

Why Does Humanity Still Tolerate the Tragedy of Wars in the 21st Century? The Big Picture

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Theme: [History](#)

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Professor Tremblay's Important Statement

Under these circumstances, with the escalation of the war in Ukraine, it would be useful and desirable for the Secretary General of the United Nations, Mr. António Guterres, to convene the United Nations General Assembly, in order to discuss the question of peace in the world, considering the great risk that the deterioration of the war in Ukraine currently poses to humanity.

Since the end of the [Second World War](#) (1939-1945), there have been many civil wars and several important regional [military conflicts](#) between two or more countries, but none has evolved into a general world war involving all the most heavily armed countries. The most serious regional wars were the [Korean War](#) (1950-1953), the [Vietnam War](#) (1955-1975), the [Iraq War](#) (2003-2011), the [Syria War](#) (2011-), and the [Ukraine War](#) (2022-).

Indeed, with no sign yet of peace in [Ukraine](#), nine years after the overthrow of the elected Ukrainian government, in February 2014, and nearly one year after the Russian [military invasion](#), last February 24—and with a real danger that such a prolonged proxy conflict between great powers could escalate into a nuclear world war—it may be appropriate to search for reasons why, in this 21st Century, the world is still threatened with murderous and destructive wars.

There are basic tendencies in human nature, structural institutional failures and geopolitical factors for why this is the case.

Let us identify the most important causes, which can explain why wars of aggression and

proxy wars are still taking place today.

- Human nature: Warlike instincts as the basis for wars

Basic human instincts of control, conquest, domination, and exploitation have often been the very background to conflicts and wars between states.

That may be because some countries are, over time, ruled by men who are bent on using violence to gain and expand their power: they may be kings, emperors, dictators, autocrats or hardliners, even in so-called advanced societies.

If war belongs to the very nature of man, in order to escape this atavism, civilization would need to be more commonly based on humanistic principles, and democratic rules and laws, in order to curb the tendency of autocratic governments or oligarchies to dominate other peoples.

- Attempts to prevent wars, with ethical principles or through international cooperation

The Just War Theory

Ever since the philosophical works of Augustine of Hippo (354-430) and Thomas Aquinas (1225-1274), the most well known religious thinkers about the [Just war theory](#) (*jus ad bellum*), there have been several attempts to introduce some morality and some fairness, if not more justice, into the practice of organized military violence between nations.

According to thinkers of the '*just war theory*', a war must not be pre-emptive but be defensive. It must rest on self-defense. Its purpose must be to defend a nation's peace against serious injury, and be a lesser evil than the alternatives, after all diplomatic options have been exhausted. For that, a war must meet some criteria, such as being based on a just cause (ex: protect innocent life), seeking a just long-term peace, being under the control of a legitimate authority, being proportional in the means used and being waged as a last resort.

Needless to say, with no practical means to prevent wars of aggression, the *Just war theory* has not prevented wars of aggression, or wars of conquest, from taking place since its inception.

Indeed, when unscrupulous and arrogant leaders subscribe only to the law of the jungle in international relations, it leads to the application of the dictatorial rule that "might makes right".

The League of Nations (1920-1946)

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Before World War I, there were two rival military alliances: the Central Powers, which included Germany, Austria-Hungary and Italy, joined later by Bulgaria and the Ottoman Empire; and the Allies, which included France, the United Kingdom and Russia, joined later by Japan and the United States.

The spark that ignited WWI happened in Bosnia, in the city of Sarajevo, on June 28, 1914, when [Archduke Franz Ferdinand](#)—heir to the Austro-Hungarian Empire—was shot to death along with his wife, Sophie, by the Serbian nationalist Gavrilo Princip. With that, military alliances came into play.

