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Just War Theory: Foundation from Philosophical Underpinnings to Theological Integration and its Application to the Ukrainian Conflict

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Introduction

In light of the highly controversial ongoing conflict in Ukraine, many are returning to the foundational questions: What justifies war? What does moral conduct in conflict look like? These are the same questions that have been asked by great philosophers and theologians for millennia. Over time, the answers have evolved but have also been synthesized, producing the modern just war theory that guides the decisions and narratives surrounding modern conflict today. To develop a Biblical perspective of modern conflicts, it is of value to shed light on the philosophical and Biblical underpinnings behind the simplified narratives often utilized to argue for and against various sides. This paper does this by opening with a discussion of early philosophers and the foundation of just war theory before incorporating the eventual integration of Biblical perspectives through the contribution of early church theologians. In conclusion, and with this foundation in mind, the philosophy is then applied to the current example of the Ukrainian conflict which is at the forefront of public discourse on the relevance and proper application of just war theory in modern contexts.

Early Origins

Just war theory has not always been uniformly presented, and it contains a variety of perspectives. Its origins contain contributions and elements derived from a number of different thinkers and periods of time. To maintain scope, this research will examine the first thoughts surrounding just war and provide foundational understanding by analyzing two key secular philosophers' contributions to its origins.

One of the key contributors to the early evolution of just war theory was the Greek philosopher Plato. Plato had a unique perspective on the matter of war, being surrounded by it from an early age. Born in 429 BC, Plato was only two years old at the start of the Peloponnesian War which lasted from 431-404 BC. During this time, his city, Athens, was consistently attacked and until his mid-20s he knew nothing but violent war, hunger, displacement, and political battles for power. In light of this, Plato considered the concept of war deeply.¹ Though he does not lay out just war theory as it is known today, he laid the philosophical groundwork by framing the question. This is seen in his work, *The Republic*, which frames the question of “Why would nations go to war?” abstractly but answers it universally. This is the first time this question is framed in traditional philosophy.^{2 3} In his response, he argued that people would wage war in “want of resources to support a certain lifestyle” becoming the first in Western thought to adopt this outlook.⁴ So, Plato planted the seed of just war theory by abstractly framing the key question that is the basis for just war theory philosophy.

Following the foundation laid by Plato, the philosopher Cicero would wrestle with similar questions, being born centuries later in 106 BC. Much like Plato, political and military turmoil was nothing new to Cicero. He was familiar with conflict from an early age as he was born in Rome during the period of its conquests in the Eastern portion of the Mediterranean

¹ Richard Kraut, “Plato,” in *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, last modified February 12, 2022, <https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/plato/>.

² Eric Patterson and Timothy Demy, *Philosophers on War* (Newport, RI: Stone Tower Books, 2017), 19-38.

³ Plato and D. J. Allan, *Republic* (London: Bristol Classical Press, 1993), 187-191.

⁴ *Ibid*, 35.

region.⁵ Though he primarily focused on Roman law and philosophy, Cicero offered a vital contribution to just war theory.

Cicero's works emphasized a prioritization of the pursuit of peace, or in other words, viewing war as a last resort only for the purpose of peace not gain. This was especially important in the age of conquest when much of the conflict was founded in pride and the pursuit of individual power.⁶ In *On Duties*, Cicero wrote, "Most people think that the achievements of war are more important than those of peace... We must also beware of ambition for glory, for it robs us of liberty, and in defense of liberty, a high-souled man should stake everything. And one ought not to seek military authority; nay, rather it ought sometimes to be declined, sometimes to be resigned."⁷ This argument correlates with two requirements for Just War in modern theory, the first being that it is declared with lawful authority and the second is that all other paths to peace and resolution have been exhausted.

Integration of Biblical Perspectives

Many scholars offer consensus that the contribution of Christian theology is rooted deeply in the formation of the modern principles of just war.⁸ This argument is best demonstrated through the works of two of the most foundational and influential Christian thinkers in the early years of the church, Augustine and Aquinas.

