Benefits of Tragedies: Are They Worth It?

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Introduction

Why do social tragedies happen? Philosophers have pondered this question for ages. There are certain events in history when exorbitant numbers of humans have died. Why do horrible events such as plagues and wars happen? Why did the Black Death wipe out a third of the population in Europe? What is the true function for war? Not just what we see, but what is its purpose in the scheme of life? Is there something good that comes from these tragic occurrences? I think that sometimes a tragic event can occur to prevent an even worse tragedy. If events like the Black Death or wars had not occurred, what would things be like today? I feel there must be some good reason or these events would not have happened. In an attempt to answer this question I will examine three specific events in history. I will look at the losses of life due to these events. Statistical data will become extremely important. To determine benefits of these three specific tragedies I will focus mainly on economics.

The one thing these types of events have in common is that they decrease the population. Is depopulation the reason these events happened? If population had continually increased from the time of the Middle Ages without significant setbacks, what would the world be like today? As it is, we do not have enough food to feed the world population. In this paper I will try to determine what the population would have been today without the Black Death, the
American Civil War, and World War II. What effect did these three events have on the world? Did anything good come from these ominous events? I will also examine how these events effected the economies of certain countries involved in them. England suffered the most from the Black Death, the Civil War has been called the bloodiest in American history, and France was decimated in World War II. I believe there must be some good reason for these events or they would not have occurred.

The Black Death

One of the most well known population theories is that of Thomas Malthus. He claimed that there were 'positive checks' to population. These checks, "are various...arising from vice or misery, which in any degree contributes to shorten the natural duration of human life...[including] epidemics, wars, plague, and famine".¹ One of the first reported cases of the plague was during Justinian's reign over the Roman empire. This outbreak, "in the words of Gibbon, effected 'a visible decrease of the human species, which has never been repaired in some of the fairest countries of the globe'".² The Black Death of the fourteenth century was a very gruesome disease. Purple spots caused by hemorrhages marked the victims. Some other symptoms were chest pains, inflammation of the lungs and throat, and vomiting of blood. Statistical data from the time is scarce; however, different sources estimate the losses due to this plague at between one third and one forth of the population of Europe.³ "Europe was again in that state of
underpopulation from which it had wrested itself since the twelfth century." This is obviously one of the most significant depopulation events of all times. One can sometimes wonder why it was necessary for such an abominable event to occur. The presence of death was felt throughout the English countryside as well as in the cities. Forty-four percent of the clergy in the dioceses of York and Lincoln were taken by the Black Death. Some villages in Cambridge reported death rates of up to seventy percent. Hundreds of people per day were being buried in London. Many people during the 1350's may have wondered why God could allow that many people to die. "There are numerous instances in history when a great plague which has wiped out a considerable part of the population has made life much easier for the survivors for some years or even decades...". Is this the answer? Did all those people die to make life easier for those who survived?

Another benefit of the plague was that it gave a new vigor to preventive medicine. It "brought higher standards of medical education and practice, municipal physicians, and dispensaries, increased the number of physicians, and inspired a large corpus of medical literature the value of which transcended its primary purpose." The Black Death gave the medical profession a new importance.

One good benefit of the plague was improved living conditions. The people of England began to consider sanitation problems. Gloucester, in 1348, broke ties with
Bristol in trying to cut itself off from the filth and presence of the plague in that city. The Crown decided action must be taken on a greater scale. Prior to the Black Death, residents of London and other cities were allowed to throw trash into the streets, but now this became illegal.

...in succeeding years these and other sanitary ordinances appeared from time to time. Declaring that many maladies had resulted from dumping filth and waste into ditches, rivers, and other waters near towns, these penalized anyone, as high as 20[pounds], who caused 'corruption near a city or great town to corrupt the air.' Defiling the Themes and keeping nuisances, including slaughterhouses, regularly came in for attention.

The Black Death, therefore brought a new awareness of the importance of cleanliness.

The Black Death seemed to lead to the end of traditional Medieval institutions in England. "The shortage of workers following the Black Death...led to a rise in wages and probably facilitated the shift from serfdom to free labor." Wages skyrocketed, as did prices. Economic advances seemed to come to a halt. Many fields went uncultivated due to lack of labor, and bridges and roads went unrepaired. This does not seem to indicate a better life for the survivors. However, one must look at another class: the peasants.

