

Born under a bad sign

The indelible Marks of Total
War on Twentieth Century Lives

Prof.dr. Ralf Futselaar

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Colophon

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Introduction

I am taking a bit of a risk here, having just been elevated to the august status of Professor of Social History, but I would like to come clear straight away and confess that I am not actually sure what social history is. Now, I am quite confident that most other people don't really know either, and I don't think many of the people who call themselves social historians mind that the field is not very well defined. But this lecture happens to be about the application of a social history approach to understanding warfare and its consequences in the past. In that context, it is useful to have at least some sort of working definition. In 1985, the late Charles Tilly, then a professor of social science at Columbia University, gave a simple definition that is perhaps not overly precise, but that will do for our purposes today.

According to Tilly, the job of a social historian is, first of all to "document large structural changes", secondly to "reconstruct the experiences of ordinary people in the course of those changes", and finally to "connect the two". That seems simple enough, although it doesn't necessarily limit the field very much. After all, large structural change is everywhere, and has always been everywhere, and ordinary people are usually all over the place as well. We could also rephrase the definition negatively. Social history is *not* about short-lived, exceptional things, and neither is it about very famous or seemingly important people.¹

I think this makes clear straight away why combining social history with the study of armed conflict is not common. Wars, after all, are usually relatively brief. The kind of "structural change" that a social historian would normally look at, like the demographic transition, or the rise of capitalism, happens at a different speed. But let's have a look how far we can get and if we can establish whether this nevertheless is a fruitful route.

Today I will be referring mostly to the Second World War in Europe. It is the conflict I personally am most knowledgeable about, or at least believe to be knowledgeable about, and it is a conflict many of you believe to be knowledgeable about as well. For better or worse, it is also a conflict that has considerable societal resonance, especially in the Netherlands. This has the consequence that to discuss it is often a bit like screaming into a megaphone, but that is the price we pay for familiarity, I am afraid.

¹ Tilly, Charles. 1984. Big structures, large processes, huge comparisons. New York: Russel Sage Foundation.

That does not mean, that any of the things I am hoping to convince you of this afternoon are specific to this conflict or to this part of the world. Indeed the contrary: the relationships between economic progress and new types of warfare, the development and use of mass media to create a collective willingness to engage in extreme and often self-destructive violence, the dramatic and permanent impact of wars and other forms of mass violence on vulnerable civilians, are not limited to this specific context or that specific time. War is ongoing as we speak. So are its consequences. I will get back to this towards the end of this lecture.

Structural violence

Let's return, for a moment, to Tilly's working definition of Social History. Social history is about things that are structural. "Structural" is something of a weasel word, because while it suggests great rigidity, it is actually somewhat vague, at least in the context of the social sciences. In architecture, we can differentiate between structural elements, without which a building collapses, and nonstructural elements, which merely make a building more useable, comfortable, or beautiful. In history, what we call structural usually designates aspects of societies that change slowly and affect many aspects of life. Modern economic growth, organized religion, or crop rotation systems, could all be considered structural in a historical sense, but that doesn't mean that history would stop, or society would collapse, if a society would turn to different modes of food production, become secular, or experience economic stagnation.

The "structural" of historians, then, is a considerably vaguer term than the "structural" of architects, but to speak of the structural, in history, is at least to speak of things that are relatively long-lasting and have a relatively wide-ranging influence. I have to admit, though, that in over two decades of historical research I have never encountered any historian who claimed something they studied was particularly "nonstructural". Maybe we love our research topics too much.

Are war, mass violence or genocide not structural phenomena? Although these types of violence are worryingly common, at least they are still mostly episodic. Literally billions of people have firsthand experience of war, but the overwhelming majority of them experience far more years of peace than of war in their lifetime. Wars seem to fall squarely in what the French historian Fernand Braudel referred to as *événements*, perhaps best translated as "mere events", although I think it is worth pointing out that he developed this idea while interned at OfLag X-C, near Lübeck, as a prisoner of war. To paraphrase Leon Trotsky, Braudel may have been disinterested in War, but War certainly was interested in Braudel.

To be fair to Braudel, he was an historian of the sixteenth century and studied a period in which wars, or at least battles, were relatively short-lived affairs. Societies in which the overwhelming majority of people were permanently engaged in food production simply did not have the economic wherewithal to engage in prolonged mass warfare, such as we have seen in the twentieth century. That does not necessarily mean the consequences of those conflicts were always small in scale as well. In the Thirty Years War, in the seventeenth century, social collapse, famine and especially bubonic plague killed millions of people, even though the actual battles were small and short by modern standards.

