

Comptes rendus — Book Reviews

GEOFFREY BEST. — *Humanity in Warfare*. New York: Columbia University Press, 1980. Pp. xi, 400.

Anyone whose memory of London or of ruined German cities after the bombing of World War II leads him to regard this book's title as self-contradictory is profoundly mistaken. Even in the twentieth century warfare, as waged by the civilized nations, has been far more humane than that of primitive peoples. For example, in 1868 the victorious Maoris, who had just sacked the infant white settlement at Poverty Bay in New Zealand's North Island, not only slaughtered and mutilated all the settlers but ate as many of them as they could and then (writes my somewhat sarcastic authority) showed "the sacred light of civilization that was burning within them by *potting the remainder of the corpses in tins* and sending them as presents to their friends in the country". Eight decades later the professional soldiers of the belligerent powers in 1939-45 never contemplated such behaviour as this, — however beastly some of the governments they served may have been.

Mr Best therefore chose a good subject when he began this study of the development of the humane conduct of civilized war. He takes his subject from the theories of Emmerich de Vattel in the 1750s through the French Revolution, and such events as the Declaration of Paris on maritime commercial warfare of 1856, the foundation of the Red Cross and the series of conferences at Geneva and the Hague, from 1864 down to 1979 — of all of which he gives a convenient chronological table.

The reader cannot help being impressed by the way in which the problems of one age reappear in another. To name a very current problem, what is a commander to do about enemy guerillas? Everyone knows how Spanish guerillas troubled French invaders in the Peninsular War, and it is therefore interesting to read that French guerillas had given Spanish invaders similar trouble in 1793. The Spanish commander protested to his French opponent in terms that amount to a classic statement of the problem. His own troops had not come to indulge in "murder and rapine"; he could recognize a properly enlisted opponent "wearing the uniform, badges and equipment" of a soldier, but if anyone, peasant or bourgeois, in civilian garb used arms against his troops, he would "immediately hang him and ... be justified in doing so". Here sentiment may grieve for the patriot executed for striking a blow against the invader of his country, but the Spanish general's question still stands unanswered — how is the *franc-tireur* out of uniform to be distinguished from any other brigand or terrorist? Any commander worthy of the name knows he has responsibilities to the individual men under his command which he must take seriously, and he cannot stand idly by if enemy civilians declare an "open season" on them (with no bag limits).

All along statesmen have remained uneasily aware that the stresses of wartime could create problems for which it was not easy to lay down effective rules in peacetime. Hence, for example, the preamble to the regulations approved at The Hague in 1907 declares that nations had "been inspired by the desire to diminish the evils of war, *so far as military requirements permit*" (my italics). None could

then have foreseen that one day the mass bombing of cities where civilian workers made armaments would become a "military requirement"; but it did, and is fully discussed in this book. The results of the Nuremberg Trials receive much less notice from Mr Best, but what he does say (pp. 291ff) is to the point — yet, for some reason, not indexed; why?

Mr Best has researched his subject thoroughly, and the abundant information in his text is supplemented by footnotes which are far more useful than the mere author-and-page references to which many modern writers confine themselves. His eleven-page bibliography is yet another valuable contribution, and his comments are often shrewd.

So far, so good; yet Mr Best has still failed to write a satisfactory book. A historian needs to do more than merely pick a good subject and research it well. He must also present his findings to the public in a readable form; and the value of Mr Best's book is most sadly damaged by the way he has written it. Writing is, of course, an art and we cannot all be artists, but we should try to make what we write comprehensible. This means, first of all, using a normal vocabulary of words familiar enough to merit being defined in the dictionaries commonly used by ordinary people. Too often, however, Mr Best employs words which are unknown to this reviewer's dictionary; and if we can perhaps guess what he means when he speaks of "pillage and plunder" (p. 92), what are we to make of "immiseration" (p. 100)? His mistakes in grammar are also painfully frequent and so are cumbersome sentences of which one example must suffice, namely:

A modest acquaintance with the social sciences relevant to 'conflict' and 'violence' confirms my belief that, just as the mind of man may be understood for practical purposes as being subject to pushes and pulls in opposite directions at once — e.g. towards social harmony and comradeship and 'peace' on the one side, and towards competitiveness, quarrelsomeness, and in the end, 'war' on the other — so also, though in more complicated and usually more roundabout ways, may political societies in their relations with one another be understood as experiencing simultaneous contrary inclinations, some towards peaceful relations with their neighbours and others towards unpeaceful ones. (p. 135)

In short, this is a book to which one would hesitate to refer even a keen graduate student, for fear his struggle to understand its prose would destroy his interest in its subject.

