

Past (Im)Perfect Continuous

Trans-Cultural Articulations of the Postmemory of WWII

edited by
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The *Human Smoke* Controversy, and Beyond: Remembering the Unpopular Pacifism of WW2

I would like to begin with a brief mention of two recent examples of World War Two cinematic postmemory, as film is a form of memorialization and post-memorialization which is, and will most likely continue to be, enormously influential. The first is *The Darkest Hour*, the movie that allowed Gary Oldman to garner an Oscar for what many considered his stellar performance as Winston Churchill, and indeed managed to keep alive the myth that has grown around this historical figure as if he, almost single-handedly, stood up against the Nazis until the Stars and Stripes army joined the fray. As only a few critics observed, by watching the movie one would never know that this champion of democracy was also the man who, among other things, was “strongly in favour of using poisoned gas against uncivilised tribes,” who thought that Indians were “a beastly people with a beastly religion,” or who referred to Palestinians as “barbaric hoards who ate little but camel dung.”¹ This darkest side of Churchill is, of course, well-known to serious historians, but there is hardly any trace of it in Joe Wright’s movie. If, however, you happen to have read the text which I refer to in the title of this essay, you would definitely know not only about Churchill’s opinions about people of color and, more generally, non-English people; you might also begin to question the wisdom of both his war tactics and strategy. But a bit more on this later.

The other movie I want to mention here, to frame my main argument, is *Hacksaw Ridge*, the Mel Gibson take on the story of Desmond Doss, the World War Two conscientious objector who was awarded the Medal of Honor “for outstanding gallantry far above and

¹ Quotations of Churchill’s views are taken from Seymour. The dark side of Churchill’s legacy is emphasized especially by Callum Alexander Scott’s review, while Adrian Smith points to the film’s historical inaccuracies.

beyond the call of duty” (“Desmond Doss”) during the Battle of Okinawa. While at least one reviewer lamented that the movie “makes hash of its plainly stated moral code by reveling in the same blood-lust it condemns” (Seitz), it must be conceded that the film has the merit of raising a topic largely ignored in literary, cinematic, and even historical representations of the Second World War: that of how pacifism confronted a war in which the enemy could be easily perceived as embodying pure, undiluted evil. The utterly perverse nature of the Nazi regime is most likely the main reason why pacifism and anti-warism have been virtually erased from most discourses on the war. Here was an enemy with not even a shred of human decency and with whom, therefore, no appeasement or dialogue seemed possible. There is also another motive, particularly significant in the US context, why opposition to World War Two has been largely forgotten. While anti-war movements are as a rule routinely accused of sympathizing with the enemy whether that is true or not, in this case there were indeed pro-Nazi sympathizers among the ranks of those opposing US participation in the war, and especially among the most vocal and influential anti-war group of the day, the America First Committee (AFS).² The best-known case is perhaps that of Charles Lindbergh, whose anti-Semitism was shared by other AFS members—but, it must be added, also by many who supported US intervention.³ These two

² In his study of AFC, Wayne S. Cole argues that while one could not consider the organization as being overall pro-Nazi, several Nazi sympathizers as well as the KKK, were openly supportive of its goals. The contradictory nature of the anti-war front is not overlooked in Baker’s *Human Smoke*. For example, he reports that Rabbi Goldstein, a member of the John Hayne Holmes’ War Resisters League, though opposed to America’s participation in the war, chose not to speak at the Second National Anti-War Congress because Senator Burton Wheeler was also on the program. “In view of the anti-Jewish statements Senator Wheeler has made privately and publicly, Rabbi Goldstein said, ‘I can not as a matter of self-respect appear upon the same platform with him’” (as quoted in Baker, *Human Smoke* 330).

³ As Cole and many others have noted, while Lindbergh did denounce the persecution suffered by the Jews in Nazi Germany, he continued to entertain anti-Semitic feelings. In his well-know Des Moines speech of September 11, 1941, he stated that “the persecution they [the Jews] suffered in Germany would be sufficient to make bitter enemies of any race. But no person of honesty and vision can look on their pro-war

facts, along with a common-sense perception that the best that can be said of sincere opponents of World War Two is that they were completely mistaken about the situation at hand, has by and large prevented giving pacifist arguments a fair hearing.