When we compare these wars to more recent conflicts, the first thing we notice is a change of scale. Industrialization has made societies rich, and good at many things, from providing primary education to producing junk food, but it has also amplified our ability to wage enormous, and enormously expensive, wars. This, it is worth noting, was not obvious from the outset. It is not self-evident that the ability to feed populations with less labor, to travel quickly over large distances, to administer large organizations, would contribute so much to conflict. Even the development of new weapons was not necessarily considered a contribution to the intensifying of warfare.

Richard Gatling, for example, who developed one of the first machine guns, envisaged a process of mechanization of war not unlike that in agriculture. Since his Gatling Gun enabled fewer people to fire more bullets, he reasoned, far fewer soldiers would be needed to achieve the same amount of warfare. Unlike labor saving automatic thrashers, and other mechanical inventions in agriculture, this is clearly not what happened in war. Especially in the twentieth century, the main consequence of improved firepower was more bullets, not the involvement of fewer people. And where innovation did mean fewer people had to enter the battlefield, such as in the recent rise of drone warfare, the drop in casualties has been one-sided to say the least.

In the late twentieth century, a great deal of ink was spilled by historians on the typology of the World Wars, and specifically on whether they could be adequately described as "total wars", a term popularized by general Erich Ludendorff in the 1930s.² I will not reiterate or repeat those discussions here, as that would be even more boring than it was the first time around. The gist of those discussions, however, is relevant here. Total wars, the ones in which many millions of people participated, are different from previous types of warfare because of the enormous resources, in terms of people, raw materials and energy, expended on them.

² Ludendorff, Erich. 1935. *Der totale Krieg*. München: Ludendorffs Verlag.

Wars like the World Wars were waged by internally stable, industrialized countries that were able to wage prolonged, gruesome wars, to which their economies became almost wholly devoted. To even have the power to decimate civilian consumption, for years, in the interest of a bloody power struggle I think is an ability governments simply did not have before, and one that many governments still don't have today. Even if the World Wars may not necessarily fit an ideal type of total war, *totaler krieg* or *guerre totale*, they differed fundamentally from what went before. The willingness to sacrifice nearly everything for victory, turned inventions like machine guns into the deadly scourge they are until this day.

In the light of these observations, I think it is easier to see the structural element in warfare. A set of structural changes in the nineteenth century, such as the rise of print capitalism, and consequently of nationalism, the coming of industrialization and increased economic interdependence made new, bigger wars, possible. In fact, it is increasingly common to view the conflicts that we have decided to call World Wars as brief outbursts of extreme violence in a much longer process of violent subjugation that we call modern imperialism. In that sense a long period of almost permanent "slow violence", and sometimes not so slow violence, was punctuated by a few periods of extreme escalation. Wars are the periods when structural violence goes haywire to such an extent that people usually shielded from its effects also become directly affected.

Looking at it from this perspective, warfare in the twentieth century is perhaps only a set of events, battles, bombardments, mass murders, sometimes genocides, that are primarily symptoms of a new and very problematic modernity. They were made possible, and continue to be made possible, by long, relatively slow social and economic change. This includes wealth, technological ability and executive power within societies, but also the desire, indeed the perceived necessity, to exert power over others, elsewhere.

Clearly, the causes of modern wars fall into the realm of social history. But what about the consequences? Wars can have myriad effects on economic inequality, technical innovation, social policy and other fields. Today, however, I would like to focus on slightly less obvious effects, namely the impact of periods of conflict on specific age groups. It matters a great deal at what age people experience the stress, violence and general hardships of war, both at the time and in later life. Because humans tend to live quite long, the impact of war in early life can have a very long afterlife and continue to exert an influence on societies decades later. Interestingly, these effects have attracted only limited attention from historians. They are, however, popular topics outside the academic domain.

In fact, there is a regrettable tendency in present day society to overemphasize generational difference and to relate all sorts of social conflicts and problems to clusters of birth years. Belonging to a specific generation or cohort, the terms tend to be used interchangeably, is generally believed to have an overwhelming influence on people's tastes in popular music, access to the housing market, sartorial sense, and avocado consumption. Such differences are easily politicized, because they allow for relatively precise and universal divisions between people. Virtually everybody has a known date of birth, so it is trivially easy to pigeonhole people. This simplicity of course also leads to crudeness. In spite of the current caricatures, not all baby boomers own real estate, and neither do all millennials like to eat avocado on toast.

The fact that many exceptions exist, does not mean cohort effects are not real, but it does mean that they need to be investigated with care rather than righteous indignation. It is also important to separate cohort effects from age effects. A taste for the music of Sir Cliff Richard, for example, is mostly linked to a specific cohort. The consumption of reading glasses, although currently common among roughly the same people, is much more age related. Today's youth will probably never appreciate Cliff Richard, but they sure will need reading glasses when their time has come. Liking Cliff is a cohort effect, far-sightedness an age effect. The question remains how the very violent episodes of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries have created cohort effects, what those effects are, and how they are best investigated.

