

## **Bedmond 11.15 September 16 2018 Battle of Britain Sunday**

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We were sure, as a nation, that what we were doing then and in the remaining five years of war, was right and just as we strove to counter a dangerous and terrible ideology that was already well on the way to achieving not only continental domination but the mass murder of some 7 million people for no other reason than that they were Jewish, or gypsies or ‘mentally handicapped’ as we used to say or homosexual or simply opposed to the regime which was overseeing these atrocities. Right and just.

For me, it raises three very important questions. Is there such a thing as a ‘just’ war? Does even a ‘just’ war ever achieve what it sets out to do? With today’s weapons of mass destruction, can war be ‘justified’ any longer?

Religious philosophers have wrestled for centuries with the issue of the 'Just War'. Augustine, Bishop of Hippo in the early 5<sup>th</sup> century and Thomas Aquinas, a Dominican Friar in the fourteenth century produced the basis for the 7 conditions now generally accepted for a war to be officially declared 'Just'.

1. The war in question must be started and authorized by the legitimate governing authority of the State. A war conducted by concerned groups within a State but without its authority is not, internationally, accepted as 'just'.
2. The cause for which the war is fought must be 'just', not selfish or for self or national glorification. A 'just' cause would be such things as a policy of genocide on the part of the enemy, the invasion of someone else's land, a policy of world or international domination.
3. The war must have a 'right intention' – perhaps to bring lasting peace out of a long period of destructive warfare, a speedy resolution of injustice, the punishment of perpetrators of atrocities and war crimes. The acquisition of territory or the imposition of a particular way of life would not be considered a 'right intention'.
4. It must be a last resort. All other possible ways to resolve the situation must have been exhaustively tried and agreed to have failed.
5. Only enough force to achieve the right intention must be used. For many, this would exclude such things as saturation bombing or active retaliation against those who have been defeated.
6. Such a war must only be fought if there is a reasonable chance of success. Without such a condition, the war would be an unacceptable waste of human life and resources and could not be considered 'just'.
7. The good gained by victory must be greater than the evil which led to the war in the first place.

When I turn to those conditions for a war to be considered 'just', I can't help thinking of the slaughter in the trenches of the First World War, or the 20 million – yes, 20 million – Russians killed during the Second World War. Or of the commercial and business interests which lay behind so much of the reasoning leading to several of the wars of the last century, or the ideologies which formed the decisions to try to achieve 'regime change' in our own time.

So to my second question – does war ever solve the problems which give rise to war in the first place? Did we, as a nation and an alliance, prevent the mass murder of those 7 million Jews and their fellow-sufferers? Would there have been masses more had we not intervened with military force? How do those 20 million Russian deaths weigh in the scales of 'justice'? The Battle of Britain, a relatively minor battle in the overall picture of war, certainly seems to have prevented the invasion of our own land, but its end also played its part in enabling the German High Command to concentrate on the invasion and subjection of major areas of European Russia. In our own time, again, is life in Iraq or Afghanistan really any better for the military

engagements in those areas? Again, please note that these are questions, not answers.

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And if I were to ask him, as my mind honours those famous 'few' from my childhood days whose bravery and commitment we remember on this Battle of Britain Sunday, who really should be the ones I should honour, what would I hear him say? "Blessed are the peacemakers; they will be recognized as children of God".

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## **Bedmond 11.15 September 16 2018 Battle of Britain Sunday**

Today is Battle of Britain Sunday, the nearest Sunday after Battle of Britain Day, September 15. That was the day on which, in 1940, the German High Command officially agreed to postpone (and, some time later, to cancel) Operation Sealion, the plan to invade and conquer Britain. That was what this two-month long battle had been all about. From the German point of view the destruction of the resources of the Royal Air Force was a necessary preliminary to the invasion of Britain and what took place between July 12 and September 15 was the way they planned to achieve just that. From the British point of view it was a desperate struggle to prevent that happening. September 15 saw the failure of a massive attempt by the German High Command to draw huge RAF resources into the air as bombers launched a massive day-long attack on London while their fighters shot down what they thought was left of the RAF Fighter Command. It failed. That day has always been kept as the annual Battle of Britain day. In actual fact the decision to postpone Operation Sealion had been made the day before but kept on hold in case the attack on London actually achieved its aim.

I have my own vivid memories of it all. As a child I remember watching long white vapour trails in the clear blue summer skies of the time as the fighter planes fought it out. I went to see the shot down Messerschmidt fighter on display in Aldershot High Street. I was fired at by a low-flying German fighter plane, probably unloading its heavy ammunition in order to get the most out of its remaining fuel for the long flight home; I was grabbed by my mother and flung unceremoniously under the table in the back room. I sat next to a fighter pilot wearing hospital blues at a band parade in the Manor Park grounds and stared in horror when he turned his badly burnt and scarred face to me. He told me not to be frightened, it would soon all clear up. There's a kind of mystique of chivalrous, gallant heroism about it all and a brand of reverence for it all bordering on the glorification of war itself. A kind of glorification we come close to mirroring in our own time, if we are not very careful, with Help for Heroes and annual Remembrance Day commemorations at the Royal Albert Hall – and please note, I said we “come close to”!

