

HOLY WAR
IN
LATE MEDIEVAL
AND
EARLY MODERN
EAST-CENTRAL
EUROPE



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Introduction

Moral misgivings regarding the great evil inherent in war have accompanied man since the dawn of civilization. Yet all civilizations have worked out a relationship to war and its consequences. Much on this subject can be learned by studying the history of ancient Egypt, Greece or Rome. Jewish tradition has also left a great legacy with regard to the question of war. Ancient civilizations regarded war as a final – often only – means of resolving conflicts between antagonistic nations and peoples. Worth mentioning are the varying fortunes of the struggles between the Greeks and Persians, the Jews and the Philistines, or the Romans and the Carthaginians. Periods of great military struggles gave birth to legends and myths associated with the deeds of famous warriors: Leonidas, Alexander the Great, Cincinnatus and Gaius Julius Caesar. Such legends exerted enormous influence on the upbringing of future generations as well as on the formation of civil and patriotic attitudes. In the classical period the model of the soldier hero was formed – of a patriot fighting in the defense of his fatherland and the faith of his ancestors. He was characterized by bravery, manliness, faith and generosity. It was necessary to demonstrate this last trait not only to one's comrades in arms, but also to one's enemies defeated on the field of battle. In Rome the above-mentioned noble features of a warrior were defined by the collective designator "virtus", which is derived from the Latin word "vir" or "man". It was possible to gain fame as a skillful individual in a war led in defense of the fatherland or on a campaign of conquest. Armed conflicts having the character of a civil war were treated very differently, particularly those in which fellow citizens perished. Internal conflicts were considered the greatest evil and met with universal condemnation. This did not dissuade ambitious individuals or political groups from resorting to force and starting civil wars. History is full of examples of such bloody, fratricidal battles,

which brought death and destruction to entire countries and nations. Thus not every war garnered societal approval. Cicero, in his work *De Officiis*, wrote that Romans only considered those wars as just, which were waged for the purpose of regaining goods that were owed, and which were begun only after a warning and then a formal declaration had been issued.

Christianity, which developed on the basis of religious and ideological traditions that originated in the Mediterranean basin, simultaneously co-opted the heritage of ancient political thought and began a new approach to the question of war. In the framework of Christian doctrine two mutually exclusive ideas were in conflict: the pacifism of the New Testament (which led to the rejection of all force) on the one hand and on the other the permissibility of armed conflict for defense of the fatherland and the faith. The latter obliged adherents to observe certain, religiously defined, conditions for waging war. Watershed moments in the history of the early church are connected to Christian victories: the battles of the Mulvian Bridge in 312 A.D. as well as the Frigidus River in 394 A.D. The first led to the proclamation of tolerance for Christians and the second made Christianity the dominant religion in the Roman Empire. In this manner the idea of just war (*bellum iustum*) in western civilization was born. One can distinguish four phases of its development within the Roman Catholic tradition: patristic, scholastic, Jesuit and contemporary.

St. Augustine, Bishop of Hippo (d. 430), initiated reflections on the subject of just war. It is not true, however, that he worked out these ideas in full. A good deal of the research suggests that St. Augustine's thought was developed into a coherent system only many centuries later. Weighing the question of war and the justified use of force he mainly referenced the Old Testament and Roman law, and philosophy. We find the earliest reflections of St. Augustine on this subject in the treatise *De Ordine*, written to combat the Manichean heresy. In his opinion a well-organized Christian society had the obligation to defend itself from evil for the purpose of preserving divine law. He further developed this thought in his treatise *Contra Faustum* written many years later as well as in *De Civitate Dei*, his most famous work, written in the years 413–427 A.D.

In the second period of the Middle Ages there were a number of people who continued St. Augustine's work, who ordered and expanded the scope of the problem of just war. The most significant

