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The Changed Meaning of Death in War

In his seminal book *Medical Nemesis*, social thinker Ivan Illic argued that all “disease is a socially created reality”. In this paper, I argue that even life and death are social constructions. Indeed the same physical reality of dying has assumed a variety of meanings throughout history and among different societies. From this point of view, death is more than a simple physical process. This does mean that life and death have no material and biological constitution, but rather that the meaning and the values we attach to them have historically changed. And with these historical changes our practices towards life and death have varied too.

One of these changing practices regards how we fight in war. In particular, I argue that death beliefs and perceptions contribute to explain the evolution of Western warfare and also account for some of the main challenges of contemporary Western way of war. Although these beliefs are far from explaining war in its entirety, by highlighting how “human material” is valued and used in the battlefield, they point to one of its most significant aspects. To discuss at all interestingly about war is indeed inevitably to talk about death.