Population, the Lessons of War, and the Promise of Peace

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Nineteenth century Malthusian theory gained significant attention at the outbreak of World War I. Beginning with his 1798 book *Essay on the Principle of Population*, Thomas Malthus had argued that war served as a check on population when resources became scarce. His work gained a substantial number of followers. During the modernist era of science and progress that unfolded after 1900, neo-Malthusians observed real conditions leading to war, but they were now less willing to accept war as inevitable. They looked more carefully at Malthus’s assertions that overpopulation would lead to competition for resources and hence into violent conflict, and noted that humankind now had within its hands the power to control births.

The scientific community added arguments of Charles Darwin, who, according to the prominent neo-Malthusian V. Drysdale, “has shown beyond the possibility of dispute that over-reproduction leads to a constant struggle for existence. Animal life is one perpetual conflict, and man too has been in a constant state of war—the impelling force being really, although not always ostensibly, the need for food.”

Opponents argued that birth rates in Europe had been declining and policy makers should instead address food supply and distribution, which would make the control of births unnecessary. Darwin, himself, did not condone family limitation and considered artificial checks to natural population growth as problematic and detrimental to healthy family life.

Yet, Malthusianism prevailed among intellectuals and the upper classes, drawing from the teachings of natural selection.

Before the outbreak of the First World War and during its execution, observers also wrote on Malthusianism within a framework of militarism. The contemporary state of Europe drew significant attention from Malthusians, and in the United States, they argued that rational, progressive thinkers should view the Europeans’ tendency toward war with disgust. In this “Progressive Era” it seemed unimaginable to them that self-proclaimed civilizations could not resolve their conflict without resorting to arms.

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Edwin W. James described the increasing destructiveness of weaponry and war in “The Malthusian Doctrine and War,” published in the *Scientific Monthly* in 1916. Late nineteenth century technology that advanced transportation, industrialization, and economic expansion in Western Europe and the United States also contributed to innovations in warfare, he wrote, and nations with access to chemicals, explosives, modern steel-making processes, and mass production, applied them to war technology. Capitalist competition between and among nationalist economies added strong undercurrents to militarist preparations, creating an increasingly dangerous environment that many believed was sure to lead to war.

James described a world in which historical ills may have been eradicated while an inclination toward war was amplified. “In at least two of the great western nations compulsory military service has existed for many years; in several others large standing armies and powerful navies have been maintained in times of peace,” he noted. “While the public mind has been turned toward ameliorating the harshness of famine and pestilence, it has been accustomed to consider war as a possible contingency, not to be combated as undesirable but to be prepared for.” The preparations for war guaranteed an increase in intensity and destructiveness of human life when it did come. James argued that man had become desensitized to the military culture surrounding him, paying taxes to support it, always aware of army units and naval fleets nearby, his children playing on fortification ramps and slopes while vacationing at seaside resorts. In some cases, he served in militias or attended military school. “The individual mind finds no shock in considering a resort to war.”

James reminded readers Malthus had argued that because resources multiplied only arithmetically while population multiplied geometrically, there would be shortages. If population were not checked through preventive measures such as delayed marriage, it would ultimately be limited through positive measures, such as famine, disease, and war. As famine and disease had been alleviated by modern man, the only positive check remaining was war. And because man had been so conditioned to accept war as inevitable—through “civilized” society’s creation of a military culture—he was accepting the only positive check left, according to Malthusianism, which could meet and temper the pressures of population.

There were aspects of modern society that Malthus could not have taken into account and the capacity for which transformed even further in the nineteenth century, creating an even wider chasm between his analyses and the world at the turn of the twentieth century. First, Malthus described what might be considered pre-modern societies where lack of food, for example, directly led to individuals turning on one another. In more modern economies and governing systems, however, the individual was more remotely and indirectly connected with military action. While individuals were recruited and assigned to engage in war, decisions to declare war were made at much higher levels. In addition, it was only necessary for governments to give the impression that there were economic pressures or scarcity of resources so severe as to make danger imminent.

