

WAR

BEFORE

CIVILIZATION

THE MYTH OF
THE PEACEFUL
SAVAGE

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of manpower mobilization, then, war is no less important to tribes than to nations.

PREHISTORIC WARFARE

With regard to prehistory, nothing comparable to the surveys of historical and ethnographic societies cited earlier exists as yet. Any attempts to survey 2 million years of human prehistory for evidence of violence and armed conflict face several daunting difficulties. The first is that most regions of the world are poorly known archaeologically—the rare exceptions being Europe (especially the west), the Near East, and parts of the United States. The most unequivocal evidence of armed conflict consists of human skeletons with weapon traumas (especially, embedded bone or stone projectile points) and fortifications. However, humans have buried their dead for only the past 150,000 years or so; before this, the human remains that have been found were often disturbed and fragmented by scavengers and natural forces. Even during the past 150,000 years, many prehistoric peoples disposed of their dead in ways—for example, cremation and exposure—that left no remains for anthropologists to study. Only among some peoples—those for whom the use of stone- and bone-tipped weapons (which can survive embedded in or closely associated with human skeletons) was commonplace—is it easy to distinguish accidental traumas from those inflicted by humans. The use of these weapons occurred only during the past 40,000 years, and in many regions perishable wooden and bamboo spears and projectiles continued to be used until modern times. Until humans began living in permanent villages, fortifications would have not repaid the labor required to construct them (Chapter 3). But humans seem to have become sufficiently sedentary only during the past 14,000 years, and permanent villages are common in most regions only after the adoption of farming (8000 B.C. at the earliest). Thus it is possible to document prehistoric warfare reliably only within the past 20,000 to 30,000 years and in a only a few areas of the world. Granting these limitations, what does the archaeological evidence say about the peacefulness of prehistoric peoples?

Some authors have claimed that the evidence of homicide is as old as humanity—or at least as old as the genus *Homo* (that is, over 1 million years).²⁵ But many of the traumas found on early hominid skeletons have been proved by subsequent investigation to have had nonhomicidal causes or cannot be distinguished from accidental traumas of a similar character.²⁶ For instance, the paired “spear wounds” found on some South African Australopithecine skulls are now recognized as punctures created by leopard canines as the predator carried these luckless ancestors of ours, gripping their heads in its teeth. As another example, Neanderthals seem to have been especially accident prone,

compared with the modern humans who followed them. Neanderthals' bones evidence many injuries and breakages (one study determined that 40 percent of them had suffered head injuries). Which, if any, of these injuries were caused by human violence cannot be determined. Since the heavy musculature and robust bones of Neanderthals imply that their way of life was much more strenuous and physically demanding than that of more recent humans, it seems probable that most of the traumas in question were accidental. Why they so often “forgot to duck” remains a mystery, however.

Whenever modern humans appear on the scene, definitive evidence of homicidal violence becomes more common, given a sufficient sample of burials.²⁷ Several of the rare burials of earliest modern humans in central and western Europe, dating from 34,000 to 24,000 years ago, show evidence of violent death. At Grimaldi in Italy, a projectile point was embedded in the spinal column of a child's skeleton dating to the Aurignacian (the culture of the earliest modern humans in Europe, ca. 36,000 to 27,000 years ago). One Aurignacian skull from southern France may have been scalped; it has cut-marks on its frontal (forehead). Evidence from the celebrated Upper Palaeolithic cemeteries of Czechoslovakia, dating between 35,000 and 24,000 years ago, implies—either by direct evidence of weapons traumas, especially cranial fractures on adult males, or by the improbability of alternative explanations for mass burials of men, women, and children—that violent conflicts and deaths were common. In the Nile Valley of Egypt, the earliest evidence of death by homicide is a male burial, dated to about 20,000 years ago, with stone projectile points in the skeleton's abdominal region and another point embedded in its upper arm (a wound that had partially healed before his death). The one earlier human skeleton found in Egypt bears no evidence of violence, but the next more recent human remains there are rife with evidence of homicide.

The human skeletons found in a Late Palaeolithic cemetery at Gebel Sahaba in Egyptian Nubia, dating about 12,000 to 14,000 years ago, show that warfare there was very common and particularly brutal.²⁸ Over 40 percent of the fifty-nine men, women, and children buried in this cemetery had stone projectile points intimately associated with or embedded in their skeletons. Several adults had multiple wounds (as many as twenty), and the wounds found on children were all in the head or neck—that is, execution shots. The excavator, Fred Wendorf, estimates that more than half the people buried there had died violently. He also notes that homicidal violence at Gebel Sahaba was not a once-in-a-lifetime event, since many of the adults showed healed parry fractures of their forearm bones—a common trauma on victims of violence—and because the cemetery had obviously been used over several generations. The Gebel Sahaba burials offer graphic testimony that prehistoric hunter-gatherers could be as

ruthlessly violent as any of their more recent counterparts and that prehistoric warfare continued for long periods of time.

In western Europe (and more poorly known North Africa), ample evidence of violent death has been found among the remains of the final hunter-gatherers of the Mesolithic period (ca. 10,000 to 5,000 years ago).²⁹ One of the most gruesome instances is provided by Ofnet Cave in Germany, where two caches of "trophy" skulls were found, arranged "like eggs in a basket," comprising the disembodied heads of thirty-four men, women, and children, most with multiple holes knocked through their skulls by stone axes. Indeed, some archaeologists, impressed by the abundant evidence of homicide in the European Mesolithic, date the beginnings of "real" war to this period.

Indications of conflict, as reflected by violent death and the earliest fortifications, become especially pervasive in western Europe during the ensuing Neolithic period (the era of the first farmers, ca. 7,000 to 4,000 years ago, depending on the region).³⁰ Some archaeologists have argued that real warfare begins only when hunters become farmers. This mistaken point of view does have some especially grim support in the remains of Neolithic mass killings at Talheim in Germany (ca. 5000 B.C.) and Roaix in southeastern France (ca. 2000 B.C.). At Talheim, the bodies of eighteen adults and sixteen children had been thrown into a large pit; the intact skulls show that the victims had been killed by blows from at least six different axes.³¹ More than 100 persons of all ages and both sexes, often with arrowpoints embedded in their bones, received a hasty and simultaneous burial at Roaix. The villages of the first farmers in many regions of western Europe were fortified with ditches and palisades. Several of these early enclosures in Britain, after being extensively excavated, yielded clear evidence of having been attacked, stormed, and burned by bow-wielding enemies. The early agricultural tribes and petty chiefdoms of Neolithic Europe were anything but peaceful.