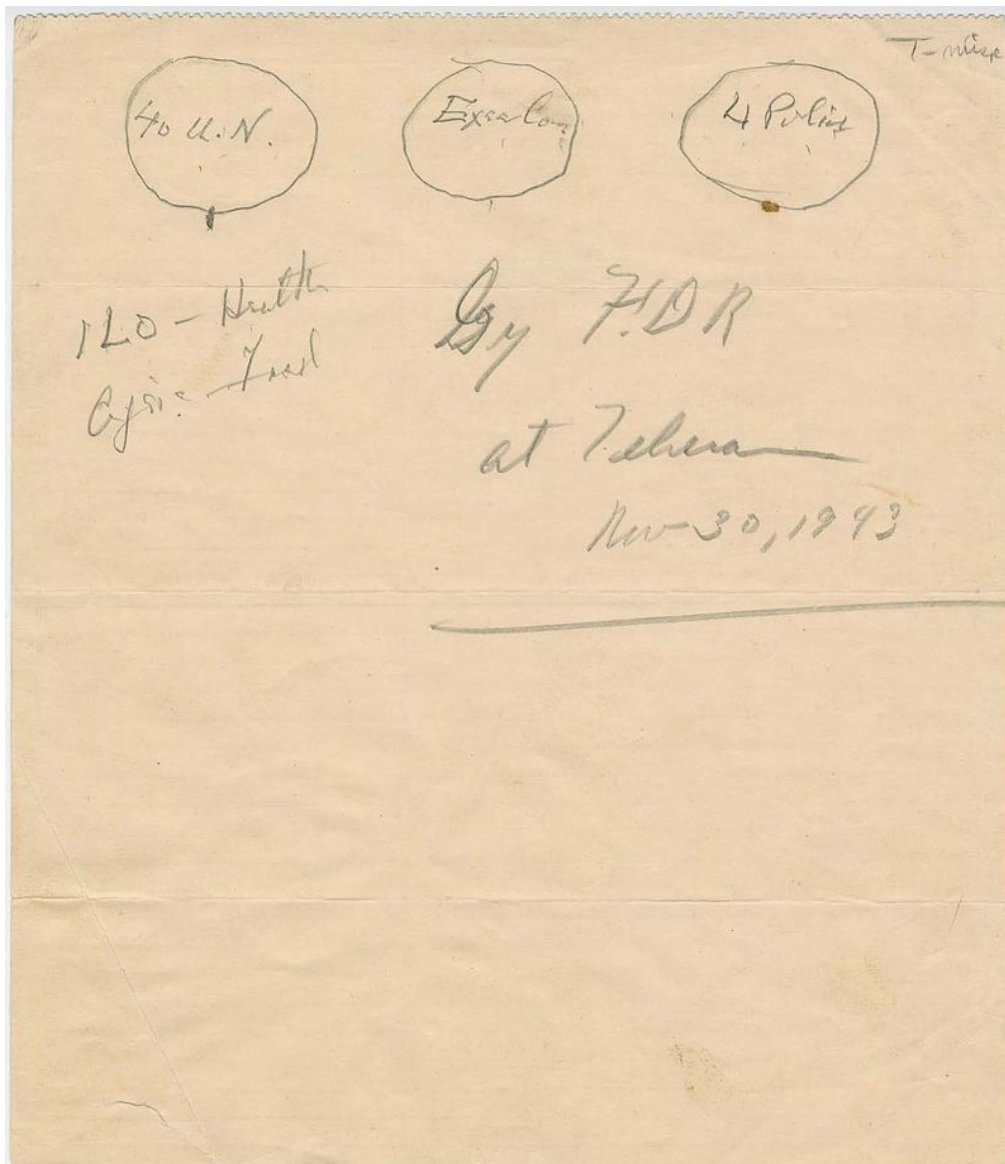
Without the military alliances, the assassination of Archduke Franz Ferdinand would have only caused a regional war between Serbia and Austria-Hungary. However, because of alliances, Russia came to assist Serbia, which in turn led Germany to declare war on Russia.

A question needs to be asked: Are military alliances powder kegs for creating large wars?

Even though, after WWI, the League of Nations was designed to prevent wars, it was too weak to prevent arms races between countries and to enforce disarmament agreements. It was also too weak to impose solutions to conflicts through negotiation or arbitration in cases of international conflicts.

The United Nations (1945)

The [Second World War](#) (1939-1946) is considered to have been a legacy of WWI. And, just like WWI, it involved two opposing [military alliances](#). On one side was the Axis Powers (Germany, Italy, and Japan) and on the other, the Allied Powers (France, Britain, Canada, the U.S., the Soviet Union and China).



1943 sketch by Franklin Roosevelt of the UN original three branches: The [Four Policemen](#), an executive branch, and an international assembly of forty UN member states (Licensed under the Public Domain)

The immediate cause of WWI was the German military invasion of neighboring Poland, on September 1, 1939. Britain and France then both declared war against Germany, on September 3, 1939, in accordance with the defense treaties that they had signed with Poland.

