when confined to battle, only capture one aspect of the tragedy of war.[5] When individuals die their families are left bereaved; of the injured some will die later and others will be incapable of returning to normal life, left physically or psychologically damaged; homes are destroyed and social infrastructure collapses. War leads to disease and malnutrition or a breakdown in law and order which adds to the overall levels of violence in society. Sexual assaults follow armies as they move through populated areas. Those seeking to flee the immediate impact of war often put themselves through terrible hardships, becoming either internally displaced or full refugees. As the fortunes of war change, some of these might return home while others will be forever exiled. War may just be the worst of many bad things afflicting a country that combine to make life progressively miserable, including oppressive governments and natural disasters. It is entirely possible that deaths from indirect causes can be almost as high as those caused by deliberate killing.[6]

Ignoring the fate of civilians distorts the reality of war, even if including them results in imprecision and uncertainty. The consequences of their exclusion can be seen by noting that, while COW lists total battle deaths for Korea as 909,000 by some accounts, if civilians were included the figure could reach some 4 million. It was starvation and disease that did for most of the estimated two million people who died in Cambodia under Pol Pot in the 1970s. The 80–100,000 people killed directly was large enough by any standards, but still perhaps only 4 per cent of the total.

During the nineteenth century brutal attacks on civilians were a way of showing enemy populations how they would suffer if they resisted. In the twentieth century the elimination of whole groups of people of supposedly inferior race or dangerous belief was adopted as a war aim. In the twenty-first century, extreme Islamist groups saw the murder of apostates and

unbelievers a vital political goal. Murdering civilians with no capacity to resist in large numbers is a category of killing that is war-like but involves no battle, of which the Nazi holocaust against the Jews is the prime example. One of the most gruesome of recent times was the Rwandan genocide of 1994, with estimates of those killed put at anywhere between 500,000 and 1,000,000.[7] It did not figure in either the standard COW or PRIO databases. The PRIO developed a new category of 'one-sided violence' to accommodate such events, but these cannot really be considered separate from war, as war creates the conditions that make them possible.[8] In Rwanda the lack of actual resistance indicated the speed and single-mindedness of the militia offensive. Would some serious skirmishes in a couple of villages have suddenly moved this whole episode onto a list of wars? The deaths suffered at the hands of an oppressive government have at times been comparable to casualties in wars, but kept out of the databases of war by a lack of organised resistance.[9]

All these issues created a problem for those who wished to base their studies on accurate measurements of casualties. If the aim was to compare different wars, rather than convey their full horror, then there was a case for using the narrowest and supposedly most reliable of measures, those who died in battle. This was COW's approach. But even here care is needed. Many military deaths during a war occur away from actual battle. American battle-deaths in the COW database record 116,516 for the First World War, 405,400 for the Second World War, 54,487 for the Korean War of the early 1950s, 58,153 for the Vietnam War from 1965 to 1973, 376 for the 1991 Gulf War, but only two for the 2001 invasion of Afghanistan and 140 for the 2003 invasion of Iraq. These numbers included those who were killed in combat but also those who died as a result of accidents, disease, or also as a result of being prisoners of war. COW did not distinguish these two types of causes, but they are relevant. Combat deaths were less than half of the total in the First World War and still about half in the Second, a ratio that was maintained into the 1991 Gulf War.[10]

Contrast the 22,000 French soldiers who died of yellow fever in Haiti at the start of the nineteenth century and the approximately 18,000 British and French soldiers who died of cholera during the Crimean War with zero British fatalities from 29 soldiers hospitalised because they had contracted

an infectious disease in Afghanistan in 2002. By then recruits were likely to be healthier, and so able to cope better with injury. They were inoculated against what would once have been killer diseases as they moved into unfamiliar territory. Body armour provided better protection, and if troops were injured in battle they got much improved treatment on the spot and were then speedily evacuated to a field hospital. Until the middle of the last century Disease and Non-Battle Injury (DNBI) was the major cause of death for soldiers deployed to war. Instead of the evacuation of an injured soldier involving days of being carried on a litter, a soldier fighting for a modern army should be whisked away on a helicopter and get to a well-equipped facility within an hour. So, Tanisha Fazal argued, war has become 'less lethal'. Between 1946 and 2008, there was a 50 per cent decline in known battle deaths. By contrast there was only a 20 per cent decline in estimated battle casualties. Battle deaths were therefore declining more than twice as quickly as battle casualties. The same conflict that produced 1,200 casualties in 1860 was likely to have produced 800 casualties in 1980. [11]

