

Can war ever be justified?

Sir Winston Churchill's famous slogan was "Jaw jaw not war war." By this he meant that all attempts should be made to avoid war, and that war should only be embarked upon when all other avenues had been exhausted. The problem for the historian is getting to the truth behind the motivation of individuals. The historian needs to get behind the lies, half truths, propaganda, jingoism, disinformation to establish the real picture. "In war the first casualty is truth." Despite the glorification that war received in earlier days, history shows us that war is a destructive force and the negatives far outweigh the positives. Death, injury, expense, damage to property, not to mention the breakdown in relationships between countries, contributing to years of suspicion and distrust. Only occasionally, can one find real justification for war. Perhaps only in the 2nd World war with its objective of stopping the expansion of Hitler's 3rd Reich, or the recent success of Nato and the United Nations in stopping Slobadan Milosevic in his attempts to wipe out the Kosovans, can we find positives in war.

The Crusades provide us with a clear example of the deceit that can surround the real motives behind war. Pope Urban would have us believe that it was a Christian's duty to free the Holy Land from the control of the infidel Muslims, and in the process could freely kill any Muslim without fear of condemnation from God. Their sins would be forgiven and they would be reserved a guaranteed place in heaven. In reality, Pope Urban was an ambitious man wishing to extend his authority throughout Christendom and beyond. The growing threat of the Muslim empire threatened the existence of the papacy. He had to unite Europe, much like Philip II of Spain in the Counter Reformation, to head off this threat.

However, if one looks carefully, cracks can be seen in this argument. Much like the war with Iraq, there were ulterior motives. Many suggest that oil, "black gold", is the main motivation behind President Bush's actions. Likewise, trade was behind the cause for crusading. The Muslims controlled the overland trade route from Asia to Europe. This strangle hold was effecting the wealth of European merchants and countries alike. Spices were a lucrative business. £1 of spices bought in the Spice Islands of Indonesia could be sold for £1000 back in Europe. A huge profit margin. Diaz, da Gama and Magellan had not yet discovered sea routes to the Spice Islands and it was vital that the Mediterranean ports in the Holy land were once again in the hands of Europe. Add to this the personal ambitions of young nobles who found themselves without land and wealth after the death of their father and kings in Europe who needed a distraction for feuding barons, and a clearer picture emerges that could cast doubt on the justifications put forward to support other wars.