Second, sensibilities regarding “necessities” had shifted through the nineteenth century. A growing middle class had become reliant on a certain standard of living which expanded their notion of essentials beyond food and water and engaging in war for the sake of protecting a certain standard

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of living against all others had become more likely. As modern war took place between and among nations, orchestrated by nations’ leaders, it became more critical to look at unequal distribution of wealth in natural resources. The acquisition of petroleum and metals such as iron and copper needed for industrial strength and consequently increased accumulation of capital might occur because of an advantageous geographical position and chance location. While disadvantaged nations could practice conservation and frugality, there may come a day when they resort to war in order to forcibly share in the wealth denied to them by circumstance.

A consciousness of global inequity and the potential for war due to lack of accessibility of resources or perceived economic pressures inspired peace movements. However, an enlightened attitude toward international relations should not be comprised simply of propaganda in favor of peace for the sake of peace, wrote James. Rather, the causes of true economic pressures must be removed. Recommendations included advancements in science and rural development, making rural life more attractive, elimination of trade restrictions, agreements, and tariffs in order to permit free trade among all nations, the abolition of absolutism, and greater efficiency in republican forms of government. In addition, governments should legalize the dissemination of contraceptive information.

The summer of 1914 had marked a peak in pacifism in the United States. The new century had ushered in progressive ideals of cleaning up corruption in government and business, implementing programs of economic justice, expanding democratic institutions including the right to vote for women, alleviating social ills through public health, nutrition programs, and child labor laws, and in essence eliminating many of what progressives termed the root causes of conflict. Peace would stem naturally from such an environment, they believed. By 1917, however, militarism became an integral part of culture. Pacifists did not see this as the exception; rather, an intensification of the norm. They strove hard to infuse the populace with pacifistic sensibilities, but the outbreak of the Great War and the Americanization of what was to become the First World War seemed to tear those efforts apart.

In addition, it became clearer that the U.S. was not, at its foundation, a peaceful nation at all. With the onset of war and eventual U.S. entrance in 1916, plans for international arbitration were dropped, as were movements toward toleration for minorities, greater freedom of conscience, and freedom of speech. Elsie Clews Parsons explained why she believed the American public became acculturated so easily to recent militaristic patterns. She noted how Americans exhibited pre-existent resemblances which lent themselves to militarism:

Negro disenfranchisement, segregation and lynching suggested that racial discrimination is not altogether alien to American practice. A number of instances in the treatment accorded to Hebrews might also be cited in this connection, as well as certain attitudes towards immigrants, particularly immigrants from southern or southeastern Europe.

Americanization, whether conscious or unconscious, is characterized not only by racial discrimination, it insists on homogeneity, and the homogeneity or like-mindedness it

5 Ibid., pp. 267-271.
6 Elsie Clews Parsons, “Patterns for Peace or War,” The Scientific Monthly 5:3 (September, 1917), p. 230.
demands permits of so little variation that we are led to question whether respect or tolerance for minorities in general is a notable American trait."

Pacifists also warned that businesses and corporations benefited greatly from militarism; the buildup of armaments brought profits and replenishment after the use of those armaments brought even more profits. When society saw economic benefit in war, leaders were less inclined to address basic weaknesses that led to war. The price paid for this superficial boost to the economy was further human destruction, even more widespread and brutal destruction as advances in technology led to greater casualties. Further, corporations were exempt from regular taxes as they contributed to the war effort, placing increased burdens on the working class who sacrificed through their labor and increased taxes to pay for defense. World War I was referred to as a “rich man’s war.”

At times, pacifists used terms such as hysteria and epidemic of fear when describing the newfound intensity of militarism in American society during the war. Columbia University Professor of Sociology and History of Civilization, Franklin H. Giddings, dismissed such rhetoric, arguing that it was reasonable to expect one percent of the male population to serve in the military. Adjusting for age and ability, a force of one million would represent five percent of the population, still realistic, though pacifists would consider it monstrous. The term militaristic might appropriately be used to describe Europe, he said, with German forces—those organized plus those trained but not organized combined—numbered 8,000,000 in a country of less than 70,000,000. Organized forces in the six greater nations of Europe—Germany, Austria-Hungary, France, Russia, Italy, and Great Britain—totaled 25,000,000. He concluded a U.S. force of 1,000,000 should not be considered evidence of militarism.

