

# A brief war dictionary<sup>1</sup>

JOHANNES ADAMSEN

If you, like me, find it challenging to make sense of the daily dose of war news, a little reference book might be helpful. The intention is to clarify and enlighten and - I admit - to confuse in a hopefully thought-provoking way:

**Antisemitism.** An anti-word for something that doesn't exist: Semitism. Semites were previously used for peoples with Semitic languages (e.g., Arabs and Hebrews). Today, the word is used for people who are against, detest, and hate Jews - and as the Danish author Aksel Sandemose writes about Espen Arnakke, they are after him, not for what he has done, but for what he is, or is claimed to be. The irony is that they, the antisemites, know nothing about "Semitism," i.e., Judaism. We can roughly outline three historical forms of antisemitism. A religious antisemitism based on Christianity, where Jews are often (falsely) identified with the Israelites in the Old Testament; secondly, racist antisemitism, which, following Darwin, claims the Jews as an inferior and dangerous race; thirdly, political antisemitism, where Jews are made responsible for everything the Israeli state does. You give yourself the right (see Terrorist) to beat up Jews in Copenhagen because you hate Netanyahu. Sadly, modern political antisemitism can pick up the slurs and insults of earlier forms.

**Children.** Even if they are halfway grown-ups, these small people regularly appear in reports of war and other madness. It is often unclear whether the fact that children are also killed and wounded is a more heinous crime than ordinary war crimes. Before modernity, killing enemy children or enlisting them as (perhaps future) warriors was quite common. If there was one, the argument was that evil should be nipped in the bud. With modernity and, not least, individuality and, to a certain extent, a softening of the culture of violence and war, children were no longer seen as afflicted with original sin or as part of a family or community; they were to be judged by their deeds, so they were innocent by definition. What strikes us about the word children is not just mutilation and death; it's the very meaninglessness of war - what have they done? As if most of them have done anything (see Civilians). Danish poet Inger Christensen writes beautifully and chillingly: "But children they are not/ there is no one to carry them anymore." A kind of definition of a child: To be carried, physically and spiritually. Not only are children affected by the incomprehensible and meaningless, but they lose the adult world that

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should embody their future. Children are no longer children but forced adults in a human and cultural void.

**Civilians** A common phrase in reports is that so and so many innocent civilians have been hit, killed, or wounded (see Killed and wounded). It is often emphasized that they are innocent, innocent of what? And is guilt enough of a reason? What is probably more hidden in the recurring phrase is that it is particularly bad that it affects civilians. As if it is not characteristic of modern wars that civilians suffer the most! But why isn't it just as bad if it's soldiers? Is it because they are supposed to be able to defend themselves? Or that they are believed to be there voluntarily, all of them? Soldiers are not someone's brother or boyfriend or son - or sister?

**Cold War.** A state where there is a kind of peace (wars are relegated to the periphery of the superpowers) but under threat of total annihilation (cruelly humorously summarized by the acronym MAD, Mutual Assured Destruction). The state is meaningless, almost nihilistic. How do you defend yourself against the threat of self-destruction? Like threatening a suicide candidate with death? What have we - politically and ethically - inherited and carried on from the Cold War atmosphere? How to think ethically here, cf. Russia's threats of nuclear bombs? And why weren't they removed for good after the fall of the Berlin Wall? The 1970 Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty was not only meant to prevent new countries from acquiring nuclear weapons but since then, even though the treaty has probably been successful, several countries, including India, Pakistan, and North Korea, have also acquired them (what about Israel). Art. 6 says that nuclear weapon countries must work towards reduction, preferably elimination. Good idea.

**Conflict.** A conflict with your girlfriend or teacher is the same word used when journalists write and talk about the conflict in Gaza. I know the range of meanings of words, but aren't war and conflict different states?

