

---

REFLECTIONS

---

# Violence in the Twentieth Century

## *A Closer Look*



JAMES L. PAYNE

**A**mong the many social changes wrought by modern communications, perhaps none is so striking as our newfound ability to learn about and react to violence. In an earlier age, cities, countries, and even civilizations could be swallowed up in bloodshed without other parts of the world even knowing about it. Today, tragedies in the farthest corner of the globe are comprehensively reported and widely discussed.

The system of attention and concern begins with the news media, which instantly bring us details of worldwide strife, but it doesn't end there. The world now has a vast network of scholars, academic centers, and think tanks specializing in war, genocide, and repression. In addition, many government agencies and international bodies keep records on terrorism, refugees, and military forces. Information on violence is made available to everyone through an extensive publishing system that generates vast quantities of books, reports, and Web pages. The Library of Congress catalog, for example, already contains fifty-one entries on the Rwanda genocide, an episode that occurred just six years ago in an obscure corner of the world. Another illustration of the intensity of modern record keeping is a recent book on the "troubles" of Northern Ireland that lists the names and circumstances of death of all 3,637 victims of the political infighting since 1970 (McKittrick et al. 1999).

---

**James L. Payne** is an independent scholar and author living in Sandpoint, Idaho.

*The Independent Review*, v.VI, n.3, Winter 2002, ISSN 1086-1653, Copyright © 2002, pp. 447–455.

Violence also figures in the policy agenda to an extent that would amaze our ancestors. The quest for world peace—seen in the nineteenth century as the utopian project of idealists and cranks—has become, with the advent of the United Nations and dozens of other international bodies, a major industry. Diplomats and politicians criss-cross the globe attempting to settle conflicts. Another way that violence commands policy attention today is in reaction to past atrocities. Governments today have become deeply involved in reacting to episodes of violence that took place many decades ago. They ponder the possibility of punishing perpetrators, providing apologies, establishing reparations, and remembering victims. The reaction to the Nazi Holocaust set the pattern, which has now been followed for dozens of other atrocities, from repression in Chile and Argentina to the American relocation of persons of Japanese ancestry during World War II. (As an Armenian American whose maternal grandparents were slain by the Turks, I followed with interest the recent congressional effort to call Turkey to account for the genocide against Armenians some eighty-five years ago.)

Yet for all the data and concern—or perhaps one should say because of it—we are now singularly unable to put violence in perspective, unable to grasp the overall trend. It is a classic case of not being able to see the forest for the trees. Fixated on the specific horrors about which we are thoroughly informed, if not overinformed, we have adopted a pessimistic, and to a certain extent hysterical, stance. The world, we say, is being consumed by an increasing and increasingly dangerous wave of violence. The facts, easily seen if we step back a little, point in the opposite direction, however. They reveal a broad and highly encouraging decline in world violence.

### **A Perverse Superlative**

A useful way to explore the gap between fear and fact is to examine the often heard assertion that the twentieth century was “the most violent in history.” Taken on the emotional level, as an expression of sentiment, the declaration cannot be faulted. It is the speaker’s way of saying “there was a great deal of shocking and deplorable violence in the twentieth century.” Of course there was; any sane, moral person would agree. The statement makes a factual claim, however, and as such it has worked its way into modern culture as if it described a historical truth. As a factual proposition, though, it is strikingly flawed.

In the first place, this claim assumes facts not in evidence. For some forty centuries of history spanning tens of thousands of tribes, kingdoms, and empires around the world, virtually all of the information about violence over all this time and in all these places has been lost or was never recorded. Therefore, the claim that the twentieth century was the “most violent in history” is impossible to document.

A second problem with the claim is that it reflects a rather alarming ignorance of the existing historical evidence. Although not strictly testable, it might have some plausibility if the available data indicated that violence was much lower in earlier times, that prior to the twentieth century mankind conducted itself in an enlightened, non-

violent way. There is no such indication. What little we know about the past reveals that it was appallingly bloody. Start, if you like, with the Bible, which reports in the book of Joshua that the Hebrew conquest of the Holy Land was a systematic program of God-ordained genocide, an extermination of every man, woman, and child in each conquered city. Turn your attention to China, and you will find a history of stupendous civil wars, each costing millions of lives, as one can estimate from the abrupt declines in population following the upheavals. For example, as a result of the fighting and massacres of the Nanking revolt in 1853–64, the population of the province fell by 70 percent (Chesneau 1973, 40). Clearly, the claim that of all centuries the twentieth has been the most violent is by no means a self-evident truth. The uncritical acceptance of this idea says more about today's low level of historical literacy than it does about history.

