

Population Growth and the Clouds of War

By William H. McNeill

[In World Wars I and II] war aims and political ideologies may have misled all concerned; but behind the bitter struggles one can surely discern a demographic factor as ineluctable as the geometry of power rivalries.

This perception offers a second approach to an understanding of the two wars. For if the democratic and industrial revolutions were, among other things, responses to a population squeeze that impinged on western Europe toward the end of the eighteenth century, the military convulsions of the twentieth century can be interpreted in the same way — as responses to collisions between population growth and limits set by traditional modes of rural life in central and eastern Europe in particular, and across wide areas of Asia in rather more diversified and variegated fashion as well. Assuredly, a basic and fundamental disturbance to all existing social relationships set in whenever and wherever broods of peasant children grew to adulthood in villages where, when it came time for them to marry and assume adult roles, they could not get hold of enough land to live as their forefathers had done from time immemorial. In such circumstances, traditional ways of rural life came under unbearable strain. Family duties and the moral imperatives of village customs could not be fulfilled. The only question was what form of revolutionary ideal would attract the frustrated young people.

Ever since the mid-eighteenth century, European and world populations have been out of balance. Lowered death rates allowed more children to grow to adulthood than in earlier centuries; but birthrates did not automatically adjust downward. Quite the contrary, they were likely to rise, since with fewer lethal epidemics, couples more often survived throughout their childbearing years.¹

For a century or more in central and eastern Europe, increasing numbers simply meant increasing

wealth. More labor improved cultivation, broke new land to the plow, and intensified agricultural production in many different ways. Nevertheless, such responses had a limit; and by the 1880s it seems clear that diminishing returns had set in drastically in nearly all European villages situated between the Rhine and the Don. This was signaled by two changes. First, between 1880 and 1914 emigration assumed extraordinary proportions, carrying millions across the seas to America and projecting other millions eastward into Siberia as well. Second, diverse forms of revolutionary discontent began to affect villagers as well as townspeople in central and eastern Europe during these same decades.

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Pressures on village custom and traditional social patterns intensified until 1914, when World War I diverted their expression into new channels and by killing many millions of people in central and eastern Europe, did something to relieve the problem of rural overpopulation. But it was not until World War II brought much greater slaughter as well as massive flights and wholesale ethnic transfers that central and eastern European populations replicated the French response to the revolutionary upheavals at the beginning of the nineteenth century by regulating births to accord with perceived economic circumstances and expectations. As a result, after 1950, population growth ceased putting serious strain on European society.²

Diverse experiences in coping with population growth go far to explain the attitudes and behavior of the European powers on the eve of World War I. By mid-century France and Great Britain had each in its own contrasting way gone far to resolve the internal tensions that rapidly rising rural populations had created in those lands between 1780 and 1850.³ Rising real wages registered this fact during and after the 1850s. Deliberate limitation of births among the French tied population growth to economic experience and expectation. In Great Britain, those who could not find satisfactory work at home went abroad, where careers in lands of European settlement were readily available.⁴

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Russia's position was like that of Great Britain in the sense that migration towards a politically accessible and thinly inhabited frontier was available to rural folk who faced unacceptable constriction of traditional patterns of life in their native villages. Between 1880 and 1914 something over six million Russians migrated to Siberia and about four million established themselves in the Caucasus as well. Simultaneously, from the westernmost provinces of Russia an additional flood of about two and a half million emigrated overseas, though most of these were Poles and Jews, not ethnic Russians.⁵ These safety valves were supplemented by expanding urban employment, thanks to railroads and the manifold forms of industrial and commercial expansion provoked by cheapened overland transport. Nevertheless, much of rural Russia simmered with discontent in the first decade of the twentieth century, as demonstrated by the sudden flare-up of revolutionary violence in 1905-06.