However, historians have placed a lot of the blame for WWI on the failure of the League of Nations to prevent regional wars. They single out the [Treaty of Versailles](#) of June 1919, which imposed the payment of severe war reparations on Germany (the Weimar Republic) and on its economy, besides depriving Germany of several territories along with other exactions. Such a severe humiliation of an entire nation, in turn, promoted the rise of the Nazi movement and of militarism in Germany, but also in Italy and in Japan.

The creation of the United Nations on June 26, 1945, in San Francisco, represents an attempt to ban wars of aggression, after the failure of the League of Nations. Indeed, the United Nations [Charter](#) states that its main purpose is to “*save succeeding generations from the scourge of war*”.

Even though the U.N. Charter makes wars of aggression illegal, powerful states nevertheless

continue to engage in wars of aggression against other less powerful nations, under different pretexts, claiming that their violent aggression is 'necessary', while resorting to an abusive interpretation of the [Self-defense article 51](#).

That is why it can be said that the post-Second World War era has not left the world in a better position today for avoiding wars of aggression, than during the pre-World War I period. *"The more things change, the more they stay the same."*

- Geopolitical factors and the danger of military alliances

The Cold War I (1945-1991)

During WWII, the United States and the Soviet Union were allies. However, once the war ended, they engaged in building two powerful opposing 'defensive' military alliances.

On the one hand, in 1949, the U.S. government was instrumental in creating [The North Atlantic Treaty Organization](#) (NATO), a 'defensive' military alliance initially regrouping 12 countries (the United States and Belgium, Canada, Denmark, France, Iceland, Italy, Luxembourg, the Netherlands, Norway, Portugal, and the United Kingdom). Presently, it has 30 members, with a number of countries waiting to join (Sweden, Finland and Ukraine).

Its official objective was to provide a counterweight to Soviet armies stationed in central and Eastern Europe after World War II.

NATO's Article 5 stipulates that:

"an armed attack against one or more of them in Europe or [North America](#) shall be considered an attack against them all; and consequently they agree that, if such an armed attack occurs, each of them, in exercise of the right of individual or [collective](#) self-defense recognized by Article 51 of the Charter of the United Nations, will assist the Party or Parties so attacked by taking forthwith, individually and in concert with the other Parties, such action as it deems necessary, including the use of [armed force](#), to restore and maintain the security of the North Atlantic area."

On the other hand, the Soviet Union formed the Warsaw Pact military alliance in 1955, in order to counterbalance the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO). It had 8 Eastern European member states: the Soviet Union (USSR), Albania, Poland, Romania, Hungary, East Germany, Czechoslovakia and Bulgaria.

The founding treaty of the 'defensive' [Warsaw Pact](#) called on the member states to come to the defense of any member attacked by an outside force, and it set up a unified military command.

During more than three decades, these two opposing 'defensive' military alliances, a Western bloc and an Eastern bloc, served as counterweight to one another through the establishment of a balance of power in Europe.

However, the East European Warsaw Pact was officially disbanded in 1991, when the Soviet Union went through a severe political crisis and disintegrated, on December 25, 1991, being replaced by the Russian federation and 15 new states. That ended the thirty-six year Cold War.

Such an event left the Western bloc alliance, NATO, without a potential enemy to counterbalance.

The U.S. government, under President George H.W. Bush (1924-2018), as the promoter of NATO, then had two choices: either to dismantle the Western military alliance or to reorient its purpose and develop new missions.

The choice was made not to dismantle NATO, in order to maintain American influence in Europe.

Such a decision was not exempt from raising many misgivings on the part of the Russian government, which feared to be placed in the position of facing a potentially belligerent NATO. In order to allay such fears, the U.S. administration of George H.W. Bush gave assurances, through the Secretary of State [James Baker](#) (and representatives of other Western governments did the same) that NATO “*would not expand into Eastern Europe*” and therefore, would not pose a military threat to Russia.

As a counterpart, the Russian government was expected to go along with the reunification of East Germany (the German Democratic Republic) and West Germany (the German Federal Republic) into a single sovereign state, within the NATO alliance.

However, things changed in 1994 and even more so in 1999.

