

# **The Tragedy of War and the Search for Meaning in International History**

Hauptmann Lecture

Park College

April 10, 2002

## **Introduction**

My remarks this evening are drawn from a chapter in a book that I completed last autumn. This particular chapter, however, was written last spring. We are all alarmingly aware national and international situations then were very different from those prevailing today. The World Trade Center still stood in New York City, the Pentagon Building was still whole, some 4000 Americans, now dead, were going about their daily business. An indeterminate, but assumedly large number of Afghan citizens, now dead, were also alive. Biological attacks on civilian populations were scenarios imagined in think tank studies, and except for peacekeeping assignments in places like Bosnia and Kosovo, the military forces of the United States were on their bases and in their barracks. All of this has abruptly, dramatically and ominously changed.

This altered context has rendered what I wrote last spring about the tragedy of war both somewhat more poignant, but also more trivial than may have been the case before September 11. My essay is more poignant because our country is at war, and a good part of the evil typically unleashed by war was unleashed right here in the United States. But the essay is also more trivial because its concerns about historiography, interpretative methodology and the like shunt us onto academic tangents that might be more interesting in less urgent settings.

I'll not take you onto any of these tangents this evening. Let it suffice to say that book that contains this chapter on "The Tragedy of War" is a collection of essays written to demonstrate that the study of international relations is not the exclusive province of social

scientists. Relations among states and peoples can be studied humanistically as well as scientifically, and the intellectual dividends from humanistic approaches are substantial.

### **Cause vs. Meaning in International History**

Pablo Picasso's *Guernica* hangs massively in Madrid's Paseo del Prado, offering there a permanent, cubistic testimony to the horrors of war. *Guernica*, was painted in 1937 to memorialize the bombing of the Basque town of Guernica by fascist air forces during the Spanish Civil War. As there were no Republican soldiers in Guernica at the time of the attack, the victims were civilians – old men, women and children. This, Picasso symbolically depicts: the omnipresence of death, the suffering of the survivors and the physical destruction of the city. Yet, depiction is not what *Guernica* is about, because Picasso's object in creating his masterpiece was to find *meaning* in the horrific events of April 1937. For Picasso in this particular instance, as for other artists working in their preferred media, finding and conveying meaning becomes tantamount to *explaining*. For Picasso perhaps, and certainly for countless interpreters, *Guernica* explains by giving meaning to the Spanish Civil War, to Spain itself, to war itself, even to the human condition overall. This work of art may also capture something of the meaning of international history.

*International history* is the record of interactions among states and peoples. It is the record of things that have happened when states and peoples encountered one another in times past. My lecture tonight is about the phenomenon of war, a familiar recurrence in international history. But my lecture is not about the *causes of war*. Rather it is about the *meaning* of war. That is, what does the seemingly perennial recurrence of war tell us about the human condition?

Because of the well invested efforts of social scientists, a good deal is known about the causes of war—war in general, kinds of war in particular and specific wars specifically. But

attributing meaning has been of less concern to social scientists, and much more the forte of artists, poets, dramatists, novelists and those historians who lean toward the artistic side of their professional calling. Picasso's *Guernica*, the etchings and paintings of Goya, the seventeenth century engravings of Richter, Meyer, Franck and Collot, Homer's *Iliad*, Leo Tolstoy's *War and Peace*, Erich Maria Remarque's *Im Westen nichts neues*, Jean Giraudoux's, *La guerre de Troie n'aura pas lieu*, Kurt Vonnegut's *Slaughterhouse- five*, Vera Brittan's *Testament of Youth*, Steven Pressfield's, *Gates of Fire*, Shoshtakovich's *Lenningrad Symphony*, and many, many other works of art attribute meaning to war – personal meaning, societal meaning, mythical meaning and moral meaning. In the same manner, interpretations that attribute *historical meaning* enrich the writings of many noted historians. Here I would call your attention to Cicely Wedgewood's masterful writings on the Thirty Years War, or the entire repertoire of British Historian John Keegan. Whereas artists attribute meaning, audiences, readers, critics and scholars search for it in their works.

