

Casualty Recording in Historical Perspective

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I gave this talk at King's College for the launch of
[Standards for Casualty Recording](#)

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The Vietnam War Memorial lists names of fallen ***US service personnel***



We seem to have a strong impulse to memorialize our war dead.

Everyone in this room can call to mind some person-by-person listings of war dead.

Humans have a long, albeit, spotty history of making such lists.

The Marathon Stone



Names of ***Athenian soldiers*** killed in the Battle of Marathon

Makers of these lists often only focus on one type of victim, e.g., soldiers of one country or members of one ethnic group.

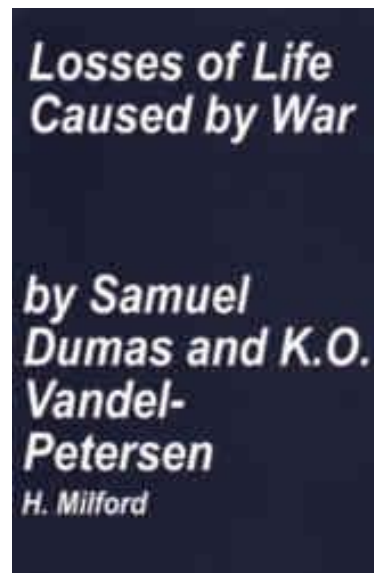
The overwhelming majority of war dead over the centuries have perished without a trace, even though we can trace the roots of casualty recording at least back to the ancient world.

The mid-19th century seems to have marked a turning point – there were massive casualty recording efforts applied to ***service personnel*** in both the Crimean War (slide 5) and the US Civil War (slide 6).





Then in 1923, i.e., shortly after World War 1, the newish Carnegie Endowment for International Peace put out a landmark study that attempted to ***estimate*** both military ***and civilian*** losses in a large number of wars.



The real achievement of this book was to ***signal that all human losses in war matter***, (although some of the estimates and methods presented in the book are also of interest).

The War in Kosovo – 1998-1999



Later came casualty recording for ***both civilians and combatants*** for many modern wars, including the war in Kosovo.

For some wars we also have ***statistical estimates*** of war deaths (of widely varying quality) and how these are allocated across time, space, gender and other variables.

There is no time today to delve seriously into the field of casualty estimation.

Here I just note that statistical estimates of numbers killed in wars are very different from, but complementary to, person-by-person casualty records.

For more details on the roles of casualty recording and estimation see [this paper](#), [my blog](#) (*War, Numbers and Human Losses: The Truth Counts*) and an unpublished paper that I will make available as soon as possible.

(Email me at mspagat@rhul.ac.uk if you want to pursue these issues further.)

And today we've reached another milestone!



Everyone in this room should download the Standards and at least read the table of contents which is written in clear and complete sentences.

The details are important but let me just a few things I think are particularly important.

“Casualty recorders must be inclusive in their recording”

That is, you should record civilians, combatants, males, females, Serbs, Croats, Albanians, etc..

Only inclusive methodologies can be truly convincing within the suspicious environment that generally surrounds casualty recording.

I was on a panel in Belgrade for the presentation of [Kosovo Memory Book](#) (KMB) during which someone aggressively questioned us on why KMB excludes Serbs from its list; KMB was able to offer the powerful response that, actually, KMB **does** include Serbs.



“Casualty recorders must make information about their methodology transparent and publicly accessible.”

Transparency is a necessary ingredient to allay suspicions – and people will always be suspicious of war casualty numbers.

Transparency is not a magic bullet to neutralize suspicions but without it there is no hope to convince sceptics of the quality of your work.
(This statement applies in general - not just to casualty recording.)

“All data entries should remain open so as to incorporate any new information.”

In other words, casualty records are always a work in progress that can be improved.

Strive for progress
not perfection.

- unknown

I have highlighted *inclusiveness, transparency and continuous improvement*.



But there is much more in the Standards – please have a look.

I'll make one further point, specifically about ***standardization*** itself, which allows us to compare many wars across a single platform.

Thus, through standardization casualty recording enters the world of ***big data***.

My research team exploited this powerful data feature to find remarkable regularities in the sizes and timings of violent events ranging across a number of modern wars, in a research programme that started with this paper:

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Finally, there are a large number of people who have contributed to the Standards work but I would like to single out ***Hamit Dardagan, Annabelle Giger, Elizabeth Minor, Hana Salama and John Sloboda.***



Thank you so much for all that you have done!

**THANKS
FOR
LISTENING**