Violence, Statistics, and the Politics of Accounting for the Dead

edited by Marc-Antoine Pérouse de Montclos, Elizabeth Minor, and Samrat Sinha
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The subject: excess mortality resulting from mass violence. I knew when I started reading this book that I would need to be cautious about the tenor of its review. The topic is quite literally life-and-death and demands great care on several accounts. Beyond numerical indicators, deaths in conflict carry meanings that are not adequately conveyed by statistics. The subject encompasses the very substance of life. In this book, edited by Pérouse de Montclos et al., ten authors share their thematic analyses, historical accounts, and case studies on a particular kind of excess mortality, addressing a noticeable gap in the literature on population studies. The texts inherit the venerable tradition of "bearing witness," the work of the International Practitioner Network of casualty recording organizations, and the campaign "Every Casualty Worldwide."

The book starts with a text from Gates et al. and the argument that excess mortality (i.e., the rate of premature deaths in a given population) is an essential indicator to development studies. Looking at numbers of battle-related deaths and civilian casualties, the authors show in their piece that excess mortality and development are interrelated. This might not come as a surprise, since armed conflicts bring major disruptions, with destruction, civilian casualties, reduction of national revenues, and often diversion of expenditures from education and health. Perhaps countries where bloodshed has occurred tend to be among the less well developed, but this is a contentious topic.

Counting the bodies might seem a simple task at first sight, but Pérouse de Montclos, who sets the tone of the book with his introduction, a core piece, and the conclusion, demonstrates the difficulties in situations of mass violence. Only four main sources of information are available to accomplish this task (pre- and post-conflict censuses, ex-post victimization surveys, press reports on violence, and investigations of individual deaths), and none of these are complete or fully reliable. Reporting deaths is also prone to political manipulation, where numbers are conveniently altered to declare or finish a war, to require or deny humanitarian aid, or to justify or dissuade peacekeeping intervention. To add to the difficulty, excess mortality is also subject to propaganda, where the number of casualties is used to "frame the narratives of insecurity, the poverty trap and the 'curse' of failed states in comparison to developed countries" (p. 3).

Accounting for conflict deaths occupies a contested terrain where neutrality is essential to preserve credibility. Isabelle Vonèche-Cardia provides a valuable piece on the International Committee of the Red Cross and its pioneer work in tracing missing persons and documenting the circumstances of deaths. We learn, for instance, that the organization was instrumental in tracing the military with soldiers' identity tags. Beginning from its work on tracing wounded soldiers and then war prisoners, the organization extended its work to civilians. However, the Red Cross did not take on the business of counting deaths, and the lack of a single international organization doing this work has proven problematic. These issues and others set the stage for the second part of the book, which comprises a set of case studies and conclusions.

The book presents three separate case studies of casualty-recording practitioners. Dodd and Perkins present the NGO Action on Armed Violence—a non-governmental organization working to reduce the incidence of harm of armed violence around the world—to illustrate the importance of counting the casualties, especially for civilian deaths that are insufficiently documented. It uses English-language news reports from around the world to record the casualties and to document their context (e.g., time, location, and weapon used), enabling it to provide incident-based monitoring, which is useful to track patterns and weapons to alert the public and decision-makers so humanitarian help can be best provided.

In the second case study, Samrat Sinha describes the use of local newspapers in the region of Manipur, India (2008–09) to measure the burden of conflict at the micro-level. A structured database makes it possible to track insurgency events and identify the agents of the conflict. However, local newspapers have inherent limitations. They do not document everything; the injured are underreported and remote areas are not always covered. In practice, violent civil strife poses serious difficulties for reporting and for the protection of non-combatant observers.

In the final case study, Igor Roginek shows how questionnaires and interviews documented human losses in the war in Croatia (1991–95). He illustrates how important it is to rigorously document deaths, their circumstances and locations, and to enable the mourning process. Furthermore, it is crucial to resolve the debate on responsibilities for the deaths, to initiate the reconciliation process, and ultimately to prosecute war criminals.

The book is a vital contribution for anyone involved beyond the numbers in this particularly difficult kind of excess mortality. It offers essential insights on the complexity and the difficulties of the task. It demonstrates repeatedly that the body count of the victims of violence is not only a statistic but decisive evidence for understanding and preventing violent conflicts, for peace-making processes, for mourning human losses, and for prosecuting criminals. The book performs a notable service in documenting methodologies to measure and evaluate this special kind of excess mortality within the realm of population studies.

Even so, it demonstrates that methodologies for counting the deaths from mass violence are not yet standardized. The reliability of the account often depends on the particular purpose of the particular effort. Scientific detachment meets long-lost cousin: scientific engagement. This book cannot be ignored by those engaged directly in this work and by those dealing with its consequences.