

Lessons of World War II?*

Professor Barnouw argues that "the Holocaust" has become "a gigantic construct of memory stories of singular Jewish suffering" and that this likely proceeds from the Eichmann trial of 1961 in which the goal of establishing the guilt of the Nazi regime was turned into a powerful expression of the Jews as victims. Their experience "became real," capturing the imagination and erasing the historicity of the calamitous events. From this, then, came a hierarchy of "remembrance worthiness," from Jewish victims, to gypsies and homosexuals, to Poles murdered by the Nazis, Russian POWs in labor camps, German political enemies of the regime and Russian civilian victims of the war. Largely erased were "German civilians killed in the air war and on the trek from the East." In turn, this Holocaust-centered perspective on World War II was appropriated by American politicians who used it to reinforce an already established Manichaen position in justification of imperialist and ideological wars and interventions, often in direct violation of international law and, of course, to justify a Mideast policy which has had disastrous consequences for Palestinians. She concludes that "it will take a different German perspective on WW II, one less dominated by the uniqueness of the "Auschwitz' and the purity of German remorse, to find some degree of commonality in the human experience of this horrible war." It is not merely that Germans also suffered or that "too many Germans and Americans" share in worrying that the Germans (as others) are not "really sincere" in their expressed remorse, despite six decades of German "bad conscience." Here, anticipating Henningsen, one

* A response to Dagmar Barnouw's paper, "Hierarchies of Remembrance: The Politics of World War Two in Germany and America, 1945-2005" which was Keynote address at the conference, **Remembering and Reconsidering: The 60th Anniversary of the End of World War Two in Europe and Asia**, sponsored by The University of Hawai'i at Manoa and Hawai'i Pacific University, November 10-12, 2005. Also see her book, *The War in the Empty Air*, Indianapolis: University of Indiana Press, 2005.

might note that by comparison, Americans have some way to go as regards the historical memory of the genocide of indigenous peoples and of slavery. But the large issue for Barnouw is the usefulness, sixty years later, "of an enduring hierarchy of suffering that has removed from historical memory the larger part of a war so familiarly and viciously destructive that it should have meant the end of all wars" (*The War in the Empty Air*, xii). Indeed, have we learned nothing about war from the experience of the horror of World War II?

These are all large and important historical problems, and, of course, the unconvinced will be not be convinced by the arguments of an essay, perhaps even by the arguments of several large books. There are, to be sure, large bodies of existing literature, all contentious, which are part of the argument. Barnouw's book which treats much of this literature is to be highly recommended. While I do not pretend to have mastered this body of literature, her arguments are powerful. In what follows I concentrate on some of the critical problems as I see them.

First, the Holocaust perspective on World War II assumes that the event was unique and, accordingly, that it was new to the world. Neither would seem to be true. She allows that "the combination of historical facts underlying 'Auschwitz' is indeed 'unique' in the sense of probably not reproducible." But I think that she would also acknowledge that this is true of all complex historical phenomena. I take it, accordingly, that at some level of abstraction, there are similarities to "unique" events. In this case, there have been other genocides, including the systematic destruction of native Americans, Armenians, Cambodians, and many others besides. And indeed to this day, genocides continue. This means also, as she insists, that the idea of explaining a genocidal event in terms of the banality of ordinary people and the Evil of extraordinary murders "was and is too simple." The problem here is not simply the analytic uselessness of Evil (with or without capital letters), but that because events are concretely

unique, explaining them requires close attention to the particular causes and conditions which produce them. There were certainly features of "the Holocaust" which were not true of (say) the policy of extermination of native Americans, and there were features of it which it shares with other non-genocidal events.

This takes me to a key point. Barnouw suggests that WW II was "a novel situation in which the boundaries of human morality were irreversibly crossed to include the Allies' unleashing of the fire-storms devastating Japan and Germany." This needs some unpacking and allows us to raise some further difficult questions.

The "novel situation" was created by a series of historical developments some of which are fairly obvious, even if they are too often ignored.