Another problem with this claim has to do with chronology: it glosses over the fact that a century is a hundred years, a huge span of time during which dramatic changes may be taking place. It is misleading to treat this one-hundred-year period as if it were a single point in time, and it is particularly perverse to define the entire era by events that took place in the early part of the century—especially the two world wars and the genocidal dictatorships of Stalin and Hitler.

Consider how we would react to the following claim that someone might make about our economic well-being: “The American economy in the twentieth century was the most depressed in history.” By pointing to the Great Depression of the 1930s, the speaker might establish a certain plausibility for the statement, yet we would all recognize it as a strangely contorted way of reporting history. The claim about the magnitude of twentieth-century violence commits the same abuse. It is indeed puzzling that we should be so eager to embrace the wars and genocides of more than half a century ago as belonging to our own era. Why haven't we distanced ourselves from this “ancient history” and taken pride in recent progress?

### **How the Cameras Mislead**

Two factors seem to account for our failure to adopt this healthy, empirical approach to violence in modern times. First, the operation of the modern mass media has prevented us from noticing that progress is being made. By their very nature, the media present a distorted view of what is happening in the world. The problem is not that the cameras are lying. The atrocities are real. The distortion springs from biased sampling. The cameras, after all, are not placed randomly around the world. If they were, they would merely show boring pictures of people peacefully walking around cities, towns, and villages. Instead, reporters and cameramen go where there will be scenes of violence. Because the news media seek out bloodshed, viewers will be given the impression of a highly violent world, no matter what the actual trend.

Suppose that in one period a million people are being killed in riots, wars, and genocides around the world, and cameras have captured scores of scenes of violence,

filling the airwaves with them. Now suppose that several generations later the rate of killing has fallen to *one-tenth* of the previous level: a dramatic decline. Owing to the selection bias of the news media, the public will never suspect this change. The cameramen and reporters are still able to find plenty of images of violence, for even in this relatively peaceful world, one hundred thousand people are being killed. Furthermore, the increasing ease of transportation will enable news personnel to get quickly to more places, thus increasing the coverage of strife and giving the impression that violence is increasing!

The foregoing illustration is not merely hypothetical. It describes approximately what has been happening over the past century. The real news about violence in the twentieth century is that it declined dramatically. As I show in this essay, the data on genocide, war, and preparations for war reveal dramatic reductions. Yet the public, swayed by the media's bias, has not noticed the change.

A second distortion comes from the tendency to exaggerate evil in order to motivate people to take action against it. If a fire is burning in one part of town and you want citizens to turn out to fight it, it makes sense to claim that it is very large and might even threaten the entire town. If you report that the fire is relatively small and will probably go out on its own—which may well be the truth—fewer firefighters will show up. In the modern world, violence is the fire that everyone deplors. The individuals and groups commenting on the violence are not, for the most part, objective: they feel a need to encourage people to oppose it. The result is a tendency to exaggerate the violence and to magnify the threat it poses in the modern world.

Over the years, I have collected many published examples of this kind of distortion. For example, in June 1999 my local newspaper carried an Associated Press story with the headline “Armed Conflicts Are Increasing around World, Institute Says.” The basis of the story was a press release from the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (SIPRI), which makes a yearly compilation of wars in progress. The institute had just released its 1998 figures, which showed twenty-seven wars, up from twenty-five in 1997. “Clearly,” the SIPRI official was quoted as saying, “1998 shows a worse picture in terms of armed conflicts around the world.” This evidence, the story concluded, “paints a gloomy picture of global security on the eve of a new millennium” (Associated Press 1999, 6).

