



EDITED BY JAN HANSEN, JOCHEN HUNG, JAROSLAV IRA,
JUDIT KLEMENT, SYLVAIN LESAGE, JUAN LUIS SIMAL, AND
ANDREW TOMPKINS

THE EUROPEAN EXPERIENCE

A Multi-Perspective History
of Modern Europe, 1500-2000



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2.1.3 Demographic Change in Europe in Contemporary History (ca. 1900–2000)

Gábor Koloh, Jakub Rákosník, and Thomas Schad

Introduction

The demographic development of Europe in the twentieth century can be grasped by two indicators: firstly, the rate of natural demographic increase and decrease (birth and death rates), which was also shaped by external factors such as wars, plagues, and forced migrations; secondly, in order to explain the more intrinsic dynamics of demographic change in Europe, all the other factors of the changing Human Development Index (HDI) must be taken into account—such as health, knowledge, education, and economic wealth.

The demographic history of Europe in the twentieth century can be broken down into four periods, according to three historical breaks.

The first phase (pre-1914) was characterised by a gradual decline in birth rates that had started to rise, in the vast majority of European countries, during the last three decades of the nineteenth century. In less industrialised countries, natality had recently peaked during the 1880s and 1890s (Serbia, Romania), or at the beginning of the twentieth century (Bulgaria). The decline in the birth rate then culminated during the First World War.

The interwar period induced the second phase: after a short wave of post-war compensatory births (births postponed due to war), the decades of the 1920s and especially the 1930s were considered by many contemporaries to be an age of population depression.

The third phase began with the post-1945 baby boom, which was particularly pronounced in most Western European countries (although delayed in West Germany), while behind the emerging 'Iron Curtain', it was more moderate. The considerably long period of economic growth after the Second World War and the benefits of the post-war welfare state provided better living conditions for families with children. This also meant that people married earlier.

The fourth period, the so-called 'second demographic transition', started in the mid-1960s in the West. Individualist attitudes, career demands, and changes in social attitudes (including the relaxation of traditional gender roles), combined with the availability of effective contraceptives, led to very low fertility. The lands behind the 'Iron Curtain' were affected by this process later, but the transformation of the 1990s had significant impacts on Central and Eastern European societies in terms of fertility, and this process continues to be very dynamic.

First Break: The Impact of the First World War

While the first, pre-1914 phase can be considered as part of the 'long' nineteenth century, with respect to the European demographic trends that were described in the previous chapter, events after 1914 set new conditions. In total, the First World War took an estimated seventeen million lives from all over the world. Additionally, it is estimated that the three waves of the Spanish Influenza pandemic killed more than fifty million people between 1918 and 1920, when the world population was estimated to be around 1.9 billion. Population losses were concentrated in the countries involved in the war: in Germany or Hungary, for example, four times as many people died as a result of the war than did from influenza; in Britain it was three times as many; in Italy two times as many. But in other parts of the world, the opposite situation prevailed.

During the war, there was also a sharp decline in birth rates due to family disintegration and war-induced misery. For instance, in the territory of present-day Austria, the number of newborns fell from 250,000 in 1914 to 140,000 in 1918. Moreover, the rate of stillbirths increased slightly during the war, as well as the number of children born out of wedlock (in today's Czech Republic this accounted for 0.5 percent of all births in 1915, rising to 13.5 percent by 1918). Germany offers another insightful example. A glance at the country's birth rate reveals a significant decrease: while in 1900, the birth rate was still 35.8 per 1000 inhabitants, it dropped to 27.0 in 1914, when the war started. The war period itself saw further decreases in the birth rate, which dropped as low as 14.3 by the end of the war in 1918.

