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THE RUSSO-UKRAINIAN CONFLICT AND THE ETHICS OF WAR OF AUGUSTINE AND AQUINAS

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ABSTRACT

This article analyzes the justice of the Russo-Ukrainian War from the views of just war theorists Augustine and Aquinas. Augustine of Hippo, in his war ethics, believed that war is both a consequence of sin and a potential remedy. Aquinas examined the subject of war ethics, emphasizing the importance of human nature and the common good. Some scholars argue that their theory of just war has become inadequate due to the emergence of nuclear weapons, while others continue to apply their framework to contemporary issues, including drone warfare. In this article, we will explore how Augustine and Aquinas might have viewed the Russo-Ukrainian War, considering the criteria for just war that they accepted, as well as those that emerged later. Furthermore, we will examine the relevance of nuclear arsenals, drones, and NATO in evaluating the ethics of war in the works of Augustine and Aquinas.

Keywords: Russo-Ukrainian War; Just War; Augustine; Aquinas.

Introduction

If one sets aside the discussions found in poetic or religious literature, such as those by Homer or biblical texts, determining who first addressed the question of the virtue of justice in war remains a contentious issue today. A more theological perspective might lead us to begin with thinkers like Augustine or Ambrose. One could start with Thucydides or Xenophon from a military standpoint. Or try a philosophical approach, drawing us to Plato or Aristotle, while a political lens could lead us to begin with Cicero.

Brunstetter and O'Driscoll (2018), who edited a 2018 book on just war thinkers throughout history, acknowledge that identifying the origins of the just war tradition and its initial proponents is a complex issue. They consider several candidates for the title of first just war theorist, including Aristotle, who may have been the first to use the term "just war", Cicero, who discussed the "justice of war" in parts of his renowned work *On duties*, and Augustine, often regarded as the father of just war theory. Although they argue that Thomas Aquinas should be considered the founder of just war theory, as the concept was more distinctly articulated in his 13th-century writings, they believe that any of these figures can defensibly be

considered foundational to just war theory. With this in mind, they started their collection of just war thinkers with Cicero. Reichberg, Syse, and Begby's (2006) collection, *The ethics of war*, begins with discussions of Thucydides and Plato. It also includes articles on Augustine and Aquinas. Similarly, the 2017 collection *Philosophers on war*, edited by Eric Patterson and Timothy Demy (2017), begins with Plato and Aristotle and includes debates on Augustine and Aquinas.

Notwithstanding, some thinkers are essential to the debate on just war, and Augustine is undoubtedly a central figure in theology, philosophy, and political science, particularly in discussions about the justice of war from ancient times to modern debates. After the September 11, 2001 terrorist attacks, a group of theologians and philosophers — including Michael Walzer, Samuel Huntington, Francis Fukuyama, Jean Bethke Elshtain, James Turner Johnson, Michael Novak, Nina Shea, Richard Mouw, Max L. Stackhouse and George Weigel — issued a manifesto supporting war against what they termed "Islamicism", the violent, extremist, and radically intolerant religious-political movement that threatens the world. In this manifesto, they engaged in a debate about the principles of a "just war". To support their arguments, they only referenced the thoughts of Augustine. They stated:

> The primary moral justification for war is to protect the innocent from certain harm. Augustine, whose early 5th century book, The City of God, is a seminal contribution to just war thinking, argues (echoing Socrates) that it is better for the Christian as an individual to suffer harm rather than to commit it. But is the morally responsible person also required, or even permitted, to make for other innocent persons a commitment to non-self-defense? For Augustine, and for the broader just war tradition, the answer is no. If one has compelling evidence that innocent people who are in no position to protect themselves will be grievously harmed unless coercive force is used to stop an aggressor, then the moral principle of love of neighbor calls us to the use of force (Washington Post, 2002).

This article will explore the ideas of two prominent theologians and philosophers, Augustine and Aquinas, who are well-known figures in just war theory. We will examine how their concepts relate to the current war in Ukraine, which involves the use of drones and the nuclear threat.

Augustine and Thomas Aquinas are crucial to any analysis of just war theory, although their ethical frameworks for war are firmly grounded in theology. This importance remains evident in today's world, where we continue to witness the strong connection between war policy and religious foundations. Particularly in the Russo-Ukrainian War, we continue to see the intertwining of war and religious ethics, despite both countries sharing

nearly the same religious traditions. In 2024, the Russian Orthodox Church (2024) released a statement framing Russia's war against Ukraine — and against Western countries — as a holy endeavor, positioning Russia as a defender "against the Antichrist" (Russian Orthodox Church, 2024). Pope Francis, along with a representative of the Ukrainian Greek Catholic Church, for their part, condemned the war between Russia and Ukraine as a "sacrilegious war" (Souza, 2025). Because this war has caused a profound schism within the Orthodox Church, pitting the Russian Orthodox Church, the largest and most influential branch of Orthodoxy, against the Ecumenical Patriarchate of Constantinople, which, despite its historical significance and status as "first among equals", has a far smaller following. This division not only threatens religious unity but also deepens the wounds of conflict.

The Russo-Ukrainian war

If we can define World War I as a conflict driven by imperialist military alliances and World War II as a battle against Nazi ideology and Japanese Imperialism, how should we understand the current war between Russia and Ukraine — a conflict that many fear might ignite World War III? The controversial General Mark Milley is said to define the war as "a small Russian army fighting a large Russian army" (Entous, 2025), shedding light on the deep historical and cultural ties between these two nations, alongside a significant disparity in magnitude.

The histories of Ukraine and Russia are profoundly intertwined, marked by extended periods during which they were unified under a single nation or shared a common political leadership. Ukraine was integrated into the Russian Empire from the late 18th century until 1917 and later became part of the Soviet Union (USSR) from 1922 to 1991. This era encompasses the devastating famine in Soviet Ukraine from 1932 to 1933, known as the Holodomor, which had a profound impact on the national psyche.

