A photograph of a street scene in a conflict zone. The image shows several multi-story buildings, some of which appear to be damaged or partially destroyed. Debris is scattered on the ground. A person is visible in the lower left foreground, and another person is walking in the middle ground. The overall atmosphere is one of destruction and displacement.

Long-term trends in violence and armed conflicts

Dr. Marek Rybář
Political Violence
Spring 2023

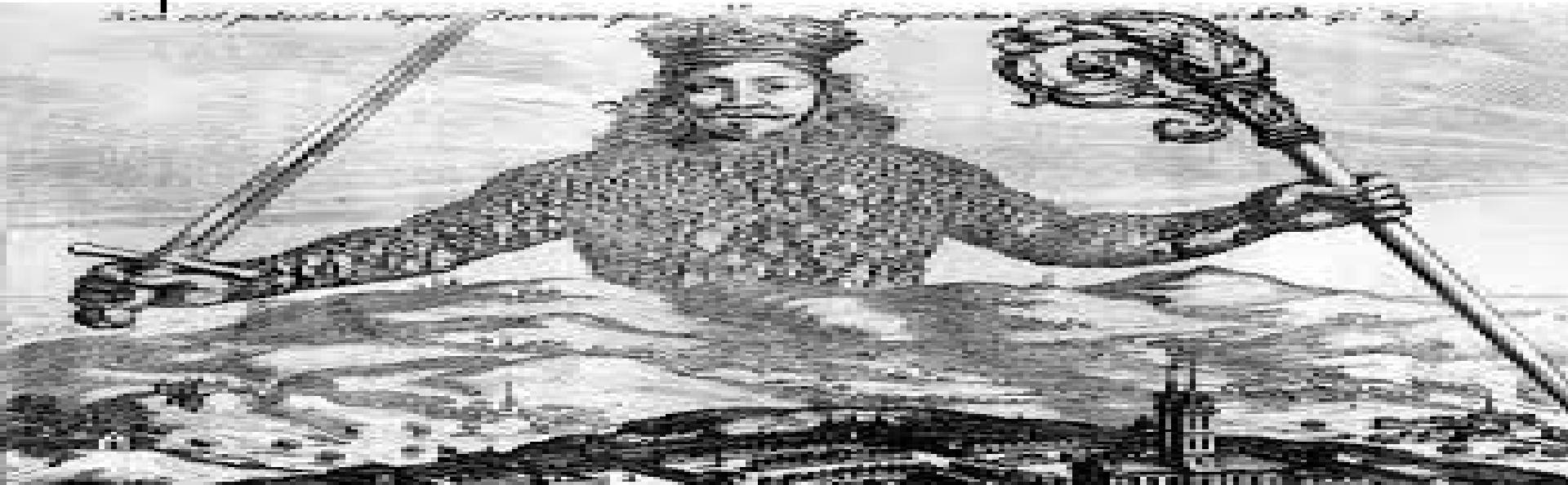
Leviathan

Thomas Hobbes (1651)

“[All men have the equality of ability such that the weak may be able to kill the strong] . . . this equality of ability ariseth equality of hope in the attaining of our ends. And therefore if any two men desire the same thing, which nevertheless they cannot both enjoy, they become enemies”

Leviathan (cont.)

“In the nature of man, we find three principal causes of quarrel: first, competition; secondly, diffidence (fear), thirdly, glory. The first maketh man invade for gain; the second, for safety; and the third, for reputation.”



Leviathan (cont.)

“During the time men live without a common power to keep them all in awe, they are in a condition which is called war. . . . every man against every man. . . . and the life of man [is] solitary, poor, nasty, brutish, and short.”