The really difficult demographic problem of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries came in the regions of Europe between the French and British on the west and the Russians on the east. In Germany, for example, the average annual surplus of births over deaths in the decade 1900-1910 was

866,000, yet Germany's remarkable industrial and commercial expansion provided so many jobs that Polish farm workers had to be imported to cultivate east German estates.⁶ Nonetheless, the strains rapid urbanization put upon older patterns of life were very great. Germany's ruling elites were mostly drawn from rural and small-town backgrounds and often felt endangered by the new, thrusting urban elements. Marxist revolutionary rhetoric, popular among industrial workingmen, was particularly frightening. Simultaneously, many Germans felt endangered by impending Slavic inundation from the east. The result was a strong sense of beleaguerment and a more rigid, reckless support of Austria-Hungary in the summer of 1914 than would otherwise have seem sensible.⁷

It is ironic to reflect on the difference between German and French developments. Had the German old regime been less successful in coping with the population surge in the nineteenth century, some sort of revolutionary movement might well have come to power in Germany with an attractive, universalist ideology, suited to appeal to other peoples of Europe as the ideals of the French revolutionaries had done in the eighteenth century. But instead, the German bid for European hegemony was fought out in the name of narrowly exclusive, nationalist, and racist principles, designed rather to repel than attract others. Success in industrializing so rapidly, in other words, may have foreclosed Germany's longer-range chances of winning the wars of the twentieth century in the name of some form of revolutionary socialism. Marxist prescriptions for the future thus went astray. Instead, by a twist of fate that would have appalled Karl Marx, after 1917 the Russians made Marxism the ideological instrument of their state power.

Before 1917, however, this remarkable reversal of roles was unimaginable. In the regions of Europe lying east and south of Germany, industrial expansion entirely failed to keep pace with population growth.⁸ Consequently, the most acute manifestations of political distress appeared within the borders of the Hapsburg and ex-Ottoman empires. (Russia's Polish provinces belong in this category too.) Overseas emigration, though very great,⁹ was insufficient to relieve the problem. Youths who pursued secondary education in hope of qualifying for white-collar employment were strategically situated to communicate revolutionary

political ideals to their frustrated contemporaries in the villages. They did so with marked success, beginning as early as the 1870s in Bulgaria and Serbia,¹⁰ and at somewhat later dates in other parts of eastern Europe. The Balkans, accordingly, became the powder keg of Europe. It was appropriate indeed that the spark that triggered World War I was struck by Gavrilo Princip, a youth whose efforts at pursuing a secondary school education had entirely failed to provide him with satisfactory access to adult life but had imbued him with an intense, revolutionary form of nationalism.¹¹

World War I did something to relieve rural overcrowding in central and eastern Europe. Millions of peasant sons were mobilized into the rival armies and something like 10.5 million died.¹² In the aftermath, nationalist revolutions in the Hapsburg Empire (1918-19) and socialist revolutions in Russia (1917) did little to relieve peasant overcrowding. Except in Hungary, both forms of revolution did succeed in depriving prewar possessing classes of most of their landed property. But land redistribution among an already impoverished peasantry did little to improve productivity. Indeed it usually worked in an opposite way, since the new owners lacked both capital and know-how with which to farm efficiently. The postwar settlement therefore quite failed to relieve the difficulty of too many people trying to pursue a traditional peasant style of life. The Russians responded between 1928 and 1932 with a state program of industrial investment supported by forcible collectivization of agriculture. In the rest of eastern Europe, when depression came in the 1930s, rural distress commonly found anti-Semitic expression, since Jewish middlemen were numerous enough to be vulnerable to the charge that they prospered by buying cheap and selling dear at the peasantry's expense.

Hence it was not until World War II provoked a far more massive die-off in eastern Europe, totaling perhaps as many as 47 million¹³ that a more brutal but enduring solution to the problem of too many people trying to live on too little land emerged. For it was during and after World War II that the inhabitants of eastern Europe began to limit births. Birthrates swiftly sank towards a much lower level than before; so low, indeed, that in some countries population replacement ceased to be assured without alien immigration.¹⁴

As births came into systematic relation with economic expectations all across the face of Europe,¹⁵ the crisis period through which central and eastern Europe had passed between 1880 and 1950 came to an end. Family patterns and sex habits changed; customs and mores of peasant life altered; and the demographic regime that had fomented World Wars I and II ceased to prevail.

