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Introduction

War is a violent teacher. It brings people down to the level of their circumstances.

—THUCYDIDES, *HISTORY OF THE PELOPONNESIAN WAR*, C. 400 B.C.

By some queer change in international outlook, things that were condemned as crimes against humanity twenty-five years ago seem today to be accepted as part and parcel of the inevitable consequence of “total” war. . . . Then, an air raid on a peaceful city was stigmatised as an act of barbarism; now the rival belligerents openly boast of the extent of the destruction that they have caused to each other’s centres of population.

—*IRISH TIMES*, APRIL 19, 1941

All major wars are and always have been against the civil population.

—SIR ARTHUR TRAVERS “BOMBER” HARRIS, 1977

Many histories of war are military histories—but not this one. It focuses instead on the millions of civilians killed and injured during the twentieth century’s two world wars (World War I and World War II). By “civilians” we mean all those men, women, and children who did not bear arms or set out to kill—that is, noncombatants. The numbers who perished are staggering. The estimates of civilian deaths that Walter Clemens and David Singer (2000) propose—9.7 million during World War I and 25.5 million

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during World War II, respectively—are, as we shall see, too low; war-induced famines alone may have cost 30 million lives or more during the two wars.¹ Estimates of 25 million for all war deaths in the Soviet Union during World War II and 14 million in China, on which more will come later, imply a global aggregate of well over 50 million lives, or well over the entire populations of France or the United Kingdom at the time.² Much more speculative estimates of the cost in lives of earlier wars imply that only gigantic, long-lasting conflicts involving the likes of Genghis Khan in the early thirteenth century, Timur (or Tamerlane) in the fourteenth, the Shunzhi Emperor in the mid-seventeenth, or the Taiping Heavenly Kingdom under Hong Xiuquan and his followers in the mid-nineteenth are likely to have come anywhere close to the twentieth-century's world wars in terms of total deaths, and those estimates do not distinguish between military and civilian deaths.³

During World War II, more so than during World War I, most if not all the warring parties countenanced civilian deaths on a mass scale. Lofty prewar commitments to sparing civilians evaporated once the dogs of war were let slip. Given the lack of an enforcement mechanism, laws agreed upon in peacetime were nearly always broken whenever they got in the way of military goals. Meanwhile, both sides accused the other of atrocities against civilians and reaped the propagandistic rewards to be had from such claims. Eventually civilians, too, called for retaliation and revenge against enemy civilians. War transformed how people felt about civilians; at the height of World War II, novelist and journalist George Orwell denounced “all talk of ‘limiting’ or ‘humanizing’ war [as] sheer humbug.”⁴ That is far from saying that all sides were equally guilty. But the history of the two world wars is a reminder that the only sure way to prevent the huge cost of war in innocent civilian lives is to prevent war itself.

The bloody events that produce the outcomes described in what follows have qualitative and quantitative dimensions, which are strongly complementary. This is not a book about numbers for the sake of numbers. Yet without getting the numbers right when possible and pointing out when that is impossible, we cannot argue with those who, innocently or otherwise, deny or exaggerate wartime savagery. Getting the numbers right also helps us to show not only how human savagery and brutality survived the Enlightenment but how the technological progress that the Enlightenment helped engender made it more effective. Against the belief in human progress due to better technology and the rise of “state capacity,” often deemed to have been a good thing, the numbers speak louder than words.

Death came to civilians in many gruesome guises, some familiar since antiquity and some novel. Both world wars caused several famines. Both spawned genocides, above all the Jewish Holocaust. Both targeted civilians as a means of winning: during World War I through blockades and forced labor, during World War II through expropriation and far more forced labor, and through aerial bombing on a massive scale, culminating in the atomic bombs dropped on Hiroshima and Nagasaki in early August 1945. Both wars led to huge enforced displacements of civilian populations, both planned and unplanned. Long-range artillery and aerial bombardment killed relatively few civilians during World War I, but they caused hundreds of thousands of deaths during World War II.⁵ World War I did not cause but exacerbated the influenza pandemic of 1918–19, which cost tens of millions of lives. And for every civilian who died there were more who were injured, who endured physical and sexual assault, who were displaced and impoverished and bereaved, or who suffered trauma. These various causes of civilian death and injury are among the subjects of this book.

