

The Moral and Political Legitimations of War and the Complex Dynamics of Peace Negotiation Processes

Alexander Yendell ¹  and Oliver Hidalgo ² 

¹ Research Institute Social Cohesion, Section Leipzig, Germany

² Faculty of Social and Educational Sciences, University of Passau, Germany

Correspondence: Alexander Yendell (alexander.yendell@uni-leipzig.de)

Submitted: 7 September 2025 **Published:** 30 September 2025

Issue: This editorial is part of the issue “The Moral and Political Legitimations of War and the Complex Dynamics of Peace Negotiation Processes” edited by Alexander Yendell (Research Institute Social Cohesion, Section Leipzig) and Oliver Hidalgo (University of Passau), fully open access at <https://doi.org/10.17645/pag.i391>

Abstract

This thematic issue investigates the moral and political legitimations of war and the complex dynamics of peace negotiation processes in contemporary international politics. It brings together contributions from political science, sociology, international relations, and political psychology to examine how military interventions are justified, how peace is negotiated or prevented, and how legitimacy is constructed, challenged, and transformed over time. The articles address a wide range of empirical cases—from Afghanistan and Ukraine to Cyprus and Mozambique—while engaging with normative frameworks such as just war theory, root narrative theory, and theories of authoritarianism. Several contributions interrogate the discursive and institutional mechanisms through which states, elites, and publics justify war, be it through historical analogies, legal claims, national myths, or emotional appeals. Others highlight the psychological and ideological underpinnings of militarism, including collective narcissism, authoritarian submission, and gendered dispositions toward violence. One central theme running through the issue is the fragility of normative boundaries between aggression and defence, and how these are negotiated differently depending on regime type, political culture, and strategic interests. Particular attention is given to the interplay of moral reasoning, political communication, and affective dynamics in shaping public support for war. In doing so, this issue contributes to a more comprehensive understanding of how legitimacy is contested in wartime and peacebuilding contexts alike. It also offers critical reflections on the ethical limits of just war theories and the psychosocial conditions under which war becomes normatively acceptable to democratic societies.

Keywords

just war theory; masculinity; peace negotiations; political communication; political psychology; war justification; war legitimacy

1. Introduction

The justification of war and the negotiation of peace are among the most contentious and normatively charged phenomena in international politics. The reasons for going to war are almost always multiple and contested, and the conditions under which peace processes begin, evolve, or fail are shaped by political power struggles, legal interpretations, media discourses, and moral convictions. Particularly in contemporary armed conflicts, the legitimization of war has become increasingly complex, as both aggressors and defenders craft narratives that blend legal justifications with emotional appeals, historical grievances, and ethical imperatives.

This thematic issue explores the changing nature of war legitimization and the shifting boundaries between militarism and pacifism in contemporary political contexts. While classical just war theory distinguished sharply between offensive and defensive warfare, today's conflicts often blur these lines. The rhetorical claim to “defend” democracy, human rights, or sovereignty can be (and often is) appropriated by states pursuing aggressive goals. At the same time, societies and political actors that initially oppose warfare may come to support military escalation once clear asymmetries of guilt or responsibility are established. The normative architecture of warfare is thus both fragile and malleable.

Moreover, war itself is not merely a geopolitical phenomenon but also an existential and psychological event. It is experienced and processed collectively through identity narratives, moral frames, and discursive struggles over legitimacy. In this context, distinctions between aggressor and victim, just cause and propaganda, or resistance and extremism are not fixed but dynamically negotiated. In liberal democracies, where public opinion and legitimacy play crucial roles, the politics of justification are particularly salient. But even in authoritarian regimes, the public and symbolic staging of war has become a key mechanism of internal legitimization.

This issue asks: How do states, political elites, intellectuals, and media actors construct legitimacy for war and peace? What role do historical analogies, legal arguments, and ethical tropes play? How are discourses of war and peace shaped by regime type, institutional constraints, and international alliances? And what psychological mechanisms influence public and political support for war?

Drawing on insights from political science, sociology, international relations, and political psychology, the contributions in this issue illuminate the complex mechanisms through which war is legitimised and peace becomes politically negotiable.

2. Overview of Contributions

Alayasa and Nemec (2025) compare different models of post-war reconstruction in conflict-affected countries. While security and economy-driven approaches in Afghanistan, Iraq, and Palestine often produced authoritarian regimes and further violence, Rwanda's sustainable development model fostered stability and recovery. The study questions the universal applicability of reconstruction frameworks and advocates for context-sensitive strategies.