One hopes, therefore, that, before he publishes again, Mr Best will seriously study the job of writing the short, clear sentences, composed of short and simple words, that make comprehensible English. In reading his present book one could not help recalling, rather wistfully, the style of his fellow military historian, William Napier, from whom one example may be quoted. Of a crisis in the storm of Badajoz in April 1812, Napier wrote:

A reinforcement from the French reserve then came up, a sharp action followed, both sides fired through the gate and the enemy retired, but Ridge fell and no man died that night with more glory — yet many died and there was much glory.

Now one must admit that few of us can expect to look very good when compared with Napier at his best. Yet one may also observe that the storm of Badajoz was a pretty involved subject and the prose in which Napier describes it is a first-rate model. In our example there are eight sentences, all short and numbering just forty-three words all told. Of those forty-three words none are abstract nouns; and only a couple are of more than two syllables — "reinforcement" and "enemy". Finally — a good test — the whole excerpt can be read aloud

without pausing for breath. One could wish that more authors today would study Napier's way of making complex subjects easy for his readers; and one also wishes Mr Best the success in improving his own style which his research deserves.

Richard GLOVER,
Victoria.

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HUBERT CHARBONNEAU et André LAROSE, éd. — *Les grandes mortalités: étude méthodologique des crises démographiques du passé*. Liège, Union internationale pour l'étude scientifique de la population, [1979]. 373 p.

En 1975, avait lieu à Montebello dans le Québec un colloque international qui regroupait soixante-quatorze participants, originaires d'une vingtaine de pays, dont l'objectif commun était de comparer les résultats de leurs recherches sur les famines, les épidémies et autres fléaux démographiques d'autrefois, sans oublier les guerres. H. Charbonneau et A. LaRose se sont chargés de réunir et de publier une sélection des travaux de cette rencontre dont le bilan est considérable: vingt-six textes produits par un nombre égal d'auteurs, venus de treize pays différents, et traitant de cas de mortalités massives dans dix-huit pays du monde du XVI^e siècle à nos jours. Il va sans dire que cet effort de mise en commun, pour des fins comparatives, d'observations à propos d'événements isolés et répartis d'une façon inégale dans le temps et dans l'espace, ne relevait pas d'un intérêt étroit pour l'unique et l'exceptionnel mais visait à confronter des méthodes et, peut-être, à dégager un modèle applicable à tous les phénomènes de même nature.

Les invités de ce colloque avaient d'ailleurs été saisis au préalable d'un premier schéma exprimé en une formule mathématique et mis au point par le Dr Thomas Hollingsworth, dont la préoccupation essentielle était de déterminer l'intensité de ces crises, leur durée et surtout leur extension (pp. 17-28). À cet égard, son projet de classement des crises tenait moins à leur nature qu'au territoire qu'elles touchaient, des villages et des régions jusqu'aux pays et même au monde. Les principales variables incluses dans sa formule sont le nombre de décès, la durée de la crise et la population du territoire concerné. En plus de ces éléments dits objectifs, le Dr Hollingsworth proposait d'intégrer dans sa formule des facteurs subjectifs, puisque, dit-il, l'intensité de toute crise démographique « is essentially an intuitive idea, depending on human psychology and reactions » (p. 26). S'il paraît convenir à l'identification des crises, ce modèle a été sérieusement mis en doute, lorsqu'il s'agit de mesurer adéquatement leur intensité et l'impact des facteurs subjectifs en ce domaine (pp. 153-57, 171-79). En effet, la donnée la plus difficile à obtenir une fois que le nombre de décès est connu, est l'effectif de la population affectée par l'événement.

La méthode proposée par Jacques Dupâquier résout sans peine ce problème puisqu'il part du postulat que tout « indice de mesure de la mortalité doit être fondé exclusivement sur les statistiques de décès » (p. 84). Le calcul de cet indice résulte de la mise en rapport du nombre de décès pendant l'année de la crise et du nombre moyen de décès pendant les dix années encadrantes, soit les cinq années antérieures et les cinq années postérieures. Cet exercice, que nous décrivons sommairement ici, débouche en fin de compte sur la construction d'une échelle de