Hobbes

- Hobbes' work is sometimes confused for an apology for absolutism
- however, it is more appropriate to understand it as a warning: situations in which there is no central authority (the state), i.e. no monopoly for legitimate use of violence, recede to chaos
- William Golding – Lord of the Flies
- a good illustration is the anarchical nature of international relations: there is no central authority able to control the states' behavior

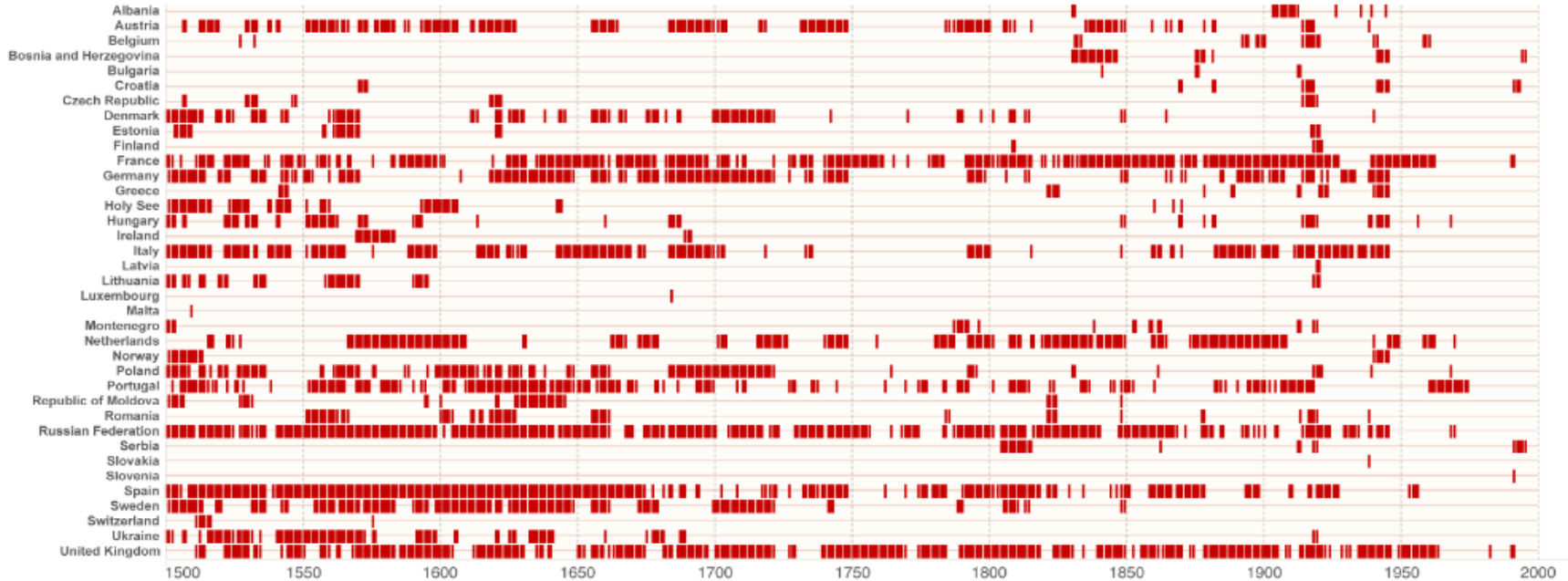
Is violence ubiquitous?

- a suicide bombing attack in Peshawar (Pakistan) in January 2023
- a Russian invasion of Ukraine (Feb 2022-)
- civil wars in Ethiopia and Yemen
- ongoing conflicts in Somalia, Libya, Venezuela and elsewhere
- the war of Mexican drug cartels