Uyar (2025) analyses secret negotiations between democratic governments and rebel groups, demonstrating that the level of government representation crucially shapes rebel responses. Drawing on costly signaling

theory, this author's findings show that high-level delegates in covert diplomacy increase credibility and reduce violence, while low-level representatives tend to undermine trust. The article thus sheds light on the subtle mechanisms underpinning peace negotiations.

Sempijja and Mora Brito (2025) examine how colonial and post-colonial wars were legitimized in Angola and Mozambique. Their comparative study explores how newly independent states constructed justifications for violence and how international actors, especially the United Nations, influenced peace processes. Relying on archival material and discourse analysis, the article highlights the importance of historical framing and international adaptability in war-to-peace transitions.

Feilen (2025) investigates Germany's military engagement in Afghanistan and the struggle for legitimacy surrounding the Bundeswehr's role in the International Security Assistance Force mission. His neo-institutionalist analysis shows how the German state attempted to maintain legitimacy while avoiding the terminology of war, a reflection of broader societal pacifism. The article explores the dissonance between political communication, media coverage of casualties, and public expectations in democratic societies, offering insights into how legitimacy is contested and maintained in modern military interventions.

Among the contributions that take a psychological perspective on war legitimization, the article by Źemojtel-Piotrowska et al. (2025) examines how collective narcissism and different forms of authoritarianism relate to beliefs justifying war. Drawing on a community sample from Poland, the authors develop a new typology of war justification—distinguishing between morally constrained “just war” principles and more permissive views endorsing unrestricted reasons or means of warfare. Their analysis shows that left-wing authoritarianism correlates with greater support for unrestricted war justifications, while secure national identification tends to align with more morally constrained views. Surprisingly, communal national narcissism is associated with lower endorsement of just war principles and neither religious affiliation nor right-wing authoritarianism predict moral war justifications in expected ways. These findings suggest a complex and sometimes counterintuitive relationship between ideological orientation, ingroup attachment, and moral reasoning about war.

Alexandrescu's (2025) contribution develops a dynamic framework for understanding the evolving legitimization of military interventions over time. The proposed Wartime Justification Trajectory conceptualises war legitimacy not as a fixed precondition but as a contested and shifting process, shaped by changing battlefield dynamics, political communication, and public reactions. Drawing on case studies from Afghanistan, Iraq, and Ukraine, the article identifies four key phases—initial justification, conflict dynamics, social reactions, and post-conflict evaluations—and shows how political leaders adjust their narratives as conflicts unfold. By combining discourse analysis with public opinion data, Alexandrescu demonstrates that the perceived legitimacy of war is subject to continuous renegotiation. This contribution offers both theoretical and empirical insights into the conditions under which wars retain or lose public support, thus enriching scholarly debates in international relations and political communication.

The complex interplay between spatial boundaries and discursive legitimations is at the heart of Ulas' (2025) study of the protracted Cypriot conflict. Drawing on root narrative theory and border studies, Ulas analyzes how the physical and symbolic dimensions of the Cyprus border have sustained a state of “no war, no peace.” The article traces how narratives of identity and otherness, often embedded in everyday discourses and

spatial arrangements, reinforce conflictual self-organisation among the Republic of Cyprus, North Cyprus, and Turkey. Rather than peace being portrayed as a shared societal good, it is often framed as an unjust or dangerous compromise—particularly when grievances remain unacknowledged. Ulas’ analysis shows how intractability becomes entrenched not only through political standoffs but also through the materiality of the border and the persistence of trauma, offering broader insights into how spatial configurations shape the discursive foundations of war and peace.

Hidalgo (2025) presents a fundamental critique of the just war tradition. While just war theories have long claimed to offer a moral framework for distinguishing legitimate military interventions from illegitimate aggression, Hidalgo argues that in practice they often serve to morally embellish military force and obscure underlying political interests. Rather than calling for absolute pacifism, he offers a nuanced perspective grounded in political realism, highlighting the inherent moral uncertainties of warfare. He contends that war, if ever justified, must be embedded within a broader theory of just peace—one that reframes the normative discussion away from the legitimacy of violence towards the preconditions and ethics of sustainable peace. In doing so, the article challenges both the philosophical coherence and the political utility of just war theories as currently conceived.

