



## **The Ethics of War**

Bertrand Russell

The question whether war is ever justified, and if so under what circumstances, is one which has been forcing itself upon the attention of all thoughtful men. On this question I find myself in the somewhat painful position of holding that no single one of the combatants is justified in the present war, while not taking the extreme Tolstoyan view that war is under all circumstances a crime. Opinions on such a subject as war are the outcome of feeling rather than of thought: given a man's emotional temperament, his convictions, both on war in general, and on any particular war which may occur during his lifetime, can be predicted with tolerable certainty. The arguments used will be mere reinforcements to convictions otherwise reached. The fundamental facts in this as in all ethical questions are feelings; all that thought can do is to clarify and systematize the expression of those feelings, and it is such clarifying and systematizing of my own feelings that I wish to attempt in the present article.

### I.

The question of rights and wrongs of a particular war is generally considered from a juridical or quasi-juridical standpoint: so and so broke such and such a treaty, crossed such and such a frontier, committed such and such technically unfriendly acts, and therefore by the rules it is permissible to kill as many of his nation as modern armaments render possible. There is a certain unreality, a certain lack of imaginative grasp about this way of viewing matters. It has the advantage, always dearly prized by lazy men, of substituting a formula, at once ambiguous and easily applied, for the vital realization of the consequences of acts. The juridical point of view is in fact an illegitimate transference, to the relations of States, of principles properly applicable to the relation of individuals within a State. Within a State, private war is forbidden, and the disputes of private citizens are settled, not by their own force, but by the force of the police, which, being overwhelming, very seldom needs to be explicitly displayed. It is necessary that there should be rules according to which the police decide who is to be considered in the right in a private dispute. These rules constitute law. The chief gain derived from the law and the police is the abolition of private wars, and this gain is independent of the question whether the law as it stands is the best possible. It is therefore in the public interest that the man who goes against the law should be considered in the wrong, not because of the excellence of the law, but because of the importance of avoiding the resort to force as between individuals within the State.

In the interrelation of States nothing of the same sort exists. There is, it is true, a body of conventions called "international law," and there are innumerable treaties between High Contracting Powers. But the conventions and the treaties differ from anything that could properly be called law by the absence of sanction: there is no police force able or willing to enforce their observance. It follows from this that every nation concludes multitudes of divergent and incompatible treaties, and that, in spite of the high language one sometimes

hears, the main purpose of the treaties is in actual fact to afford the sort of pretext which is considered respectable for engaging in war with another Power. A Power is considered unscrupulous when it goes to war without previously providing itself with such a pretext--unless indeed its opponent is a small country, in which case it is only to be blamed if that small country happens to be under the protection of some other Great Power. England and Russia may partition Persia immediately after guaranteeing its integrity and independence, because no other Great Power has a recognized interest in Persia, and Persia is one of those small States in regard to which treaty obligations are not considered binding. France and Spain, under a similar guarantee as to Morocco, must not partition it without first compensating Germany, because it is recognized that, until such compensation has been offered and accepted, Germany, though not Morocco, has a legitimate interest in the preservation of that country. All Great Powers having guaranteed the neutrality of Belgium, England has a recognized right to resent its violation--a right which is exercised when it is believed to be to England's interest, and waived when England's interest is not thought to be involved. A treaty is therefore not to be regarded as a contract having the same kind of binding force as belongs to private contracts; it is to be regarded merely as a means of giving notice to rival powers that certain acts may, if the national interest so demand, form one of those reasons for war which are recognized as legitimate. If the faithful observance of treaties were a frequent occurrence, like the observance of contracts, the breach of a treaty might be a real and not merely a formal ground for war, since it would tend to weaken the practice of deciding disputes by agreement rather than by armed force. In the absence of such a practice, however, appeal to treaties is only to be regarded as part of the diplomatic machinery. A nation whose diplomacy has been skilfully conducted will always, when it believes that its interests demand war, be able to find some treaty or agreement bringing its intervention within the rules of the diplomatic game. It is obvious, however, that, so long as treaties are only observed when it is convenient to do so, the rules of the diplomatic game have nothing to do with the question whether embarking or participating in a war will or will not be for the good of mankind, and it is this question which has to be decided in considering whether a war is justified or not.

