

Can War Be Just? A Case Analysis Attempt on the Russia–Ukraine War Sine Ira Et Studio

Gábor Dániel Nagy 

Department of Social Studies, University of Szeged, Szeged, Hungary

Email: nagy.gabor.daniel@szte.hu

How to cite this paper: Nagy, G. D. (2023). Can War Be Just? A Case Analysis Attempt on the Russia–Ukraine War Sine Ira Et Studio. *Open Journal of Philosophy*, 13, 407-417. <https://doi.org/10.4236/ojpp.2023.132027>

Received: February 24, 2023

Accepted: May 26, 2023

Published: May 29, 2023

Copyright © 2023 by author(s) and Scientific Research Publishing Inc. This work is licensed under the Creative Commons Attribution International License (CC BY 4.0).

<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>



Open Access

Abstract

The current confrontation between Russia and Ukraine raises essential problems regarding ethics and laws of war. It also presents an opportunity to compose an ethics case study to analyze the idea of a just war. The present-day war of Russia's aggression toward Ukraine can hardly be analyzed ethically. We lean back to the seminal ideas of just war theorists to argue that war must be waged in a manner that is consistent with moral and ethical principles, such as proportionality, discrimination, and respect for the rights of non-combatants. This article emphasizes the relationship between war and politics, and the belief that military forces should be used rationally and calculatedly. Wars have influenced the development of the modern world history. The fall of the Soviet Union led to 30 years of peace; however, the ideas of its creators returned to contemporary Russian thinking. We attempt to draw conclusions based on the past to enable conflict to end peacefully and a balance to be restored.

Keywords

Just War, Jus Ad Bellum, Jus in Bello, Russia, Ukraine, NATO, USA, MAD

1. Introduction

Whether there is such a thing as a just war is a difficult and contentious matter that has been discussed at length by philosophers, political leaders, and military strategists for millennia. The current confrontation between Russia and Ukraine poses important problems about ethics and the law of war, and it also presents a useful case study for analyzing the idea of a just war.

War theory argues that war can be justified under certain conditions, such as when it is necessary to defend oneself or others against aggression or prevent greater harm. In general, just war theory argues that war can be justified in cer-

tain circumstances. However, war theorists also argue that war must be waged in a manner consistent with moral and ethical principles, such as proportionality, discrimination, and respect for the rights of non-combatants. They believe that this is the only way that war can be fought in a moral and ethical manner.

The war between Russia and Ukraine poses some challenging considerations regarding the fulfillment of these conditions. Some people believe that Russia's annexation of Crimea and its backing for separatist insurgents in eastern Ukraine constituted aggression, and that the Ukrainian government is therefore within its right to defend itself in response to this aggression. Others claim that the military reaction from Ukraine was excessive, resulting in unnecessarily harmful consequences for people and the violation of international law.

2. Theoretical Background

2.1. On the Philosophical-Ethical Idea of a Just War

Saint Augustine wrote extensively about war. Augustine articulated a moral framework for evaluating justice in war. "A just war is won't to be described as one that avenges wrongs, when a nation or state has to be punished, for refusing to make amends for the wrongs inflicted by its subjects, or to restore what it has seized unjustly." (Augustine, 2009, Book IV, Chapter 3)

Augustine emphasizes that a just war must have a legitimate cause, such as punishment for wrongs or the restoration of what has been seized unjustly. He also implied that a just war must be conducted in a proportionate manner without excessive violence or harm to non-combatants.

With a leap in time in the nineteenth century, we reached one of the first modern thinkers on armed conflicts, Clausewitz. He conducted significant scientific work on the importance of political context in understanding and evaluating military strategies. He believed that the ultimate goal of war was to achieve political objectives, and that military force should be used as a means to this end.

Clausewitz's ideas on war have been interpreted in different ways, but his views on war and morality are not always clear. However, his emphasis on the relationship between war and politics and his belief that military force should be used rationally and calculatedly influenced the development of modern war theories.

"War is not merely a political act, but also a real political instrument, a continuation of political commerce, a carrying out of the same by other means." Source: Clausewitz and Carl Von. *On War*. Oxford University Press, 2008, Book I, Chapter 1. This citation emphasizes that war should be viewed as a political instrument used to further political goals.