Although the interwar period saw a general decline of emigration from Europe, immediately after the war, population movements were considerable. In the Carpathian Basin, where the population had previously been in decline, emigration to the American continent continued, primarily to Canada after the introduction of the quota system in the US. But for the masses of people becoming minorities in newly-formed states (predominantly Hungarians), seeking refuge in Hungary became the most favourable option for getting by. In the second half of the interwar period, increasingly extremist right-wing

demographic policies, inspired by racist conceptions spreading from Germany especially, put an increasing migratory pressure on the Jewish population of the region. Drawing from the same ideological mainstream of that time, many political elites of the European interwar period started to adopt more ambitious demographic policies. This resulted in the formulation of both various population growth theories, and intrusive, pro-natalist policies with an increasingly militaristic character—primarily but not exclusively in the countries that lost the First World War. Yet still, there was a constant decline in natality.

The Great Depression of the 1930s only intensified an atmosphere of concern over the demographic development of Europe: in 1913, for example, the number of newborns per 1,000 inhabitants was 19.0 in France, 28.2 in Netherlands, 27.2 in Finland, and 27.6 in Germany; by 1935 this had declined to 15.3 in France, 20.2 in the Netherlands, and 19.6 in Finland. That same year in Germany, aggressive, pro-natalist policies increased the birth rate slightly to 18.9, encouraged by the Nazis, who were in their second year of power. In 1939, the first year of the Second World War, the birth rate rose to 20.4, a number that would never be reached again in Germany.



Fig. 1: Propaganda poster of the British Eugenics Society (1930s). CC BY-NC, Wellcome Collection, <https://wellcomecollection.org/works/vzzcqeyx/items>.

Population policies became the subject of passionate discussions. At one end of the debate stood the populationists, who were seeking to promote the growth of the birth rate. At the other end were the so-called Neo-Malthusians, who promoted low fertility through contraception in order to improve the living standards of the lower classes. Not only the quantity, but also the quality of the population became an important issue of the time. Eugenics belonged to scientific discourse. Numerous supporters of eugenicist selection could be found among the socialists and liberals as well as among the nationalists. These tendencies culminated in the 1930s in the German National Socialist practice of forced sterilisation. This idea came from the USA, and we can also find it in other European countries of that time, such as Sweden (1934) or Norway (1934).

Second Break: The Second World War and the Post-war Baby Boom

The Second World War is estimated to have cost sixty-five million people's lives (worldwide), with the highest number of losses in a single state being the Soviet Union's estimated twenty-seven million victims. As for Germany, the figures of losses vary between 6.5 and seven million people, whereas Poland lost six million, and Yugoslavia 1.7 million lives. These total figures form a larger picture by including all groups of victims. But the demographic landscape across Europe also changed from an ethnic viewpoint: for example, European Jews were almost entirely extinguished or expelled by the Nazis and their collaborationists.

In the years directly following the war, forced migration continued, as the example of Germany shows: between 1945 and 1950, around 6 million people, mostly ethnic Germans, were forced to migrate from other countries in Central and Eastern Europe to post-war Germany, now divided between East and West. There was moreover a significant migration movement from East to West in Germany: an estimated four million people migrated between 1946 and 1961, until the Berlin Wall and the closure of the inter-German border halted large scale migrations, without entirely ending them. Despite population growth throughout the 1950s and 1960s, the rapidly growing German economy needed more manpower. Consequently, West Germany signed a series of bilateral contracts with countries such as Greece, Turkey, or Yugoslavia. This led to an influx of workers (and later their relatives), known as 'guest workers' (*Gastarbeiter*). Low wages and a lack of currency convertibility did not make the region behind the Iron Curtain an attractive migration destination. Yet labour migration was not completely new, as proven by the example of East Germany, where 'contract workers' (*Vertragsarbeiter*)

migrated from Mozambique, Poland, Hungary, Vietnam, Angola, Cuba, and other mostly socialist countries.

In those European countries that remained colonial powers by the end of the Second World War, the impact of decolonisation on demographic change cannot be underestimated: following Algeria's independence from French colonisation, more than 800,000 so-called *Pieds-Noirs* (settlers of French and European origin) relocated to mainland France and other French territories, accompanied by numerous local collaborationists. On the other hand, France saw significant numbers of immigrants from all its former colonies, who left their homelands for economic or political reasons. In the UK, citizens of the Commonwealth—a political association of fifty-four countries (as of 2022), most of which formerly belonged to the British Empire—had privileged immigration rights as British Subjects until 1962. The process of decolonisation had an equally important impact on smaller colonial powers, such as Portugal or Netherlands, where the influx of these newcomers increased the population by five to ten percent. By 1970, Western Europe in particular had definitively transformed from an emigrant continent into an immigrant one.

