IS WAR A NECESSARY FUNCTION OF HUMAN CIVILIZATION?

Tyranny, the Necessity of Force, the Illusion of Perpetual Peace, and the Hard Question of Whether Violence Can Be Righteous

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Abstract

The preceding companion paper established that war is the oldest organized human activity and that pride, tribalism, and material competition are its layered causes. This paper confronts the harder moral and political question that conclusion forces upon us: If war is the endemic condition of humanity, is it therefore a *necessary* condition — a function without which the species would be consumed by the tyranny and evil that the same human nature also produces? The paper examines the philosophical, historical, theological, and political evidence for the proposition that organized violence, however terrible, has served as the primary check on the consolidation of absolute power throughout human history. It then examines the counterproposition — that peace is achievable by structural means — and subjects it to rigorous historical scrutiny. The paper concludes that perpetual peace without any capacity for organized resistance to evil is not merely naive but is itself a precondition for the worst forms of tyranny; that the question is therefore not whether force is sometimes necessary but whether it can be disciplined by justice; and that the deepest problem is not political but anthropological — rooted in the same human nature that makes both tyranny and resistance to it inevitable.

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I. The Question Stated: Is War a Necessary Evil or a Necessary Good?

The preceding analysis established the anatomy of war's causes: pride, tribalism, material competition, and the structural logic of walls — the demarcation of *us* and *them* that is inseparable from the formation of any human community. If those causes are permanent features of human nature and social organization, the question that follows is not whether war will continue but whether war, or at least the organized capacity for violence, serves a function without which human civilization would be worse — perhaps catastrophically worse — than it is with it.

This is not a comfortable question to ask. The reflexive answer in polite contemporary discourse is that war is always evil, always a failure of some better alternative, always something that wiser governance and more enlightened international institutions could prevent. This answer is understandable as a moral aspiration. As a historical and political proposition, it is demonstrably false.

The uncomfortable truth that history keeps forcing upon those who study it carefully is this: the major acts of liberation in human history — the overthrow of empires, the defeat of totalitarianism, the breaking of the slave trade, the end of colonial rule in many countries — were accomplished not by negotiation, petition, or the gradual enlightenment of oppressors, but by organized violence or the credible threat of it. The oppressor rarely relinquishes power because asked politely. The tyrant rarely moderates his tyranny because of moral argument. The historical record is, on this point, nearly without exception.

This does not mean that all violence is justified, that might makes right, or that the resort to war is without cost. It means something more specific and more difficult: that the capacity for organized resistance to evil — which is to say, the capacity for war — appears to be a necessary condition for the preservation of any space in which human beings can live as something other than slaves. Whether that capacity can be directed by justice, constrained by law, and exercised with proportionality is the practical moral question. Whether it can be eliminated entirely without surrendering the world to those who will never eliminate theirs is the question this paper addresses.

The phrasing of the original question — "Is peace on earth without war Pollyanna?" — is more penetrating than it might appear. "Pollyanna," from Eleanor Porter's 1913 novel, has come to denote a disposition of compulsive optimism that refuses to acknowledge evil even when staring directly at it. The question is whether the aspiration to perpetual peace is not merely optimistic but *willfully blind* — whether it requires averting the eyes from what human beings actually do to one another when power is unchecked, and from what history shows about the only mechanisms that have reliably checked it.

II. The Historical Evidence: What Happens When Resistance Ceases

Before constructing the philosophical argument, the historical evidence deserves direct examination. The question is empirical as well as philosophical: What actually happens when a population loses or surrenders the capacity for organized resistance to power?

A. The Pax Romana and Its Cost

The Roman Empire's celebrated *Pax Romana* (27 B.C.E.–180 C.E.) is the most frequently cited example of large-scale peace in the ancient world. For approximately two centuries, the Mediterranean basin experienced a level of internal order, commercial connectivity, and relative freedom from interstate warfare that was unprecedented in the ancient world and would not be equaled for over a millennium. Population grew. Trade flourished. Cities expanded. Infrastructure — roads, aqueducts, harbors — reached a level of development that parts of Europe would not regain until the early modern period.

But the Pax Romana was not peace in any morally uncomplicated sense. It was the peace of overwhelming military dominance — the pacification of conquered peoples by force, the suppression of resistance by crucifixion and enslavement, and the maintenance of order through the constant threat of Roman military power. Tacitus, in his *Agricola*, puts into the mouth of the British chieftain Calgacus a summary judgment that remains among the most honest assessments of imperial peace in the ancient literature: *Ubi solitudinem faciunt, pacem appellant* — "Where they make a desert, they call it peace."

The populations incorporated into the Pax Romana had not chosen it. The Gauls, the Britons, the Jews, the Dacians, the Armenians had all fought, and lost, wars of resistance against Roman expansion. Their peace was the peace of subjects, not of free peoples. They enjoyed the benefits of Roman order — and they paid for those benefits with sovereignty, taxation, and the permanent availability of their bodies for Roman labor, military service, and entertainment. The Pax Romana illustrates with precision what peace without the capacity for resistance looks like: it looks like empire.

B. The Mongol Peace (Pax Mongolica)

The Mongol Empire of the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries — the largest contiguous land empire in human history — also generated a period of relative peace and commercial stability across the Eurasian landmass after the initial conquests. The *Pax Mongolica* facilitated the trade routes that Marco Polo traveled and enabled the exchange of goods, ideas, and technologies across vast distances.

It was preceded by what may be the most concentrated episode of mass killing in the pre-modern period. The Mongol conquests under Genghis Khan and his successors (1206–1368 C.E.) killed an estimated 30 to 40 million people — approximately 10 percent of the world's population at the time. The populations of Persia, Central Asia, China, and Eastern Europe were reduced catastrophically. Entire cities — Nishapur, Merv, Baghdad, Kiev — were destroyed so completely that some never recovered their pre-Mongol populations. The *Pax Mongolica* was the peace of a world that had exhausted its capacity for resistance.