Why do noncombatants die during wars? It may be helpful to distinguish between two broad categories of victim, even if the dividing line between them is blurry. The first includes those civilians who die as the unintended collateral damage of war, people who are just in the wrong place at the wrong time or who are victims of actions meant to accomplish something else but end up killing instead or who succumb to the crises created by mass conflict (e.g., famines, infectious diseases, a lack of shelter and exposure to the elements). The second is the *deliberate* killing of civilians, either because of a belief that such will help to win a war (e.g., through aerial bombings or the starvation of besieged cities) or out of pure malice and hatred for a perceived enemy during the fog of war, as in the cases of the Holocaust or the Armenian genocide.

Civilians in Earlier Wars

“War is hell.” When General William Tecumseh Sherman spoke these words to a class of graduating cadets at the Michigan Military Academy in 1879, he was not referring to his infamous march through Georgia in the later stages of the American Civil War but to the carnage that had resulted from the Union and Confederate armies engaging each other in battle.⁶ In fact, although Sherman’s march destroyed much of Georgia’s industrial infrastructure and deprived its people of foodstuffs, his troops, like General Philip Sheridan’s in the Shenandoah Valley, were disciplined, and civilian casualties were

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few. The same holds for the American Civil War more generally: civilians made up only a small fraction of all deaths. The war cost as many as 750,000 military lives, but its most eminent historian has estimated the number of civilian deaths at about 50,000, or 7 percent of all deaths. While no precise numbers are forthcoming, the lack of serious epidemics and the relatively small number of violent incidents involving civilians point to a low number. In 1863 the war produced the Lieber Code to govern the conduct of soldiers on the Union side, but the code was concerned with issues such as the treatment of guerrilla fighters and Black escapees rather than civilian welfare.⁷

Historical context matters. Did the American Civil War reflect an earlier stage in the history of war, when civilians were much less likely to suffer? Were World War I and World War II defining moments for civilian vulnerability in wartime? Did they bring the killing of civilians to a new level? How different were the causes of such deaths? Is it true that before the twentieth century, “war [was] an ugly thing, but we had rules in which we made sure that soldiers fought soldiers but did not victimize civilians”?⁸ One can think of some wars that support such a claim—it has been argued that, in Europe at least, for some decades during the nineteenth century “people’s wars” gave way to “wars between armies of the states.” But that was merely an interlude before World War I and World War II “civilianized” war again.⁹ Nowadays, there is a growing consensus that throughout the ages civilians have suffered much in wartime. Even in nineteenth-century Europe, wars in the Balkans and in the East exacted a high cost in civilian lives. One analysis based on nearly five hundred wars since AD 1700 suggests that on average civilians made up half of all deaths, with little change in that proportion over time. Colonial and civil wars result in higher civilian shares than interstate wars, and ethnoreligious conflicts produce the highest proportion of civilian casualties.¹⁰ Again, such statistics render the American Civil War exceptional in terms of civilian deaths.

Julius Caesar has been dubbed “the first *génocidaire* in European history,” but thanks to the Athenian historian Thucydides, war-linked genocides in Europe can be documented back to 416–415 BCE, when an Athenian army destroyed the island of Melos (today’s Milos), slaying its entire adult male population and selling its women and children into slavery.¹¹ The Hebrew Bible, too, contains many references to wars that would strike the modern reader as genocidal, such as those against the Amalekites and Midianites, but historians and archaeologists question the historicity of those accounts. In later times, others more than matched the barbarism of ancient Greece and Rome. Nongenocidal wars repeatedly targeted civilians too, with some, such

as the Napoleonic Wars in Iberia and the Thirty Years' War (1618–48), standing out.¹² In the history of the latter, incidents such as the Sack of Magdeburg in 1631 are notorious, but in the course of that war, it is reckoned that more than a quarter of the inhabitants of the area comprising modern Germany died. The overwhelming majority of those were civilians, with more succumbing to hunger and infectious disease than to bloody atrocities. The same holds for the “Spanish Fury” of Antwerp in November 1576, when Spanish forces massacred thousands of civilians sheltering in the city. Similarly, Cromwellian outrages in mid-seventeenth-century Ireland have a prominent place in popular history, but famine and plague were mostly responsible for the accompanying demographic catastrophe that may well have exceeded, in relative terms, the Great Irish Famine of the 1840s. According to economist and colonizer Sir William Petty, in Ireland between 1641 and 1652 “about 504 [thousand] of the Irish perished, or were wasted by the Sword, Plague, Famine, Hardship, and Banishment.” Petty’s calculations were often cavalier, but this figure tallies with recent assessments that war-related losses, mainly in 1649–52, reached 20 to 25 percent of the population.¹³ Today some historians would categorize the Irish colonial wars of the late sixteenth and mid-seventeenth centuries as genocidal, following a pattern whereby genocidal wars happen “after extreme social and political crisis, where normal rules of behavior are suspended and violence is honored.”¹⁴