**Education.** It's easiest to think of war only as something between adult soldiers and - impossible to miss - something between soldiers, airplane bombings, drones, and missiles on the one hand and hapless civilians on the other. However, war also affects the entire education system: there are suddenly friends and enemies. Even in relatively democratic countries, it may seem legitimate for free teachers to incorporate an ongoing war into their teaching and choice of materials, where the courtyard of war (see Ideology and Translation) either appears or remains invisible. Regarding education, peace, intercultural understanding, and dialogue, i.e., open teaching, are crucial. Unfortunately, bringing war into education is as common as it is destructive to the end of war. It may be helpful to be aware that in global history, the divide between them and us tends to be, first and foremost, a divide between decent people and 'inhumans.' War reinforces this divide; good education counteracts it. Art and literature from the other further understanding and therefore is civilizing and makes for good education, 'Bildung'; or else the alternative, instead of reading the other, our representation of others takes the forefront. Education is understanding; understanding is translation.

**Fanatic.** A fanatic is an ideologue with a mission, i.e., everyone must be converted (see ideology), or a narrow-minded and embittered person with a single purpose. Crucially different to the ideologue, who may be prone to violence, the fanatic is either violent or stumblingly close

to it (see Terrorist). A fanatic often feels personally offended by the world, so any disagreement is a new offense.

**Genocide.** A legal term for the most violent of all crimes. However, it is also a term that hides rather than portrays horrors in international media. Heinrich Böll once, while drinking his morning coffee, saw a newspaper report about—if I remember correctly—a family tragedy. The report was three lines long, and he put three sugar cubes over it. There you go: so much suffering under three sugar cubes. The metaphor should be lost on no one.

If you think about how violent abduction, torture, and murder of one human being is, the murder - with or without prior horrors - of 10 people is unimaginable, a massacre. What about the 13 people being massacred at Columbine High School? Thirteen. It is still an open wound 25 years later. But we have gotten used to much more. 22,000 (Katyn 1942), 500,000-1,000,000 (Rwanda 1994), 1,390,000 (Cambodia 1975-79). Mao's China, the Taiping Rebellion before that (1850-64), Stalin's Russia, Hitler's Germany. Is the truth that 13 in Columbine is outrageous, 22,000 is just a number? - Concretization: Assuming it takes 30 seconds to type the name and year of birth, correctly spelled, of an individual, it would take 23 working days of 8 hours each without a break to type 22,000 names, a good month of work. Mass murder, crime against humanity, massacre, genocide. The standstill of the imagination.

**Hospitals and rescuers.** At least since Henri Dunant founded the Red Cross more than 150 years ago, we have respected help of all kinds for the wounded in war. We like to think so. Yet bombing or capturing hospitals, murdering rescuers or other aid workers seems particularly violent. But isn't that exactly what war does (see War), at least, especially where war takes on an aspect of extermination?

**Hostages/Prisoners.** On Oct. 7, 2023, Hamas and several other groups took about 240 hostages in a brutal and terrorist attack on Israel. And at least 4,700 Palestinians are imprisoned in Israel, many of them without conviction, not yet sentenced, and - almost certainly - convicted under questionable evidence and dubious laws; among them, over 1,100 were detained for 'security' reasons. Note that Hamas takes hostages; Israel takes prisoners/detainees (see Warriors). The positive difference is that regarding prisoners - maybe - you can be told something by someone in a system that - again, maybe - can be held accountable. The common denominator is that you are unsure of the health and well-being of both; torture exists in both places, and it spreads fear (see Terror III).

Kant pointed out that the earth is round, so you cannot escape indefinitely. This gives a new dimension to the prison, which most people in democratic constitutional states associate with criminals. This new dimension is the camp. From the Boer War (1899-1902) to the concentration camps and Gulag and further to China's Laogai and Sudan, refugees are held in camps as both prisoners and hostages (see Refugees).

**House and home.** Repeated footage from diverse places in Europe and the US, the unhappy people with their summer cottages flooded and, to a considerable extent, destroyed by seawater and sewage, in other places, in other countries with snakes, reptiles, and other unpleasant and dangerous things. And for many, these are just vacation homes. It is not difficult to imagine the scale of the disaster for the individual standing outside their bombed-out house. After all, a home is not just a house but a house that the human enterprise has built and furnished, transforming the material into a living framework for human life. A home is not just a

place to come home to; as the saying goes, it is also a place you can walk away from (in the expectation of returning; see Refugee). In Gaza, at least half the houses were destroyed, similarly, in eastern Ukraine. Sudan, Myanmar – and other places are not mentioned; we are not interested - we have decided. Corresponding to the number of houses is the number of 'displaced' people (see Refugees).