In relation to war, cohort effects are most commonly mentioned in Germany, a society heavily affected by war, and afflicted with an above-average tendency to self-reflection. A good example is the notion of the *Kriegsjugendgeneration*, a term introduced by historian Ulrich Herbert to describe the German people, and specifically the men, who had been teenagers during the First World War -too young to fight, but old enough to identify strongly with the soldiers at the front. Having missed their chance to prove themselves on the battlefield, in the view of Herbert, they were particularly vulnerable, and perhaps overly keen to be vulnerable, to the dream of martially confirmed masculinity offered by Nazi Germany.³

Part of the appeal of this idea, I think, is that is very relatable. It is easy to imagine the impact of the war on these boys and it feels entirely plausible that the effect was roughly what Herbert described. On the other hand, how important this experience was, and how widely it was shared, remains to be seen. Herbert described the psychological makeup of a very specific sub-group of these men,

³ Herbert, Ulrich. 2016. *Best: biographische studien über Radikalismus, Weltanschauung und Vernunft, 1903-1989*. München: C.H. Beck.

who predominantly belonged to the relative elite. He minted the term in his biography of one such figure, Werner Best. There is plenty to say about Best (and Ulrich Herbert did), but ordinary he was not.

This brings us back to our working definition of social history. We were going to discuss structural change and ordinary people, after all. That means a change from biography to prosopography, not the study of a life, but the study of groups of lives. Before I go on to explaining how and why I think this should be done, allow me to dwell for a moment on the role of ordinary people in the writing of history today, because there is some confusion about their appropriate role in historical analysis.

Ordinary people

On a superficial level, ordinary people seem to be doing quite well in history at the moment. The days in which historians wrote almost exclusively about supposedly Great Men is decades behind us, and today we experience a steady stream of biographies, social media posts and other publications focusing on one, or a few, ordinary individuals who lived through, or died during, difficult times, especially World War Two. Some of these publications come from professional historians or established archives and research institutions. Others come from amateurs, often relatives of the people described. They give, according to their makers, “a face”, to the more abstract historical narrative. They make the past relatable.

This may seem a relatively new development, but it is not. The usage of individual life stories to represent violent episodes long antedates the Second World War. One relevant example is that of Horst Wessel. Wessel, an unremarkable, 26-year-old hooligan and SA member from Bielefeld, was shot and killed by a communist activist in Berlin in 1930. He became the “face” of a systematic campaign, designed by a young dr. Goebbels, both to emphasize the heroism of the early SA and to create a narrative of victimhood at the hands of the opponents of national socialism. The fact that Horst Wessel was, for all intents and purposes, an unremarkable and relatively unimportant man, made it easy for people to identify with him and it also made his life story pliable for propaganda purposes.

Horst Wessel’s martyrdom has ended up in the dustbin of history, but the concept underlying the Horst Wessel cult is alive and well. There seems to be a widespread belief that major historical events and violent tragedies are somehow too difficult or too boring if they do not get presented in the form of a limited number of carefully curated life stories about easily recognizable, relatable people. For the most part, these stories are nowadays used for sustaining a view of history that recognizes

past crimes and atrocities, rather than to fan the flames of fascist hatred. This is progress. But the underlying idea, that complicated historical reality has to be made accessible for the masses with stories about people with whom they can identify, is very similar.

The strategy of linking history to a relatable person, thereby creating a sense of emotional attachment, is effective, but it does little or nothing for historical understanding. The relatable individual from the past, after all, is especially welcome when their story chimes well with the narrative that is to be conveyed. They are not remembered on their own terms, as important people in and of themselves, but as illustrations.

This became evident in 2012, when a 15-year-old submitted a poem for the Dutch national commemoration day on 4 May. It was a poem about an ordinary person, his own great uncle, who had joined the Waffen SS during the early 1940s. The ensuing outrage made clear that historical portraits were welcome only if they fitted a certain narrative, and were appropriate to certain time and a certain place. We like to hear about ordinary people, it seems, for as long as they are the right kind of ordinary. This is not to say that members of the Waffen SS urgently need to be included in commemorations. But it does illustrate our relationship with ordinary people in the past.

With the coming of social media the number of mini-histories in circulation has exploded. The handy abbreviation “OTD” or “on this day” provides an easy way to sort these stories, and place them online on, for example, the date of the birth, death, or marriage of the person in question. Throw in a grainy picture and we have created another flash of profound, relatable historical content, amidst the advertorials, foodpics, and memes. I fear the sheer number of these stories alone make them precisely into the thing they set out not to be. Unremarkable. As moving as they may be individually, when aggregated to sufficiently large numbers these simple stories of individual suffering become a kind of historical elevator music.