The word 'boomer' or 'baby-boomer' is derived from developments after the Second World War, when birth rates rose and the economy flourished. The 'baby boom' that arose in the United States or in Canada was milder in Europe, however. Pro-natalist policies and the related ban on abortions, or efforts to reduce them, were soon replaced in Central and Eastern Europe by the complete liberalisation of abortion at the turn of the 1950s and into the 1960s. The only exception was Romania, where the abortion ban introduced in the mid-1960s led to a very short-term increase in fertility. As a result of the social and economic policies of the 1950s and 1960s, forced collectivisation and rapid secularisation took place in all Soviet satellite states (though at very different paces), impacting both the livelihoods and value systems of families. The employment rate of women increased faster than it did in the West. This process not only brought about a tension between childbearing and work, but the intensifying spatial mobility also resulted in a shift away from the immediate family, which meant the loss of help from parents and relatives, in addition to low wages and limited nursery spaces.

Despite some demographic policy measures based on incentives, it was the reduction in mortality rates that became crucial in the population growth of Europe until the mid-twentieth century, driven primarily by the decline in infant mortality. There were important regional differences, and a deterioration of indicators can be traced from the West to the East of Europe. For example, while the average infant mortality in interwar Sweden was fifty-four per 1,000 newborns, the number was 142 in Poland. The post-war period saw a gradual decrease of these indicators, while regional differences persisted. At

the beginning of the 1970s, this rate had fallen to eleven in the case of Sweden and to thirty in Poland.

An important indicator of the quality of life is life expectancy, which rose throughout the twentieth century across Europe, albeit unevenly. The average rise in life expectancy was between two and three months per year, due to medical improvements as well as rising living standards. Growth trends were visible in Western as well as in Eastern parts of Europe during the 1950s and 1960s. Divergence was evident only in the 1970s and 1980s, when Eastern Bloc life expectancies grew significantly more slowly, stagnated, or even declined, as in the case of the Soviet Union.

The historian Edward Shorter classified the decade of the 1960s as the period of the (second) sexual revolution. Its typical features were a higher degree of sexual permissiveness, women's sexual autonomy, and the decriminalisation of homosexuality. One very important factor with respect to liberation of sexual relations was increased access to contraception throughout the 1960s. When Czechoslovak demographers researched this issue in 1956, they recognised that more than two-thirds of people used a form of *coitus interruptus* as a method of contraception. Condoms were acceptable only for one fifth of them. In the second half of the 1960s, hormonal contraception became more readily available, at least in the West. The lack of foreign trade and other economic barriers in the countries of the East meant that access to the pill was scarce. The scarcity of effective and comfortable contraception consequently led to higher levels of abortions.

Third Break: 1970s, Start of the Second Demographic Transition

The number of people living in Europe grew without respect to declining fertility. Today, the population is twenty-five percent larger than in 1960. However, this has been the case mainly due to Europe's positive migration balance. The decline in fertility observed from the mid-1960s has been described by some demographic analyses as the process of the 'second demographic transition'. Its guiding features include sustained sub-replacement fertility, population ageing, and the plurality of family arrangements other than marriage.

