

World War 1: Trauma and Memory

Finding and interrogating historical data

ANNIKA:

So Vince, our task today is to try and find out just how many people died in the First World War. That's not an easy task, is it?

VINCENT:

It's not an easy task because first of all, we have to be careful how we define our terms. We're talking about casualty statistics here today, but "casualties" doesn't just mean those who died in the war. It means all men who weren't fit to fight, so we need to take into account injuries, men who were maybe taken prisoner, and those who went missing. So we need to be careful not to confuse casualties with simply deaths.

ANNIKA:

So here you're talking about military casualties, then, but what about civilian casualties? Are they included in the statistics that we have?

VINCENT:

Well, often they're not. That's the problem. Of course, civilians were affected by the war as well, but it's quite difficult to get accurate figures for civilian casualties because we need to think about whether these civilians were directly affected by the war, perhaps by bombing or so on, or whether they were maybe indirectly affected by starvation because of lack of food as a result of the war, for example.

ANNIKA:

And I guess also giving statistics for different countries must be difficult for all sorts of reasons. For example, borders changed between the beginning of the war and after the end of the war, so a country with its borders of 1914 might have different borders in 1918. For example, Austria Hungary, which has a unified army consisting of several different nationalities, but in order to understand how many Czech soldiers, say, died, or how many Hungarian soldiers died, it's very difficult. So best to look at armies rather than nations, and then the records that armies keep, how reliable are they?

VINCENT:

Well, this is the other problem. Obviously, armies did keep records, and these are very useful to historians, but the main problem that we have is, of course, armies weren't so concerned with exactly how many men had died. Obviously, armies were mainly concerned with how many men would be available to fight the next battle. Some soldiers might have died of illness or disease and so on, which again, might not be counted by the army as a death in battle, for example.

Another thing to bear in mind is that if soldiers were severely injured, they might be discharged from the army. Of course, they may have died of very severe wounds a year or two afterwards when they were no longer in the army, and these men would not be included in the death statistics.

ANNIKA:

Historians over the years have really come to revise the figures that we've all taken for granted, and it seems that there really was serious underestimates, and that the casualty rates were even higher than previously suspected.

VINCENT:

Absolutely, yeah.

ANNIKA:

So if we wanted to find out, for example, about British casualties, how would we go about finding out how many British soldiers died?

VINCENT:

Well, a natural starting point, of course, is to go on the internet, and if we type in to a search engine, "First World War casualties," we can see what the first few matches are. Of course, one of the many sites that we can look at is Wikipedia, for example.

ANNIKA:

And so what does it say, then, for the United Kingdom?

VINCENT:

The first major statistic that we see is that of military deaths. We can see that those was a range between nearly 703,000 through to about 888,000.

ANNIKA:

That's a very large discrepancy there, isn't it? Does not refer to what we just talked about, that the estimates used to be lower and now they are higher?

VINCENT:

It does, yeah. The fact that there's clearly a range here alerts us to the fact that we can't get an accurate figure. If we take into account the entire British Empire, we've got figures for Australia, Canada, India, New Zealand, Newfoundland, and South Africa as well, and if they're added to the United Kingdom, we get a subtotal, which is between around 908,000 and 1.1 million.

ANNIKA:

These are the military deaths as opposed to overall casualties.

VINCENT:

These are just the military deaths listed here, yeah. Every statistic here has a footnote, and if we click down, we see that it usually references a book. So we know that these things haven't just been plucked out of thin air. Ideally, they do relate to some academic work somewhere. So this looks like a fairly good starting point.

ANNIKA:

And actually looking at those footnotes, I recognise the lot of names from very reputable First World War experts, so that would be another clue that this is a reliable source.

VINCENT:

Exactly. If we go to another one of our hits from the search engine, and we look at this website here, which is PBS.org.

ANNIKA:

Is that the American public broadcaster?

VINCENT:

It is, yes. This is a table, obviously, that originates from America. If we try and look up British deaths during the war, that figure isn't listed. What we have here is the figure for the British Empire.

ANNIKA:

So where does the information on PBS come from? Do we know?

