

Exaggerating War Death Numbers

Talk given on March 1, 2018 at the event:

The Bloody Lens

The media's treatment of war and terrorism: a debate

Professor Michael Spagat, Department of Economics, Royal Holloway
University of London, m.spagat@rhul.ac.uk

These are the people killed in the Parkland High School shooting



There are 17 of them.

This massacre may catalyse movement toward stricter gun control laws in the US, saving future lives.

A lot is riding on the debate this horrific event has generated.

So maybe it would be helpful to exaggerate the number of people killed in the incident.

If this massacre of 17 would lead to some package of gun control measures then, surely, inflating the number to 50 would lead to a stricter, hence better, package.



Why not?

In fact, let's just make it an even 100.

Raise your hand if you pledge to join me on social media pushing the line that 100 people were killed at Parkland.

If someone challenges us we'll get really angry and insist that the mainstream media is covering up the true size of the massacre.

Shame on the denialists who say it's only 17!

When I wrote the last slide I assumed that nobody would raise his/her hand – hopefully this turned out to be true.

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But **why** shouldn't we exaggerate the death count in this massacre?

Off the top of my head I can think of three main reasons not to do this.

1. It's wrong to lie.

2. It dishonours the true victims to lard up their numbers with fake ones.

3. We would never get away with it (well, aside from convincing a fringe of crazies). Where are the names and faces of our additional 83?

Yet, when referring to wars in faraway places people often make such exaggerations.

Conditions 1 and 2 are still true but condition 3 may not hold – exaggerators might get away with it.

The war in Kosovo (1998-99)

We know with great certainty that the number of people killed was around 13,500 (see [this paper of mine](#))

Yet look at these headlines that appeared during the war:

Cohen Fears 100,000 Kosovo Men Killed by Serbs

By Tom Doggett

Reuters

Sunday, May 16, 1999; 2:56 p.m. EDT

Up to 100,000 ethnic Albanian men in Kosovo of fighting age have vanished and may have been killed by Serbian forces, Defense Secretary William Cohen said on Sunday.

"We've now seen about 100,000 military-aged men missing. . . . They may have been murdered," Cohen said on the CBS news program "Face the Nation."



Joint Chiefs of Staff Chairman Gen. Henry Shelton, left, and Secretary of Defense William Cohen on CBS's "Face the Nation." (AP)

In fairness, Cohen hedges but this still looks like official US support for an estimate of 100,000 murders.

But why stop at 100,000?

NEWS

200,000 KOSOVARS MAY BE MISSING

By Deborah Orin

May 25, 1999 | 4:00am

As many as 200,000 Kosovar men may be missing as Serbian thugs continue their “ethnic cleansing” of the province, British officials said yesterday.

The latest charges of Serbian atrocities came as the Kosovo war entered its third month.

There have been fears since the start of the war on March 24 about the fate of Kosovar men marched off at gunpoint by Serbian troops – but 200,000 is the highest number yet circulated.

British Defense Secretary George Robertson scoffed at the sudden Serbian release Sunday of about 1,000 Kosovar men – many emaciated and beaten – saying many, many more remain at risk.

“That could leave as many as 200,000 other men of military age who are missing, 200,000 more tales of savage cruelty, 200,000 more families forced to suffer the pain of separation, 200,000 more reasons why we must see this through to the end,” Robertson said.

Again, I acknowledge the distinction between missing and killed although I think that many will see this as 200,000 killed.

David Scheffer, United States Ambassador-at-Large for War Crimes Issues describes a back-of-an-envelope calculation leading to the 100,000 number as “conservative.”

He notes that US intelligence agencies released estimates between 225,000 and 400,000.

In [his book](#), Scheffer writes:

“Given the murderous track record of the Bosnian Serbs in the Srebrenica genocide, we had to assume the worst and sound the alarm. With so many men missing what exactly was their fate? We never stated that they in fact were killed, only that such massacres could have occurred. I personally put the number out there with considerable emphasis, to try to deter further killings. We were sending the message that with so many men missing, we had better not find out that all or any significant number of them had been killed.”

