

NUMBERS AND THEIR BACKGROUND

I followed the First and Second Chechen Wars (1994–1996, 1999–2000) in the media. I thought that these wars were treated with surprising indifference in Finland. Trade and tourism between Finland and Russia continued as if there was no war.

I also visited Russia several times (St. Petersburg and Moscow) during both wars. Most of the people I met there supported the war and had a racist attitude towards the Chechens. According to many Russians, the Chechens were "by nature a violent people who cannot be trusted and are impossible to get along with".

I made my first related artworks in 1996. The reason was my nonspecific sympathy for the Chechens. And on the other hand, the fact that I started seeing Russian, legless war veterans in St. Petersburg, sitting on the street begging, with a cardboard sign in front of them.

In order to understand the situation better, I started to make a statistical comparisons between a few different wars. I looked at the wars fought by Finland, the wars that USA fought against Iraq and the Russian wars in Chechnya: what were their mutual differences and similarities? I listed the number of deaths and their ratio to the population. In this way, I tried to make visible how heavy each war had been on the participating countries: had only ten thousandth of the population died in it, or one tenth, or something in between?

I also tried to figure out the number of civilian casualties and how big or small it was in different wars compared to the number of soldiers killed. Why? Because the number of civilian casualties tells about the nature of each war from the point of view of the different parties to the war. This made my comparison partially uncertain, because the number of civilian casualties is not always known or there is great disagreement about it. I skated on even weaker ice when I collected information about the indirect victims of wars, that is, about those who did not die violently, but died for example because the war caused the collapse of healthcare system and made clean drinking water unavailable. It is difficult to calculate the indirect victims of wars, but I think it is important to try to do it, because otherwise a large part or most of the impacts of war remain hidden.

I could have included in my comparison also many other wars. For example, the war between Afghanistan and the Soviet Union (1979–1989), the war between Afghanistan and the USA (2001–2021), and the civil war in Syria (2011–) would fit the comparison just as well. However, I wanted to limit the material to Finland, Iraq and Chechnya, three small countries that were all attacked by a great power, but whose post-war histories differ greatly from each other.

My topic was not the justification of these wars, or the lack of it. Those in war justify their actions in many ways. For example, it is common to think that defensive war is always justified, offensive war never. Therefore, the attacking party usually tries to either pretend to be the defending party — "actually you started it, not me" — or present their attack as a pre-emptive strike, a war that was coming anyway, because of the behavior of the other party, and therefore it is good and right to strike first. Although we tend to consider defensive war justified and offensive war unjustified, it does not make sense to make this an absolute rule. In theory, if, for example, there is a famine in country A caused by the country's government, maybe it is that country B attacks country A, to defeat the harmful government of country A. Such situations can also occur in practice. However the US and Russian attacks on Iraq and Chechnya were not like that.

What were the outcomes of my research? The first was that the wars fought in Iraq and Chechnya were even heavier than the wars fought Finland fought. In proportion to the population, the death rate of both soldiers and civilians in the wars in Iraq and Chechnya was so much higher than in the wars that Finland fought. And the end result is different from Finland's wars. Finland survived its Civil War perfectly: after the war it managed to remove the mutual grudges of different population groups well enough to develop into a peaceful democracy and a rich welfare society. Finland also survived the Second World War without serious injuries: it did not become occupied, and it did not lose its independence. It could have been completely different. It didn't happen, but the main reason was not the Finnish grit, but rather the lucky sum of many different factors.

All this is very familiar and self-evident to many of us. However, I'm not saying these things out loud just to spread information and opinions, but also for myself. Even if I already knew all this — and more — I still think it's good to come back to these numbers again and again and think about what I can do to make future numbers different. I hope that these numbers do not distance you from the suffering of others, do not abstract it, but on the contrary bring it closer and strengthen your tendency to compassion.

FINLAND

CIVIL WAR (27.1.1918–15.5.1918)

In 1918, there was a Civil War in Finland. The reason for the war was different views on the future of newly independent Finland. And above all, the mutual mistrust, fear and delusions of different population groups.

In the civil war, 36,640 Finns, 450–500 Germans and 2,200–2,700 Russians were killed.

Of the Finns killed, 9,403 died in battles, 9,720 were executed or murdered, 13,446 died in prison camps, 613 after being released from them, 2,193 disappeared and 1,265 were killed in other ways.¹

In the Civil War, 1.17% of Finland's population was killed. (At the end of 1917 the population of Finland had been 3,134,300.²)

Only a minority of those killed were soldiers, and only a quarter of the victims of the war died in combat. Most died somewhere else: they starved in prison camps or were executed or murdered.

In this sense, most of the wars after the Second World War resemble the Finnish Civil War more than Finland's part in the Second World War. In the majority of wars fought after 1945, deaths have mainly occurred outside of combat, and most of the dead are something other than soldiers: armed or unarmed civilians.

