

# The Meaninglessness Of War

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## Introduction

War is sometimes defended as necessary for self-defence, protection of civilians, or resistance to aggression. That possibility makes the subject morally difficult: condemning every use of force can ignore situations in which people face invasion, genocide, or systematic violence. Yet the fact that a war may have an intelligible purpose does not mean that the war itself produces meaningful or controllable results. Once organized violence begins, its effects spread far beyond the political objective announced by leaders. Civilians are killed or displaced, public services collapse, fear reshapes daily life, and the institutions needed for peace are damaged (Walzer, 2015; International Committee of the Red Cross, "Urban warfare and violence").

The meaninglessness of war therefore should not be understood as the claim that every participant lacks a reason. States, movements, and individuals often have powerful motives. The stronger argument is that warfare repeatedly destroys the very goods it claims to defend: human security, political order, dignity, community, and a viable future. Even military victory can leave a society poorer, more authoritarian, traumatized, and divided. This essay evaluates war through its human, economic, political, environmental, and moral consequences while also considering the objection that force can sometimes be necessary (Walzer, 2015).

## Defining War and Its Claimed Purposes

War is sustained armed conflict between organized political groups, usually states or forces seeking state-like authority. It differs from isolated crime because it mobilizes institutions, weapons, personnel, finance, information, and law for collective violence. Governments may claim that war protects territory, deters attack, rescues an ally, defeats terrorism, changes a regime, or enforces an international rule. Such aims can be sincere, strategic, propagandistic, or mixed (Walzer, 2015).

A declared purpose does not settle the ethical question. Leaders may underestimate costs, exaggerate threats, or assume that battlefield success will automatically create political stability. Military planning can identify targets and campaigns, but it cannot fully control civilian reaction, regional escalation, economic disruption, revenge, or the political order that follows. The difference between a goal and an outcome is central to understanding why war so often becomes meaningless (Walzer, 2015).

# The Destruction of Human Life

The most direct consequence of war is death and injury. Combatants face obvious danger, but modern conflict frequently occurs in towns and cities where civilians live beside military objectives. Explosive weapons can damage homes, schools, hospitals, roads, water systems, and power networks even when a military target is present. The International Committee of the Red Cross emphasizes that the effects are both direct and indirect: an explosion may kill immediately, while damage to sanitation, electricity, or health care causes disease and additional deaths later (International Committee of the Red Cross, “Explosive weapons in populated areas: The consequences for civilians”; International Committee of the Red Cross, “Urban warfare and violence”).

Statistics can make these losses appear abstract. Each casualty represents relationships interrupted: a child without a parent, a family without income, a patient without a clinician, or a community without experienced teachers and engineers. Injury also continues long after a ceasefire. Amputations, burns, brain injury, chronic pain, and psychological trauma can shape an entire lifetime. A political settlement cannot restore the dead or return years lost to disability and grief (International Committee of the Red Cross, “Urban warfare and violence”).

## Displacement and the Loss of Home

People flee when bombardment, persecution, forced recruitment, hunger, or the collapse of services makes ordinary life impossible. Displacement is not simply a change of address. Families may lose documents, property, employment, education, community support, and access to medical treatment. Those who remain within their country may receive less legal protection and international attention than refugees who cross a border (International Committee of the Red Cross, “Urban warfare and violence”).

Return is often delayed even after fighting stops. Homes may be destroyed, mines and unexploded weapons may remain, and local economies may no longer function. Displaced people can spend years in temporary housing that becomes semi-permanent. Children grow up without a stable school, while adults lose professional skills or become dependent on irregular work. War thus turns temporary emergency into a long social condition (International Committee of the Red Cross, 2015).

## Collapse of Essential Services

Urban societies depend on interconnected systems. A hospital needs electricity, clean water, medicine, communications, transport, and trained staff. A water plant depends on pumps, fuel, spare parts, laboratories, and safe access for workers. When one system fails, others follow. Damage to a power station can affect water distribution, refrigeration, communications, banking, and medical care at the same time (International Committee of the Red Cross, 2015).

This interconnected collapse shows why the effects of war cannot be measured only by battlefield deaths. The ICRC has documented how protracted conflict gradually degrades water, sanitation, electricity, and health systems. Repair becomes harder because technicians flee, supply chains fail, and public budgets are diverted to military needs. A city can survive a single strike yet become unlivable through cumulative damage (International Committee of the Red Cross, 2015).

## Economic Consequences

War consumes resources that could support health, education, housing, transport, climate resilience, or productive investment. Governments borrow heavily, raise taxes, redirect factories, and accept shortages. Private investment falls when contracts, property rights, and future demand become uncertain. Insurance becomes unavailable or expensive, trade routes change, and skilled workers leave (Walzer, 2015).

Some industries profit from military spending, but their gains do not prove that society is richer. Production of weapons may increase measured output while reducing the stock of useful civilian infrastructure. Reconstruction can create later economic activity, yet rebuilding a destroyed bridge is not a benefit compared with having the bridge remain intact. Opportunity cost is essential: money and talent used to replace what war destroyed cannot create new schools, research, or businesses.