"The first, the supreme, the most far-reaching act of judgment that the statesman and commander have to make is to establish... the kind of war on which they are embarking; neither mistaking it for, nor trying to turn it into something that is alien to its nature." Source: (Von Clausewitz, 1950). The citation high-

lights the importance of making a clear and accurate assessment of the nature of war and avoiding attempts to impose political or moral principles that are not in line with the realities of conflict.

These citations highlight Clausewitz's views on the relationship between war and politics and the importance of understanding the nature of war being fought. These ideas have influenced debates on just war theory and the morality of wars.

Agnes Heller, a contemporary philosopher of the Lukács School, defined war as a conflict that is fought for a just cause and in a morally correct manner. According to her, a just war must meet certain criteria, such as having a clear objective, being proportionate in terms of the means used, and respecting the principles of non-combatant immunity. Additionally, she believed that the decision to go to war should only be made as a last resort with the consent of the international community. She wrote extensively about the subject of war and the morality of military action.

In her book "Beyond Justice," Heller critiques traditional just war theory, arguing that the framework of just war has been dominated by the interests of powerful nations and has not adequately addressed the experiences and perspectives of oppressed or marginalized groups. She advocates for a more inclusive and cosmopolitan approach to war that considers the experiences and perspectives of people from all cultures and backgrounds.

Heller also critiques the concept of *jus ad bellum*—the criteria for the justice of going to war—arguing that this framework has been used to justify wars of aggression and imperialism. She argued that wars must be waged for just causes and must be authorized by a legitimate authority but that these criteria must be evaluated in a broader, more inclusive, and more cosmopolitan context.

In her book, Heller also explores the morality of war in light of changes in international relations and the emergence of new forms of conflict such as asymmetric and hybrid warfare. She argued that the principles of just war must be updated and adapted to address these new realities and that a more cosmopolitan approach is necessary to ensure that the morality of war is grounded in universal principles and values. "The time has come to reformulate the concept of just war in order to fit the demands of a pluralistic and democratic world." (Heller, 1987)

Turner Johnson's work on just war theory focuses on the idea of *jus in bello*, a set of criteria used to evaluate the conduct of war. He emphasized the importance of understanding the norms and customs of war and the ways in which these norms have changed over time. He also stressed the importance of understanding how military power can be used to achieve political goals and the need to balance the pursuit of those goals with moral and ethical considerations.

Johnson's ideas on war have been influential in shaping contemporary debates on the morality of war, and his work remains an important resource for scholars and policymakers seeking to understand the complexities of warfare and how it can be conducted in an ethical manner.

In his book [Walzer \(1991\)](#) lays out a framework for evaluating the justice of wars, emphasizing the need for a clear distinction between *jus ad bellum* (the criteria for the justice of going to war) and *jus in bello* (the criteria for the justice of the conduct of war). He argues that just wars must have a just cause, be authorized by legitimate authority, and have a reasonable chance of success. Additionally, he asserted that wars must be conducted in a proportionate manner with minimal harm to non-combatants and civilian populations.

Walzer also explored the complexities of modern warfare, the challenges posed by new technologies, and the changing nature of conflicts. He argues that the principles of just war must be applied to all forms of conflict, regardless of the level of technology or the nature of the enemy.

“War is not simply a political act, but also an act that creates political obligations, obligations to repair the damage, obligations that persist after the hostilities are over.” ([Walzer, 1991](#))

2.2. Just War Theory Identifies Two Types of Just Wars: Defensive Wars and Wars of Aggression, with Two Different Analytical Frameworks

Defensive Wars: A defensive war is fought in response to an attack or threat and is aimed at protecting the territorial integrity, independence, or political independence of a state. ([Zinser, 2015](#))

Wars of Aggression: A war of aggression is fought to gain territory, resources, or political control. Wars of aggression are considered unjust unless there are compelling moral or humanitarian reasons for the conflict.

Jus ad bellum is a Latin term that refers to criteria used to evaluate the justness of going to war. This is a central principle of just war theory, a moral framework used to assess the justice of wars. *Jus ad bellum* establishes the conditions that must be met before a state morally justifies using military force.

The criteria for *jus ad bellum* typically include the following:

Just Cause: There must be a legitimate reason for going to war, such as self-defense or defense of others, protection of human rights, or prevention of an imminent threat to peace.

