

No Glory in Killing: War's Reality

Gerard Bodifée

An extract

Original title Oorlog, hoe lang nog?
Publisher Ertsberg, 2024

Translation Dutch into English
Translator Rob Naborn

© Gerard Bodifée/Rob Naborn/Ertsberg/Flanders Literature – this text cannot be copied nor made public by means of (digital) print, copy, internet or in any other way without prior consent from the rights holders.

Contents

Preface

Introduction

1. No goal, no purpose

Why are wars fought? Often, there is no goal; at most a trigger. Sometimes there is a goal, but war does more harm than good.

2. A potential goal, a potential purpose?

Does war fulfill a human need? Is there such a thing as a just war? Many opinions about the usefulness of or the need for war are based on illusions.

3. Innate

Originally, man was an aggressive predator. Over time, a moral consciousness has developed within man. Old biological instincts can make way for humane ideas that motivate behavior.

4. The worst evil

Three reasons to eradicate wars. Wars cause more pain than any other crime or natural disaster. In a war lives are sacrificed, which can never be justified. A modern war inflicts damage on a global scale.

5. How much longer?

Three ways to eradicate wars. The people must refuse to go to war. The simplistic global dichotomy ally-enemy must be abandoned (despite inevitable opposition). Arms production must be reined in worldwide.

Epilogue

Acknowledgments

Index of names

From the Introduction

The price paid for war is always too high. Whoever starts it or gets dragged into it, will pay. How and how much cannot be estimated beforehand, but it is certain that it will be paid in hard currency, in human lives. Young men are sent onto the battlefield, where many will die, but that won't be enough. Ordinary people, old folks, sick people, helpful people, scared people, crying children will die or be maimed, in their dark shelters or under the rubble of collapsed houses, with no hope of rescue. Why do people do this to each other? No one could possibly explain to the children, frightened to death, why bombs fall from the sky that crush people and destroy everything. Why do these terrible things have to happen? Why must people who normally care so much for each other, are so attached to each other, who can love each other more than anything on earth - why must they kill each other now, exterminate others as though they are a plague? Why? Because it is war, and war demands its price. Yes, but why?

[...]

War brings no peace but sows the hatred from which new wars will grow. War needs enmity to be able to act inhumanely. Hatred and enmity are the root and the result of everything that wars do. In this way, evil feeds itself. How else could history be this endless chain of wars that has always been and threatens to always be?

In this book I will defend the position that war, meaning large-scale violence by a country or a people prepared to sacrifice human lives for a stated goal, under no circumstances and for no reason whatsoever can be permitted. The so-called just war, a notion that has often been discussed throughout history and that is often still defended, is dangerous fiction. Not one ideal, no matter how noble, can be a legitimate reason for war, not even self-defense. The use of violence to achieve goals that are in and of themselves laudable and necessary is only acceptable on the small and limited scale of an individual. A person who is the victim of aggression has the right to defend himself, even with violence, if necessary. Even witnesses of aggression are morally obliged to help the victim. That is not part of the discussion. But wars are fought between nations, states, or other large communities. A war is planned and organized. And the violence extends beyond any reasonable proportion to the goals they want to achieve with it. From a moral or humane standpoint, it can never be justified that groups or organizations try to secure their continued existence by killing the individuals those groups are made up of, or worse, that they are not even a part of. Killing so that one can continue to live can't be the best way.

From Chapter 3

It is the tragedy of the history of the human species that the development of morality which started deep in prehistoric times did not lead to a complete muzzling of the old predator instinct before the destructive warfare technologies emerged. The pace of the inventions cannot be stopped, but the opportunities to speed up moral development should have been seized more forcefully. It is hard to imagine how different the world would have looked if, during the late Roman Empire, they had taken the Christian message more seriously when they made it the state religion. Technological breakthroughs with the most consequential outcomes for the development of weaponry were metallurgy, the engineering of firearms, and nuclear technology. They all came too early. People weren't ready for them; nothing had prepared us for the real challenge man faced: breaking with his

own biological past. Now man possesses these weapons of mass destruction before he has succeeded in taming his inner predator. That makes his presence on Earth nothing less than a catastrophic paradox. He preaches morality but sows death and destruction. He wants to transcend nature but stoops to being a catastrophe of it.

In the *Critique of Pure Reason*, Kant argued that theoretical reason is incapable of answering all the questions it asks. This leads to his conclusion that the goal of reason is to find unity between knowledge and moral action. The ultimate goal of human reason is therefore not just to acquire knowledge but, more importantly, to find the greatest good. All our knowledge must work to serve this goal of finding virtue and acting virtuously.