Though not quite as influential as Aquinas in the development of modern just war theory, St. Augustine laid the groundwork necessary to approach the topic of war from a Christian perspective in the early years of church theology as he developed the early culture of Christian classical thought at the time.⁹ St. Augustine had the difficult task of struggling with how to reconcile the requirement for Roman citizens to fight for their country with the peacemaking teachings of Jesus. This is found in the work *City of God* where he states, "They who have waged war in obedience to the divine command, or in conformity with His laws, have represented in their persons the public justice or the wisdom of government, and in this capacity have put to death wicked men; such persons have by no means violated the commandment 'Thou shalt not kill' . . . the wise man will wage Just Wars."¹⁰ He was highly critical of Man's ability to determine justice in general with his consistent emphasis on sinful nature and the corruption of man which then impacts one's values and priorities.¹¹

He justified these actions by introducing three key Biblical principles into the discussion on conflict. First, he argued that all wars were a result of sin.¹² As a result of the fall of man, the sinful nature of humanity made war unavoidable. His second principle was that war was a remedy for sins, and therefore, war was at times justifiable. This was an important principle as

⁵ Raphael Woolf, "Cicero," in *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, last modified January 16, 2022, <https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/cicero/#CiceLifeTime>.

⁶ Cicero, M. T. Griffin, and E. M. Atkins, *On Duties* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), 67.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 71.

⁸ Therese Lysaught, "Christian Traditions of Peace: Just War and Pacifism," *Catechist Magazine*, March 2003, https://epublications.marquette.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1146&context=theo_fac.

⁹ Carol Harrison, *Augustine: Christian Truth and Fractured Humanity* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), 52-53.

¹⁰ Tom Grimes and Augustine, *City of God* (London: Bloomsbury Paperbacks, 2014), 25.

¹¹ Paul Ramsey, *War and the Christian Conscience* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1961), 40-42.

¹² Louis J. Swift, *The Early Fathers on War and Military Service* (Wilmington: Geoffrey Chapman, 1985), 135-140.

many early believers and Romans specifically saw the teachings of Jesus as pacifist, questioning the validity of violent means in any circumstance.¹³ Third, he argued that peace should always be the goal, but not when it requires a blind eye to injustice. Augustine states, “We do not seek peace in order to be at war, but we go to war that we may have peace. Be peaceful, therefore, in warring, so that you may vanquish those whom you war against and bring them to the prosperity of peace.”¹⁴ Augustine felt that injustice was a greater evil than war, so Christians have the duty to execute war in defense of the innocent and pursuit of punishment for evil for the ultimate purpose of pursuing peace.¹⁵ This is once again shown in his statement, “True religion looks upon as peaceful those wars that are waged not for motives of aggrandizement, or cruelty, but with the object of securing peace, of punishing evil-doers, and of uplifting the good.”¹⁶

With the foundation of Christian perspectives on war in place, modern just war theory began to take shape with the works of Aquinas, mostly through his work *Summa Theologiae*'s articles and objections on war.¹⁷ Much like Augustine, he rooted his thoughts in the words of Paul found in Romans 13:3-4 which says, “For rulers are not a terror to good conduct, but to bad. Do you want to be unafraid of the authority? Do what is good, and you will have its approval. For it is God’s servant for your good. But if you do wrong, be afraid, because it does not carry the sword for no reason. For it is God’s servant, an avenger that brings wrath on the one who does wrong.”¹⁸ So, he advocated for peace while understanding that war was required for the enforcement of justice and peace. In this period the line between vengeance and the pursuit of justice and peace, which is now considered just war theory, was simply three core requirements for the justification of conflict. This was outlined by the introduction of *Jus ad bellum*, the conditions under which one may go to war with just cause. This synthesized the philosophy into 3 criteria necessary for a war to be considered just. The first is that the war is waged by a legitimate authority. Second, the war must have a just cause. This can be tied back to Augustine’s requirement that it is for the sake of punishing evil, protecting the innocent, and maintaining peace and justice. Third, the war must have just intentions.¹⁹ This once again circles back to the foundation of Augustine as well as the theological basis which emphasizes the intention of the heart.