VINCENT:

Well, there isn't actually any reference listed here. There's no footnotes. There's no reference to any actual other sources, any history books or anything. We do need to be careful when using a site like this to make sure that we know where these figures are coming from.

ANNIKA:

So this would be useful for cross referencing, but you wouldn't necessarily use it as your only source of information.

VINCENT:

Exactly. I'd be wary of just looking at one table like this without any references and then going away and not looking at other sites.

ANNIKA:

Is there another website we can look at?

VINCENT:

Sure. One other website I looked up was the Western Front Association website. As the name suggests, the focus here is only on British soldiers who died on the Western Front. Of course, the vast majority of soldiers who served in the First World War for Britain did fight on the Western Front. Of course, not all of them did. Some of them fought in the Middle East and some of them fought in Africa, for example. So figures we get here are slightly different to those that we've been looking at on other sites like Wikipedia, for example.

ANNIKA:

Yeah. These figures are right, but they're only giving you a little snapshot.

VINCENT:

Exactly. We can't always compare like for like. These are some useful statistics, but we can't compare this table and the table we've just been looking at because we're comparing two different things here.

ANNIKA:

What about other sources? Historians like printed sources. We like books.

VINCENT:

Books would certainly be useful, and I think that's the perfect next step after looking at the internet, yes.

ANNIKA:

Right. Should we go and find some?

VINCENT:

Let's go and have a look.

ANNIKA:

Well, there's no shortage of books on the First World War, is there? I picked up this one, which is an encyclopaedia of the First World War, and it's a relatively recent one, so let's have a look.

VINCENT:

Great Britain and Ireland.

ANNIKA:

Military deaths, 750,000, so a little bit higher than what we found earlier, I think. And British colonies are listed separately, 180,000, so the total is 930,000, which is, again, slightly higher than what we found before.

VINCENT:

Slightly higher than the lower range given, but within the range that we saw on Wikipedia, for example.

ANNIKA:

We also have figures here for civilian deaths. It's quite difficult to get at those, and I think you can see that from these figures because they're so rounded-- 300,000, 700,000. Lots of question marks as well, which show you that we just simply do not have the information.

If I were to direct somebody to a very recent publication on the First World War that might include some of this information, I'd probably send them to Jay Winter's *Cambridge History of the First World War*, and I've got here the table that's included in that book. What's useful about this one is that it compares what different authors have given as casualty figures over the years, starting in 1972 and ending with an up to date estimate.

VINCENT:

This is really interesting because we gain a sense of just how difficult it is to give accurate figures, and just how estimates can vary.

ANNIKA:

It lists 761,000 for the losses for Great Britain, which is higher than what we've encountered. And what about the empire?

VINCENT:

And again, we see we've got a breakdown of the empire here, and it gives us a total figure, which is 959,000 listed there. So again, slightly higher than some of the figures we've seen on the internet.

ANNIKA:

Yes, absolutely. So would you say, then, in conclusion that it's better to use books, it's better to use the internet? What is the best way to try and do this sort of research?

VINCENT:

Well, that's a tricky question. I mean, I think it's good to use a variety of sources. Of course, with a book, it's had to go through the publishing process, so that means it's usually been peer reviewed, which means other historians have checked the facts and figures and so on. So generally, books are likely to be more reliable than a site plucked off the internet, but that doesn't mean to say that the internet can't be useful for doing this research. I think the key thing is to use a variety of sources, look at a variety of websites, and preferably look at some printed books as well.

ANNIKA:

It's just overwhelming how vast these figures are. I mean, we looked today mainly at British casualties, but some 10 million soldiers, it is estimated, died, and some six million civilians were victims of this war. I think these numbers are so vast, it's almost impossible to comprehend.

VINCENT:

Exactly. I think sometimes looking at all these figures and statistics, we can become a little bit numb to the actual real pain and suffering that just one of these deaths might have caused.

ANNIKA:

Absolutely. And I also think it's pretty much incomprehensible that we simply do not know just how many people died.

VINCENT:

Absolutely, yeah. But I think hopefully today, we've proven that we can get a little bit closer to getting some idea of maybe just how many people were affected by the First World War.

ANNIKA:

Well, thanks for doing this research with me.

VINCENT:

Thank you very much.