I don’t mean to be overly grumpy or negative about the efforts of people who try to improve society by expanding historical knowledge, but I do want to delineate the border between these practices and serious historical inquiry. All good social history is about ordinary people, but not all history about ordinary people is good social history. Most of it is not even very good history.

When we talk about ordinary people, and the effect wars and other violent episodes have had on their lives, we will have to consider matters of selection, and matters of scale. When Ulrich Herbert uses terms like *Kriegsjugendgeneration*, he is ascribing certain qualities to a sizeable number of people, in this case German males born in

the early 1900s. The overwhelming majority of those people have left few or no traces. Those of them who can easily be investigated are usually in one way or another prominent, like Werner Best was, but they can hardly be expected to be representative of their generation. I don't mean to necessarily make history less relatable, less interesting or less fun, but I am afraid meaningful knowledge about societies more often than not requires us to aggregate individual stories.

Counting words

Traditionally, social historians, and other scholars interested in ordinary people, have often turned to quantitative methods to scale up the number of people they investigated. That also meant, more or less automatically, that they often focused on numerical variables. In the heyday of this approach, roughly in the 1970s, investigations into social mobility, physical height, income inequality etc. proved to be ideal vehicles for this type of work. Although they did not entirely solve problems around representativity, they did come a long way. Everybody has a height. Those heights differ, for all sorts of reasons, and are next to meaningless on their own. When aggregated, however, they can tell us a great deal about societies in the past, because average height is a reasonably good indicator of the biological standard of living during childhood of a large group.

For most twentieth century societies, we have pretty good data on the heights of young men, including Ulrich Herbert's *Kriegsjugendgeneration*, because of conscription, but we know next to nothing about the ideas of those young men. The fact that many left documentary evidence, in the form of letters and sometimes diaries, does not really help. Not only are these notoriously time consuming to assess, there is little or no formal framework to analyze them. This is a problem more generally with alphanumeric variables, or text, as it is more commonly known. Textual sources are especially useful when we investigate the special, the exceptional and the very temporary. Letters are great material for biographers, as are diaries or even inaugural lectures, but they are less useful to a social historian. Close reading, a central skill of historians, is likewise less useful in social history. We are simply not as interested in the ideas, worldview or prejudices of a particular author, however brilliant or important, but much more in the people who were not very particular at all.

Aside from close reading, which is the precise, meticulous reading of small amounts of text to unearth meanings, symbols and references that would not immediately be evident to the normal reader, the last few years have seen the emergence of the related craft of distant reading. Distant reading, or text mining, would seem to be

the opposite of close reading, but reality is a bit more complicated. In both cases, historians look at historical texts with special attention to formal aspects, choice of words, aspects of tone, things that are left unsaid, and things that are emphasized. The difference lies in scale. Close reading is done with the eyes, with limited amounts of text. Text mining, by contrast, is done in bulk. By a computer.

It seems anathema to historians to have machines take over part of their reading work. And to be fair, the notion of the computer doing the reading is not entirely accurate. Computer-assisted reading of large amounts of text usually does involve the human researcher reading big chunks of the material used. It would be difficult to ask appropriate questions otherwise. But unlike traditional reading, which is by necessity limited by the available time of the reader, computers can investigate infinitely larger amounts of text and they can do so very well, provided that we ask them the right questions. The implications for social history, and especially the social history of conflict, are difficult to overstate.

When we look at conflicts in the past, distant reading can, and I believe will, provide new and better insights than we have thus far arrived at. I will try to give an example.

In the last few years, there have been a series of court cases in Germany against very elderly people, usually well over 90. As teenagers, they worked in or around concentration camps, contributing in one way or another to the astounding suffering, and mass murder, of their inmates. Their prosecution has led to the seemingly absurd scenes of people well over the age of ninety, on trial in juvenile courts.

I am but a simple historian, so I will defer judgment on the legal merits of these cases to legal scholars, just as I will leave ethical judgments of these cases to a few million self-appointed experts on various social media. What I do want to talk about is the environments in which these people grew up and how it may or may not have impacted the behaviors common in their generation. Remember, this is social history. We are not so much talking about Oskar, Otto or Irmgard specifically, but about people like them. People growing up in Nazi Germany.

Aside from the question of their individual guilt, these people were twice unlucky. In the first place because they lived long enough to be put on trial for crimes that until quite recently were not considered suitable to prosecution. But even more so because their formative years were spent entirely inside the Nazi state, in which racist violence and even genocide was sanctioned by the state. They lived in an environment, moreover, where all information streams were subject to state control. They, and their cohort, lived in an externally enforced information bubble which was much more limited and restrictive than what facebook, insta or twitter provide today. Needless to say, that does not absolve them. A lifetime of Nazi

propaganda does not automatically or inevitably create a war criminal or a murderer. But at the same time it is necessary to recognize that life experiences, and certainly life experiences at a specific age, can have a strong and lasting impact on the lives of many people. Many ordinary people, I should add.