In addition, the United States was comprised of significantly more territory than European nations, given the area of Alaska and possessions abroad. This gave the U.S. more coastline to protect and also a less dense population overall. The lack of population density would make any military presence less noticeable. A million-man force, supported by five million in reserves should have no effect on American domestic life. “It would be neither more nor less appreciable than a police force of 15,000 men in [the] city of Philadelphia, with its population of more than one million and a half inhabitants,” wrote Giddings. Giddings argued that the democratic nature of military service requirements strengthened democracy, and that military training was beneficial in and of itself. It instilled discipline, responsibility, love of country, loyalty, and obedience in young men. Throughout history, he contended, democracies and republics did not become militaristic, while monarchies always did, or tended to become so. Democracies had nothing to gain and everything

7 Ibid., pp. 230-231.
8 Ibid., pp. 235-237.
10 Ibid., p. 178.
to lose by engaging in an aggressive war. But they placed themselves in danger by failing to protect themselves against aggression of the ruthless.\textsuperscript{11}

While many intellectual leaders argued that fundamental tenets of modern civilization should prevent war, age-old connections between population, manpower, and military might did not die. The connections were rooted in biblical descriptions equating the bearing of sons as the increase of arrows in one’s quiver. Some might expect that technological advances in weaponry would make such ancient connections irrelevant, but that was not the case. The capacity for destruction and lives lost only increased, and if a nation were to remain strong—in militarists’ eyes, Malthusians feared—population should remain strong.

In addition, medical advances had contributed to rapid increases in population, and a higher standard of living created higher demands on resources in developed nations and their colonies. From 1800 to the onset of World War I, the world’s population nearly tripled, from 640,000,000 to 1,693,000,000. The greatest growth occurred not in less developed regions, but in wealthier countries. While birth rates dropped alongside industrialization, so did death rates, with better health lowering infant mortality and extending longevity. Europe’s population increased from 127,000,000 in 1741 to 452,000,000 in 1914, and similar growth appeared to take hold wherever there was British influence, or what was often termed Western civilization. Areas that exhibited tremendous population growth in the same period included the United States, Australia, South Africa, Egypt, Argentina, and the Philippines.\textsuperscript{12} In addition to food supply, the British were also concerned about continuing increases in consumption of coal. Nearly all industries had become dependent on coal, either directly or indirectly. In addition, an abundant supply of coal was required to maintain Britain’s position in global trade, and the export of manufactured goods was necessary for increased exchange of food imports. As Britain was importing a majority of its food, its coal reserves were diminishing by millions of tons annually. Very importantly, coal could not be regenerated and replenished as agricultural produce could. It was estimated that in 1801, Britain consumed more than ten million tons of coal per year and by the onset of World War I was consuming more than 263 million tons per year.\textsuperscript{13} He referred to the classic work, \textit{The Coal Question}, in which Professor W. S. Jevons warned in the 1860s, “We cannot long continue our present rate of progress. The first check to our growing prosperity must render our population excessive.”\textsuperscript{14}

In his 1917 work \textit{Essays in Wartime}, Havelock Ellis criticized those who did not see a problem in recent trends in population growth. He was a friend and associate of Margaret Sanger, leader of the birth control movement, and a strong proponent of birth control himself. He was particularly

\begin{footnotesize}
\textsuperscript{11} Ibid., p. 179.


\textsuperscript{14} Ibid., p. 18.
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hard on religious figures and condemned contemporary references to the biblical order to “increase and multiply,” describing it as an “authoritative command of a tribal God who was, according to the scriptural narrative, addressing a world inhabited by eight people.” The world of the early twentieth century was a starkly different place, he reminded. Still, some professed patriots held onto this notion in their “clamoring for plentiful and cheap men.” While it may have been considered a religious, moral, natural, scientific, and patriotic duty at one time, the earth could no longer withstand the practice of having as many children as possible. This, he said, set the stage for war.\(^{15}\)

Ellis agreed that war may well affect the quality of the new race detrimentally, and there was no doubt of the effects—while perhaps temporary—on the quantity of men. While there may be a brief increase in birth rates once veterans returned home, the drafting of a large portion of young men in the first place diminished the population through the “pouring out [of] the blood of the young manhood of the race,” said Ellis.