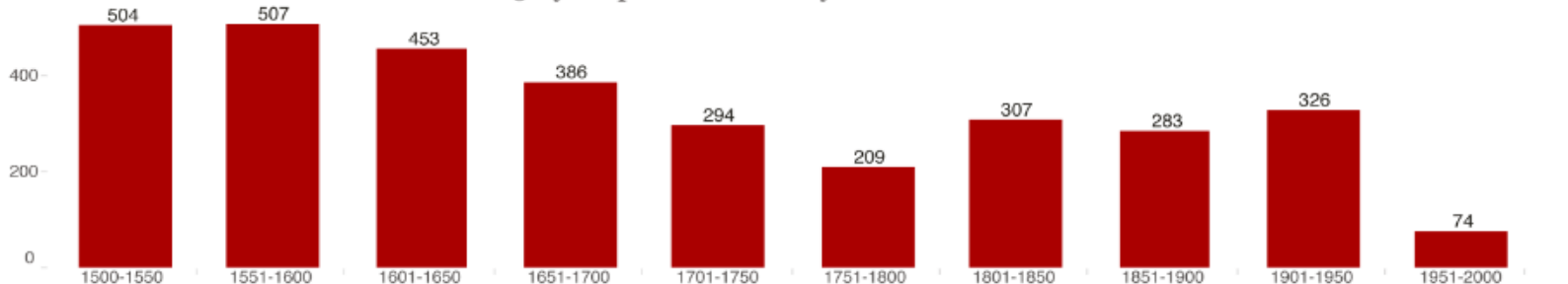
Unusually peaceful times



Years in which European countries took part in an international war (1500-2000)
 Years in which a country participated in an armed conflict with another country, or if two or more distinct historical states had a conflict in a region classified now as a single country.



For each 50 year period: Sum of years in war for all countries



Data sources: CLIO Infra Project based on the Conflict Catalog by Peter Brecke.
 This is a data visualisation from OurWorldinData.org. There you find more visualisations on this topic.

