

WORLD WAR TWO AS 'TOTAL WAR' RAISED MORE ETHICAL QUESTIONS THAN IT ANSWERED

The 20th century was a period of massive conflicts on a global scale. The peace treaties that ended World War I created the conditions for World War II. The Second World War began in 1939, lasted until 1945, and was fought on all the world's major continents.

Historians regard it as the deadliest and the most destructive war in the history of humanity. Many people died, whole countries' infrastructure was destroyed and the scale of the violence was something that the world had never seen before. What were the ethical implications of World War II?

At face value, one would easily conclude that it was an immoral engagement whose consequences were death and property destruction. However, some scholars have found moral justifications for some of the actions taken during the war.

Whether the War Had a Just Cause

Some scholars and politicians claim that all the suffering that people endured during World War II was justified because the war achieved a morally justifiable outcome, the destruction of the

authoritarian regimes that were in power in Berlin, Rome and Tokyo and a victory for democracy and human rights. I beg to differ!

Yes, the German and the Japanese militarism were extinguished and the population in those two countries, predominantly in Germany was exposed to a long-lasting and very effective campaign aimed at transforming their self-consciousness, but the other monster, the Soviet communist regime metastasized and swallowed whole Eastern Europe with the initial tacit acquiescence of the Americans and the British. The resulting Cold War almost turned hot in a few occasions which threatened the very existence of the world as we know it.

The Red mass murderers led by Stalin were in many cases even worse than their Nazi enemies so to claim that the Allies victory was some kind of victory for democracy is at best disingenuous.

But let's also turn our attention to the Americans and look at one of the seminal events of World War II, the bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki. Did this action have any positive effects that could justify the massive loss of life? America's dropping the atomic bomb on Japan remains one of the most significant moments of the conflict and one of the reasons the war eventually ended.

In Hiroshima alone, more than 100,000 people died from the attack. Some scholars have argued that the bombing was moral because the war would have continued for several more months had America not attacked Japan and many more Americans would have died fighting the Japanese on their home soil. That of course also means that the attacks on Hiroshima and Nagasaki

which lead to the Japan surrender, removed any danger for America itself. This line of thinking is part of the so called utilitarian model, where the end justifies the means. The model primarily focuses on the result of the action rather than the moral value of the deed. Therefore, according to these scholars the bombing of Japan was ethical because its results meant that no more American and Japanese people would have had to die. However, this raises other critical questions, such as whether killing, regardless of the underlying reason, has ethical justifications. Also I am very doubtful that the Americans when dropping the bombs over Hiroshima and Nagasaki were doing it because they were trying to prevent further loss of Japanese life down the road.

The indiscriminate killing of non-combatants

Since ancient times people have tried to impose some kind of rules during war that all sides of a conflict were supposed to obey. One of these rules is that the warring sides, when executing military operations must distinguish between enemy combatants and non-combatants. Although some moralists have argued that the atomic bombings of Japan were ethical because they ended the war, others view them as immoral because they killed many innocent people with weapons of mass destruction more suited for use in the battlefield. At that time, the atomic bomb was a new weapon, and no country was ever in possession of such might before. The Second World War provided an opportunity to

experiment with it and understand its effectiveness. The atomic bomb had a devastating impact on the Japanese civilian population in the two unfortunate cities Hiroshima and Nagasaki, where regular people were going about their daily lives and had nothing to do with the prosecution of the war. The indiscriminate nature of the bombing and the deliberate targeting of the urban centers were malicious, evil acts aimed not only to force the Japanese into submission but to avenge for the attack on Pearl Harbor. The negative long-term effects of the Hiroshima and Nagasaki bombings continued for many years. The attacks raised severe ethical issues because it affected the most vulnerable, elderly people, women and children. Moreover, they violated several fundamental principles, including fairness, compassion, and justice. Therefore, America's attack on Japan in 1945 remains one of the most morally controversial events that will continue dividing the public for many years to come. Of course others could argue that Japan at that time was in a state of total mobilization and every Japanese person, irrespective of his/her status was contributing to the war effort and therefore was a legitimate target of American reprisals.

Unlike many other conflicts before, the Second World War was unique because it involved massive civilian deaths. Casualties in earlier wars consisted mainly of soldiers participating in the battles but in World War II, by some estimates, about half of the European casualties were civilians. The Nazi regime for example was responsible for murdering millions of people. Similarly the Soviet soldiers inflicted terrible horrors on the German civilians

during their conquest of Germany, as a payback for the way the Russians were treated in the earlier stages of the war. The proponents of such barbarous acts would argue that the killing of civilians is just another military tactic. Terminating innocent lives gives the perpetrators more bargaining power and, it is also a way of breaking the spirit of their opponents and forcing them to surrender. However, critics would argue that innocent people have nothing to do with the war. When assessing the causes of the Second World War, ordinary citizens were not part of the disagreements that resulted in the war. A military confrontation should only encompass the soldiers and other trained military personnel.

