

Aggressive war: then and now

By [Luciana Bohne](#)

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Richard Overy's "Interrogations: The Nazi Elite in Allied Hands, 1945," recounts the interrogations of the accused Nazi war criminals while in detention—May to October 1945—at Nuremberg, before the trial took place. It was not, for me, an easy read for reasons that will be evidenced below.

I was struck by their denial of the crimes they knew they had committed. This denial came through as the unselfconscious jocularly of some (Ribbentrop), the supposed "charm" of others (Goering), the pompous, self-serving "objectivity" of one (Speer), the weeping cowardice of one or two, the faked amnesia of another (Hess)—above all I was struck by the banality of them all. They seemed a completely unimaginative and uninteresting lot, except in one regard. They had all been extremely imaginative in causing pain—especially through war. They had gotten great bonuses for their support of war from Hitler—huge estates, large sums of money. But they had not been imaginative military geniuses at that. No, what struck me as remarkable was their loyalty to and alacrity for war. In this, they had merely parroted Hitler, for asked what was Hitler's foreign policy, his adjutant (1935-39), Fritz Wiedemann, promptly answered, "To make war." Asked how he knew, Wiedemann said, "His own words."

So that is how it goes.

Let me tell you a family story as lived in Italy (later Yugoslavia, now Croatia) under Nazi occupation. In the spring of 1944, the camp commandant of the only Nazi extermination camp on Italian soil (La Risiera in Trieste, Italy) was assassinated by partisans about 16 miles from my village. Collective punishment was swift and brutal. Over a period of 10 days, several villages were burnt (one with the population ordered to stay inside the burning houses); indiscriminate round-ups and systematic executions occurred.

In one of the round-ups, at different locations, my father and his two brothers (one on Easter break from the university in Venice) were arrested. They were not partisans. Not yet. I was then four years old. The memories are my own. I remember watching in front of the house with my grandmother, unmarried aunt, great uncle, my dog, my mother and the other aunt—the one married to one of the uncles under arrest, with my baby cousin in her arms. A long column of male civilians filed by on the road in front of our house. They had a hallucinated look, I have since thought. They were flanked by SS men, agitated to a paroxysm of threats. My father, when he passed our house, turned his head to look at us. An SS man hit him on the head with the butt of a rifle. My mother fainted; my married aunt screamed, promptly silenced by my great-uncle's slapping his hand on her mouth. My grandmother, in a feat that defied reason or logic, fell to the ground grabbing the leg of a soldier, stationary at the side of the road. He shook her off, kicking. Then the memory fades.

Another memory sub-enters. That of my father. They were taken two kilometers up a hill, made to dig a grave, then lined and shot in an orderly fashion. My father was recognised by a collaborator, who “vouched” for him—some ancient favor owed, no doubt. My father was thrown in a truck and taken to the basement of a castle’s dungeon, in the pretty town eight kilometers south where we went to market once a month, where in the dark he found his two brothers.

My mother, too remembered. The village heard that men were kept in the dungeon. Over holy week, the two young sisters-in-law, my mother and my aunt biked to find them, laden with gifts for collaborators who might intercede for release if they were alive. They were so scared, my mother and my aunt, that they bumped against each other on the trip down, scattering hams and bottles of wine on the dusty road, again and again. They picked themselves up and eventually offered up the gifts. They were told the men were alive. On Good Friday, they began to hang them from trees on the main boulevard of the city. On Easter Sunday, my mother alone bicycled to the castle. She saw the corpses, hanging from the trees. When she reached the castle, our three men were released. She said she asked them to blindfold her for the walk back.

Her memory was confirmed by my university-student uncle. He said that my mother walked through the town blindfolded. Forty years later she showed me where “they were the thickest”—the hanging bodies. She pointed to the little park, off the boulevard, in the evening’s fading light but would not go in. I held her as she shivered.