## II.

It is necessary, in regard to any war, to consider, not its paper justification in past agreements, but its real justification in the balance of good which it is to bring to mankind. At the beginning of a war each nation, under the influence of what is called patriotism, believes that its own victory is both certain and of great importance to mankind. The praiseworthiness of this belief has become an accepted maxim of common sense: even when war is actually in progress it is held to be natural and right that a citizen of an enemy country should regard the victory of his side as assured and highly desirable. By concentrating attention upon the supposed advantages of the victory of our own side, we become more or less blind to the evils inseparable from war and equally certain whichever side may ultimately prove victorious. Yet so long as these are not fully realized, it is impossible to judge justly whether a war is or is not likely to be beneficial to the human race. Although the theme is trite, it is necessary therefore briefly to remind ourselves what the evils of war really are.

To begin with the most obvious evil: large numbers of young men, the most courageous and the most physically fit in their respective nations, are killed, bringing great sorrow to their friends, loss to the community, and gain only to themselves. Many others are maimed for life, some go mad, and others become nervous wrecks, mere useless and helpless derelicts. Of those who survive many will be brutalized and morally degraded by the fierce business of killing, which, however much it may be the soldier's duty, must shock and

often destroy the more humane instincts. As every truthful record of war shows, fear and hate let loose the wild beast in a not inconsiderable proportion of combatants, leading to strange cruelties, which must be faced, but not dwelt upon if sanity is to be preserved....

The evils which war produces outside the area of military operations are perhaps even more serious, for though less intense they are far more widespread. Passing by the anxiety and sorrow of those whose sons or husbands or brothers are at the front, the extent and consequences of the economic injury inflicted by war are much greater than is usually realized. It is common to speak of economic evils as merely material, and of desire for economic progress as grovelling and uninspired. This view is perhaps natural in well-to-do people, to whom economic progress means setting up a motor car or taking holidays in Scotland instead of at the seaside. But with regard to the poorer classes of society, economic progress is the first condition of many spiritual goods and even often of life itself. An overcrowded family, living in a slum in conditions of filth and immorality, where half the children die from ignorance of hygiene and bad sanitation, and the remainder grow up stunted and ignorant--such a family can hardly make progress mentally or spiritually, except through an improvement in its economic condition. And without going to the very bottom of the social scale, economic progress is essential to the possibility of good education, of a tolerable existence for women, and of that breadth and freedom of outlook upon which any solid and national advance must be based. It is not the most oppressed or the most ill-used who make an effective plea for social justice, for some reorganization of society which shall give less to the idler and more to the common man. Throughout the Napoleonic wars, while the landowners of England continually increased their rent-rolls, the mass of the wage-earning population sank into greater and greater destitution. It was only afterwards, during the long peace, that a less unjust distribution began to be possible. It cannot be doubted that the desire on the part of the rich to distract men's minds from the claims of social justice has been more or less unconsciously one of the motives leading to war in modern Europe. Everywhere the well-to-do and the political parties which represent their interests have been the chief agents in stirring up international hatred and in persuading the working man that his real enemy is the foreigner. Thus war, and the fear of war, has a double effect in retarding social progress: it diminishes the resources available for improving the condition of the wage-earning classes, and it distracts men's minds from the need and possibility of general improvement by persuading them that the way to better themselves is to injure their comrades in some other country. It is as a protest against this delusion that international socialism has arisen, and whatever may be thought of socialism as an economic doctrine, its internationalism makes it the sanest force in modern politics, and the only body which has preserved some degree of judgment and humanity in the present chaos.

Of all the evils of war the greatest, in my opinion, is the purely spiritual evil: the hatred, the injustice, the repudiation of truth, the artificial conflict, where, if once the blindness of atavistic instincts and the sinister influence of anti-social interests, such as those of armaments with their subservient press, could be overcome, it would be seen that there is a real consonance of interest and essential identity of human nature, and every reason to replace hatred by love. Mr. Norman Angell has well shown how unreal, as applied to the conflicts of civilized States, is the whole vocabulary of international conflict, how illusory are the gains supposed to be obtained by victory, and how fallacious are the injuries to which nations, in times of peace, are supposed to inflict upon each other in economic competition. The importance of this thesis lies, not so much in its direct economic application, as in the hope which it affords for the liberation of better spiritual impulses in the relations of different communities. To love our enemies, however desirable, is not easy; and therefore it is well to realize that the enmity springs only from blindness, not from any inexorable physical necessity.

