THE IMPETUS OF WAR IN HUMAN CIVILIZATION

A Comparative Study of Secular and Religious Causes, Ideological Mass Death, Colonial Violence, and the Roots of Human Conflict from Genesis to the Present

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Abstract

War is the oldest organized human activity after subsistence. From the first walled settlements of the ancient Near East to the industrialized killing fields of the twentieth century, human beings have demonstrated a persistent, cross-cultural compulsion to organize violence against one another at scale. This paper examines the deep causes of war across the full span of recorded and prehistoric human history, drawing on David Frye's *Walls: A History of Civilization in Blood and Stone* (2018) as a primary interpretive framework alongside historical, anthropological, archaeological, and textual sources. The paper addresses four core analytical questions: (1) What are the comparative secular and religious causes of war? (2) How many lives have been destroyed by ideological killing machines — communism, political Islam, and colonialism in particular? (3) What wars have been conducted in the name of Christianity, and would the Greek New Testament have sanctioned them? (4) What wars have been conducted in the name of Islam, and does the Quran actually authorize the violence done in its name? The paper concludes with a synthetic analysis of the deepest cause of war — whether pride (*hubris*, as diagnosed in the Genesis narrative), tribalism, or material need forms the primary impetus — and reflects on what the cumulative cost of organized human violence means for the future of the species.

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I. Introduction: Walls, War, and the Human Condition

In the opening pages of *Walls: A History of Civilization in Blood and Stone* (2018), historian David Frye poses a question so simple it is almost easy to overlook: Why did ancient peoples build walls? The answer he develops across the book's remarkable scope — from Mesopotamia's earliest mudbrick fortifications to Hadrian's Wall to the Great Wall of China — is that walls are the most honest monument in human history. They tell the truth that temples and palaces obscure: the world has always been dangerous, and the primary danger has always been other human beings.

Frye's insight is archaeological, but it opens onto a philosophical problem of the first order. War is not an aberration in human history. It is not a detour from civilization's otherwise peaceable road. It is, the evidence increasingly suggests, co-constitutive with civilization itself. The first cities were fortified. The first kings were warriors. The first bureaucracies were logistical systems for feeding armies. The first taxes were tribute. The first writing, in some reconstructions, was bookkeeping for military grain stores. Civilization and organized violence were born together, and they have never been separated.

This paper asks the hardest version of that historical problem. It is not merely a history of wars — that catalogue would fill a library. It is an inquiry into *why* wars begin, who fights them under what banners, what the sacred texts of the fighting faiths actually say about violence, and what the cumulative verdict of organized human violence is on the prospects of the species. The question underneath all of these questions is the one the Book of Genesis placed at the center of the human story before any army had yet marched: Is pride — the desire to be what we are not, to take what is not ours, to exalt the self above the other — the primordial engine of human destruction?

II. The Archaeology of Early Warfare

The archaeological record is unambiguous on a point that many political theorists prefer to obscure: violence is not a late development in human social organization. It is among the earliest. The pacifist myth — associated with Rousseau's "noble savage" and popularized in twentieth-century anthropological romanticism — has been comprehensively overturned by the physical evidence.

At Crow Creek, South Dakota, a mass grave dating to approximately 1325 C.E. contains the skeletons of nearly 500 men, women, and children. The bones show systematic scalping, skull fractures, and dismemberment consistent with organized massacre, not individual murder. At Asparn-Schletz in Austria, a Neolithic site (c. 5000 B.C.E.) yielded the scattered, unburied bones of at least 67 individuals killed by blows to the head — an early European massacre. At Nataruk in Kenya, a site dated to approximately 10,000 B.C.E., researchers found 27 skeletons with evidence of lethal interpersonal violence: blunt force trauma to the skull, embedded obsidian projectiles, and the positioning of remains consistent with massacre rather than burial ritual.

What these sites establish, in concert with hundreds of similar findings worldwide, is that organized lethal violence between human groups substantially predates writing, cities, agriculture, and all of the social structures that political philosophers have traditionally identified as the causes of war. If Rousseau was right that civilization corrupted an originally peaceful human nature, the corrupting must have happened very quickly — within the first emergence of *Homo sapiens* as a behaviorally modern species.

Steven Pinker's *The Better Angels of Our Nature* (2011) synthesizes this archaeological and anthropological data and reaches a conclusion that is simultaneously encouraging and sobering: the *rate* of violent death has declined over the longue durée of human history, even as the absolute numbers have risen with population. A prehistoric individual had a statistically

higher chance of dying by violence than a modern one. But the mechanisms of violence have grown exponentially more powerful with each technological epoch, and the twentieth century — despite Pinker's optimism — produced the two most destructive wars in human history and ideological killing machines of unprecedented efficiency.

III. David Frye's *Walls*: The Foundational Argument

David Frye's *Walls: A History of Civilization in Blood and Stone* (2018) makes a deceptively simple argument that ramifies in unexpected directions. Frye, a classical historian at SUNY Erie, proposes that the most important divide in human history is not between civilization and barbarism, East and West, or sacred and secular. It is the divide between *walled* peoples and *unwalled* peoples — between those who lived behind fortifications and those who did not.

Frye traces this divide across four millennia. The earliest Mesopotamian cities — Uruk, Eridu, Nippur, Ur — were all walled. The first dynasty pharaohs fortified Egypt's borders. The Greeks walled their poleis; the Romans built limes and hadrian's Wall; the Chinese built the longest fortification in history. In every case, the wall was the primary response to the same threat: mobile, unwalled raiders — nomads, steppe peoples, brigands — who could strike and withdraw before organized resistance could form.