Wage increases, depending on the area of work, were between fifty to one hundred percent. "Enterprising peasants once having tasted not merely freedom but economic well-being saw a future for themselves as capitalists, however small the scale". Land was being offered at
cheaper prices which made its acquisition easier for the peasants. The surviving peasants might also have argued that the Black Death aided in their fight for freedom from the lord of the manor. Many people took advantage of the situation to make a career change. "Clerks became merchants, former workmen became employers and contractors, farm laborers became gentleman farmers."12 Peasant lives seem to have been improving, but for the lord of the manor it was a different situation.13

Many manors suffered greatly from the Black Death. There are some instances where the entire population of a manor was eliminated. Two-thirds of the renters were lost on two manors in Oxfordshire and Hampshire.14 The landowners that survived had to face rising costs of production. Not only were wages for workers increasing, but also the price of the supplies they needed. The price of canvas almost doubled between 1347 and 1350. The price of salt rose from 4.63d to 1s2d, and iron from 8s6d to over a pound.15 The lords found it difficult to keep up rents because it was easy for the tenants to find other places to live and to locate new jobs.16 It is obvious that the peasants benefited most from the Black Death.

For the plague survivors, there was a new appreciation of life. The poor began to wear the clothes of the rich. "Never before had such a display of magnificence been seen, such richly adorned clothes, and so much luxuriant feasting."17 The priests were hardly able to keep up with
the increase of marriages. In one parish forty-two marriages were recorded between January 14, and February 24, of 1349. People were marrying each other in hopes of replenishing the population, but only a great deal of time would be able to accomplish that extraordinary task. People were enjoying life like never before.

Were these the reasons for the Black Death? Does it take so many to die for so few to appreciate life? Were the economic benefits for the peasants the reason? Exact numbers can only be estimated in this case, but as many as twenty-five million may have died. It is difficult to estimate what the population would be today if the plague had not taken those lives. Imagine if those twenty-five million regenerated for six centuries. I do not feel that there could have been a way to support that many more people, too many people are dying from starvation as it is. There had to be some purpose for all the plague deaths. I feel that so many had to die so that we could live today.

The American Civil War

The causes of the Civil War in America have been debated for years. Many will say it was fought to put an end to slavery. Others contend that it was fought for solely economic reasons. More Americans died in this war than any other. Yet, to some surprise the losses only added up to two percent of the population. In effect the country lost about 630,000 men. In comparison to the Black Death, this war was nothing. Yet, I feel that it did have an impact on
the United States. Had those men lived to reproduce, it might have had significant results, especially for a country entering the Industrial Revolution.

The Civil War was a dramatic time in American history. It was a very emotional war which brought an end to the horrors of slavery. Many of the greatest heroes of this country arose out of this conflict, Robert E. Lee, Ulysses S. Grant, and Abraham Lincoln were but a few. The country was torn for the first time since its separation from England. Families were also divided, brother fighting brother.

The Civil War began in 1861. Early in the year seven Southern states had withdrawn from the union and in April the fighting started at Fort Sumter in Charleston, North Carolina. Legally the conflict began on April 15, 1861, with President Lincoln’s proclamation of war. The war lasted four long years and included battles at Bull Run and Fredericksburg. At the time of these two battles, it looked as though the South might have triumphed. This idea was quelled when General George McClellan stopped General Robert E. Lee at the battle of Antietam. The North arose victorious and Lee surrendered to Grant at Appomattox Court House on April 9, 1865. The final day of the war was April 26, 1865, when General J.E. Johnston surrendered to General William Tecumseh Sherman near Durham North Carolina.19

Again the question, why did this war have to happen? Why did those men have to die? It is not as apparent in this case as in the Black Death that they died as a way to deplete
the population. However, I do still believe that such a large decrease in the numbers, (630,000), of nineteenth century century young males, did have an affect on the current population. I maintain that if these people had lived to reproduce we would now have a much greater famine problem. If fertility trends would have remained constant, four children per family in 1858, and the men would not have died, within four generations approximately 153 million more people could have been living and reproducing in the United States. This significant of a number could have had profound affects on todays society. If not for depopulation reasons, why did such a bloody event have to occur? Were there any benefits to the war? To answer this question we must turn to the effect the war had on the economy of the United States.

