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World War II: Why Was This War Different?

I

The war against Nazi Germany is an extreme case, but not—one meets young men and women who need to be told—an imaginary case. It happened, and the event (and Nazism itself) has properly been the focus of much of our political and sociological theorizing in the years since. It has not figured largely, however, in our speculations about the just war, for reasons that I hope will become apparent as I write. Revived by the atomic threat and then by the war in Vietnam, American interest in just war theory has been marked, like much else in contemporary thought, by a disbelief in history. The fall of man, it sometimes appears, took place at Hiroshima.¹ There are occasional retrospective glances at Nazi aggression or, more often, at such Allied outrages as the firebombing of Dresden. But these call forth easy judgments, which rarely engage the human experience of those years. I don’t mean that they fail to speak to the suffering caused by the Nazis and by the Allied war against them; they miss the fearfulness, the sense of danger, the ultimate character of the struggle.

Most wars are described in ultimate terms while they are being fought. Soldiers are encouraged, presumably, if they believe that the stakes are high, that freedom, justice, civilization itself are threatened.

¹ Much of the literature on the just war continues to be the work of Christian theologians, who, unless they are very up-to-date, know perfectly well when the fall occurred. I am referring rather to a new way of talking about war, pervasive especially at our universities.
To the historian, or to the detached bystander, these descriptions are rarely plausible. The course of European history might well have been different, for example, had Napoleon won his wars, but it is hard to believe that it would have been more barbarous than it actually has been. Many of us, however, believed at the time and still believe a quarter of a century later that Nazism was an ultimate threat to everything decent in our lives, an ideology and a practice of political domination so murderous, so degrading even to those who might survive, that the consequences of its final victory in World War II were literally beyond calculation, immeasurably awful. We see it—and I don't use the phrase lightly—as evil objectified in the world, and in a form so potent and apparent that there could never have been anything to do but fight against it. It would be valuable to try to say precisely why we feel that way (avoiding the temptation simply to point) and to try also to make comparisons with other examples of evil in the world, with Stalinism above all. I cannot undertake either of these tasks. In this essay, I want only to ask how this perception of evil, which I am going to assume, affects our moral judgments in two cases: the decision, chiefly British, to go to war against Nazi Germany, and the decision, again chiefly British, to carry on that war by bombing German cities and terrorizing the civilian population.

II

To judge the decision to go to war, it is necessary to judge also the previous decisions not to go to war. The morality of appeasement is at issue, and this is a more complicated issue than it has sometimes appeared to be. Since some thirty million people died in the course of World War II, we should surely look with sympathy on all efforts to avoid the war altogether. But appeasement was an effort that failed, and thirty million people died. It is easy, then, to insist on what seems true enough, that the appeasers were an incredibly ignorant, complacent, and cowardly group of men, and to condemn their policy out of hand.² At the time, however, appeasement was supported by people

² This is the line taken, for example, in two informative and highly plausible studies of appeasement: Martin Gilbert and Richard Gott, The Appeasers (London, 1963); and Margaret George, The Warped Vision: British Foreign Policy 1933-1939 (Pittsburgh, 1965).
whom those adjectives don’t describe, and for moral reasons. Not only for those reasons, of course, but they are my immediate concern. First among them was the accurate perception that the costs of the coming war would be carried to a very large degree by the civilian population. In part, this was a self-fulfilling prophecy: the British, not the Germans, planned and built a strategic bombing force capable of a sustained campaign against urban centers. But it is not strange that a government building such a force, and others who knew about it, should be fearful of a war in which it might be used.

The second reason is equally important, if not as a motive, at least as a justification for appeasement. This was the sense, widespread in Britain (though not in France), that the Versailles Treaty had been unjust, that no permanent settlement could be founded on it, and that major changes were necessary in the map of Central Europe—for moral as well as political reasons. British foreign policy had already reflected this feeling in the 1920’s (not only when the Tories were in power), and it continued to do so after 1933. The national government, like the London Times, which consistently mirrored its policy, “saw no reason why an action that was justified by ethics and politics before January, 1933, should be held to be falsified by the events of the 30th of that month.” There is the crux of the matter, for the Nazi seizure of power did in fact change everything, politically and ethically, and if this was not immediately apparent, it ought to have become apparent long before 1939.