The lesson is not that the Mongols were uniquely evil among conquerors — the mechanisms of their violence were those of their time and culture. The lesson is structural: peace achieved through the elimination of the capacity for resistance is the peace of the conquered, and it persists exactly as long as the conqueror remains more powerful than any coalition that might challenge him. When the Mongol state fragmented, the peace fragmented with it.

C. The Consolidation of Totalitarian States in the Twentieth Century

The twentieth century provides the most analytically precise laboratory for the question of what happens when organized resistance to state power is eliminated. The Nazi, Soviet, Chinese Communist, Cambodian, and North Korean states all achieved their most extreme atrocities only after systematically disarming and disorganizing the populations they controlled.

The sequence in each case was remarkably consistent. First, political opposition was criminalized. Second, independent organizations — trade unions, churches, professional associations, fraternal societies — were infiltrated, co-opted, or destroyed. Third, weapons were confiscated from the civilian population. Fourth, surveillance and informant networks were established to prevent the re-emergence of organized resistance. Fifth, with resistance eliminated, the killing began in earnest.

The Holocaust is the most studied example of this sequence. The systematic murder of six million Jews (and five to six million others) was possible precisely because the victims had been stripped of the capacity for organized resistance before the killing began: legal discrimination (Nuremberg Laws, 1935), economic exclusion, concentration in ghettos, disarmament, and the destruction of community institutions all preceded the death camps. The Warsaw Ghetto Uprising of April–May 1943 — in which a few hundred fighters with improvised weapons held off the German military for nearly a month — demonstrated that even minimal organized resistance imposed significant costs on the perpetrators. But it came too late and with too few resources to prevent the genocide.

Hannah Arendt's *The Origins of Totalitarianism* (1951) identifies the elimination of the distinction between public and private life, the atomization of individuals from all mediating institutions, and the destruction of any space for organized resistance as the defining structural conditions for totalitarianism. The totalitarian state requires the total defenselessness of its subjects. Where subjects retain the organizational capacity for resistance — even the *potential* for it — total domination is impossible.

D. What the Absence of Resistance Produces

The pattern across these historical examples is consistent enough to warrant a general proposition: the uncontested consolidation of power over a population, wherever it has occurred in history, has produced exploitation, oppression, and frequently mass killing. The reason is not that rulers are uniformly evil — some are, some are not — but that power without accountability tends, across enough iterations and time, toward exploitation, and that the most reliable form of accountability is the credible capacity of the governed to make the exercise of power costly for the governors.

This is what James Madison meant in Federalist No. 51 when he wrote: "If men were angels, no government would be necessary. If angels were to govern men, neither external nor internal

controls on government would be necessary." Madison's constitutional design was premised on the anthropological realism that the same human nature that makes government necessary also makes government dangerous, and that the only reliable check on the abuse of power is a counter-power capable of resisting it.

The historical record does not support optimism about what happens when that counter-power is absent.

III. The Philosophical Tradition: War, Justice, and the Duty to Resist

A. Aristotle and the Political Animal

Aristotle's political philosophy begins with the observation that the human being is *zōon politikon* — a political animal — meaning that human beings are constitutively social creatures who can only achieve their proper nature within a political community (*polis*). But Aristotle also recognizes that political communities are not naturally peaceful: the *polis* exists in a world of other *poleis*, and the capacity for warfare is inseparable from the capacity for political self-governance. In his *Politics* (VII.14), Aristotle discusses the proper education of citizens in the arts of war, not because war is good but because a political community that cannot defend itself ceases to exist as a self-governing entity.

Aristotle's insight is that the capacity for organized violence is not separable from political freedom — that the free city and the armed citizen are, in the ancient world, the same thing. The Greek *hoplite* — the free citizen who fought in the phalanx — was the same person as the citizen who voted in the assembly. The disarmed population of a conquered city became the slave population of the conqueror. Political freedom and the capacity for armed self-defense were, in Greek political thought and practice, inseparable.

B. Cicero and the Just War

Marcus Tullius Cicero (106–43 B.C.E.) gave Western political thought its first systematic treatment of the conditions under which war is just in his *De Re Publica* and *De Officiis*. Cicero established the criteria that would form the basis of all subsequent just war theory: war must be declared for a just cause (defensive or to recover what has been wrongly taken); it must be conducted by a legitimate authority; it must be preceded by a formal declaration and offer of peace; and it must be conducted in accordance with the laws of war, including the protection of non-combatants and the humane treatment of prisoners.

Crucially, Cicero did not regard war as intrinsically evil — he regarded *unjust* war as evil and just war as a moral duty. In *De Officiis* (1.23), he writes: "There are two ways of settling a dispute: first by discussion; second, by physical force; and since the former is characteristic of man, the latter of the brute, we must resort to force only in case we may not avail ourselves of discussion." The implication is not that force is always wrong but that it is the appropriate response when reason and discussion have been exhausted or made unavailable by the other party's intransigence.

C. Augustine: The City of God and the City of Man

Augustine of Hippo (354–430 C.E.) wrote *The City of God* (*De Civitate Dei*) in the aftermath of the Visigothic sack of Rome in 410 C.E. — an event that shattered the Roman world's confidence in the permanence of its own civilization. Augustine's political theology is the most important Christian analysis of war and peace in the Western tradition, and it is neither simply pacifist nor simply pro-war.

Augustine develops a distinction between two cities that coexist in this world: the City of God (*civitas Dei*), characterized by love of God and neighbor, and the City of Man (*civitas terrena*), characterized by self-love and the desire for domination (*libido dominandi*). These two cities are not identifiable with the Church and the State respectively — they are intermingled in all human institutions until the final judgment. The political consequence of this intermingling is that no earthly peace is complete or permanent: the *pax terrena* (earthly peace) is a real but fragile good, perpetually threatened by the libido dominandi that is embedded in human nature.

