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# Artistic creativity and extreme events: The heterogeneous impact of war on composers' production<sup>☆</sup>

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## ABSTRACT

The relationship between extreme events and creativity is rather ambiguous and yet of significance across several disciplines. The following study adds to the debate by analyzing the impact of war on individual artistic output by building on a global sample of 115 prominent composers born after 1800. The study investigates how their productivity changes during various types of war and over their lifetime. Composers' productivity decreases during war, however not so much for those turning 30 or those in late 50s or above. Interestingly, the effect is not negative for all types of war: higher output can be observed during defensive or victorious international wars. This result could be attributable to emotional factors.

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*There is something suspicious about music, gentlemen. I insist that she is, by her nature, equivocal. I shall not be going too far in saying at once that she is politically suspect.* – Herr Settembrini, ch. 4  
(Thomas Mann, *The Magic Mountain*, Fischer, 1924)

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## 1. Introduction

What is the relationship between extreme events and the creativity of artists? More particularly, how does war affect the artistic output of a person? In a variety of forms and contexts, this question has long intrigued numerous social scientists from various academic disciplines. Historians seem to be unified in the argument that war is destructive and detrimental to the creative process itself. However, over the last decades only limited evidence has been found for the existence of a negative impact of war on the arts or on the number of great artists. Moreover, some studies have revealed a positive impact of conflict on the arts and artists. The ambiguous and counterintuitive relationship between war and the arts that has often been found in previous research remains a puzzle.

Several distinguished scholars provide qualitative discussions of history and claim that war and internal unrest have a negative impact on artists and their artistic creativity. [Toynbee \(1972\)](#) studies the rise and fall of 23 civilizations and describes how the suppression of conflict enables the flourishing of the arts and of great cultures. Only peace and the absence of internal frontiers enable the circulation of ideas and discoveries, whereas military history provides a continuing illustration of the “disastrous effects of relying on an old-fashioned technique instead of pressing on to meet the future with creative innovations.” [Wright \(1942\)](#) provides a thorough study of the institution of war, historically, legally and culturally, and concludes “war in itself has never constructed (...) cultural institutions or practises, and it has often destroyed old organizations and customs.” The destructiveness of military conflict is also argued by [Sorokin \(1937\)](#), where internal disturbances and wars are defined as the sharpest forms of disorganization of a system of social relationships; a society without balanced fundamental norms and values cannot raise its own culture or create arts.

However, in recent decades, social scientists have usually not succeeded in establishing the negative impact of conflict on artistic creativity or on the number of great artists; despite having used a variety of databases and having followed different methodological approaches. [Simonton \(1975\)](#) studies the impact of war on creativity in Western Civilization from 700 B.C. to 1839 A.D. His sample consists of approximately 5000 creative individuals, grouped in 127 generations, cited in an international collection of about 50 histories, anthologies, and biographical dictionaries. The hypothesis, that the number of creators in one generation is a negative function of the number of wars, is rejected. In a later study, [Simonton \(1976\)](#) studies the correlations between imperial instability (i.e., number of revolts and rebellions in the context of large empire states) and discursive creativity in the field of science, philosophy, literature and classical music. All observations are allotted to 122 generations covering the time period from 540 B.C. to 1900 A.D. The estimated coefficients are found to be positive and indicate that a higher number of creative individuals existed in times of imperial instability – a tentative indication of a positive impact of war on creativity. [Simonton \(1977\)](#) analyzes the role of stress factors for a sample of ten composers, with war being one of the considered stressors. The author concludes that total productivity is free of external influences. More recently, [Murray \(2003\)](#) investigates the impact of war and internal unrest on the number of important European visual artists, writers, composers and scientists. These individuals are grouped by generation and the data set covers the period from 1400 to 1950. In a restricted regression, the variables that characterize war and social unrest have no significant effect on the number of important figures in a generation. The employment of an expanded model, when several other explanatory and control variables are included, suggests that the impact of war on human accomplishment is positive and highly significant. [Hellmanzik \(2010\)](#) studies clustering premiums for visual artists and regresses prices of paintings on artist's age and several control variables, including dummies for both World Wars. The results indicate that artworks painted during World War I and World War II are valued higher by 6.1 per cent and 47.8 per cent, respectively. This finding is even more interesting as the war-premiums exceed, on average, the estimated cluster premiums. Evidence on the existence of a negative effect is rather limited. [Borowiecki and O'Hagan \(2013\)](#) investigate the impact of war on individual life-cycle creativity using a similar sample of composers as employed in the underlying article and find that war decreases annual output of the individuals covered.<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> The underlying study, by disclosing that the impact of some wars can be positive, does not contradict the results presented in [Borowiecki and O'Hagan \(2013\)](#). On the contrary, it points out that if one accounted for the few types of wars that are positively associated with creativity, the overall negative impact would be even stronger.

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