Court cases, such as those currently ongoing in Germany, are of course directed at individuals. But mass violence, there is a hint in the term, is not the work of individuals. Individuals do not singlehandedly start or wage total wars. They are mass activities by definition. For all the damage a single suicide terrorist, arsonist or school shooter can do, they do not come close to the carnage of warfare. Because warfare is a highly social activity, we again enter the realm of social history and we can see why distant reading can mean so much for our understanding of conflict. If the era of total war has shown anything it is that millions of people could be enticed to willingly engage in prolonged periods of warfare and accept that this led, in the best of cases, to serious discomfort, danger and loss of income, and in the worst case to an untimely, lonely, and deeply unpleasant death.

We know little about the mechanisms underlying these social phenomena. There have been some experimental studies, to see how group dynamics might entice people to behave in such a seemingly irrational way. Those experiments, however, were for the most part based on questionable research practices, shifty statistics, and very weak controls. Besides, it is not entirely obvious that short-term play-acting experiments, using university students as Guinea pigs, would easily yield insights in the behavior of much more diverse populations of millions of people, over much longer periods of time.

Likewise, we know quite a lot about combat motivation, because of the strong incentives for military organizations to investigate it. But combat troops are hardly representative of whole populations. And wars are not sustained by the unfortunate minority of a population who end up in a combat situation.

What can we do, to gain a better understanding of the collective willingness to engage in, or support, acts of mass violence? To begin with, it is important to note that seemingly firm and widely held convictions tend to change quite easily in historical time. Only a few decades ago, allowing same sex couples to get married was considered ludicrous and outlandish by many people. Today, the banality of marriage is equally available to all couples in most European countries. People in the Netherlands today, and even 4 or 5 decades ago, would hardly be supportive of waging a brutal and expensive war to regain control over a far larger country on the other side of the planet. But between 1945 and 1949, the Dutch war to recolonize the Indonesian Archipelago was quite broadly supported.

What text mining and scanning technologies will allow us to do is to write the social history of ideas. I think widespread ideas, ideologies, are important for understanding violence in our societies, and for understanding the lasting impact they have on the lives of millions.

Karl Marx, or one of his many followers, would probably have pointed out that the underlying causes of such ideologies, and indeed of mass violence, lay in the class structure of societies, in the way they were organized economically. But even if that is true, which I doubt, the mechanism of conveying the ambitions of the ruling classes onto the rest of society, happened through cultural products such as films, images, and especially text. Marx himself, I think, was acutely aware of this, since he chose to stimulate class war by making cultural products, such as the communist manifesto, rather than wait for the inevitable uprising of the proletariat.

When we look at the role of culture in relation to modern conflicts, we can see that there are two functions that culture plays to effectuate popular support. The first is to convince people, often millions of people, that conflict is directed at people who pose a significant threat, who are somehow unworthy of normal life, who are different, and undeserving of care. The Holocaust Scholar Helen Fein described this process as placing the other outside of the "universe of obligation".⁴

Stimulating negative emotions, specifically hatred towards others, is only half of the job. The identification of outsiders, enemies and hate figures is necessary, because without an enemy to direct aggression at, warfare would at most be a risky type of performance art. The second half of the job is bringing people together. Modern warfare is a collective effort and just as much as aggression needs a goal, an enemy, people waging war require a high degree of social coherence. There is no "I" in "team", as management consultants the world over are happy to inform us. There is no "I" in "total war" either. Creating a sense of belonging, of shared fate, of solidarity, is at least as essential a motivational force in the waging of war as building up a clear image of an enemy.

This is all fairly obvious. The important question, however, is not whether the creation of enmity and solidarity took place, but rather how it was done. And when. This is where distant reading techniques truly shine. Thanks to the efforts of libraries, archives and companies such as Alphabet, we have a massive amount of machine-readable text from, especially, the twentieth century. Computational analysis allows us to identify associations, changes in vocabulary and other developments that can help historians, or anybody sufficiently acquainted with the

4 Fein, Helen. 1984. *Accounting for genocide: national responses and Jewish victimization during the Holocaust*. New York: The Free Press.

historical background, to identify shifts in opinion. Techniques like word embeddings and sentiment mining make it possible to identify changes in the way in which concepts change, or are used. In the context of the Second World War, this could include terms such as “communist”, “Jew”, “Britain” or “capitalism”.