### **Moral Meaning and Tragic Plot**

My particular examination in the history of war amounted to a search for moral meaning. My discovery was that war is morally offensive because it destroys conditions and objects that human value. It destroys milieux within which humans flourish, and most notably it destroys human life itself. This is hardly a world-shaking or indeed a very original discovery. It does nevertheless fly in the face of opposite conclusions reached by both Kant and Hegel, to say nothing of Neitzche, Trietsche, Meinke and Marx, as well as many third world intellectuals writing today about liberation, emancipation, resistance, struggle and the imperatives and virtues of violence.

My broader, and perhaps more interesting finding, however, is that war contributes to making *tragedy* an inherent attribute of the human condition. War is not the only contributor to the tragedy of the human condition, but it is probably the main contribution to the human conditions that emanates from international relations.

***Tragedy is a literary genre.*** It is a plot, a form of narrative, a kind of story, or a way of telling a story. I am going to use tragedy, the literary genre, as a theory of international relations.

Exactly what kind of story tragedy tells is a matter of considerable controversy among literary scholars and philosophers. I don't dare to get into this controversy here, so let it suffice to say that there are number of different kinds of tragic plots. I find one variety of tragic unfolding that poets, novelists, and playwrights have found (or imagined) to be particularly evocative with respect to war in the history of international relations. We find this particular plot, for example, in the plays of Euripides, notably *The Medea* and *The Trojan Women*. It is also the plot of Shakespeare's *Othello*. It is the plot of Christopher Marlowe's *Tamburlaine*, and the main theme of Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*. It is also the plot of Eugene Oneill's *Morning Becomes Electra*. We also find it in the stark and terrifying imagery of Picasso's *Guernica*. Some even hear it in Shostakovich's *Lennigrad Symphony*, and I believe that I also hear in the chilling silence of the last movement of his *Fourth Symphony*.

In all of these the story is the same:

- (1) precipitating circumstances permit the unleashing of evil;
- (2) via its agents, evil, once unleashed, enters into people's lives, uninvited and certainly unwelcome. There it reaps monumental destructiveness, trampling human values, and it leaves in its wake grief, misery and death;

(3) those grieved, made miserable and killed are often innocents, total innocents, undeserving of harm. Harm simply befalls them because of who they are or where they are.

(4) at the end, those perpetrating evil go unpunished. Or otherwise, there is no punishment that is imaginably commensurate with the enormity of the moral outrage they have perpetrated. There is therefore no retribution, no redemption, no ultimate justice.

Revealingly, in a number of works containing this particular plot, notably Euripides *Trojan Women*, Marlowe's *Tamburlaine*, and Picasso's *Guernica*, the precipitating circumstance that permits the unleashing of evil is war.

### **Evil Defined**

To this point, I've used the term "evil" without defining it. The definition is key to understanding the tragedy of war. I've taken my definition of "evil" from work of the contemporary moral philosopher John Kekes. He deals with it in his fascinating book titled *Facing Evil*. For Kekes, evil is not a metaphysical presence, a Satanic influence, a force from the dark side or any other kind of supernatural agent or willfulness. It is rather an *occurrence*, something that happens to persons or people when outside agents enter uninvited to disrupt or destroy their lives. The intrusion of evil renders the human condition tragic. For Kekes, furthermore, evil is "underserved harm." The victims in tragic situations, he says, "suffer evil understood as underserved harm. The harm may be totally undeserved, or it may be grossly disproportional to what is merited by the agents' life and conduct."

### **Examining War**

It is time now to look at the phenomenon of war. In my essay I examine eight wars – the Trojan (which may or may not have actually happened), the Peloponnesian, the Punic Wars,

especially the third which resulted in the destruction of Carthage, the Hundred Years War, the Thirty Years War, World War I and World War II.

