

And Then There Were Too Many

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The latest census in Ukraine revealed an apocalyptic drop of 10% in its population - from 52.5 million a decade ago to a mere 47.5 million last year. Demographers predict a precipitous decline of one third in Russia's impoverished, inebriated, disillusioned, and ageing citizenry. Births in many countries in the rich, industrialized, West are below the replacement rate. These bastions of conspicuous affluence are shriveling.

Scholars and decision-makers - once terrified by the Malthusian dystopia of a "population bomb" - are more sanguine now. Advances in agricultural technology eradicated hunger even in teeming places like India and China. And then there is the old idea of progress: birth rates tend to decline with higher education levels and growing incomes. Family planning has had resounding successes in places as diverse as Thailand, China, and western Africa.

In the near past, fecundity used to compensate for infant mortality. As the latter declined - so did the former. Children are means of production in many destitute countries. Hence the inordinately large families of the past - a form of insurance against the economic outcomes of the inevitable demise of some of one's off-spring.