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Elsewhere in the world, of course, the demographic surge followed different rhythms. In China, for example, collision between mounting rural population and available land became acute as early as 1850 and 1850-64.¹⁶ Asian peasantries did not again respond to revolutionary ideals on a massive scale until after World War I. Suffice it here to refer to the career of Mohandas Ghandi (1869-1948), whose first successful efforts to appeal to the rural classes of India dated from the early 1920s and to that of Mao Tse-tung (1893-1976), whose mobilization of Chinese peasant support for his version of Marxism dated from 1927. The linkages that prevailed in Europe between overcrowding on the land and revolutionary politicization of rural populations were duplicated in much of Asia during ensuing decades,¹⁷ and in some regions of Africa as well. But conditions varied greatly from region to region, and in many tropical climates disease regimes that kept human numbers efficiently in check continued to prevail until after World War II.

Japan's twentieth-century imperial aggression coincided with a surge in that nation's population growth that crested only after World War II, although maximal rate of increase came earlier.¹⁸ But World War II brought decisive metamorphosis to Japanese rural life, and, after the war, birthrates started down at almost the same time as in central and eastern Europe. To all appearances, therefore, Japan also passed through its version of the modern

demographic crisis during World War II just as most of Europe did.¹⁹

Obviously, revolutionary expressions of rural frustration when insufficient land is available to allow young people to live as their parents had done have not vanished from the earth. Outbreaks in Latin American, parts of Africa, and in southeast Asia continue to occur. But for World Wars I and II, Japan's population surge, and the chronologically parallel crisis in eastern and central Europe was what mainly mattered. Having changed their demographic pattern, these lands are unlikely to become again the seat of comparable military-political unrest. ■

NOTES

¹ On the concept of "vital revolution" see K.F. Helleiner, "The Vital Revolution Reconsidered," in D. V. Glass and D.E.C. Eversley, *Population in History* (London, 1965), pp. 79-86; Ralph Thomlinson, *Population Dynamics: Causes and Consequences of World Demographic Change* (New York, 1965), pp. 14 ff.

² For an overview of the population phenomena of the war era see Eugene M. Kulischer, *Europe on the Move: War and Population Changes, 1917-1947* (New York, 1948).

³ Britain's Irish problem was not exactly solved by the catastrophe of the potato blight and resultant famine of 1845-46; but population growth abruptly gave way to population wastage in Ireland, thanks to accelerated emigration and rigorous postponement of the age of marriage until the newlyweds could inherit land. After 1845 the political tensions of Ireland were therefore no longer fed by rising population but took especial venom from the prolonged sexual frustration which became the normal lot of Irish countrymen waiting to inherit land before they dared to marry. On the psychological and sociological consequences of the remarkable demographic regime that prevailed in Ireland after the famine see Conrad Arensburg, *The Irish Countryman* (London, 1937).

⁴ Chain migration whereby one successful emigrant saved money to finance his relatives' emigration made it possible for even the very poor to get across the ocean in statistically significant numbers. As a result the emptying-out of English villages with the decay of crop farming after 1873 produced no serious political disturbance in Great Britain. It did raise the tide of emigration from the British Isles to an all-time high in the years 1911-13. Cf. R.C.K. Ensor, *England, 1870-1914* (Oxford, 1936), p. 500.

⁵ Marcel Reinhard, André Armengaud, and Jacques Dupaquier, *Histoire générale de la population mondiale*, 3d ed. (Paris, 1968), pp. 401, 470; Donald W. Treadgold, *The Great Siberian Migration* (Princeton, 1957), pp. 33-35.

⁶ Between 1880 and 1914 nearly half a million German farm workers left the east. According to William W. Hagen, *Germans, Poles, and Jews: The Nationality Conflict in the Prussian East, 1772-1914* (Chicago, 1980), the total was 482,062.

⁷ Analysis of how the "archaic" character of German political leadership on the eve of the war helped to precipitate the catastrophe has become standard among German historians since Fritz Fischer pioneered this approach with his famous books, *Griff nach der Weltmacht* (Düsseldorf, 1961) and *Krieg der Illusionen* (Düsseldorf, 1969) translated as *Germany's War Aims in the First World War*, (London, 1967) and *War of Illusions: German Policies from 1911 to 1914* (London, 1975).

⁸ Paralleling similar failures within the British Isles in such parts as the Scottish Highlands and southern Ireland.

⁹ About 4 million persons left Hapsburg lands for overseas destinations between 1900 and 1914. Emigration from Russia's western provinces was about 2.5 million, and from Italy was so massive as to depopulate some southern villages. Reinhard et al., *Histoire générale*, pp. 400-401, gives a table of European emigration showing relevant statistics for the pre-World War I decades.