WINTER WAR, CONTINUATION WAR AND LAPLAND WAR (1939–1945)³
Finland vs. Soviet Union. Finland vs. Germany.

Finland participated in the Second World War by fighting three wars of its own, first two as an ally of Germany against the Soviet Union and then one more against Germany.

When the Soviet Union invaded Finland in 1939, the Winter War began. Finland lost the war, but achieved a defensive victory, i.e. it kept its independence, but lost some of its territories to the Soviet Union. The Continuation War began in 1941 when Finland attacked the Soviet Union, as an ally of Germany, to regain the lost territories and perhaps even to expand. Finland lost the war and lost more territories, but still kept its independence. After losing the Continuation War, Finland had to drive the Germans, its former allies, out of Finland at the insistence of the Soviet Union. The Germans retreated, fighting and destroying. That was the Lapland War.

WINTER WAR (30.11.1939–13.3.1940): 25,904 Finnish soldiers were killed or disappeared. 957 civilians were killed. 126,875 Soviet soldiers were killed or disappeared. CONTINUATION WAR (25.6.1941–19.9.1944): 63,204 Finnish soldiers were killed or disappeared. 1,129 Finnish civilians were killed. 201,000 Soviet soldiers were killed or disappeared. Between 4,000 and 7,000 Russian civilians were killed. LAPLAND WAR (15.9.1944–27.3.1945): 1,038 Finnish soldiers were killed or disappeared. About 1,000 German soldiers were killed.

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A total of 92,232 Finns were killed in **these wars**, of which 2,086 were civilians. In other words: **2.5% of Finland's population was killed**, since in 1939 the population of Finland had been 3,699,700.

The Finns killed 328,000 Russian soldiers, 4,000 – 7,000 Russian civilians and 1,000 German soldiers in these wars. **In these wars 0.17% of the Soviet Union's population was killed**, since in 1941 its population had been 196,716,000.

IRAQ

PERSIAN GULF WAR (2.8.1990–17.1.1991)

Iraq vs. USA and its allies.

Iraq occupied its neighboring country Kuwait in 1990. The USA responded by starting the Persian Gulf War, i.e. by attacking Iraq with its allies.

294 US soldiers were killed in the Persian Gulf War. The number of Iraqi soldiers killed was between 20,000 and 105,000. The number of civilian casualties was between 100,000 and 200,000.⁴

ECONOMIC SANCTIONS IN EFFECT BETWEEN THE PERSIAN GULF WAR AND THE IRAQ WAR (1990–2003)

The USA won the Persian Gulf War, but occupied only part of the country and quickly withdrew from it. The USA hoped that the Iraqis themselves would have overthrown their despotic leader Saddam Hussein, but it didn't happen. Hussein remained in power.

When the war started in 1990, the United Nations Security Council had imposed a trade embargo on Iraq. The sanctions were originally justified by the idea that Hussein's Iraq must be forced to withdraw from Kuwait, but when Iraqi troops were expelled from there at the very beginning of the Persian Gulf War, the sanctions remained in force and they remained in force even after the war. The sanctions were on until the end of the next war, i.e. all in all for thirteen years (6.8.1990–22.5.2003). However, they were modified over the years by moving from general sanctions prohibiting almost all trade to specific sanctions. After the liberation of Kuwait, the sanctions were justified as an attempt to reduce Hussein's power, pressure Iraq to pay war reparations, and prevent Iraq from developing weapons of mass destruction. However, the sanctions did not weaken Hussein's position, but only caused poverty and suffering for the citizens of Iraq. Iraq paid war reparations⁵ and did not develop weapons of mass destruction, but it is difficult to say whether the sanctions had any effect on this development.

It is certain that the economic sanctions increased the death rate in Iraq, but the dispute is about how much? Did the sanctions kill 100,000 Iraqis or a million and a half or something in between?

The damage caused by the sanctions to the people of Iraq has been difficult to assess and prove. For example, when it has been investigated whether child mortality in Iraq increased during the wars and sanctions or not, different surveys have reached conclusions that totally opposite to each other. Example 1: Ramsey Clark, former US Attorney General, claimed that the sanctions had already caused the death of one and a half million Iraqis by 1996: "former US Attorney General combine to call our attention to a genocidal policy that has taken the lives of over 500,000 Iraqi children in recent years, and threatens the future of millions more."⁶ Example 2: Naira A. Awqati, M.M. Ali, N.J. Al-Ward, et al. (2009): "in Iraq, under-five mortality rate decreased from 87.8 per 1,000 live births in the second half of the seventies to 58.9 per 1,000 live births in the second half of the eighties, then increased again in the first and second halves of the nineties to (91.0 and 121.7 per 1,000 live births, respectively)".⁷