Again, most war-related civilian deaths in the past were not due to systematic killings but to the hunger and diseases attendant on warfare. What was new about the twentieth century was not civilian casualties but the widespread humanitarian concern for civilians, as reflected in international law and in the rise of nongovernmental organizations directed at aiding and protecting civilians.¹⁵ The International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) was founded in 1863 after the carnage at the Battle of Solferino (1859) moved its founder, the Swiss-born philanthropist and Nobel Peace Prize winner Henri Dunant, to form a society to relieve soldiers wounded in future wars. But its remit related solely to military victims. On the eve of World War I, in 1912, the Red Cross extended its mission to include prisoners of war, and during World War II, it sought to help victims of all kinds. The Commission for Relief in Belgium (1914), Save the Children (1918), Oxfam (1942), Catholic Relief Services (1943), and Médecins sans frontières (1971), among others, targeted civilian victims of war from the outset.

Today it is common to contrast “old wars,” which were “grand clashes between two or more sides in which battle . . . was the decisive encounter,” and “new wars,” in which “battles between armed groups are rather rare

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and most violence is directed against civilians.” The chronological dimension of this contrast is reflected in the assertions from the Carnegie Commission on Preventing Deadly Conflict in 1997 that “in some wars today, 90 percent of those killed in conflict are noncombatants, compared with less than 15 percent when the century began” and from the United Nations (UN) Development Programme in 1998 that “civilian fatalities have climbed from 5% of war-related deaths at the turn of the century to more than 90% in the wars of the 1990s.” In *New and Old Wars*, Mary Kaldor, an influential theorist of modern warfare, invoked such numbers to argue for her characterization of wars in the modern era, albeit without the caveat “in some wars” at the beginning of the first quotation.¹⁶ Many plausible reasons for the reversal have been proposed: greater access to lethal weapons, the intensification of racial and religious hatred, new military technologies, a greater acceptance of terrorism, and widespread contempt for international humanitarian law. As Robert Gerwarth notes, during World War I there were no significant differences in terms of brutality between Allied and Central Powers troops, and the brutality of World War II was subject to significant regional variation. Much more important, according to Gerwarth, was the violence linked to population transfers and to militias of both the Left and Right in the immediate post-World War I era.¹⁷

Evidence for the reversal proposed by Kaldor and others is mixed, however. On the one hand, as already noted, the civilian share of war deaths before the twentieth century was much higher than assumed and comes close to or matches the World War I and World War II shares mentioned above. On the other hand, during the major wars of recent decades, military deaths have tended, if anything, to exceed civilian casualties, as during the Vietnam War (1965–75), the Arab-Israeli War (1967), the Indo-Pakistani War (1971), the Yom Kippur War (1983), the Iran-Iraq War (1980–88), and the U.S. War in Afghanistan (2001–21). That also holds for the ongoing war in Ukraine, with the Israel-Hamas war being a glaring exception.¹⁸ Civil and quasi-civil conflicts come closest to being “new” wars; for example, military casualties outnumbered civilian during the Gulf War of 1990–91, but civilian casualties dominated in the uprising against the Iraqi government that followed that war. Civilian deaths also outnumbered military in the Bosnia-Herzegovina war of 1992–95 by 54 to 46 percent.¹⁹ In several civil conflicts in Africa since the 1960s, the civilian share was higher, often exceeding a ratio of eight to one or ten to one.²⁰ But it is difficult to see the world wars as marking some kind of dividing line between “old” and “new” wars in this sense.

Innocent Bystanders?

World War I, known as the Great War before an even greater war began in 1939, was not the first war to be fought on a global scale. The Seven Years' War (1757–63) involved most of the European great powers and military action in Asia, Europe, and North America. The reach of the French Revolution and the Napoleonic Wars (1792–1815) was even wider, touching places as far apart as Ireland and Haiti, Cairo and Hyderabad, Moscow and Louisiana. However, in terms of scale, World War I and World War II represented a new era of “total war.” The emergence of the term “total war” is often associated with the publication of German general Erich Ludendorff's *Der totale Krieg* in 1935, with an English translation, *The Nation at War*, following in 1936. Indeed, the *Oxford English Dictionary* attributes the term to him. But it was already in circulation during World War I, as evidenced in a letter from Captain Peter Strasser, commander of the German navy's Airship Division, to his mother:²¹

We who strike the enemy where his heart beats have been slandered as baby killers and murderers of women. What we do is repugnant to us too, but necessary, very necessary. A soldier cannot function without the factory worker, the farmer and all the other providers behind them. Nowadays there is no such animal as a noncombatant. Modern warfare is total warfare.

