

The Fatal Accounting of War

When Land Is Priced Above Lives

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Uncompressed Thinking

Preamble

In risk assessment, assigning a monetary value to human life is always uncomfortable, but it is also unavoidable. The purpose is not to declare what a person is “worth” in any moral, spiritual, or human sense. The purpose is to prevent decision-makers from treating death as an unpriced externality. When a bridge is designed, a drug is approved, a factory is regulated, a road is redesigned, or a public-safety measure is evaluated, human mortality risk must be translated into a form that can be compared against costs, benefits, and alternatives. Without such a valuation, human life is not protected more respectfully. It is often protected less, because the loss remains invisible in the calculation.

The accepted concept is the Value of a Statistical Life, or VSL. It reflects the aggregate value society places on small reductions in mortality risk. In practical terms, it asks: if many people each face a small risk of death, how much should society rationally spend to reduce that risk enough to statistically prevent one death? This is not a price tag placed on an identified individual. It is a discipline imposed on public decision-making so that preventable death is not dismissed as “just part of the cost.”

That logic becomes especially important when applied to war. In ordinary risk assessment, we force ourselves to count lives because otherwise infrastructure, industry, and government would routinely underprice safety. In war, the opposite failure becomes catastrophic: land, prestige, historical grievance, political ambition, and territorial symbolism are often priced higher than the people who are sacrificed for them. A risk-assessment view exposes this inversion. It asks a brutal but necessary question: what is the claimed value of the objective, and how many human lives is that objective consuming?

The Russia-Ukraine war now gives this question a terrifying real-world ledger. The numbers are uncertain, politically contested, and incomplete, but uncertainty does not soften the conclusion. By mid-June 2026, reported and estimated military losses on the Russian side alone approach a scale normally associated with world wars. Ukrainian losses are also devastating, even under conservative estimates. Civilians continue to be killed and wounded month after month. These are not abstractions. They are not “inputs.” They are the main asset of both countries being consumed in real time.

Position Statement

For international war-risk analysis, the ethically defensible baseline should be a universal humanitarian VSL. In this framework, the value of a statistical life should not be reduced because the person was born in a poorer country, lives under a weaker economy, or has a lower measured national income. A Ukrainian life, a Russian life, and an American life should carry the same humanitarian value in the analysis.

For that reason, I propose using **\$14 million per statistical life** as the universal humanitarian VSL for comparative war-risk assessment involving the United States, Russia, and Ukraine. This value is approximately aligned with current U.S. federal regulatory practice and gives the analysis a clear, transparent anchor.

When applied to the Russia-Ukraine war, this universal humanitarian VSL turns the battlefield from a map into an accounting sheet of human destruction. Even if one avoids all contested political claims and uses only broad casualty ranges, the mortality cost reaches into the trillions of dollars. The larger casualty burden — including wounded, disabled, missing, displaced, traumatized, and economically destroyed lives — is far beyond any clean numerical expression. The purpose of the number is not to reduce human beings to dollars. It is to prevent leaders, analysts, and the public from reducing them to zero.

Country-adjusted VSL values may still be shown, but only as domestic economic willingness-to-pay estimates. They are useful for conventional benefit-cost analysis inside a country, where income levels affect observed ability to pay for risk reduction. They should not be mistaken for moral value. They should not be used to imply that Russian or Ukrainian lives are worth less. They show the limitation of domestic economic metrics, not the true worth of people.

Human Loss Ledger: Russia-Ukraine War

Human Loss Category	Current Working Estimate	How It Should Be Used
Russian military personnel losses	~1.38 million	Use as a broad personnel-loss figure, including killed, wounded, missing, or otherwise removed from combat. Do not treat as deaths only.
Russian military deaths	Nearly 500,000	Use as a mortality estimate with caution; the true number remains contested.
Ukrainian military casualties	~500,000–600,000	Use as a broad killed/wounded/missing estimate.
Ukrainian military deaths	~100,000–140,000 by Western estimates; 55,000 officially acknowledged by Ukraine	Show both the external estimate and the lower official figure to preserve transparency.

Verified civilian deaths in Ukraine	More than 15,000, with actual toll likely higher	Use as a confirmed minimum, not a full count.
Combined military casualties	Roughly 1.9–2.0 million	Use as the human-loss scale of the war, not as a VSL mortality calculation.
Direct deaths for VSL illustration	Roughly 600,000+ using current Western estimates	At \$14 million per life, the mortality ledger alone exceeds \$8 trillion.

These numbers are not precise in the way an engineering measurement is precise. They are wartime estimates, assembled under conditions of secrecy, propaganda, incomplete access, and political pressure. But for risk assessment, the conclusion does not depend on exact precision. Whether the true number is lower or higher within the credible range, the result is the same: the human cost has already overwhelmed any rational valuation of land as land.

