

**The Problem with Pacifism:  
How Pacifism Can Lead to Genocide and Why One Should Fight to Combat Evil**

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## **Abstract**

War is a horrendous act that human beings can commit unto each other. As a result, people have adopted an ideology that rejects not only war, but any form of violence. The practitioners of this ideology known as pacifism believe that violence will never solve any problems and will end up making more people suffer. However, this paper will show that pacifism can lead to genocide. Through foreign invaders, oppressive government, and general human nature, human beings will wipe out a society if no one is willing to use violence to fight for a just world. Violence is simply a tool that can be used for good or for evil, it all depends on the motivation behind the use of violence. If the motivation is pure, then violence can save lives, while if an evil heart uses violence, they can commit genocide. Pacifism on the other hand, while pure in intention, will almost always allow for injustices, such as genocide, to be committed.

## 1. Introduction

Many people believe violent conflicts, especially wars, are wrong and unjust. The notion of pacifism seems to take the moral high ground by speaking out against any forms of violence as violence leads to bloodshed. However, pacifism is a dangerous notion because it would create more bloodshed among the people as it could invite genocide to societies who practice pacifism. In an indirect way, pacifism can do more harm for a society than conflict. This paper will demonstrate why total pacifism should not be practiced in any society because it can lead to genocide or mass murder due to oppression from corrupt governments, invasions of power-hungry governments, and humanity's own sinful nature.

## 2. Defining Pacifism

It is important to define terms because pacifism, like many other words, can have different meanings depending on who is defining the word. The four common definitions of pacifism are: 1) pacifism could be nonviolent towards people only, allowing for property destruction of others as long as no one gets injured in the process or aftermath; 2) pacifism could be relative, which would be no violence unless in matters of self-defense or to overcome a greater evil; 3) pacifism is anti-war, which would be against any direct or indirect involvement of war; or 4) pacifism could be absolute or total, which would be no violence to either people or others' property no matter the circumstances. Since definition 1 condones violence against property and definition 2 is conditional, neither of those definitions are truly pacifistic in nature.

Definition 3 is specifically against war only and is perhaps the most commonly used definition. The problem with this definition is that one can be anti-war and not be a pacifist, or one can be a pacifist and not be anti-war. For example, one could oppose wars and armies, but condone violence on a personal level as a means of self-defense. Desmond Doss, a U.S. Army medic from Lynchburg, Virginia who was made famous due to his efforts at Hacksaw Ridge (in which were the basis of the motion picture), was such a devout pacifist, he would not touch any weapon. But even so, Doss joined the United States Army during World War II because he saw the importance of saving lives instead of ending lives. It would be accurate to describe Doss as a pacifist even though he had a direct involvement in the war because he never directly participated in the violent firefights. Instead of fighting, Doss would try and save the wounded during and after the firefights. However, if one were to follow the third definition, then Doss would not be considered a pacifist since he actively participated in warfare.

Definition 4 is unconditional in meaning and is thus the only true definition of pacifism. As such, whenever this paper mentions or uses pacifism, it will be in accordance with the fourth definition.

## 3. Defining Genocide

Now that pacifism has been defined, defining genocide is the next important step in order to carry out the discussion of how pacifism can lead to genocide. Genocide is an extreme form of discrimination in which the end objective is the eradication of a certain group of people. These groups are often targeted based on either race, ethnicity, or religion. However, a person's discrimination could include any type of physical appearance or ideological belief system such as skin color, political affiliation, etc. It must also be noted there are two different types of genocide: active and passive. The active form of genocide is the direct killing of a specific group of people such as mass-murder. This is perhaps what most people think of when they hear the word "genocide" as it is the most common type that has been perpetrated with the Holocaust as being the prime example. The passive form is the indirect killing of a specific group of people

such as forced sterilization. This is relatively newer and is perhaps most known for how China is trying to kill off the Uyghurs.

#### 4. Why People Promote Pacifism

People generally favor pacifism because they believe wars are morally wrong and evil acts, which they are right. Pacifists believe violence only begets more violence, that it is a circle of hate perpetuating itself. One of the reasons why many Christians are pacifists (and also why many pacifists are Christians) is because Jesus teaches Christians to love and forgive those who would do them harm.<sup>1</sup> The Sermon on the Mount is perhaps the most famous for teaching Christians how they should act as taught by Jesus. During this lesson on Christian ethics, Jesus said to not resist evildoers, but turn the other cheek.<sup>2</sup> However, the Bible also states that people need to “rescue those being taken off to death, and save those stumbling toward slaughter.”<sup>3</sup> In other words, if people have the ability to save the lives of others, then they should, even if they must use violence in order to save those lives. The problem with the total pacifism ideology is that it leaves no room for exceptions, all violence is immoral no matter the reasoning and thus, saving others through violence is immoral.