The groundwork of philosophers such as Plato and Cicero as well as theologians of the early church such as Augustine and Aquinas paved the way for the modern criteria for just war theory. *Jus ad bellum*, first introduced by Aquinas, has now developed through the work of following thinkers into a sixfold criterion which is as follows:

1. The war must be for a just cause.
2. The war must be lawfully declared by a lawful authority.
3. The intention behind the war must be good.

¹³ “History of War Ethics,” Ethics Guide, BBC, 2014, <https://www.bbc.co.uk/ethics/war/just/history.shtml#:~:text=The%20discussion%20of%20the%20ethics,St%20Thomas%20Aquinas%20and%20others.>

¹⁴ Joe Carter, “A Brief Introduction to the Just War Tradition: Jus Ad Bellum,” Ethics and Religious Liberty Commission, last modified August 17, 2017, <https://erlc.com/resource-library/articles/a-brief-introduction-to-the-just-war-tradition-jus-ad-bellum/>.

¹⁵ Augustine, et al., *Contra Faustum* (New Advent, 2009), Book XXII, Chap. 78.

¹⁶ Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae* (Matriti: La Ed. Catholica, 1962), Objection 1.

¹⁷ Ibid, Q. 40 Article 1.

¹⁸ Rom. 13:3-4 (ESV)

¹⁹ Alexander Mosely, “Just War Theory: Aquinas,” in *Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, accessed May 6, 2023, <https://iep.utm.edu/justwar/>.

4. All other ways of resolving the problem should have been tried first.
5. There must be a reasonable chance of success.
6. The means used must be in proportion to the end that the war seeks to achieve.²⁰

In its development, one can also see the introduction to *Jus in bello* which defines the conditions for how a Just War may be fought. The criteria outlined for *Jus in bello* are as follows:

1. Innocent people and non-combatants should not be harmed.
2. Only appropriate force should be used. (This applies to both the sort of force and how much force is used.)
3. Internationally agreed conventions regulating war must be obeyed.

These criteria for both *Jus ad bellum* and *Jus in bello* will be used in the application of just war theory to the Russian invasion of Ukraine and its stated justification in doing so.

Russian Justification and Application

To determine whether Russia is justified in its invasion of Ukraine, Russia's own justification and reasoning should first be considered. The philosophy informing Russia's campaign was not simply invented to justify a course of action but dates back to the early 1900s. In the wake of the collapse of the Russian Empire in 1917, Russian thinker Nikolai Trubetzkoy published *Europe and Humanity* in which he criticized the West for its colonialism and Eurocentrism.²¹ He, in turn, called for a return to the "legacy of Chinggis Khan", away from a focus on Europe to create a "great continent-spanning Russian-Eurasian state." This was the introduction of the Eurasianism philosophy that viewed Russia as a "Eurasian polity formed by a deep history of cultural exchanges among people of Turkic, Slavic, Mongol, and other Asian origins."²² This philosophy gained little attention during the age of the Soviet Union and finally gained traction in the 1980s through the outspoken dissident, Lev Gumilyov who believed that under a charismatic leader, an ethnic group could evolve into a "super ethnos" when spread over a large geographical area. Following this "Eurasian Revival" of sorts, this philosophy took center stage with the publication of *The Foundations of Geopolitics: The Geopolitical Future of Russia* by Russian philosopher Aleksandr Dugin. In the publication, Dugin expanded the enemy defined by Eurasianism to the entire Atlantic and specifically the United States. Additionally, Russia had always been an empire and, through global expansion, became a world empire once again. This was in contrast to the anti-imperial sentiments previously held by the philosophy, but Dugin's work redefined Eurasianism as the Russians knew it.²³

In the 1990s when Soviet elites lost their power and the new Russia was left with damaged world standing, Russian leadership searched for a new vision for Russian dominance. Naturally, they found their answer in Eurasianism and the Dugin philosophy. Vladimir Putin has

²⁰ "What Is a Just War?" Ethics Guide, BBC, 2014, <https://www.bbc.co.uk/ethics/war/just/what.shtml>.