As it happens, the institute and the Associated Press were combining forces to paint a biased picture. SIPRI's own data show that the total number of armed conflicts was running at thirty-five to thirty-six a year in the mid-1980s, when the tabulation was begun, and peaked at thirty-seven in 1990 (Sollenberg, Wallenstein, and Jato 1999, 18). Since then the number of wars has declined dramatically, touching an all-time low of twenty-five in 1997. The 1998 figure was up slightly but still far below the peak at the beginning of the decade. Thus, the headline reporting the SIPRI data should have been, “Armed Conflicts in Decline.” Such a story was not expedient, however, for either the Associated Press or the institute because it would lack the shock value desired by a news

organization, and it would contradict the mission of a peace institute, which aims to cultivate antimilitary sentiment by painting a picture of growing violence.

In diplomatic and military bureaucracies, the hunger for appropriations leads to a systematic exaggeration of the threat of violence. Generals are loath to report that the probability of foreign aggression is diminishing, for such a report might suggest the desirability of a reduction of military spending. Diplomats are similarly reluctant to admit that the world might be growing more peaceful on its own because that possibility would make their initiatives seem less necessary.

## The Declining Appeal of War

Setting aside the misconceptions generated by the news media and by the institutional impulse to exaggerate, what, then, was the real trend of violence in the twentieth century? Let us begin with war.

According to political scientist John Mueller, the world passed a historic milestone in 1984: “the major countries of the developed world had managed to remain at peace with each other for the longest continuous stretch of time since the days of the Roman Empire”—that is, since there have been nation-states in Europe (1989, 3). It is an achievement that the modern age, with its gaze fixed on events of the early part of the century, has not yet digested. Moreover, it is an achievement that seems to strengthen with each passing year, as historian Paul Johnson observed in 1995: “The 50 years of peace between the Great Powers [1945–1995] is a significant landmark in human history. Never before, and indeed never since there have been Great Powers to fight each other, has a general peace lasted so long. What is notable about our half-century of general peace is that the likelihood of general war has been steadily declining throughout these five decades, and that the risk of war now is smaller than at any time in the last 50 years” (A20).

The same movement away from war that we see in Europe is also evident in Central and South America. In the nineteenth century, the people of that region fought more than two dozen international wars, many of them quite costly. In the past half-century, however, there have been only four armed conflicts between countries, all of them quite small: the “soccer war” between El Salvador and Honduras in 1969, the Falklands War between Britain and Argentina in 1983, and the U.S. interventions in Grenada (1983) and Panama (1989).

The situation in Asia, Africa, and the Middle East is somewhat more difficult to assess because most of the countries in these regions have been created only recently from colonial holdings, and therefore meaningful comparisons with the past are difficult. Although considerable fighting has taken place in these areas in modern times, it is not clear that this violence represents an increase over the amount of strife that prevailed in the days of tribes and empires. It is encouraging to note, however, that the current pattern seems to be toward a decline in conflicts, as indicated by the SIPRI data noted earlier.

