

THE ETHICS OF MODERN WAR

“ANY nation,” the present Pope has said, “so mad as to contemplate war would be guilty of monstrous homicide and almost certainly of suicide.” There is, it would seem, a tendency to meet any proposal for the prevention of war and the promotion of peace with the argument that there is such a thing as a just war, and to leave it at that. There is a danger here of relapsing into the *laissez aller* attitude described by M. Maritain as “using the eternal truths as a pillow to go to sleep on.” To restrict discussion to the question of whether there can be a just war in the abstract is to invite unreality.

“There is such a thing as a just war.” For this position we have a formidable array of authorities, if we are to pin our faith to authorities; a formidable array of arguments, if we choose to take reason as our guide. “There is such a thing as legitimate self-defence, as legitimately helping the injured even by offensive warfare.” A proper authority, a just cause, a right intention, these are, according to St. Thomas, the three prerequisites of the just war. Can they not often and easily enough be fulfilled? In theory perhaps; in the hypothesis of two isolated States, in an isolated point of time, with clear-cut and indisputable aggression or injury on the one side and the impossibility of any defence or redress other than by war on the other. Such a state of affairs, however, in the world of to-day is, to all intents and purposes, impossible. There is the intricate maze of past history to be unravelled, the fact of antecedent injury and counter-injury, the “passing down from generation to generation,” as Pius XI has said, of the “mournful heritage of hatred and revenge,” to be considered, and to give us pause if we are tempted to assert the likelihood of an aggression wholly and without qualification unjust. The aggressor State of to-day may well be the injured of yesterday, and *now* the one only because *then* the other. A just cause, then; who, in most conceivable cases, can decide, not indeed whether it be wrong to commit aggression, but whether it be right to oppose the needs which gave rise to the aggression? And a

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right intention; surely, the militarist will argue, if State X steals my property and I fight solely in order to retrieve my property, that is a right intention. But St. Thomas is more explicit: "a right intention, namely, that good be promoted or evil avoided." That such a result should issue from a modern war, whatever we may think about a mediæval or a primitive one, is unthinkable.

"The militarist," as Mr. Huxley has remarked, is "incurably romantic." Curious how hard the romantic idea of war dies: the gay, colourful spectacle, the elegant accoutrements, the courtly summons to the prepared field (a moral stone's throw from the fields of Eton), the thrill and glamour of the game (played of course meticulously according to the rules), the courteous acceptance of surrender. . . . So one finds people poring over war-books and photographs exactly in the spirit in which the office-boy pores over Buffalo Bill. We have not to consider merely the destruction of millions of combatants (one is sometimes told that influenza carried off more men in one year than the War did in four—as though in some mysterious fashion the War was thereby condoned); we have to consider also the concomitant evils: the fate of women and children, inevitable in modern warfare, the destruction of families, cities, everything that is most of value, materially and spiritually; we have to consider the subsequent evils: ethnologically, the decay of the race due to the elimination of the best of an entire generation; economically, the dislocation of a continent or indeed of the world; politically, the residue of hatred and desire for revenge, germs of yet further wars; psychologically, the legacy of innumerable neuroses, ruining individuals and maiming the race; morally, the decay of values, disillusionment, the complete wreckage of even the most ordinary and pedestrian of human ideals; finally, in religion, the decay of faith ("What is God doing?") and the consequent wave of blank despairing materialism. And we as Christians cannot forget the further consideration: that for us war must be more than the killing of men by men; it is the tearing asunder of the Body of Christ. "That good may be promoted and evil avoided" . . .