Another example used to promote pacifism is when Jesus rebuked Peter for drawing his sword and severing a soldier’s ear in order to defend Jesus in the Gospel of Matthew: “Then Jesus told him, ‘Put your sword back in its place because all who take up the sword will perish by the sword.’”<sup>4</sup> However, there are two possible counters to the case of using this verse to support passivism. One could interpret this verse that Jesus was warning those who live their lives out in perpetual violence will die a violent death especially if the individuals are outnumbered like in Peter’s situation. It was not meant to argue against defending oneself or others with a weapon, but more as a warning to weigh one’s options before one commits to a violent solution. The second argument is that Jesus did not want Peter to interfere with God’s plan. Jesus was sent to save mankind of its sin. Jesus foresaw the events of how He would be sacrificed, and He knew it would be futile for Peter to try and save Him as everything was being done in accordance with God’s will and no one has the ability to change God’s will.

Mohandas Gandhi is perhaps known to be the champion for pacifist ideals. His use of civil disobedience is often used as an example of how pacifism can deter bloodshed. However, that only works if the opposing side holds the same beliefs or if the aggressor believes bloodshed will only complicate matters. Those who intend to commit evil acts will do so through violence, and as such, there are times when a lesser evil act must be committed in order to stop an even greater evil act.

Even though Gandhi’s use of pacifistic resistance paved way for India to gain independence from Britain. Gandhi did not believe in absolute pacifism. According to George Estey and Doris Hunter in their work *Nonviolence: A Reader in the Ethics of Action*, Gandhi once stated, “My non-violence does not admit of running away from danger and leaving dear ones unprotected. Between violence and cowardly flight, I can only prefer violence to

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<sup>1</sup> Matthew 5:43-48, CSB.

<sup>2</sup> Matthew 5:38-39, CSB.

<sup>3</sup> Proverbs 24:11, CSB.

<sup>4</sup> Matthew 5:50-52, CSB.

cowardice.”<sup>5</sup> Even though Gandhi believed violence to be morally wrong, he believed it was even more wrong to run away while others become victims of violence instead of fighting to protect innocent lives. This only shows that even the firmest believers in pacifism have limits to their belief.

### **5. Foreign Invasions**

Since the beginning of nations and governments, there have been nations who try to encroach on other nations’ borders. These invaders want nothing more than to conquer and expand their lands. Those who were conquered were either executed or assimilated in their conqueror’s society. In order to protect borders, a nation must have a strong defense and a will to fight off invaders who would do harm to its people.

During the 1930s, Britain’s Independent Labour Party was a political party in Britain and mostly held a pacifistic ideology. However, according to John McIlroy and Alan Campbell in their article, “The Last Chance Saloon? The Independent Labour Party and Miners’ Militancy in the Second World War Revisited,” as Hitler rose to power and war seemed imminent between Britain and Nazi Germany, James Maxton, who was the face of the Labour Party and was in opposition of the war abandon the ideology of pacifism in order to prepare for the impending war against fascism.<sup>6</sup> The Labour Party knew they had a responsibility to protect its people at all costs and if they had not abandoned their stance on pacifism, then all of Britain would be lost to the Nazis. Jews and other minorities in Britain would suffer the same genocidal fate as their German counterparts.

According to medieval European historian, Matthew Paris, the Mongols were brutes that wanted to cleanse the world by slaughtering the world’s populace and make the world their own.<sup>7</sup> In 1223, the Mongols invaded Russia and defeated them. They convinced the Russians to stop fighting and pay a ransom in exchange for safe passage back home.<sup>8</sup> Unfortunately for the Russians, the Mongols went back on their word and slaughtered the Russians.

Even though the Russians were not pacifists, they chose to give up fighting in exchange for supposed safety, which was based entirely on the words of the enemy. Had the Russians refused to surrender, some of them might have been able to survive the onslaught. Surrendering the will to fight sums up the pacifist belief system. Even though the Russians were not pacifists and chose to fight, in the end, they gave up the willingness to fight for their survival and chose the nonviolent solution of surrendering as they thought it was the better option than fighting. In reality, the Russians just made themselves easier targets for the Mongols as they continued with their quest of purification their purge.