The ongoing conflict highlights the proximity between the two countries, particularly among their military leaders. For instance, Ukrainian General Zabrodskyi trained at a military academy in St. Petersburg and served in the Russian Army for five years. Similarly, Ukrainian General Syrsky was born in Russia and served in its army until 1991.

The ethics of Russians, which notably encompass parts of Ukraine, remain largely enigmatic to the West. In his insightful book *My Russia: war or peace?* Russian writer Mikhail Shishkin (2023) sheds light on this subject. He argues that Russia was never truly de-Stalinized, nor were there any Nuremberg-style trials to address the crimes committed by the communists.

Shishkin points out that globalization and the collapse of the Soviet Union did not fundamentally alter the Russian psyche. He suggests that most of the Russian population tends to view democracy as chaotic and instead favors stability provided by strong leaders, showing little appreciation for moderation. Additionally, he characterizes them as fatalistic and submissive, which may explain the prolonged grip Vladimir Putin has on power and the Russian reaction to Ukraine's pursuit of closer ties with European democracies.

Serhii Plokhy (2022), for his part, in his recent book on Ukrainian history, explores the ethical dimensions of Ukraine, particularly in the context of the ongoing conflict with Russia. He emphasizes that it is impossible to fully narrate Ukraine’s story without considering its diverse regions. As Ukraine's borders have changed over time, various cultural influences have emerged, including those from Austrian, Hungarian, Polish, Cossack, and Russian backgrounds. The Russian influence is especially strong along the Black Sea coast and in the Donets Basin.

To understand Eastern European ethics and the broader context of the region, it is essential to consider these influences, as they may lead to potential paths for lasting peace. However, in the case of Russia and Ukraine, the traditional view of ethnic groups in a clash of civilizations does not capture the ethical dynamics of this war. The ongoing conflict appears to be primarily driven by deep-rooted differences in political ideology, which continue to fuel tensions and hostilities between the two nations.

Here, we will not examine the truth or importance of the causes of the Russo-Ukrainian War but rather consider how Augustine and Aquinas might analyze the conflict. But to effectively address the issue, it is essential to recognize the well-documented origins of the war. These thinkers would consider those origins alongside the theological ethics of the two countries. Before the outbreak of open war between Russia and Ukraine, a tumultuous history existed between the two countries. This included political and military interference from both internal and external sources, as well as mutual distrust between Russia and Ukraine, and between Russia and Western nations.

The expansion of NATO into Eastern European countries is a significant concern for Russia. During the Cold War, this issue heightened tensions between the Western powers and the USSR. Noteworthy events during that time include Turkey's admission to NATO in 1952 and West Germany's in 1955. In 2008, NATO leaders agreed that Ukraine would eventually become a member. Prior to that year, several countries that were part of the former Warsaw Pact, such as Poland, Hungary, the Czech Republic, Bulgaria, and Romania, joined NATO. After the war, Ukraine

applied for membership in September 2022; however, it has not yet received an invitation to join due to differing opinions among NATO member states.

Many analysts trace the origins of the war back to the Euromaidan uprising, a series of protests and civil unrest that occurred between November 2013 and February 2014. This movement highlighted the divide in Ukraine between the pro-European sentiments in the western and central regions and the pro-Russian attitudes in the eastern and southern areas. The unrest ultimately led to the ousting of President Viktor Yanukovych, who had preferred closer ties with the Russian government over pursuing an agreement with the European Union.

The Euromaidan crisis was followed by Russia's invasion of Crimea. Russia's annexation of Crimea in March 2014 marked the first use of military force for territorial expansion in Europe since World War II. It is essential to note that Crimea has historical ties to Russia, having been transferred from Russia to Ukraine in 1954 by Nikita Khrushchev to commemorate the 300th anniversary of the Treaty of Pereyaslav[2]. The region is home to the Russian Black Sea Fleet in Sevastopol and has a predominantly Russian-speaking population. The annexation occurred quickly and without significant violence, taking advantage of the military disorganization in Ukraine following the Euromaidan protests. Additionally, the annexation bolstered Russia's support for separatists in the Donbass region.

Despite the significant support Ukraine has received since 2022, there has been a notable absence of military intervention by Western powers following Russia’s annexation of Crimea. This lack of action is arguably one of the factors that contributed to the 2022 invasion. The United States, the European Union, and their allies condemned the annexation as a violation of international law and responded by imposing economic sanctions on Russia, suspending Russia from the G8, and providing financial assistance to Ukraine. However, no military intervention occurred due to concerns about a potential confrontation with Russia. The main reasons for this abstention included the desire to avoid direct conflict with Russia’s nuclear arsenal and military capabilities, Ukraine’s non-membership in NATO, and Crimea’s historical ties to Russia.

The annexation of Crimea has significantly empowered Russian separatists in the Donbas region, encompassing the Donetsk and Luhansk areas. In April 2014, these separatists, backed by Russia, started clashing with Ukrainian forces in a bid to establish the self-proclaimed Donetsk People's Republic (DPR) and Luhansk People's Republic (LPR). This ongoing conflict has tragically led to the loss of thousands of lives by the end of

2014, highlighting the urgent need for a resolution to restore peace in the region.

At the end of 2014, efforts began to establish a ceasefire between the separatists and Ukraine, as outlined in the Minsk Agreements. These agreements were mediated by the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE). The first agreement, known as Minsk I, was reached in September 2014, followed by Minsk II in February 2015. Key negotiations involved representatives from Ukraine, Russia, France, and Germany. Initially, the ceasefire established by these agreements helped reduce hostilities; however, violations continued, with both sides accusing one another of infractions. Ultimately, the agreements were deemed unsuccessful. In 2022, just days before the invasion of Ukraine, Russia recognized the Donetsk People's Republic (DPR) and the Luhansk People's Republic (LPR) as independent entities.