Gibson's movie manages to pay homage to Doss by showing that it was possible for a man who as a Seventh-Day Adventist refused to carry let alone fire a weapon, to display not only moral but also immense physical courage. On the other hand, as none of the reviews I read suggests, one could easily argue that while the film pays tribute to a forgotten and heroic character, it also chooses to focus on a pacifist who by no means refused to take an active part in the war. Though it is perhaps understandable that in a movie bent on emphasizing his courage in battle certain moral and political questions would be downplayed, it seems odd that the story never questions Doss's pacifist wisdom. Of course, we know that pacifism is not a monolithic ideology, and that it comes in various degrees, but as World War Two-resisters from Union Theological Seminary put it in their statement "Why We Refused to Register," while they felt "a deep bond of unity with those who decide to register as conscientious objectors," they also realized that gaining "personal exemption from the most crassly un-Christian requirements of the act does not compensate for the fact that we are complying with it and accepting its protection" (Benedict, et al.). In short, without questioning the good intentions of *Hacksaw Ridge's* story, and Doss's utmost good faith, the movie treats its viewers to a sort of sanitized version of pacifism—a pacifism that aimed at safeguarding one's individual conscience but certainly not at turning it into "the counter-friction to stop the machine" (211), as Henry David Thoreau would have put it.

It is to this second kind of active and militant pacifism that novelist Nicholas Baker dedicates *Human Smoke: The Beginnings of*

policy here today without seeing the dangers involved in such a policy, both for us and for them. . . . A few farsighted Jewish people realize this and stand opposed to intervention. But the majority still do not. Their greatest danger to this country lies in their large ownership and influence in our motion pictures, our press, our radio, and our government" (as quoted in Cole 144).

World War II, the End of Civilization, published in 2008 by Simon & Schuster, an odd kind of book that proved to be enormously controversial. Before I say something about the book's content, however, a few words about its form are in order. The text is a collage of, mostly snippets or sections, from newspaper articles (in large part) as well as government transcripts and personal diaries of the time. The authorial voice is hardly audible, which is not to say that the book does not bear a strong authorial imprint. Covering the period that goes from the aftermath of World War One to American entry into World War Two after the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor, the montage seems to advance an implicit thesis, even though—at least to my mind—such thesis is not as absolute as Baker's detractors argue. What is Baker's controversial argument? In a nutshell what he wants to suggest is that the allies should have at least *tried* to negotiate an armistice with Hitler, as that was the only way in which Jews and other persecuted minorities might have been saved. This, as Baker himself has made abundantly clear in an essay that he wrote for *Harper's* in reply to his critics three years after the publication of *Human Smoke*, is by no means his own original idea. Abraham Kaufman and Jessie Wallace Hughan, respectively the secretary and the founder of the War Resisters League, in the early 1940's gave speeches, wrote letters, and handed out leaflets calling for a peace "conditional upon the release of Jews and other political prisoners" ("Myth" 749). Dorothy Day, too, wrote on the front page of the *Catholic Worker* that "Peace Now Without Victory Will Save Jews," a notion echoed by the Jewish Peace Fellowship, which also called for an armistice that would "make an end to the world-wide slaughter" (qtd. in "Myth" 749). In the *Harper's* essay, Baker also mentions that the British publisher Victor Gollancz sold 250,000 copies of a pamphlet called "Let My People Go," in which the wisdom of Churchill's carpet-bombing and fire-storming strategy was strongly called into question. "This 'policy'—Gollancz wrote—it must be plainly said, will not save a single Jewish life." His concern was, "and he put it in italics, *the saving of life now*. The German government had to be approached immediately and asked to allow Jews to emigrate." If the Nazis refused such a proposal, the Allies would lose nothing and it

“would strip Hitler of the excuse that he cannot afford to feed useless mouths” (“Myth” 750).