Unusually peaceful times

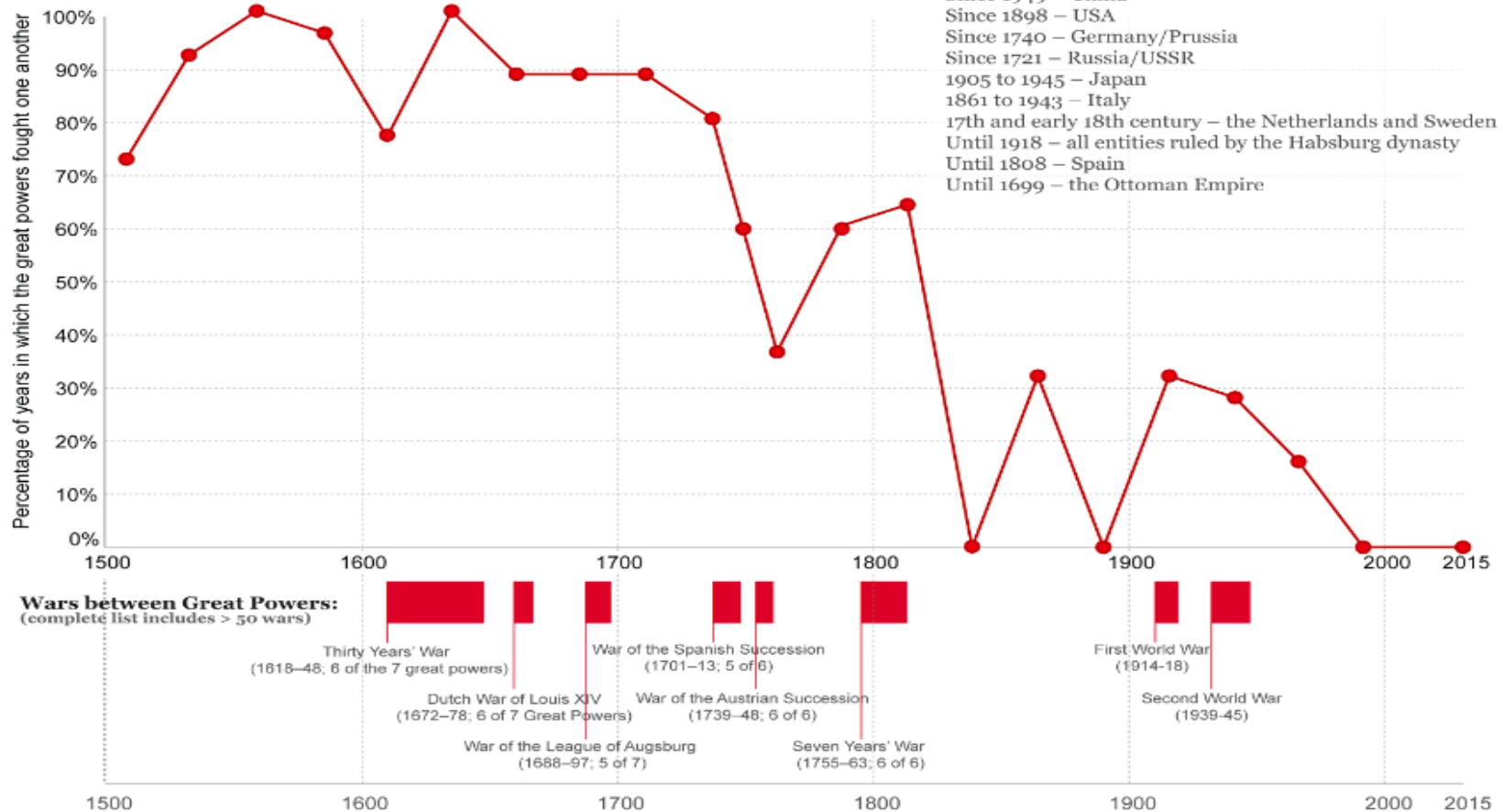
Our World
in Data

Percentage of years in which the 'Great Powers' fought one another, 1500-2015 – by Max Roser

Between 1500 and today there were more than 50 wars between 'Great Powers'.
Data are aggregated over 25-year periods.

The Great Powers:

- Entire period – France and England/Great Britain/U.K.
- Since 1949 – China
- Since 1898 – USA
- Since 1740 – Germany/Prussia
- Since 1721 – Russia/USSR
- 1905 to 1945 – Japan
- 1861 to 1943 – Italy
- 17th and early 18th century – the Netherlands and Sweden
- Until 1918 – all entities ruled by the Habsburg dynasty
- Until 1808 – Spain
- Until 1699 – the Ottoman Empire