Following these events, the situation escalated into open conflict when regular Russian forces invaded Ukraine in February 2022, despite the absence of a formal declaration of war. Ukraine successfully managed to repel the initial attacks, resulting in a prolonged conflict. The invasion drew widespread global condemnation. In response, NATO and its Western allies imposed unprecedented sanctions on Russia and began financial and military cooperation with Ukraine.

Several attempts have been made to reach agreements or ceasefires, beginning just four days after the 2022 invasion, but these efforts have consistently failed. Notably, a potential deal in April 2022 was reportedly vetoed by British Prime Minister Boris Johnson. Still, the Bucha Massacre by Russian troops in March of that year also made reaching an agreement more difficult. More recent attempts at an agreement occurred in 2025, during Donald Trump's presidency. The primary reasons for these failures include irreconcilable demands (such as the recognition of occupied territories and security guarantees), a lack of trust, recurrent violations, the unsuccessful legacy of the Minsk Agreements, and external influences.

Weapons and just war theory

The Russo-Ukrainian War presents a serious threat regarding the potential use of nuclear weapons by Russia. Ukraine previously held the third-largest nuclear arsenal in the world, a status it lost with the dissolution of the Soviet Union. In 1994, under the Budapest Memorandum on Security Assurances signed by Ukraine, the United States, the United Kingdom, and Russia, Ukraine committed to giving up its nuclear weapons. In exchange for this sacrifice, Ukraine was promised security guarantees that,

regrettably, have not been adequately upheld. By 1996, Ukraine had transferred all its nuclear warheads to Russia for dismantling. As both Russia and Ukraine are signatories to the Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons (NPT), Ukraine stands as a non-nuclear-weapon state while Russia remains a significant nuclear power, holding the largest stockpile of nuclear warheads in the world.

Conflicts on borders where nuclear states are involved create immense fear globally, as the prospect of nuclear weapon use becomes increasingly likely — an alarming reality evidenced by the similar tensions seen recently between India and Pakistan. The world must recognize the gravity of this situation and work towards ensuring lasting peace and stability in the region.

The looming threat of nuclear weapons is a stark reminder of their devastating impact, as seen in the only instances of their use during war in August 1945 against the cities of Hiroshima and Nagasaki. These bombings obliterated entire communities and claimed the lives of countless innocent civilians.

Still in 1945, we had three insightful reactions from scholars about the profound effects and repercussions of atomic bombs—two philosophers and one theologian. Their perspectives shed light on the moral and existential dilemmas introduced by this momentous event.

Albert Camus stands out as the first philosopher to confront the profound implications of the atomic bombing of Hiroshima. During World War II, he actively participated in the French Resistance, contributing editorials to an underground newspaper called Combat from 1943 to 1947. These passionate writings were later compiled into anthologies, with the English version titled *Between hell and reason* (Camus, 1991). Alexandre de Gramont, who translated Camus's editorials, expressed in the preface that he was taken aback by Camus's support for violence during this tumultuous period. In these editorials, Camus boldly defends severe measures, including the death penalty and the execution of traitors and Nazi collaborators in France. Camus was the first philosopher to engage in a critical discussion of the atomic bomb, with an editorial dated August 6, 1945, specifically addressing the bombing of Hiroshima. He argued that if Japan surrendered due to the devastation at Hiroshima and the ensuing intimidation, everyone should be happy. However, he also warned of the alarming future that loomed over humanity, insisting that we must recognize that pursuing peace is the only struggle truly worth undertaking.

Another important philosopher who commented on the atomic bomb in August 1945 was Bertrand Russell. He wrote an article titled *The bomb and civilization* (Russell, 1945), which was published in Forward, Vol. 39,

No. 33, on August 18, 1945. In his article, Russell begins with a detailed scientific description of the bomb, followed by a discussion of its political implications. He viewed the atomic bomb as a significant scientific achievement, but he also saw it as a profound moral failure, especially regarding the attack on Hiroshima. Given that Japan had not yet surrendered when Russell wrote, he expressed hope that the use of the bomb would lead to Japan's surrender. He recognized that competition over uranium would likely spark future conflicts. He foresaw potential rivalries among the World War II Allies. Despite these concerns, Russell felt fortunate that only the United States had nuclear weapons at that time. With the prospect of the Soviet Union seeking to develop its own nuclear capabilities, he identified two possible paths to world peace. The first option was the establishment of an international authority to regulate uranium use, which Russell considered utopian. The second, more realistic option for him was the dominant influence of the United States in global politics, which could promote peace or the emergence of another peaceful power.

It is striking that two philosophers, often regarded as pacifists — Camus and Russell — expressed a sense of joy or relief at the use of the atomic bomb in Japan. They perceived this devastating weapon as a potential means to achieve lasting peace, a perspective that challenges conventional views on pacifism.

Among theologians, it is generally accepted that the first published work addressing the impact of atomic bombs on Christian theology was written by the Catholic priest Ronald Knox in his book *God and the atom* (Knox, 1945). The initial chapters of the book vividly illustrate the immediate perplexity triggered by news of the atomic bombs in the newspapers of August 1945. He provides a comprehensive examination of the metaphysical implications of the nuclear age, raising several questions about human power over humanity and the role of science in contrast to the tenets of the Christian faith. Additionally, he discusses social and political ramifications, particularly the fear of the growing influence of atheistic Soviet communism.

Knox states that he will not discuss whether the destruction of Hiroshima was right or wrong, but rather whether the nuclear attack was good or bad. He seems to acknowledge that it might have been a good thing, but he argues that it could have been executed better. His thesis suggests that it would have been more perfect if they had not bombed Hiroshima. He believes it would have been preferable to drop the atomic bomb in a remote location to demonstrate the power of nuclear weaponry, rather than targeting a city and killing thousands of innocent people. For

Knox, by dropping the bombs on Hiroshima, the Allies lost the chance to show that their power was tempered with mercy.

