War and Peace Data Introduction

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The past was not peaceful. Is there more violent conflict today than in the past? Is war becoming deadlier? The data is more complicated than you might think.

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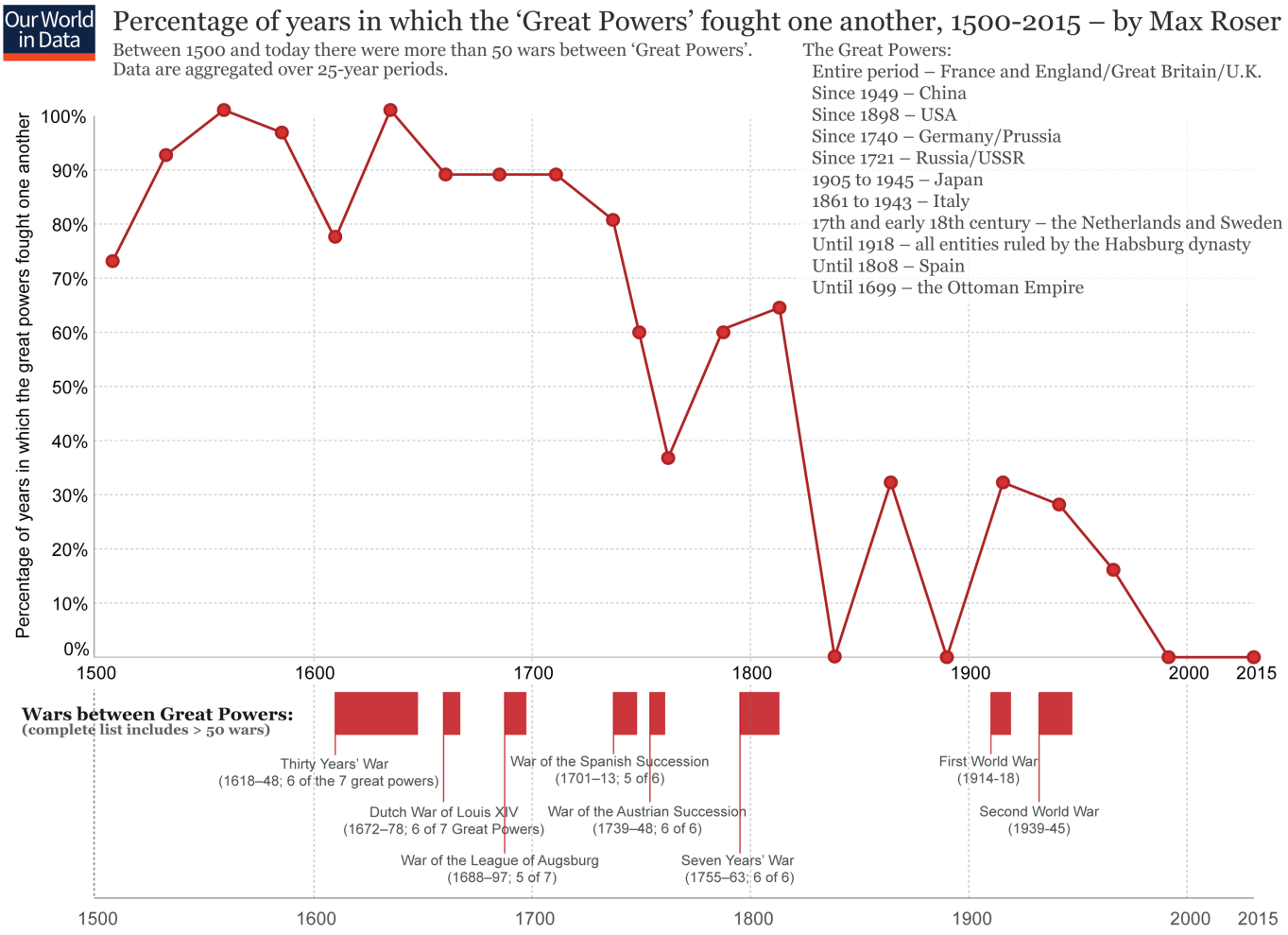
Introduction

The past was not peaceful. History is full of bloody wars. Yet many people think human history only became very violent recently. One reason for this is that people alive today don't remember past wars. Most wars are simply forgotten. Also, some wars happened so long ago that we know little about them. There is little information about them, but we do have some useful evidence. It can help us estimate the number of deaths in past wars. Below are several charts. They will give you a sense of these estimates.