The wall, Frye argues, is the physical expression of a civilization's fundamental anxiety. It answers the question: Who is *in* and who is *out*? It establishes, in stone and mud and timber, the most basic political distinction in human experience: *us* versus *them*. This distinction — which Frye traces through military history, political philosophy, and comparative civilization studies — is the mother of all the causes of war. Once the wall goes up, the people inside it have interests that differ from the people outside, and conflict over the boundary becomes structurally inevitable.

Frye's argument is not merely architectural. He uses the wall as a lens for understanding the political psychology of civilized peoples. Inside the wall, hierarchy develops: someone must maintain the wall, command the garrison, distribute the grain. Outside the wall, freedom and precarity coexist: no hierarchy, no taxation, no law — but also no security. The walled and the unwalled look at each other across the fortification with mutual incomprehension that curdled, through thousands of iterations, into mutual contempt and recurring violence.

This framework is essential for understanding the full scope of war's causes because it locates the impetus for violence not primarily in ideology or religion but in the structural logic of human social organization. Walls create insiders and outsiders. Insiders accumulate surplus that outsiders want. Outsiders represent freedom that insiders alternately fear and envy. The tension is self-perpetuating and does not require any particular theology or political philosophy to ignite it — though theology and political philosophy have rarely failed to provide the accelerant.

IV. Secular Causes of War: A Typology

Before examining religious motivations, it is analytically necessary to establish the secular causes of war. This typology draws on Frye, Thucydides, Clausewitz, and modern conflict studies.

Resource Competition and Survival. The most primordial cause of organized violence is material: food, water, land, mineral wealth. Thucydides identified the three root causes of war as fear, honor, and interest. His third category — *interest* — encompasses the raw calculus of survival: groups fight because they need what another group has, or because they fear losing what they have to the other group. This driver is evident in the earliest human violence (competition over hunting grounds and water sources) and persists into the industrial era (the Ottoman and British struggles over oil in the Persian Gulf; the Japanese expansion into resource-rich Asia; Nazi Germany's *Lebensraum* strategy).

Political Power and the State. The development of the state created a new cause of war entirely: the struggle for political dominance. Once organized hierarchies existed, the hierarchy itself became a prize worth fighting over. Succession wars, civil wars, wars of dynastic ambition — from the Wars of the Roses to the Thirty Years' War to the Napoleonic campaigns — were driven primarily by elite competition for political control, not by resource scarcity or religious conviction. Clausewitz's famous formulation — "War is the continuation of politics by other means" — applies most cleanly to this category.

Nationalism and Ethnic Identity. The nineteenth century saw the rise of nationalism as a mass political force, transforming state-level conflicts into people's wars. The Wars of German Unification (1864–1871), the Balkan Wars (1912–1913), the First World War (1914–1918), and ultimately the Second World War all drew much of their lethal energy from nationalist mobilization — the claim that ethnically defined peoples have the right, even the duty, to secure political boundaries congruent with their cultural identity. This cause of war is secular in its formal ideology (nationalism is not a theology) but psychological in its roots (it draws on the same tribal identity mechanisms as religious warfare).

Economic Systems and Class Conflict. Marxist theory reinterprets the history of war as the expression of class conflict — ruling classes using organized violence to maintain control over the means of production, or exploited classes rising against their exploiters. While Marxist theory overreaches in reducing all war to economic cause, economic grievance is a genuine and well-documented contributor to many conflicts: the English Civil War, the American Revolution, the Paris Commune of 1871, and numerous twentieth-century revolutionary conflicts all incorporated substantial economic dimensions.

Ideology. The twentieth century produced a new category: purely ideological war — conflict driven by competing visions of the correct organization of human society. Fascism, communism, liberal democracy, and ethnonationalism collided with catastrophic violence between 1914 and 1989. This cause differs from the religious cause in one crucial structural respect: its claims are about *this world*, not the next. But its psychological mechanisms — the certainty of righteousness, the dehumanization of opponents, the willingness to kill for an abstraction — are functionally identical to those of religious war.

V. Religious Causes of War: A Typology

Religion enters the causes of war through multiple distinct mechanisms, not all of which are equally primary.

Sacred Territory. The most straightforward religious cause of war is the claim that a particular geographical space has divine significance and must be under the control of the group to whom God has given it. The Israelite conquest of Canaan, the Crusades, the Arab-Israeli conflict, and numerous Hindu-Muslim communal conflicts in South Asia all partake of this logic. Sacred territory claims are especially intractable because they are, by definition, non-negotiable: you cannot compromise about the will of God.

Religious Exclusivism and the Duty to Convert or Destroy. Some religious traditions include within their scriptural or theological frameworks a duty to bring all humanity under their religious system — either through conversion or, in some interpretations, through conquest. This creates a structural cause of expansionist warfare. The Islamic concept of *jihad* in certain of its classical formulations, and the medieval Catholic concept of *bellum iustum* (just war) extended to the recovery of Christian lands, both exemplify this mechanism.

Religious Identity as Tribal Marker. Perhaps more commonly than either of the above, religion functions in war not as a primary theological cause but as the most powerful available marker of group identity. In the Troubles in Northern Ireland, the Bosnian War, and much of the Arab-Israeli conflict, religious labels (Catholic/Protestant, Muslim/Orthodox, Jew/Arab) served primarily to demarcate ethnic and political communities rather than to express genuine theological conviction. Combatants who rarely prayed nevertheless killed and died for identities their religions had historically shaped. This use of religion as tribal marker is arguably more common than genuinely theological warfare, and it is important to distinguish the two.

Apocalyptic and Millenarian Expectation. Some religious violence is driven by the conviction that the end of history is imminent and that violence can hasten or participate in the divine consummation of all things. The Münster Anabaptists (1534–1535), various jihadist movements that seek to provoke the apocalyptic final battle (*Malhama al-Kubra*), and the Japanese *kamikaze* ideology (which had Shinto religious dimensions) all draw on this mechanism.