One may well find these propositions ill-conceived and argue that negotiations with the Third Reich would not have brought about the desired results. But let me say this once again, they are not Baker’s own invention—these were the notions that at least some pacifists (and some non-pacifists, too) entertained at the time. I doubt, however, that the examples quoted by Baker would in any way make his critics relent. In fact, what several of them seem to find particularly irritating is nothing less than Baker’s dedication (in his afterword) “to the memory of Clarence Pickett and other American and British pacifists. They’ve never really gotten their due. They tried to save Jewish refugees, feed Europe, reconcile the United States and Japan, and stop the war from happening. They failed, but they were right” (*Human Smoke* 474). It’s especially the last sentence, I suppose, that many find unacceptable—the notion that Baker would know *now*, seven decades plus after the fact, what was the right thing to do *then*, and, moreover, that the right thing to do was not add fuel to fire but seek peace. What clearly transpires from the criticism that the book has received, from Left, Right, and Center, is that it is either outrageous or ludicrous, or both, to suggest that pacifism may figure in any way significant in discussions of World War Two. In the lapidary words of David Cesarani, writing for the *Independent*, by reading Baker’s book we learn that some pacifists “were truly honourable people who ... succoured refugees from Nazism when the US administration was most stony-hearted. But some of them were idiots, and a few managed to be both at the same time.”

Perhaps because I share at least some of Baker’s admiration for the “absolute pacifists” who did not compromise on their principles and—at least in cases like those of Don Benedict, David Dellinger, and Bayard Rustin— paid dearly for their ideas by serving prison sentences and constant abuse from guards and some fellow prisoners, I have a different understanding of what *Human Smoke* tries to accomplish. While I do agree that, as Katha Pollit has put it in another devastatingly critical review for *The Nation*, “Baker’s cut-and-paste method suggests without stating outright, much less making a coherent argument,” to

my mind what his collage implies is not so much that, as Pollit argues, “lives would have been spared had Churchill made a separate peace and Roosevelt stayed out of the war,” but that—to quote from Baker’s *Harper’s* piece—“the pacifists were the only ones, during a time of catastrophic violence, who repeatedly put forward proposals that had any chance of saving a threatened people.”⁴ Pollit candidly admits that reading the book made her feel “something I had never felt before: fury at pacifists.” If on the one hand I find such fury oddly misplaced considering the gallery of war criminals peopling the pages of *Human Smoke*, on the other Pollit’s comment hits the right target of this whole diatribe: the unwillingness to concede that, as Baker has put it, “the P-word” may be used “in any positive way ... especially in connection with the Second World War” (“Myth 738”).

I realize that at this point the discussion would seem to revolve around the merit (or demerit) of Baker’s, by his own admission, tentative historical argument.⁵ Since I am not a historian of World War Two, I would have little to contribute to this debate. But before finally suggesting why *Human Smoke* and the controversy that surrounds it,

⁴ This is a complex, somewhat slippery, issue. Baker does indeed seem to imply, as I myself noted above, that a negotiated peace and America’s non-entry in the war might have saved lives—mostly, though not only, Jewish lives—but that would have happened *only if the pacifist agenda had been fully implemented*. If, in other words, the first, most important political objective of the anti-Nazi camp had truly been that of sparing the suffering of millions of civilians. Baker himself concedes that he does not expect readers of *Human Smoke* to agree necessarily with him that pacifists “were right in their principled opposition to that enormous war—the war that Hitler began,” but that their position should be taken “seriously,” so as to see “whether there was some wisdom in it” (“Myth” 739). I am not sure that Baker’s collage ultimately suggests that, by following a pacifist strategy, the war would have been avoided. The main point of his book is that war was not the means to save the Jews, because “The Jews needed immigration visas, not Flying Fortresses. And who was doing the best to get them visas, as well as food, money, and hiding places? Pacifists were” (739).

⁵ “[P]acifists opposed the counterproductive barbarity of the Allied bombing campaign, and they offered positive proposals to save the Jews: create safe havens, call an armistice, negotiate a peace that would guarantee the passage of refugees. We should have tried. If the armistice plan failed, then it failed. We could always have resumed the battle. Not trying leaves us culpable” (“Myth 754”).

may be relevant to postmemory, understood as an imaginative practice, in need of constant renegotiations and recalibrations, let me say that much as we may remain unconvinced by Baker's ideas, the book's insistence on the fact that—as Pollit herself acknowledges—“neither Roosevelt nor Churchill did a thing to prevent the Holocaust” is certainly praiseworthy.⁶ That the US State Department actually refused to grant visas for Jewish refugees, may not be news for people well versed in World War Two history, but is something not to be forgotten if we wish to resist—as personally I think we should—what Baker calls “the dangerous myth of the good war.”