Right Intent: The war must be fought with the right intentions, such as restoring peace or protecting the innocent.

Last Resort: All other peaceful means of resolving the conflict must have been exhausted before resorting to military force.

Proportionality: The means used in the war must be proportionate to the end goal and should not cause unnecessary harm to civilians and noncombatants.

Reasonable Chance of Success: There must be a reasonable chance of success in achieving the objectives of war.

Legitimate Authority: The decision to go to war must be made by a legitimate authority such as a government or the international community.

These criteria are meant to ensure that the use of military force is morally justified and that war is conducted in a way that minimizes harm to non-

combatants and respects the principles of just war.

Jus in Bello is a Latin term that refers to the criteria used to evaluate the justness of conduct during a war. This is a central principle of just war theory, a moral framework used to assess the justice of wars. Jus in Bello sets out rules for how the war must be conducted, regardless of the justice of the cause for which it is being fought.

The criteria for jus in bello typically include the following:

Discrimination: There must be a distinction between military targets and civilian noncombatants. Civilians and noncombatants must not be targeted or subjected to intentional harm.

Proportionality: The use of military force must be proportionate to the end goal and should not cause excessive harm to civilians and noncombatants.

Fair Treatment of Prisoners of War: Prisoners of War must be treated with dignity.

Respect for the Dead: The dead, including enemy soldiers and civilians, must be treated with respect.

These criteria ensure that the war is conducted in a manner that minimizes harm to non-combatants and respects human dignity and rights. By adhering to these principles, jus in bello help mitigate the negative consequences of war and uphold the international community's moral standards.

3. The Soviet Union's Bolshevik Thinker's Ideas on War

The Bolsheviks believed in the necessity of armed struggle for the protection and advancement of the socialist state. They saw wars as a necessary means of defending the Soviet Union and socialist revolution and argued that military force was an essential component of the revolutionary process.

Bolsheviks' ideas on war and military strategy were shaped by their commitment to socialism and belief in the absolute power of the state. They saw the use of military force as a necessary means of achieving political and economic objectives and were not concerned with the moral or ethical implications of their actions. "War is a continuation of politics by other means. The purpose of war is to gain political advantage." (Lenin, 1917) Lenin believed that wars were a necessary part of the revolutionary process, and that armed struggle was an essential means of achieving political and economic change. He believed that imperialism was the highest stage of capitalism and that wars were a result of competition for resources and markets between capitalist states. He argued that diplomacy or disarmament could not prevent wars and that the only way to end war was to overthrow the capitalist system.

Lenin saw the use of military force as a necessary means of achieving political and economic transformation and argued that wars were justified when they served the interests of the working class and advanced the cause of socialism. "The socialism of the future will inevitably be a war socialism, not only in the sense that the working class will have to fight to conquer political power, but al-

so in the sense that the socialist society, while it is being built, will have to defend itself against external enemies and against internal counter-revolution.” (Lenin, 1917)

Stalin believed that military power was necessary for the protection and advancement of a socialist state. He saw wars as a necessary means of defending the Soviet Union and socialist revolution and argued that military force was an essential component of the revolutionary process. He was known for his aggressive military tactics, including the use of large-scale purges and mass deportations to maintain control over the Soviet population.

Stalin’s ideas on war and military strategy were shaped by his commitment to the causes of socialism and his belief in the state’s power. He saw the use of military force as a necessary means of achieving political and economic objectives and was not concerned with his actions’ moral or ethical implications. “The Red Army is not only a military organization, but also a political organization, the organization of the dictatorship of the proletariat.” (Stalin, 1924)

Trotsky believed that wars were a necessary part of the revolutionary process and that the use of military force was an essential means of achieving political and economic change. He saw the revolutionary state as a tool for implementing the will of the working class and advancing the causes of socialism.

