

HISTORY TEACHING REVIEW

YEAR BOOK

EDITOR: ANDREW HUNT

VOLUME 22

2008

Biographical Notes on the contributors

Editorial

Independence for Higher?
Robert Bruce and the Scottish Wars of Independence

Professor Edward J Cowan
University of Glasgow

The Final Arbiter: Public Opinion and Union Victory
in the American Civil War

Dr Adam IP Smith
University College London

J M Barrie and the First World War:
Propagandist; Philanthropist and Apologist

Dr Ann Petrie
Angus College

Early Soviet Cultural Policy and Experimentation

Dr Neil Edmunds
University of West England

The League of Nations and Disarmament: A Lost Cause?

Dr Carolyn Kitching
University of Teeside

Opposition and Accommodation in Nazi Germany:
An overview of Perspectives

Professor Tim Kirk
University of Newcastle

Nancy Astor and Hamish Henderson's
'The Ballad of the D-Day Dodgers'

Dr David Martin
University of Sheffield

Industry, Pollution and the Apartheid state in South Africa

Dr Phia Steyn
University of Stirling

The Comparative Accountancy of Death in War

Dr Mike Haynes
University of Wolverhampton

Reviews and Perspectives

H.T.R. YEAR BOOK is the Journal of the Scottish Association of Teachers of History. Contributions, editorial correspondence and books for review should be sent to the Editor, Andrew Hunt, 35 Carrongrove Avenue, Carron, Falkirk FK2 8NG.

The publication of an article in *H.T.R. Year Book* does not imply S.A.T.H.'s official approval of the opinions expressed therein

Cover: A cigarette card, produced some time in the earlier 1930s, of George V laying the wreath on behalf of the nation at the Cenotaph on Remembrance Day. My thanks to JD Henderson for providing the card, and to WD and HO Wills, London for their permission for SATH to use this card without charge.

BIOGRAPHICAL NOTES ON THE CONTRIBUTORS

PROFESSOR EDWARD J COWAN, FRSE taught at the Universities of Edinburgh, Guelph (Ontario) and Glasgow before taking up his present position as Director of the University of Glasgow's Crichton Campus. Professor of Scottish History at Glasgow, he is much in demand as a speaker, journalist and broadcaster. He has published widely on various aspects of Scottish History and has been a Visiting Professor in Australia, New Zealand, Canada and the United States. His most recent publications are *For Freedom Alone: The Declaration of Arbroath 1320* (revised edition 2008), *The Wallace Book* (2007) and *Folk in Print: Scotland's Chapbook Heritage* (2007).

DR ADAM IPSMITH, a Senior Lecturer in American History at UCL, is a regular contributor to the *Times Literary Supplement* and other journals. He is the author of two books on the American Civil War: *No Party Now: Politics in the Civil War North* (Oxford University Press, 2006), a study of party politics and political participation in the Union, and *The American Civil War* (Palgrave, 2007), an overview of the war aimed at students and general readers which draws on all the recent historiography.

DR PHIA STEYN is a lecturer in African Environmental History at the University of Stirling. She has written several articles and chapters on the history of South African environmentalism between the 1960s and the 1990s, ethnic minority campaigns against multinational oil companies in Ecuador and Nigeria, the politics of water, the history of food consumption amongst the Basotho people of Lesotho, and the history of Shell-BP in Nigeria. She is currently working on two monograph projects, namely the history of the rinderpest epidemic in the Orange Free State republic (1896-1898) and an environmental history of apartheid South Africa.

DR ANN PETRIE is a Course Leader at Angus College, Arbroath. Before studying for a postgraduate degree she co-authored *'The Glaxo': 50 Years in Montrose*, published in May 2002. Following this she successfully completed her Ph.D. 'Scottish Culture and the First World War, 1914-1939' in August 2006. She is currently working on a short book entitled *Rent Strikes: An East Coast Perspective*, which is due for publication in the Autumn 2008. Her area of academic interest focuses on the period surrounding the First World War and its impact on the home front in Scotland.

DR CAROLYN KITCHING is Reader in British International History at the University of Teesside. Her publications include *Britain and the Problem of International Disarmament, 1919-34* (1999) and *Britain and the Geneva Disarmament Conference, 1932-1934* (2003). She is Editor of the newsletter of the British International History Group, and her research interests include disarmament, the politics of the First Labour Government, the League of Nations and the United Nations.

DR NEIL EDMUNDS is Senior Lecturer in Modern European History at the University of West of England, Bristol. He is author of *The Soviet Proletarian Music Movement* (Oxford: Peter Lang, 2000) and editor of *Soviet Music and Society under Lenin and Stalin. The Baton and Sickle* (London: Routledge Curzon, 2004). His articles on twentieth-century musical life have appeared in numerous journals, including *Slavonic and East European Review*, *Tempo*, and *Contemporary British History*. He is currently researching Russian musicians in Shanghai during the inter-war period.