The story of each of these can be related as a narrative of tragedy. The tragic plot in effect gives meaning to the sequences of events. In each instance, the outbreak of war casts contenders into a Hobbesian state of nature where moral constraints are easily and readily set aside. This inevitably leads to rampages of evil, defined as undeserved harm. All of these wars involved not only momentous counts of battlefield casualties, but also the wanton slaughter of non-combatants. “War,” John Keegan emphasizes, “is a dirty business.” Few wars have resulted in the punishment of evil doers. Fewer still perhaps have yielded justice, however defined. Most have produced political adjustments in boundaries or jurisdictions, which, historically have turned out to have little significance. Most have laid foundations for future wars.

For example, Cicely Wedgewood, at the conclusion of her brilliant study of the Thirty Years War, notes that,

**The Peace of Westphalia was like most peace treaties, a rearrangement of the European map ready for the next war . . . The Peace has been described as marking an epoch in European history, and it is commonly taken to do so. It is supposed to divide the period of religious wars from that of national wars, the ideological wars from wars of mere aggression. But the demarcation is as artificial as such arbitrary divisions commonly are. Aggression, dynastic ambition and fanaticism are all alike present in the hazy background behind the actual reality of war, and the last wars of religion merged insensibly into the pseudo-national wars of the future.**

Yet, the Thirty Years War directly or indirectly caused the deaths of between one-third and one-half of the population of Germany. It had similarly dire affects in Bohemia and other regions of Central Europe. It also involved countless occurrences of unspeakable atrocity – murder, massacre, torture, pillage, plunder and rape – perpetrated mainly on non-combatants.

The same story, the same tragic story, is told over and over again in the history of war. I've not the time to go on at length. A few sound bites will therefore have to do:

### The End of the 3<sup>rd</sup> Punic War

The 3<sup>rd</sup> Punic War in 146 B.C. ended with the destruction of the city of Carthage, the account of which is recorded in the writings of the Roman historian Appian:

**. . . the Roman general remained in personal command, without sleep, through the entire attack . . . Carthaginian fury was matched by Roman savagery. In the buildings, the attackers slaughtered everyone they came across, tossing many of the disarmed to troops below, who impaled them on raised pikes. Dead and dying citizens were used to fill ditches across which advanced Scipio's transport. . . Everywhere, bodies festooned the tortured city: young and old, male and female, sprawled on footways, protruding amid crumbled masonry and charred beams. . . Carthage was lost.**

### The Hundred Years' War

The Hundred Years' War, nominally between England and France, (date) went for a century mainly because nobody knew how to stop it. It was one the most senseless conflicts in European history, It was also one of the most savage, inspite of the fact that romantic historians have glamorized it as chivalrous affair. Historian Robin Neillands is among those who refused to glorify this war. In one moving passage, he described the siege of Rouen in the year 1418:

By the end of July 1418, Henry [Henry V of England] had the city of Rouen completely surrounded. . . . [I]n early December 1418, . . . the defenders attempted to reduce the demands on their ever-declining food stocks by expelling 12,000 people – the so-called *bouches inutiles* – useless mouths – from the city. Henry refused to let these people pass through the lines, and many of them, old men, women and children, perished in the winter chill, starving and helpless, between the walls and the tents of the besiegers. The scenes of suffering were recorded by an Englishman, John Paige: ‘Here and there were children of two or three, begging for bread and starving, their parents dead . . . . a woman was clutching her dead baby to her breast, and a child was sucking the breast of its dead mother. There were ten or twelve to every one alive, many dying quietly and lying down between the lines as though asleep.’

The horror of war, including the massacre of civilians are not the characteristics of past eras only. Barbarism is timeless, and chivalrous warfare is a myth. There never has been much distinction between combatants and non-combatants as attacking armies have always made war on civilians.