Shortly after the event of the indiscriminate roundups, my grandmother hid a nephew, a wounded partisan, in the bowels of a hayloft in the stable for a month—at the peril of us all. The family had joined the resistance.

In that part of occupied Italy—where Resistance was fierce and bloody—other families didn’t fare so well, but I have never forgotten our survival in the horror of that day. There were others.

To those who wonder why I write to condemn this war in Iraq, I say, “It is because of the children; children see a world in war they will never forget. Ever after, it is a world without innocence or trust. Beneath every normal act—marriage, birth, accomplishments—lurks the fear and threat of impending dispossession and wanton loss. I owe it to that child who was me and who never got to be a child again—and to the children everywhere whose joys are stolen by war.”

Indeed, I often feel I’m not really entitled to my presence in this world—I have survived, through my family’s survival, as a shadow of what might have become me. So many children didn’t make it—nor did their parents. Buried somewhere deep in my unconscious is the belief that we were meant to die and that all of life is just stolen luck—chance. For me, protesting this awful war in Iraq is no intellectual abstraction. It is personal. I am there more than I am here.

Americans wondered in 2003 why Europeans (and millions of others) opposed this war. I say, they know war. And perhaps I’m right.

Perhaps, if Americans had been allowed to know and feel Hiroshima they would have rejected war, but they were never given the chance.

Hiroshima, so iconic in the world's imagination for signifying the inhumanity of war, is in the US a technological event—the day on which “American lives” were saved by American can-doism and know-howism. Why one would want to live “saved” by an incinerating mushroom cloud that cost the instant death of 80,000 unarmed civilians is not something that has been allowed to be considered. August 6, Hiroshima Day, is so little observed in this country that the genocidal sanctions against Iraq were launched on that day in 1990—probably coincidentally. So short and inconsequential is the memory of Hiroshima on these shores! One million and a half Iraqi people died over 13 years. Of this—a virtual atomic bomb of sanctions—here in the US, not a word. Silence.

Since I began with the Nuremberg trials of 1946, let me end with the judgment of Judge Parker, of Great Britain, on that occasion. I hope the echo resonates in the present, which is the present of the US destruction of Fallujah—the napalm dropped (okay, for pedants, let us use the name of the Pentagon's new, improved product, “firebombs”), the bodies left stinking in the streets, the families shot while trying to swim away to safety, the hospitals bombed and the medical staff killed, the collective punishment of a town for having legitimately resisted an unlawful occupation—an echo for all the breaches of international law that have been carried out in our names. That echo from Parker's judgment at Nuremberg reads like this: “The evidence relating to war crimes has been overwhelming, in its volume and its detail. The truth remains that war crimes were committed on a vast scale . . . There can be no doubt that the majority of them arose from the Nazi conception of ‘total war’ with which these aggressive wars were waged. For in this conception of ‘total war’ the moral ideas underlying the [Geneva] conventions which seek to make war more humane are no longer regarded as having force or validity. Everything is made subordinate to the overmastering dictates of war. Rules, regulations, assurances, and treaties all alike are of no moment, and so, freed from the restraining influence of international law, the aggressive war is conducted by the Nazi leaders in the most barbaric way.”

Our newly-nominated attorney general said all those conventions Judge Parker refers to in his opinion are today “quaint.” Once again, might makes right. According to Alberto Gonzales, states (but perhaps he means only this state) no longer need derive their authority from a consensus in international law but from artillery, tanks, and bombs. Nazi war criminal Hermann Goering couldn't have agreed more. In interrogations by US Nuremberg personnel in 1946, Goering stated: “We rearmed Germany until we bristled. I am only sorry we did not rearm more. Of course, I considered treaties as so much toilet paper.”

Unfortunately for this criminal war-pragmatist, the allies disagreed on the relevance of international law to the sanity of the world: they were going to hang him, so he took cyanide instead. As he lived, so he die

Luciana Bohne is a Global Research Contributing Editor. She teaches film and literature at Edinboro University of Pennsylvania.

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