Interestingly, the historically blood-soaked Near East has yielded little evidence of violent conflict during the Early Neolithic.³² Although extensive and elaborate fortifications were erected during this period at Jericho, they became common in the Near East only in the later Neolithic and in the Bronze Age.

When we turn to the United States—specifically to those areas that have been subject to intensive archaeological scrutiny and where large samples of human burials have been excavated, such as the Southwest, California, the Pacific Northwest Coast, and the Mississippi drainage—violent deaths are at least in evidence and, in some periods, were extremely common.³³ Fortifications were constructed at various times and in various regions by prehistoric farmers in the Mississippi drainage and in the Southwest, as well as by the prehistoric sedentary hunter-gatherers of the Northwest Coast.³⁴ As with the best-studied re-

gions of the prehistoric Old World, the prehistoric New World was also a place where the dogs of war were seldom on a leash.

In each of these regions, the indications are that warfare was relatively rare during some periods; nothing suggests, however, that prehistoric nonstate societies were significantly and universally more peaceful than those described ethnographically. The archaeological evidence indicates instead that homicide has been practiced since the appearance of modern humankind and that warfare is documented in the archaeological record of the past 10,000 years in every well-studied region. In the chapters that follow, it will become clear that archaeological evidence strongly supports ethnographic accounts concerning the conduct, consequences, and causes of prestate warfare.

There is simply no proof that warfare in small-scale societies was a rarer or less serious undertaking than among civilized societies. In general, warfare in prestate societies was both frequent and important. If anything, peace was a scarcer commodity for members of bands, tribes, and chiefdoms than for the average citizen of a civilized state.

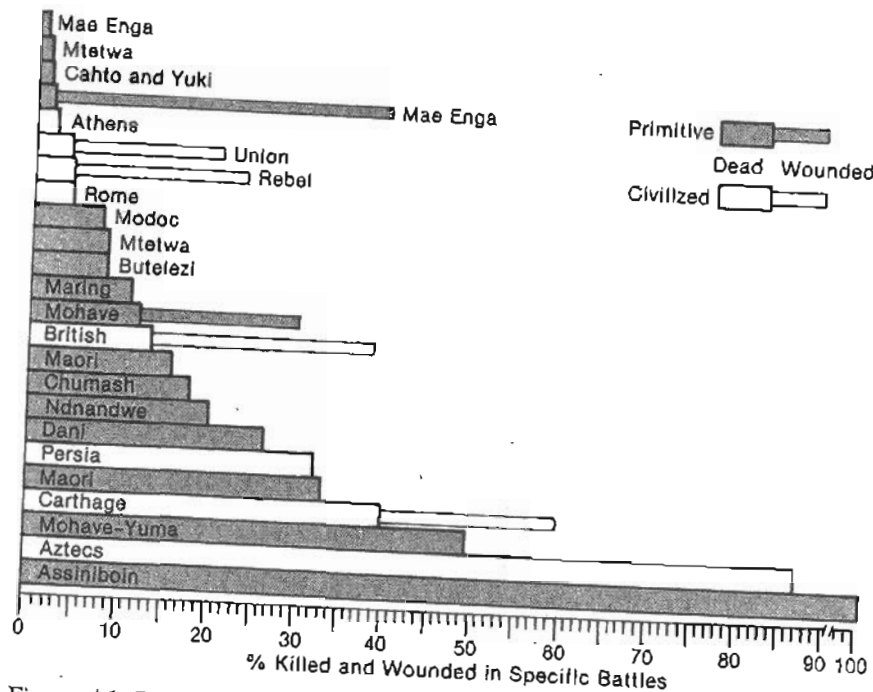


Figure 4.1 Casualties in various tribal, ancient, and modern battles (see Appendix, Table 4.1).

tends to confirm the impressions of ethnographers and their informants. There are many descriptions of such battles with no fatal casualties, although the fighting would often then be renewed after brief intervals until fatalities did occur. However, the phenomenon of low casualties in arranged battles is not universal in prestate warfare. Sources among the Yokuts of central California insisted that half of the participants in one formal battle involving three "tribes" were killed.¹¹ Furthermore, the casualties in primitive encounter battles were often heavy. For example, as in the case of the Assiniboin raiders, when a war party of Plains Indians was caught and heavily outnumbered by its enemies, the smaller party was usually completely wiped out.¹² The safest conclusion to draw from such a small and mixed sample is that no evidence consistently indicates that primitive battles are proportionately less lethal or less injurious than civilized ones.

The preceding figures, moreover, are for single sustained encounters of one to four days and do not account for the frequency of battle. For example, in the Cahto-Yuki case, battle was resumed twice with similar losses after ten-day truces. The Cahto fought six separate battles during that summer. By comparison, the armies of the Potomac and of Northern Virginia did not have another

minor engagement after Gettysburg for three months, and the next full-scale battle (the Wilderness) occurred ten months later.¹³ The cumulative effect of frequent but low-casualty battles will be discussed in Chapter 6.

When one of the contenting parties in prestate warfare was routed, the subsequent rampage by the victors through the losers' territory often claimed the lives of many women and children as well as men.¹⁴ One Maring clan of 600 people in New Guinea lost 2 percent of its population in the rout that followed its loss of 3 percent of its people in the preceding battle. This total may not seem very severe, but to produce equivalent figures France (with a population of 42 million) would have had to lose over 1.2 million soldiers in its 1940 defeat and some 840,000 civilians in the immediate aftermath (or five times the total number of war-related French deaths during the whole war). Victorious Tahitian warriors killed so many people in a loser's territory that an "intolerable stench" of decaying corpses "pervaded defeated districts for long periods after battle." Similarly severe slaughters attended battlefield defeats among the chiefdoms of Fiji and Cauca Valley of Colombia. These examples illustrate the most important and universal rule of war: do not lose.