### III.

Are there any wars which achieve so much for the good of mankind as to outweigh all the evils we have been considering? I think there have been such wars in the past, but they are not wars of the sort with which our diplomatists are concerned, for which our armies and navies have been prepared, and which are exemplified by the present conflict. For the purposes of classification we may roughly distinguish four kinds of wars, though of course in any given case a war is not likely to be quite clearly of any one of the four kinds. With this proviso we may distinguish: (1) Wars of Colonization; (2) Wars of Principle; (3) Wars of Self-defence; (4) Wars of Prestige. Of these four kinds I should say that the first and second are fairly often justified; the third seldom, except against an adversary of inferior civilization, and the fourth, which is the sort to which the present war belongs, never. Let us consider these four kinds of war in succession.

By a "war of colonization" I mean a war whose purpose is to drive out the whole population of some territory and replace it by an invading population of a different race. Ancient wars were very largely of this kind, of which we have a good example in the Book of Joshua. In modern times the conflicts of Europeans with American-Indians, Maories, and other aborigines in temperate regions, have been of this kind. Such wars are totally devoid of technical justification, and are apt to be more ruthless than any other war. Nevertheless, if we are to judge by results, we cannot regret that such wars have taken place. They have the merit, often quite fallaciously claimed for all wars, of leading in the main to the survival of the fittest, and it is chiefly through such wars that the civilized portion of the world has been extended from the neighborhood of the Mediterranean to the greater part of the earth's surface. The eighteenth century, which liked to praise the virtues of the savage and contrast them with the gilded corruption of courts, nevertheless had no scruple in thrusting the noble savage out from his North American hunting grounds. And we cannot at this date bring ourselves to condemn the process by which the American continent has been acquired for European civilization. In order that such wars may be justified, it is necessary that there should be a very great and undeniable difference between the civilization of the colonizers and that of the dispossessed natives. It is necessary also that the climate should be one in which the invading race can flourish. When these conditions are satisfied the conquest becomes justified, though the actual fighting against the dispossessed inhabitants ought, of course, to be avoided as far as is compatible with colonizing. Many humane people will object in theory to the justification of this form of robbery, but I do not think that any practical or effective objection is likely to be made.

Such wars, however, belong now to the past. The regions where the white men can live are all allotted, either to white races or to yellow races to whom the white man is not clearly superior, and whom, in any case, he is not strong enough to expel. Apart from small punitive expeditions, wars of colonization, in the true sense, are no longer possible. What are nowadays called colonial wars do not aim at the complete occupation of a country by a conquering race; they aim only at securing certain governmental and trading advantages. They belong, in fact, rather with what I call wars of prestige, than with wars of colonization in the old sense. There are, it is true, a few rare exceptions. The Greeks in the second Balkan war conducted a war of colonization against the Bulgarians; throughout a certain territory which they intended to occupy, they killed all the men, and carried off all the women. But in such cases, the only possible justification fails, since there is no evidence of superior civilization on the side of the conquerors.

In spite, however, of the fact that wars of colonization belong to the past, men's feelings and beliefs about war are still those appropriate to the extinct conditions which rendered such wars possible. When the present war began, many people in England imagined that if

the Allies were victorious Germany would cease to exist; Germany was to be “destroyed” or “smashed,” and since these phrases sounded vigorous and cheering, people failed to see that they were totally devoid of meaning. There are some seventy million Germans; with great good fortune, we might, in a successful war, succeed in killing two millions of them. There would then still be sixty-eight million Germans, and in a few years the loss of population due to the war would be made good. Germany is not merely a State, but a nation, bound together by a common language, common traditions, and common ideals. Whatever the outcome of the war, this nation will still exist at the end of it, and its strength cannot be permanently impaired. But the imagination in what pertains to war is still dominated by Homer and the Old Testament; men who cannot see that circumstances have changed since those works were composed are called ““practical”” men and are said to be free from illusions. Those, on the other hand, who have some understanding of the modern world, and some capacity for freeing their minds from the influence of phrases, are called dreamy idealists, Utopians, traitors, and friends of every country but their own. If the facts were understood, wars amongst civilized nations would cease, owing to their inherent absurdity. Men’s passions always lag behind their political organizations, and facts which leave no outlet for passions are not readily admitted. In order that hatred, pride, and violence may find an outlet, men unconsciously blind themselves to the plainest facts of politics and economics, and modern war continues to be waged with the phrases and theories invented by simpler men in a simpler age.