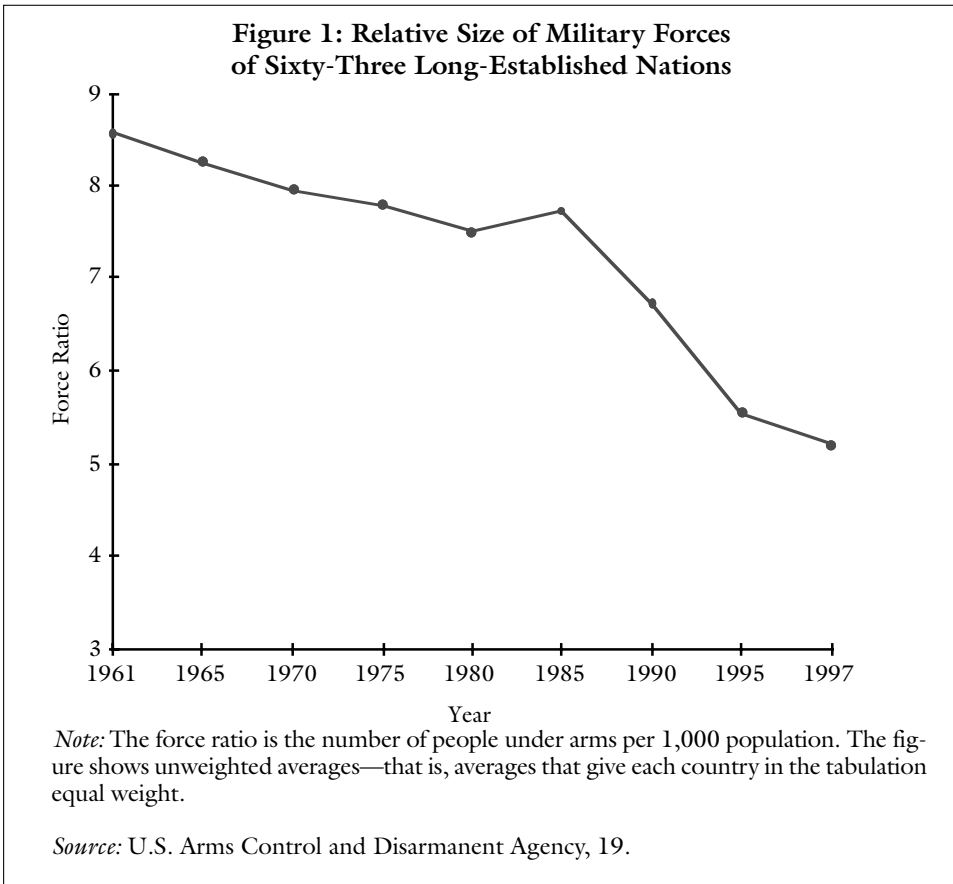
The tendency toward peace also shows up in the size of military forces. For generations, it has been customary to decry the “arms race” presumed to be taking place between the great powers and also between countries in regional rivalries. It is not clear how well this image fit the facts even at the height of the Cold War, but in any case the trend now is clearly in the opposite direction, with countries reducing their efforts to field military forces. One way to gauge this trend is to inspect “force ratios”—that is, the number of military personnel per one thousand population. In the sixty-three long-established countries (the nations independent before World War II), the average force ratio has been falling for the past forty years, as figure 1 indicates. Another measure of the emphasis on military forces is seen in changes in conscription requirements. In recent decades, countries have been shortening the period of required service and in many cases abandoning the draft altogether. The survey of conscription practices in forty-eight major, long-established countries by the International Institute of Strategic Studies (IISS) in London shows the average period of conscription falling from 17.4 months in 1970 to 8.6 months in 2000 (IISS 1970, 2000).

## Changing Views of Genocide

The number of books and articles on the Holocaust and on other recent mass slayings sometimes makes it seem that genocide was invented in the twentieth century. Factually, of course, this impression is far from accurate. Throughout history, this kind of violence has been recurrent and widespread. The practice of exterminating alien peoples has been so widely employed—on all sides—that one sometimes wonders how the human race ever survived.

What sets the twentieth century apart in regard to genocide is that for the first time, mankind recognized it as a shockingly unacceptable form of violence. In earlier times, massacres were seen as a run-of-the-mill aspect of conquest. In the occasional cases in which participants bothered to express an opinion about them, their attitude was one of pride in having carried out an effective extermination. For example, during the French Revolution, an uprising of Catholics in 1794 took place in the Vendée, a region in western France. General Westermann led the government army to suppress the revolt, and his forces exterminated thousands of men, women, and children. To kill large numbers of people quickly the army adopted a mechanized system of mass slaughter that utilized shallow slave ships, the *noyades*. Prisoners were loaded on them and locked in; the boats were then briefly pressed below the water to drown all aboard, then refloated for the next load. In his report to the French Convention, Westermann openly boasted of his deeds: “The Vendée is no more. . . . According to your orders, I have trampled their children beneath our horses’ feet; I have massacred their women, so they will no longer give birth to brigands. I do not have a single prisoner to reproach me. I have exterminated them all” (Davies 1998, 705–6).