War also encourages informal and criminal economies. Smuggling, looting, extortion, trafficking, corruption, and illicit arms markets flourish when policing and courts weaken. Criminal networks can outlast the conflict and undermine the peace that follows.

## Political Consequences

Leaders often promise that war will establish order, but conflict can strengthen authoritarian practices. Emergency powers, censorship, surveillance, detention, and restrictions on dissent may be introduced as temporary measures and then remain. Opposition is easily portrayed as disloyal when national survival is invoked (Walzer, 2015).

War also changes political identities. Fear and grief make compromise appear like betrayal. Communities may be reduced to ethnic, religious, or national categories, while individuals who once lived together become suspected enemies. Atrocities create demands for revenge, and each side uses the violence of the other to justify escalation. Even a negotiated settlement must operate inside this damaged political culture (Walzer, 2015).

## Education, Health, and Generational Harm

School closures are among war's least visible long-term consequences. Children may miss months or years of education, and universities lose faculty, laboratories, and libraries. Interrupted learning affects future earnings, civic participation, and national capacity. Education provided in emergency settings is valuable but rarely replaces a stable school system (International Committee of the Red Cross, "Urban warfare and violence").

Health effects also extend beyond wounds. Vaccination programs are interrupted, prenatal care becomes unsafe, chronic diseases go untreated, and malnutrition increases. Mental-health consequences include anxiety, depression, traumatic stress, complicated grief, and developmental difficulties. Most survivors show resilience, but resilience should not be used to minimize avoidable suffering (International Committee of the Red Cross, 2015).

## Environmental Damage

War can pollute soil, water, and air through burning fuel, damaged industrial facilities, destroyed pipelines, toxic remnants, and military waste. Forests and farmland may be mined or burned. Wildlife management and environmental monitoring collapse. Damage can cross borders through rivers, smoke, and displaced populations (International Committee of the Red Cross, "Urban warfare and violence").

The environment is not separate from human security. Polluted water harms health, damaged farmland increases hunger, and destroyed ecosystems remove livelihoods. Environmental recovery can take decades, making the end of combat only the beginning of another crisis (International Committee of the Red Cross, 2015).

## The Argument That War Can Be Necessary

A serious anti-war argument must address cases in which nonviolence appears unable to stop immediate aggression. International law recognizes self-defence under defined conditions, and moral traditions such as just-war theory ask whether force has a just cause, legitimate authority, reasonable prospect of success, proportionality, and last-resort status. These principles acknowledge that refusing to resist can also permit harm (Walzer, 2015).

However, "necessary" should be treated as a demanding conclusion rather than a slogan. Leaders must show that peaceful alternatives were genuinely pursued, that the aim is limited and achievable, and that civilian harm will be minimized. They must also consider what political settlement can follow. A campaign without a credible path to peace risks converting emergency defence into indefinite violence (Walzer, 2015).

# Why Victory Does Not Automatically Create Meaning

Military victory answers who controlled the battlefield; it does not answer whether the war improved human life. A victorious state may inherit destroyed territory, hostile populations, debt, veterans needing care, and weakened democratic institutions. The defeated side may experience humiliation that fuels future conflict. Peace imposed without legitimacy can become an interval before another war (Walzer, 2015).

Meaning is also contested among participants. A soldier may find courage, loyalty, or sacrifice meaningful even within a destructive campaign. Those personal meanings deserve respect, but they do not justify the political decision that created the danger. Honouring service should not require romanticizing war.

## Alternatives to War

Diplomacy is sometimes dismissed as weakness because its successes are less dramatic than military victories. Effective prevention includes negotiation, mediation, arms control, early warning, peacekeeping, economic cooperation, protection of minority rights, and institutions that allow grievances to be addressed without violence. These methods are imperfect, but their failures do not make war reliable (Walzer, 2015).

Societies also need credible defence, civilian protection, and accountability for aggression. The alternative to war is not passive hope; it is sustained investment in institutions that reduce incentives and opportunities for violence. Reconciliation, transitional justice, reconstruction, and inclusive governance are necessary after conflict, but they are cheaper and more humane when destruction has been prevented (Walzer, 2015).

## Conclusion

War becomes meaningless not because every side lacks a stated purpose, but because organized violence repeatedly defeats the purposes for which it is launched. It kills and injures, uproots families, destroys infrastructure, weakens economies, damages the environment, interrupts education, and reshapes politics around fear and revenge. These consequences continue long after formal hostilities end (International Committee of the Red Cross, "Urban warfare and violence"; International Committee of the Red Cross, "Explosive weapons in populated areas: The consequences for civilians"; International Committee of the Red Cross, 2015).

Force may sometimes be defended as necessary against immediate aggression, but necessity must

be proven through strict moral and practical tests. The burden should rest on those who propose war, not on civilians asked to endure it. A mature society honours courage without glorifying destruction and recognizes that the most meaningful victory is often the conflict prevented before cities, institutions, and lives are lost (Walzer, 2015).

## References

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