In several ethnographic cases, formal battles with controlled casualties were restricted to fighting within a tribe or linguistic group. When the adversary was truly "foreign," warfare was more relentless, ruthless, and uncontrolled.¹⁵ Thus the rules of war applied to only certain "related" adversaries, but unrestricted warfare, without rules and aimed at annihilation, was practiced against outsiders.

RAIDS AND AMBUSHES

The most common form of combat employed in primitive warfare but little used in formal civilized warfare has been small raids or ambushes. These have usually involved having a handful of men sneak into enemy territory to kill one or a few people on an encounter basis or by means of some more elaborate ambush. Women and children have commonly been killed in such raids.¹⁶ The Cahto-Yuki war mentioned earlier was started when some Yuki, angry over Cahto use of a disputed obsidian quarry and some plant-gathering territory, killed a gathering party of four Cahto girls. One common raiding technique (favored by groups as diverse as the Bering Straits Eskimo and the Mae Enga of New Guinea) consisted of quietly surrounding enemy houses just before dawn and killing the occupants by thrusting spears through the flimsy walls, shooting arrows through doorways and smoke holes, or firing as the victims emerged after the structure had been set afire. During hard winters, the Chilcotin of British Columbia would attack small isolated hamlets or family camps of other tribes, kill all the inhabitants, and live off their stored food. The East Cree of Quebec

slaughtered any Inuit (Eskimo) families they encountered, taking only infants as captives. Neither age nor sex was any guarantee of protection during primitive raids.

Because the victims were unprepared or unarmed and because raids were so frequent, a predictably high cumulative fatality rate resulted.¹⁷ One Yanomamo village was raided twenty-five times in just fifteen months, losing 5 percent of its population. In just one summer (1823), two Yellowknife raids killed eight Dogrib (four men and four women), representing 3 percent of the population of the two victimized Dogrib bands; similar raids had been endured for years. Even when formal battles occurred frequently, more deaths were inflicted by raids. Among the Dugum Dani, in fewer than six months, seven ritual battles killed only two men, but nine raids over the same period killed seven people. Figures cited in Chapter 2 indicate that nearly all western North American Indian groups were raided at least twice each year. A careful and open-eyed reading of ethnographies, early historical accounts, and recorded tribal traditions for some supposedly pacifistic Plateau tribes in British Columbia leaves no doubt that raiding and other forms of combat were both frequent and persistent in this area. The numbers killed as a result of these raids were sometimes extremely significant, as in the case of 400 Lilloet (approximately 10 percent of the tribal population) slain in the course of a week-long raid by a neighboring tribe.¹⁸ Many groups, such as the Yanomamo of Venezuela and Koaka of Guadalcanal, never resorted to formal battles at all. Raids and ambushes have been the most frequent and widely employed form of nonstate warfare because they are terribly effective at eliminating enemies with a minimum of risk.

Raids characteristically kill only a few people at a time; they kill a higher proportion of women than do battles or even the routs that follow them; they kill individuals or small groups caught in isolated circumstances away from major population concentrations; and because the victims are outnumbered, surprised, and often unarmed, their wounds are often inflicted as they try to flee. Archaeologically, this pattern will thus be evidenced by four corresponding characteristics: burials of individual or small groups of homicide victims; women as a high proportion of the victims; burials sometimes located away from the major habitation zones (although raid victims were recovered and buried in the usual cemeteries); and evidence that most wounds, even on adult males, were inflicted from behind.¹⁹ Several isolated prehistoric burials in central Washington State fit this pattern precisely, and radiocarbon dates indicate that raiding went on in this region for over 1,500 years. Projectile points found embedded in these skeletons indicate that in some cases the killers were "foreigners." Interestingly, the usual ethnographic descriptions of the tribes in this area—indeed, in the whole culture area of the Plateau—depict them as exceptionally peaceful. At a cemetery site in central Illinois dating to about A.D. 1300, 16 percent of the

264 individuals buried there met violent deaths and also fit the patterns expected for raid victims. Similar attritional violence is documented in prehistoric cemeteries in central British Columbia and in California, where burials of probable raid victims were accumulated over several hundred years. The homicide victims at the 13,000-year-old Gebel Sahaba cemetery in Egypt do not quite fit this small ambush-raid pattern: more victims were buried at one time; adult males' wounds were commonly left frontal, indicating that they were wounded while fighting with their bows; and children were common among the victims. In this case, the attacks seem to have been on a larger scale—perhaps against small encampments rather than against isolated work parties. These burials accumulated over at least two generations. In each of the cases cited, the proportion of violent deaths is quite high. For example, the homicide rate of the prehistoric Illinois villagers would have been 1,400 times that of modern Britain or about 70 times that of the United States in 1980!²⁰ There can be little doubt that the frequent, sustained, and deadly raids recorded for ethnographic tribal groups were also practiced in many prehistoric cases.

MASSACRES

A gradual scalar transition in primitive warfare leads from the small raid to massacres. The latter are larger surprise attacks whose purpose is to annihilate an enemy social unit. The simplest form involves surrounding or infiltrating an enemy village and, when a signal is given, attempting to kill everyone within reach.²¹ Such killing has usually been indiscriminate, although women and children evidently escape in the confusion more often than adult males. In one case of massacre in New Guinea, the victim group of 300 lost about 8 percent of its population. In a case from a different area, a tribal confederation of 1,000 people lost nearly 13 percent of its population in just the first hour of an attack by several other confederacies. Surprise attacks on California Pomo villages usually killed between 5 and 15 percent of their inhabitants. When the first Spanish explorers reached the coastal Barbareño Chumash of California, the latter had just had two of their villages surprised, burned, and completely annihilated by raiders from the interior, representing a minimum loss of 10 percent of their tribal population. After enduring years of raids by the Yellowknife tribe of northern Canada, several Dogrib bands combined to wipe out a Yellowknife camp, killing four men, thirteen women, and seventeen children who accounted for 20 percent of the victims' population. The Yellowknives never recovered from this blow, and the descendants of the demoralized survivors were gradually absorbed by neighboring groups. The seldom-achieved goal of another subarctic tribe, the Kutchin, was to surround and annihilate an encampment of their traditional enemies, the Mackenzie Eskimo, leaving only one

male alive. This male, called "The Survivor," was spared only so he could spread word of the deed. The Upper Tanana or Nabesna of Alaska massacred most of one band (numbering perhaps 100 people) of Southern Tutchone. Similar slaughters have been recorded in South America, as in the case of a treacherous attack on guests at a Yanomamo feast in which 15 of 115 people were killed in a single day. The approximate average loss in these various instances was 10 percent. To put such massacre mortalities in perspective, this level of population loss would be equivalent to killing over 13 million Americans in 1941 or over 7 million Japanese in 1945 in a single air raid. The results of intertribal massacres could be devastating, especially to a social unit already decimated by battles and raids.

