Introduction:

From 1914 to 1918, approximately 17 million soldiers were killed and almost 7 million civilians were killed in what is known as “The Great War.” This is similar to the casualty numbers during the Second World war between 1939 to 1945 of 15 million soldier deaths, and three times this were civilian deaths. Although these two wars, fought in the 20th century, were great in death and power, unsettlingly, these were certainly not the first wars to be waged on earth’s land. This raises the question: Can there be a ‘just war’?

War is expressed in many texts such as films, novels and poems. The Book Thief novel, written by Markus Zusak is about a poor 9 year old innocent girl who faces the reality of war when her hometown become victims of a bombing during WWII and who becomes aware of the plan made by the Axis Powers to exterminate all Jews. This text connects to the film The Boy in Striped Pyjamas, directed by Mark Herman, as this film also demonstrates the attempt to annihilate all Jews in WWII, and contains a 9 year old German boy who becomes friends with a similar-aged Jew boy from across the fence. Following the idea of war and discrimination, poet, Rupert Brooke, writer of The Soldier, expresses war to be patriotic, unlike Alfred Edward Housman’s poem Here Dead We Lie, which expresses war to be pointless. There are three principles to consider when justifying a “Just War;” A war can only be just if it is fought with a reasonable chance of success; the violence used in the war must be proportional to the injury suffered; and the weapons used in war must discriminate between combatants and non-combatants.

A war can only be just if it is fought with a reasonable chance of success. To put simply, deaths and injuries suffered for a hopeless cause are not morally justifiable. In the second World War (1939 - 1945), our allies including Britain, France, Australia, Canada, India, the Soviet Union, China and USA (and NZ) declared war against the Axis Powers including Germany, Italy and Japan. Our allies had approximately 77.1 million soldiers register for the war, however, not all of these men were out on the battlefield (some never even left their country to go and fight). This compares to the Axis Powers registrations of approximately 29.4 million (of which also not every registration was taken on board). All in all, these figures just state how wrong and ignorant the Axis Powers were when they accepted the war declaration as they didn't exactly stand a chance up against a large force (over double the amount of soldiers they had themselves). This information relates to the novel The Book Thief, written by Markus Zusak, as it is set in the Second World War, however, from the view of the Axis powers. In this novel, Zusak describes war to be pointless, horrifying and a complete waste of life and writes the novel from “Death’s” point of view. “A small but noteworthy note. I’ve seen so many young men over the years who think they’re running at other young men. They are not. They are running at me.” This quote stated by Death justifies that all soldiers out on the battlefield physically fighting, are all almost completely certain to die. Statistics state that in the allied troops, approximately only one in every fifty-six (1.8%) men would survive the war, meaning that this particular war and how Markus Zusak has justified war does not follow this particular principle of only waging war if there is a reasonable chance of success. This novel connects to the poem Here Dead We Lie, written by Alfred Edward Housman in 1914, as Housman similarly expresses his feelings towards war to be futile and a waste of a young man’s life (this novel focus’ on the actual soldiers who fought in war, unlike The Book Thief, which focus’ a lot on the civilians and the Holocaust). This poem is about youth soldiers (who are also the narrators) who are forced to rapidly shorten their lives by their incompetent leaders who sent them out to be slaughtered. These young soldiers could not decline the request as they would be shameful and would not receive respect from their elders. These soldiers blamed their old-aged leaders for sacrificing youth life, and I do not blame them. “Here dead we lie, because we did not choose.” This quote strongly expresses the putrid anger and annoyance that the forced-youth soldiers felt towards the idea of war. Overall, this novel based in WWII and this poem written during the first world war expresses war as a whole to be futile and

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1 http://ww1facts.net/quick-reference/ww1-casualties/
3 https://answers.yahoo.com/question/index?qid=20090714190811AAKYgRa
5 http://gizmodo.com/5774387/what-were-a-us-soldiers-odds-of-dying-in-every-war
6 http://www.warpoetry.co.uk/housman.html
pointless whether there is a decent chance of success or not as the deaths and injuries suffered were not morally justifiable and were very likely for a hopeless cause, meaning WWI and WWII are not “Just.”