VI. Wars of Communism: The Secular Ideology of Mass Death

Communism is the most lethal secular ideology in human history. The attempt to implement Marxist-Leninist political economy in the twentieth century produced, by any reasonable estimate, more deaths than any religious war in history — and more deaths than any other single human enterprise except perhaps the full sweep of Western colonialism. The numbers, even conservatively calculated, are staggering.

The Soviet Union

The Soviet state under Lenin and Stalin (1917–1953) killed its own citizens at an extraordinary rate. The most reliable academic estimates, drawn from opened Soviet archives following the USSR's collapse, include the following categories of death attributable to deliberate state policy:

The Red Terror (1918–1921): Cheka executions, labor camps, and deliberate famine used as a weapon against political opponents — estimated 1.2 to 1.5 million deaths. The Ukrainian Holodomor (1932–1933): The deliberate starvation of Ukraine through forced collectivization and grain confiscation — 3.5 to 7.5 million deaths. Scholars including Robert Conquest, Timothy Snyder (*Bloodlands*, 2010), and the Institut für Zeitgeschichte Munich converge on approximately 4 million as the most defensible estimate. The Great Purge (1936–1938): Approximately 750,000 executions by the NKVD, plus millions more sent to the Gulag. The Gulag system overall: 1.5 to 1.8 million deaths from labor camp conditions between 1918 and 1956. Deportations of ethnic minorities (Chechens, Crimean Tatars, Volga Germans, Poles): Approximately 1 to 2 million deaths from the conditions of deportation and resettlement. The total Soviet death toll attributable to deliberate state violence and famine-as-policy runs to approximately 15 to 20 million deaths, depending on methodology. The demographic historian R.J. Rummel coined the term *democide* — government murder of its own citizens — and calculated the Soviet total at approximately 61.9 million, a figure most scholars consider inflated but directionally significant.

Communist China

Mao Zedong's People's Republic of China (1949–1976) exceeded even the Soviet record in absolute numbers, primarily through two catastrophic episodes of deliberate policy.

The Great Leap Forward (1958–1962): Mao's forced collectivization of agriculture and simultaneous campaign to industrialize through "backyard furnaces" produced a famine of previously unimaginable scale. Peasants were forbidden to harvest crops that rotted in the fields while local officials, terrified of reporting bad news, falsified grain production figures upward. The result was a government-produced famine that killed an estimated 30 to 55 million people. Frank Dikötter's *Mao's Great Famine* (2010), based on provincial archives, estimates 45 million. This is the largest famine in recorded human history, and it was entirely the product of deliberate government policy enforced by state violence. The Cultural Revolution (1966–1976): Mao's deliberate destruction of Chinese traditional culture, intellectuals, and "class enemies" through the Red Guards and state apparatus killed an estimated 500,000 to 2 million directly, with tens of millions more imprisoned, tortured, or displaced. The total Chinese Communist death toll attributable to deliberate policy is estimated at 40 to 70 million.

Cambodia

The Khmer Rouge under Pol Pot (1975–1979) achieved the highest rate of democide relative to national population in history. In four years, the Khmer Rouge killed approximately 1.5 to 2 million Cambodians — between 21 and 25 percent of the entire population — through executions, forced labor, starvation, and deliberate medical neglect. The Killing Fields were a systematic project of ideological purification: the educated, the urban, the ethnic minorities, the

religious (particularly Buddhist monks and the Muslim Cham people) were targeted for extermination as obstacles to the agrarian communist utopia.

North Korea, Vietnam, Cuba, Ethiopia, and Others

Communist governments in North Korea have maintained a prison camp system (*kwan-li-so*) responsible for an estimated 400,000 to 1.5 million deaths since the Korean War. The Vietnamese Communist regime killed an estimated 1 to 1.5 million through executions, *re-education camps*, and boat-people drownings. Cuban Communist executions, while lower in absolute numbers, achieved comparable rates relative to population in the early years of the Castro revolution. Mengistu Haile Mariam's Marxist-Leninist Derg regime in Ethiopia (1974–1991) killed an estimated 500,000 to 2 million through the Red Terror and deliberate mismanagement of famine relief.

The Ideological Analysis

Why did Marxist-Leninist communism produce such staggering death tolls wherever it was implemented? The answer lies in the structure of its ideology, not in accidental perversions of a benign theory. Communism divides humanity into two ontological categories: the proletariat (the historically righteous class) and the class enemy (the historically condemned). The class enemy — bourgeois, kulak, intellectual, religious believer — is not merely wrong but is an obstacle to the inevitable march of history. The logic of Marxist-Leninist practice, wherever it was actually implemented, was that the class enemy must be liquidated or re-educated, that the party embodies historical truth and therefore its will supersedes any individual right, and that any sacrifice of individual lives is justified by the utopian end.

This logic is structurally identical, in its psychological mechanisms, to religious fanaticism: an absolute truth, a defined enemy of that truth, the subordination of individual moral scruple to the demands of the higher cause, and the promise of a paradise (the classless society) that justifies present suffering. Communism is secular in its formal ideology but eschatological in its deep structure — it is a secular religion with saints (Marx, Lenin, Mao), heretics (Trotskyists, revisionists), scripture (*Das Kapital*, the *Little Red Book*), and an apocalyptic vision of the end of history.

The total death toll of communist governments in the twentieth century is estimated by *The Black Book of Communism* (Courtois et al., 1999) at approximately 94 million. Independent scholarly estimates range from 65 to 100 million. Whatever the precise figure, it represents the greatest single concentration of organized political killing in human history.