Obviously, the most gratifying outcome of the war was the abolishment of slavery. We look back on it today and wonder how the plantation owners could have ever supported what we see today as an inhumane institution. Many say it was just their way of life. We must consider slavery's demise a good result of the war. If that many men were willing to lay down their lives for this cause, it must have been worth it. The Civil War brought an end to this wretched institution; this I feel must be considered a benefit.

The economy of the United States improved after the war, though some claim otherwise. The improvement in the economy cannot be easily seen when looking at the South; it suffered
greatest from the fighting. Most of the devastating battles were fought in the South. No history student can claim not to have heard of the massive destruction of Sherman’s March. The property value in the South decreased by $2,759,627,918 (of which $1,634,105,341 was due to the loss of the slaves). Some of the remaining loss was caused by a lower value of confederate money.21

Agriculture was also a very important resource of the South that suffered. The losses in livestock were numerous.

The figures collected in 1866 show that the South was short [of livestock] as compared with the numbers of 1860: 32 per cent in horses, 30 per cent in mules, 35 per cent in cattle, 20 per cent in sheep, and 42 per cent in swine. Four years later the census reports a deficiency of 454,644 horses; 207,146 mules; 1,063,776 cattle; 1,354,380 sheep; and 6,330,696 swine.22

The value of livestock in the South did not equal its prewar amount until over forty years later. Cotton was one of the most important crops of the South. In decades prior to the war cotton consumption had been increasing at astounding rates. Between 1840 and 1850 it rose 143%, and the decade of 1850 to 1860 saw an increase of 47%. The war decade was much different. Consumption did not increase at all from 1860 to 1870 but in fact decreased by six percent. After 1870 it slowly began to rise again.23 Agriculture, the primary economic force in the South, had been devastated.

Business also suffered. Capital was very hard to come by, and credit was scarce. Currency had been reduced by over thirty-five million dollars, and interest rates rose to
astronomical amounts. Upon the closing of his furniture store, one Southern businessman commented, that he could not afford to make enemies by refusing to give credit, yet he could not afford to go bankrupt by giving it out.\textsuperscript{24}

In the North the situation was vastly different. The value of real estate in the northern states increased by seventy-three percent. The quantity of live stock in seven northern states increased by twenty-five percent.\textsuperscript{25} The North was also the location of the great industrial revolution in the United States. The rejuvenation of the economy started in the North with increased industry. Industry had long been dominant as the primary economic motivator in the North. Charles Beard seemed to feel the difference between the Northern and Southern economies was one of the reasons for the war. "Beard views America's history as a great movement away from Jefferson's agrarian type of society to the capitalistic, industrial, mechanized, and urban society..."\textsuperscript{26} The North felt its growth was being stifled by the Southern rule of the Federal government. The only way for the North to advance more economically was for it to gain control of the White House. To do this they would have to defeat the South, which they did.

There are several examples of increased industry in the North in the years before and immediately after the war. One of the most prominent examples is in the production of pig iron. In the decade prior to the war pig iron production had increased by fifty percent, and between 1865 and 1873
production had more than doubled. In almost the same manner the production of bituminous coal also increased. Between 1850 and 1860 it had risen almost 100%; in the ten years following the war it rose 145%. But one of the most economically advantageous benefits of the war had to be in the area of railroad production.

The railroad system was essential to the success of industry. In the decade of 1865 to 1875 there were approximately 40,000 miles of track laid in the United States. In the ten years prior to the war only 20,000 miles had been laid. In 1862 the federal government gave a land grant to the Union Pacific and Central Pacific railroads. Other railroads received similar grants in following years. This increase of operation of the railroad led to increased consumption of heavy industrial products and easier access to agricultural lands in the West. The affect of the new railroad system on the economy was extremely beneficial.

Were there economic benefits of the American Civil War? The answer must be yes. Although the South was decimated it did recover. The demand for industrial products soared during the confrontation and for years afterward. The economy, led mostly by advances in the North, reached new levels. "The Civil War proved to be a boon to Northern economic development...Industry, for example, was not created by the war, but wartime demands greatly stimulated and encouraged the industrial development which already had a good start." The American Civil War did have significant
economic benefits, it helped bring about the United States' rapid transition into the Industrial Era.