At that time, Knox could not have known that American military officials and scientists had considered doing exactly what he proposed—using the atomic bomb for demonstration purposes without inflicting further harm on cities or innocent lives. However, this suggestion was quickly dismissed for several reasons. Japan had already suffered extensive devastation from numerous attacks on various cities and had yet to surrender. By August 1945, only two atomic bombs were available. Conducting a single demonstration, which might have failed or gone unnoticed by Japan, would have been prohibitively expensive. The Allies sought a swift conclusion to the war, and there was also the political necessity of demonstrating power to an emerging rival, the Soviet Union.

The Cold War was a period marked by numerous military conflicts and pivotal events, such as the Cuban Missile Crisis of 1962. This era ignited a vigorous theological and political debate centered on the principle of deterrence, encapsulated in the provocative slogan "better dead than red".

The ongoing nuclear threats posed by Iran and North Korea have lingered since the dissolution of the USSR. Yet, the Russia-Ukraine war, which erupted in 2014, presents a far greater danger. This conflict not only brings nuclear weapons alarmingly close to Europe but also involves Russia, the nation with the most extensive nuclear arsenal globally. The stakes have never been higher, and the world must pay attention.

Engaging with nations that possess nuclear arsenals, as Russia, necessitates maximum caution. With more than 5,000 nuclear warheads, Russia holds the largest arsenal in the world, underscoring the critical need for careful diplomacy and strategic management. An atomic incident involving any party could lead to further nuclear incidents, not only among the directly involved nations but also among other countries with nuclear capabilities that have long-standing rivalries. Examples include North and South Korea, India and Pakistan, China and Japan, as well as Israel and its Middle Eastern adversaries.

In addition to the nuclear threat, the Russo-Ukrainian war marks the first conflict predominantly conducted using drones (unmanned aerial vehicles or UAVs, a land, sea, or air vehicle that is remotely or automatically controlled) in history. Thousands of drones are utilized for various military purposes, including surveillance, reconnaissance, espionage, and as armed unmanned aircraft. Some drones are even designed as kamikaze vehicles, while others are specialized weapons aimed at destroying enemy drones.

The use of drones for military operations gained prominence during the Obama administration (2009-2017), which significantly expanded drone

warfare as a key component of its counterterrorism strategy. This expansion drew considerable criticism due to the high number of civilian casualties in countries like Pakistan, Yemen, and Afghanistan. Critics highlighted concerns about secrecy and lack of accountability, racially biased targeting, and extrajudicial killings.

The concept of using unmanned vehicles for attack or reconnaissance is not new; balloons carrying explosives were employed as early as the 19th century. The term "drone" is often believed to have originated from a British biplane named Queen Bee, developed in the 1930s for anti-aircraft defense training. Rudimentary drones were also used during World War II, particularly in anti-aircraft defense training. Notably, the failed Operation Aphrodite involved using manned bombers to launch radio-controlled drones loaded with explosives, resulting in the death of Joseph P. Kennedy Jr., President Kennedy's brother, during a 1944 mission.

Currently, in the Russo-Ukrainian war, the development of drones and anti-drone technologies is advancing rapidly. The conflict is genuinely transformative for drone warfare. Countries like the United States, China, Turkey, Israel, Poland, and Iran are all producing drones, alongside domestic manufacturing from the countries involved in the war. Thousands of UAVs are in action, varying in price, some very inexpensive but capable of causing significant damage, and differing in attack range, durability, and effectiveness. During the war, it was claimed that no tank in the world could survive a drone strike costing just $400.

Additionally, the Russo-Ukrainian War has featured the development of various technologies to counter drone operations. These include the use of radar systems, electronic warfare, radio and noise sensors, measures for interference in drone control, kinetic defense, and laser technologies. Drones also require increased mobility in logistical operations to prevent UAV attacks.

What sets modern drones apart is their remarkable capability for real-time, around-the-clock surveillance and precision strikes. This advancement necessitates enhanced logistical strategies, mobility, and the development of sophisticated countermeasures and weapons to distract, intercept, or neutralize UAVs, ensuring dominance in contemporary combat scenarios.

The distinct features of killing by remote control demand thorough ethical consideration. In addition to the immemorial ethical issue regarding weapons that make killing appear risk-free, in which ethical aspects such as honor, bravery, heroism, risk, guilt, remorse, and emotions are considered absent, the use of drones raises significant ethical concerns related to technology and the principles of international humanitarian and armed conflict laws. Drone technology is considered ethically problematic

due to its affordability and ease of use. Does this inexpensive technology affect our ability to wage a just war? Does this technology violate the condition of a war as a last resort? It can make warfare faster, cheaper, and safer, potentially reducing the moral imperative to avoid conflict. Additionally, some argue that drone technology can be cruel and disproportionate since the adversary is often unable to respond or retaliate effectively. How does the use of nonhuman drones change the relationship between adversaries? What are the inherent limitations of a robot in terms of its ability to think and act ethically during combat? In terms of international law, some argue that UAVs must comply with existing international humanitarian and armed conflict laws. In contrast, others contend that these laws need to be revised to account for the unique challenges posed by UAVs in warfare.

Currently, there is no evidence indicating that UAVs can be deployed alongside nuclear weapons. This lack of integration is crucial, as the combination could lead to devastating consequences, potentially making atomic weapons more accessible and affordable, just like the drones we've seen proliferating. Currently, UAVs serve as conventional weapons, capable of inflicting serious harm and significant loss of life, yet they do not carry the existential threat of global annihilation.

Interestingly, discussions about the ethical implications of UAVs were more prevalent in the literature during the U.S. government's use of drones against terrorists. During the Russo-Ukrainian war, where both sides employ drones—sometimes sourced from the same provider — this ethical debate has become much more muted.

