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Innocents and Innocence

Mass punishment and its aftermath.

Rose Humphries was just one of many Londoners who bore the brunt of the German Blitz during 1940. Her parents had refused to send her north into the countryside where she would be mostly safe from the bombs. If they were going to die, they should do it together, was her mother's way of thumbing her nose at Hitler. And so, in that year on September, 19 1940, Rose found herself ogling at Winston Churchill who had come down from his perch of government to inspect the ruinous remains of houses on Portman street, just near Marble Arch. The bombing had fortunately not destroyed the apartment building in which she lived with her mother and father (when he was there), and it was obvious that, if it had, and she were inside, it would have been the end of time for her.

Churchill picked his way through mounds of rubble and puffed at his cigar as if to blow away the smoke and dust that rose from the piles of bricks, broken concrete, splintered timber and small fires that still burned in many crevices. Only nine years old at the time, Rose strained to get close to Sir Winston. She had heard so many stories about him. He was fearless, and he had told Hitler to go to hell lots of times. It all seemed like a Fairytale to her. She wanted to touch him as her way to make sure he was real. She imagined him as a kind of giant who would one day crush Hitler. Churchill came near, poking at the rubble with his cane, harumphing and puffing. Her mother held her back. She was, after all, one of many crowding around, hoping to get close to this giant who would eventually save them. That he would, they had no doubt.

Though the numbers would mean little to Rose. Approximately 32,000 civilians were killed during the blitz and

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87,000 seriously injured. Some two million houses were destroyed. Churchill was well aware of the dreadful destruction and of what his people were going through. He knew it, and his people knew it. It made it a simple calculation as to what should be done to such people who committed these crimes on innocent people. Unlike World War I, and other wars before it, this was not a war confined to a series of battles between military sides. Rather it was a huge battle in which civilians were the targets and the pawns. It even had a military term: “strategic bombing.”

Churchill was the only politician in the United Kingdom who saw it all coming. He had pleaded with Chamberlin and many others to prepare the country for war. He was convinced that Hitler would not stop at Poland. That his Third Reich would gobble up all Europe, and as soon as that was accomplished, turn his eyes to the United Kingdom.

It was not so much the battles. Churchill had grown up with them throughout his childhood playing out all the great battles of history with his toy soldier collection. It would be reasonable to say that he was obsessed with war. He did not go to university, which no doubt he could have done, Oxford surely, given his father’s high positions in politics. Rather, he wanted to be a soldier, and that is what he became, fighting in British India, the Anglo-Sudan war, the second Boer War and other skirmishes. He became a famous war correspondent, and eventually joined politics, following in his (disapproving) father’s footsteps. As First Lord of the Admiralty, he oversaw the disastrous campaign in Gallipoli, noting that “the price to be paid in taking Gallipoli would no doubt be heavy.” A drastic understatement: 250,000 casualties, 46,000 allied forces dead, and the enemy (the Turks) the same number of casualties with 65,000 dead. And then there was World War II. In evaluating Churchill’s handling of both wars, it is hard to get out of one’s mind his toy soldiers all lined up, kept as they were as a child well into adulthood. All of the great battles of western history he played over and over again.

But the enemy, whoever it was, had to be fought, and when overcome, punished severely for their crimes. When it came to World War II, it was a simple matter to Churchill, though not to

many of his peace-loving opponents. Hitler was an insane evil figure, bent on the destruction of the western world as it was, his aim to establish a master race that would bring in a new world of prosperity and great accomplishments. Like Churchill, he had a dream, and it would cost many lives. Only Churchill's dream was the defense and preservation of the established social structure of western society and politics. He saw Hitler clearly as the great destroyer of civilization. Not only had he to be defeated for what he would do and had already done, but also for who and what he was. A tyrant and the arch enemy of civilization, as were all his followers.

Thus arose the Allied version of strategic bombing.