The Call for Papers of the conference for which an earlier draft of this essay was written reminds us that the memory of World War Two is also currently being threatened by the rise of far-right populism.⁷ This dangerous mix of nationalism, sexism and hatred of foreigners, and especially “dark” people, has taken in some European countries a

⁶ In this essay, as in many of the papers originally presented at the conference *Past (Im)Perfect Continuous. Trans-Cultural Articulations of the Postmemory of WWII*, the term “postmemory” is used in a much looser sense than how it was originally conceived by Marianne Hirsch. Rather than focusing on how individuals imagine, and re-member, traumatic experiences lived by their forefathers, I concentrate on how writers, activists, and politicians who understand, shape, and rhetorically deploy the legacy of the war for what are eminently public purposes. Hirsch writes that “Postmemory is a powerful form of memory precisely because its connection to its object or source is mediated not through recollection but through an imaginative investment and creation” (662). One may argue that, though its nature is different, and differently motivated, also what we might wish to call historical-cultural-political postmemory is sustained by “imaginative investment and creation” and as such is always tempted to rewrite past events to bring them in line with some contemporary script. As I think it will be clear to readers of this essay, I don't think this is a practice that can be avoided, as long as the rewriting concerns the *meaning* and the *political-cultural value* of facts, not their actual occurrence, or the reasons why they took place, when such reasons have been ascertained with a reasonable degree of objectivity. By calling attention to pacifist resistance or approaches to the war, this essay is a modest attempt to complicate the moral and political “lessons” to be drawn today the war.

⁷ “The rise of the far right both in Europe and in the US precisely at a time in which the direct witnesses and survivors of the dramatic events of WWII (including the Holocaust, but not only) are dying out, makes the need for a strong memorialization—for a solid stone to stumble upon, as it were—as urgent today as ever” (“Call for Papers”).

distinct polemical tone vis-à-vis the legacy of World War Two. One need only think of Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orbán condoning the commemorations of Miklos Horthy and Jozsef Nyiro: the first, the Admiral who ruled Hungary between 1920 and 1944, and was an ally of Nazi Germany; the second, a raging anti-Semitic writer and supporter of the Hungarian fascist party. Equally shocking are some remarks on their countries' respective Nazi and Fascist past that have come from the German *Alternative für Deutschland* and the Italian *Lega*. One of the *AfD* party leaders, Alexander Gauland, "during the election campaign, in Sept. 2017 ... gave a speech in which he said that 'no other people have been so clearly presented with a false past as the Germans.' Gauland called for 'the past to be returned to the people of Germany,' by which he meant a past in which Germans were free to be 'proud of the accomplishments of our soldiers in both world wars'" (Stanley). More recently, *Afd* lawmakers "staged a walk out from the Bavarian parliament during a service to remember Holocaust victims" (Batchelor) after their party had been accused of playing down the criminal record of Germany's Nazi past. On his part, the Italian *Lega*'s leader Matteo Salvini is on record for publicly declaring that while such things as the Fascist racial laws were "mad," "many things were done in the Fascist period, such as the introduction of the pension system and the reclamation of marshland areas" ("Lot done"), which is like saying that the autobahn system Germany built in the 1930's is a "merit" of the Hitler regime, which unfortunately also masterminded the Holocaust and launched a war that cost the lives of millions of people. Perhaps the most troubling of these revisionist moves—also because it has been passed by the parliament of a supposedly democratic state—is the outrageous Polish law that criminalizes any mention of Poles as "being responsible or complicit in the Nazi crimes committed by the Third German Reich" (John).

However, the odious revisionism of the far right is not the only way in which the memory of the immense human catastrophe of World War Two is smeared. As several political commentators have observed, and as no scholar has better and more convincingly argued than David Hoogland Noon, in his article "Operation Enduring Analogy: World War II, the War on Terror, and the Uses of Historical Memory," a

