Worksheet 1.1

The Geneva Conventions and Total War

The Geneva Conventions are a set of international treaties (four treaties and three additional protocols) designed, in the words of the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC), to ‘limit the barbarity of war’. Visit this site to find out more about the history and purpose behind the conventions.

Now click here. This ICRC site provides the full text of the conventions. Choose one of the conventions listed, and read through the articles. As you do so, ask yourself the following questions.

1 Why was Article 3 added to the Geneva Conventions? To what extent could we say that all wars are now ‘total wars’? Support your answer with examples taken from the second half of the 20th century.

2 Do you think that if two countries are engaged in total war against one another, then enemy soldiers should be given rights? Give reasons for your answer.

3 It could be argued that the Geneva Conventions are only really relevant to the victors of a conflict, as only they get to enforce them. Do you agree with this argument, and if so does your conclusion affect the authority of the Conventions?