Holocaust

The Holocaust is another World War II atrocity that raises numerous moral issues. During World War II, Nazi Germans wiped out approximately 6 million Jews. Historical studies showed that this led to the disappearance of many Jewish communities that had lived in Europe for hundreds of years. The mass killing of the Jewish people raises many moral questions regarding the nature of humans. The Nazi Germans had no legitimate reasons to hate or kill the Jews. Instead, it was a matter of extremism and racism directed at the German Jews who were accused of being the root cause of all the problems that had befallen Germany after the country lost World War I. These actions of the leadership of the National-Socialist Party raise the question whether it is ever justified to create divisions among people and use them to mobilize the population and achieve

political gains.

Traditionally, perpetrators of genocides have used dehumanization and identity politics to justify their actions. What this means is that before the elements within the population that are deemed to be alien, subversive and dangerous are put to death they have to be stripped of their humanity. In the eyes of the perpetrators of the Holocaust their victims did not belong to the human race but were some vile creatures that had to be erased from the face of the Earth. Those views were affront to humanity and contrary to the very foundations of the Christian, European civilization.

Morally Justifiable Start of a Conflict

World War II also raised significant ethical questions regarding the moral authority to start a conflict. After the First World War, the victors formed the League of Nations with the intention of creating a mechanism that would prevent the repeat of such a catastrophe ever again.

That was to happen by encouraging the member states to resolve any disputes they might have between them in a peaceful manner. Based on its structure and purpose, the League of Nations was mandated to act as the ethical enforcer against violence. As nations came together, they communicated that none had the right to rule over the other and they all would agree to abide by the decisions of this supra-national authority. However the League of Nations ultimately lost all credibility after Japan and then Italy ignored its resolutions. In the modern context, the UN

has the authority to ask for military interventions against state and non-state actors but because any of the permanent members of the Security Council could veto such request in practice such action has been authorized by the Security Council only a few times in its history. All the wars after World War II had been waged by countries in pursuit of their own national interests but the real reasons were always hidden while the propaganda machine manufactures beautiful phrases and high-minded reasons to justify the military actions. One interesting example is how instead of “Ministry of War” or a “War Department” all those government entities dealing with waging war nowadays are called “Ministry of Defense” or something similar.

Thus not much has changed since World War II except that the wars now have to be portrayed as a necessary defense of democracy and human rights, and that is often done by both sides of the conflict. One most recent example is the Russian invasion of Ukraine that is presented by both sides as a life-or-death struggle for freedom and democracy against the forces of racism and nationalism while the real reasons are different for the different actors in this conflict. Another similarity with the pre-World War II situation is the way Russia, just like Japan and Italy before World War II, ignores the UN calls for peace and continues to pursue its dream for imperial rebirth, hoping to dismantle the current world order in the process.

Nations started World War II, not because a legitimate supranational authority had declared it. Instead, it was a conflict caused by the desire to protect the rights of the respective nations

from real or perceived threats. Of course, everyone saw differently both the threats and the measures that needed to be taken to neutralize these threats. For instance, the US entered the war after Japan attacked its naval base at Pearl Harbor in December, 1941. Britain felt threatened by the aggressive German conquests in Europe and both Germany and Japan felt that the international order at that time was unjust and designed to benefit their adversaries. So all this begs the question whether nations should consider rights infringement as a justifiable cause for starting a war. Although some believe that legitimate authority should emanate from a global organization, others opine that a war waged in defense of a country's national interests is also morally justifiable. The problem is that very often the elite and the ordinary people see the country's national interests very differently but the citizenry, absent an outright rebellion, often lacks the tools to force a decision in their favor.

Conclusion

Moralists keep asking whether the sacrifices made during World War II were worth it. As previously noted, the end of the First World War ushered in the League of Nations, an entity established by the victors aimed at preventing future bloody conflicts from emerging. However the world order established after the Great War had clear beneficiaries and losing sides and that sowed the seeds of the Second World War. The world order that emerged after World War II managed to incorporate the former adversaries Germany and Japan as willing participants in it, who

had vested interest in protecting it. But this “rules-based international order” did not include the former Soviet Union and the other communist countries for a long time and when the West emerged victorious after 1989, Russia clearly unhappy with the outcome started playing the role Germany and Japan played before World War II and now tries to bring down the whole global architecture established after 1941.

In summary there are many ethical questions raised as a result of the bloodiest conflict in human history, World War II.

The just cause argument looks at the impact of the conflict.

Although some believe that the victory of the Western democracies achieved long-lasting world peace, others note that it came at such a high cost in terms of mass deaths and destruction of property that it is not ethically justifiable.

Some scholars believe that the one thing World War II taught us is that nations should be denied the ability to wage war on their own which could reduce the chance of another world war ever occurring, while others hold the “outdated” view that countries’ legitimate pursuit of national interests sometime leads to war and that is unavoidable part of the international politics.

Other scholars focused solely on how the conflict touched impacted the civilians. Some have argued that the Second World War was immoral because it affected the civilian population while others justified this violence on the basis that it prevented even more deaths and destruction. Finally some economists even did input -to -outcome-analysis of the war but such calculations obviously cannot take into account the immeasurable suffering

that the war inflicted on millions of people all over the world.
Thus, the justifications for starting World War II remain a highly
controversial topic for discussion.

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