

Democracy and the Ethics of War

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Course Description

Are democracies more peaceful and virtuous than other forms of government? Some friends of democracy say yes: self-governing citizens are less likely to rush into wars than autocratic or oligarchic leaders, and more likely to respect human rights and the rule of law when their states resort to force. Others point out dangerous gaps between ideal democratic principles and unjust or warlike realities. Critical perspectives suggest that democracies – past and present – are so deeply rooted in unjust economic, colonial, and patriarchal structures that we need to rethink democratic and ethical practices down to the ground.

This course examines the recurring tensions between democracy, ethics, and war from all these points of view. With readings from history, philosophy, political and international relations theory, and literature, we'll consider several broad frameworks for understanding these tensions: international 'realism', the dynamics of democratic competition and communications, gender roles, imperialist mindsets, and the political economics of liberal democracies. Along the way, we'll look at cases where direct or indirect involvement in wars has created complex ethical challenges for democracies. We will ask: Are some forms of democracy more war-prone than others? How can leaders and citizens maintain ethical standards – and robust democratic institutions – under pressure from the conflicts that lead to wars? How might individual democracies and the international system be reformed to disincentivise violence and regulate the deeper causes of war?

Requirements

Academic Integrity

Bard College Berlin maintains the highest standards of academic integrity and expects students to adhere to these standards at all times. Instances in which students fail to meet the expected standards of academic integrity will be dealt with under the Code of Student Conduct, Section 14.3 (Academic Misconduct) in the Student Handbook.

Accommodations

Bard College Berlin is committed to inclusion and providing equal access to all students; we uphold and maintain all aspects of Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973, the Americans with Disabilities Act of 1990, and the ADA Amendments Act of 2008, and Section 3 of the German Disability Equality Act of April 27, 2002 (Federal Law Gazette I p. 1468). If you have a disability, or think you may have a disability, please contact the Disability Accommodation Coordinator, Atticus Kleen, (accommodations@berlin.bard.edu) to request an official accommodation.

Requests for accommodations should be made as early as possible to ensure adequate time for coordination and planning. Please note that accommodations are not retroactive and may require advance notice to implement.

If you have already been approved for accommodations with the Disability Accommodation Coordinator, please arrange to meet with me outside of class so that we can develop an implementation plan.

Students may face extenuating circumstances related to various personal or external factors, which impact their academic performance. While these circumstances often do not fall within the legal framework of Disability Accommodations, Bard College Berlin is committed to supporting students experiencing such circumstances. A student needing a short extension or a replacement assignment because of an extenuating circumstance is encouraged to make arrangements directly with instructors if possible. If further support is needed, please visit the [Bard College Berlin Accessibility page](#). Questions about this process can be directed to James Harker (j.harker@berlin.bard.edu) or Maria Anderson-Long (m.andersonlong@berlin.bard.edu).

Attendance

Attendance at all classes is a crucial part of the education offered by Bard College Berlin. To account for minor circumstances, two absences from twice-per-week courses or the equivalent (e.g. one absence from a once-per-week course) should not affect the participation grade or require documentation. A valid doctor's note or similar evidence is required for other absences. Unexcused lateness will be noted in the final participation grade.

Students are expected to be present and prepared for each class session. Active participation during lectures and seminar discussions is essential.

Bard College Berlin may not offer credit for any course in which a student has missed more than 30% of classes, regardless of the reasons for the absences. The full Bard College Berlin attendance policy can be found in the Student Handbook, Section 2.8.

Assignments and Assessment

•Reading assignments

Readings will be provided in the form of PDFs, online links, or library references.

•Participation

30%

The class involves thoughtful and active participation in class discussions and working groups. Students should come to class not only having read and viewed the materials assigned for that day, but also prepared to discuss the readings and to contribute thoughtfully to the conversation. Participation criteria include (1) prompt and regular attendance, at minimum; (2) active contributions and questions in our discussions, and (3) evidence of active, respectful listening and engagement.

The classroom is a protected space and you should feel free to voice your arguments and comments. Please do not hesitate to address the seminar leaders if you feel that this is not the case.