thoughts on the subject were gathered together by the Bolognese jurist Gratian in his famous work the *Decretum* (*Decretum Gratiani*), finished around 1150. One of the fragments of this work (pars II, causa 23) was dedicated to the question of just war (*bellum iustum*). Referring to the same idea he states that it is only possible to speak of it if it is waged by command of a sovereign ruler for the purpose of defending higher values and the public good, but never for personal benefit. The *Decretum* contained not only the theses of St. Augustine but also of Isidore of Seville and other early medieval thinkers. They became the subject of a broad discussion among legal writers. In particular, a number of treatises on this subject appeared in the period of the crusades, when a proper justification was sought for wars waged against infidels. It was at this time that one began to see holy war as expeditions against pagans and heretics, their purpose being the defense of church property, the lives of Christians or the propagation of the faith. The right to declare such a war belonged to sovereign powers, but with the knowledge, permission and at the initiative of the spiritual authority. In the twelfth and thirteenth centuries canonists considered whether the pope himself had the right to initiate and wage a just war. As the Vicar of Christ on earth, he seemingly had more of a right and authority to do this than lay powers. In practice, however, it was decided that the pope would summon contemporary rulers to undertake battle in the name of Christians and Christendom, but he himself would not direct the war. Sovereign rulers would have the final say, which in practice placed the authority for directing just war in the hands of secular government. The role of the pope was not, however, insignificant. Summoning and encouraging secular rulers to wage war against pagans, Christian heretics and above all Muslims threatening Europe remained his privilege.

In the period of the crusades we see a ripening of the canonical conflict concerning the crusade as a specific form of just war. The concept was not accepted by all scholars, which brought about the need for its precise legal and theological definition. The solutions produced stated that one could recognize the crusades as just only under strictly defined criteria. They permitted the use of force by a secular authority, whose obligation was to act in accordance with the statements in St. Paul's Letter to the Romans (13:4), wherein authority is defined as "a tool of God for meting out justice to those who do evil." Thomas Aquinas summarized this concept of

just war with great economy in his *Summa Theologica* written in the thirteenth century.

In his work Thomas Aquinas assembled the hitherto existing theological and legal ideas of just war. He did not yet use the term “holy war”, but instead the former term “just war”. The main purpose for undertaking and waging war was, in his opinion, the defense of endangered life and property as well as the spiritual values of members of the Christian community. The author indicated three conditions of just war. They were: the exclusive right of a sovereign authority to declare war (*auctoritas principis*), the existence of a just cause (*causa iusta*), and its limitation to only satisfying received wrongdoings (*intentio recta*). Relying on Thomas Aquinas it was proven that the right to wage just war indeed fell to the state authority, but only the spiritual authority could declare it. Faith can be the basis for declaring or undertaking war in situations where life, property, or spiritual values are threatened. Morally acceptable intentions for engaging in war were thus reduced to situations in which there was a need for the defense of religion, for guaranteeing public safety as well as the defense of those who are persecuted. Not only the declaration and prosecution of war were to be subject to legal restrictions (*ius ad bellum*), so was the manner in which war was waged (*ius in bello*).

Towards the end of the Middle Ages the theory of “just war” merged with the concept of “holy war” and took on new meaning. Previously, the idea and practice did not clearly take into account questions of the manner in which military actions were performed. Theories concentrated more on *ius ad bellum* than *ius in bello*. Only canon law placed limitations on behavior while waging war. It wasn't until the Hundred Years War in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries that deeper considerations of this subject were undertaken. Honoré Bonet began the discussion in his *Arbre des Batailles*, a work written in the form of a scholastic dialogue. Treating war as a permanent phenomenon that was difficult to uproot from this earth, Bonet was convinced that one could civilize armed conflict in the framework of just war. The fundamental condition was, according to him, respecting the immunity of those who did not take part in war. Knights ought to observe the ethos of their class. They depended on a special code, which regulated behavior on the field of battle. Beyond the display of manliness and bravery the knight was obliged to observe fairness in battle, he was able to attack the enemy only

face-to-face and showing the proper respect. Attacking those who were weak and unarmed contradicted the knightly ethos. Combatants ought to keep their word, to care for the common welfare, to be loyal to their ruler as well as to show solidarity with other representatives of their class.

In the fifteenth century Christine de Pisan adopted and populated her works with these same ideas, which were disseminated by other authors after her. The result was a development of the idea of just war and of its derivative, holy war, which included both the foundational theory of *ius ad bellum* (on the basis of Thomas of Aquinas) as well as its development *ius in bello* (on the basis of canon law and the chivalric code). The concept of just war, thus developed, passed unchanged into the Early Modern era.