Augustine and Aquinas approaches

In discussing military conflict, it may not be entirely accurate to claim that Augustine is the founder of just war theory, as the relationship between Christian justice and war had already been a topic of debate prior to his time. However, Augustine is likely the most frequently cited authority in the discussion of just war (Johnson, 2018, p. 20). Augustine’s way of reconciling Christianity with war served as a foundation for future Christian theologians. Thinkers such as Gratian, Thomas Aquinas, Vitoria, Suarez, Grotius, Luther, and Calvin all owe a debt to Augustine (Corey & Charles, 2012, p. 53). Discussions surrounding the morality of war continue to resonate with Augustine’s ideas today (Coates, 1997, p. 97). Augustine’s views on war are rooted in his concept of original sin; as a result of Adam’s fall from Paradise, humanity conflicts with God and tends to pursue selfish interests that threaten society (Swift, 1983, p. 111).

Augustine can be seen as aligning himself more closely with figures who embrace the idea of war, such as Cicero, who viewed war as a path to glory and honor, and Francis Lieber, who regarded war as a natural and healthy aspect of national identity, necessary to defend the rights of citizens. Augustine believed that war could serve as a corrective force in a "fallen" world, offering the possibility of restoring order and ultimately improving society (Carvin, 2018, p. 182-183). But, in Augustine's view, wars should not be celebrated as triumphs. Regardless of the reason, war incites temptations to seize and carry away by force to achieve peace.

Most readers of Augustine focus on his books *Confessions* and *City of God*, but these are not the primary sources for Augustine's views on war. Some thinkers may refer to passages from *City of God*, but the primary texts that articulate Augustine's theory on war are *Contra Faustum* and his letters to Marcellinus and Boniface. Additionally, *De Libero Arbitrio* is relevant, as it not only argues against the notion that all acts of killing are inherently sinful but also explores recurring themes in ethics.

In chronological order, *De Libero Arbitrio* is the oldest text, written around the year 388, shortly after Augustine's conversion in 386, when he was grappling with Manichaeism. The next work, *Contra Faustum*, was written around 397 and continues to address Manichaeism, but focuses on the Old Testament. Following this, we have the *Epistle to Marcellinus*, written around 411, and then the *Epistle to Boniface* and *City of God*, both composed after 413.

In *Contra Faustum*, Augustine examines the role of secular authority in waging war, emphasizing its significance in justifying the need for conflict. In chapter 75, Augustine defends the necessity of having authority as one of the principles of a just war. He also stresses that for a war to be considered just, the intention behind it must be just. Additionally, he argues that soldiers are innocent in the act of killing, as their profession demands discipline and obedience.

In book 22, chapter 74, Augustine contends that the true evil of war lies not in the deaths of individuals, including innocent non-combatants, but rather in the inherent violence and ambition for power that men of war can exhibit. When asked about the evils of war, Augustine completely dismisses the possibility of innocent people dying. He responds that this concern does not align with religious sentiment; rather, it is simply a "cowardly dislike". (Augustine, book XXII, chapter 74). This perspective is particularly relevant, given that many used to think that one criterion for a just war is the protection of the innocent, and others even consider this the essential criterion. In chapter 76 of the same book, Augustine presents the idea that true peace resides in the hearts of men. This serves as a response to

pacifists who cite Christ's instruction to "turn the other cheek" as a basis for their arguments against conflict.

Concerning the protection of noncombatants, Augustine's views seem to diverge from those of Aquinas, particularly in chapter 5 of book 1 of *De Libero Arbitrio*. While Aquinas framed the rationale for self-defense as a means of protecting innocent individuals — known as the Doctrine of Double Effect — Augustine presented a different perspective. Augustine raised the question of whether it is permissible to kill an enemy who violently attacks us or a robber who treacherously assaults us. His perspective emphasizes a life devoted to others rather than to oneself. Augustine argues that defending one's own life is of lesser value. This raises a provocative question: how can the defense of one's own life hold less importance? Augustine posits that by starting from the eternal law and recognizing the presence of God, the supreme being, we understand that our lives do not end with our physical bodies. Augustine suggested that human beings should prioritize serving others rather than focusing on their own lives.

Considering Augustine's point of view, however, it cannot be said that Aquinas dismisses eternal law; he approaches it from a different angle. Aquinas emphasized that humanity is created in the image and likeness of God and has received the gift of life from Him. Therefore, we have a responsibility to defend life, especially since individual lives are valuable to others. It is challenging to determine which approach aligns more closely with Christian values.

In chapter 2 of the *Letter to Marcellinus*, the concept of war is described as a form of "benevolent severity" (*benigna asperitas*) (Augustine, chapter 2, paragraph 14). This means that war can serve as a means to rectify the wrongs committed by an unjust aggressor, much like a father correcting a son who has made a mistake. Additionally, for Augustine, war can also be viewed as an act of mercy. This perspective of war as benevolent severity is fundamental to the Christian theory of just war, as it suggests that war can lead to justice and charity.

In the *Letter to Boniface*, paragraph 6, Augustine discusses the teleological aspect of war, emphasizing that war must be waged in the pursuit of peace and with the right intentions. He also highlights the importance of being merciful towards enemies and captives, which relates to the principles of *jus in bello* and proportionality. Additionally, Augustine asserts that war should only be waged out of necessity. The ultimate goal is not to wage wars for their own sake, but rather to achieve peace through the act of war.

In book 19, chapter 7 of *City of God*, Augustine expresses sorrow over the atrocities committed during wartime, whether they arise from the

Roman Empire's pursuit of unity, from hostile nations outside the empire, or from the differing identities of nations within the empire. Augustine introduces the concept of the "wise man", (Augustine, book 19, chapter 7) who mourns the necessity of war while recognizing it as a quest for justice.

In Augustine's philosophy, we find several key criteria for the theory of just war. These include the necessity of an authority to declare war, the understanding of war as a painful means to achieve justice, the requirement of a cause to rectify an injustice, and the need for a just intention, which ultimately aims for peace. Additionally, Augustine stresses the importance of mercy and proportionality in warfare. Importantly, Augustine's perspective on war emphasizes human sin rather than merely the destruction it causes. While he acknowledges the devastation of war, he believes that the true evil lies in the pursuit of power and the inherent search for evil, rather than in the death of innocents.