The violence used in the war must be proportional to the injury suffered, in other words, states are prohibited from using force not necessary to attain the limited objective of addressing the injury suffered. In The Book Thief, Zusak describes a scenario where the protagonist’s hometown and street, Himmel Street, was crippingly bombarded with bombs. “The last time I saw her was red. The sky was like soup, boiling and stirring. In some places it was burned. There were black crumbs and pepper, streaked across the redness.” Zusak describes how the bombs in the skies looked like “black crumbs and pepper” and how all the fire and smoke caused by the bombs made the sky red in colour and made the sky appear to be “boiling and stirring” with smoke. These mass bombings expressed in The Book Thief signify a major loss of life. Statistics state that one of the English bombs, the Blockbuster, drew horrendous damage to anyone and almost anything within a 2km radius of the crash site. This large (1800kg - 5400kg) and reasonably cheap bomb created by the Royal Air Force in 1942, took advantage of the area it had fallen into and took the responsibility of killing hundreds of thousands of civilians (possibly even millions). By a single weapon being dropped onto the city streets and battlefields, this dramatically kills many people, allowing the “Just War” principle to ring out WWII to be un-just. This text written by Markus Zusak connects to the film, The Boy in Stiped Pyjamas, directed by Mark Herman as they both display horrendous loss of life, un-proportional to the damage dealt. Herman expresses his utter disgust towards the German’s beliefs (influenced by the Nazi leader Adolf Hitler) by showing the world what they did to a specific race and anyone who tried to help them whether they were German or not. These were the Jews. Herman indicates in his film that the Jews were sent to concentration camps where they would be dressed in grey and white striped pyjamas, starved and were killed in all sorts of horrible ways. In The Book Thief, Zusak shows us that if a local were ever to try and publicly help a passing Jew (who had been imprisoned), that they would be humiliated publicly too; often whipped or killed on the spot. Herman incorporates an emotional ending to his film by allowing one of the main characters to be killed along with a bunch of Jews accidentally; Bruno, the 9 year old son of a German officer who became friends with a similar aged Jew boy across the fence, Shmuel. “... only the victims and survivors can truly comprehend the awfulness of that time and place; the rest of us live on the other side of the fence, staring through from our own comfortable place, trying in our own clumsy ways to make sense of it all.”

This expresses the the world’s feelings now towards the harsh realities of then. Statistics state that in “The Final Solution,” (1941 - 1945) approximately 5,933,900 Jews were killed (aprox. 67% of overall Jew population in Europe). As if the World War wasn’t creating enough deaths already! These two texts, The book Thief novel and The Boy in Striped Pyjamas film both express the crippling and harsh realities of war and both appear negative when it comes to following the “Just War” principle of having the violence used being proportional to the injury suffered. Therefore, these texts show that WWII was not a “Just War.”

The weapons used in war must discriminate between combatants and non-combatants. In other words, civilians are never permissible targets of war, and every effort must be taken to avoid killing civilians. Markus Zusak based his novel, The Book Thief, on how civilians during the war suffered. An example of how the civilian’s suffering was shown in the novel is when the protagonist’s hometown is being bombed and how the victims (the civilians) were frightened for their life, literally. “Soon, everyone in the cellar was holding the hand of another, and the group of Germans stood in a lumpy circle. The cold hands melted into the warm ones, and in some cases, the feeling of another human pulse was transported. It came through the layers of pale, stiffened skin. Some of them closed their eyes, waiting for their final demise, or hoping for a sign that the raid was finally over.” Here, Zusak is describing how frightened the civilians must have been when their local ‘raid’ sirens were set off. Britain holds the “biggest purpose-built” air raid shelter in the world, built in the 1930’s. It is estimated that the bomb shelter can hold up to 6,500 civilians. However, civilians do not fight in the wars. The soldiers do, so why must we build magnificently large protection shelters when it is

9 https://www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org/jsource/Holocaust/killedtable.html
not the civilians war? The Soldier, written by Rupert Brooke in 1914 can be connected to The Book Thief because there is no link. Author of The Book Thief, Markus Zusak, expresses his opinion on war to be futile and unnecessary, whereas Rupert Brooke (who had not yet fought in the war) expresses war to be passionate and afterlife-rewarding. Brooke was known to be a handsome and clever young man who thought only idealistically and patriotically of war when it came to writing his poems, oblivious to the realities of the war and how much it made the people around him suffer. “If I should die, think only this of me, that there’s some corner of a foreign field, that is forever England.” What Brooke is trying to tell here is that if the narrator of the poem dies on a battlefield, most probably in another country, that exact place of death will become a part of English land too. Even if the English soldier (narrator) is not buried on that spot, supposedly his body would shed blood onto the ground, therefore, turning the soil into ‘English soil.’ Although this text does not directly refer to the criteria, “The weapons used in war must discriminate between combatants and non-combatants,” it does link in the way that the soldier (narrator) of this text is reciting this idealistic war poem to his family and friends (civilians) in England, reassuring them that he is risking his life for a great cause, and that death for him will be a luxury as he will allegedly ‘live on forever.’ However, realistically his family and friends would be terrified as to what could happen to their soldier friend and therefore, leaving them to suffer with stress, anxiety and other mental illnesses. Markus Zusak and Rupert Brooke’s texts, The Book Thief and The Soldier are both examples of texts that do not follow the criteria of ‘purposely NOT targeting civilians’ during the war, as they both in some way express the pain and suffering that were caused by the civilians mentioned in the texts.

The Book Thief novel, The Boy in Striped Pyjamas film, and the two poems, Here Dead we Lie and The Soldier all significantly show how war as a whole is unjust by using a few of the “just war” criteria. All these texts show connections and differences relative to the idea of war and if it is “just” or not and express war in many different ways and from many different points of view. Therefore, in relation to my texts and the time periods they were written in, war is not justifiable and this has been proven by statistics stating that the civilian death toll was significantly greater than the soldier’s death toll who were out on the battle field during the First and Second World War. Although these were only two wars, I am convinced that the civilian death to soldier death ratio would be similar for all other wars before and after WWI and WWII.

Text Bibliography:


Edward Housman. A (1914). Here Dead we Lie.