Gert Mueller lived with his mom and dad just around the corner from the Waldorf Astoria on Joachimsthaller Street. His dad was a mechanic who took care of all the plumbing and electrical and other essentials that kept the famous hotel running smoothly. On any ordinary day there were always important problems to fix, but on August 26, 1940, the first major bombing of Berlin occurred, signaling to Gert's dad that he was destined to have his hands full keeping the hotel running. As it turned out, though, the first bombing caused young Gert, all of twelve years old, to cry, when he learned that the enormous explosion he heard on that day was a bomb falling on the Berlin Zoo, very close to the hotel and his home. Worse, his favorite elephant was killed in the attack. And much worse, after this very poor start of the bombing by the allies, their attacks were to become more and more lethal, resulting in around half of all buildings in Berlin destroyed, some 50,000 people killed, and hundreds of thousands made homeless. Gert's father would lose his life while attending to his job, a massive wall of brick and stone collapsing on him as he walked to the hotel early one morning to inspect the damage of the night's air raid. By the end of the war, and much of the year following it, Gert and his mom survived by some means unfathomable. Gert had little memory of that time. It remained a mystery to him how his mom kept him alive.

From 1940 through the end of the war in 1945 Churchill saw

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to it that bombing raids were relentlessly directed at a number of German cities (Dresden perhaps the most infamous) to destroy infrastructure, but most important of all, to kill as many Germans as possible and destroy as many homes as possible, especially when assisted towards the end of the war by the U.S. Air force. As Churchill's head of Bomber Command Sir Arthur "Bomber" Harris said: "We can wreck Berlin from end to end if the U.S. Air Force comes with us. It will only cost us between 400 and 500 aircraft but it will cost Germany the war." This was great sounding talk, much of it bravado, though, since about half way through the war, Hitler's Luftwaffe was holding its own, not to mention that the Germans had invented the self-driven V2 rockets that gradually could be aimed with more and more precision as the technology improved.

One could argue, though, that it was not the Americans who would turn the war around in the Allies' favor, but in fact the Russians, thanks to Hitler's fatal error of double-crossing the Russians and attacking them on June 22, 1941. It was to become a battle that would repeat the fatal error made by Napoleon a century before. Russia turned both battles into a war of attrition, sacrificing its own military, but especially its civilians, who were starved and sacrificed by a frozen earth policy to draw the German troops well into Russia, until the unrelenting winter destroyed the German military, along with a great many Russians, military and civilian.

By the time the Americans joined the war after the attack on Pearl Harbor on December 7, 1941, the stubborn British led by their stubborn Prime Minister, were gritting their teeth, the airforce suffering what seemed like unsustainable casualties. And eventually, these numbers would become appalling on all sides, even when compared to those lost as a result of the USA dropping two atomic bombs on the Japanese. The USSR lost 12 million military and 15 million civilians in World War II, by far the most of any of the allied countries. And Japan lost 1.5 million military and half a million civilians. The U.K. Lost 403,000 military and 92,700 civilians; the USA lost 6,000 civilians and 407,000 military.

The winning of wars is commonly attributed by historians to the great leadership of famous leaders or generals: Alexander the Great, Julius Caesar, the Duke of Marlborough, Napoleon, Wellington, Bolivar, Churchill, and yes, Hitler (at first a spectacular winner). Yet all these great leaders also lost particular battles, and an analysis of the battles over which they presided shows that there was much luck or good fortune attached to the events (commonly attributed to the “fog of war”) and that includes the weather and various other unforeseen events. What a great irony it is, then, that the moral certitude that follows victory is displayed with such flourish. The morally upright are the victors, and the losers vanquished and humiliated, their leaders seen as the most evil of doers. The winners build monuments and worship their heroes of past wars -- the losers forever disappearing into the moral depravities of history.

Well, not quite so. For later generations, unscathed by the personal sufferings and losses of distant forebears, assiduously ferret out details of the shocking depravities of war, and reveal to the innocence of modernity, that the heroes of past wars, the proclaimed winners, also committed atrocities in battles and aftermaths of battles. From which the distasteful conclusion follows: the winners are reduced to the same level or morality as the losers.

It is much easier to weigh up the degrees of evil of particular persons and their actions, than it is to weigh up the degrees of good overall. For evil flaunts itself, and invokes in its finders, an outrage easily justified. The outrage clearly showing itself to be pure and good: the opposite of evil.

For this reason, the Nuremberg and Tokyo trials were held in order to demonstrate to the world (but really to the allies themselves) the justice and moral superiority of the victors over the vanquished. These trials were, in their own way, world shattering events of moral turpitude. The losers of the Great War and their respective countries (mainly Germany) were humiliated by having to sign away large portions of their territories, including those not taken by them in the war. They were stripped of their economies, (forced into impossible debt) largely

sentenced to poverty and humiliating subservience to the victors. Churchill, to become the hero of World War II, strongly opposed the Treaty of Versailles, because it had deeply humiliated the enemy, thereby, he argued, guaranteeing that they will remain the enemy and guaranteeing another war. None believed him. Churchill had a kind of gentlemen's morality: we have a fair fight, then we shake hands and respect each other and continue on our way, all the time respecting our enemy that was.