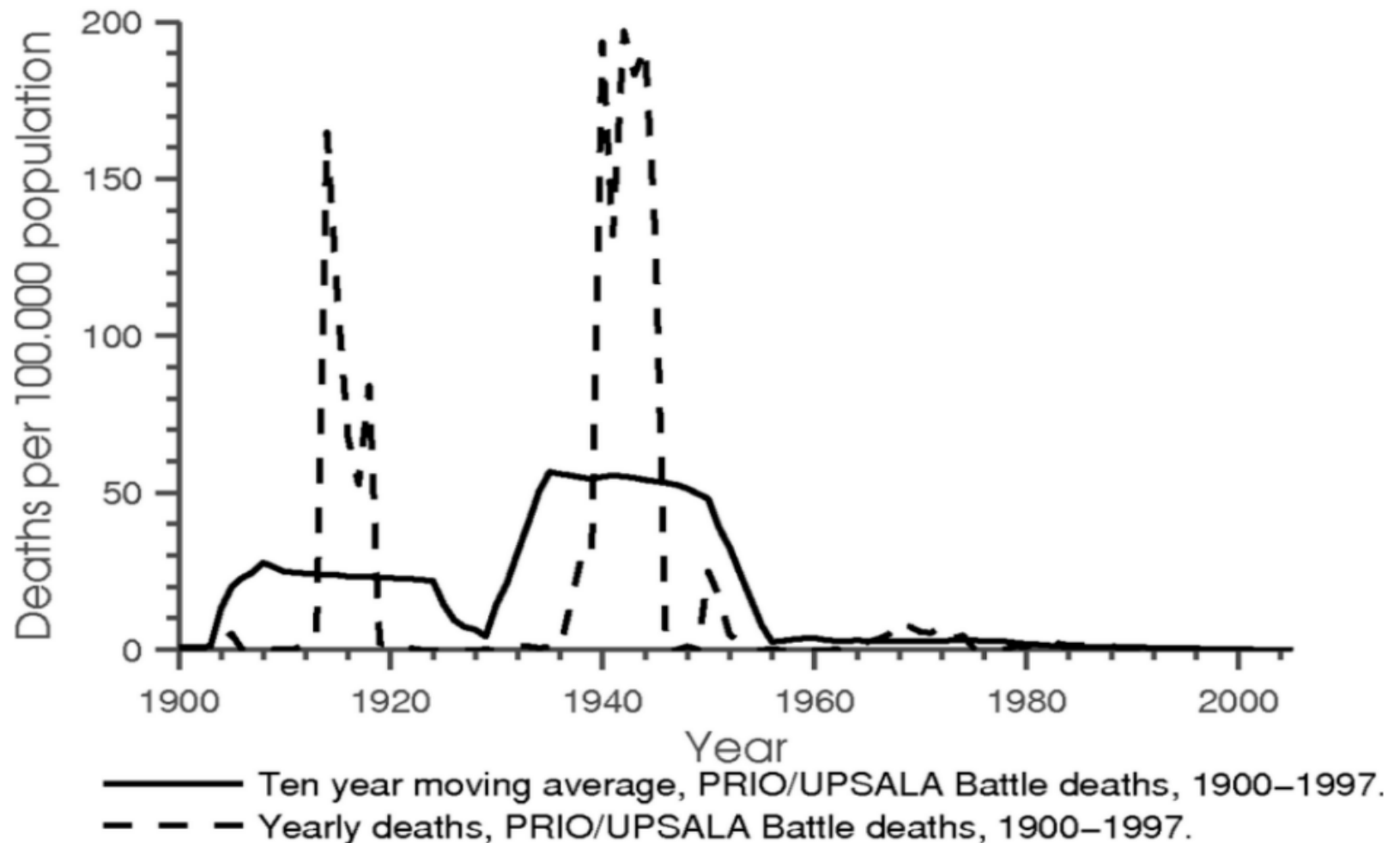


Data source: Steven Pinker (2011) – The Better Angels of Our Nature: Why Violence Has Declined. Based on data from Levy, J. S., & Thompson, W. R. (2011) – The Arc of War

The interactive data visualisation is available at [OurWorldinData.org](https://ourworldindata.org). There you find the raw data and more visualisations on this topic.