In a forthcoming paper, Milan van Lange and I have used such techniques to investigate the cruise-missile debate in the Netherlands in the 1980s. Although people felt strongly about these missiles at the time, it is a somewhat pedestrian topic compared to the warfare we are discussing here, but as a proof of concept it is quite useful. We show that while political positions were rigid, the tone of the discussion shifted markedly from one dominated by the notion of self-defense, towards one in which the dangers of nuclear proliferation became dominant. The tide was turning, well before NATO decided the rockets were not really needed anymore, anyway.

For many countries, predominantly in Europe but increasingly elsewhere, public language, in all its diversity, fickleness and hyperbole, has become researchable. That is, as long as historians take the trouble to learn the technical skills to actually do so. To be fair, the uptake has thus far been a bit disappointing, but I have good hopes for the future.

The majority of the datasets currently available are either political texts, like parliamentary proceedings, or newspapers. But as you will recall, we were going to discuss ordinary people. Ordinary people don't give speeches in parliament or write in newspapers. That is the domain of politicians, journalists and other people who have opinions for a living. The language of ordinary people is not public, but private.

Fortunately, a sizeable amount of private language has also been kept. For much of the twentieth century, letter writing was a primary means of personal communication. A staggering number of such letters has been preserved. The NIOD alone, hardly the largest collector of these sources, has around 200.000 pages of personal letters. Until recently, it was difficult, if not impossible, to analyze this source using computers. Even reading them, although some people had good handwriting at the time, can be tedious and difficult.

Since a few years, however, we have witnessed a small revolution in the field of handwritten text recognition. With a few hundred euros worth of equipment, a scanning station can be set up to rapidly digitize, and make machine readable, handwritten documents. As we speak, the NIOD (with support from the ministry of Health, Welfare and Sports, as well as the Mondriaan Fund) is busy digitizing wartime letters and adding metadata. This is, to understate the matter, an exciting development. Just as it was tremendously useful for our historical understanding to be able to know the heights, the incomes or the addresses of thousands of

historical people, we are now approaching the point where we can investigate personal expressions in bulk.

My PhD supervisor Hans Blom famously stated, decades ago, that there is no such thing as “the” public opinion.⁵ Four decades later, we are approaching the point where we can systematically investigate how opinions are formed and how they, and especially the language in which they are expressed, change with time. This will bring us no closer to identifying a single public opinion. But it will help us to understand the diversity of views and feelings expressed by specific groups of people. You will not be surprised to learn that I am particularly interested to find out how cohort effects would play into this. And although historians rarely fare well when making predictions, I fully expect a much more sophisticated understanding of the making of a warrior cohort, than we have thus far been able to arrive at.

You may be getting the impression that, just like the topic of my research, I am trying to expand the territory of social history somewhat. My aim is not, however, to conquer or assimilate the history of ideas or computational linguistics, but rather to use the insights and techniques from these fields to do better research in my own field. That said, a bit of academic expansionism should be forgiven. And since we have only a few minutes left, I would like to limit myself to modern medicine.

Early life and warfare

As I already mentioned, humans tend to have a rather long lifespan. Thanks to improved living standards and preventive medicine, many people nowadays live for eight decades or more, a longevity that was possible but unlikely at the time of their birth. The very lengthiness of human lives, quite automatically, means that many of us have lived through a great deal of history, history which has left an imprint on us in many ways. Mentally, but also physically. An aged body is an historical record, not unlike an old tree.

Some aspects of this historical record are easily detected in a living body. Think of the scars of smallpox vaccinations, once given to children, now only visible on the arms of the elderly. There are many more traces of history to be found for the astute (self) observer. People may be shorter than they could have been, because of malnourishment in the past, or their teeth can be affected by a lack of proper toothpaste and an abundance of sugar earlier on.

⁵ Blom, J.C.H. 1989. *Crisis, bezetting en herstel: tien studies over Nederland 1930-1950*. 's-Gravenhage: Nijgh & Van Ditmar Universitair.

These are relatively innocuous examples, but the late consequences of early misfortune can be severe and deadly. A country such as Japan, with one of the healthiest populations in the world and a life expectancy to match, has dealt since the late twentieth century with very high rates of tuberculosis among the elderly. Although anybody can catch TB, the disease is strongly associated with poverty. In the Japanese case, however, the prevalence of TB is not caused by the adverse circumstances under which these people live. Indeed, quite the reverse. They tend to suffer from reactivated latent tuberculosis, infections they incurred during or even well before the Second World War. Now that high living standards and quality medical care have helped them live to a high age, they become frail and the disease opportunistically reasserts itself. Like a deadly postcard from a past in which living standards were low, Tuberculosis was rife and octogenarians were rare.