#### IV.

The second type of war which may sometimes be justified is what may be called ““the war of principle.”” To this kind belong the wars of Protestant and Catholic, and the English and American civil wars. In such cases, each side, or at least one side, is honestly convinced that the progress of mankind depends upon the adoption of certain beliefs--beliefs which, through blindness or natural depravity, mankind will not regard as reasonable, except when presented at the point of the bayonet. Such wars may be justified: for example, a nation practising religious toleration may be justified in resisting a persecuting nation holding a different creed. On this ground we might justify the resistance of the Dutch to the England and French combined in the time of Charles II. But wars of principle are much less often justified than is believed by those in whose age they occur. It is very rarely that a principle of genuine value to mankind can only be propagated by military force: as a rule, it is the bad part of men’s principles, not the good part, which makes it necessary to fight for their defence. And for this reason the bad part rather than the good rises to prominence during the progress of a war of principle. A nation undertaking a war in defence of religious toleration would be almost certain to persecute those of its citizens who did not believe in religious toleration. A war on behalf of democracy, if it is long and fierce, is sure to end in the exclusion from all share of power of those who do not support the war. Mr. George Trevelyan in an eloquent passage describes the defeat which, as the ultimate outcome of our civil war, overtook alike the ideals of the Roundheads and the ideals of the Cavaliers. ““And this was the curse of the victors, not to die, but to live, and almost to lose their awful faith in God, when they saw the Restoration, not of the old gaiety that was too gay for them and the old loyalty that was too loyal for them, but of corruption and selfishness that had neither country nor king. The sound of the Roundhead cannon has long ago died away, but still the silence of the garden is heavy with unalterable fate, brooding over besiegers and besieged, in such haste to destroy each other and permit only the vile to survive.”” This common doom of opposite ideals is the usual, though not the invariable, penalty of supporting ideals by force. While it may therefore be conceded that such wars are not



invariably to be condemned, we must nevertheless scrutinize very skeptically the claim of any particular war to be justified on the ground of the victory which it brings to some important principle.

There are some who maintain that the present war is a war in defence of democracy. I do not know whether this view is adopted by the Tsar, and for the sake of the stability of the Alliance I sincerely hope that it is not. I do not, however, desire to dispute the proposition that democracy in the western nations would suffer from the victory of Germany. What I do wish to dispute is the belief not infrequently entertained in England that if the Allies are victorious democracy can be forced upon a reluctant Germany as part of the conditions of peace. Men who think thus have lost sight of the spirit of democracy in worship of the letter. The Germans have the form of government which they desire, and therefore any other form, imposed by alien victors, would be less in harmony with the spirit of democracy, however much it might conform to the letter. Men do right to desire strongly the victory of ideals which they believe to be important, but it is almost always a sign of yielding to undue impatience when men believe that what is valuable in their ideals can be furthered by the substitution of force for peaceful persuasion. To advocate democracy by war is only to repeat, on a vaster scale and with far more tragic results, the error of those who have sought it hitherto by the assassin's knife and the bomb of the anarchist.

The next kind of war to be considered is the war of self-defence. This kind of war is almost universally admitted to be justifiable, and is condemned only by Christ and Tolstoy. The justification of wars of self-defence is very convenient, since so far as I know there has never yet been a war which was not one of self-defence. Every strategist assures us that the true defence is offence; every great nation believes that its own overwhelming strength is the only possible guarantee of the world's peace and can only be secured by the defeat of other nations. In the present war, Serbia is defending itself against the brutal aggression of Austria-Hungary; Austria-Hungary is defending itself against the disruptive revolutionary agitation which Serbia is believed to have fomented; Russia is defending Slavdom against the menace of Teutonic aggression; Germany is defending Teutonic civilization against the encroachments of the Slav; France is defending itself against a repetition of 1870; and England, which sought only the preservation of the status quo, is defending itself against a prospective menace to its maritime supremacy. The claim of each side to be fighting in self-defence appears to the other side mere wanton hypocrisy, because in each case the other side believes that self-defence is only to be achieved by conquest. So long as the principle of self-defence is recognized as affording always a sufficient justification for war, this tragic conflict of irresistible claims remains unavoidable. In certain cases, where there is a clash of differing civilizations, a war of self-defence may be justified on the same grounds as a war of principle. I think, however, that, even as a matter of practical politics, the principle of non-resistance contains an immense measure of wisdom if only men would have the courage to carry it out. The evils suffered during a hostile invasion are suffered because resistance is offered: the Duchy of Luxemburg, which was not in a position to offer resistance, has escaped the fate of the other regions occupied by hostile troops. What one civilized nation can achieve against another by means of conquest is very much less than is commonly supposed. It is said, both here and in Germany, that each side is fighting for its existence; but when this phrase is scrutinized, it is found to cover a great deal of confusion of thought induced by unreasoning panic. We cannot destroy Germany even by a complete military victory, nor conversely, could Germany destroy England even if our Navy were sunk and London occupied by the Prussians. English civilization, the English language, English manufactures would still exist, and as a matter of practical politics it would be totally impossible for Germany to establish a tyranny in this country. If the Germans, instead of being resisted by force of arms, had been passively permitted to