TIM KIRK is Professor of European History at the University of Newcastle. He is the author of *Nazism and the Austrian Working Class* (Cambridge, 1996) and *Nazi Germany* (Palgrave, 2007). His research interests are in the comparative history of fascism and in central European political and cultural history. He has edited a number of collections in these areas, including *Opposing Fascism* (Cambridge, 1999) and *Working towards the Fuehrer* (Manchester, 2003), both with Tony McElligott; and *The City in Central Europe* (Ashgate, 2000), with Malcolm Gee and Jill Steward, colleagues in the Research Group in European Urban Culture (<http://www.europeanurbanculture.co.uk/>). He is currently a visiting Research Fellow at the University of Vienna, where he is working on Hitler's Germany and the Balkans.

DR DAVID MARTIN teaches in the History Department at the University of Sheffield. Co-author of *Labour in British Society 1830-1914* (2000) and co-editor of *Ideology and the Labour Movement* (1979), he also contributed to the first ten volumes of the *Dictionary of Labour Biography* (1972-2000). An essay on the Parliamentary Labour Party in 1906 appeared in *Men Who Made Labour*, edited by Alan Haworth and Dianne Hayter (Routledge, 2006).

DR MIKE HAYNES works at the University of Wolverhampton and is especially interested in the history of the former Soviet Union and the wider issue of the human costs of change. He has co-authored *A Century of State Murder? Death and Public Policy in Russia*, (2003) and is co-editor of *History and Revolution: Refuting Revisionism*, (2007).

The Comparative Accountancy of Death in War

DR MIKE HAYNES

Do deaths in war matter? Isn't it enough to say that in this war a lot were killed and in that one a lot more? As Stalin is supposed to have said, a single death is a tragedy, a million deaths is a statistic. He was wrong. A million deaths is a million lives lost and a million tragedies for those left behind. But to judge from the way that historians carelessly approach the issue of how many died you might think that they agreed with Stalin, or even the US general, Tommy Franks, who infamously said 'we don't do body counts'. Actually historians do give body counts but they do so capriciously and with little regard for accuracy and the problems it poses.

Take a casual example – John Lewis Gaddis's *The Cold War*, published to acclaim in 2005. Here we learn that on September 1 1983 the Soviet air force shot down a South Korean airliner that had strayed into Soviet airspace with the loss of 209 *civilians*, 63 of them Americans. The figures are very precise, even the identification that they were civilians and 63 were Americans. But what of the big numbers? When it comes to the discussion of the Vietnam War there are none. Nor are there any for the illegal bombing of Cambodia. Nor are there any for the no less controversial Soviet occupation of Afghanistan, though most accounts will give you a sense that we need to measure the combined dead of these wars in millions. But Gaddis is not completely hostile to big numbers in this book. Discussing the Russian invasion of Hungary in 1956 he tells us 'some 1500 Soviet soldiers and 20,000 Hungarians' were killed.¹ This looks better but even the general reader will notice that the figures are approximate compared to those of the airliner. But there is worse. They are both completely wrong. There are more or less official figures easily available in the standard historical account. The authors suggest that these are an undercount but nothing like the extent to which Gaddis's data might suggest. The official number of Soviet dead was 669 killed, 1540 wounded and 51 missing. The official number of Hungarians counted were 2,502 dead and 19,226 wounded.² Gaddis has therefore unwittingly quoted data which doubles the number of Soviet dead and multiplies the Hungarian 7-8 times. Or perhaps he has made the mistake of confusing dead and wounded with dead – a surprisingly common error in accounts of battles and wars.

When it comes to the Korean War, on the other hand, things look better, 'According to official statistics 36,568 Americans died in combat. No such specificity is possible in calculating other losses, but it is likely that some 600,000 Chinese troops and well over 2 million Koreans, civilians and military personnel, perished during three years of fighting'. This seems much more helpful. But notice the uneven precision. Each American death is seemingly known, each of them a tragedy, a life lost in service to a grateful nation, recorded, memorialised. The margin for error *appears* to be nil. 'No such specificity is possible in calculating other losses' – but why? Did no one know their names? Has no one memorialised them? Or have we simply not bothered to look at 'their' losses with the same care we treat 'our losses' for it may well be that someone has actually counted them with some accuracy. Then what do the numbers mean? Take 'some 600,000' - if 'some' means only a 5% margin of error then this alone is equivalent to 80% of the US dead. Then what does 'well over 2 million Koreans' mean? Gaddis clearly wants to suggest that this rounded figure is a significant undercount but by how much? 100,000 would be 2.7 times the US losses, 200,000 5.5 times and so on. And notice also that the figures for the US are of those who 'died in combat' while those for the Chinese and Koreans are 'perished during three years of fighting'. And where did Gaddis get his data? In this case he tells us 'the figures come from Britannica Online'.³ This is surely puzzling. The different editions of the Encyclopaedia Britannica are undoubtedly the best general source for war dead figures, but Gaddis is one of the leading historians of the Cold War and his books are meticulously researched. When it comes to the dead, however, he is content to rely on a secondary source in a way we might suspect he would not if he were sourcing a controversial quotation.