We were sure, as a nation, that what we were doing then and in the remaining five years of war, was right and just as we strove to counter a dangerous and terrible ideology that was already well on the way to achieving not only continental domination but the mass murder of some 7 million people for no other reason than that they were Jewish, or gypsies or ‘mentally handicapped’ as we used to say or homosexual or simply opposed to the regime which was overseeing these atrocities. Right and just.

For me, it raises three very important questions. Is there such a thing as a ‘just’ war? Does even a ‘just’ war ever achieve what it sets out to do? With today’s weapons of mass destruction, can war be ‘justified’ any longer?

Religious philosophers have wrestled for centuries with the issue of the 'Just War'. Augustine, Bishop of Hippo in the early 5<sup>th</sup> century and Thomas Aquinas, a Dominican Friar in the fourteenth century produced the basis for the 7 conditions now generally accepted for a war to be officially declared 'Just'.

1. The war in question must be started and authorized by the legitimate governing authority of the State. A war conducted by concerned groups within a State but without its authority is not, internationally, accepted as 'just'.
2. The cause for which the war is fought must be 'just', not selfish or for self or national glorification. A 'just' cause would be such things as a policy of genocide on the part of the enemy, the invasion of someone else's land, a policy of world or international domination.
3. The war must have a 'right intention' – perhaps to bring lasting peace out of a long period of destructive warfare, a speedy resolution of injustice, the punishment of perpetrators of atrocities and war crimes. The acquisition of territory or the imposition of a particular way of life would not be considered a 'right intention'.
4. It must be a last resort. All other possible ways to resolve the situation must have been exhaustively tried and agreed to have failed.
5. Only enough force to achieve the right intention must be used. For many, this would exclude such things as saturation bombing or active retaliation against those who have been defeated.
6. Such a war must only be fought if there is a reasonable chance of success. Without such a condition, the war would be an unacceptable waste of human life and resources and could not be considered 'just'.
7. The good gained by victory must be greater than the evil which led to the war in the first place.

When I turn to those conditions for a war to be considered 'just', I can't help thinking of the slaughter in the trenches of the First World War, or the 20 million – yes, 20 million – Russians killed during the Second World War. Or of the commercial and business interests which lay behind so much of the reasoning leading to several of the wars of the last century, or the ideologies which formed the decisions to try to achieve 'regime change' in our own time.

So to my second question – does war ever solve the problems which give rise to war in the first place? Did we, as a nation and an alliance, prevent the mass murder of those 7 million Jews and their fellow-sufferers? Would there have been masses more had we not intervened with military force? How do those 20 million Russian deaths weigh in the scales of 'justice'? The Battle of Britain, a relatively minor battle in the overall picture of war, certainly seems to have prevented the invasion of our own land, but its end also played its part in enabling the German High Command to concentrate on the invasion and subjection of major areas of European Russia. In our own time, again, is life in Iraq or Afghanistan really any better for the military

engagements in those areas? Again, please note that these are questions, not answers.

Which leads to my third question. However positively we may have given our own answers to the first two, can a war now, given the possession by an unknown number of States of weapons of such mass destruction as to make the atomic bomb attacks on Hiroshima and Nagasaki seem almost trivial, however 'just' the cause, ever meet those criteria for a war to be considered a "Just War" ? However good a cause there may be, would it not be more 'just' to accept the consequences of an alien ideology being imposed on ourselves or our allies rather than risk the annihilation of almost entire states and nations?

I look back on my own over-treasured memories of vapour trails in the sky, of Spitfires and Hurricanes overhead, of wounded young men of courage and heroism and I can't help wondering – was it all right and good, was it all just and justifiable? If it was, can it ever be so again in the light of our knowledge of what would happen if...?

We talk of Jesus being present with us in our worship, as, indeed, in our daily lives. If we were to ask him, present with us now, what he would have to say, how would he put it?

How hard it would be to hear him say again, to us as to his hearers those two thousand years ago "You have heard how it was said 'eye for eye and tooth for tooth'; but I say to you 'offer no resistance to the wicked'. On the contrary, if anyone hits you on the right cheek, offer him the other as well!"

And if I were to ask him, as my mind honours those famous 'few' from my childhood days whose bravery and commitment we remember on this Battle of Britain Sunday, who really should be the ones I should honour, what would I hear him say? "Blessed are the peacemakers; they will be recognized as children of God".

I very much doubt whether you or I can ever prevent the atrocities one group of humans always seems hell-bent on inflicting on another in nearly every quarter of the globe. I doubt whether our protests and banners or our votes for or against our appointed authorities will ever prevent them and allied States from risking all by using war as the chosen method of controlling alien ideologies and defending our own. We can all of us, however, go out of our way to try to be peacemakers wherever we come across tension and conflict, injustice, oppression or domination, probably not on the overall global stage, but certainly in the everyday relationships we encounter in our own little world.

How great it would be ultimately to be recognized as the 'children of God'.

BJH