Just as there is an ultimate goal for man, to which all our other goals are subordinate, there must also be an ultimate goal for the entire world, of which man is a part. As the only being with morality as a goal, moral man must be the goal of the entire world. Kant underlines that this ultimate goal should not be man as a biological species, not his physicality, but the essence of man, from which his free moral activities originate. Physical man, with his biologically functioning body, is the natural organism through which we strive for this goal. In man as a moral being, the world strives for "ontological perfection," for "religious perfection," in other words, for God.

[...]

With these impassioned thoughts of the old philosopher from Königsberg (now Kaliningrad) our attention has strayed far from the scenes of war. Nonetheless, Kant's vision of man's ultimate goal must encompass the entire reality of man, man as he is and not just what he ought to be. Does what he says also hold true for the failing human, a human that stoops to the inhumane, the human that kills in order to live? How can the soldier on the front who is prepared to kill, in servile obedience to the order he has been given, be reflected in this vision of man striving for "religious perfection"? The soldier, eye to eye with the enemy, is its tragic opposite. Man is an end in himself, not merely the means to an end, Kant tells us. With these words, he cannot be speaking about the soldier on the front who allows himself to be reduced to a simple tool, a cog in a huge fighting machine. Man is a free and autonomous being, Kant stresses; he must decide for himself whom he obeys. The soldier on the front doesn't decide anything, however. He covers his tracks, listens to a command, aims his gun, shoots. He has no choice. Does he fit Kant's definition of man? The soldier in a filthy trench does not have the characteristics of a human being. His body is that of a human; he belongs to the human species; he has the characteristics we admire in people: courage, bravery, comradery... He is a human being, no doubt, but in an anachronistic sense. His behavior is that of a pre-human being, an animal that must kill in order to survive. The soldier on the front is a human being in which all animal instincts have been reactivated: the tenacity of the fight, the pleasure of watching the opponent die, the killing instinct aroused. His old self takes control. The beast lives again. War pushes man back into prehistoric times. War dehumanizes man.

From Chapter 4

A war can never be good, for whatever end, not for the losers, not for the victors (if any), and not for the innocent people (which there will always be), who were not involved but often pay the highest price. That is what history teaches us, and that is the premise for me to reject war under any condition. The evil that war creates is abhorrent and abysmal, like hell itself. Taking into consideration the scope and severity of the human suffering caused, the material

damage inflicted, and the moral guilt connected to so much purposeful destruction, war is the worst evil, worse than any other crime a human can commit. War is an injustice that is always greater than the justice that can possibly be intended. [...]

The perversity of the evil that war is can be found not only in its excess and senselessness, but also in its self-reinforcing effect. Violence begets violence. He who hits will get hit and will hit again in return, and so on. Violence multiplies itself, exponentially. That is where the immeasurable evil of war comes from. As soon as the fight starts and the first deaths have been recorded, a dynamic develops in which the killing goes faster and faster. Old instincts re-emerge. An urge to kill surges, grows, and intensifies, and eventually becomes an all-dominating force. Soon, the original goal for the fight (if there was one in the first place) no longer determines its course; the goal becomes inflicting as many losses as possible on the enemy. Killing for killing's sake is the only thing that counts now, out of revenge, or rage, or whatever uncontrollable drive. Only by unleashing that instinct can soldiers on the battlefield be pushed to do what is completely unreasonable: climb out of the trenches, while being rained on by bullets, and run toward the enemy with a bayonet on their rifles. Only the unhinged "killing instinct," drilled in during training, can activate that.

The drive to kill in combat is not a will to kill but a force that is stronger than a will can be, stronger than the will to live, too, an unchained force of nature. Nothing, not even military discipline, can control the drive in the end. Once loose, it breaks through all boundaries, expands beyond the fight, and takes aim at anything that can be killed and ripped apart. That is the deadly, inhumane explosion of the death drive that appears during wartime. It happens in all wars.

War means a great societal agitation, when people are consciously sacrificed to achieve a specific purpose. [...] History has taught us that the willingness to sacrifice human lives in times of war knows no bounds and that nobody is spared, not even children or defenseless people. The answer to the question of what end could justify such a human sacrifice is simple: that end does not exist.

But can self-defense not be a legitimate goal? Can't there be sound reasons to fight a war against an aggressor, or offer armed resistance against a tyrant? The argument that a country's self-defense is a legitimate reason to go to war is generally accepted in moral philosophy, but on closer inspection, that standpoint has simply been taken for granted and is not tenable in the end. We do not deny that self-defense with means proportionate to the threat can be a just reaction. But warfare is not an acceptable means. If a country uses the right to self-defense to justify war, and therefore to sacrifice human lives, why wouldn't the individual who understands that he will be sacrificed in the fight have the right to defend himself by refusing to fight? Whose interest prevails, that of the state or that of the individual?