Strasser, who would die in the last Zeppelin attack over Britain in early August 1918, was claiming that killing civilians reduced the enemy's resources in a war that was total. Around the same time in France, the right-wing journalist Léon Daudet (son of the well-known writer Alphonse Daudet) also used the term—“a total war: us or them”—and in April 1918 he published *La guerre totale*, a fierce polemic against a negotiated settlement with Germany.²² The term resonated more widely during World War II. It appeared in the *Irish Times* for the first time on December 23, 1939, citing a pamphlet produced by the United Kingdom's Ministry of Information: “To keep their air force going in a ‘total’ war against Britain and France, the Nazis would need to make up for losses amounting to at least fifty per cent a month.” On February 13, 1940, the same newspaper cited Reich Minister for Labour Franz Seldte as saying “Remember we are waging total war, and we have to demand a great deal, not only of the soldiers, but also of the home front.” Total war, in other words, entailed bigger and longer wars and therefore unprecedented material sacrifices from the civilian population. On the eve

of the German Blitzkrieg, the prime minister of France, Édouard Daladier, also repeatedly referred to “total war.” But the term achieved a new, more sinister resonance in the wake of Joseph Goebbels’s chilling *totaler Krieg* speech in Berlin’s *Sportpalast* on February 18, 1943, a fortnight after the rout of the Wehrmacht at Stalingrad.²³

In Britain, World War I seems also to have spawned several other terms that put civilians on central stage, such as “war effort” (1914), “rationing” (1915), “propaganda film” (1916), and “home front” (1917).²⁴ The first use of “home front” identified in the *Oxford English Dictionary Online* dates from April 11, 1917, in the *Times*; the expression appeared in the *Irish Times* for the first time on June 12, 1918. This new rhetoric of mobilization seemed to be redefining the role of noncombatants, even if the concept of total war was anticipated in France in 1793 in a decree declaring a *levée en masse* (mass conscription), which began:

From this moment, until when its enemies have been swept from the territory of the Republic, the whole of France is permanently at the service of its armies. The young people will do the fighting; married men will forge arms and transport provisions; the women will make tents, clothes and serve in hospitals; the children will convert old linen to lint, and the old men will be driven to public places to cheer on the fighting men, to preach hatred for kings and the unity of the Republic. Public accommodation will be converted into barracks, public places into workshops for armaments, cellar floors will be washed to extract saltpetre. Firearms will be exclusively reserved for those who face enemy, civil society will make do with hunting rifles and knives. Saddle horses will be needed for the cavalry corps; draft horses other than those used in agriculture will drive artillery and supplies.

The American and French Revolutions of the late eighteenth century introduced an era when armies, wars, and mentalities were “democratized”; indeed, such democratization was probably a precondition for the French *levée en masse* of 1793. Yet in relative terms, recruitment in France during the Revolution and the Napoleonic Wars (2.6 million men aged over twenty, or more than a third of a total male population aged twenty to fifty-nine of 7.5 million) fell far short of that achieved in 1914–18 (8 million, or almost four-fifths of a male population aged twenty to fifty-nine of 10.5 million over four years).²⁵ In the wars against Napoleon, the British army peaked at 250,000 (out of a male population aged twenty to fifty-nine of about 7 million in Great Britain and Ireland) in 1813, whereas Britain mobilized over

6 million by the end of World War I (out of a male population aged twenty to fifty-nine of over 11.3 million), and 2.9 million served in World War II (out of a male population aged twenty to fifty-nine of about 12 million). Total German and French deployments during the Franco-Prussian War of 1870–71 were 1.5 million and 2 million, respectively. During World War I, they were 11 million and 8 million; during World War II, they were 13.6 million and 5 million. The two world wars cost much more in aggregate budgetary terms than the American Civil War; its \$80 billion was dwarfed by their \$2 trillion and \$10 trillion, respectively, using 2011 purchasing power parities. In terms of military spending as a percentage of gross domestic product, the cost of fighting the American Civil War (84 percent) shaded that of World War I (78 percent) but was dwarfed by that of World War II (246 percent).²⁶ All these numbers are, of course, approximations, but they are indicative nonetheless. Their flip side is the cost in foregone consumption.²⁷ Nor do they factor in the devastation caused by war.