Yet Nazi demands were not so different from those frequently expressed by other Germans in the 1920’s. Above all, they were similarly founded—this was the pretense—on the respectable and commonly accepted doctrine of national self-determination. There were, in fact, large German majorities in both the Sudetenland and Danzig, the cri-

3. “When war came, the Germans had no systematic plans for a strategic air offensive against Britain and . . . a bomber force of unimpressive quality” (Noble Frankland, Bomber Offensive: The Devastation of Europe [New York, 1970], p. 12).

4. See A.J.P. Taylor, The Origins of the Second World War (New York, 1968). Taylor’s more controversial assertions about German foreign policy don’t seem to me relevant to the moral questions I raise in this paper.

sis points of 1938 and 1939, and an adjustment of boundaries in these two areas must have seemed to many people a simple case of distributive justice: the land to its people or to the greater number of its people. It is only the further consequences of the distributive act that make it seem horrendous: all the people to the Nazi state.

There were, then, two ways of defending appeasement, by reference to the fear of war and to the right of self-determination. Both of these figure in the argument of a very intelligent little book published in 1939 by the Catholic writer Gerald Vann. I am going to look closely at Vann’s book, because it is the only attempt I have come across to apply just war theory directly to the problem of appeasement (and specifically to the Czech crisis of 1938). “The German government,” Vann begins, “whether its claims were justified or not, or in what degree, had put itself in the wrong by its methods. There could be no doubt that an invasion, in the circumstances in which it was, in fact, threatened in September, would have been an unjust act of aggression.” But he does not conclude from this that the act should have been resisted by the Czechs or the threat resolutely faced by the British. His book is a defense of Munich. He defends that short-lived settlement because of his fear of a general war, but also, I think, because German claims did seem to him at least partially justified: “It is wrong to commit aggression; it may be equally wrong to resist the demands that cause the aggression.” The word “cause” is being used oddly here, but Vann’s meaning could hardly have been lost on anyone reading his book in 1939, and it is stressed in his (unobjectionable) conclusion: “we should do everything . . . in our power to ensure that legitimate grievances are heard, legitimate demands satisfied, without loss of time. . . .”

It is the fear of war, however, rather than any view of justice, that leads Vann to propose what might be called the “Munich principle”: “If a nation finds itself called upon to defend another nation which is unjustly attacked and to which it is bound by treaty, then it is bound to fulfill its obligations. . . . It may, however, be its right, and even its duty, to try to persuade the victim of aggression to avoid the ultimate evil of a general conflict by agreeing to terms less favorable than those

6. *Morality and War* (London, 1939). The quotations that follow are from pp. 31-32, 37, and 41; italics are mine.
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which it can claim in justice . . . provided always that such a surrender of rights would not mean in fact a surrender once and for all to the rule of violence.” The “duty” here is simply “seek peace”—Hobbes’s first law of nature and presumably near the top of Catholic lists as well (though Vann’s phrase “ultimate evil” suggests that it is nearer to the top than in fact it is). This is a duty that rulers of states certainly have; its performance is owed to their own people and to others as well; and it may override other obligations established by international treaties and conventions. But the argument does require the limiting clause at the end, which I would have thought applicable in September 1938. That clause is worth examining, since its purpose is obviously to tell us when to appease and when not—and so when to make war and when not.