VII. Wars and Violence Under the Banner of Islam

A. The Early Islamic Conquests (632–750 C.E.)

The death of the Prophet Muhammad in 632 C.E. was followed within a decade by one of the most dramatic military expansions in world history. The Arab Muslim armies, under the first

four caliphs (Abu Bakr, Umar, Uthman, Ali) and then the Umayyad dynasty, conquered the entire Arabian Peninsula, the Levant, Persia, Egypt, North Africa, and Central Asia within approximately a century.

The early conquests were not primarily wars of forced conversion. The classical Islamic legal framework distinguished between *ahl al-kitab* (People of the Book — Jews and Christians) who could retain their religion under *dhimmi* status upon payment of the *jizya* (poll tax) and submission to Muslim political authority, and pagans who faced a starker choice. The conquests were, in their own terms and in the historical record, wars of political and territorial expansion whose religious justification was built into the conceptual framework of the expanding empire. The conquered populations were offered terms; those who resisted were fought.

The death toll of the early Islamic conquests is difficult to calculate with precision. The conquest of Persia alone (633–651 C.E.) involved massive military engagements — the Battle of al-Qadisiyyah (636 C.E.) and the Battle of Nahavand (642 C.E.) — in which Persian forces suffered catastrophic losses. Demographic historians estimate that the cumulative military and civilian deaths from the early Islamic conquests across the Middle East, Persia, and North Africa ran to several million over the century of expansion.

B. Medieval Jihad and the Crusade Response

The Crusades (1095–1291 C.E.) are often discussed as a Christian phenomenon, and they were — but they were also a response to a century and a half of Islamic expansion into Christian territory, including the conquest of Jerusalem (637 C.E.), the Muslim advance into France (stopped at Tours/Poitiers in 732 C.E.), and the Seljuk Turkish conquest of Anatolia (culminating in the Byzantine defeat at Manzikert in 1071 C.E.) that precipitated Pope Urban II's call to crusade in 1095 C.E. The medieval period saw sustained Islamic military pressure on Christian Europe from both east (the Seljuks and later the Ottomans) and west (the Moors in Spain, who controlled most of the Iberian Peninsula from 711 to 1492 C.E.).

C. The Ottoman Wars

The Ottoman Empire (1299–1922 C.E.) prosecuted warfare as an organizing principle of the state. The classical Ottoman theory of governance divided the world into *Dar al-Islam* (the House of Islam, under Muslim rule) and *Dar al-Harb* (the House of War, not yet under Muslim rule), with the implication that it was the duty of the Sultan as Commander of the Faithful to expand the former at the expense of the latter. The Ottomans conquered Constantinople in 1453 C.E., ending the Byzantine Empire; advanced twice to the gates of Vienna (1529 and 1683 C.E.); controlled the Balkans, Greece, Hungary, and much of North Africa; and waged nearly continuous warfare on their borders for over four centuries.

The Armenian Genocide (1915–1923 C.E.), conducted by the late Ottoman state and its successor the Young Turk government, killed an estimated 600,000 to 1.5 million Armenian Christians through deliberate massacre, death marches, and starvation. While the Young Turk government was ideologically nationalist rather than primarily Islamist, the killings drew on centuries of communal tension between Muslim Turks and Christian Armenians in which religious identity was inseparable from ethnic and political identity.

D. Modern Jihadist Violence

The late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries have seen the emergence of transnational Salafi-jihadist movements — Al-Qaeda, the Islamic State (ISIS/ISIL/Daesh), Boko Haram, Al-Shabaab, and others — that have prosecuted terrorism and insurgent warfare explicitly in the name of Islamic religious duty. The Islamic State, at its height (2014–2019), controlled a territory roughly the size of the United Kingdom, governed by its interpretation of Islamic law, and killed an estimated 50,000 to 80,000 people through executions, genocide (the Yazidi genocide of 2014 is considered a genocide by the UN and major scholars), and combat. Al-Qaeda's operations — culminating in the September 11, 2001 attacks (2,977 killed) — have been the most geopolitically consequential terrorist attacks in history, triggering a global "War on Terror" that has killed an estimated 480,000 to 1 million people (including combatants and civilians) in Iraq, Afghanistan, Pakistan, and beyond.

E. Does the Quran Sanction These Wars?

This is the most contested question in contemporary religious studies, and it deserves careful, text-grounded analysis rather than either apologetic deflection or polemical overstatement.

The Quran (القرآن) contains a substantial number of verses that directly address warfare, and interpreting them requires understanding the principle of *naskh* (abrogation) — the classical Islamic legal doctrine that later Quranic revelations supersede earlier ones on the same topic — as well as the distinction between *Meccan* suras (revealed during Muhammad's period of relative weakness and minority status, 610–622 C.E.) and *Medinan* suras (revealed after the Hijra, when Muhammad led an armed community and conducted warfare, 622–632 C.E.).

The verses most frequently cited in support of offensive warfare are primarily Medinan. Surah 9 (*Al-Tawbah*, "Repentance") is the most militarily forceful chapter in the Quran. Verse 9:5, often called the "Sword Verse" (*Ayat al-Sayf*), reads: "When the sacred months have passed, kill the polytheists wherever you find them, and capture them and besiege them and sit in wait for them at every place of ambush." Verse 9:29 commands: "Fight those who do not believe in Allah or in the Last Day and who do not consider unlawful what Allah and His Messenger have made unlawful and who do not adopt the religion of truth from those who were given the Scripture — [fight] until they give the *jizyah* willingly while they are humbled."