World War II

The actual beginning of World War II is often debated. On October 21, 1933 Germany left the League of Nations. Within three years Germany broke the Treaty of Versailles and remilitarized the Rhineland. On March 13, 1938, Austria joined Germany under the Anschluss and, in a little more than a year, Germany invaded Poland. On September 3, 1939 Britain, France, Australia, and New Zealand declared war on Germany. The occupation of France began in 1940. On December 7, 1941, Pearl Harbor was attacked and the following day the United States declared war on Japan. A detailed discussion of the battles and atrocities of the war is not necessary for the purpose of this paper. On May 5, 1945, the German forces surrendered to the British. After the atomic bombs were dropped on Hiroshima and Nagasaki on August 6, and 9, 1945, Japanese forces also surrendered.\textsuperscript{30}

The losses of life caused by World War II were great. It is ranked first in severity of all wars.\textsuperscript{31} The estimated total dead, as a direct result of the conflict is between 45 and 50 million, 5 million alone were Jews. The Soviet Union suffered the greatest losses with 18 million dead. Germany and Austria lost 6 million, as did Poland. The United States lost 323,000.\textsuperscript{32} France, which will be more closely examined, suffered losses of 1.3 million.\textsuperscript{33} The total percentage of the world's population lost during the war was slight; however,
when speaking of deaths in these great numbers I find it difficult to consider them as slight.

Again it is difficult to estimate the impact of the war on today’s population. A total of 50 million dead is not much when compared to the total world population, but it had a greater impact on certain areas. The Soviet Union, due to losses and reduced births, was said to have lost 17% of its population. France’s human loses were also high during the war, but it had suffered greater casualties in the Napoleonic wars. The loss of population seems to have helped the French. To see this benefit from World War II, the French economy must be examined.

Did World War II have benefits for the French? The answer is yes. The loss of population actually aided France. Industry had new desires to expand. The annual net number of births increased from 300,000 to 350,000 after the war. The total population increased from 41 million in 1946 to 50 million in 1966. Yet, France in 1968, was still underpopulated. The country could contain double the population without experiencing overcrowding. This state of underpopulation helped lead to economic advances. There was room for industry to expand without dealing with an overcrowding problem.

Economically France benefited from the war. Immediately after the war things were a bit unstable. In 1946 there was a strong black market in France. The official price of sugar was 10 cents per pound, but on the black market it sold for a
dollar per pound. The franc did increase in value somewhat and the budget was balanced. Economists have said the German defeat of the French was the reason for such a remarkable revival. For the first time the French realized the reasons their country had been in a state of decline. Their pride had been hurt and they wanted to recover. In reference to this idea John Ardagh quotes Professor Charles P. Kindleberger, of the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, who stated;

...to conclude that the basic change in the French economy is one of people and attitudes is frustrating to the economist' but, after examining and discounting a number of purely economic explanations of the French recovery [it can be declared to be] due to the restaffing of the economy with new men and to new French attitudes.  

The war provided a new opportunity for France to re-establish its greatness. The heavy toll on the population and physique of France gave them a new beginning in 1945.

In general, France's industry grew in the post-war years. Productivity increased an average of 5 percent per year from 1949 to 1969. Prior to the war it rose at an average rate of 2.5 percent per year. Strikes in 1947 drove up wages as well as prices. In 3 months time wages rose 34 percent. Industry was changing rapidly. In John Monnet's First Plan of 1946 the key phrase was "modernization or downfall."  

The railroads in France were greatly modernized in post World War II years. At the end of the war four-fifths of the
engines and coaches had been destroyed, as well as considerable miles of track. Six thousand miles were never reopened after the war. Louis Armand, who was in charge of rebuilding the railway system, insisted that everything be modern. The latest technology was utilized to build big, new marshaling yards which would replace those that were destroyed during German bombings. Bright, young design engineers, with a large budget, created new engines. French trains have set world speed records; the cruising speed of an average passenger train is 125 miles per hour. These engines have become a profitable export for France. The big difference between the prewar railways of France and the new ones was that the latter were electric. Twenty-three percent of the tracks are electric and they carry seventy-four percent of the traffic. Nearly the entire system has been redone, including new, longer trains with very powerful engines. Armand also avoided laying tracks that could lead to traffic jams like in the London area. In 1954 the "fixed reproducible capital" in the transportation and communication system of France was 16.6 trillion francs. In 1913 it had only been 40.1 million. This new and improved railway system may not have come about without the impetus of the war.