In the second half of the sixteenth century the Jesuits made an important contribution to the theoretical considerations of the concept of holy war. The colleges they had founded were a new style of school and they had the purpose of educating a new generation of Christians to face the enemies of the faith. It was the Jesuits who demonstrated that the current structure of Christian armies, which were comprised of mercenary soldiers uncommitted to ideals, was responsible for defeats at the hands of non-Christians. Antonio Possevino's publication of a catechism for Christian soldiers preparing for battle in 1569 titled *Il soldato cristiano* began to change this situation. Possevino put forth an idea of just war as one waged not only in accordance with the law, but also in accordance with a Christian conscience. In his work, the Jesuit author warned those warriors going to war against the "Turks and other barbarians" of becoming fascinated with Muslim culture, and in particular he warned them against reading the Koran. Instead he proposed the recitation of the rosary as well as a litany and frequenting Holy Mass. The first edition of *Il soldato cristiano* was given to soldiers preparing for the naval expedition against the Ottomans resulting in the Christian victory at Lepanto in 1571. In the following decades other works modeled on this soldier's catechism appeared in East-Central Europe. The Polish Jesuit Piotr Skarga authored one of the most famous of these titled *The Soldier's Service* (*Żołnierskie nabożeństwo*). In this work, the author emphasized the ideal Christian soldier as a manly knight, concerned with the welfare of the state and the nation. He is able to stand against evil and lawlessness, knows how to govern his own

weakness and gathers strength from the Catholic faith, even if it means sacrificing his own life in the service of God and country.

The Christian idea of holy war had its counterpart in Islamic civilization – *jihad*. Until recently historians treated these two traditions as separate, unrelated phenomena. Now many scholars believe that these ideas exerted a mutual influence on one another evolving in the framework of two religions, cultures and civilizations in conflict. The term *jihad* was not originally associated with war. The Arabic etymology of this word indicates a struggle or effort of any type, whereas waging *jihad* “with sword in hand” seems to be a later expansion of the meaning of this term. In the classic doctrine of *jihad*, which was formulated in the Middle Ages, the world was divided into two conflicting regions. The first of these was the *Dar-al-Islam* (Abode of Islam) – a united state populated by a society of Muslims, living in accordance with sharia law and directed by a righteous ruler (*imam*). *Dar al-Islam* also encompassed non-Islamic communities (*dhimmi*), whose separate laws were tolerated by the Islamic state, so long as they did not call into question Muslim authority. The counterpart to *Dar al-Islam* was *Dar al-Harb* (the Abode of War). Islamic law was not present in the Abode of War, which, in the opinion of Muslims, was the cause of the anarchy and moral depravity of those living there. The Islamic ruler was obligated to wage religious war (or *jihad*) if there was an opportunity to do so, in order to decrease the territory of the *Dar al-Harb* and increase the reach and expanse of the *Dar al-Islam*. This was a collective obligation on Muslim society (*fard kifaya*), which required the participation of those who were capable of waging it. Muslims who were not able to march into battle were required to help Muslim warriors by providing them material, logistic and moral support. If the leader of an Islamic state was unable or unwilling to wage war against the infidel, then other Muslims were required to take this responsibility on themselves.

Koranic law strictly regulated the rules of *jihad*. Above all, men waged war. In time of war Muslim soldiers were to avoid attacking women and children. Some Muslim jurists extended this rule to include the elderly, young boys, beggars, merchants and the mentally insane. It was, however, possible to kill all adult men regardless of whether they took part in battle or were taken captive. It was also permissible to use all forms of weapons and military tactics. The Koran strictly forbid killing through maiming as well as torture, burning

alive, breaking oaths or violating guarantees of safety for foreign emissaries and ambassadors which had been previously granted. Should Muslim armies be defeated truces were permitted with the infidel, which suspended, but never eliminated the obligation of *jihad*. The maximum duration of such a truce was not more than ten years. After this period *jihad* should begin again.

The above-described practice of *jihad* arose during the era of the crusades. It was at this time that writings praising the virtues of *jihad* appeared. The authors of these works promoted the thesis that forms of *jihad* other than combat were not necessary for the followers of Muhammad. In this way one can observe the negative influence of the idea of *jihad* on certain Christian groups and communities in contact with Muslims. This is particularly visible in the activities of the crusading orders in the Holy Land: the Templars and in particular the Teutonic Knights – Knights of the Teutonic Order of the Most Holy Virgin Mary. Along with the appearance of the latter in Central Europe – first in Hungary and then on the Black Sea coast – *jihad* in “Christian form” appeared in these areas. A completely non-Christian system of values and warrior ethos characterized these monastic knights who bore a black cross on a white tunic. In waging war they did not hesitate to perform the most horrible cruelties, violating fundamental divine and human laws. Fear and panic prevailed among the residents of those regions bordering with them. Among the Catholics residing in the Polish kingdom, their behavior aroused shock and disbelief. Complaints about the manner in which they were Christianizing the Prussian lands were delivered on several occasions to the popes. Scholars supported the Polish kings in this activity. Most distinguished among them was Paweł Włodkowic (Paulus Vladimiri), a professor at the University of Krakow. Without doubt one must recognize him as one of the first proponents of ideas of tolerance. In his *Treatise on the power of the Pope and the Emperor with regard to unbelievers* (*Tractatus de potestate papae et imperatoris respectu infidelium*), which he presented before the council in July of 1415, he stated that no one is permitted to attack pagans and non-believers under the pretext of spreading the faith, if these are living peacefully in their own state. In the framework of just war it is only possible to defend oneself against an attack from them. It is worth emphasizing that those directing Polish politics adhered to this rule [political doctrine] in the period of transition between the