These problems – not giving numbers, giving the wrong numbers, failing to explain the different levels of precision in the numbers, failing to clarify differences in meaning and finally taking the numbers at second or third hand are all characteristic of the way that historians deal with the issue of the dead in war. We can see this in another casual example, Donald Featherstone's much older book on *Colonial Small Wars 1837-1901*. This is not major work but it retains its value as a guide to British colonial actions. 'At 11.30am the battle was over. The Dervish army was wiped out. It had lost 11,000 killed, 16,000 wounded and over 4,000 prisoners from a total of about 40,000 men. The Anglo-Egyptian army, numbering perhaps 22,000 men, lost 48 killed and 382 wounded'.⁴ Thus the notorious Battle of Omdurman in 1898. The parallels with Gaddis's numbers should be clear. Here is the same problem with precision - apparently exact with the respect to the Anglo-Egyptians, near exact with respect to time and vague with respect to the Dervish army where the implied margins for error are many times the numbers killed on 'Anglo-Egyptian side'. But with a kill ratio of the order of 1:200 we might wonder whether the odd thousand here or there matters that much?

What kind of person worries about this? Having co-authored a book on the history of death in twentieth century Russia some of my friends think a strange one.⁵ 'I don't understand how you do it,' said a fellow historian of Russia. 'I couldn't finish the death book, it was just too depressing.' Fortunately not everyone thinks this way. Contrary to the post-modernists, getting the facts right is a professional duty. But it is more, it is a way to reclaim life and affirm its importance through bringing the salutary discipline of accuracy to the discussion of some of the most controversial episodes in past and present history.

But are there no easily available compendia to which we can refer for reliable data? Some brave souls have attempted to compile these. The pioneer was Lewis Fry Richardson (1881-1953), a Quaker meteorologist whose stature has grown since his death. Richardson wanted to end war but to do this he had to understand it and being a scientist he needed data to test theories. This led him to collect data about violent deaths, broadly for the period 1820-1950, which were published posthumously in *Statistics of Deadly Quarrels*. To do this he had to deal with problems still with us today. How do we define a war, for example? 'One can find cases of homicide which one large group of people condemned as murder, while another group condoned or praised as legitimate war. Such things went on in Ireland in 1921 and are going on now in Palestine'. Once defined how do we then deal with the accuracy issue? Richardson, the scientist, opted to avoid the issue of detailed errors by counting orders of magnitude on a log scale.⁶ But Richardson was only as good, as are his successors, as the sources on which they draw. Here knowledgeable amateurs have perhaps a more honourable record than historians in drawing together data, but inevitably they lack the time and sometimes the expertise to go back to the most authoritative sources which are often hidden away and obscure.⁷

So what are the principles that should guide this 'comparative accountancy' of human losses in war? There are two ways in which we can calculate war deaths. The first is to do the 'body count', adding up all the different war and war related deaths. The second is to use population estimates from before and after the war and work out how many people are missing because of the 'abnormal mortality' of war. If we were able to do the body count and population estimates correctly we should arrive at similar figures. In practice we can rarely do this and statistical error means that the two approaches never tally exactly. But they remain a check on each other. To see how they work let us begin with the body count approach.

Three categories of people die in wars (1) uniformed soldiers; (2) ancillaries - which can run from 'private mercenaries' to guerrilla fighters, to civilians involved in supplies, to camp followers and so on; (3) civilians not directly engaged in the war effort but who die as 'collateral damage'. Counting each category poses different problems. Uniformed soldiers are the easiest bit, at least in wars between states with good bureaucratic traditions. Note the pretence of great accuracy that is possible in the figures of the American Civil War losses, 2.75 million 'wore the blue and gray ... 633,026 died and 471,427 were wounded ... The population of the nation was 31.5 million, which means our casualties were 3.5% of the population'.⁸ Problems arise if the disruption of war causes a collapse in record keeping. This is especially likely if the war is fought on the territory of one of the states involved. So for example the precision of our data for British and German war deaths in

France in 1914-1918 is good (but there is always a margin for error). For the 1939-1945 war on the other hand the British military deaths have a smaller margin for error than the German military deaths.

If either or both of the states lacks a strong bureaucratic tradition (or collapses) the recording will be weak. It may even be left to the winning side which is unlikely to strive for the same precision about other people's losses compared to its own. This explains the uneven data for Omdurman and other colonial encounters. In fact at Omdurman the British did undertake a battlefield body count which is where the figure of 11,000 comes from. But contemporaries also suggested that 25% of the wounded might subsequently have died giving a figure of 16,000 Dervish dead. They, and we, cannot know precisely but for the Imperial side its dead will usually include those who died of wounds later (at least within a certain time of battle).