**Human Rights.** Various parts of the war are regularly claimed to violate human rights, even though every war that is not defensive naturally violates them. Human rights are routinely thematized as 'Western,' but typically by dictators, whereas people, such as Protestants in Beijing in 1989, see nothing other than the rights of all people. The problem is not only that they are called universal and have become a kind of 'hyper-good' concerning everything national and regional but also that the Universal Declaration of 1948 somehow places itself in third place beyond ethics and law. First, they are universal in their appeal structure: Suddenly and historically, a citizen - and we are talking about a world predominantly shaped by nation-states (with all the negative side effects) - can appeal a national judgment to a supranational body. And even though its only power is the power of words, not many countries love a judgment that goes against them. The power of the word is strong; therefore, the appeal to human rights is strong. The fall of the Berlin Wall arguably begins with the Helsinki Agreement of 1975, where the Soviet Union directly accepts human rights. This is related to the second problem, which is the strange status of human rights before they become actual law, such as the supra-regional human rights courts, including the UN. The very fact that human rights are neither ethics (and thus embedded in existing cultures) nor law in the first place; they are tied to a strange, that is, remarkable, way of thinking about human dignity: It is not supported by any other reason, but open to non-universal cultural and religious justifications. It has a dialogical appealing force: one cannot, even implicitly, ask any human being about his opinion on his own life and health without admitting his dignity (see also Education); the question, may I torture you, is meaningless!

**Ideology.** Ideology is a frozen worldview that is never wrong. The opponent always has the burden of proof, but any counterargument/evidence only indicates that the opponent is outside the truth. An ideology appears all-encompassing and often involves religion and nation. There is an open and dialogical religion and a closed and closing one, and there is the love of country with respect for the ditto of others and without. However, in ideology, the others are no longer others; they are wrong. Ideology has two front yards: 1. doubt and 2. the self-opinionated. Ad 1: Doubt because it gnaws and becomes unbearable, not a healthy skepticism about certain things, but a general doubt on the way towards despair that can turn into ideology, where everything makes sense - but to the exclusion of large parts of life. Ad 2: The self-opinionated, where it is not enough to be right, but where the right must always be taken home with a trump card and preferably worship - and this applies in all relationships: nothing is too small for a discussion, nothing too insignificant for my right to be enforced. Israeli poet Yehuda Amichai (1924-2000): "From the place where we are right/Flowers will never grow/In the spring".

So, ideology has two courtyards and is itself the courtyard of war (see Fanatic), because in ideology, honest disagreement has disappeared in favor of a friend-enemy dichotomy. Ideology does not tolerate compromise. Ideology often attracts and is nourished by intellectuals.

**Infrastructure.** The culture we don't talk about, but which in modern conditions turns culture into more by handling roads, energy, water, waste, and sewage. The latest episode of 'Alone in the Wilderness' shows what happens if you starve and freeze, i.e., weight loss and hypothermia. It's bad but voluntary; there is help nearby. And there are no children or sick people. I was a boy in the Danish town Viborg in the late seventies when the heat supply across large parts of the city broke down in considerable cold: we sat in the kitchen with an oven and random heat supply, football in cold halls with very cold water in the shower. And there were no broken windows, rockets, or explosions around us. Luxury! No one was bombing the supply crew while they were repairing. Again: Luxury!

**Killed and wounded.** Ugly numbers sting the eyes daily in newspapers and media from Ukraine and Gaza - fortunately, the horrific figures from Sudan, for example, are not mentioned! But how many people are involved every time someone dies? 10? 40? 100? mourners? And what does injury mean? Broken arm, rendering you incapacitated? Or severely brain damaged? Permanently mentally destabilized? Paralyzed from the neck down? Legs blown off? We only know from our own 'veterans' that PTSD, often severe, is a consequence of maybe just a few months at war. What horror lurks behind the numbers (see Metaphysical Anxiety)?

**The laws of war.** A necessary, perhaps even deft, attempt to square the circle. In war, almost all laws are silent, from the protection of the sick and wounded to civilians. However, they remain silent, depending on the nature of the laws, as they were just before the war. But the new thing is that there may be a reckoning when the war is over. Nuremberg. Milošević. Will that deter anyone, e.g., Putin? I'll omit a question mark here.