Insofar as the *levée en masse* and *Volkskrieg* both privileged mass conscription, the potential remained to keep the distinction between civilian and military. But the unprecedented mobilization of resources also increased the incentive of those at war to target civilians, both as contributors to the “war effort” and as citizens. And the mobilization for total war as represented in contemporary propaganda blurred the distinction between soldier and civilian that international law sought to establish in Geneva in 1949. In the wake of World War II, a U.S. legal scholar used the terms “noncombatant” and “civilian” interchangeably “to include all peaceful inhabitants of a country, not attached to or accompanying its armed force.” But he then claimed, ignoring the young, the elderly, and those who looked after them, as well as the ill and the inactive, that the distinction between combatant and noncombatant had been “so whittled down by the demands of military necessity that it has become more apparent than real.”²⁸

The rhetoric of wartime leaders also placed their civilians at risk. On August 7, 1914, a few days after the outbreak of hostilities, Prime Minister René Viviani appealed to Frenchwomen to take to the fields that their menfolk had been forced to leave behind: “Prepare to show them tomorrow the land cultivated, the crops harvested, the field sown! No work is menial in these grave times.”²⁹ British prime minister Winston Churchill went further in 1940, declaring that “the front line runs through the factories. The workmen are soldiers with different weapons but the same courage.”³⁰ Such morale-boosting rhetoric has its darker corollary. Just a fortnight before the bombing of Hiroshima, a last-ditch Japanese effort at a *levée en masse*

prompted the declaration in a U.S. intelligence report that “the entire population of Japan is a proper target. . . . There are no civilians in Japan.” General Curtis LeMay, commander of the bombing campaign in Japan at its climax, felt the same: “There are no innocent civilians,” he would later say. “It is their government and you are fighting a people, you are not trying to fight an armed force anymore.”³¹ By the same token, in the wake of World War II some observers defended the mistreatment of German civilians on the grounds that they had brought it upon themselves by voting for Hitler. And, indeed, a week after Hamas’s barbaric outrages against Israeli civilians on October 7, 2023, Israeli president Isaac Herzog said of civilians in Gaza, “It’s not true, this rhetoric about civilians being not aware, not involved. It’s absolutely not true. They could have risen up, they could have fought against the evil regime which took over Gaza in a coup d’état.”³²

One particular group, mainly women, highlights this issue. During World War I, the number of women working as *munitionettes*, or “canary girls” (because filling shells with TNT turned their skin yellow), in the United Kingdom reached 0.6 million, distributed across over two hundred plants controlled by the Ministry of Munitions (figure 0.1). During World War II, the munitions workers, now more likely to be known as “bomb girls,” peaked at nearly a million in the United Kingdom. In France during World War I, the number of *munitionettes* reached over 0.4 million. They mattered, even if General Joseph Joffre, commander in chief of the French forces at the time, greatly exaggerated in 1915 by claiming “If the women employed in the factories stopped work for twenty minutes, the Allies would lose the war.”³³ Without them, it is true, there would have been fewer fighting soldiers. In Germany, where munitions workers numbered a million in 1917–18, the greater reliance on men meant the diversion of hundreds of thousands of soldiers from the front.

Still, in international humanitarian law a civilian is simply someone who is not a member of the armed forces and does not take part in hostilities. The ICRC’s interpretation is that taking part in war involves actions causing, or intending to cause, harm to military or civilian adversaries—of being what sociologist Anthony Giddens has dubbed the “specialist purveyor of the means of violence.”³⁴ That interpretation does not embrace munitions workers, though it probably should include those who shielded or provided useful information to the armed forces. Most of the millions of civilian victims described in the following chapters were innocent victims. A majority were women and children. They endured and perished from famine, from indiscriminate bombing from above, from infectious diseases, from forced and



FIGURE 0.1. Munitionettes at work in Nottinghamshire, England, 1917

often violent displacements, and—most horrific of all—from genocide. The data analyzed in what follows, however imprecise, reflect the ICRC’s view.