### **6. Government Oppression**

Government can be a great institution to organize an otherwise chaotic society. The people within a society create rules and laws for everybody within that society to follow. However, people are not perfect and thus, neither are the institutions they establish. Throughout

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<sup>5</sup> Mohandas Gandhi, quoted in George F. Estey and Doris A. Hunter, *Nonviolence: A Reader in the Ethics of Action* (Waltham: Xerox College Publishing, 1971), 92.

<sup>6</sup> John McIlroy and Alan Campbell, “The Last Chance Saloon? The Independent Labour Party and Miners’ Militancy in the Second World War Revisited,” *Journal of Contemporary History* 46, no. 4 (2011): 877-878.

<sup>7</sup> Matthew Paris, quoted in David M Crowe, *War Crimes, Genocide, and Justice* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014), 22.

<sup>8</sup> David M Crowe, *War Crimes, Genocide, and Justice* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014), 22.

the history of government, people have become oppressed or enslaved by their own government. For example, Nazi Germany forced Jews to live in certain districts known as ghettos, where they were segregated from the rest of society; enslaved them by means of concentration camps; and eventually tried to eradicate them, which they mostly succeeded as they murdered the majority of the Jewish population. This genocide of the Jews is known as the Holocaust.

According to J. Daryl Charles and Timothy J. Demy in their book entitled *War, Peace, and Christianity*, Gandhi stated that “[the Jewish people] should commit suicide rather than resist Nazi tyranny.”<sup>9</sup> This quotation sums up why pacifism can be morally wrong as it suggests life is not worth saving if it has to be saved through violence. However, non-pacifists did not listen to Gandhi and were willing to risk their lives to fight against this evil and oppressive regime. They not only saved the Jews from genocide, but they save the rest of the world from tyranny. Without the Allied Forces waging a war against Hitler and his Axis Power, the Jewish people would have all been eradicated.

## 7. Human Nature

Wars are horrendous and no one should have to go through war. Unfortunately, due to the depravity of man, destruction will always be a part of human nature. Human beings strive on conflicts, and yearn for power and control, and those conflicts evolve into wars. To those who are corrupt with power and lust for control, life is cheap. This is how these tyrants can justify slavery and murder of those they deem to be weak and unworthy. By nature, human beings are selfish and ignorant creatures who only think of themselves. American theologian, Reinhold Niebuhr, stated that “pacifists do not know human nature well enough to be concerned about the contradictions between the law of love and the sin of man.”<sup>10</sup> Moral theologian and ethicist, Joseph Capizzi, summed up Niebuhr sentiment by stating, “Because of this ignorance of the depths of human sinfulness, pacifists, Niebuhr alleged, foisted a distorted (idealist) ethic upon the political community.”<sup>11</sup>

The pacifist ideal is a just dream of a false reality that can never be attained. Even though wars have ended countless lives, people cannot resist from waging even more wars. History has shown this to be true. Governments commit atrocities because it is in the nature of those in power of those governments. Human nature is, at the core, the reason why evil acts such as genocides have been committed and are still being committed to this very day. Even without governments, groups of people have committed genocides against other groups of people.

According to Jeffrey Ostler and Karl Jacoby’s article, “After 1776: Native Nations, Settler Colonialism, and the Meaning of America, during the American Revolutionary War in 1782, a militia group from Pennsylvania slaughtered the Moravian Native Americans in their village of Gnadenhütten located in Ohio.”<sup>12</sup> The *Encyclopedia Britannica* expanded on the event described in Ostler and Jacoby’s article. According to the *Encyclopedia Britannica*, the Native

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<sup>9</sup> J. Daryl Charles and Timothy J. Demy, *War, Peace, and Christianity* (Wheaton, Crossway, 2010), 367.

<sup>10</sup> Reinhold Niebuhr, “Why the Christian Church is Not Pacifist,” in *The Essential Reinhold Niebuhr: Selected Essays and Addresses*, ed. Robert McAfee Brown (New Haven: Yale University, 1987), 109.

<sup>11</sup> Joseph E. Capizzi, *Politics, Justice, War: Christian Governance and the Ethics of Warfare*. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2015), 19.

<sup>12</sup> Jeffrey Ostler and Karl Jacoby, “After 1776: Native Nations, Settler Colonialism, and the Meaning of America,” *Journal of Genocide Research* (2021): 6.