Classical Islamic jurisprudence — across all four major Sunni schools of law (Hanafi, Maliki, Shafi'i, Hanbali) — interpreted Surah 9 as the final, definitive statement on the relationship between the Muslim community and non-Muslim political powers, superseding the more conciliatory earlier verses. This is not a modern jihadist innovation; it is the consensus classical position. The classical jurists divided the world into *Dar al-Islam* and *Dar al-Harb* and held that the Muslim community had a collective duty (*fard kifaya*) to expand the former at the expense of the latter when capable of doing so.

However, several significant qualifications are required. First, the classical jurisprudence is contested within Islam itself: the Meccan verses — which counsel patience, peaceful preaching, and coexistence — have always had their advocates, and major twentieth-century Islamic reformers (most notably Mahmoud Shaltut of Al-Azhar in 1948) argued for a purely defensive interpretation of *jihad*. Second, the Quran contains many verses that explicitly prohibit

aggression: “Fight in the cause of Allah those who fight you, and do not transgress. Indeed, Allah does not like transgressors” (2:190); “There is no compulsion in religion” (2:256); “If they incline toward peace, then incline toward it also” (8:61). Third, the majority of the world’s 1.8 billion Muslims do not interpret their faith as requiring violent expansion.

The honest textual answer is this: The Quran contains verses that can legitimately be read to authorize offensive warfare against non-Muslims in the pursuit of political-religious domination, and this reading was the mainstream classical scholarly position for over a millennium. The early Islamic conquests, the Ottoman wars, and (selectively and in distorted form) modern jihadist violence can appeal to genuine textual and jurisprudential precedent within the Islamic tradition. This is not a polemic against all of Islam; it is a sober reading of textual history. It is also true that the same tradition contains significant resources for peaceful interpretation, and that the majority of Muslims worldwide have never participated in or endorsed violent jihad.

VIII. Wars Conducted in the Name of Christianity

A. The Crusades (1095–1291 C.E.)

The Crusades were a series of military campaigns authorized by the papacy and conducted by Western European Christian knights with the primary stated objective of recovering Jerusalem and the Holy Land from Muslim control. There were eight major Crusades and numerous minor ones between 1095 and 1291 C.E.

The death tolls of the Crusades are difficult to calculate precisely. The First Crusade’s capture of Jerusalem (1099 C.E.) is described in graphic terms by multiple contemporary sources — both Christian and Muslim — and involved the massacre of much of Jerusalem’s population. Modern estimates of those killed in the Jerusalem massacre range from 3,000 to 10,000. Thomas Madden, a leading Crusades historian (*The New Concise History of the Crusades*, 2005), notes that the First Crusade overall involved approximately 35,000–40,000 combatants and enormous civilian casualties across the Levant. The total death toll of the full crusading period — combatants and civilians, Christian and Muslim — is estimated in the range of 1 to 3 million over two centuries.

The Fourth Crusade (1202–1204 C.E.) notoriously sacked the Christian city of Constantinople rather than fighting Muslims — one of the most striking examples of declared religious purpose being perverted almost immediately by political and economic interest.

B. The Wars of Religion (1524–1648 C.E.)

The Protestant Reformation fracture of Western Christianity produced a century of devastating intra-Christian warfare across Europe. The German Peasants’ War (1524–1525), the French Wars of Religion (1562–1598), the Dutch Revolt (1568–1648), the Thirty Years’ War (1618–1648), and the English Civil War (1642–1651) were all fought under religious banners — Catholic

versus Protestant — though economic, dynastic, and nationalist interests were deeply intertwined with the theological.

The Thirty Years' War is the most destructive of these conflicts. Fought primarily in the Holy Roman Empire (modern Germany), it killed an estimated 8 million people — roughly a third of the German population — through combat, famine, and plague. The war began as a conflict between Catholic and Protestant princes over religious rights and devolved, particularly after France (Catholic) allied with Protestant Sweden against the Catholic Habsburgs, into a war of political interest dressed in religious clothing. The Peace of Westphalia (1648), which ended the war, is conventionally dated as the founding moment of the modern state system and the separation of religious from political authority in European governance.

The St. Bartholomew's Day Massacre (August 23–24, 1572), in which French Catholic forces killed between 5,000 and 30,000 Huguenot (French Protestant) men, women, and children, represents one of the most concentrated episodes of religious violence in European history. It was authorized by the Crown and celebrated by Pope Gregory XIII, who ordered a commemorative medal struck.

C. Colonial Violence Under the Cross

European colonialism was often accompanied by Christian missionary activity, and the relationship between the cross and the sword was intimate and frequently brutal. The Spanish conquest of the Americas (1492–c. 1600) — conducted under papal authorization (*Inter caetera*, 1493) — destroyed the Aztec Empire, the Inca Empire, and dozens of smaller civilizations. The indigenous population of the Americas fell from an estimated 50–60 million at contact to approximately 5–6 million by 1650 — a demographic catastrophe driven primarily by epidemic disease (for which the colonizers bear no moral responsibility) but significantly augmented by deliberate violence, forced labor, and the destruction of food systems (for which they do). Bartolomé de las Casas, a Spanish Dominican friar and himself an eyewitness, documented Spanish atrocities in *A Short Account of the Destruction of the Indies* (1542) in terms that remain harrowing.

The Belgian Congo under King Leopold II (1885–1908) — conducted under the banner of Christian civilization and the abolition of the Arab slave trade — killed an estimated 5 to 10 million Congolese through forced labor, mutilation, and starvation. The Scramble for Africa (1881–1914) more broadly imposed European rule on the African continent through systematic violence that killed an estimated 1 to 2 million people in military conquest alone, with many more dying from the long-term effects of colonial destruction of traditional economies.