Killing Civilians and Moral Equivalence

Protagonists sometimes argue that counting and publishing estimates of civilian casualties while a war is still in progress can only help the enemy; as the chief of the U.S.-led International Security Assistance Force lamented in 2009, “The perception caused by civilian casualties is one of the most dangerous enemies we face.”³⁵ Meanwhile, propagandists on both sides of conflicts tend to exaggerate or conceal civilian casualties, as the case may be. Other observers believe that full knowledge of the cost in lives may prevent future wars. “If the evils of war are in reality larger and the benefits smaller than in the common view they appear to be,” wrote economist John Bates Clark in 1916, this should “afford a basis for an enlightened policy whenever there is danger of international conflicts.”³⁶ Either way, therefore, adding up civilian casualties in order to get a better sense of the costs of war is not a morally unambiguous exercise.

Some civilian deaths during World War I and World War II were deliberate or intentional, but more were not; some might seem justifiable in the circumstances, but more were emphatically not. Summing up deaths from a vast range of contexts in order to produce an aggregate toll is therefore controversial. It can be seen to imply that all civilian deaths were equally reprehensible, thereby obscuring the contexts in which they occurred and implying “a sort of moral bookkeeping that offsets one series of atrocities against what might be considered another.”³⁷ That statement recalls a letter to the *Times* at the start of the Nuremberg trials in October 1945 from the campaigning philosopher Bertrand Russell, in which he expressed outrage at the mass expulsions of ethnic Germans from Eastern Europe by asking, “Are mass deportations crimes when committed by our enemies during war and justifiable measures of social adjustment when carried out by our allies in time of peace? Is it more humane to turn out old women and children to die at a distance than to asphyxiate Jews in gas chambers?”³⁸

Even today, granting that Russell’s protest was well meant, the moral equivalence underlying it is troubling. Historian Atina Grossmann’s bitter critique of Helke Sander’s *Befreier und Befreite* (*Liberators Take Liberties*), a feminist film about the mass rape of German women by Soviet troops at the end of World War II, offers an opposing perspective on this issue. Grossmann bristled at whether what “may be a horrifically accurate estimate (of rapes committed) . . . has something to do with precisely a competitiveness about the status of victim . . . so sensitive in the context of World War II.” For Grossmann this story of rape is not “universal”: it is one of German women, often racists and enthusiastic Nazi supporters, being raped by Soviet soldiers who defeated Nazi Germany and who had “liberated death camps.” Grossmann worried that the mass rape would become part of a narrative “that might support postwar Germans’ self-perception as victims insofar as it might participate in a dangerous revival of German nationalism, whitewash the Nazi past, and normalize a genocidal war.” She, in turn, has been accused of insensitivity toward the suffering of war rape victims.³⁹

Similarly, passionate critics of the Allied bombing campaign against civilians, such as author and historian Jörg Friedrich and novelist W. G. Sebald, have been accused of ignoring both the context of the bombing and the much greater suffering endured by the victims of Nazism elsewhere. For example, in a hostile review of Richard Overy’s *The Bombing War* (2013) the U.S. military strategist Edward Luttwak juxtaposed the fatalities resulting from the firebombing of Hamburg in late July 1943 and the “achievements” of that city’s notorious Reserve Police Battalion 101 during the slaughter

of tens of thousands of Jews in the Lublin district of eastern Poland four months later.⁴⁰ But surely historians can explain different sets of atrocities without slipping into moral equivalence? This work attempts to do so, but it will probably not please everybody.

The “Dark Figures” of War

Sociologists and criminologists refer to the “dark figure” of crime as a means of highlighting the limitations of recorded data. The expression has broader resonance for estimates of death tolls in past wars. First, it recalls the definitional and contextual issues just discussed, which must be kept in view. Second, the sheer elusiveness of accurate estimates of civilian casualties makes them “dark figures.” The fog of war makes it inherently difficult to count people, dead or alive; as we shall see, the lack of accurate data creates a vacuum for wild guesstimates that tend to be recycled and eventually treated as fact. A glance at Wikipedia’s “List of Wars by Death Toll” highlights the problem. Where a range is given, the average gap between Wikipedia’s low and high estimates of death tolls prior to World War I is nearly double, with a coefficient of variation of 0.83. Sometimes the width of the range, as with the 20–70 million given for the Taiping Rebellion (1850–64), makes numbers meaningless, other than as a rhetorical device. And sometimes—as with the 36–40 million given for the Three Kingdoms war in China (184–280 CE)—the estimate is both too big and too narrow to be credible.⁴¹ The trouble is that there is a ready market for data, no matter how questionable. Spurious numbers have a habit of taking on a life of their own. As economic historian Greg Clark remarks, “Among modern economists there is a hunger by the credulous for numbers, any numbers however dubious their provenance, to lend support to the model of the moment.”⁴² Nevertheless, there is a role as well for cautious estimates, presented with suitable caveats, if only to rule out more farfetched numbers. Sometimes, too, it is appropriate to point out that no numbers are better than bad numbers. And Albert Einstein’s familiar bon mot, “Everything that can be counted does not necessarily count; everything that counts cannot necessarily be counted,” is also apposite here.