Within this framework, Augustine develops his theology of just war. He argues that Christians may legitimately participate in warfare when it serves the cause of earthly peace — that is, when it restrains the aggressors whose libido dominandi would otherwise destroy the conditions of civil life. War is never a good in itself; it is sometimes the lesser evil — the violence necessary to prevent greater violence. Augustine writes in *Contra Faustum* (22.74): "The real evils in war are love of violence, revengeful cruelty, fierce and implacable enmity, wild resistance, and the lust of power." These vices of motivation are what make war evil; war undertaken from love of peace and the protection of the innocent is another matter.

Augustine's framework is the foundation of all subsequent Christian just war thinking and is the most honest theological account of the permanent tension between the Christian ethic of love and the political necessity of force: he refuses both the sentimentalism that pretends force is never necessary and the cynicism that pretends it needs no justification.

D. Aquinas: Force as a Moral Instrument

Thomas Aquinas (1225–1274 C.E.) systematized the just war tradition in the *Summa Theologica* (II-II, Q. 40), establishing three criteria that remain the core of just war doctrine: legitimate authority (only the sovereign, not private individuals, may declare war); just cause (defense against aggression, recovery of wrongly seized goods, or punishment of injustice); and right intention (the goal must be peace and justice, not vengeance or conquest). Aquinas adds the criterion of *last resort* — war is only permissible when other means have failed.

The significance of Aquinas's formulation is that it treats the use of force as a moral instrument — neither inherently righteous nor inherently evil, but subject to moral evaluation by criteria that are in principle objective. This framework does not glorify war; it subjects it to the same moral reasoning that governs other human actions and insists that the taking of human life, even in legitimate warfare, requires serious justification.

E. Locke: The Right of Revolution

John Locke's *Second Treatise of Government* (1689) provides the most influential political-philosophical justification for armed resistance to tyranny in the modern tradition. Locke argues that political authority is legitimate only when it is exercised in accordance with natural law and with the consent of the governed; that a government which systematically violates natural rights becomes tyrannical; and that the people retain a right — indeed, a duty — to resist and overthrow tyrannical government.

Locke's right of revolution is explicitly a right to use force: "Wherever law ends, tyranny begins… and whoever in authority exceeds the power given him by the law… may be opposed, as any other man who by force invades the right of another" (*Second Treatise*, ch. 18, §202). The revolutionary right is not merely the right to complain or petition; it is the right to take up arms. Locke grounds this right in the natural law argument that self-preservation is a fundamental duty — that to surrender the right of resistance is to consent to one's own slavery, which no person has the moral right to do.

Locke's arguments were the direct philosophical foundation for the American Declaration of Independence (1776) and the French Declaration of the Rights of Man (1789), both of which appealed to the right of revolution against tyrannical government. They represent the Enlightenment's most rigorous philosophical case for the proposition that organized violence against tyranny is not merely permissible but can be a moral duty.

F. Kant: Perpetual Peace and Its Limits

Immanuel Kant's *Perpetual Peace: A Philosophical Sketch* (1795) is the most intellectually serious attempt in the Western philosophical tradition to argue for the possibility of a world without war. Kant proposes that perpetual peace can be achieved through a federation of republican states, based on three "definitive articles": that the civil constitution of every state should be republican (with separation of powers and rule of law); that the law of nations should be founded on a federation of free states; and that cosmopolitan law should be limited to conditions of universal hospitality.

Kant's argument has been enormously influential — it is the philosophical foundation of the League of Nations, the United Nations, and the liberal internationalist project of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. Democratic Peace Theory (discussed below) is essentially Kant's first article subjected to empirical testing.

However, Kant's argument contains a crucial evasion that his successors have rarely honestly confronted: it assumes that the states joining the federation are already republican and already committed to the rule of law. It does not tell us what to do about states that are not — about the tyrant, the conquering empire, the genocidal regime that has no intention of joining a peaceful federation on equal terms. Kant's perpetual peace is achievable, if at all, only among states that have already resolved the problem of internal tyranny. For states that have not — for the subjects of Hitler, Stalin, Mao, or Pol Pot — it offers nothing.

IV. The Theological Question: Does Scripture Authorize Defensive Violence?

A. The Hebrew Bible: War, Yahweh, and the Defense of Israel

The Hebrew Bible contains more extensive treatment of warfare than almost any other ancient religious text, and its theology of war is neither simple pacifism nor simple militarism. God commands the Israelite conquest of Canaan (Deuteronomy 7, 20); raises up judges and kings to lead armies; is described as a "man of war" (*ish milhamah*, אִישׁ מִלְחָמָה, Exodus 15:3); and repeatedly authorizes military action against oppressors of his people. The Psalms of warfare — "Blessed be the Lord, my rock, who trains my hands for war and my fingers for battle" (Psalm 144:1) — express a theology of divine authorization for defensive and liberating violence.

The Hebrew prophetic tradition adds complexity. Isaiah's vision of swords beaten into plowshares (Isaiah 2:4, Micah 4:3) is eschatological — a description of what God will ultimately bring about at the end of history, not a prescription for present political organization. Ecclesiastes 3:8 includes "a time for war and a time for peace" in its catalogue of the times and seasons of human experience — a realist acknowledgment that war is part of the created order of temporal life.

The Hebrew Bible does not endorse war for its own sake or for conquest of neighbors unjustly. It consistently portrays Israel's wars as either divinely commanded responses to evil (the Canaanite conquest, however morally complex) or defensive responses to aggression (the Judges' wars, David's wars, the Maccabean revolt). The tradition condemns aggressive imperial war — the prophets are unsparing in their critique of Assyria, Babylon, and Egypt precisely for their wars of conquest and oppression.

B. The Greek New Testament: Pacifism, the Sword, and Romans 13

As established in the preceding companion paper, the Greek New Testament's ethical teaching is among the most consistently non-violent in the ancient world. Jesus commands love of enemies (Matthew 5:44), renunciation of retaliation (5:39), and peacemaking (5:9); he rebukes Peter's sword (Matthew 26:52) and declares his kingdom not of this world's political order (John 18:36). The NT nowhere authorizes Christians to take up arms in any cause, political or religious.