Such explosive slaughters seem to have occurred infrequently.²² For the Dugum Dani of highland New Guinea, it is estimated that such massacres happened only once every ten or twenty years. Over a period of half a century, the Sambia of the same region fought six neighboring tribes in wars involving massacres. The Yellowknife tribe of northern Canada had been raiding the neighboring Dogribs for no more than twenty years when, as we have seen, the latter annihilated one of their camps. These few cases hardly suffice to support a generalization; but in a number of other ethnographies, such slaughters were recalled by older informants born a generation before colonial pacification, suggesting that massacres once a generation were not an unusual experience in many nonstate groups.

Contrary to Brian Ferguson's claim that such slaughters were a consequence of contact with modern European or other civilizations, archaeology yields evidence of prehistoric massacres more severe than any recounted in ethnography.²³ For example, at Crow Creek in South Dakota, archaeologists found a mass grave containing the remains of more than 500 men, women, and children who had been slaughtered, scalped, and mutilated during an attack on their village a century and a half before Columbus's arrival (ca. A.D. 1325). The attack seems to have occurred just when the village's fortifications were being rebuilt. All the houses were burned, and most of the inhabitants were murdered. This death toll represented more than 60 percent of the village's population, estimated from the number of houses to have been about 800. The survivors appear to have been primarily young women, as their skeletons are underrepresented among the bones; if so, they were probably taken away as captives. Certainly, the site was deserted for some time after the attack because the bodies evidently remained exposed to scavenging animals for a few weeks before burial. In other words, this whole village was annihilated in a single attack and never reoccupied.

A similar massacre occurred in the historic period (ca. 1785) at the fortified Larson site, where the dead had been similarly scalped, mutilated, and finally

buried under the collapsed roofs and walls of their burned houses. This example clearly shows that except for introducing some new weapons (in particular, muskets and iron-headed arrows), contact with Western civilization caused no significant change in the tenor of warfare in this area. In other words, anthropologists are not justified in dismissing or discounting the ethnographic descriptions of Middle Missouri warfare since they apply equally well to the precontact period. Evidence of a similar slaughter and burning of a whole village, dating to the late thirteenth century, has been uncovered in southwestern Colorado at Sand Canyon Pueblo, where (as at the Larson site) the bodies of the victims were buried under the collapsed roofs of their burned houses.

After surveying a large number of prehistoric burial populations in the eastern United States, archaeologist George Milner concluded that the pre-Columbian warfare of this whole region featured "repeated ambushes punctuated by devastating attacks at particularly opportune moments."²⁴ From North America at least, archaeological evidence reveals precisely the same pattern recorded ethnographically for tribal peoples the world over of frequent deadly raids and occasional horrific massacres. This was an indigenous and "native" pattern long before contact with Europeans complicated the situation. When the sailing ship released them from their own continent, Europeans brought many new ills and evils to the non-Western world, but neither war nor its worst features were among these novelties.

Similar massacres are also documented for the prestate peoples of prehistoric western Europe (Chapter 2).²⁵ At the time of the Talheim massacre 7,000 years ago, neither civilizations nor states had yet developed *anywhere*. At Roaix in France, 4,000 years ago, more than 100 people of both sexes and all ages were killed by bow-wielding adversaries and then hastily buried in a mass grave. When this French massacre occurred, the nearest civilization was 1,000 miles away in Minoan Crete. In both cases, the number of victims conforms closely to the average number of inhabitants estimated by archaeologists for the average Early Neolithic hamlet and the average Late Neolithic village—respectively, the most common size of settlement in each period. Before any possible contact with civilizations, the tribesmen of Neolithic Europe, like those of the prehistoric United States, were thus wiping out whole settlements.

SIX

The Harvest of Mars

The Casualties of War

Although anthropologists have paid some attention to the actual conduct of primitive warfare, until very recently they seldom documented or examined its direct effects. Like those Soviet planners who believed that one big factory was always better than a host of smaller ones, Westerners have a tendency to equate size with efficiency. But efficiency is a ratio, not an absolute. Effects are most profitably assessed in relation to the effort invested in obtaining them. Viewed in proportionate terms, how effective is pre-civilized warfare in wreaking death and destruction on enemies or in exacting profits from victory? This is the question to which we now turn.

PRISONERS AND CAPTIVES

It is extremely uncommon to find instances among nonstate groups of recognizing surrender or taking adult male prisoners. Adult males who fell into the hands of their enemies were usually immediately dispatched.¹ The Mae Enga

tribesmen of highland New Guinea provide a typical example. When a Mae Enga warrior was seriously wounded by an arrow or a javelin, his adversaries would charge forward to chop him literally to pieces with their axes. To save their wounded from such a gruesome and culturally humiliating death, comrades would surround them so that they could be guided or carried to the rear. But the usual eagerness to dispatch enemy wounded was such that slightly wounded warriors would sometimes feign greater debility in order to draw their reckless opponents forward into flanking crossfire.² Armed or unarmed, adult males were killed without hesitation in battles, raids, or the routs following battles in the great majority of primitive societies. Surrender was not a practical option for adult tribesmen because survival after capture was unthinkable.