Almost eight centuries after Augustine, Thomas Aquinas emerged as one of the greatest philosophers of the Catholic Church. Although Aquinas was influenced by Augustine, whom he cites frequently, he advanced beyond Augustine in both theology and philosophy. His work, the *Summa Theologica*, was even elevated to the same level as the Scriptures and the decrees of the popes in the 1879 encyclical *Aeterni Patris* by Pope Leo XIII.

Aquinas lived during a time of conflict (Gregory, 2018, p. 50-52). His family was connected to knighthood; both his father and brother were knights, and his brother Renauld was imprisoned and ultimately killed by the forces of Holy Roman Emperor Frederick II.

Aquinas drew extensively from Augustine and Gratian in his exploration of justice in war. However, Aquinas also tackled contemporary issues, such as the conflicts between Christians and Muslims, and his approach, influenced by Aristotelian thought, differentiated him from Augustine's perspective on war within his theological framework. While Augustine emphasized the foundations of sin, redemption, and grace, Aquinas concentrated more on human nature, the virtues, and the significance of defending the political community for the common good.

Aquinas's discussions on war are intricately tied to the theological debate on charity, influencing many theologians in the Church. Notably, the Jesuit theologian Francisco Suarez, who also examined just war through the lens of the theological virtue of charity, in his book *A work in three theological virtues: faith, hope and charity*, but from a more legalistic standpoint, making him a precursor to Hugo Grotius.

Aquinas specifically addressed the topic of war in question 40 of part II-II of his *Summa Theologica*. This section is organized around the typology of virtues, which includes theological virtues (faith, hope, and charity) and

cardinal or moral virtues (justice, prudence, fortitude, and temperance). One might expect the concept of just war to fall under moral theology, particularly within the realms of justice, prudence, or fortitude. However, question 40 is found in the Treatise on Charity. This placement enables us to gain a deeper understanding of the hermeneutics of the *Summa Theologica*. It is essential not to view question 40 in isolation. Aquinas intended to explore whether war constitutes a sin against charity, similar to hatred or greed.

In addition to question 40, Aquinas addresses several other relevant questions to the morality of war in his *Summa Theologica*. Notable among these is question 64, part II-II, where he discusses when it is lawful to kill and presents the well-known Doctrine of Double Effect (DDE). Additionally, we have questions 90-97, part I-II, on laws, question 108, part II-II, where Aquinas explores the concept of revenge, question 42, part II-II, on sedition, and question 29, part II-II, in which he defines peace. In question 2 of part II-II, article 5, within the Treatise on Faith, he introduces the term "just war", linking it to the defense of the common good. The discussion in this question also includes a consideration of whether the type of weapon used in war affects the morality of the act.

It is rare for a theologian or philosopher to engage in all of these questions truly. Theologians and philosophers have adopted a varying number of questions of the *Summa Theologica* to explain Thomas Aquinas' views on just war. The vast majority use a maximum of two questions. Some important thinkers have sometimes even overlooked question 40 entirely while discussing Aquinas on war. For example, the Irish catholic philosopher Elizabeth Anscombe concentrated mainly on question 64 and parts of question 91, without addressing question 40 at all. That approach influenced others, like the philosopher Thomas Nagel.

To address the question of whether a just war is possible, Aquinas, in question 40 of his Treatise on Charity, referenced Augustine, notably his work *Contra Faustum*, as well as passages from the scriptures. He identified three key criteria for a just war: legitimate authority to declare war, a just cause, and a just intention.

To admit that Aquinas had additional criteria for a just war, one must examine his responses to other questions in the *Summa Theologica*. The criterion that war should be a last resort is addressed in question 105, part I-II, article 3, where Aquinas discusses how to interact with foreigners. Another criterion, the protection of non-combatants during war (known as the criterion of discrimination), is elaborated in question 64, part II-II, which we will explore next. Additionally, we can reference the criterion of proportionality in question 42, part II-II, article 2, where Aquinas examines

sedition and tyrannical rule. Additionally, in question 2 of part II-II, article 5, Aquinas discussed whether the type of weapon used in war affects the morality of the act. Aquinas argues that the choice of weapon is an accidental issue and not essential to ethical precepts that must be respected. This perspective can be used adequately or not to modern considerations of warfare, such as the use of drones or atomic bombs.

Aquinas also delved into the notion of peace in his Treatise on Charity. He posited that the peace we attain in this world is, by its nature, imperfect, due to various internal and external challenges that disrupt it. For Aquinas, true peace is rooted in two essential virtues. It is indirectly cultivated through justice, as justice eliminates the barriers to peace. However, it is charity that directly generates peace, as its very essence fosters harmony. Hence, peace emerges as both a byproduct of justice and a direct result of charity, underlining the importance of both in achieving a just society.

In question 64 of part II-II in the Treatise on Justice found in the *Summa Theologica*, Aquinas delves into the conditions under which killing may be considered lawful. He asserts that taking the life of an innocent person is a sin and articulates the critical Doctrine of Double Effect (DDE) in article 7. This doctrine plays a vital role in the ethical discussions surrounding theology, philosophy, and psychology, particularly in relation to the intentions behind moral actions. Aquinas's profound insights reveal that the DDE is structured around specific ethical criteria that facilitate a rational appraisal of behavior, ultimately helping us evaluate the morality or permissibility of an action. Nothing hinders one act from having two effects, only one of which is intended, while the other is beside the intention. The act intended by the agent does not have to be inherently good or an obligation; however, it must not be intrinsically evil. The harmful effect should arise from the good effect or be directly linked to the action that produces the good effect. Here, the principle of immediacy pertains to causation rather than time, ensuring that negative outcomes are not used as a means to achieve beneficial ones, emphasizing that the ends cannot justify the means. The agent must never intend the harmful effect, whether as a goal or as a means to an end. Lastly, a proportionate reason must exist to justify any harmful effects resulting from the actions taken. This framework not only upholds ethical integrity but also guides us toward making conscientious choices in complex moral dilemmas.