However, three passages create complexity for a purely pacifist reading:

Luke 22:36: At the Last Supper, Jesus tells his disciples: "But now let the one who has a moneybag take it, and likewise a knapsack. And let the one who has no sword sell his cloak and buy one" (*kai ho mē echōn pōlēsatō to himation autou kai agorasatō machairan*). The disciples respond that they have two swords, and Jesus replies "It is enough" (*Hikanon estin*). The interpretation of this passage is contested: some read it as a purely metaphorical preparation for a spiritually dangerous period ahead; others read it as a genuine authorization of self-defense. The two-sword limit and the "it is enough" response suggest that Jesus is not calling for militarization. But the passage exists and has been used in theological discussion of self-defense.

Romans 13:1–4: Paul's instruction to submit to governing authorities includes: "For [the ruler] is God's servant for your good. But if you do wrong, be afraid, for he does not bear the sword in vain (*ou gar eikē tēn machairan pherei*). For he is the servant of God, an avenger who carries out God's wrath on the wrongdoer." This passage attributes a legitimate God-ordained function to the state's use of coercive force — including the sword. It does not authorize private violence, but it establishes that organized, state-directed force in the service of justice is not inherently opposed to the divine order. This is the primary NT text on which the just war tradition builds its theological case.

Revelation 19:11–16: The eschatological vision of Christ returning as a warrior king — "He is clothed in a robe dipped in blood… From his mouth comes a sharp sword with which to strike down the nations" — establishes that the NT does not categorically renounce all violence as incompatible with God's purposes. The eschatological violence is divine, not human, and cannot straightforwardly authorize human warfare. But it rules out a purely pacifist theology of the divine.

The honest NT synthesis is this: Christians are not authorized by the NT to wage offensive war or to use violence for political or religious conquest. They are authorized by Romans 13 to recognize the legitimate coercive function of the state. Whether individual Christians may participate in the state's just use of force — as soldiers, police, or resisters of tyranny — is a question the NT leaves more open than either pacifists or crusaders have acknowledged.

C. The Distinction Between Personal Ethics and Political Necessity

The most important distinction in the theological analysis of war is between the ethics of the *individual* and the ethics of the *political community*. The Sermon on the Mount's commands — turn the other cheek, love your enemies — are addressed to individual disciples in their personal relationships and their personal response to persecution. They are not, and were not intended to be, a complete political constitution for the governance of nations.

This distinction was recognized by Reinhold Niebuhr (1892–1971), arguably the greatest American political theologian of the twentieth century. Niebuhr's *Moral Man and Immoral Society* (1932) makes the case that the ethics applicable to individual persons — forgiveness, self-sacrifice, love — cannot be mechanically applied to political communities, because political communities have responsibilities that individuals do not: they are obligated to protect their members, to maintain justice within their borders, and to resist external aggression that would destroy the conditions of any human good. A political leader who responds to invasion by turning the other cheek has not been more virtuous than a leader who resists — he has been derelict in his duty of care to the people entrusted to him.

Niebuhr writes in *Christianity and Power Politics* (1940): "If we believe that if Britain had only been fortunate enough to have produced a purely Christian government which would have… not resisted Hitler, the world would have been saved… we hold a faith which is betrayed by every fact of human experience." Niebuhr's "Christian Realism" insists on taking sin — the radical corruption of human nature and human institutions — seriously, and concludes that a world of sinful human beings requires the organized capacity for coercion as a permanent feature of political life.

D. Dietrich Bonhoeffer: The Man Who Chose the Sword

The most dramatic and instructive single case in the theological tradition on this question is that of Dietrich Bonhoeffer (1906–1945). Bonhoeffer was a German Lutheran theologian, a committed Christian pacifist — author of *The Cost of Discipleship* (1937), which contains one of the most demanding expositions of the Sermon on the Mount in modern theology — who nonetheless joined the conspiracy to assassinate Adolf Hitler and was executed by the Nazis at Flossenbürg concentration camp on April 9, 1945, three weeks before the German surrender.

Bonhoeffer's decision was not made lightly or without anguish. He wrote in *Ethics* (published posthumously): "When a man takes guilt upon himself in responsibility, and no responsible man can avoid this, he imputes this guilt to himself and to no one else; he answers for it… Before other men he is justified by necessity; before himself he is acquitted by his conscience; but before God he hopes only for mercy." Bonhoeffer recognized that his participation in violent resistance to Hitler was morally impermissible by the strict standards of the Sermon on the Mount — and he did it anyway, accepting moral guilt, because he judged that the alternative — passive Christian witness while the Nazi machine continued its killing — was a greater evil.

Bonhoeffer's case is not a comfortable one for either the pacifist or the just-war theorist. The pacifist cannot explain why doing nothing while six million Jews and millions of others were murdered was morally superior to a failed assassination attempt. The just-war theorist cannot fully domesticate Bonhoeffer's tortured moral reasoning into the clean categories of Augustine and Aquinas. Bonhoeffer represents what may be the honest theological endpoint of the question: that genuine resistance to genuine evil sometimes requires acts that cannot be fully justified — that leave the actor in debt to grace rather than self-righteous in the prosecution of a clean moral cause.

V. The Empirical Record: Has Organized Resistance to Tyranny Worked?

A. The Greco-Persian Wars and the Defense of Political Pluralism

The Greco-Persian Wars (490–479 B.C.E.) are the first clear historical case of a free political order preserved by armed resistance against a superior imperial power committed to its absorption. The Achaemenid Persian Empire under Darius I and then Xerxes I was the largest political entity the ancient world had yet seen — a multi-ethnic empire of approximately 50 million people stretching from Egypt to the Indus River. The Greek city-states it faced were small, fractious, perpetually at war with each other, and massively outmatched in numbers.