WITH MODERN ARMED FORCES THERE ARE ESTABLISHED AND reliable means of recording death, injury, or missing in action. With less organised armies the position is much more difficult. Retrospective forms of accounting draw on whatever information comes to hand, whether field reports from fighting units, newspaper stories, benefits claims, or medical records, but these are often incomplete or ambiguous. Mortality rates over time can identify before and after effects of a war. Census data can help work out the size of a dip in a country's population. Post-war surveys might sample the losses suffered by families and the prevalence of war-related injuries. All these measures raise their own issues of comprehensiveness, representativeness, and reliability.

The difficulties can be illustrated with the American Civil War. Not long after the event the death toll was put at 620,000, of which just over 360,000 were from the North and the rest from the South. This was the number used by COW. It was the result of painstaking work by two Union Army veterans, William Fox and Thomas Livermore. As there were no procedures in place during the war to identify and count the dead,

wounded, and missing in action, Fox worked through every report and record he could find. With the North there were claims for pensions and survivors' benefits, but there was no such evidence for the South. His initial, sketchy analysis on the Confederate side offered a round number of 94,000. Livermore raised this to 258,000 by assuming the same ratio of accident and disease-related deaths to combat-related on the Confederate side as on the Union side.[12] The 620,000 number was long left unchallenged.[13] In 2011 J. David Hacker, a demographer, demonstrated that the South's losses had probably been underestimated.[14] It was less urbanised, so disease was probably much higher than in the North; its young men would not have acquired the degree of immunity to infectious 'camp' diseases. This would have become even more acute during the last year of the war, as medical care and food supplies deteriorated. Using census data to measure the impact on the overall population, Hacker concluded that 'excess' male deaths from the war were between 650,000 and 850,000, with 750,000 a reasonable midpoint. That was about 20 per cent higher than the previous estimate.

With the more confused and ambiguous situations found with insurgencies, different issues arise. To illustrate the problems of counting even on a comparatively small scale, Kelly Greenhill examined a report that the terrorist group Boko Haram had massacred between 150 and 2,000 people in a village in north-eastern Nigeria in early 2015. The incident took place in a dangerous area controlled by insurgents, beyond modern connectivity, with only satellite pictures for visual information. Getting reliable information from 'morgues, hospitals, and law-enforcement entities' was hampered because they were 'internally inept, externally obstructed, structurally inadequate, or simply corrupt'. Eyewitnesses' reports also had to be treated carefully because individuals might answer in such a way as 'to protect themselves from psychological and physical harm' or to gain reward by concocting or embellishing answers. It was difficult to distinguish irregular fighters from ordinary civilians, as they would look the same in death, and even more so to distinguish direct deaths from the indirect. Was a child drowning in a river as she tried to escape a victim of war or just of an unfortunate accident?

Greenhill noted that those who took the most care in counting

casualties, by cross-referencing media reports of fatalities with figures from hospitals, morgues, and NGOs, were likely to generate lower numbers than more active methods, by getting data from statistically representative selections of individuals and households that live in or have escaped from affected areas. Here the risk was likely to be one of over-counting. In the case of this particular incident, she observed that it suited both local officials, who wanted the government to take action, and Boko Haram, who wanted to show off their strength, to inflate the numbers. And then once the numbers reached the public domain, 'they take on a life of their own.'[15]

That this could be true with one incident at a particular time threw into relief the problems of developing reliable numbers for really large wars. The Second World War resulted in unprecedented levels of killing, with conflicts in Asia and Europe merging, the murder of millions of civilians on an industrial scale, and every type of warfare, from naval encounters, massive air raids, lightning offensives, dogged defending, and partisan resistance, concluding with atomic bombs.

