



10-1-1994

# Wm. Eckhardt, *Civilizations, Empires, and Wars: a Quantitative History of War.*

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### Recommended Citation

Melko, Matthew (1994) "Wm. Eckhardt, *Civilizations, Empires, and Wars: a Quantitative History of War.*," *Comparative Civilizations Review*: Vol. 31 : No. 31 , Article 14.

Available at: <https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/ccr/vol31/iss31/14>

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## WARS IN CIVILIZATIONAL PERSPECTIVE

William Eckhardt, *Civilizations, Empires and Wars: A Quantitative History of War*. Jefferson, North Carolina: McFarland, 1992.

In the middle of the book is a J curve showing war related deaths in world history. A dramatic increase begins in the 19th century, and the twentieth century alone has accounted for more fatalities than all other centuries. Not only that, but the majority of this lethality has Faustian origins.

This is disconcerting to civilizationists who have been accustomed to responding to charges of Western brutality with accounts of military barbarism in Mesopotamia, India, Islamic Civilization and the Classical world. But whether or not Faustians are more barbaric, it appears that Western technology has made it possible for them to outdo their forerunners. In this century, with a good deal of help from other civilizations, we have been killing a million people a year in collective violent actions.

But how can Eckhardt know this? Even if he can collect statistics for the twentieth century, how can he compare them to the massacres of the Assyrians or Timur Lenk? And what about population discrepancies? If the 20th Century has been so lethal, isn't that partly because there have been so many more people to kill?

Well, if anyone can answer these questions, Eckhardt can. Not only has he combed the historical records in making his own estimates, but he has also collected the estimates of most other historians and statisticians who have tried to gather such evidence, not only Quincy Wright and Pitirim Sorokin, but at least a dozen other lesser known historical quantifiers. Not only has he collected them, but half of his book is devoted to evaluating the reliability of their data. And he has taken population into consideration too. Still the twentieth century is more lethal than all others combined, and the West has been the main aggressor.

The book could be divided into three parts. The first five chapters satisfy the subtitle: a quantitative history of war. The history is too sketchy to be of use to most civilizationists, but along the way he stops to compare the data of Sorokin and Hans Kohn, sometimes coming up with interpretations the authors had never made.

The second part of the book involves a comparative study of the findings of the historians of war. This may be the most valuable part of the book, because it brings together a number of quantitative studies, not only Sorokin, Wright and Kohn, but also Jack Levy, Singer and Small, Richardson, Eckhardt himself, and perhaps a dozen others. The collection is a treasure itself, and the statistical evaluation is fascinating and intelligible even to the layman who begins to get nervous at the mention of chi squares. Some of the findings of the historians are undermined; others verified. Sometimes even Sorokin understated.

The third part of the book consists of a single chapter in which Eckhardt sums up his own theories about war. He thinks war is built into the structure of civilization, not an inevitable human trait. If this is the case, however, the problem

posed by the increased lethality of war can be solved only by making significant structural changes that would reduce temptation for exploitation, and this, he concedes, would take a long time to accomplish. Meanwhile, it would appear, we are going to continue to experience high levels of lethality that could get worse, not good news when we are trying to decide how to take advantage of the peace dividend.

The book contains its own review, an afterword by the civilizationist, David Wilkinson. Wilkinson concludes that Eckhardt's most enduring findings are that the initiating of war is very risky, most war fatalities are noncombatants, and that war deaths and magnitudes have risen strikingly since A.D. 1500. In his chapter by chapter commentary, Wilkinson picks out a number of theories and findings by Eckhardt that would call for further research.

For those who have been engaged in war research, Eckhardt was a valuable resource. You could always call him at his Dunedin retirement home to ask how many wars were going on in the world this morning or to make an estimate of fatalities per 100,000 population per year for Europe during the Age of the Baroque. He would cheerfully interrupt what he was doing, dig into his computer files, make the calculations if he didn't have them, and call you back. His death is a great loss to peace research.

In a footnote to the third or fourth volume of *Social and Cultural Dynamics* Sorokin remarks to critics: "Let anyone who can do better do better; unfortunately, so far, no one has." Eckhardt would never make such a challenge, but on the statistical measure of war in history, he has done very well.

I don't know if he ever saw Wilkinson's Afterword, but I think Eckhardt would have liked the suggestions for further research. He was little interested in personal glory; he saw himself as part of a group of colleagues who were working together on a long term project that would eventually increase our understanding and make peace possible. It would be an appropriate tribute to Bill Eckhardt if some of these lines were followed and his successors were to make substantial contributions to that effort.

Matthew Melko