The Greek decision to resist — at Marathon (490 B.C.E.), at Thermopylae and Salamis (480 B.C.E.), at Plataea (479 B.C.E.) — preserved the existence of the *polis* as a political form: the self-governing city of free citizens who made their own laws and elected their own magistrates. The historical consequences are incalculable. Had Persia absorbed Greece, the Athenian democratic experiment, the philosophical tradition of Socrates, Plato, and Aristotle, the dramatic tradition of Aeschylus, Sophocles, and Euripides — all of the cultural inheritance that formed the

foundation of Western civilization — would not have developed as they did. Tom Holland's *Persian Fire* (2005) and Victor Davis Hanson's *The Western Way of War* (1989) both make the case, with substantial historiographical support, that Thermopylae and Salamis were among the most consequential military engagements in human history — not because the Greeks were noble warriors but because the alternative to their resistance was the extinction of the political and cultural order they represented.

B. The American Revolution

The American Revolution (1775–1783) is the most influential modern case of the Lockean right of revolution exercised in practice. The colonists' armed resistance to British imperial authority — supported philosophically by the Declaration of Independence's explicit invocation of the right to alter or abolish government that has become destructive of natural rights — produced the first constitutional republic in the modern world and established the template that inspired subsequent democratic revolutions across two centuries.

The revolution was not conducted by saints or without atrocity — the treatment of Loyalists, the continuation of slavery within the revolutionary order, and the subsequent wars against Native American nations all represent moral failures that must be acknowledged. But the political achievement — a constitutional system with separation of powers, a bill of rights, and a framework of limited government — was genuine and consequential. And it was achieved by organized armed resistance, not by petition or negotiation. The British Crown had been presented with petitions for seventeen years before shots were fired at Lexington.

C. The Allied Resistance to Nazi Germany

The clearest and most morally unambiguous case for the necessity of war as a response to evil in the modern period is the Allied resistance to Nazi Germany (1939–1945). The Nazi state was committed, by its foundational ideology, to the racial reorganization of Europe through conquest, enslavement, and genocide. It had demonstrated — in the Kristallnacht pogroms, the T4 euthanasia program, the invasion of Poland, and the early stages of what became the Holocaust — that it was not amenable to negotiation or containment. The Munich Agreement of 1938 — Neville Chamberlain's appeasement of Hitler's territorial demands, purchased at the cost of Czechoslovakia's sovereignty — had shown with devastating clarity that the alternative to armed resistance was not peace but the progressive expansion of Nazi power and Nazi killing.

The Allied resistance cost approximately 70–85 million lives — the deadliest conflict in human history. It ended the Nazi regime, liberated the surviving Jews of Nazi-occupied Europe (approximately one-third of the European Jewish population, since two-thirds had already been murdered), and restored political sovereignty to the conquered nations of Western Europe. It also established the post-war international order — the United Nations, the Nuremberg tribunals, the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, the Geneva Conventions' expansion — that has, however imperfectly, constrained the resort to aggressive war for eighty years.

The question that history forces on us is: What was the alternative? Chamberlain's appeasement had already answered that question by 1939. The alternative to the fifty million Allied dead of World War II was not peace — it was the consolidation of a Nazi empire over

Europe, the completion of the Holocaust, and the indefinite enslavement of the populations of the conquered continent. The price of not fighting was not zero. It was the Holocaust completed and the permanent Nazi domination of Europe. On any serious moral calculus, the Allied war against Nazi Germany was not merely justifiable — it was morally obligatory.

D. Decolonization and the Right of Self-Determination

The decolonization movements of the mid-twentieth century — the Algerian War of Independence (1954–1962), the Kenyan Mau Mau revolt (1952–1960), the Vietnamese resistance to French and then American imperialism (1945–1975), and dozens of other anti-colonial struggles — represent organized violence in the service of self-determination against colonial powers that had demonstrated no willingness to relinquish control through negotiation. The moral status of these conflicts is complex and varies by case, but the structural pattern is consistent: colonial power refuses peaceful transfer of sovereignty; colonial subjects resort to armed resistance; colonial power eventually withdraws or is defeated.

The cases where decolonization was achieved primarily through nonviolent means — India under Gandhi, Ghana under Nkrumah — are important and are addressed below. But they are also exceptional, and they occurred in specific political contexts (a British Empire already weakened by World War II, governed by a democratic public capable of being moved by moral argument) that did not apply universally.

E. The Cold War: Deterrence as Armed Peace

The Cold War (1947–1991) represents the most sustained experiment in the strategic use of armed force as a *preventive* against war rather than a means of conducting it. The doctrine of nuclear deterrence — mutual assured destruction (MAD) — maintained a condition of armed standoff between the United States and the Soviet Union for forty-four years without a direct military engagement between the two powers. The existence of approximately 70,000 nuclear warheads at the peak of the arms race meant that the cost of great-power war had become so catastrophic as to be strategically irrational for both sides.

The Cold War deterrence system preserved a rough equilibrium in Europe — freezing the post-World War II boundaries and preventing the Soviet expansion that Stalin's stated ambitions and the Red Army's capabilities would otherwise have made highly likely. It did so at enormous cost: the arms race consumed trillions of dollars of productive capacity; proxy wars in Korea, Vietnam, Angola, Afghanistan, and elsewhere killed millions; and the constant risk of miscalculation or accident created a permanent existential threat that has not fully abated with the Cold War's end.

But deterrence worked, in the specific sense that it prevented direct great-power war for forty-four years. The Kantian pacifist has no plausible alternative explanation for why the Soviet Union — which had demonstrated its willingness to use military force to impose its political order in Hungary (1956), Czechoslovakia (1968), and Afghanistan (1979) — did not attempt the same in Western Europe. The answer is the credible threat of overwhelming military response. Armed deterrence, not moral argument, preserved the freedom of Western Europe.

VI. The Counterargument: Can Peace Be Achieved Without War?

The case for war's necessity must be subjected to the strongest counterarguments available, not dismissed. Three significant alternatives to organized violence as the primary check on tyranny and aggression deserve serious examination.

