



# War is Hell - We must Stop It

*Satish Kumar*

*We can enjoy Tolstoy's great story, but we should also heed his message.*

Earlier this year I was watching the BBC adaptation of War and Peace, a visually inspired and heart-wrenching representation of Tolstoy's great narrative. It is a story of love and betrayal, joy and sorrow, extravagance and deprivation – but above all, it is an unambiguous articulation of the stupidity and futility of war.

During the war scenes, I found myself wondering whether Messrs Putin and Obama, Cameron and Hollande, Assad and Rouhani and all the presidents and prime ministers of the world were watching this programme. If not, then they should have been. If they were, then they would know the truth of truths: that war is hell and all wars end in unmitigated disaster.

After experiencing the carnage of the battlefield, Prince Andrei says to Pierre Bezukhov: "War is the vilest thing in the world. Men come together to kill each other, they slaughter and maim tens of thousands and then they say prayers of thanksgiving for having slaughtered so many people. How does God look down and listen to them?"

Even if people in politics, the military and business did watch the series, they may have focused on its photography, its costumes, its acting and its setting. But surely, hardly ever will they have watched the series – or, for that matter, read the novel – for its wisdom, its truth and its message.

Currently many wars are being fought in the Middle East. As a consequence, many countries, including European countries, are experiencing a deluge of refugees. Millions of people have been made destitute because of the egos of those promoting wars and their pride, narrow self-interest, geopolitical ambition and desire for power.

Of course, all warring parties claim to have high ideals on their side. They claim to be fighting for their religion, or for democracy, or for national security, or to stem the menace of terrorism. But religion, democracy and security are the greatest casualties of war. And, moreover, ordinary and innocent civilians – men, women and children – are terrorised in their homes, schools, shops, hospitals, mosques and churches. They are left with no other option but to flee from their homeland and seek shelter in other lands.

However, it seems that no government wants to have refugees coming to its country. Providing food, jobs, accommodation, education and medicine – let alone a sense of community – for millions of people in a short space of time is not easy.

Wars create refugees. If governments don't want to have refugees, they should not go to war. Whoever goes to war should be prepared to take the refugees, as many refugees as there are and will be. Waging a war and then barring refugees from entering your country is a dereliction of duty. Even when there is a civil war, countries not involved in the conflict have an

international humanitarian responsibility to support, sustain and accept people who are fleeing the war. But if countries are engaged in military action and causing the civilians to flee, such countries have an even greater obligation to accept refugees and support them until the war comes to an end and the refugees are able to return home. Nations involved in such wars also have an obligation to rebuild the destroyed homes, hospitals, schools, shops and cities, so that refugees can and are willing to go home.

Politicians need to ask themselves why they choose to go to war when there are no problems or disputes that cannot be resolved by diplomacy, negotiation, compromise, generosity and mutual understanding. The whole of humanity has a shared common interest to live in peace and harmony together despite our differences and diversities. Therefore, the wounds of all disputes, disagreements and divisions can and should be healed by rising above narrow self-interest and embracing the interest of common humanity. As Mahatma Gandhi said, there is no way to peace. Peace is the way.

The path of peace is paved by the principle of nonviolence. But governments need to recognise the falsity of claiming that their violence is good but the violence of others is bad. Nonviolence is a universal principle. We have to be prepared to minimise all forms of violence, and discard large-scale and organised violence. Politicians, like doctors, need to take the pledge of 'Do no harm' and follow the golden rule that we should treat others as we would like others to treat us. In the end it is the meek, not the military, who will be blessed and will inherit the Earth.

Martin Luther King, Nelson Mandela and Mahatma Gandhi set a shining example of such universal nonviolence. The Indian Emperor Ashoka – who was a cruel ruler and waged many merciless wars – came to the conclusion eventually that violence, slaughter of humans and destruction of towns and villages doesn't bring peace or happiness. Violence begets violence. If you want to establish peace, democracy, freedom and the practice of religious principles, that should be achieved through nonviolent means alone. Noble ends must be pursued by noble means. However long it takes, we have to have enough patience to restrain from violent response, be it domestic violence, class wars, civil wars or international wars. All wars are a failure of human ingenuity, negotiating skills, diplomacy and imagination.