D. Does the Greek New Testament Sanction These Wars?

The question of whether the Greek New Testament authorizes Christian warfare — the Crusades, the Wars of Religion, or colonial violence conducted under Christian banners — admits of a cleaner textual answer than the parallel Quranic question.

The Greek New Testament contains no authorization for offensive warfare. This is not a close call. The ethical teaching of the Gospels is among the most consistently pacifist bodies of religious literature in the ancient world. Jesus's Sermon on the Mount (Matthew 5–7) includes: "Blessed are the peacemakers (*hoi eirēnopoioi*, οἱ εἰρηνοποιοί), for they shall be called sons

of God" (5:9); "But I say to you, love your enemies (*agapate tous echthrous humōn*, ἀγαπᾶτε τοὺς ἐχθροὺς ὑμῶν) and pray for those who persecute you" (5:44); "Do not resist (*mē antistēnai*) the one who is evil. But if anyone slaps you on the right cheek, turn to him the other also" (5:39).

Jesus explicitly rebukes Peter for violent self-defense at his arrest: "Put your sword back into its place (*aposires tēn machairan sou eis ton topon autēs*). For all who take the sword will perish by the sword" (Matthew 26:52). In John 18:36, Jesus tells Pilate: "My kingdom is not of this world (*hē basileia hē emē ouk estin ek tou kosmou toutou*). If my kingdom were of this world, my servants would have been fighting, that I might not be delivered over to the Jews." This is an explicit renunciation of political violence in defense of his own cause.

Paul's letter to the Romans (12:17–21) continues this trajectory: "Repay no one evil for evil… If possible, so far as it depends on you, live peaceably with all. Beloved, never avenge yourselves, but leave it to the wrath of God… Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good." The letter to the Hebrews (12:14) commands: "Pursue peace (*diōkete tēn eirēnēn*) with everyone."

The one New Testament passage most frequently invoked in support of Christian acceptance of state violence is Romans 13:1–7, in which Paul instructs believers to submit to governing authorities as "servants of God" who bear the sword in judgment against evil. This passage established the Christian theology of legitimate state authority — what Augustine later elaborated as the just war tradition — but it is a theology of *state* authority, not of the church bearing arms. And it says nothing about crusade, conquest, or the conversion of pagans by force.

The historically honest conclusion is stark: The Greek New Testament provides no textual basis whatsoever for offensive warfare, crusade, forced conversion, or colonial conquest conducted in the name of Christ. The Crusades, the Wars of Religion, and colonial violence under the cross were not sanctioned by the texts of the religion in whose name they were conducted. They represent, in each case, the use of Christian identity as a tribal and political marker — and in some cases the deliberate ideological corruption of Christian teaching — in service of conquest, political power, and economic interest. Augustine's just war theory, Aquinas's elaboration of it, and the papal doctrine of holy war were theological developments constructed to justify violence that the New Testament itself had not authorized. This is one of the most significant divergences between a religion's founding texts and its subsequent institutional history in the human record.

IX. Colonial Wars and the Body Count of Empire

Western colonialism — primarily but not exclusively European — was the dominant geopolitical fact of the period from approximately 1492 to 1960 C.E. Its human costs, when totaled across the full scope of the imperial enterprise, rival or exceed those of any other category of organized violence in human history.

The demographic catastrophe of the Americas has been noted above. In Asia, the British colonial enterprise killed millions through deliberate famine policy. Mike Davis's *Late Victorian*

Holocausts: El Niño Famines and the Making of the Third World (2001) documents how British colonial agricultural and trade policies in India during drought years (1876–1879 and 1896–1902) prevented famine relief and contributed to the deaths of an estimated 12 to 29 million Indians. The British-imposed opium trade in China — enforced by two Opium Wars (1839–1842 and 1856–1860) — destroyed the social fabric of coastal Chinese society and contributed to the instability that produced the Taiping Rebellion (1850–1864), the deadliest civil war in human history at an estimated 20 to 30 million deaths. The Dutch colonial system in Indonesia (*Cultuurstelsel*) extracted agricultural surplus at rates that caused periodic famines. The German colonial campaigns against the Herero and Nama people in South-West Africa (1904–1908) killed approximately 75,000–100,000 — the first genocide of the twentieth century.

The total human cost of Western colonialism, across five centuries, is impossible to calculate with precision but has been estimated by scholars including Adam Hochschild, Mike Davis, and David Stannard at somewhere between 50 and 100 million deaths from direct violence, deliberately induced famine, and the destruction of indigenous social structures and economies. This figure does not include the approximately 12 to 15 million Africans transported across the Atlantic in the slave trade (with an estimated 1.5 to 2 million dying during the Middle Passage alone), or the many millions more who died in the African interior during slave raids.

Colonialism was conducted under various ideological banners: Christian civilization, racial hierarchy (Social Darwinism), the "civilizing mission" (*mission civilisatrice*), and free trade. It was rarely conducted primarily for religious reasons, though religious institutions — Catholic missions in the Americas and Africa, Protestant missions in Asia and the Pacific — provided ideological cover and sometimes direct logistical support for colonial enterprises.

X. Comparative Death Tolls: A Statistical Reckoning

The following estimates synthesize the scholarly literature on major causes of mass death through organized violence and deliberate policy. All figures are approximate and contested; ranges reflect scholarly disagreement.

Communist Regimes (20th century): 65–100 million deaths. Soviet Union: 15–20 million. China: 40–70 million. Cambodia: 1.5–2 million. North Korea, Vietnam, Cuba, Ethiopia combined: 3–6 million. Source: *The Black Book of Communism* (Courtois et al., 1999); R.J. Rummel's *Death by Government* (1994); Frank Dikötter's *Mao's Great Famine* (2010).