We think of recent wars as the deadliest in human history. Look at World War II, for example. Many millions died in that war. It may seem as though humans have gotten more warlike. But this may not be true. There were many, many bloody wars in the past. Some people believe war has actually become less common over the last 100 years.

The charts below examine wars over time. Chart 1 shows the percentage of years the "great powers" fought each other. "Great powers" are states that are powerful on a global scale.

Chart 1:



Data source: Steven Pinker (2011) – The Better Angels of Our Nature: Why Violence Has Declined. Based on data from Levy, J. S., & Thompson, W. R. (2011) – The Arc of War
The interactive data visualisation is available at OurWorldinData.org. There you find the raw data and more visualisations on this topic. Licensed under CC-BY-SA by the author Max Roser.

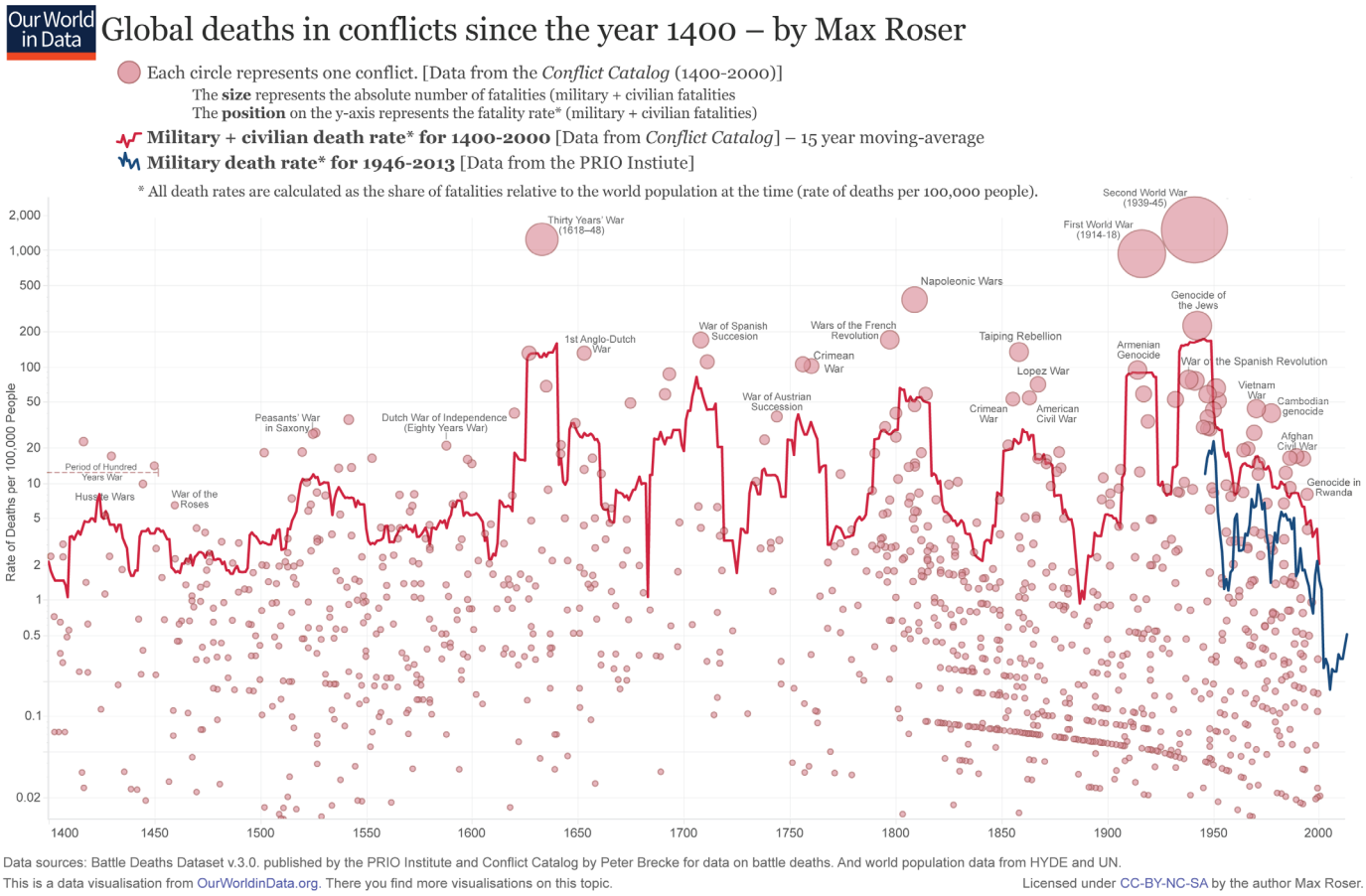
Explore at: https://ourworldindata.org/uploads/2013/08/ourworldindata_percentage-of-years-in-which-the-great-powers-fought-one-another-1500%E2%80%932000.png By Our World in Data, CC BY 4.0.