questionable and often downright cynical use of World War Two analogies has been one of the chief propaganda instruments employed by the George W. Bush administration to sell the war on terrorism to the world's public opinion. In fact, one may wish to add that Bush senior, at the time of the First Gulf War, was perhaps the first politician to deploy the "Good War" as a weapon useful to kick, along with Saddam Hussein's ass (Bush's own words—see Hunt), also the noxious "Vietnam syndrome" hindering the US army's role as global super-cop (see Dionne Jr.). The Bushes have not been alone at playing this rhetorical game. At the time of the NATO bombing of Serbia in 1999, during Bill Clinton's presidency, Kosovars were compared to Jews, and Milosevic was renamed Hitlerovic.⁸ Moreover, it must be observed that if, in the late historian Marilyn Young's words, "There are, it seems, only two kinds of war the United States can fight: World War II or Vietnam. Anything that can be made to look like World War II is OK," World War Two analogies have been employed also outside the US. In 1999, the then "Green" German minister Joschka Fischer "told the congress that Serbian repression of the Kosovars would be 'another Auschwitz'; anyone who opposed NATO intervention would thereby be responsible for a second holocaust. ... Thus the German military's return to offensive warfare, explicitly outlawed by the Constitution because of Nazi war crimes, was legitimated through the moral exploitation of the very same" (97).⁹

⁸The analogies between World War Two and Kosovo are briefly analyzed in Alexander 46-49. His lengthy discussion of how the Holocaust has become instrumental in the construction of a new moral universalism, while valuable in its own right as a sociological analysis, seems to miss or downplay the intricate and often very contradictory political ramifications of the current rhetoric of human rights, with its corollary notion of "humanitarian warfare."

⁹Alexander, in a footnote of his essay, quotes a *San Francisco Chronicle* article in which Germany's deputy foreign minister for U.S. relations explained that if Germany was able to participate in the NATO bombing of Yugoslavia it was because the "68ers," that is the veterans of the student movement, "used to tell their elders, 'We will not stand by, as you did while minority rights are trampled and massacres take place.' Slobodan Milosevic gave them a chance to prove it" (as qtd. in Alexander 79). From this perspective, Germany's act of war would be an explicit repudiation of its Nazi past. But from Jachnow's perspective, the very opposite is true: by taking part in a

In his already-mentioned *Independent* review of *Human Smoke*, Cesarani suspects “that Baker is really writing about Iraq. What we have here is 1933 viewed through the lens of 2003.” And if Baker may have good reasons for feeling angry at the lies and manipulations that paved the way to the Allied attack on Iraq—which in all likelihood could have been avoided through diplomatic means, thus sparing tens of thousands of lives—he should have known better than apply retroactively this notion to an altogether different context, as “history is too serious a thing to be left to novelists.” Cesarani, as a professional historian, has of course every right to defend his trade, even though even skeptic readers of the late Hayden White’s work would probably be more cautious in drawing clear-cut boundaries between the province of history and that of literature. At any rate, if on the one hand it might be argued that Baker ends up committing the same sin he deplores in others—that of mobilizing a selective memory of World War Two to pursue a political agenda—on the other we must honestly ask ourselves if *anyone* looking at World War Two today, and especially anyone who was not a direct witness of those events, can really avoid seeing them through the lens of contemporary concerns. The question I raise is an epistemological, not an ontological one. It concerns the realm of interpretation, not whether certain facts occurred or not. No meaningful conversation about the issues under consideration can take place if one does not share a respect for what are the incontrovertible facts of the matter. So, I can understand some of Baker’s readers irritation because the documents he quotes (none of which, however, is false) appear to insinuate that Franklin Delano Roosevelt goaded the Japanese into attacking the US fleet so that he could have the *casus belli* he needed to lead a reluctant country into yet another World War. This

military operation (which, by the way, took place in territories formerly devastated by the Wehrmacht) the German state contravened a law created precisely to prevent any type of offensive war. This may well be a paradigmatic example of how the memory and post-memory of World War Two become entangled in both individual and collective histories, and in the politics in which such histories are inevitably imbricated.

conspiratorial thesis is rejected by most historians, as far as I can tell, but to conclude from this that the US were not expecting to clash sooner or later with Japanese imperialism to defend their own imperial interests in the Far East, would seem to be equally misconceived. At any rate, these are disagreements that have to do with how we *interpret* certain facts, and to imagine that how we interpret the past may not be influenced by our beliefs about the present is simply chimerical.