Example 3: Richard Garfield (1999): "The figure of 106,106 excess deaths [...] from 1990 through the first quarter of 1998 is intended to be a best conservative estimate of excess mortality among under five-year-olds. Excess deaths are not the only important impact on the health and welfare of the population. Prior to 1990 death came to about one in every twenty Iraqis under the age of five. During the 1990s about one additional Iraqi out of twenty born died before reaching age five."⁸ Example 4:

Tim Dyson, Valeria Cetorelli (2017): "there was no major rise in child mortality in Iraq after 1990 and during the period of the sanctions. Conversely, there was no major improvement in child mortality after the downfall of Saddam Hussein."⁹

The more recent studies, which claim that infant mortality did not really increase much, are apparently partially correct, as they manage to correct some of the errors of the previous studies. However, this does not mean that the sanctions were harmless to the Iraqis and beneficial to Hussein's opponents, because it is undeniable that the sanctions collapsed the Iraqi economy, increased poverty and weakened the health of Iraqis. In addition, it is worth noting that the change in child mortality can be measured in many ways. Some comparisons, such as those published by UNICEF, have assumed that without wars and sanctions, child mortality would have continued to decrease in the same way that it had decreased in the 1980s. According to UNICEF, wars and sanctions prevented positive development, and the increase in child mortality should not only be compared to what it was in 1990, when the war started, but to what it could have been ten years later, if positive development had been allowed to continue.

Estimates of the total number of deaths due to the sanctions — Iraqis of all ages, not just children under five — also vary, but not as much as for child mortality. The truth is probably between the extremes: the collapse of infrastructure and health care caused by the war significantly increased the death rate in Iraq. The sanctions worsened the situation by wrecking Iraq's economy, blocking access to medicine and halting the development of health care.¹⁰ During the sanctions, in the period between the two wars, the death rate of Iraqis increased significantly anyway, and whether the correct number is 100,000 or 1.5 million or something in between, it is anyway higher than the number of Iraqi soldiers who died in combat in the pre-sanctions war. The sanctions were more lethal than the war that preceded them.

IRAQ WAR (20.3.2003–18.12.2011) AND THE VIOLENT ACTIVITIES AFTER IT (2011–2017–)¹¹

The USA attacked Iraq again in 2003. The war was justified with three arguments. The USA claimed that Iraq was developing weapons of mass destruction and was therefore dangerous to the whole world. The USA claimed that Iraq was a base and financier of international terrorism. The US also claimed that the war was necessary to liberate the Iraqi people.¹²

The USA won the war and occupied Iraq and tried to pacify and "democratize" the country, but failed. The Iraqis fought both among themselves and against the US occupation forces. In the end, the USA stopped its own military operations and withdrew its troops from Iraq on 18.12.2011.

The justifications for the war turned out to be lies and mistakes. Iraq had no weapons of mass destruction and was not trying to develop them. Iraq was not the center of so-called terrorism. And the Iraqi people did not support the US invasion and occupation of the country — not in the name of liberating the country or otherwise.

During the Iraq war and the subsequent occupation (2003–2011), 4,418 US soldiers and 13 civilians (employees of the US Department of Defense) were killed in Iraq.^{13 14}

Estimates of the number of Iraqi soldiers and Iraqi fighters killed in the war vary between 34,000 and 72,000.¹⁵

When the USA had withdrawn from Iraq in 2011, the violence in Iraq continued. There are many different estimates of the civilian casualties of the war and the subsequent unrest. In some the method is to literally count the killed one by one. Iraq Body Count's estimate is of this kind. According to them, the number of Iraqi civilians killed during and after the war, from March 2003 to February 2017, is between 186,736 and 210,090.¹⁶ According to an accounting by Brown University's Watson Institute, the number of Iraqi civilians killed during and after the Iraq war and occupation is between 275,000 and 306,000.¹⁷

Some other studies have recorded an increase in the total mortality rate, which includes also those who did not die violently. Of course, non-violent deaths are not automatically casualties of wars, but the war caused a collapse of health care, polluted the environment, contaminated drinking water, and so on, thereby increasing the overall mortality rate. If the death rate has increased from what it was before the war, it seems reasonable to assume that the increase is due specifically to the war — either directly or indirectly, when no other major causes are known. Gilbert Burnham et al. (2006): "We estimate that as of July, 2006, there have been 654,965 (392,979 – 942,636) excess Iraqi deaths as a consequence of the war, which corresponds to 2.5% of the population in the study area."¹⁸

One study estimated that 60% of deaths during and after the war were violent and 40% other. Amy Hagopian et al (2013): "We estimate that more than 60% of excess deaths were directly attributable to violence, with the rest associated with the collapse of infrastructure and other indirect, but war-related, causes."¹⁹

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US losses in Iraq (1990–2011) totaled: 4,786 dead soldiers, 13 dead civilians. That was **0.0016% of the US population**, as in 2003 the US population was 291,049,000.²⁰

Iraqi losses during the same period were: 54,000 – 177,000 dead soldiers. 287,000 – 1,143,000 civilians killed. 100,000 — 1,500,000 civilians killed due to economic sanctions. ...that is a total of 441,000 – 2,820,000 deaths due to the war.

