

Peace Briefing

The human costs of war – definitional and methodological ambiguity of casualties

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THE ARGUMENTS

Quantitatively measuring war casualties, more specifically civilian versus military casualties, is a controversial issue in public, organizational and academic discourse. Numerous peace researchers and humanitarian organizations argue that the majority of war casualties are civilians (see for example Clemens Jr. & Singer, 2000; Grossrieder, 2002; Shifferd, 2011; Sivard, 1996). Others argue that the civilian versus military death ratio is an overestimate (see for example Goldstein, 2011; Human Security Centre, 2005; Pinker, 2011).

It is obvious that there is debate and we are warned to make statistical generalizations about war (Roberts, 2010).

THE CONTROVERSY

The difficulties begin with the definitional ambiguities of what constitutes

war casualties. According to the Peace Research Institute Oslo, battle deaths are defined as “as deaths resulting directly from violence inflicted through the use of armed force by a party to an armed conflict during contested combat”, excluding the “the sustained destruction of soldiers or civilians outside of the context of any reciprocal threat of lethal force” (<http://www.prio.no>). The Correlates of War Project, which “seeks to facilitate the collection, dissemination, and use of accurate and reliable quantitative data in international relations”, also points to the complexity of gathering fatality figures. Differences in death figures vary greatly

depending on the sources. Reasons are for example contestable political information where states minimize their own losses to avoid criticism or inflate deaths to gain sympathy. Fatalities caused to opponents may be downplayed to avoid bloodthirsty appearance or inflated to prove military efficacy (<http://www.correlatesofwar.org/>).

Another important distinction is that of battle deaths (soldiers and civilians killed in combat) and non-battle deaths (one-sided violence, increased criminal and unorganized violence, increased nonviolent mortality) which together constitute war deaths (Lacina & Gleditsch, 2005). Data for selected conflicts in Africa shows the significant differences between battle deaths and war deaths with the lowest estimates contributing to only 3% battle dead and 97% war dead (see table 4 in Lacina & Gleditsch, 2005).

A further major difficulty is the calculation of death tolls based on very different methodologies, one of which is collating and recording war fatalities based on a wide variety of sources, the other one relying on estimates derived from mortality surveys. Differing policy, advocacy and analytic purposes are contributing

During World War II, and in many of the conflicts since, civilians have been the main victims of armed conflict. (International Committee of the Red Cross)

factors. Other specific reasons are governments forbidding reporting of war deaths or contrary to that, the over-reporting of war deaths.

AN INTEGRATIVE VIEW OF WAR CASUALTIES

Indirect war-deaths – e.g. disease or malnutrition – are not accurately measurable, even though so-called “excess deaths” can be estimated by comparing prewar and wartime mortality rates (Spagat, Mack, Cooper, & Kreutz, 2009). Adding longitudinal postwar estimates that address clearly attributable consequences

of war are advisable. Indirect victims of armed conflicts can be traced back to the following:

- Destruction of infrastructure
- Landmines
- Use of depleted uranium
- Refugees and internally displaced people
- Malnutrition
- Diseases
- Lawlessness
- Intra-state killings
- Victims of rape and other forms of sexual violence
- Social injustice

Human Security Centre. (2005). Human security report : war and peace in the 21st century (pp. v.). New York, NY: Oxford University Press.

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Lacina, Bethany, & Gleditsch, Nils Petter. (2005). Monitoring trends in global combat: a new dataset of battle deaths. *European Journal of Population*, 21(145-166).

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Modern warfare kills more civilians than soldiers. (Clemens Jr. & Singer, 2000)

Roberts, Adam. (2010). *Lives and Statistics: Are 90% of War Victims Civilians?*

CONCLUSION

In sum, the statistical debate and problems with providing unambiguous data is has to be acknowledged. However, downplaying the number of civilian casualties is a dangerous distraction from the long-lasting human costs of war.

A thorough war casualty assessment must include direct and indirect war deaths. Only by doing that the myth of "clean", "surgical" warfare with declining numbers of combat casualties can be rightfully countered. As Kathy Kelly states, "the havoc wreaked upon civilians is unparalleled, intended and unmitigated" (2008).

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