There is hardly any question that, while researching and writing *Human Smoke*, Baker would have had the so-called War on Terror on his mind.¹⁰ His *Harper's* essay gives explicit indication that this was indeed the case. There, he insistently laments US readiness to bomb any corner of the planet where things appear to take turns Washington disapproves. From the First Gulf War and the bombing of Belgrade, to the endless, intermittent pounding of both Iraq and Afghanistan and the havoc let loose in Lybia, World War Two is routinely invoked as “pacifism’s great smoking counterexample.” As Baker writes, “we” always have no choice but intervene—and bomb—“because *look at World War II*” (“Myth” 742). His book was certainly not the first one to call into question simple-minded, Manichean readings of World War Two, and thus debunk the myth of the “good war.” Michael C. C Adams’ *The Best War Ever: America and World War II* (1994), Michael Zezima’s *Saving Private Power: The Hidden History of the Good War* (2000), Jacques Pawels’ *Le myth de la bonne guerre* (2005), each in its own way, have raised serious questions not only about the Allied conduct of the war, but especially about the way the war has been

¹⁰ Or, for that matter, that his antipathy for the allied conduct of the war against Japan may well have been influenced by the legacy of the Vietnam War, a conflict that would show how—from at least the assault on the Philippines in 1898 during the Spanish-American war—US imperialism in the Far East was anything but an invention of Japanese war propaganda (though of course Japan used it to cover its own criminal imperialism in China and elsewhere).

memorialized to fit political agendas that usually contemplate the recourse to military force. Of course, any criticism of how the Allies fought the war is likely to elicit *reductio ad hitlerum* counterarguments, as if questioning, say, the firebombing of German cities is tantamount to arguing that Hitler and Churchill were war criminals of the same ilk. They obviously were not, and it strikes me as somewhat intellectually dishonest to argue that this is what Baker wishes to suggest. The fact remains, however, that the fire-bombing of German cities was not only—objectively speaking—as savage an act of war as the Blitz, but that as a member of Churchill’s cabinet observed as early as 1941, “Bombing does NOT affect German morale.” On the other hand, as General Raymond Lee argued, it was good for “The morale of the British people . . . if the bombing stopped, their spirit would immediately suffer” (*Human Smoke* 434).

One may continue to believe that, notwithstanding Churchill’s predilection for bombing—to quote Baker—“as a form of pedagogy—a way of enlightening city dwellers as to the hellishness of remote battlefields” (*Human Smoke* 191)—and Franklin Delano Roosevelt’s refusal to allow Jewish refugees into the country, any comparison of the evils committed by the two sides is out of the question. Personally, I don’t think our primary aim should be to compare evils—our moral imperative should be to tell the truth. And yes, all truths of course must be contextualized, but how else would we call fire-bombing a city, knowing you will kill thousands of civilians and with the intention of provoking terror and endless human misery if not a war crime? If one wishes to defend or in any case justify the destruction of Dresden, the firebombing of Tokyo, or the dropping of the Atomic bomb on Hiroshima and Nagasaki, one must be ready to argue that in some instances recourse to terrorism and criminal violence may be necessary—this is what implicitly Churchill himself admitted when he declared “that the Germans should be made to suffer in their homeland and cities something of the torments they have let loose upon their neighbors and upon the world” (as qtd. in *Human Smoke* 358). The torments inflicted on Germany had to be equal to those the Nazis had visited on their enemies, and to be equal they had to be meted out in the same ruthless fashion. Again, I am no historian nor a military strategist

but even assuming historians and strategists had all the right answers and they were able to offer decisive evidence that only by pursuing the war the ways the Allied did, the Third Reich could be defeated, I would still want to call a spade a spade.

In a way I can understand the anger of some reviews. To claim that pacifism was a viable alternative, or, worse still, to feel sympathy for those who, consistently with their beliefs, actively opposed the war effort by refusing even to serve in labor camps the way David Dillinger did, may be irritating to whomever thinks not only that the Axis could be defeated only by military force but because—I suspect—it seems to imply that amid so much chaos and ambiguity one could preserve intact one's most deeply felt beliefs. What lies behind *Human Smoke*'s hostile reviews, I think, is "fury" against would-be "Beautiful Souls" who did not wish to compromise their abstract love of non-violence. I don't think, however, that this is how people like Bayard Rustin, Don Benedict, David Dellinger, Rabbi Cronbach, or Milton Mayer saw themselves. These war resisters held a strong belief in the *power* of non-violence—they may have been mistaken, of course, but they sincerely believed lives could be saved not by looking the other way, but by *fighting* in a different way. As Baker writes summarizing Milton Mayer's argument, "we couldn't fight fascism by acting like animals—we could fight it only by trying to stay human" (*Human Smoke* 150). In Mayer's own words, "War is at once the essence and apotheosis, the beginning and the triumph, of Fascism" (187).