Although the numbers are better for World War I and World War II than for most earlier wars, gaps and uncertainties remain. In an age of industrialized slaughter, states went to great lengths to record military casualties, but civilian fatalities frequently went uncounted; indeed, figures were often deliberately obscured. That is why some historians avoid estimates of civilian casualties.⁴³ Still, establishing a figure for civilian fatalities can reveal much

about the nature of modern war. Our concern in the following chapters is not only to build on earlier estimates of casualties from a range of causes, some reliable, some approximate at best, but also to warn against spurious precision when even approximations are impossible. Thus, for example, while the human toll of the Jewish Holocaust is generally agreed to have been about 6 million,⁴⁴ the tolls of two other war genocides, those of the Armenian community in Turkey during World War I and of the European Roma community during World War II, cannot be determined with any precision. Scholarly estimates of the former range from 0.6 to 1.2 million and of the latter from “at least 130,000” to “between 250,000 and 500,000,” and higher numbers have been cited in both cases.⁴⁵ During World War II, Chinese civilians faced both a civil war and Japanese occupation. No estimate of the resultant civilian deaths, which range from an implausibly low 2.5 million to 20 million, is reliable.⁴⁶ One of the fruits of this book is a negative one: offering some sense of what war casualties are beyond estimation.

The numbers of victims of aerial bombing during World War II are less contested, but they have provoked controversy in the past. Today the generally accepted estimate for all deaths (though mostly civilians) from U.S. bombing in Japan during World War II is about 0.4 million, but initially the U.S. Strategic Bombing Survey placed the number at 0.9 million plus 1.3 million injured. A UN estimate of 140,000 for the death toll in Hiroshima is now preferred to an earlier tally of 260,000 by Japan’s Pacific War National Air-Raid Victim Consoling Association.⁴⁷ It is now also widely accepted that initial estimates of the number of civilian deaths caused by the notorious bombings of the German cities of Hamburg and Dresden during World War II were far too high. The same holds for an estimate of 0.8 million hunger-related deaths in Germany during and in the wake of World War I, where the true figure may have reached 0.4–0.5 million.⁴⁸

And so some estimates are set deliberately low in a spirit of denial; some are exaggerated for effect; some were never intended to be taken literally.⁴⁹ Estimates of famine deaths in Vietnam in 1944–45 range from 0.4 to 2 million and in Java from 1.3 to 2.4 million. Similarly, estimates of the German refugees murdered in Czechoslovakia in the wake of World War II range from the 15,000 to 40,000 claimed by Czech historians to the 2.23 million claimed by the German historian Heinz Nawratil.⁵⁰ The Nazis’ chief propagandist, Joseph Goebbels, put the death toll in Dresden in February 1945 at 250,000, and a near-contemporary account claimed that “no survivor could report on the events in the center of Dresden, where 300,000 persons were reported killed in 24 hours.” In one of her last essays, Susan Sontag would

recycle an estimate of “more than a hundred thousand German civilians, three-fourths of them women,” but the expert consensus on the true death toll is now about 25,000.⁵¹ People will sometimes pick the number that suits them: in an interview in 1977 Marshal Sir Arthur Travers “Bomber” Harris, head of the Royal Air Force’s Bomber Command at the height of World War II, recycled an implausibly high figure for the Allied blockade of Germany during World War I as a way of making the numbers killed by the Bomber Command during World War II seem “small.”⁵²

In addition to those who perished were those who survived but were physically or mentally scarred by war. They include the injured and the bereaved, those traumatized by what they witnessed and experienced, and those suffering the long-term consequences of being in utero or being born during or in the wake of war. They must also find a place in what follows. And here, too, one encounters great discrepancies in estimates: for instance, the estimated number of women raped by Soviet and Western forces at the end of World War II ranges from less than hundreds of thousands to over two million.⁵³