First, there was time when soldiers engaged only soldiers and while crops may be burned, non-combatants were not the direct objects of violence. (Of course, they could become slaves of the victors and might suffer in other ways.) This changed, most obviously during the American Civil War, but it was anticipated by Clausewitz's analysis of the French Revolution.

Second, there was time when only citizens were soldiers and it was only the assembled citizens who decided to go to war. Themistocles failed in his effort to convince the citizens of Athens not to make war against Sicily. But as Machiavelli had already seen, this situation was long past. Not only was there the necessity that the state be large so as to be able to field large armies, but in consequence, "those who rule" were necessarily distinct from "the people." With the emergence of the modern state, the Prince, or later, the Chancellor or the President—including democratically elected presidents, had the power (if generally not the right) to make war, and the people had no choice in this. Citizens are obliged to participate—or indeed, as in any modern state, if they chose to resist, they are arrested as traitors, and often killed. To be sure,

in a Republic they might reject the party in power at the next election, but modern wars once started create an entirely new situation and are not easily ended.¹ Today, we speak of "quagmires." Moreover, as Clausewitz insisted, once started, they are "limitless" and have a logic of their own—an observation which indeed must not be underestimated.

Finally, given that states make wars against other states, as Clausewitz also saw, it came to be believed that winning the war involved not merely defeating the enemy army with an superior force, but destroying the will and capacity of the nation to continue the war.

All of this bears importantly on the matters at hand.

First, it seems easy to argue that German suffering in WW II can be discounted since, after all, "they" brought it on themselves. But it was not the German people who decided to make war, but Hitler and the Nazis. Of course, many Germans supported this, some with serious misgivings. But more generally we need to notice that while wars require at least the passive participation of "the people," *in all of modern experience*, those with the power to make war have been able either to keep citizens passive or to convince them not only that the war was justified but that the regime could do whatever was deemed necessary to win the war. This is, perhaps, the fundamental problem of modern war, not solved even in the best case, a representative regime which grants full civil liberties. Thus, while a large segment of American

¹ Anti-war movements remain, perhaps, the only remaining democratic capacity. They are, of course, possible only *after* a war has begun, are difficult to generate and sustain, and their consequences are hard to estimate. The long and difficult experience in Vietnam, however, suggests that they can be most effective—at least in some circumstances, including, for example, where there are civil liberties, the military is comprised of conscripts and, critically, the population is not under direct attack.

public opinion currently (November 2005) seems to have rejected both the official justification for the invasion of Iraq and the conduct of this war, most citizens remain passive.²

One might draw different conclusions from this very troublesome fact. One might hold that we are all equally responsible and equally bear guilt for the death and destruction which war brings. But surely *some* are far more responsible than others. Indeed, this would seem to have been the original rationale of the post-war trials. As these trials assumed, one must distinguish between those who decided to make war and those who had no say in the matter.

Second, there is the problem of non-combatants. For soldiers in the field engaged with a uniformed enemy, it is killed or be killed, so this is not the major moral problem. With guerrilla war, a phenomenon very characteristic of war since World War II, things become considerably more complicated.³ For present purposes, the serious moral problem is the use of air power to destroy the will and capacity of the enemy—"the war in the empty air." If there is any hope of justifying such a policy, a very strong additional premise is necessary: that bombing cities is either a necessary or at least an effective instrument in achieving the goal of destroying the will and capacity of the nation to continue the war. This belief is widely shared.⁴ This raises a serious problem of counter-factual history: What would have been the course of the war and its outcome if the cities of Germany and Japan had not been bombed? The evidence suggests that defined in

² My *War and Democracy* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell , 1998) made the effort to explain the willingness of citizens to be "good citizens" and the equally troublesome fact that even men (and women) in arms will struggle hard to justify their roles in war-making.

³ They are complicated not only morally: "Who is the enemy?" but also strategically. Paradoxically, the memory of World War II has forestalled fully coming to grips with the very changed situation of guerilla war.