The shift to more individualistic attitudes can also be considered a basis for declining fertility. Marriage, in the meantime, had changed in nature, along with the spread of extramarital births and domestic partnerships. Delayed entry into parenthood has become a typical feature. At the beginning of the twenty-first century, first-time mothers were more than five years older than

in 1970. In Western countries, the onset of this transition was longer and more gradual. For the countries behind the Iron Curtain, the process was delayed, but then became much more dynamic during the 1990s. Contrary to the Western experience, the 1970s and 1980s were the years of rising fertility in the East, though increases were very moderate. While the West started to be confronted with the crisis of the welfare state during the economic ‘stagflation’ of the 1970s, communist regimes promoted a sort of family welfare that enabled citizens to marry at a quite young age. The example of Czechoslovakia is instructive in this respect. The country’s very generous pronatalist policy pushed birth rates back up above the replacement rate (2.1 children per woman) in the 1970s. However, this lasted only for a rather short period of time. In 1970, the fertility rate was only at the level of 1.92 children per woman. Four years later, it was at 2.44. After that, however, the sources of growth—massive investments in housing and various forms of child allowance, as well as numerous cohorts of mothers born during the post-war baby boom—were depleted, and fertility fell below the replacement rate from 1980 onwards.

The turn of the 1980s and 1990s profoundly changed the circumstances of everyday life in the East. The three pillars of the social welfare system of Central and Eastern Europe, which guaranteed employment, social protection and stable price levels, ceased to exist. The shock caused by this change triggered a transformational crisis after 1990. Fertility continued to fall. On the other hand, the improvement in mortality rates changed rapidly in Slovenia, Poland and the Czech Republic and somewhat more slowly in Hungary and the Soviet successor states. Health improvements can only be considered stratum-specific due to the affordability of modern treatments, diagnostics, medication, and so on.

At the same time, migratory pressures had increased: the previous restrictions had been lifted, and an east-west migration began towards the states of Europe with a better standard of living. The wave of political refugees that had accompanied the twentieth century was also transformed in several stages during the final decades of the century: 1980s refugees arriving from communist states were replaced in the 1990s by those arriving from the disintegrating Yugoslavia, then, at the turn of the millennium, by those coming from crisis zones outside of Europe.

Conclusion

The delayed start of the first demographic transition outside of Europe (see previous chapter) and its earlier completion in Europe than anywhere else—in the form of low death rates as well as low birth rates—caused a dynamic decline in the European share of the total human population. In 1900, one

quarter of the world population lived in Europe. By 2000, it was less than one eighth.

Population growth outside of Europe, especially in the 1960s, provoked dark predictions of imminent overpopulation. The then-natural increase of population, such as in central America (3.2 per cent) or northern and central Africa as well as south-eastern Asia (2.7 per cent) seemed to pose a threat in terms of resource consumption. Europe at the peak of the demographic transition never grew faster than 1.5 per cent per year, even while its leading countries colonised other continents. The question remains as to how long the demographic transition in the countries of the 'Global South' will last. The natural increase of populations in Africa, Asia, and Latin America was lower in the 1990s than thirty years earlier. Recent UN estimates anticipate the stabilisation of the world population at around ten billion during the second half of the twenty-first century.

The decline of the birth rate in Europe has been slower in the twenty-first century in comparison to its steep decline during the last three decades of the previous century. The total fertility rate according to Eurostat is also slightly higher today than at the end of the twentieth century (1.43 live births per woman in 2001, and 1.53 in 2019). Although the outlook is less pessimistic now than in the 1990s, the population decrease of Europe caused by the second demographic transition is unlikely to be overcome in the following decades. Immigration became the most important source of European population growth long before the last decades of the twentieth century.

However, the very different patterns of present-day emigration from, and immigration to, European countries also reflect the deep impact of the history of the East-West rift caused by the Cold War. A paradigmatic example for these oftentimes divergent developments inside Europe can even be found inside the formerly divided state of Germany: while the western regions and its capital city Berlin attract immigrants from all over the world, the eastern German town of Eisenhüttenstadt, just eighty kilometres from Berlin at the Polish border, is a centre of emigration and depopulation: its population has halved from a peak of 53,048 in 1988 to only 23,878 in 2019, and parts of the city that once supported this larger population are scheduled to be dismantled.

Discussion questions

1. In which ways was twentieth-century demographic development different in Eastern and Western Europe?
2. In which ways did immigration shape European society in the twentieth century?
3. Does Europe need immigration? Why or why not?

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