Let us imagine a state whose government strives to press its boundaries or its sphere of influence outward, a little bit here, a little bit there, continually over a period of time, using force or the threat of force as these appear necessary—a conventional “great power,” in other words. Certainly the people against whom the pressure is being brought have a right to resist; allied states have a prima facie obligation to support their resistance. But appeasement, in either case, would not, or not necessarily, be immoral; nor would it be difficult to construct a case where there would be a “duty” of the sort Vann suggests to seek peace. (And the duty would seem, or be, greater if the pressure had some moral justification.) Appeasement would involve a surrender to violence, but given a conventional power, it would not or might not involve the absolute subjection of a particular group of people to “the rule of violence.” I take it that absolute subjection or something like that is what Vann intends by “once and for all.” He cannot mean “forever,” for governments fall, states decay, people rebel; we know nothing about forever. “Rule of violence” is a more difficult phrase. We can hardly set the moral limit of appeasement at the point where it means yielding to greater physical force; it almost always means that. As a moral limit, the phrase must point to something more unusual and more frightening: the rule of men committed to the continual use of violence, to a policy of genocide, terrorism, or enslavement. Then appeasement would be, quite simply, a failure to resist evil in the world.
But I do not want to assert a general obligation to resist evil anywhere in the world: one's work would never be done. I am still considering the "Munich principle" and its possible applications. The crucial question concerns the obligation of the people and rulers of a state like Britain to their weaker and threatened allies. The case of rulers probably has to be stressed, even when we are considering democracies, since rulers make decisions affecting others that are reviewed only after the fact and often inadequately by their own people and not at all by the people of allied states. How can they subject their fellow citizens to war because of "a quarrel in a faraway country between peoples of whom we know nothing"—even if the outcome or likely outcome of the quarrel is the triumph of evil (far away)?

The appropriate response to Chamberlain's extraordinary statement is to point out that the British knew a great deal about both Czechs and Germans. They knew (at any rate, the information was available to them) what sort of government the Germans had, what it was doing in its own country, and what it was likely to do in any country it came to rule.7 And they knew that they had an alliance with the Czechs. Now it is possible to conceive of a world in which states have no relations whatsoever with one another, just as political theorists have sometimes constructed the mental image of a world of utterly dissociated individuals. Then there would be no obligations at all and no reason for any state or individual to be concerned about the moral condition of any other. It is not clear that one could even formulate the idea of a moral condition in such circumstances. But we do not live in either of these possible worlds. The British government had in fact obligations to the Czechs and good reason to worry about the moral condition of Germany. It might in good faith apply the "Munich principle" and seek to persuade the Czechs to yield to German demands only so long as yielding did not mean surrendering the Czechs "once and for all to the rule of violence." I find it very difficult to accept that any consideration for the safety of Britain or the peace of the world could override the obligation not to urge or to enforce such a surren-

7. British news correspondents in Germany sent home brutally honest reports. Geoffrey Dawson, editor of the Times, friend of Chamberlain, and one of the chief appeasers, "doctored the dispatches" in order to conceal the truth (George, The Warped Vision, p. 144).
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der. The appeasement of Nazis at the expense of Czechs cannot be described as the overriding of obligations to the Czechs; it is their total renunciation. I can be committed to protect another man and yet urge that he surrender his purse to an armed thief; but I cannot urge that he surrender his life to a murderer, without denying my commitment altogether or breaking my faith.

It can't be said, however, that I am bound by my commitment to attack the murderer myself if I cannot do so effectively or if the likely outcome is my own destruction or the death of other people for whom I am responsible. Obligations to perform this or that specific action, to declare war or to fight, for example, can be overridden by conflicting duties. But war is never the only alternative to appeasement: there are sanctions short of war (including the threat of war), and if nothing else is possible or other duties intervene, there remains at least the residual obligation not to make one's peace with the necessary surrender, to refuse to recognize or to admit that it is (in the usual sense of the term) "once and for all." Not to fight now may be justified or excusable, but "peace in our time" is obscene. We are bound to resist the evil that threatens or consumes our friends and allies at least to this extent: that we maintain our recognition of it as evil, declare our lasting hostility to it, prepare, by whatever means are appropriate, to fight against it.

Nor is it the case that whether we wage war against it or not depends simply on a calculation as to the number of lives likely to be lost if there is war or peace. Probably such calculations cannot be made with any degree of accuracy, but even if they were accurate, they would not be sufficient. Suppose that Nazism had triumphed unresisted in Europe and that its "rule of violence" had resulted in twenty million deaths before an internal coup had produced a "moderate" military regime and ended the reign of terror. But thirty million people (including some but not all of the first twenty million) died in the course of World War II. Foreknowledge of these outcomes would still not provide a sufficient reason for avoiding the war, because the human losses involved in a Nazi victory are not losses of life alone,