Let's ask the question differently. How does the importance of the life of an individual relate to the importance that a state has in its survival? A human individual is a living being, an entity with consciousness, his own observations, his own will, his own spontaneity, and of irreplaceable value for relatives, friends, and loved ones. An individual feels and is aware of his existence. His existence is more than simply being; it is a conscious experience, an inspiration that gives a far-reaching, transcendental meaning to an existence in which amazement, beauty, love, and the pursuit of happiness are the elements. The state is nothing like this; it is an idea, a collective, and as such, a construct of the human imagination, defined as a set of conventions built among individuals with an eye to their collective well-being. This way, a state can have power and resolve and acquire a certain

autonomy by holding itself up as independent vis-à-vis other states and its own citizens, but a state does not have its own consciousness, no will or awareness of reality like a human individual does. Whatever a state does or says, it does so through individuals. A representative of the state, the head of state, a civil servant or whoever acts on behalf of the state, is always an individual. The state does not exist in and of itself. It is only a construct, a representation by the citizens about what connects them and to which they subject themselves, more or less voluntarily.

In real life, only individuals exist. What we call "states" in politics, "peoples" in ethnology, and "species" in biology, these are all just ideas people use to distinguish collective features above the level of the individual. These collectivities are not individualities, however; they do not have the status of an entity on their own. For all those reasons, the right of people to defend themselves against violence by the state, both their own and a foreign state, takes precedence over the right the state asserts to defend itself against other states. This is why it is never permissible for a state to sacrifice individuals to reach its own objectives [...] The right of an individual to self-defense against a state that wants to use him for war purposes has precedence over the right a state may have to defend itself against other states.

From Chapter 5

Sometimes, states have their own, romanticized self-image, which doesn't necessarily correspond with the objective facts, yet it has taken root in their history, keeping it from being completely separated from reality. Therefore, the image is not necessarily false or insincere, even though people from other countries have a different view of reality. For example, many Americans are convinced of their country's "exceptionalism." Their belief is that the United States of America is different from all other countries because they must fulfill a special role in the world. Because of their democratic institutions and the importance assigned to freedom, the US must offer humanity new opportunities and hope. Less pronounced but directly linked is of course the idea that the country, based on this important task, must be strong and must arm itself to be able to fulfill its task. It may sometimes be allowed to do what other countries may never do, such as annex or interfere in other countries' internal affairs.

Russia, the big foil, has a self-image that is less explicitly formulated but lives strongly in its entire literature and philosophy. The vast country is aware of its historic call that originates from its complexity and vastness in which old forces from East and West are woven together. In the endless space of the land, the Russian soul finds its permanent destination. According to Dostoevsky, the Orthodox Church, intimately connected to Russian life, is closest to the original Christianity, and it will bring salvation to the world, in the end.

In the twentieth century, both "chosen peoples" found themselves face-to-face with their mind-boggling armies, without ever really attacking, a "Cold War" that was generally understood as a battle between Communism and Capitalism. But now that Russia has turned away from Communism, and the conflict continues after a brief lull into the twenty-first century, we must understand the confrontation to be a clash of two deeper-lying visions of life itself and of what the fundamental destination of humanity on Earth should be. An American optimism aimed at resolve, which proclaims human rights and is in essence humanist in nature, as opposed to a socially moved Russian

soul, marked by tragedy, that is struggling with its insatiable hunger for godliness, a largely religious craving. How can the two understand each other, so that they no longer consider fighting a necessity?

From the epilogue

Certainly, war is in our blood. We are still young as a biological species, and our distant ancestor, the predator, is still hiding inside us and is not dead. It comes alive when it smells danger. But the hungry beast no longer has free rein. We have trapped it in a harness of rules and prohibitions, as much as we can. In the course of his long history, man developed into a rational being, with his own ideas and ideals that the animalistic character lacks. Through morality more than intelligence, man distinguishes himself from animals. Moral ideals such as non-violence, kindness, and a sense of responsibility are the goals a humane society pursues. At least in times of peace and reason. Then the animal in us is forced to remain calm. But, again, it is *not dead*. The addiction to violence hasn't disappeared; it is deeply rooted in our character. That is the complex reality of who we are and what we do, here on Earth. Man is an ambivalent creature, part animal, part noble, and far from a saint. He knows that using bloody violence is morally wrong, but in the rush of combat he forgets.

War is a form of insanity. Reason gives way, the conscience is silent, and blind forces of nature have free rein when man no longer has the beast within under control. Then the unchained violence is larger, crueler, and more savage than anything animal nature can create. Now the fight is with weapons, products of the special combination of genius and stupidity that is human. Its destructive power is large enough to seriously damage Earth. The arsenal to administer ourselves the final blow is already accessible to the human species.
