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## Star Wars, Syria, and Our Civil War: Bearing Witness to Atrocity and Suffering

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# Star Wars, Syria, and Our Civil War: Bearing Witness to Atrocity and Suffering

## **Abstract**

Bear with me on this one. The American Civil War will make it into this conversation, but I have a lot of other things to talk about first. And I should also warn: **minor spoilers ahead.**

I was moved to silence after seeing *Rogue One*, the first spin-off film of the *Star Wars* franchise. Even now, tears creep into my eyes as I remember how it shook me. I had heard [reviews](#) claiming that it was the first *Star Wars* movie to put the cost of war at the center of the narrative. I hadn't expected it to be so true.

*Rogue One* is far from a perfect movie, but it boldly presents many powerful themes that move it beyond the traditional scope of the *Star Wars* universe. It deals not only with acts of war, but with their human consequences.

[*excerpt*]

## **Keywords**

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## **Disciplines**

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## **Comments**

This blog post originally appeared in [The Gettysburg Compiler](#) and was created by students at Gettysburg College.

# THE GETTYSBURG COMPILER

## ON THE FRONT LINES OF HISTORY

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### Star Wars, Syria, and Our Civil War: Bearing Witness to Atrocity and Suffering



Courtesy of Wookipedia.

By *Kevin Lavery '16*

Bear with me on this one. The American Civil War will make it into this conversation, but I have a lot of other things to talk about first. And I should also warn: **minor spoilers ahead.**

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*Rogue One* is far from a perfect movie, but it boldly presents many powerful themes that move it beyond the traditional scope of the *Star Wars* universe. It deals not only with acts of war, but with their human consequences.

Near the end of the second act, a powerful moment plays out as rebel spy Cassian Andor confronts Jyn Erso for challenging how far he was willing to go for his cause. He reminds her that while she had reluctantly supported the rebels only since the beginning of the film, he and

others had devoted their lives to liberating the galaxy. “I’ve been in this fight since I was six years old,” he tells her.

When I heard those words, I was no longer in a galaxy far, far away. I had been painfully transported back to Earth, thinking of the estimated 300,000 child soldiers and all the children around the world who are even now caught in the midst of wars. I saw their stories in the character Cassion Andor—from the child soldiers recently released from Columbia’s Farc rebel group to those still trapped in near-genocidal conditions in South Sudan and Aleppo. Aleppo. May it be burned into our minds along with every other tragedy that has led us to recommit ourselves to the old lie: “Never again.” As I write, a fragile ceasefire holds and UN observers are on their way while civilians are being evacuated from the ruins of the city they once called their home. It was probably knowledge of the atrocities taking place there that caused the movie to affect me so strongly, reports of Russian-backed regime forces executing civilians *en masse*. For my generation, this level of violence is unprecedented in our memories. Srebrenica, Rwanda, and Darfur came before our innocence had been swept away with the currents of maturity and cynicism. The humanitarian crisis in Syria is our first experience of a prolonged atrocity on this immense scale.



The streets of Aleppo. Voice of America News, via Wikimedia Commons.

The night after I saw *Rogue One*, I heard a report from NPR war correspondent Alison Meuse on the fall of Aleppo. She related a story from the front-lines of the conflict that reminded me of why I was so moved by Cassion’s words:

I was speaking to a humanitarian worker who’s responding in some of these districts – front-line districts that have just been retaken by Syrian government forces and their allies. He found this little boy who had survived through the offensive, and he started following him around. And he was about maybe 10 years old, and he turned out to be an orphan. And he had survived all

alone in the Old City of Aleppo these past four and half years, and he was delivering water to people because the taps have been off.

And, yeah, that sticks with you because it makes you think about all these people, not just under the bombs, not just displaced, but also the people whose lives have just been destroyed.

Like Cassion, this boy was six years old when his chance at a normal life was stolen away from him and he became part of a conflict bigger than any individual, much less a child. Unlike Cassion, this boy is real. He could easily have been one of the 50,000 children killed since the war began, just a portion of the 400,000 total deaths. Instead, he survived, though he has borne more than any child should ever have to bear.

All of this is taking place during my year as a staff member at the Civil War Institute, where my energies are devoted to the study of our own bloody fratricide. Working in this field reminds me every day how easy it is to grow numb to horrors that took place a long time ago. It's not that we don't care about the American Civil War—we certainly do—but how we often take its complexity for granted in a way that disguises its nature as a human catastrophe. This makes it all the more difficult for us to understand a conflict like Syria, in all its shades of grays. And while studying the past can offer tools for helping us make sense of the present, too often we use our deep interest in the past to avoid answering hard questions.

Escapism—and its futility—is another theme addressed in the plot of *Rogue One*. Jyn Erso's destiny is closely intertwined with the fate of the rebellion, yet she struggles to reconcile herself to this truth. Early in the film, when she reunites with the extremist rebel leader who raised her, he demands how she can tolerate the oppression of imperial rule. "What does it matter if you never look up?" Jyn replies coldly.



Aleppo before civil war, a modern city like any other. Alen Ištoković (Creative Commons Attribution 3.0), via Wikimedia Commons.

It's easier for Jyn just to keep her head down, and the same is true for us when it comes to atrocities and injustices in our own world today. Herein lies another reason that the American Civil War is more appealing to study than the Syrian Civil War. We can't undo what has already taken place. We bear no personal responsibility for the killing, slavery, rape, and destruction of property that accompanied our Civil War. Even if some commentators believe there is collective guilt still bleeding over from the Civil War, we can think about it without being directly implicated. That's a luxury that we can only pretend to have when we consider the war in Syria, the horror of which prompts us to feign powerlessness. I don't mean to imply that stopping it or sending aid is simple or easy, but neither is possible if we continue to avert our gaze and act like events halfway around the world don't affect us. As Jyn comes to understand by the end of the *Rogue One*, we cannot afford to care about abuses of power and the loss of human life only when we feel like it—not without others paying the price.

Instead of fighting real battles in America, we have the luxury of refighting old ones. For us, the idea of Civil War is one that we can revisit for pleasure, to satisfy our intellectual hunger, and to galvanize our political ideologies. Those *living* Civil War lack that privilege. At best, they're preoccupied trying to make their vision of the world a reality. At worst, they're just trying to survive. Does it cost us anything to have sympathy for the victims of Syria's dreadful war?

*Star Wars* is science fiction. We know that. But the themes that give *Rogue One* such power—tragedy, sacrifice, atrocity—are as present in our world today as they are on the big-screen or were during the American Civil War. If we find ourselves moved by *Star Wars* or our Civil War, we should find it in ourselves to look at Syria’s catastrophe with renewed compassion. May a real understanding of the costs of war—revealed through present, past, and even fictional wars—lead us to discover empathy for its victims instead of fearing them. In the process, we may come to a deeper understanding of our own Civil War—and of ourselves.

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*Students of the Civil War often appreciate reading letters sent by soldiers and civilians. If you want to read messages (primary sources!) sent by those trapped on the ground in Aleppo, you can [click here](#). For more on the humanitarian crisis in Aleppo, [start here](#).*

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