8. Thus, Britain declared war in September 1939, but made no move to help the Poles, her leaders arguing, probably rightly, that they had no means of doing so effectively and were compelled to buy time.
and the gains of war or peace cannot be measured simply in lives saved. I don't doubt that the rulers of the state have a very strong obligation to preserve the lives of their people, and so calculations of this sort should never be foreign to them. They have no right to a heroic disdain for such matters. But the social union is something more than a pact for the preservation of life; it is also a way of living together and (inevitably) of living with other peoples and other unions, and there is something here that needs to be preserved as well. In the choice between Nazi victory and resistance through war (when victory is possible), there is human degradation and enslavement on the one side and dignity, courage, and solidarity on the other. Here it is not possible simply to count. One relies on moral intuitions which can be defended and articulated, it seems to me, only in terms of a theory of evil.

But what is there to say if we are told that the Tory government of Britain, the cabinet of appeasement, did not regard the Nazi regime as evil? Many Tories seem in fact to have felt that the Nazis, while certainly very crude people, were doing what needed to be done in Central Europe, weeding out radicals, Jews, and trade unionists, building a bastion against the Bolsheviks. Given such a view, appeasement is easily defensible, even if it means "persuading" Czechs (and others) to accept a settlement that is less than just or that is enforced by the Nazis with violence or the threat of violence. And then, those of us who regard the German regime as a force for evil (and especially those of us who are radicals, Jews, and trade unionists) must also regard the Tories as our enemies and fight them on the way to fighting the Nazis. We ought to distinguish, of course, between Tory complicity and Nazi crime.

There is a further question: What is there to say if the men who eventually do fight the Nazis do not regard them as evil—or do not regard the struggle against the evil of Nazism as their primary purpose? Theorists of the just war usually require that soldiers and their political and military commanders have just intentions, but this is one

9. "It was widely felt in British political and financial circles that such a useful bulwark against Communism as Hitler, deserved sympathy and support" (Paul Einzig, Appeasement Before, During and After the War [London, 1942], pp. 53-54).
of the most difficult and obscure features of their theory. Do they mean, for example, only just intentions or just intentions among others? There are always others: men hope for many things from the end of a war. “In 1939,” writes a British historian, “Britain went to war, not to destroy Nazism, but to prevent the further spread of German domination in Europe.”10 At the time, the two purposes were served by the same action and probably could not have been served in any other way. The destruction of Nazism, one might say, was the foreseeable side effect of the British war against German imperialism. Nor was it an effect the British leaders were unwilling to have; many of them certainly hoped for it. But it was not their chief purpose. Now one could oppose “German domination” even if there were no such thing as Nazism, but I am not sure that one could justly oppose it by all-out war. Does the existence of a Nazi regime in Germany justify the war? I am inclined to think that it does, but I want more importantly to insist that the war would not have been justified if its only purpose and foreseeable effect had been to prevent Germany from winning a position in international affairs comparable to that of Britain herself in the nineteenth century. Then the “Munich principle” might well apply, and appeasement become a duty—if it were in fact the only way to avoid the carnage of a worldwide conflict. And the same judgment would have to be passed with reference to my next case, and with even greater emphasis: the bombing of cities is surely not a justified response to a conventional imperialism.

III

The British have not, at least, tried to conceal the character of the war they chose to fight. It was late in 1940 that the decision to bomb cities was made. A directive issued in June of that year had “specifically laid down that targets had to be identified and aimed at. Indiscriminate bombing was forbidden.” In November, after the German raid on Coventry, “Bomber Command was instructed simply to aim at the center of a city.” What had once been called indiscriminate bomb-

10. Martin Gilbert, Britain and Germany Between the Wars (London, 1964), p. 70. Gilbert may mean only that the British would not have gone to war, and did not, to destroy Nazism in Germany—a point which raises many difficult questions that I cannot consider here.
ing was now required, and by early 1942 aiming at military or industrial targets within cities was barred: “the aiming points are to be the built-up areas, not, for instance, the dockyards or aircraft factories.”

The purpose of the raids was explicitly declared to be the destruction of civilian morale. Following the famous minute of Lord Cherwell in 1942, the means to this demoralization was further specified: working-class residential areas were the prime targets. Cherwell thought it possible to render a third of the German population homeless by the middle of 1943.