The reasons for this no-prisoners policy were seldom articulated by its practitioners. In many cases, it was simply tradition, a practice so common and universal that it needed no explanation. For example, during the 1879 Anglo-Zulu War, a British officer asked some Zulu prisoners why he should not kill them, as Zulus always killed British who fell into their hands. One prisoner answered, "There is a very good reason why you should not kill us. We kill you because it is the custom of Black men but it isn't the White men's custom."³ Impressed by this appeal to the power of custom, the officer spared these Zulu prisoners. Overall, however, British soldiers were quick to abandon civilized constraints with regard to Zulu captives when it became evident that no reciprocity was forthcoming. Beyond the proximate cause of convention, one can only speculate about the ultimate reasons that male prisoners were seldom taken in primitive warfare. The most likely reason is that enemy warriors were unlikely to accept captivity without attempting violent escapes or revenge; thus holding them captive required levels of vigilance and upkeep that most tribal societies were unable or unprepared to provide.

A few cultures occasionally took men captive only to sacrifice them to their gods or torture them to death later.⁴ Among the Iroquoian tribes of the Northeast, captured warriors were often subject to preliminary torture during the return journey of a war party. When the party arrived at the home village, the prisoners were beaten by running the gauntlet into the village. At a council, the warrior prisoners who survived these initial torments were distributed to families who had recently lost men in warfare. After these prisoners were ritually adopted and given the name of the family's dead member, they were usually tortured to death over several days. The victim was expected to display great fortitude during these torments—taunting his torturers and expressing contempt for their efforts. When the prisoner was dead, some parts of his body were eaten (usually including his heart) by his murderers. Archaeological finds of human bones in prehistoric Iroquoian kitchen middens indicate that it was also a pre-Columbian practice.⁵ Similar treatment was inflicted on captives by various

Tupi groups in South America; in some tribes, the tortured prisoner was dispatched by children using arrows or axes, and the boys' hands were then dipped in the victim's blood to symbolize their duty to become warriors. Later destruction of male captives by ritual torture, sacrifice, or cannibalism (Chapter 7) has been recorded for the Maoris and Marquesans of Polynesia, Fijians, a few North American tribes, several South American groups, and various New Guinea groups.⁶ This fate was usually reserved for only a few enemy warriors—usually chiefs or other men of renown. The majority of captured foes were simply executed without further ceremony. These elaborate customs, however gruesome, merely delayed or prolonged the inevitable destruction of enemy males.

In some societies, of course, blood kin and in-laws who met one another in combat would try to avoid harming one another. In highland New Guinea, for example, a warrior who spotted a relative on the other side might move to another part of the battle line or might point this relative out to his comrades, asking them to spare him (a protection that was usually only temporary).⁷ The underlying motive was to avoid having a relative's or in-law's blood on one's hands—not necessarily to save him from harm. In most primitive combat, adversaries neither gave nor expected quarter from anyone.

However, some East African tribes did recognize surrender because the practice of ransoming prisoners with cattle was common. Among the Meru herdsmen of Kenya, a warrior wishing to surrender lifted his spear above his head and shouted "Take cattle!" But if his opponents had deaths to avenge, acceptance of his capitulation was by no means a foregone conclusion. The custom of capturing adult males and incorporating them into a tribe was extremely rare anywhere.⁸ The Shawnee and Fox tribes of the United States (and very occasionally a few other tribes in the Northeast) spared only those male captives who had survived the hardships and tortures inflicted during their journey to their captors' village and who were immediately claimed by families who needed replacements for war casualties. A few South American petty chiefdoms saved some captive young men and married them to the daughters of their captors, in order to incorporate them as a despised "servile" class. The Nuer of Sudan adopted boys captured from their enemies (the Dinka), and women of marriageable age and girls were incorporated less formally. On the other hand, old women and babies captured in Nuer raids were clubbed to death and their bodies burned with the Dinka huts. Dinka adult males were simply killed.⁹ Groups that used or sold war captives as slaves usually preferred to subjugate women and children and therefore immediately dispatched all adult male captives.¹⁰ In general, the primitive warrior had only three means of surviving combat: an arranged truce, victory, or (in defeat) fleetness of foot.

In some primitive societies, women were spared injury or capture by enemy

warriors.¹¹ Even in societies where women were often slain in the small raids and rare wild slaughters attending massacres and routs, they could enjoy remarkable immunity from harm on formal battlefields. In Kapauku battles in New Guinea, for instance, married women wandered freely about the battlefield collecting arrows to resupply their men, "as if they were harvesting potatoes or cucumbers," and even acting as scouts or lookouts. Unmarried Kapauku girls had to be more circumspect because if caught by the enemy, they might be raped. When Tuareg tribesmen of the Sahara were defeated near their encampments, they bolted, leaving their women and children in the hands of their enemies. This behavior reflected the Tuaregs' expectation, given their own customs, that women and children were inviolable in warfare.¹² Such chivalrous behavior toward women and children was, however, not the norm among non-state groups.

The capture of women was one of the spoils of victory—and occasionally one of the primary aims of warfare—for many tribal warriors. In many societies, if the men lost a fight, the women were subject to capture and forced incorporation into the captor's society. Most Indian tribes in western North America at least occasionally conducted raids to capture women.¹³ The social position of captive women varied widely among cultures, from abject slaves to concubines to secondary wives to full spouses. In a few cases, female captives could be ransomed or, of course, escape.¹⁴ In situations where ransom or escape were not possible, the treatment of captive young women amounted to rape, whether actual violence was used against them to enforce cohabitation with their captors or was only implicit in their situation.

Sometimes the number of captive women held by a group represented a considerable proportion of its female population. According to their traditions, the Island Caribs of the Lesser Antilles had conquered these islands a century before Columbus by exterminating the resident Arawak men and taking the women for wives. After a few generations, there developed a peculiar linguistic situation in which the women and children spoke Arawak to one another, but the men spoke a corrupt form of Carib among themselves and to the women.¹⁵ Although the loss of even a large percentage of males will have no direct influence on a group's demographic fortunes (whatever the effect on its military viability may be), the loss or gain of fertile women can mean the difference between population decline and growth.¹⁶

Female captives were also very valuable economically. In many societies, women's labor provided the greater part of staple food. In California, acorns (a dietary staple) were gathered and processed by women. On the Pacific Northwest Coast, women performed the time-consuming but essential work of cleaning and drying salmon, which could be caught only during brief annual runs but were a staple food year-round. Since salmon were not difficult to locate or to

catch, one man could supply several women with full-time work. Throughout Melanesia, gardening and pig rearing were female specialties. The widespread practice of polygamy indicates that many societies found that having several adult women in a household was not burdensome but was usually an economic boon. It became even more of an advantage if the additional women could be acquired without the costs of a bride-price or interfering in-laws.