•Presentations

20%

Each student will give (1) one individual presentation (10%) and (2) one paired (2 people) (10%) presentation over the semester. Presentations should clearly set out the main arguments in that week's readings, assess their strengths and weaknesses, and where relevant apply the arguments to historical or recent cases. While the starting point should be a discussion of assigned readings, presenters should go beyond a mere summary and develop their own arguments about the issue at hand. Presentations may be delivered in various formats: with slides, through short films, or in other forms discussed in advance with the instructor. They should be about 20 minutes for the presentation itself, followed by a wider class discussion that presenters will lead. **You are strongly advised to discuss the presentation with the instructor the week before during office hours.**

• Written reviews

30%

Students will write three short reviews (about 700 words, counting 10% each toward the final grade) of one or two of the class readings. As a general guide, the review should have two parts. Part I (about 350 words) should include: i) a brief, independent summary of the argument of the piece, ii) an account of what you found to be a particularly good feature of the text, iii) an account of what you consider a weakness in the piece. Part II (about 350 words) should discuss a case or issue of your own choosing and say EITHER why you think the argument helps to (a) explain and/or (b) evaluate your case, OR why it falls short in these ways. Grades are likely to be higher when it is evident that students are engaging with the reading and with our class. Evidence of independent thinking in structure, approach, and writing is also highly valued.

Due dates: (1) end of week 4, (2) MIDTERM: end of the week just before midterm break, (3) end of week 10. Students should choose readings that cover a range of topics over the course of the semester.

• Final paper

20%

For the final assignment, students will choose their own essay question and write a 3000 word paper that examines a topic from our class in an independent, carefully argued way. Papers should take a case study and examine it from different perspectives, drawing mainly on readings from our class. The aims are (1) to take an in-depth look at real-life policy-related debates or broader political disagreements about a question relating to the ethics of war and democracy, and (2) to show a serious, independent engagement with questions discussed in class and in class readings. **Please discuss your case study with me in advance.** The focus of your essay may be broad and global or specific and local.

Policy on Late Submission of Papers

Essays that are up to 24 hours late can be downgraded up to one full grade (from B+ to C+, for example). Instructors are not obliged to accept essays that are more than 24 hours late. Where a professor agrees to accept a late assignment, it should be submitted by the new deadline agreed upon by both parties. Thereafter, the student will receive a failing grade for the assignment. Grades and comments will be returned to students in a timely fashion. Students are also entitled to make an appointment to discuss essay assignments and feedback during instructors' office hours.

Students will receive feedback for their course work during and at the end of the semester. Students are entitled to make an appointment with an instructor to discuss seminar

participation, or may be asked to meet with the instructor at any stage in the semester regarding class progress.

Schedule

There are 2-4 required readings for each 3-hour weekly class, plus recommended readings if students choose to write or present on a given topic or would just like to read further.

1. Are democracies more peaceful?

I. War: definitions and explanations

- Sinisa Malesevic, *The Sociology of War and Violence*, chap. 3, 89-101

II. Democratic peace theory: claims and doubts

‘Democratic Peace Theory explained’ (Noah Zerbe, YouTube) [watch] Also recommended: SwissInfo online, ‘Does democracy really make the world more peaceful?’

III. Classical arguments

- Jean-Jacques Rousseau, ‘The State of War’ (1758) in Gourevitch, *Social Contract and Other Works*, 162-176 and Perpetual Peace (1761)
- Immanuel Kant, ‘Perpetual Peace’ (1795)

2. War ethics: traditions and themes

I. European just war traditions

- ‘Just War Theory’, Internet Encyclopaedia

II. Other traditions:

- Chia-Yu Liang, ‘Chinese Just War Theories? Three examples and their implications’ (2023)
- Torkil Brekke, ‘The Ethics of War and the Concept of War in India and Europe’ (2005)
Recommended: Hassan Shibly, ‘War, Islam, and the Sanctity of Life’ (2017)

III. Basic Jus ad bellum: What is ‘self-defence’?

- Massimo Renzo, ‘Political Self-determination and Wars of National Defence’ (2018)
Also recommended: ‘[Self-Defense](#)’, *The Stanford Encyclopaedia of Philosophy*