In modern warfare it is impossible to avoid civilian casualties and collateral damage to schools, shops, hospitals and homes. Therefore, all wars are potentially illegal. The legally binding Geneva Convention says that non-combatant civilians must not be inflicted with death and destruction.

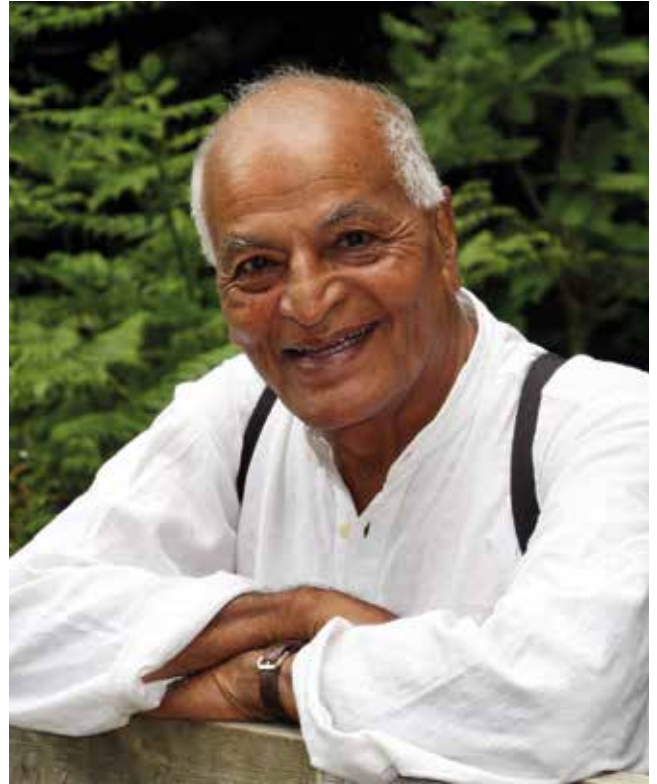
Martin Luther King wrote: "The old law of an eye for an eye leaves everybody blind."

We cannot extinguish a fire by putting more fuel on it. Jesus said it, the Buddha said it, the prophet Muhammad said it. Pope Francis says it. The Dalai Lama says it. Why are political and military leaders not paying any attention to this practical wisdom coming from a long line of enlightened human beings? Not only have we seen the enormous suffering of civilians and military personnel during small and great wars. We have evidence that wars don't work. You kill a dictator, and another tyrant appears and takes his place. You kill one terrorist, but then ten more are born and radicalised. The history of humanity is littered with failed wars and futile conflicts.

The time has come to realise that wars are barbaric and uncivilised. They are counter-productive. Let the United Nations Security Council and General Assembly pass a resolution to abolish wars and establish a strong world council of negotiators to resolve conflicts wherever they arise.

We need to be courageous and renounce war as a means to solve political problems. That is what Tolstoy says in War and Peace. It is not only a great novel but also a great message. And the BBC's adaptation is not only good acting, good photography and good performance: it is also a pertinent message to us all.

We can opt for war, or for peace. The choice is ours.



**Satish Kumar** is a former Jain monk and long-term peace and environment activist. He has been the Editor in Chief of *Resurgence & Ecologist* magazine for over 40 years and is the author of many books including *No Destination* and *You Are, Therefore I Am*.

This article featured in *Resurgence & Ecologist* issue 296, May/June 2016. All rights to this article are reserved to The Resurgence Trust. To buy a copy of the magazine, read further articles or find out about the Trust, visit: [www.resurgence.org](http://www.resurgence.org)