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But suppose a situation so critical, the threatened loss of something so overwhelmingly valuable, that all these effects would not outweigh its loss, would war (modern war) be then permissible? It is, to take one consideration only, the common teaching of theologians that it must be in any case the very last resort, that there must be no other possible remedy. Can this condition ever be verified? Too readily we accept the notion that, arbitration and conciliation once tried and rejected, war alone remains. There is the Christian expedient, demanding, like all the Christian virtues, a virile courage, of organized passive resistance. In the first place, it is Christian. The fact surely needs no proving. Our Lord did not in fact choose Satan's alternative of worldly power at the Temptation; He did not summon His legions of angels; He put into practice His own precept of meeting evil with good, and met injury with the dignity and heroism of turning the other cheek. In the second place, it works: Mr. Huxley mentions a number of examples, from the early Christians to modern industrial strikes, in which it has been successful; Father Stratmann instances the 1920 *Putsch* in Germany. To hit a man back always means that he will do his best to hit harder the second time. An attack to-day from another Power, to which we offered only passive resistance, would mean great loss and suffering and damage; but it would not mean a fraction of the loss and suffering and damage which a war would produce. "Any nation so mad as to contemplate war would be guilty . . . almost certainly of suicide."

There are three dangers which in making up our minds about modern war it is essential for us to avoid. In the first place we cannot leave judgment to our instincts, to the "old Adam": "The matter is . . . too serious to be left to the judgment of the old Adam"¹; our instinct when attacked, for instance, is to defend ourselves with the weapons of the attackers, but what does that mean to-day? We cannot allow ourselves, and this is the second point, to judge on the past. War to-day is a *new thing*. There will be no such thing, in a war between Big Powers to-day, as defence as we have

¹ Bertrand Russell, *Which Way to Peace?* p. 118.

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hitherto known it. For there will be no such thing as war as we have hitherto known it. According to the findings of military experts and official pronouncements the issue is quite clear: there will be war not of army against army but of people against people; there will be not battles between armed forces but reciprocal attacks upon civilian populations; defence will mean merely reprisals—they have bombed our capital, killed our population with gas and thermite, destroyed our economic life; we must do the same to them.² Thirdly, then, we must beware of glibly applying the statements of theologians to things which those theologians never envisaged. As Cardinal Faulhaber has said: "The teaching of moral theology in regard to war will speak a new language. It will remain true to its old principles, but in regard to the permissibility of war it will take account of the new facts."³ That new language has been bluntly used by the present Pope when he called modern war unequivocally "mass murder" and a "monstrous crime." "It is absolutely certain," writes the priest-author of *Peace and the Clergy*, "that actual war to-day is directed consciously and *directa intentione*, and so not *per accidens*, also against the civil population"⁴; in other words, it directly contemplates mass murder.

The militarist is incurably romantic. It is incredible how little we learn from experience. We know something, though not everything, of the activities of armament firms in promoting war. "Many of these were recently exposed by a Senate inquiry in the United States, but the British public, as far as was possible, was hindered from knowing what had been discovered in the way of intrigues to prevent disarmament by encouraging suspicions between nations."⁵ We have had a war to end war, to make the world safe for democracy and the rest, and we know, or ought to know,

² Cf. Bertrand Russell, *op. cit.*, ch. II. The author remarks: "Official pronouncements, of course, make the best of the situation, because they must, at all costs, deter the population from insisting that war shall not take place."

³ *Peace and the Clergy*, p. 135.

⁴ *Op. cit.*, p. 156.

⁵ Bertrand Russell, *op. cit.*, p. 162.

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just how much these ideals weigh in the real motives for war—greed, capitalism, predatory imperialism.⁶ We know that war means the slaughter of millions of people who had no desire for war and had done nothing to deserve one, and the destruction of that very civilization and those very ideals which the warmongers try to make us believe we are fighting to save. Yet once again the young are ready to think of war as a glorious adventure, and to swallow the diabolic claptrap with which the press is seeking once again to make us war-minded. “The situation amounts to this,” writes Captain Philip S. Mumford: “the Governments of the great powers propose in effect to carry out the mutual destruction of the citizens of the great powers. If the British, French or other governments were to tell their respective subjects that they were carrying out a policy which would finally entail blowing their own people and towns to pieces, those citizens would show very practical signs of wishing to alter the situation. But when the same governments embark upon policies which would entail that those very same citizens shall share the identical fate, but that the German government will do the British destruction while the British do the German, etc., etc., the peoples hug the tatters of their nationalist rags around themselves and await the storm with a fatalistic calm engendered by false standards of patriotism. Self-destruction would, of course, be folly, but mutual destruction is realistic.” And Bertrand Russell, who quotes the passage, rightly concludes: “In such a war, what will be the difference between ‘winning’ and ‘losing’?”⁷

If there are people, then, whom the ethical argument leaves unmoved, it is difficult to see how they remain unmoved by this second consideration, the commonsense utilitarian issue,

⁶ Lord Pridian, having solemnly recited the Ten Commandments, remarked:

“Magnificent, Rudyard, aren’t they?”

