

AGAINST WAR

Peace Pledge Union 1 Peace Passage London N7 0BT

PPU ACTION FOR PEACE
www.ppu.org.uk

SINCE THE END of the Second World War in 1945 there have been over 250 major wars in which over 50 million people have been killed, tens of millions made homeless, and countless millions injured and bereaved. In the history of warfare the twentieth century stands out as the bloodiest and most brutal - three times more people have been killed in wars in the last ninety years than in all the previous five hundred. The 21st century is off to a bad start.

nowhere to hide

No part of the world has escaped the scourge of war. There is nowhere that modern weapons or armies cannot reach. Anywhere in the world you can find people who will use guns to get their own way. From under the ocean a missile can fly out beyond the atmosphere and come down to destroy a city on the other side of the world; while a tiny butterfly-like object - anti-personnel mines - can blow up the child who picks it up thinking it's a toy.

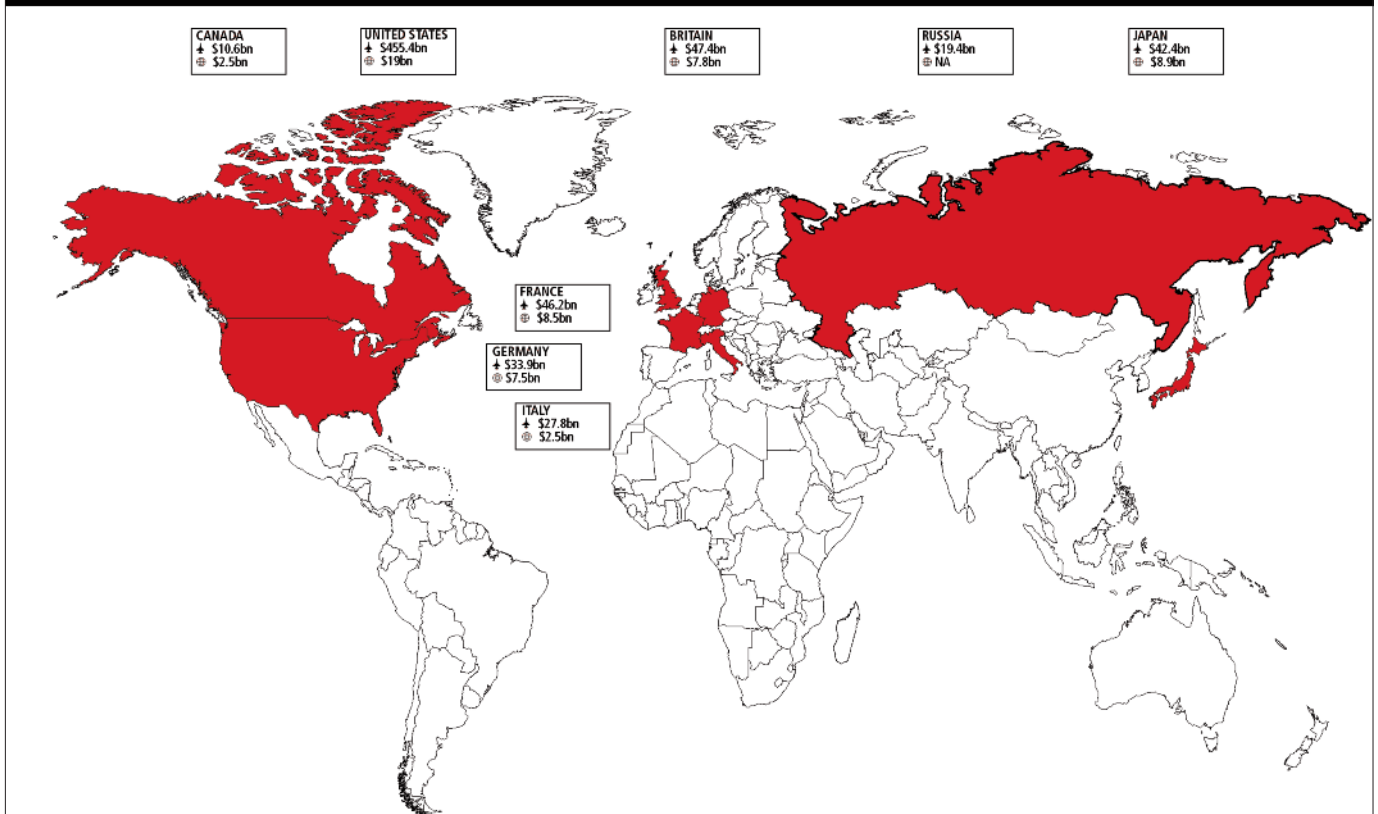
The destructive power of weapons has grown enormously during the twentieth century. Unfortunately, people's ability to resolve conflict has not made the same strides.

Expenditure on the military has also grown steadily. But despite this massive increase most people don't feel more secure. Wars have not brought peace. The desire to invent ever more effective weapons to defend or deter has absorbed an ever-growing amount of money; but it's done nothing to pre-

vent war. What has happened is that weapons have become ever more expensive and destructive; but resources for the things that might actually make our lives better (such as an adequate health service in Britain, or easy access to clean water in many parts of the Third World) have been reduced. In some parts of the world military expenditure has itself become the source of conflict: resources are used to buy weapons and maintain the armed forces while much of the population lives in appalling poverty.