The wars of a century spill 120,000,000 gallons of blood, enough to fill three million forty-gallon casks, or to create a perpetual fountain sending up a jet of 150 gallons per hour, a fountain which has been flowing unceasingly ever since the dawn of history. It is to be noted, also, that those slain on the battlefield by no means represent the total victims of a wary, but only about half of them.\(^{16}\)

Ellis also looked more directly at the eugenic effects of war. “For war never hits men at random. It only hits a carefully selected percentage of ‘fit’ men. It tends, in other words, to strike out temporarily, or in a fatal event, permanently, from the class of fathers precisely that percentage of the population which the eugenist wishes to see in that class.” He went on:

For, however an army is recruited, it is only those men reaching a fairly high standard of fitness who are accepted, and these, even in times of peace, are hampered in the task of carrying out the race, which the less fit and the unfit are free to do at their own good pleasure. At the time of the Napoleonic Wars, the age of conscription was lowered to eighteen and marriage was an exemption from service. This resulted in many young men marrying hastily to avoid the draft, certainly injurious to the race.\(^{17}\)

Ellis blamed German militarists for advocating for war, in part, because they saw it as a regenerator—a process that would strengthen the hardiness of the future German population. According to Hegel, “War invigorates humanity, as storms preserve the sea from putrescence.” To Molke, “War is an integral part of God’s universe, developing man’s noblest attributes.” To Treitschke, “The condemnation of war is not only absurd, it is immoral.”\(^{18}\) A recently unified imperial Germany adopted expansion as a primary foreign policy, coming comparatively late to the colonization process and thus turning its attention toward neighboring nations on the continent.


\(^{16}\) Ellis, *Essays in Wartime*, p. 29.

\(^{17}\) Ibid., p. 33.

\(^{18}\) Ibid., p. 36.
of Europe. The *Geopolitiker* argued that nation-states were organically expansive and the obvious result of population pressure in a growing nation.¹⁹

Adelyne More disputed major claims against the use of artificial contraception, saying it was the most effective way to limit births and that limiting births had a number of advantages. First, it was the only way women could hope to attain independence and self-development, which were key to the progress of humanity as a whole. Second, it was the most effective way to alleviate infant mortality, as mothers would have more sufficient time and attention to devote to each child. Next, it was necessary to limit family size if one wished to better his or her economic situation. More also argued that modern prophylaxis (through the use of rubber condoms and diaphragms) prevented the spread of venereal disease. And very importantly the regulation of population was “the most effective way of ensuring the cessation of war.” She maintained that the feeling of expansion when brought up against geographical barriers acted blindly in the direction of conflict, whether in colonial rivalry or territorial “swarming.” In addition, the lowering of social conditions due to overpopulation made people long for a change of any kind, and at any price. They may not consciously desire war, but their resistance to the powerful interests which flourish on war was weakened to a dangerous degree.²⁰

According to More, industrialization could not be considered a primary cause of a declining birth rate, as it fell rapidly between 1870 and 1900 in much of Europe and after 1900 in Germany, after industry began flourishing. She argued it was simply because women of the upper classes had decided not to have as many children. Though birth rates continued to decline during the first years of the war, More feared they might quickly rise once the conflict had come to an end. Militarists in Germany could appeal for more births once again on the grounds of patriotism, particularly if they viewed the Russians and English as producing too many babies. This appeal, she reminded, was the one remaining source of danger—the primary basis for wars in the past.²¹

Physician and birth control advocate C. Killick Millard acknowledged the militarist argument and fear of Germany among the British, noting that most nations have an “inherent desire to increase and become greater as compared with their neighbors, and if necessary at the expense of their neighbors.” This was often considered and taught as patriotism, but Millard described it as a pseudo-patriotism, which threatened world peace. “All through the world’s history, ever since the herdsmen of Lot strove with those of Abraham, one of the fundamental and predisposing causes of war, apart from immediate and personal causes, has been the pressure of increasing populations and the desire for national expansion.” He added, quoting a recent Birth Rate Commission report, “A pressure of population in any country brings as its chief historic consequence overflows and

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²¹ Ibid. pp. 25, 51.
migrations into neighboring or other accessible countries, not only for peaceful settlement, but also for conquest and for the subjugation and exploitation of the weaker peoples. This always remains a chief cause of international dispute and wars.”