### The Rape of Nanking

The conflict between Japan and China, that was one of preludes to World War II, was one of the most atrocious wars in modern history. In December 1937 the Japanese stormed the city of Nanking and on December 17 a *New York Times* reporter who witnessed the initial phases of the sack of Nanking filed a dispatch from aboard the U.S.S. Oahu that was then moored in Shanghai’s harbor. **“Through wholesale atrocities and vandalism at Nanking,”** the story began,

**the Japanese Army has thrown away a rare opportunity to gain the respect and confidence of the Chinese inhabitants and of foreign opinion there. . .**

**The killing of civilians was widespread. Foreigners who traveled widely through the city Wednesday [December 16] found civilian dead on every street.**

**Policemen and firemen were special objects of attack. Many victims were bayoneted and some of the wounds were barbarously cruel. . . .**

**The Japanese looting amounted almost to plundering the entire city. Nearly every building was entered by Japanese soldiers, often under the eyes of their officers, and the men took whatever they wanted . . .**

**The mass executions of war prisoners added to the horrors the Japanese brought to Nanking. After killing the Chinese soldiers who threw down their arms and surrendered, the Japanese combed the city for men in civilian garb who were suspected of being former soldiers. . . .**

**The Japanese appear to want the horrors to remain as long as possible, to impress on the Chinese the terrible results of resisting Japan.**

More than 300,000 people were killed during the sack of Nanking, most of them Civilians, many of them tortured. Twenty thousand women were raped, and most were then murdered. Before the Japanese occupation of China ended in 1945, an estimated 13 million Chinese civilians died.

If anything, the carnage and inhumanities connected with war have increased in the industrial age, with the twentieth century exacting the greatest tolls of all. Altogether, “the First World War killed at least ten million people in battle, most of them young or very young, and millions more died from war-related causes. The Second World War killed fifty million, of

whom fewer than half were servicemen in uniform. At the very end of the Second World War two more cities destroyed were added to the ever-lengthening list, Hiroshima and Nagasaki. The Nuclear Age opened on August 6, 1945 when the military forces of the United States dropped an atomic bomb on the Japanese city of Hiroshima. In an instant, 300,000 people, nearly all of them civilians, were killed, injured or missing and 90 percent of the city was leveled. Three days later, another atomic bomb was dropped on the Japanese city of Nagasaki, this one killing or wounding 75,000 people and obliterating a third of the city.

### **War and the Tragic Vision**

The narratives of war could be recited endlessly. And after we witness the carnage, we must also reflect on what wars have accomplished in human history. Most wars, as Wedgwood observed regarding the Thirty Years War, have been senseless. There are exceptions to this generalization, but not very many. Most wars have moved political boundaries -- sometimes a little, sometimes a lot-- only to see them moved again after succeeding wars. Most wars, depending on their outcome, have either inflated or deflated the prestige of governments or ruling houses, and often the egos of rulers. Some have changed governments, only to see the deposed regimes eventually return, or to see successor governments behave just as their deposed predecessors behaved. Most wars have proved to be occasions for moving treasure from one jurisdiction to another, as the victors almost always rob the defeated. Most wars have also inflamed desires for revenge and provoked revanchist drives that become provocations for new wars.

*What is the meaning of all of this? What meaning can it possibly have?* Here the great tragedians would instruct, that the human condition is essentially a tragic one, and that war is a prevailing agent of the human tragedy. When war occurs, evil is unleashed, it intrudes into

innocent lives uninvited and unwelcome, it either destroys those lives or dramatically degrades them, and after rampaging and destroying the agents of evil exit unpunished and justice is mocked.

Anguish is timeless. When John Keegan delivered the BBC's Reith Lectures in 1998, he devoted most of the first lecture to the costs of war, and opened his reflections on the emotional costs of war with an ironic metaphor about telegrams:

The telegraph boy on his bicycle, pedaling the suburban street and symbol to the Victorians of a new and benevolent technological advance, became for parents and wives during both world wars literally an omen of terror – for it was by telegram that the awful flimsy form beginning ‘We regret to inform you that’ was brought to front doors, a trigger for the articulation of the constant unspoken prayer, ‘Let him pass by, let him stop at another house, let it not be us.’ In Britain during the first world war that prayer was not answered several million times. . . <sup>1</sup>

---

<sup>1</sup> John Keegan, *War and Our World* (New York: Vintage Books, 2001), p. 4.