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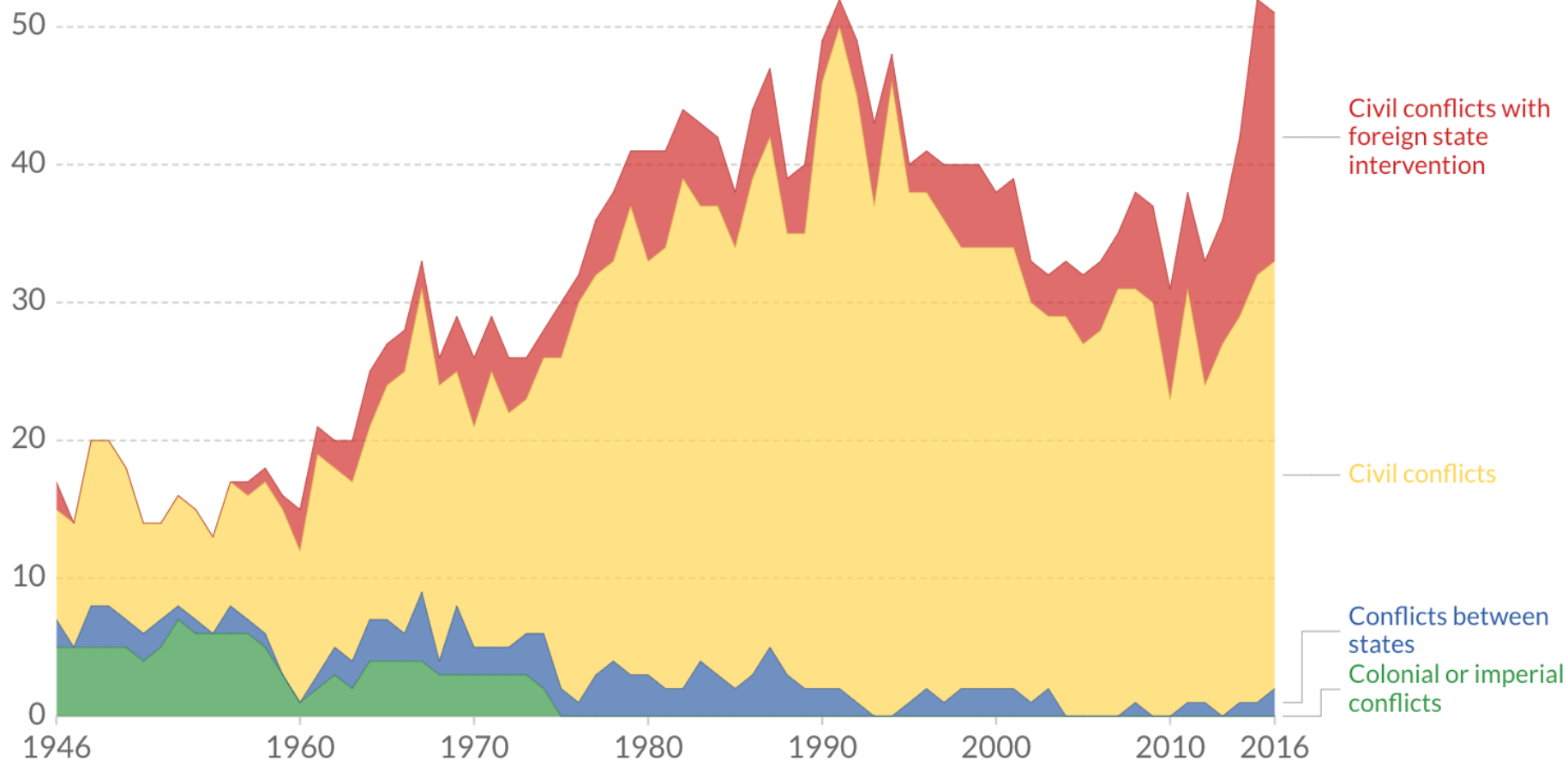
Battle deaths in international conflicts per 100.000 inhabitants (Acemoglu 2012)



State-based conflicts since 1946, 1946 to 2016

Only conflicts in which at least one party was the government of a state are included. Ongoing conflicts are represented for every year in which they resulted in at least 25 battle-related deaths.

□ Relative



Source: UCDP/PRIO Armed Conflict Dataset

Note: The war categories paraphrase UCDP/PRIO's technical definitions of 'Extrasystemic', 'Internal', 'Internationalised internal' and 'Interstate' respectively.

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Is it a statistical fluke?

- skeptics: human nature has not changed, we all share innate inclination to violence
- similar innate aggressive tendencies exist among all primates
- the universality of violence in human societies: homicide, rape, domestic violence, rioting, raiding and feuding

Is it a statistical fluke?

- furthermore, evolutionary psychology concludes that, as our species evolved, certain genes, hormones, brain circuits, and selective pressures militated toward violence
- those pressures could not have gone into reverse within two-three generations since the end of WWII

If it is not a trend, how can we explain that

- human sacrifice was a regular practice in every early civilization and now has vanished?
- Between the Middle Ages and the 20th century, rates of homicide in Europe fell at least 35fold?
- since the second half of the 18th century, every major Western country abolished the use of torture as a form of criminal punishment?
- European countries used to have hundreds of capital crimes, including trivial offenses, and by mid-20th century the death penalty was abolished by every western democracy (except the US)?

If it is not a trend, how can we explain that

- slavery was once legal everywhere on earth, the last country to outlaw it was Mauritania (1980)?
- witch hunts, religious persecutions, dueling, blood sports, and debtors' prisons were abolished?
- corporal punishment of children (both paddling and whipping in schools AND smacking in households) in sharp decline in most Western countries and made illegal in several European countries?