Millard contended that German dreams of national expansion and world supremacy were fostered and encouraged by the rapid growth in population, due primarily to its high birth rate in the late nineteenth century. Quoting from the first chapter of Prince von Bulow’s 1913 Imperial Germany, entitled “Germany’s Struggle for World Power,” which justified a shift from Bismarck’s Continental Policy to one of expansion, Millard wrote,

The course of events has long driven German policy out from the narrow confines of Europe into the wider world. It was not ambitious restlessness which urged us to imitate the Great Powers that had long ago embarked on world politics. The strength of the Nation . . . as it grew, burst the bounds of its old home, and its policy was dictated by the new interests and needs.

He also quoted from a 1916 Berliner Post opinion piece:

Can a great and rapidly growing nation like Germany always renounce all claims to further development or to the expansion of its political power? The final settlement with France and England, the expansion of our colonial possessions in order to create new German homes for the overflow of our population . . . these are the problems which must be faced in the near future.

At the Fifth International Neo-Malthusian and Birth Control Conference held in London in 1922, Swedish physician Anton Nyström reinforced the neo-Malthusian view that contraception could well act as a preventive of birth and consequently overpopulation in this modern century, so that “death-bringing” population checks of the past like wars and extermination of peoples might come to an end. He pointed to reckless killing in the past, with examples from wars between civilized states:

For instance, when the Assyrian Empire was destroyed by the Medes and the Persians, nearly half the population perished; hundreds of thousands of Germans were killed by the Romans when they threatened the Roman Empire; when Carthage was taken and destroyed by the Romans, the greater part of its 700,000 inhabitants were killed . . . The crusades led to enormous losses of human life; the same was the case with the Europeans in the Thirty Years War. The witch trials and the cruelties of the Inquisition led to the death of innumerable persons, in total at least 1-1/3 million.

Nyström warned that despite the practice of preventing births throughout history, overpopulation won out and contributed to pressures for territory and ultimate war. Significant growth in numbers and the need for new sources of food had driven the Germans to expand into the Roman Empire. The same was true of Asians moving west into Europe. Colonies had served as outlets for


overcrowded European countries, and this was the case with the British colonies in North America. Throughout the process of expansion, European nations battled one another for possession of colonies and colonists devastated Native populations.

Germany based its military and colonial policies on the recent increase of its population, argued neo-Malthusians, for it saw strength in its own nation against others that did not experience so great an increase as its own. There was no question that this was a primary cause of the outbreak of war in Europe. If Germany had a population of 50 million instead of more than 60 million, “there would have been no world war.”25 Social hygienist Max Gruber argued that the war was inevitable and unavoidable due to the recent growth in Germany’s population from forty million to eighty million. He called the war a “biological necessity.”26 Ellis added that the belligerents responsible for initiating the war—Russia, Austria, and Serbia, in addition to Germany—had the highest birth rates in Europe. He noted that they had not yet experienced a lowering of their birth rates, as had occurred in other European nations in the previous century because they were among the most backward people in Europe.27 Gruber estimated that if Germany’s population continued to grow at the same rate that it had between 1900 and 1905, by the end of the twentieth century it would reach 250,000,000, making it invulnerable to other nations. Ellis pointed out that Russia, with a growing population, could indeed be a threat to Germany, and also that Germany’s birth rate had begun to fall.28

Among the most gruesome of considerations regarding population and the categorizations of humans in the age of modern warfare, were those using the term “cannon fodder.” Societies of the past did argue extensively for the need to fight wars and that required military might in the form of manpower. Neo-Malthusians following World War I recognized that new technology had increased weaponry’s capacity for death, and maintained a modern, peaceful world should leave no room for the idea of children as future cannon fodder. Such a notion was deemed antiquated at best. In addition, methods of carrying out war were changing, particularly with the introduction of air attacks. Cicely Hamilton argued that should a nation be able to engage in air warfare, “a teeming population will be a real handicap to a belligerent nation’ and that military strategy and tactics of the future will be directed less towards the destruction of armies in the field than towards the terrorizing and stampeding of large masses of disorganized civilians.” She continued:

Cities and industrial districts stampeded will resolve themselves into hordes of famished nomads—men and women who are dangerous as well as useless because deprived of their means of livelihood. If sufficiently panic-stricken when they take flight, they will avoid railways and roads—which are likely to be targets from the air—and not only devour the countryside, but trample it beneath their feet. . . . In a day or two a vagrant and millionfold starvation—grown reckless, a widespread invasion by famished plunderers, more terrible by far than invasion by an army that is fed and disciplined.

