

The Leaderboard Nobody Can Score

Lesson 21 appendix · Subotai vs Stalin vs the USSR vs Putin, scored as K/D · sources: *Subotai the Valiant*, *Gulag: A History*, *The Shortest History of the Soviet Union* · 1,243 passages indexed

The short version

Only one of these four has a scoreable ratio, and it is the thirteenth-century one.

Stalin's number is not a K/D — it is team damage. The Soviet Union's number is terrible and it won anyway. Putin's is not a number at all, for the same reason the Mongol one is good: who was doing the counting, and who they were counting for.

The board

Player	Numerator (kills)	Denominator (own dead)	Scoreable?
Subotai	Counted deliberately, one ear per body	Never recorded	Half — K is solid, D is absent
Stalin	2,749,163 archival, admitted incomplete	<i>Same population as the numerator</i>	No — category error
USSR, 1941–45	Large	Catastrophic	Yes, and it's bad — and it won
Putin	Contested	Contested	No — both figures are produced by belligerents

Stalin · this is not a K/D, it is team damage

The decisive structural fact: Subotai's kills were foreigners and Stalin's were Soviet citizens. In a ratio, that is not a detail. It means every point in Stalin's numerator is simultaneously a point in his own denominator. He is not farming an enemy team. There is only one team.

And the system consumed its own operators. Applebaum, on the moment the Great Terror begins: the NKVD "controlled the fate of more than a million prisoners. But the relative calm was not to last. Abruptly, **the system was about to turn itself inside out, in a revolution that would destroy masters and slaves alike.**"

The purge of the Red Army officer corps is the part that actually matters tactically. Stalin shot his own commanders in 1937–38 and then fought Germany with whoever was left. In the only framing that makes K/D meaningful — am I getting more value out of this engagement than it costs me — **he degraded his own side before the match started.** Subotai spent thirty years building a staff. Stalin deleted his.

The number, and the reason the number is a trap

Applebaum has an appendix titled simply *How Many?* and she opens it by refusing the question as asked:

*"'How many died?' is in fact an imprecise question, in the case of the Soviet Union, and those who ask such a question should first consider **what it is that they really want to know.**"*

Then she gives it anyway, under protest. For deaths in the camps of the Gulag and the exile villages, 1929 to 1953, from archival sources — "even the historian who compiled it points out that it is incomplete, and does not cover all categories of prisoner in every year. Again, **I reluctantly cite it: 2,749,163.**" And immediately: "Even if it were complete, however, this figure still would not reflect all of the victims of the Stalinist judicial system."

For context on the rate: during the war years alone, "well over two million people died in the camps and colonies of the Gulag", of whom "more than 10,000 were shot, for treason or sabotage, on the orders of camp prosecutors."

Note the seven significant figures. 2,749,163 looks like the most precise number on this page and is the least trustworthy, because its precision comes from clerks who were measured on their paperwork. Subotai's 65 battles is a rounder number from a worse archive and is probably closer to true.

The Soviet Union, 1941–45 · a terrible ratio that won

This is the finding that should bother a ratio enthusiast most.

Soviet doctrine in the Second World War did not optimise the exchange rate. It optimised for the win and paid whatever the exchange rate demanded. Subotai's maxim list is the opposite instinct — leave the enemy an exit, because killing a cornered man costs you men you did not have to spend.

Both approaches worked. One conquered thirty-two nations; the other took Berlin.

So the honest conclusion is the unwelcome one: K/D does not predict victory. It measures efficiency per engagement, and wars are not decided per engagement. A commander with a beautiful ratio and no replacements loses to a commander with an ugly ratio and a continent behind him — which is, incidentally, why the Mongols withdrew from Hungary in 1242 and never came back. They lost nothing. They just went home to vote.

Putin · why there is no number

The corpus here ends with Fitzpatrick's 2022 volume and contains no casualty data for the Ukraine war, so nothing in this analysis can supply one. **What can be said is why the gap exists:** every figure in circulation originates with a belligerent or with a party funded by one, and each side's incentive runs in the opposite direction — inflate the enemy's dead, suppress your own.

Fitzpatrick does supply the strategic frame, in Putin's own formulation: "**anyone who feels no regret for the passing of the Soviet Union has no heart, and anyone who hopes to restore it has no brain.**"

Read as a ratio statement, that line is an admission about price. Regret is free. Restoration has a bill, and he is on record as having known that before he was on record as not caring.

The punchline

The Mongols have better casualty accounting than 2026 does, and the reason is that they were not publishing.

The nine sacks of right ears from Liegnitz were carried to a commander, for an after-action report, inside a system that had to allocate soldiers to the next campaign. A wrong number cost the staff a battle. **They were counting for management, not for the press.**

Modern casualty figures are produced in the opposite direction — compiled to be announced, by people whose budget and legitimacy depend on the announcement. That is the same defect Gabriel

identifies in the medieval sources, pointed the other way: enemies inflated Mongol army size "in order to explain their defeats," because being outnumbered is a better excuse than being outgeneralled.

The 13th century counted bodies to decide what to do next. The 21st counts them to decide what to say next. Only one of those produces a usable number.

The honest limits, since this started as a joke

Treating mass death as a scoreboard is a lens, not a judgement, and it breaks in exactly one place: it has no term for whether the fight should have happened. Subotai's 65–0 is an efficiency record attached to the destruction of cities — Riazan fell in five days and a chronicler wrote that "no eyes remained open to weep for the dead." A ratio cannot see that sentence, which is the main thing to know about ratios.

And the four are not comparable units. One is a field commander, two are heads of state, one is a state. Comparing a general's battle record to a regime's internal death toll is a category jump, and the only reason it produces anything is that the jump itself is the finding: **the moment the enemy and the population are the same people, the metric stops working.**

Footnote for the record: the brief was "Putin, Stallon, and Russia". Rambo's claimed ratio in *First Blood Part II* is roughly 70–0, which is Subotai's record with a worse supply chain and no ear-counting squad, and is therefore inadmissible.