**Of War and Epidemics: Unnatural Couplings, Problematic Conceptions**

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Abstract

The relationship between war and epidemics is usually cast pathogenically. This article pursues a different perspective: that of the history of the *idea*of relating wars to epidemics. It considers how this notion was formulated, deployed, and transformed over time. The first section reviews prevailing approaches to the war and epidemics dyad, and outlines the reasons for its ‘denaturalization’ within contemporary historical demography. The article then turns to a series of publications between the 1830s and 1940s that sought to make retrospective comparisons between combat deaths and deaths from epidemic diseases during military operations. This tight focus permits some boundary to be drawn around a subject that otherwise easily extends to the whole history of civilization and disease. It enables us to concentrate on the different socio‐political and professionalizing contexts within which the ‘fatal partnership’ between war and disease was fashioned, and eventually deposed, in epidemiology. By thus historicizing the relationship, the article contributes to a view of epidemiology and historical epidemiology as socially‐constructed discourses. As such, it cautions against borrowing uncritically from the writings of the original framers of the retrospectively fashioned war‐and‐epidemics couplet—borrowings, arguably, that have served to constrain the imaginative capacities of historians ever since.

**This Article**

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