**Merchants of death.** Oh, we almost forgot. The arms industry is thriving. And they can sell tried and tested equipment, from knives and rifles to missiles, tanks, and fighter jets. And the ubiquitous drones. Experts are baffled by the rise in military spending over the past year. As if we hadn't known for a long time that schools and biodiversity would thrive if all that money ... etc., etc. Devilish dilemma: We can't just let North Korea, China, Iran, and Russia produce for their own "use" (see Killed and Wounded). My youthful exercise in the human imagination, namely in understanding lack of imagination: What does it look like in the minds of ordinary people who wake up daily, eat breakfast, trudge or race to work to spend all their human energy, cognitive capacity, ingenuity, cleverness, and technological power to invent and develop missiles, poison gas, nuclear weapons, bombs, torture devices - and home while complaining about the traffic, home to eat dinner and sing to the children? Is it moral schizophrenia? Compartmentalization? Callousness? The banality of evil? True patriotism? Or just 'human'?

**Metaphysical anxiety.** Anxiety is everyone's companion, but often something underlying rather than eroding. The anxiety of war is cruel and concrete. Not the anxiety that belongs to ordinary human life (cf. Kierkegaard), but the one that occupies every pore, drifts down the walls, hangs like something smelly in cracks, basements, and roadsides, the one that hears rockets and weapons all the time, especially when there is nothing. The anxiety that creeps under doors and windows like poison and radiation penetrates concrete and shields and settles in the hair and under the nails is almost metaphysical. It hangs in everything and constantly

activates soul and body, penetrates cell metabolism, undermines all human categories, activates and alarms without being able to do anything. Metaphysical anxiety is an existence where everything is under the sign: Scream! Flee! Kill! (See Terror III.)

**Military.** Important institution, and global. And theoretically, relatively underexplored, most significant sociologists, e.g., Luhmann, have not independently studied the military and its influence on the institutions of even democratic countries. The military is usually considered (see Warriors) as under control and in democracies as subordinate to civilian government. But the military, historians tell us, are often cult-like organizations with considerable contempt for civilians and with units that cultivate and demand loyalty. In ancient Athens and the Roman Empire, we saw how the military logically took over leadership; it is perfectly possible to be democratic internally and imperialistic externally for a more extended period. But the soldiers coming home in large numbers are doing something to democracy.

It says a lot about a school and how students are referred to in the classroom; it says a lot about a country and how the enemy (and civilians) are referred to in the military, both in war and peace. Dehumanizing language matters (see Translation).

**Nationalism.** Patriotism, or love of one's country, is not nationalism. Nationalism is political/ideological because it consumes everything: religion, poetry, art, and private life. It is also characterized, like populism, by turning inward. Nationalism, by nationalists, of course, is, first and foremost, a way of ideologizing a country and dividing the right from the wrong. Nationalism will always try to seize religion, the part that can be ideologized, not the part that maintains the dialogue; nationalism will always seek power and is, therefore, also prepared for war. Nationalists see their opponents as universal or supranational. Unlike patriotism, they look down on others. Nationalism is probably driven more by hate than love. In love of one's country, you love your country like parents love their children, knowing that others love theirs. In nationalism, one's 'children' must surpass the others. Preferably, the others must be kept down.

**Navalny.** Murdered, powerless man in Russia, first attempted murder, then almost murdered by isolation (prison camp), and finally murdered. Why was he murdered? The answer is the power of the powerless. It could also have been Adam Michnik, Václav Havel, Yuri Orlov, Liu Xiaobo, and many more. Don't forget those names, please. Alexei Navalny escaped the Russian terror, the fanaticism that demands conformity and fear (see Terror III). He smiled. Much worse than Prigozhin. Armed rebellion is terrible. But a man who eschews the friend-enemy ideology is a disaster. He is here in this dictionary because he breaks the logic of war, uniformity, fanaticism, destruction.