More wars or more peace?

Chart 1 begins in 1500 CE. It seems to show that wars have become less common over time. But is that the whole story? Things are more complicated than that. Let's look at some long-term data.

Chart 2 shows deaths from wars over the past 600 years or so. It begins around 1400. This chart helps us better understand whether humanity is trending toward more or fewer wars. It also helps show whether wars are becoming more deadly or less deadly. The x-axis of this chart represents time. It runs from about 1400 CE to the present. The y-axis represents the number of people killed in the war, per 100,000 people.

Chart 2:



Explore at: https://slides.ourworldindata.org/war-and-violence/#/6 By Our World in Data, CC BY 4.0.

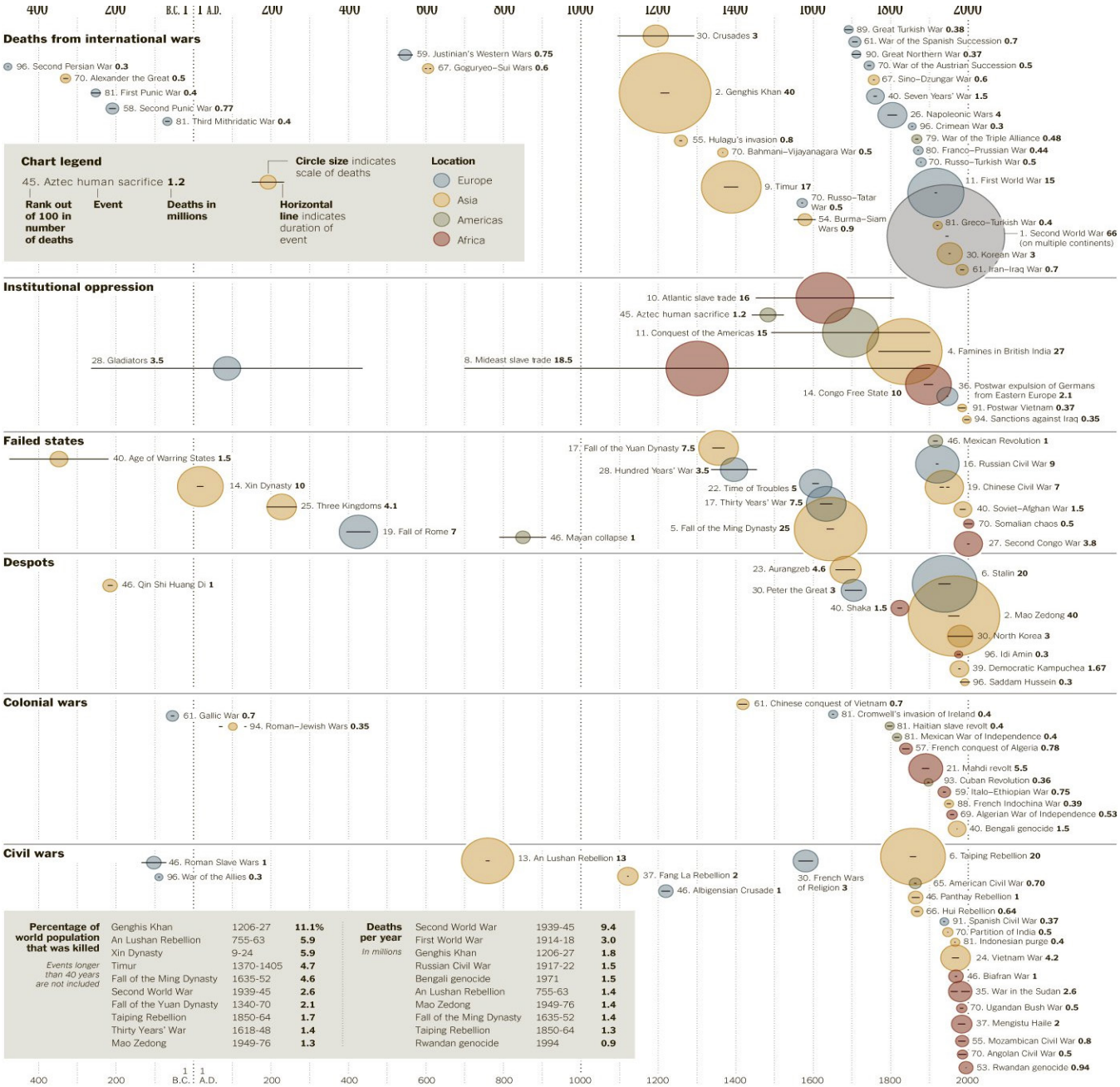
The red circles in Chart 2 represent individual wars. These are the wars listed in the "Conflict Catalog." The "Conflict Catalog" is a collection of information about past wars. It was put together by Dr. Peter Brecke. It looks at 3,708 conflicts.

Chart 2 shows how much the global population decreased as a result of wars. This gives a sense of how much impact these events had. The chart shows how many people died in individual wars. It also provides an estimate of the average death rate from all wars across the globe. That estimate is indicated by the red line. After about 1900, there are two different estimates. One is represented by the red line. The other is represented by the blue line.