The nature of warfare has also changed. From the set-piece battles of the earlier centuries, the blood and mud of the trenches in the First World War, and the fast-moving mechanised battlefields of World War Two, to the high-tech 'surgical' computer-guided action in Afghanistan and Iraq, war as seen through our television screens appears to have become a well-ordered, almost bloodless, affair. Nothing could be further from the truth.

What the G8 countries spend on arms ...and what they give in aid



During the twentieth century the proportion of civilian casualties has risen steadily. In World War Two two-thirds of those killed were civilians; by the beginning of the 1990s civilian deaths approached 90 per cent. This is partly the result of technological developments, but there is another major reason.

Many modern armed conflicts are not between states but within them: struggles between soldiers and civilians, or between competing civilian groups. Such conflicts are likely to be fought out in country villages and urban streets. In such wars, the 'enemy' camp is everywhere, and the distinctions between combatant and non-combatant melt away into the fear, suspicion and confusion of civilian life under fire.

Many contemporary struggles are between different ethnic groups in the same country or in former States. When ethnic loyalties rule, other moral codes are often abandoned. It becomes horribly easy to proceed from neighbourhood hostility to 'ethnic cleansing' and genocide. After that, killing adults is not enough; future generations of 'the enemy' - their children - must also be eliminated. Women and children are then not just caught in the crossfire, they become targets as well. As one political commentator put it (in a 1994 broadcast before violence erupted in Rwanda), 'To kill the big rats, you have to kill the little rats.'

Behind many of today's armed conflicts lies a long history of wars which ended, maybe, with winners and losers, but rarely with solutions to the problems which caused war in the first place. (The wars in former Yugoslavia, and in the territories that used to be part of the Soviet Union, are obvious examples.)

why war?

Wars don't happen by accident. To wage war, you need weapons, many of which take a lot of time, money and people to produce. Weapons make people feel more important and powerful (and more dangerous). Many political and military leaders therefore feel they must have the most powerful weapons possible.

Furthermore, the military are often dissatisfied with what weapons they have. They want something 'better', and certainly better than the weapons the 'other side' has. To get money from government to upgrade their weapon resources, military representatives may exaggerate the 'strength' of a potential 'enemy'. Without a threat, after all, there is no real justification for having big, expensive weapons; so sometimes a 'threat' will be imagined or invented - weapons of mass destruction in Iraq for example.

This competitive upward spiral, as one side tries to outdo the other in ever more destructive weapons, is called 'the arms race'. The armed forces, politicians, industry and workers become entwined in what an American President called 'the military industrial complex'. Armed forces get the fighting equipment they want; politicians gain prestige (punching above one's strength, as a recent British Foreign Minister described it); companies and shareholders make a lot of money; and there are jobs for hundreds of thousands of people so the trade unions love it.

Wars don't happen by accident. As well as weapons, wars need people who are prepared to use them: to kill, and to be killed. Certainly there are people who don't need persuading. But more often people fight because it's what they're paid to do: they work for the armed services or as mercenaries. Certainly there are people who, however reluctantly, choose to go to war because they believe it's the right thing to do. (Unfortunately, sometimes they believe it's the only thing to do). But

more often people are forced - 'conscripted' - into the armed services by their government, and have no choice in the matter.

In fact, organised war is not a natural activity. One commentator described it as 'a highly planned and co-operative form of theft and murder, which began over ten thousand years ago when those who learned to grow wheat and save the surplus were robbed by nomads of the things they could not provide themselves.' Men began to use spears to kill people as well as animals: the arms race was already under way. Ten thousand years ago people may not have known what else to do; today we don't have that excuse.

all in a day's work

Since the beginning of history people have got angry, had disagreements and punch-ups, and even killed each other. This we have in common with a few other animal species. But it's very different from war.

War is an activity that needs preparation, organisation, planning and calculation, like farming, or education, or building. It has little to do with aggressive moods or eruptions of anger. There is no baring of teeth in the chemical weapons laboratory. Designing a nuclear bomb that can kill millions of people is a long-term project, requiring skill, imagination, quiet concentration, and a lot of taxpayers' money. The outcome of military research and development will take many years to see the light of day. This is not done in response to any actual threat but in fact creates the very threat it purports to protect us from. The hundreds of thousands of people employed in armaments factories in Britain alone don't go to work in the morning red with fury and ready to slay 'the enemy'. Most of them are loving parents who take care of their children, seldom considering that the weapons they help to make might one day kill some other parent's children somewhere else.

Murder, the world over, is a crime punishable by long prison sentences (in some countries by execution). Yet hundreds of thousands of people in the world's armed forces are trained to murder - and murder people they do not even know. Whatever words we use to disguise the fact, war is essentially about murder. To drop bombs on a city, for example, is to murder ordinary citizens, many of them children; the pilot has no personal quarrel with them, but drops the bomb in the name of war - and thereby commits a mass murder.

But 'murder' is not a word used when talking about war. That would clearly make war a bad thing - something we should avoid at all cost, ready to lock up anyone who tries it. You can see the problem - 'British soldiers murder 150 Iraqi women and children in liberation of Kuwait' would make a very unusual headline in the daily paper. War transforms murder not only into something acceptable but highly commendable, for which, if you survive, you may receive praise, promotion, and even a medal.

BRIEFING NOTES

A full set of briefing notes including ones on

- arms trade
- nuclear weapons
- military research
- militarisation of education
- education for peace
- pacifism and non-violence
- human rights

and what can be done is included in the new members pack