A. The Gandhian Model: Nonviolent Resistance

Mahatma Gandhi's satyagraha — "truth-force" or nonviolent resistance — achieved the independence of India from British colonial rule (1947) without a major armed uprising, and in doing so established the most important practical model of nonviolent political resistance in the modern world. Gandhi demonstrated that a sufficiently disciplined mass movement, willing to absorb violence without responding in kind and to publicize that violence to an international audience capable of moral response, could impose sufficient political, economic, and reputational costs on an oppressor to compel political change.

Martin Luther King Jr. adapted the Gandhian model to the American civil rights movement (1955–1968) with comparable success: the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and the Voting Rights Act of 1965 were achieved primarily through nonviolent mass action, civil disobedience, and the strategic exploitation of the political vulnerability of Southern segregationism in a Cold War context where American racial injustice was being used as propaganda by the Soviet Union.

These are genuine achievements, and they prove that nonviolent resistance can succeed under the right conditions. The right conditions, however, turn out to be highly specific: the oppressor must have a democratic domestic political system susceptible to moral pressure; the oppressor must have a free press capable of publicizing the violence done to nonviolent resisters; the oppressor must have a reputation — international or domestic — that it values enough to protect by moderating its violence; and there must be an international or domestic audience capable of being moved by moral argument and empowered to act on it.

Gandhi himself acknowledged that his methods would not have worked against the Nazis. "If ever the Nazis had occupied [India]," he wrote in 1938, "the way [the Jews] have accepted their fate… is not 'good' or 'praiseworthy' suffering. They must fight for their lives." Gandhi's nonviolent resistance required a British opponent. Against Hitler's SS, it would have produced only martyrdom without political effect. The Jewish victims of the Holocaust did not lack moral courage — they lacked weapons, organization, and the political conditions in which nonviolent resistance could impose costs on the oppressor.

B. International Institutions: The League of Nations and the United Nations

The League of Nations (1919–1946) was the first attempt to create a permanent international institution capable of resolving disputes between states without war. It failed catastrophically: it could not prevent Japan's invasion of Manchuria (1931), Italy's invasion of Ethiopia (1935), or Germany's remilitarization and territorial expansion (1936–1939). Its failure was structural: it had no independent military capacity, its mechanisms for collective security required unanimous agreement among major powers, and the United States never joined. The world system that was supposed to make World War II impossible produced instead the most destructive war in history.

The United Nations (founded 1945) represents the post-war attempt to correct the League's structural failures. The UN has genuine achievements: it has served as a forum for diplomatic negotiation, authorized peacekeeping operations that have contained some conflicts, and maintained international legal frameworks (including the Genocide Convention, the Refugee Convention, and the Convention Against Torture) that have set moral standards even when not fully enforced. The International Criminal Court, established in 2002, has prosecuted some perpetrators of atrocity crimes.

But the UN's capacity to prevent major war or stop genocide in real time has been consistently, and sometimes catastrophically, inadequate. The Rwandan genocide of 1994 killed approximately 800,000 Tutsi in 100 days while UN peacekeepers were present in Rwanda and the Security Council deliberated. The Srebrenica massacre (1995) occurred under the eyes of Dutch UN peacekeepers who could not prevent it. The Syrian civil war (2011–present) has killed an estimated 500,000 people while the Security Council has been paralyzed by Russian and Chinese vetoes. The Russian invasion of Ukraine (2022) — a clear violation of the UN Charter's prohibition on aggressive war — has produced UN resolutions of condemnation that Russia simply ignores as a permanent Security Council member.

The UN's fundamental structural weakness is the same as the League's: it is a voluntary association of sovereign states, the most powerful of which can veto any enforcement action directed against themselves or their clients. It is not a world government with independent coercive capacity; it is a forum in which great powers negotiate when their interests align and deadlock when they do not. Against determined great-power aggression or genocide conducted by a powerful state, it has proven structurally incapable.

C. Democratic Peace Theory

Democratic Peace Theory — the empirical observation, first noted by Kant and formalized by political scientists Michael Doyle and Bruce Russett in the 1980s, that liberal democracies rarely if ever go to war with each other — is the most important evidence for the proposition that a structural transformation of political regimes could reduce the incidence of war. The empirical regularity is robust: in the post-World War II period, no two mature liberal democracies have gone to war with each other.

The theory's explanatory mechanism is contested (institutional constraints on the use of force? shared norms of peaceful conflict resolution? economic interdependence?), but the empirical pattern is genuine. If all states in the world were mature liberal democracies, the theory predicts a dramatic reduction in interstate warfare.

The problems are twofold. First, the theory applies only to mature liberal democracies — states in the process of democratizing are actually *more* prone to war, not less, because democratic mobilization of nationalist sentiment without established institutional constraints can be more aggressive than stable authoritarian states (Edward Mansfield and Jack Snyder's work on "democratizing states" documents this). Second, the theory applies to relations *between* democracies; it says nothing about wars initiated by non-democracies against democracies or against their own populations. The world still contains a substantial number of authoritarian states with no inclination toward democratic reform, several of which are nuclear-armed.

D. The Limits of Each Approach

The three alternatives to war — nonviolent resistance, international institutions, and democratic peace — all work under conditions that do not universally obtain. Nonviolent resistance requires an oppressor susceptible to moral pressure. International institutions require great-power agreement that is frequently unavailable. Democratic peace requires democracy, which is not universally present and is not self-generating in the absence of the political conditions — civil society, rule of law, economic development, absence of external aggression — that democracies require. None of these alternatives can reliably protect a population from a determined, ruthless, totalitarian aggressor that has achieved monopoly control of force within its territory and against its neighbors.

This is not an argument against pursuing these alternatives — they have genuine value and should be developed as far as possible. It is an argument against the naive claim that they have made war obsolete or that renouncing the capacity for armed resistance is compatible with the preservation of human freedom.

