WAR ISN'T THIS CENTURY'S BIGGEST KILLER

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Published in *The Wall Street Journal* (July 7, 1986). This was based on a pilot survey of possible sources of democide data. As a result of this study I applied for a grant from the United States Institute of Peace to do a much more methodical survey of democide, which eventuated in my *Death by Government* and *Statistics of Democide*. This pilot study underestimated these final totals by about 42 percent.

Our century is noted for its absolute and bloody wars. World War I saw nine-million people killed in battle, an incredible record that was far surpassed within a few decades by the 15 million battle deaths of World War II. Even the number killed in twentieth century revolutions and civil wars have set historical records. In total, this century's battle killed in all its international and domestic wars, revolutions, and violent conflicts is so far about 35,654,000.

Yet, even more unbelievable than these vast numbers killed in war during the lifetime of some still living, and largely unknown, is this shocking fact. This century's total killed by absolutist governments already far exceeds that for all wars,
domestic and international. Indeed, this number already approximates the number that might be killed in a nuclear war.

Table 1 provides the relevant totals and classifies these by type of government (following Freedom House's definitions) and war. By government killed is meant any direct or indirect killing by government officials, or government acquiescence in the killing by others, of more than 1,000 people, except execution for what are conventionally considered criminal acts (murder, rape, spying, treason, and the like). This killing is apart from the pursuit of any ongoing military action or campaign, or as part of any conflict event. For example, the Jews that Hitler slaughtered during World War II would be counted, since their merciless and systematic killing was unrelated to and actually conflicted with Hitler's pursuit of the war.

The totals in the Table are based on a nation-by-nation assessment and are absolute minimal figures that may underestimate the true total by ten percent or more. Moreover, these figures do not even include the 1921-1922 and 1958-1961 famines in the Soviet Union and China causing about 4 million and 27 million dead, respectively. The former famine was mainly due to the imposition of a command agricultural economy, forced requisitions of food by the Soviets, and the liquidation campaigns of the Cheka; the latter was wholly caused by Mao's agriculturally destructive Great Leap Forward and collectivization.

However, Table 1 does include the Soviet government's planned and administered starvation of the Ukraine begun in 1932 as a way of breaking peasant opposition to collectivization and destroying Ukrainian nationalism. As many as ten million may have been starved to death or succumbed to famine related diseases; I estimate eight million died. Had these people all been shot, the Soviet government's moral responsibility could be no greater.

The Table lists 831 thousand people killed by free -- democratic -- governments, which should startle most readers. This figure involves the French massacres in Algeria before and during the Algerian war (36,000 killed, at a minimum), and those killed by the Soviets after being forcibly repatriated to them by the Allied Democracies during and after World War II.

It is outrageous that in line with and even often surpassing in zeal the letter of the Yalta Agreement signed by Stalin, Churchill, and Roosevelt, the Allied Democracies,
particular Great Britain and the United States, turned over to Soviet authorities more than 2,250,000 Soviet citizens, prisoners of war, and Russian exiles (who were not Soviet citizens) found in the Allied zones of occupation in Europe. Most of these people were terrified of the consequences of repatriation and refused to cooperate in their repatriation; often whole families preferred suicide. Of those the Allied Democracies repatriation, an estimated 795,000 were executed, or died in slave-labor camps or in transit to them.

If a government is to be held responsible for those prisoners who die in freight cars or in their camps from privation, surely those democratic governments that turned helpless people over to totalitarian rulers with foreknowledge of their peril, also should be held responsible.

Concerning now the overall mortality statistics shown in the table, it is sad that hundreds of thousands of people can be killed by governments with hardly an international murmur, while a war killing several thousand people can cause an immediate world outcry and global reaction. Simply contrast the international focus on the relatively minor Falkland Islands War of Britain and Argentina with the widescale lack of interest in Burundi's killing or acquiescence in such killing of about 100,000 Hutu in 1972, of Indonesia slaughtering a likely 600,000 "communists" in 1965, and of Pakistan, in an initially well planned massacre, eventually killing from one to three million Bengalis in 1971.