Of course, many tribal societies took no prisoners and retained no captives of any sex or age.¹⁷ The Chemehuevi of the Southwest and several tribes in California spared no one. Perhaps the harshest treatment of captives was meted out in Polynesia. The Tahitians are described as leaving enemy children pinned to their mothers with spears or "pierced through the head and strung on cords." The Maoris sometimes disabled captive women so that they could not escape, permitting the warriors to rape, kill, and eat them when it was more convenient to do so. Even in societies where captives were taken, once general killing started it could be difficult to stop. For example, in an Asmat head-hunting raid in New Guinea, anyone interested in saving a woman or child as a captive (something rarely done) experienced considerable difficulty in preventing his overexcited comrades from dispatching his chosen prisoners.¹⁸

In general, nonstate groups preserved the lives of captives only when some material benefit would accrue; this approach generally limited the persons spared to women and children. States, by contrast, often have a strong material interest in preserving the lives of defeated enemies—even adult males—because they can become tax- and tribute-paying subjects, serfs, or slaves. The life-preserving rituals of formal surrender and widespread official distaste for killing noncombatants are expressions of this interest. Economically, the state is usually best served by the submission of its enemies, not by genocide. The atrocities that do occur in civilized warfare usually happen when commanders lose control of their soldiers, whose primary motive may be the primitive one of avenging combat losses or previous real or fictive enemy atrocities. And slaughters of noncombatants can occur as a matter of policy, when the policymakers themselves are consumed by ethnic hatred or when they make a calculated attempt to use state terrorism to cow a conquered populace.

The reaction of the German government during the Herero-Nama uprising in Southwest Africa in 1904 is an example of the self-interested mercy of states and of the conditions under which it fails. The local military governor, General von Trotha, issued an extermination order against the Hereros. The imperial chancellor and the German colonial office successfully demanded that this order be countermanded by the Kaiser: it was inhumane, was bad for public relations, and (perhaps most important) would "undermine the potential for development" by eliminating native labor. The governor, his troops, and the German colonists paid little heed to the Kaiser's order, however. When the

fighting ended several years later, only one-half of the Nama and one-sixth of the Herero had survived.¹⁹ Precisely this weakness of state control over frontier "militias" made massacres of native peoples more common by such agents than by the "regular" forces of the state. Indeed, the most notorious massacres of North American Indians, such as those at Sand Creek and Camp Grant, and the only actual genocides (that is, complete extinction of a tribe primarily by homicide) during the European conquest were all inflicted by local militias.²⁰ In many respects, these frontier struggles played out as tribal wars in which one tribe happened to be composed of European colonists. In general, though, the prospects for the defeated were slightly brighter (if still dim) if they were vanquished by a state than by a nonstate society.

Only the "rules of war," cultural expectations, and tribal or national loyalties make it possible to distinguish between legitimate warfare and atrocities. Is there any behavioral difference between Caesar's extermination of the Bituriges at Bourges, the slaughter of Minnesota settlers by the Sioux in 1862, the massacres by the U.S. Army at Wounded Knee and My Lai, the Allied air strikes at Dresden and Hiroshima, the massacres committed by Japanese soldiers in Nanking and Manila, and the similar accomplishments of primitives described earlier, except the body counts and the assignment of our sympathies with the perpetrators or the victims? Apologists for such massacres always claim that their perpetrators were "provoked." But war always seems full to overflowing with provocations. At any rate, the treatment of captives and prisoners by nonstate groups has usually and literally been atrocious.

WAR DEATHS

Citizens of modern states tend to believe that everything they do is more efficient and effective than the corresponding efforts of primitives or ancients. Given the neo-Rousseauian tenor of the present day, this expectation about modern civilization finds ready acceptance in relation to distasteful or harmful behavior. Therefore, it comes as a shock to discover that the proportion of war casualties in primitive societies almost always exceeds that suffered by even the most bellicose or war-torn modern states.

Actual casualty figures from primitive warfare are scarce, and only in the past few decades have ethnographers attempted to collect such information. Figure 6.1 compares these casualty rates with those of the most war-torn modern states. Following the practice of several ethnographers, to facilitate comparison, these war death rates are expressed as annual percentages of mean population. Another measure of the deadliness of warfare is the proportion of all deaths caused by war; these figures are given in Figure 6.2. By either measure, primitive warfare was much deadlier than its modern counterpart.²¹ The death rates

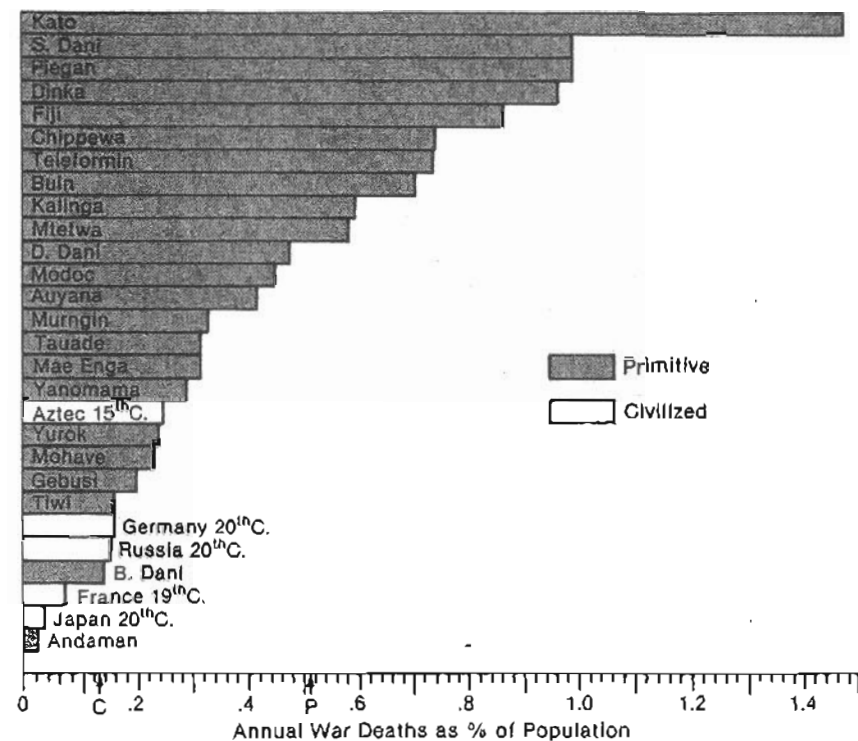


Figure 6.1 War fatality rates (percentage of population killed per annum) for various prestate and civilized societies (see Appendix, Table 6.1).