Human nature has multiple components 1/4

- human violence springs from several motives, each involving different neurobiological system:
- **1. exploitation:** violence used as the means to an end, damaging a human who is an obstacle to something one wants
- **2. dominance:** the urge to dominate, to become the alpha male; the urge among groups for tribal, ethnic, racial, national or religious supremacy

Human nature has multiple components 2/4

- **3. revenge:** the conviction that someone who has committed a moral infraction deserves to be punished
- **4. ideology:** shared belief systems, spread virally or by indoctrination or force, hold out the prospect for a utopia: since utopia is a world that will be infinitely good, one is permitted to use unlimited amount of force against those who stand in its way

Human nature has multiple components 3/4

- some of our kinder gentler faculties are pushing against these impulses:
- **1. self-control:** *circuitry in the frontal lobes of the brain* that can anticipate the long-term consequences of our actions and inhibit them accordingly
- **2. empathy:** the ability to feel someone else's pain

Human nature has multiple components 4/4

- **3. the moral sense:** a system of norms and taboos centered on intuitions of fairness, loyalty to a community, deference to legitimate authority etc., can motivate the imposition of standards of fairness
- **4. reason:** cognitive processes that allow us to engage in objective detached analysis

Contextual nature of the use of violence

- any combination of the violence-inducing motives may trigger the decision to wage war
- many human responses are opportunistic, reactive or facultative, elicited by various combinations of environmental triggers and cognitive and emotional states
- **predation** and **exploitation** may occur when an opportunity to exploit a victim at low risk presents itself
- if one lives an orderly bourgeois life free from grave threats or insults, any violent tendencies could lie as dormant

Human Cognition

- the *cognitive apparatus which makes it possible for humans to reason* is special in inhibiting humans from the use of violence
- human cognition can produce **social constructs** that are capable of preventing violence if the right social infrastructure is there: literacy, open debate, the mobility of people
- they work by *disincentivizing* leaders and populations from plunging into war

Social Constructs capable of Preventing Violence

- **limits on government**, including in democracy, so that governments do not perpetrate more violence on their people than they prevent
- an **infrastructure of commerce**, which makes it cheaper to buy things than to plunder them and which makes other people more valuable alive than dead
- an **international community** which can propagate the norms of nonviolent cooperation
- intergovernmental **organizations** which can encourage commerce, resolve disputes, police infractions and penalize aggression

Social Constructs capable of Preventing Violence

- **measured responses to aggression**, including economic sanctions, symbolic declarations, tactics of nonviolent resistance, and proportional counterstrikes
- **reconciliation measures** such as ceremonies, monuments, truth commissions and formal apologies
- **humanistic counter-ideologies** such as human rights which can compete with nationalism, militarism, revanchism and utopian ideologies

Criticism

- there is wide agreement on the decline of war and other forms of violence
- however, we are unable to choose between alternative plausible theories explaining that decline
- furthermore, even if the trend is accepted, it cannot be extrapolated into the future

Criticism

- there may be lack of “better angels” outside the West, and even the West may be backsliding
- Pinker may underestimate the importance of the **international system** and the distribution of power
- the rise of China is of particular concern
- a panel of scientist in 1912 could have extrapolated from the current trends toward a decline of war too
- environmental change, esp. climate change (future scarcity conflicts, population migration etc.)

Criticism

- democracy may lead to peace but democratization process has often been associated with violence
- our evolutionary legacy ensures that the inner demons never go away, they may be triggered in response to threats and actions outside West
- leaders play a key role: they may be more likely than the average person motivated by inner demons (competition, corruption etc.)

The Importance of International System

- Pinker misses the influence of the system in promoting and (after WWII) suppressing violence
- US primacy: during the Cold War, US leadership reduced frictions among many states that were historical antagonists
- ability to spread democracy and many of the other positive forces identified by Pinker
- economically liberal worldwide network – the growth of the global economy

What if War is (~~sometimes~~) Rational?

- Once a power shift has occurred, the states will reach a negotiated settlement. (War is costly.)
- But if states are experiencing a great power shift, that peaceful settlement may be highly disadvantageous for the declining state.
- Declining states therefore launch preventive wars if they prefer a costly but advantageous war today to an efficient but disadvantageous peace tomorrow.