Cold War II (1999-)

Indeed, during the 1994-1996 period, under pressure from the Republican Party, but also influenced by [neoconservatives](#) in favor of a unilateral neo-imperialist foreign policy, President Bill Clinton made [speeches](#) indicating that his administration would not respect anymore the assurances given to Russia by the H.W. Bush administration, i.e. that NATO would not expand “*one inch Eastward*”.

His administration had been convinced by neoconservative advisors that the U.S. government should [take advantage](#) of the extreme economic weakness of Russia to encircle the latter militarily.

In October 1996, President Clinton made it official that NATO enlargement was part of his foreign policy when he openly [called](#) for former Warsaw Pact countries and post-Soviet republics to join NATO. This was implemented, beginning in March 1999, when three East European countries (Hungary, Poland, and the Czech Republic) officially joined NATO.

In March 1999, the Clinton administration went one step further. It sidestepped the United Nations Charter, which forbids acts of aggression, and instead relied on the cover of [NATO](#) to initiate an aerial bombing campaign in Yugoslavia, against Serbian military targets. On that date, the U.S. government rendered the United Nations *de facto* impotent to prevent or stop wars of aggression. Since then, the U.S. government has relied on the NATO substitute to justify its military interventions abroad.

- Pretexts, provocations, lies and other deceptive tactics are commonly used to initiate war

There are panoply of indirect possibilities and treacherous strategies to initiate interstate

warfare, besides directly bombing a country or sending armies to invade a foreign country.

For instance, a nation with warlike intentions can use [provocations](#) and threats as a prelude to war, or to incite an enemy to retaliate; an aggressor may also try to disrupt and destabilize a country by simulating a military attack through war games and [covert operations](#). The recourse to a [false flag](#) operation (when a country commits an act of war and blames another country for it) has often been employed.

Another trick to hurt an unfriendly country is to resort to a [proxy war](#) (i.e. a war waged by a client-state against a targeted enemy, but being financed and armed by a major third party instigator). A mixture of a proxy war and a false flag operation can then be part of a plan to enlarge a conflict into an open war.

A war plan on the part of an aggressor can go as far as [sabotaging](#) the installations of a foreign country for military or political motives, through covert operations. An aggressor can also impose a [siege](#) on a victimized nation without any formal declaration of war.

One tactic commonly used to start a war is to denigrate and [demonize](#) an adversary, through lies and deceptive propaganda about that country's armaments or real intention.

Another way to push a targeted country to war is to impose trade [embargoes](#) of some essential commodity that it must import, such as oil. Indeed, the unilateral imposition of economic and financial [sanctions](#) against a country, in order to hurt its economy, is another hostile act that could result in a war.

That is why it is so arduous to prevent a war only through legal and diplomatic means, or through mediation, when a powerful nation is bent on going to war against another country.

Neither the *League of Nations* nor the *United Nations* made it illegal for a warlike nation to provoke a war through indirect means.

This is an indication of how complex and difficult it remains to make the curse of wars of aggression a truly obsolete event. Nevertheless, wars of aggression, now with the destructive capabilities of [nuclear weapons](#), must be prevented, if humanity is to survive on this planet.

Finally, a not too cheery fact: A recent [study](#) has concluded that democracies are more likely to start wars than autocratic regimes.

Conclusion

Currently, the international political and legal framework to prevent or to end war is in shambles. The United Nations has been sidelined and its authority as an arbiter of military conflicts, as stipulated in the U.N. Charter, has been undermined and replaced with a comeback of more or less arbitrary raw power politics.

Like in a not so glorious past, military alliances have been reconstituted and the reliance on a new "Balance of Power" is again the only bulwark against a worldwide military conflagration.

A more civilized world would free itself of the trap of atavistic military alliances, a proven historical recipe for permanent wars, high public indebtedness and persistent inflation. Wars

of aggression and proxy wars should be eliminated as a barbarous human institution, once and for all.

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This article was originally published on the author's blog site, [Dr. Rodrigue Tremblay](#).

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Featured image: A U.S. Navy Lockheed SP-2H Neptune (BuNo 140986) of patrol squadron VP-18 Flying Phantoms flying over a Soviet freighter. The freighter is most probably the Okhotsk, which left the port at Nuevita carrying 12 IL-28 airplanes on 5 December 1962 (Licensed under the Public Domain)

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