VII. Is Peace on Earth Without War "Pollyanna"? — A Realistic Assessment

A. The Nature of Evil in Human Political Organization

The term "Pollyanna" denotes not merely optimism but a specific pathology of optimism: the refusal to acknowledge evil even when it is directly observable. The question of whether perpetual peace is achievable without any capacity for armed resistance requires a direct assessment of the nature of evil in human political organization.

The twentieth century's experience with totalitarianism — examined in exhaustive detail by Hannah Arendt (*The Origins of Totalitarianism*, 1951), Alexander Solzhenitsyn (*The Gulag Archipelago*, 1973–1975), Václav Havel (*The Power of the Powerless*, 1978), and others who lived it — establishes beyond reasonable historical doubt that human beings are capable of constructing and operating political systems of extraordinary, systematic cruelty. These systems were not aberrations produced by uniquely evil individuals; they were structures that drew ordinary human beings into participation in atrocity through ideology, fear, incentive, and the elimination of any alternative.

The Milgram experiments (1961–1962), in which ordinary American subjects administered what they believed to be severe electric shocks to screaming victims when instructed to do so by an authority figure, demonstrated the same capacity in a controlled laboratory setting. Philip Zimbardo's Stanford Prison Experiment (1971) showed that ordinary college students placed in guard roles would abuse their prisoner-subjects within days. The psychological literature is consistent: human beings are capable of great cruelty under the right institutional conditions, and those conditions are not rare or exotic — they are produced by the normal operations of hierarchical power.

Perpetual peace without any capacity for resistance to evil is not merely Pollyanna — it is a structural invitation to the worst expressions of human political pathology. A world in which all populations have surrendered or been deprived of the capacity for organized resistance to power is a world in which power is accountable to nothing. The historical record is unambiguous about what power that is accountable to nothing eventually produces.

B. The Structural Argument for Armed Resistance

The structural argument is simple: Power tends toward its own expansion and perpetuation. The only reliable check on power is counter-power — the capacity to impose costs on power sufficient to deter its worst abuses. Where that counter-power is absent, history provides no examples of benevolent self-restraint by those who hold unchecked authority across any substantial period of time.

This is not a claim that the capacity for resistance always works or that armed resistance always succeeds. It is a claim about what the alternative to that capacity has historically produced. The populations of Nazi Germany, Soviet Russia, Communist China, and Cambodia that were most completely disarmed and atomized — stripped of any organizational capacity for resistance — suffered the worst atrocities. The populations that retained some capacity for resistance — however asymmetric — imposed costs that at least constrained the scope of their oppression.

David Frye's argument in *Walls* is relevant here: the wall is an act of claiming that something inside it is worth protecting. The disarmament of a population is the demolition of the wall — not the abolition of the threat, but the removal of the capacity to respond to it. The threat does not go away when the wall comes down. The predators simply find it easier to enter.

C. The Paradox of Pacifism

There is a profound paradox at the heart of radical pacifism that its most intellectually honest advocates have acknowledged. The pacifist who refuses all resort to violence, even in resistance to genocide, is not maintaining moral purity — he is making a choice about who bears the cost of that purity. If I refuse to fight, someone else is killed in my place: the Jews of Europe, the Armenians of Anatolia, the Tutsi of Rwanda. The pure conscience of the non-resister is purchased at the price of the lives of those who needed resistance and did not get it.

George Orwell — who fought in Spain against Franco's fascism, was wounded, and spent his subsequent career thinking about the relationship between violence and freedom — put this with characteristic directness in "Notes on Nationalism" (1945): "Pacifism is objectively pro-Fascist. This is elementary common sense. If you hamper the war effort of one side, you automatically help out that of the other. Nor is there any real way of remaining outside such a war as the present one. In practice, 'he that is not with me is against me.'" Orwell was a socialist and no enthusiast of war; his point is not that violence is good but that the refusal to resist evil is not morally neutral — it is a choice with consequences for those who depend on resistance.

C.S. Lewis, in "Why I Am Not a Pacifist" (1940), makes the complementary theological argument: that Christian pacifism, however sincere, is based on a misreading of the New Testament that fails to distinguish between personal ethics and political duty, and that the

Christian who refuses to participate in just resistance to evil while others bear the cost is engaged in a form of moral selfishness dressed as virtue.

D. What History Actually Shows About Lasting Peace

Genuine lasting peace — not the peace of the conquered or the peace of exhaustion, but a durable order in which different communities coexist without organized violence — has been achieved, historically, under a limited set of conditions. These conditions are instructive.

Internal peace within political communities has been most durable where: (1) political authority is genuinely constrained by law and accountable to the governed; (2) economic arrangements distribute enough of the surplus to prevent the immiseration that breeds revolution; (3) cultural and ethnic pluralism is accommodated within inclusive political institutions; and (4) the monopoly of legitimate force is held by an entity (the state) that is itself subject to legal and democratic constraint. The constitutional democracies of Western Europe have achieved the longest period of internal peace in their history since 1945 — eighty years — under precisely these conditions.

International peace between states has been most durable where: (1) no single state is powerful enough to achieve hegemony without facing a coalition of countervailing powers; (2) trade and economic interdependence make war economically catastrophic for all parties; (3) international legal norms against aggressive war are backed by the credible threat of collective military response; and (4) nuclear deterrence makes great-power war existentially irrational. The post-1945 international order has produced the longest period without great-power war in recorded modern history — again, eighty years — under precisely these conditions.

Both forms of lasting peace — internal and international — depend on the *credible capacity for force*, not its absence. Constitutional democracy is maintained by the state's monopoly of legitimate force, which deters private violence and rebellion. International peace is maintained by the balance of power and nuclear deterrence, which deters interstate aggression. In neither case has peace been achieved or maintained by the elimination of the capacity for organized violence. It has been achieved by the disciplined, institutionalized, accountable *organization* of that capacity.

This is the honest answer to the Pollyanna question: peace without any capacity for organized resistance to evil is not achievable and has never been achieved. Peace *with* a well-organized, institutionally constrained, democratically accountable capacity for force has been achieved — and has proven to be the most durable form of peace that human beings have managed to construct.