A most noteworthy and still sensitive example of this double standard is the Vietnam War. The international community was outraged at the American attempt to militarily prevent North Vietnam from taking over South Vietnam and ultimately Laos and Cambodia. "Stop the killing" was the cry, and eventually, the pressure of foreign and domestic opposition forced an American withdrawal. The overall number killed in the Vietnam War on all sides was about 1,216,000 people.

With the United States subsequently refusing them even modest military aid, South Vietnam was militarily defeated by the North and completely swallowed; and Cambodia was taken over by the communist Khmer Rouge, who in trying to recreate a primitive communist agricultural society slaughtered from one to three million Cambodians. If we take a middle two-million as the best estimate, then in four years the government of this small nation of seven million alone killed 64 percent more people than died in the ten-year Vietnam War.

Overall, the best estimate of those killed after the Vietnam War by the victorious communists in Vietnam, Laos, and Cambodia is 2,270,000. Now totaling almost twice as many as died in the Vietnam War, this communist killing still continues.
To view this double standard from another perspective, both World Wars cost twenty-four million battle deaths. But from 1918 to 1953, the Soviet government executed, slaughtered, starved, beat or tortured to death, or otherwise killed 39,500,000 of its own people (my best estimate among figures ranging from a minimum of twenty million killed by Stalin to a total over the whole communist period of eighty-three million). For China under Mao Tse-tung, the communist government eliminated, as an average figure between estimates, 45,000,000 Chinese. The number killed for just these two nations is about 84,500,000 human beings, or a lethality of 252 percent more than both World Wars together. Yet, have the world community and intellectuals generally shown anything like the same horror, the same outrage, the same outpouring of anti-killing literature, over these Soviet and Chinese megakillings as has been directed at the much less deadly World Wars?

As can be seen from Table 1, communist governments are overall almost four times more lethal to their citizens than non-communist ones, and in per capita terms nearly twice as lethal (even considering the huge populations of the USSR and China).

However, as large as the per capita killed is for communist governments, it is nearly the same as for other non-free governments. This is due to the massacres and wide scale killing in the very small country of East Timor, where since 1975 Indonesia has eliminated (aside from the guerrilla war and associated violence) an estimated 100 thousand Timorese out of a population of 600 thousand. Omitting this country alone would reduce the average killed by noncommunist, nonfree governments to 397 per 10,000, or significantly less than the 477 per 10,000 for communist countries.

In any case, we can still see from the table that the more freedom in a nation, the fewer people killed by government. Freedom acts to brake the use of a governing elite's power over life and death to pursue their policies and ensure their rule.

This principle appeared to be violated in two aforementioned special cases. One was the French government carrying out mass killing in the colony of Algeria, where compared to Frenchmen the Algerians were second class citizens, without the right to vote in French elections. In the other case the Allied Democracies acted during and just after wartime, under strict secrecy, to turn over foreigners to a communist government. These foreigners, of course, had no rights as citizens that would protect them in the democracies. In no case have I found a democratic government carrying out massacres, genocide, and mass executions of its own citizens; nor have I found a case where such a government’s policies have knowingly and directly resulted in the large scale deaths of its people though privation, torture, beatings, and the like.

Absolutism is not only many times deadlier than war, but itself is the major factor causing war and other forms of violent conflict. It is a major cause of militarism. Indeed, absolutism, not war, is mankind’s deadliest scourge of all.
In light of all this, the peaceful, nonviolent, pursuit and fostering of civil liberties and political rights must be made mankind's highest humanitarian goal. Not simply to give the greatest number the greatest happiness, not simply to obey the moral imperative of individual rights, not simply to further the efficiency and productivity of a free society, but also and mainly because freedom preserves peace and life.