**New wars.** Most people think of war as a battle, military versus military, but 'new' wars are often anything but, including hybrid wars (e.g., using hacking and digital 'weapons' as misinformation). The reasons for new wars are also less precise. The 'old' wars were and often are about conquest, while new wars usually camouflage themselves behind ideal justifications (Iraq war). In Israel-Palestine, no military meets another (see Military). Surprisingly, Russia's attack on Ukraine is about conquest, yet it is also justified ideally (against the so-called Nazi regime in Kyiv). The limitlessness of 'new' wars makes the boundaries of war porous - who is

at war in the so-called Middle East and significant parts of Africa - and the end unclear (see Truce).

**Peace.** For Hobbes in the 17th century - and he knew what he was writing about - peace was not just the absence of war. Peace also requires that one is not resolved on war, i.e., the state of war begins before weapons are used. In several ancient cultures, the word peace connoted not just non-war but also well-being, friendship, justice, basic order, and even fertility; peace is wholeness and fullness of its own, and not least, interpersonal. There may not be war in Haiti, but there is certainly no peace.

The UN's 17 Sustainable Development Goals, which are all good, include number 16, "Peace, justice and strong institutions." On the UN website, the motto at the very top next to the name reads Peace, dignity, and equality on a healthy planet. Peace. Without which everything else collapses, i.e., forget about the SDGs in war. Also, forget about climate and biodiversity.

**Precision bombing.** A term for bombs and weapons that only hit the guilty ones. The guilty ones! Anything else is 'collateral damage,' another word for mistakes that cost human lives (see Killed and injured). I also refer to the unwritten words, 'propaganda' and 'free imagination.'

**Refugees.** There are many reasons for fleeing, and fleeing is neither travel nor emigration. Here, we are talking about flight that is not due to the legitimate pursuit of suspected criminals by relatively just authorities. Refugees today are often in large numbers: modern, efficient states with meticulous registration of people chase large numbers out or treat them in such a way that they flee. They are gathered in camps, and the camp protects them from nature - or it protects the surrounding society from refugees, often both. The camp takes on a life of its own – incl. own abuses. From fellow refugees, from guardians. The camp is a symbol of modern society with borders and regulations. Beware if you fall outside. And the camp regularly becomes almost permanent. There have been camps for Palestinian refugees since 1948. Hundreds of thousands are still there. Many were born and raised there, and they know nothing else. You get used to it so much, especially when you don't have to live in the camps.

**Terror (I).** Here's something simple at last: Terror is something the others commit, and they are too cowardly to go to open war. They target the civilian population; they are the most cowardly of humans, in fact, almost not human. They have put themselves on the outside, out there where Guantánamo is, where laws are not heard. Sings Bob Dylan: "If you want to live outside the law, you got to be honest".

**Terror (II).** This makes it clear (see Terror I) that Putin's bombing of Chechnya in the nineties is not terror, nor in Ukraine, let alone the Israeli bombing of Gaza. States (see Warriors) do not commit terror; that is for wretches. If you don't believe me, read the newspapers.

**Terror (III).** The word terror is Latin for fear and horror. Don't get me wrong, not the fear of gaining weight or being late for work, but the one that can lead to Metaphysical Anxiety (see this). Terror is basically killing, hurting, and destroying to scare survivors, preferably into doing what terrorists want. State terror is likely much more extensive than all other kinds combined (despite Terror II). We remember 9/11 and forget Chechnya. Maybe war is just the epitome

of terror. Whoever commits terror wages war, even war in peacetime. Hamas committed terror. Were Hiroshima and Nagasaki also terror?

It should not be overlooked that a special kind of terror prevails in perhaps more than half of the world's countries: the terror of dictatorship, precisely a type of war in peacetime. The dictatorship feeds on the terror (see Terrorist) that comes from surveillance, internal espionage (the old East Germany had one Stasi informer per 50 inhabitants), secret police, arbitrary imprisonment, and torture (see Navalny).

Palestinian writer Izzat Ghazzawi (1951-2003): "Terror is not culture and never can be."

**Terrorist.** A human being where the legislative, judicial, and executive powers coincide in one person, i.e., a legislator, judge, and executioner in one. And: there is only one law, one meaning, one truth. Everything divergent is under the sign of destruction (see Terror III). In a dictatorship, there are always two laws: the official ones and those of the dictatorship. Hence, there is always a culture of lies.