A battlefield count, moreover, can only ever be rough. Who counts accurately amidst the stench of rotting corpses? And as firepower has increased so has the level of battlefield damage to humans as well as things. All battlefields are hell but the hell has grown as the power of the sword and arrow gave way to ever more destructive bullets, shells, grenades and so on. By 1860 a chaplain to the British forces in the Third Opium War in China could report the impact of their bombardment on Chinese forces, 'it was indeed an awful sight, limbs blown away, bodies literally burst asunder, one black and livid mess of blood and wounds'.⁹ By the time of the First World War the destructive power of bullets and especially shells was such that huge numbers of dead remained unidentified and unidentifiable as bodies were blown to pieces. In this war 60% of British casualties were from shells and grenades. 'How many died?' asked Siegfried Sassoon, in his poem *The Effect*, 'As many as you wish,/ Don't count 'em; they're too many./ Who'll buy my nice fresh corpses, two a penny'.¹⁰ But they were counted. Of the 1.1 million Commonwealth dead in this war 53% had identified burials, 17% unidentified burials and 30% were simply memorialised as, in Kipling's phrase, 'known unto God'.¹¹

In military history there has been some attempt to measure the lethality of munitions which has grown enormously in the last century and a half. This created the huge asymmetry in warfare which made colonial forces all but undefeatable in open battle. (Custer might not have had to make his last stand if he had taken the Gatling guns he was offered). More recently this asymmetry has been evident in America's conflicts with less advanced states. 'Mechanical war' is argued now to trump 'manpower' wars with large loss of life being a thing of the past as a 'revolution in military affairs' takes place. But this effect is more evident on the side of the big power. Those on the receiving end might see things differently. What is a smart or dumb weapon is controversial as is the balance between them. And smart weapons are only as smart as the dumb human beings who use them. Moreover sooner or later troops have to be deployed on the ground where it is possible to counter some of the asymmetry. And this is to say nothing of what would happen if forces were more equally matched with modern weaponry.¹²

What of those we have called ancillaries? Fighting has always involved more than uniformed troops. In recent years concern has grown that the US is outsourcing war to private contractors but there has always been an element of this even in the most formal of conflicts. Paid private fighters are less uncommon than we imagine and civilian support for armies often extends to the front line. Before the nineteenth century a typical army has been described as 'a rag tag agglomeration of fighting men, speculators, provisioners, wives, prostitutes, a kind of vagabond social system of its own'.¹³ We know little of the size of camp followers but some have suggested on occasion they outnumbered fighting troops. Men and women lived alongside the fighting soldiers (sometimes stepping into the breach) fetching, carrying, foraging, cooking, mending, comforting and nursing, providing sex and so on. Even with the later growth of uniformed civilian elements such as nurses, these invisible civilian roles close to the front did not all disappear but just because they are invisible so too are the deaths of 'camp followers' who were caught up when the battle overtook them.

Soldiers, as Hackett once put it, sign a contract of 'unlimited liability' when they join. Civilians have no such contract but they have always died both directly through destruction and indirectly through war's negative health effects.¹⁴ Although we associate this with the total nature of modern

war, which some date back to the Napoleonic Wars, civilians have always died in large numbers whatever the Geneva conventions might say.¹⁵ The German bombing of Britain in World War II killed 60,000; Britain's bombing of Germany an estimated 600,000. Later 150,000-220,000 are estimated to have died in the Nagasaki and Hiroshima atomic bombs alone. The numbers are vague because no-one was sure of the exact numbers in the cities and the destruction was so complete. Beyond this, modern wars, as in the Nazi case, have sometimes assumed a genocidal character (though this term is now widely abused.)¹⁶ But defeating your enemy by disrupting his supplies, destroying his civilian base and inflicting starvation, famine and disease on local populations has always been a part of warfare as has plundering, pillaging and 'living off the land' i.e. the local population. Historians can too easily contrast the 'gentlemanly limited war' of the past to the barbarism of total war and fail to count the earlier civilian victims. Seen in this light, for example, what appears to Europeans as a set of 'small colonial wars' assume a very different character if looked at from the perspective of the conquered populations.

In these wars the aim was often to inflict 'total war' on your opponent. Hannah Arendt argued that it was here that we find the roots of later Nazi genocide, an argument recently echoed by Sven Lindqvist and Marc Ferro.¹⁷ Mass killings and atrocities by European soldiers and their local levies occurred systematically as an essential part of imperial conquest. The brutality of King Leopold's Congo or Germany's extermination of the Herero people in South-West Africa are well known. Less so (or more excused) are cases closer to home. 'The hypocritical British heart beats for all except those their own empire drowns in blood', Lindqvist caustically wrote.¹⁸ For Lindqvist, acquiring and defending European colonial rule involved a double invisibility. People at home were shielded from a view of the full brutality involved while in the colonies themselves 'the art of killing from a distance became a European speciality very early on'. At Omdurman, for example Sudanese fighters could not get nearer than 300 yards to the British lines. In this unequal fight, Churchill, would write of the white soldiers, 'nobody expected to be killed'. War became 'a sporting element in a splendid game'.¹⁹ But it was no less easy to shell and burn villages from afar.