Americans were executed under orders of a man, Capt. David Williamson of the Pennsylvania militia. The reason Capt. Williamson and his volunteer militia of ninety men slaughtered the Moravian Natives was because they refused to take part in the Revolutionary War and help fight against the British forces.<sup>13</sup> There was an apparent second reason why Capt. Williamson slaughtered them: he let his emotions overwhelm him and they clouded his judgement. Before Capt. Williamson came to the Moravian Americans' village, there was a series of raids against the colonials carried out by other Native Americans.<sup>14</sup> Though the Native Americans that carried out the raids were not the Moravians, Capt. Williamson did not seem to care as he wanted revenge against all Native Americans.

It is human nature to want to seek revenge against those who have committed wrongdoing. Human beings seek to destroy what they do not like. In the case of Capt. Williamson, he did not like the Moravians because they were Native Americans, not because they committed any wrongdoing. He lumped them in the same group as other Native American tribes who had committed wrongs. Being a pacifistic tribe, the Moravian Natives refused to defend themselves against Capt. Williamson's assault, which resulted in the massacre of the entire village. If the Moravians pushed aside their pacifistic belief, they might have been able to hold back Capt. Williamson's assault and some of them might have even survived.

### **8. Just War**

One never wants to go to war as they can change a person's soul. However, there are times when war is a necessary. If one does not go to war when they should, evil becomes rampant. Evil exists because good men do nothing to prevent such evil from existing. It is important for Christians and other pacifists to remember that one "can also commit injustice by doing nothing"<sup>15</sup> as Marcus Aurelius had stated in his work, *Meditations*. Human beings are created in the image of God and we, as a people, are not to commit murder as that is harming the image of God. However, according to Dr. Darrel Cole in *When God Says War is Right*, if we refuse to protect others from murder, then we are also harming the image of God.<sup>16</sup> For this reason, Dr. Cole states just war theories were created to "bring some sort of justice and order to this temporal existence."<sup>17</sup> Human beings were originally created to be good, yet due to sin invading mankind's heart, human beings became corrupt. This notion is seconded by Jean Bethke Elshtain, who said humanity has "two different states of nature: the state of integral nature and the state of fallen nature."<sup>18</sup> War is never good, but it can be used to attain good by defending against those who seek to destroy.

### **9. Conclusion**

In conclusion, pacifism, much like genocide, is an idealist's dream; though how they go about in making their dream a reality is what sets them apart. The perpetrators of both pacifism

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<sup>13</sup> Editors of Encyclopedia Britannica, "Gnadenhütten Massacre," *Encyclopedia Britannica*, March 1, 2021, <https://www.britannica.com/event/Gnadenhutten-Massacre>.

<sup>14</sup> Editors of Encyclopedia Britannica, "Gnadenhütten Massacre."

<sup>15</sup> Marcus Aurelius, *Meditations*, trans. Gregory Hays (New York: Modern Library, 2002), 119.

<sup>16</sup> Darrell Cole, *When God Says War is Right* (Colorado Springs: WaterBrook Press, 2002), 66.

<sup>17</sup> Cole, 71.

<sup>18</sup> Jean Bethke Elshtain, *Who Are We?* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2000) 25, quoted in Eric Patterson and Timothy J. Demy, *Philosophers of War*, (Newport: Stone Tower Books, 2017), 337.

and genocide believe they are making the world a better place. Those who commit genocide do so because they believe it is their duty to purge those who they deem to be unclean in order to purify the current reality into an ideal world. Pacifists also believe in living in an ideal world. However, they try to accomplish their goal by trying to influence others to believe the same as them. The very essence of idealists is to persuade others to think or be like them.

It is impossible for societies to be absolutely pacifistic. If one makes exceptions to the pacifism ideology, then one admits pacifism does not work all the time and there are times where violence must be used for protection. If people merely stand by and allow an evil act to be committed when they could have stopped it through violence, they themselves are culpable in that evil act as well. As children of God, human beings must do what they can to protect and help each other in this dangerous world. Pacifism is, in theory, a noble ideology. However, like most noble ideologies, it is never sustainable in reality. In order to truly live in a pacifistic world, humanity must get rid of all the weapons in the world, eliminate the hatred within the human heart along with the desire to fight, and finally be able to emphasize or understand others without misconceptions. One can only hope that humanity will transcend to this level of consciousness, but until that can be accomplished (if it is even possible to accomplish), then pacifism will only serve as an obstacle to justice and an enabler to evil.

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