Tuberculosis, or *kekaku*, as it is known in Japanese, is not specific to violent episodes in history. But the rise of militarism in Showa era Japan, and the resulting devotion of resources to pointless imperialist adventures elsewhere in Asia, culminating in the near destruction of Japan itself, created a perfect environment for the disease to thrive. TB is dangerous to teenagers. The elderly victims of the disease today were simply in the wrong place at the wrong time -seven or eight decades ago.

In the case of TB, at least the vector of the disease, *Micobacterium tuberculosis*, is well known and well understood. Since at least the 1980s, however, there has been an increasing awareness that the immediate consequences of war, such as stress and malnutrition, may well have much more complex, and long-lasting consequences, especially on people who are at the very beginning of life.

The Fetal Origins Hypothesis of the 1980s, and more recently the DOHaD paradigm (DOHaD means Developmental Origins of Health and Disease), emphasize the importance of early life for the later health of humans. And by early, I mean in utero, or just after. Maybe even shortly before conception. Obviously, fetuses, babies or toddlers would be by and large unaffected by news media and propaganda, unlike the people I discussed earlier on. But that does not mean that being born in times of total war would not leave a mark. In fact, the opposite is true. Both the obvious problems of malnutrition, but also the much less obvious effects of parental stress, can and did leave a significant marker on the human organism.

The Dutch Hunger Winter, the famine that occurred, locally but severely, in large parts of the urbanized Western Netherlands in the Winter of 1944-45, has often been used as a starting point for investigations into such effects. It was a subsistence crisis that occurred sufficiently long ago and coincided with a sufficiently orderly administration that we have inherited relatively precise data about its consequences.

I say sufficiently long ago, because we know that it can take quite long for these effects to become observable. It has recently been found that people with prenatal exposure to the 9/11 attacks in New York City, have a markedly higher incidence of attention deficit disorders than similar people without such exposure.⁶ This does not mean that this is the most important consequence of that episode for them, it is simply a type of problem that reveals itself relatively early on, most notably in school. A higher propensity for heart attacks, for example, would become apparent much later, because the number of twentysomethings suffering heart attacks is anyway very small. We hope for the best, by the way, when these men and women enter their 50s.

So. If we want to investigate the long-term impact of war-related circumstances on later life, we either need to go back in time quite far, to a period when the people who are old now were still young, or we alternatively can investigate very young children now and simply wait until they grow old. The latter option may seem to be included for comedic effect, but that is not the case. Projects such as the Avon Longitudinal Study of Parents and Children, which started in the 1990s, really do try to follow people over very long periods of time. Still, waiting for people to grow old and see how they do is playing a long game. Not necessarily the kind of game that research funding agencies prefer.

It is not surprising, in that context, that researchers in these fields tend to prefer using older, historical data to investigate these effects retroactively. There is, however, a significant downside to doing so. The data collected in the past, inevitably, were created by people from the past, according to ideas prevalent in the past, and they also relate to a population in the past. You would think, with so much past, that these researchers would seek advice from, or read the work of historians. This, however, is not the case. There are currently over a hundred publications that use the Dutch Hunger winter as a source of data. Virtually none of these engage in any way at all with historical literature about this difficult period. The recent work of Ingrid de Zwart, a seminal historical study into the Hunger Winter, has been broadly ignored by researchers with a medical background.

This is of course very disappointing for a historian, but our hurt feelings are not the issue here. What is problematic is that these publications generally rely on a number of assumptions that, in the light of both recent and older historiography, are simply incorrect. One of these assumptions, implicitly made in all of these investigations, is that of non-migration. The underlying population, out of which the pregnant

6 Manzari, N., Matvienko-Sikar, K., Baldoni, F. et al. Prenatal maternal stress and risk of neurodevelopmental disorders in the offspring: a systematic review and meta-analysis. *Soc Psychiatry Psychiatr Epidemiol* 54, 1299–1309 (2019).

women under investigation come, is assumed to be stable. This is not borne out by the available historical evidence. People were leaving famine-infested cities in droves, completely altering the makeup of the urban population. There is no reason to believe that pregnant women would have been especially keen to stick around and face starvation, if they did not have to.

I may have suggested that willful historical ignorance pervades all of medical research in this field, but that is not actually the case. Like a little coastal village in Roman-occupied Gaul, dr. Sam Schoenmakers of the department of Obstetrics and Gynecology at the Erasmus MC has bucked the trend and set up an investigation that explicitly does use historical expertise. For over a year now, Sam and I have been collaborating on what I think is the first ever project in the (hereby established) field of historical obstetrics, or obstetric history.

What are we doing? Basically, one of this city's main birth clinics, the *Rijkswaarnschouw voor Vroedvrouwen*, has left a complete record of all births that took place there. The so-called *partusboeken*, currently in the National Archives in The Hague, contain detailed records of thousands of births. Starting with the period 1938-1948, these are now in the process of being digitized. Although we have currently run out of funding, with only half of the births done, we can already distinguish important patterns.