⁴ As above, one needs to distinguish between high level decision makers, whose motives are too often less than honorable, and those who are commanded to carry out the policies. It was certainly believed by most RAF airmen and the airmen in B-17s, B-25s, or later, B-29s, who believed that they were serving the cause of justice and that their actions were contributing to ultimate victory. Otherwise their behavior is utterly unintelligible. I note here that I was B-52 qualified to arm and drop nuclear bombs, took considerable pride in my good scores on practice runs. Later I was re-called to active duty to drop 82nd airborne on Cuba.

its own terms, the policy was not effective: Production during World War II was slowed but not stopped and there may be nothing which so powerfully reinforces the will to victory as a campaign of bombing—a strategy, we need to be reminded, which amounts to terrorism. Indeed, even a de-moralized civilian population, faced with the daily struggle to survive will not likely be able to resist or to mount a campaign to end the war.

The question of the justifiability of the policy of bombing is part of the larger question of "war crimes," perhaps the main concern of the post WW II trials." Here we must distinguish the effort to assign responsibility for wars of aggression from the question of the conduct of the war, including, in addition to bombing civilians, torture, the treatment of POWs and other violations of the Geneva and other Codes. The former question requires us to examine the broader general context and causes of modern war—a point emphasized in Barnouw's book and too often forgotten. Thus, questions of imperialism—and resistance to it, and the putative requirements of "national" survival enter as considerations.⁵

As regards the question of war crimes, she refers in her book to McNamara's recollection of Curtis LeMay's observation that because of the bombing policy, both he and McNamara would be tried for war crimes if the US lost the war. But LeMay's question: "What makes it immoral if you lose and moral if you win?" misses the point here. This relativist posture must be rejected: One can insist that an act is a war crime if and only if it makes little or no significant contribution to the winning of the war. One cannot have a war crime without a war. So the problem of war is the real moral problem.

⁵ Thus, the people of Japan could easily come to believe that they had nothing to apologize for, that they were under threat from imperialist powers. Compare here the remarkable Bush argument that the invasion of Iraq was entirely justified as a preemptive strike.

Comparison of Japan and Germany suggests also that once the distinction between assigning responsibility for a war of aggression was collapsed into war crimes, it was easy to see how Nazi policy in WW II made a "holocaust centered" view of the war convincing. Both Germany and Japan were aggressors and many war crimes were committed by the Japanese, but there was nothing comparing to the Holocaust.

But to return: One might hold that the killing of non-combatants is never justified, but frankly, such a Kantian position cannot, I think, be sustained—unless, that is, one assumes a pacifist position. Assuming then that the war is just, one needs to be historical. That is, one must ask *whether at any given point* during the course of a just war, parties could have known whether the policy was effective in bringing the war to a "successful" conclusion. To quote from Barnow's book, it seems clear that:

in the end stage, the Second World War was fought on both sides "as if there was no death," no limits to the destruction of humans, combatants and civilians alike, no modern sense of the frailty and finiteness of life. In the end, that war had created its own "empty air," spaces of annihilation peopled with millions and millions of the anonymous dead (xii).⁶

To be sure, with the dropping of the atomic bomb on Hiroshima and Nagasaki, technology allowed for a dramatic development of the idea that bombing civilians was critical to winning the war. I am convinced with Barnouw that the atomic bombings were neither necessary nor effective in bringing the war to a conclusion, especially given what we now know to be the counterproductive consequences of the prior devastating fire-bombing of Tokyo.⁷ Indeed, it may well be that the atomic bombs, dropped on the Japanese, were aimed at the Russians. More generally, if the evidence does not sustain belief that the policy was consequentially justified, then there is a heavy, perhaps insurmountable burden on any regime which seeks to justify terroristic bombing. Sadly, one can hardly be optimistic that rejection of

⁶ Indeed, as she concludes, a consequence of Holocaust memory-stories has been "to undo in remembrance precisely this anonymity" (xii).

⁷ In a later session of the conference for which the foregoing was prepared, Brien Hallett argued very persuasively that it was the Soviet declaration of war against Japan which brought the regime to surrender.

the policy will become an enduring lesson of WW II. Unfortunately, it remains a lynchpin of US foreign and military policy.

To conclude, then, for reasons provided by Barnouw and some others besides, it seems that we have not learned much from the experiences of World War II, and that, with her, this owes considerably to failures and distortions in our historical memory.

Peter T. Manicas

November 2005