Letters to the Editor

Economy and mortality in Eastern and Western Europe between 1945 and 1990: the largest medical trial of history

From IMRE BONCZ\textsuperscript{1*} and ANDOR SEBESTYÉN\textsuperscript{2}

A previous issue (December 2005) of the Journal was devoted to publications analysing the relationship between economic growth and mortality. The investigations presented in two papers\textsuperscript{1,2} came to a contradictory outcome in terms of the relation between economic growth and mortality in the United States. We would like to draw the attention of another practical example on this topic.

Between 1945 and 1990 Europe was divided by the ‘iron curtain’ into two different parts: the Western European or capitalist and the Eastern European or socialist countries. The two groups of countries followed a different development pattern regarding many factors including—among others—economy and mortality. This period of 45 years in Europe can be considered as the largest medical ‘trial’ of history.

The study design was planned during the Second World War in the city of Jalta by the political leaders of the Soviet Union, United Kingdom, and United States of America. The countries (therefore the patients) were assigned into two

**Figure 1** ‘The epidemiological iron curtain’ in Europe: standardized death rates for all causes, all ages per 100 000 population in 1990. Source of data: WHO Health for All Database

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Centrally planned economies, economic slumps, and health conditions

From JOSÉ A TAPIA GRANADOS

I am not sure why Boncz and Sebestyén, while ignoring contributors providing specific comments on Eastern Europe to the IJE debate on mortality and economic growth, refer in their letter to other contributions, in which nothing is said about the issue. Whatever Boncz and Sebestyén’s reasons for this, they discuss colourfully the division of Europe in Yalta (1945) into an American and a Russian sphere of influence, describing it as ‘the largest medical trial in history,’ in which the two groups of patients—countries—separated by ‘the iron curtain,’ were assigned to two different treatments, ‘capitalism’ and ‘socialism.’ Clever or gaudy, the metaphor seems to be stretched and I am doubtful to what extent it may be useful as a heuristic device. Indeed, a large portion of one ‘treatment group,’ the USSR, had been ‘treated’ from 1917. Then, after 1945, countries like China, Cuba, Vietnam, Ethiopia, etc. were included in a similar ‘treatment’ group, though this happened in other continents and not behind the European ‘iron curtain.’

The papers by Tapia Granados and Brenner reveal the importance of within country changes in mortality and economy based on the example of the United States, but we would like to emphasize this relationship between the countries of Eastern and Western Europe. The political status and economic background of the two parts of Europe between 1945 and 1990 with the existence of the iron curtain had a significant effect on the health status of the population, which should be investigated more in detail.

Conflict of interest: None.

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