This thematic issue concludes with a contribution by Yendell and Herbert (2025) that revisits classical psychoanalytic and political-psychological approaches to the legitimization of military conflict. Drawing on a population-based survey conducted in the UK in 2023, the authors analyse a wide array of psychological and ideological dispositions—including authoritarian submission, political radicalisation, and normative attitudes toward violence—that shape generalised support for war. Particular emphasis is placed on masculinity-related aggression and latent sadistic traits, both of which emerge as powerful predictors of militaristic attitudes. The study draws on theoretical frameworks ranging from Adorno et al.’s (1950) authoritarian personality concept to Theweleit’s (2019) psychoanalytic interpretation of male fantasies and violence, illustrating how affective structures, gender anxieties, and identity-related pathologies underpin the normative acceptance of war. In doing so, the article not only revives key insights from the Frankfurt School and object relations theory, but also shows how war legitimization in contemporary democracies remains deeply entangled with authoritarian, affective, and psychosocial dynamics.

Together, the contributions in this thematic issue demonstrate that the legitimacy of war and the prospects for peace cannot be understood through legal or strategic lenses alone. They must be analysed as dynamic constellations of discourse, identity, ideology, and affect, shaped by historical contingencies and sustained by collective narratives that reach far beyond the battlefield.

Acknowledgments

The authors would like to express their sincere gratitude to all contributors to this thematic issue, as well as to the reviewers for their constructive feedback and valuable suggestions throughout the editorial process.

Conflict of Interests

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

LLMs Disclosure

The authors used ChatGPT-4 (OpenAI) for language editing and structural clarity in preparing this editorial. All content was generated, verified, and finalised by the authors based on the full-text contributions of the individual articles.

References

- Adorno, T. W., Frenkel-Brunswik, E., Levinson, D. J., & Sanford, R. N. (1950). *The authoritarian personality*. Harper und Brothers.
- Alayasa, J., & Nemec, J. (2025). Rebuilding countries in a war and post-war context: Reconstruction models and their impacts. *Politics and Governance*, 13, Article 9879. <https://doi.org/10.17645/pag.9879>
- Alexandrescu, M. (2025). The wartime justification trajectory: A dynamic approach to justifying wars in the 21st century. *Politics and Governance*, 13, Article 10044. <https://doi.org/10.17645/pag.10044>
- Feilen, T. (2025). When violence becomes visible: The Bundeswehr's struggle for legitimacy in Afghanistan. *Politics and Governance*, 13, Article 10066. <https://doi.org/10.17645/pag.10066>
- Hidalgo, O. (2025). The shortcomings of just war theories and the legitimacy of just peace. *Politics and Governance*, 13, Article 10159. <https://doi.org/10.17645/pag.10159>
- Sempijja, N., & Brito, P. (2025). Colonial and post-colonial war legitimization and peace process efficacy: The cases of Angola and Mozambique. *Politics and Governance*, 13, Article 10022. <https://doi.org/10.17645/pag.10022>
- Theweleit, K. (2019). *Männerphantasien* (Überarbeitete Ausgabe, revidierte Ausgabe). Matthes & Seitz Berlin.
- Ulas, H. (2025). A complex border: Intractability and the physical roots of discursive legitimations in Cyprus. *Politics and Governance*, 13, Article 10151. <https://doi.org/10.17645/pag.10151>
- Uyar, S. K. (2025). Exploring covert diplomacy in peace negotiations. *Politics and Governance*, 13, Article 10015. <https://doi.org/10.17645/pag.10015>
- Yendell, A., & Herbert, D. (2025). Authoritarianism and the psychology of war: Exploring personality traits in the legitimization of military conflict. *Politics and Governance*, 13, Article 10292. <https://doi.org/10.17645/pag.10292>
- Żemojtel-Piotrowska, M., Radkiewicz, P., Rudnev, M., Kumove, H., & Piotrowski, J. (2025). Collective narcissism, left- and right-wing authoritarianisms, and justification of war. *Politics and Governance*, 13, Article 10025. <https://doi.org/10.17645/pag.10025>

About the Authors



Alexander Yendell (Dr. phil) is a sociologist at the Research Institute Social Cohesion, Section Leipzig, and a board member of the Centre for Research on Right-Wing Extremism and Democracy at Leipzig University. His research focuses on trust in democracies, right-wing extremism, Islamophobia, anti-Semitism, and social-ecological transformation.



Oliver Hidalgo holds the chair of political science with a special focus on political theory at the University of Passau. His main research topics are the history of political ideas, democratic theory, politics and religion, and international political theory. Oliver's recent publications include the special issues Digital Religions Meet Politics (with Eva-Maria Euchner and Simon Fink) and Non-Western Democracies (both for *Frontiers in Political Science* in 2025).