Analysis

Risk assessment begins with a simple discipline: consequences must be counted before decisions are justified. If a decision creates a probability of death, the expected loss is not zero simply because the victims are unnamed. In regulatory safety work, this principle protects the public from hidden mortality risk. It forces decision-makers to ask whether the benefit of an action is large enough to justify the expected human cost.

War should be subjected to at least the same discipline. In the abstract, if a policy sacrifices 10,000 people, then under a universal humanitarian VSL of \$14 million per life, the mortality loss alone is approximately \$140 billion. If it sacrifices 100,000 people, the mortality loss alone is approximately \$1.4 trillion. The Russia-Ukraine war has moved far beyond that abstract scale. Current estimates place combined military casualties near two million, with direct deaths plausibly exceeding 600,000 when Russian, Ukrainian, and verified civilian deaths are considered together. At \$14 million per statistical life, the mortality ledger alone exceeds \$8 trillion. This excludes injuries, disability, trauma, family destruction, refugee displacement, lost children, lost education, ruined cities, economic collapse, environmental damage, and generational hatred. The true cost is therefore not larger by a little. It is larger by orders of magnitude.

This framing does not answer every question about war. There may be cases where a society fights because its survival is directly at stake, because surrender would lead to extermination, enslavement, or permanent destruction of its people. Risk assessment does not require pacifism. It requires clarity. It requires leaders to identify the real objective, estimate the human cost, compare alternatives, and stop hiding behind vague words like territory, honor, destiny, historical right, or strategic depth.

The core absurdity becomes visible when wars are fought for ownership of land while consuming the very people who make land valuable. Land has value because human beings can live on it, build on it, cultivate it, defend it, imagine on it, and develop it. Without people, land is geography. With people, it becomes economy, culture, memory, technology, and future.

This is even more true in the modern technological age. The productive frontier is moving upward: science, software, automation, biotechnology, artificial intelligence, advanced manufacturing, energy systems, education, and human creativity increasingly determine national strength. A square mile of land may matter, but the trained, healthy, inventive human beings who can build the next economy matter far more. A country that trades its young people for ruins is not gaining land. It is liquidating its future.

This is the deepest risk-assessment failure of war. A country does not merely lose soldiers. It loses engineers, builders, doctors, fathers, sons, teachers, mechanics, farmers, programmers, musicians, scientists, and unborn generations. It loses the people who would have turned land into wealth. It loses the very human capital that makes sovereignty meaningful. In that sense, war over territory often destroys the asset that territory was supposed to serve.

From a risk-assessment perspective, war often represents a grotesque misallocation of value. The accounting is backward. Territory is treated as priceless; people are treated as expendable. But if human life is counted honestly, the equation changes. A destroyed village, a captured field, or a symbolic line on a map must be compared against the statistical value of every soldier and civilian lost to obtain it. Very quickly, the supposed gain collapses under the weight of the human cost.

Conclusion

The universal humanitarian VSL does not pretend to measure the full value of a human being. No number can do that. Its purpose is more limited and more practical: to prevent human death from being assigned an implicit value of zero.

For ordinary domestic regulation, country-adjusted VSL estimates may be useful economic tools. For war assessment, they are morally insufficient. The defensible position is to use a common humanitarian value — approximately \$14 million per statistical life — for every person, regardless of nationality.

When this discipline is applied to the Russia-Ukraine war, the conclusion is no longer abstract. Reported Russian military personnel losses are now above 1.3 million. Ukrainian military casualties are estimated in the hundreds of thousands. Direct military deaths on both sides, together with verified civilian deaths, plausibly exceed 600,000 under current Western estimates, while the combined killed, wounded, and missing approach two million. At a universal humanitarian VSL of \$14 million, the mortality ledger alone exceeds \$8 trillion — before counting the wounded, the amputated, the widowed, the orphaned, the displaced, the frozen, the traumatized, the unborn, and the cities turned into rubble.

That is the fatal accounting of war. Territory is treated as priceless; people are treated as spendable. But land without people is not a nation. It is soil. It is stone. It is a line on a map. The people are the nation. The people are the economy. The people are the culture. The people are the future.

Most wars over territorial ownership are therefore not only moral failures; they are analytical failures. They destroy the main asset of every country — its people — in exchange for land whose relative value declines as technology, productivity, and human capital become the true engines of national power.

A serious risk assessment does not romanticize land soaked with blood. It counts the blood first.

And after the counting is done, there is only one honest sentence left:

STOP CALLING THIS STRATEGY. THIS IS A COUNTRY BURNING ITS PEOPLE FOR A MAP.