Now the rule against the deliberate killing of civilians (noncombatants) in wartime is very old and its moral value widely recognized. Its application to the problems of aerial bombardment was, in 1940, fairly recent, not yet incorporated in international treaties and conventions, but there could be no doubt as to the practical requirements of the rule, broadly understood. Thus an international commission of jurists meeting in The Hague in the 1920’s concluded that: “Aerial bombardment destined to terrorize the civilian population, or to destroy or damage private property which has no military character, or to wound noncombatants, is prohibited.” These prohibitions and the rule from which they follow can be defended in a variety of ways, of which I will single out two, without attempting to choose between them. It can be defended first as a limit upon the destructive force of warfare which is generally useful to mankind—useful over time, that is, since its violation might at any given moment serve the interests of one party or another. Doubtless, the precise marking of the limit, the definition of noncombatant, proves in every war a troublesome and ultimately an arbitrary matter. But this is not a satisfactory criticism of the argument for the utility of the rule. There are conventional guidelines that can be followed and, what is more important, clear cases on either side of any particular disputed line. It is the acceptance

11. Frankland, *Bomber Offensive*, pp. 24ff. I should note that the Americans, when they came into the war, tended to favor precision bombing—though not for moral reasons. American pilots did join in attacks on cities (Dresden, for example) and later made terror bombing their policy in the war against Japan. But I will confine myself here to a discussion of the British decision.


of these conventions and the recognition of the clear cases that is generally useful, and that is all the rule requires.

The rule can also be defended because of the intrinsic value it attaches to human personality. It requires that we pay attention to what men and women are actually doing, that we regard and treat them as responsible agents. So we fight soldiers, who are armed and trained and committed to fight us (whether or not they are actually engaged in combat). But we do not fight civilians who, whatever their hopes for our destruction, are not engaged in bringing it about. Obviously, this defense is challenged by the claim, frequently made, that there are no noncombatants in modern war. That claim is certainly exaggerated (small children are always, one might say eternally, noncombatants), but I am inclined to think it is false unless stated very modestly indeed. In modern war, there are fewer noncombatants than ever before. This minimal claim follows from the conventional recognition that munitions workers are at least partial combatants, subject to attack in their factories (though not at home)—for modern war requires a very large industrial plant. But there remain vast numbers of people who are not engaged in any activity properly called war-making. In the words of the philosopher G.E.M. Anscombe, they "are not fighting and not engaged in supplying those who are with the means of fighting.”14 Intentional attacks on them do not seem to me properly called combat. Such attacks victimize and exploit innocent people, turning them into means to an end which, it must be stressed again, they were not opposing in any military way, though they may have opposed it in other ways when they were alive. In the bombing of cities, civilians are effectively claimed as hostages by the enemy and, like more conventional hostages, are degraded from moral agents to human pawns even before they are murdered.

It should be clear that I have been using words like “responsible,” “innocent,” and “moral agent” in a special sense in the preceding paragraph. These are all words that can be used in a perfectly ordinary way with reference to criminal action. But war, even when it is an aggressive war, is not necessarily the criminal action of soldiers or munitions workers. With reference to the war itself, they may not be

14. G.E.M. Anscombe, Mr. Truman’s Degree (privately printed, n.d.). This is one of the best defenses of the immunity of noncombatants.
agents at all and not personally responsible. And then they are innocent in the ordinary sense of that word, which means that they cannot rightly be punished. But they can be resisted and attacked because, as Miss Anscombe says, they are engaged in harming (even if the harming is justified). Their own options may be radically limited: they can only hide, flee, surrender, or work and fight. Nevertheless, we treat them (and, what is more important, the others, who are not engaged in harming) as persons in the only way we can, given the conditions of war—by paying attention to the activites in which they are actually engaged. In peacetime, we “pay attention” differently, looking to past actions, intentions, extenuations, and so on. I don’t want to argue, however, that these last considerations do not figure at all in our wartime thinking. I shall suggest later on one way in which they cut across the combatant-noncombatant distinction.