'War is war and savage war is the worst of the lot' said one British officer in Africa. The idea 'of fighting with an uncivilised race with the same feelings of humanity that dictate our wars with civilised races' was a fallacy said an early British 'embedded journalist in Zululand in 1879. Michael Lieven has traced how systematic massacre of prisoners occurred alongside demonstrative battlefield lynching. But he has also shown how extensive were the subsequent reprisals inflicted on the local population – the seizure of livestock, crop destructions and burning out countless villages. Having already lost a significant part of the able bodied population to battle and massacre, the Zulu population was then subject to an economic calamity. 'I have lost my cattle. I have no mealies, I and my people are starving,' said one Zulu in the aftermath.²⁰

Sadly such imperial actions were commonplace as Sir Garnet Wolseley made clear. 'In planning a war against an uncivilised nation who has, perhaps, no capital, your first object should be the capture of whatever they prize most, and the destruction or deprivation of which will probably bring the war most rapidly to a conclusion. When the enemy could not be touched in his patriotism, or his honour he was touched through his pocket by carrying off his flocks and destroying his crops.'²¹ These tactics have given rise to sharp controversy recently in India on the 150th anniversary of the Indian Mutiny which is now often seen as a war of independence. There is little doubt that several hundred thousand died directly and indirectly as a result of reprisals but Amaresh Mishra has recently suggested a figure of 10 million additional deaths for 1857-1867. While his critics condemn this as a 'back of the envelop' calculation, the fact that it is necessary at all is a reflection of the invisibility of the victims.²²

In the twentieth century came civilian attacks from the air. The young Arthur Harris wrote of Iraq in the 1920s that 'the Arab and Kurd...now know what real bombing means in casualties and damage; they now know that within 45 minutes a full-sized village can be partially wiped out and a third of its inhabitants killed by four or five machines'. 'Air control is a marvellous means of bringing these wild mountain tribes to heel. It is swift, economic and humane, as we always drop warning messages some hours before, so that they clear out... An eastern mind forgets quickly, and

if he is not punished for his misdeeds straight way, he has forgotten all about them, and feels his punishment is not merited if delayed,' wrote another of Harris's colleagues of the time.²³

Body count figures will therefore be liable to be undercounts because of their failures to deal adequately with non-military personnel. But a global body count figure will also be made up of individual figures with different margins of error that reflect the social and political face of war. Essentially a global body count will be made up of a statistic plus an estimate plus a guesstimate. But this does not mean that all estimates are of equal value or that we should simply average a few indiscriminate guesses. We should track down the best estimates and be open about the margins of error.

Counting the dead through the use of population estimates based on census material might seem to be a much less reliable way of dealing with the problem of war dead. But it can be very accurate if what we want to know is the total number of excess deaths. For it to work best we need two things – good and recent census data and good registration of births and deaths. It is therefore more appropriate to analyse war deaths in more advanced and organised societies. What it cannot do (at least with any precision) is to help allocate deaths to the different groups. This method gives us the total who, in Gaddis's terms, 'perished during the years of war'.²⁴

To see how this works we can do a simplified estimate of Soviet population losses in World War II. To find out its war time population losses between 1941-1945 we do the following calculation

(1) 1941 population plus births 1941-1945 minus 1945 population = Total losses

But some of these would have died anyway due to natural causes. So we now need to calculate

(2) Total losses minus hypothesised losses 1941-45 on basis of pre-war death rates = additional wartime mortality.

It is this calculation that gives us the widely quoted figure of 26-27 million losses. There will always be a margin for error in the underlying data due to defects in the census and registration of births and deaths. But of these problems can be coped with we can arrive at a good estimate. Interestingly for Stalin's Russia all these problems seem manageable in part because it was bureaucratic state.

But the demographic approach is likely to undercount deaths too. Suppose, for example, a bomb is dropped on an old people's home or a maternity ward in 1941. Some of the old people or young babies would undoubtedly have died of 'natural causes' by 1945. But in this example they clearly died as a consequence of war even though some might have died a little later. It would be hard to convince relatives that they were not war victims. This is not a trivial point. War tends to carry off the weak of all ages but if they died more prematurely than they might have done had there been no war then they are surely war victims. Thus the Soviet war dead figure of 26-27 million should actually be put even though there is still debate as to what addition might be made.