VIII. Synthesis: The Necessary, the Tragic, and the Righteous

A. War as Tragedy Rather Than Triumph

The case that war is sometimes necessary must be distinguished from the claim that war is ever triumphant. The honest position is that war is always tragic — that it always involves the

destruction of human life, the suffering of innocents, the corruption of those who fight it, and the generation of grievances that may produce future conflicts. The just war tradition has always insisted on this: war is the lesser evil, never a good in itself.

The testimony of those who have actually fought in wars is almost universally consistent on this point. The celebratory nationalism that sends young men to war is rarely shared by the veterans who return from it. Wilfred Owen's *Dulce et Decorum Est* (1917), Karl Kraus's *The Last Days of Mankind* (1922), Erich Maria Remarque's *All Quiet on the Western Front* (1929), and Tim O'Brien's *The Things They Carried* (1990) — the literature of those who have actually experienced modern warfare — express not heroism but grief, horror, and the permanent psychological damage that organized violence inflicts on those who conduct it. This witness does not refute the case for just war; it is a necessary part of it. War is necessary, when it is necessary, *and* it is terrible. Both things are true at the same time.

B. The Just War Tradition Reconsidered

The just war tradition — from Cicero through Augustine, Aquinas, Grotius, and Vitoria to the modern theorists like Michael Walzer (*Just and Unjust Wars*, 1977) — represents the most serious sustained attempt in Western moral thought to subject the resort to violence to rational moral criteria. Its criteria remain the most honest available framework for the evaluation of specific wars:

Jus ad bellum (the right to go to war): just cause, legitimate authority, right intention, last resort, probability of success, proportionality of ends. *Jus in bello* (justice in the conduct of war): discrimination between combatants and non-combatants, proportionality in the means used, prohibition of certain weapons and tactics regardless of military advantage.

The just war tradition has been used to justify wars it should not have justified — the Crusades, colonial conquest, wars of religious compulsion. But the tradition itself contains the resources for the critique of those misapplications. A war that kills civilians indiscriminately, that is conducted for aggrandizement rather than defense, that is pursued beyond the point of achieving its just objective, violates the tradition's own standards. The problem is not the framework but the human capacity for self-deception in its application.

C. What Makes Resistance to Tyranny Different from Aggression

The crucial moral distinction that the just war tradition attempts to maintain — and that its critics frequently collapse — is the distinction between *aggression* and *resistance*. Aggression initiates violence against a party that has not posed an imminent threat; resistance responds to violence or its credible threat with force. This distinction is not always clean in practice — preemptive war, proxy war, and asymmetric conflict all create genuine borderline cases — but it is morally real and historically significant.

The Allies who fought Nazi Germany were not morally equivalent to the Nazis they fought. The partisans who resisted Soviet occupation of Eastern Europe were not morally equivalent to the Red Army soldiers who occupied them. The Rwandan Tutsi who took up arms in self-defense were not morally equivalent to the Interahamwe militias who were slaughtering their families. The refusal to draw these distinctions — the moral equivalence argument that "both sides" in any conflict are equally guilty — is itself a form of Pollyanna thinking: it permits the

comfortable illusion of clean hands while refusing to face the reality that someone must bear the cost of resistance if resistance is to happen at all.

IX. Conclusion: The Permanent Tension and the Question of Hope

The question this paper began with — Is war a necessary function to prevent evil and tyranny? — admits of an honest answer: *Yes, the organized capacity for resistance to evil is necessary, and it has historically been the primary check on tyranny that actually worked. And no, this does not make war good; it makes it tragic.*

Perpetual peace without any capacity for armed resistance is not Pollyanna — it is something darker than Pollyanna: it is the willful abdication of responsibility for the world as it actually is, in exchange for the private comfort of moral purity. Pollyanna was merely naively optimistic. The political theology of absolute pacifism, in a world that contains nuclear-armed authoritarian states and genocidal ideologies, is something closer to complicity with the evil it refuses to resist.

This does not mean that all wars are just, that all violence is defensible, or that the development of better alternatives to war should not be the primary political project of our time. It means that the development of those alternatives — international law, democratic governance, economic interdependence, nuclear deterrence, diplomatic institutions — does not eliminate the need for the credible capacity to use force when those alternatives fail. And they fail regularly, as the twenty-first century has already demonstrated in Ukraine, Gaza, Syria, Sudan, and elsewhere.

The permanent tension that this conclusion describes is not resolvable by argument or by political institution — it is a feature of the human condition as Genesis describes it. The human animal is capable of profound goodness and of systematic evil; of extraordinary cooperation and of organized slaughter; of the construction of constitutional order and of its demolition by those who seize power within it. The same creature that built the cathedral also built the concentration camp, and usually within the same civilization, within the same century, sometimes within the same generation.

What this means for the future of humanity is not despair — the evidence of history includes both the worst and the best of what human beings have built. It means something more demanding: the permanent, never-completed work of building and maintaining the institutions, the moral traditions, the democratic accountability, and the credible capacity for just force that together constitute the only realistic alternative to the world that unresisted evil consistently produces.

Reinhold Niebuhr, in what remains the most honest single sentence in modern political theology, summarized the human condition this way in *The Irony of American History* (1952): “Nothing that is worth doing can be achieved in our lifetime; therefore we must be saved by hope. Nothing which is true or beautiful or good makes complete sense in any immediate context of history; therefore we must be saved by faith. Nothing we do, however virtuous, can be accomplished alone; therefore we must be saved by love.”

The question of war and peace does not resolve in favor of either the warrior or the pacifist. It resolves in the permanent, costly, often failed, always necessary effort to hold the capacity for force accountable to justice — and in the recognition that human beings have never been able to do this perfectly, and have never been able to stop trying.

That is not Pollyanna. It is not despair. It is the description of the human condition as it actually is, as Genesis understood it, and as every honest century of human history has confirmed.

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