Trotsky was a strong advocate of revolutionary internationalism and he believed that the struggle for socialism was a global struggle that required active involvement of the working class in different countries. He argued that the Soviet Union had a duty to support the revolutionary movements of the oppressed people of the world and to assist them in their struggle for freedom and justice. “The socialist revolution is impossible without the revolutionary use of force. The state power of the proletariat cannot be established and consolidated except by civil war.” (Trotsky, 1924)

It is possible to trace the origins of the Russian-Ukrainian conflict back to the early 20th century and the concepts and practices of Bolshevism, which developed during the Russian Revolution of 1917. These events catalyzed the conflict between Russia and Ukraine. Bolshevism, initially led by Lenin and Stalin, sought to establish a one-party dictatorship with the goal of establishing a socialist state. This was accomplished by the destruction of the previous government. The ideology of the Bolsheviks maintained that war was an essential and inescapable component of the revolutionary process, and a prerequisite for the establishment of a socialist state.

The Bolshevik government followed the goal of expanding and spreading communism, which led to the involvement of the Soviet Union in a number of wars and conflicts, notably the invasion of Poland in 1920 and the Russian Civil War. This expansionist agenda also had repercussions for the connections that the Soviet Union had with its surrounding countries, particularly Ukraine.

The administration of the Soviet Union considered Ukraine to be an essential part of the socialist state. As a result, they adopted a strategy of integrating Ukraine into the Soviet Union through political repression and the forced col-

lectivization of the Ukrainian population. Consequently, widespread famine came to be known as the Holodomor, in which millions of people in Ukraine perished.

This historical pattern of conflict and territorial disputes between Russia and Ukraine continued into the post-Soviet era, as seen by the Russian-Ukrainian War, which may be considered a continuation of this trend. The Russian government viewed Ukraine's decision to move closer to the West and pursue integration with the European Union as a threat, which led to the outbreak of war in 2014 (Putin, 2021). The conflict was precipitated by Ukraine's decision to move closer to the West and pursue integration with the European Union. The 2022 attack by Russia was envisaged by the American Intelligence and Military Strategist community and widely communicated to the government of Ukraine. It was received with skepticism. However, these events unfolded, as predicted.

The Russian Orthodox Church

The Russian Orthodox Church, like the Eastern Orthodox Church, has a rich tradition of teaching the morality of war and the use of military force. The Russian Orthodox Church holds that war should only be used as a last resort and in accordance with certain moral criteria.

The Russian Orthodox Church's teachings on just war are rooted in the principles of natural law, the teachings of the New Testament, and the Fathers of the Church. The Church holds that war should only be used to defend innocence, restore peace, and uphold justice and that it should never be used for purposes of aggression or conquest. "War is never a good thing, but sometimes it is a necessary evil, in order to restore peace and protect the innocent." St. John of Damascus. *Exact Position of Orthodox Faith*. c. 743 AD. (Damascene, 1914)

4. Contemporary Views Summarized

4.1. Russian Views and Justification Attempts

The official view of the Russian government regarding the conflict in Ukraine is that it is a result of Western interference and a response to the violation of the rights of Russian-speaking Ukrainian populations. The Russian government argued that its actions in Crimea and support for separatist rebels in eastern Ukraine are necessary to protect the rights and interests of ethnic Russians and speakers in the region. "We cannot ignore the urge of millions of Russians and Russian-speaking people who live in Ukraine and who have become an obstacle in the way of the development of Ukrainian statehood. We cannot leave them at the mercy of nationalists and radicals." Putin, Vladimir. *Speech in the Federal Assembly*. March 18, 2014.

The Russian government has made several arguments to support its position that conflict in Ukraine is just. These arguments are based on various political, historical, and cultural factors and are seen as an attempt to justify Russia's actions in the region.

First, the Russian government argued that the conflict in Ukraine was a result of historical, cultural, and linguistic ties between Russia and Ukraine. According to this argument, Russia has a moral obligation to protect the rights of ethnic Russians and Russian speakers in Ukraine, and to defend their interests against what it sees as Ukrainian nationalism and anti-Russian sentiment.

Second, the Russian government argued that the conflict in Ukraine was the result of the *coup d' état* that took place in Kiev in 2014. According to this argument, the ouster of pro-Russian President Yanukovich was illegal and carried out with the support of the West. The Russian government has also claimed that the Ukrainian government is dominated by far-right nationalist groups that are hostile to Russia, and that these groups pose a threat to the security of ethnic Russians in Ukraine.