IV. Discussion: Is war ever just? Recommended: Maja Zehfuss, *War and the Ethics of Politics* (2018), chaps. 1 and 2

3. Realism I: democracy and hegemonic war

I. Deep patterns: Thucydides’ Trap and ‘structural realism’:

- Graham Allison, *Destined for War: Can America and China Escape Thucydides’ Trap?* (2018), introduction
Recommended: Are China and the US doomed to conflict? | Kevin Rudd TED talk, 2015 (20.06 mins, Thuc. at 8.35)

II. Democracy and war in action:

- Thucydides, *The Peloponnesian War*, selections
Recommended background:
R. Craig Nation, 'Thucydides and Contemporary Strategy' (2010)
Michael Crowley, 'Why the White House is Reading Greek History,' POLITICO 2017
BBC In Our Time: Thucydides. 2015

4. Realism II: Expansionist republics

I. 'Republican realism': what is it? Is it realistic?

- Stanford Encyclopaedia, 'Political Realism in International Relations'

II. Machiavelli and the Roman 'model' for modern republics

- Discourses, Book I.53-58, Book II.2 and II.4, other chapters on Rome, expansion, war

III. Different kinds of 'realism':

- The Prince, chaps. 5, 15-18, 21

IV. American Revolution and the republican realist tradition of war:

- The Federalist Papers nos. I-XI (Hamilton) & XIV-XV (Madison)
Also recommended: Vibeke Tjulve & M. Williams, 'Reviving the Rhetoric of Realism'

5. Colonialism and the emerging international system

I. Spanish colonialism and clashes over the Christian ethics of war

Francisco de Vitoria (1538), Bartolomé de las Casas (1552) (short selections)

- Montaigne, 'Of Cannibals' (c. 1568)

II. British-American colonialism and its legacies:

- Locke: property rights and possessive territorial states [passages]
- Manuscript collections on wars with indigenous peoples (online)

III. Race, democracy, and international ethics

- Charles Mills, 'Race and Global Justice'

Also recommended: W.E.B. Dubois, *The World and Africa and Color and Democracy*

6. Political economies of liberal democratic war

I. Classical debates

Marx, Rosa Luxemburg [short selections]

- Zlatko Hadžidedić, *Nations and Capital* chap. VII
- John Maynard Keynes, *The Economic Consequences of the Peace*, parts

II. Fear, honour, profit: security and economics in 20th-21st century democratic wars

- Edgar Illas, 'Survival or: the global logic of capitalism' (2015)
- Maurizio Guerrero, *Neoliberalism and the 'war on drugs'* (2021)

Also recommended: Zaynab Quadri, 'Forever War for Profit' (2025)

III. Case studies: US today

7. Nationalism and self-determination

I. The rise of nationalism and the nation-state ideal

- J-J Rousseau, 'Considerations on the Government of Poland' (selections)
- JG Fichte, 'Addresses to the German Nation', chap. 8

Recommended: E. Benner, 'Japanese national doctrines in international perspective' (2006), 'The Varieties of Nationalist Thought' (2013)

II. National-self-determination and hopes for 'democratic peace' after WWI

- N.K. Nawaz, 'The meaning and range of the principle of self-determination' (1965)
- Steve E. Sachs, 'Self-Determination and Disorder' (2003)

Recommended: Eric Storm, *Nationalism: A World History*, chap. 6 pp. 173-197

III. Nationalism as a cause of war, and its effects on ethical standards today

Case studies: TBD

8. Anti-colonial and post-colonial wars: focus on Africa

I. 'Scramble for Africa' and Post-colonial democracy

- Dipo Faloyin, *Africa is not a Country* (2022), Parts Two and Four

II. Decolonisation:

- Frantz Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth* (select)

Recommended: Oladipo Fashina, 'Frantz Fanon and the Ethical Justification of Anti-Colonial Violence' (1989); Julius Nyerere, 'Without unity, there is no future for Africa' (1997 speech)