But he never acknowledges the fact that all these estimates, from the “conservative” 100,000 on up turned out to be way too high.

To be clear – 13,500 violent deaths is a lot, especially in such a small country like Kosovo.

But I'm saying that it's not OK to convert this into 100,000 or 200,000 or 400,000 deaths in an attempt to try to get an outcome you want – in this case NATO military intervention.

The Democratic Republic of Congo

AFRICA

Congo's Death Rate Unchanged Since War Ended

By LYDIA POLGREEN JAN. 23, 2008



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ARTICLES REMAINING

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The last slide was a New York Times headline – here are the opening paragraphs of the story.

DAKAR, Senegal — Five years after Congo's catastrophic war officially ended, the rate at which people are dying in the country remains virtually unchanged, according to a new survey, despite the efforts of the world's largest peacekeeping force, billions of dollars in international aid and a historic election that revived democracy after decades of violence and despotism.

The survey, released Tuesday, estimated that 45,000 people continue to die every month, about the same pace as in 2004, when the international push to rebuild the country had scarcely begun. Almost all the deaths come from hunger and disease, signs that the country is still grappling with the aftermath of a war that gutted its infrastructure, forced millions to flee and flattened its economy.

In all, more than 5.4 million people have died in Congo since the war began in 1998, according to the most recent survey's estimate, the latest in a series completed by the International Rescue Committee, an American aid organization. Nearly half of the dead were children younger than 5 years old.

Key points.

1. The International Rescue Committee (IRC) did a survey and found 5.4 million deaths in the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC)
2. Only a small percentage of these are claimed to be violent.
3. Almost $\frac{1}{2}$ of the deaths are said to be of children.

4. The IRC's number is based on comparing the DRC's death rates with the average death rates of countries in its region... although the DRC has long done much worse than its neighbours.

This approach would be like measuring the number of Mexicans killed in Mexico's drug war by comparing Mexico's death rates with those of the US and Canada.

So the 5.4 million number is highly dubious.

5. The IRC claims suggest that the huge efforts by the international community to help the DRC have been to no avail – billions in aid, a huge peacekeeping force, elections....