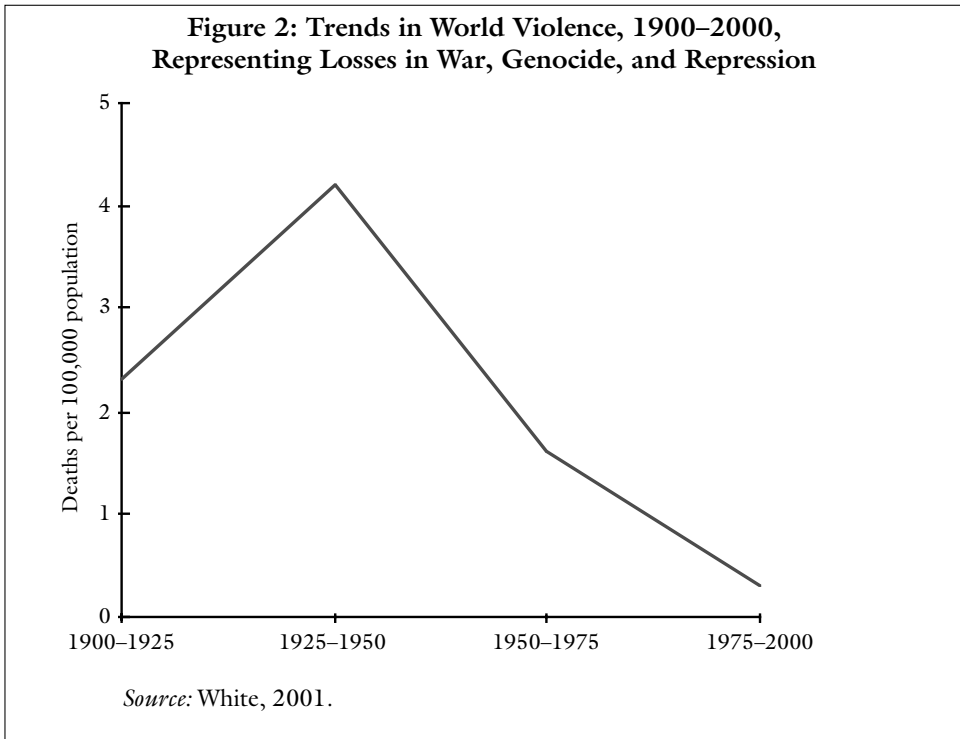
Twentieth-century society’s shock about genocide and all the writing and discussion on the subject have made it seem that genocide is an increasing phenome-



non, but the opposite is true. In fact, the growing disapproval of mass slaying is bringing about a dramatic decline in the incidence of genocide. Researcher Matthew White (2001) has compiled comprehensive statistics on world violence in the twentieth century that illustrate the overall trend in genocide and other types of killing. White combined the deaths from all known wars and genocides, as well as deaths in other types of political repressions in each quarter of the twentieth century, and then expressed these deaths as a fraction of the world population in the corresponding period. His results, shown in figure 2, indicate that the casualty rate in the most recent period—1975 to 2000—had fallen to less than one-tenth the level of half a century ago. In other words, we are living in unusually peaceful times, perhaps even—if the somewhat unscientific superlative will be permitted—the most peaceful in history.

## Conclusion

A decline in the amount of violence does not mean an end of violence. The world still has plenty of tensions, hot spots, and reckless leaders. Nevertheless, an awareness of the overall trend should give us a degree of patience in dealing with these troubles. When faced with an intractable and dangerous dispute, the temptation may often be



to throw up one's hands, to adopt hyperbolic language, and to think in terms of extreme measures. One example of this pattern of frustration might be the Arab-Israeli conflict, which seems lately to have taken a painful turn for the worse. One is beginning to hear it said that peace in this area will never be achieved—the implication being that an extremely violent outcome is inevitable.

Such pessimism is not warranted by the experience of the twentieth century. The Cold War itself is a good example of a conflict that seemed insoluble and likely to end in cataclysm. Many prominent diplomats and foreign-policy experts went on record predicting that World War III between the United States and the Soviet Union was a near certainty (Mueller 1995, 191–93). For example, the distinguished scholar of international relations Hans J. Morgenthau declared in 1979: “In my opinion the world is moving ineluctably toward a third world war—a strategic nuclear war. I do not believe that anything can be done to prevent it” (qtd. in Mueller 1995, 192). Obviously, such prophecies now appear overwrought.