A number of reasons have been given for the British decision to attack German cities. From the beginning, the attacks were defended as reprisals for the German blitz. This defense was thought to be politically popular and was energetically argued by the Prime Minister, who apparently also believed that reprisal raids were necessary for British morale. “The British airforce,” he promised in a radio broadcast in 1941, would make “the German people taste and gulp each month a sharper dose of the miseries they have showered upon mankind.” It is interesting to note that a Gallup poll of this same year showed that “the most determined demand for [reprisal raids] came from Cumberland, Westmorland, and the North Riding of Yorkshire, rural areas barely touched by bombing, where some ¾ of the population wanted them. In central London, conversely, the proportion was only forty-five percent.” Doubtless, Churchill had more political support in Cumberland, Westmorland, and the North Riding than in central London, but there was room for leadership here and obvious counterarguments to be made to the reprisal defense. I won’t attempt to make them now, since I want to concentrate on the military justifications for terror bombing, which, we must assume, were paramount in Churchill’s mind also. I should note, however, that the de-

16. Ibid., p. 229.
In terms of civilian morale, which is or might be a military justification, seems highly implausible. The news that Germany was being bombed was certainly glad tidings in Britain, but as late as 1944 the overwhelming majority of Britishers still believed that the raids were directed solely against military targets. Presumably that is what they wanted to believe—there was quite a bit of evidence to the contrary—but that says something about the character of their morale. (It should also be said that the campaign against terror bombing, run largely by pacifists, won very little popular support.)

I can only discuss the military arguments in a general way. There was a great deal of dispute at the time, largely about technical matters: the calculations of the Cherwell minute, for example, were sharply attacked by a group of men whose opposition to terror bombing may well have had moral grounds, but whose position was never, to the best of my knowledge, stated in moral terms. These disputes are not my concern here, except insofar as the doubts they raised enter (as they must) into political and moral calculations. First of all, then, it became clear early in the war that, given the navigational devices then available, no target smaller than a fairly large city could reasonably be aimed at. A study made in 1941 indicated that of those planes that actually did attack their target (that is, two-thirds of the attacking force), only one-third dropped their bombs within five miles of the point aimed at. Once this was known, it would seem dishonest to claim that the intended target was, say, this aircraft factory and that the indiscriminate destruction around it was only an unintended, if foreseeable, consequence of the justified attempt to stop the production of planes. What was really unintended but foreseeable was that the factory itself would probably escape harm. If strategic bombing was to make any sense, one would have to plan the destruction one could (and did) cause. Lord Cherwell’s minute was an effort at such planning. In fact, of course, navigational devices were rapidly improved as the war went on, and the bombing of specific military targets continued, receiving at times (before the June 1944 invasion of France, for example) top priority and severely limiting Bomber Command’s ability to destroy cities. Today many experts believe that the

17. Ibid., p. 491.
war might have been ended sooner had there been a greater concentration of air power against targets like the German oil refineries. But the decision to bomb cities was made at a time when victory was, literally, not in sight and the specter of defeat ever present. And it was made when no other decision seemed possible if there was to be any serious offensive against Germany.

Bomber Command was the only offensive weapon available to the British in those frightening years, and I expect there is some truth to the notion that it was used simply because it was available. "It was the only force in the west," writes Sir Arthur Harris, chief of Bomber Command from 1942 until the end of the war, "which could take offensive action... against Germany, our only means of getting at the enemy in a way that would hurt at all." Offensive action could have been postponed until (or in the hope of) some more favorable time; there was even considerable military pressure for postponement. Harris was hardpressed to keep his Command together in the face of repeated calls for tactical air support (which would have been coordinated with ground action largely defensive in character, since the German armies were still advancing everywhere). Sometimes, in his memoirs, he allows himself to sound like a bureaucrat defending his function and his office, but obviously he was also defending a certain conception of how the war might best be fought. He did not believe that the weapons he commanded should be used because he commanded them. He believed that the tactical use of bombers could not win the war and that the destruction of cities ("the only possible policy for Bomber Command at that time") could win it. That is an argument requiring careful examination. It was apparently accepted by the Prime Minister. "The bombers alone," Churchill had said as early as September 1940, "provide the means of victory."