Germans died in many ways during the war—in battle and air raids, persecuted by their own government, or in the mass expulsions at the end of the war. Adding all these up has led to a total of some 7.5 million, but each of the component parts has been questioned. A total of 4.3 million for the losses during the military campaign is based on the German High Command's wartime figures, although these figures became increasingly unreliable as the system for their compilation broke down during the later stages of the war.[16]

These uncertainties are moderate compared with those surrounding Soviet casualties. Stalin, perhaps conscious that his own poor decisions had allowed Hitler to catch his country by surprise, at first referred to 7 million total deaths. By 1961 a much higher figure of 20 million was in official use, although acknowledged as probably too low. In 1990, President Mikhail Gorbachev spoke of 'almost 27 million'. Then the military dead, based on a hitherto-secret General Staff report from the mid-1960s, was put at 8,668,400. This was made up of 6,329,600 killed in action or died of wounds, 555,500 from non-combat deaths, and 1,783,300 missing in action who were never found and prisoners of war who did not

return.[17] These figures were criticised as underestimates.[18] On civilian deaths the Russian Academy of Sciences published an estimate in 1995 that put those in areas occupied by Germans at 13.7 million. This number was made up of acts of genocide and reprisals, 7.4 million; deportations for slave labour, 2.2 million; and famine and disease, 4.1 million. An additional 3 million deaths was estimated for deaths due to famine and disease in the unoccupied regions.

Although these figures moved into general use there were many subsequent efforts from within Russia and outside to refine them. Yet the margins of error in these calculations would be enormous tragedies in themselves. How many died after being taken prisoner by Germans? These numbers were complicated by those who had been captured but escaped to return to their units, who avoided returning after the war, who did return and were then incarcerated because considered tainted, or who were treated as POWs by Germans but were actually ordinary civilians or partisans. Many deaths over this period were the result of the politics and economics of the Soviet state and the pernicious ideology of Nazism, as well as the nature of the armed conflict. The war followed years of deliberate political persecution and catastrophic social and economic policies, notably the Soviet 'gulag', made up of concentration or labour camps, or the forced starvation in Ukraine in the 1930s. According to Alexander Yakovlev, as many as 35 million died because of repression.[19] The gulag did not shut down over the war. Perhaps as many as 1 million died in prison or forced deportations while it was underway.[20] Demographic analysis suffered because the last pre-war census was falsified to play down the impact of the forced collectivisation of the 1930s.[21]

So while most estimates of the costs of war to the Soviet Union stayed close to 28 million, some reputable analysts considered it reasonable to go as high as 35 million.[22] Estimates of military deaths ranged from 5 to 14 million and of civilian deaths from 7 to more than 18 million. COW's figure of 7.5 million Soviet battle deaths, with no mention of civilian deaths, was certainly too low, and barely conveyed one aspect of the Soviet experience. In *The Better Angels of Our Nature*, Steven Pinker used 55 million total dead for the Second World War, but if numbers from the

higher end of the range with Germany and the Soviet Union were taken, as well as China, where the true numbers are also hard to calculate but have been put conservatively at 14 million, then the total approached 85 million.[23]

With the more recent conflicts in Iraq and Afghanistan, the cost of occupying those countries was much less than that of dealing with the insurgencies. The analysis was complicated by COW's methodology, as the counter-insurgency operations appeared separately under extra-state rather than intrastate wars, with local resistance in Afghanistan and Iraq leading to 552 and 3,985 casualties respectively. All these could be identified by their names and the circumstances in which they died. The same was generally true of civilian contractors and members of international organisations.

On the Iraqi side the position was more complex. The number of civilians killed directly in the 1991 war as a result of coalition bombing was reported by the Iraqis to be 2,278. There were no precise estimates for military casualties. As the fighting ended, US commanders were puzzled by the large discrepancy between the estimated size of the Iraqi army and the numbers taken prisoner. The gap, they assumed, must be Iraqi dead, perhaps as many as 100,000 killed, 300,000 wounded, and 150,000 desertions.[24] But they had overestimated the size of the Iraqi Army prior to the war by presuming Iraqi units to be at full strength, when large numbers had failed to report for duty and many more had deserted at the first opportunity, so that once coalition air strikes started, there were perhaps only 200,000–300,000 troops to fight. This led one analyst to put Iraqi combat deaths from the air campaign at 750–1,500 and a maximum of 6,500 dead from the ground campaign.[25] Another assessment opted for 20–26,000 Iraqi troops killed.[26] Little of this was based on actual counts.[27]