**Translation.** What is this word, also this, doing in a war dictionary? Why is translation interesting, let alone important? Because truth cannot tolerate not being confronted with the other, i.e., with an expanded reality. Given that many enmities are also across language boundaries and few people know both languages, we depend on good translations. *Traduttore traditore*: The translator is a traitor – it has been said for centuries. The translator's reliability was questioned simply by knowing a language others do not understand. However, the other side is that translation requires responsiveness and respect for two realities: the one that needs to be understood and the one into which something needs to be made understandable. It requires linguistic care. It requires dialog. Careful and caring listening and reading is already education (character formation): the first step away from barbarism, brutality, and lies (see Truth and Fanatic). For the simple reason that the other, the enemy or potential enemy, is given a voice, becomes a human being in his own right, and regains his dignity, the essential condition of compromise.

**Truce.** Modern states don't declare war; I think that ended in Poland in September 1939. That's why there is no longer a real peace agreement. At most, there is a ceasefire that—possibly—lasts (a little), like between North and South Korea since 1953. A ceasefire is—at best—associated with a peace process. A ceasefire is often the expectation of war, almost without the horrors of war.

**Truth.** The first casualty of war is truth. It is often said. The question is whether truth is usually sacrificed in order to go to war. Truth - in the sense that someone says something (assertoric/assertive) about something to someone, and it is true (don't ask the philosophers) - always has several enemies in everyday life, or at least obstacles. There is the misunderstanding, and there is the lie. Schleiermacher said that misunderstanding almost falls by itself; it's part of language. The lie is another matter. In all dictatorships and wars, the lie is omnipresent. A lie doesn't have to convince; it's enough to make people doubt. "His lips are moving; ergo, he is lying," say the Italians. The lie may be obviously present, but to reveal a lie is not to know the truth. Man's strange craving for a master (cf. Kant) means that even when everything is questionable, the power structure tends to be believed ("You wouldn't say that the entire state apparatus is lying?"). Holding on to the truth (*satyagraha*, in Gandhian terms) is already



resistance and hope for peace (see Navalny). - Truth requires will and courage (see Translation); it feeds on understanding; it is, for the same reason, always fragile. A regime of lies, however, is far more fragile because every lie must be justified with a new one. However, the lying regime still always has a remedy, namely censorship and violence.

**War.** *Inter arma leges silent*, quoted Kant – among arms, the laws are silent! Despite modern rules and conventions, it's not hard to find violations of the same. Outrage is, unfortunately, often misplaced; what did you expect? And yet, the alternative to outrage is not cynicism and indifference. War is glorious. War is wonderful. Says the inexperienced, according to Erasmus of Rotterdam. Sport and war have one thing in common: lose or win! Maybe that's why sports attract fanatics. Pre-war begins with ideology (see ideology), where you don't disagree, but where the opponent becomes the enemy, a state moving away from democracy. A draw is just that: undecided, unclear, no one wins.

War attracts some because everything becomes simple. The unsettled, the undecided, the unclear, the compromises, all ordinary is condensed into an either-or. There is a choice of sides; what a release! Not least because of this, soldiers can miss the war. As Israeli Amos Oz wrote about the fanatic, the one possessed by the (war) God, it begins at home, and there is only one meaning. Curing a fanatic is as easy as preventing war. In war, the laws are silent, yes, and the fanatic will solve the problems by destruction: guns, bombs, murder. And if you can't destroy, there is a strange liberation in frightening and striking with terror - oh, to see them cringe... (see Terror II and III). Curing a fanatic begins with being able to keep two incompatible opinions in mind at the same time (see Navalny).

**Warriors.** Simply put, everyone in war is an active warrior. But no, warriors are a particular group of non-civilized actors; civilized actors have soldiers. In Afghanistan, there are warriors, Taliban, and savages like that. In Gaza, too - but Israel has soldiers. That distinction is frequent but unclear. Doesn't it mean that warriors are, first and foremost, outside the law (see War)? Or are they even noble, unlike soldiers and their Prussian-modern cadaver discipline? Does most people's use of warriors mean that soldiers obey the laws of war and warriors are barbaric?