Third, the Russian government argued that its actions in Ukraine were self-defense. According to this argument, Russia was forced to annex Crimea and support separatist movements in eastern Ukraine to protect itself against what it saw as a threat to national security. The Russian government also claimed that it was planning to join NATO, which would have placed Russian security at risk. (Putin, 2021)

4.2. Ukrainian Views and Justification Rationales

Several Ukrainian thinkers have contributed to the field of war theory. One such person is Bērziņš (2020). These scientific works are rather building on innovations and new strategies on the battlefield, than the ethical – philosophical implications of war.

The Ukrainian government's official view regarding the conflict in Ukraine is that it is a result of the aggression and illegal annexation of Crimea by Russia, and a violation of Ukrainian sovereignty and territorial integrity. The Ukrainian government has argued that it is defending itself against Russian-backed separatists in eastern Ukraine and that its actions are in accordance with international law. "The situation in the east of our country is a result of armed aggression by the Russian Federation, which annexed Crimea and continued to support illegal armed groups in the east of Ukraine. The Ukrainian government is committed to resolving the conflict peacefully but will not allow anyone to threaten the territorial integrity and sovereignty of our country." Zelensky, Volodymyr. Address to the Nation. September 1, 2020.

The Ukrainian government and its supporters have made several arguments to support their position that conflict in Ukraine is merely a defensive war. These arguments are based on various political, legal, and historical factors, and are seen as an attempt to justify Ukraine's actions in the face of Russian aggression.

First, the Ukrainian government argued that the conflict resulted from Russian aggression and the annexation of Crimea. According to this argument, Russia's actions in Ukraine are clear violations of international law and Ukraine's territorial integrity. The Ukrainian government also claimed that Russia's an-

nexation of Crimea was illegal and illegitimate and that it was carried out without the consent of Ukrainian people.

Second, the Ukrainian government has argued that its actions in eastern Ukraine are self-defence. According to this argument, Ukraine was forced to defend itself against Russian-backed separatist movements in the region that sought to secede from Ukraine and join Russia. The Ukrainian government also claimed that these separatist movements were receiving support and supplies from Russia, and that they posed a direct threat to the security of Ukraine.

Third, the Ukrainian government has argued that its actions in eastern Ukraine are in line with international law and the principles of the United Nations. According to this argument, Ukraine has the right to defend itself against aggression and to preserve its territorial integrity and independence. The Ukrainian government has also claimed that its actions in eastern Ukraine have been carried out in accordance with international humanitarian law and that it has taken steps to minimize civilian casualties and avoid civilian harm.

4.3. The American Stance on the War and NATO's Role

The official view of the United States government regarding the conflict in Ukraine is that it is a result of Russian aggression, the annexation of Crimea, and a violation of Ukrainian sovereignty and territorial integrity. The US imposed economic sanctions on Russia in response to its actions in Ukraine, and provided diplomatic, economic, and military assistance to the Ukrainian government. "The United States condemns the Russian Federation's invasion and annexation of the Crimean peninsula. This act is a violation of Ukraine's sovereignty and territorial integrity and a breach of international law." The White House. Statement by the President of Ukraine. March 18, 2014.

A speech by US Secretary of State Antony Blinken in 2021 discussing the ongoing conflict in eastern Ukraine stated: "The United States remains steadfast in our support for Ukraine's sovereignty and territorial integrity. We call on Russia to end its aggression in eastern Ukraine and to fully implement its obligations under the Minsk agreements." Blinken, Antony. Remarks at the United Nations. March 24, 2021.

It is a fact that the United States of America is one of the greatest military forces that are a part of NATO, and that it plays a considerable role in the organization's decision-making processes. This is well known to the public. To say the United States "essentially controls" NATO and that the organization exists only to further American global interests, is to oversimplify the alliance's institutions, objectives, and practices in a misleading and inaccurate way. Although the United States is a significant participant, it does not have the authority to control an organization's goals or activities unilaterally.

The North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) has been a target of criticism in recent years for being unduly focused on the interests of the United States and for adopting a military-first approach to security. However, it is essential to remember that the North Atlantic Treaty Organization functions in

accordance with the principles of collective defence. This indicates that an assault on a member nation is viewed as an attack on all the members. This guiding concept is established in Article 5 of the North Atlantic Treaty and serves as the foundation for the collective defence commitment made by the organization.