Western Colonialism (1492–1960): 50–100 million deaths including direct violence, famine-as-policy, and slave trade mortality. Sources: Mike Davis (2001); Adam Hochschild's *King Leopold's Ghost* (1998); David Stannard's *American Holocaust* (1992).

Islamic Conquests and Wars (historical cumulative): Total deaths attributable to warfare conducted under Islamic banners across fourteen centuries are estimated in the range of 60–80 million by the political scientist R.J. Rummel and historian Bill Warner, though these figures are contested and may include non-combatants killed under Muslim rule rather than in warfare per se. The Indian subcontinent suffered particularly: historian K.S. Lal's controversial

but widely cited estimate suggests 60–80 million deaths during the Muslim conquest and rule of India (8th–18th centuries), though this includes famine and plague as well as direct violence.

The Crusades: 1–3 million deaths, 1095–1291 C.E.

Wars of Religion (European, 1524–1648): 8–12 million deaths.

World War I: 17–20 million deaths (primarily secular-nationalist).

World War II: 70–85 million deaths (secular-ideological: fascism, nationalism, communism).

The Holocaust: 6 million Jews; 5–6 million others (Roma, disabled, political prisoners, Soviet POWs). A product of racial-ideological, not religious, motivation.

The comparison reveals something important: the three largest single concentrations of deliberate mass death in the human record are all secular or ideological rather than religious in their primary motivation — communist regimes, Nazi Germany, and Western colonialism. This does not exonerate religious warfare, which has its own horrific body count. But it decisively refutes the Enlightenment narrative that religion is the primary cause of human violence and that secular governance is inherently more peaceful. The twentieth century — the most secular century in European history — was also the bloodiest century in human history.

XI. Synthesis: What Causes War Among Human Beings?

A. Pride and the Genesis Diagnosis

The Book of Genesis offers the oldest psychological diagnosis of the cause of human violence in the Western textual tradition — and it is not primarily a military or political analysis. It is a portrait of the human interior.

The narrative begins not with war but with the desire to transgress the boundary between what is and what is claimed: "You will be like God, knowing good and evil" (Genesis 3:5). The Serpent's temptation does not promise comfort, safety, or survival. It promises *elevation* — the aspiration to be something other than what one is, to possess what is not given, to occupy a position not one's own. The Hebrew term *ga'on* (גָּאוֹן), usually translated as "pride" or "arrogance," and its close relative *gĕ'eh* (גֵּאֶה), appear throughout the wisdom literature as the primary diagnosis of human disorder. Proverbs 16:18 states the principle with compact severity: "Pride (*gaon*) goes before destruction, and a haughty spirit before a fall."

The Genesis narrative's next act of violence follows immediately from the first act of pride. Cain kills Abel — not for survival (both have food), not for territory (there is no shortage of land), not for political power (there is no state) — but for *honor*. God has regarded Abel's offering with favor and Cain's without, and Cain cannot bear the diminishment of his status relative to his brother. The first murder in the human story is a status crime. It is the violence of wounded pride.

This diagnosis has been taken seriously by serious thinkers across very different traditions. The philosopher René Girard's *Violence and the Sacred* (1972) proposes a "mimetic theory" of desire and violence: human beings desire what they see others desiring (mimetic desire), and this convergence of desire on the same objects produces rivalry, which produces violence. Girard's theory is secular in its methodology but converges with the Genesis diagnosis: violence originates in the desire to be what another is, to have what another has.

Thomas Hobbes, writing without reference to Genesis, arrives at the same structural analysis in *Leviathan* (1651): the causes of war in the state of nature are competition (for gain), diffidence (for safety), and glory (for reputation). Hobbes's third cause — glory — is the desire for status recognition, the refusal to be regarded as less than one believes oneself to be. It is, translated into secular-political language, pride.

The testimony of former combatants, the historiography of military decision-making, and the psychology of conflict all converge on the same finding: wars between human groups are rarely about survival alone. They are almost always, at least in part, about honor, dignity, status, and the refusal to be seen as subordinate, weak, or contemptible. The Great War began with an assassination; it was sustained for four years by the mutual refusal of the great powers to accept a settlement that would have been read as national humiliation. Hitler's war began with a genuine grievance (the Versailles settlement was punitive and unjust) but was sustained by a monstrous pride — the racial pride of Aryan supremacy, the personal pride of a man who could not accept the limitations of the world as he found it. Every colonial enterprise was accompanied by a rhetoric of civilizational superiority — the pride of the "civilized" in their alleged superiority over the "primitive" — that served to justify what was recognizably predation.

The Genesis diagnosis is not naive or sectarian. It is, in fact, among the most empirically well-supported psychological analyses of human violence in the literature.

B. Tribalism and In-Group/Out-Group Psychology

David Frye's *Walls* points to a structural cause that is, in chronological terms, even more fundamental than pride: the wall. The wall is the physical inscription of the distinction between *in-group* and *out-group*, and this distinction — which evolutionary psychologists trace to the adaptive pressures of the Pleistocene, when human survival depended on cooperation within the small group and competition with other groups — is the substrate on which all other causes of war operate.

Jonathan Haidt's *The Righteous Mind* (2012) synthesizes the moral psychology literature and proposes that the human moral matrix includes a fundamental "loyalty/betrayal" axis — the valorization of in-group solidarity and the stigmatization of out-group members — that is not merely learned but is deeply embedded in human moral psychology. Henri Tajfel's "social identity theory" (1979) demonstrated experimentally that human beings form in-group/out-group distinctions based on the most arbitrary criteria (he divided subjects into groups by which painter they preferred) and immediately display favoritism toward the in-group and discrimination against the out-group.