We should also note that in some circumstances applying the demographic method could produce perverse results. Suppose that the war caused the death rate to fall, it might then appear that war is saving lives. This might seem unlikely but to some extent this happened in the UK during World War II. Because no invasion took place the civilian death and missing toll to July 1945 was officially only 60,595 (precision again!). Indirectly the stress of war may have carried off others prematurely, but rationing and the re-organisation of medical service was so successful that there was a significant improvement in *overall* health and life expectancy.

Whether we use the body count or demographic method we also have to consider when to stop. It is not obvious when accounting for war deaths should end - when the fighting officially stops, unofficially, an armistice, a peace treaty or when the casualties stop? But when do they stop? A century on, buried World War One munitions still kill people each year on the western front. More serious numerically is the legacy of land mines and cluster bombs (and depleted uranium) used so often in recent conflicts. The 1950 Japanese census recorded 280,000 survivors of the atomic bombs, a number of whom may have experienced early deaths. The stress of war is also ongoing. It

is alleged that more British Falkland's War veterans have committed suicide than were killed in the war itself. A case is being made for a larger first Gulf War effect and an Iraq and Afghanistan effect on veterans. There is more systematic evidence of a 'Vietnam Effect'. Probably there have been such war effects throughout history but people just accepted them or preferred not to look. Today we are more inquisitive. One hypothesis suggested to explain the rising mortality of adults in late middle age in Russia in the 1990s was this might be a delayed legacy of the physical and mental stress on children in World War II. In the event other explanations seem more credible but the need to pose the question shows that war legacies have both a possible veteran and civilian component.

These arguments are fraught with political implications. Those who wage war are rarely interested in accounting for its full human or economic cost and many of these issues come together in the controversies over the recent history of death in Iraq – one of the most contested issues in contemporary history. Like poorer countries, Iraq has had a high rate of population growth in the last half century with population rising from 5 million in 1950 to 13 million in 1980. Per capita income also rose in these years nearly 5 times (increasing from 20% to 60% of the UK level). Thereafter the controversy begins as the Iraqi people experienced 3 wars, internal repression, more than a decade of economic sanctions (ostensibly designed to be less onerous than war) and occupation.

These two and half decades have not only had a serious impact on the Iraqi people but also the state bureaucracy. Decadal censuses were held in October 1977, 1987 and 1997 but the later one was limited in detail and geographic scope. No census was undertaken in 2007. The Iraqi population grew to 18 million in 1990 and 23 million in 2000, even as people struggled with social catastrophe. One measure of this is income per head which between 1979 and 1990 fell by two thirds (to 15% of the 1990 UK level). In 1991 amidst war it collapsed by a further two thirds (to 6% of the UK level). In the 1990s there was some small recovery but Iraq remains poor with an output per head at the start of the second war close to its level in 1950 (less than 10% of the current UK level and less than 20% of its neighbours).²⁵

Measuring the human cost of Iraq's history involves counting deaths directly as well as measuring those which might not have occurred had repression, sanctions and war not intervened. Internal repression in Saddam Hussein's Iraq was considerable and part of the promise of regime change was that there would be a proper accounting. This has not occurred. We can therefore only note estimates of thousands shot and executed, and tens of thousands of victims, Kurds, Shiites, Marsh Arabs of ethnic repression and a further component of death caused by displacement. The Iran-Iraq War left an uncertain toll. Iraq acknowledged 220,000 deaths to which demographers then add different estimates for the unknown dead.

The first Gulf War produced a further surge in deaths. In Kuwait a subsequent retrospective study by Harvard University epidemiologists has claimed to detect a long term mortality effect in addition to the invasion and seven month occupation deaths. On the coalition side there were only 213 combat deaths (plus a significant number of out of combat deaths) in pushing the Iraqi forces back. But on the Iraqi side there is huge controversy. US spokesmen originally argued no numbers could be given but Mary Beth Daponte, a government demographer, had already made estimates which, when leaked, almost led to her dismissal. She initially estimated a death toll of 158,000 including 40,000 soldiers, 13,000 civilians, 70,000 indirect deaths and 30,000 in further repressions of the Shiite and Kurd population but she has since revised this figure to over 200,000.

However other semi-official US estimates have subsequently suggested that fewer Iraqi troops died.²⁶

Then there is the debate over sanctions on Iraq which lasted from 1990-2003. When Madeleine Albright was asked in 1996 about an alleged half a million additional child deaths because of these she said that this was 'a price worth paying' to keep pressure on the Iraqi regime. Tony Blair subsequently accepted a similar figure but blamed it on Saddam Hussein's intransigence. Some estimates put sanctions-induced excess mortality at as high as 1-1.5 million for the period they were in place.²⁷

More controversial still is the issue of the costs of the occupation since 2003. Four main types of violent deaths have taken place – those of coalition forces and the Iraqi security forces; those

killed by the coalition and Iraqi forces; Iraqis killed by and in relation to the insurgency-resistance; and those that are a product of increased criminalisation. In addition there is also the question of the impact that the chaos of the occupation has had on wider trends in civilian mortality and especially infant mortality and life expectancy.