The Doctrine of Double Effect plays a crucial role in the just war debate, particularly in the context of *jus in bello* — how wars should be conducted ethically. It is undeniable that many military actions can inadvertently harm or kill noncombatants. Weapons like atomic bombs and biological agents pose an even greater risk to innocent lives. This

underscores the necessity of stringent ethical considerations in wartime decision-making to minimize civilian casualties.

In exploring the morality of wars, it is also important to consider how Aquinas examined the concept of revenge in his Treatise on Justice from the *Summa Theologica*. A just war can often be viewed as a necessary form of revenge against an injustice suffered. In question 108 of part II-II, Aquinas argues that revenge is not inherently evil; instead, what matters is the intention behind it, which is closely related to the Doctrine of the Double Effect. In revenge, one must strive to focus on achieving good.

Just War Ethics in the Russo-Ukrainian Conflict

In the analysis of the ethics of war in Augustine and Aquinas, notable differences emerge, particularly in their respective perspectives. Augustine argues from the standpoint of human sin, suggesting that war can sometimes be viewed as a merciful act. In contrast, Aquinas approaches the topic from the perspective of human nature, framing war within the theology of charity. Despite these differing viewpoints, both philosophers emphasize that war should aim to achieve justice and peace. They also defend similar criteria for just war, including the necessity of authority, just cause, right intention, proportionality, and last resort.

Augustine places a stronger emphasis on the justice of war and the sins that war can exacerbate. He often perceives prioritizing the innocent as a form of cowardice in the quest for justice. Aquinas, for his part, emphasizes the common good and provides a detailed philosophical framework, particularly in relation to issues of law, sedition, and revenge. He also argues that the choice of weapons in war is a secondary consideration. Furthermore, he emphasizes the importance of discrimination in warfare, specifically highlighting the necessity of protecting innocent individuals.

The Russo-Ukrainian War highlights the complexities of a conflict that bears many similarities to a civil war, including its religious dimensions, which are rooted in the Orthodox Christian traditions of the nations involved. Additionally, it is crucial to consider factors that are unfamiliar to both theologians. It can be challenging to understand their perspectives on NATO, a political-military alliance without any religious basis, or on the Euromaidan uprisings, both of which are central to this conflict. Nor did they consider the moral implications of nuclear weapons or UAVs.

It is often argued that the criteria for just war should not be viewed merely as boxes to check off when met. However, they serve as a

framework for assessing the justice of war. Let's consider these criteria in the ongoing conflict between Russia and Ukraine.

One undeniable fact remains: one nation has invaded another. The justice of war firmly aligns with Ukraine, a country that has faced two invasions — first in 2014 and again in 2022. Thus, Ukraine stands on solid ground when it comes to the justice of war, as it has a legitimate right to defend itself against invasions. Ukraine undeniably meets the criteria of just cause. Ukraine is justified in its actions during the war, as it has a legitimate right to defend itself against invasions. Ukraine undoubtedly meets the criteria for a just cause and right intention.

When considering the criterion of authority, despite the valid critiques aimed at the political systems of both nations, one can still assert that both Ukraine and Russia fulfill this criterion.

In light of the invasions and the failed attempts at diplomacy, there is a compelling argument that Ukraine acted against the invader as a last resort, with the intention of reclaiming parts of its territory that had been taken.

On the other hand, Russia may argue that the principle of preventive war justifies its actions. While philosophers like Augustine and Aquinas did not analyze the ethics of preventive war, this does not exclude it from being deemed just. The concept was indeed explored by earlier thinkers such as Thucydides, who lived long before them. From the Russians' perspective, NATO's expansion may be perceived as a threat to Russian sovereignty. Additionally, Ukraine's ideological shift towards European influence could be seen as a risk to its military position, particularly concerning its naval fleet based in Sevastopol, Crimea. During the Cold War, the USSR reacted to NATO expansion, particularly following the entry of Turkey and West Germany into NATO, by issuing threats, ramping up arms production, and establishing the Warsaw Pact in 1955.

For Russia, Ukraine's proximity to Moscow represents a significant threat, as the terrain lacks natural barriers such as mountains, rivers, swamps, or deserts that could defend Moscow. Furthermore, Ukraine could serve as a staging ground for an invasion of the Volgograd Gap — an area of strategic importance situated between the Black and Caspian Seas, between the Don and Volga rivers in southern Russia, near the city of Volgograd (formerly Stalingrad), which is critical to Russia's geopolitical and economic security. Russia is particularly aware of the historic Battle of Stalingrad, during which the Nazis attempted to control this vital stretch of land[3]. Moreover, if a NATO-aligned Ukraine were to dominate Crimea, it would severely restrict Russia's ability to project political, economic, and

military power in and out of the Black Sea, effectively transforming it into a NATO-Turkish lake.

This geographical challenge has led Russia to adopt a strategy of attrition: to delay invaders, prolong their invasion, and leverage the harsh Russian winter to either defeat them or establish a buffer zone with neighboring countries (Harrel, 2023, p. 30-34). After the dissolution of the Soviet Union and the Warsaw Pact in 1991, the spread of democracy from Poland and Ukraine posed a threat to Russia's autocratic government. A democratic Ukraine is only about 480 kilometers (298 miles) from Moscow.

In terms of proportionality, Ukraine, a country without nuclear weapons, is acting in self-defense as it tries to repel the invader, using both conventional weapons and tactics, as well as drones. On the other hand, Russia has been accused of committing atrocities and war crimes during the conflict. It could also be argued that Russia acted disproportionately in its invasions, as diplomatic solutions could have addressed its concerns about Ukrainian domestic politics, NATO expansion, and the Volgograd Gap. However, the Russian side would likely disagree, claiming that their invasions and support for Russian separatist groups were proportionate to the perceived risks faced by the country.

With the advent of nuclear weapons, the criterion of proportionality — according to which the benefits of war must outweigh its harmful effects — is significantly undermined, since its use can easily have an impact of an unjustifiable magnitude. Aquinas's view that the choice of weapon is an "accidental" issue and not essential to the justice of war must be fundamentally altered.