shown for civilized states overestimate the deadliness of combat, since most war deaths were caused by disease until very recently. For example, two-thirds of the deaths suffered by the Union armed forces during the Civil War were due to disease.²² Such disease casualties are included in the war death rates for civilized states but not in those of primitive groups. Moreover, many civilized war deaths were the result of accidents involving horses, vehicles, and weapons. For example, approximately 20 percent of British deaths in the Crimean War and 14 percent in the Boer War were accidental.²³ The deaths recorded for the primitive groups were all the direct result of wounds suffered in combat and inflicted by the enemy. Were such noncombat deaths deleted from the civilized rates given in Figure 6.1, the terrible deadliness of primitive compared with modern combat would be even more one-sided.

But what of civilian deaths from disease or starvation resulting from the disruptions and dislocations caused by war? Again such deaths are included in the civilized rates but not in those of the primitive groups. These are difficult to

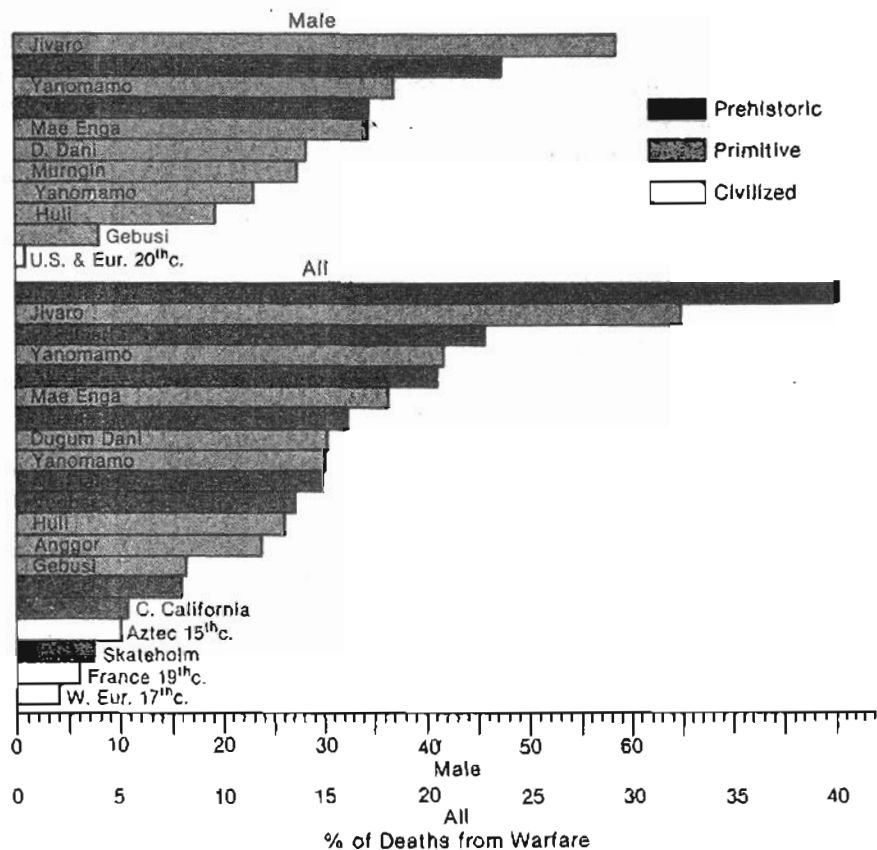


Figure 6.2 Percentage of male (upper) and all (lower) deaths caused by warfare in various societies (see Appendix, Table 6.2).

calculate for modern states, and no figures are available for any primitive society. However, they were probably just as common in primitive warfare as in the civilized variety. For example, the ethnographer of the Mae Enga of New Guinea describes the wartime consequences of the "sudden and forced movements of women and children, the elderly and the ill, over difficult terrain in bleak and often wet weather":

We simply do not know how many infants and old people succumb to pneumonia in these flights, how many refugees are drowned when trying to cross boulder-strewn torrents, how many already sick and weak people die because food supplies are interrupted. These less obvious costs of war, I believe, accumulate significantly through time and . . . have played their part in effecting a relatively low rate of population growth in the recent past.²⁴

One may also quickly dispose of the argument that these high casualty rates only reflect contact between tribal peoples and Westerners by citing the very similar proportions of violent deaths documented in several prehistoric populations (Figure 6.2).²⁵ My own first excavation training was on a prehistoric village site on the San Francisco Bay in California. Thousand-year-old skeletons with obsidian arrowheads embedded in the bones, missing heads, and other signs of violent death were so common that our excavation crew referred to burials as "bad sights." As a matter of fact, one distinctive characteristic of this period in central Californian prehistory is that about 5 percent of all human skeletons contain embedded arrowheads—which, of course, represent only the most obvious evidence of death in warfare. The actual percentage of violent deaths must have been much higher. Indeed, several of these prehistoric cases seriously underestimate the number of violent deaths because only individuals with projectiles in their bones are counted as war deaths. Judging from the Gebel Sahaba cemetery, where only 25 percent of the skeletons that show signs of arrow wounds have the points so embedded, the real proportion of war deaths in the California and Scandinavian cases in Figure 6.2 probably ranged from about 7 percent to as much as 40 percent of all deaths. Contrary to arguments that tribal violence increased after contact with Europeans, the percentage of burials in coastal British Columbia bearing evidence of violent traumas was actually *lower* after European contact (13 percent from 1774 to 1874) than the very high levels (20 to 32 percent) evidenced in the prehistoric periods.²⁶ It is clear from these archaeological examples that the casualty rates recorded by ethnographers are neither improbable nor exceptional. Tribal peoples needed no instructions or inducements from Europeans to make real war.

