



The Laws of War: Justice, Rights, and Ethics in Military Contexts

Collection Summary

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Throughout human history, societies, states, and nations have viewed military action as a necessary tool to help achieve their wider political, strategic, or ideological goals. The experience of warfare, for combatants and civilians alike, is often horrific. Destruction, chaos, and suffering are widespread. As a result, alongside grander endeavours to end war altogether and to create lasting peace, more pragmatic efforts have emerged **to impose laws, rules, and ethical frameworks upon the conduct of war so as to mitigate the misery and collateral damage that it causes.**

These efforts have increased exponentially since the end of the eighteenth century. **As conflicts grew in scale and impact, as mass citizen armies took to the field, and as questions of human rights gained traction, the need for robust laws of war became ever clearer.** By appearing to contain and regulate the impact of warfare, these rules also served to legitimise, and even to justify, military action in increasingly democratic societies.

Containing over 100,000 images from The National Archives (UK), this collection shows that the laws of war could take many forms. These range from overarching grand ideas about when it is, or is not, legitimate to declare war, through policies designed to secure and safeguard civilians in times of conflict, and down to the mechanisms of courts martial, which have sought to apply a distinctive conception of justice to the relative mayhem of warzones.

This collection will be of interest to historians, legal scholars, criminologists, and defence and strategic studies experts—its contents reveal much about attitudes towards warfare over the last 300 years and the extent to which efforts to regulate it have succeeded or failed.

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