Tribalism is the universally available raw material for war. Any distinction — religious, ethnic, linguistic, territorial, ideological — can be weaponized to produce the in-group/out-group

dynamics that make organized killing possible and, under the right conditions, feel morally obligatory. The wall that Frye describes is not only the mudbrick fortification of an ancient city. It is the interior psychological wall that every human group erects around its sense of self and belonging. Religious wars, nationalist wars, ideological wars, and colonial wars all exploit this same psychological substrate. They differ in the vocabulary they use to draw the line between *us* and *them*; they share the identical cognitive and emotional mechanism.

C. Material Need, Resource Competition, and Malthusian Pressure

Thomas Malthus's *Essay on the Principle of Population* (1798) proposed that human population tends to grow faster than food supply, and that the resulting pressure — what he called "positive checks" including war, famine, and disease — periodically reduced population to sustainable levels. Modern archaeology has broadly confirmed that resource stress is a major driver of intergroup violence: rates of skeletal trauma rise during drought periods, population-dense periods, and periods of climatic instability.

Peter Turchin's "cliodynamics" — the application of mathematical modeling to historical dynamics — traces cycles of political instability and mass violence to underlying structural factors including elite overproduction (too many people competing for too few elite positions), popular immiseration (declining living standards for the majority), and fiscal stress on the state. These cycles have operated across very different historical periods and cultural contexts, suggesting that material structural factors — independent of ideology, religion, or pride — generate predictable patterns of social violence.

Jared Diamond's *Guns, Germs, and Steel* (1997) provides the broadest environmental-materialist account of why some civilizations conquered others: geographic and ecological advantages determined which populations developed the technologies, epidemic immunities, and organizational structures that allowed them to overwhelm their neighbors. Colonial conquest, on this analysis, was not primarily about pride or ideology — it was about the exploitation of structural advantages that were themselves the product of geography.

D. The Interplay of All Three

The honest answer to the question of what causes war is that pride, tribalism, and material interest are not competing explanations but layered ones, and that no major war in human history is adequately explained by any single cause.

Material need provides the conditions of stress and competition that make conflict possible. Tribalism provides the psychological and social mechanisms that organize individual aggression into collective violence — that transform a group of individuals who might each, personally, prefer peace into a fighting force capable of sustained organized killing. Pride — the desire for status, honor, recognition, and the refusal to accept subordination — provides the motivational fuel that drives conflict beyond what material interest alone would justify, that causes wars to continue long after the rational calculation of interest would counsel peace, and that shapes the atrocities committed in war's conduct.

The Book of Genesis identifies pride as primary because the narrative is diagnostic of the human *interior*, not merely of human social structures. The Genesis account is not wrong about material need and tribalism — the story of Babel (Genesis 11) addresses the violence of

collective identity; the story of Jacob and Esau addresses the violence of resource competition and birthright. But the primordial diagnosis — that the first rupture in the human story was the desire to be other than what one is, to take what is not given, to exalt the self — has proven to be a remarkably durable and empirically defensible account of what drives human beings across all the subsequent variations of their organized violence.

XII. Conclusion: The Outcome of Humanity and the Question of Hope

What is the verdict of this long, blood-soaked account on the prospects of the human species?

The raw numbers are sobering. Across recorded history, the total number of human deaths from warfare has been estimated by various historians and demographers at between 150 and 1 billion, depending on what is included and how far back the estimate extends. The twentieth century alone produced approximately 200 million deaths from war, genocide, and politically induced famine — more than any previous century by a factor of many multiples. The development of nuclear weapons — which first demonstrated their destructive capacity at Hiroshima and Nagasaki in August 1945, killing approximately 129,000–226,000 people in two explosions — means that the species now possesses the technical capability to end itself.

And yet David Frye's insight about walls points toward something that neither pure pessimism nor facile optimism can capture. The wall was built because something worth preserving existed inside it. The farmer behind the wall was protecting not merely grain but family, community, the accumulated labor of generations, the possibility of a life that was more than mere survival. The wall was an act of fear — but it was also an act of love, in the most austere sense. It said: *This matters. These people matter. This is worth defending.*

Steven Pinker's data — contested but not refuted — shows that the rate of violent death has declined over the very long run. The abolition of chattel slavery, the Geneva Conventions, the post-1945 international legal framework against aggressive war, the decline of great-power warfare since 1945, the spread of democratic governance — these are genuine achievements. They are fragile, contested, and reversible. But they exist, which means that human beings are not simply slaves to the mechanisms of pride, tribalism, and material competition that have driven their violence. They can, under some conditions, organize themselves to restrain these mechanisms.

The deepest question is whether those restraining conditions are self-sustaining. The evidence of history suggests they are not. Civilizations that achieved relative peace have, without exception, eventually been undone by the pressures — internal or external — that the Genesis narrative describes: pride asserting itself, the wall between *us* and *them* being redrawn, material stress disrupting the arrangements of cooperation. The Roman peace (*Pax Romana*) lasted approximately 200 years. The European peace after 1815 lasted less than a century. The post-1945 peace among great powers has now lasted approximately 80 years — longer than most such arrangements in history.

The answer to the question of pride versus tribalism versus need as the primary cause of war is, ultimately, that they cannot be separated because they are facets of the same underlying

reality: the human capacity for self-deception. Nations go to war because they can tell themselves — and often believe — that they are fighting for God, or for justice, or for survival, when they are also and often primarily fighting for honor, for dominance, and for the unwillingness to accept the world as it is. The Genesis account names this incapacity as the primordial wound: the refusal of the creature to accept the condition of being a creature.

Whether that wound can be healed — and whether the answer is political, technological, spiritual, or some combination — is the question that every generation since the first walled city has had to answer for itself. The walls are still going up. The question is what is being built inside them.

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