But how can such high losses be reconciled with the low casualty rates generally observed in primitive battles, where action is often broken off when both sides have suffered a few dead? Part of the answer lies in the higher sortie rate of primitive warriors. As was noted earlier, warfare occurs much more frequently in most primitive societies than in civilized ones. Thus a relatively low loss rate per war, battle, or raid can cumulate very rapidly to catastrophic levels. Suppose that a tribe with 100 warriors breaks off fighting or arranges a truce in a battle after the loss of just 5 percent dead or mortally wounded. If such battles occurred about four times a year, the cumulative loss in just five years would be 64 percent, leaving only about 36 warriors alive to defend the group. Given a high frequency of warfare, likely losses due to small raids and ambushes, and other sources of losses to warrior strength from accidents or disease, no small group could afford to accept losses in battle exceeding 2 percent. Even that loss rate per fight, if battles take place four times a year, would reduce the group's fighting strength by a third in just five years. When debilitating wounds that do not result in death are also taken into account, it becomes clear why warriors

from small societies were so prone to end battles after just a few casualties. At issue was not just their personal survival but literally that of their group.

Restricting the number and severity of casualties can be done only in the context of formal battles. Small raids and ambushes, which are more frequent than battles and more indiscriminately deadly, are less subject to control. Larger-scale surprise attacks, not uncommon in primitive wars, can cause extremely high levels of casualties. The uncontrollable violence and frequency of such raids and massacres thus make primitive warfare deadlier than modern wars.

The usual primitive practices of not recognizing surrender and of dispatching all male captives also contribute to the lethality of such warfare. Despite the great difficulties inherent in successfully surrendering in the heat of battle, this life-saving option is often resorted to by civilized soldiers; as we have seen, however, it is unavailable to his primitive counterparts. Wounded soldiers who fall into the hands of civilized foes may receive very poor care or may be killed to prevent them from becoming a burden to their captors, but a similar misfortune for a primitive warrior meant certain death.

As for women, even when the ritual conventions of civilized war are not observed by modern states, their female mortalities do not exceed those usually inflicted over time by tribal warfare. The Allied "strategic" bombing of Germany killed more women than men; but compared with Germany's total male losses, these deaths still represented a ratio of only one female to every sixteen to twenty males.²⁷ Of course, the Nazi death squads and death camps killed so indiscriminately that the sex ratio of Germany's victims must be much closer to unity.²⁸ The corresponding ratios for the prestate groups range from about 1:1 to 1:15 (with a median of 1:7)—in every case a higher proportion of female deaths than that caused by the Allies and in a few cases little better than the proportion inflicted by the Nazis.²⁹

The cumulative effects of all these forms of violence can decimate a small clan or tribe.³⁰ One small New Guinea community began a war with twenty-two married men. After just four and a half months of fighting, six men (27 percent) had been killed, eight men had moved away to safety, and the group had been forced to merge with another unit in order to survive. In a war between two Papuan village confederacies (each with populations of 600 to 700 people) that lasted for more than a year, over 250 people were killed, and one side was left with almost no adult males. At the beginning of the nineteenth century, the Blackfoot tribe of the northern Plains was 50 percent deficient in adult males—presumably because of combat deaths since the deficiency disappeared rapidly after intertribal warfare ended later in the century. These percentages equal or exceed the decimations suffered by any modern state in its wars.³¹

Even complete annihilation of enemy social units has not been unknown in

primitive wars. Instances of tribes or subtribes being driven to extinction by persistent tribal warfare have been recorded from several areas of the world.³² Such genocides were sometimes accomplished by a single surprise massacre, on other occasions by longer-term attrition from repeated raids, or by a combination of both. The case of the Woriau Maring of New Guinea illustrates one method by which such annihilations were accomplished, and it also indicates why such occurrences tend to be rare. As was mentioned in Chapter 4, a favorite raid tactic in highland New Guinea consisted of stealthily surrounding the men's houses of an enemy, setting them afire, and killing all those who emerged. Usually, one Maring clan had insufficient manpower to attack all of an enemy's men's houses simultaneously and had to retreat in the face of counterattacks from the unattacked houses after killing a few men. In the Woriau case, two enemy clans allied themselves for the attack and were able to cover every house, annihilating the Woriau's manpower in a single day. The defenseless survivors then dispersed and ceased to exist as a collective group. Indeed, social extinction in tribal societies seems not to have entailed the killing of every person in the victimized group; rather, after a significant portion of the group (including most of its adult men) was killed, the surviving remnants were incorporated into the societies of the victors or into friendly groups with whom they sought refuge. Thus a social or linguistic entity was destroyed, if not necessarily the whole of the biological population that composed it. These may be social versions of "the death of a thousand cuts," but they are extinctions just the same.

The high war death rates among most nonstate societies are obviously the result of several features of primitive warfare: the prevalence of wars, the high proportion of tribesmen who face combat, the cumulative effects of frequent but low-casualty battles, the unmitigated deadliness and very high frequency of raids, the catastrophic mortalities inflicted in general massacres, the customary killing of all adult males, and the often atrocious treatment of women and children. For these reasons, a member of a typical tribal society, especially a male, had a far higher probability of dying "by the sword" than a citizen of an average modern state.

One author has very liberally estimated that more than 100 million people have died from all war-related causes (including famine and disease) on our planet during this century.³³ These deaths could be regarded as the price modern humanity has paid for being divided into nation-states. Yet this appalling figure is *twenty times smaller* than the losses that might have resulted if the world's population were still organized into bands, tribes, and chiefdoms.³⁴ A typical tribal society lost about about .5 percent of its population in combat each year (Figure 6.1). Applying this casualty rate to the earth's twentieth-century populations predicts more than 2 billion war deaths since 1900. Unlike a nuclear