²¹ Nikolai Trubetskoy, "Europe and Mankind-English Translation," trans. Sasha Trubetskoy, accessed March 22, 2022, <https://sashamaps.net/docs/writings/europe-and-mankind/>.

²² Jane Burbank, "The Grand Theory Driving Putin to War," *New York Times*, March 22, 2022, <https://www.nytimes.com/2022/03/22/opinion/russia-ukraine-putin-eurasianism.html>.

²³ Ibid.

made this state philosophy evident, stating in 2013 that “Eurasia was a major geopolitical zone where Russia’s “genetic code” and its many peoples would be defended against “extreme Western-style liberalism.” In 2021 he also stated that “Russians and Ukrainians are one people,”²⁴ In addition to the Eurasian philosophy, the thought of Trubetzky echoed much of the same sentiment stating in *On the Ukrainian Problem*, his 1927 article, that Ukrainian culture was “individualization of all-Russian culture”, further reinforcing the idea that Russia was a “mother country” of sorts and was the empire or ethnic group that was destined to reunite with its bloodline.²⁵ At the start of the invasion, Putin outlined his justification directly in a speech arguing that “Crimea, Donetsk and Luhansk “freely” made their choice to be part of Russia” and Ukraine’s retaliation was yet another sign of the West’s attack on Russia. In an additional claim of justification, Putin argued for the “De-Nazification” of Ukraine. In this argument, he argued that nationalists made Ukraine a failing state and brainwashed the people about their true history with the Russian state, which once again points towards a Eurasian thought process elevating Russian culture and dominance.²⁶ In light of this, the invasion of Ukraine by Russia should be no surprise. With the post-Soviet framework of Trubetzky and Dugin's philosophy, Russia can justify not only their invasion of Ukraine but any nation or people group that they deem ought to be under their empire or assimilated to their super-ethnos. If indeed they are operating under this philosophy, Russia must either absorb or destroy Ukraine.

While, yes, Russia can justify its invasion of Ukraine on their philosophical grounds, when we apply the findings of this research on the origins of just war theory, it is evident that Russia is not justified in its violent course of action. Specifically, Russia’s actions fail to comply with the first four criteria of just war theory. First, Russia did not invade with factually sound just cause. For example, they argue that they are concerned about NATO staging an invasion of Russia from Ukraine, but this is an ungrounded concern, and likely a distraction from the true purpose.²⁷ Second, they did not exhaust all other methods of peace, especially the means of discourse as discussed in our analysis of Cicero.²⁸ Russia invaded with no negotiation and without provocation, and even throughout the conflict, the discourse has been limited with negotiations remaining hostile and unreasonable.²⁹

Beyond the application of the foundation principles of *jus ad bellum* laid out by early philosophers, the conditions of provocation put forth by Russia are also outside the bounds of theological principles of just war put forth by Augustine and Aquinas. Augustine’s three key contributions to just war theory, punishing evil, protecting the innocent, and maintaining peace and justice, were each violated in this instance. Ukraine did not instigate the conflict as explained previously, therefore there is no requirement for punishing evildoers. In light of this, Russia has

²⁴ “Vladimir Putin Meets with Members the Valdai International Discussion Club,” Valdai Discussion Club, September 20, 2013, https://valdaiclub.com/a/highlights/vladimir_putin_meets_with_members_the_valdai_international_discussion_club_transcript_of_the_speech_/?sphrase_id=701234. 2000.

²⁵ Trubetzky, “Europe and Mankind-English Translation.”