5. Conclusion

The confrontation between Russia and Ukraine is intricate and extremely disputed and has raised crucial concerns regarding the nature of the war and the potential hazards of large-scale armed battles. At this article, I argue that the conflict cannot be justified, since it puts the entire survival of the world in jeopardy due to the MAD (Mutually Assured Destruction) philosophy, and that it represents a lose-lose situation for all parties involved. In other words, war is not in one's best interest. (Sokolski, 2004)

The theory of mutually assured destruction (MAD) is grounded in the doctrine of deterrence, which proposes that one state can prevent an attack by another by threatening to react with a force that is far more deadly than the first strike. The concept of mutually assured destruction (MAD) is based on the assumption that the mere possibility of its occurrence would be sufficient to dissuade either side from starting a nuclear assault because the results would be too disastrous for both sides.

Given that nuclear weapons are located in an area where confrontation between Russia and Ukraine is taking place, there is reason to be concerned about the possible hazards of large-scale armed conflict in the 21st century. Given the involvement of major powers such as Russia and NATO, as well as the possibility that more nations will become engaged in this war, the conflict has the potential to expand into a much larger and more destructive conflict in the future.

In addition, war cannot be defended because it is a righteous conflict and has resulted in widespread bloodshed and human suffering. Violence has caused hundreds of thousands of people to be displaced from their homes, resulting in the death of thousands of innocent civilians. In addition, the battle has resulted in a humanitarian catastrophe in the area. Many people are dealing with a lack of food, water, and medical supplies. In conclusion, the Russian-Ukrainian war cannot be justified as a fair war because of the threats it presents to the very life of the world as well as the widespread brutality and human suffering it has produced as a result of the conflict. It is imperative that efforts be made to find a peaceful and diplomatic resolution to the conflict, to prevent a full-scale war that could have catastrophic repercussions for the entire world. The conflict represents a loss-loss situation for all parties involved, and it is important that efforts are made to find a solution to the conflict. The members of the international community have an obligation to collaborate to locate a peaceful resolution to the dispute and prevent the MAD doctrine from being put into action.

This article tried to look at the ongoing war from an unbiased point of view, and still found it very dangerous to the existence of the World as we know it to-

day. However, a war is just, any conflict with a participating nuclear armed state shall be seized at the earliest possible moment in nowadays, and not escalated by interior or exterior factors.

Can such a conflict deepen an already festering wound to the wounded collective identity of CEE? (Máté-Tóth, 2019)

Acknowledgements

The research was conducted without external funding. However, I must credit Prof. András Máté-Tóth and the CONVIVENCE Research group of the Hungarian Academy of Sciences as inspirations for ideas and a workshop for debate.

Conflicts of Interest

The author declares no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

References

- Augustine, S. (2009). *The City of God*. Hendrickson Publishers.
- Bērziņš, J. (2020). The Theory and Practice of New Generation Warfare: The Case of Ukraine and Syria. *The Journal of Slavic Military Studies*, 33, 355-380. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13518046.2020.1824109>
- Damascene, S. J. (1914). *Barlaam and Ioasaph* (Translated by G. R. Woodward, & H. Mattingly). Harvard University Press.
- Heller, A. (1987). *Beyond Justice* (p. 346). Basil Blackwell.
- Lenin, V. I. (1917). The Tasks of the Proletariat in the Present Revolution. In V. I. Lenin (Ed.), *Collected Works* (Vol. 24, pp. 19-26). Progress Publishers.
- Máté-Tóth, A. (2019). *Freiheit und Populismus*. Springer Fachmedien Wiesbaden. <https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-658-25485-8>
- Putin, V. V. (2021). *On the Historical Unity of Russians and Ukrainians*. The Russian President's Official Website.
- Sokolski, H. D. (2004). *Getting MAD: A Nuclear Mutual Assured Destruction, Its Origins and Practice*. US Army War College Press.
- Stalin, J. (1924). *Foundations of Leninism ('The Dictatorship of the Proletariat')*. National Labour Press.
- Trotsky, L. (1924). *Problems of Life*. Methuen Publishing.
- Von Clausewitz, C. (1950). *On War* (Vol. 1). Jazzybee Verlag.
- Walzer, M. (1991). *Just and Unjust Wars*. Basic Books.
- Zinser, H. (2015). *Religion und Krieg*. Verlag Wilhelm Fink. <https://doi.org/10.30965/9783846758335>