Violent deaths are not properly counted partly through choice ('we do not do body counts') and partly now because the conditions probably preclude it. Seemingly exact numbers of coalition dead are available and these suggest 4,304 died in the first five years to March 20 2008 (3992 US, 75 UK and 237 others).²⁸ But these figures do not include over 1000 deaths of 'contractors' (or mercenaries) – part of the privatisation of war.

The real difficulty however is tracing Iraqi deaths on all sides. There have been two attempts at body counts. The Iraqi government began a 'morgue' count but then seemingly abandoned it under pressure as the numbers rose, the head of the Baghdad morgue fled abroad. The unofficial UK Iraq body count undertakes what is called 'passive surveillance' - a count based on morgue and (largely English language) press reports. Its five year violent death total is 82-90,000.²⁹ Although there may be some double counting here, it is more likely a lower estimate as it is individual deaths and deaths in more remote places will not be adequately captured. Even so this represents a very significant figure.

The second way of assessing deaths is through surveys which have become more difficult as conditions have deteriorated. Surveys can involve a body count element, (who do you know who has died and how did they die?). They can also involve a comparison of mortality over time, (who do you know who died in period X compared to period Y). This should allow additional mortality to be calculated. Surveys published in the *Lancet* have suggested a huge number of post invasion deaths from violence. According to a 2006 survey, by July of that year there had been 650,000 additional deaths, 600,000 of which were due to violence. Other surveys have produced figures between the Lancet surveys and the Iraqi Body Count data. All data points to a huge toll but the Lancet figures have been especially controversial.

Critics have argued that the survey teams have been politically motivated; that technically the surveys have been based on questionable sampling methods; lack of rigour on the part of interviewers; dishonest respondents; that the high figures for deaths imply even more implausibly high figures of wounded. The authors, some of the best known figures in their field, defend their reputations and techniques but also demand that their critics support better structured and more complete surveys rather than risk the accusation that they prefer the bliss of ignorance to the pain of knowing.³⁰

We need, however, to be careful. Figures for each element of the long tragedy of Iraq cannot simply be summed. The calculations for sanctions deaths, for example, need to be netted of the effects of the first Gulf War. No less there needs to be consistency between the different elements. If sanctions created a high pre 2003 civilian mortality rate then we cannot assume a low one for calculations of post 2003 additional deaths.

Moreover most attention has been focused on violent deaths, the issue of non violent deaths is possibly consistently underestimated. As we know, relatively well organised states such as the UK in World War II can improve or contain the impact of crisis on civilian health. Is it plausible that the same has been happening in Iraq? Here, according to the UNHCR, we have one of the biggest humanitarian catastrophes still in existence. More than 10% of the population has been displaced (over 2 million abroad and 1.5 million internally). The daily life of the mass of the population is affected by fear, unemployment, inadequately functioning water, electricity, sewage etc and a struggling health service.³¹ All this points to significant problems with non violent mortality which the Lancet studies may underestimate in favour of violent death.

The picture then is not a pretty or easy one. But in war it never is. No less than modern day politicians and generals, historians are prone to understate the cost of war and not least when it falls on what Kipling called 'the lesser breeds'. The numbers do matter. Frustrations with the difficulties of calculating them often lead to the view that there are 'lies, damned lies and statistics'. This is not so.

The problem is not the statistics but the people who abuse, misuse, lie or more generously fail to understand them. If the numbers are poor then let us work to improve them. Let us make them more accurate, track down the margins of error. Historians who get their dates wrong or mangle their quotes have their competence and professionalism doubted. Our standards are rightly high. They should be no less high when it comes to numbers and not least the numbers of deaths of our fellow human beings.

NOTES:

- 1 J.Gaddis, *The Cold War*, London: Penguin Books, 2007, p. 227, 109.
- 2 G Litván (ed), *The Hungarian Revolution of 1956: Reform, Revolt and Repression 1953-1963* (Longman, 1996).
- 3 Gaddis, *op cit.*, p.271
- 4 D.Featherstone, *Colonial Small Wars 1837-1901*, London: David and Charles, 1973, p.194.
- 5 M.Haynes and R. Husan, *A Century of State Murder? Death and Policy in Twentieth-Century Russia*, London: Pluto Press, 2003.
- 6 L.F.Richardson, *Statistics of Deadly Quarrels*, London: Atlantic Books, 1960; B.Hayes, 'Statistics of deadly quarrels', *American Scientist*, January-February, 2002, vol. 90 no.1; O.M.Ashford, *Prophet or Professor?: The Life and Work of Lewis Fry Richardson*, Bristol: Adam Hilger, 1985.
- 7 See R.J.Rummel's website and books <http://www.hawaii.edu/powerkills/> which give very high estimates and Matthew White's excellent amateur site <http://users.erols.com/mwhite28/warstat1.htm>.
- 8 D.Baucom, 'Technological war: reality and the American myth', *Air University Review*, September-October 1981
- 9 Quoted J.Newinger, *The Blood Never Dried. A People's History of the British Empire*, London: Bookmarks, 2006, p. 60.
- 10 J.Keegan & R. Holmes, *Soldiers. A history of Men in Battle*, London; Hamish Hamilton, 1985, p. 151
- 11 Calculated from, Commonwealth War Graves Commission, Annual Report 2006-2007. (<http://www.cwgc.org/>). The equivalent Commonwealth figures for World War II are 60% identified burials, 4% unidentified and 36% memorialised. Air and sea casualties affect these ratios which also vary by front).
- 12 For critiques of the argument 'high tech' wars can reduce deaths see D.Baucom, 'Technological war: reality and the American myth', *Air University Review*, September- October 1981; R.Mandel, 'The wartime utility of precision versus brute force in weaponry', *Armed Forces and Society*, vol. 30 no. 2, 2004 Winter, pp. 171-201.
- 13 J.B.Elshtain, 'Women and war' in C.Townsend ed., *The Oxford History of Modern War*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000, p. 306.
- 14 B.S.Levy & V.W. Sidel eds., *War and Public Health*, American Public Health Association, 2000.
- 15 For a recent development of this view see David A Bell, *The First Total War: Napoleon's Europe and the Birth of Modern Warfare*, London: Bloomsbury, 2007
- 16 For good introductions to some of the issues in definitions see M.Mazower; 'Violence and the state in the twentieth century', *American Historical Review*, vol. 107 no.4, October 2002; pp. 1158-1178; M. Mandani, 'The politics of naming: genocide, civil war, insurgency', *London Review of Books*, vol. 29 no. 5, 8 March.
- 17 S. Lindqvist, *'Exterminate all the brutes'*, London: Granta, 1997; M.Ferro, 'Communism, Nazism, Colonialism: what value has the analogy?' in M.Haynes & J.Wolfreys eds., *History and Revolution: Refuting Revisionism*, London: Verso, 2007, pp. 156-171.
- 18 Lindqvist, *op cit.*, p. 82
- 19 Lindqvist, *op cit.*, p.46,54
- 20 M.Lieven, 'Butchering the brutes all over the place': total war and massacre in Zululand, 1879', *History*, vol. 84, no. 276, 1999 October, pp. 614-632.

- 21 Quoted Featherstone, *op cit.*, p. 13.
- 22 Amaresh Misra, *War of Civilisations: The Long Revolution (India AD 1857)*, New Delhi, Rupa, 2007.
- 23 S.Lindqvist, *A History of Bombing, London*; Granta Books, 2002; see also D.Killingray, 'A Swift Agent of Government': Air Power in British Colonial Africa, 1916-1939' *The Journal of African History*, vol. 25, No. 4 (1984), pp. 429-444
- 24 M.Haynes, 'Counting Soviet Deaths in the Great Patriotic War: A Note', *Europe-Asia Studies*, vol. 55 no. 2, 2003, pp.303-309.
- 25 Calculated from data in A.Maddison, *The World Economy: Historical Statistics*, Paris: OECD, 2003.
- 26 On Daponte's work and her troubles when it was revealed see B.Daponte, 'A case study in estimating casualties from war and its aftermath: the 1991 Persian Gulf War. *Physicians for Social Responsibility Quarterly*, 1993;3(2):57-66; 'Toting the casualties of war', *Business Week*, 6 February 2003. J.Kelly, 'Estimates of deaths in first war still in dispute', *Post Gazette*, Sunday, February 16, 2003 <http://www.post-gazette.com/nation/20030216casualty0216p5.asp>
- 27 S.Zurbrigg, 'Economic Sanctions on Iraq: Tool for Peace, or Travesty?' *Muslim World Journal of Human Rights*, vol 4 no. 2 September 2007 for a discussion.
- 28 <http://icasualties.org/oif/>. But controversy surrounds the numbers of wounded; whether those who die later are properly counted; the issue of military suicide rates etc.
- 29 www.iraqbodycount.org/
- 30 L.Roberts et al, 'Mortality before and after the 2003 invasion of Iraq: cluster sample survey', *Lancet*, vol. 364, 1857-1864; G.Burham et al, 'Mortality after the 2003 invasion of Iraq: a cross section-sectional cluster sample survey', *Lancet*, vol. 368, 1421-1428; S.Zeger & E.Johnson, 'Estimating excess deaths in Iraq since the US-British led invasion', *Significance*, vol 4 no 2, June 2007, pp. 54-59; J.Steele & S. Goldenberg, 'What is the real death toll in Iraq?', *Guardian*, 19 March 2008.
- 31 <http://www.unhcr-iraqcrisis.org/>