III. African ethical traditions and post-colonial approaches

- Lawrence Ogo Ogbu, 'Toward an African Theory of Just War' (2020)
- Zedekia Sidha and Michael Ntabo Mabururu, 'The moral justification of war: an African case' (2016)

Recommended: Luis Cordeiro-Rodrigues, 'African views of Just War in Mandela and Cabral' (2018)

9. War ideologies, propaganda, and ethical orientations

I. Mobilisation strategies and propaganda

- Sinisa Malesevic, 'War propaganda and solidarity', *Sociology of War and Violence* chap. 7
- Maja Zehfuss, *War and the Politics of Ethics*, chaps. 4 and 5

II. Survivalism, sacrifice, death

- Yael Tamir, 'Pro Patria Mori!' in McKim et.al. *The Morality of Nationalism*

III. Case studies TBD

10. Gender and sexuality in democratic wars

I. Ancient perspectives

- Aristophanes, passages from *Lysistrata* and *Assemblywomen*
Recommended: Plato, *Republic* (passages)

II. The connections between gender and war

- Joshua Goldstein, *Gender and War: How Gender Shapes the War System and Vice Versa* (2001)
- Laura Sjoberg, 'Just war without civilians' (2014)

III. How does war shape democracy and vice versa?

Case studies: TBD

11. Humanitarian interventions and sovereignty

I. Arguments

- Michael Walzer, *Just and Unjust Wars*, chap. 6 and 'The Moral Standing of States: a response to four critics', *Philosophy and Public Affairs* (1980)
- C.A.J. Coady, 'The Ethics of Armed Humanitarian Intervention' (2002), chaps. 4-5
- Richard Miller, 'Respectable Oppressors, Hypocritical Liberators: Morality, Intervention and Reality', in D. Chatterjee & D. Scheid (eds) *Ethics and Foreign Intervention*
- Cécile Fabre, chap. 5 in *Cosmopolitan War*

II. Case studies

12. State and non-state actors at war

I. Individualist, collectivist, and other approaches

- Fabre, 'Civil wars', chap. 4 and 'Asymmetrical Wars', chap. 7 in *Cosmopolitan War*

II. 'Ethnic' wars and climate and food insecurity

- 'Why has Sudan descended into mass slaughter? The answer goes far beyond simple ethnic conflict' The Conversation (November 2025)
- Husain Arif, 'A Hidden Hunger Crisis is Destabilising the World', Foreign Affairs (November 2025)

III. States against non-state actors

- Helen Frowe, 'The moral status of terrorism', chaps. 9-10 in *The Ethics of War and Peace*
Recommended: M. Valbjørn, A. Bank and M. Darwich (2024), 'Forward to the Past? Regional repercussions of the Gaza War', *Middle East Policy*

13. Democracy, dirty hands, and modern technologies

I. Arguments for dirty hands and their effects on democracy

- Michael Walzer, 'Political Action: The Problem of Dirty Hands', *Philosophy and Public Affairs*, Vol. 2, No. 2 (1973), pp. 160-180

- Thucydides, the Mytilinean Debate (Book III), Melian Dialogue (Book 5)
- Elliot Ackerman, 'Winning Ugly: What the War on Terror Cost America' in Foreign Affairs 100/5 (2021)
Recommended: Mervat F. Hatem, 'Discourses on the "War on Terrorism" in the US and its view of Arab, Muslim, and Gendered "Other"' in The Arab Studies Journal, 11/12 (2003-4)

II. Modern mass warfare and targeted killings

- David Fidler, 'Just and Unjust War, Uses of Force and Coercion: An Ethical Enquiry with Cyber Illustrations' (2016)
Recommended: Zehfuss, 'Targeting' chap. 3 in *War and the Politics of Ethics*

14. Democratic communications, social media, and prospects for peace

I. Democratic peace revisited

- Oona Hathaway and Scott Shapiro, 'Might Unmakes Right: the catastrophic collapse of norms against the use of force' in Foreign Affairs, vol. 104 no. 4 (July-August 2025)

II. Social media

- Video tbd

III. Discussion: what can be done?