medieval and early modern eras in their struggles with Moscow, the Turks and the Tartars. The remaining rulers of Catholic countries in this region acted similarly.

During the late medieval period East-Central Europe became the theater of the most important struggles between Christianity and Islam. Already from the middle of the fourteenth century Hungary was recognized as the “bulwark of Christendom” defending its southern borders against Ottoman aggression. Poland obtained this moniker from the time of the famous Battle of Varna, in 1444. The wars waged at that time with Islam took on the character of holy wars. A watershed moment in the history of Europe was the Ottoman conquest of Constantinople in 1453. In conquering the remnants of Byzantium, the Ottoman Empire liquidated a previous buffer between Western Christendom and the expansive Islamic state. Henceforth the Ottomans subjected nearly the entire Balkans, destroyed the power of Hungary and threatened the southern possessions of the Polish kingdom. The aggressive policies of successive sultans brought Ottoman armies to the gates of Vienna in 1529. For nearly two centuries holy war – war in defense of a faith and a civilization dominated the hearts and minds of persons living in the regions of East-Central Europe. At the same time, Western Europe was occupied primarily with political and religious struggles as well as economic rivalries in overseas colonies, maintaining an indifferent stance towards this threat.

In the Early Modern period not only the countries along the Danube border but even Venice was forced to pay the sultan an annual tribute. In this situation successive popes, aware of the great deeds of their predecessors, tried to unite the forces of all Christendom for a common defense. The reformation proved an obstacle to these efforts, as it shattered and weakened the block of Christian states. Martin Luther and other leaders of this movement saw in the papacy a greater threat to Europe and the world than Muslim aggression. The Turks were, in the opinion of Protestants, the external enemy, combating the Christian faith with the sword. The papacy, however, was the internal enemy – a spiritual one, in which the reformers perceived the Antichrist. Luther himself, believing that the Apocalypse and the end of the world was near, considered the Turks a divine punishment sent by God to punish man’s sins. This stance weakened the strength of Christians engaged in holy war with

Muslims. Not only Protestants brought about a worsening of the situation. Catholic France acted in a similarly disgraceful manner and in the Early Modern period failed to unite national interests as Joan of Arc had done. For tactical reasons France concluded an agreement with the Ottoman Empire directed against the Habsburgs. Elizabethan England likewise showed greater solidarity towards Islam than the papacy. It was now possible to do business with the Muslim courts of Morocco, Persia and the Ottoman Empire. Current research indicates that this great change occurred in the course of one generation. Catholic countries, in a deadly struggle, were deprived of aid in this manner from the strongest states of the West. The barbarous attacks of Muslims armies – the devastation of cities and villages, seizure of property, snatching of livestock and people affected not only the countries located in Central Europe, but also the entire Black Sea coast, where the Ottoman fleet had achieved in the course of the sixteenth century a decisive dominance. It is estimated that over a million Christians found themselves in Muslim enslavement at this time.

As stated above, in a situation where the secular authority was weak, the Holy See became the patron of armed actions in Europe's defense. Without exception, successive popes gave the Ottoman threat first priority. The Roman Church not only summoned others to the defense but also organized the collection of funds necessary for holy war. The means obtained were earmarked not only for weapons and material. They were also used to build castles and fortresses and to renovate city walls in areas threatened by Ottoman raids. Furthermore, the Holy See granted special indulgences and special graces to those taking part in the wars for the defense of the faith.

After the fall of Hungary in the middle of the sixteenth century the weight of responsibility for the fate of East-Central Europe rested in part on Habsburg-ruled Austria, and in part on the Kingdom of Poland. The future of European civilization and culture depended on the cooperation of these two Catholic countries. In the end, it was the famous battle at the gates of Vienna in 1683 that gave victory to Christendom over Islam.

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