“No doubt, no doubt,” replied the general, to whom they had come with all the force of novelty, and who had therefore weighed every word with care, “but, by Gad! they’ll do some harm in India if they leak out”. . . Empire was ever in his mind.” (Osbert Sitwell: *Miracle on Sinai*, p. 186.)

⁷ *Op. cit.*, pp. 122-3.

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the aspect of suicide. To argue hypothetically to-day as to the possibility in theory of a just war is to argue about the morality of possessing lethal weapons while sitting on a time-bomb.

It is sometimes asserted that to argue from the greater evils of modern warfare as opposed to those of past ages is to argue from a fictitious premise; war to-day, it is said, is no more horrible than it has been in earlier ages when it was condoned or even encouraged by the Church. Such a contention, in the first place, ignores the complexity of modern life. It is no longer possible to attack one State without affecting every other State. The nations are in many respects a solidarity; the dislocations brought about by war are not confined to the combatants. Again, the contention ignores the psychological evolution of the race; war can no longer be an incident which closes with the making of peace and leaves little effect upon the survivors; it effects a spiritual and nervous dislocation equal in extent to the economic upheavals, and possibly more lasting. Thirdly, it ignores the fact that, as has been pointed out, war as it would be waged to-day is different not in degree but specifically from war as it has been known in the past. Whatever may be said of the rightness or wrongness of warfare between opposing armies is obviously irrelevant to the question of attacking, *directa intentione*, the civilian population as such.

Another argument may be noted. We have had to fight in the past, it is urged, for the very existence of our civilization, and, had we not fought, that civilization would never have survived; we may have to fight for it again if we wish to preserve it. Two considerations may be suggested in answer to this, leaving on one side the rather fruitless discussion of what might have been in the past. First, is it clear what exactly we should be fighting to preserve in such a case? Would it be our traditional cultural values? Are these really enshrined in our decaying liberal-democracy? Or would it be the saving of that capitalist system which is so clearly destroying our cultural values and all the things which humanism prizes? Would we be fighting for humanity, or for Money? And secondly, granting our present system to

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be the safeguard of humanist values, would war against their enemies be likely to save them? Is it not probable that the result would be mere anarchy and chaos whichever side happened to be regarded as victorious?⁸ On the other hand, what chance would an alien system ultimately have of imposing itself upon a people doggedly determined not to accept it? It is this consideration, that war is in fact the worst way of defending what is of value, that answers the least worthy argument of the militarist: that the pacifist would basely refuse to serve his country in time of crisis. This is merely to misunderstand the whole issue. The pacifist holds that to engage in war is the worst way of serving his country's interests.

On all these grounds, then, it is argued, a just war is in the concrete impossible, and the resort to warfare immoral.

The call to work for peace, so often urged by the Popes, is a call which we cannot neglect. "The peace of Christ in the kingdom of Christ"—it must be the ideal of every Christian; and it is an ideal which will not be fulfilled unless we are prepared to labour, as the Popes have laboured, for the avoidance of war, for the establishment and growth of that "mutual trust and friendship" which, in the words of Pius XI, rather than a "forest of bayonets," is the "best guarantee of tranquillity."

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⁸ Mr. Baldwin stated bluntly in his speech at the Lord Mayor's Banquet: "There is no one in Europe to-day, and I don't care who he is, who does not know what war in the long run means. It means all over Europe the degradation of the life of the people. It means misery compared with which the misery of the last War was happiness. And it means in the end anarchy and a world revolution, and we all know it" (*Times*, November 10th).