The bombers alone—that poses the issue very starkly and perhaps wrongly, given the disputes over strategy to which I have already re-

20. Sir Arthur Harris, Bomber Offensive (London, 1947), p. 74. Harris claims to have been skeptical about the prospect of civilian demoralization; he favored the bombing of cities because he thought that was the only way to destroy German industry.
21. Ibid., p. 88.
ferred. At the very least, Churchill's statement suggested a certainty to which neither he nor anyone else had any right. But the issue can be stated so as to accommodate a certain skepticism and to permit even the most sophisticated among us to indulge in a common fantasy: suppose I sat in the seat of power and had to decide whether or not to use Bomber Command. Suppose further that unless bombers were used, and used (in the only way they could be used systematically and effectively) against cities, the probability that Germany would eventually be defeated would be radically reduced. It makes no sense to fill in figures; I have no notion what the probabilities actually were or even how they should have been calculated had our present knowledge been available, nor any precise understanding of how different figures would affect the moral argument. But it does seem to me that the more certain a German victory appeared to be in the absence of a bomber offensive, the more justifiable was the decision to launch the offensive.

Before developing this argument, however, I want to deal with a more frequently encountered version of the military defense, heavily stressed by Harris. Here the emphasis is not on the probability of victory itself, but rather on the time and price of victory. Bomber Command, it is claimed, ended the war sooner than it would otherwise have been ended and, despite the immense civilian casualties it inflicted, at a lower cost in human lives. Assuming this claim to be true (I have already indicated that precisely opposite claims are made by some historians and strategists), it is nevertheless not sufficient to justify the bombing.23 The utility of the general rule cannot be denied on the basis of evidence that the rule is harmful in this or that present case, since it has presumably been beneficial in the past and its erosion or rejection might be disastrous for the future. At the very least, evidence would have to be presented that looked to the future and suggested that the long-term balance was in favor of life and not death. Arguments more or less of this sort were made at the time (not by Harris); they commonly took the form of a kind of deterrence theory. Bombing, suggested George Orwell, for example, brought the true

character of modern warfare home to the civilian population, to all those people who supported the war, even enjoyed it, only because they did not feel its effects; now they felt them, and so war was less likely in the future. I doubt that there is enough evidence for this argument actually to lead anybody to begin bombing cities; it is an apology after the fact, and not a very convincing one.

In any case, the defense of the rule, even the utilitarian defense, need not be concerned only with the preservation of life. The presumed benefits of the rule reach further than that; there is much else that we might plausibly want to preserve—the quality of our lives, for example, our civilization and morality, our collective abhorrence of murder, even when it seems to serve, as it always does, some narrow purpose. Then the deliberate slaughter of innocent men and women cannot be justified simply because it saves the lives of other men and women. I suppose it is possible to imagine cases that make that last assertion hard: where the number of people involved is small; the probability of saving six, say, at the cost of killing one, is very high; the events are hidden from the public eye; and so on. I won't discuss such cases here, but only suggest that they are somehow put out of our minds by the sheer scale of the calculations necessary in World War II. To kill 278,966 civilians (the number is made up) in order to avoid the deaths of an unknown but probably larger number of civilians and soldiers is surely a bizarre, godlike, frightening, and horrendous act. This is not simply because no one can possibly know enough to justify murder on such a scale (he would have to know everything), but also because the knowledge he claims to have and the evil he hopes to avoid are neither of them radical or extreme enough even to explain his action. He is guilty of a drastic attack on our entire civilization, and his only defense is that he hoped to save and may have saved some of our lives.

But suppose that civilization itself is really at stake, that the question is not the price of victory, but victory simply, and our defeat will


25. Nor is it wrong to suggest, for reasons given above, that the lives involved have to be weighed differently: killing civilians is worse than killing soldiers.
be a triumph not for some conventional them, but specifically for the Nazis. With this knowledge in mind, I find myself moving uneasily toward the decision Churchill made, though not, perhaps, for his (or all of his) reasons. Given the view of Nazism I have been assuming, the issue takes this form: Should I wager this determinate crime against that immeasurable evil? Obviously, if there is some other way of avoiding the evil or even a reasonable chance of another way, I must wager differently or elsewhere. But I can never hope to be sure; even if I wager and win, it is still possible that I was wrong, that my crime was unnecessary to victory. But I can argue that I studied the case as closely as I was able, took the best advice I could find, and so on. If this is right, and my perception of evil not hysterical or self-serving, then surely I must wager. There is no option; the risk otherwise is too great. My own action is determinate, of course, only as to its immediate consequences, while the rule which bars such acts looks to the future, but I dare to say that there will be no future or no foreseeable future for civilization and its rules unless I accept the burdens of criminality.26

