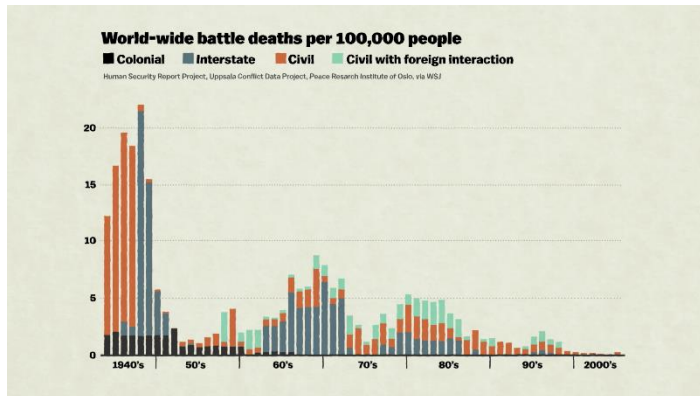


Views from the Pews: Isaiah prophesies the decline of war

For thousands of years, God's comforting words about nations beating swords into ploughshares, as reported by Isaiah 2, have seemed like a mirage, perpetually out of reach except to hopeless optimists. An analysis of global war death rates per 100,000 people since the year 1400 (<https://www.vox.com/2015/6/23/8832311/war-casualties-600-years>), shows lots of ups and downs but no long term trend. Periods with five or 10 battle casualties per 100,000 people look like they've been pretty common throughout history, in addition to huge wars such as the Thirty Years' War, the Napoleonic Wars, or the two World Wars. If you zoom in on the 21st century, the picture looks even better: battle deaths during the 2000s (so far) appear to drop to close to zero per 100,000 people:



Certainly, current events in Ukraine will record a sudden new peak. History will show whether it ever reaches the heights recorded since the 1940s.

Is this just a statistical myth? Temporary dips in war deaths can always be expected, as the chart shows, and cynics claim that that there's no reason to believe this time should be different. Others argue, by contrast, that things really have changed.

Steven Pinker, a Harvard psychologist, wrote a book entitled *The Better Angels of Our Nature*. He makes the strongest case yet that the world is getting progressively more peaceful. He points out that the rise of democracy, capitalism, industrial civilization, and international institutions like the UN have radically transformed the way global politics operates.

Look, for a recent example, at the way that international cooperation immediately defused the potentially dangerous consequences of the stray Russian-made missile that landed across the border in Poland. Since 1949, such an event affecting a NATO country could have triggered an immediate and catastrophic response from trigger-happy combatants ranged on both sides. Yes, NATO was swiftly alerted, but stood down as soon as calm international communication established the event as an unintended accident. Before that, there was Cuba, Kuwait, and other crises which also avoided catastrophe by a hairsbreadth. So, within my lifespan, the chances of the worst outcome of a high-level confrontation have radically diminished. Today we should all pray as never before for all international agencies trying to end the war in Ukraine.

In our time, at last, Isaiah might be right, at least to the extent that we learn to beat our missiles into free trade agreements.

Kim King