establish themselves wherever they pleased, the halo of glory and courage surrounding the brutality of military success would have been absent, and public opinion in Germany itself would have rendered any oppression impossible. The history of our own dealings with our colonies affords abundant examples to show that under such circumstances the refusal of self-government is not possible. In a word, it is the means of repelling hostile aggression which make hostile aggression disastrous and which generate the fear by which hostile nations come to think aggression justified. As between civilized nations, therefore, non-resistance would seem not only a distant religious ideal, but the course of practical wisdom. Only pride and fear stand in the way of its adoption. But the pride of military glory might be overcome by a nobler pride, and the fear might be overcome by a clearer realization of the solidity and indestructibility of a modern civilized nation.

## VI.

The last kind of war we have to consider is what I have called “the war of prestige.” Prestige is seldom more than one element in the causes of a war, but it is often a very important element. In the present war, until the war had actually broken out, it was almost the only thing involved, although as soon as the war began other and much more important matters came to be at stake. The initial question between Austria and Russia was almost wholly one of prestige. The lives of Balkan peasants could not have been much affected for good or evil by the participation or non-participation of Austrian officials in the trial of supposed Servian accomplices in the Sarajevo murders. This important question, which is the one on which the war is being fought, concerns what is called the hegemony of the Balkans, and this is entirely a question of prestige. Men desire the sense of triumph, and fear the sense of humiliation which they would have in yielding to the demands of another nation. Rather than forego the triumph, rather than endure the humiliation, they are willing to inflict upon the world all those disasters which it is now suffering and all that exhaustion and impoverishment which it must long continue to suffer. The willingness to inflict and endure such evils is almost universally praised; it is called high-spirited, worthy of a great nation, showing fidelity to ancestral traditions. The slightest sign of reasonableness is attributed to fear, and received with shame on the one side and with derision on the other. In private life exactly the same state of opinion existed so long as duelling was practised, and exists still in those countries in which this custom still survives. It is now recognized, at any rate in the Anglo-Saxon world, that the so called ““honor”” which made duelling appear inevitable was a folly and a delusion. It is perhaps not too much to hope that the day may come when the honor of nations, like that of individuals, will be longer measured by their willingness to inflict slaughter. It can hardly be hoped, however, that such a change will be brought about while the affairs of nations are left in the keeping of diplomatists whose status is bound up with the diplomatic or military triumph of the countries from which they come, and whose manner of life renders them unusually ignorant of all the political and economic facts of real importance and of all the changes of opinions and organization which make the present world different from that of the eighteenth century. If any real progress is to be made in introducing sanity into international relations, it is vital that these relations should be in the hands of men less aloof and less aristocratic, more in touch with common life, and more emancipated from the prejudices of a bygone age. It is necessary also that popular education, instead of inflaming the hatred of foreigners and representing even the tiniest triumph as worthy of even the greatest sacrifices, should aim rather at producing some sense of the solidarity of mankind and of the paltriness of those objects to which diplomatists, often secretly, think fit to pledge the manhood and heroism of nations.

The objects for which men have fought in the past, whether just or unjust, are no longer to be achieved by wars amongst civilized nations. A great weight of tradition, of financial interests, of political insincerity, is bound up with the anachronism of international hostility. It is, however, perhaps not chimerical to hope that the present war, which has shocked the conscience of mankind more than any war in previous history, may produce a revulsion against antiquated methods, and may lead the exhausted nations to insist upon the brotherhood and co-operation which their rulers have hitherto denied them. There is no reason whatever against the settlement of all disputes by a Council of Powers deliberating in public. Nothing stands in its way except the pride of rulers who wish to remain uncontrolled by anything higher than their own will. When this great tragedy has worked itself out to its disastrous conclusion, when the passions of hate and self-assertion have given place to compassion with the universal misery, the nations will perhaps realize that they have fought in blindness and delusion, and that the way of mercy is the way of happiness for all.

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