25 Ibid., pp. 177-178.
26 Ellis, Essays in Wartime, p. 65.
27 Ibid.
28 Ibid, pp. 67-68.
Hamilton decried any continued consideration of population as backup support for a nation’s military forces. While non-combatants may have served some purpose as an auxiliary force in the past, air warfare would instead work to destroy centers of production, sending civilians into a state of chaos. She warned that “starvation on the run” had become the military objective of the future, and “the aim and object of the ‘scientific’ soldier of the future will be to produce nomadic anarchy and break an enemy Government by burdening it with useless mouths.” This would be more effective where populations were dense.29

The discussion of warfare continued. In her presentation “War and Malthusianism,” the German feminist and pacifist Helene Stöcker reflected on the hope she and her Malthusian colleagues had held in 1911, before the outbreak of war, when the last international conference had been held in Dresden. Though the war had since brought disillusionment, skepticism, and despair, they had not been totally discouraged and she felt once again inspired by the London gathering. She acknowledged an intensification of their efforts due to the war, saying that its destruction served as evidence that population control was necessary. Various political parties in Europe were demanding legalized abortion by this time. Soviets, free from religious condemnation, were working to provide abortion access as a woman’s right to equality and as a solution to poverty and Germans were considering the same. Stöcker reminded her audience that preventing conception was preferable to ending a pregnancy at the very least for health reasons, arguing for more widespread dissemination of contraceptives and contraceptive information. She also advocated for better protections for women in the workplace, so that they would not have to labor in factory environments proving dangerous to her health and to that of an unborn child. In addition, she pointed to the hypocrisy of condemning abortion—considering it murder—while believing the wartime murder of adult men natural and necessary.

For good reason, at the last German Conference of Pacifists, a Catholic chaplain received the greatest applause when he declared he had always pleaded the following point of view: . . . You have no right to proclaim the holiness of the unborn life of the human embryo as long as you have not secured the protection and the inviolability of human life against the murderous force of war.

Stöcker pointed to advances made in recognizing the benefits of birth control information since the war and again hoped leaders would acknowledge the truth of war, that it was unnecessary and a threat to human life and the progress of man. For those who had suggested the Great War was necessary in moving civilization forward to the goal of peace, she quoted Napoleon, who believed war itself did not lead to an eternal peace: “Someone said after a terrible battle, looking at the numerous dead: ‘They will bring us through their deaths eternal peace.’ Napoleon answered, ‘I am afraid they will keep it for themselves.’” Stöcker added, “It is the Living’s turn to make use of this knowledge so terrible confirmed by the last war.”30


So convinced were neo-Malthusians gathered at the Fifth International Conference that overpopulation contributed to war, that Harold Cox, president of the “National and International” session put forth the following resolution:

The Fifth International Neo-Malthusian and Birth Control Conference calls attention now to the generally admitted fact that over-population due to high birth rates is the most potent cause of international rivalry and war. It also wishes to point out that mere numbers are not an effective protection to a nation in the event of war, as modern warfare is becoming more and more a question of science and engineering directed and carried out by highly trained individuals. The three conditions for securing universal peace and national security are (a) the limitation of the birth rate of each country to its area and resources, (b) increase of racial efficiency through abstention of reproduction of the unfit, and (c) development of international law and international co-operation in place of national rivalries.

It therefore calls upon the Governments of all nations to promote the extension of Birth Control knowledge, especially among their least efficient inhabitants, and urges the League of Nations to proclaim as a general principle that increase of numbers is not to be regarded as a justification for national expansion, but that each nation should limit its numbers to its own resources.31

The Fifth International Conference marked a notable intersection among the history of birth control, First World War, and peace efforts. It was there that leaders articulated, with a greater degree of evidence in their minds, the many ways in which population issues related to war in the modern era. Their case for wider access to contraception in both the developed and less developed world was fortified by world events, as tragic as they were. Though the League of Nations did not fully embrace birth control policies, the United Nations made them a key part of their efforts following the Second World War and into the twenty-first century.