



## Capital COMMENTARY

### Remembering Hiroshima and Nagasaki

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This month marks the 52nd anniversary of the atomic bombing of Japan. Was the bombing just? Was it moral?

From the standpoint of the Christian Just War tradition, to be just, a war must be fought in self defense. The authority to use force is explicitly given to government in the New Testament, and it is no great stretch to say that it is as legitimate to use it to protect people from foreign invasion and enslavement as it is "to punish evil doers" who are domestically grown.

The Just War tradition also speaks to the question of how to engage in war. One of the rules is that fighting should engage only trained, armed, professional soldiers. If armed soldiers kill unarmed noncombatants, it is murder, not war.

What is remarkable about the rule of immunity for noncombatants is that it was actually and regularly observed until September 1, 1939. As late as World War I, there were cases of German and French commanders delaying a battle so civilians could be evacuated from a village caught between their two armies. But World War II changed matters. It opened with the Nazi bombing of unarmed Polish civilians: men going to work, women going to market, children going to school.

On that day, Hitler single-handedly demolished a 1600-year-old tradition along with the Polish defenses. Without so much as a blink of hesitation, all parties to the war adopted the policy he initiated. From that day on, war was changed into precisely what the Just War tradition forbade: armed, trained, professionals attacking untrained noncombatants. And so it has remained to this day. Throughout the rest of World War II and the Cold War, the task of an armed force was not so much to defeat another armed force as it was to protect its unarmed civilian population which was the other army's primary target.

Seen in this light, we may better judge the use of atomic weapons on Japan. These were weapons whose destruction could not possibly be confined to military targets. By their very nature they could not fail to kill and terrorize civilians. They were a continuation and extension of the Hitler doctrine of war. I do not mean to suggest that the allies' *cause* was unjust, but from the point of view of justice, abandoning the rule that exempted civilians from deliberate attack represented a grave injustice from which the world needs to recover. Should we have avoided using those atomic weapons? Yes. At least we should have tried a lot harder to avoid using them. Remember, the rationale for developing them in the first place was that we needed to beat Hitler to them. But by August, 1945, Hitler was dead and Germany had surrendered. Did their use help end the war sooner and thus save lives? The answer is probably yes, but that aim might have been achieved without dropping those bombs on civilians. We could have tried showing an explosion to Japanese scientists and military leaders to convince them both of the fact that we had such a weapon and of its incredible destructive force. And since we could have done that, we should have done it. So is the Just War tradition dead and gone? I hope and pray it is not. I pray that Christians around the world will work for the utter destruction and repudiation of all atomic weapons everywhere and for the just use of non-atomic weapons. And I hope that the continued development of smart weapons will help to revive the rule that armies at war engage only military targets.

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