As any social historian would expect, we can distinguish the impact of class, for example by looking at the neighborhoods where young mothers lived, in the bodies of both mothers and their children. We can also, and this is a much more radical insight, see that the occupation years *before* the Hunger Winter saw a clear deterioration in the health of both mothers and babies.

It is still early days for this investigation, which is done with the help of ambitious interns from the history department, but it is clear that we can reach a far more sophisticated understanding of the impact of wars and disasters on early life by collaborating, than by working in isolation. That I get to learn a few things about the exciting field of neonatology, is an unexpected but welcome bonus.

Conclusion

In 1967, the blues singer Albert King recorded the song this lecture takes its title from. Born under a bad sign is a song outlining the miserable life of an unfortunate, deserted and illiterate man who reflects that "If it wasn't for bad luck, I wouldn't have no luck at all". Obviously, this is a bit of a hyperbole, but it reflects the unpleasant reality that being born in unfortunate circumstances almost always has a lasting, negative impact throughout life. If there is more life, that is. Even today, in peacetime, in a developed country, infant and child mortality in the poorer neighborhoods of Rotterdam is more than double that in affluent areas.

In times of serious disruption, caused by violence, natural disasters or the unfolding climate emergency, young and very young people stand to lose a great deal. This may be because of the adverse physical effects that, once incurred, can last a lifetime. We know that the people who have the misfortune to grow up amidst violence, may become perpetrators themselves, as we see in elderly Germans standing trial today, but also among former child soldiers the DR Congo, the Central African Republic, and Uganda.

I'd like to end on a bright note, but the truth is that we are failing children and young people in conflicts, refugee camps, and disaster areas all over the planet, and that we are doing so systematically. The problems we are creating for the world of the future are unforeseeable, but they are unlikely to be minor. Admittedly, historians are not in the business of future, but I hope I have made it somewhat clear that the systematic study of the consequences of armed conflict in the past, using the tools of the social historian, can at least contribute to a better understanding of the problems ahead of us.

Thanks

Although I had originally made different plans, I have spent much of the past two decades investigating aspects of the violent history of the twentieth century. I have worked in several places during that period, but The NIOD in Amsterdam and the Erasmus School of History, Culture and Communication at the Erasmus University, have provided me with a temporary academic home many times throughout this period. I am very happy that, with the establishment of this chair, I am now formally linked to both institutions in a more or less permanent way. Both institutions do exciting, important work, of course, but most of all they are institutions where I feel at home, because I like the people working in them. I am grateful, and proud, to be part of both these institutions, but more so to be part of these communities.

One longstanding ambition of mine, as you may have gathered from the above, was to work more on the interface between history and medicine, or history and human biology. The collaboration between Erasmus MC, ESHCC, and increasingly the NIOD, is still in its fledgling state. But I am confident that we can make a contribution both to this university, to the wider field of research, and indeed to the world. I especially want to mention our work with Global Alliance on War, Conflict & Health, which aims specifically to use research findings in the day-to-day practice of helping and saving people trapped in conflict situations. I want to thank all those involved in this collaboration for their enthusiasm and their patience.

Traditionally, historians often work alone. Over the past years, however, I have increasingly worked in teams. I would like to specifically thank the people with whom I have collaborated on research into the Srebrenica massacre, various digital humanities projects, the medical history group, the birth cohort project, and our current research into wartime psychiatry. I will not list all these people by name, for that would take too much time. But it is worth pointing out that I would have amounted to very little without them, and I certainly would not have been a professor today, if it wasn't for their help, guidance and friendship.

I have looked at a few other inaugural lectures, and it is customary to end them with some friendly words for partners, children and other family members. Newly minted professors take the opportunity to apologize for their unhealthy devotion to work, their long days in the office and their frequent absences, to travel to conferences or for fieldwork. To be honest, I don't usually work very hard at all. And besides, due to the current pandemic, I have spent an inordinate amount of time at home over the last two years, much of it with my sons, Minne and Edo, who were also homebound for months. I hope they did not get entirely fed up with me, but I would still like to promise them, and my wife, Kayoko, that I'll try to spend some more time on campus from now on.



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The impact of mass violence on societies is immense and diverse. In this inaugural lecture, Ralf Futselaar discusses the cohort effects of wars and other violent episodes on groups of people, how they are best investigated and why their impact on societies may be significant and long-lasting.

De gevolgen van massaal geweld voor samenlevingen zijn veelsoortig en immens. In deze oratie bespreekt Ralf Futselaar de cohorteffecten van oorlogen en andere gewelddadige periodes op groepen mensen, hoe die effecten het beste onderzocht kunnen worden, en waarom de gevolgen groot en vooral langdurig kunnen zijn.

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