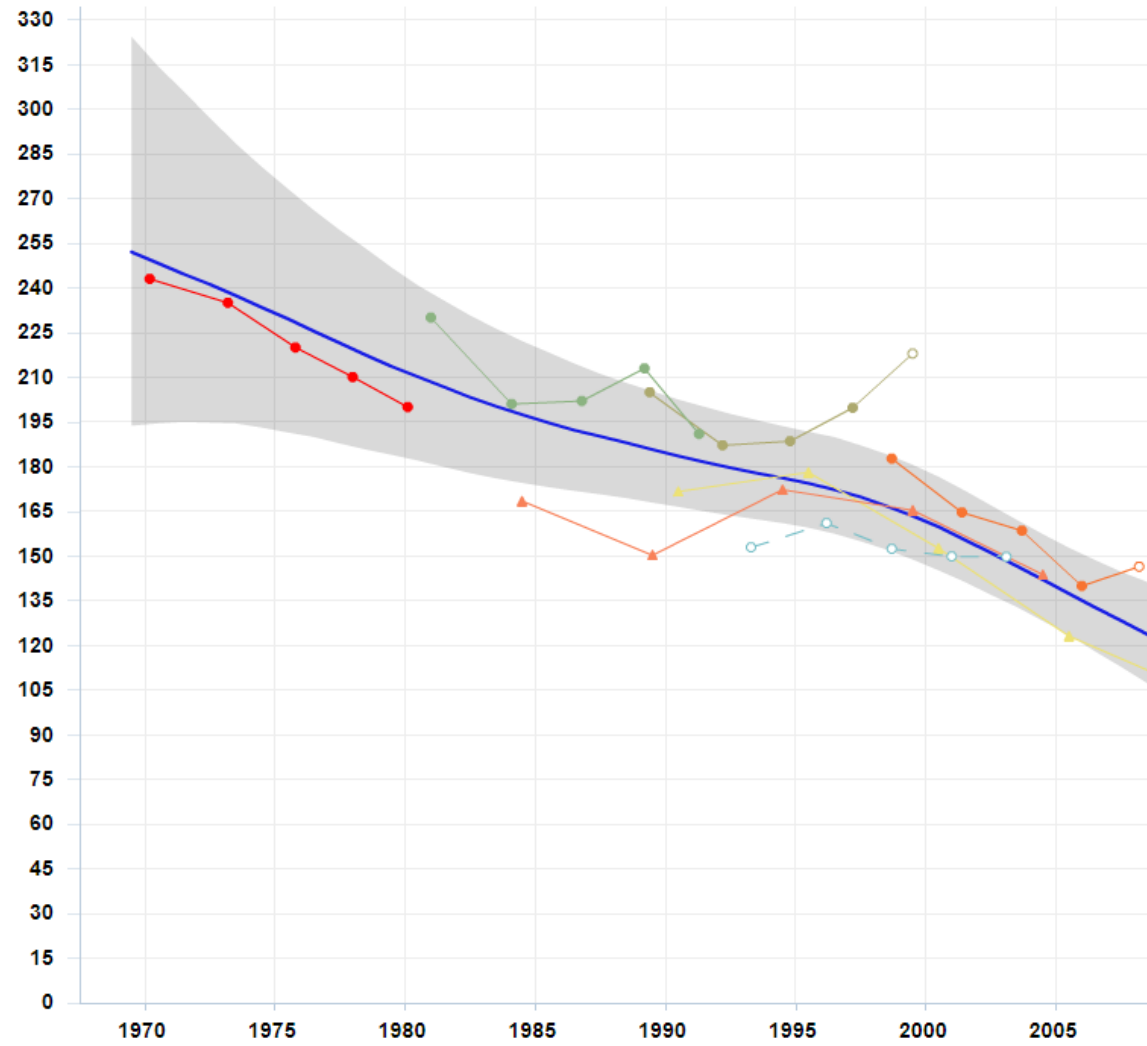
This seems really demoralizing.

But international agencies also put a lot of effort into doing high quality surveys of child mortality and these surveys show high but steadily declining child mortality in the DRC (see the next slide).

Under-Five Mortality Rate ▼

Total ▼

View ▼ | Series | Data |



6. Moreover, these surveys do not show a massive and sustained spike in child mortality rates between 1998 and 2007.

(One survey does suggest a big and temporary spike in 1998-99.)

But there must be such a spike if the IRC is even close to correct about its 5.4 million claim – remember nearly ½ of these deaths are supposed to be of children.

Yet the headline grabbing 5.4 million [circulates widely](#) including [in IRC fundraising](#) (ironically, since the work that created this number suggests that aid wasn't working in the DRC.)

7. The IRC and the outside researchers who spearheaded the work will not share their data.

Specifically, I requested the data from the two main researchers on these surveys and from the director of research at the IRC.

One researcher ignored my request, the other one turned me down and the IRC director said that the IRC doesn't have the data.

To be clear once again, the DRC has many serious problems and is highly deserving of economic aid.

I just don't think it's helpful to exaggerate the death tolls there and it may actually be harmful by portraying the DRC as an exotic place where people just kill each other no matter what and there's no point in pouring money into it.

Finishing Up

I've used my 15 minutes to attack exaggerated numbers which I consider to be quite a big and underappreciated problem.

But, of course, there are also many cases of people denying well established war-death numbers.

This denial happens with pretty much any solid genocide number.

I picked out two cases of exaggeration but I had many to choose from.

For example, just two days ago I published [a paper](#) showing that a widely publicized estimate of ½ a million excess deaths in Iraq is another exaggeration (See also [this](#))

In fact, I do this sort of thing all the time on [my blog](#) – it's called "War, Numbers and Human Losses: The Truth Counts"

So let's continue this discussion!

Feel free to contact me at:

m.spagat@rhul.ac.uk

[@Michael_Spagat](#)

<https://mikespagat.wordpress.com/>

Thank you very much for listening.