The most difficult area to evaluate was that of consequential civilian deaths. One estimate put those for 1991 at some 100,000.[28] After the 2003 war this became a controversial issue. It was complicated by the extent to which Iraqi society had already been brutalised, its infrastructure degraded and its resources depleted by a series of events since the 1970s, including the war with Iran and repression of discontent, sanctions, and purges. To this was added new strands of occupation, insurgency, civil war, and

general lawlessness that marred the subsequent years.[29] Most of these dead were not directly at the hands of coalition forces, though that hardly absolved them from blame because of the impact of toppling the old regime on law and order. One organisation, the Iraq Body Count, collated all available evidence on Iraqi deaths since March 2003. For the period up to December 2012, it proposed a range of 110,937 to 121,227 deaths, accepting that this could be an underestimate.[30] Yet their estimates were higher than those for organisations such as the Uppsala Conflict Data Program as well as the United Nations.[31]

Another approach, published in the medical magazine *The Lancet*, involved interviewing a number of households and asking about family deaths, from which they concluded that some 655,000 people had died beyond what might otherwise have been the case from March 2003 until June 2006.[32] Questions were raised about the representativeness of the sample and the extent of the extrapolation into a population of 26 million, and the accuracy of the assumptions on pre-war death rates. It was almost certainly an overestimate.[33] A better study in 2013, using a similar but more refined methodology, at a time when the situation in Iraq was less fraught, concluded that there had been 461,000 excess deaths from 2003 to 2011. Of these about 60 per cent were found to be due to violence, of which about a third were attributed to coalition forces (that is some 90,000). At the peak of the war men faced a 2.9 per cent higher risk of death than they did before the war and women a 0.7 per cent higher risk of death.[34] These were not, of course, the only costs of war. Estimates from the numbers of Iraqis who have migrated abroad since 2003 range from 1.7 million (the United Nations figure) to 2.3 million.[35] Well over a million people also fled from violence to safer parts within Iraq.[36]

These mortality rates show how much worse things were for Iraqis than they would have been had things continued as they were before the invasion, but the tensions within Iraqi society could well have come out in another way at another time and in an equally virulent form. Next door, Syria, which appeared to be as stable as any Middle Eastern country, came to be consumed by a civil war which gathered pace in 2011. This became extraordinarily violent very quickly, largely as a result of the crude tactics used by the regime to defend itself, aggravated by the large number of

players involved and the role of external actors. The United Nations tried to keep count of the death toll, seeking reasonable confirmation of deaths even though this produced a conservative estimate.[37] In August 2014 it reported that 191,369 had died by that date. A year later it gave only a round number, putting the death toll at 250,000 and then gave up trying to update the figures because of a lack of good information. The Syrian Observatory for Human Rights was able to document some 321,358 individuals' deaths by March 2017, but assumed that there were some 85,000 more that had not been documented. Of the documented, government forces and the various factions opposed to the government lost about 112,000 each. Some 96,000 civilians had been killed, of which over 80 percent were the result of government action. In addition, more than 2 million Syrians had been left injured and with permanent disabilities, and about 12 million had been displaced. This was out of a population of just over 20 million at the start of the conflict.[38]

DEATH TOLLS ARE COMPILATIONS OF PERSONAL TRAGEDIES. The meaning for each individual and their family soon gets lost as the toll rises and the counting becomes more difficult. As the numbers grow so too does anonymity until eventually the statistics defy human comprehension with margins of error equivalent to the populations of large cities. Analysts were bound to make use of the best numbers available, however flawed, but there was no science here, and the great uncertainties created opportunities for political manipulation and wilful distortion. It was important to attempt to quantify suffering, but only if it was understood that the figures were imprecise and usually relied on guesswork. Even when efforts were made to report accurately on casualties, as in Syria, at some point the numbers overwhelmed. It became impossible to keep count. As estimates were always involved there was no good reason for excluding the inherently less measurable aspects of suffering, especially those resulting from the collapse of infrastructure and the effects of disease, malnutrition, and poverty. Raw numbers, however carefully put together, still only told part of the story of war.