But the Nuremberg and Tokyo trials changed all that. The confused and ambivalent morality that lay buried beneath the trials was well demonstrated by the case of Alfred Jodi, who signed orders for the summary execution of Allied commandos and Soviet commissars as well as the instruments of surrender on 7 May 1945 in Reims. He was hanged 16 October 1946 and posthumously rehabilitated in 1953, which was later reversed. Nevertheless, these trials of the justice of war did not stop the victors from using prisoners of war as forced labor for a few years after the armistice was signed. But in the grand scheme of morality, forced labor and other reparations (Germany had to give up some territory to Russia and Poland), took the back seat to the grand show of the Nuremberg and Tokyo trials.

But what of the insignificant individuals whose lives were disrupted by these moralities of war and justice?

Rose Humphries lived to tell the story of the blitz to her children and grandchildren. Her mother, laid ill from malnutrition and other maladies of poverty caused by war, died at a young age of 42, leaving Rose alone with her father who returned from the war early in 1946, repatriated from an Italian prisoner of war camp. Great Britain, though the victors, was great no more, and it took several years for her dad to find permanent work, which he did, naturally, in the building industry. For her part, Rose took it all in her stride, and when the U.K. Joined the European Union in 1973, she was an eager young woman who quickly ran to Europe to see what all the fuss had been about, and especially to discover Italy and the Italians who, strangely, her father spoke of as great friends and who knew how to enjoy the small things (eating) in life, even though in the aftermath of the war, eating had become a necessity for survival, not a means of daily

pleasure. In fact, it was in post war Rome that Rose met a fine young Italian man from Trieste. They married and lived in Rome ever after. One can only marvel at the resilience of humanity!

Gert Mueller was a teenager by the time Berlin was under reconstruction, and the schools were back in operation. His mother wanted him to become a mechanic like his dad, and perhaps had history been kind to him, and his dad survived, he would have. But in the absence of his father, it was necessary for him to find work — and there was lots of it rebuilding Berlin — to help restore their own house and lives, especially that of his mother who had given all to keep them alive, during the ghastly few years of reconstruction in Berlin. But Berlin was their home, and his mother would not budge from their old apartment. And once the schools got under way, he was able to go to night school to make sure he could get an education and make a life for himself. That was what his mother (and his father if alive also) harped on every day and night. It would be understandable if he resented it. But he did not, for he saw that it was the only sure way forward, and that it would take great effort and perseverance. He was not to know, of course, that he would meet a glamorous American young woman a nurse who worked for the Red Cross. They became friends, he began to help her on her many forays into homes that suffered far more than his own. She told him of the marvels of the United States. He was enthralled. They married and he went with her to New York, a city far greater than Berlin ever was, where he would go to school and eventually become a law professor specializing in European and International law. His mother remained in their Berlin apartment where she died in 1980. Just as the question of German reparations to Poland was raised again. Gert hurried home to his mother's funeral, sold their apartment, and would never return again to Berlin. Living in New York with his own family, he had managed easily enough to forget those dark days after the war. Why go back?

These parallel lives were simply two of many, many more life courses, after the war, repeated over and over to an infinite degree, a remonstrance to every one of them, of their refusal to give in to the tyranny of moral turpitude. That is, of immoral morality; of good and evil intertwined and unwound by trials of

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justice and punishment. Could those trials truly identify who were specifically responsible for all those millions of deaths? Hitler and Churchill perhaps? And add to that maybe Roosevelt, Eisenhower and Truman, not to mention Hirohito and his great generals?

Or, the easiest, blame it all on Hitler, and the actions of his opponents pardoned because they were forced to do what they did in order to win — and therefore assume ownership of morality and its definition.

In sum, a just punishment for genocide and its correlatives (unnecessary wars for example) is an impossibility because there is no punishment that is sufficiently severe—unless, of course, genocide were the punishment. But this would erase the distinction between crime and punishment, would it not?

Moral: The morality of heroes feeds off the suffering of others, whether winners or losers .

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