

The State of the Field: Demography and War

The Rise and Fall—and Rise—of Interest in Demography and War

At its root, the importance of the link between demography and war is the relative capacity of a given political unit's population to aid in its defense or to threaten other political units. For this reason, population increase and decrease have always been identified as vital security issues; however, the importance of raw population as an increment of state power has waxed and waned across time in response to technological innovations and broad normative social changes (de Bliokh, 1977; Mearsheimer, 2001).

Contemporary interest in population as a source of state military power has its origins in the French Revolution, which unleashed the power of the mass army on what was then a Europe ruled by monarchs in possession of highly specialized and relatively small professional armies (Posen, 1993). Thus beyond its normative implications regarding the proper basis of legitimate government, the French Revolution established demographics, including its emphasis on comparative birth rates, as an enduring interest of states, whether motivated by greed, insecurity, or aggression.

The Industrial Revolution threatened to change this relationship, as the railroad and the steamship made it possible to field and main-

democracy is the principle of majority rule, states adopting democratic forms of government find themselves keenly interested in the proportions of politically active groups that inhabit their territories (Toft, 2003).

On the other hand, despite the conventional wisdom that changes in the demographic composition of states correlate with political instability and war, surprisingly little sustained scholar-

that technology trumps people. This prejudice, in most cases unfounded and in some cases positively dangerous, underpins a general lack of attention to everything from demographics and war, to the strategy and tactics of labor-intensive military organizations. Faith in technology extends across a wide array of social, economic, and political problems. Second, to put it bluntly, the study of demography and war is incredi-

political system be resilient enough to handle these future demographic challenges without reverting to a form of apartheid, in order to hang on to large portions of the West Bank and maintain the particularly Jewish character of the state of Israel?

Conclusions

In summary, demographics and war will continue to be an important and policy-relevant topic. Shifts in facilitating technologies—along with, in some cases, deliberate demographic strategies for attaining power and resources—continue to be under-researched and poorly understood, which leads in many cases to counterproductive or destructive aid and intervention strategies. Progress on the independent causal impact of demography on war will therefore demand careful research designs and may not be susceptible to the kind of parsimony currently so popular among social scientists in general, and political scientists in particular. Only by building a community dedicated to sustained and quality research can we redress this situation.

Notes

1. Exceptions include Goldstone (1991), Toft (2002, 2005), and Hudson and den Boer (2004). Excellent surveys include Levy and Krebs (2001) and Cincotta, Engelman, and Anastasion (2003).
2. See commentaries in this *Report* by Sarah Staveteig on age ratio and conflict, and by Valerie Hudson and Andrea den Boer on sex ratio and conflict.

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