¹⁰ In Serbia, the Radical party, founded in 1879, set up a rural party machine and agitational network that changed the basis of politics in that country within a decade or so. Cf. Alex N. Dragnich, *Serbia, Nikola Pasic and Yugoslavia* (New Brunswick, N.J., 1974), pp. 17-22. For Bulgaria, see Cyril Black, *The Establishment of Constitutional Government in Bulgaria* (Princeton, 1943), pp. 39 ff.

¹¹ Nationalism appealed more than socialism to east European peasants and former peasants because it could be interpreted as meaning the dispossession of ethnically alien landlords and urban property owners without infringing peasant property in the slightest. The Serbian Radical Party, accordingly, shed its founders' socialism as it succeeded in gaining peasant support. On socialist beginnings of the Radicals see Woodford D. McClellan, *Svetozar Markovic and the Origins of Balkan Socialism* (Princeton, 1964).

¹² This figure is the remainder when French and British war losses are subtracted from the global figure of 13 million for World War I casualties offered by Reinhard et al., *Histoire générale*, p. 488. Estimates are very loose at best, for record keeping broke down in all defeated countries, and epidemics of typhus and influenza killed many civilians as well as soldiers. Such deaths are sometimes classed as war related, sometimes excluded.

¹³ Ibid., p. 573. Margin for error is even greater in World War II than in World War I calculations, if only because more than half the casualties were civilian.

¹⁴ Cf. Ansley J. Coale, et al., eds. *Human Fertility in Russia Since the Nineteenth Century* (Princeton, 1979); David M. Heer, "The Demographic Transition in the Russian Empire and the Soviet Union," *Journal of Social History* 1 (1968): 193-240; Reinhard, et al., *Histoire générale*, p. 610.

¹⁵ With the exception of Albania and Albanian populations inside Yugoslavia, among whom a Moslem heritage and mountainous habitat combined to preserve traditional sexual and family patterns. Cf. John Salt and Hugh Clout, *Migration in Post-war Europe: Geographical Essays* (Oxford, 1976), p. 13. Political manifestations of the resulting population pressure became troublesome in Yugoslavia in 1981.

¹⁶ About 40 million died in that rebellion; and an additional 8 million Chinese emigrated to borderlands and overseas in ensuing decades. The country's population of about 430 million in 1850 was cut back to only 400 million in 1870 according to Reinhard et al., *Histoire générale*, p. 476.

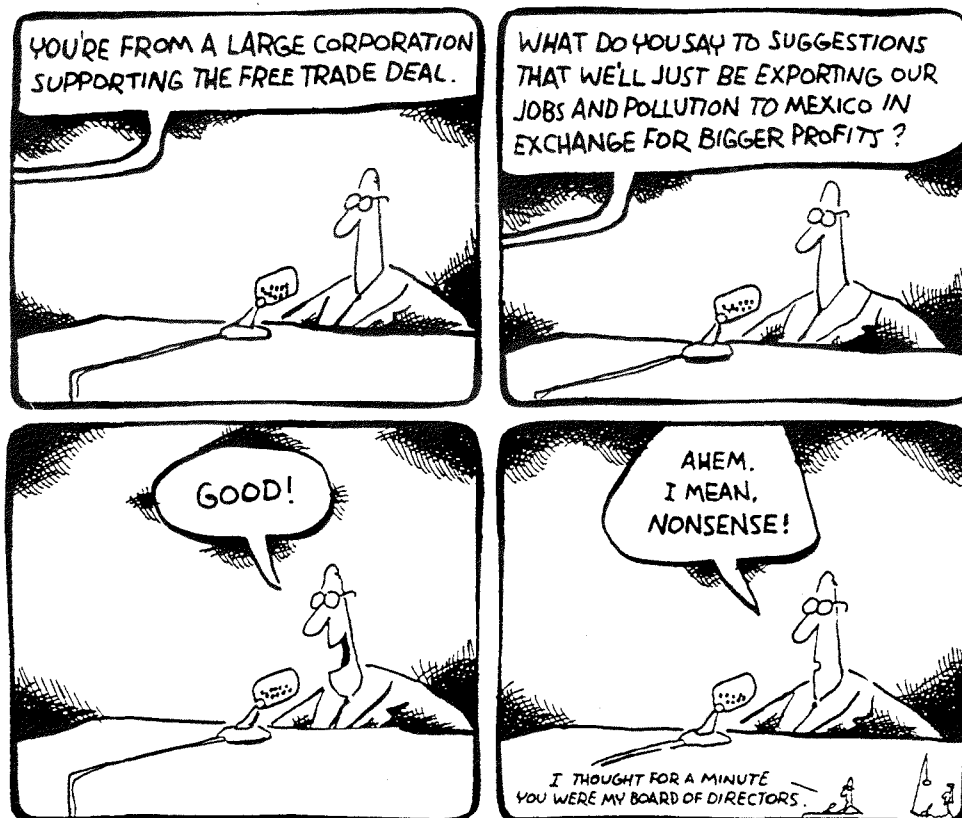
¹⁷ For China Cf. M. P. Redfield, ed., *China's Gentry: Essays in Rural-Urban Relations* by Hsiao-tung Fei (Chicago, 1953).

