Azar Gat is currently tackling a project he calls “War in Human Civilization,” in which he attempts to conduct a multi-disciplinary analysis of human fighting: how long humans have warred, how they fought, and why. Gat anticipated that the book based on his research would be well over a thousand pages.

Gat said that between a million and two million years ago, there was little fighting in hunter-gatherer societies because, with no concept of property, there was nothing to dispute. Simple survival against beast and nature was the primary goal for humans. As evidenced by global violence in the twenty-first century, at some point there was a shift. Could it be attributed to concepts of property? The answer is more complicated than that, but Gat said history has not yet been able to fully explain it.

Gat said that both Rousseau and Hobbes addressed human-on-human violence in a philosophical way: the former argued that structures of human society corrupted natural instincts of species survival; the latter wrote that property structures were the primary motivation for violence.

Archeological findings have been similarly inconclusive, said Gat. Digs have produced ancient artifacts like stone axes, spears and arrows, but he said it is impossible to know if those were for hunting animals or fighting other humans.

Other theories about human violence have suggested that intraspecies violence is largely ritualistic and that killings are asymmetrical, such as when strong members target weak or young prey.

Gat analyzed literature that describes tribal behavior from the perspective of an outsider, and he said the evidence is still inconclusive about the cause of human violence. Further, using these accounts is problematic because the contact paradox acknowledges that an outside perspective usually distorts tribal behavior through the act of interpreting it, so accounts are likely to be biased. Some scholars also argue that the introduction of European society into tribal based cultures may have actually inspired intraspecies killings in isolated tribal communities, so European accounts can be problematic in this regard, as well.

Why do humans kill one another? Gat attempted to answer this complex query by citing research done in the South Pacific. He sees this as the best test case because there are scarce resources, ample competition among tribes, and only relatively recent introduction of foreign cultures. He found that there is evidence of long-time fighting in these cultures, usually over resources like food, although there was also fighting over reproductive capacity. Polygamy, rape, and kidnapping were found to be commonplace. Also, people sometimes battled over prestige objects that enhanced their bodies, presumably to attract attention from the most desirable of the opposite sex.

He also discovered other motivations for human violence, including tribal killings that arose from sorcery or playfulness and pugnacity. Other deaths could be attributed to fighting and hunting, sometimes in relation to preparing for a battle.