Finally, fallibility aside, figures are a cold way of capturing the enormity of civilian losses during World War I and World War II. Soviet journalist Vassili Grossman’s verbal depiction of what he witnessed in Treblinka in mid-August 1944 captures its horrors much more effectively than his feeble attempt at estimating (or exaggerating) the number who perished there.⁵⁴ In the end there remains Sherman’s aphorism: “War is cruelty and you cannot refine it.”⁵⁵ Aren’t any estimates of the aggregate civilian fatalities—which are by definition, refinements—inadequate and unavailing for explaining the experience of war? How does one measure cruelty? How does one measure grief? History demands a figure, but the figure somehow occludes the darkness that underlies it. Big anonymous numbers may have shock value, but they compromise compassion and empathy. And counting deaths risks equating them in morally troubling ways.

In contemplating the horrors of the world wars, genocides, bombings, and atrocities spring to mind more readily than famine, and much has been written about them. Yet if war-related deaths in the new Soviet Union in 1918–22 are included, hunger, famine, and associated diseases were the single biggest cause of civilian mortality during World War I and World War II. And whether those post-1918 deaths are included or not, famine deaths during World War II exceeded those during World War I by a big margin. The role of famine is paramount, and that is why the first part of our account describes famine in both wars in some detail. Some of those

famines will be familiar and well documented, while others have attracted research only recently, and a few await systematic analysis. Some of these war famines broadly replicated earlier famines in terms of proximate causes and symptoms, but others differed in a number of ways. And whereas a few were deliberate, more were the by-products of strategic decision-making that placed military goals before civilian needs. As we shall see, relatively affluent economies were not immune from hunger and starvation; famines in the heavily urban western Netherlands and in Leningrad (today's Saint Petersburg) during World War II have yielded precious data that shed light on aspects of other lesser-known famines.

The Guns of August, V-E Day, “the eleventh hour of the eleventh day of the eleventh month”: dates linked to World War I and World War II are engraved in our memories. Yet it has been argued that World War II began in 1931,⁵⁶ and certainly events in Ethiopia and in Spain and in China may be seen as dress rehearsals for what was to follow. And there is a good case for arguing that World War I did not end until the Russian Civil War and the Greco-Turkish War were over. Indeed, one of the foremost historians of World War I, Jay Winter, has described July 24, 1923, the day on which representatives of Turkey and Greece signed a peace treaty in Lausanne, as *The Day the Great War Ended*.⁵⁷ Similarly, the embers of World War II were not extinguished until 1946 or 1947. Our discussion reflects these broader chronologies. The approach is thematic rather than chronological. The order in which settings and victims are discussed, whether by chapter or within chapters, is not intended to relativize them. Chapters 1 to 3 are devoted to hunger and famines during World War I and World War II. They pay particular attention to aspects such as the demographic impact and characteristics of war famines, the constraints on relief efforts in wartime settings, the use of blockades as a military tactic, food rationing and the operation of black markets, and the long-term health impacts of hunger. The enormous cost of famine in terms of lives lost during the two wars will be highlighted, even if questions remain about the accuracy of some of the data invoked. Chapters 4 and 5 shift the focus from famine to the more familiar territory of war-related genocides, particularly the Jewish Holocaust. Chapter 6 describes the impact of a new and controversial form of war tactic that disproportionately targeted civilians, aerial bombing. There is broad consensus now on the death tolls from bombing in Europe and Japan. The figures for elsewhere in Asia are of poor quality, but the global total killed from the above during World War II was well over a million and possibly 1.5 million. Chapter 7 is devoted to war-related migration, involving displaced persons

fleeing for their lives, refugees, and forced laborers. Both wars produced unprecedented numbers of human migrants, both during the fighting and in its wake. Not easily quantified but possibly numbering 100 million or more in total, these, too, were nearly all innocent victims. Reliable numbers on another category of victim, those targeted by sexual violence and other atrocities, are even more elusive. They are the focus of chapters 8 and 9. Chapter 10 examines the impact of World War I and World War II on civilian morale and trauma, both in the short run and the long run. A century ago the term “trauma” (from *τραῦμα*, Greek for “a wound”) referred to physical injury; only in the post-World War II period has it been in widespread use in its modern sense of psychic injury. Nowadays the UN is ubiquitous, and it features prominently and controversially in the literature on both world wars. Chapter 11 summarizes and concludes with some broader speculations.

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