¹⁸ Japan's population rose as follows:

Year	Total	Increment	Percent
1880	36.4 m.	-	-
1890	40.5	4.1	11
1900	44.8	4.3	11
1910	50.9	6.1	14
1920	55.9	5.0	10
1930	64.4	8.5	15
1940	73.1	8.7	13.5
1950	83.2	10.	14

Source: Reinhard et al., *Histoire générale*, pp. 479, 566, 640.

¹⁹ For Japanese rural population growth and political protest see Takehiko Yoshihashi, *Conspiracy at Mukden: The Rise of the Japanese Military* (New Haven, 1963); Tadashi Fukutake, *Japanese Rural Society* (Tokyo, 1967); Ronald P. Dore, *Land Reform in Japan* (London, 1959); Cyril E. Black et al., *The Modernization of Japan and Russia* (New York, 1975), pp. 179-85, 281; Carl Mosk, "Demographic Transition in Japan," *Journal of Economic History* 37 (1977): 655-74.



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The Failure of Internationalism

By Joseph Wayne Smith

...let's look at the potholes in the streets. There are potholes all over the civilized world, but is that any reason for setting up a global pothole authority to fix our potholes? Would the pothole in your street be filled sooner if we globalized the problem?

The moral is surely obvious: never globalize a problem if it can possibly be solved locally. It may be chic but it is not wise to tack the adjective global onto the names of problems that are merely widespread — for example, "global hunger," "global poverty," and "the global population problem."

We will make no progress with population problems, which are a root cause of both hunger and poverty, until we deglobaize them. Populations, like potholes, are produced locally, and, unlike atmospheric pollution, remain local — unless some people are unwise as to globalize them by permitting population excesses to migrate into the better-endowed countries. Marx's formula, "to each according to his needs," is a recipe for national suicide.

We are not faced with a single global population problem but, rather, with about 180 separate national population problems. All population controls must be applied locally; local governments are the agents best prepared to choose local means. Means must fit local traditions. For one nation to attempt to impose its ethical principles on another is to violate national sovereignty and endanger international peace. The only legitimate demand that nations can make on one

another is this: "Don't try to solve your population problems by exporting your excess people to us."¹

* * *

What every progressive nation wants from others is ideas and information. But ideas don't have to be wrapped in human form to get them from one place to another. Radio waves, printed documents, film and electronic records do the job very well indeed. There is no need to risk the civil disorder that can so easily follow from mixing substantial bodies of human beings in the same location, when these beings bring with them passionately held beliefs and practices that are irreconcilable with those of the receiving nation. ...

Diversity is the opposite of unity, and unity is a prime requirement for national survival in the short run. In the long run, beliefs must be susceptible to change, but massive immigration is a dangerous way to bring about change in ideas and practices.

To nurture both unity and progress a double policy should be embraced: great diversity worldwide; limited diversity within each nation.²

Internationalism

Various attempts at a solution to the cluster of problems contributing to what has been called the "global crisis" have been proposed, all involving some form of "high tech fix"³ or an attempt to reconcile economic growth with environmental conservation. We have seen that these strategies are failures. The situation is indeed a grim one. As Harwood has argued,⁴ despite good evidence that humanity is hurtling towards the precipice of ecological collapse⁵ and the 80-90 per cent of the population of Australia, for example, are "very