Recent reports indicate that Russia briefly issued threats of using atomic weapons against Ukraine and even NATO allies, though these threats ultimately did not come to fruition. In contrast, both nations are actively engaging in military actions using conventional weapons and drones. Unlike the devastating impact of atomic bombs, drone warfare today adheres more closely to the principle of proportionality. It aligns with the framework of conventional warfare analysis, emphasizing *jus in bello* and the critical importance of safeguarding non-combatants during conflicts.

Considering the modern criterion of just war called "serious prospects of success", or "chance of victory", which is absent in both Augustine's and Aquinas's writings, a generalized nuclear war leads to destruction not only for the defending country but also for the attacking country. In such a scenario, there are no winners, underscoring the need to reassess our approach to warfare in the nuclear age.

A generalized nuclear war is unjustifiable in the context of a just war. This criterion also directs us to assess the prospects of victory for both

countries involved. Russia is significantly larger — over 25 times the size of Ukraine — and wealthier, with a GDP more than 10 times that of Ukraine in US dollars. Additionally, Russia has a population more than four times that of Ukraine and possesses the largest nuclear arsenal in the world. Ukraine's chances of victory on its own are virtually nonexistent, especially with the potential threat of Russia employing atomic weapons.

Some theorists argue that the criterion of chance of success does not apply to defensive wars, as there is an unavoidable obligation to defend the state. Ukraine's response is certainly rooted in the defense of its sovereignty. But even in defensive wars, the Augustinian criterion of proportionality remains relevant. This principle states that the use of weapons should not result in more serious harm and disruption than the harm being addressed. Given Russia's military and economic power, a full-scale war between Russia and Ukraine, without any restrictions, could lead to Ukraine's destruction. Ukraine has received military and financial support from NATO allied countries to confront Russia. This support has been carefully managed to avoid provoking Russia into using its nuclear arsenal or launching attacks on allied nations. This complex situation was not anticipated by Augustine, Aquinas, or even modern theorists.

Augustine and Aquinas would likely argue that NATO countries are effectively at war with Russia, as they align themselves with Ukraine’s pursuit of victory and actively support the conflict with weapons and funding. Once again, the presence of nuclear weapons significantly alters the calculus for both Russia and Ukraine’s allies, necessitating a reassessment of the proportionality of NATO support to prevent a localized conflict from escalating into a broader war.

Question 64 of the *Summa Theologica* holds significant relevance in the ongoing conflict, impacting not only the nations directly engaged in battle but also Ukraine's Western allies and arms suppliers, such as China and Turkey, who play a less direct role. Aquinas's Doctrine of Double Effect offers a critical lens through which to assess each military and political action during this war. In a world where supplying weapons might bring us closer to nuclear conflict, every decision must adhere to the ethical principles outlined in this Doctrine.

Conclusion

Cultural differences are significant, particularly in western Ukraine, which has a distinct identity separate from Russia. However, Russia and Ukraine share a long history of interdependence, marked by conflicts and humanitarian crises, as well as political unions and land transfers through

administrative acts that underscore their shared history and friendship. The ongoing conflict often resembles a civil war. This parallel is emphasized by the fact that many Ukrainian military leaders were born and trained in Russia, highlighting the close ties between the two nations.

According to the criteria for a just war established by Augustine and Aquinas, Ukraine has more substantial grounds to assert that it is engaged in a just war against Russia. Ukraine is fighting a defensive war that meets several critical criteria, including a just cause, right intentions, legitimate authority, being a last resort, and potentially adhering to the principle of proportionality. In contrast, Russia's position relies on a logic of preventive war, which has weaker solid grounds for being recognized as a just war.

However, due to the nuclear risk involved, the principle of proportionality takes precedence. This criterion imposes limits on both Russian actions and the considerations regarding the possibility of success for Ukraine and its NATO allies.

It is important to note that the criterion of the probability of success, which Augustine or Aquinas did not accept, is not necessary for assessing the justice of a war. Instead, the criterion of proportionality examines whether the war will result in less harm than the evils it seeks to combat. This criterion inherently includes an assessment of success, albeit success can often be a challenging concept to define.

The risks associated with a war involving a country that possesses nuclear weapons extend far beyond the borders of the warring nations. Therefore, Aquinas' Doctrine of Double Effect becomes particularly relevant for all parties involved, both directly and indirectly, to prevent the escalation toward a nuclear conflict. This doctrine posits that an act can have two effects: one intended and another unintended. This principle is crucial for nations engaged in the ongoing conflict between Ukraine and Russia. It is essential to evaluate and continually reassess both acts and intentions, keeping in mind not only the goal of military victory but also the intended and unforeseen consequences for the entire world. While this level of scrutiny can be paralyzing, the existence of atomic weapons makes it an unavoidable ethical responsibility.

Augustine and Thomas Aquinas established universal ethical principles for assessing justice in war and during war, and these principles remain relevant regardless of the historical context or religious affiliations of the nations involved. In the landscape of contemporary warfare, such as the Russo-Ukrainian War, where nuclear weapons and drones play a pivotal role, their criteria and doctrines of military ethics hold steadfast. These principles are crucial and undeniably relevant, guiding our understanding of the moral implications in today's conflicts.

Notes

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[2] Treaty of 1654, in which the Ukrainian Cossack Hetmanate placed itself under Russian protection. The shared Orthodox faith was a key factor in the treaty. The treaty sparked the Russo-Polish War (1654–1667)

[3] In 1941 and 1942, Nazi Germany temporarily captured large portions of Ukraine, Crimea, and parts of the North Caucasus. They sought to control the strategic area around Stalingrad, known as the Volgograd Gap, during World War II (during Operation Barbarossa (1941) and Operation Blue (1942)), to sever Soviet access to the Caucasus oil fields and divide the country. But the Germans suffered a decisive defeat in the Battle of Stalingrad from 1942 to 1943.

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