Another example of a long-standing conflict that seems to offer no way out is the strife between Catholics and Protestants in Ireland. This centuries-old conflict seems to be moving to an end, although it hasn't quite reached it. As the Irish dispute illustrates, many of these difficult, bloody conflicts are not capable of resolution in a single stroke. Instead, they have to evolve toward that state. Such evolution is a long, drawn out process involving steps forward and steps back. Just as no particular agree-



ment can be said to guarantee permanent peace, neither should flare-ups be taken as proof of an inevitable state of hostility.

In proceeding along the path of patient muddling in disputes around the world, diplomats and the public in general ought to take heart. The lesson of the twentieth century, clearly borne out in the statistics of war and peace, indicate that history appears to be on the side of peace.

## References

- Associated Press. 1999. Armed Conflicts Are Increasing around World, Institute Says. *Bonner County Daily Bee*, June 17, 6.
- Chesneaux, Jean. 1973. *Peasant Revolts in China 1840–1949*. London: Thames and Hudson.
- Davies, Norman. 1998. *Europe: A History*. New York: Harper.
- International Institute for Strategic Studies. 1970. *The Military Balance 1970–1971*. London: International Institute for Strategic Studies.
- . 2000. *The Military Balance 2000–2001*. London: International Institute for Strategic Studies.
- Johnson, Paul. 1995. Another 50 Years of Peace? *Wall Street Journal*, May 9, A20.
- McKittrick, David, Seamus Kelters, Brian Feeney, and Chris Thornton. 1999. *Lost Lives*. Edinburgh: Mainstream.
- Mueller, John. 1989. *Retreat from Doomsday: The Obsolescence of Major War*. New York: Basic.
- . 1995. *Quiet Cataclysm: Reflections on the Recent Transformation of World Politics*. New York: HarperCollins.
- Sollenberg, Margareta, Peter Wallensteen, and Andres Jato. 1999. Major Armed Conflicts. In *SIPRI Yearbook 1999*, edited by Adam Daniel Rotfeld, 15–33. Oxford, Eng.: Oxford University Press.
- U.S. Arms Control and Disarmament Agency. 1971–1998. *World Military Expenditures and Arms Transfers*. Washington, D.C.: U.S. Department of State.
- White, Matthew. 2001. *Historical Atlas of the 20th Century*. March 21. Available at: [www.users.erols.com/mwhite28/20centry.htm](http://www.users.erols.com/mwhite28/20centry.htm).

# SUBSCRIBE NOW AND RECEIVE A FREE BOOK!



“*The Independent Review* does not accept pronouncements of government officials nor the conventional wisdom at face value.”

—**JOHN R. MACARTHUR**, Publisher, *Harper’s*

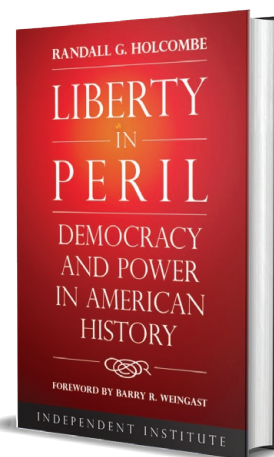
“*The Independent Review* is excellent.”

—**GARY BECKER**, Nobel Laureate in Economic Sciences

Subscribe to [The Independent Review](#) and receive a free book of your choice such as *Liberty in Peril: Democracy and Power in American History*, by Randall G. Holcombe.

Thought-provoking and educational, [The Independent Review](#) is blazing the way toward informed debate. This quarterly journal offers leading-edge insights on today’s most critical issues in economics, healthcare, education, the environment, energy, defense, law, history, political science, philosophy, and sociology.

Student? Educator? Journalist? Business or civic leader? Engaged citizen? This journal is for YOU!



Order today for more **FREE** book options

**SUBSCRIBE**

*The Independent Review* is now available digitally on mobile devices and tablets via the Apple/Android App Stores and Magzter. Subscriptions and single issues start at \$2.99. [Learn More.](#)