France's automobile industry also grew after the war. Renault currently produces a very high quality car, its growth began following World War II. After the war cars were in high demand. In 1945 there were only one million cars
serving the entire population of France. The people wanted cars quickly and did not care about extras. The little French cars hit the United States market in 1957 with a bang. Americans seemed to adore the small cute French auto, and many still do today. By 1959 Renault was the fourth largest car producer in the world and France’s chief exporter of automobiles.

Coal mining was also modernized after World War II. The new, modern techniques allowed an increase in output. The production by man per hour rose 23 percent above the pre-war rate. Great Britain’s production only increased by 6 percent. This is an impressing statistic, considering how much better Britain fared after the war. The modernization also led to a preservation of manpower. New machines could do the work of several men. This helped France to combat its shortage of labor due to the war. The new modernization plan aided many areas of industry.

Another facet of the French economy that was benefited by the war was agriculture. There was a great need for food production following the war. Much of what had been produced had been shipped to Germany. Under the First Plan there was an increase in machinery. Between 1938 and 1945 there were 35,000 tractors in France. This number increased to 230,000 by 1954. Pre-war outputs were greatly surpassed. There was an increase in the standard of living for the farmer, although, as in the case of the peasants following the Black Death, it was unevenly distributed. The standard of living
for the farmer rose 25 percent from 1938 to 1958. This is a notable increase.\textsuperscript{45} The assets in agriculture in 1913 were 8.6 million \textit{francs}, but in 1954 they were an astounding 2.0 trillion. This kind of increase is almost unbelievable.\textsuperscript{46} Many areas of the economy benefited from the war.

There were benefits from World War II. The losses of life, however inhumane it must sound, were beneficial, especially to France. This country now had room to grow. France's economy improved significantly after the war, largely due to lessons learned from the war. The defeat of the French was a blessing in disguise. "A result of her [France's] degrading experience of occupation, however, was a new spirit. The drive to rise from the disgrace of defeat promised a revitalization of France."\textsuperscript{47} France at least benefited economically from the war. As for the world, one must consider the population loss a benefit. The population loss was greater than just the actual deaths suffered during the war. Many of the men were young, as were many of the female civilians that perished, and would have produced many offspring had they lived. The lowering of the world's population was an economic benefits from World War II.

Conclusions

When examining these past events one must wonder why? Thomas Malthus believed depopulation events happen as a check to population. He felt that the population would double itself every 25 years if it went unchecked.\textsuperscript{48} To date it is not known if he was correct because population has always
been checked, by such things as plagues, wars, and famines. I have come to the conclusion that there is no truly accurate formula to determine what the population would be today if such events as these had not occurred. No one can really tell what would have happened, we can only examine what did happen. In modern times, war can be held directly and indirectly accountable for ten percent of the world’s deaths.\(^4\) Considering the entire population of the world, this is a significant number of people. "During the great twentieth-century conflicts, massive mobilization has caused birth deficits of up to 40 or even 50 percent of what could have been predicted on the basis of current trends."\(^5\) This is a shocking statement. The estimated increase in population between 1990 and 2000 is 1,304 million people.\(^5\) Taking into consideration Malthus’ theory, if there were no wars or diseases the population would increase by 2,608 million people. Some population experts may say these numbers are insignificant when speaking of world population, but the addition of over 2 billion people would surely greatly affect the world’s situation.

Death can be a sensitive subject. Some people may have a difficult time comprehending death in these numbers. There was a difference between the Black Death and the wars. The Black Death wiped out one third of the population, not of one country, but of an entire continent. War, however, probably did more damage in prehistoric times. There is little statistical evidence available for such early eras of
history. Some historians feel that this indicates that war was a more significant factor of depopulation in times before written records. In comparison to the Black Death and other diseases, war today is not that much of a factor.

