

War Crimes

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War hasn't changed much over the centuries. Enemies still do horrible things to each other, but what has changed is how we view these actions. There are two new concepts that are called for in "international law" War Crimes and Genocide. The trouble is that there is no enforcement for violators of these crimes. International Law does not really exist yet, beyond the concept of what should be practiced by all civilized nations. But we live in a world in which all the nations on earth are not civilized. The Geneva Convention was an earlier agreement among the civilized about how war should be conducted. The uncivilized nations just ignored this.

It is difficult to watch the Hamas/Israeli war unfold, a war that illustrates the trouble with International Law. Hamas is an outlaw, staging a sneak attack on Israel, murdering (and even beheading) young attendees of a peace concert, and kidnapping more than 100.

Israel, which is not an outlaw, has responded with such rage that they are shocking even friendly states and feeding the age-old horrors of anti-Semitism.

Modern viewers are uncomfortable remembering the relatively recent behavior of all of us in World War II: started by the Nazis and Japanese, but the retaliation of the supposedly civilized world (US and British Empire) was horrific. We all engaged in mass punishment of innocent civilian populations with bombing cities into rubble and the use of the world's first atomic bombs.

When the war was over, new institutions emerged: the UN, a War Crimes Trial for Germany's horrific war crimes, including the extermination of 6 million European Jews, murdered because they were Jewish. This action gave rise to a new name: genocide.

Today's world (the civilized parts) condemns behaviors that they practiced themselves before we identified such a thing as war crimes and genocide. They were not new crimes, just new legal concepts.

Historically, genocide was widely practiced in antiquity. When countries engaged in repeated warfare, eventually the stronger resolved the problem by totally massacring all the enemy's men and taking the women into captivity. Ancient Greece remembered their own experience, the Trojan War, a conflict that occurred centuries before Greek historians and authors depicted it. The play, The Trojan Women, actually tells the story from the vantage point of the women, about to be carried off, as they watched their male children, including babies, slaughtered. Obviously 5th century BC Greece was troubled by this, to their credit.

Ancient Rome had endless conflicts with their merchant enemies, the Phoenicians, until they finally decided to remove them entirely. They sacked all Phoenician cities and towns, slaughtering all men, carrying off all women, and burning the towns to the ground. Phoenicians disappeared from history.

When Rome accepted a new religion, Christianity, they initially stopped their ancient practice of slavery. This was a step forward to being civilized. However, soon slavery reemerged, initially as serfdom, but later as slavery again. It rose to its ultimate horror under Spain, Portugal, and England's colony in North America.

In the Middle Ages, warfare included sieges of cities: attempts to starve them out until they surrendered. By the 18th century, this sort of warfare lessened. Warfare became battlegrounds between masses of soldiers armed with increasingly lethal weapons.

This changed in World War I, when the Germans introduced chemical warfare (poison gas) and aircraft dropping bombs on civilian populations. Soon all combatants were using the same tactics. Poison gas was so horrible, however, that international agreements forbade its use. Enemies knew that if they used it, the other side would also use it.

In historic terms, it was only recently that we all committed the crimes that we now condemn. Genocide was practiced long before it had a name. We and the Canadians used it on Native Americans in distributing smallpox blankets (germ warfare) and genocide by starvation (killing the buffalo), reservations, and cultural genocide in educating native children.

We now recognize that this behavior is wrong, ugly, and should be condemned by all civilized countries. Holdouts are still Hamas, Russia, and our own domestic terrorists. War is still a savage enterprise.

683 words

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