It is **at least 1.7% and at most 11% of Iraq's population**, as in 2003 the population of Iraq was about 26 million (25,645,000).²¹

CHECHNYA

FIRST CHECHEN WAR (11.12.1994–31.8.1996)
SECOND CHECHEN WAR (7.8.1999–30.4.2000)
After the wars, active insurgencies until 2009 and smaller-scale Chechen resistance until 2017.
Chechnya vs. Russia.

When the Soviet Union collapsed in 1991, Chechnya declared itself independent. In 1994, Russia declared war on Chechnya, with the intention of merging it to Russia again. Russia lost the war.

Russia invaded Chechnya again in 1999. That war Russia won, installed a puppet ruler to lead Chechnya, and made the country a part of the Russian Federation again.

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THE FIRST CHECHEN WAR
4,000 Chechen soldiers or fighters were killed.²²
14,000 Russian soldiers were killed.²³
Between 50,000 and 100,000 civilians were killed in Chechnya.²⁴

THE SECOND CHECHEN WAR
3,000 Chechen soldiers or fighters were killed.²⁵
11,000 Russian soldiers were killed.²⁶
Between 30,000 and 80,000 civilians were killed in Chechnya.²⁷

In total, between 66,000 and 200,000 Chechen residents, mostly civilians, were killed in these wars.

It is unclear what the population of Chechnya was before the wars. In the 1989 census, the population of Chechnya-Ingushetia was 1,277,000.²⁸ When the Ingushetia part is subtracted from it and it is assumed that Chechnya's population growth continued in the pattern of the previous years until the war that started in 1994, it can be said with certainty that in 1994 the population of the country was somewhere between 1 and 1.3 million between.²⁹

After the wars, in 2002, a census was conducted in all of Russia, in which the population of Chechnya was recorded as 1,088,816. The Russian human rights organization Memorial³⁰ considered the result incorrect and estimated that the real population of the country at that time, after the wars, was only 700,000.³¹

Losses in Chechnya are even more difficult to calculate than in Iraq, as the numbers are more conflicting. However, based on the above figures, it can be said with certainty that in **these wars 5–20% of the population of Chechnya were killed** and those killed were mostly civilians.

The population of Russia in 1995 was 148 million.³² 28,000 – 32,000 Russian soldiers were **killed in these wars**. That was **0.02% of the Russian population**.

The future of Chechnya is still open. Did Vladimir Putin's Russia succeed in melting Chechnya into Russia or not? At the moment, it seems that yes, because there has been no rebellious activity in Chechnya for a long time and the position of Putin's vassal, who rules the country, seems strong. The country's population has also largely changed: many Chechens died in the wars, even more went into exile, either to neighboring countries or far away, and a correspondingly at least some Russian-speaking and Russian-minded population has moved in. Has Russianization succeeded so well that there is no going back? Or can Chechnya still rise from the grave, as a state, culture and identity? Russia has created a vassal state that is not based on the identity, language and culture of the citizens, but on the self-interest and violence of the group that holds power there. Of course, it can turn against its master³³ or collapse, like other tyrannical regimes, but after that, can a new sense of national identity still rear its head in Chechnya?

The wars in Chechnya and the struggle against Russia are in many ways similar to the struggle of Ukraine. Russia does not recognize either country's right to independence, nor the identity of either nation: for Putin's Russia, both Chechens and Ukrainians are Russian, even if they don't understand or accept it themselves.³⁴ Russia is also using in Ukraine the method of warfare it used in Chechnya (and Syria). It's based on indiscriminate destruction of the enemy territory by artillery fire and air attacks, regardless of civilian casualties.³⁵

Right now, in the spring of 2024, it doesn't seem likely that Russia would be able to subdue Ukraine by war, let alone conquer it. When thinking about Ukraine and helping Ukraine, it is good to also remember Chechnya, a country and people that Russia swallowed. And also to remember that Putin's Russia would hardly have ever attacked Ukraine if it did not have the experience based on the wars in Chechnya that "yes, this works, this can be done, there will be no significant international backlash, and even a very stubborn people can not only be subdued by violence, but also assimilates the attacker".

CONCLUSIONS

The Finnish civil war was ahead of its time: most of the killed were not soldiers, but something else.

In these wars, Chechnya fared worse than Finland and Iraq: the number of dead in proportion to the population was the highest in the Chechen wars, and as a result of the war, the entire country disappeared.

Russia invaded Ukraine, in 2014 and 2022–, encouraged by the wars in Iraq and Chechnya.

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