Now, let's look at Chart 3. It looks at data from the past 2,500 years. It shows deaths from the 100 deadliest wars and other conflicts in this time. The size of a circle shows how many people died in an event. The line through a circle shows how long the war lasted. The color of a circle shows where the conflict happened.

What do the charts tell us? Where did the deadliest wars occur? When did they occur? Is the world becoming more peaceful? Or is it becoming more warlike? What might cause things to change in the future?

Chart 3:



Explore at: https://ourworldindata.org/uploads/2013/08/The-100-Worst-Atrocities-over-the-last-Millennia-New-York-Times-Data-from-Matthew-White0.png By Our World in Data, CC BY 4.0.

Max Roser

Max is the founder and director of Our World in Data. He began the project in 2011 and for several years was the sole author, until receiving funding for the formation of a team. Max's research focuses on poverty, global health, and the distribution of incomes. He is also Programme Director of the Oxford Martin Programme on Global Development at the University of Oxford, and Co-executive Director of Global Change Data Lab, the non-profit organization that publishes and maintains the website and the data tools that make OWID's work possible.

Image credits

Cover: An SDF fighter walks down a empty street amid destruction on February 16, 2019 in As Susah, Syria. Civilians have begun returning to some small towns close to Bagouz that were recently liberated by the US-led coalition and the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF). Fighting continues in a small section in the west of Bagouz. SDF General Ciya announced today that ISIl fighters were holding just a 700sq meter area. © Chris McGrath/Getty Images