But if my crime is not determinate at all, if we imagine Sir Arthur Harris, for example, in possession of and ready to use the first atomic bomb, then the risks are probably no longer acceptable. And it is no longer necessary or morally possible to accept the risks as soon as the threat of immeasurable evil passes. That is why it is so easy to condemn the attack on Dresden in 1945, which killed so many thousands of people and may or may not have hastened the end of the war by a few days: there was no longer even a remote chance of a Nazi victory.27 Indeed, the worst of the destruction of German cities took place after the greatest danger was long past and cannot be defended with the sorts of arguments I have been using.

All this has been very hard to write, and one of the most difficult and puzzling features of the argument has until now remained hidden. Is there any reason to find the moral burdens of the bombing more acceptable because the cities bombed were German? Allied
planes did bomb French cities and kill many Frenchmen, but they always did this while bombing what were or were thought to be military targets. They did not aim at the “built-up areas” of French cities. Suppose they had: the theory that distinguishes combatants from noncombatants does not distinguish Allied from enemy noncombatants, not at least with regard to the question of their murder. Yet I would find the wager far more difficult to undertake or defend if, through some strange combination of circumstances, it required the deliberate slaughter of French civilians. It is at this point that considerations of responsibility and moral agency (in the ordinary sense) necessarily enter our thinking. They do not justify bombing cities or killing civilians, but they may explain or help explain why, assuming some other reason for doing these things, one only aims at certain cities and intends to kill certain civilians. The argument here is perhaps analogous to that general view of punishment which holds that one does not punish people because they are guilty, but that one nevertheless only punishes guilty people. I do not mean to suggest some sort of collective guilt shared by German combatants and noncombatants alike. But it does make sense to say that there were a great many more people in German cities responsible, in however diminished a degree, for the evil of Nazism than there were in French cities. And that may be sufficient to explain the feeling I have alluded to above, which other people probably share and are as uneasy about as I am.

IV

It is undoubtedly reckless to talk of immeasurable evil. Someone will surely come along and suggest a way of measuring the Nazi


29. The issue might be clarified if we imagine a German city in which no children lived and where all the adults had actively supported the Nazi Party. Whatever punishment ought to be imposed on those adults surely ought not to be imposed on them by bombing their city. Bombing the city would be a crime, if only because it would be punishing the inhabitants without a trial. Yet if it appeared that Nazism could be defeated in no other way, one would hesitate less before committing that crime than if there were innocent people among the inhabitants of the city. (This example was suggested to me at a discussion of my paper by members of the Society for Ethical and Legal Philosophy.)
threat to civilized values. What is even more likely is that many people will insist that there have been numerous threats no less serious, whether measurable or not, in recent political history. I am prepared to argue that last point. But it is probably more important to recognize that disagreements will in fact occur, and other men at other times will be tempted to make the ultimate wager. Who would refuse to fight at Armageddon? Unfortunately, there are always going to be soldiers on the battlefields of Blenheim who think they are standing at Armageddon and who are prepared to risk some awful crime for the sake of victory. That is why moral rules are so important and why they are usually stated and probably should be stated (in international law, for example) in absolute terms.

It is tempting, though it would be wrong, to say that Nazism requires us to recognize the limits of the absolute. It is more prosaic, and probably right, to say, as my previous arguments require, that the rules are not absolute. They establish very strong presumptions against certain sorts of actions, like the deliberate killing of noncombatants. These are not irrebuttable presumptions, however, even if the conventional rebuttals have to be rejected. It is possible to imagine situations where one would break the rules and accept the moral consequences of doing so. And it is possible to find such situations in recent history. I realize that I have not suggested criteria by which they might be recognized; that still needs to be done, and while it will obviously not be difficult to offer a formal description of immeasurability, the substance of evil is much harder to grasp and explain, at least for secular minds like my own. All I have done here is to single out World War II as a case where a wager against the rules might be morally required. That is what makes World War II different.