²⁶ Laura Pennisi, “How Eurasianism Is Manipulated to Justify the War in Ukraine,” *Quo Vademus*, June 17, 2022, <https://quo-vademus.org/how-eurasianism-is-manipulated-to-justify-the-war-in-ukraine/>.

²⁷ Patrick Donahue and Daryna Karolinska, “Understanding the Roots of Russia’s War in Ukraine,” *Bloomberg*, March 2, 2022, <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2022-03-02/understanding-the-roots-of-russia-s-war-in-ukraine-quicktake>.

²⁸ Cicero, M. T. Griffin, and E. M. Atkins, *On Duties* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), 1-2.

²⁹ Mary Glantz, “Ukraine: A Real Peace Will Require Change from Russia,” United States Institute of Peace, last modified January 26, 2023, <https://www.usip.org/publications/2023/01/ukraine-real-peace-will-require-change-russia>.

no reason to protect the innocent, Augustine's second contribution, as Ukraine is not at fault for wrongdoing or harm to citizens. It is much the opposite as over 9,000 Ukrainian civilians, including over 500 children, have been killed in only six months by the Russian operation.³⁰ Finally, the bounds of maintaining peace are violated by unwarranted violence of this course of action. Many of these same reasonings apply in parallel with Aquinas' three requirements of just war from *Summa Theologiae*, derived from the works of the Apostle Paul. The cause is unjustifiable for the actions taken and does not have good intentions as it publicly seeks to fix problems that don't exist while having ulterior motives under the surface for personal gain. The final criterion, that it is waged by a legitimate authority, is the only arguable point. While we don't have the scope to discuss the legitimacy of Vladimir Putin's power, he stands as the official leader of the nation and therefore can be considered a legitimate authority depending on one's perspective of legitimate authority by definition. This leaves the conflict at odds with every criterion of just war laid out in early thought and just war theology, absent the one arguable point of legitimate authority.

Conclusion

In conclusion, this work researching just war theory has analyzed the origins of just war theory, the Biblical integration into Just war theory through the works of early church theologians, the justification used by Russia to invade Ukraine, and finally the application of Just war theory to the conflict. From the sources analyzed it became evidently clear that the answer to the primary research question was that Russia was not justified under Just war theory to invade Ukraine, but rather used Eurasian philosophy to negate their responsibility for an unfounded conflict. As a result of this brash action, the count of Ukrainian civilian casualties is nearing 10,000 with the number injured nearing 16,00 and the numbers only continue to climb.³¹

Just war can indeed be difficult to rationalize from a Biblical perspective as Romans 12:18 says, "If possible, so far as it depends on you, live peaceably with all."³² and Matthew 26:4 says, "And you will hear of wars and rumors of wars. See that you are not alarmed, for this must take place, but the end is not yet."³³ Yet, in Titus 3:1 it says, "Remind them to be submissive to rulers and authorities, to be obedient, to be ready for every good work,"³⁴ Where is the middle? It is difficult in Just war theory to find where to draw the line, but in the midst of all of these Biblical answers, the feeble minds of man can rely on the truth shared in James 1:5 which says, "If any of you lacks wisdom, let him ask God, who gives generously to all without reproach, and it will be given him."³⁵ While some concepts may be beyond our comprehension, this study has demonstrated that through the great minds of philosophers and the faithful studying of the Word by the theologians of the early church, Just war theory has been developed in compatibility with Biblical principles for the purpose of fighting injustice and pursuing peace.

³⁰ "Ukraine War Reaches 500 Days, UN Laments 9,000 Civilians Killed," *Al Jazeera*, July 8, 2023, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2023/7/8/more-than-9000-civilians-killed-as-ukraine-war-hits-500-days-un>.

³¹ "Ukraine Civilian War Casualties," Statista, accessed July 17, 2023, <https://www.statista.com/statistics/1293492/ukraine-war-casualties/>.

³² Rom. 12:18 (ESV)

³³ Matt. 26:4 (ESV)

³⁴ Tit. 3:1 (ESV)

³⁵ Jas. 1:5 (ESV)

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