Even though, unlike him, we may feel that in those days war was the only way, we should never, I think, make the mistake of arguing that it was a "good" way. It may have been a necessary way but even if we don't like to admit it, I think Mayer *was* by and large right: to fight Fascism in several instances the "good guys" had to resort to the kind of savage warfare that also the Fascists practiced. That Etty Hillesum could write in her diary, on March 15, 1941, "It is the problem of our age: hatred of Germans poisons everyone's mind," is something that should give everyone pause. She certainly didn't mean to suggest that hatred of Jews was unimportant. What she meant was that "Indiscriminate hatred is the worst thing there is. It is the sickness of the soul" (as qtd. in *Human Smoke* 296). Perhaps there are extreme conditions under

which most of us are forced to hate. Indeed, one may wish to observe that even Hillesum implicitly acknowledged that what made hate unbearable was its lack of discrimination—that it was not able to make distinctions between those who might have deserved it and those who did not, or not to the same extent. In other words, in Hillesum’s phrase, hate was the equivalent of the bombings (conducted by both the Allies and the Luftwaffe), which would not distinguish between military and civilian targets. Should we be “furious” at those like her, who resisted the spirit of the times and interrogated—not many years later, but in the thick of it—the sanity of the war? I cannot bring myself—I have to admit that—to join with utter conviction Baker in declaring that pacifists “were right.” But on the other hand, I also refuse to believe that they were certainly wrong, as many hostile reviewers of *Human Smoke* have either stated or implied in their assaults on the book. Most importantly, they were no armchair war resisters. Not only they were willing to go to jail to uphold their principles and hold on to their conscience. “They tried to save Jewish refugees, feed Europe, reconcile the United States and Japan” (*Human Smoke* 474), and they refused to give in to the barbarous common-sense of the day.

As the memory of the horrendous conflict that devastated the world inevitably gives way to postmemory, its legacy will continue to be intensely, and at times fiercely contested. It is hard to imagine that it could be otherwise. Hence, we will most likely continue to see the war invoked any time a “sanctifying touch” (Noon 339) is needed to justify mostly US-led military interventions around the planet, while in some countries the effort to whitewash their participation in the horrors and slaughters of the war will be instrumental to the pursuit of xenophobic and authoritarian political agendas. But there will be also other ways in which the “moral capital” of the war will be invoked. As I write these lines, activists engaged in saving the lives of immigrants who try to reach the shores of Europe are invoking a new Nuremberg against those politicians who, like Italian former deputy prime minister and minister of the Interior Matteo Salvini, have closed seaports to ships carrying refugees. Considering that many of the ships that are forced to go back end up returning migrants to Libyan detention camps—where, according to the UN, they are held “in horrific conditions” (see *United*

Nations), and many end up dead, raped or otherwise abused—the analogy to the ways in which many western countries, and the US in particular, responded to the Jewish refugee crisis from the 1930's onwards, seems legitimate. That is also why we need a book like Baker's *Human Smoke*. Regardless of how convinced we might be of its overarching thesis, by resisting the myth of the "Good War," far from belittling or excusing in any way the crimes of Nazi and Japanese imperialism, it insists that we should not forget the horrors which all participants in the war perpetrated. If, as my generation was taught, the ultimate legacy of World War II was that war and violence are not the answer to political and social conflicts, wouldn't it be absurd to forget the work done by those who preached this moral also *before* the catastrophe took place?

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Past (Im)perfect Continuous. *Trans-Cultural Articulations of the Postmemory of WWII* presents an international and interdisciplinary approach to the comprehension of the postmemory of WWII, accounting for a number of different intellectual trajectories that investigate WWII and the Holocaust as paradigms for other traumas within a global and multidirectional context. Indeed, by exceeding the geographical boundaries of nations and states and overcoming contextual specificities, postmemory foregrounds continuous, active, connective, transcultural, and always imperfect representations of violence that engage with the alterity of other histories and other subjects. 75 years after the end of WWII, this volume is primarily concerned with the convergence between postmemory and underexamined aspects of the history and aftermath of WWII, as well as with several sociopolitical anxieties and representational preoccupations.

Drawing from different disciplines, the critical and visual works gathered in this volume interrogate the referential power of postmemory, considering its transcultural interplay with various forms, media, frames of reference, conceptual registers, and narrative structures.

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