As civilization progressed, war tended to play an increasing role in society. Its function as population regulator probably tended to increase, although until recent times it has never been as important in this connection as pestilence, famine, and practices of religious celibacy and postponed marriage.

It does not matter what type of event kills the most people. What matters is that so many have been killed. Another part of Thomas Malthus' theory needs to be examined a bit: His belief if the population goes unchecked there will be a shortage of food. He feels that food production will not increase as fast as the population. There is already starvation in the world today. One need not look just at India or Ethiopia to see it. People in this county are starving. Many are poor and cannot afford food, but would we even have enough to give to them? "By the year 2030, the world must produce more than twice the food it does today." Overpopulation is a serious problem. I, by no means, am implying that there needs to be a war or plague to solve it. However, when looking at AIDS one might begin to wonder if this is the new Black Death.

When making conclusions such as these there are two certain levels to consider. The first level is factual. Through statistics it has been shown that there were economic benefits to the Black Death, the American Civil War, and
World War II. These types of conclusions are easy to make. These were basic economical judgments. There are however, more difficult decisions to make. One must make a moral judgment. Yes, there were benefits. People began to appreciate life more at the end of the fourteenth century. The United States was able to vault itself into a chief industrial nation by the end of the 1800's. The French were able to start anew in 1945 after war. These things are evident, but - were they worth it?

This question is most important. The purpose of this paper was to find a reason behind some of the most tragic events in history. Economic benefits are evident but do not provide me with a sufficient answer. Depopulation benefits come closer. Could all those massive numbers of people have died so that the Earth and her precious resources would last longer? Would she have been able to support a greater population. We will find out soon. But yet, was it worth it? Is society so impressive today that it was worth those people dying for. Some would say yes. I feel, after reading and considering the sources used for this paper, that I owe much more to this society than I have been giving. Ultimately I have been searching for an answer to questions that have been asked for ages. I have always been told that God has a purpose for everything that happens, I wanted to know the purpose behind such events as plagues and wars, and I have found some. I did not know the answer to the question "were those lives worth it?", until recently.
The estimated population of the world in the year 2000 is 6.994 billion. To lose a few hundred thousand does not seem like much. But the key thing to remember is that they are a few hundred thousand people. We are presumably a humane society. To speak about lives as if they were some car or other possession that can be disregarded so easily is difficult. Were the benefits realized after the Black Death worth the untimely death of so many people? Was America’s industrial advancement worth the lost two percent of its population in the 1860’s? Were improvements made after World War II worth the lives of fifty million people? What is one death in a world with thousands of millions of inhabitants? Recently in Indiana, there was a House Resolution passed by the State House of Representatives honoring the seven men who died in Operation Desert Storm. Each family walked up to Governor Evan Bayh to receive a copy of the resolution and a certificate. I watched the families of the servicemen as Governor Bayh spoke. I watched their expressions and their tears. I wondered what they would say in answer to the question - why? Did it matter to them that there might be an economic benefit to the war? What is more important, each individual life or the benefits to society? One question that has been asked for ages is: do you do what is good for the one or what is good for the whole? We would hope there would be a choice where each individual of the group would benefit, this is not often the situation. In most cases someone will be harmed. This question is old but the dilemma
persists today for the leaders and people of all nations. The parents and loved ones of those seven Indiana servicemen may think about the dilemma. Did it matter to them that, because their son or daughter died, society would be better off in years to come? I do not know the answer, but in the past, sacrifices of individuals have resulted in benefits to society.
Footnotes


5. Mullett, pp.20-21


7. Mullett, p.6

8. Ibid, p.31


11. Mullett, p.29


13. Mullett, pp.24-30


18. Renouard, p.29.


22. Ibid, p.83.
25. Ibid, p.84.
26. Ibid, p.161
27. Ibid, pp. 165.


32. Ibid, pp. 132, 133.

34. Marcel Leroy, Population and World Politics. (Belgium: Netherlands Interuniversity Demographic Institute, 1978) p.78.


37. Ardagh, p.5.
39. Dubois, p.495.
42. Dubois, p.51.
43. Ardagh, p.58.
44. Ibid, p.49.
45. Ibid, p.69.
46. Dubois, p. 151.
47. Cave, p. 579.
50. Leroy, p.79.
52. Wright, p.569.
Bibliography


